Context Paper Seven
Participatory Tools and Techniques of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)

A Critical Review of Development Paradigms

Development has been defined and understood in various ways at different points of time. Following the Second World War, in about 1950, it came to be understood as growth in income where the focus was on transferring western aid to Third World countries. Development in this era was defined as growth in per capita income; the belief that higher transfers of capital from developed countries to developing countries would lead to faster changes in per capita income in the latter countries. The result of this approach was that poor people were not reached at all. By 1960, the focus shifted to social progress through transfer of technology from the west to the east. The focus was, however, not only on increased per capita income but also on health, education, and other social factors. This time the attempt was to achieve development through social rather than economic means. But, as people were considered to be passive recipients as in the previous model, this approach also failed to benefit people much; the poor were rather further marginalised.

In view of the past experiences, development in 1970 came to be centred around the concept of integration where development was to be achieved through economic as well as social means. The idea this time was to benefit more people; and thus people were asked to participate in integrated activities by contributing labour and/or cash. Though this approach was relatively more people-oriented than the earlier ones, the problem with this development paradigm was that the plans were top-down and focussed more on local elites or so-called 'leaders'. As such, the rest of the people in the programme area felt neglected and the benefits were taken by a few people only.

Only in 1980 did the real focus of development shift to people, the emphasis was more on people's participation and mobilisation of local resources in all development activities. Accordingly, plans were developed along bottom-up approaches in which local people and NGOs had a major role to play. The development in this era was expected to be achieved through human, economic, and social means. The result was much more positive than before as people could contribute a great deal and realise their potential. Evolving from the liberation concept

of development of 1980 the concept of dialogue as a means to development was realised in 1990 where the focus was on improving the quality of people's lives. This concept is completely a people-centred approach in which the focus for development is on cultural, environmental, human, economic, and social aspects. The approach is based on a participatory process in which it is believed that unless and until the people themselves are involved in all stages of development activities, such as need identification, planning, designing, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation, development is not possible and, even in cases where it seems to be happening, because of significant inputs it will not be sustainable.

Understanding Participatory Approaches and Their Differences from Other Research Techniques

Before discussing the philosophy of participatory approaches it might be useful to develop an understanding of the word 'participation' itself. The concept of participation varies from individual to individual and institution to institution as in the case of development. For simplicity, and to set a proper context in this paper, participation is defined as a learning process by which communities control and deal with change and development and incorporate new knowledge into their existing management system. In other words, the opposite of doing 'for' people is participation 'by' people. With this understanding of participation, a participatory approach can hence be defined as one which deeply respects the knowledge of the local people and creates an environment in which local people can understand their potentials, their capacity, and their power and come to develop their self-esteem.

Certain assumptions of the participatory approach are as follow.

- Development should not be imposed from outside but should flourish from within the concerned community itself.

- Development is possible only through bottom-up planning and should evolve around people's felt needs and aspirations.

- Local people know more than 'development experts' and should be considered as partners in the development process rather than mere beneficiaries.
- A reversal of role between local people and outsiders is needed to empower local people and increase the chances of development projects being successful.

At this point it might also be useful to mention briefly the following basic differences between participatory approaches and other traditional extension practices.

- A participatory approach believes in a global approach, rather than the sectoral approach of other techniques.
- A participatory approach believes that development initiatives should come from the community and not from outside, unlike the traditional approach in which initiatives usually come from outside.
- A participatory approach follows a group approach – to create group dynamics – and not an individual approach, which is mainly the focus of traditional extension practices.
- A participatory approach aims at reinforcing the capacities of local population rather than on the technology transfer of the traditional approach.

Meaning, Basic Components and Principles of PRA

The review of development paradigms presented above showed how the focus of different development approaches prevalent at different times has changed. More recently, the shift in focus has been from a centralized blueprint approach to a decentralized bottom-up planning process. In these changes, a major role has been played by two related families of approaches known as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). RRA, which emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, focussed more on quickly eliciting, analysing, and evaluating information and hypotheses about rural life and resources. Its further evolution spreading in the late 80s and early 90s, PRA focussed more on ways to empower local people so that they themselves could appraise and analyse their problems and resources, and plan, act, and monitor and evaluate programmes based on local capacity and knowledge. The major difference between RRA and PRA is that information is elicited and extracted to a greater extent by outsiders in the former case, while in the latter it is owned and shared by the local people. PRA originated in the Third World countries, and it has developed and spread rapidly with many innovations and applications over the years. Thus far, it has been more used by NGOs. Recently, its use is also being seen in government systems, especially sectors such as agriculture, forestry, and water.

