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A brief guide to training in participatory methods in the field

This section of the Notes provides training materials for participatory learning, exploring a different theme in each issue¹. This article provides a range of examples of how to train in participatory methods in a field setting, which is where the most important learning takes places.

• Preparing for the field

Preparing thoroughly for fieldwork is vital as this is where participants will practice new methods and make mistakes. Good forward planning will ensure that their learning is not disrupted by other factors. If you are training for your own institution, then you should do the planning. If you have been commissioned by another institution, then you should give them a detailed checklist of issues to be acted on before the workshop starts (see Box 1). Uncertainties will never completely be removed nor avoided, but thorough preparation always increases the capacity to cope.

The host community

Fieldwork, which involves teams descending on and disrupting life in a community, may not always be a desirable part of training. This is particularly true if follow-up activities in the village sites cannot be guaranteed or are not possible. This raises ethical questions about doing training in the field and practising on local people, and is very likely to create problems at the village level, jeopardising the possibility of working there in future.

BOX 1

CHECKLIST: PREPARING FOR THE FIELD

The host community

- Does the community know when you will be arriving and how long you will be staying?
- Are the fieldwork dates convenient for local people? Are there important political or economic events or cultural ceremonies that will draw people away?
- Do they know why you are coming?
- If it is just for training, do they know there is no guaranteed follow-up? Will they still be interested in accommodating the teams?
- If it is part of the on-going activities of the trainees' institution(s), are there resources to follow up?
- When is it most convenient for women and for men to be involved in discussions?

Accommodation

- Are you planning to stay in the villages? If so, have full discussions been held on the practical arrangements?
- If not, how close to the community will you be staying?
- Is there electricity in the village? If so, you may be able to show slides or videos to people

Food and beverages

- What arrangements have been made to feed the team and/or the villagers?
- Will you buy food there or take it with you?

Transportation

- How will the team get to the village sites?
- Are there sufficient vehicles/petrol allocations?

Materials

- Do you have a full supply of charts, papers, pens etc. for the visualisations?
- Do you have small notebooks for each participant?

¹ Taken from a *Trainers Guide for Participatory Learning and Action*. Published by IIED. Price £18.95, plus p&p (20% UK, 25% Europe, Rest of world 40% airmail or 25% surface). See inside cover for details on how to order publications.

It may be preferable to train in a classroom setting and to practise methods with other participants at that session. When participants return to their work, they can try to introduce and experiment with the new methods in the course of their normal work. This avoids the problems of trainees feeling uneasy about 'experimenting' on people they do not know and will not be working with in the future. However, this approach can make it difficult to control the quality of the work, as participants are not trained in the reality of field situations.

Selecting field teams

In general, most fieldwork during training workshops is conducted by interdisciplinary teams of 3-8 people. If you are training more than eight, then there will be at least two field teams and team selection will be necessary. You can opt for self selection of teams or choose them yourself. Either way it will be important to ensure well-balanced groups.

- *Language* - who speaks the local language and/or dialect?
- *Gender* - ensure a balanced mix of women and men.
- *Professional experience* - mix people from different disciplines.
- *Hierarchy* - consider the normal working relationships of participants, and try to divide participants into groups with a mix of different statuses - if differences are too great, put similar people together into groups.
- *Experience with participatory methods* - appoint any participants with previous experiences, as resource people.
- *Knowledge of the field site* - try to spread those who know the field sites through the groups to act as resource people.
- *Personality* - consider some of the criteria for roles within groups (A brief guide to group dynamics and team building, *PLA Notes* 29, June 1997), and try to ensure a mix of roles to enhance team performance.

Ask the group to add other selection criteria that they might feel are relevant. One task that can create a shared understanding of the aims of the fieldwork is to ask each field team to formulate its own objectives. These can include learning objectives related to understanding the principles of participatory

learning and action, but can also entail different aspects of understanding local livelihoods. These objectives can then be used during the daily review meetings in the field to assess and redirect the work. They will be helpful for final evaluations to assess what has been accomplished, and to discuss what was not realised and why this was the case.



