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Participatory Rural Appraisal: Lessons for Countries in the North?

Julia Preece

This paper describes and analyses various perspectives on participatory rural appraisal and the relationship between its rhetoric and practice, particularly regarding its claims to give voice to the marginalised and contribution to development needs. Drawing on relevant literature that both critiques and provides examples of practice, the paper analyses two case studies to explore what lessons we can learn about the approach and its applicability as a methodology for marginalised social groups in European contexts.

Key words: Participatory, appraisal, research, methodology, ethics

1. Introduction

Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) ... is a holistic, all encompassing data collection exercise about a whole community. The research process is put as far as possible into the hands of ordinary people. Although 'experts' (the community educators) are involved, their role is to facilitate, not take over, the investigation. It has very practical goals. The aim of the inquiry is to obtain a detailed understanding and analysis of a specific local context; then for local people to prioritise their needs based on this enhanced understanding. The outcome of this process is a community action plan, devised with a view to helping local communities solve their own problems through different local initiatives. The PRA embraces diversity. It can be applied in a range of adult education contexts, such as health, agriculture, biodiversity and urban planning. It is used to address specific Af-

rican problems such as desertification, low food production, declining productivity and fuelwood shortage. PRA, then, is: 'built on the premise that participation by the beneficiaries in any project is fundamental' and that 'locally developed technologies are more likely to succeed' in building community confidence and capacity (Egerton University 2000, 4). Its strategy is to encourage the use of local cultural values, organisations and knowledge systems for solving problems. The community is involved in every stage of the PRA process (Chilisa/Preece 2005: 198).

PRA emanated from countries in the global South¹ as a strategy to involve poor rural communities in their own development. Drawing on relevant literature this paper will explore to what extent PRA lives up to its rhetoric, and how effectively it contributes to sustainable outcomes. The paper will also explore what lessons we can learn about PRA and its applicability as a methodology for marginalised social groups in European contexts. We begin with a brief introduction to the evolution of PRA as a participatory methodology.

2. Evolution of participatory methodologies

Traditional research approaches are often criticised for failing to address issues of ownership and control or power relations between the 'expert academic' and practitioner or layperson involved in the study (Green et al. 1995). Countries from the so called developing world have particularly voiced their concerns about the way powerful outsiders investigate local communities with only partial knowledge of local contexts (Mulenga 1999). The concept of participatory research, as an antidote to these criticisms, has evolved from a number of directions. On the one hand development agencies and policymakers who sought quick access to socio economic data were responding to critiques of trickle down economic development theory and concerns about top-down development without consultation with local communities (Boyde 2000; Campbell 2002; Hayward et al. 2004); on the other hand

¹ The global South is one of many terms given to countries such as Africa and Asia which are seen as in need of development aid. All terms have derogatory and sometimes inaccurate connotations. It was felt that this particular term is less offensive than other ones currently in use, whilst recognising that no term accurately describes such a range of countries or their circumstances.

communities themselves have increased their demands to be included in decisions that affected their daily lives (Hayward et al. 2004). Furthermore, in the past decade there has been increasing emphasis on the need to respect multiple voices and a reluctance among researchers to speak for the 'other' in contexts where there were significant power differentials between the researcher and the researched (Cottrell and Parpart 2006). Collaboration and participation have now become an ethical issue in their own right, particularly for the poor and marginalised:

In order for pro-poor development to become a reality, poor people themselves must be not only involved as respondents, but also have access to the information generated, a role in its analysis and in identifying the practical implications for change (Chambers/Mayoux 2005: 7).

Gray et al. (2000: 244) argue that the philosophical commitment to participatory research has been influenced by these two traditions – third world development and action research – now 'subsumed under the unifying umbrella of participatory research'. Participatory methods claimed to produce knowledge that was more valid and reliable in representing context specific ways of knowing the social world (Campbell 2002).

The range of terminologies that come under this unifying umbrella are considerable. They include: participatory research, participatory action research, action research, collaborative enquiry, emancipatory research and participatory rural appraisal amongst others (Green et al. 1995). They are seen as being positioned within a range of radical theories such as neo-Marxism, critical theory and feminist frameworks (Mulenga 1999). Fox (2006) suggests that many of these research terms are complementary but different in their approach and purpose. They seem to lie along a continuum of radical to liberal goals. At the more radical end he includes amongst them such terms as 'power-structure research' – as pioneered in Latin America. Here the goal is to reveal injustices and pressure points in the system that causes these injustices so people's anger will provoke them into targeted action (Fox 2006: 27). On the other hand he sees the 'testimonial research' of many feminist scholars as a means of enabling marginalised voices and histories to be heard, so that the 'other' is better understood in context. Other participatory research may be focused on making invisible problems visible, so as to redefine what counts

as a problem and enable us to see, for example, that environmental threats are intertwined with issues of race or class. But there is a common goal of all these terms to shift the focus away from the researcher, who simply raises awareness amongst the researched, to a goal of mutual learning and agenda sharing amongst researchers and participants.

