

PRA: START, STUMBLE, SELF-CORRECT, SHARE

Participatory Rural Appraisal is a label. More and more people are adopting it, and calling what they do PRA. More and more influential organisations are requesting or requiring that PRA be carried out.

This brings dangers and opportunities.

The dangers are that the label will be used or claimed for activities where behaviour and attitudes are not participatory; that these activities will do badly; and that good PRA will be discredited. There is a danger too that the demand for training in PRA will so outstrip good supply that some will claim to be PRA trainers when they have no direct personal experience of good PRA. This has already happened.

The opportunities are hard to assess but look big. Time, though, will show. Perhaps we have in good PRA one among a family of approaches for reversing centralisation, standardisation, and top-down development; and for enabling and empowering rural communities and the poor to do more of their own analysis, to take command more of their lives and resources, and to improve their wellbeing as they define it.

So what is the core of good PRA?

We should all have different answers. It is more important to ask the question, and to puzzle and puzzle about good answers, than to have one right answer. It is more important for each person and each group to invent and adapt their own approach, methods, sequences and combinations than to adopt a ready-made manual or model. Let a thousand flowers bloom (and why only a thousand?), and let them be flowers which bloom better and better, and spread their seeds.

Here is one personal set of answers. If you read them, criticise them. Reject them. Think out your own, from your own ideas and experience.

In the words of the one-sentence manual

"Use your own best judgement at all times"

The core of good PRA is our behaviour and attitudes.
It involves:

- * being self-aware and self-critical
- * embracing error
- * handing over the stick
- * sitting, listening and learning
- * improvising, inventing, adapting
- * using our own best judgement at all times

So we can ask:

- * who lectures? who holds the stick? whose finger wags?
- * whose knowledge, analysis and priorities count?

Ours? Theirs, as we assume them to be? Or theirs as they freely express them?

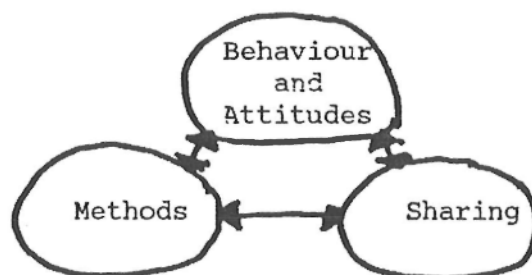
Good PRA is empowering, not extractive.

Good PRA makes mistakes, learns from them, and so is self-improving.

Good PRA spreads and improves on its own.

So START. Do not wait. Get on with it. Relax. Try things. Learn by doing. Fail forwards. Experiment. Ask - what went well? What went badly? What can we learn? How can we do better? How can we help others to do better?

Remember the three pillars



Done well, PRA becomes self-improving and self-spreading: self-improving through critical awareness, embracing error, and learning what works; and self-spreading through sharing.

Start with behaviour and attitudes. Ours. And use the methods at once to help.

Or start with a method, and observe and reflect on your behaviour and attitudes as you use it. Relax. Listen. Keep quiet. Allow fun. Learn. And learn how to do better.

PRA is what we make of it. It is a potential, not a panacea. If you do not like it, leave it. No one will mind. It is not for everyone. But if you like it, and use it, share it and help others to share.

Have a go. Why not?

Robert Chambers
pradiss.doc