Trainers' tasks and pitfalls

For the trainees, the fieldwork is a period of practice, mistakes and correction that reinforces the learning points identified during earlier points of the workshop. During the fieldwork, you as the trainer, are a guardian of the process, pointing trainees to issues developed in the workshop phase of the training. Box 2 shows tasks that are of particular importance during fieldwork.

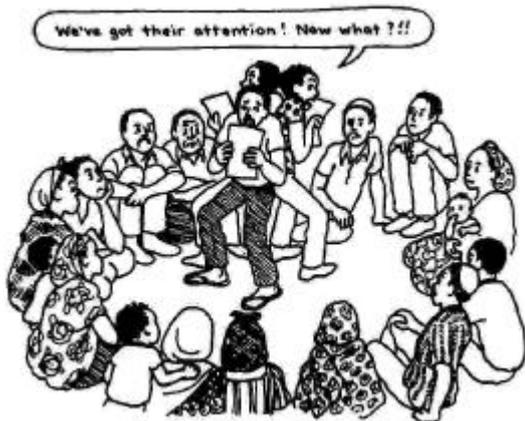
There are dangers for trainers, too, particularly when they are encouraging groups to achieve a goal. Trainers sometimes strive towards a good outcome and may try to control events too much. This can be counterproductive, as groups cannot be forced to perform in a manner or at the exact moment that you think is ideal. Remember that it is just as important for trainers *to hand over the stick* as it is for participants.

BOX 2
TRAINERS' FIELDWORK TASKS

1. Reinforce the principles of participatory learning and action or of specific methods
2. Provide information on the process or methods when necessary
3. Remind participants about effective interviewing skills
4. Facilitate discussions in the review meeting, picking up on incidents that occurred during the day
5. Monitor continually that logistical arrangements operate smoothly
6. Remember that you are responsible for all participants - move between subgroups while in the field
7. Reshuffle groups to match people up

• **Getting started in the field**

You have a crucial role to play just after arrival at the field site. This is when participants generally feel most nervous. They may have been through extensive practice in the workshop but may still feel uncomfortable or unclear about using familiar methods. In many cases, such nervousness arises out of a belief that they are not capable of participating in these 'complex' analyses. The trainees will need to get used to new roles - *listening rather than telling the villagers, creating learning situations rather than dictating and facilitating rather than controlling the situation.*



The shift to visualisation

What has become very clear from past field-based training exercises is the importance of starting immediately with a diagramming-based method. If this is not done in the first

discussions with local people, then it becomes progressively more difficult to switch off from familiar interviewing. Here are tips for starting the fieldwork off smoothly:

- Discuss the panic factor in advance.
- Ask each team to decide in advance the issue, method and local informants they hope to work with.
- Encourage the team to begin with a concrete activity that requires group inputs, has been practised before and is almost certain to lead to a concrete output.
- Organise a session to start off the fieldwork that will involve the team in trying their hand at everyday local activities. This breaks the ice and clearly establishes new roles, with local people as teachers and professionals as learners.
- Tell the team to relax.

Another aspect of visualisation that should be emphasised is the benefits for local people. An encounter between a team of facilitators and a group of local people may be a rare local opportunity, when both women and men are encouraged to think about their own livelihoods and conditions in a systematic way. Very often it is also an exceptional occasion for certain local groups (men/women, young/old, landed/landless etc.) to come together for joint analysis.

Emphasising sequences of methods

A great deal of the strength of participatory learning and action is derived from the way in which the process and outputs of one method can lead into another. This continuity enhances reliability of the discussions and allows for further probing of key issues. Doing a series of exercises with the same group of people allows for the development of openness and familiarity. However, sequencing can also have drawbacks that you must watch out for, especially when trainees become so comfortable with certain local people that they choose not to seek out others. Besides introducing biases in the results, this could place a heavy burden on the local analysts' time.

