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Experience with PRA training and hands-on implementation: results of an ex-post-study of PRA training courses

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• Introduction

Special efforts to promote participatory approaches within the GTZ, the German Agency for Technical Co-operation, started at the end of the 1980s and have accelerated since the early 1990s. They comprise training and other forms of capacity development, learning from experiences in the field, as well as assessing and adapting processes and methods.

Between 1993 and 1996, the GTZ conducted six training courses on the approach and methodology of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in Germany and Austria as part of its staff upgrading programme. In this paper, we assess the findings of a survey into the effectiveness of this training.

The central component of these six-day courses was the actual implementation or simulation of a PRA. In addition to interviews and field observation, the participants spent two days with a host family and finally organised a community meeting where they presented their insights and discussed jointly with community members, areas for possible future action. All of this was framed by an approximately ½ day introduction with trial runs in selected methods, culminating in a session in which the participants reflected on all their experiences in the course.

In 1996 the courses were evaluated through a written survey¹. The survey aimed to determine the quality of these training events, and especially their practical relevance from the point of view of the course participants. It also aimed to gain an insight into the participants' subsequent practical experience with PRA. The evaluation took place between six months and three and a half years after the respective training course. 62 out of 98 course participants responded to the questionnaire, which contained both open and closed questions.

The course in retrospect

On the whole, the course can be described as very successful. In retrospect, the large majority of participants (80%) found that the quite considerable time and money invested in the course had been worthwhile. What is more, nearly all the participants (97%) have since recommended the approach and methods to colleagues both within GTZ and elsewhere.

They felt the PRA course was especially relevant to two areas of their professional activities:

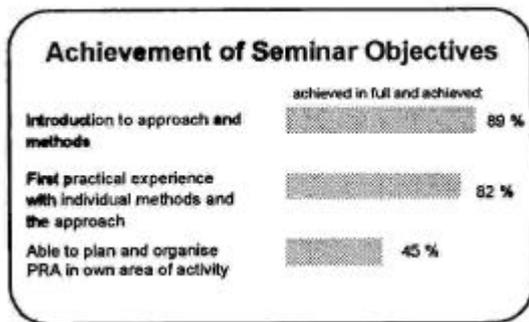
- in their own practical applications in their field of work (52%); and,

¹ The study was conducted by Ms. Gunde Gassner-Keita, in co-operation with Mr. Reiner Forster, GTZ, Unit 04, within the scope of her MA-level dissertation at Kassel University on 'Training Workshops on the Approach and Methodology of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and its Implementation in Practice' (document available in German language only).

- as an orientation; course participation facilitated better orientation and judgement skills when it came to implementing participatory approaches (48%).

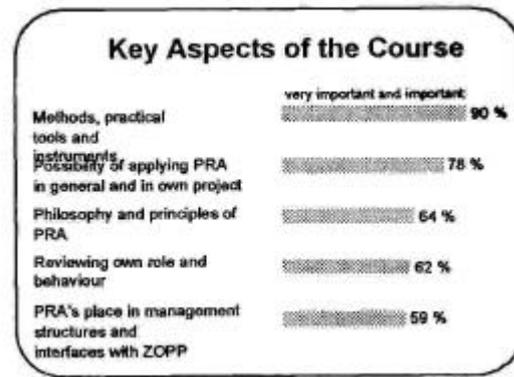
According to those surveyed, the seminar was very successful in achieving its objectives, especially in introducing the PRA approach and methodology and in providing first practical experience (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Achievement of seminar objectives



Participants felt the seminar was less successful in helping them to plan and organise PRA in their own work.

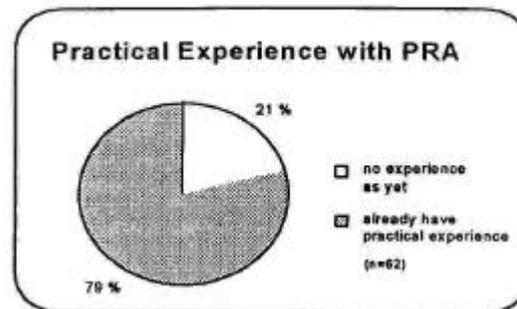
To most participants, the most important aspects were the methods and practical tools and instruments, as well as the experience of applying PRA in general and in their own projects (90% and 78% respectively). In contrast, other aspects such as the philosophy and principles of PRA, reviewing one's own role and behaviour, as well as PRA's place in management approaches and its interfaces with objectives-oriented project planning (ZOPP), were perceived to be less important (see Figure 2).



