

**Participatory Learning Approaches and ZOPP**  
**Remarks to the GTZ Workshop "ZOPP Marries PRA?"**  
**25th March 1996**

By Robert Chambers

First let me thank GTZ for convening this workshop. It is both timely and important. It is timely because it may help us to see good ways forward in our crisis of paradigms. It is important because since GTZ has been so much a leader in innovating with and spreading ZOPP, changes in GTZ may have big impacts in other organisations, perhaps especially the EU which I understand is currently adopting something like ZOPP for its projects.

I feel bad coming here and making the critical remarks which will follow. This is for two reasons. First, I have a disreputable past: I have been responsible for the management of a pastoral development project which was a disaster because of its top-down authoritarian style; and in the early 1970s, I was involved in the development of procedures in the Special Rural Development Programme in Kenya which some have identified as an antecedent of the Logical Framework and of ZOPP. Second, old or ageing men who go around telling people what they should do, are a major part of the problems of our world. And here am I doing just that. However, if there is one field in which the English can claim to be world-leaders, it is hypocrisy. So if you are generous, you will interpret my behaviour simply as an attempt to maintain national standards.

I am not sure about this term of "marriage". Nowadays, it is more and more the custom here in the North to have prolonged partnerships before formal union. Also there is a problem of stability in marriages, and if the British Royal Family is anything to go by, the higher the level of the marriage, the less stable it is liable to be. Still, the imagery is appropriate in one respect, namely that ZOPP is masculine, being linear and rigid, more concerned with things and with an engineering mode in action, while PRA is more feminine, (and I should be careful with any adjectives), and more concerned with people and process. More than marriage perhaps we are concerned with mutual learning and with looking for the best alternatives, combinations, and sequences, of activities.

Two quotations seem appropriate. The first is from Karl Popper who wrote something on these lines:

"You may be right, and I may be wrong, and by an effort together we may get closer to the truth".

and the other is from a character in Tom Stoppard's play "**Arcadia**":

"It is the best time to be alive, when almost everything you thought you knew is wrong".

In the spirit of these two quotations we can struggle together to find better ways of doing things.

**Context**

The context in which we do this is relevant. Three dimensions stand out. First, the rate of change in almost every domain seems to be accelerating. This includes the lives and aspirations of people all round the world, including those who are "remote". Second, we - development professionals - have a history of astonishing error. It is humbling to see how often we have been wrong. And third, a problem running through this is dominance in behaviour and attitudes. Let me elaborate on this.

The issue can be expressed as "Whose reality counts?". There are many relationships between "uppers" and "lowers".

**Table 1**

Dimension/context	North Uppers	South Lowers
Spatial	Core (urban, industrial)	Periphery (rural, agricultural)
International and development	The North (esp USA) 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 Learner

The dominance of "uppers" over "lowers" is part of the problem, and leads to many errors. "Uppers" construct their own realities and impose them on "lowers". When they do not fit, misinformation is generated, and development projects and other initiatives often fail.

One way of seeing this is as mutually reinforcing north-south magnets. Bureaucratic hierarchies and social systems, families, relationships between professionals and non-professionals and the like can be seen as oriented between the powerful and the subordinate. The enterprise in which we are engaged in development is becoming (I think correctly) trying to weaken these dominant north-south magnetic fields. This means that although we retain hierarchy and bureaucracy, which is necessary up to a point, the magnetism is weakened and we are freer to relate laterally, upwards and downwards, and to be adaptive and flexible in new ways.

To illustrate, this a spectacular example is that of psychoanalysts from Freud until the 1980s and to some extent even the 1990s. They have believed that the accounts of being incestuously abused in childhood, given to them by women patients, were untrue, and reflected wish-fulfilment, the repressed sexual desires of the victim for the abuser. That this professional and patriarchal myth could have been perpetuated for three generations is a terrible warning to the rest of us who may be in powerful positions about the dangers of perpetuating our own fantasies in a development context. The question is "Whose reality counts?", "ours" or "theirs". As part of this we have to ask:

- ❖ Whose knowledge counts?
- ❖ Whose needs?
- ❖ Whose priorities/criteria?
- ❖ Whose appraisal? analysis? planning?
- ❖ Whose baseline?
- ❖ Whose action?
- ❖ Whose indicators?
- ❖ Whose monitoring?
- ❖ Whose evaluation?

