

# PRA - five years later Where are we now?

by Robert Chambers & Irene Guijt

The use of participatory approaches has exploded in recent years. Exciting, innovative and important new approaches to development research, planning and action are evolving rapidly all over the world but this is not happening without difficulties and concerns. This article highlights some important emerging issues, and is based on the thoughts and experiences of many trainers and practitioners of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) around

the world. It is not, in any way, a 'final statement' on PRA. The practice of PRA is evolving too rapidly to be captured in anything but a momentary update. We are continually learning through action and critical debates, improving our skills and sharpening our thoughts. As experiences spread and deepen so does our understanding of the issues involved. Your critical reflections are most welcome in this process.



### Why RRA and PRA developed

Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) evolved in the late 1970s and 1980s, and is one of the precursors of PRA. With accelerating global change and greater awareness of the value of local knowledge, the need for good and timely information and insights became more clearly evident. Four decades of 'development' work, despite its isolated successes, was obviously not solving the problems. Large scale questionnaire surveys were costly, and generated information that was usually late, inaccurate and little used. Rural development tourism, quick countryside visits, with its anti-poverty biases was recognized as part of the problem. Outsiders collected information about rural people's realities by visiting places close to urban centres and on main roads, often at successful project sites, during the more prosperous time of the year and by talking to better-off farmers, almost always men.

The failings of these approaches insulated and isolated senior and powerful people, most of whom are men, from rural realities. The failings of this approach above all helped many development professionals to recognize that 'we', as people external to the community where development was intended, and our confidence in our own knowledge, are much of the problem, and that local people, and their knowledge, are the basis of the solution. RRA developed as a research approach to help minimise such biases, an alternative that was cost effective and provided sufficiently accurate information quickly.

At the end of the 1980s, PRA began to evolve in the search for practical research and planning approaches that could support more decentralized planning and more democratic decision-making, value social diversity, work towards sustainability, and enhance community participation and empowerment. PRA can be described as 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. In most cases, the use of PRA is initiated by outside development workers. But when used well, PRA can enable local people (rural or urban), to undertake their own appraisal, analysis, action, monitoring and evaluation. It can draw marginalised people better into planning processes, giving them more control over their own lives.

Both RRA and PRA have built on a wide range of disciplines. In the early 1980s approaches used by agro-ecologists, development planners and geographers provided many of the methodological insights. Since then social science influences (anthropology, sociology, psychology, public administration, etc.) and community development practice (from diverse fields, notably health care and agriculture) have made contributions. The real basis of evolution has proven to be staff of NGOs and some innovative government agencies, whose interaction with villagers has encouraged improvisations, adaptations and new inventions.

Many methods have developed, such as participatory mapping, matrices, wellbeing ranking, causal and

linking diagramming, and have been combined in many sequences and an amazing range of applications. These experiences have shown clearly that there are advantages to methods that are flexible rather than rigid, visual rather than verbal, based on group rather than individual analysis, and that compare rather than measure. A major learning for outsiders has been that local people have a far greater capacity to use these methods and to conduct their own analysis than had been supposed.

Beside the basic principles that RRA and PRA share (see Box 1), the more recent experiences with PRA suggest additional key principles:

● **Facilitation.** The importance of good facilitation skills, which aims to enable local people do more or all of the investigation, mapping, modelling, diagramming, ranking, scoring, quantification, analysis, presentation, planning **themselves** and to own the outcome. Analysis by them is shared with outsiders and the information stays with the people who generated it, being taken away only with their permission.

● **Sharing.** A culture of sharing of information, of methods, of food, of field experiences between and among

#### BOX 1. Basic principles of RRA and PRA

- offsetting biases - spatial, project, person (gender, elite), seasonal, professional, courtesy.
- rapid progressive learning - flexible, exploratory, interactive, inventive.
- reversal of roles - learning from, with and by local people; eliciting and using their criteria and categories; and finding, understanding and appreciating local people's knowledge.
- optimal ignorance and appropriate imprecision - not finding out more than is needed and not measuring when comparing is enough. We are trained to make absolute measurements but often trends, scores or ranking are all that are required.
- triangulation - using different methods, sources and disciplines, and a range of informants in a range of places, and cross-checking to get closer to the truth through successive approximations.
- principal investigators' direct learning from and with local people.
- seeking diversity and differences.

NGOs, government and villagers, without clinging to the ownership of ideas and information which is common to much development work.

