# Critical reflections on rapid and participatory rural appraisal

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### Introduction

This paper starts by addressing the question of the purpose(s) of Rapid Rural Appraisal and Participatory Rural Appraisal (RRA/PRA). It outlines three broad contexts in which they are undertaken in practice. It then considers some of the challenges facing PRA. These include introducing and spreading PRA within communities; institutionalising PRA into development organisations and their projects or programmes; assuring and maintaining quality, both of the PRA process and its facilitation; and, finally, the lack of a methodological critique of PRA.

The paper was inspired by the author's belief that there has been a lack of critical writing in the PRA literature, although this is now starting to change. It is offered as a small contribution to this emerging literature (some of which is listed in the bibliography at the end of the paper).

### RRA/PRA for what?

RRA and PRA methods are being used in different ways by many different kinds of people for very different purposes, and the labels RRA/PRA are used rather indiscriminately to cover all of these.

#### PRA as a research methodology

PRA is increasingly seen and used as an alternative or supplement to conventional surveys and other methods of social research (such as participant observation), by consultants and other development professionals, as well as academics. I would call most such work RRA (although it is often called PRA), whenever the selection of issues, questions, methods, and applications is determined by outsiders. In this context, RRA and PRA are located on a mainly methodological continuum.

### PRA for (project) appraisal

Many other PRAs appear to have been initiated by outsiders (NGOs, government organisations) as a way of encouraging communities to describe their situation, identify and prioritise their needs, formulate a plan of action, diagnose problems during implementation, or engage in participatory monitoring and evaluation), using PRA methods.

The agenda and objectives for this sort of PRA work are also usually set by outsiders, but the emphasis here is often on learning from communities, in order to make development work more appropriate and responsive (as opposed to the objective of getting an academic degree or providing information for donors, policy makers, or others involved in development work).

### PRA as part of a process of participatory development

PRA seems to be much less commonly used to initiate and/or sustain a process of participatory development.

The difference between PRA as process and PRA as appraisal has more to do with who sets the agenda and what the objectives are than with who uses the methods. The objective of PRA in this case appears to be to empower people and support a process of self-reliant development, on the terms set by the communities themselves.

## Challenges facing PRA

### Introducing and spreading PRA within communities

This is the main challenge for those using PRA as part of a process of participatory development. It involves identifying, training, and otherwise assisting some sort of local animator network, until no further support is felt to be necessary. PRA, understood primarily as a set of methods, will be only a small part of such a process, as well as of the repertoire of skills required to support it. On the other hand, the behavioural principles and attitudes underlying PRA will be crucial.

However, there is nothing new about these. Perhaps the contribution of PRA to participatory development therefore lies in the contribution that training in the methods and, more importantly, the practice of facilitating them in communities can make to developing the analytical, decision-making, and other capabilities (such as working together) that are necessary for self-help development.

The question then becomes one of how training and supporting local PRA facilitators can best be done, and how the lessons of

experience can be shared where this has been attempted (for example, selection criteria for community PRA facilitators, details of their PRA training, incentives and support requirements, capabilities developed, changing relationships, etc.).

### Introducing PRA into development organisations and projects

An increasing number of development organisations worldwide are enthusiastically adopting a PRA approach for project appraisal, as defined above (which includes diagnosing problems of implementation as well as monitoring and evaluation).

However, many of these organisations (or projects) are now encountering obstacles related to the objective of making their work more responsive to community needs. These obstacles may be external or internal. External obstacles include an unfavourable policy environment. Internal obstacles are more obvious and numerous. They include the hierarchical culture of management; the lack of incentives for PRA work, or conflict with prior top-down planning and evaluation mechanisms; and rigid or inappropriate accountability requirements (and other agendas) of donors, central ministries, and politicians.

In short, PRA does not really fit into the conventional project framework. So-called process projects may be a contradiction in terms, certainly as projects are conventionally defined.

### Quality (and quality assurance) issues in PRA training

**Focus on methods, not principles, behaviour and attitudes:** There still appears to be a focus on methods in PRA training. This is understandable, as the methods are easy to understand and practise, although far more difficult to learn how to facilitate. On the other hand, while the primacy of attitudes, behaviour, and principles is often emphasised, it is less clear how these can be developed in training situations. There is also a danger of mechanical application (and standardised mixing or sequencing) of methods, if these aspects of PRA are neglected.

**Focus on content (what was learned), rather than process:** Most PRA training reports talk about what was learned and what methods were used. They do not contain much reflection on process (such as who participated, what they did, how they did it, etc.).

**Locating PRA methods within an analytical framework:** The selection of PRA methods by outsiders often appears not to be situated in a coherent analytical framework of development. This may also explain

the lack of contextual analysis in many PRA reports. However, some attempts have been made to do so. For example, one model, developed by Sam Joseph at ActionAid, attempts to locate PRA within a framework for the analysis of livelihoods.