Is it ours, or theirs?

### **Two Paradigms**

The reality which has counted in the past has tended to be ours, top-down and related to things rather than people. Two columns can illustrate the contrast between the paradigm for things, which is top-down with planning blueprints and that of people, which is bottom-up, with participatory processes.

**Table 2: The Paradigms of Things and People Contrasted**

<i>Concerned With</i>	Things	People
<i>Mode</i>	Blueprint	Learning process
<i>Key Activity/Concept</i>	Planning	Participation
<i>Objectives</i>	Pre-set	Evolving
<i>Logic</i>	Linear, Newtonian	Iterative
<i>Actions/Outcomes</i>	Standardised	Diverse
<i>Assumptions</i>	Reductionist	Holistic, systems
<i>People Seen As</i>	Objects, targets	Subjects, actors
<i>Outsiders' Roles</i>	Transfer, "motivate"	Facilitate, empower
<i>Main Outsiders</i>	Engineers, economists	Any/all who have participatory behaviour/attitudes
<i>Outputs</i>	Infrastructure	Capabilities
	Physical change	Institutions

Historically, development has been dominated by the "things/blueprint" column. We need that side, especially when infrastructure is being constructed. The question is whether the approaches that fit there should be transferred to and applied to people and process.

It will be obvious that these two columns resonate with ZOPP and with PRA respectively. The left-hand column tends to be top-down, centralised, supply driven, and with accountability upwards; the right-hand column tends to be bottom-up, decentralised, demand drawn and with accountability downwards. These may be slightly caricatures and idealisations. Nevertheless the contrast does seem to have some meaning. So a question we can ask ourselves is whether ZOPP in practice tends to have evolved from the modes of operation of the "things" column and perhaps to be appropriate there; and whether it is in the process of shifting through PCM (Project Cycle Management) towards the "people and process" column which is where PRA has evolved and applies.

There is a danger here of "four legs good, two legs bad", to use the analogy of George Orwell's **Animal Farm**, of "people good", "things bad". What we are concerned with is seeing what is appropriate and what fits where. My argument is that what has been appropriate and fits when dealing with things is not appropriate and does not fit when dealing with people, society, and social processes.

## PRA

If PRA has a philosophy, it is one which encourages each individual to use personal judgement. This means that any PRA practitioner or trainer who lists the commitments and principles of PRA may come up with a different list. However, seeing and trying to understand what PRA practitioners do, and how they behave, there seem to me four commitments or principles which stand out:

1. Personal Responsibility. This includes self-critical awareness, non-dominating behaviour and attitudes, and a commitment to the other three principles.
2. Equity. A commitment to trying to enable those who are worse off to improve their lives and experiences in ways in which they welcome.
3. Empowerment. Enabling them to do that, and empowering "lowers", those who are weak, disadvantaged and marginalised.
4. Diversity. Encouraging and celebrating diversity and pluralism in every domain.

Putting these into practice generates many questions. Among these is, "Who participates in whose project?". Do *they* participate in *ours*? Or do *we* participate *theirs*? And following on, the questions again and again: who are *they*? - Poor women? People who are "remote"? Minorities? The young? The old? The poor? The rich? The local elite? Officials? Or who?

PRA is not a panacea. There is a widespread mass of bad practice in the name of PRA, often through a failure to recognise the primacy of the personal and of behaviour and attitudes. Nothing that I say here should give the impression that PRA is a universal solution to be applied everywhere to solve all problems. Nevertheless, paradigmatically it seems to fit people and process and to have potential for empowering those who are weak.

Let me illustrate how these themes come together with a practical case. Meera Shah was invited by the World Bank to facilitate some of the processes of reconstruction and rehabilitation after the Maharashtra earthquake. She found that everyone was agreeing that the best layout for the new villages would be a grid. She doubted this. But the engineers, the officials, the planners, and also the local people all seemed to agree. It was only through persistent facilitation and enabling people to express their reality through mapping and modelling that the local people were able to gain the confidence, and also to conduct the analysis, which enabled them to recognise and express that they did not want the grid layout. They wanted a more complex and varied arrangement which allowed them to live together in their familiar social groups, and to have open spaces.

