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Planning, communities and empowerment

An introduction to participatory rural appraisal

⬤ **Arnon A. Bar-On and Gerard Prinsen**

Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) – a family of methods that enables communities to assemble with formal service providers, identify and analyse critical elements of their life in their own idioms, and plan and carry through feasible changes – has become a routine in development work in non-industrialized countries. Despite this popularity, however, published work on the methodology is mostly inaccessible to wider audiences.[1] This article describes the core elements of PRA. Following a historical overview, it introduces PRA's major characteristics, principles and tools. Then, based on the authors' experience with a large-scale PRA pilot project in Botswana, a critique of PRA is offered, outlining its chief advantages and weaknesses. Finally, some lessons are presented regarding the application of PRA in both 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' societies.

Historical rationale

Inadequate information and rapid rural appraisal
In the mid-1970s, development workers began to face the fact that despite large investments in welfare, many people, especially in rural areas, remained in poverty. In the dogma of the time, given to rational planning, this was attributed mainly to the paucity of quantitative information available, due either to structural

Arnon A. Bar-On is Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Work, University of Botswana, Private Bag 0022, Gaborone, Botswana. [e-mail: bar-on@noka.ub.bw]
Gerard Prinsen is Extension Workers Training Co-ordinator, Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, Gaborone, Botswana.

constraints, such as illiteracy, or to the prohibitive cost of collecting the data. Dissatisfied with this situation, some workers produced alternative research methods to better meet their needs. In hindsight, we can generalize their reservations concerning the data-gathering tools of the day as centring on four concerns: whose views were being portrayed and on what, and the precision and timeliness of the tools' outputs.

Whose information: the gatherers' or the informants'? Standard survey techniques are generally unable to unveil different interpretations of, and attitudes towards, similar phenomena. This is because most such techniques are designed to test preconceived hypotheses and are prone, therefore, to misportray reality if their informants' constructs differ from those of their designers. Consequently, because successful help depends on its recipients' receptiveness, many surveys have failed to introduce or engender new technologies. Also, the primary tool of these techniques, the questionnaire, was found wanting because in many societies people live free of the notion that every question has an answer, and the idea of brevity is alien (Mitchell and Sim, 1991).

Content: compartmentalized or holistic? Standard survey techniques, whose products are mainly quantitative, are useful mainly for exploring material inputs to interventions and their outcomes. They are less effective, however, at exploring the processes of intervention, considered the backbone of development, for which more qualitative data are required. Also, because surveys focus on specific life arenas, such as 'agriculture', 'family' and 'health', they tend to decontextualize people's lives, in the sense of detracting attention from these arenas' interdependence. A typical example is the frequent failure to impart to farmers agricultural innovations developed in research stations, because of their different labour practices and beliefs.

Product: precision or appropriate imprecision? Surveys are good at producing accurate statistical accounts of phenomena. This product is lost, however, on much development work since identifying trends and orders of magnitude is often sufficient. For example, it is usually enough to know that farmers consider losses of produce to be significant without necessarily measuring them at 27 or 33 percent.

Timeliness. Finally, dissatisfaction with surveys set in because they generally take a long time. The poor, it was claimed, need quicker responses that link research with action. Also, the economic climate was changing: with public resources becoming

scarcer, a premium was being put on cost-effectiveness that precluded exhaustive studies.

From these four critiques, there emerged by the early 1980s a 'toolbox' of new information-gathering techniques that because they were developed in the field owed more to anthropology and ethnographic research than to sociology. Cumulatively known as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), which captured the issues of timeliness ('rapid') and appropriate imprecision ('appraisal') in its title, these techniques followed three chief principles.

1. Understanding situations from the informants' perspective, mainly by revisiting hypotheses as new information became available. Two important innovations in this regard were the simultaneous gathering of the information by persons working in different disciplines so as to understand the information better, and a heavy reliance on visualization to deal with the difficulties posed by illiteracy.
2. Concentrating on information that is 'good enough' for the job, as opposed to maximizing the possible obtainable information.
3. Increasing the timeliness of the information by completing the data analysis in the field.

