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NGOs AND DEVELOPMENT: THE PRIMACY OF THE PERSONAL

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Summary Overview

The experience with participatory rural appraisal (PRA) suggests that a reversal of the normally dominant behaviour and attitudes of outsiders is crucial for participatory development. Personal behaviour and attitudes have, though, been neglected in seeing how to do better. The development enterprise is oriented "North-South" by patterns of dominance between "uppers" and "lowers", and by funding, pressures to disburse, and top-down accountability. These patterns increasingly affect NGOs, which may then become more like government organisations, in scale, staffing, hierarchical culture, procedures, and self-deception.

Policies, procedures and organisational cultures are determined by individuals, especially those in positions of power. To stem and reverse trends of dominance and deception requires personal change and action by them: to shift emphasis from upward to downward accountability; to resist pressures to disburse; to stress and reward truth, trust and honesty; and above all, to enjoy giving up the normal exercise of power, and enabling lowers to do more and take more responsibility. Participatory field experiences and training can help these personal changes. These in turn require a new professionalism of training, and for some NGOs a redefinition of roles. The question then is to what extent such changes would resolve problems of programming, performance, legitimacy, and accountability.

"Discovering" Behaviour and Attitudes

In the early stages of the coalescing of approaches and methods which led to participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and its relatives, it was participatory methods that seemed the key: participatory mapping and modelling; matrix ranking and scoring; seasonal calendars; trend and change analysis; causal and linkage diagramming; wealth and well-being ranking; time use analysis; the identification and ranking of best bets; and so on. In the early 1990s, though, field experience showed that the behaviour and attitudes of outsiders mattered more. This included sitting down, listening and learning; "handing over the stick" (or pen, or chalk); being confident that "they can do it" (that local people can map, model, diagram and so on); embracing error and failing forwards; using one's own best judgement at all times; relaxing and not rushing; and "being nice to people" (see e.g. Mascarenhas et al 1991; Chambers 1992). The reason why the capabilities of local people to conduct their own analysis, especially but not only visually, had not earlier been common knowledge appeared to be the near-universal tendency of outsiders to dominate - to lecture, to interrupt, to make suggestions, to be dominant both verbally and non-verbally. A watershed was a PRA training in Karnataka where a participatory planning session was monitored, finding that the villagers spoke for only 11 out of 45 minutes, and that they were interrupted 45 times. The most difficult lesson for outsiders in PRA training became learning to shut up: not to interview and not to interrupt while local people were doing their own analysis. More and more, PRA field training exercises have stressed outsiders' behaviour and attitudes more than PRA methods.

Normal N-S Dominance

This in turn extended naturally into examining wider patterns of dominance and submission, seeing one dimension of social relations as being between uppers and lowers (table 1)¹, and then, by analogy with a magnetic field, as oriented North-South. The

¹ I am grateful to Jenny Chambers for discussions and ideas about uppers and lowers, and other insights. Responsibility for opinions and errors is, though, mine.

stronger the top magnets, so the stronger the N-S orientation of the low magnets. Any person can be an upper in some contexts, and a lower in others; and some are multiple uppers (male, old, senior, white, wealthy...) and others multiple lowers (female, young, junior, black, poor...). Complete revolutionary reversals, as in Robespierre's France, Stalin's Russia and Mao's China, are "slot-rattling", retaining the patterns of dominance, but putting different people in power. Democratic empowerment entails reversals which neutralise forces of dominance, and liberate, allowing freedom to make relationships in all directions (figure 1). For this to happen requires changes in the behaviour and attitudes of uppers.

Contemporary Change in NGOs

In this perspective, the development enterprise, whatever the rhetoric, can be seen to be oriented by this metaphorical N-S magnetism of dominance, with uppers and lowers. In the hierarchies of funding agencies (World Bank, multilaterals, bilaterals, NNGOs) and recipients of funds, the relationships are repeated downwards. Pressures to disburse from the top drive donor staff on mission to dominate. Shortage of time means rushed preparation of projects and proposals. Demands for accountability from the top require the specification of targets (through logical frameworks, GOPP, ZOPP and the like). Targets drive staff to spend. Participation is submissive. Monitoring and evaluation are then demanded to assure that the money has been well spent and impacts have been good, using criteria determined from above.

