

Context Paper Eight

Participatory Tools and Techniques

(Appreciative Planning and Action: APA)

Appreciative Planning and Action (APA)

Introduction

Appreciative Planning and Action (APA) has been developed and piloted by The Mountain Institute (TMI) in Nepal, Sikkim, Tibet, Peru and the USA as an innovative approach to grassroots' village planning and mobilisation. This technique shows considerable promise as a mechanism for helping empower groups and communities to take positive action for their own development. Drawing on Appreciative Inquiry (AI) on a relatively new organizational development methodology, Appreciative Planning and Action is built on searching for the positive, for successes, for what works, as opposed to the problem-oriented focus of many planning and development strategies. APA also draws directly on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and other group dynamics' disciplines.

The paper on which this summary is based reviews the development and application of APA in Nepal under the Mountain Institute's Makalu-Barun Conservation Project (MBCP). APA programmes have been conducted in all MBCP operational areas with over 1,000 villagers in about three dozen settlements from tropical lowlands to mountain highlands. An evolutionary action-research approach has been used to develop and to refine the APA process.

APA is built on the following four basic elements.

- One goal
 - Seeking the root cause of success (not the root cause of failure)
- Two laws
 - What you seek is what you find (the questions help determine the answers).
 - Where you believe you are going is where you will end up.
- Three principles
 - If you look for problems, you find more problems.

- If you look for successes, you find more successes.
- If you have faith in your dreams, you can achieve miracles

- Four 'Ds'

- Discovery - Asking positive questions, seeking what works, what empowers
- Dream - visioning what could be, where we want to go
- Design - Making an action plan based on what we can do for ourselves
Making personal commitments
- Delivery - Start taking action, now!

Through Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PME), this 4-D process leads directly back to the Discovery step, which is: reviewing with participants what has worked best, what might work even better, and what we can do to follow-up on our actions. The 4-D process is compatible with most standard project cycles which are based on a parallel 4-step process of problem identification and analysis, choice of alternatives, development of a plan, and implementation of the plan. APA thus can be introduced harmoniously into existing systems, giving new meaning and power to those systems rather than undermining or invalidating them.

Practical exercises in some villages in Nepal have shown that APA does the following.

- Empowers - helps groups celebrate, embrace, and learn from their successes instead of focussing on their problems.
- Mobilises - gives groups concrete actions they can start immediately.
- Energises - provides a future-focus that encourages groups to create a vision, to select steps that help move them toward fulfilling their vision, and to take the first step towards achieving it.

The APA process has helped community forest user groups to 'discover' that they can help fund community development activities. Villagers consumed with negative attitudes about themselves have celebrated their achievements and made plans to take positive action

together. Leaders have shown a commitment to cultural conservation and community development and have shared ancient dances. Local people in a small scruffy market centre at the confluence of two beautiful rivers imagined a vibrant bazaar and set to work to achieve their dream with a 'clean-up' campaign that same afternoon.

Like any new technique, APA risks the danger of becoming a fad, of being misused or oversimplified or, more seriously, not appropriately followed-up. Because of its focus on the positive, APA risks becoming trivialised by the momentum, power, and historical commitment of academic and professional disciplines which have traditionally drawn their validity from the search for, analysis, dissection, and articulation of problems and failures and the outward allocation of blame.

Mission Statement of Appreciative Planning and Action

- To empower communities and individuals to take pride in what and who they are and what they have achieved; to dream of what might be; to plan for what can be; and to feel the energy that comes from making commitments and completing the first step.
- To be simple enough for anyone to do it and profound enough to change people's lives.

APA

Appreciative Planning and Action is being developed and used by The Mountain Institute in Nepal as a tool to help promote sustainable and participatory conservation and community development in remote rural communities. TMI's basic global commitment is to advance mountain people and protect mountain environments. The goal of TMI's Makalu-Barun Conservation Project in Nepal is to protect the biodiversity of the Makalu-Barun National Park and Conservation Area through the establishment of an innovative management system that integrates national park management with participatory conservation area management. MBCP is based on a 12-year agreement between His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMG) and The Mountain Institute which commenced in 1988.

From its outset, MBCP has been built on participatory planning with the local communities and support of community initiatives. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has been the basic tool for engaging communities in analysis, problem identification, and priority setting. Project activities include community forestry, village development, income generation, culture conservation, ecotourism, drinking water, trail and bridge improvement, irrigation, school building, sanitation, grain mills, and cottage industries.

