

‘Everyone is doing something and calling it PRA’
A Critical Reflection on Participatory Methods in Development

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Abstract. The present paper argues that implementing participatory methods which go beyond consultation involves a wide range of difficulties. Even very careful implementation, which demands a range of skills and critical awareness of the identified problems, can not eliminate all of the issues raised. On the contrary, the mainstreaming of participation has in many instances counteracted its underlying ideals. However, cases of bad practice should not justify writing off the entire approach.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, development interventions have come under increased criticism for the bureaucratic, top-down and centre-outwards approach which have characterised them (Chambers 2008: 49) and the ‘cognitive authority’ that was exercised over other people (Nussbaum 2000). Practitioners and scholars alike called for more responsive, participatory and people-centred approaches and since the late 1990s the *Sustainable Livelihoods Approach* (SLA) has become the new, widely-employed paradigm in international development discourse (Mdee 2002: 6).¹ The SLA as a particular ‘way of thinking about the objectives, scope and priorities for development’ (IDS 2011a) is based on a set of principles, namely that any development intervention should be people-centred, responsive and participatory as well as dynamic, multi-level, conducted in partnership and sustainable (IDS 2011b). Emphasis is laid on a bottom-up approach which aims to understand the target group’s perceptions of poverty and well-being, and enables them to identify and formulate their own priorities and desired futures (livelihood outcomes), and to plan and act accordingly (Chambers 1997: 156), recognising and drawing upon already existing resources (Hickey & Mohan 2004b: 3, 18; cf. Chambers 2008: xv).² Thus, the framework not only calls for a considerable increase in the involvement of the target group in development projects, but also

¹ For the conceptual origins of the SLA, see Chambers & Conway (1992); for a detailed description of the approach, see IDS (2011a, 2011b).

² Five distinct forms of capital are recognised in the SLA: Human, social, natural, physical and financial capital.

attempts a reversal of the conventional classification of ‘uppers’ (experts) and ‘lowers’ (recipients).³

The realisation of these ideals before and during an intervention requires methods for target group participation which go beyond simple consultation. Therefore, a wide range of participatory methodologies have been developed, many of them summarised under the concept *Participatory Rural Appraisal* (PRA),⁴ which are employed from the outset and throughout the entire programme or project cycle. These methods have been designed and are constantly adapted to empower people to present and analyse their livelihoods and to identify and formulate priorities and strategies for action. They are meant to enable people to collect and analyse the information they themselves need to improve *their* lives in ways *they* decide (Mayoux 2005; cf. Chambers 1997; Cornwall 2011).

However, it has often been questioned whether the currently employed methodologies do indeed reflect the underlying principles of the approach and further the stated goal of empowerment.⁵ Despite increasing criticism, participatory methodologies have moved since the mid-1980s ‘virtually unchecked from the margins to the mainstream of development’ (Hickey & Mohan 2004b: 3).

This paper will examine some of the main difficulties and pitfalls related to participatory methods. It will be pointed out that a truly participatory implementation of these methods demands high levels of reflexivity and awareness of the investigated dynamics on the part of the facilitator in order to minimise their impact. However, the mainstreaming of participation in development which occurred during the last decade has in many instances counteracted this ideal.

³ Despite his calls for a reversal of the uppers-lowers-dichotomy, Chambers (2008) himself like many others does not overcome this mental framework but reproduces it by constantly referring to ‘the poor’ or ‘the lowers’ (see Mohan 2001). It has to be questioned whether this dichotomy can be overcome by simply redefining ‘uppers’. Instead of ‘reversing’, an abolition of ‘uppers’ and ‘lowers’ is likely to be more successful. The present paper will therefore avoid normative terms by speaking of ‘target group’, ‘participants’ or ‘stakeholders’.