Adding empowerment to information: the birth of PRA

RRA served practitioners well for a decade, with its stress on timeliness being its major attraction. By the late 1980s, however, major reservations set in, but as distinguished from the past, when the challenges were mainly technical, the new reservations were more ideological.

Insufficient and inappropriate resource provision. Historically, governments in the South embarked on development by investing in infrastructure. Often building on quasi-socialist ideologies, this approach assumed first that what communities primarily lacked were adequate material resources (schools, clinics and agricultural inputs) and, secondly, that with government control of the economy these resources would be forthcoming. Following the oil crisis of 1973, at least this second assumption proved wrong, but with money still readily available from sympathetic donors this took time to be comprehended (Osei-Hwedie and Bar-On, 1999).

All this changed, however, in the mid-1980s. Partly because aid

was much reduced, and partly because of the apparent vindication of the free market after the collapse of the socialist regimes, governments realized that if change were to occur, then communities would have to do more for themselves. Concomitantly, the donor agencies reached the same conclusion. When re-examining their prevailing policy of funding communities directly, they realized that while this was beneficial in the short term, the gains in the long term were unsustainable due to donor dependency. What was required, therefore, were measures that would prepare people towards greater self-reliance.

Inaccessible resources. Quite separate from financial insufficiency are situations where funds are available but remain inaccessible to local communities, especially in rural areas. For understandable social and political reasons, the dominant power structure ensures that most resources are invested in urban centres. It was deduced, therefore, that what was required was not only better data but also to empower constituents to stake their claim in the national cake.

Generation and use of information. Lastly, concern was expressed that RRA had broken away insufficiently from the standard idea that while the generation of information must involve its subjects, the generation of knowledge was the domain of 'experts'. This contrasted with the constructivist view of knowledge as an interactive activity, which is also deemed less exploitative (Reynolds, 1997). What was needed, therefore, were methods that fuse data and knowledge generation, and that would replace informants being dependent on outsiders.

To summarize briefly, RRA and PRA are distinguished mainly by their premise for the cause of underdevelopment. While RRA identifies this cause chiefly in the quality of the information required for external planning, PRA adopts an overtly political stance: the disadvantaged lack not only services and amenities but also are victims of their exclusion from power. Thus, while RRA was essentially a research tool, yielded by external change agents, PRA more closely identifies with changing people through their active participation.

Support from unexpected quarters
It is likely that PRA would have remained the pursuit of a few, more radical development workers were it not that its analysis of underdevelopment and resultant intervention strategies coincided

with those of international organizations like the World Bank. Dominated as much by neo-liberal economic theories as by liberal political thought – indeed regarding the two as inherently linked – this organization undertook to reform the third world's political structures in its own image while helping them economically. To this end, PRA fitted the World Bank to a tee as it focuses on three of the hallmarks of liberal ideology: self-reliance, democratic processes and the poor (Bar-On, 1997). Consequently, after having used PRA in several of its own projects, the World Bank reported that 'there is significant evidence that participation can in many circumstances improve the quality, effectiveness and sustainability of projects ... and [is] found to be particularly important in reaching the poor' (World Bank, 1994:1).

Application of PRA

While there is no 'correct' way to run PRA, its typical application follows six steps that take up to three weeks to carry out, either in a single time block or spread over several months.

1. Preparation (3–5 days). Community representatives are told of PRA's purpose and how it is conducted. Should they accept it, then the facilitators study secondary data to familiarize themselves with the community. They may also spend a few days in the community to collect primary data and to sensitize potential participants to the upcoming events.

2. Data gathering (4–6 days). Ice-breakers and other tools are used to assemble people and enable them to picture their community and how they would like it to develop. The facilitators take care only to ask questions, not comment on what is said, and ensure that everyone comprehends the information equally. This latter objective is achieved in daily 'recap sessions' at which the proceedings, reproduced visually, are open to any additions.

3. Synthesis (1–2 days). Alone or with (s)elected community representatives, the facilitators cluster the information in broad categories ('education', 'transport', 'health') and re-present it to the community for verification. The only criterion employed is avoiding 'absent solutions' (that is, problems that begin with 'lack of services') since such 'solutions' usually limit the scope for potential change. For example, for the problem 'the clinic closes at weekends' the obvious solution would be 'to open the clinic at weekends', whereas if the difficulty is rephrased as 'access to medical care', then other solutions might be forthcoming.

