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Getting to grips with the future together': PRA projects in the alpine regions of Switzerland

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• Introduction

This paper describes how PRA has been used in an agricultural context in Switzerland. Its main focus is the most recent PRA project and the methodologies used. It also explores the impact of the PRA eighteen months after it was carried out.

LBL, the Agricultural Extension Centre, links scientific and political institutions with local advisory services and farmers. Its aim is to provide farmers with timely information and advice on improvements for their agricultural processes. In this context, PRAs are becoming a powerful methodology for interacting with the farming community.

Until recently, Swiss farmers did not have to worry about their income since agricultural policy was based on a subsidy system independent of the market. Switzerland pays annually 3500 million SFr in support for its agricultural sector. However, less than 4 per cent of the Swiss population work in agriculture and the remaining 96 per cent of the population are no longer willing to support the old agricultural system. Swiss production costs are high and consumers want prices comparable to other European market prices. A liberalisation of the market and a change of farming philosophy seems inevitable.

In the alpine borderland where trade and industry are scarce, the question of agricultural survival emerges. The solution seems to be found in regionally integrated agriculture, trade, industry and tourism. 'To get to grips with the

future together' is a PRA programme initiated by LBL. It shows promising results in its first five years having identified new options for small scale farmers and rural people.

• PRA in three alpine regions

The most recent PRA was conducted in November 1994. Three rural alpine regions were visited simultaneously during one week by groups of students and more experienced PRA facilitators. Workshops were conducted in Isenthal, Safien and Lungern. Farmers and representatives of the local trade and tourist industry conducted intensive talks about their situation and prospects for the future.

The research teams consisted of 6 representatives of LBL, 2 extensionists, 15 students and 3 teachers from the Swiss technical College of Agriculture in Zollikofen (SIL), 2 social anthropologists and 4 students from the University of Zurich, together with 7 extension officers from Safien, Lungern and Isenthal. Most of the participants were using PRA-methods for the first time.

Crucial to the success of this project was the preparatory work undertaken by LBL and local groups and extension officers from the three alpine regions during the year prior to the workshops. This groundwork was invaluable in motivating local people to participate in the PRA project.

The aim of the PRA was to analyse the status of alpine communities and generate new ideas for the future. The research provided a platform for learning and action and a catalyst for realising the opportunities, hopes, fears and 'crazy ideas' generated by farmers and the local trade and

tourist industry. However, it became clear that PRA has to be part of a much bigger and more complex regional development process and is not an end in itself.

• Methodology

After a two day training in the methods and philosophy of PRA, the three research teams left for their destinations in the Alps. Seven days of practical PRA-field work were carried out. An initial meeting was arranged between extension officers, local working groups and facilitators. Transect walks were undertaken in the villages, which provided first impressions of both the potential and problems of the particular region.

Subsequently, semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were carried out, by pairs of outsiders, with 25-30 local farming families and representatives of the local trade and tourist industry. The SSIs focused on future projects and ideas. The interview teams were changed for each SSI. This had several advantages:

- promoted interdisciplinary teams;
- promoted mixed teams of women and men;
- different teams led to different questions, discussions, reflections and, ultimately, more viewpoints (triangulation);
- anonymity of the results could more easily be ensured (a very important point); and,
- from a training perspective, the opportunity to work with very different personalities was a valuable learning experience.

Each SSI was discussed immediately after completing it. In order to visualize the interview, the main points were highlighted on coloured cards: *green* cards carried opportunities and the possibilities and wishes expressed by our interview partners, *yellow* cards stood for questions and problems, *blue* cards were suggestions and plans for pragmatic action and *pink* cards represented 'crazy ideas'. We explicitly asked local people to express their 'crazy' ideas to induce creative thinking.

In Lungern, evening workshops were held in the first three days of the PRA process. These covered topics suggested by the local extension officers and working groups. In Safien, an additional workshop was held on the Sunday with young people who were working or studying in town during the week. They felt strongly about their home valley and were concerned about its future. Additional group discussions with the youth of the valley highlighted that they felt marginalized because they were not part of the decision making process.

At the end of the week, the PRA entered its final stage: analysing the 500 cards carrying the data generated during the previous days. The cards were grouped into topics. Each general topic was represented on a poster. The four coloured cards gave an immediate idea of problems, hopes, fears, projects and crazy ideas. Box 1 shows the topics generated in this analysis (known as the 'metaplan' or 'card and chart technique', see also Schmidt, this issue).



