
THE POWER OF PARTICIPATION: PRA AND POLICY

Summary:

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has much to offer the policy-making process. It provides a way to give poor people a voice, enabling them to express and analyse their problems and priorities. Used well, it can generate important and often surprising insights which can contribute to policies which are better fitted to serving the needs of the poor. More fundamentally, it can challenge the perceptions of those in authority and begin to change attitudes and agendas. PRA is spreading fast and becoming more mainstream. But there are dangers in scaling up its use too quickly, and risks of PRA being discredited in the process.

What is PRA?

PRA can be described as a family of approaches, methods and behaviours that enable people to express and analyse the realities of their lives and conditions, to plan themselves what action to take, and to monitor and evaluate the results. Its methods have evolved from Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA). The difference is that PRA emphasises processes which empower local people, whereas RRA is mainly seen as a means for outsiders to gather information.

The terminology is confusing and there is much debate about what constitutes "real" PRA. The key elements of PRA are the methods used, and - most importantly - the behaviour and attitudes of those who facilitate it.

Methods

PRA employs a wide range of methods to enable people to express and share information, and to stimulate discussion and analysis. Many are visually based, involving local people in creating, for example:

- *maps showing who lives where and the location of important local features and resources such as water, forests, schools and other services;*
- *flow diagrams to indicate linkages, sequences, causes, effects, problems and solutions;*
- *seasonal calendars showing how food availability, workloads, family health, prices, wages and other factors vary during the year;*
- *matrices or grids, scored with seeds, pebbles or other counters, to compare things - such as the merits of different crop varieties or tree species, or how conditions have changed over time.*

PRA activities usually take place in groups, working on the ground or on paper. The ground is more participatory, and helps empower those who are not literate. Visual techniques provide scope for creativity and encourage a frank exchange of views. They also allow crosschecking. Using a combinations of PRA methods a very detailed picture can be built up, one that expresses the complexity and diversity of local people's realities far better than conventional survey techniques such as questionnaires.

Behaviour and attitudes

PRA depends on facilitators acting as convenors and catalysts, but without dominating the process. Many find this difficult. They must take time, show respect, be open and self-critical, and learn not to interrupt. They need to have confidence that local people, whether they are literate or not, women or men, rich or poor, are capable of carrying out their own analysis.

The use and abuse of PRA

Unfortunately, there has been much abuse of PRA by outsiders keen only to extract information quickly, and use it for their own purposes. Such practice is unethical because local people are brought into a process in which expectations are raised, and then frustrated, if no action or follow-up results. To avoid this, those wishing to use PRA methods in a purely extractive way need to be transparent about their intentions, and refrain from calling what they do PRA.

In PRA, facilitators act as a catalyst, but it is up to local people to decide what to do with the information and analysis they generate. Outsiders may choose to use PRA findings - for example, to influence policy or for research purposes. In all cases, however, there must be a commitment on the part of the facilitating organisation to do its best to support, if requested to do so, the actions that local people have decided on.

Practical applications

Since the early 1990s, PRA approaches and methods have evolved and spread with astonishing speed. Originating mainly among non-government organisations (NGOs) in East Africa and South Asia, they have since been adopted by government departments, training institutes, aid agencies, and universities all over the world. They are now being used in at least 100 countries, with PRA networks existing in over 30.

PRA has been applied in almost every domain of development and community action, both urban and rural. Examples include:

- *natural resources management*
- *establishing land rights of indigenous people*
- *slum development*
- *HIV/AIDS awareness and action*
- *anti-poverty programmes*
- *disaster management*
- *negotiation and conflict resolution*
- *adult literacy*

Insights emerging from PRA

Participatory approaches have proved to be of direct value for policy-makers. They provide an opportunity to meet people face-to-face and a means of gaining quick and accurate assessments of the implications and impacts of policies. These examples illustrate the kinds of insights that have emerged:

Urban violence in Jamaica

PRA highlighted how the stigma of living in an area with a bad reputation for violence makes it difficult to get jobs. It

also shed light on the complex ways in which poverty and violence are interconnected.

