

Required activities before participatory rural appraisal (PRA)

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Abstract: Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is one of the participatory research techniques in the class of qualitative research. Robert Chambers describes PRA as “a growing family of approaches, methods, attitudes and behaviours to enable and empower people to share, analyze and enhance their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, act, monitor, evaluate and reflect”. There exist different methods of data collection and analysis, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Through time, more appropriate and refined methods have been developed. In the context of rural development, information regarding the communities, their livelihoods, their beliefs, the physical environment in which they live, and their resource endowments need to be gathered and interpreted in a manner that identifies their priorities with a view of developing better understanding of their status and designing appropriate intervention projects directed at resolving their problems. Much of the spread of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) as an emerging family of approaches and methods has been lateral, South-South, through experiential learning and changes in behavior, with different local applications. Rapid spread has made quality assurance a concern, with dangers from “instant fashion”, rushing, formalism and ruts. Promising potentials include farmers’ own farming systems research, alternatives to questionnaire surveys, monitoring, evaluation and lateral spread by local people, empowerment of the poorer and weaker, and policy review.

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Introduction:

The different ways of data collection and interpretation can be seen under two perspectives (IUCN, 2001): qualitative versus quantitative, and participatory versus top down. While the quantitative methods generate information that can be captured numerically, the qualitative methods generally do not generate specific numbers. Qualitative methods are concerned with exploring meanings, processes, reasons, and explanations (Inglis, 1992).

RRA has criticized for being extractive and highly dependent on expert interpretation. It was thus found useful to replace it with PRA which involves a process of learning from, with and by rural people about rural conditions. PRA shares much with its parent, RRA, but is distinguished from it in practice by correcting two common errors: roles of investigation are reversed; and rushing is replaced by relaxation and rapport. At the heart of all these developments was Robert Chambers, although Paulo Friere has also had strong influence especially in similar developments in education circles (Provention Concertium).

PRA has evolved and spread from beginnings in Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Sudan and elsewhere, and in early 1994 is known to be being quite widely practiced in parts of Bangladesh, Botswana, Ethiopia, francophone West Africa, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka,

Sudan, Uganda, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe, while starts have been made in at least a score of other countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Hundreds of nongovernment organizations (NGOs) have adopted PRA and developed applications, as have a number of government departments. The use of PRA methods is being increasingly explored by students and faculty in universities for research, and by training institutes for fieldwork. Spread appears to be accelerating.

Five key principles that form the basis of any PRA activity:**1. PARTICIPATION:**

PRA relies heavily on participation by the communities, as the method is designed to enable local people to be involved, not only as sources of information, but as partners with the PRA team in gathering and analyzing the information.

2. FLEXIBILITY:

The combination of techniques that is appropriate in a particular development context will be determined by such variables as the size and skill mix of the PRA team, the time and resources available, and the topic and location of the work (Dunn, 1991).

3. TEAMWORK:

Generally, a PRA is best conducted by a local team (speaking the local languages) with a few outsiders present, a significant representation of women, and a

mix of sector specialists and social scientists, according to the topic.

4. OPTIMAL IGNORANCE:

To be efficient in terms of both time and money, PRA work intends to gather just enough information to make the necessary recommendations and decisions.

5. SYSTEMATIC:

As PRA-generated data is seldom conducive to statistical analysis (given its largely qualitative nature and relatively small sample size), alternative ways have been developed to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. These include sampling based on approximate stratification of the community by geographic location or relative wealth, and cross-checking, that is using a number of techniques to investigate views on a single topic (including through a final community meeting to discuss the findings and correct inconsistencies).

PRA are good for:

- Providing basic information in situations where little is known
- Identifying and assessing problems
- Appraising, designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluation programs and projects
- Getting a better picture of needs and organizations' ability to meet them
- Developing and transferring appropriate technologies
- Appraising emergencies
- Planning projects that are more relevant, restructuring administrations, assisting in decision-making and policy formation
- Generating hypotheses, ruling out inappropriate ones
- Providing guidelines for survey designs and assessing the applicability of their results to other places.
- Fleshing – out complementing, interpreting, or giving depth and context to information obtained through other methods.

Preparation before the PRA:

Proper preparations determine the success of PRA for it involves learning-by-doing and depends on team contributions. In addition to selecting the site where PRA is to be conducted and collecting secondary information regarding the specific sites and their neighborhoods, it is necessary to:

- Establish a PRA Team;
- Establish a Kuset PRA Committee;
- Conduct Preliminary Visits to the Community;
- Developing PRA Schedule.

1. The PRA Team:

The PRA Team consists five faculty members of the faculty of business and economics.