Participatory Village Consultation and Planning

TMI and MBCP have been using PRA techniques for working in rural communities. They have also sought means of strengthening and enhancing these participatory processes in an effort to develop more PRA tools. The objectives of such efforts has been to make the tools more readily accessible to local staff and villagers and to seek new ways to encourage, empower, and to mobilise communities to take charge of their own development.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

Appreciative Inquiry was developed by the David Cooperrider, S. Srivastava, Jane Watkins, Diana Whitney, Barbara Sloan, and the faculty at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. AI exercises have been introduced into MBCP's semi-annual planning and have brought workshops positive energy into what might otherwise have been a relatively dry and sometimes negative process of reviewing progress and problems and mapping out plans for overcoming obstacles during the year ahead. AI was introduced at a GEM workshop in India in 1996 and attracted attention among organizational development specialists in Nepal, including management trainers from South Asia Partnership and Karuna Management. They found that the method resonated with traditional philosophy and had potential applications for local and international organizations working in Nepal.

From Appreciative Inquiry and PRA to Appreciative Planning and Action (APA)

Some AI exercises were introduced into a PRA village consultation and planning programme for ecotourism in Sikkim as part of TMI's Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Ecotourism Project. These exercises asked the local people to examine what they valued in their culture and community, what they would like to share with others, and how they might begin developing ecotourism activities in their community. The results were very encouraging and resulted in participants starting a village clean-up campaign on the spot, at the end of their PRA programme.

In 1997, the project's PRA programme was reoriented to introduce the full range of AI techniques into village consultation and staff training. The AI approach was woven into various village PRA programmes in different ways, evaluated, and tried again through an iterative 'learning process' approach of trial and error. The work resulted, among other things, in the resurrection of an old plan to open new trekking routes to an attractive peak in the area. A second programme was also introduced in another half-dozen communities in Tamku Sector, the central part of the MBCP conservation area. Simultaneously, the APA approach was revised and tested further. A parallel Appreciative Inquiry programme was initiated and introduced into ecotourism planning programmes with local

communities. This approach was used in a dozen training programmes and over 50 workshops and meetings in more than 30 mountain villages. The result is that a new approach to community planning and mobilisation has evolved, one based largely on the Appreciative Inquiry framework. PRA exercises and techniques will continue to be woven into the application of APA as they work extremely well in combination with the appreciative model.

Report from the Field: APA in Action

The APA approach was applied in villages lying between the Arun Valley and Sagarmatha to issues of community development, culture conservation, income generation, ecotourism, participatory natural resource management, and people-wildlife conflicts.

The process was started by splicing some AI concepts on to the excellent, proven, and globally-recognised Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) process of village consultation. This process also provides a unique sense of ownership among staff since there is a feeling of being involved actively in programme design, evolution, improvement, and application. This process includes three critical ingredients: appreciation, planning, and action.

Most participatory development programmes have had little success in empowering rural communities. Empowerment, by definition, must involve people feeling a sense of power, not just participation. Empowerment involves self-confidence and/or self-generated initiatives. Yet, after decades of commitment to participation and empowerment by the full panoply of donors, governments, and NGOs, many communities and villagers remain ashamed of their lack of education, their poverty, and their powerlessness. What involvement they have had with development appears not to have empowered them so much as encouraged them to focus on their problems and often to train them to become little more than professional beggars. This tragically negative, self-deprecating attitude, and the dependency syndrome that seem to evolve from reliance on outside help is depicted in a remark by an old woman in Rasuwa District, Nepal.

"We are a village of ignorant, uneducated people. We need drinking water supplies, water to grow more vegetables, we need training. My sons are uneducated and working as porters, our men are carrying porter loads leaving us women to care for the fields....."

APA appears to offer an alternative to the low self-esteem and dependency which pervade Nepal's villages. It goes beyond the 'power of positive thinking' by giving specific tools and techniques for generating and keeping up the positive thinking and encouraging self-reliance and local initiative.

Efficiency, Time Management and Taking Action

The basic elements of APA include simplification, codification, and adaptation to make it possible to complete an entire process with a village in as little as two to four hours, ending up with a basic action plan for the years ahead, plus a set of action steps to start immediately. This initial action step is combined with empowering personal promises that draw their inspiration from other organizational development sources as well as from AI's own 'provocative proposition' concept. Where appropriate and needed, APA can be augmented with a full range of PRA tools and activities.

Scenes from the Field: Vignettes from Recent APA Exercises

Scene 1

Location - Sisuwatar market, several days' walk up in the mountains from Khandbari, Nepal. A dusty, dirty little collection of tawdry bamboo shelters that comes alive once a week as a local market. Wrap-up meeting with local staff and village representatives.