● **Behaviour and attitudes.** The behaviour and attitudes of external facilitators are of primary importance, more important than methods. And indeed, PRA practitioners and trainers are increasingly stressing personal behaviour and attitudes. These all important attitudes include: critical self awareness and embracing error; sitting down, listening and learning; not lecturing but 'handing over the stick' to villagers, who become the main teachers and analysts; having confidence that 'they can do it'; and a relaxed and open-ended inventiveness.

It means asking local people to help outsiders learn, respecting them. Self-criticism means learning to accept doubt, acknowledging and learning from errors, continuously trying to do better, and building active learning and improvement into every experience.

All this implies considerable professional and often personal change, and requires good training skills of the PRA trainers. It means that outsiders must take time to reflect on how their role in community interactions change and what they must learn to do and to stop doing, if local people are to benefit from this. It also often means that community members must adapt to their new, more powerful roles, shedding images of hand-outs and dependency on outside-led activities.

### RRA and PRA

RRA and PRA are very different, despite the similarity in the methods that are being used. The difference lies in their purpose and process. RRA began and continues to be a better way for outsiders to learn. It enables outsiders to gain information and insights from local people and about local conditions. This information is an important input into their own

planning so that they will be able to respond more effectively to the needs and priorities of the people they are meant to serve. The greater the understanding that decision or policy makers have of local reality, the more responsive they may be. Participatory methods, like participatory mapping, can be used in an RRA study. But the emphasis of an RRA exercise lies with the collection of local information. Analysis is carried out by the outsider, later, outside the area of study.

The way PRA has evolved means that it generally refers to a process that empowers local people to change their own condition and situation. It is intended to enable local people to conduct their own analysis and often to plan and take action. It has, therefore, come to encompass more than a single, short, field-based exercise. It means transforming the old dependency roles and recognizing local people, both men and women, as active analysts, planners and organizers. A PRA field exercise is not only for information and idea generation, but it is about analysis and learning by local people. It is about building the process of participation, of discussion and communication, and conflict resolution. This means that the process grows and evolves out of the specifics of the local context.

This does not mean that the external agents are neutral or do not engage in discussions during a PRA process. They are also active, like any of the other interest groups, and have their opinions and ideas. But outsiders have a role to play in, above all, facilitating this analysis by community members. For this they have to learn to keep quiet, to encourage and foster confidence and, especially at first, to restrain their desire to put forward their own ideas. The issue is a subtle one of relative power and devolving analysis and decision-making consciously, at every possible opportunity.

This means that the focus of analysis in PRA-based work is not just the data that are collected but also



reflecting on the process. Processes are just as important in the development of a community action plan as the 'data'. Processes do not start and end during a short field exercise and they are not always easy to understand. This understanding is built up over a longer term. PRA itself becomes part of a process, of development, and of empowerment. Learning to see 'process' as one of the 'products' of PRA, means a reorientation for fieldworkers. They need to develop skills to see processes and to facilitate them, where appropriate. It also means seeing the use of PRA methods as taking place within a longer time span.

So participatory approaches are not substitutes for but are rather an integral part of, long-term dialogue and sustained interaction. Yet many agencies naively assume that a single, brief participatory exercise with a group of local people will lead to positive and lasting change. No participatory approach offers a quick solution to complex problems. There is no shortcut to success. The first participatory encounter between an external enabling agency and a local community should be seen as the start, not the end, of a long complicated but mutually beneficial journey of joint analysis, self-critical awareness, capacity strengthening, and resource mobilization. This is a learning process that develops and promotes new methods and changes the prevailing attitudes, behaviour, norms, skills and procedures, both within the agency as well as within the local community (see Box 2).

### Why is PRA spreading so widely?

PRA appears to answer a widely felt need that seems to know no boundaries of discipline or of geography. Although it has mainly developed in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the approaches are now spreading and being used in Europe and Australia. Some even talk of a "revolution" in

local (rural and urban) research methods and action.

When done well, with good rapport, these approaches and methods work, involving local people in their own analysis and planning, leading to action, and giving outsiders good insights. The experience is often enjoyable for all concerned. But many of those who have had the opportunity to take part in a PRA (often a training exercise) have found it to be not only fun; it was also an eye-opener. Many missed opportunities become apparent as the knowledge and capacity of local

communities to contribute to their own development are revealed. (That we ever thought otherwise!)