Note that other member(s) already involved in development activities in or near the specified areas shall be included if found necessary, for in PRA, the Team is expected to have the necessary technical know how in different areas (agriculture, health, education, infrastructure, credit, marketing, culture, etc.). It also needs to have a fair gender composition. Although every team member should be familiar with all aspects of the PRA, each team member is also designated for specific tasks which are described as follows(NCAER, 1993):

a. PRA team leader: One of the PRA Team members will be designated as a leader in each of the four PRAs. That is one team leader will be assigned for each of the four villages. The team leader will be selected in such a way that four members will alternatively serve as team leaders for each of the four PRAs. The role of the team leader is to(Scoones, 1993):

- Play the leading role in the formation of the village PRA committee;
- Ensure that all preparatory work has been done;
- Make sure that the objectives of each session are achieved;
- Coordinate preparation of the PRA report;
- Resolve any problems which may arise;
- Assign facilitators and note-takers for each session;
- Organize the reports from the note-taker/s into a coherent whole;
- Work as the principal editor of that particular PRA report.

Importantly, the PRA team leader is also responsible for ensuring that all technical areas are appropriately covered. Though not intended to do so, many PRA exercises may reflect the technical bias of the facilitators or note-takers as opposed to community needs and interests. This should be avoided at all costs, and the PRA team leader should ensure that.

b. Facilitator: For each PRA session, one individual should be designated as the lead facilitator (note that the team leader may also serve as a facilitator in some of the sessions). As a key objective of the PRA is to promote active community participation, the role of the facilitator is very important and includes:

Before the Session:

- Knowing the contents of their session very well in order that they rarely have to look at the manual for guidance
- Ensuring that the site is well prepared – that there are enough places to sit, that there is

not too much noise close by, that the area is well shaded, etc.

- Ensuring that the seating arrangement is good – and that participants can be seated in a circle so that they can see the facilitator, other participants, as well as any flipchart or blackboard which may be used. Important: if participants are not properly seated, have everyone get up and rearrange the meeting place. During the Session
 - Ensuring that all participants understand and contribute to the discussions.
 1. If one participant is talking too much, thank him/her for his/her comments and ask another opinion;
 2. If some participants are not contributing at all, ask them directly what they think;
 3. Do not let only one person or a small group of participants dominate the discussions;
 4. Pay special attention to women and the poor who may not feel comfortable contributing.
 - Ensuring that team members share their ideas only after the community members have provided their own, and that the team members avoid influencing the community's decisions.
 - Managing the time available for the session to ensure that all objectives are achieved.
 - At the end of the session, thank participants for their contributions and explain to them the next activity (Drummond, 1992).
- c. Note taker:** Because much information is generated throughout the PRA, the task of taking notes is very important to the program's success. One person shall be assigned as a note-taker for each session. The role of the note taker includes (Uphoff, 1992):
- Sitting among participants and take notes (it may preferably be done in such a way that the participants are not so aware that someone is taking notes);
 - Noting all main discussion points, and paying special attention to the comments of participants concerns:
 1. What they feel are problems;
 2. What they believe are the causes of these problems;
 3. Possible solutions, and especially how the community has solved these problems in the past;
 4. Special beliefs, customs and religious practices.

- Asking participants to repeat comments if they are not well understood;
- Assisting the facilitator by reminding if some important things are left out or not properly taken care of; Copying information presented on big paper into a notebook;
- Reviewing the notes with the facilitator to make sure that they are complete and correct;
- Copy the notes to a laptop at the end of each day's work.

d. Technical Resource Persons: Specific team members should be designated to serve as resource persons for key technical areas. If appropriate technical persons are not available with the team, the support of government bureaus or NGOs will be sought (Swift, 1991).

These individuals may serve as facilitators for sessions related to their technical area, or may simply assist the PRA team, the PRA committee or other participants in identifying community problems, causes and possible solutions. Note that even though Technical Resource Persons may have much expertise, they should share their ideas only after community members have discussed their own, and avoid influencing the community's decisions. In addition to focus group discussions, technical persons could be used during transect walk (Appleyard, 1998).

2. Preliminary Visits to the Community:

After selecting the specific areas where PRA is to be conducted, the PRA Team (all members need preferably attend) needs to conduct a visit to meet members (local leaders), development workers in the area, government workers, health workers, teachers, and religious leaders with the following duties:

- Introducing the PRA approach to local administrators and community leaders and explaining the objectives of the PRA;
- Explaining the contents and schedule of the PRA program;
- Requesting that a Village PRA Committee be established;
- Deciding on the dates for the PRA;
- Making necessary logistical arrangements, including:
 1. Identifying sites to conduct large and small group meetings;
 2. Discussing lodging arrangements for the PRA Team (if the PRA team decides to stay in the area during the PRA work).

