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## Sharing our concerns and looking to the future

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### • Introduction

We are an informal group of development practitioners, researchers and trainers from South and North, using, supporting and developing participatory approaches, often known as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). A working description of PRA is *"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"*. Used well, PRA can enable local people, rural or urban, to undertake their own appraisal, analysis, action, monitoring and evaluation. It can empower women, poor people and disadvantaged people, giving them more control over their lives.

As part of a process of reflection, learning and sharing we have reviewed our experience and current developments. Many donors, government organisations and NGOs are now requesting and requiring that PRA be used in their programmes and projects. This brings opportunities and dangers. The opportunities are to initiate and sustain processes of change: empowering disadvantaged people and communities, transforming organisations; and reorienting individuals. The dangers come from demanding too much, in a top-down mode, too fast, with too little understanding of participatory development and its implications. Annex 1 summarises the symptoms and causes of low quality PRA work.

PRA practitioners have come to stress personal behaviour and attitudes, role reversals, facilitating participation through group processes and visualisation, critical self-awareness embracing error and sharing without boundaries. We believe that these principles and concepts must be placed at the

centre of all participatory development activities.

Experience has led us, and many others to recognise the implications of participatory approaches, such as PRA, for:

- personal and professional values, norms and behaviour;
- community issues;
- organisational structures, styles and practices of management;
- approaches and methods in training;
- networking and sharing between all actors engaged in the development and spread of participatory thinking and practice; and,
- the policies and practices of donors.

We recognise that we are only a few among many around the world who are striving to develop and facilitate the spread of participatory approaches. We offer this statement of principles in the hope that others will share their experiences, views, and values in the same spirit so that we can all continue to learn from each other.

We welcome your responses.

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## • Personal and professional

We strongly believe that, as PRA professionals, we bear a personal responsibility to:

- develop a self-critical attitude, recognising that we are continually learning and welcome rigorous peer review;
- be explicit about whether we are eliciting information for external use, or are engaged in processes leading to community action. We should make this distinction clear to the people with whom we are interacting and document this accordingly;
- interact with others (colleagues, community members, and other professionals) with respect and empathy, transparency, and support;
- recognise the need to acquire both training skills and 'hands-on' experience in carrying out a PRA process in the field;
- make a commitment to value equally the contributions made by all partners (South, North, local, external);
- respect the need for diversity of others' views, and approaches;
- identify, in partnership with communities, appropriate forms of compensation when we are eliciting information for external use;
- ensure that credit and compensation are given where due;
- strive towards a process of empowerment of marginalised people, in which PRA methods can play a part;
- attempt to link-up with existing PRA networks and professionals in every context; and,
- equip ourselves with any necessary skills to recognise, acknowledge and address the existence of diversity of social relations in each context.

These are all signs of personal and professional commitment to pursue development processes which strive to improve the lives of those who are (relatively) marginalised.

## • Community issues

### Ethics

In relation to interactions with communities, we strive to:

- achieve mutual respect, including a commitment to long - term partnership;
- be honest with ourselves about our own objectives;
- be open, honest and transparent about our objectives with all community sections.

### Equity

We recognise that:

- different groups, as defined locally by age, gender, well-being, ethnicity, religion, caste, language etc. have different perspectives;
- there should be commitment by outside organisations to understand different needs and multiple perspectives within communities;
- responding to the needs of the vulnerable involves respect for all groups. This may mean challenging asymmetrical relationships *via* conflict resolution methods.

### Preconditions for engagement

- Be honest with the community about what is in it for them;
- PRA activities should lead to direct improvements in the community through:
  - operational development on the ground;
  - changes in higher level institutions (such as research, extension and planning) which have an impact at community level; and,
  - shifts in policy, which have an impact at community level.

We should also acknowledge that some of these expected changes cannot be guaranteed.

- There should be no one-off exercises in communities without explicitly defined outcomes as described above.