Sequences are an aspect that cannot usually be dealt with adequately in the workshop, where exercises are not sequenced but take place

within a different session. One way to duplicate this sequencing of methods in the field is to take participants through a detailed case study or simulation. Alternatively, you can use a series of slides/overheads or a video to guide people through a real example and to discuss how and why various methods were applied sequentially.

One possible constraint to the use of sequences is a very rigid attitude to the field guide or checklist. Some field teams can become obsessed with each and every issue on their checklist before allowing exercises to flow and different issues to be discussed. It will not always be easy for you, the trainer, to encourage trainees to use their checklist flexibly, while giving them enough structure to overcome the initial panic that can set in at the start of fieldwork.

Dealing with senior visitors

It is rare for senior officials or staff to attend training courses from start to finish. However, often they do wish to participate for short periods. This can be very beneficial and/or extremely disruptive. When senior officials attend opening and closing ceremonies or listen to presentations, their presence can be a strong endorsement of the new approach. If senior staff are able to participate fully, then other work demands will still probably compete for their time. Be ready for them to be delayed regularly. They may also take longer to let go of status and hierarchy, and so are more likely to dominate certain discussions.

To ensure continued institutional support for the use of participatory approaches after the training workshop ends, it is essential that senior staff should be involved in the training at some point. Some way to encourage their positive involvement include:

- Recommending attendance at key points during the workshop;
- Organising a debriefing session run by trainees after the training;
- Holding a one-day workshop that brings together representatives from the community, the trainees and relevant senior staff and other authorities. Allow local people to make their presentations and trainees to describe the core concepts and

methods. Give senior staff time to ask questions and consider the implications of the approach; and,

- Organising a meeting after the field reports have been prepared and circulated to senior officials. Invite certain key trainees and local people to meet with the interested officials to discuss the conclusions and follow-up.

• Review, feedback and presentation

Information collection, analysis and preparation is a continuous and iterative process during participatory learning and action. There is a regular need to review the process and assess information collected before planning the next stage. As a trainer, you should aim to facilitate this process at various stages during a field-based training course. Review sessions are a vital way for you to get feedback - you will not be able to follow each team but do try to sit in on some sessions of the different field teams. Here are a few suggestions for effective review sessions:

- Hold regular meetings, both in the morning and afternoon/evening, with the whole group to discuss individual feelings and group dynamics as well as substantive findings. Encourage participants to record their reactions and reflections in a field diary. Documenting the process of learning is vital for reflection at a later stage;
- Reflect during review meetings on how individuals felt before and after they had started a particular exercise. Ask the team: what they were thinking about, what they were finding difficult, how did they deal with problems and what suggestions they have for dealing with problems?;
- Encourage the groups to appoint a 'process observer' to report on the group dynamics for each new discussion with local people; and,
- Try one minute role plays of problems encountered in the field during the reflection sessions.



Fieldwork feedback and presentations

An essential part of participatory learning and action is presenting findings and proposals for action or research. Feedback sessions may take place in the workshop with the field team or in the field with villagers. A number of key issues to consider when planning such session include the following:

- How? What is the appropriate presentation style to encourage group analysis and reflection on information collected?
- Who? Who presents and has a chance to analyse the information collected is a key issue. Information can be interpreted in many ways and it is important that diverse local perspectives are heard during presentations. It is good to encourage local women and men to present the findings of their joint analysis back to the field team and other villagers to initiate discussion. Breaking up into smaller discussion groups may offer the opportunity for more detailed and freer reflection.
- Where? The place where feedback and presentation takes place may influence the subsequent discussion.
- When? Allowing time for feedback in the field is a key component of participatory processes. This allows villagers to have a chance to comment on information and the analysis presented by the field team and other villagers.

If more than one site has been selected during the training, then presentations by participants of their findings to colleagues are also useful to:

- practise presentation skills;
- illustrate differences in methods and sequences used;
- describe innovations in methods; and,
- discuss issues of substance.

