PRA: Where Has All the Participation Gone?

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Abstract

Participation is a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decision and resources which affect them. But development initiatives have to be based on sound information. PRA takes the participatory process back a logical step: stakeholders, and particularly local people involved in a project, should help to determine the agenda for inquiry, participate in collecting the information, analyzing it, and deciding what to do about it. PRA is a flexible participatory strategy which draws on community expertise and involvement to get action-based, timely, cost-effective and reliable information. Although PRA has been widely used in participatory projects, it has not lived up to its expectations when it comes to empowerment of local people. This philosophical paper takes a closer look at some of the problems, limitations, biases and dangers that have become evident. More particularly, this paper draws conclusions that have implications for practice in development projects.
Introduction

The past two decades has witnessed more shifts in the rhetoric of rural development than in its practice. These shifts include the now familiar reversals from top-down to bottom-up, from centralized standardization to local diversity, and from blueprint to learning process. Linked with these, there have also been small beginnings of changes in modes of learning. The move here is away from extractive survey questionnaires and towards participatory appraisal and analysis in which more and more the activities previously appropriated by outsiders are instead carried out by local rural or urban people themselves.

In these changes, a part has been played by two closely related families of approaches and of methods, often referred to as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) which spread in the 1980s, and its further evolution into Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) which has came about fast and begun to spread in the 1990s. Norton and Francis (1992), describe the change in terminology from RRA to PRA as a reflection of the shift from an extractive mode of operation where the aim was simply to obtain information in a rapid focused and cost effective manner, to facilitating local informants active participation in the planning of activities. Chambers (2003), in his updated definition, describes PRA as a term that “is being used to describe a growing family of approaches, methods, attitudes and behaviors to enable and empower people to share, analyze and enhance their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, act, monitor, evaluate and reflect”.

The promoters of RRA/PRA, particularly in the UK and India, have published innumerable papers and books about the advantages of these methods. I do not deny the great potential of PRA in empowering local people to plan and implement their own development. However, in view of the perhaps even greater danger that “participatory” methods-presently in style-are misused, I draw attention here to some of the problems, limitations, biases and dangers which have become evident. These are not meant as arguments against applying PRA approaches but rather to ensure that practitioners keep the “red warning lights” in view. For the purpose of this philosophical study, I conducted a theoretical review of literature that has been published over the past two decades along with my field experience in RRA/PRA. The overarching goal of this review is to draw conclusions from the theoretical base that has implications for practice in development projects.

I. Need for communication skills

Like other approaches to development planning, participatory approaches are not a panacea and are by no means easy. Their application requires considerable skill and sensitivity. This means that appropriate training is needed and that even then, not all staff of development agencies will have the aptitude to apply participatory approaches.

Participatory methods require, above all, communication skills—not only listening skills, but also the ability to ask relevant questions. PRA practitioners commonly regard themselves as teachers with knowledge and insight superior to that of rural people. Their “etic” views hold them back from listening to local views and ideas. They draw heavily on their experience from elsewhere and explore questions that are of concern perhaps to
government ministries, research institutes or donor headquarters but not to the local
people. The discovery here should be that local people have capabilities of which
outsiders have been largely, or totally, unaware. It is therefore imperative for PRA
practitioners to either “hand over the stick” of authority or at least “get hold of the other
end of the stick” of authority (Chambers, 1997). During a PRA session among watershed
farmers in western part of Iran, I realized that I had to do a lot of “shoulder tapping”
(Chambers, 1983) in order to remind one of my team members to talk less and listen
more.

An aspect of communication seldom discussed in the reports on participatory
approaches is the question of translation. For example, many watershed farmers in
western part of Iran, did not speak the official language of the country in which they live,
and some of our team members did not speak the watersheds’ farmers mother tongue.
Although the visualization methods used in PRA can overcome the barrier of different
languages, the differences in interpretation of images will remain. It is ideal if local
people who speak the language and understand the local “codes” can be members of the
PRA team (Biswas, 2000). If persons are hired as translators, there is a danger that they
filter and influence the communication with the local community. Translators should be
involved in planning and discussing the fieldwork, so that they share an understanding of
the purpose and can bring in their own knowledge of the culture. It is useful to list in the
local language the concepts and terms which are likely to be encountered (e.g. watershed
practices, seasons, land topography) and to revise these lists as new key concepts arise
during fieldwork. For longer-term interaction in a development process, the importance of
learning a language with which one can communicate directly with local people is
undeniable.

II. Gender issues

There is an intrinsic gender bias in some RRA/PRA methods that take several hours to
complete and interfere with women’s normal routine (cooking, collecting fuel and water,
childcare), as women tend to have less free time than men. Furthermore, in many
societies women are less accustomed than men to expressing themselves in public and
may be reluctant to be involved in meetings of larger groups. In some societies, cultural
rules limit women’s contacts with strangers, and it are not socially acceptable that women
speak openly on formal occasions. During the PRA practice with fish farmers in
Kermanshah, we could not open any communication channel with women farmers
because there were no woman among our team members. It is therefore easier or even
necessary that PRA practitioners (preferably women) interact with local women in
smaller groups. Gender differences can be deliberately raised during PRAs by asking
separate groups of men and women to do the same exercise such as mapping (Pretty,
Guijt, Thomson & Scoones, 1995). As an example, men can be asked about the activities
of women in addition to their own activities, and women about their own activities and
those of the men.
III. Imposition of foreign concepts

Although PRA was developed in the South and most of the good trainers are in and from the South, certain PRA tools may impose a western way of seeing or recording. These may be maps, matrices, flows etc. The visualization may not be readily understood in all societies, although the use of aerial photographs in participatory landuse planning (Sandford, 1989) shows that these methods can be used with more success than one might anticipate. Some people with a strong verbal culture may experience difficulties in expressing themselves in diagrams. It is noteworthy that watershed farmers working with PRA practitioners in Kermanshah province located in the western part of Iran, explicitly requested a shift from visualization to the written and spoken word for assessment and planning activities.