4. Ranking (1–2 days). The community prioritizes its concerns within each cluster and between the clusters. This is important not only for operational reasons (putting the most urgently perceived matter first) but is also likely to raise the community's commitment to change by showing its members that their concerns are taken seriously.

5. Preparing and adopting a Community Action Plan (3–4 days). Divided into groups, the participants devise strategies to tackle their unsatisfactory situations and to operationalize their preferred strategies. The cumulative results are written up as a Community Action Plan (CAP) and presented to the community at large and representatives of its service-providers.

6. Implementing and monitoring. The CAP, being only a plan, needs tight implementation and follow-up. These processes can be entrusted to government agencies, to joint governmental and non-governmental committees, or to a local community worker.

Principles

Underlying the above process in all its stages are six principles that translate easily into practical guidelines. These principles are as follows.

1. Active learning. As mentioned above, PRA assumes that 'reality' is socially constructed. Consequently, everything from data identification to the allocation of tasks is undertaken reflectively with the active participation of all stakeholders.

2. Triangulation. To increase the likelihood of capturing the multifaceted, intrinsically holistic, nature of everyday life, all activities are triangulated. This methodology covers the participants, the units of observation, and the tools. First, *participants*. Given that different people construct their lives differently and so have different interests, participants are drawn from the widest possible range of membership groups (age, gender and ethnicity, income, trades, newcomers and old-timers, etc.).[2] Likewise, the facilitators, too, are drawn from different disciplines and organizations and, where possible, are the persons charged directly with helping the community. This is to increase their connectivity with their users as well as their own lateral co-operation, that is often weak due to their employment in different organizations. Second, *units of observation*. Data are gathered on as many aspects of community life as possible or, when focused on a specific topic, are approached holistically to capture as many of their manifestations as possible

and their direct and indirect effects. Third, *tools*. Invariably, every tool has particular advantages and disadvantages. To offset these biases, PRA uses a variety of tools for most of its activities, with accuracy achieved principally through diversification rather than by replication.

3. Flexibility. In PRA, few goals are fixed ahead. Instead, they are continuously modified as the participants better realize their needs. PRA handbooks contain, therefore, no fixed methodology but advocate that techniques should be selected according to the opportunities of the moment.

4. Focus on strengths. Traditional development usually deals with a community's weaknesses: what it lacks or needs replacing. PRA, in contrast, focuses on the community's strengths, like its organizational capacities, and how these strengths can be buttressed still further.

5. Sufficiency of knowledge. Following the idea of 'optimal ignorance', all information-gathering is action-oriented. Data rely, therefore, mainly on proxies and comparison, not measurement.

6. On-the-spot analysis. PRA is a process of learning by, with and from the community, rather than a single trait. Consequently, all information is analysed and used on the spot.

Tools

In line with its flexibility, PRA uses a sizeable number and variety of tools that, while mindful of the danger of generalization, can be grouped in three sets that build on each other (Table 1).

The first set of tools has the dual purpose of mobilizing the community and of identifying its characteristics. Since participation in PRA is voluntary, the first challenge is to gather residents and stimulate them sufficiently to keep their interest. To this end, requesting people to present themselves is very effective. For example, they may be asked to draw a map of their community and guide the facilitators around it. Later, once trust is built up, more focused instruments, such as livelihood and historical analyses, can be used to gather more specific information. The key feature of most of these tools is that they allow the community to take the lead and portray itself in its own idioms. Also, by building on group work, they bring in a wide range of experiences and criteria to bear, and engender quick responses. On top of this, the fact that all these techniques use visualization means that non-literate participants can contribute fully to the process.

