

Analysing communication in participatory appraisal

K. Linzer and R. Kowalski

Introduction

This paper analyses part of the communication process in participation by examining a participatory rural appraisal (PRA) that was organised in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. The paper aims to improve the quality of communication between participants of the regional technology transfer system.

The Santa Cruz Department covers nearly 30% of the area of Bolivia. Most of the technical improvements to agriculture in this region have been developed by 'Centro de Investigacion Agricola Tropical' (CIAT). This is a semi-governmental institution, created in 1975, which is responsible for agricultural research and transfer of technology.

CIAT's objectives are to generate recommendations to improve the agricultural production practices and raise the crop yields of the farms in the region. CIAT's assumption is that the technology which fits the needs of the farmers is not available and needs to be generated locally. Its aim is to provide extension personnel, and through them, the farmers, with research results tailored to the needs of local farming systems. Thus, the communication between research programmes and extensionists has become very important.

Influenced by the trend of international development projects and donors, as well as new legislation about popular participation, CIAT's approach is changing towards increasing the participation of farmers. CIAT has a Department for Technology Transfer (DTT) which forms the link between research bodies and those institutions that develop extension programmes. One of the main

functions of DTT is to feedback technical constraints in the field and farmer demands for improved technology. This is realised in an informal way through permanent contact between CIAT researchers, DTT staff, extensionists and farmers. It is also achieved in a formal way by 'sondeos' (a local version of RRA), and more recently, by PRA.

Participatory appraisal in San Miguel

Since 1994, DTT has co-ordinated the use of PRA in three communities for planning research and extension activities. But how well is PRA working and what are the weaknesses in its current application? One of the first PRAs was undertaken in San Miguel de los Angeles, and this will be used as an example for analysing some characteristics of the communication process¹.

San Miguel is a small, peasant community located in the lowlands, 100 km north-east from the city of Santa Cruz. The villagers are of two origins: Quechuas and Chiquitanos. They took possession of this area 10 years ago and have achieved legal ownership. Their production system is based on slash and burn agriculture.

PRA in San Miguel was planned by DTT and OASI, an NGO with community development programmes in the area in health, education, social organisation and production. The project was then proposed to the community. The visitor team was composed of four agronomists and a communicator from CIAT, and two community workers from OASI. The team stayed in the community for five days.

¹ The information in this section is based on a report on PRA in San Miguel which was written and delivered in the community in August 1994, and also on notes drawn from direct observation.

The activities to be undertaken during the PRA were defined during the first community meeting and included the following objectives:

- Information gathering using PRA methods;
- Representation, analysis and systematisation of information by the PRA team (which included villagers) and in a meeting with 'local experts' (men or women who have experience and skills in aspects of the information obtained);
- Determination and classification of problems and opportunities;
- Elaboration of an action plan for solving prioritised problems in a community meeting; and,
- Development and delivery of a report, which contained copies of the diagrams developed during the PRA, a description of activities undertaken and a copy of the action plan elaborated during the final community meeting.

The outcome of the PRA was an action plan for solving the most important problems of the community in the areas of production, health and education.

Characteristics of the communication process in San Miguel

In agricultural research and extension programmes in Santa Cruz, communication is characterised as primarily 'one-way' communication: from researcher through extensionists to farmers. This approach is characterised by the absence of dialogue between the farmer and technicians.

For analysing parts of the communication process in San Miguel, the Lasswell model is used. Lasswell claimed that an act of communication is adequately explained only if every aspect of the following question has been answered: 'Who/ says what/ in which channel/ to whom/ with what effect' (Morgan

and Welton 1986). Here we use the Lasswell model to analyse the first step of the communication process in San Miguel, the first meeting between the visitors and the villagers.