Not only donors but also government organisations, training institutes and universities see the important opportunities inherent in PRA and have requested training and are using and evolving variants of PRA. PRA-based work has been carried out in almost every domain of local action and development including community planning, watershed development and management, social forestry, tank rehabilitation, women's programmes,

### BOX 2. PRA is a learning process

Redd Barna's work with PRA in Kyakatebe and Akoboi in Uganda is based on trying to understand and include intra-communal difference in the development of Community Action Plans. The work is undertaken with 5 community groups: younger women (often unmarried mothers), older women, younger men, older men, and, importantly, children. What seems essential to date is to create an appreciation amongst these groups of the uniqueness and importance of each group's priorities, so that older men will not, for example, oppose the needs that younger women might feel for community family planning activities. Redd Barna's approach is evolving towards a multi-stage process of dialogue with and between these social groups, with about 2-3 weeks between each stage.

**Step 1:** initial field-based use of PRA methods to start situation analysis with 5 groups, with government extension staff who work in and with those communities and Redd Barna staff (who are all seconded to the National Council for Children).

**Step 2:** deepen discussions, identify those that have not yet been involved, and seek to draw them into the existing groups, where appropriate. Separate discussion groups might be needed where this is not considered possible by local people.

**Step 3:** draw up initial Group Action Priorities and Plan (GAPPs) in the groups.

**Step 4:** share these initial GAPPs amongst the groups, so that all the groups will have a chance to see, discuss, criticise, and, if necessary, laugh about the priorities of others, in order to come to a greater appreciation of the diversity of local concerns and above all, the validity of all of them. This means that there are 5 sets of GAPPs being shared and discussed within the 5 groups, privately.

**Step 5:** revise, if necessary, GAPPs as a result of understanding the needs and priorities of other social groups.

**Step 6:** meeting of (representatives of) the 5 social groups to merge the GAPPs into a Community Action Plan which will be submitted to the Sub-district for funding. At this meeting, the following is identified: areas of totally shared interest (where all 5 groups express a need), areas of partially shared interest (where 2, 3 or 4 groups have overlapping needs), and areas of unique interest (with needs specific to a particular group). This allows for collective action on areas of common interest, while valuing unique needs and acting on them, if necessary, only by the group who expressed them.

credit, client (stake-holder) selection and deselection, health programmes, water and sanitation, animal husbandry, agricultural research and extension, emergency programmes, food security, institutional development and development staff training. Training institutes are interested in adopting and adapting the approach and methods for fieldwork and field experience of their students. Universities were at first slow to show interest but this is now changing fast.

PRA practitioners and trainers have, in general, strongly emphasised sharing of experiences, so much informal networking has helped the approach to spread quickly. Learning experience workshops have been convened in many places and countries. For example, five international South-South field workshops have been hosted, four in India and one in Sri Lanka. These were organized by Action Aid, AKRSP, MYRADA, OUTREACH and Self-Help Support Programme (Inter-cooperation). Participants came from over 20 countries from Asia, Africa and Latin America. They stayed in villages, facilitated the use of PRA methods, and shared their experiences. There are now plans for more workshops on a regional basis, including in Mexico and the Philippines.

As more and more people try out these approaches the need for exchanging experiences and ideas is growing. Networks, both formal and informal, are evolving at national and regional levels, and efforts are made by many to document and share their personal experiences. (See box on page 13 for more information.)

Accepting that there is no one right answer to be applied PRA stimulates inventiveness. People, both local and outsiders, have been developing their own varieties of methods, sequences, and processes, such as those of Redd Barna. The list of approaches and methods is long and continues to grow (see Box 3). It provides practitioners with a varied menu from which they can choose, try out and explore. Some

of the methods are common sense. Others are ingenious and not obvious. Some are quite simple, others less so. The rate of innovation makes it impossible to keep up to date.

But if attitudes are rigid and focus on mechanical use of the methods, many of these methods will not work. Where attitudes are open and focus on getting the process and rapport right, then new opportunities appear. With appropriate attitudes and behaviour, each specific situation provides much scope for adapting and inventing new variations.