Girls' education in The Gambia

PRA revealed the frustration of girls denied access to primary education; about a quarter of girls of school age had been "invisible", and considered ineligible because they were about to be married. It also highlighted other problems. Subsequently, education policy changed with a lowering of the entry age for girls, an increase in the number of female teachers, and a postponement of school fees for all students until after harvest (when people have more cash).

The position of women in Morocco

PRA showed how women's problems and priorities often differ not only from men's, but also between women - depending on their access to basic services and infrastructures, and their social background.

Impact of user fees on healthcare in Zambia

PRA demonstrated the wide gap between policy and practice on exemptions from healthcare charges for the destitute and those with infectious or chronic diseases. It showed how the poorest often lose out; they also complained that health staff were often rude to them. Policies have since changed including the exemption from user fees of whole communities struck by calamities such as famine.

Management of parks in India and Pakistan

Using PRA, local people were able to define sustainable management and conservation practices for themselves, and challenge existing legislation and practices which both harmed the parks and denied them a livelihood.

Indigenous land rights in Honduras and Panama

PRA analysis with participatory mapping showed how the areas where indigenous people's land rights were threatened coincided with those with greatest biological diversity. This has strengthened their claims to the land and to the right to manage and conserve its resources.

Land tenure in Guinea

PRA exposed how the official belief that traditional tenure systems no longer existed was wrong. It showed how these systems persist, are very diverse, and are crucial in formulating effective policies.

Controlling pests in Indonesia

Participatory maps have been used widely by farmers in Indonesia to monitor pest infestation and plan action as part of integrated pest management programmes.

Forest policy in the UK

PRA demonstrated how villagers in Scotland are interested in purchasing and managing forests as a means of generating local livelihoods. Policy changes are now underway to allow this to happen.

Gaining insights through PRA does not guarantee policy change. There are examples where lessons learned through PRA have led to shifts in policy. But usually the link is less clear and change has resulted from a combination of factors and shifts in the climate of opinion. In most cases, by far the biggest influence of PRA has been in bringing the realities of poor people to the notice of policy-makers - in forms which are both credible and difficult to deny.

Using PRA in Poverty Assessments

Participatory methods have been increasingly used in the national Poverty Assessments promoted by the World Bank. This has stemmed from concerns about the limitations of conventional methods used in earlier Assessments, including their failure to capture aspects of the complexity and diversity of poverty.

So far, variants of PRA have been used in "Participatory Poverty Assessments" in six African countries. Different

approaches have been tried. In Kenya and Tanzania, the approach included sampling a larger number of communities, using predesigned scoring cards and categories, the aim being to produce statistically comparable results. In Ghana, Zambia, South Africa and Mozambique, fewer communities were covered but in more depth and with a more open-ended approach.

The objective was to enable poor people to express and analyse their realities and priorities, so that these could be fed into the design of anti-poverty policies. Local teams of researchers and facilitators were first trained in participatory techniques. Fieldwork was then conducted, in some cases in communities where NGOs in the team already had working relations. This helped establish rapport and provided an avenue for follow-up later on.

The process brought out important aspects of poverty and vulnerability which conventional analyses had ignored. The disabled and sick, for example, were often identified as a particularly vulnerable category, while food security emerged as a prime indicator of poverty. Other common findings were the significance to poor people of:

- *the sharp seasonality of poverty, sickness, stress and demands for money (such as school expenses);*
- *the isolation of rural communities, and the importance of all-weather roads and transport;*
- *access to health care, and how user fees and rude staff keep poor people from using health services;*
- *differences in perceptions, realities and priorities between women and men;*
- *the value of safety nets in bad seasons and bad years to supplement peoples' coping strategies;*
- *having multiple sources of food and income, including part-time agriculture and home gardens.*

The richness and diversity of the findings posed problems when it came to synthesising the information. It also raised questions about how insights covering such a broad range of issues could be translated into practical policies. But the general consensus was that use of participatory methods had greatly improved the value of the exercise.

