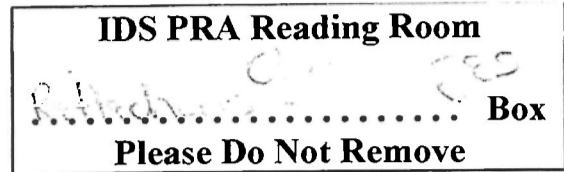# HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF PRA WORLDWIDE

Remarks made at the National PRA Conference, Addis Ababa, 13 February 1996

It is a great pleasure and privilege to have been invited to this Conference. Let me thank Farm Africa for convening it. I do however feel bad about coming to your country for a few days, no doubt giving my opinion on a number of matters, and then leaving. This is precisely the behaviour which I condemn in other people. Hypocrisy is perhaps the only field in which the English can claim to be World Leaders. All I can do is appeal to you to be generous and interpret my behaviour as an attempt to maintain national standards.

THE ORIGINS OF RRA AND PRA

Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) originated in the South. They have had both negative and positive sources.

On the negative side RRA was partly a reaction against the biases of rural development tourism. Quite a number of us in this room will have arranged visits for senior or distinguished people. We all know the care that we take over such visits in terms of what is visited, who is met, and what is said. The more powerful and distinguished the visitor (and I would include especially old men from the North) the more carefully prepared is the visit and the more misleading the impressions gathered are likely to be. RRA sought to offset the biases and misleading nature of rural development tourism. The second negative origin was large-scale questionnaire surveys - their high cost, laboriousness, and the misleading and often useless information they have tended to generate. RRA sought to introduce less formal methods with their own rigour which could give outsiders valid insights at lower cost and with less delay.

On the positive side RRA and PRA owe much to the approaches of social anthropology (especially the distinction between the insiders' view and that of the outsiders - the emic and the etic), from agroecosystem analysis (especially mapping and diagramming of local conditions and changes), farming systems research (especially the insight that small poor farmers have complex and diverse farming systems, and try to complicate and diversify them, not simplify and standardise, in order to reduce risk and increase returns) and from participatory activist research (especially the tradition of Paulo Freire and the idea that poor people should be enabled to conduct their own analysis of their conditions).

RRA evolved especially in the 1980s and was highly developed in Thailand especially at the University of Khon Kaen. In its classical form it emphasised multi-disciplinary teams, careful observation, semi-structured interviewing, and focus groups. PRA began in the late 1980s and

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has been evolving in the 1990s to date, and its methods especially involve groups rather than individuals, visual representations (maps, diagrams) rather than solely verbal communication, comparing rather than measuring, and above all a shift from dominant relationships between outsiders and local people to relationships of facilitation and empowerment.

In this evolution Ethiopia has played a notable part. It is appropriate that we are meeting in this training centre since the Ethiopian Red Cross made a significant contribution in the late 1980s in the evolution of RRA and PRA. There have also been two other contributions from Ethiopia which have had a wide impact worldwide. The first was the participatory modelling by children, women and men separately in North Omo which was facilitated by Ejigu Jonfa, Haile Mariam Tebeje, Tadesse Dessalegn and Hailu Halala. This showed dramatically the different realities, through the models which they made of their environment, of different groups of people. The second was the cartoon of interviewing cows by Hadgu, Yisehak and Tekle. Both of these were published in **RRA Notes**, and both were photocopied and sent to many parts of the world. On a personal note it was in Wollo in the Peasant Association of Abicho that in 1988 I first came to realise that relatively uneducated farmers could understand bar diagrams. It was also there, in the Peasant Association of Gobeya, that farmers showed monthly rainfall going back five years. The diagram recording their insight was widely disseminated by Gordon Conway including to a large audience in FAO in Rome. Many people were astonished at the power of recall of farmers. And some asked 'But what about the **real** figures?' Which raised the question 'Whose reality counts?'

WHAT IS PRA?