So what are the distinctive features of participatory rural appraisal? And does it achieve what it claims to do?

3. Participatory rural appraisal

To answer these questions we must briefly explore the origins of the term and look at some of its characteristics. Southern contexts such as Latin America (Percy 1999) and Africa (De Vos 1998 and Mulenga 1999) are often cited as the source of participatory research as a response to development methods that were being overshadowed by neo-colonial interference:

Critics of African development such as Julius Nyerere of Tanzania argued that any meaningful development could only be achieved if the people's culture and popular knowledges were integrated into the process (Mulenga 1999: 3).

There were problems with the term participatory research in African development contexts, however. Development agencies were using the word tokenistically without transferring any real ownership of the research process or its outcomes. Centralised, top down approaches to development had left the rural poor increasingly dependent on public provision with no sense of ownership over their own destiny (Chilisa/Preece 2005: 197). Since 2002 decentralised governance systems in many countries have provided the impetus to cascade decision making responsibilities down to local communities. This required in most cases a re-training of institutional officers to build confidence in community leadership structures.

To facilitate this transition, participatory rural appraisal was offered as a response to policy maker and aid agency needs for quick access to socio economic data at local levels (Campbell 2002). Drawing on Chambers' work, Campbell (2002: 21) states that it embodies five principles: to function as a trade-off between the traditional preference for quantifiable data and the real-

ity need to collect relevant information; to counteract the biases of development tourism; to serve as a triangulation method; to provide a flexible way of learning directly from and with rural people; and to be an interactive process that embraces diversity and multiple realities. The goal of PRA is to maximise the skills, knowledge, expertise and analytical skills of village communities through a process of data collection, discussion of issues and possible solutions and the creation of an agreed community action plan that will not only include action by community members themselves, but also engage officials over an agreed timescale. Sometimes the community may raise a particular problem, but more often than not a change agent initiates the process.

The people engaged in PRA are not necessarily trained researchers, as the case studies cited in the latter part of this paper demonstrate. Often, therefore, there is a requirement that officials, such as extension workers in rural communities, have to review their whole approach to their development responsibilities. Instead of seeing farmers or other client groups as mere recipients of new techniques or information provided by the extension workers, for instance, the participatory appraisal approach requires a new form of engagement, whereby extension workers listen and farmers articulate their local knowledge in a shared process of learning and working together to look for solutions to identified problems (Percy 1999). It is sometimes argued that the main gain from this process is what the researcher-facilitators learn about their clients' own skills and understanding, rather than new technical knowledge that can guide the goal for change or development (Doyle/Krasny 2003).

PRA has now evolved into a methodology for use in a variety of situations including urban communities, and it is often now simply known as participatory appraisal (PEANuT 2005). While its primary goal is to transfer ownership of knowledge creation to communities, it does more than simply gather data, however, since action is the intended outcome. There is an explicit aim to reduce the distance between the researcher and the researched (Gray et al. 2000) and the research process has come to be defined as:

Systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for the purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change (Green et al. 1995: 54).

The process

The goal of the participatory appraisal (PA) process is to be as inclusive as possible in collecting views from across the community population. This usually involves several people acting as facilitators, rather than interaction with one researcher. Data collection techniques are designed to be useable amongst communities where literacy levels are low. PA has been described as embracing a family of methods and approaches that involve group based learning and planning, using different techniques to investigate an issue from several different angles (Kapoor 2002). The aim is to gradually build up a knowledge base of whole communities through visual activities, walks, discussions, role play, interviews, photos, seasonal calendars, diagrams – exploring what people think, how they live their lives and specific cultural domains of those lives. By recording information from such a diverse range of techniques, and feeding back to community members they are challenged to consider perspectives other than their own in the effort to find common solutions. Many of the techniques are borrowed from qualitative social research, though the emphasis is on visual and group data, rather than individualised information.