The point here is that there was a self-reinforcing myth, imposed by the powerful and reflected back to them. It required commitment and an empowering mode of interaction to dispel this. It is so easy, and so widespread for those who are dominant and powerful to transfer their reality to others rather than to empower others to express their own.

## ZOPP

From this perspective, ZOPP in its classical form can be seen as a sequence of procedures which has tended to impose the reality of "uppers" on "lowers". Seven defects (I will not say deadly sins) express and reinforce this tendency:

1. **The top-down descending sequence of ZOPP workshops.**
2. **Reductionism to one core problem.** Life simply is not like that. Different people have different problems, and different mixtures of problems.
3. **The imperative of consensus.** Divergent opinions, as surely among ourselves here, are positive. Agreement, or apparent agreement, can be a lowest common consensus, and can reflect the interests and wishes of the powerful and articulate rather than those of the weak and inarticulate, in a ZOPP workshop as in a community.
4. **People as targets.** They are treated as objects rather than subjects. There is a "target group" with all the imagery of us aiming and shooting and trying to hit the target, rather than of enabling people to move, choose, and determine their own destinies.
5. **Language.** Accounts of ZOPP workshops suggest that fluency in the language used - usually English - enables some participants to dominate and marginalises others.
6. **Who is present? Who participates?** And on what terms? How frequently and with what degree of empowerment to analyse and express their reality, have poor women been involved in ZOPP workshops?
7. **The assumption that we know best.** This may not always be the case, but seems implicit in the process. A quotation from a ZOPP process in Chad comes from the World Bank Participation Sourcebook. One of the Chadians said to a Bank staff member in the middle of the ZOPP process:

"I am telling you that I have a headache, and you keep telling me that I have a footache and you want to force me to take a medicine for that"

(Page 30 of the Sourcebook)

There may be more. For example, ZOPP moderators may tend to be in physically dominant positions, especially in the management and organisation of the cards on the wall. This contrasts with the democracy of the ground where people are free to move cards around themselves into whatever categories and relationships they think are appropriate.

To what extent these points apply will be well-known and recognised by many in this room who have ZOPP experience. To illustrate, let me quote from two relevant accounts. The first is a letter from Rashida Dohad in Pakistan. She took part in a ZOPP process with a NGO. She wrote:

".. they began developing a Project Planning Matrix. Based on problems identified by the participants at this workshop this matrix listed the sectors in which [the NGO]

would work over a certain period of time and set indicative targets. When this exercise began I protested, rather vociferously, that these decisions should not be taken in this room and argued for a more participatory, open-ended planning process. The outside facilitator tried to convince me that this exercise was in fact *participatory* since it involved "representatives" of the local people! I pointed out that the 8 people -- all males -- from 12 "clusters" (each cluster consists of about 8-12 villages which means these 8 persons were in fact representing 49 villages!) could only represent their own view, or at best that of a certain group. I also argued that as they were outnumbered by the articulate [NGO] staff and may have found it difficult to follow all the written stuff (ZOPP makes profuse use of index cards) these so-called reps of local people had little opportunity to get in a word, leave alone participate, in deciding on the perceived problems of local people and the sectors on which [the NGO] should concentrate!"

(pers. comm Rashida Dohad, 1995)

The second is from Lars Johansson, a social anthropologist, who has worked a lot in Tanzania in the Lindi and Mtwara regions. He has written in Forests Trees and People Newsletter (Vol 26/27, 1995: 62-3) that in the process of evolution of an on-going project there was a:

"not very constructive period of trying to write up and appraise a five year plan according to the logical framework format. Making programme and project documents had become increasingly traumatic to all involved. The more we learned the more important it seemed not to mystify development and take the initiative away from local people through abstract concepts of objectivity like outputs and indicators. The strategies that proved to work did so because they were locally intelligible and based on subjective representations of reality, so that they could be negotiated in spoken Swahili during village workshops amongst people with different perspectives and interests. Personal commitments to a coalition of people proved much more important than scientifically adequate project logics, but required a totally different approach to planning"

If these are some of the problems the question then is whether the paper on project cycle management goes far enough in overcoming them and in proposing and legitimating new ways of going about things.