### The opportunities

One of the strengths of PRA is that many of the methods are visual and, therefore, accessible to a larger group of people. The group debates that ensue further stimulate improvisation, resulting in new combinations and applications. The visual methods can be summarised as six main activities: mapping and modelling; sequencing (chronologically); listing; sorting and ranking; using objects (seeds, stones, sticks, etc.) to count, estimate and score; and linking or relating. These activities have been combined in many different sequences, often using two or three together. In a matrix of famines and their relative characteristics villagers in Senegal combined sequencing of the famines, listing of their characteristics, and scoring these for their intensity. On farm maps that they had drawn, farmers in Kenya drew linkage lines for nutrient flows to and from their compost pits, and then placed seeds on these lines to indicate the volume and importance of each flow. A farmer in Vietnam listed causes and effects of deforestation on cards, drew these on the ground, scored each card for significance with seeds, and also placed the cards around the deforestation circle to signify relative contribution. A group of herders in Somaliland listed 25 water supplies which had been improved, then 45

criteria for assessing their quality and utility. They then scored each criterion out of 10 in the resulting matrix, with two scores in each box, one for before the improvement and one for after improvement. As these examples suggest, the more the visual activities are used in combinations, the more local people can share and analyse their views on the diversity and complexity of their reality.

The stories about the effective use of combinations and sequences of methods in drawing out people's views are many. Community members' own words capture the power of these approaches:

● *"At the beginning I thought it was just fun but now I have seen the map helped us to generate a discussion on our problems."*

● *"I never knew that even you [referring to another man in the group who looked very poor] could talk in public."*

● *"I don't agree with what is depicted in the diagram. I did not go to school but I am not necessarily poor."*

● *"This is just astonishing. We know each of these pieces because they are part of our existence. But we have never thought of it all put together like this. This is our life and our history."*

### Benefits .... and challenges

Some of the benefits of the use of PRA have included the following:

● **Empowering the poor and weak.** Enabling a group (eg. labourers, women, poor women, small farmers, etc) or a community themselves to analyse conditions, giving them confidence to state and assert their priorities, to present proposals, to make demands and to take action, leading to sustainable and effective participatory programmes.

2. From 'It is the young trees that make a thick forest', ed. by I. Guijt, A. Fugelsang, T. Kisadha.

3. From 'Livelihoods, livestock and change: the versatility and richness of historical matrices' by M. Freudenberger & K. Schoonmaker Freudenberger, RRA notes 21.

### BOX 3. A menu of methods

- Find and critically review secondary data. They can mislead. They can also help a lot especially in the earlier stages, eg. deciding where to go, and where gaps or contradictions in understanding exist.
- Observe directly (see for yourself). This can be most effective if combined with self-critical awareness of personal biases that are a result of our own specialized education and background, and consciously trying to compensate these.
- Seek those who are experts about specific issues. This is so obvious and yet often overlooked, perhaps because outsiders assume that they do not exist. For example: What mechanisms for conflict management/resolution exist and who in the community is involved?
- Key probes: questions that can lead directly to key issues again based on the assumption that local people are doing something eg. "What new practices have you or others in this village experimented with in recent years?" "What happens when someone's house burns down?"
- Case studies and stories: a household history and profile, a farm, coping with a crisis, how a conflict was resolved.
- Groups (casual or random encounter; focus; representative or structured for diversity; community, neighbourhood or a specific social group; or formal). Group interviews are often powerful and efficient, but relatively neglected, perhaps due to continued focus on counting through individual questionnaire-based interviews.
- Do-it-yourself: Roles of expertise are reversed, with local people as experts, and outsiders as clumsy novices. Local people supervise and teach skills (to fetch firewood, cut and carry fodder grass, level a field, transplant, weed, mud a hut...), allowing others to learn about their realities, needs and priorities.
- Mapping and modelling: people's mapping, drawing and colouring on the ground, with sticks, seeds, powders, etc. to make social, health or demographic maps (of a residential village), resource maps of village lands or forests, maps of fields, farms, home gardens, topic maps (for water, soils, trees, etc.), service or opportunity maps, making three dimensional models of watersheds, etc. These methods have been one of the most widely used and can be combined with or lead into household listing and wellbeing ranking, transects, and linkage diagrams.
- Local analysis of secondary sources: Participatory analysis of aerial photographs (often best at 1:5000) to identify soil types, land conditions, land tenure, etc. also satellite imagery.
- Transect walks: systematically walking with key informants through an area, observing, asking, listening, discussing, learning about different zones, local technologies, introduced technologies, seeking problems, solutions, opportunities, and mapping and/or diagramming resources and findings. Transects take many forms: vertical, loop, along a watercourse, sometimes even the sea bottom!
- Timelines and trend and change analysis: Chronologies of events, listing major local events with approximate dates; peoples accounts of the past, of how customs, practices and things close to them have changed; ethno-biographies - local history of a crop, an animal, a tree, a pest, a weed ..., diagrams and maps showing ecological histories, changes in land use and cropping patterns, population, migration, fuel uses, education, health, credit ..., and the causes of changes and trends, often with estimation of relative magnitude.
- Seasonal calendars - distribution of days of rain, amount of rain or soil moisture, crops, women's, children's and men's work including agricultural and non-agricultural labour, diet, food consumption, sickness, prices, migration, income, expenditure, etc.
- Daily time use analysis: Indicating relative amounts of time, degrees of drudgery, etc., activities sometimes indicating seasonal variations.
- Institutional or Venn diagramming. Identifying individuals and institutions important in and for a community or group, or within an organization and their relationships.
- Linkage diagrams: of flows, connections, and causality. This has been used for marketing, nutrient flows on farms, migration, social contacts, impacts of interventions and trends, etc.
- Wellbeing grouping (or wealth ranking): grouping or ranking households according to local criteria, including those considered poorest and worst off. A good lead into discussions of the livelihoods of the poor and how they cope.
- Matrix scoring and ranking: especially using matrices and seeds to compare through scoring, for example different trees, or soils, or methods of soil and water conservation, varieties of a crop or animal, fields on a farm, fish, weeds, conditions at different times, and to express preferences.
- Team contracts and interactions: contracts drawn up by teams with agreed norms of behaviour; modes of interaction within teams, including changing pairs, evening discussions, mutual criticism and help; how to behave in the field, etc. (The team may consist of outsiders only, local people only, or local people and outsiders together.)
- Shared presentations and analysis: where maps, models, diagrams, and findings are presented by local people and/or outsiders, especially at community meetings, and checked corrected and discussed. Brainstorming, especially joint sessions with local people. But who talks? And how much? Who dominates? Who interrupts whom? Whose ideas dominate? Who lectures?
- Contrast comparisons: Asking group A to analyse group B and vice versa. This has been used for gender awareness, asking men to analyse how women spend their time.
- Drama and participatory video making on key issues: to draw together the problems analysis and explore solutions.
- (Notes on these and other tools, with examples of their use, are in IIED's *Participatory Learning and Action: A Trainer's Guide*. See page 13 for more information)

