

Participatory Rural

PARTICIPATORY Rural Appraisal (PRA) refers to a growing family of approaches and methods which are used internationally in work in rural areas. The basis of PRA is to enable rural people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions to plan and act.

BEFORE the late 1970s development practice relied almost exclusively on conventional survey methodologies. Dissatisfaction with these started to emerge with evidence of their weaknesses. The result was Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) as an alternative approach. RRA aimed to address problems of bias in rural work, time taken to do surveys and produce results and the cost involved in investigations of rural life.

Some of the biases identified among rural researchers were:

- Seasonal bias where development workers "toured" rural communities during seasons that suited them. They tended to avoid seasons of extreme rain or heat although these were the periods when rural communities experienced most hardship.
- Spatial bias where development workers tended to concentrate on areas near cities or roads. Poorer rural communities were almost never in such accessible areas.
- Person bias where development workers

tended to focus on elite groups in communities who were mostly better-off and almost always male.

- Political bias where development workers tended to work in areas that supported their own political leanings.
- Diplomatic bias. Courtesy and convention often inhibited development workers from asking about and meeting poorer community members.

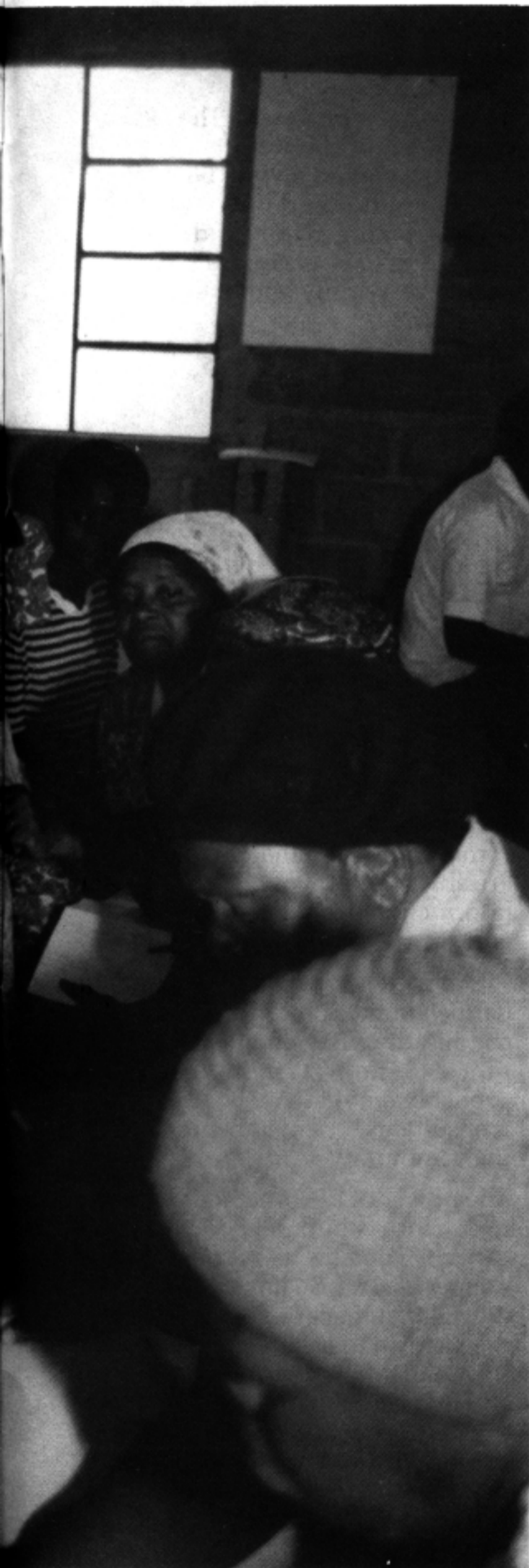
In the mid-1980s "participation" and "participatory" entered the RRA vocabulary and RRA itself, until then accepted as a very cost-effective, valid and reliable method of rural research, was seen as having two inherent problems. Firstly, RRA served the interests of outside professionals. Secondly, it took away information from rural communities.

There were experiments with "participatory RRA" in Kenya and India. It was during the Kenya experiments with "participatory RRA" that the term Participatory Rural Appraisal was coined.

At the same time, in India, an explosion of innovation in rural research methods was happening, especially among non-government organisations. In some villages, village volunteers showed they could facilitate PRA processes themselves. Government organisations got involved early on and received and promoted training in PRA methods.