As bilateral and multilateral donors divert more of their funds to NGOs, and as higher proportions of NGO funding come from these official sources, so NGOs become more prone to these influences. Unless care is taken, some of the effects are likely to be bad. It is a commonplace that a top-down disbursement drive impedes and negates participation. It also strengthens hierarchy, and generates standardisation, misfits between central programmes and local needs, and misleadingly positive feedback². The culture and procedures of organisations are affected. The self-deceiving state already exists; the self-deceiving NGO is also coming into being, and if trends continue will become more prevalent. As NGOs become bigger and undertake more of the service functions previously performed by governments, so they can be expected to become more like hierarchical government organisations.

This matters because it means losing some of the real and supposed comparative advantages of NGOs such as sensitivity to local conditions, commitment to the poor, ability to vary actions according to needs, hard work and the will to serve.

The Primacy of the Personal

Many prescriptions will surely be presented at this workshop. All are likely to mean that people in power - uppers - should do something different. This is obvious to the point of embarrassment. Yet we are so trapped in the search for universals which fit normal concepts and criteria, and which are part of our professional tools of trade, that we can easily not notice or discuss what stares us most in the face, the fact that individual personal choice of what to do mediates every action and every change. What is done and

² For evidence and elaboration see three papers "Bureaucratic Reversals and Local Diversity", IDS Bulletin, 19, 4: 50-56, "The Self-deceiving State", IDS Bulletin 23, 4: 31-42, and "All Power Deceives", IDS Bulletin, 25, 2: 14-25

not done depends on what people chose to do and not to do, and especially those with more power.

If, for example, all managers and staff in all multilateral and bilateral agencies, NGOs and GROs tomorrow abandoned their N-S orientation, adopted a participatory philosophy and behaviour, and supported each other in the change, the world of development would be transformed. Top-down disbursement drives, targets, rushed visits, and deceptions would diminish or disappear, and each level would empower the levels below to exercise discretion and differentiate what was done.

Or if, to take another example, all development professionals were tomorrow to become aware, committed, honest and courageous in serving and empowering the poorer, and enabling others to do the same, most field programmes would be transformed.

What stops changes like these are "the system" - procedures, expectations, confidential reports, criteria for promotions, penal management, organisation cultures, precedent, inertia, corruption, family-first motivation and the like. One person cannot change, it can be said, unless the whole system, and others, change.

This is a convenient but false position. For every person there is some room for manoeuvre, and for every upper there is room to make room for manoeuvre for lowers. Alliances can be made with others - upwards, downwards and laterally - who are like-minded. Many brave people have had the vision and courage to change and to help others to change.

The mystery is that such obvious points need to be made at all. Personal behaviour and attitudes are an odd blind spot in development. Training is given prominence, but mostly it is concerned with imparting knowledge and skills. The modes of training are themselves usually top-down transfer of technology, reproducing the magnetic N-S field of hierarchy. The trainer is an upper who knows; and those taught or trained as lowers do not know. The teacher or trainer transfers to the trainees not only knowledge and skills, and at the same time the upper-lower orientation. So the trainees leave to become uppers in turn, transferring knowledge and technology to new lowers. Through training, thus, the N-S field is reinforced.

Where in contrast, training becomes a process of helping people learn, and of enabling personal change towards egalitarian, democratic, participatory relationships, the N-S field can be expected to weaken, opening up options for more trust, freedom and choice in relationships and actions and more local and individual diversity.

Reasons for Neglect

The neglect of the personal may be partly explained as follows:

- * academic values. Any discussion of personal change risks sounding evangelical. Academics affect to abhor moralising and reward appearances of dispassionate scientific detachment and objectivity.
- * hypocrisy. Almost all development professionals (and certainly myself) are hypocrites, and most know it. But we do not like to parade our hypocrisy too publicly by saying what ought to be done at the personal level, because we know we will not do it ourselves.

- * the missing discipline. Psychology is the missing discipline of development. Psychologists are rare among development professionals, and where they are found working in development it is often not as psychologists or trainers but in some other capacity.
- * low calibre training staff. Many staff are posted to training institutes as punishments or in the hope that in training their incompetence or indolence will do less harm³. In consequence rather few trainers are interested, willing or able to innovate by conducting training for personal change.
- * the challenge of participatory training. Participatory training is not easy. Helping people to learn for themselves rather than teaching them in a N-S manner often requires personal reorientation by the trainer, plus risk-taking, effort, at times discomfort, and embracing uncertainty. The dominant mode of teaching and training, in contrast, is the lecture or lecture and discussion, where the instructor maintains control and implements a close-ended blueprint instead of facilitating an open-ended process.