Handbooks for conducting the PA process are documented from a variety of sources (for example Egerton University 2000; Trust for Community Outreach and Education 2001; Chambers 2002). Although diversity and flexibility is encouraged there is a recommended approach that maximises community involvement. The Egerton University PRA Field Handbook (2000, 4) proposed eight steps for an external facilitator in the African village context, in the following order: site selection; preliminary site visits to establish contact and build relationships; public announcement of activities through traditional information dissemination meetings; data gathering; data collation and analysis; preparation of the community action plan; adoption of the plan and strategies for its implementation; and then ongoing participatory monitoring and evaluation. Community members are usually recruited as co-research facilitators, and also to bridge communication gaps with various population sectors. Whilst the notion of ‘community’, for these purposes, originated as a ‘village community’ it may in different contexts be translated more broadly

as, for example, business community (Michaels et al 2001) or special interest group community (Taylor 1999).

Data is collected over an extended period. Since this is done in a variety of ways it is often fragmented and needs to be organised by the facilitators, whilst allowing the community members themselves to make sense of the whole. It is often the style of data collection which gives participatory appraisal its distinctive feel. Maps are often constructed out of local materials on the ground and only copied onto paper once they are completed. The map evolves through discussion and identification of particular issues. A 'transect map' is effectively a walking map, where community members walk through a particular area and talk about various landmarks or activities. In similar fashion, people can discuss interagency links by physically grouping themselves into large Venn diagrams drawn on the ground, using coloured ribbon or other resources to signify connections or communication links, depending on the community context (Michaels et al. 2001). Other examples of data collection include timelines that list key events in the life of a community, seasonal and daily calendars that record activities for men and women, livelihood maps that list the resources a household needs on a daily basis and where they collect them from. Issues for men and women are often discussed separately, revealing the problematics of gendered decision making in one African context, as the following extract shows:

It was no surprise that the problems which the women raised were different from those of the men. Shortage of wood for fuel is a major problem for the women, for example, as they often have to spend many hours searching for it, and they were therefore very interested in economical stoves. Traditional harmful practices such as circumcision were also mentioned by the women.

The men were more interested in training in non-agricultural fields. In both villages in Oromia, almost half the population no longer have enough land to be able to live off what it produces. These men, most of whom are young, have to hire themselves out as wage labourers on other farms, assuming that they find work at all (Burkhardt 2000: 310-311).

During all these activities problems issues and solutions are discussed and recorded. Occasionally technical data (such as soil testing) is included at the request of the community.

If the discussions have been facilitated effectively the causes and potential solutions to problems will be emerging throughout the process in readiness for action planning. At this stage community members often divide into thematic groups to address particular issues in more detail. The PA team facilitate decision making by drawing attention to the recorded discussions, including references to solutions that may have worked in the past. Community action planning is undertaken through the same participative process, including any identification of training needs that would facilitate action and monitoring. An example of such a discussion process is taken from the Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE) Training Manual (2001). This particular scenario represents the final stages of a community empowerment process, facilitated by Nondwe, and designed to address poverty issues in a South African township:

Together they analysed the summaries ... After a while clear patterns began to emerge After a short while, as people calmed down, Nondwe put up a big drawing Then she asked ... 'why is there a higher rate of gastroenteritis among children living on the south side of Umzekelo along the banks of the river?' 'Because they play in the river most often', said someone. 'Yes but who lives there?' ... 'the poorest of the poor live in that area' ... Then Eunice got up again and said: 'That's another thing our investigation revealed. Gastroenteritis is more prevalent in the areas of greatest poverty in Umzekelo. And infants who get gastroenteritis are more likely to die from dehydration'With Nondwe's careful facilitation, people first began to use their growing understanding of local conditions (TCOE 2001: 185) ...All that was left to do now was to plan Several women ... said they would like to present a play based on what they had learnt ...Eunice said that she would like to borrow her church minister's camera and document the health and sanitation problems (TCOE 2001: 191).

This example demonstrates that the facilitator needs to be highly skilled at group dynamics, organisation data management and critical awareness raising. Participatory data collection evolves into participatory education in order

to arrive at collective action for empowerment and change. Freirian notions of conscientisation or Brookfield's (1987) description of critical thinking would be appropriate pedagogical skills for the facilitator-as-researcher here. The effectiveness of the process is heavily dependent on how it is managed by the research leaders.

4. Critiques of the process

The rhetoric of participation, empowerment and development and the potential of the process to produce sustainable outcomes have come under increasing scrutiny, however. The criticisms relate to methodological, outcome and ethical concerns.

