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Some notes on conducting PRA training in Nepal

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• Introduction

In recent years in many developing countries PRA has gained increasing popularity among NGOs as a powerful technique to involve local people in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating development projects. Nepal is no exception. Increasingly, the interest of donor agencies in participatory approaches has led many professionals and trainers to conduct PRA training here in Nepal. But they would, certainly, be deeply hurt if they knew that many ex-participants of those PRA trainings argue that they would never suggest any one to participate in PRA training in future. This is, indeed, a serious matter. If anyone is to be blamed for this, we the trainers should appear on top of the list. This is sour and difficult to digest. But providing PRA training has become a 'bread earner' for many of us and lack of seriousness among trainers is a grave matter.

Nonetheless, the purpose of this paper is neither to count the strengths of PRA, nor to make attempts to change attitudes of those ex-participants who have already acquired negative attitudes towards PRA methods. This paper has been prepared in the realisation of the need to share training experiences among trainers. We report on a PRA training course that we gave recently to the field staff of World Neighbours and its collaborating local NGOs - Baudha-Bahunipati Family Welfare Project, Samaj Sewa Samuha, Tamakoshi Sewa Samiti, and the Nepal Agroforestry Foundation. The training was conducted at Hinguwapati, a village in Kavrepalanchowk District, Nepal in December 1993.

• On participants

In this training the participants were very heterogenous in terms of experience, socio-economic background, educational qualifications, position in the organisations and so on. Often trainers do not like to train heterogenous groups. In the beginning it seemed a challenge for us, but we came to realise that a heterogenous group of participants is an advantage for conducting PRA training. In our view, sharing experiences among the participants was a factor that contributed to the success of the training. For this it is essential that trainers meet some prospective participants beforehand to assess their needs, expectations and knowledge of PRA. Course materials should be prepared in advance, taking into account the needs of such diverse groups.

• On entry to the subject

Before starting the training course our major concern was how to introduce PRA to the participants. Should we start by defining PRA, or by discussing why PRA is conducted? In both cases, the danger loomed that response from the participants would be minimal and that we would be delivering a one-way lecture, counting the strengths of the PRA, as if we were suggesting a new approach to replace the old traditional one. We wanted to avoid the emergence of this top-down situation.

After hours of discussion amongst ourselves, we decided to start the session by asking the participants to list the characteristics of development workers who they feel are responsible for the unsatisfactory performance of many rural development projects. To our satisfaction this question proved a good entry point to the PRA training. The participants

listed a number of practices/behaviours that we could easily relate to the professional biases often described by Robert Chambers. We passed nearly a whole morning session discussing these issues which enabled us to then introduce PRA. The participants seemed so convinced about the need for a participatory approach that their participation in the following training sessions was fully motivated and exciting for us.

The purpose of this argument is not to suggest that the question we asked is appropriate and should be used as a model or blue-print to start a training course on PRA. It is obvious that the question depends on the nature of participants and situations. But we do want to argue that it is beneficial to start PRA training by not entering directly into the subject, but with a question such as the above so as to motivate participants as to the value of learning PRA methods. A hasty introduction to the subject might lessen the interest of the participants.

• On the training session

We have observed that in Nepal, PRA training courses last anything from 3 to 15 days. Of course, the duration of training depends on the subject areas to be covered, the nature of participants and so on. However, a long PRA training seems rather a waste of resources and confusing for the participants. For development practitioners or field staff who have no earlier exposure to PRA methods, an initial training of 5-7 days seems optimal. It is our contention that one can never learn PRA methods unless one practises them. In the beginning, only a few methods should be introduced and participants should be encouraged to practise them. Indeed, PRA is a new culture to many people, demanding unlearning of many things that they have been doing/practising for number of years.

For field practice participants were taken to the settlement of Judi gaon. Judi gaon has 58 households, most of which (more than 90%) belong to the *Danuwar* tribe. Although the villagers were earlier briefed about the purpose of the training, their participation and cooperation during the training period was exciting, encouraging and motivating.

Following a set pattern of discussion, practice and reflection each day gave the participants confidence in their work and training. Participants were asked to carry out triangulation each day with the farmers before using a new method. Reminding participants regularly about the basic guidelines for conducting PRA is important. Because the core of good PRA is based on specified behaviours and attitudes, these should be restated and reinforced many times during the training session.

• On closing the training session

The closing event is very important for every training session. Our prime concern over the training period was how to close the training session so that participants would go back to their jobs, not only with continued motivation for PRA, but also committed to practising it honestly.

Firstly, discussing dangers for PRA was a good start that made all participants realise the potential problems. Secondly, we told the participants that they were now the graduates of the PRA training and therefore, eligible for receiving PRA's *Mul Mantra* (*Mul Mantra* is a Nepali term which approximately means fundamentals to PRA that one should not forget over one's life as *mantra*). All the participants were delighted and they seemed eager to hear that *Mantra*. For this we gave them two words: REAL and LEARN.

	R	-	RESPECT FOR THE PEOPLE
	E	-	ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO SHARE IDEAS
REAL	A	-	ASK QUESTIONS
	L	-	LISTEN CAREFULLY
	L	-	LISTEN
	E	-	ENCOURAGE
LEARN	A	-	ASK
	R	-	REVIEW
	N	-	NOTE

Because the training was conducted in Nepali, we tried to find Nepali equivalent terminologies for the above terms. However, we could not find a better translation that would really solve our problem. Reluctantly, this time we had given this *Mantra* in English. This was liked very much by the participants. It really touched their heart. They pledged to

practise it all over the rest of their life. Our search for the equivalent terms in Nepali continues.

Thirdly, in response to increasing demands for a manual by the participants, we decided to distribute a manual for PRA methods - said to be used by the Krishi Gram Vikas Kendra of India. The book was completely blank except the last page which contained the message:

"USE YOUR OWN BEST JUDGEMENT AT ALL TIMES"

Showing the cover page, we told the participants that they could ask World Neighbours to buy a book for each of them, should they think that the book was useful. Each of them was given one minute time to go over the book. Many participants were surprised. How could they assess the value of such a big book within a minute? We insisted that the book can be evaluated in one minute. Upon the circulation of the book all participants except one were delighted and happy. Since we had no way to know how participants would feel react, and whether they would take it seriously or as a joke, we had been a bit concerned and were pleased with the outcome.

However, one participant seemed angry that we were making a fool of him. His anger was a shock for us. We tried our best to explain our reasons for handing out the book. Our intention had been to stress that everyone should take responsibility for what he does. At the end he was convinced and we were pleased that we were able to further enhance the value of the training. Had he not expressed his dissatisfaction, we might not have an opportunity to further reinforce the idea what we wanted to emphasise at the end. Indeed, it was a good lesson for us. We learned many things from this last exercise. Our sincerest thanks go to him.

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