The commonly-accepted **meaning of PRA** is that it is a way of enabling local people to analyse their living conditions, to share the outcomes of this analysis, and to plan their activities. It is a 'handing over the stick from outsider to insider' in methods and action. The outsider's role is that of a catalyst, a facilitator and convenor of processes within a community which is prepared to alter its situation. This technique recognises that rural people have a vast pool of knowledge, experience, and expertise which must be used to assess and develop their own plans since such a plan has a higher chance of being effective, successful, and sustainable than plans evolved by outsiders. This method has been recognised as cost-effective and less time-consuming, able to gather information quickly and prioritise development activities, assess the feasibility of projects, monitor progress or evaluate a project. It is an important approach enabling outsiders to learn from rural people about their community. In other words, it is a methodological framework in which the knowledge of local people is taken as the starting point and the outsiders learn from them by using different locally suitable and appropriate methods. The ultimate goal is to identify some possible concrete actions based on a shared understanding of the situation at hand. It is also a means of making development efforts more tangible for the local people.

There are three basic **components of PRA**: facilitation, attitude, and behaviour of outsiders and culture of sharing. In PRA, outsiders act as facilitators and enable local people to do most or all of the investigation, mapping, modelling, diagramming, analysis, presentation, and planning. While applying PRA techniques, outsiders are expected to facilitate so as to try to maximise the effective use of local knowledge, experience, resources, and expertise. The process followed should raise a feeling of ownership on the part of the community towards the project, thus increasing the chances of the project being successful as well as sustainable.

The second basic component of PRA is that the facilitators are expected to follow local norms as much as possible so that local people can feel they are part of their own community. This requires the outsiders or the facilitators to pay attention on every activity such as where to sit, how to listen to local people without lecturing by themselves, appropriate visiting time, respecting local people's knowledge, skill and expertise, taking on an attitude of learning and embracing error.

Finally, continual sharing of information with local people, with other PRA team members, and with other institutions, NGOs, and government is another basic component of PRA that has to be considered by the PRA team members all the time.

The following are PRA's basic principles.

Triangulation: A form of cross-checking by varying team composition, sources of information, and application of tools and techniques. Each team should include both men and women members representing several different disciplines and areas of knowledge. Each phenomenon

should be illuminated from different points of view and studied using different techniques.

Flexibility and informality: There is plenty of flexibility and informality in the PRA process. As long as the PRA team is clear about the purposes of the exercise, the team has every freedom to be flexible and informal in the selection of key informants, sources of information, tools and techniques, and places and processes. The moment the PRA team feels like the selected people or tools or sources are not sufficiently representative, or capable, or adequate enough to get the required information, they can be changed. Similarly, the process is so informal that the team can meet people any time and anywhere suitable.

Iterative and progressive learning: The basic principle in PRA is that the whole learning is from the local people in the community itself. The PRA team listens, takes part in every day activities, and asks to be taught local skills. The team regards the knowledge of the local people as paramount and keeps updating itself as the field work goes on with different individuals and groups in the community. As far as possible, the PRA team should endeavour to see the problems through the eyes of the affected households. This is possible as the team stays in the community until a draft outline of what is to be done in the community is prepared.

Optimal ignorance: The other important principle of PRA is that the team should always try its best to ignore information that is not relevant and useful to the programme objectives. In other words, the whole focus should be given only to the topics and the areas that are of particular concern to the team. The ability to judge what is essential and what saves the time of both the local people and the PRA team also helps the former to contribute more to the whole PRA exercise.

On-the-spot analysis: PRA emphasises on-the-spot analysis that takes place at different times and which can help reach the best level of precision of the collected information. The first level of analysis takes place at the individual level through discussions with local people as individuals and in groups regarding the stated objectives of the exercise. The second level of analysis takes place in groups with other PRA team members and local people in smaller groups using different tools and techniques. The third and final analysis takes place while presenting the findings to a large group of local people in the community. This is when the PRA team will have every opportunity to add, correct, and verify the information collected earlier for its reliability and precision.