**Familiarisation, field-based training, and training of trainers:** There is a widespread view that there are at least three different types of PRA training, which have not been sufficiently distinguished to date, namely familiarisation workshops, field-based training, and training of PRA trainers.

Familiarisation workshops are short-term classroom-based events for people who will not be facilitating PRA in the field, but whose support might be required for a PRA approach.

Field-based training is a longer-term process, intended for PRA facilitators. A distinction between support agency and community PRA facilitators would also be useful.

Training of PRA trainers is another type of training of which more is required, given the common view that there are not enough 'good' PRA trainers available. The problem with this view is what does 'good' mean, and who decides (or should decide)?

Most of the current writing (and experience) appears to be about the second type of training, and more writing and sharing of experience about the first and third types is needed.

**Different levels of PRA training:** This is related to the previous point. PRA trainers and others seeking to promote PRA may need to identify and prioritise their audiences more strategically.

**One-off versus on-going PRA training:** Too much field-based PRA training seems to be a one-off affair, often in communities where there is no other on-going relationship with the training organisation concerned. There is now an increasing realisation that this is not sufficient, and that follow-up training or support of some kind is needed, even though PRA facilitators (community-based or agency-based) should, ideally, learn as they go along.

**Role of the PRA facilitator and skills required:** This will obviously depend on the context (research, project, or community) in which the PRA facilitator is working. Growing experience is showing that an understanding of the methods and (practice of) PRA principles is not enough. Facilitation and communication skills are crucial, and conflict-resolution skills may also be required.

What are (and should be) the roles of PRA facilitators, in different contexts and settings? Similarly, what are (and should be) the skills

required, not just of PRA facilitators, but also of PRA trainers, and trainers of trainers? More thought and discussion about this would be useful. No doubt there will be many answers and even more further questions!

## *Lack of a methodological critique of PRA*

This is perhaps understandable, given the enthusiasm generated by the application of PRA methods, as well as their relative novelty and obvious practical 'hands on' usefulness. Nevertheless, questions are increasingly being asked about PRA methodology.

The initial debate was about the reliability and validity of the results of these methods, as compared with those generated by other approaches. In the few cases where comparisons have been made, the results of PRA have either been similar to those of conventional methods, or it has been the latter, not those of PRA, upon which some doubt has been cast.

Similarly, anthropologists in particular remain sceptical of the rapidity of PRAs, conceived as one-off exercises by outsiders, and the limitations thought to be associated with this, particularly the lack of initial understanding and familiarity with the environment, and thus the likely superficiality of any information or knowledge gained.

More recently, there has been some literature questioning the cultural appropriateness of the PRA approach or particular PRA methods. One author, for example, has focused on possible distortions related to the public nature of much PRA work, such as the gender bias which this may create in many cultures, as well as the inhibiting effects on the participation of some of those who are present.

The same author also highlights the unequal power relationships that exist, both between PRA facilitators and communities (with the consequent syndrome of 'I'll tell them what I think they want to hear') and within communities themselves.

It is also questionable whether all cultures necessarily learn and communicate best in a pictorial fashion. More fundamentally, how far can any means of communication transcend cultural and other differences (for instance, of experience)? Surely these differences affect our interpretation of what we hear or see in important ways, no matter how well we listen!

Yet, despite these and other recent methodological concerns (and principles such as critical awareness), the literature on PRA seems to be remarkably silent on questions of who did or did not participate, as

well as on other process questions, such as why particular methods were used, and how these might have affected those involved.

What is also surprising, finally, given the emphasis on local perceptions, is the lack of information about local perceptions of the PRA approach and methods (other than from PRA training-course participants). Most of the PRA literature appears to have been written 'top–down', by outsiders, usually at a fairly high level.

## Conclusions

A number of conclusions suggest themselves on the basis of the views expressed above.

Firstly, those involved in promoting RRA/PRA should be clear about the context(s) and purpose(s) of its use. RRA/PRA can be used for development research, at various stages in the project cycle, and for community-led development. The nature and levels of PRA training, as well as of its facilitation, should reflect these different contexts and purposes.

Secondly, the two main operational challenges continuing to face PRA are how to introduce and spread PRA within and between communities, and how to introduce and spread RRA/PRA within government development organisations and programmes.

Thirdly, the main process-related challenges facing RRA/PRA are how to measure and maintain quality. Current concerns in this area include the continuing focus on methods rather than principles, and the focus on content (i.e. what was learned) rather than process.

A methodological critique of RRA/PRA (largely absent at present, with a few notable exceptions) is required to help resolve these 'quality assurance' challenges.

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