• 'Who': the communicator

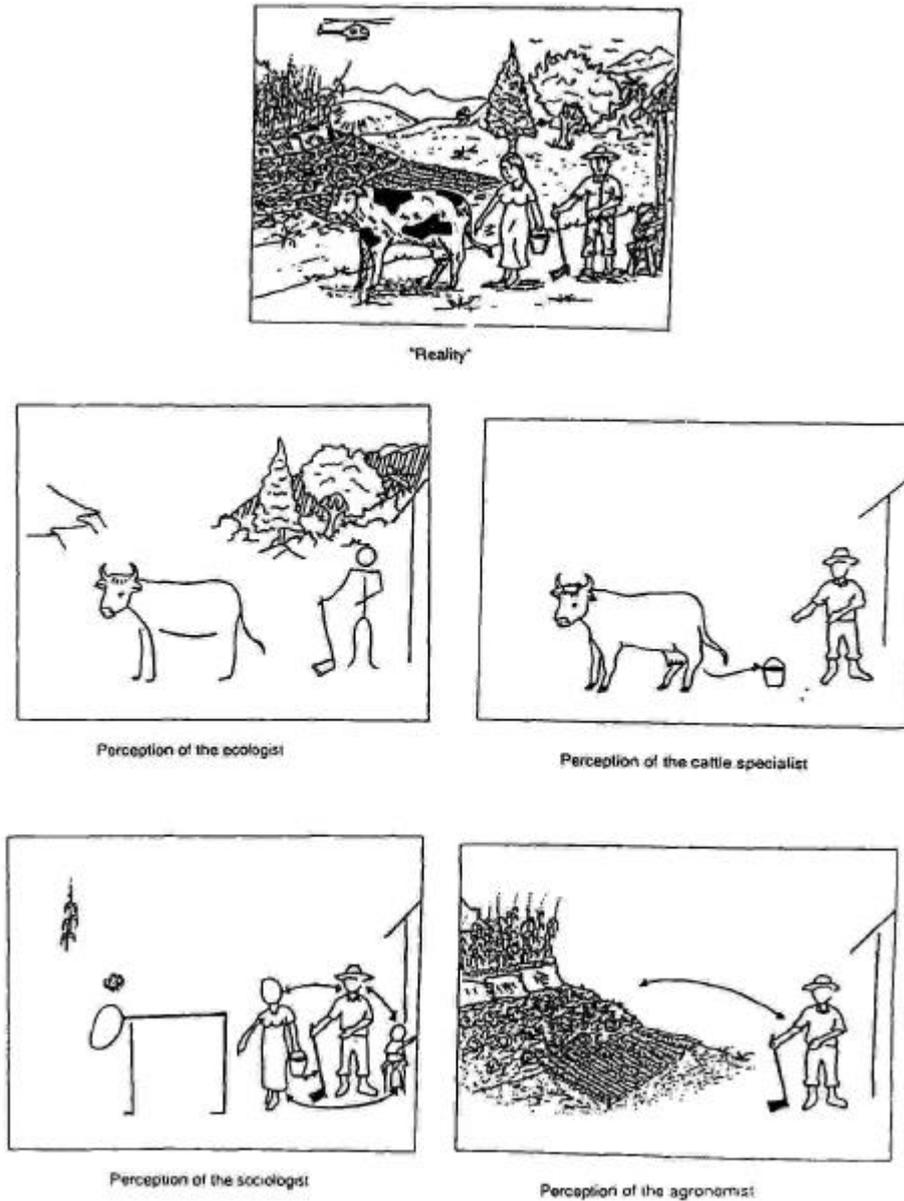
The 'who' is represented by the visitors. As described above, they have different professional backgrounds. They also have different experiences, work in different environments, belong to different cultures and were of both sexes. Thus, the visitors' perceptions of the 'reality' of the community were not homogeneous. As O'Connor and Seymour (1994) indicate: 'that part of the world we can perceive is filtered by our unique experiences, culture language, beliefs, values, interests and assumptions'. Figure 1 illustrates this situation.