RRA is often characterised as 'extractive' and PRA as 'empowering'. RRA should not be downgraded as though it is a second best. It can be perfectly legitimate for outsiders to gather data for good purposes. As with all research there are ethical questions, and in this respect RRA is no different from other forms of research. As for PRA, many practitioners in the South feel that it should be distinguished from RRA, as a process which is ongoing, in which the outsider is a facilitator rather than a data collector. A useful distinction here may be between RRA methods and PRA methods. Any of the methods can be used in either an RRA mode or a PRA mode, An RRA can be conducted using PRA methods, for example participatory mapping and diagramming; and RRA methods such as focus groups an observation can be used in a PRA process of empowerment.

PRA has been described in various ways. One is, *"a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act"*.

PRA has not been deduced from theory. In this respect is differs somewhat from the Freirian tradition. PRA has been induced from practice. Methods and approaches have been found to work. It is only after they have been used that the question has been asked why they work. This does not mean that they do not have a theory. To the contrary there is a growing and powerful theory underlying PRA, especially what happens with groups and visualisations, with cross-checking and the cumulative building up of a diagrammatic expression of a group reality.

In terms of philosophy three elements can be found very commonly in the attitudes and commitment of PRA facilitators. The first is the idea of 'use your own best judgement at all times', meaning that the individual facilitator takes responsibility. There is no pre-set manual which tells you exactly what to do step by step. This encourages responsiveness, improvisation and adaptability and can make space for local people to impress their reality freely and creatively. Second, there is a commitment to equity, including gender-related equity. Third, there is empowerment including enabling local people to conduct their own analysis.

THE SPREAD OF PRA

PRA has spread widely in many directions.

* **Geographical:** The early developments of PRA were mainly in Kenya and India, but PRA evolved in parallel in different places, and rapidly spread to other countries. Trainers from the South played a significant part in this. It also spread from South to North, and is now practised in the North, notably in the UK, and especially in Scotland where it has contributed to a changing forestry policy. Strikingly villagers in Scotland are trying to gain control over neighbouring Forest Commission land in order to improve and secure their livelihoods. Trainers from the South have been instrumental in introducing PRA in some parts of the North, for example Finland.

* **Applications:** The spread has been into many applications and sectors, not only poverty related programmes, health, agriculture, natural resource management, but also into organisational analysis and urban applications (including a recent investigation of urban violence in Jamaica).

* **Process:** PRA has entered from appraisal through action to implementation and monitoring in evaluation.

* **Personal:** PRA has shifted its emphasis from professional change associated with new methods to personal change in behaviour and attitudes.

* **Institutional change:** Impact has spread to institutional change and changes in project procedures, notably challenging and modifying LFA (Logical Framework Analysis) and ZOPP.

* **Organisational:** PRA has spread from NGOs, where it mainly originated, to other organisations, including Government Departments, universities and now perhaps increasingly to democratic councils.

* **Policy:** It has been shown to be a powerful instrument for policy assessment and change through the PPAs (Participatory Poverty Assessments) of Ghana, Zambia and South Africa, with potential, too, for bringing senior policy makers into direct interaction with poor people.

* **Empowerment and negotiation:** PRA has been used to empower different groups within communities, especially women, the poor, and the marginalised, and to facilitate negotiation between groups and the resolution of conflict.

* **Scale:** With an apparently exponential spread, activities described as PRA have gone to scale with an astonishing speed. To give examples: in India last year between April and August over 300 trainers were trained for a month, including one week on PRA, to become trainers of some 12,000 government staff engaged in a national watershed management programme. One method - wealth or well-being ranking - has now been used with something between 100,000 and 200,000 households, in order to enable community members to identify the poorer households for involvement in anti-poverty programmes. In countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Bolivia, Indonesia, Kenya, Nepal, South Africa and Vietnam, to mention but a few, PRA activities are now very widespread indeed.

CHALLENGES NOW

RRA and PRA are not a panacea. Like any other approaches and methods, they can be done badly. There has been very extensive abuse and misuse of both. One of the principles of PRA is self-critical awareness. It is vitally important for us all to learn from the mistakes and errors which are now so widespread. At the same time developments have shown a quite astonishing potential for PRA approaches and methods.

Six challenges stand out in other parts of the world. I wonder whether these apply also in Ethiopia.