Discovery: Most exciting moments from the week's training and village exercises. "I really get this. I can do this.... and it really will make a difference in my work. And, besides, it's fun." This came from first one, then another, participant and clearly emerged as a consensus. They felt confident that they could use APA as a tool to work with people and villages without outside 'expert' help.

Hearing those enthusiastic remarks, facilitators asked whether they were ready to pull together a quick APA with people gathered at the market, remembering that in one or two hours' time they had to reach the next destination. The answer was, "No problem, we'll get right to it!"

Less than an hour later, an elderly villager said: "We just finished our meeting, made a plan for the development of this market for the year ahead, and have all decided to start right now by cleaning up this place." Minutes later, brooms were busy, piles of trash were mounting and fires had started to consume the refuse. Within 30 minutes, the place looked better and clean.

Scene 2

Location - Small village of Bala, winding up a three-hour APA meeting with three sub-groups: cultural conservation, community development, and income-generation. They have finished their appreciative review, shared their dreams and wishes, and drawn up a Future Map for their village development.

Group One: Cultural Conservation - committed to the resurrection of an ancient traditional dance representing local cultural links with the environment. The group

promised to present a folk dance at local fairs in the area during 'Visit Nepal 1998.'

Group Two: Community Development - outlines self-help plans to finish construction of the clubhouse they are building and roofing for their adult study centre, plus fundraising plans to support these activities. All members also promised that they would each build a latrine in the following week.

Group Three: Income Generation - pledged a new poultry project, vegetable/kitchen gardening, and collectively they all made a commitment to contribute self-help labour to the construction of a new trail to make the area a more attractive trekking destination. A follow-up exercise with these groups revealed that they had undertaken the activities they promised.

Scene 3

Location - Bung Sector, a place known for its traditional *allo* (stinging nettle plant) industry, which had no organizational structure. At the end of the meeting, they collectively decided to start repairing and rehabilitation of an old trek route that would bring trekkers into the area.

Scene 4

Location - Navagaun, Seduwa Sector, a Sherpa village where traditional values are of great importance to the local people. At an APA meeting they discussed implementing the action plan they had developed for their village. Villagers decided to protect a sacred water source that was being polluted by livestock. This mini-project was completed by a group of 30-40 people in 15-20 minutes.

Scene 5

Location - Chepuwa village, Hatiya Sector. A three-hour APA meeting had just finished. The participants decided to build latrines as a first step in their village development. A few hours after the meeting, the APA team passing through the village observed a number of villagers already busy making their latrines. This shows that local communities can do a lot if they make commitments and take small steps to fulfill them. It is possible to bring about all the development in rural communities if local people take collective action.

Appreciative Planning and Action Process

Having reviewed the application of APA and its promise, it seems appropriate to provide some details on the actual APA process. In short, APA follows a framework of 4 basic elements, including a modified '4-D' planning and action process.

Appreciative Planning and Action

- One goal
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- Four Ds

DISCOVERY (Success Map) What gives life to this village? What are your successes? The best.. --Seeking Success	DREAM (Future Map) Vision of the future. Looking ahead 10 years, 20 years. 5-year plan 1-year action plan
DESIGN (Group dialogue) Constructing the future. Next steps	DELIVERY (Delivery) Enjoy. Actions we can take now to be done. Immediately: same day, same place, Tasks to start now in 10-30 minutes
RE-DISCOVERY (Monitoring) What was the best? What can make our vision even better? Sharing and reflection	

- i. Discovery Asking empowering, positive questions about the best, about what gives life to this organization, this village.
 - Seeking and understanding successes, analysing them for what they teach us. 'The answers we get depend on the questions we ask'. The key is good questions.
 - Share "Success Maps" - among the entire group.

Discovery is tailored to the group and/or situation. It replaces the familiar 'problem identification' step in the normal planning process. Discovery often starts

with personal introduction. Simultaneously, leading questions seeking successes and feelings of empowerment are then used to one or more small groups to create their own 'Success Map'.

When asking questions, do not rush or push for answers; wait 30 seconds before rephrasing a question; then if no response comes, ask a new question. Move on, do not belabour a question that does not generate a good response.

Discovery typically reveals that the favourite, most empowering projects, have been those the community has done on its own rather than those initiated and supported by outsiders.

ii. **Dream:** Creating a positive vision of what might be, what we would like to achieve.

- Close our eyes for one minute; imagine what we would like to find here in 10 or 20 years or so... think of what is needed to help make our dream come true...for our children...
- Prepare a 'Future Map' or diagram that illustrates our dream of the future.
- Share our 'Future Map' among the entire group (if subdivided). Dreams are shared briefly in the full group and then discussed in small groups to achieve a reasonable consensus on an exciting, yet achievable, vision for the future that can be illustrated by the group in a map or diagram form.

iii. **Design:** Turning our picture of the future into an action plan to realise it.