Table 1   PRA tools and their objectives (selected examples)

Set	Examples of tools	Objectives
Data-gathering	Map drawing Livelihood analysis Time trends Daily activity profile Transect Interviewing Participatory observation	Mobilize the community and gather information on its resources, difficulties and wants in its own idioms
Data analysis	Brainstorming Ranking Flow diagrams	Enable the community and external change agents to better understand unsatisfactory situations, and prioritize these situations from the community's perspective
Planning	Problem-solving Community Action Plan	Establish how the most pressing difficulties will be tackled, with or without the help of external resources

It should be pointed out that using different tools at this stage does not necessarily generate different information but rather variations in how the same information is perceived by different participants. This is something the methodology accentuates by dividing the participants, where appropriate, into gender groups to account for the fact that women and men highlight different phenomena and use different scales. In this sense, the process itself is empowering as it enables people to learn about themselves. For example, in debriefing a mapping exercise carried out in separate gender groups, men and women usually better realize that their perceptions of each other are more complex than they had previously imagined.

In contrast to this increased self-realization end of the first set of tools, the second and third sets are more concerned with capacity-building. The former, comprising of analytical, problem-solving and opportunity analyses, plus a variety of ranking exercises, deals mainly with systematizing the data that were gathered. In the process, however, people are made aware of their capacity for action, and shown how they can interact better with each other and with the facilitators. Again, all is done by constant re-presentation of the products that allows the participants to control the tools and,

in a sense, 'own' them; otherwise, they have little opportunity to evaluate the exercise but with their feet.

Finally, the last set of tools deals with pulling everything together. Although largely a technical task, among the new skills imparted now are identifying human and material resources that can be used for implementation, scheduling, allocating responsibilities, and learning the arts of monitoring, follow-up and evaluation.

Advantages

This discussion of the advantages of PRA is drawn from a large-scale pilot project undertaken in Botswana to assess whether PRA could improve planning at village level (Prinsen et al., 1996). Currently this planning is done mainly at district level, but is found wanting in two major respects. First, few of the officials in charge consult their constituents sufficiently. This runs against the traditional way of conducting public affairs in the country, involving extensive grassroots consultation, and so has led to increasing political dissent. Secondly, when consulted, the primary product of villagers consists of one-sided 'shopping lists' submitted to the government. This might have done in the past when the foremost needs in Botswana concerned infrastructure, but no longer suits the present when the need is for people to build themselves, using the infrastructure already in place.

The pilot project consisted of PRA exercises in four villages spaced throughout the country and their follow-up six months later. A dozen officers from different government departments, specially trained for the task, facilitated each exercise, and filled in a questionnaire on its various elements before, during and immediately after its application. At the end of each PRA and in the follow-up the officers also took part in focused group discussions. Concurrently, ten village-based service-providers from a fifth district where three PRAs were carried out two years earlier were also interviewed on their perceptions of PRA. Besides the longer time lapse, the only difference between these PRAs and those in the pilot project was that in the villages in which they were conducted one of the villagers was paid a nominal fee to follow up their CAPs.

Fundamental advantages

Understanding micro realities. PRA proponents claim that it leads to new, or at least more insightful, understandings of a

community's micro reality both by its members and those who are meant to help them. This is due to the active interaction of the parties and because PRA challenges the conventional 'executor' status assigned to service-providers and that they ascribe to themselves. The project strongly confirmed these gains in understandings. For example, whereas 82 percent of the 75 officers initially agreed with the statement 'Men are more responsible than women when it comes to community affairs', and only 7 percent disagreed, by the end of the PRA these numbers changed to 57 percent and 37 percent, respectively. Similarly, an increasing proportion of officers expressed the opinion that the villagers were too divided among themselves to work as 'a community' (from 43 percent before the PRA to 61 percent at its conclusion). These 'insights' are the more surprising given that all the officers had extensive contact with the villages before the PRA.

Appreciation of local organizations. A major criterion of PRA's success is the extent to which it enhances the capacity of local organizations to carry out their part in development plans. At all stages of the research, the officers in the four PRAs were evenly divided on this point. Also, 65 percent of 40 village-based workers at these sites (who were added to the interviewees in the follow-up) believed that the villages lacked such capacities. Yet, in sharp contrast, 80 percent of the officers in the fifth district held the opposite view. This suggests that while in the short term the officers were sceptical of the communities' capacities, the longer they worked with the communities the more they came to appreciate their organizational strengths.

