

Participatory Rural Appraisal: Recent Developments and Implications

What is PRA?

Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) is a term used to describe new approaches and methods in which rural people themselves do much more of the investigation, presentation, analysis, planning, and dissemination than has been normal in the past.

Pillars, principles and precepts

PRA has three pillars: behaviour; methods; and sharing. Behaviour refers to changes in the behaviour and attitudes of outsiders, with self-critical awareness, embracing and learning from error, and reversals of roles, with outsiders respecting, and learning from and with, rural people. Methods refers to a continually expanding repertoire of methods of learning from, with and by rural people. Sharing refers to a spirit of non-possessive openness, sharing knowledge, training, methods and approaches between practitioners, between organisations, and between rural people and each other and outsiders.

PRA requires that outsiders "hand over the stick" - passing the authority and initiative to rural people so that they are encouraged, enabled and empowered to do many of the things we thought we had to do, and only we could do. In the participatory mode, it is now much more they who map, make models, conduct transects, observe, make analytical diagrams, estimate, rank, score, present information, analyse, plan, monitor, evaluate, and disseminate. Information which we used to extract and take away for our analysis now remains much more with them, often for them to update and refine as they learn more and conditions change.

PRA derives some of its principles and precepts from its parent and contemporary, rapid rural appraisal (RRA). These include rapid, flexible and progressive learning, learning from rural people, optimal ignorance, and triangulation. To these PRA has added learning by rural people through their own analysis, and for outsiders - critical self-awareness, listening not lecturing, embracing error, and the one-sentence manual "Use your own best judgement at all times".

Origins

PRA represents a confluence and development of changes taking place simultaneously and under different names in different organisations and places. It draws on many sources and traditions - including applied anthropology, participatory research, farming systems research, agroecosystem analysis, and rapid rural appraisal. It seems to go beyond these in providing combinations and sequences of methods such as participatory mapping and modelling, transects, wealth and wellbeing ranking, matrix ranking and scoring, visual and analytical diagramming and quantification of several sorts, which elicit and present a richness of knowledge and analysis which has hitherto rarely been expressed.

The term PRA was probably first used in Kenya in 1988. The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in India in late 1988 conducted an appraisal in Gujarat in a participatory mode which has been followed by much innovation and discovery. Other NGOs in India, especially but not only MYRADA (Bangalore), Action Aid (Bangalore), and SPEECH (Madurai), and also Government institutions such as the LBS National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie and the Drylands Development Board, Karnataka, have in parallel and with many mutual exchanges of experience, been moving in similar directions.

Experiences of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India) (AKRSP)

AKRSP is an NGO involved in promoting and catalysing community participation in natural resource management through village institutions for increased income generation and productivity for rural communities. AKRSP has been using Participatory Rural Appraisal and Planning to enable village communities in rural Gujarat to conduct appraisals, develop village natural resource management plans, implement them, monitor and evaluate them.

The experiences in the last three years have shown that villages have an inherent capacity to collect, analyse, discuss and present the information related with their resources based on indigenous knowledge and expertise. The villagers map, model, conduct transects, rank, score and identify opportunities related to their resources and produce village plans if facilitated by outsiders with the right attitude and using enabling methods.

This process has also led to the evolution of a cadre of village facilitators who enable data to be collected, analysed and presented in the form of a Village Resource Management Plan. The villagers produce Watershed Treatment Plans, Land Use Maps, select species for afforestation through Matrix Ranking, evaluate crop varieties and technologies through diagramming, prepare impact diagrams for interventions and monitor and evaluate the programmes through preparation of baseline and impact programmes. These outputs lead to analysis and decision-making on viability, experimentation, choice of technology, land use planning and performance evaluation of village institutions. The current applications are in the area of watershed management, forestry, agricultural extension and research, savings and credit.

These plans are now being presented by the village institutions to District and Local Government officials. Some of these plans are now being funded by State and Central Governments as a part of the various development plans of the Government. Many State and Central Government implementing and training institutions have shown interest in the approach. AKRSP has conducted some training programmes in the Districts in which it is working.

Implications

These rapid and at times astonishing innovations and discoveries by AKRSP are paralleled by those of other NGOs such as MYRADA, Action Aid, SPEECH and others. Many developments are also taking place in other countries and continents. The implications are still not easy to grasp. A critically

pessimistic view would be that these are flashes in the pan, achieved in favourable conditions by exceptional NGOs in a few places, and not widely replicable. An enthusiastically optimistic view would be that these are methodological breakthroughs whose time has come, and which will spread throughout development practice, transforming in the process the relations between "us" and "them", and providing the basis for sustainable rural development and livelihoods for the 21st century. Our own view is that they do indeed represent something of a paradigm shift, and that they have come to stay, develop and spread, but that their final potential is impossible to assess.

One need is then evaluative research on the comparative effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of PRA methods and processes. There is here a vast research agenda in which to date hardly any interest has been shown.

There is, though, no need to wait for research before further developing, promoting and spreading PRA. Its value is self-evident to the organisations which are practising it. Rather, the major challenge is whether those few organisations and persons with competence to provide training can share and spread their experience. This applies not just within a country but also internationally. NGOs like the AKRSP, Action Aid, MYRADA, SPEECH and others have thus been faced with a new potential role with which they are variously coming to terms, of passing on their experience and methods not only within India, and also outside India.

There is no lack of demand. The evident popularity and power of PRA, when done well, has provoked requests for training which far exceed the supply of competent trainers. In these conditions, quality assurance is a concern. Three measures can help:

- * enabling good practitioners and trainers to pass on their skills
- * encouraging and enabling more people to become good practitioners and trainers
- * insisting that critical self-awareness and embracing error are central to PRA, so that it can be self-improving where it spreads without training

The stakes are high. If PRA were only half as popular and powerful as we believe it to be, the benefits from its introduction into new organisations, countries and continents, from its cross-fertilisation with other modes and methods, and from its development and spread, should still be great. Not to act, not to share experience gained, not to share the approach and methods developed, would be an act in itself. The need and opportunity are there. The question is whether the need will be recognised and the opportunity seized, and how quickly, how well, and by whom.

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