

OLD WINE

PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL

PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL - A CRITIQUE

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In the past ~~25~~ years, Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), and its modified version Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), have been given considerable importance among the rural development voluntary organisations in the country. Some of this has been promoted by a few funding agencies (as a necessary ingredient of project grants); some has been due to the importation of these ideas from the North (primarily from England). The increasing utilisation of RRA, as well as increasing demand for training of field workers in RRA, necessitates examination of the perspective and methodology underlying this "technique". While various materials on this topic have been occasionally coming out from different sources, its rather useful compilation has been presented in the previous issue of SEARCH NEWS (Volume VI, Issue No: 4, October-December, 1991). My reflections on this approach are largely based on the materials I have read in that document.

individual and group interviews and mapping of village physical infrastructure, seems to provide a variant to the questionnaire-based statistically analysed data.

Subsequently RRA has been apparently transformed into the PRA. It is not clear how "Participatory" replaced "Rapid". There seems to be no theoretical or philosophical justification for the transformation of RRA into PRA. It is, however, possible to infer that the insertion of the word "Participatory" instead of "Rapid" has been largely due to the reliance of this approach on members of the local community for collecting data (in particular village mapping). Therefore, "Participatory Rural Appraisal" seems to be a minor variant of RRA and the two have been used inter-changeably so far.

Critique

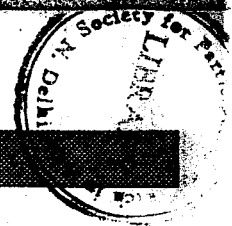
It is clear from the foregoing that the basic rationale for RRA seems to be the requirement of developing local data for concrete programme planning and monitoring with minimal expenditure of resources. Therefore, the most profound critique of this approach is its roots in "cost-cutting" measures in the process of understanding a given reality. It is of utmost importance that all local programmes are built on a systematic and deep understanding of the given local village reality. But, the key question is: 'how will this systematic and deep understanding of the given reality be built?' The attempt under RRA seems to be to put together a set of techniques of data collection (with primary reliance on village mapping) which can be used to quickly get a picture of the local reality. It is not clear how significant is the requirement of cutting cost in this most critical stage of understanding the local reality. In fact, a superficial, transient and ahistorical 'reading' of local village reality can be prejudicial to the very objective of building a locally relevant development programme. Field workers of many grass-root voluntary organisations have in the past been "accused" of not

The most vocal proponents of PRA do agree that it originated as RRA. The thrust in the beginning was on the word "Rapid". It was invented due to the requirements of developing a "quick" way of assessing a given rural reality in order to develop appropriate programmes of rural development. The traditional base-line survey as a pre-requisite for programme planning consumed enormous amount of resources - time, personnel, money. As a result, RRA emerged as a technique to "map", in a couple of days (or preferably in one sitting itself) the village resources available. The emphasis in RRA is on developing ways and means to size-up a local reality "rapidly".

The second underlying rationale for the emergence of RRA as a technique for planning and monitoring rural development programmes seems to be an attempt to find alternatives to singular statistical analysis, based on the traditional model of base-line survey. Preparation for such data collection, analysis and its utilisation demands greater set of resources than is normally available. RRA, through utilisation of non-statistical approaches, in particular methods of

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PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL

'reading' local reality in depth. The growing popularisation of RRA will only reinforce this trend and promote a 'reading' of rural reality without its complexity and historicity.

The second most important critique of RRA can be raised from the perspective of the purpose of the exercise itself. "Whose interests does PRA or RRA serve"? It appears that it is primarily serving the interests of local development agencies and their field workers by facilitating their efforts in programme planning and monitoring. It is not clear how this study of local reality helps the local communities itself. "Does PRA become a tool for manipulation by field workers of a local development agency"? Who controls the objectives, the process and the outcomes of PRA? Do the local communities determine the need and the use of outputs from PRA? Unless this fundamental issue of control over the objectives, the process and the outcomes of such research process is squarely addressed, PRA may well be a new "gimmick" to

ensure an extensive, quick and yet manipulative process of understanding local reality. It will then not be any different from external agents collecting data from local villagers through a questionnaire to serve their own academic or planning interests. If PRA has to serve to strengthen the capacity of local communities to analyse their own reality, then emphasis should be on the perspective of control over the process and not merely on methods and techniques of data collection.

In its early stages of development, this is the cross-road that PRA faces. One road leads to becoming a variant of traditional research methodology under the label of 'qualitative' techniques (like participant observation or field operations research). The other road may bring it closer to a contribution to Participatory Research as a process of challenging the monopoly over knowledge and strengthening critical capacities for reflection and analysis of local communities.

The choice is critical, yet important.

COMMENTS ON PRA FROM A NGO LEADER

(We have here a critique on PRA by Mr Devasenapathi, Project Co-ordinator of Community Rehabilitation Organisation for Progress (CROP) working in Trichy district)

Introduction

The whole concept of 'Participation' and 'Collective' wisdom of the people has gained in importance and popularity in the last one decade in the wide arena of Development. The programmes in the Development field today focus on minorities such as harijans, tribals, refugees, migrant labour, slum dwellers, gypsies etc - the common feature being that they are landless and unskilled.

Participation and NGOs

Most of the NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) working at the grassroot level try to plan their programmes along with the beneficiaries - i.e., the Target Groups.

There are different types of activities implemented by the NGOs:

- Non-Formal Education; Adult Education; Women Sangams; Kattamaran Fishermen Sangams; Social Forestry; Skill Training; Production Cooperatives (Honey, Fiber, Tamarind, Palmyra Products, etc); Agricultural Labour Sangams; Sangam Leaders' Courses; Bonded Rehabilitation Programmes; Health; Education; Drought work; Flood work, etc.

Although programmes like relief work are done to benefit small landholders and the landless, majority of the Development Programmes are aimed to benefit the landless in the poor communities only.