Community and formal organizations' interaction. Another claim for PRA is that it increases people's confidence. The project assessed this claim by gauging changes in the community's interaction with formal service-providers at both the individual and organizational level. Concerning the first level, the officers noted a 30 percent increase in individuals' applications after the PRA, and only a smaller increase in their interactions with local organizations. In the fifth district, however, these increases were higher: 55 percent and 80 percent, respectively. It can be concluded, therefore, that PRA changes both users' and service-providers' behaviour.

Women, ethnic minorities, young people and the poor. In Botswana, as in most societies, women, young people, members of ethnic minorities and the poor are under-represented in public decision-making. Yet, in spite of this, a clear majority of the officers at the onset of the PRAs, 61 percent, held that the customary power

structure serves everyone equally. All this changed, however, as the officers worked with the communities. After their experience, only 44 percent stated that the current system took account of all interests, while the proportion of those who disagreed more than doubled. Further, and more importantly, this was also the opinion of the village participants as witnessed, for example, by their statements 'During the PRA everybody could talk freely' and 'We were being listened to'.

Operational advantages

Besides the above strengths, PRA was found to have some organizational benefits. First, with increased exposure to its operations, many officers believed PRA would improve the quality of *their* work, meaning that their clients would now realize more that they needed to take greater responsibility for their own affairs. Secondly, and following on from this, most officers concluded that this would also reduce their workload, which in the follow-up was confirmed (although short of the officers' expectations). Finally, three-quarters of the officers reported that following the PRA they co-operated more among themselves. This can be attributed to their having forged personal relations with their fellow facilitators, to having learnt more about other departments and to the fact that they now had clearer plans to work on together.

Weaknesses

Like all interventions, PRA is founded on assumptions, both overt and covert, that underpin its rationale. Typical examples are that lay people have knowledge and information that if systematized strengthen their problem-solving capacities, and that people are committed to directing their own development and to controlling it. It is also assumed that the methodological components of the intervention are optimal to its objectives. Closer examination of these assumptions, however, reveals that they do not always stand up to reality, as is often the case with other participatory approaches (Bar-On, 1997).

Fundamental weaknesses

Information. More than any single assumption, PRA is predicated on the idea that 'ordinary' people can generate solutions to their situations because it is they who know their needs best and

what feasible means are available to meet them. Moreover, it also assumes that unless people use their own data for this purpose, they will remain disempowered, if not exploited.

That people best know their concerns is self-evident since only they know what they like and dislike and how they feel about different things. It is a separate question, however, whether they are also best placed to answer these concerns. This is because, as Mosse (1994: 521) has pointed out, 'if knowledge about livelihoods were equivalent to knowledge for action then undoubtedly [most people] would have solved their problems through self-help long ago'.

Underlying this plain but frequently overlooked phenomenon is the fact that if we were to ask people to articulate why they behave as they do – that is, ask them to explain the rules they are following – the majority would be hard put. Of course, this does not mean that most people do not 'know' such rules, but this knowledge is usually subconscious, and it takes someone with necessary training to unveil and construct it. Consequently, as Bloch (1991: 193–4) cautions, 'when our informants honestly say "this is why we do such things", or "this is what this means" . . . instead of being pleased we should be suspicious and ask what kind of peculiar knowledge is this which can take such explicit, linguistic form?'.

All these difficulties emerged in the pilot project, in addition to other, more technical, problems. For example, the assumption that people have enough knowledge to realize the consequences of their decisions was often called into question, especially when it came to estimating the costs of their ideas. Indeed, even the validity of some data was often questionable. For example, it was common to be told about a custom, but probing for when it was practised and how revealed that it had either lapsed or was never practised at all. On a more technical note, but with important implications for PRA's objectives, it was also found that much of the information gathered was already known. This finding, that tends to homogenize issues and gloss over conflicts, can be attributed largely to the public nature of the exercise that rarely allows the participants to move beyond 'safe' discourse. Also, much of the information was repetitive due to the idea that to be genuinely useful, the participants must generate all data directly. Consequently, much effort was lost as neither the information collected during the preparation phase nor that collected in other PRAs was ever used.[3]

Participation. To the outside observer, a PRA's success is determined chiefly by two criteria: the rate and depth of participation.