⁴ The history of participation in development is much longer than usually acknowledged; for example, Hickey & Mohan (2004b: 5-8) refer to colonial community development during the 1940s as participatory. Today, Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) and Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP) are often used synonymously to PRA, even though they have developed out of different contexts. For other participatory methodologies, see Chambers (2008: 93). The work of Robert Chambers (e.g. 1994) has been particularly influential in the proliferation of participatory approaches in both development research and projects, however, as Scoones (2011: 123) argues, PRA has primarily been developed from field workers, not in universities.

⁵ For a comprehensive overview of a wide range of criticisms of participatory methods in development, see Cooke & Kothari (2001) and Hickey & Mohan (2004a).

Who are the experts?

The fundamental principle of both the SLA and participatory methods is a belief in the value of local knowledge and the aim of empowerment and self-help rather than paternalism. Project workers are supposed to take on the role of facilitator rather than expert or donor, and the stakeholders themselves are supposed to generate knowledge and decide on objectives and strategies. However, whether this process can be realised as envisaged is highly questionable.

First of all, it remains questionable whether ‘development experts’ can easily shake off the professionalism by which they define themselves and the role which they have acquired over several years: Will they be able to abandon old roles which were defined by top-down teaching behaviour, speaking from the position of the more powerful donor (Schönhuth 1996: 32; cf. Francis 2001: 81; Cornwall 2004: 84)? Subtle markers such as dominant body language or speech behaviour might reintroduce these hierarchies into nominally equal participatory exercises. Furthermore, ‘facilitators’ are also confronted with expectations which contradict this new role: Krummacher (2004: 67) finds that during PRA in Kenya, facilitators were constantly referred to as ‘teachers’. In this context, actions which are intended to reduce the power gap, such as sitting on the ground, can make participants feel very uncomfortable (Grace Carswell, pers. comm.),⁶ and using materials such as beans for scoring might be regarded as ‘unmodern’ and inadequate and thus discourage the participation of some stakeholders.

Whether the facilitators want it or not, development projects often create a patron-client relationship between facilitators and participants (Mosse 2001: 26). In this regard, one may wonder whether it is possible *not* to represent the development agency which is always associated with resources (Francis 2001: 80).

Another problem arises from the participants’ knowledge or assumptions about the donor’s profile or interest, the so called *development effect* (Stirrat 1996: 81). Mosse pointed out that the aims of a project ‘clearly influence the way in which people construct their “needs”’ (2001: 20-23, cf. 2005; Lavigne-Delville et al. 2001: 11).⁷ Thus, participants frame their ‘needs’ in terms of what they know or assume

⁶ In contrast to these findings, Chambers (2002) advocates a ‘democracy of the ground’, arguing that sitting, mapping and talking at eye level helps to break down hierarchies.

⁷ Although the aim of a project should not be known from the outset but identified in cooperation with the assumed beneficiaries, most of these might have assumptions about the aims of certain NGOs or development agencies prior to PRA workshops, while the latter are bound by long-term strategies or donor agendas (Cornwall 2003: 1327; cf. Mosse 2005). A normative dilemma arises

the agency will be able to deliver and thus secure ‘known benefits [...] that might have been jeopardized by some more complex and differentiated statement of preferences’ (2001: 21). Mosse thus argues that participatory exercises produce ‘knowledge *for* action and not *about* livelihoods’ (2005: 95, italics in orig.). According to him, participants are ‘equipped to produce knowledge that the project needed’, while their ‘needs’ are strongly conditioned by project deliverables (2005: 96). Even if facilitators try to exercise little guidance, PRA exercises might thus result in participants simply parroting the discourse and preferred solutions of the ‘experts’ (Cornwall 2004: 84).⁸ More generally, Rossi calls participatory development interventions an ‘offer-driven process’ (Neubert 2005: 255, cit. in Rossi 2006: 45), ‘which relies on sensitization to create a demand for the types of goods and services that projects can supply at any one time’ (Rossi 2006: 46).

From taking part to participation

‘Getting a seat at the table?’