#### **PCM**

As I read it, the paper bears scars of honest struggle. At times it seems almost schizoid in the language used. It has some of the old and some of the new, some of what fits with things and some of what fits with people. I do not underestimate the valiant efforts which have gone into this. There are positive statements. For example:

That participants should be involved from the start

That there should be participation by all affected

That there should be transparent decision-making and analysis

On the other hand the old language is in there. There should be a solid plan. Development is a structured process. A project must have cornerstones in place before implementation. It should be clearly target-oriented. There should be pre-defined analysis and planning steps. All of these belong to the paradigm of things, of control, of predictability, of standardisation.

But development is not like a Swiss train journey, much as one may appreciate its hyper-reliability and punctuality. It is more like being in a boat at sea and trying to fish. The weather changes, the tides and currents vary, the waves come from different directions, the boat is blown about, and where the fish are and what sort they are is always different. What is done at any particular stage depends on the circumstances and the perceptions of a changing reality. What matters is judgement, sensitivity, to use the steering wheel, to avoid dangers, and to exploit opportunities.

So one comes back to the people-oriented statements and asks:

If participants are to be involved from the start - who and how?

If participation is to be by all affected - who are they? How are they identified? How do they participate? To what extent? And how are they empowered? Is it their reality that counts?

With transparent decision-making and analysis - Transparent to whom? And whose decision-making and analysis?

The paper asks whether what is proposed will be accepted by the target group, whether it will be accepted by the individuals affected. Perhaps more pertinent questions are whether the "target group" - the people whom it is sought to empower, to enable to gain a better life according to their own values and desires - were involved in deciding the priorities. Again it is who participates in whose project? Who monitors whom? What is to be verifiable by whom? Who is accountable to whom?

There is not only much of the old language in the PCM document. There are also words which I do not find there or which are not strongly emphasised - empowerment, facilitation, women, behaviour, attitudes.

Perhaps it helps to recognise that the paradigm we are talking of implies changes in different dimensions. In PRA we have talked of there being three pillars. These pillars link with dimensions of change. Methods influence professionalism, behaviour and attitudes influence the personal, and sharing and partnership influence the institutional (see Figure 1). Of these the most important is the personal. But all three interact and can reinforce one another either in the direction of top-down hierarchy or in the direction of democratic empowerment. At the 50th Anniversary Symposium of FAO in Quebec in October 1995 there were fifteen statements adopted. One of them was:

"To develop and implement methods and approaches to help professionals, at all levels in organisations and interactions with farmers and the food-insecure, to adopt behaviour and attitudes which are truly participatory, non-dominating and empowering".

That is a huge challenge.

### **Ideas for Action**

Let me suggest three thrusts and actions:

1. *Experiment, invent, learn, share.* The regional learning groups on participation and the programme of R and D on "critical factors and pre-conditions for success in participatory approaches" sound positive initiatives which should bear good fruit. There is much scope for trying out and adapting sequences and combinations for different conditions. Perhaps, quite radically, ideas about what is a project can be diversified. Much of this is happening anyway. Should one, perhaps, sometimes think of an ALP (Action Learning Process) rather than a "project". It is excellent that in the official statement of GTZ policy, diversity and experimentation are legitimated.