Offsetting biases: The process to be followed in PRA is also very well known for minimising or not repeating the biases which are often seen in other research techniques referred to as 'development tourism'. The biases reported in such development tourism include spatial bias, meaning visiting only nearby and easily accessible sites, project bias, meaning seeing only sites where special efforts are being undertaken to produce some tangible results, and person bias, which means meeting only males who are educated and elites and bypassing the illiterate, poor, marginalised people, and women. Other biases seen in the conventional research technique are seasonal bias when outsiders visit only in the dry and cool seasons, overlooking what happens in the rainy and summer seasons – the time when real problems are exposed in the community, daytime bias, meaning seeing the village only at daytime and not in the morning and evening, and professional bias, which means seeing only that which is of professional interest to the outsiders.

Strengths, Weaknesses and Challenges of PRA

Strengths

The increased use of PRA all over the world in itself is a good indicator of its strength. Nonetheless, a few major strengths that have been commonly reported by researchers and practitioners have been presented below.

- Raises feeling of ownership: The process followed in PRA raises local people's feelings of ownership as they are involved from the early stage of need identification through all subsequent phases of project activities. This can then increase people's interest not only at the time of implementing project activities but also at the time of operating and maintaining them.
- Data collected represent all segments of the community: As the process involved in PRA tries to cover as much variation as applicable in the community, the collected data can be representative of all groups of people – rich, poor, resourceful, resourceless, men, women, marginalised, women-headed households, etc, so that the plans developed thereafter can meet the needs of all groups in the community.
- Extensive cross-checking mechanisms: Another strength of PRA is that it includes extensive cross-checking mechanisms. For example, the data collected from one gender or group is always compared with that of another sex or group. Similarly, information collected through one technique is also verified and cross-checked using another technique. All these mechanisms built in to PRA increase the reliability of the collected data.
- Transparent: The whole PRA activity is so transparent that local people will have no problem in understanding what is going on. This saves time of both the PRA team and local people while planning and implementing project activities.
- Flexibility: As discussed earlier, the PRA process involves a lot of flexibility as long as the facilitators are clear about their activities and aim for progressive learning.
- Qualitative and attitudinal information: Due to the use of different visual aids, diagrams, maps, and

modelling, local people involved in the PRA exercises take them as familiar routine activities. As the process gets into the heart of the local people, it can motivate them to express their inner feelings about the issues being discussed with them. This is seldom possible by the use of other research techniques.

- User-friendly tools and techniques: PRA tries to emphasise the use of local materials and resources such as locally available colour powders, seeds, sticks, and leaves as far as possible. Therefore, local people, including illiterate men and women, should have no problem in participating and contributing to the PRA activities.

- Effective for micro-level planning: Experience accumulated so far reveals that PRA is very effective for micro-level planning as local people have full knowledge of and control over the local resources. Since PRA believes that every community has a diverse situation, problems should also be dealt with through separate mechanisms. As a result, planning done with smaller groups becomes very effective in addressing group specific needs and problems.

- Empowerment: As local people are given every opportunity to initiate the PRA process, and as they are taking a lead in the whole PRA exercise, they feel deeply empowered – the key to successful development projects.

- Informality: The informality involved in the PRA process in terms of the use of tools and techniques, selection of key informants and location, and the methods themselves improve the quality of field work.

- Sustainable: As almost all PRA activities are carried out in the field itself, a good relationship between the local people and outsiders is built up, thereby increasing the chances of the project activities being sustainable.

Some Weaknesses

Some of the weaknesses associated with PRA are listed below. However, if the PRA process and techniques are used in a systematic way and following the principles of PRA, these weaknesses can be minimised or removed.

- Not suitable for collecting hard/quantified data: PRA does not aim to collect hard/quantified data and it is often criticised for this. However, experience has proven that local people are also capable of expressing themselves quantitatively, at least in proportionate terms. Such information is no less reliable than that derived through questionnaires where the information is mostly collected from individuals without any cross-checking provision.

- PRA practitioners require a lot of skills: The skill of obtaining accurate and reliable information from purposively selected individuals or groups of people in a short period of time requires building up a good relationship with the community. This depends on the patience, skills, and expertise of the PRA team. It is

therefore important that PRA team members be well-trained before going to the field.

- Raises people's expectations: As a number of people become involved in the PRA process at least in the beginning and in the end, it is natural that their expectations may be raised . It is therefore important to make the purpose of the exercise clear from the beginning. Reinforcement of such clarity about what the community can and cannot expect from such exercises may have to be made later.

- Findings cannot be generalised: It is often said that, as the key informants participating in the PRA process are purposively selected, the findings cannot be generalised. What is important to consider here is that the people selected to participate in the PRA activity always possess sound knowledge of the issues under exploration. Furthermore, all the information is passed through different sources of information, tools, and informants-following the principle of triangulation. Therefore, it can be safely argued that the findings of a well-planned PRA exercise can be applied to cover a larger area, though serious preparation and caution are required while doing so.

