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Participatory methods: precipitating or avoiding conflict?

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• Introduction

Some of the articles appearing in this issue of *PLA Notes* and elsewhere indicate that the use of PRA methodology does not provide an adequate understanding of the social relations, and especially the tensions between various social groups in a community. As PRA tries to build consensus in the community at the end of the appraisal process, the complexity of social relationships, which can inhibit community action and articulation of joint priorities and subsequently joint action, are said to be overlooked, creating a false sense of a community willing to cooperate. A related issue often mentioned is that PRA as a methodology is not geared towards highlighting and resolving conflicts within the community.

This article is based on our own experience and those of others who have used PRA for a long term process of local institutional development. First we describe some factors which inhibit many practitioners from using PRA as part of an effective process which recognises and handles conflict as an inherent component of participatory development. Using examples from India we then illustrate situations where the use of PRA has led to conflicts and describe how the process was managed in different institutional contexts.

• Moving beyond appraisals

PRA is often interpreted narrowly as the use of appraisal methods leading to the production of a village plan and a final village meeting indicating community consensus. This has prevented many practitioners from exploiting the full potential of the process. For many of

us PRA is a part of a long term complex process of engagement involving negotiations, bargaining, dialogue and conflict resolution. Unfortunately most writing on these issues is done by Western academics who use PRA methods for a very short time, mainly during appraisals (5 to 7 days), and who are generally absent when negotiation and bargaining takes place and conflicts surface. Also, most researchers are more interested in extracting information and have short processes of engagement. For most of these people, the production of a glossy report is sufficient to build their careers. They have little stake in observing and handling conflict as it emerges, due to the short term nature of their engagement and low commitment to action as result of their focus on predominantly on research.

• The quality and intensity of facilitation

The use of any type of participatory methods in handling conflict situations is dependent on the quality and intensity of facilitation. At the risk of repeating ourselves, we reiterate that intensive and sustained interaction is required to facilitate the process of negotiation, bargaining and conflict resolution, long after the initial appraisal is over. While it may be relatively easy for anyone to facilitate the use of PRA methods, the skills needed for the facilitation of negotiation and conflict management are very different. Having said that, there are many examples of PRA adaptation for negotiation and conflict management in an institutional context of long term engagement and local institutional development. As most good facilitators of these processes do not enjoy writing, academics everywhere have a field day writing

articles based on only limited understanding and capacity for facilitation.

- **The institutional objective**

The management of any participatory process also depends on the objective and mission of the facilitating institution. If a support organisation values empowerment of the poor, and is willing to make it a major objective it will have to take risk, allow conflict to surface and then enable the marginalised groups to manage the process. If the objective of the support institution is to develop an overall village institution it will try to create a consensus between various groups. Both require negotiation but the first might lead to conflict and the second might lead to a compromise. Most external donors and short term consultants have a low capacity to take risk within the shorter time frames in which they operate. They thus end up using PRA methods for very narrow ends like production of plans and reports and are rarely able to initiate a long term process of institutional development.

Box 1 details an experience where a participatory process led to conflict and describes how it was managed.

Other examples of the use of PRA for catalysing negotiations on issues of conflict and equity relate to sharing water resources from lift irrigation projects in some villages of Bharuch district in Gujarat. Initial appraisal processes in some of these villages revealed that even though a number of households were landless, they are involved in farming as share-croppers or as tenant farmers. However, since they own no land of their own, they are not eligible to join the lift irrigation cooperative societies, which means that they have no access to the irrigation water. Given its limited availability, especially during the summer season and at times during winter, water has to be rationed according to the water rights of the cooperative members. Owning no land, coupled with no water rights would have further deteriorated the condition of the landless. After the appraisal process and

subsequent negotiations about the resultant increase in income from making irrigation water available, the landed farmers were ready to share water equally from the lift irrigation programme. This enabled the landless to sell water to the farmers and negotiate share-cropping arrangements where landless could get a higher share by share-cropping as they provided labour and water, two key inputs for increasing production. This could not have been achieved if the facilitating organisation did not have equity as an important objective. This enabled it to use PRA to precipitate negotiations on implications of the process of equal sharing of water.

During the appraisal process in one of these villages where a lift irrigation project was being proposed, it was realised that with only a marginal additional investment the irrigation pipes could easily be extended to cover the small homestead plots used by women to grow one rainfed crop of vegetables and a little maize. The women felt confident that with irrigation they would be able to grow vegetables all year round. Members dug the channels to lay the pipes and the women had access to the irrigation water at the same time as men got it for their main agricultural fields. Conflicts surfaced as men argued that their main crop was more important than the vegetables and other crops grown by the women on their tiny homestead plots. As a result, they argued, women should not be allowed to irrigate their plots till the men had irrigated all their fields. Having no bargaining power with the village men, most of the women lost their winter vegetable crop the first year. During a participatory review of the performance of the irrigation project in the village, the women said that they had lost their crops while the men were rejoicing about the wheat crop they had been able to grow for the first time. The women threatened to withdraw their membership from the irrigation cooperative. With the support from the NGO, a compromise was finally reached, whereby women members would be treated equally to male members and would have the same rotation of turns, provided

BOX 1

PARTICIPATION LEADING TO VIOLENCE AND DEATH

Devalia in Surendranagar District of Gujarat, India is a highly caste stratified village. Rajputs have traditionally owned the large fields and control most common property resources, including water. Gadvis, with their small land holdings form the lowest rung of the local caste hierarchy. Rajputs control most surface water resources in an area which is categorised by low rainfall and cyclical droughts. As a result most Gadvis find it difficult to grow one rainfed crop annually and end up working as labourers for the Rajputs at very low wages.