Some of the implications would seem to be:

- The importance of behaviour and attitudes training for staff at an early stage in any project or ALP process
  - PRA-type processes very early on involving the poor, marginalised etc., in their own analysis and identification of their needs and priorities
  - A high ratio of expenditures on staff to other items, especially in the early stages
  - Low expenditures especially at first
  - Monitoring process rather than product
  - Throughout struggling to ensure that it is "their" reality that counts
2. *Retraining ZOPP trainers.* I crossed out the word "rehabilitating" and will not use that. All the same, there is a large and influential body of people around the world who have been trained as ZOPP trainers. Surely, in terms of personal orientation, career pattern, dependency on ZOPP training as a source of livelihood etc., they must vary a great deal. If there is to be a shift towards more participatory approaches at field level, they could be both an obstacle and a resource. Does it make sense to institute a programme of training for them, providing them with new opportunities, stressing behaviour and attitudes (e.g. using the ground rather than the wall, handing over the stick etc., etc.) and perhaps including "WIN-WIN" experiences, staying with communities? ("WIN-WIN" trainings have been developed by Sam Joseph of Action

Aid in India. Communities agree, in return for a fee, to host outsiders, to teach them about community life and activities, to demonstrate PRA type forms of analysis, etc... UNDP and ODA are both starting to send their staff for these types of experiences.).

3. *Recruitment.* There is no-one in this room from Personnel. At a workshop of the Participatory Learning Group of the World Bank, at which almost a hundred Bank staff were present, there was also no-one from Personnel. And yet recruitment, and the criteria used in recruitment, are critical. What are the attitudes and criteria and values of those who carry out the recruitment for organisations like GTZ? (See Figure 2.) Is it critically important that those who recruit staff to join GTZ should themselves have a participatory mode of interaction, that they should themselves share the values which go with a people-oriented process approach in development, and should recruit others who are similarly comfortable with and committed to participatory approaches?

To conclude, I sense in this meeting a wonderful openness and willingness to struggle to find better ways of doing things. I suppose that in this room we are not a representative group for GTZ as a whole. Nevertheless, it is hugely encouraging to have the sense that we are all of us engaged in an open learning process. It allows us to ask whether, in considering ZOPP and PRA, and the needs for bottom-up empowering modes of development, anything like a marriage makes sense. I rather doubt it. It is easy from outside an organisation to urge people to be radical. It is much harder within. But this workshop provides a safe space to think radically, but also practically. Let us hope that our sharing of experiences will lead us all to insights and ideas of how to do things which are new and better, especially for those whose realities in the past have counted for little.

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FIGURE 1 AND LINKAGES  
DIMENSIONS OF CHANGE