Appraisal



Although there are lots of similarities between RRA and PRA methods but their approaches are quite different. Effective PRA needs a radical shift in the role of outsiders who work in rural communities. It needs the outsider/researcher to take on the role of facilitator or convenor, rather than investigator or analyst. It also needs local rural people to own and use the information that comes out of PRA exercises, rather than outside researchers or development workers owning and using this.

Most PRA principles have emerged through practise - finding out what does or doesn't work and why. In general there is agreement on the following principles:

- learning should be from rural people themselves, be direct, on-site, face-to-face and draw on local physical, technical and social knowledge
- the "tourism" method can be offset through being patient, listening rather than lecturing, being unimposing and seeking out marginal groups in a community
- being prepared to trade off quantity of information against relevance and accuracy against speed (accepting that it is better to be approximately right than precisely wrong)
- using a range of methods, types of information and investigators to

cross-check information (called triangulating)

- facilitating rural people's investigation, analysis, presentation and learning so that they do it themselves and are able to present and own the results of information gathering themselves
- facilitators should constantly examine their behaviour and try to do better throughout the PRA process

PRA may be used effectively in participatory appraisal and planning, participatory implementation and monitoring, investigation of topics and training and orienting villagers and outsiders. It has been used effectively to investigate:

- natural resource management areas of work, such as, water and soil conservation, forestry, fisheries, wildlife reserve buffer zones, and village resource management plans.
- agriculture - crops and animal husbandry, irrigation design, markets and marketing potential
- equity programmes - identifying credit needs, sources and interventions, finding and selecting poor people for programmes, identifying income earning opportunities.
- health and nutrition - nutrition assessments and monitoring, planning and locating water supplies

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PRA in South Africa

PRA is fast becoming a familiar and popular aspect of rural work in South Africa. AFRA has on its own and through the Midlands Rural Development Network (MIDNET), contributed to this growth.

In mid-1992 discussions on PRA as a methodology for work in rural areas started, informally, in AFRA. In October 1992, AFRA piloted a study on the effects of drought, using basic PRA methods, in the Stoffelton community of the Bulwer area in Natal.

The results of this pilot study increased enthusiasm about PRA. Through the PRA exercise conducted in Stoffelton, the community was integrated into a drought relief process which greatly enhanced community organisation and the Stoffelton Advancement Committee, the community's organisation, was able to get emergency water relief for the community.

PRA training

AFRA distributed the pilot study widely within the National Land Committee (NLC) and MIDNET, the networks to which it belongs. AFRA also encouraged and supported other interested individuals to experiment with PRA techniques. The Indian NGO, MYRADA, who were centrally involved in pioneering PRA development in India, later asked AFRA to allow it to use the pilot study in its training programme in India.

Increased awareness and enthusiasm about PRA created needs for training. MIDNET and the School for Rural Community Development, based at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, took responsibility for this training. They secured an experienced Indian trainer, James Mascarenhas, to run a training programme in April 1993 to address the demand for PRA training among NGOs. The training programme, held in Bulwer, Natal and using fieldwork in the Stoffelton community, drew 26 NGO participants from South Africa and Namibia. The skill of the trainer and the enthusiasm of trainees contributed to the programmes' success and out of this programme grew needs for further training and networking around PRA experiences. Participants in the April 1993 training have since produced a PRA training manual and further training programmes are planned for November/ December 1993 and February/March 1994.

International exchange

A South-South PRA Practitioners Exchange is being held in September 1993 in India. Kamal Singh, of AFRA's Drought Project, and Ntshane Moroka of the Orange Free State Rural Committee are the South Africans attending. We hope this contribute to future international South-South networking.

PRA and power: some cautionary words

PRA was developed as a tool to increase community ownership over development processes. The emphasis and focus of processes should always be the community and the agenda, timing, nature and product of PRA processes should rest firmly with the community.

Although PRA techniques generate vast amounts of information, PRA is not a new research fad. We must guard against simply extracting valuable information from communities for use by NGOs or consultants who have contact with the communities. Doing this would be no different from conventional research processes. Instead, we should ensure that information remains the "property" of the communities and that they are able to use this information to analyse, plan and act.

PRA processes can only happen in the context of a community's development process. The best (and probably only) PRA "consultants" are members of the community.

The power of PRA methods to enhance community capacity contains its greatest danger as well. So it is crucial that there be some mechanism to ensure good PRA. Such "quality control" should ensure that the greatest benefits go to the community and not those who are already in powerful positions.