

Logical Framework Approach and PRA: mutually exclusive or complementary tools for project planning?

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Introduction

The overall purpose of project planning is to improve project performance. However, there is no general consensus with regard to how to undertake this. One planning system used by many donor agencies is the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) or 'logframe'. An alternative system is Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), which has further evolved into Participatory Learning and Action (PLA). LFA and PRA systems are considered by Chambers, the father of PRA/PLA methods, to be mutually exclusive (Chambers 1996, 1997). This paper questions that view and proposes a method for how it is possible to combine the two methods.

There are several pitfalls in project planning. One is the position that the plan should be fulfilled at any cost. However, circumstances (external factors) might change during project implementation, thus necessitating adjustments to the original plans (Hersoug 1996). If these factors develop negatively during the project period, the project may have to be terminated or redesigned in order to circumvent them. External factors may also develop favourably, thereby opening up new possibilities. If planning and implementation are viewed too rigidly, these opportunities will be foregone. The third pitfall is not to have any plan or to have a plan with few or no implications for project implementation. This causes frustration among project staff and beneficiaries because it is not known where the project is heading. Project planning is, therefore, a question of finding a suitable balance between stability and flexibility (Hersoug 1996). As a general rule, the more you know about the external factors which can influence a project, the more you can plan in detail. More realistic goals may also be established during project implementation. This is also in line with the current thinking that project implementation should be a learning process.

Planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation are parts of a continuous project cycle. It is of special importance that the lessons learned during project implementation feed back into the ongoing planning process.

Planning according to LFA

LFA is a method that is used widely for planning development projects. The reasons for introducing logframe systems have been (NORAD 1995; Vanoppen 1994; Steigerwald 1994):

- to assist projects in establishing clear and realistic objectives;
- to promote logical thinking and check the internal logic;
- to provide a basis for monitoring and evaluation and make planners think in evaluatory terms;
- to make planners state the assumptions that they are making;
- to encourage people to consider what their expectations are;
- to focus attention;
- to summarise key information in one document;
- to improve communication between donor and recipient.

LFA proposes a seven-step procedure in the planning of a development project (NORAD 1995):

- 1 *Participatory analyses*—identify the groups affected by the project. The main groups are analysed with regard to main problems, interests, potentials, and linkages. A decision is taken on whose interests and what problems are to be given priority.
- 2 *Problem analyses*—identify a focal problem and establish cause/effect relationships through the use of a ‘problem tree’.
- 3 *Objective analyses*—transformation of the ‘problem tree’ into an ‘objective tree’.
- 4 *Alternative analyses*—assess different options for the project. This assessment can be based on technical, financial, economic, institutional, social, and environmental feasibility.
- 5 *Identify the main project elements*—goal (long-term overall objective), purpose (operational objective), outputs (results that are guaranteed by the project), activities, and inputs.
- 6 *Assumptions*—describe conditions that must exist if the project is to succeed but which are outside the control of the project.

7 *Identify indicators*—the performance standard to be reached in order to achieve the goal, purpose, and outputs.

These steps are normally undertaken in an LFA workshop. The elements from steps 5 to 7 are also combined in the project planning matrix.

In LFA, the development process is seen as a causal link of events. The outputs are produced if the activities take place and the assumptions in relation to output are fulfilled; the purpose is attained if the outputs have been produced and the assumptions in relation to purpose achieved. Finally, the goal is achieved if the purpose is attained and the goal-related assumptions are fulfilled. By adopting such a procedure, the project is forced to think through its internal logic and reflect on the factors that influence its performance.

Planning according to PRA

Development projects often show some success during the project period, but the outcomes are frequently not sustained (Pretty 1995). One important shortcoming has often been that the local beneficiaries do not develop a true sense of ownership of the project and therefore take little or no responsibility for sustaining the infrastructure or organisation that have been developed by it. Irrigation dams, soil conservation structures, credit groups, and even women's groups are often considered as belonging to the project alone. A critical point in development planning is, therefore, to identify local priorities and encourage stakeholders' responsibility. A tool which has been developed to ensure stakeholder participation in planning, monitoring, and evaluation is the PRA method. Empowerment of the local people is an important principle in PRA, which seeks to give local people a key role in all aspects of development projects in which they are to be involved. PRA also emphasises the building of local problem-solving capacity and acknowledges that different groups in a society have different needs.