Practical implementation of course contents

The majority of the participants (79%) have since gained first-hand practical experience with PRA. However, some of those questioned attended the course just six months before the survey (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Practical experience with PRA



Of the 41 participants reporting practical experience after the training, most have initiated or commissioned a PRA and/or implemented one themselves in their own work. About a third in each case have passed on PRA techniques as a trainer and/or took part in another PRA session (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Scope of experience

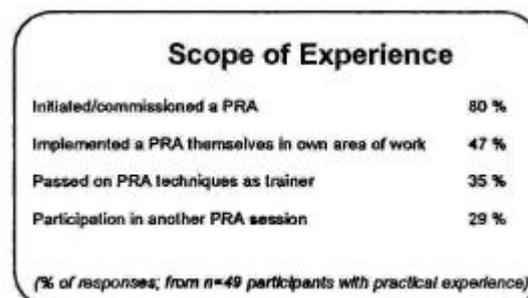


Figure 2. Key aspects of the course

PRA was mainly used in situation and target-group analyses, and to support participatory planning processes; each counting for 39% of the responses.

In addition, participants report using PRA in organisational development (10%), awareness-raising/target-group mobilisation (10%), training (8%), participatory consultancy inputs (8%) and research (6%). Some of those interviewed stated that they adapted certain aspects of the methods whilst implementing PRA in their own work, particularly when:

- combining PRA with other instruments and methodological approaches, such as aerial photography and GPS², theatre, participatory action research, SWPO/SEPO³;
- awareness-raising of decision-makers by involving them in a PRA; and,
- combining PRA with objectives-oriented project planning (ZOPP).

Applications experience

In most cases, applying PRA resulted in tangible improvements in the projects on which course participants worked after the training (82%; 32 projects). The participants were able to identify improvements in the following areas:

- confidence and self-organisation of target groups in relation to project activities;
- planning; and,
- relationships between target groups and advisors/extension officers (see Figure 5).

Various problems manifested themselves during PRA implementation. Participants that had just had their first practical experience with PRA named the inadequate application of the approach as the prime source of difficulty (54% of those questioned). Other difficulties included problems with the political situation in the partner country, a lack of support by the project team and the considerable inputs of time and human resources involved in PRA (see Figure 6).

² GPS- Geographical Positioning System

³ SWPO – Strengths-Weaknesses -Potentials - Obstacles, a simple method for (self-) evaluation and planning (in French: SEPO)

Figure 5. Project level impact

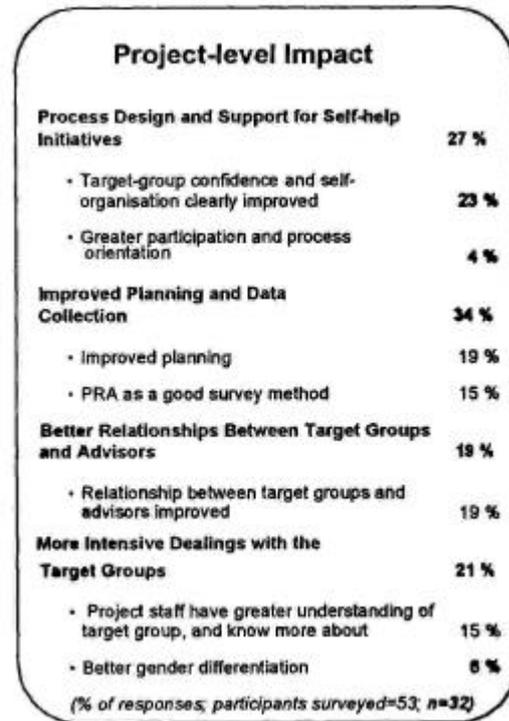


Figure 6. Application difficulties



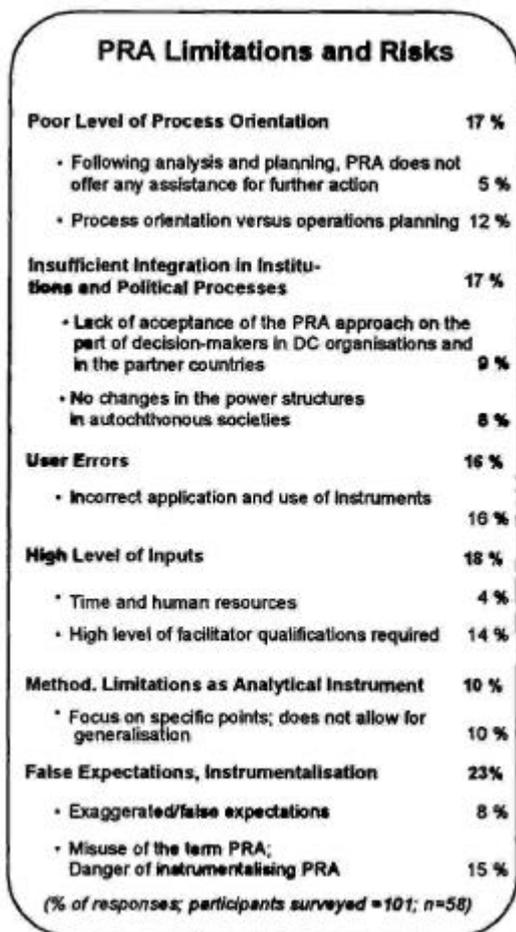
The participants' comments about the limitations and risks of PRA (see Figure 7) echo the application difficulties and reflect the debate on participatory approaches in