4.1 *Participation techniques*

Hayward and Simpson (2004) point out that the experience of participation is not always a positive experience for the participants in developing countries in terms of inclusiveness and ownership. Often this reflects poor training on the part of facilitators who are either trained by or are Westerners. The choice of technique may reflect the importing of implicit western cultural bias into different cultural contexts (Campbell 2002). Some data gathering tools can fail to address issues of gender, age or lifestyle (Boyde 2000) meaning that the participants themselves often have to learn new skills in order to participate at all and the nature of the data collected still reflects the goals of the researchers. Boyde points out that PRA techniques, in their effort to counteract criticisms of bias in quantitative methods, fail to acknowledge that no data gathering tool is entirely value free. For example visualisation strategies designed to enable local people to conduct their own analysis and action plans may fail to take into account the controlling role that facilitators play in steering the group deliberations. Similarly group interviews themselves may 'not address the problem of selecting members to groups, the composition of the group, or the role of the moderator' (Campbell 2002: 24). In close association with this concern Green et al (1995) highlight the concern of representativeness. If only a few self selected individuals take part in the appraisal process they may purport to represent the views of many when this is not the case.

Chambers and Mayoux (2005: 26) acknowledge that there may be problems in who participates or people's willingness to contribute. Campbell sums these issues up as a lack of transparency in reporting the techniques and procedures used and lack of flexibility in adjusting to context.

Boyde (2000) adds to these concerns by pointing out that PRAs are often conducted by non governmental organisations (NGOs) which are rarely locally owned so this results in a 'subtle top-down intervention, controlled and managed by external forces' so that participation actually becomes 'covert manipulation' (pages unnumbered). He also reminds us that many of the problems which communities unearth can be attributed to wider structural concerns, over which the facilitators of PRA projects have little control. Sometimes these issues become so large that the process pays insufficient attention to highlighting local strengths that could solve more focused problems. At other times there are attempts by researchers to claim more generalisable outcomes than localised context specific situations can reflect.

The issue of power relations in PRA methodologies, can therefore be hidden in the discourse of 'participatory', thus re-creating all the problems that participatory research claims to overcome. For instance Kapoor (2002) states that there is no quality assurance over the PRA process to ensure that discussions are coercion free or the facilitator is not abusing his or her power and authority (p.108). Kapoor also points out that it is unclear how PRA provides opportunities to critique which community claims are erroneous. Furthermore, Boyde (2000), Mulenga (1999) and others' concerns that there is an inevitable tension between the development practitioner's values and personal agendas and those of the more career oriented and institutionally pressurised academic require a constant trade-off between the ideology of participation and the reality of the research process. Cottrell and Parpart (2006) suggest that frank and open discussions from the beginning may help to resolve some of these issues.

Finally Kapoor (2002) articulates the concern that participatory appraisal literature is under-theorised. Although issues of empowerment and participation are central to its work, there is almost no reference to theoretical notions of power or democracy. He cites Foucault's concept of power as a relationship and the role that power plays in legitimising knowledge. He also refers

to Habermasian literature that discusses deliberative democracy as a strategy for challenging the state. The absence of such a critical theoretical overview, he argues, means that ‘difference’ is denied in the pursuit of consensus and political activism is suppressed in favour of liberalism (Kapoor 2002: 114f.).

Many of the above criticisms could apply to the mis-use of any methodology, of course. Chambers and Mayoux (2005) suggest we should look at the problem slightly differently. For instance we should ask how reliable is the alternative – quantitative, top down collected data - in addressing the above concerns, especially those of power relations and the inter-linkages between multi-dimensional aspects of poverty (Chambers/Mayoux 2005: 4). From here we can look for ways to enhance the quality of participatory methodologies, to minimise their deficiencies. Chambers and Mayoux point out that local people’s knowledge is more useful for community analysis than ‘official’ information. But, as the TCOE extract indicated, there is a need for appropriate training of facilitators, cultural sensitising and pilot testing of methods. Also analysis should be ongoing, rather than short, one-off exercises. The triangulation process is necessary to offset concerns of bias or representativeness, but the range of tools used need not include diagrams or methods that are inappropriate for any particular circumstance. Chambers and Mayoux argue that although empowerment cannot be assumed, the methods, when used sensitively and correctly have greater potential to increase accountability in the development process:

The main challenge is not rigour, but how to enable the poorest to have a voice in definitions and policies for pro-poor growth and civil society development in the face of institutional prejudice against a process which challenges conventional norms of expertise and power relations (Chambers/Mayoux 2005: 18).