Even after these explanations, there remains a residual mystery why personal change and training concerned with behaviour and attitudes, should be such cinderellas of development, when they are such a universal variables amenable to change.

An Agenda for Personal Action

If policy, practice and performance depend on personal action, and personal action depends on personal experience, learning and change, an agenda for action can be sought. Many actions imply reversals of the normal conditions. Here is a list:

- * respecting, listening to, learning from, "handing over the stick to", and empowering, one's lowers, and encouraging and enabling them to do the same
- * instituting and supporting democratic and participatory management
- * shifting emphasis from upward to downward accountability
- * refraining from and resisting pressures to disburse big sums fast
- * stressing and rewarding, trust, truth, and exercise of responsible judgement, and local diversity
- * learning (as an upper) to enjoy giving up power and (as a lower) to accept and exercise responsibility
- * deciding where best to work, and seeking a mix of locations, posts, responsibilities and experiences (S and N, lower and upper, periphery and centre) in the interests of learning, improving judgement, and seeing what best to do.

³ There are outstanding exceptions of which at least half a dozen could be named in India alone; but I believe this to be sadly true for most training institutes.

An Agenda for Experiential Learning

The thrust of this note is that personal development, with changes in behaviour and attitudes, should be high on the agenda for all development professionals. There is still an amazing neglect of helping uppers learn how to learn from lowers, and how to enable lowers to learn from and with each other. Most university staff still lecture, and know little about participatory learning. Since the time when they took up their posts, most donor agency staff have never spent unconstrained, unrushed, unofficial time exposed to and learning about field realities, if indeed they have ever done so. Many NGO staff believe they can speak for the poor, but rather few have facilitated participatory analysis by poor people, or if they have, have tended to dominate without realising the misleading effects of their dominance.

The power and the potential of the family of approaches and methods now known as PRA must not be exaggerated. PRA, like any other participatory approach, can be done badly, and is being done badly on a growing scale. But where PRA has been done well, it has often brought personal change to those who facilitate it. Those who have managed to alter their normally dominant behaviour, to hand over the stick, to facilitate, to take time, to sit down and listen, and not to dominate whether by word or act, have found, quite simply, new pleasures, satisfactions, insights and interests, in short, that they enjoy and learn from the experience, and that things change for them.

Several elements have proved powerful: living and sleeping in villages; taking the role of novice, being taught village tasks, and making a fool of oneself; video feedback of personal behaviour; facilitating and observing group visual synergy which shows how well "they can do it" (figure 2); sharing food; and personal and group reflection.

All this suggests a four-point agenda and questions, for experiential learning and change:

1. New policy and practice in agencies. This means rethinking and reorganisation by uppers in NGOs, Governments and donor agencies to provide field learning experiences for themselves and their lowers, and authoritatively setting aside time for these activities. This is not a new idea. Has it been taken by any besides the German organisation *Justitia et Pax* (Kochendorfer-Lucius and Osner 1991; Osner et al 1992)? If so, by whom and with what experience? And if not, why not?
2. Multiplying, supporting and releasing good trainer/facilitators. More good participatory trainer/facilitators are needed. The PRA experience is that this is a specialised activity requiring a rather special personal orientation and stamina. Most of the PRA training expertise is in the South. There is a danger in North and South alike of trainers setting up who are not right for the job. Some good PRA trainers in the South have been and are being enabled within their organisations to devote more time to participatory training. Others, sometimes frustrated by line responsibilities, have left to become full-time independent trainers or to found their own NGOs. Given current demand and need, the case is strong for supporting and releasing good trainer/facilitators wherever they are. For all concerned, the question of quality of training and learning remains. How can and should it be tackled?
3. Organisations for Learning Experience (OLEs). New organisations are needed, or changes in existing organisations, to provide interactive learning environments and experiences (Pretty and Chambers 1993). In other fields, such as humanistic and gestalt psychotherapy, such organisations exist. The difference in development is that the interactive learning environment is best the village or slum, which poses special problems.

How many such organisations already exist? How can they improve? And how could they be multiplied?

4. New Approaches and Methods. For scaling up, there is much scope for the development, adoption, sharing and spread of effective approaches and methods for behaviour and attitude change. Many are known in diverse fields and could be brought together. More could and should be invented for the development context. Who will take the lead? And how can approaches and methods best be improved and shared?