### **Practice**

- The process with the community should begin with explanations and seeking their permission;
- Timing and pace should be governed by local context of separate sections of the community; and,
- Respect the fact that information is generated by local people and so ask their permission to document, remove and use information. When possible, ensure that original diagrams and copies of reports remain in the community.

### **Local human resource support and development**

This involves a commitment to:

- enhance capacity of local people, on an individual as well as an institutional basis, to be PRA practitioners and trainers in analysis and implementation of developmental activities in their own and neighbouring communities;
- ensure that PRA activities lead to strengthening of existing and/or formation of new local institutions, in order to meet local needs; and,
- ensure follow-up support for community sections and their institutions.

### **• Institutional aspects**

#### **Long-term commitment to process**

- Top managers/decision makers need to commit themselves to a long-term process going “beyond projects” to promote a participatory development approach.

#### **Organisational environment and culture**

- The organisational culture should provide opportunities to enable learning from experiences and mistakes, and should be flexible enough to allow experimentation.

### **Institutional management and styles**

- There should be a transition from management styles based on hierarchy, inhibited communications, command and obedience relationships to more organic styles that encourage lateral communication, collegial authority, and flexible roles and procedures; and,
- Institutions should create conditions that encourage employees to be participatory in their work with each other, and not just during “field visits”.

### **Incentives/rewards**

- Incentives and rewards must encourage staff to be honest, work in the field with communities, stay on as staff, and encourage joint action between institutions and villages.

### **Organisational procedures and implementation**

- Organisational and programme management procedures should be changed so as to enable linking PRA with programme management and implementation (eg. decentralisation of funds management). They should try to build PRA from the start of the programme cycle. PRA and related participatory processes should be initially piloted on a small-scale and should be mainly implemented through local institutions.

### **Outward linkages**

- There is a need to develop effective linkages (eg training exchange; co-management of projects, information flows) outside of institutions to help partners (including donors) understand more and strengthen participatory processes. These linkages must be based on mutual respect, integrity and trust.

## • Training

PRA training should ...

- make a clear distinction between PRA orientation and PRA training. PRA orientation involves familiarisation of principles and methods to non-field based decision makers, policy makers and donors, whose learning can be enhanced through exposure to the field based process;
- take place in a institutional context (research, academic, consulting, donor, development NGO/GO/bilateral/multilateral) which is potentially responsive to participatory approaches;
- be part of an ongoing community-based development process which is field-based and has provision for follow-up action;
- begin with social analysis, attitudes and behaviour and institutional issues followed by the principles and methods;
- focus on field staff, line managers and community analyst who will facilitate the process in the community;
- strive to develop a range of skills and experiences: analytical skills; communication skills; learner centred training skills; knowledge of principles and methods, and training of trainers skills;
- emphasis familiarity with local language, culture and context while encouraging cross-cultural sharing; and,
- clearly specify objectives which may include research for policy and other purposes, subject to community agreement, with feedback to the community development process wherever possible.

## • Donors

Donors working with PRA should ...

- focus on PRA as a *process* leading to change, not a product in and of itself. This means commitment to long-term development processes and follow-up activities and support;
- provide more flexible funding and move towards more open-ended, event-focused

targets for disbursement and physical achievement;

- promote participatory monitoring and self-evaluation procedures which build in reciprocal accountability (communities, development organisations, donors);
- encourage and support organisations which can move towards participatory training and learning to help other organisations change;
- encourage policies and programmes which offer a range of development options/choices based on locally - defined criteria, needs and priorities;
- encourage establishment of small, self-managed teams of practitioners and trainers within development organisations - where appropriate - with the freedom to experiment, innovate, make and learn from mistakes, and act;
- support pilot learning processes with gradual/phased scaling-up depending on local conditions; and,
- avoid confusing and over-burdening development organisations by harmonising funding approaches and accounting and reporting procedures.

