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PRA for self-reliant rural development: the case of a resettlement area in Ethiopia

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• Introduction

The Tana Beles area in Gojam, Ethiopia, is one of the largest conventional resettlement sites in Ethiopia. In the mid 1980s almost 80 000 people from different parts of the country were transferred here. Its core, the Beles Valley, covers an area of 220 000 hectares. The resettled population have come from very dissimilar geographical areas and are having to face severe difficulties adapting to the new environment. Most troublesome are the changed climate, farming practices, consumption patterns and food habits as well as the struggle with unfamiliar diseases. Malaria, the most common cause of death in the resettlement area, and trypanosomiasis, the most widespread livestock disease, did not exist at all in the places most settlers originated from.

In 1986 a huge project was initiated in the area by the Italian government to provide physical and social infrastructure. This was capital-intensive and top-down in its approach. When, in 1991, all foreign projects in the Beles Valley were suspended, they left behind a strong material and psychological dependency of settlers on external aid and assistance. The absence of a gradual and balanced development process has brought about severe problems of adaptation, integration and effective assimilation into the local ecological conditions, the fluid socio-economic situation and the new cultural reality.

Therefore the major challenge at present is to redirect policy interventions to enhance the transition from emergency aid to self-reliant and self-sufficient development. However, autonomous community development and its

sustainability in the long term demand the effective participation of the beneficiaries in the decision-making process.

Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli (CISP), an Italian NGO, is operating in the Tana Beles area, and as part of their Multisectoral Programme in Support of the Resettled Population in the Beles Valley, PRA-based fieldwork was carried out by the author, with the assistance of Solomon Shone. Since PRA is a flexible methodology, sensitive to heterogeneous local circumstances, this approach appeared to be highly promising for research in such a complex project setting.

PRA of resettlement issues

The major objective of the fieldwork was to explore general adjustment problems and constraints, needs and priorities, and the expectations and aspirations of the settlers. It also aimed to explore the economic activities performed in the village communities to reveal the significance of non-agricultural income-generating activities. However it was also hoped that a participatory approach would be a powerful means to encourage the settlers' self-awareness about their important role in their own development process and to foster confidence in their capacity to take initiatives on their own.

• Fieldwork strategies

Before starting the fieldwork, we collected information from a variety of secondary sources. This helped us to clarify the general objectives and identify crucial issues for the investigation. After a thorough preliminary examination of the local situation, we

established the criteria for selecting the target villages for the fieldwork. Criteria used included ethnic features of the communities, economic activities and evolving migratory trends.

Based on a pre-arranged check-list of topics, several informal and semi-structured interviews were carried out with different target groups, key informants, families and individual settlers. The topics addressed ranged from socio-economic, agricultural, health, nutritional, political and institutional matters to family planning and gender issues. The settlers were also actively involved in transect walks, or the drawing of maps, matrices, graphs, seasonal calendars, pie charts (*enjera* diagrams), flow and Venn diagrams.

Breaking the ice

Before we started the interviews, the greatest challenge seemed to be to establish an open, confident and sincere relationship with the settlers. This was not an easy task. Some of them have developed a suspicious attitude towards outsiders while others were well aware of their ability to manipulate information to their advantage. To gain acceptance by the people, we looked for a key person who could introduce us to the villagers and show us around. This person needed to be someone enjoying great respect, and on whom the villagers relied. In one village the orthodox priest gave us valuable support and helped us establish a rapport with people.

We also found it helpful to make an effort to reverse the usual relationship between outsider professionals and local beneficiaries, stressing that we came to learn form them about their personal and family problems, the hardships they were experiencing at home and in the village community, the suggestions they wanted to put forward, and the hopes they had for the future. In order to create a relaxed atmosphere, to show our sincere intentions and to gain their respect, we found it was useful to participate in daily community and family tasks such as helping farmers to harvest rice and going to church when there was a village festivity. People were very busy with

harvesting and food processing, so our participation in their daily activities provided opportunities to carry out spontaneous and informal interviews without interrupting their duties. There were also more spontaneous situations suitable for breaking the ice. Once, for instance, to get in touch with reluctant town dwellers, we joined in a card game with them.

Inevitably the settlers were interested to know where this research would lead. We had to be careful because people's expectations are all too easily raised. We emphasised that we were not directly in charge of decision-making and that our task was only to assess the situation and to offer some guidelines for future policy interventions.

As the majority of settlers had been involved in conventional questionnaire surveys in the past, it did not take much time for them to notice the different approach. They were surprised by our behaviour, but appreciated our interest, curiosity and enthusiasm and were usually keen to participate in the analytical exercises.

