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## How to deal with 1012 ideas: PRA in an urban community in Switzerland

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### • Introduction

Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) can generate a large amount of information that needs to be processed and analysed. We would like to share an approach to analysing PRA data from an urban setting in Switzerland. We used a metaplan, sometimes referred to as the 'card and chart technique', as a way to structure and visualise information (see Box 1).

**BOX 1  
METAPLAN TECHNIQUE**

The metaplan was first developed in Germany for the moderation of groups of learners (Schnelle and Stolz, 1977). The pinboard method or metaplan is a visualisation technique that works with boards, large sheets of paper, different coloured square and round sheets of paper, pins, glues and pens. The basic rules are: not to write more than one idea on one card and to express the idea in about ten words (three lines) using a marker pen. The advantages include: everyone's contribution is visible and cards can be moved and arranged into subject clusters. The visualisation process facilitates communication between group members.

Swiss agriculture is facing tremendous changes. Deregulation of the market, a strong Swiss franc that impedes exports and declining subsidies for the agricultural sector are forcing farmers to reorient their agriculture and their way of life. In this context, LBL, the Swiss Centre for Agricultural Extension, began to conduct PRA in local communities (see also

Scheuermeier and Ison 1992, Hürlimann and Jufer, this issue). LBL is a service organization and resource base for the national agricultural extension service with experience in adult education and training. It also has a mandate to document experiences in agricultural extension in developing countries. It was in this context that LBL became familiar with PRA and learned from it to adapt PRA to Switzerland.

In November 1995, PRA was carried out in the small town of Willisau (Kanton Lucerne). This was the first time that an urban community had requested LBL to conduct a PRA in its area. Willisau is a small town of 7000 inhabitants in the pre-alpine region. For historical reasons it is characterised by strong partitions between the urban and rural population as well as between two dominant political parties.

The aim of the PRA in Willisau was to initiate constructive dialogue within the community over a short period of time. The project-week 'Willisau 2001' (as the PRA was called) was limited to six working days. Because it was of short duration, a high level of motivation was maintained. Twenty two people collected data for Willisau 2001, generating a huge amount of information.

### • The main steps in the Swiss PRA

Following the request for a PRA, a local project group was formed. This took charge of the logistics, finance, public relations and identification of interview partners. The role of LBL was to prepare methodologies and form a multidisciplinary team of outsiders (including PRA practitioners, professors and students). The team was introduced to and trained in the

PRA methodology and the metaplan analysis during a two-day workshop.

The project-week began with a local familiarization by means of a transect-walk. Subsequently, information was gathered using a range of methodologies: fifty one 'conversations around the kitchen table' were undertaken (i.e. semi-structured interviews with families of Willisau) together with ten topical group discussions and workshops with school classes.

Immediately following each activity, the main themes were transcribed onto coloured cards by the facilitators: yellow for problems, green for wishes and opportunities, blue for proposed projects and red for crazy ideas. The number of cards generated per activity was pre-determined (although not strictly) so the facilitators had to focus each discussion to its most important statements. An internal code was added to these 'minutes' of the interviews to allow us to trace the source and author of each card. The cards were pinned on boards at the operation centre such that one row of cards represented one interview.

The information gathering was completed in three days. During this time, we generated 1012 cards, each representing a particular idea expressed by citizens of Willisau.

- **From 1012 ideas to 12 subject-clusters**

On the forth morning, the facilitators met to discuss the large number of cards. Team members reflected on their own discussions and identified the two most important subject areas in Willisau. The 22 team members came up with 44 subjects which were written on cards. These were grouped into clusters of similar or related subject cards. These clusters were given working titles and each one pinned to a separate board.

The next step was for the facilitators to assign their own 'minute-cards' from interviews to the respective subject-clusters. A number of cards could not be allocated and so a second generation of subject-clusters was formed. The remaining cards were easily distributed following the same procedure.

This step was amazing! The group managed to reorganize all 1012 cards into twelve subject clusters in 90 minutes. The metaplan is extremely fast and efficient. The subject-clusters served as a starting point for the thematic analysis which resulted in the formulation of specific project proposals.

**BOX 2**  
**RESULTS OF SWISS PRA**

It is only a couple of months since the PRA was completed in Willisau. However, one of the subjects discussed was the urgent need for a locality where the youth can meet. This has been debated in Willisau for 30 years but without decision! It seems that PRA has opened and softened old positions such that a youth club should soon become reality.

The impact of PRAs elsewhere in Switzerland include: co-ordination of forest management and fuelwood sales, sharing of agricultural equipment among farmers in remote valleys, establishing institutions for debate and exchange of information.

These results are measurable. But there have been other less obvious outputs. PRA has helped establish fora for feedback and have opened new ways to communicate and interact with and within communities.

The project-ideas were visualised on posters. On the final evening of the project week, the results of the PRA were presented to an audience of 350 Willisau citizens. During this evening, people had the opportunity to enrol for a particular subject. This was the first step of handing over and following up the projects that had been identified. The local project group and extension services provided support to initiate projects by convening the first meetings etc.. The first signs of change became evident at Willisau a couple of days after the project week (see Box 2). The town council, inspired by the PRA, decided to change the seating order of the township meeting to enhance participation .

The final role for LBL was to photograph the posters to provide the people with a photographic record of Willisau 2001. Furthermore, a one-day evaluation with the facilitators was undertaken, providing an opportunity to reflect upon the exercise.

can sort, analyse and visualise a large amount of information in a short time.

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#### REFERENCES

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statements. Can a complex situation be reflected adequately in this way? Are details lost that may become important at a later stage?

- clusters. In this example, the building of clusters was based on the experiences of the facilitators (i.e. just outsiders). We should complement this approach in future by enabling local people to participate in this process and by using the cards to structure the definition of subject-clusters.
- the method relies on pin-boards, paper, cards, felt-pens etc.. The availability and transport of this hardware could impede a wider application of this method.
- visualising complex ideas and concepts.

On balance, we feel the advantages of the method outweigh its limitations. Our experiences suggest that this efficient approach