situations and with people engaged in practical development activities. But this does not mean that it is without a rich theoretical basis. PRA is based on an action-research approach, in which theory and practice are constantly challenged through experience, reflection and learning. The valuing of theory over practice in most academic disciplines (You've heard the joke about the economist who lies awake at night mulling over whether that which works in practice will also work in theory) means that practice-oriented PRA approaches are often not taken seriously. Yet recent theoretical work shows that participatory approaches raise deep philosophical issues important in social science debates.

7. That it's just old wine in new bottles. Although PRA, in its ongoing evolution, has been inspired by many sources, it is not simply old hat. As with all major shifts in thinking and practice, PRA is uniting wide-ranging debates and practices in a novel manner. Its emphasis on free visualisation and continual improvisation contrast with

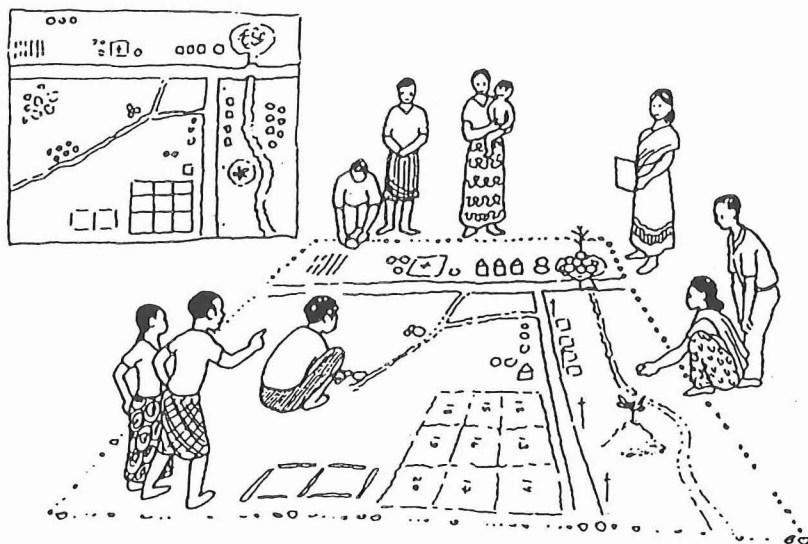
other approaches using pre-determined diagrams mechanically. Its focus on attitudes and behaviour of external agents contrast with approaches that disregard this key aspect of local interaction. The extensive range of applications in research and planning on, for example, land tenure, HIV, urban planning, natural resource management, and domestic violence, and subsequent sharing of experiences enriches methodological development. It has proven adaptable to diverse contexts, and accessible and acceptable to a wide range of development professionals.

