

CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL: MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE FOR DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), as a tool of development research since the 1970s, has been successful in its pursuit of social justice, poverty alleviation and democratisation, and has continuing relevance. The impetus is not on the spread of PRA, but on participatory approaches, behaviour, attitudes, and mindset. PRA has the flexibility to adapt and synthesise with other development tools. Therefore, it has the ability to meet immediate social demands through improvisation, and turn itself into a movement. This democratic PRA entered the development mainstream in the early 1990s in a definitive move from the controversial, top down bureaucratic project planning methodologies like that of survey questionnaires, coinciding with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Long before PRA was conceptualized, its basic principles were in practical use in informal ways in many parts of the world. Participation has numerous managerial implications in terms of quality decisions, ownership of decisions, leadership, economies of scale, higher levels of productivity, and effective utilization of available resources. The concept of participation is increasingly seen in the context of citizenship and local governance. The transformative notion of participation endows people with the right to participate in politics, democracy, and development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) offers the possibility of democratizing development (Cornwall and Scoones, 2011). The advantages of PRA in relation to other project planning tools is its flexibility to adopt and adapt other methodologies, pursue social justice, playing a role in poverty alleviation and democratization.

The objective of this article is to encourage institutionalization of participation. This article supports the adoption of participatory approaches in various projects and studies. The special emphasis on participation arises from a few reasons. First, it has the potential to offset any managerial bureaucracy (Biggs, 2008). Second, it has the prospect of dislodging a strong dependency culture. Third, it helps regain self-image, self-respect, and public consciousness (Narayanasami, 2009).

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The first part of the article briefly looks at what PRA is about, its evolution, its applications, and its comparison with survey questionnaires. The second part of the article focuses on its strengths, challenges, and relevance. In this second part, there is a brief case study on Bangladesh that delineates how group formation and empowerment, the defining features of participation, work out on the ground. I have chosen this particular Bangladesh case study to commemorate participation in development which has been in use in this country since 1994 (Chambers, 1994a). To recap, the main purpose of the article includes scrutiny of the relevance of participation, its managerial implications, and its strategic importance for democracy.

1.1 WHAT IS PRA?

PRA can be described as a growing family of approaches and methods, behaviours and relationships for uncovering local contexts and life. The marginalized include the poor, women, the young, and the old in a locality who are described as the main stakeholders for PRA. PRA is most celebrated for its democratic participatory bottom-up approaches that empower people by enabling them to identify and analyze their problems, i.e. poverty, discrimination against women and children, and this approach generates local innovations, so that they can take initiative and charge of their own development (Chambers, 2008).

There are three main components of PRA: methods, behaviour and attitude, and sharing. First, PRA methods are visible, tangible, and are usually performed by small groups. Local people make maps and diagrams, usually on the ground, by using local materials which they later transfer to paper. The whole process is carried out in the presence of sensitive facilitators who listen rather than act. Such easy methods can be employed many times involving various small groups to do cross checking. Here the self-critical facilitators continuously and critically examine their own behaviour and they take personal responsibility for the data by using their judgement and avoiding any reliance on manuals. They also contribute to observing and assessing the rigour of trustworthiness of the process. Local people can also act as facilitators (Chambers, 2008).

Second, in PRA, behaviour and attitude is considered to be more important than the methods. The behaviour and attitude stress that the development initiatives should be in the hands of the local people, especially the poorer and marginalized sections of people, and facilitators must play sensitive roles, based on their judgement in relation to local situations (Chambers, 2008).

Third, one of its most salient features is that it pre-emptively foregoes any exclusive ownership and branding of the methodology by stressing the sharing in and between communities, between organizations, and between countries and methodologies. This enables it to meet immediate social demands through improvisation and to turn itself into a movement (Chambers, 2008).

1.2 PRA APPLICATIONS

Participation moved to the mainstream from the margins over the 1990s, becoming a must for governments and international development agencies, and is described as both a method of delivery and an intended outcome in itself (Williams, 2004b). PRA entered the development mainstream as a result of the obvious failure of conventional, top-down, technocratic project planning methodologies, and coincided with the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. Donor governments, World Bank aid programmes and international aid agencies began to underscore the necessity for the voices of the poor to be heard, because they matter (Cornwall and Scoones, 2011).