The visitors formed a team with a determined goal: to facilitate a good PRA and to achieve the objectives mentioned above. According to O'Connor and Seymour (1994), the success of teamwork depends on dealing with the following key points:

- Goal setting;
- Communicating effectively within the group and to the outside world;
- Reading the environment accurately; and,
- Commitment to success.

In the San Miguel context, these key points rely on personal communication skills and knowledge about the socio-political situation of the farmers. In relation to the members of the visitor team in San Miguel, these were both underdeveloped.

Figure 1. Perceptions of reality Adapted from NUR (1994)



- **‘What’: the message**

In San Miguel the intended message has been: ‘we want to share your knowledge, to help you to identify your problems and opportunities and to plan actions for solving your most important problems’.

The message code

Morgan and Welton (1986) suggest that encoding a message supposes a conscious

decision by the sender to attempt to put the message across in a particular way using appropriate signs. The signs used in San Miguel were spoken words. The words used by the visitors were chosen according to the language to which the villagers are accustomed. For example, local terminology was used and technical definitions were avoided.

Other signs were also used and expressed through non-verbal communication. These non-verbal signs were used to gain rapport and facilitate communication. They included: the

wearing of simple clothes and sandals, the sharing of food and drinks, sitting on benches in the middle of the villagers instead of chairs at the front, participating in football games, sleeping in the community and other actions for matching villagers' customs.

The message content

Words are the content of the message. Postures, expression and the tone of voice provide the context in which the message is embedded. Together they make the meaning of communication.

This means that our unconscious attitudes and behaviour were communicated to the villagers. If a team member was expressing consciously 'we like you and want to share with you' but really did not like the community or felt superior, then s/he is likely to be unconsciously sending this message to the community.

For example, in one exercise in San Miguel, some team members lectured farmers about how to cultivate vegetables, when they were supposed to listen. Their unconscious message was 'I know more than you.'

This behaviour of technicians can be understood as we have often not been helped during formal education to see the farmer as a subject, rather than as an object, of research. As shown in Figure 1, a technician may not notice the farmers at all but focus on the crops and livestock.

Many of us agronomists in Santa Cruz have deep roots in the 'transfer of technology'. This means that we are used to deciding research priorities, generating technology and passing it to extension agents to transfer to farmers. Motivated technicians may be willing to be participatory and see the farmer as a partner. However, they may unconsciously express their traditional beliefs that farmers do not understand agricultural technology.

In communication theory, a transaction which delivers inconsistent messages is called an 'ulterior transaction'. Steward and Joines (1992) explain that every message has a psychological level as well as a social level. In an ulterior transaction, the two do not match.

One of the communication rules of transactional analysis states that 'the behavioural outcome of an ulterior transaction is determined at the psychological and not at the social level'. This means that the unconscious message, expressed through body language and tone of voice, is more effective than consciously chosen signs.

The treatment of the message

The treatment of the message refers to the combination of elements and structure of the message. In San Miguel, the treatment of the message was semi-structured. The idea was clear and some symbols and signs had been chosen. But the combination of symbols and signs depended on rapport and feedback during the process of communication.

The channel

In San Miguel, face to face communication was used. Group discussions were used for problem analysis, prioritising and action planning. Visual aids were included to represent and discuss information. This facilitated the participation of those people who were illiterate or not accustomed to express themselves through the spoken word.

• 'To whom': the receiver

The potential receiver was the whole community. Like the visitor team, the community is an organisation with its own culture and internal communication networks.

At the two community meetings, most of the adult villagers, both men and women, were present. Nevertheless, the level of participation was not equal between the community members. For example, the Quechua speaking women participated the least. They speak little Spanish and are mostly illiterate. If they wish to communicate, they must speak in Spanish, as this is the language used in formal meetings. Another barrier is their lack of self-confidence. Some of them and also some of their husbands believe that women have nothing important to contribute in public meetings. Many women remain silent rather than expose themselves to criticism.