3. The Kshet PRA Committee (KPC):

Because the success of a PRA depends on strong community participation, a KPC (also called Village PRA committee – VPC) is established. Among

others, the KPC is used as an important means to win the trust of the community. The following describe its major characteristics:

1. Composition of the KPC: To ensure the committee is well-suited for its tasks, it should be composed of:

- Six members with an equal number of men and women;
- One of the six members need to be a member of leadership to facilitate the success of the PRA;
- One of the female members need to be selected from the women's association;
- One member of the committee should come from the church (orthodox) leadership;
- Most appropriately the other members (apart from the representative from the or administration and the representative from the women's association) should be elected by the community during a meeting of the community members. If found difficult, another mechanism may be thought;
- Representatives of different areas of the village; different economic groups; and different religious groups in the case of more than one religion;
- Members who have the time to not only help in preparing the community for PRA, but also to help during the PRA, as well as after PRA with the follow-up activities.

2. Roles and Responsibilities of the KPC: The major tasks of the committee include:

- Explaining to other community members the objectives, schedule and importance of the PRA;
- Arranging the place where meetings take place;
- Encouraging all community members to actively participate throughout the PRA;
- If possible, note-taking and similar tasks;
- Meeting with the PRA Team at the end of each day to discuss issues, team findings, problems, etc.;
- Assist participants in the different sessions of the PRA;
- Assisting in PRA follow up activities.

4. Developing the PRA Schedule:

About two weeks before the PRA, the PRA Team should meet to review activities already undertaken and develop the actual schedule for the PRA. Important activities include:

- Fixing the dates for the different PRA sessions in consultation with the PRA committee;

- Indicate the particular sessions and their specific dates including the results expected of each session;
- Specify the roles of each member (facilitator, note taker, etc.)
- Material preparation;
- Logistics (transport, lodging, food preparation);
- Indicate the specific date when the preliminary report should be produced;
- Others.

The PRA team leader is responsible for developing the schedule and makes follow up.

5. Activities upon arrival in the Community:

As final preparatory activities, and once the PRA Team has arrived in the community and has settled lodging and meal arrangements, they should undertake to:

- Meet with the KPC and or leaders to review
 1. The purpose of the PRA;
 2. The PRA Schedule;
 3. The role of the PRA Committee and village leaders;
 4. Preparatory activities the village has undertaken; and
 5. Other important issues (e.g. PRA Team lodging, if applicable)
- Visit PRA Meeting Sites: With the PRA Committee, the Team should visit sites designated by the village for general meetings and small discussion and working groups(Hahn, 1991).
- Plan Transect Walk: The PRA Team should take some time to walk through and around the village – both to familiarize them with the village and to allow villagers to familiarize themselves with PRA Team members. During this time, the PRA Team should also decide what areas they will walk through when they conduct the Transect Walk exercise.
- Review of the Schedule and Roles: Finally the PRA Team should meet to review all of the above, and make any final preparations and review the roles of Facilitators and Note Takers.

Conclusions:

The main objectives of the current PRA are:

1. Empowerment of rural communities by assisting them to systematically utilize their local knowledge to identify problems and strengths, develop skills of analysis, and design appropriate mechanisms for intervention by themselves and/or by development agents;

2. advancement of understanding by academicians/researchers of local knowledge and acknowledgement of the capacity of communities to gather data, conduct analysis, and identify as well as prioritize problems and solutions;

3. utilization of the research questions/problems identified during the PRAs for further investigation;

4. documenting and presenting the outcomes of the PRAs to development agents (governmental and non-governmental) and other stakeholders so that they could undertake interventions in line with the findings.

PRA consists of a series of participatory exercises which help community members better assess their history, resources, and overall situation as concerns agriculture, health, marketing, credit, coping mechanisms, education, and other important areas. During the conduct of the PRAs, rural communities in the selected villages will gather information on the resources they already possess; organize their knowledge; share experience among themselves; learn from each other; identify and prioritize local development needs; and develop action plans which respond to these needs.

The many different perspectives on daily reality and the visualisation offer good opportunities to go beyond the most obvious and dominant points of view in the community. The only warning here should be that too much attention to group discussions/ -activities might enable some groups to dominate the discussion. The methodology is open to modification; everybody can develop new tools and new ways of organising things. This makes PRA applicable in a very wide range of situations. Indeed, it has been used in both rural and urban areas, both in developing countries and industrial countries, in agriculture, in health care and in social programmes. PRA can also be used to collect data; local people are able to generate and/or collect reliable data which they themselves analyze and use for planning.

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