Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) - is central to FARM's work in Africa. Prof Robert Chambers, Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, who has played a key part in the development of PRA, attended in February, the first national PRA conference to be held in Ethiopia and organised by FARM. Below is a summary of his address.

Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) originated in the South. They had both negative and positive sources. On the negative side, RRA was partly a reaction against the biases of "rural development tourism" when big shots from development agencies were taken on packaged tours of rural projects specially prepared for the occasion. Quite a number of us in this room will have arranged visits for senior, distinguished people, taking infinite care over what they were told and what was 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 arising from rural development tourism. It involved local people more in making decisions about what matters and what to do. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) insights at lower cost and with much less of the labouriousness and high cost, simplifies and standardises, in order to reduce risk and increase returns and to participatory activist research (especially the idea that poor people should be enabled to conduct their own analysis of conditions in the tradition of Paulo Freire).

PRA emerged in the 1980s and was highly developed in Thailand, particularly 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 continues to evolve. Its methods involve groups rather than individuals, visual representations (maps, diagrams) rather than solely verbal communication, comparing rather than measuring and, above all, a shift from dominance by outsiders of local people to facilitation and empowerment. PRA is often characterised as "extractive" and PRA as "empowering". But 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. Many PRA practitioners in the South feel that PRA is distinct from RRA simply because it is a process which is ongoing in which the outsider is a facilitator rather than a data collector. Both approaches use the same methods. An RRA can be conducted using PRA methods, for example participatory mapping and diagramming; and RRA methods such as focus groups and observation can be used in a PRA process of empowerment.

PRA has been described as "a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions in order to plan and to act". PRA has not been deduced from a theory. In this respect it differs somewhat from the Freinet teaching method which was induced from practice, from methods and approaches that have been found to work. It is only after they have been used that people have asked why they work.

The Spread of PRA

PRA has spread widely in many directions.

Geographical: PRA started mainly in Kenya and India, but evolved in parallel in different places and rapidly spread to other countries. Trainers from the South have helped to introduce PRA to some parts of the North, for example Finland.

Application: The approach has spread into many applications and sectors beyond poverty related programmes, health, agriculture, and natural resource management, to organisational analysis and urban applications (including a recent investigation of urban violence in Jamaica).

Process: PRA has grown from appraisal through action to implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Personal: PRA has shifted its emphasis from professional

change associated with new methods to personal change in behaviour and attitudes.

Institutional change: PRA's impact has spread to initiate and changed project procedures, notably challenging and modifying LFA (Logical Framework Analysis) and ZOPP used by large development agencies such as A and N.

Organisational: PRA has spread from the non-governmental organisations where it mainly originated, to organisations, including government departments, universities and now, perhaps increasingly, to democratic councils.

The challenge here is to continue and extend the development of government and university staff in PRA approaches and methods. Training raises many problems, especially where professionals have a fondness for hierarchy. The challenge is to continue the spread of PRA.

2. Quality and scaling-up

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. Scarcely has a PRA been done in communities without some problems, they can be done, can lead to bad decisions about what matters and what to do. PRA's value lies in its capacity to change rapidly and effectively.

3. Ethical

The challenge is to continue and extend the training of government and university staff in PRA approaches and methods. Training raises many problems, especially where professionals have a fondness for hierarchy. The challenge is to continue the spread of PRA.

4. Policy

Influences PRA methods are proving powerful means for influencing policy for the better. Participatory Poverty Assessments have already led to significant policy changes.

5. Sharing and networking

Finally there is a challenge for all of us to share our experiences and to think together. The conference will be considering networking in Ethiopia. At the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and International Institute for the Environment and Development (IIED) we are anxious to support national initiatives 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.

PRA in action: the men grapple with their map. Rubber strips are used for the boundaries and, unlike the women, it is boundaries rather than crops that interest them most.