PRA approaches and methods, sometimes in combination with or with the adaptation of other approaches, are being applied to agriculture and natural resource management, as well as programs for security, empowerment, rights, equity, food security assessment, health, water, sanitation, organizational analysis, policy analysis and so forth (Chambers, 2008).

1.3 THE EVOLUTION OF PRA

As suggested earlier, PRA is adaptable and is sometimes used under various names. The emphasis is not so much on the spread of PRA but on participatory approaches, behaviours, attitudes, methods and mindsets (Chambers, 2008). The initial reason behind the introduction of participatory approaches was to make a definitive move away from the tyranny of top-down, bureaucratic survey questionnaires (Chambers, 1994b).

The most important thing about the evolution of PRA is that the theory of participation has co-evolved with practice. The evolution of participatory methodologies in development practice has been taking place since the 1970s (Chambers, 2008). It may be mentioned that long before PRA was conceptualized, its basic principles had been in practical use in informal ways in many parts of the world (Cornwall and Scoones, 2011).

PRA has many sources. The most direct source is Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) from which it evolved. The basic difference between PRA and RRA is that PRA information is generated, analyzed and owned by local people as part of the process of their empowerment, whereas RRA information is extracted by outsiders through semi-structured interviews (Chambers, 1994c). PRA also shares much with other traditions, especially the agro-ecosystem analysis that contributed sketch mapping and diagramming (Chambers, 2008).

1.4 COMPARISON OF PRA WITH SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRES

Conventional questionnaire surveys have many drawbacks. Most importantly, they fail to help expand an understanding of the lives and conditions of poorer people. The deductive approach of a standardized blueprint questionnaire forces the whole method into

reductionism (Chambers, 2008, p. 2-12). The effect of the data enumerator makes the standards of rigour questionable. The survey questions in some cases run the risk of imposing the concepts and categories of outsiders rather than those of local people. The questionnaire surveys usually fail to explore causal relationships or social relationships or qualitative aspects of society. The enumerator-respondent differences in language, literacy, gender, power, demeanour and the nature of their interpersonal relationship at the time of interview may distort the reality. Poor people can give false or misleading answers out of fear, ignorance, prudence, hostility, and hope of benefit. Incompetent and unmotivated data investigators in many cases also make the quality of data questionable (Chambers, 2008).

In contrast, PRA can capture the complexity, diversity, accuracy and relevance of local contexts. This provides an empowering experience for all stakeholders (Chambers, 2008, p. 88). Participation principles include face to face learning from local people. They emphasise being adaptive. Participation helps stakeholders learn rapidly and progressively. It offsets biases by being unimposing, relaxed and by listening to the voices of the poor. It optimises trade-offs between the cost of learning and the usefulness of information and appropriate imprecision. It ensures crosschecking. Participation ensures diversity by learning from exceptions, dissensions and oddities (Chambers, 1994c).

2. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PRA

2.1 THE STRENGTH OF PRA

The core idea of PRA is to transform power relations through democratic participation that leads to the empowerment of marginalized people. It enables local people to express, analyze and expand their own knowledge for their own development. Thus participation itself is an empowering experience (Chambers, 2008, p. 96-97). Self-critical questions like “Whose knowledge counts?”, “Whose values?”, “Whose learning?”, “Whose empowerment?”, and the overarching question of “Whose reality counts?”, help restrain the tendency of powerful outsiders and professionals to force their realities onto local people. As a result, the ownership of information generated by local people belongs to them (Chambers, 1997, p. 101).

