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Participation in Scotland: the rural development forestry programme

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• Introduction

The use of RRA and PRA in developed countries has been increasing over the last few years, and includes examples from Austria (Kievelitz and Forster, 1994); Switzerland (Scheuermeier and Ison, 1992), Australia (Ampt and Ison, 1989; Dunn 1993), North America (Gaventa and Lewis, 1991) and the UK (Cresswell, 1992) on topics ranging from land degradation and farming research to economic education and health. However, few of the studies have examined in any detail the application of the methodology and how well it transfers to a developed country. This paper deals with one experience in PRA in the planning of forestry activities in Scotland. On the basis of that experience we also make observations on how far PRA may be more widely applied in the Scottish environment.

• Participation in Scotland

Forestry is a land use with much to offer rural Scotland. However, to date many of the benefits have accrued to interests other than local people, who see the sale of forest resources to local buyers increasing, small nurseries and sawmills closing down, and a decline in local employment prospects. It was in this context that the idea of using PRA in Scotland was introduced by the Scottish Rural Development Forestry Programme¹. The aim was to give local people a voice in these changes.

The first activity undertaken, for which Reforesting Scotland was given sole

responsibility, was to produce four case studies analysing different local situations regarding rural people and forestry around Scotland. PRA was chosen for this analysis. A major reason for this choice was that NGOs' attempts to introduce change had failed to convince policy makers in the past. We felt that presenting local people's aspirations would be a far more convincing approach in signalling that change was required.

The most widespread form of public participation in natural resource matters in Scotland at present is through the Town and Country Planning system. This is limited to the right to make comments concerning development proposals and further limited by the fact that many aspects of natural resource management fall outside the scope of planning legislation. Other participatory initiatives, such as *Planning for Real* (Gibson, 1994) have been used with great success in urban environments, but whether and how they can be adapted to encompass the diverse problems of rural areas has yet to be demonstrated.

Those involved in this programme who also have experience of overseas rural development forestry work felt that many issues facing the project were similar to those being tackled by many development projects working in developing countries. These include:

- enabling a process through which local people themselves analyse their situation; and,
- including the options and increasing the confidence of those who don't normally get involved in discussing local issues.

¹ Run jointly by three NGOs: Reforesting Scotland, Rural Forum and Highlands and Islands Forum

Thus there was no reason why PRA would not be an equally effective approach in a Northern setting.

Some of the NGOs involved were unconvinced about the value of PRA as an appropriate approach in this context. However, as described below, they too became swept up in the process and realised the value of the approach.

The case studies

The case studies were conducted from March to June 1994. They were facilitated by different combinations of people at different times. For example a team of 25 people, which included 12 forestry civil servants from India, facilitated the Laggan case study. The studies thus served two purposes; to stimulate a participatory process of analysis and discussion with local people and an opportunity for practical experience for trainees. We were honest with the community about the aims and limitations of the study right from the start. It would have been unrealistic to make false promises that the work would stimulate change. All we could provide was an assurance that we would present people's aspirations and ideas that emerged during the PRA to the policy makers.

The work was conducted in four communities.

Laggan is a small village in the Central Highlands where a group of people from the Community Association have been trying to buy a block of neglected Forestry Commission² forest so that they can manage it to provide employment and income for people in the local area.

Tomintoul is situated to the east of the Cairngorm mountains. Most of the land and forest around Tomintoul is owned by the state. The land is managed for tourism and recreation and local people have no involvement in administering its use. People would like to have more access and control over the land and are looking for ways in which to achieve this.

The third community, Carsphairn, is a hilly sheep farming area in south-west Scotland which has undergone rapid commercial

afforestation over the past 50 years. Anti-forestry feeling in the area is strong and people want to gain more local benefits from the forests and have a greater say in decision making over planting and management.

Finally, in the crofting³ community of Borve on the Isle of Skye, crofters were frustrated in their efforts to initiate an afforestation scheme by the owner of the land. They subsequently joined together to buy the whole township from the landowner, and now plan to go ahead with a tree planting scheme on some of their common grazing land. This is a communal venture in an area which in the past has had very little interest in or tradition of planting trees.

The process

All the case studies followed roughly the same process. Having introduced the aims and approach of the study to local contacts in the villages, a village meeting was held in a local venue (a village hall or a large room in someone's house). Local people were separated into small task groups to produce social maps, land use maps, seasonal calendars, Venn diagrams, timelines and livelihood analysis charts. These meetings took place in a cheerful informal atmosphere with plenty of tea and cakes, after which local people presented their work back to each other for comment.

The following two days consisted of more focused semi-structured interviews with individuals in their own houses (both those who attended the village meeting and those who didn't) and then a final presentation of information obtained by the facilitators back to local people for cross-checking and comments. During the process different potential benefits that would be derived from local forests were suggested by many of the people. At the end of the process people voted for those benefits they felt would be most important. Each person had a certain number of beans to vote with which they distributed anonymously.

² The agency which runs and manages the state forest land.

³ Crofting is a system of small-scale farming peculiar to the marginal lands of Scotland.