4.2 Ethical questions

So, they and others argue, it is down to questions of ethics as to whose voices are taken seriously and to whom the data belongs. Such concerns include ensuring sensitive community data is not put into the wrong hands – at community or local government level. Questions that must be asked of the PA project include: Whose interests are being served? Whose indicators are most

relevant for assessing the development process? Whose numbers count? Whose analysis is most relevant and reliable? Who needs the information? Who is most likely to be empowered in the process? (Chambers/Mayoux 2005: 18). Boyde (2000) adds a further question: 'Is this a search to discover something from which all parties can learn?' (pages unnumbered) and invites us to consider whether the documented outcomes will really help to improve the situation of the least powerful. In other words, whose voices are being heard? Chambers and Mayoux (2005) also raise the issue of how much community time it is ethical to demand of people who are using all their energy to sustain themselves and how much of the data should be removed for analysis from outside of the community itself. Kapoor, however, points out the danger of placing so much emphasis on accepting the validity of community data at the expense of injecting a critical stance into the process:

To privilege what is is often to unquestioningly accept the status quo ... can mean simplifying or ignoring broader relationships between say local communities and socio economic power structures (Kapoor 2002: 102).

We can see, therefore, that the participatory appraisal approach requires sensitivity, cultural awareness, and a commitment to giving voice to the disadvantaged. At the same time it requires an ethical commitment to respect diversity and difference whilst also facilitating awareness raising and ultimately empowerment through highlighting contradictions in people's stories, situations and perspectives. The action plan must tread a fine line between too much or too little control and the creation of realistic agendas for change. In particular participants must be facilitated in such a way that they learn to critique themselves and their findings. In adult education terms this cuts across a Friirian conscientisation process or Habermasian concept of deliberative democracy, within feminist or similar critical frameworks that are sensitive to issues of power. An analysis of two case studies taken from very different situations shows the degree of reflexivity required by researchers if they are to maintain an ethical balance. They show the trade-offs or compromises as well as potential for flexibility that participatory appraisal generates and they also demonstrate the applicability of this approach in widely different contexts.

5. Case studies

The author of this paper has used certain aspects of PRA methods as a researcher (see Preece/Ntseane 2003 for example)² and has also been privy to discussions amongst rural development government officers in Botswana about community action plan implementation concerns, and the degree to which PRA can overcome ethnicity exclusions (Mompoti and Prinsen 2000). However, recent funding failures have delayed the opportunity for a planned comparative study in PRA. This paper therefore draws on existing literature to critique two case studies in an attempt to reflect on the learning that took place between the researchers and their target participants and the extent to which action for change took place.

5.1 *Example one*

The first example is taken from a World Bank funded project in April 1995 (Massiah 1997). Its significance lies in the fact that this was, at the time, an innovation for World Bank engagement in non quantitative studies. Its significance also lies in the extent to which the report could be assessed as following a community agenda that would result in community owned outcomes. The report describes the first phase of a project to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection in three communities in Nigeria's Plateau State. The research team consisted of personnel from the State Ministry of Health, AIDS Action Managers in the participating local authorities, a university academic and representative from the World Bank. University students who spoke the local languages served as interviewers during the field work.

² The author was a member of a small team which conducted several open ended focus group discussions with employees in Botswana based companies where employees discussed culturally contextual issues, concerns and possible solutions to the country's HIV/AIDS pandemic. These responses were then organised into a three-person dialogue drama that was played back to the focus groups who responded in terms of action they were prepared to agree with, or not. The author has also participated with African and British students and academics in a participatory appraisal training workshop where participants undertook a variety of appraisal activities including thematically organising and prioritising issues raised by the group, pair ranking and action planning, visual construction of concepts and producing historical time lines.

The problem situation identified by the researchers was that HIV and syphilis prevalence rates in Nigeria were increasing and the Plateau State had the highest levels in the country. The goal was to collect information about STD/AIDS that could inform subsequent monitoring activities in the areas. The criteria for site selection was that each district contained at least one private or public health facility and was accessible by road. The three sites are briefly described as follows. Jos North local government authority includes the capital city and is a prime trading centre for long distance truck drivers. It also includes two smaller and more traditional communities that have three different ethnic populations. Mangu local authority has both an urban and rural settlement with four different ethnic groups and the third local government authority, Langtang, is primarily rural with limited transport facilities.

The process of involvement was conducted by the local authority AIDS Action Managers through village elders who introduced the team to their communities. The precise means of selecting the target group is not described in the report (merely saying that 'participants were selected by their own communities' (Massiah 1997: 42), but they consisted of professional health workers, traditional healers and pharmacists, male and female community members, long distant truck drivers and STD patients. Interviews with commercial sex workers and village elders were conducted by the AIDS Action Managers. Questions related to identifying and prioritising development concerns and health concerns. A total of 16 data collection methods were used, including social and institutional mapping, interviews, and matrix ranking. Data was collected over a period of two weeks.