The visible and tangible approaches and methods of PRA reverse power relations and empower locals in many ways. First, the group motivation, group-visual synergy, adding detail, cross checking, discussing, cumulative representation and collective analysis generate learning which is empowering. Second, mapping and diagramming reverses power relations by literally instituting democracy on the ground. Sometimes older and more powerful people do not get down to activities on the ground, with the plea of dignity, whereas younger people and women do so and thereby express their views. The 'on the ground' activities give less room for eye contact and also lessen the possibility of verbal domination by the powerful. Third, visible and tangible approaches enable locals, especially the disadvantaged to

represent complex realities and relationships through representation across a broad range of topics. Visible maps include social or census maps, the resource maps that exhibits local resources, mobility maps that tracks mobility patterns of people, and so forth. The tangible methods include trend diagrams, change diagrams, time lines, wealth and well-being ranking, seasonal diagramming, Venn diagrams, causal linkage diagrams, proportional piling and Matrix ranking. Fourth, participatory approaches and methods can produce qualitative as well as quantitative data. The data generated have been found to be accurate, authoritative, and full of utility (Chambers, 2008).

2.2 THE CHALLENGES FOR PRA

This section presents some challenges for participation. There is an argument that the participatory approach serves as a technical tool devoid of politics. There have been suggestions that the objective of PRA is to achieve equity in social and economic conditions in purely technical terms. It is further argued that the empowerment that results from participation is depoliticized (Cleaver, 2001). There is a further suggestion that a community is seen as a homogeneous, harmonious and static unit in participatory development that obscures the power relations within communities. It has also been argued that it conceals gender, age, ethnicity, class, caste and religion based divisions in a community (Cook and Kothari, 2001). A relevant case study on how participation generates politics and empowerment irrespective of social homogeneity or divisions follows in a later section.

There is a concern that facilitators may override the existing legitimate decision-making processes in a democracy (Hailey, 2001). The intervention that aims to overturn existing decision-making structures is sometimes criticized as a colonizing tendency of social change and marginalization (Mohan, 2001). It is also sometimes equated with cultural imperialism, suggesting that stereotyping behaviour may deny and devalue the existing group cultures. Moreover, participation is described as a mechanism for exploitation in a capitalist market (Mohan and Hickey, 2004).

Furthermore, there are some questions about the validity and reliability of group formation dynamics which is termed as the defining characteristic of participatory development. It has been suggested that group dynamics may reinforce the interests of the already powerful (Cook and Kothari, 2001). It has also been implied that group dynamics may lead to risky decisions, alternative or second-best decisions, wrong decisions, or even coercive persuasion (Cook, 2001). This issue of group formation dynamics is further elucidated in the coming case study section.

2.3 RELEVANCE OF PRA

2.3.1 TRANSFORMATIVE PARTICIPATION: CITIZENSHIP AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

This section brings forth the relevance of PRA based on the transformative notion of participation that reinforces the strengths and diffuses the challenges as discussed earlier. The concept of participation is increasingly seen in the context of the rights of citizenship and local governance. Participatory citizenship brings political force into participation. This can meet the challenge of building new relationships between ordinary people and institutions where the voice of the people will be heard. It can revitalize the diminished liberal form of democracy that is dominated by professionals, technocrats, and bureaucracy. The prerequisites for this transformative participation are a strong central state, a well developed civil society, and an organized political force. Therefore, it requires building up awareness programmes on rights and citizenship, raising civil associations and social movements on governance issues, and strengthening institutions of governance at the local and central level (Gaventa, 2004).

The notion of participatory citizenship rephrases the question of participatory intervention, and it asks how the competency of participants can be enhanced so that they can demonstrate their agency. This reconciles the issue of inclusions and exclusions of external factors in intervention. Participatory citizenship establishes participation as a political right infused with strong political, legal, and moral imperatives (Gaventa, 2004).

Participation brings the state closer to people and the bureaucracy is made redundant (Mohan and Hickey, 2004, p. 59-71). This transforms passive participants into active citizens with rights to participate in institutions (Henry, 2004). The resulting empowerment is seen in the context of longer term political projects, not in short term development program trajectories (Williams, 2004a).