Apart from the role of donors and facilitators, participatory processes are also complicated by other issues. One of the accentuated advantages of PRA is that the generated outputs such as maps, piles or diagrams are visual, tangible, can combine quantitative as well as qualitative data, and can give insights into sensitive subjects such as gendered power relations (Chambers 2008: 125-126). Methods such as matrix scoring, organisational/Venn diagramming and wealth-rankings have been adopted and are used almost all over the world (Chambers 2008: 134), as they are viewed as enabling even illiterate and innumerate people to participate (Cooke 2004: 48).⁹ It is assumed that vulnerable and subordinate groups are thereby given an equal opportunity to participate and voice their opinions.

However, this supposed inclusiveness is hard to fulfil: Mosse (2005: 75) recounts considerable difficulty in motivating people to participate in PRA workshops, which tended to be dominated by the local elite. Members of the target group were unwittingly absent for reasons such as work, temporary migration,

when participants’ priorities contradict basic principles or long-term development goals such as increasing public welfare, equality or sustainability, see Cornwall (2003: 1328).

⁸ Mosse (1993: 12) also relates that the homogenous portrayal of ‘communities’ influences the way in which they represent themselves, namely as homogeneous and showing solidarity. The homogenous voice is then mistakenly interpreted as a lack of different interests.

⁹ However, participatory methods are still critiqued as being ethno-centric (see Cooke 2001; Mdee 2002), as facilitators assume rational thinking and participatory methods demand literacy with regard to visual representations of livelihoods.

trade, education and others, and if locally present they were occupied or not interested in taking part in workshops.

Even if facilitators are able to generate a non-random sample in order to hear as many voices as possible and not only to represent existing patterns of power, questions of power remain. Participants do not act in a social vacuum, rather, PRA sessions create public and formal social contexts (Krummacher 2004: 39; cf. Mosse 1993), 'within which freedom of speech is not equally shared but on the contrary reflects inequalities of power' (Lavigne-Delville et al. 2001: 9).¹⁰ Since the spaces in which sessions take place are infused with existing relations of power, accessing them is more difficult for some than for others (Cornwall 2004: 80): Traditional domesticity for instance tends to inhibit women's participation in events perceived as public and formal (Mosse 1993: 16, 2005: 85).

Cornwall eloquently observes that 'having a voice clearly depends on more than getting a seat at the table' (2004: 84). Thus, even if they are nominally present, marginalised groups are often excluded from articulating their interests and needs (Floquet & Mongbo 2000: 277, cit. in Krummacher 2004: 40), for example if they lack skills such as language fluency or, more importantly, because they feel intimidated or cowed, particularly when in unfamiliar spaces or in the presence of authorities or 'experts' (Kapoor 2002: 106; Cornwall 2004: 84; cf. Cornwall 2003).

More fundamentally, Vokral (1994: 42) argues that the idea of democratic decision-making which underlies participatory methodologies is not always compatible with prevailing ways of taking decisions (cf. Henkel & Stirrat 2001: 180), while Schönhuth (1996: 34) points out that one should not assume that all participants will be willing to relinquish their knowledge in the public sphere, rather, they may deliberately provide false or misleading information in order to protect their knowledge for whatever reason.

For instance, disadvantaged groups might prefer not to voice their opinion in public settings because of fear. In some cases, taking part in participatory activities resulted in bodily harm for some participants, for instance when women were later punished by their husbands (Chambers 2008: 164) or PRA exercises resulted in violent confrontations between different castes (Shah & Shah 1995). In

¹⁰ Despite internal inequalities and power structures, facilitators often assume an idealised notion of rural communities as fixed, homogenous and harmonic entities. On this 'myth of community', see Guijt & Shah (1998a) and Mohan (2001). The same holds true for other assumed groups as 'the' women (see Cornwall 2003).

addition, PRA can expose people to danger when they describe illegal or non-conformist behaviour (Chambers 2008: 163).