- There is a heavy reliance on the practitioners in PRA: The success or failure of a PRA exercise is solely dependent on the PRA team which may have no more than four to five members. Team members who are not committed and well-trained may affect the whole outcome of the PRA exercise, so careful attention must be paid when selecting the PRA practitioners. One other way of controlling such a problem is through regular interaction among the PRA team members to discuss the progress made in the field. Such frequent interactions and meetings can reveal in time any bias on the part of any PRA team member.

- Not appropriate for macro-level research and planning: The use of PRA has been seen more in micro-level planning so far. Thus, it is often said that it is not useful for large-scale studies and macro-level planning. However, a well-planned and systematised PRA can definitely fill in this gap, as some successful attempts have already been made in this regard in different parts of Asia and Africa.

- Its relevance in monitoring and evaluation is yet to be seen: Accumulated experience shows the use of PRA more at the need identification, planning and implementation stages, but many activities are already leading to the application of PRA at monitoring and evaluation stages. FAO activities in watershed management can be taken as good examples of this. Nonetheless, it remains true that work needs to be done to spread the use of PRA beyond need identification and planning.

Challenges to PRA

- High demand is leading to mediocre PRA practice.
- PRA use has become fashionable, resulting in poor quality.

- Donors and governments have still not been able to move away from target-oriented programmes.
- Poor quality of training given by some individuals has failed to change the attitude and behaviour of PRA practitioners.
- PRA use has been largely limited to individuals and not much institutionalised.
- There is sufficient experience of scattered PRA use, but there is very limited use in thorough and rigorous research.
- Limited use has delayed its scaling up.
- PRA use is more generally limited to NGOs and the time has come to spread it within government systems.
- Sharing of experiences is very limited, so there is a need to focus on networking.

Suggested PRA Tools and Techniques in Watershed Management

Time Line

A record of events and activities which occurred in the community in the past. This activity involves discussion with a group of local people (usually 4-8) about what they consider to be the most important past events in the community. This is a good ice-breaker for building rapport with local people and showing interest in their lives.

An Example of Time Line

The main purpose of the time line is to identify events in time to which local people can refer when discussing historical issues. If local people have an event to which they can relate their discussion, the recall is likely to be more accurate than trying to remember '15 years ago'. Examples of such events could be major earthquakes, disease epidemics, land surveys, or opening up of certain institutions like schools, health posts, or any government offices. In preparing such a time line, the year of the event is shown in the left hand column and the events are shown in the right hand column. One more column can be added under 'remarks' to report some other information that can qualify the events of the development activities reported by the informants. This time line can show how people's customs, practices, and matters close to them have changed. It could be a history of crops or livestock or land use practices or population.

Social, Resource and Land Use Map

A sketch of the community compiled in cooperation with a group of local men and women to identify physical and socioeconomic details along with the infrastructure available in the community. Depending upon the purpose of the exercise, different names can be given to such sketches such as social map, resource map, land-use map, etc.

An Example of a Social, Resource and Land-use Map

The aim of mapping is to allow local people to express their perceptions of location, usage patterns and changes, of local resources or facilities. Mapping can be carried out using a variety of media such as colour powders, counters and sticks, small pebbles and paper marks and even leaves and grasses and other locally available materials to show different features of the community. Though mapping can be done both on paper and the ground, it is better to let local people draw such a map on the ground so that many people can participate and contribute to the mapping process. A mapping exercise done on a paper can limit the participation of the person holding the pen, and it does not allow changes of mistakes or ideas easily. Once such maps are prepared they can then open up further investigations and analysis of the local situations. It is always advisable to copy the map in the notebook to give a permanent record of the information. However, it is important to keep in mind while copying the map that the meaning is not changed and accompanying discussions are also noted simultaneously. Immediate copying of the map from ground to the notebook can prevent the exercise from being spoiled or useless in case there is an onset of rain or strong wind or children playing or standing on them.

Transects

A systematic walk with a few key informants through an area, observing, asking, listening, discussing, identifying different zones, local technologies, seeking problems, solutions, opportunities, and mapping and diagramming resources and findings.

An Example of Transects

This technique has the advantage of leading to field observations and to discussion with local people. Transect diagrams can also be used to provide a historical picture of changes in resources or farming practices. A major past event taken from the time line can be referred to and the local people are then asked to draw a transect for the points in time. The transect also helps to determine whether there are sub-zones within the community that require special consideration.