Findings were reported bilingually by the team to community meetings, in the form of participatory workshops consisting of participants in the field-work. The research coordinator summarised the research findings and community members commented on issues, prioritised and added to them. A key recommendation in relation to the focus of the study was that health education should be provided in local languages and be distributed through more traditional communication routes rather than as posters written in English. A number of recommendations for decreasing confusions about picture content in the HIV/AIDS prevention posters were also made. In addition problems of literacy, education, roads and water supply were highlighted by the commu-

nity, along with general health concerns such as malaria. Cultural and religious norms impacted on health and sexual behaviour generally. An important recommendation included the need to foster collaboration between traditional and medical care providers, since community members relied on traditional healers far more than the professionals had realised.

Commentary

A significant feature of the findings was that the communities themselves did not rank STDs and HIV/AIDS as their main health concerns:

In general, women perceive childhood diseases as priorities, and they rank them higher than men do. Among women, the main health concerns are measles, dysentery / diarrhea, and hypertension; men's main health concerns are meningitis, typhoid, and hernia. Malaria is mentioned more by men than women Doctors and nurses identify similar health priorities (Massiah 1997: 16).

Indeed lack of health care facilities generally were secondary to wider development concerns related to poverty, such as existence of potable water, access to credit and agriculture markets (Massiah 1997: 14). Yet the project's priorities were STDs and AIDS. This remains the title of the project and these items are the only ones identified in the report summary. This would suggest that although the consultation process was adhered to as a strategy, the research team still filtered out the issues that they intended to spend their energies on.

Another concern is the nature of who participated. Whilst key people were identified through traditional community structures, it has already been highlighted that minority ethnic groups are often marginalised in this process since traditional expectations of entitlement and participation can intercede. Mompati and Prinsen (2000), for instance, describe how the participatory appraisal process in Botswana resulted in minority ethnic groups and women being systematically excluded from consultation opportunities, or being withdrawn from meetings if they spoke out against dominant values. The World Bank report makes no observation about problems that may have arisen during consultation processes, other than recognising that the lack of

sustained support at community action planning stages is a reason for failure to implement changes. Furthermore, whilst the field work of two weeks was identified as time consuming, reference is not made to the length of time the workers took to gain access to these communities. Although some of the teams would have been relatively well known to the communities, some may not have been, suggesting that barriers of trust may not have fully dissipated during such a short time-frame.

Nevertheless reflection amongst the researchers suggested that the activity itself had built cross-sectoral partnerships and raised the professionals' consciousness of their own biases towards community members, a clearer understanding of the dynamics of community behaviours and interpretation of health messages, and the potential of communities to identify solutions to their own problems (Massiah 1997: 2). These latter features were a significant finding of Youngman and Maruatona (1998) during their assessment of a pilot PRA project in Botswana. A key learning curve for appraisal teams is to realise that their communities have relevant skills and knowledge and can actively engage in programme research.

For the community members it was felt that the PRA process had facilitated new partnerships and lines of accountability though they expressed scepticism about the likelihood that action would be taken without sufficient follow-up and input from relevant professionals (Massiah 1997: 2). The issue of sustainability is highlighted particularly when there is a perceived distance between the appraisal team and community members themselves. In spite of its innovatory nature for the World Bank, this project still reflected a top down structure whose limitations filtered through to the participants themselves. A theoretical understanding in terms of power relations or group dynamics was not discussed.

5.2 *Example two*

The second case study transports us into a Western context, but still with minority ethnic groups. Doyle and Krasny (2003) describe a project which engaged American youth in learning about ethnic gardening practices using research methods adapted from participatory rural appraisal. The context for

this project focuses on issues of intergenerational and ethnic marginalisation in poor American urban neighbourhoods. The youth and community gardeners were low income Puerto Ricans, Hispanic immigrants and African Americans with roots in the American south:

Community gardeners in the US tend to be low-income minorities and recent immigrants living in apartment buildings in neighbourhoods with little open space and few grocery stores that carry fresh fruit and vegetables. They voluntarily work in the gardens, which provide a place to socialize, relax and appreciate nature, and a means of accessing fresh produce (Doyle/Krasny 2003: 94).

The project was stimulated by cooperative extension educators who wanted to use PRA as an educational/community action tool for local youth from the same minority backgrounds as the adult community gardeners. The youth would be trained as PRA researchers to document gardening practices and then conduct community action based on their results. The idea was to stimulate interest in 'urban agro-ecology and food systems' to compensate for the lack of grocery stores. The youth in this case were therefore both researcher-facilitators but also community members who would be expected to subsequently undertake their own action with their elders. The educators both trained the youth and maintained a presence throughout the PRA exercise, sometimes sharing responsibility for the data collection when the youth encountered difficulties. The self reflection process therefore took place at three levels – the gardeners, the youth researchers, the educators. Six PRA methods were used – a visual time-line and interviews to document garden history, mapping of plots and gardens and seasonal calendar to identify planting practices, soil tests, Venn diagrams to locate resource flows within the wider community, followed by a shared action plan between gardeners and youth to identify problems and solutions. The project took place over several weeks during the long summer vacation.