These four directions, actions and sets of questions imply reversals of the normal top-down, centre-outwards, and upper to lower tendencies. Instead, the new directions are bottom-up, outside-centrewards⁴, and lower to upper. They turn the normal N-S donor-recipient relationship on its head. More and more development professionals in the North are requesting PRA experience and training for themselves in the South. This demand from the North exceeds supply from the South. The South already has a vital donor role in enabling those from the North to gain more general development experience. Is there potential here for extending and deepening that role by providing more people from the North with PRA-type learning experiences in the field, contributing more balance and reciprocity to S-N and N-S relationships?

If through personal choice, alliances, and mutual support, by uppers and lowers alike, more NGOs pursued this agenda, and spread it to other organisations with which they worked, to what extent would problems remain for them programming, performance, legitimacy and accountability?

In the development agenda, does personal change then deserve a new primacy?

⁴ It is significant that this is such an awkward and unfamiliar phrase. It is simply not commonly used, if at all.

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Figure 1: Dominance, reversals and freedom

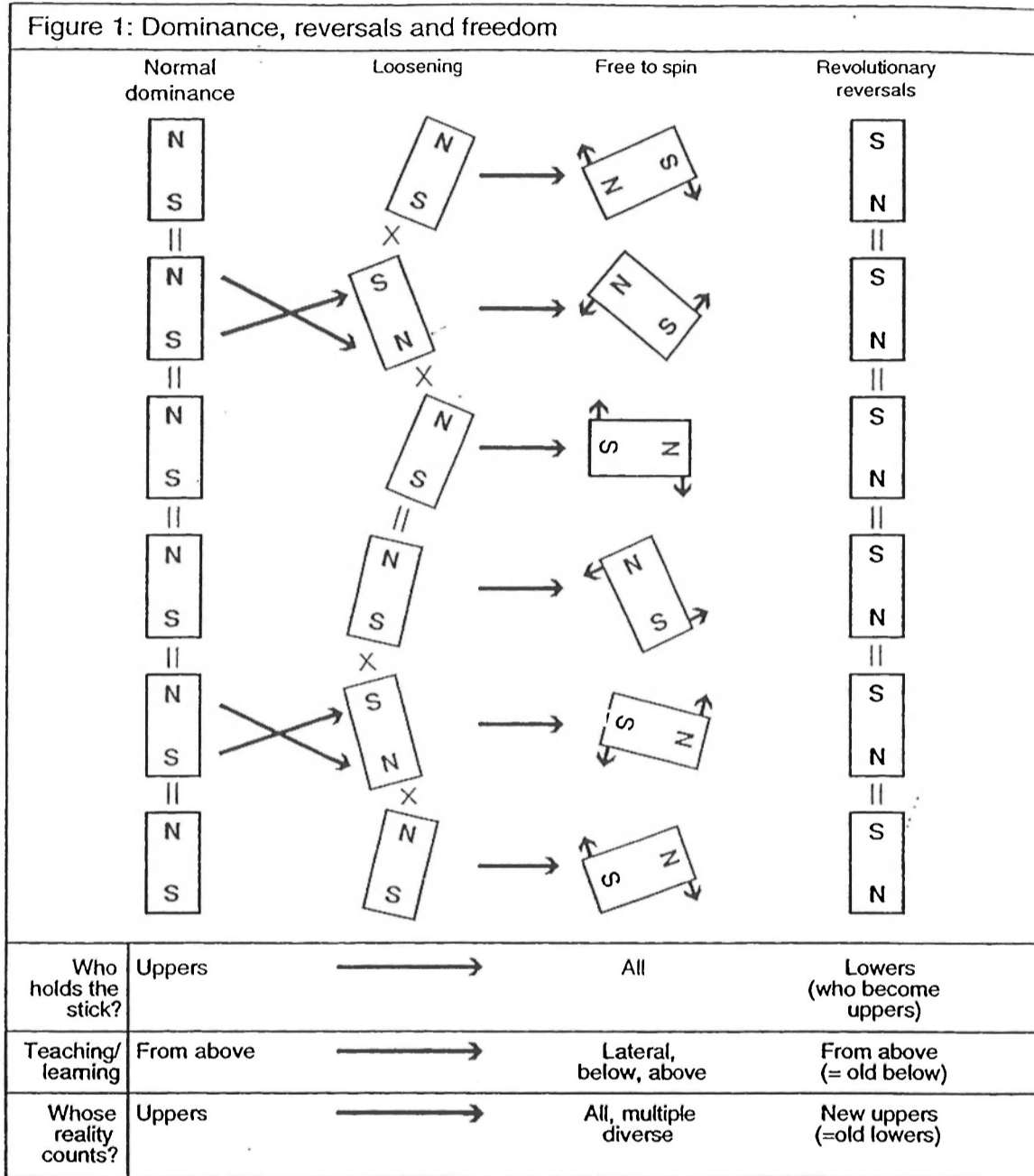


FIGURE 2: GROUP-VISUAL SYNERGY IN PRA

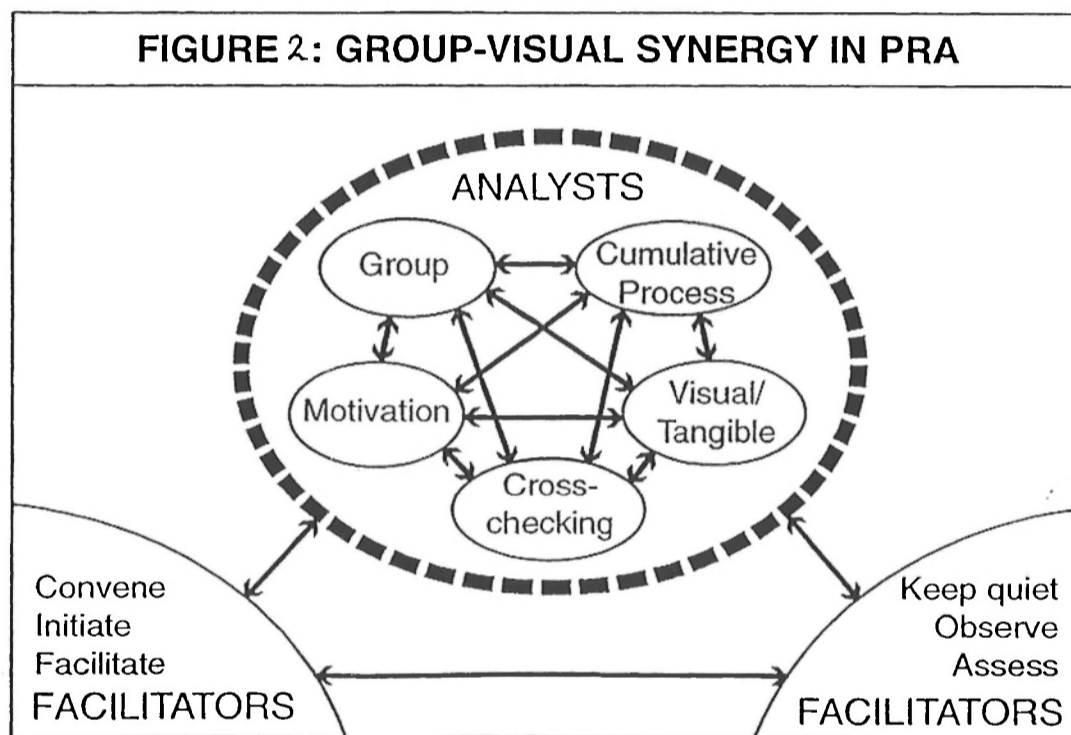


Table 1: North-South, Upper-Lower Relationships

Dimension/context	North Uppers	South Lowers
Spatial	Core (urban, industrial)	Periphery (rural, agricultural)
International and development	The North IMF, World Bank Donors Creditors	The South Poor countries Recipients Debtors
Personal ascriptive	Male White High ethnic or caste group	Female Black Low ethnic or caste group
Life cycle	Old person Parent Mother-in-law	Young person Child Daughter-in-law
Bureaucratic organisation	Senior Manager Official Patron Officer Warden, guard	Junior Worker Supplicant Client "other rank" Inmate, prisoner
Social, spiritual	Patron Priest Guru Doctor, psychiatrist	Client Lay person Disciple Patient
Teaching and learning	Master Lecturer Teacher	Apprentice Student Pupil

Individuals are multiple uppers or multiple lowers, and a person can be an upper in one context and a lower in another.

FIGURE 2 THE PRIMACY OF THE PERSONAL

