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A Note on PRA-related Networks

This note responds to a request from some participants at the Encuentro Latinoamericano - Experiencias Participativas Comunitarias, Isla de Mujeres, Mexico, August 1995. I am not including much on Latin American networks as I know rather little about them.

What follows is a fallible and selective personal view. My knowledge is incomplete. However, in terms of "facts", what follows is to the best of my belief reasonably accurate.

The networks listed are all different in origins, state of evolution, and degree of formal existence.

Types of network.

Roughly, there are six types:

1. informal/formative. One person or organisation has come forward and volunteered to act as a focal point for information, meetings, and actions towards a more formal network. Probably:

Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Jordan, Mali, Mexico, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Norway, Philippines, Sudan, Uganda, Vietnam, Zimbabwe

These are all at national or sub-national levels.

2. formal/active. A group or groups have a variety of activities on a regular basis. Usually there is a room somewhere with materials, and a full-time or part-time person who is responsible, with an office in an organisation. Some (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kalanjium, Nepal, Sri Lanka...) have regular or ad hoc workshops or meetings. Some have produced newsletters (Bangladesh, NRDF in South Africa, ActionAid in India, Sri Lanka....), and Nepal has produced publications. Some have a permanent staff member (Kalanjium, Kenya, Nepal..). Examples are:

Bangladesh, China (Yunnan), Finland, ActionAid in India, Kalanjium in India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nepal, South Africa, Sri Lanka

These are all at national or sub-national levels.

3. regional. An organisation has accepted or seeks to accept responsibility at a regional (i.e. several country) level. Examples are:

Egypt (for Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan), and Senegal (for Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Senegal)

Each of these areas has a cultural and linguistic identity (mainly Arabic-speaking, and francophone, respectively)

4. international/transcontinental (NNGOs, multilaterals, bilaterals....)

Especially NNGOs are networking within their organisations, and/or seeking to facilitate South-South linkages and exchanges. Examples are ActionAid, CARE, IDS Sussex, IIED, OXFAM, Redd Barna, SCF, UNDP, World Resources Institute, World Neighbours.....

SCF in South Asia, for example, has recruited a full-time PRA trainer from Pakistan.

5. informal/local. Largely invisible, there are now many informal local networks, often with a branch of a larger NGO which services smaller NGOs and/or Government in a District or subdistrict. An example is MYRADA in Uttara Kannada District in India, serving the Forest Department and about a dozen small NGOs. Another is OUTREACH, Bangalore. Another is the lateral spread of PRA from community to community in parts of Amazonia.

6. electronic. Examples are multiplying of electronic networks which already exist and which extend their coverage of participatory methodologies, and of new networks which are being formed. Examples include e-mail networks in South Africa, India, USA (Cornell) and Canada (Guelph), and existing networks in Latin America.

(5 and 6 are living in largely unconnected worlds)

A possible seventh type is specialised networks, as in Indonesia.

Origins and Sequences

Most of those networks which have become well established began with a group of interested individuals from various NGOs. One or more well-advertised one-day workshops in the capital city has quite often provided the occasion and catalyst for early planning and action (Bangladesh (2 workshops), Kenya (3), Nepal (2), Sri Lanka (1)...). The process of formation has usually been spread over two or three years, with activities building up informally over that period.

Most of the countries which have well established networks have a capital city which is much larger than any other urban centre (Bangladesh, Kenya, Nepal, Senegal, Sri Lanka...). Conversely, countries with several major urban centres have found it difficult to get together, despite a lot of activity (Pakistan, Tanzania..).

Particular actions which may provide ideas for others have been:

Kenya. PAMFORK eventually formed with a governing body of 8 (4 from NGOs, 4 from Universities), under the umbrella of an official Government-NGO liaison committee, after a long and patient process.

Nepal. A three-day retreat (January 1995) to reflect, debate and plan, leading to a publication of proceedings. A Memorandum of Association carefully worked out (see attached).

India (ActionAid). An information service to provide hard copy on request, plus a newsletter (Participation in Action). Also organises training with village residence hosted by villagers available to international participants (fee $100 per day, Rs300 to national participants).