8. That training is the answer. One common response to 'new' ideas is to train everyone in their use. The demand for training in PRA is phenomenal. This carries several risks. First, inexperienced trainers are threatening the quality of training and subsequent practice. Second, a training course alone will not ensure appropriate follow-up. Too often, organisations have not explored the implications for themselves in terms of support after the training. Successful training requi-

res encouraging new ways of learning within organisations. Training courses are always only part of the answer.

9. That people involved are neutral. The myth of the neutral, detached, observing researcher or practitioner is incorrect. People are never neutral, whether they are village participants or external agents. Everyone is unavoidably a participant in some way or other, and these roles and implications need to be understood. This will affect the information gathered and the analyses carried out. In participatory development, everyone is responsible for her/his actions. The political and ethical implications of participatory action-research must therefore be discussed openly and responded to.

10. That it is not political. The actions of people engaged in participatory research or development have consequences which are in a broad sense political. Power, control, and authority are all part of participatory processes. Conflicts, disputes and tensions may be raised when becoming involved in such a process. Ignoring this is dangerous. Everyone should be aware of the issues of power and control, conflict and dispute that are part of an action-research approach to development. All participants must learn and be ready to deal with these issues. This may mean taking sides or taking a mediating or negotiating role, which are all political acts.



## Conclusions

Clearly, PRA, or any participatory development approach for that matter, is not a bandage to stick together old failing concepts and approaches. Saying "First we'll do a PRA and then we can transfer the technology" is simply not an option. Nor is it possible for community members to say, "First we'll participate in their PRA and then we will take the free seed and fertilizer they are bound to offer." Both groups need to adapt to different roles, different processes, and different relationships.

But the dangers and pitfalls are where the real challenges lie. Too much is being demanded, too fast, and with little understanding of participatory development and its implications. Concerns have been voiced<sup>1</sup> about:

- the need to recognise and work at personal responsibilities and professional ethics, such as developing self-critical attitudes and seeking peer review;
- the interaction with community members, which requires dealing with ethics and equity, and careful consideration of the preconditions for engagement, practice, and local human resource support and development;
- the need for the organisations involved to ensure long term commitment to process, to adapt their organisational culture, management styles, incentives, and procedures, and to seek outward links actively;
- the quality of some training, which forgets the analysis of social differences and the importance of behaviour, and often happens as a one-off event;
- the contradictory demands of donors for both quick visible results and slow participatory development, with donors' and governments' pressures to disburse funds and achieve targets again and again weakening and destroying participation;
- the need for more sharing of good and poor experiences, and networking.

Despite its power when well done PRA is not a quick fix to complex problems, although there are many who wish this were the case. The implications of this new way of working, which emphasises processes rather than outputs, diversity rather than conformity, attitudes rather than quantifiable targets have not always been taken equally seriously by the various actors involved. Unfortunately the continuing search for quick fixes has allowed many myths to take hold, myths which are undermining the very spirit of PRA and the potentials which it holds.

### Ten myths about PRA<sup>2</sup>

1. That it's quick. While many of the methods associated with PRA may be relatively cost-effective in encouraging dialogue, joint analysis and learning, the processes of participatory development are slow and difficult.
2. That it's easy. PRA methods are appealingly simple, explaining in part their popularity. They are useful for many people, from villagers to field practitioners to academics. But even experienced PRA practitioners know that the successful use of the approach requires many other skills, especially in communication, facilitation and conflict negotiation.
3. That anyone can do it. Anyone can help make a map or do a matrix

scoring with some success. But this does not mean that learning takes place or changes occur. Using the language of participation, as many consultancy groups and large aid bureaucracies do, does not mean that fieldwork will be successful. Wider issues of organisational change, management and reward systems, staff behaviour, ethics and responsibilities also have to be addressed.

