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## Some reflections of a new PRA participant: the development manager

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### • Introduction

June 28th 1993 - cloudy weather in Rayatwadi and Dhaba villages, Betul District in Madhya Pradesh. Place - an 18th century resthouse without electricity near these villages. Seven of us were arguing over the various options available for understanding the villagers' problems and for coming to some possible solutions to help them to help themselves. Several partners were involved: the government (Forest Department, Woman and Child Development Department, Water Supply and Health and Education Departments and others), the villagers themselves and the PRA facilitators. I was the principal orchestrator, whose role was to encourage the PRA enthusiasts to use the methods (social mapping, wealth ranking, transects and so on) carefully and try to identify the main problems in the short period of four days.

The aim was to liaise between government officials and the villagers to reveal how the villagers feel about government programmes, how useful or useless they are. It was important to ensure that the villagers' expectations were not raised to believe that PRA would solve all their problems. This was a difficult task, but quite enjoyable since it revealed the mysticism, realism, romanticism and pragmatism of PRA.

### • Social mapping

For the first time I was exposed to a social mapping exercise, and this raised several questions for experts in this method. It is true that the mapping exercise helps to break the ice and brings the villagers closer. But it is

impossible to continue mapping everything about village life. Village life consists of 'village inside' and 'village outside'. It may be difficult to map the components of 'village inside' life, which include:

- personal problems;
- diseases;
- agonies; and,
- sorrows associated with death and disability.

However social mapping is quite useful, and indeed essential, for depicting 'village outside' life, which includes resources such as:

- farmers' fields;
- forests;
- rivers;
- ponds; and,
- wells and handpumps etc.

But we must be careful not to overdo the mapping exercise to the point where the villagers lose interest. We therefore must be aware of the right point at which to stop the exercise and start talking, rather than be slaves to PRA tools. When government officials are present, mapping can be a threatening experience for villagers. Sensitive issues such as encroachment onto forest land and the misuse of public places which can all be depicted on maps, may not be admitted to by villagers.

Secondly, what use are these maps? What can we use them for? Do government officials value them? Can they take corrective action based on these maps? Is hanging them in village *choupals* useful for villagers and visitors alike to see them? Can this map be made a legal map in the sense that disputes

(particularly encroachments onto public lands) are settled on the basis of this map? As development managers we have to use them for planning village development.

### • **Wealth ranking**

Wealth ranking is valuable for getting to know the poverty status of Indian families. However the Indian poverty line as defined by planners, and the poverty line that emerges as a result of PRA exercises, do not match.

For example in the village of Dhaba the villagers listed as many as 30 criteria to identify the poor; land asset was only one of these criteria. To illustrate the significance of this we can take the case of a widow who had lands but could not cultivate. She was identified by the villagers as poor. However the Indian poverty line would rank her as non-poor, and she would not qualify for any benefits under anti-poverty programmes.

This has policy implications. How do we reconcile the officially-recognised poor and the PRA-recognised poor? Standardisation is unavoidable in a large area and when a mass of poverty-level families have to be identified. Although Indian planners swear to people's participation in identifying the poor families in their massive IRDP, the reality of the situation is that the poor are identified by the Block Development Officer (BDO) by applying land assets criteria. This is where the wealth ranking and the BDO's approach conflict. Can the BDO be a party to the PRA exercise and select through the PRA poor families for anti-poverty action? PRA methods are very 'people-friendly'. We also have to make them 'state-friendly' if we want to make state resources go in the right direction. Otherwise we end up romanticising PRA tools.

### • **Conclusion**

My final question is where do we go from here? Has anything positive happened in the villages where people participated in PRAs? Has planning and implementation qualitatively improved, have state, people and PRA facilitators become continuously involved in development activities? Is the life of the villagers any better than before? We need to

know more about these to consolidate the gains of PRA and to strengthen it.

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#### NOTE

This article reflects the personal views of the author and not of his organisation, nor of the PRA facilitators.