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Training village analysts: from PRA methods to process

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• Background

This paper discusses the experiences of an NGO, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) in training village analysts in participatory appraisal and planning. It outlines how their training leads to effective and sustainable development programmes.

AKRSP works with village communities in Gujarat State, western India. It was established in 1985 to promote and create an environment in which village communities, through their own village institutions (VIs) could manage their local natural resources in a productive, equitable and sustainable manner. The process uses participatory appraisal and planning for the formation of village institutions to implement natural resource management plans prepared by the villagers.

The villagers are encouraged to develop a local cadre of volunteers who develop expertise in appraisal, planning, implementation, management and monitoring and to also build functional links between the state, NGOs, cooperatives and financial institutions in the area. These volunteers are accountable to the VIs who pay them performance-related incentives. The VIs are in the process of federating into a regional body which will act as a support organisation to local VIs. It will spearhead the development of new VIs and the evolution of functional and management expertise at the village level.

The role of AKSRP in this process is mainly one of support:

- it initially provides training in appraisal and planning for volunteers selected by the community;

- it facilitates the formation of VIs and enables the community to assess the support it will require to strengthen them; and
- it tries to provide training support in technical, financial, management and monitoring areas.

The emphasis is not on creating a large support organisation with expertise in all areas, but rather on encouraging villagers to volunteer to become 'para-professionals' in different areas depending on their interests and abilities. The AKRSP training strategy has been to involve itself mainly in the training of village trainers and encourages them to conduct training programmes for new trainees. This has enabled AKRSP to concentrate on a wide range of issues and facilitate the faster spread of the programme.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is the major training methodology used to enable the volunteers to become village analysts, managers and agents of institutional change. PRA increases the volunteers' capacity to interact with all sections of the village community and to develop a common perspective of village natural resources development. This also aids the development of functional leaders in the community who are able to carry out planning more objectively. This is in contrast to traditional leaders who mostly develop plans according to the needs of government departments and external institutions.

• Designing training programmes at the village level

We now describe some of the aspects which are considered when designing a programme

for training village volunteers in planning, appraisal and analysis:

- Most of the training takes place in the village. The training group includes representatives from ten villages in the area and is based on the practical problems of the village where the training is held. The VI is encouraged to use the training programme as an opportunity for programme development and to provide VI meetings as a platform for testing the ideas and skills developed by the volunteers.
- The training places a strong emphasis on problem-solving and decision-making. Problems are discussed and alternative solutions appraised. For example, the problem of low agricultural productivity is discussed by volunteers, who are encouraged to analyse the reasons for low productivity in different household farms. This allows them to appreciate the different constraints facing individual households and helps them to develop specific plans with the people.
- Training is iterative, rather than a one-off process, so that volunteers are able to analyse certain issues in detail and then report the findings back to each other.
- Significant time is devoted to sharing experiences amongst the group. This ensures that lateral learning occurs between the villages. It also helps villagers to develop confidence in analysing and finding solutions to regional problems, by giving a broad base to their expertise. Furthermore, it is useful in creating a regional body of expertise for mutual support.
- The skills of analysis, planning and appraisal are further consolidated through a number of exercises in the village facilitated by the volunteers. They are encouraged to make presentations to the members of the VI as well as to each other. This ensures wide consultation and the development of skills before development programmes are taken up. It also ensures that the members of the VI are included in the process and allows them to evaluate the performance of the village volunteers.

- Every six months the work done by the volunteers is evaluated by the VIs and by the other volunteers. This process is facilitated by AKRSP and linked with the payment of incentives to the volunteers by the VIs and taking up further development programmes in the village.

• **Process of village level training**

We now describe the major steps of a training programme for village volunteers especially concerned with watershed management. The process is divided into a number of stages.

Introductory phase

The VI is asked to nominate a group of three or four volunteers for training, preferably from varied wealth backgrounds (defined in terms of farm size and land ownership). The selected volunteers are asked to carry out 'test' exercises in their own village before participating in the training programme. They are given the choice of using verbal or visual methods for collecting information. These enable the volunteers to develop analytical abilities and help them to prepare for the course, which greatly increases the effectiveness of the training programme. Some example of test exercises include:

- inventory of soil and water conservation practices used by the people, and their economic returns;
- local soil classification and taxonomy;
- classification of households based on their dependence on common property resources and fuelwood consumption patterns; and.
- classification of lands by productivity.

The training programme starts with presentations by participants of their experiences. This enables trainees to talk about their village's specific problems and helps them to develop confidence in presentation and analysis. This process of initial presentation also creates an interactive environment for the training, avoids a lecture format and encourages interaction. This is followed by group exercises to develop group dynamics and teamwork. Peer group feedback

from these exercises allows trainees to look critically at their own behaviour.

Next there is a brief introduction to the methods, using slides, charts and illustrations. All the methods are discussed in relation to an issue, problem or decision. After the description of each method the participants are asked to practice them with a group of villagers. This helps them become familiar with the methods and to analyse the problems related to the resource they are studying. An example of just such an exercise could be mapping the productivity of private agricultural lands and analysing the reasons for variations in productivity.

Appraisal phase

The second phase of the programme concentrates on aggregation, appraisal and planning. Here trainees become involved in developing options for natural resource management. They are encouraged to make presentations to the different groups in the village, aggregate village natural resource management plans and conduct discussions on the feasibility of these plans. They also conduct talks on how these plans would contribute to the community and whether a VI should be set up to implement them. This helps the host village to develop its plan and also equips the volunteers to carry out similar exercises in the future.