The origins of PRA lie in participatory action, agro-ecological analyses, participatory observation, applied anthropology, farming systems research, and Rapid Rural Appraisal (Chambers 1997). It is an assembly of different methods such as wealth-ranking, ranking matrices, seasonal profiles, mapping, transect walks, etc. The approach emphasises the active participation of the local population in the collection and analyses of data, use of visual techniques, group discussions, and information sharing.

Participatory planning has been shown to increase uptake of services, decrease operational costs, increase transparency, and increase the mobilisation and capacity of local people to act for themselves (Pretty 1995). Participation can also be considered as a fundamental right (ibid.).

Comparing the methods

Chambers (1997) considers PRA as completely opposed to LFA, while others think that LFA does not necessarily contradict the people-oriented approach of PRA (Mikkelsen 1995).

One clear difference is that the LFA method takes no stand with regard to who is present and by whom decisions are taken (NORAD 1995). On the other hand, an important principle of PRA is empowerment of weak and vulnerable groups (Chambers 1997). This principle is not, however, a guarantee for the active participation of local stakeholders. There are good and bad practitioners of both LFA and PRA methods. The success of either method in project planning depends very much on the skills and attitudes of the facilitators.

One of the criticisms of the LFA is that its difficult vocabulary excludes local people from participating (Chambers 1997). This gives more power to 'elite groups', as these know how to articulate their needs using the 'LFA language'. This language makes frequent use of the term 'target group', something which may convey the idea of passive recipients of aid and undermine the idea that the overall objective of development assistance is to enable people to act for themselves and determine their own destiny.

Another criticism is that in LFA the different challenges that people face are reduced to one core problem (Chambers 1997), while different groups within a community may well have different problems, making establishment of a core problem a struggle between different groups. Consensus is not always possible.

A major strength of LFA is its structured approach. It is easy to get an overview of the project, and the indicators that are identified can be used as a basis for monitoring and evaluation. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the method has become so popular among donor agencies. Planning according to PRA has no clear structure and it may, therefore, be difficult to get an overview of the project.

Combining LFA and PRA

Each of the two methods has its weaknesses and strengths and it is therefore of interest to discuss how it is possible to use the two methods in a complementary way. One approach is to use LFA for giving the overall structure of the planning process and the checklist of factors to consider, while PRA is used in discussions and decision making at the grassroots level. Thus, unlike the conventional LFA approach, the key decisions are not taken in an LFA workshop, but by the local stakeholders. The project staff should facilitate, but the final decision making should be in the hands of the project beneficiaries.

PRA should be used to identify vulnerable groups (step 1 in the LFA), local problems and their causes (step 2), to discuss with local stakeholders the goals of the project and which activities should be given priority (steps 3–5), to identify the external factors which can influence the project (step 6), and to define the indicators (step 7). PRA tools to be used include, among others, wealth ranking and matrix scoring. Wealth ranking is used to identify different wealth groups in the villages, and the subsequent analyses of problems and alternatives are undertaken within the different wealth groups. This enables the weakest groups to express their needs and to decide on their priorities for the project. The outcome of such a process is often that differences emerge between the priorities of the different groups, and a decision will have to be made with regard to whose interest will count the most in the decision-making process. There will always be a power struggle, regardless of which planning system is used. However, what this process seeks to ensure is that the weakest groups are able to express their needs. Identification of indicators should be a participatory process, and the selected indicators should reflect how local stakeholders measure progress.

LFA is used to organise the decisions from the PRA exercise into a project matrix (PM). The PM will provide an overview of the project, show what is to be expected from it, and which indicators are to be used to measure project performance. The structuring of the PM is a joint responsibility of project beneficiaries and project staff. LFA should only be used to assist in planning and should not be used rigidly. It is mainly a tool to assist the project in asking the right questions and in structuring the main elements of the project.

Conclusions

It is proposed that LFA and PRA be used in a complementary way. The LFA method is used to structure the overall planning process while PRA is used to identify local problems and to foster decision making at the local level. The strength of LFA lies in structuring the main elements of the projects whereas PRA is an important tool in promoting participation and empowerment of local stakeholders.

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