4. That it's 'just' fancy methods. The popular and visible image of PRA is the range of methods that have emerged over the past decade. These have proved effective and widely applicable. However, methods are only part of a wider shift being seen within both government and non-government agencies. This has deeper implications. In addition to the use of participatory methods, conditions for success seem to include an open learning environment within organisations, and institutional policies, procedures and cultures that encourage innovation.

5. That it's based on the perspectives of particular disciplines. PRA has grown not out of university departments but from practical field experiences. The main innovators have been field workers and local people in the South (but also increasingly in the North). PRA has drawn on and combined elements from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The lack of a conventional disciplinary focus has been considered unrigorous and unpublishable, and the experimental and interactive nature of PRA has been sensed as threatening by some academics. While students increasingly seek to use PRA methods, teaching professionals sometimes resist. Universities have been among the last to take up participatory approaches in their courses.

6. That it has no theoretical basis. PRA is usually associated with practical

### BOX 6. Who was not met and heard? ... The process continues.

When Redd Barna returned to Kyakatebe for initial impact discussions, they also met with a group of people who had been selected through the well-being ranking that was done in March; people from the poorest 50 households who had non-school-going children and had not been involved in the PRA process. The discussion with them focused on the constraints they experienced in getting involved in this type of process. Their comments about what they had learnt from the discussion included:

"Unless I am to be assisted, I don't attend. Even the Resistance Committee meetings I don't attend. But this meeting has made me realise the usefulness of attending such meetings."  
"I now know that, although I want to be assisted, I also want to contribute to my wellbeing."  
"Whenever you mix with others, you get better ideas than your own. This meeting has increased my knowledge and understanding of the process that took place."

1. Sharing our Concerns and Looking to the Future, PLA Notes 22.

2. Adapted from Ian Scoones, Ten Myths about Participatory Rural Appraisal, IIED. PLA Notes, forthcoming.

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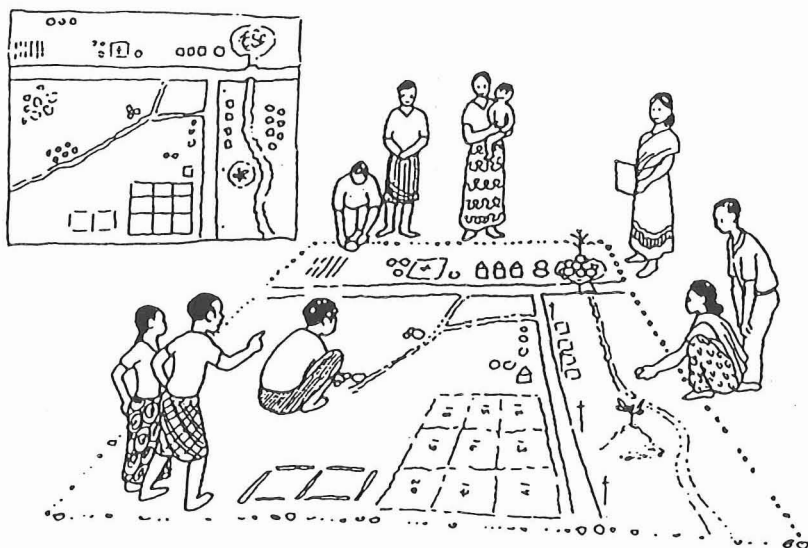
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10. That it is not political. The actions of people engaged in participatory research or development have consequences which are in a broad sense political. Power, control, and authority are all part of participatory processes. Conflicts, disputes and tensions may be raised when becoming involved in such a process. Ignoring this is dangerous. Everyone should be aware of the issues of power and control, conflict and dispute that are part of an action-research approach to development. All participants must learn and be ready to deal with these issues. This may mean taking sides or taking a mediating or negotiating role, which are all political acts.

## Conclusions

Clearly, PRA, or any participatory development approach for that matter, is not a bandage to stick together old failing concepts and approaches. Saying "First we'll do a PRA and then we can transfer the technology" is simply not an option. Nor is it possible for community members to say, "First we'll participate in their PRA and then we will take the free seed and fertilizer they are bound to offer." Both groups need to adapt to different roles, different processes, and different relationships.



Where does all this lead? How crucial is it that outsiders should be aware that rural people should and do conduct their own investigations and analysis and that this needs to be taken into consideration by decision and policy makers? Does PRA provide a strategy for local empowerment and sustainable development? Is it feasible on a large scale? Many of these questions are being answered by experience.