Having a voice and being heard

Even when all participants engage in active participation, pre-existing hierarchies come into play: Arguments are differently respected and weighted by other participants (cf. Kapoor 2002: 105), some speakers are better equipped to make themselves heard and others are labelled right from the start because of their social standing or even the accent or words they use (Cornwall 2004: 84, cf. Kohn 2000). Mosse furthermore argues that ‘dominant groups are able to generalise the particular’ (1993: 16) and make their private concerns public ‘by endorsing and putting on record dominant views’ (1993: 13; cf. Cornwall 1998: 48; Kapoor 2002; Lavigne-Delville et al. 2001: 10).

However, it is not only those with higher social standing who might disregard others’ concerns, but those who have spent most of their lives at the receiving end of prejudices often have internalised discrimination themselves and therefore have difficulties imagining themselves as actors, let alone agents, whose voice is worthy of being heard (Cornwall 2004: 84; cf. Freire 1972).¹¹

In the light of these difficulties, several authors have pointed to the danger that ‘PRA can work to hide local relations of power. [In particular, the emphasis] on consensus in data expression and presentation is [...] prone to the silencing of marginal or “dissident” views’ (Goebel 1998: 284, cit. in Krummacher 2004: 39). Men in particular are often identified as dominating group proceedings, which is why Chambers (2008: 142; cf. Kapoor 2002: 109) calls for separate mapping to disclose issues and realities which are important to women and children. However, Cornwall (1998: 50) has argued that the grouping of men and women is far from being sufficient as these groups in themselves are highly diverse and structured by unequal power.¹² But while this current practice of separating different groups may ‘help create space for alternative world-views to emerge and to be articulated’

¹¹ Such an internalisation of inequalities is particularly well conceptualised by Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* (1977: 78-88), which he uses to explain why members of subordinate groups often unconsciously behave in ways that reproduce and reinforce their subordination. On the example of women, see Bourdieu (2002).

¹² Ironically, the gender-aware approach tends to ignore the voices especially of young, uneducated, and jobless or landless men, who are often marginalised (Cornwall 2003: 1331). Welbourne (1991) identified four axes of differences within villages where she worked, namely age, gender, poverty-wealth and ethnicity. However, the axes of difference can certainly be expanded to other categories which might also overlap such as caste, religion, political allegiance or origin.

(Cornwall 2004: 86; cf. Chambers 1997) and identify issues critical to women or other subordinate groups, these differences run the risk of ‘disappear[ing] into the melting pot of an “average community plan”’ (Guijt & Shah 1998b: 8). In this case, power relations are not necessarily challenged, but rather intensified (Mayoux 1995: 252; Stirrat 1996: 77; Crawley 1998: 31).¹³

Group dynamics & response effects

More generally and even in relatively egalitarian groups, the output of participatory exercises might not necessarily represent the participants’ diverse opinions. There are several well-known response effects which can severely influence the behaviour of participants and thus the generated data.¹⁴ Furthermore, group dynamics such as peer pressure or group think, for example when all participants try to reach a consensus without conflict, can serve to conceal diversity and generate mean values only (Cooke 2001: 102). Moreover, Cooke (2001: 102) points to the difficulty of interpreting silence correctly.

The interface between thought and action

As has become clear, in contrast to seemingly straight-forward representations, implementing participatory methods involves a wide range of difficulties, and the simple application of PRA alone does not guarantee empowerment, local ownership or equal participation in project decision-making. Even a very careful and differentiated implementation of such methodologies, which demands a range of skills and critical awareness of the aforementioned problems and the development of creative, locally-adapted ways to minimise their impact, can not eliminate all of the issues raised.

However, in practice participation has become ‘the new tyranny’ (Cooke & Kothari 2001; cf. Hickey & Mohan 2004b: 4), a mainstream practice which is implemented in different ways, as indicated by the critical statement of an NGO manager quoted in title of this paper (cited in Cornwall & Pratt 2011: 265). ‘Participation’ is treated by some agencies ‘as a technical method of project work rather than as a political methodology of empowerment’ (Hickey & Mohan 2004b:

¹³ Crucially, these concerns assume that these groups indeed hold differing views. A different dilemma, however, is posed when women for example prefer interventions which reinforce their subordination (see Cornwall 2003: 1328).