India (Kalanjium). Much concern with a code of ethics for PRA practitioners

Sri Lanka. Well-attended (up to 100 persons) monthly or bi-monthly meetings including NGOs and Government people (even a Minister).

There is no one pattern. However, the main elements which seem to be options or needs are the following:

* a steering or executive committee
* a general council
* a bank account
* a room or part of an office
* hard copy available to interested inquirers
* a newsletter
* a part-time or full-time person
* meetings or workshops every 1, 2 or 3 months, each hosted by a different organisation, usually for 2-3 hours
* advice available about trainers, training events etc
* translations into and from local and other languages
* making links with other networks, and sharing materials South-South and South-North (limited so far, but Kenya notably active)

The first events have usually been workshops which have brought together people from NGOs, universities, training and research institutes, Government and consultancy firms. In two cases, workshops in capital cities at which villagers have presented their diagrams and maps have been formative.

NEPAN in Nepal has given a great deal of thought to its organisation and relationships and has agreed to share its "Memorandum of Association" with other networks. (Please see appendix attached, which is a good source of ideas).

Major concerns of networks have included quality assurance, training of trainers, training in behaviour and attitudes, going to scale especially with government and internationally funded projects, translations and materials, and ethics.

Funding and Sustainability

In several cases one or more NGOs with funding from the North have provided initial support, sometimes including an office or room, with various other NGOs, foundations, bilaterals and multilaterals etc, chipping in or funding particular events. Start up support has come from Intercooperation in Sri Lanka, Ford in Bangladesh, IDS with Kalanjium, and various sources in Kenya and Nepal.

NEPAN (Nepal) is aiming for sustainability and self-sufficiency in these ways:

(i)   Members' subscriptions (organisations pay more, individuals less)
(ii)   Voluntarism. Members contribute certain number of hours
(iii)   A trust fund. The hope is to obtain one-off grants to set up a fund the interest from which will cover most running costs
(iv)   A revolving fund for translations. Translations will be made and then sold to replenish the fund

(iii) and (iv) are ideas, not yet realities.

What Next?

Certain trends and lessons are evident:
1. natural units so far have tended to be with populations of 1-50 million. Some of the strongest networks are in countries of 15 - 30 million (Kenya, Nepal, Sri Lanka)
2. getting to the formal, established, stage takes time if there is to be a good spirit of sharing and partnership. Kenya went slowly with strong commitment from key actors, and

now seems strongly established. Indonesia has proceeded cautiously with activities on a significant scale, but without formalising relationships

3. tact and patience may be needed between the actors (between different organisations, and between nationals and non-nationals) in starting a network, and in maintaining a spirit of sharing and collective ownership.

4. there is no need to wait before doing something. A contact person can volunteer and start by convening meetings. Regular activities can then be hosted in turn by different organisations, with different individuals and organisations accepting responsibilities.
Given:

> the rapid spread of PRA rhetoric (and to a lesser extent reality)
> the interests of some donor agencies in providing support
> the need and opportunity for networking activities

my guess is that there may well be 30 - 40 national-level networks in a year's time.

One potential activity is photocopying and distributing <u>RRA</u> (now <u>PLA</u>) <u>Notes</u>. The present cost of distribution is high. The <u>Notes</u> go to well over 3,000 addresses in some 120 countries. It would be cheaper for reproduction and mailing to be done within each country.

IIED is also setting up a Participatory Learning and Action Resource Centre which should be able to provide services to networks on request.

Four key challenges for networks seem to stand out:

* **learning.** Learning quickly, accurately and honestly about what is happening with PRA and related participatory approaches, especially practical methods and experience with planning, negotiation, conflict resolution, implementation, M and E

* **focus.** Being selective with information. Avoiding "flooding". Disciplined communication, to be useful and usable, e.g. in short topic packs (a few of which we hope to prepare in IDS and share)

* **sharing.** Making sure that all actors (remote, using local languages, non-literate, without e-mail....) can share and learn from one another, especially laterally "South-South". This includes sharing experiences and training in the field

* **quality.** Assuring quality, preventing abuses, especially in training, and in going to scale.

It will be great if networking can contribute to these.

Do react to this note, and send ideas and corrections.

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attach: Sources and Contacts
        Nepal Participatory Action Network (NEPAN) Memorandum of Association