Matrix Ranking

Matrix ranking also helps in gaining information about local people's preferences in tree species, types of livestock or cattle, varieties of crop, etc, and the criteria on which those preferences are based. The criteria are listed on the left side, the preferences to be compared with one another are listed on top.

An Example of Matrix Ranking

The process of drawing up a matrix involves three main stages. First, the factors to be discussed in the matrix must be established in consultation with the key informants and listed across the top of the matrix. Second, an exhaustive list, given by the local key informants, is prepared down the side of the matrix of good points or qualities. Any other criteria not listed by the local people that the PRA team wants to investigate can be added at the end in the discussion with them. It is important for the criteria to be worded so that it is clear what the ratings mean. It is also useful to always list criteria in a positive way. Third, the criteria are then considered one by one and the key informants score each of the factors to be compared. If the key informants have problems scoring, it may help to start with the extremes, best and worst, and work backwards from each. Sometimes, two items can get the same score if the informants feel there is no particular difference between them on one criterion. For the convenience of the local people, use of pictures or symbols of the factors under comparison may be easier. For illiterate people, lines or small stones or seeds can also be used to show the relative importance of one factor over others. This exercise gives detailed information on what informants are basing their decisions and choices on and may illuminate areas in which research and extension activities need to be focussed, thus helping to prioritise directions for the future.

Wealth Ranking

A method for categorising households according to wealth or well-being in the community. Key informants first develop parametres that they think are important to consider while placing a household into any category and then keep on placing households into appropriate categories based on those parameters.

Seasonal Calendar

This important tool of PRA is applied to collect seasonal information such as the intensity of rainfall or soil moisture, land use or cropping patterns, migration patterns, food availability, income and expenditure patterns, etc, by month. Different lengths of sticks or straw along with counters like seeds can be used by local people to chart out on the ground the relative quantities of some variables. The seasonal calendar also helps to record village views of problems and opportunities.

Trend Line/Diagram

Trend lines are developed based on village perspectives, to show patterns of change along with the causes of such change in resource issues such as rainfall, crop production, soil loss, deforestation, livestock holding, and other matters of concern to the community. A group of local people knowledgeable of the issues to be explored are gathered for this exercise.

Venn or Circle Diagram

Venn or circle diagrams are used as a tool to discuss the relative importance or position of different factors, commonly institutional or social structures in a community. Key informants are asked to rank community institutions in order of importance and to construct diagrams that indicate the relationships between and among village units.

An Example of Venn Diagram

Circles of different sizes and colours are used to represent different organizations, institutions, or prominent people. Their relationship to each other and their relative importance in the community can be mapped out by placing these circles on the ground in relation to each other. Alternatively, the circles can be drawn directly on to paper. However, this does not allow easy movement of the circles when there is disagreement or changes in opinion following discussion.

Semi-structured Interviewing

This technique is considered to be the core of a good PRA. It is an open discussion with open-ended questions that can take place anywhere in the community, either with individuals and/or groups of key informants. It can be done using mental or written checklists and is thus also known as informal discussion. It can take place either on the path while observing community activities, over the garden fence, or in the field or homes. Due to their work load some local people may not be free to participate in activities such as mapping or diagramming, but they may be quite willing to chat while they get on with the task in hand. This technique is useful in building rapport during the initial involvement in the village. The outcomes of such interviews can provide pointers to areas needing initial investigation or at a later stage may indicate a need to change the direction of investigation.

General Training Techniques

Much of the PRA technique is based on concepts of embodied learning through social interactions, game playing, group dynamics, etc. Lectures, sharing of experiences, simulation exercises, use of relevant energisers, slide shows, and field practices form the main bases of PRA training techniques. Many PRA training courses and exercises will be guided by the following principles:

- don't lecture, don't dominate, don't interrupt,
- observe, listen and learn,
- relax,
- embrace error,
- probe and cross-check as much as possible,
- always start discussions with open-ended questions,
- show interest and enthusiasm in learning from others, and

- always use six helpers – what? when? why? where? who? and how?

Aids Required

Though the types of aids required while conducting training on PRA are based on the types of people being trained and the venue itself, some of the aids which could be useful in an ideal situation are given below.

- Posters/Flip-charts
- Overhead Transparent Sheets
- Overhead Projector
- Slide Projector
- Video Screen and Deck
- Coloured Powders
- Different Kinds of Seeds
- Other Locally Available Materials such as Counters and Sticks