Attitudes towards self-reliance

Attitudes towards self-reliant development varied amongst the resettled population. These variations were largely related to where people lived before resettlement, why resettlement occurred and the way it took place. In the case of the Amhara people, the conditions in their areas of origin were so desperate that most of them felt they could only gain from resettlement. On the other hand, the settlers belonging to the Kambata and Hadiya ethnic groups originated from rich, fertile rural areas. The previous government had wanted to balance population densities. Their area was considered too densely settled so they had been persuaded to resettle through promises of land, labour, housing, health care and so on. Such promises raised the settlers' expectations and provided a strong feeling of reliance on external aid and assistance rather than on personal achievements.

Figure 1. Transect of village L24

Figure 2. Transect of village L5

Source: PLA Notes (1995), Issue 22, pp.62 – 68, IIED London

This also had an impact on the degree to which people were active in the PRA. The first category of settlers seemed to participate more actively and sincerely in the interviews and discussions. With the second category of settlers it was more difficult to establish a confident and open-minded relationship. Many people were primarily interested in obtaining the project's future help and assistance. As a consequence they were keen to stress their major problems and needs, but did not seem very interested in the joint discussion of opportunities, proposals and solutions.

A significant example occurred during transect walks conducted in two villages: L24 which is situated far away on the borders of the resettlement area and L5, which is located close to the project headquarters. From the first transect walk, undertaken with illiterate, subsistence farmers belonging to the Amhara ethnic group, very detailed information emerged (Figure 1). In fact, the participants were very involved in the general description of the salient features of the area and pointed out major problems and constraints, as well as potential opportunities and solutions.

From the second transect walk, undertaken with four literate farmers (one was the chief of the village) belonging to the Kambata and Hadiya ethnic groups, much less discussion resulted. Indeed, from the summary of the transect it can be seen that the participants were good at formulating their needs, but did not spend much time on the inherent opportunities or on the description of the characteristics of the village surroundings (Figure 2).

- **Reflections on the PRA methods used**

In this section I shall discuss the suitability of PRA methods for the exploration of phenomena evolving over time and, thus, for the investigation of the dynamic contexts characterised by migration.

Maps

The drawing and colouring of maps on the ground gave an overview of the village, its infrastructure and its institutions. Of course it would have been particularly interesting if different groups (men, women and children) had separately drawn maps of the same village. People appeared to have difficulty in imagining a bird's-eye view of the village and in using rough indicators for wealth, health or other attributes of single households. Such detailed illustration would have been very time-consuming. It did not seem convenient to extend the exercise longer than one and a half hours.

Transects

It was easy to involve people in transect walks, and as discussed above, these were useful for understanding people's perceptions about the general characteristics of the villages and surrounding areas.

Seasonal calendars

These were helpful for analysing the monthly trends throughout the year in human diseases, crop prices and labour demand. After a preliminary discussion we asked the participants to put seeds in a line on the ground to represent each month of the year. In the Ethiopian calendar there are 13 months, so these were depicted. Participants sketched the trend lines using a different colour for each topic. However it seemed difficult for the participants to illustrate the tasks performed during the year (ploughing, sowing, weeding etc.) because of the continuous overlapping of several activities.

However, their interpretation of labour as labour-intensity on the actual days worked rather than the total number of days was thought-provoking. In fact, even though the thirteenth month of the Ethiopian calendar has only seven days, the greatest amount of labour was attributed to this particular period. The reason was that since this month has so few days, and the majority of these days are religious holidays, only two or three days are left over to carry out all the work.

The seeds (chick-peas, peas and different kinds of beans) that I had brought from Italy attracted much attention among the participants. In fact, not only did the imported seeds turn out to be a subject of great interest, but also became an excellent reward for people at the end of an exercise. The farmers were

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looking forward to sowing them during the next agricultural season.

Venn diagrams

This was a convenient method to describe the institutional changes that had occurred in recent times. Political decentralisation has taken place on the national and the regional level but, of course, also on the local level. The diagrams were drawn by two literate men who were members of the village Peasant Association. While I was surprised to find that most PRA methods can easily be handled by illiterate people, I have doubts about this being true for Venn diagrams.

Scoring

To identify people's preferences in the use of food staples we carried out a scoring exercise with five small subsistence farmers. All the participants were illiterate. The criteria for evaluation were identified during a long preliminary discussion that started with health issues and led on to matters such as nutrition and consumption patterns. Progressively the criteria were defined more precisely in order to fit into the matrix (Figure 3).