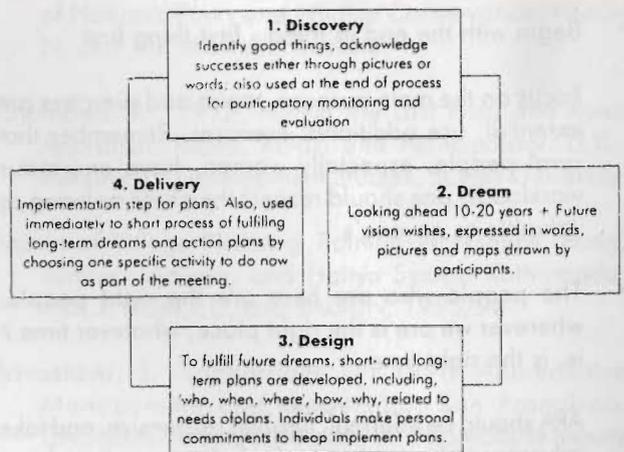
- Prepare short- and medium-term (1-year, 5-year) action plans that we will do ourselves to start implementing the dream - to turn wishes into action steps, requests, promises.
- Develop a programme to start implementing that plan this month or this season, including who, what, when, where, why, how - as appropriate to time and complexity of tasks.
- Make personal commitments on tasks from these plans that each of us will take as part of implementing the action plan.
- Share our action plans among the entire group (if subdivided).

iv. **Delivery:** 'Action Now'-starting now on the path to achieve our vision

- What are we going to do to start this process? Start now. This is the classic implementation phase of the standard project planning cycle. Action generates energy, provides a real sense of achievement, is fun, and crystallises the meaning and lessons of the entire APA process.

v. **Re-Discovery: Concluding Discussion** Participatory monitoring and evaluation of what we have just done.

- Share impressions, learning, informal evaluation, accompanied by some speeches by local people in which they share the meaning of the meeting and talk about issues on which the next steps are to be taken.
- Enjoy! Finish up with a light touch, relaxing and fun activity. Participants form a circle and are encouraged one by one to share a thought on the process, what was learned? what was the best? what might have been even better? This should be informal, light, and fun - well-sprinkled with laughter and concluded with some relaxing enjoyment such as dancing, singing, tea, snacks, jokes, etc. The well-equipped APA team always brings a drum and flutes.



Some Basic Principles for APA Practitioners

Appropriate Planning and Action activity programmes are conducted using the basic approach developed for Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), complemented by principles borrowed from other relevant programmes.

- Put the last first - put the first last
- Empower those usually left out, including those who are illiterate. All activities and materials should be visual: using pictures, maps, and diagrams drawn by the participants themselves.
- APA must involve women and disadvantaged groups directly and ensure that they have prominent roles in meetings.
- Hand over the stick (marker and / or map)
- Average people should be at the front of the meeting showing and explaining; facilitators, staff, local leaders, should be at the back listening and learning.
- All 'Success Maps', 'Future Maps', and 'Action Plans' must be left with the people who created them. These

are their planning tools to be kept and referred to, not to be carried away by facilitators.

Trade-offs: Time Constraints and the Use of Other PRA Techniques

While APA exercises should never be rushed or hasty and time should always be spent with villagers when it is reasonable to do so, there are times when efficiency is valuable. Because of time constraints, experience shows that a full APA cycle can be performed in as little as a 35-minute briefing. A training programme on the concepts with a practice session of the full 4-D cycle can be completed in one hour, and village meetings in 2 to 4 hours. This attention to efficiency can work well for local people who have busy agricultural schedules. Besides, APA can be energising, especially when people see what comes out of it in terms of actions and commitments. Also it can be enjoyable.

Raising Expectations and Mobilising Local Initiative

APA celebrates success, and successes, best moments almost always come from things people have done themselves (self-help) on their own. This leads to planning for more of the same, avoiding the old trap of village meetings which turn into a long list of problems, needs, requests, and thus contribute directly or indirectly to the promotion of dependency on outside support. Raising false expectations has been a problem. When communities are asked to summarise, analyse, and rank their problems and indicate what they can do themselves and what needs outside help, the tendency is to focus on what help might be forthcoming and from whom, rather than on what the community can do for itself. This does not yet appear to be a problem with APA, given its focus on discovering the empowerment inherent in activities undertaken by the people themselves and on the short-term action plan which is built around self-help initiatives. There is a potential risk, however, in the Dream step. It could be seen as encouraging an unrealistic vision of the future which can be discouraging if no movement is evident or likely towards achieving the Dream. Thus, it should be stressed that the Dream step of APA is a dream for the future with the remark that the achievement of dreams demands real commitments coupled with real belief. Some successful examples of dreams come true are: installation of several community-level, micro-hydro operations, village electrification, VHF telephones in rural communities, etc. These were considered impossible only a few years ago. While APA should not raise false expectations, neither should it squelch hope. The power of dreams in which people place real faith is often both surprising and empowering.