¹⁴ Several effects, biases and paradoxes are well-known in the context of qualitative research, such as question effects, deference effects, the recency effect, the central tendency bias, the *Abilene Paradox*, or the *Pygmalion Effect*; see Bernard (2000), Cooke (2001) and Chambers (2002).

11). Thus, Cornwall and Gaventa (2001; cf. Mosse 2005) notice large differences between the rhetoric of participation (participants as *makers and shapers*) and the international mainstream practice of seeking compliance with pre-shaped agendas and pre-determined development ventures (participants as *users and choosers*). Instead of being internalised and embodied, 'participatory' methodologies are integrated into top-down-management and 'used to legitimate the very approaches and methods PRA practitioners have sought to replace' (Chambers 1994: 1441; cf. Cornwall 2004: 84).

Due to this mechanisation, the approach itself has lost its value: Instead of being a creative and open process, 'participation' becomes an empty ritual (Cornwall & Pratt 2011: 265) and either serves as an alibi, used 'to legitimize action, to explain, justify, validate higher policy goals' (Mosse 2001: 27), or is well-meant but flawed in its implementation. The imperfection is among others due to schematic reliance on manuals, lack of time,¹⁵ or limited training, reflexivity and awareness about power dynamics or inter-group relations described above on the part of the facilitator (Stirrat 1996: 86; Kapoor 2002).

Ways forward

However, cases of bad practice should not justify writing off the entire approach (McGee 2002: 107, cit. in Krummacher 2004: 75). Indeed, as most critics of PRA do not provide counter-proposals and in the absence of viable alternatives, it might still be the best way to attempt a more inclusive practice in development interventions in line with the principles of the SLA and to counter top-down approaches (Hickey & Mohan 2004b: 12). In order to improve participatory processes, scholars and practitioners should learn from experience and errors (cf. Chambers 2008: xvi-xviii) and aim to adapt, develop and expand the range of methods further. Anthropological research in particular can provide valuable insights to improve PRA processes. Furthermore, in the context of the SLA participatory methods can be expanded or supplemented by other techniques such

¹⁵ Many scholars (e.g. Mosse 1993: 6; Vokral: 1994: 42; Chambers 1994: 1441; Schönhuth 1996: 33, Cornwall & Pratt 2011: 270) have critiqued participatory methods as 'short-cut social science' (Cornwall & Flemming 1995: 8) or as 'quick and dirty' (Richards 1995: 15), as it does not allow sufficient time for building rapport and thus for gaining an emic perspective and ethnographic depth. However, at the same time it remains questionable whether long-term studies are feasible due to financial and time constraints.

as immersion.¹⁶ However, caution should be taken that the focus on the local does not result in the negation of structural forces on the national or global level (Hickey & Mohan 2004b: 12; cf. Mohan & Stokke 2000).¹⁷

Including the assumed beneficiaries in the whole project cycle from the outset until evaluation can help to identify their realities (cf. Chambers 1997) and preferred futures and thus do more to improve their lives. Therefore, in addition to ensuring the high quality of participatory exercises, it remains crucial to ascertain that findings generated in this way are constantly fed back into the project or policy-making process at all stages in order to avoid the corruption or re-framing of specific and diverse needs by paternalistic behaviour or preconceived ideas (cf. Mosse 2005).

¹⁶ Short-term immersion was employed in several projects, see Jupp (2007), PLA (2007) and Chambers (2008: 159-162). This technique might answer the call for research which is more ethnographic in orientation (see e.g. Stirrat 1996: 82), however the timeframe is usually very limited.

¹⁷ Williams argues that by focussing on the local and emphasising local participation, development is depoliticised as 'any blame for project failure is displaced from macro-level concerns, and re-localized on to "the people"' (2004: 93).

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