## • Networking and information sharing

Networking efforts in relation to PRA should aim to:

- promote and facilitate a decentralised network of Regional Centres;
- develop and sustain Local Networks;
- strengthen networks with training support, exposure and logistical support;
- promote respect towards/recognition of local networks by outside individuals and institutions;
- acknowledge *local* contributions/sources of information;
- encourage willingness to share experiences openly and freely;
- seek ways of breaking communication/language barriers through translation of material to and from local languages; and,
- explore the range of possibilities for information exchange to ensure that it is *accessible to all*.

**ANNEX 1. Symptoms and Causes of Low Quality PRA Work**

<b>What?</b>	<b>Why?</b>
<p><b>OVERALL</b>                      Assumed that PRA methods equals development and positive change                      PRA practice without conceptual clarity, transparency and accountability                      Information extraction with rhetoric of political correctness</p> <p><b>PERSONAL/PROFESSIONAL</b>                      Selling the "PRA service" is a new commercial Activity which can be lucrative, new market niches                      Ego, ownership disputes, jealousies among PRA practitioners. Inhibit sharing?</p> <p><b>COMMUNITY</b>                      Insensitive vis-a-vis demands and impositions made on the poor during PRA training                      Resistance to "culture of sharing", eg food; also not budgeted for as part of PRA session                      Neglect of "costs" to individual livelihoods                      Unchallenged myths re community harmony                      Fun elements obscure political realities/divisiveness within community</p>	<p><b>OVERALL</b>                      Historical inheritance of short-cut evangelism;                      Legacy of focus on rapid terminology/names</p> <p><b>PERSONAL/PROFESSIONAL</b>                      Get rich quick                      Lack of personal and professional commitment                      Lack of openness and sharing</p> <p><b>COMMUNITY</b>                      Lack of links with social science; analysis of difference                      Project-led/focused, not community-led and focused                      Support institutions focus on themselves, not on villagers                      Inappropriate incentives for institutions and communities                      Professional biases re village consultants</p>

<b>What?</b>	<b>Why?</b>
<p><b>TRAINING</b>  Neglect of behaviour and attitudes  One-off training, with no follow-up by trainers and by institutions  Classroom-based training in lecturing mode  Overemphasis on training of outsiders; neglect training of villagers  Insufficient levels of skill-building  Principles of training neglected  Lack of in-depth analysis  Rigidity and conservatism of manuals  Lack of clarity on part of PRA trainers about institutional design</p> <p><b>INSTITUTIONAL</b>  Lack of long-term commitment  Poor adaptability of PRA with project planning, implementation, etc  Appraisal: the word is inhibiting  Terminology is inappropriate  Insufficient linking of PRA training with existing, locally based projects  No responsibility taken for follow-up in the community  Middle/line managers not sufficiently exposed to/involved in training  Lack of clarity about objectives for using PRA</p> <p><b>DONORS</b>  Predominance of donor-led initiatives  Agenda driven from outside, not from within  Donors jumping on bandwagon, following the latest fashion  Cooption - a label without substance</p> <p><b>NETWORKING</b>  Inadequate records of who was "trained", where and when  Ad hoc, haphazard planning</p>	<p><b>TRAINING</b>  Neglect of behaviour and attitudes in training  One-off trainings with no-backstopping  The word 'training' lacks clarity and is used to cover too many types of sessions  Lack of skills in institutional design and contextual understanding by trainers  Lack of skills and principles of training; training of trainers needed?  Focus on methods/product, not process of development  Limited time allocation  Mixing training with PRA is constraining</p> <p><b>INSTITUTIONAL</b>  Lack of institutional (long-term) commitment to follow-up  Imposition of project cycle mode and institutional discontinuity  Focus on appraisal, not monitoring and evaluations  Contradictions in our own practice/organisational policies with poverty focus</p> <p><b>DONORS</b>  Donor agenda driven</p> <p><b>NETWORKING</b>  Lack of functioning networks for back-up  Lack of information sharing  Lack of strategic planning by PRA practitioners</p>