



Participatory Rural Assessment

Introduction

A sustainable society is one that can persist over generations, one that is foreseeing, flexible and wise enough not to undermine either its physical or its social systems support.

In order to be socially sustainable, the combination of population, capital and technology in the society would have to be configured so that the material living standard is adequate and secure for everyone. True development means improvement of the quality of life where efforts are made to invest resources into rural development. The majority of the people in rural communities have remained largely untouched by these changes, and communities continue to grow poorer each year.

As a result the natural resource base has continued to decline (e.g soil, water, forests and fisheries), and problems such as desertification, low food production, fuel (wood) shortages and a low standard of living have risen. Centralized decision making (top down approach) excluded rural community stakeholders and as a result there is a low success rate despite any investment. For development to be sustainable, community members must participate in decision making that affects their lives. Typically local people continued to be treated as if they are unknowledgeable and to be planned for as if they had no idea what is good for them. Most institutions used similar approaches to design for rural development projects - without consultation of beneficiaries. As a result projects continue to fail. The future looks equally bleak unless new approaches are devised to arrest the situation.

Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA) as an approach to community development built on the premises that participation by the beneficiaries is fundamental for success. Projects introduced in the community must involve approaches that communities themselves can manage and control. PRA is therefore a family of approaches and methods that enable rural villages to share and analyze their knowledge of their life and conditions in order to plan and act appropriately. The process enables a group of local people to analyze their conditions and choose their own means of improving them. A plan is drawn based on appropriate and sustainable improvements of their local resources e.g soils, water, crop yields, tree produce and others.

The stages of the PRA process involve site selection, preliminary visits, launching, data gathering, data analysis and synthesis, preliminary Community Action Plan (CAP), implementation of CAP, and participatory monitoring and evaluation.

Site selection

Community leaders, workers and/or an organized community group will determine the site selection with assistance from the PRA consultants.

Preliminary visits

The first visit includes meeting chiefs, community leaders and officials, local institutions, youth groups, women groups, farming cooperatives, and NGOs operating in the area. The PRA consultant interacts with community members and explains the concepts of PRA, the Dos and Don'ts. After the introductions, formal meetings are arranged with leaders and representatives. The details of PRA are discussed and questions answered during the first stage of the process.

Launching

A community meeting is organized, giving notice well in advance to ensure optimal attendance. During the launching issues are clarified in order to gain the trust and confidence of the community.

Data gathering

During the PRA, data gathering is done using the community information to create charts, maps and graphs for community comment and analysis. During the exercise, people may be divided into small groups. This ensures greater participation and it makes it easier to collect data to discuss their findings and identify information gaps for further investigation.

Points to note

- At the end of each exercise, find out what people have learned from their session
- Each session should be wrapped up with an assessment on how the information gathered will contribute to effective planning and management.

At the end of each day, the PRA consultants will meet.

Data Collection and Tools Used

Sketch Maps

A village sketch map is made with village leaders, who indicate physical and economic details and locate the community's infrastructure. There are many types of maps. Social maps, resource maps etc. A map may present activities, problems, opportunities, and their locations, boundaries and characteristics of the community involved. The drawn map assists in laying down a transect route for the next activities.

Objectives of mapping

- (i) To establish a dialogue and consensus with groups of people
- (ii) To better understand the collective perspective and to identify what is important to the many factions of the community.
- (iii) To empower groups to analyze the existing condition and to become completely aware of their surroundings.

Examples of things to include in a sketch map are given below:

Forests and wetlands, churches, water collection points, medical facilities, health centers, hospitals, trading centers, sports field, factories, commercial farms, schools and roads.

Note: The map should have a key defining all the pictures used to locate the above developments in the community.

Transect walk or observational walk

The PRA consultants prepare a transect walk together with residents of the area to:

- Identify types of land use, the associated problems, and opportunities.
- Generate more information for PRA consultants to be better prepared to advise
- Observe more detailed information than the map can generate

Crop patterns, native and planted vegetation, land management practices, agro forestry and soil conservation practices, dominant practices, dominant tree species, and crop pests and diseases etc will all be recorded.

For the PRA Consultants, a transect walk requires keen listening, and strong observation skills to suggest appropriate solution to community challenges.

Objectives of a transect walk

- (i) To visit areas and people not visited often
- (ii) To discover differences within the area using local observation and local knowledge
- (iii)** To demonstrate willingness of the team to participate for the well being of their community

Time line / Historical calendar

The community discusses what it considers to be most important. Data is gathered from group meetings of residents with different backgrounds and perspectives, young, old, women, and men. List key events in the history of the community to better understanding what local, national, and international events the community considers to be important to how they dealt with natural resource issues in the past.