1)   INSTITUTIONAL ADOPTION AND CHANGE

The challenge here is to continue and extend the training of government and university staff, giving them good access to, and enabling them where they wish to adopt, PRA approaches and methods. Many problems have been encountered, and many issues raised, especially where professionals have hierarchical orientations and mind sets. The challenge is to continue this process of spread. In government this can imply changing procedures. ZOPP, for example, has often been challenged by PRA: ZOPP in its generally top-down mode has identified supposed priorities for local people; in contrast PRA has often enabled people to analyse and express their own priorities which then turn out to differ from those which have come out of ZOPP. In universities the challenge is to change the nature of teaching, the methods used in research especially graduate research, and to adopt more participatory modes of investigation.

2)   QUALITY AND SCALING UP

PRA methods and approaches when required on a large scale, as has happened with some Government Departments and with some donor-funded projects, can lead to bad practice. This occurs especially where there are targets for expenditure and drives to disburse money. Quality suffers seriously. Methods are applied in a wooden and routinised manner. The form of PRA may be observed, though in a rather rigid way, but the spirit and the process of empowerment are missing. The challenge here is to enable scaling-up to take place with self-improvement built in, so that practice continually improves with time. At the same time donors and government organisations have to restrain themselves from setting high targets for the disbursement funds and the achievement of participation, since, so often, top down targets destroy participation.

3)   TRAINING IN BEHAVIOUR AND ATTITUDES

It is now widely recognised that behaviour and attitudes are much more important for successful facilitation than the methods being facilitated. Perhaps the most urgent need we face is for the development and dissemination of better approaches and exercises in training to enable us to change our behaviour and attitudes and to become better facilitators. The challenge here is to be innovative, to borrow from other fields, and to share rapidly and widely those techniques which can give us insight and help us to change quite rapidly and effectively. There is one called Dominator which I hope to share with you later in this Conference.

4)   ETHICAL

Values and commitment are vital when it comes to the question of empowerment. There are dimensions here of gender, of ethnic group, of age, and of wealth. If these are to be

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recognised and moderated in the direction of equity, commitment is required on the part of outsiders. The challenge here is a personal one for all those concerned.

5)   POLICY INFLUENCE

Powerful means for influencing policy for the better have begun to be developed using PRA methods. Participatory Poverty Assessments have already led to significant policy changes. Other opportunities are through enabling local people, including those who are poorer, to interact directly and freely with policy makers. This can occur in two ways: either through policy makers and other powerful people being hosted in villages and informed and taught by local people; or by local people taking their analysis and diagrams to administrative centres and capital cities and presenting these to policy makers. We need to learn better how to use these different approaches, and to spread their use.

6)   SHARING AND NETWORKING

Finally there is a challenge for all of us to share our experiences and to learn from others. This Conference will be considering networking in Ethiopia. At IDS and IIED we are anxious to support national initiatives. We do not seek or wish to dominate. If there are ways in which we can help you with your networking, with information, documents, videos, or in other ways, let us know. We will try to do what we can, IDS and IIED work together very closely on this. IDS is concentrating somewhat more on support for networks: there are now about 20 of these established, and about 30 other contact people in different countries who in most cases are trying to start something up. IIED is concentrating somewhat more on resource centres and providing support for those who wish to set them up and of course an editing, publishing and disseminating **PLA Notes**. At IDS we have made abstracts of over 800 documents. These are available in hard copy which I am leaving here and also on disk which we can supply. We have also prepared topic packs including one on gender, and have reproduced eight videos, two each on four cassettes, which will also be left here. For the future we are considering a core or starter pack for networks, to include key PRA related documents; more topic packs according to demand; and one-pagers which would be ideas or experiences each on only one piece of paper. Part of the challenge here, to be met largely at the national level, is translations into and out of national and other languages. Much of the communication and enthusiasm for communication tends to focus on Internet. We recognise a great challenge to ensure that those who do not have access to Internet can obtain hard copy and are not marginalised.

Let us hope that by working together on these six challenges, and on others as they arise, we can make some good things happen.

The initiative of FARM African in convening and organising this National Conference provides a wonderful opportunity for sharing. Let us make the most of it. I am most grateful for the opportunity it gives me to catch up with developments, of which there have been so many, in Ethiopia. Thank you again for inviting me, and let me wish the Conference all success.

Robert Chambers

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