A total of 31 educators involved 85 youth to work with 26 gardeners across seven neighbourhoods. Youth participants were drawn from community centres and school gardening programmes serving low-income children. The project author (Doyle) conducted her own assessment of the total process through observations, interactions and interviews at the beginning, middle

and end of the programme, supplemented by end of project focus groups and youth diaries. Ultimately only four sites followed the full PRA process.

A significant action outcome for the project was that youth at two sites started their own garden and at a third site youth developed long term mentoring relationships with their neighbourhood gardeners. They also gave presentations about their findings to gardeners and community members at a garden event and county fairs.

Doyle and Krasny (2003) report that the youth experienced some challenges in facilitating the more hands-on activities such as mapping and diagrams and sometimes the educators helped to adapt the processes, for example by encouraging the youth to interpret the Venn diagram activity as a 'puzzle about how the people fit together within the garden' (p.96). There were also some language and cultural differences between the youth researchers and minority ethnic community members. More practical issues to do with time management, transport and attention spans were also cited (Doyle/Krasny 2003: 103). The youth found interviewing a more familiar technique, stimulated by the fact that the gardeners loved telling stories, but the gardeners felt more awkward when asked to draw a map or diagram. Nevertheless, they eventually became deeply engaged in mapping their plots, when the youth started drawing a map and asking gardeners for help in filling the details. The message here, of course, is to fit methods to context.

The expertise of the older, minority ethnic research 'subjects' and the age differentials for the youth researchers suggest that perhaps power differentials and the subsequent learning processes were unusually complementary in this project. So, for instance, the youth acquired substantial historical knowledge about the evolution of the gardens, the influence of surrounding environment such as pollution on the gardens and connections between the garden and broader city. They increased their knowledge about soils and soil testing. Through the necessary listening process of interviewing they were able to build a relationship with the gardeners. By the same token the educators learned to respect the young adults' own ability to take initiative:

I would say [to the youth], 'Do you want me to go over to the gardener with you? Do you want me to do anything or just be here?' They'd say,

‘No, just be here,’ and they’d come back and I’d let them tell me how it went. ... (Educator, Philadelphia) (Doyle/Krasny 2003: 97)

The activities also generated insights about people and emotions associated with gardening, as well as sustainability issues and the contribution the products made to the community. From the gardeners’ perspectives the interactions enhanced their own self respect and feeling of belonging (Doyle/Krasny 2003: 104).

Commentary

Reflections on the total action research process highlighted the difficulties in balancing a complex set of research, education and community action objectives. It was felt that the educational outcomes were achieved more successfully than research outcomes, with consequences for sustainable action. Equally the ‘total participation’ of youth and gardeners in determining objectives and devising research questions was sublimated by the educators’ overall control of the whole process, although youth were encouraged to add research questions of their own. The gardeners themselves were confused about their role in the exercise, sometimes believing they were teachers rather than participants in a shared objective. The youths’ own communication and academic skills varied, with consequent outcomes for their engagement in all the activities. A general observation was that all participants needed longer preparation time to fully understand the PRA process.

This was a complex and ambitious arrangement that made genuine attempts to involve people who would not normally have a voice in their own community. It perhaps lacked direction in that the objectives for change were not clear, and the mutual roles of each layer of participant were not always understood. Perhaps the greatest gain – as for the World Bank study – was in the breaking down of misconceptions and inter-generational stereotype expectations of each other.

6. Lessons to be learned?

A number of observations can be made concerning the relevance of literature arguments about Participatory appraisal in analysing these two case studies.

On the plus side the above cases demonstrate the versatility of the participatory approach to a variety of situations around the world. The distinctiveness of participatory rural appraisal – or participatory appraisal (PA) as it is now coming to be known – originated as a methodology that was applied to rural communities where literacy levels were low and where people felt removed from public decision making processes. These issues can be applied globally to marginalised groups and people whose levels of literacy, or knowledge of technical language, is less than that of people making decisions that affect their lives. PA not only broadens the range of strategies available to low literacy groups. It can also be effective in community mobilisation. The studies demonstrated the opportunity for data collection partnerships that would not otherwise have existed and created new dynamics between the researchers and participants. As a result of these opportunities and dynamics, knowledge was secured that would otherwise have been hidden (for example, the extent to which community members in the African context use traditional healers in relation to conventional medical resources). New knowledge often then emerges as a re-working of solutions that are context sensitive. The outcomes should not be overstated, but methods can be used to provide innovative ways of engaging with marginalised social groups, and adapted to suit particular circumstances. In addition to the above examples it has been used in situations that can range from health care situations (Gray et al 2000), to team building (Michaels et al 2001).