Institutionalising participation

The fashion for "participation", and the power and popularity of PRA - when done well - have encouraged some governments, NGOs and aid agencies to scale up rapidly.

In June 1995, for example, the Government of Indonesia directed that a four-day PRA training programme should be conducted in over 60,000 villages, all in less than a year. In India, some 300 trainers were trained in four months so they could go on to train 12,000 field staff for participatory watershed development. In Uganda, PRA training and follow up are proposed for 14,000 parishes for community capacity building and implementation of the Five Year Plan. In Vietnam, an agriculture project supported by IFAD carried out 350 activities described as PRAs in six months.

But there are real dangers in expanding the use of PRA too quickly. Experience has shown that:

- *sudden scaling up risks discrediting PRA and alienating the local people who take part, especially if it involves introducing top-down, standardised, text book approaches - something that is contrary to the whole ethos of PRA;*
- *since the attitudes and behaviour of the outsiders facilitating PRA are so crucial, training to encourage and reward the right attitudes and behaviour should be a central component in any scaling up effort;*
- *attempts to incorporate PRA into development programmes should start in pilot areas so that experience can be gained and opportunities be provided for learning and training;*
- *scaling up needs to go hand-in-hand with the nurturing of local, community-based institutions, without which PRA cannot be firmly rooted in the longer term.*

Perhaps the key point is that sustainable, grassroots participation requires changes in the whole culture and procedures of the organisations facilitating it, whether they be NGOs, government departments, donor agencies, universities, or training institutes.

As they are learning to operationalise participatory development, organisations are realising that the true challenge lies in transforming themselves - so that they are willing to share power and be receptive to new ideas, listening to people instead of lecturing them, and taking risks by opening the process up rather than trying always to control it.

Making a difference

PRA and other participatory methods have proven their potential as a means of uncovering the realities and priorities of poor people. The question is how to make the transition so that the insights coming from PRA begin to be translated into policies and practice that actually benefit the poor. This is no easy task given the entrenched attitudes and vested interests that are involved. To imagine otherwise would be naïve.

Including policy makers themselves as members of PRA teams seems to be one of the best ways of generating the commitment needed to motivate real change. This has already happened in some countries. One report from Guinea speaks of "the profound effect this had on the perspectives of the government functionaries who participated". Workshops and seminars where senior officials meet and discuss with local people is another approach.

Direct, face-to-face interaction of this kind can have a big impact. By using participatory techniques, poor people can gain in confidence and legitimacy, and start to speak out in ways that were previously impossible. Roles can be reversed, and the realities of the poor and the disadvantaged can begin to be heard.

This is obviously just the beginning. Ways of building up in-country expertise need to be pursued. Here, PRA can draw on its strong tradition of networking and sharing of experience. Any long-term strategy must include the introduction of training in participatory methods, and the attitudes that go with them, into the curricula of universities and training institutes.

Among those with whom starts have been made are medical students in Ghana and Uganda, students of Social Communication Science and Agricultural Economics in Bolivia, and Indian Administrative Service probationers. Such training can be influential; as one senior Indian Government officer put it, "I wish we had such an orientation at the start of our careers".

PRA is no panacea. It can and has been used badly. At worst it can be little more than a fad and a fraud; yet another way of creating jobs for consultants in the name of development.

Used well, however, it has a capacity to change perceptions and influence policy. Most important, for those in positions of authority and power, it can build and stiffen their commitment to make it not their needs and priorities that count, but those of the poor.

Further reading

To obtain details of PRA networks around the world, or further information on PRA, please contact:

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Useful web sites:

A range of information on PRA is also available on the IDS web site at [Participation Group Home Page](#)

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