Development Co-operation. Key limitations included:

- the poor level of process orientation in project planning and management,
- the unsatisfactory institutionalisation of the PRA approach in the political context of partner countries; and,
- the errors made in application, the high level of inputs (human resources, facilitation skills etc.) required and the methodological restrictions.

According to the participants, the main risks of PRA lie in the potential for misusing and also instrumentalising the PRA approach, as well as in the users' exaggerated and/or false expectations.

Figure 7. PRA limitations and risks



One course alone is not enough to establish firmly a participatory approach in project structures. This requires much more far-reaching institutional changes. According to those participants who had implemented PRA, these include selecting the 'right' staff (18%)

and ensuring participation is accepted by the decision-makers (17%). Incorporating participatory methods into process-oriented approaches (11%) and linking them with other methodological approaches and instruments used in project management are also regarded as important (20%).

Data base and persons surveyed

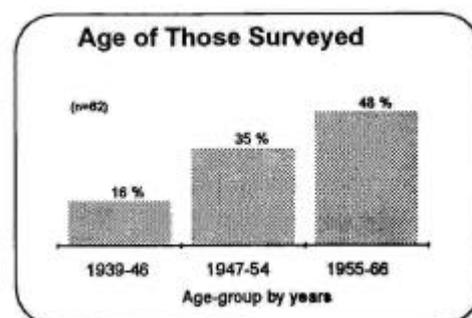
The 63% response rate to the 98 questionnaires distributed was comparatively high. This applies especially to women, 73% of whom replied, in contrast to just 57% of the male participants. The majority of those questioned were GTZ field-staff employees (51%), followed by freelancers, university staff (26%) and GTZ Head Office staff (19%). Most of those interviewed were actively involved in the rural development sector, particularly regional rural development and natural resource management (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Professional occupations of people surveyed

	all (n=62)	men (n=35)	women (n=27)
Field staff	51 %	60 %	41 %
Head Office staff	19 %	17 %	22 %
Free-lancers and/or university employees	28 %	20 %	33 %
Not employed in DC sector	2 %	-	4 %
No details	2 %	3 %	-

One look at the birth dates reveals that most of the people surveyed are under the age of 40, and there are more women than men among the younger persons surveyed (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Age of those surveyed



• Summary

The course concept *Introduction – Hands-on Application – Reflection* has obviously proved its worth. The course was given top marks by the participants; the seminar objectives have been achieved in most cases and its practical relevance is very high. The course offers an excellent initiation into the workings of the PRA approach and should continue with this same objective.

Furthermore, feedback on the experience gained with the PRA approach can be used to develop the course concept further. Although the participants were mainly interested in learning about practical tools and instruments, and less in reflecting upon their role and behaviour, the approach's political content and its process dynamics soon become apparent to them when they came to apply the methods in their own work. This confirms the limitations of applying PRA in a purely 'instrumental' way. The course has since been amended to focus more on the entire process of institutional change and the role the seconded experts have to play in this, as well as the aspect of facilitation.

There is also a need for further measures to address the identified need for a wider process of change, and the political resistance to participation at the level of target-group decision-makers and in higher echelons of administration.

This highlights the need to improve consultancy and process-design skills; something that can only be achieved to a very limited extent through training courses. On-the-job learning opportunities, such as quality circles, learning workshops, coaching etc., which facilitate an intensive exchange of experience and case-by-case analyses are better suited to this.

Training and upgrading alone are undoubtedly not enough to institutionalise participation; not without a major overhaul of the framework conditions in many partner countries and much further-reaching changes in the headquarters of Development Co-operation organisations. The course participants consider the following pre-requisites and changes necessary:

- the 'right' staff;
- acceptance at decision-making level; and,
- integration in the political process in partner countries and in the management instruments employed by GTZ and other Development Co-operation organisations.

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