However, there are some pervading issues. For instance, another continuing distinctiveness of participatory appraisal from other forms of participatory research perhaps lies in the criticism that it is under-theorised. Therein lies the rub. A more theoretical approach (perhaps using Third World Feminisms or post colonial analysis as a framework) might give the methodology academic credibility within institutions. Consequently, its strength as a user-friendly signifier of research that de-mystifies its language and accessibility to marginalised research participants might be compromised and challenge the overall purpose of retaining knowledge within the community. Another weakness of many participatory appraisals is not so much the collection or reliability of data, but the effectiveness of subsequent action plans. Perhaps a way forward would be to persuade funding sources to support research pro-

grammes that allowed for more deliberative community engagement over longer periods of time to enable communities themselves to critique, rather than simply participate in, participatory research.

Both cases also highlight that the situation to be changed is rarely identified by the target participants. It is the external agent who stimulates the exploration of the issue and the participants contribute to identifying the complexity or detail of the issue or problem situation. Therefore, the extent to which participatory appraisal is a truly grass roots led process is entirely dependent on how flexible the researchers are prepared to be regarding research outcomes. In the World Bank study for instance, the target issue of HIV/AIDS was not a priority for the participant communities. It is questionable, therefore, what sustainable outcomes would have been achieved from the community perspectives, since funding would have been linked to an agenda for HIV/AIDS change strategies alone. In the urban garden project follow up action did ensue, but it was not necessarily action for change and it was not clear whether any such action had been prioritised.

An overall criticism of the quality of, and suitability of, data gathering techniques lies, arguably, not just in the newness of those techniques but also in the quality of facilitation training. The case studies cited above seem to share the need for facilitation skills that derive from good adult education practice. So participatory appraisal methodologies require a combination of pedagogical and cultural sensitivity skills that stretch beyond those normally required of a lone researcher who may be more practised at moving into a research environment, collecting data and then moving back out to analyse it independently. Whilst methods *are* adaptable, there is sometimes an apparent mismatch between the researcher-facilitator's skills and the participants' skills and understanding. Again time and flexibility need to accommodate these concerns.

Other criticisms of PA's credibility as a research approach must also take into account that no research is value free. Participatory research is not designed to produce a universal truth but it does aim to produce something valuable for the participants. Action research is centred around engaging people in a critique of their present situation to improve practice for the future. Both case studies were attempting to contribute to the quality of life of

poor communities. The impact on sustainable development and poverty reduction will depend to what extent the outcomes can move us towards that goal. In view of the fact that poverty is multi dimensional and multi-directional (Eversole/Routh 2005) it would seem important to operationalise the findings at several levels. As researchers we also have a responsibility to reach as large an audience as possible. So whilst we may be furthering our own careers in the dissemination process we can do so ethically – by using data that draws on community voices but also presents that data in a form that will be accepted by those wider structures in society that continue to provide marginalising infrastructures, legislation and attitudinal barriers. At the same time the process needs to give local people the skills, understanding and knowledge to raise their own voices. Our ethical responsibility is in respecting difference, being open about power differentials but trying to avoid exploitation of these differences in a way that will undermine the very people we are trying to help. It is the purpose (participation at all stages with a view to local empowerment) that should be the focus, and attention to ethical responsibilities (a commitment to methods that are appropriate for purpose, a willingness to listen and recognise local indigenous strengths and abilities) that will achieve new knowledge production and political will (letting go control) that can, in turn, enable grass roots led action for change, but perhaps as a longer term strategy than PA alone can allow.

We must be realistic, however. It is highly unlikely that participatory or any other engagement with human beings will produce consensus within any community of different voices. Perhaps the best we can hope for is to start a process of deepening understanding and allow the natural course of events to slowly drip feed into an improvement in sensitivities and recognition of the positive elements of this kind of research. The process, however, has to be linked to wider development initiatives that can build on what PA has started.

This, then, is the final justification for participatory appraisal. If participatory methodologies provide access to data that is otherwise unavailable, then it has a part to play in filling the gap in knowledge about disempowerment and poverty production from the perspectives of the least empowered in society. This holds true for all countries in the world.

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