The results of the project were presented to the local communities on Friday evening. In Safien, two-thirds of the population attended. After poster presentations by various members of the local working group and research team, people enrolled for topics which were of special interest to them. A new and lively communication process began and it was evident that the new projects were in the hands of the local population.

BOX 1

TOPICS RAISED IN SAFIEN

- human relations (communication)
- agricultural production
- manufacturing and marketing of agricultural products
- integrated tourism
- new concepts in the use of living space
- development of local trade
- cultural activities
- safer access roads

TOPICS RAISED IN LUNGERN

- communication
- alternative agricultural production
- promotion of cheese marketing
- combination of farming and tourism
- farm management
- sharing of labour

In Lungern the presentation was carried out exclusively by outsiders. This proved to be a wise decision as the main problems expressed during the week were lack of both political transparency and communication between farmers and the rest of the community. It was not to the liking of everyone present that these problems were discussed in public. Some politicians tried to impose their views on the future of the region. The scale of the conflict between farmers and others interests was only fully recognised a few weeks later when the house of a progressive farmer, who had expressed her feelings in the PRA, was defaced by hostile graffiti slogans.

• **Reflections on PRA in Switzerland**

The large project-teams worked well. Their success may be attributed, in part, to an intense introductory project discussion in the first two days. We are concerned that the careful and vital preparation and support required for such projects may be neglected in scaling-up this process. The quality of the PRA may then suffer and the project could be more of a burden than a help to the local population.

The follow-up to the PRA has still to be developed. The euphoric group forming at the end of each project week has not yet been

supported in a satisfactory way. The outsiders leave and the people and regional extension services are left alone. There are new ideas, hopes and expectations in peoples' minds and an open commitment to change. Yet when the support from outside has gone, a phase of disillusionment can follow. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as it gives the community time to scale their ideas to realistic dimensions.

PRA seems to be efficient in those areas where income is relatively evenly distributed, such as Safien. In Lungern wealth differences are more marked and a small group of individuals were keen to prevent changes to the community. PRA proved useful in providing a new approach to communication among community members. Without PRA and impetus from outsiders, community ideas are hidden and discussion may fail to occur.

• **Long term impacts**

We re-visited Safien in 1996 to see what progress had been made in the eighteen months since the initial PRA week. Our visit (see Box 2) suggests that PRA can initiate longer term changes within communities.

The results of PRA in Switzerland are encouraging: more than 50 per cent of the groups initiated since 1990 are still operational. Most of them focus on local community projects, such as market stalls to sell produce directly from the farmer to the consumer, improving the tourist sector or managing farms during vacations etc.. Some of the 'crazy ideas' seem to have influenced developments, including the production of Bio-Emmental cheese.

BOX 2
REVISITING SAFIEN, MAY 1996

The following topics are still being worked on since the initial PRA:

- Human relations (communication)

A group of 6 people meet regularly to discuss issues. They have organised activities such as game afternoons, a hiking group and are interested in starting a flat sharing community for old people.

- Manufacturing and marketing of agricultural products

A group of six women farmers sell their local specialities (cakes, bread, cheese) to a regional market. The group works with the tourist office to promote information for tourists on where to buy farm products.

- Integrated Tourism

A tourist office has been formed with over 70 members. They undertake a range of activities: information dissemination to tourists, improving footpath signs, installing benches and organising cultural events.

- Development of local trade

Local business people have organised regular meetings to discuss their problems and the potential for co-operation.

- Safer Roads

An information meeting was organised to which politicians were invited. This improved their understanding of local issues in the construction of a safer road.

PRA, such as these, result in greater personal and institutional competence in community interactions, especially in managing delicate subjects. This applies to both local people and facilitators. Enthusiasm for the method and the problems of the region were sufficient to trigger the community's own learning and action.

Encouragement of local people to become co-researchers empowers them; they are not just objects at the receiving end of an institutional output of ideas and products.

When there is a common concern in a community which fears for its own future, as is happening in Switzerland, there is also the energy and determination to do something about it and become innovative. PRA can mobilize this notion of common action.

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There is a big gap between individual and public expectations of how to live together: what does the community expect from its members, what does the member expect from the community and what does the individual think privately about this? PRA is a means to make this pluralism apparent to the community through a common sharing of ideas. We consider that the main benefit of the project is that the community finds new way of communicating and planning 'to get to grips with the future together'.