Each volunteer is asked to give verbal or written feedback on what they have learnt from the programme, the problems they encountered and in which areas they feel more support would be needed in future. At this stage the volunteers are encouraged to work out with each other ways of providing mutual support in their future work. This initiates a support system to encourage the sustainability of the process.

Next each team conducts appraisals with limited support from AKRSP, although AKRSP participates in some cases as an observer. Neighbouring village volunteers are also encouraged to observe. Doing an exercise independently enables volunteers to develop confidence in their own villages and increases their analytical capacity. It also helps them to identify problems faced in their villages.

This is followed by a feedback and refresher training programme in which presentations are made by all the participants about the exercises in the village, describing the issues discussed and the problems faced. Active discussion among the participants is encouraged to facilitate critical self-awareness and to develop networking between the volunteers. Discussions are also held on how to solve the problems encountered in appraisal and planning.

The volunteers, on their return to the village, complete the village planning exercise jointly with the VI. They are supervised by the master extension volunteers in carrying out the analysis. At this stage some volunteers who are also trained in technical aspects of watershed management, conduct topical appraisals in watersheds on specific technologies and practices and work out a programme of watershed development on a micro-watershed and village basis.

Selection of master extension volunteers

During the training the volunteers who prove to be good facilitators are identified as potential trainers by the group. These are known as master extension volunteers. Once selected, the master extension volunteers are then trained as trainers, during which they are encouraged to design training programmes and develop training material using simple language to illustrate local problems. They are also taught how to handle audio visual equipment. In addition they are encouraged to work out the management aspects of training programmes. They then conduct a training programme for new village volunteers, during which AKRSP staff act as observers and make critical comments to the village trainers to improve their training skills.

Training for programme implementation, management and monitoring

The appraisal phase is followed by training volunteers in the use of participatory methods for the implementation, management and monitoring of the programmes. This ensures that skills in using the methods are further consolidated and that they can be related to all

stages of the programme cycle. Extension volunteers are encouraged to be aware of any groups that may have been excluded during the exercises. Certain material produced during the appraisal phase, for example productivity maps, are used as baselines, and the volunteers are encouraged to collect impact information using a similar framework. New methods, such as impact diagrams which assess the effect of new issues, are also introduced to the group.

• **Implications for development**

The process described above takes about three to six months in a project cycle of five to seven years. It requires high investments in training and human resource development. The end product is a local cadre of village analysts and functional leaders who can take up the responsibility of initiating development process, village institution development and ultimately the management of development programmes.

From our experience, the initial investment made in developing a local body of village analysts comes in handy during the implementation and management phase of the programme. A good example is the use of well-being ranking classification by the village volunteers to plan employment programmes (giving preference to the economically weakest households in the village) and using it for better targeting in the event of scarce resources. Extension volunteers also use some of these methods to monitor their field visits and coverage of their services to the members of the VI. They also develop their own monitoring indicators and methods.

However this process of intensive training would not be sustainable if it was not followed by a process of action and decision making, leading to practical outcomes for the village community. People take more of an interest in developing their own capacity and are more willing to commit themselves if the initial appraisal and planning process is matched by the delegation and decentralisation of both resources and management.

Our experience has shown that the cost of running such development programmes is lower, the speed and scale of development is

faster and the development is more equitable. However, if you look at the history of most development programmes, rarely do they spend the first six months on these aspects. Even the programmes which start with the objective of allowing people to participate in appraisal and planning, end up using RRA (and not PRA) and professionals continue to analyse and decide for the people.

The main reason why the participation of people in analysis is not attempted or sustained is because most trainers are not concerned with the institution building aspects and are more concerned with getting the programmes started. Since empowerment and building institutional capacity are not considered major objectives of development programmes, most professionals end up using the village community members primarily in data collection and continue to analyse information and take decisions based on the information thus collected.

• **Constraints and problems**

If creating village analysts is so critical to the sustainability of development programmes, why is it not given adequate weighting by the development authorities? There are a number of reasons for this:

- The major constraint is the difficulty of developing training programmes which demystify the skills of analysis.
- The majority of the trainers, although keen to do training programmes at headquarters in town are often not so keen to spend time in villages conducting field-based training. This leads to the playing down of the field component and the participation of mainly NGO staff in such training programmes.
- Professionals often feel threatened when village volunteers start asserting themselves and innovating. Most trainers are not used to interactive learning and are unprepared for the increase in the analytical powers of village volunteers.
- And finally, training is considered as a line item in the budgets, and the skills are not linked with the decision-making framework of the development programmes.

It is important that we recognise that unless we spend enough time and resources on training and developing village analysts, and also on increasingly using them as trainers in development programmes, these programmes will be unsustainable. Participation and PRA will remain empty rhetoric. There is a strong case for investing more in training village analysts and trainers as opposed to the development of a body of external professionals who continue to dominate the decision-making process.

At present the picture is very discouraging. Most development programmes invest huge amounts of resources on external consultants who advise people on what they should do and how they should enable people to participate. One example is the development of geographical information systems (GIS) which require huge investments and external inputs. By spending just a fraction of such resources on training village analysts and developing local information systems for planning and decision making, the need for high flying consultants would be obviated. But are we prepared to make major reversals in the way we work?

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