Table 1. Ranking of the benefits Borve Township can gain from its forestry proposals

Benefit	No. of Votes	Rank
Shelter for livestock	16	1
Pleasant surroundings	12	2
Employment	11	3
Ease of sheep management	10	4
Timber products for local use	8	5
Income from timber	7	6
Wood-based local enterprise	6	7
Wildlife conservation	4	8
Increased tourism potential	3	9

Table 1 is an outcome of this ranking exercise when conducted in Borve. The table shows that priorities are based on enhancing current farming activities and creating jobs to bring people to, or keep more people in the area.

All the methods worked well and the mapping was especially good. Most groups were very enthusiastic and inventive, others more hesitant. Getting people along to meetings proved the most difficult part but even with this, an amazing amount of information and insight was obtained in a very short time and the PRA was considered a success. At the end, all the maps and diagrams were left with the case study communities. This was a symbolic gesture to demonstrate that unlike more conventional research processes, the information collected was for the use of the local people.

After the Laggan case study we held a slide show to describe the process to the previously sceptical NGOs. Laggan residents with links to these NGOs reinforced the view that the participatory approach had been a success.

• **Sustaining the process**

In November, a national follow-up seminar was held. Participants included representatives from each of the case study locations, community groups and local forestry initiatives, forestry and rural development NGOs. The aim of the seminar was to create a level playing-field on

which policy-makers and local people could meet and communicate. To achieve this, the local people presented the case study findings themselves. The impact of this on policy makers was likely to be greater than if the researchers or NGO staff had made the presentation on their behalf. The presentations provoked much discussion and analysis of the opportunities and constraints of the various forestry initiatives.

Local workshops for local forest action planning are to be held in the case study locations and also in new areas. They will provide support and advice for local people in the planning of their initiatives, and PRA will again be the approach taken.

Constraints and opportunities for using PRA in Scotland

Opportunities

The use of PRA enabled Reforesting Scotland to allow local people in the case study locations to analyse the situation themselves and to include the opinions and increase the confidence of those who don't normally get involved in discussing local issues. It was found that the approach used was able to get beyond the one or two community activists who tend to do most of the talking at public meetings (Box 1).

BOX 1

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN LAGGAN

Whilst conducting the PRA in Laggan, it became clear that the local people were deeply divided in their opinions about the forestry initiative. About half of the people present were not in favour. The PRA process enabled people to analyse their livelihoods more objectively than they would without the presence of outsiders. Forestry was deliberately not highlighted as a particular issue during this process. During this analysis, it emerged that people were not opposed to the forestry proposal itself - they were against it because of the personalities involved and the domination of the process by certain key activists. The PRA process did not permit domination by these assertive individuals and so ordinary people could make their views heard.

Another advantage of the PRA approach was that it allowed local people to analyse historical changes in local resource management. Complex communal systems of resource use and land tenure existed in many parts of Scotland 300 years ago, but there have been many changes, in particular the dramatic and traumatic Highland Clearances to make way for large sheep farms. Traditional resource management systems have subsequently largely been lost. There are some who believe we need to return to the traditional resource management systems if rural areas are to have a sustainable future.

However, the past cannot be recreated and the Programme is attempting to facilitate a fusion of lessons learned in rural development forestry overseas with a revisiting of old Scottish systems.

Everybody involved agrees that in this fusion process the knowledge and aspirations of rural people are the key to success.

The methods helped to spur people on to further action and created wider local involvement, exposed conflicts, the constraints and opportunities for greater local involvement, and presented an opportunity for many people to put forward their ideas for the future potential for forestry in the areas.

Constraints

Notwithstanding these opportunities, there are also a number of constraints to the wider use of PRA in Scotland. Firstly, there is no history of participation in Scotland. People instead tend to be reserved when faced with authority. As a result, many PRA techniques can be alien to people. Furthermore, public meetings are very unpopular fora, widely regarded as boring and

futile, and so are rarely attended by ordinary people.

Another problem is that at present there are few trained PRA facilitators in Scotland. The skills needed are ones that are difficult to teach - people must learn by practice and making mistakes, but to do this there must be practical opportunities to learn. Organisations which can act locally need to develop and train their staff for participation and funding bodies must provide the resources for this to happen.

Finally, in many organisations in Scotland are reluctant to incorporate PRA as an approach. They argue that it is not acceptable to transfer a methodology used in the Third World to a country like Scotland. They argue that people are more literate, are likely to be offended by being asked to play games, and do not depend so directly on natural resources.

• Conclusions

On balance, however, there is demand for more PRA work in Scotland. The Scottish Rural Development Forestry Programme will continue using PRA and developing its participatory approaches as the programme progresses. There has also been a lot of interest shown by other Scottish government agencies and NGOs in the case studies and the PRA approach used. Further training sessions will be run.

Obviously there is the need, with all this interest, to ensure that all activities carried out under the title of 'PRA' can be considered good practice. This will require a critical amount of reflection and self analysis on the part of the PRA facilitators, while at the same time being positive about the process and convincing the many sceptics of the potential of PRA for Scottish situations. Not an easy task, but one

that those involved in are taking seriously. It is also acknowledged that changing institutional attitudes and working methods will be a slow process, but those involved are prepared for a long haul.

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NOTE

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