Conclusion

Experience in developing, testing, and using APA in MBCEP suggests that the technique might offer a breakthrough in the realm of community development and empowerment in rural areas. Although one has to be cautious of likely pitfalls

- They are the experts, we are here to learn
 - Facilitators use APA not to teach but to learn, as a tool to understand the richness, value, and utility of indigenous knowledge and to help local people appreciate, acknowledge, and honour who they are and the wisdom, know-how, and contributions they have made and can continue to make towards their own advancement.
- Ready - fire - aim or plunge and reflect
 - Learn by doing; take action, try something and then see how it works; adjust the process through reflection after trials; never stop learning, never stop improving the process.
- Begin with the end in mind - first thing first
 - Focus on the main purpose, topics and exercises are essential; use additional exercises. Remember that rural people, especially women, have enormous workloads; one should respect their time as being as valuable as anyone's.
- The people who are here are the right people, wherever we are is the right place, whatever time it is, is the right time.
 - APA should be informal, flexible, responsive, and take advantage of opportunities for being proactive; doing first things first, working with those who step forward to start with. Build in follow-up to ensure that balance is achieved over time.
- Take time
 - Don't rush. APA should be relaxed and informal; meetings should be publicised in advance. The APA team should preferably arrive at the site the night before for the meeting next morning.
- Turn problems into opportunities
 - APA does not avoid or ignore problems, but instead recognises and embraces problems by seeking positive ways of looking at them and turning them into constructive learning experiences and action steps.
- Enjoy
 - A successful APA programme should contribute to joy and work. Keep sessions light and enjoyable, include a celebration at the end. Essential tools – a drum and flute!

in this system as in others, nevertheless, when taking an appreciative look at the process as it has evolved in Nepal, the following emerge as elements of the APA process worth exploring further.

- It is Empowering - APA seems to generate power, energy, enthusiasm, and positive action, on the spot. It seems to be a powerful antidote to the low esteem in which many communities and villages hold themselves.
- It is Positive - APA looks for the root cause of success, not the root cause of failure. It builds up catalogues of successes and reminds people of what they have achieved rather than what they have failed to achieve.
- It is Quick - Experience has shown that a full APA cycle ending with a concrete action plan initiate immediate action, commitments of key people, and implementation of first step(s) and can be completed within from 2 to 4 hours. Demonstration training sessions, incorporating theory, methodology, and a full practice session, have been completed in 1-2 hours. Time should be taken wherever necessary and appropriate, but efficiency has merits as well, including the ability to make follow-up easier and more frequent.
- It is Easy - Field experience has shown that scouts and village leaders with little or no formal education can run these sessions on their own after as little as one day of training.
- It is Replicable - APA is relatively easy to practice in almost any setting, and can be implemented in the field without elaborate preparation. APA will require continuing follow-up to become fully operational but its simplicity and efficiency make such follow-up a replicable reality.
- It is Flexible - APA was first started with ecotourism and is now being used for community forestry, cultural conservation, income generation, market-place development, people-wildlife conflicts, team-building for staff, and organizational development. Modifications are relatively easy and straightforward.

It is APA's simplicity that gives it important advantages over some other approaches. This is a good start, but is only a beginning, and the approach has only some of the answers we will all need over the long-haul. APA has been receptive to ideas and will continue to be looking for new ideas and information that will help develop something that can survive, adapt, change, and grow over time. It is difficult to visualise the long-term sustainability of the APA method in the village setting without a long-term programme of testing, monitoring, and follow-up. Several steps may be required before our vision materialises.

'Appreciative Planning and Action' has sound roots and has shown itself to be a valuable tool with a promising

beginning in The Mountain Institute's programmes in Nepal, Sikkim, Tibet, Peru, and the USA. The Makalu-Barun Conservation Project and its 100 villages and 32,000 people are proving receptive to the approach.

APA offers a potential breakthrough for mobilising and empowering rural communities, and it is worthy of further development, testing, utilisation, and assessment.

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