The first criterion is largely intuitive: the larger the number taking part in an exercise, the better people think of it. It also carries over from the validation of standard survey techniques by which the larger the sample, the more valid the results. The second criterion, though more difficult to gauge, is used to indicate the quality of PRA.

Yet, applying these criteria to PRA requires extreme care. First, most of its tools are restricted to 25–30 participants because after this their utility decreases, which inherently constricts the methodology's representativeness. Secondly, the mere number of participants can be misleading, especially in large communities. In the project, average attendance rates varied from 13 percent in a village with 500 residents to 3.3 percent in a community five times this size. However, even if these numbers are 'acceptable' (noting that no more than 10 percent of people usually get involved in community affairs [Staples, 1984]), they betray the fact that there was a considerable variance in attendance from day to day, often decreasing to less than 1 percent of the residents. Also, turnover was also high, which introduced significant discontinuity into the proceedings. All this raises the serious question of whether participation is what people genuinely want, or is it, as Sunders (1993: 81) suggests, that for most people 'the goings-on [in public life] are mostly a matter of complete indifference'?

Operational weaknesses

Community Action Plans. At the end of the day, PRA's most visible product is the CAP, which also serves for future action. Scrutiny of these plans in the four project villages and in four other PRAs conducted in Botswana around the same time (BOC, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c) reveals, however, that in many respects they fell short of expectations. Firstly, most of the topics could only be classed 'standard', in the sense that they were well known in advance. In the Kalahari Desert, not surprisingly, the top priority was water, and in a settlement with school difficulties it was education. Consequently, most of the proposed actions were also standard, namely to mobilize external, not local, resources. For example, in a village beset by chronic poverty, one of the proposed strategies was to give each family five chickens, most of which would probably be eaten within a month if not lost to wildlife before that. Secondly, whereas an explicit purpose of PRA is to empower the weakest, only once did any of the CAPs address the

needs of such a group. Also, PRA's aspirations to work on the connectivity between different elements of community life were rarely realized. For example, a proposed vegetable gardening project focused only on its economic utility without establishing its social and environmental effects, such as on women's labour or water availability.

Tools. In this area we found two stumbling-blocks. First, although the data-gathering tools are meant to gather information on all aspects of life, they concentrate on physical and material data. This might be explained by many of the tools' agro-ecosystem background, and because identifying physical and material elements is simpler than exploring life's other arenas. Secondly, no matter how inventive the facilitators' visualization skills, imaging assumes a degree of understanding that is not necessarily universally shared. For example, Gill (1993: 12) recounts how even a pie chart might be misconstrued because '[in many places] it is difficult to find an example of a pie- or cake-like object forming part of the traditional diet'. Also, visualization is invariably reductionist and so prone to information loss as well as tending to perpetuate the facilitators' point of view, if only in the categories used and its mode of presentation (McCracken, 1989).

Costs. Given its roots in RRA, PRA clearly requires less time and effort per unit of information and change produced than other community strategies. This is not the case, however, for the community. It is a common mistake, intensified in rural areas, to take people's time for granted, or even to dismiss it because participation is 'for their own good'. Yet the pilot project showed that people have other demands on their time that take precedence over 'playing PRA's games', like looking after their children or attending a football match. Consequently, in every PRA some activities, often major, had to be cancelled, and it is likely that some information, perhaps crucial, was not identified. Also, many problems were analysed too briefly, thereby reducing the methodology's capacity-building objective.

The way forward

Historically, communities have relied first on entrepreneurial elites and then on government to import new ideas, labour and capital

that would, in turn, 'create' change. The role of the residents was to make themselves ready to receive these resources and to serve them, that is, to subserve their interests to a favourable climate of change. For various social, economic and ideological reasons, this approach to extending well-being is no longer acceptable, not to mention sustainable. Instead, countries worldwide are adopting the idea that people should build their own communities, which is to say, 'do development from within'.