We have reached a critical point in the history of humankind. We, as development professionals, face enormous challenges in this period of unprecedented change. Increasing numbers of people are living in abject poverty with little influence over their lives and seemingly few possibilities to improve their situation. Environmental problems are undermining the very lifeways on which everyone depends. With government development efforts stagnating the world over, local communities are where many of the changes will have to start. RRA can help to generate relevant information more quickly to help make wiser decisions about what each can do to contribute to solutions. PRA can help to enable local analysis and planning, within and by communities, where much is possible, even without seeking outside resources. Neither approach can nor should do everything, but both can make a meaningful contribution.

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Your comments on the issues raised in this article as well as your own experiences with PRA are welcome. The information you share with them will be fed into the PRA networks in which they both play an active role.

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### PRA networks and network contacts

In many countries PRA networks have been formed. Some are producing newsletters, others have reports of interest. We mention below those we know about that are interested in sharing information. To add to this list please send the details to: J. Skepper-Stevenson, IDS, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK.

**BANGLADESH** ● Dee Jupp, c/o Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), House B31, Road 18, Banani, Dhaka. (Tel. 880-2-500927; Fax: 880-2-883497)

**BOLIVIA** ● Fernando Dick, Coordinator of Research and Development Programs (DPIP), Universidad Nur, Ave. Bánzer No 100, Casilla 3273, Santa Cruz. (Tel: 591-3-363939; Fax: 591-3-331850; E-mail: dpid@nur.bo)

**FINLAND** ● KEPA, Attn. PRA Network, Fredrikinkatu 63A8, 00100 Helsinki. (358-0-6944233; Fax: 358-0-6941786)

**INDIA** ● Sam Joseph, Action Aid, 3 Resthouse Road, Bangalore 560 001. (Tel: 91 80 558 6682; Fax: 91 80 558 8284) ● The Coordinator, Tamil Nadu Resource Team (TNRT), Kalanjium, 59A1 Chenglavarayan St., Madras 600 012. (Tel: 91-44-613620; Fax 91-44-4821897)

**INDONESIA** ● Mary Ann Kingsley, World Education, Jalan Tebet Dalam IV F/75, Jakarta 12810. (Tel/Fax: 62-21-8291026). As the initial contact can channel enquiries to others.

**KENYA** ● Participatory Methodology Forum of Kenya (PAMFORK), c/o P.O. Box 58684, Nairobi. (Tel. after April '95: 254-2-447382; Fax: 254-2-442136).

**MEXICO** ● Alfonso González Martínez, Programa de manejo participativo de recursos naturales del Grupo de Estudios Ambientales, A.C., Allende 7, Sta. Ursula Coapa, D.F. CP 04650 Mexico. (Tel/Fax: +52-5-6171657 in Mexico City)

**MOZAMBIQUE** ● Daniel Owen, The World Bank Resident Mission, Caixa Postal 4053, Maputo. (Tel: 258-1-492841/51/61/71; Fax: 258-1-492893)

**NAMIBIA** ● Stephen Lawry, The Ford Foundation, P O Box 20614, Windhoek. (Tel: 264-61-239133; Fax: 264-61-239060)

**NEPAL** ● Anupam Bhatia, Regional Coordinator, Participatory Natural Resources Management Programme, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, G.P.O. Box 3226, Kathmandu. (Tel: 977-1-525313; Fax: 977-1-524509) Interested in participatory approaches in mountain regions of India, Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Afghanistan.

**SOUTH AFRICA** ● Midnet PRA Interest Group, P O Box 101045, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg 3209. (Tel: 27-331-457607; Fax: 27-331-455106) ● National Rural Development Forum, P O Box 32434, Braamfontein 2017. (Tel: 27-11-3395412; Fax: 27-11-3391440)

**SRI LANKA** ● Mallika Samaranyake, Intercooperation, 92/2 D S Senayaka Mawatha, Colombo 8. (Tel/Fax: 94-1-691215)

**UK** ● Institute of Development Studies at University of Sussex, Brighton, BN1 9RE. (Tel: 44-1273-678490; Fax: 44-1273-621202) ● Sustainable Agriculture Programme, IIED, 3 Endsleigh St, London WC1H 0DD. (Tel: 44-171-3882117; Fax: 44-171-3882826)

**VIETNAM** ● Bardolf Paul/Le Minh Tue, Jaako Poyry AB, PO Box 36, Hanoi. (Tel: 844-2111-48; Fax: 844-211798)