Interesting information emerged about the settlers' preferences for particular food, their perceptions regarding nutritional values (defined as being beneficial for the body) but also the cash income that different staples

produce as well as their ability to keep. The classification of milk according to this last criterion provoked a thorough discussion among the participants. Processed milk in the form of butter (boiled and spiced) could be preserved up to four years and would thus have got the absolute highest score. However the participants eventually agreed that if milk was considered in its liquid form it could not be classified as it goes bad within a few days.
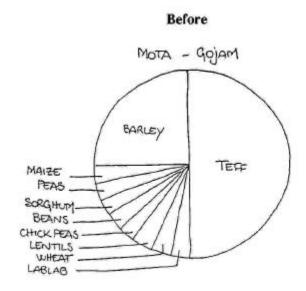
Pie charts

These were particularly suitable for expressing changes which had occurred over time. The diagram was drawn by two literate farmers, but other people also got involved in the discussion. We facilitated the diagram by giving a simple example and discovered that the people understood immediately the notion of proportion. In fact, they sketched the circles (as an *enjera*, the Ethiopian circular cereal-based dish) and they set the central point to cut the wedges properly.

This exercise enabled the farmers to show us what crops they used to produce in their area of origin, and what they produced after resettlement (Figure 4). From these diagrams it is clear how people had to adapt to significant variations not only in crop production but also in related consumption patterns and food habits.

Figure 3. Scoring exercise: food staples and their uses (village L24)

	ENJERA*	TALLA**	PRESERVATION	CASH	NUTRITIONAL VALUE
MAIZE	•	••••	•	••	•
MILLET	••	•••••	••••	••	••
SORGHUM	••••	••••	•••	••••	••••
RICE	•••••	•••	••••	•••••	•••••
CHICK PEAS	—	—	••	•••••	••••
HOT PEPPER	—	—	•	••••	••••
MILK	—	—	—	••••	•••••

* cereal-based local dish
** locally brewed beer

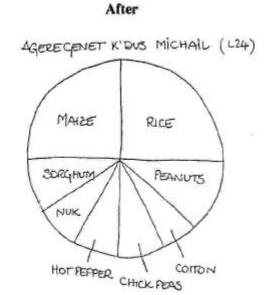**Figure 4. Pie Charts showing crop production before and after resettlement**

In another interview, the respondents used this type of diagram to show how their sources of income had changed since resettlement. In their area of origin, they gained their income exclusively from agriculture and livestock. In the resettlement area, due to the very low productivity in agriculture and because of the widespread livestock diseases, they turned to handicraft production (iron and pottery) to earn supplementary income.

Comparisons between conditions before and after certain events can be made using different PRA methods. Usually pie and Venn diagrams need to be represented separately for expressing changes over time, while diagrams such as seasonal calendars and matrices allow all the information to be represented in the one image.

Lessons learned: avoiding biases

To ensure frank and spontaneous discussions, we found it was better to avoid announcing visits in advance and to improvise daily programmes. The only time we made a mistake in this respect was when we announced our visit at a feeding-centre. It was very revealing to observe how the visit had been taken over by some of the villagers who hoped to gain support for the feeding centre. After that experience, we tried to go into villages without attracting too much attention.

The transect walks undertaken with farmers in L5 revealed how the literate, better-off and more powerful villagers impose themselves as major interlocutors to outsiders. This shows how carefully target groups should be chosen.

Biases can also arise when certain persons inhibit and interfere with group discussions. For instance, when we asked the school children to draw a map of the village, their teachers kept giving them suggestions. The outcome was that, besides buildings and institutions relevant to them, the children also drew their teachers' houses very big. These kinds of problems can be easily solved if different persons or groups can work independently.

Finally, language barriers represent a very real obstacle. During our fieldwork we had to talk through an interpreter. Sometimes, when people did not speak the official language, a double translation was necessary. However well a translator is chosen, information will inevitably get lost.

- **Conclusions**

The results have confirmed that PRA is an appropriate approach to explore knowledge at the grassroots level as well as to enhance the self-awareness of the local people involved.

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Many PRA methods proved to be useful in the particular context of resettled peoples, and good results could also be expected from other techniques such as historical profiles and trend analysis. However, starting from the basic assumption that the aim is to discover 'rooted knowledge', one might question the usefulness of PRA methods in a setting where migration has occurred and social, economic and cultural disruption has taken place. One could claim that the knowledge and perceptions of people who do not yet have much experience of their new environment might not be revealing.

I would rather argue that in this specific context of general upheaval, PRA represents a particularly useful approach to understand how people react to such disruption and develop new coping strategies. Furthermore, PRA offers an essential approach to development contexts characterised by 'project dependency', because it introduces a valuable external stimulus favouring self-awareness and a crucial means for encouraging people to become self-reliant.

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NOTE

The findings, interpretations and conclusions contained in this paper reflect the author's views only and should neither be attributed to CISP nor to UNICEF.