During a participatory appraisal of the natural resources in the village, facilitated by an NGO, the village map showed that the Gadvis had little access to the surface water resources. The Rajputs explained that improving surface water resources was a priority for them and also indicated the need to dig new wells on their lands. The Gadvis prepared a separate map and showed where they wanted to construct a community well, adding that they were willing to contribute towards its cost. The NGO engineers then went on a transect walk with the different groups in the community and identified three locations suitable for constructing new wells. One of these was located on land owned by the Gadvi community and the others were on Rajput lands. This information was presented and discussed at the end of the appraisal and the groups were asked to indicate their contribution and their terms of participation in the process.

A complex process of negotiation and bargaining lasting two to three weeks took place between the groups and between the NGO and the groups. The Rajput group told the Gadvi group that they should not contribute any of their resources for constructing the well and should try to seek 100% assistance from the NGO. From their past experience, the Gadvis knew that the Rajputs, due to their links with local politicians and bureaucrats, had usurped most of the external assistance available to the village. The Gadvis decided to contribute 33% of the total cost in cash, to provide voluntary labour for the construction and to take a Bank loan for the remaining amount. This commitment by the Gadvi group forced the Rajputs to agree to similar conditions in a village meeting.

As per the terms of the agreement, the NGO was committed to start supporting the group which was able to collect its cash contribution first and which was prepared to take up management responsibilities. The Gadvis were ready within a fortnight, and given the equity concerns of the NGO, it was felt more appropriate to start with supporting the most marginalised group in the village. The group of seven Gadvis started constructing their community well and struck water within 10 days. They developed a land use plan and map and had started preparations for cultivating in the winter season. The Rajputs was annoyed by the process. They had lost their cheap wage labourers from the Gadvi community as the group was no longer dependent on them for employment. At least six to seven meetings were organised during this period for negotiating and bargaining.

While the Gadvis were still working on their community well, they were ambushed and brutally beaten up by a group of Rajputs one afternoon. Two of the Gadvis died on the spot and others sustained serious injuries. The worst fears of the NGO staff and the Gadvi community had come true. The Rajputs, who held economic and political power, did not want to see the Gadvis improve their economic situation, which would have also meant breaking their ties of dependence with the Rajputs. The NGO facilitators felt horrified about having initiated the PRA and supporting the subsequent action in Devalia without realising its implications. It took some time for the NGO and the Gadvi leaders in Devalia to restart a dialogue on the issue. However the Gadvi community leaders felt that these deaths should not stop the NGO carrying out appraisals separately with their community and initiating similar programmes. Since then the NGO spends more time on facilitating negotiations between different groups in the community before supporting programmes. Tensions still emerge between various groups but there is a better understanding of the consequences and impact on social relations.

Mapping and discussions around maps in Devalia were only a starting point for a complex round of negotiations and action which in this case led to an extreme form of conflict. PRA precipitated the conflict and the process led to violence and death, despite the negotiations. PRA is not a class neutral methodology. It can be used to initiate activism by disadvantaged groups to force action on equity aspects. But it can enable an understanding of differences and conflict between various social groups, and can also be used effectively by sensitive facilitators to manage the conflict in a constructive manner.

all the women were ready to use the irrigation water the same day in order to minimise loss of time and water. There are many other examples of similar negotiations conducted using PRA methods to catalyse discussion on equity issues, often creating conflict in the short run. These involve giving a higher share to disadvantaged groups in employment, ground water budgeting and management, watershed management, allocation of surplus common land to the scheduled castes (socially marginalised and oppressed groups), forest protection by men and women and management of buffer zones in national parks. In most cases the facilitating organisations worked with a longer time frame, the facilitators were experienced and had worked in the facilitating organisation for a long time and the organisation was committed to more equitable processes and institutions and the empowerment of disadvantaged groups.

• **Conclusions**

The present practice of using PRA methods over a short period and mostly in training situations is counterproductive for developing indigenous institutions. The continuous use of external short term consultants and academics who have never managed a development programme or process over a long period results in bad practice. Most critical writing on these issues is based on short term observation or research. It is high time that the resources spent by donors and academic institutions on researching the impact of this bad practice are used instead for sustaining and highlighting examples of good practice where PRA is used as a part of a long term process involving appraisal, negotiation, conflict management and action resulting in development of local capacity for problem solving rather than creating continued dependence on external consultants. Will we continue to make careers from writing about bad practice or can we do something to change the practice?

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