This 'silent majority' in the local community was not drawn out enough in the group work. San Miguel consists of 30 families. The majority of men and many of the women participated in the first and last meetings. However, a problem identification meeting was attended by only 10 men and 3 women. During the early diagramming sessions, only 7 to 10 people participated, most of whom were men.

Ensuring balanced participation is a difficult task for both visitors and villagers. With hindsight it would have been better to run more homogeneous focus groups. In this way we would have gained a diversity of perspectives and could have brought participants together to review and consider the responses.

Similar to the perception of the 'outsiders', the perception of the villagers depends upon beliefs and experiences. They have been, and continue to be approached by, 'top down' methods. Now they need to become able to deal with participation.

• **'With what effect'**

The outcome of the communication process was the fulfilment of the objectives set at the first community meeting. This was achieved in a mainly relaxed and harmonious way. Six months later, some of the planned actions related to CIAT's programmes, such as participatory trials of cover crops for weed control, are being implemented in San Miguel. OASI is using the information for planning activities in agriculture, health and education.

The quality of the PRA has not been evaluated. Nevertheless, considering the communication limitations which have been set out so far, there is clearly room for improvement.

• **Constraints of communication**

The following are the main constraints of effective communication between CIAT staff members, extensionists and farmers. These were identified in the analysis of communication characteristics identified in the PRA in San Miguel:

- CIAT has no have formal channels for applying participatory methods nor for using PRA results in programme planning.
- Many people in communities now have the opportunity to participate in rural development projects, but they may not be able to take the responsibility of participation. Thus, technicians still initiate the dialogue with farmers.
- Most agronomists in Santa Cruz are focused on technical issues and are unable to embrace a more holistic world view. Thus, they do not understand farmers' behaviour and continue to feel superior to them.
- Agronomists often do not use farmers' communication systems and expect farmer to adapt themselves to the technicians' favoured methods.
- Many agronomists in Santa Cruz, even if willing to use a participatory approach, are not aware of their own limitations in terms of facilitation and personal communication skills.
- CIAT staff, extensionists and communities, who form parts of the regional technology transfer system, are comprised of people who are often not prepared for facilitating participation. Yet the weaknesses of each person affects the whole system.

• **Conclusions**

To achieve participatory communication amongst technicians, between technicians and farmers, and amongst farmers themselves, requires a change in attitude in the members of each of these groups. The primary responsibility for these changes must lie with the groups who initiate the process. This change of attitude can be learned and should be addressed through developing the skills of the researchers and extensionists. Furthermore, changes in methodology are required to ensure that, at least initially, PRA is undertaken in more homogeneous groups. This would enable more diverse views to be expressed.

To improve the level of participation in the technology transfer system in Santa Cruz and the quality of communication between participants, training programmes are required. Extensionists and researchers should attend workshops and courses aimed at changing

their behaviour and attitude. The workshops should address the need for greater self-awareness during communication, including the following:

- Critical analysis of beliefs and values of participants at the psychological level, based on transactional analysis techniques (Steward and Joines 1992). These promote the understanding of the role of programmed behaviour in interpersonal communication and the effects of such behaviour in determining perceptions of one's own and others' attitudes.
- Critical analysis of the behaviour patterns of participants. This should focus on the techniques of neuro linguistic programming (O'Connor and Seymour 1994), which is a system of understanding the way information is processed, stored and retrieved. This can promote more effective communication by recognising which methods are most appropriate for the individuals taking part in any given communication process.
- Training in communication based on close observation of effective communicators in action.
- Training in skills related to team building and management.

In addition, the attitudinal changes that are required for effective communication, must be institutionalised within CIAT. This is a process which is currently in progress. Finally, it must be recognised that what holds true for CIAT in Bolivia may also be more widely applicable. Thus, this paper challenges practitioners to reflect critically on the quality of communication in their participatory work.

- **Katrin Linzer**, CIAT, Cas. 427, Santa Cruz, Bolivia and **Robert Kowalski**, CRDT, University of Wolverhampton, Gorway Road, Walsall WSI 3BD, UK.

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