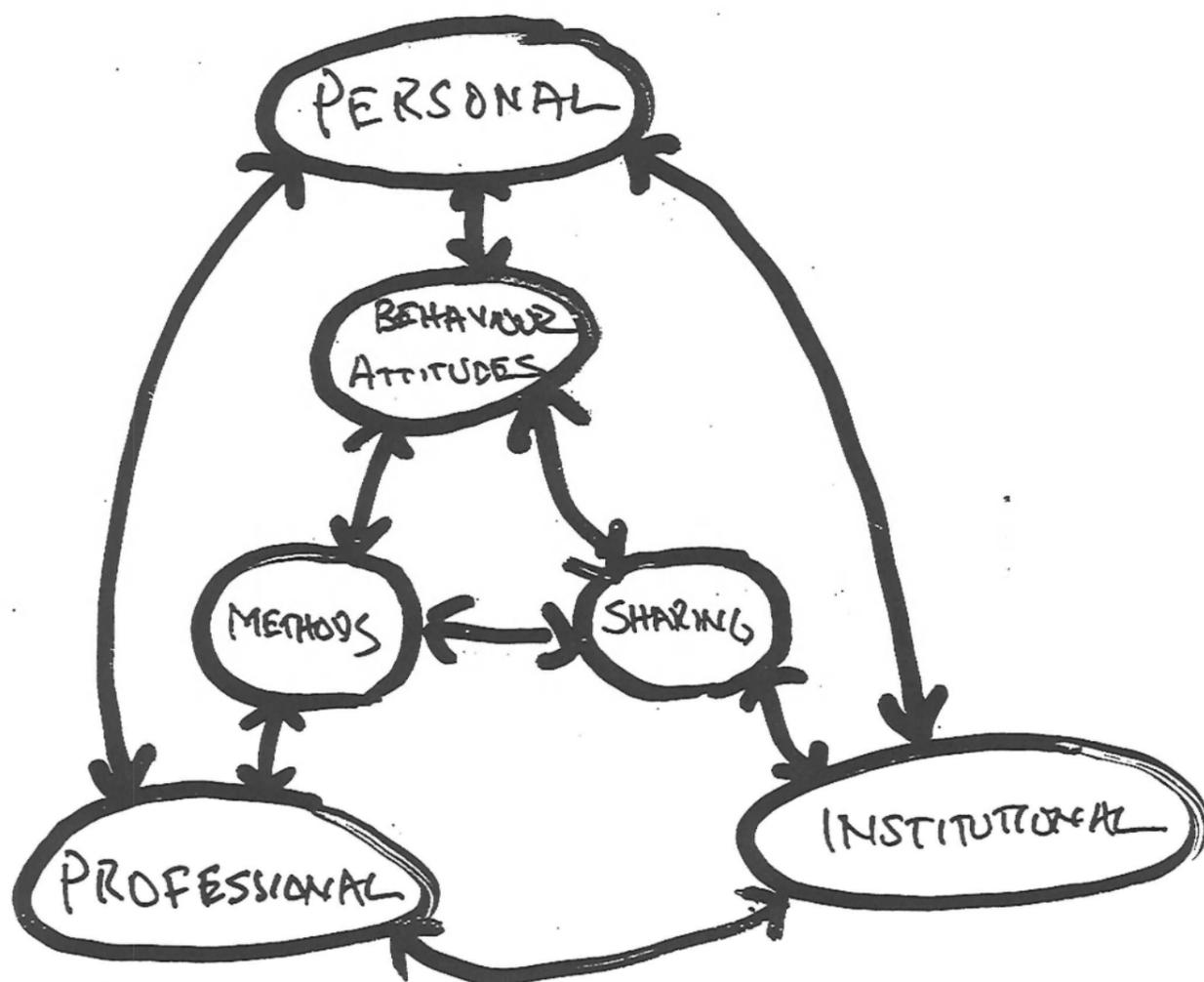
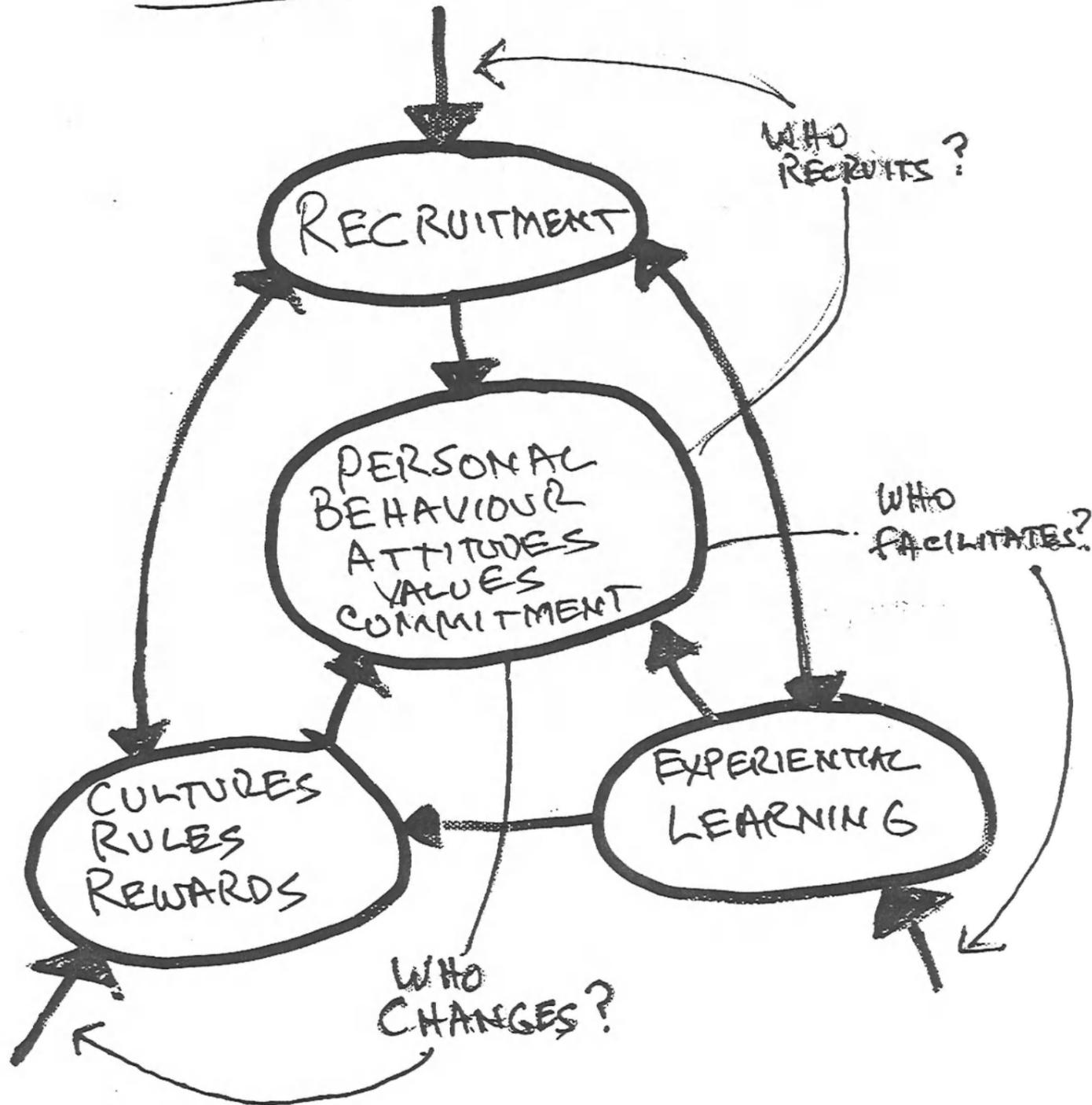