Various methods from the RRA/PRA “toolbox” can be tried in a particular setting, but the procedure of participatory planning should be sufficiently flexible to allow a change in methods, if those originally applied prove to be poorly suited. “Using your own best judgements at all times” as suggested by Chambers (1997) may be the best prescription one may apply in those situations. Appleton (1992), Grandin (1992) and Birch (1994) give good examples of how methods were adjusted during fieldwork to fit the interests, skills and preferences of both the local people and the PRA team. Thus, whether referring to communication methods, spatial views or socio-cultural-political ideals, including women’s liberation, participatory planning teams need a great deal of sensitivity to be able to recognize where they might be trying to impose foreign concepts and are in danger of ending up in a stalemate.

IV. Extractive vs. empowering application of RRA/PRA

Many RRA/PRA exercises consist in outsiders collecting indigenous knowledge and ideas and then proposing development possibilities to the local people. The term “participatory” is applied to more-or-less conventional methods of extracting information, now called “indigenous knowledge”. This is particularly evident in manuals, which give samples of “PRA” questionnaires to be applied to farmers.

Rifkin (1992) asks how active participation can be ensured when the planners provide the conceptual framework for data analysis, i.e. wealth ranking, matrix priorities, mapping? She sees a danger that such “participatory” methods are used by outsiders to obtain data to use for decision making in which the local people are not involved. PRA can easily become a manipulative process, whereby planners obtain and discriminate selective information from communities. Fernandez et al. (1991) have noted that, especially if a PRA exercise lasts only a few days, there is a tendency to collect data for outsiders’ purposes and not to initiate a process of discovery and growth of confidence among the local people to solve their problems. Chambers (2003) have also pointed to some of the concerns in PRA practice. Among a mass of bad practices, he mentions that funding agencies demand for training in a day or two with lecturing without fieldwork, and then implementation in communities as a oneoff in a short time. Furthermore, funding agencies and governments demand instant PRA on a large scale. These and other
poor practices suggest that the essence of participation inherent in PRA may not live up to its expectations in one hand and take more of a extractive based approach in the other.

All RRA/PRA methods can be used in a more extractive or a more empowering mode but some tend more towards the former (e.g. progeny history, transects) and others more to the latter (e.g. workshops, ranking, mapping). The key is the type of dialogue which takes place when these methods are applied, such as posing questions which lead to eye-opening among both insiders and outsiders during a transect, or confronting men’s and women’s views of their own and each others’ workloads. Where methods are used to show differences within the population, this can evoke discussion and stimulate ideas for change among the local people. Where they show differences between local people and higher planning levels and provide a concrete basis for discussion and finding compromises, they can become tools for collaborative planning.

V. Weaknesses in follow-up

RRA/PRA exercises are often one-off events, with no visible, immediate result apart from the production of a report, which may not even be easily accessible to the local people. Reasons for the real or apparent lack of follow-up can be (Holland & Blackburn, 1998):

- Conflicting time frames: Villagers want to see short-term responses to their efforts, whereas project personnel, government officials and donors have to go through the long cycle of reporting, assessing the report, formulating a project proposal according to donor guidelines, gaining approval, recruiting and preparing project staff etc. Even if all parties involved have the good will, a year or more may elapse between the feasibility study and initial project planning and the commencement of project work on the ground.

- Different agendas of local people and donor/government: Pre-specified focus of project activities can lead to a situation where the problems a project is supposed to solve (e.g. erosion) are not the problems of highest priority to the intended beneficiaries.

- Lip service to participation: Donors and governments may give the impression that participatory planning is desired, yet when the results of initial participatory planning are presented, they are ignored, to the great disappointment not only of the local people but also of the RRA/PRA team.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To answer the question posed by the title of this paper: “PRA: Where Has All the Participation Gone?” One should look at the barriers or limitations to participation at the individual level. Once these barriers like lack of communication skills, gender issues, imposing of foreign concepts, extractive /empowering issue, and weaknesses in follow-up are eliminated, we can say that participation is here to stay. Attitude and behavior of
practitioners is another personal characteristics that need to be changed. In other words, it is their paradigm personality that needs to match those of participation philosophy. Some PRA practitioners whose paradigm personality are truly participatory can, with a minimum of exposure, simply go ahead and learn as they go. The attitude and behavior required of us as “uppers” (outsiders, professionals, people who tend to dominate) include: critical self-awareness and embracing error, sitting down, listening and learning; not lecturing but “hand over the stick” to “lowers” (people who are local, less educated, younger, marginalized, usually dominated) who become the analysts and main teachers; having confidence that “they can do it”, and a relaxed and open-ended inventiveness. If we are to promote and sustain good participation and good PRA, we should try to put the last first and put the first last. Chambers (2003) believes that it is not difficult to put the last first but it is very difficult to put the first last. At the organizational level, funding agencies and government departments, and even NGOs, also need institutional changes of cultures, procedures and rewards if they are to enhance community participation. It is no good preaching participation at the individual level while maintaining an authoritarian hierarchy “above” with funding agency or department-driven targets, punitive management, control-oriented managers, and the like. When it comes to promoting participation, large bureaucracies with pressures to disburse should be disabled.

References