The community should include as much as they can remember from the past

- (i) When did settlements begin in the area and who were the founding residents?
- (ii) What were the first important events in the community you can remember?
- (iii) Has there been significant migration into / out the community?
- (iv) Serious drought, epidemic, famines, floods on other natural disasters
- (v) What are the some of the best projects or initiative your community has accomplished?

Seasonal calendar

Mapping out a seasonal calendar is a detailed and comprehensive task, but not necessary complicated. The calendar should establish cycles of activities and occurrences within a community over a year. Some of the common topics included in a typical seasonal calendar are annual rainfall, cash and food crops harvest period, sowing, human and animal disease occurrences, etc to establish a regular pattern of occurrence within a community. The consultant is a technical advisor who knows about the topics in question to be able to enlighten the community.

Annual cycles are important to graph to determining labor availability, timing of activities, the timing of diseases of some crops, cycles of food shortages, cash flow variations

- (i) Provide detailed information about each season
- (ii) Compare village activities month by month
- (iii) Identify cycles of activities that happen in the village on regular or cyclical basis
- (iv) To reveal the common period of excessive environmental problems but also time opportunities.

NB. The calendar should begin with rainfall since the activities require knowledge of rain cycle and rainfall

Daily calendar / gender calendar

Gender is defined as division of people based on sex. Gender analysis on the other hand involves the analysis of existing roles and responsibilities between the gender which may be based on social, cultural, historical, economic and political background

Most activities in rural societies are managed along gender lines through age old traditions and many activities are traditionally performed by women, men or children, More recently people irrespective of gender may perform many rural development activities. A discussion of traditional and contemporary gender rolls help the community examine practices. Are men or women overburdened under pretext of outdated cultural practices? Can there be a positive change in the gender roles without offending the community? Who should initiate this change? This knowledge provides a clear picture of who does what in the community.

Objectives of Daily calendar / gender calendar

- (i) To collect and analyze information on daily patterns of activities
- (ii) To compare the routines and activities of different groups in the community
- (iii) To identify the most appropriate days / times for community meetings
- (iv) To find out hardships associated with different activities in the community

Problem identification

Challenges are identified in the beginning of the data gathering exercise and a problem list is created. Exhibit the list after each tool to identify the problems.

The PRA consultants partner with residents to thoroughly exhaust possible problems that may come up later and take appropriate actions. Problems can be easily identified in social groups i.e. youth, women and men. The list becomes one long list through consensus. The purpose for this is to organize community information into a manageable structure for the community members to asses and rank. The PRA consultants, the technical advisors, officials and NGO or CBO directors from the community should all be involved.

Problem prioritization

After the problems are identified, they are ranked according to importance. A list of ten top problems and possible solutions and coping strategies are discussed and documented. A solution can be listed for more than one problem.

Pair wise ranking

Opportunities are identified during data gathering analysis and synthesis. Pair wise ranking is when the community identifies the ten most pressing problems, paired two by two. The top two problems that receive the most votes are first to receive attention and a community action plan. Solutions are ranked based on locally accepted criteria such as sustainability, stability, equitability, productivity, technical feasibility, social cultural feasibility, and cost time benefit. Opportunities can also be ranked by use of pair wise ranking.

Creation of a community action plan (CAP)

The concrete output of the PRA exercise is the CAP. It's a record of the entire community's priorities and stability. The plan can help external donors / implementing agencies determined whether the community plan is aligned with their own priorities for funding.

The CAP covers several issues

- (i) Development priorities for individual groups
- (ii) Work schedule
- (iii) Identification of areas where the community needs external assistance

Emphasis should be made on the importance of community implementation and monitoring. The CAP becomes a reference point for the development in the community.

Implementation of the CAP

The work is performed by the community members themselves, assisted by government organizations and NGOs working in the areas. All institutions, church leaders NGOs, self-help groups' local extensions, local leaders etc may be called upon to continue giving technical advice to the community. After or during the PRA exercise, the local groups involved are coordinated by one of the leaders for follow-ups, to gather materials, and get commitments and backing from institutions and government officials. A community development committee will be formed to manage and monitor progress

Participation, monitoring and evaluation

Committees that are formed are kept aware of the status of their development activities and are responsible for revising and refining the implementation strategies. All projects, programs and activities following the implementation of the CAP are continually monitored and periodically evaluated to keep on track with the initial expectations through community collaboration.

Conclusion

Many elements play a role in the fight against poverty including climate change, biodiversity degradation, promotion of environmental protection, and sustainable development. A community's involvement in problem solving will create sustainable and appropriate solutions to the challenges that rural communities face.