PRA is one of several methodologies used to equip communities to this end, which range from locality development through conscientization to social action. One of its appeals is that people find it both interesting and advantageous. In the follow-up of the project, 168 villagers were interviewed, and almost without fail they voted for PRA over all other forms of consultation. One quotation said it all: 'PRA did not give us ready answers, but helped us understand things. We were *involved* in problem-solving. This is unlike other meetings where we are told things like children.' Other benefits of PRA are that its process is well structured, which simplifies its transferability, that it produces concrete results that can unite insiders and outsiders around common action, and that it can achieve these results relatively quickly.

To date, however, PRA has been used almost exclusively in rural areas in non-industrialized countries, largely because it remains unknown elsewhere. Yet since PRA's primary objective, community empowerment, is a worldwide goal, this suggests that people elsewhere might be spending considerable time and effort reinventing the wheel rather than learning from experience.

In using PRA in different localities, however, one must beware different circumstances. Reviewing some of these differences, especially as they pertain to rural and urban settings, Mitlin and Thompson (1994) mention, among others, urban areas' greater heterogeneity and economic opportunities, their more extensive internal migration and the broader role local government plays in them. Also, in cities, it is more difficult to identify sufficient factors to define 'communities'. On closer examination, however, it would appear that most of these differences are technical rather than substantive. For example, whereas common sense suggests that PRA can best be applied in homogeneous communities, experience shows that where such homogeneity does not exist the situation can be tackled by running separate PRAs for different groups and then bringing them together. Moreover, most PRA methodologies prove effective in cutting across social, economic and cultural

barriers, which makes them especially suited to working with people of different origins and backgrounds.

The foregoing notwithstanding, PRA, like all methodologies, should be used with care. This is especially important as to date it has hardly been examined critically, perhaps because it is assumed that being 'participatory' it must be intrinsically good. It is well, therefore, to keep three points in mind. Firstly, PRA appears, at first glance, 'obvious'. This, however, is deceptive. In fact, its application requires extreme skill and flexibility, which might explain why most writings on PRA are devoted to training facilitators in how to use it. Secondly, in the modern state, rhetoric aside, 'pure' bottom-up planning is unfeasible. Certain restrictions are always imposed on communities that prevent it. Indeed, it is important to realize that even PRA is paternalistic because it is usually brought to communities, together with its conceptual tools. Hence, in the final instance, it is really participation done *to* people.

Finally, heed must be taken of three pitfalls. Firstly, PRA might be used to give credibility beyond what its methodology allows. A principal reason PRA is sponsored so widely is that, compared with other community interventions, it is efficient. It might therefore encourage the myth that there is a cheap and quick-fix road to empowerment. But PRA can only provide one input in a whole chain of inputs. Consequently, facilitators might find that in the end it demands more time and effort than they envisaged. The second danger is over-emphasizing the value of indigenous knowledge. Especially in working with marginalized groups there is danger in legitimizing such knowledge as equal to that of mainstream knowledge, ignoring their need to gain control of mainstream methods and skills. For example, in working with communities towards greater economic independence, much effort is invested in finding alternate sources for start-up funding instead of helping communities access banks. Similarly, under the guise of multiculturalism, certain minority communities are encouraged to retain their language at the expense of learning the dominant language, thus increasing their alienation from their environment. Finally, and what may become a growing trend, for some agencies and workers PRA's unconditional promotion of community ownership might be used to absolve themselves of their professional responsibilities. Disillusioned with past practices, and tired of being the scapegoats for situations beyond their control, practitioners might be saying 'Fine, we'll let you decide, and if things don't work out, don't blame us.'

Notes

1. A single but notable exception is a series of articles by Chambers (1994a, b and c).
2. In this context, Reynolds (1997) aptly reminds us that while it is important to guard against 'elite capture' in the selection of participants, it is equally important to encourage elite involvement: firstly, because, in the process, they may inadvertently reveal to the community their prejudices and interests; secondly, because their presence provides an opportunity for the non-elite to assert their grievances to their face; and thirdly, because this presence acknowledges that these stakeholders play an important role in community development.
3. In this respect, it is important to remember that ownership is determined less by its origin than by whether an idea is accepted by its beneficiaries. Hence, as Salole (1991) observes, once information or a concern has been 'sold' to a group, it makes little difference whether its initiator comes from within this group or from outside it.

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