2.4 CASE STUDY ON GROUP FORMATION AND EMPOWERMENT

This case study displays how group formation, and the empowerment process that defines participation, takes place on the ground. This study involved a few groups made up of a few women located in the Brahmanbaria district of Bangladesh. This study was conducted by Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC) and Proshika, two well-known non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh. The NGOs expected the groups to focus on socio-political realities, such as under-age marriage, dowry, and local level elections. As it turned out, at the end of the group sessions, the objective of all the different groups in fact was about how to obtain access to micro credit from the NGOs. In other words, the expectations of the newly formed groups did not match with that of the expectations of the two NGOs (Moniruzzaman, 2007).

A few factors that led to the gap between the expectations of the NGOs and the expectations of the women stakeholders have been identified. The formation of the groups was based on economic homogeneity and kinship. This was a traditional and conservative Muslim society. These women found it hard to convince the heads and elders of their families to allow them to become involved in this group formation activity. On the other hand, the facilitators who worked for the NGOs were educated but they were low-paid and therefore not motivated. They only initiated the group formation process by meeting one or two people, introducing them to the expectations of the NGOs and handing over to the latter the rest of the responsibility for group building. As such, somewhat inadvertently, the process of group formation turned out to be a truly participatory one. Thus the groups came to the conclusion that access to credit was more important to them than other socio-political objectives at that point in time. They overruled external views and discovered their own preferences and objectives. The whole process was empowering for these women. They took initiatives, built self confidence, influenced negotiation at the family and neighbourhood level, and became involved in income-generating activities (Moniruzzaman, 2007).

This case study suggests that any development exercise is a politically and culturally distinct process. Second, this also demonstrates how participation can influence the priorities and substance of a programme. Third, this participatory approach, in contrast to an interventional managerial approach, makes space for fostering a political and cultural process (Biggs, 2008). Fourth, participation has no predetermined outcomes, and it always potentially opens up spaces for unintended consequences-both positive and negative (Williams, 2004b). Fifth, participation exhibits active involvement of people at every stage of the process. Finally, participation focuses on the bottom up approach with a clear emphasis on locally defined priorities and local viewpoints (Narayanasami, 2009).

2.5 PARTICIPATION: MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Participation has a number of managerial implications. First, it produces better results. Second, the people own the decision. Third, participation nurtures leadership, builds up confidence and gives power and voice to marginalized people. Fourth, as participatory groups receive services from development or other agencies directly, this participation broadens the scope of their effect, lowers transaction costs and thus puts economies of scales in place. Fifth, the poor and the marginalized become more receptive to their potential and achieve higher levels of productivity in terms of production and income. Sixth, participation improves effective utilization of available resources. Seventh, participation sensitizes about unanticipated or unknown problems (Narayanasami, 2009).

Participation is best understood in the context of broader international political economy that constantly confronts issues like poverty, social exclusion, and inequality. The best aspect of participation is that it emphasizes principles rather than standard prescriptions. Therefore,

participation is seen as more than a toolkit of methods, or managerial insights, but rather as a more useful institutional innovation in the political and social arena (Biggs, 2008).

3. CONCLUSION

Participation is aimed at breaking down the conventional power structure. It empowers people in taking initiatives for their own development. Participation discovers local priorities and generates local and innovative solutions. It results in better decisions and ownership of decisions. Participation is both the instrument and the end result of development. The basic advantage of participation is that it focuses on principles rather than on any standard prescriptions. Therefore, participation adopts, adapts, assimilates and improvises in the face of immediate political, social, and economic demands and turns itself into a social movement.

There are numerous advantages to participation. It helps build confidence, generates politics, creates political will, and drives development. The participatory method is the best option available compared to survey questionnaires. It breaks down bureaucracy. It dislodges the dependency culture. Participations allows all kinds of people, including the poor, women, children, the old, the uneducated and other marginalized people to get engaged firsthand in any decision making process. Participation has numerous managerial implications in terms of quality decisions, ownership of decisions, leadership, economies of scale, higher levels of productivity, and effective utilization of available resources.

The transformative conception of participation sees itself in the context of the rights of citizenship. Participation gives unique understanding of the lives and livelihood of the people. It helps to situate poverty, social exclusion, and inequality, in the context of political economy, democracy, and development. Participation demonstrates that politics, democracy, and development, are inalienable and complementary. The relevance of participation continues in terms of managerial implications and democracy.

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