Processing information and writing-up

Producing a field study report is often an important objective for a training workshop, but can be the most difficult part of the workshop. But while people always seem to find the time to do the fieldwork, they are almost always 'too busy' to write it up properly.

Although training should not focus unduly on the presentation of findings nor be evaluated on that basis, the report will be an important resource for a number of reasons:

- it provides baseline information on which future activities will be built and performance monitored;
- a detailed report can convince other organisations of the value of becoming involved in a new community or area;
- if good quality reports are made available within the same institution, then inter-village comparisons become possible; and,
- it contributes to maintaining a good institutional memory.

Analytical skills are essential in report production and it is often incorrectly assumed that all participants of training courses have them. Likewise, writing skills are needed for accurate and complete reporting (see Box 3).

There is no single correct way of facilitating the writing-up. But there are several ways to make this process as enjoyable and productive as possible.

- Analysis and writing up should be a continuous process. Make sure enough time is scheduled for this each day of the fieldwork and that it is not left to a last minute rush.
- Prepare a proforma or framework for documenting the process and key findings of each discussion that the participants fill in each day. If you read these as they are filled in, then you can ask participants to

add further important information that has been left out or is too brief.

- Hold regular feedback meetings during which information gathered is also information shared.
- After extensive feedback on the process and findings, trainers can help groups with a structure for the report.

Assessing participants' progress

It is essential that you spend time finding out how well participants have progressed during the fieldwork. You will not have been able to accompany them all the time in the field, so you might consider reflecting on the following questions:

- Have they developed any bad habits?
- Have they come up with innovations?
- To what extent will they continue after the workshop with good habits?

BOX 3 A FIVE-STAGE PROCESS FOR REPORT WRITING

Step 1. Collect information by objective. This can best begin in the field when the team is preparing for the feedback session for the village. Write out each objective on a large sheet of paper, then brainstorm all the important things that have been learned under each objective and write them down, preferably on cards.

Step 2. Organise the information. Group the cards together around different issues or subject areas. Write an outline for the final report from the cards.

Step 3. Analyse the information. As a team, decide which information is the most important. What was surprising about what you learned in the field? Which parts do you want to treat in greater detail in the report because of their importance? What are the implications of what you have learned for future activities with the village or by your organisation?

Step 4. Write up the information in a report. This can be divided up so that each person writes a section.

Step 5. Review the report. All the members of the team should read the report to make sure that the information is correct from their perspective and that nothing of importance has been left out. One person can edit the report to make sure that there is no duplication between sections and to incorporate the diagrams into the text.

You might be able to find out these things by asking participants directly. But it is more likely that you will need to conduct some further workshop exercises and role plays. During these, observe participants and give feedback later. Another approach is to ask participants to write down the lessons learnt each day during the fieldwork about the principles and practice of participatory approaches, and how they relate to their own communication skills. These can then be shared, if appropriate, with the entire group, or just used by yourself to assess of what issues they are increasingly becoming aware.

TRAINERS' CHECKLIST: PARTICIPATORY METHODS IN THE FIELD

- Have you made full preparations for the field?
- Has there been close dialogue with the communities hosting the fieldwork?
- What arrangements have been made for accommodation, food, beverages and transport?
- Have you reached clear and commonly agreed division of tasks with other co-trainers for the fieldwork?
- How will the interdisciplinary teams for the field be selected: self-selecting or pre-selected?
- Have you thought about how to help participants make the transition in the field from the verbal to the visual?
- Are participants prepared to sequence the methods?
- Are you expecting senior visitors in the workshop or the field? How will you deal with their presence without it disrupting existing teams?
- Have arrangements been made to ensure all findings are presented back to villagers? Who will make the presentations?
- How will the writing-up process be managed? Will all the participants be involved? Who will get copies of the reports afterwards? Who will use the information?
- How will you assess whether participants have made any progress during the workshop?

Next issue: organising workshops for training, orientation and exposure