FIGURE 2. POINTS OF INTERVENTION AND  
THE PRIMACY OF THE PERSONAL



## ZOPP, PCM AND PRA: WHOSE REALITIES, NEEDS AND PRIORITIES COUNT?

Here are seven assertions. Do you agree?

- 1 **The realities, needs and priorities that should count most are those of local people, especially the disadvantaged** - women, the poor, the marginalised, those who are physically and socially weak and deprived. This is now conventional rhetoric, and most development professionals would endorse this statement.
- 2 **For those realities, needs and priorities to be expressed requires special efforts**, enabling local people, especially those who are deprived and disadvantaged, to meet, to reflect, to express and analyse their realities and needs, to plan and to act and to be sensitively supported. PRA, done well, is a way of facilitating such processes.
- 3 **The realities, needs and priorities expressed by local people are typically diverse, and often differ from those supposed by outsider professionals.** Different communities have different needs and priorities, as do different groups (women and men, young and old, rich and poor, ethnic groups....) within communities. Outsider professionals often misread local situations.
- 4 **In its classic form, ZOPP has been a top-down process in which professionals' realities, needs and priorities have tended to dominate and be imposed.** This has occurred through the descending sequence of ZOPPs, the imperative of consensus, the reductionism of the method, the use of outsiders' languages, the physical and social isolation from poor women and others, and perhaps at times the assumption that 'we know best'.
- 5 **The challenge is for us so to organise and behave that the diverse realities, needs and priorities of the poor and weak can be expressed and accommodated.** This requires radical reversals in project sequences, processes and procedures, in institutional cultures and rewards, and in personal behaviour and interactions at all levels. Our knowledge and values can help, but for truly empowering participation, only if they come last.
- 6 **To explore and implement these reversals is immensely exciting and important.** Any organisation which leads can make a huge contribution, far beyond the direct impact of programmes. Precisely because it has such deep experience of ZOPP, and has promoted it so widely, GTZ is exceptionally well placed to make this contribution. **The reversals require guts and vision. The rewards, for the poor, could be immense.**
- 7 **A good way forward is for sensitive PRA to come first and inform the evolution of flexible, unhurried projects, with truly participatory processes, not blueprints or products, as the objectives to be monitored.**

Robert Chambers  
3 March 1996