5

Social analysis in participatory rural development

David Mosse, with the KRIBP project team

- **Introduction**

This article focuses on the generation of knowledge about social relationships within participatory rural development projects. There is a growing recognition that relationships of power often set the conditions for participation in research planning and development action (Pottier, 1993; Mosse, 1994, 1995b; Scoones and Thompson, 1994; Nelson and Wright, 1995). They determine whose concerns are expressed, who has access to new resources, who can adopt new public roles, and thus influence the progress of external programmes. These influences are not necessarily direct. Project benefits, for example, may reach poorer households but do so through patronage networks in which men of influence continue or extend their privileged control over local resources. Moreover, projects and their staff are also powerful social actors who influence development choices (Mosse, 1995b).

However, the question remains, how can rural development projects analyse such power relations? What methods are there for the analysis of local social processes? Development practitioners have generally rejected conventional social science research methods for the analysis of social relationships. The approaches of anthropologists and historians in particular are rejected on practical grounds. They rest on the luxury of long-term research which no project can afford. Indeed, the managerial need to compress and rationalise learning has provided a major impetus to the development of rapid and participatory research and appraisal methods (eg. RRA and PRA).

PRA has often proved very effective at generating agro-ecological and (some) economic information. However, it has not proved particularly good for the kind of analysis of social relationships which projects need: information on patterns of dominance and dependence, credit relationships, factions and spheres of political influence and patronage etc. This article suggests some reasons for this in the context of rural development in India. Then, using a project example, it shows how anthropological approaches of participant observation and process documentation might be useful for social research in projects.

- **Understanding social relations through PRA**

In India, PRA methods have now spread well beyond the confines of the NGO and academic circles where they were developed and where their use was characterised by innovation and flexibility. PRA methods have become part of guidelines for major state initiatives, such as the new national watershed development programme, in which speed, scale and bureaucratic management give shape to their use. As a tool in rapid micro-planning, PRA activity often takes the form of short (two to three day) village-level group exercises combining speed and participation.

In an earlier paper (Mosse, 1994) I described some of the problems experienced with this sort of 'public' PRA at the earliest stages of the Kribhco Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project (KRIBP), a participatory farming systems development project in tribal western India. PRA methods were used to identify priority problems and to establish basic socio-economic and agro-ecological knowledge for

village-level planning and implementation. An important methodological question was whether PRA could enable project 'outsiders' to understand the social context of their initiatives sufficiently to work effectively within local communities. The first, and most immediate, issue was the usefulness of PRA in problem identification. Could the project team learn enough about local interests and relationships to distinguish underlying community problems from superficial symptoms, private interests, personal ambitions, expectations or ideas about the project? Secondly, could PRA enable the team to learn enough about local social relations (kin ties, factions, patronage links etc.) to link project activities to social networks and so ensure that project initiatives would be managed and sustained by people?

Overall, significant constraints were experienced in using PRA for social analysis. First, while within KRIBP PRA techniques were in many respects successful at generating agro-ecological information, they were less helpful in revealing the structures of power and influence within a village or in helping project workers identify the social relations which shaped 'public' opinion. PRA techniques themselves do not seem well suited to the representation of different types of social relationship. Diagramming methods (such as chapatti diagrams) which can effectively represent these have yet to be developed or refined (eg., Howes, 1991). Perceiving the need for such knowledge the KRIBP project drew on anthropological methods and used genealogies as a semi-participatory method (Mosse and Mehta, 1993). These have been widely used in the project, and together with social maps (maps of settlements marking and numbering individual households) have provided a helpful framework for interpreting, for example, participation in project activities (including PRA itself). Nonetheless genealogies offer only a static and formal picture of social relations, and are therefore inadequate for grasping the shifting dynamics of power in the village.

A second set of problems arose from the use of PRA in the early stages in the project. The project had not worked in this tribal area before and in some villages the recent experience of other development interventions raised uncertainties and anxieties (*"These people are agents of the Forest Department, the project will remove our encroachments and take over our lands"*). Under such circumstances, information on internal community relations is likely to be fairly well guarded. Outsiders' knowledge of these things will be highly constrained by the community's 'official' view of itself as harmonious and unified (Mosse, 1994). Even anthropologists engaged in long term participant observation fieldwork have found such public projections of 'community' hard to penetrate.

A potentially more serious set of problems arises from the *public* (eg., village-wide) contexts of participatory planning. While by no means the only forum for these methods, the use of PRA for rapid community-wide resource mapping and planning often does involve public settings. The first point here is that *participation* in the PRA events themselves is socially determined. In particular, PRAs can be orchestrated locally in ways which exclude divergent opinions or those of non-dominant social groups such as factions, minor lineages or clans, distant hamlets, the young or women (Mosse, 1994). So public expressions of community interests may disproportionately reflect the private interests of dominant groups or individuals. This indeed was the early experience of the KRIBP project, although this was subsequently the focus of much corrective attention. Most obviously the participation of women was limited and in various ways constrained.

With the advantage of greater knowledge of local social structures, it is now clear that in almost all cases, PRA took place under the control of key village leaders (and their groups). These were often the same leaders through whom the project had gained 'entry' into villages, and whose interests feature prominently in the earliest needs identification. Local influentials exerted their control by direct and indirect means. PRA activities took place on their land or by their houses, in public spaces or social contexts over which they held sway (Box 1).

2

_____

<table>
<tr><td>

BOX 1
LOCAL CONTROL OF PRA

In late 1992 it seemed that field workers in one village should be commended for their incorporation of *bhajans* (informal devotional singing sessions) into the PRA event as an example of placing PRA activity within locally understood informal contexts. Six months later it was clear that the *bhajan* had served to mark the PRA proceedings (and subsequent project activity) as the province of a restricted and dominant group within the village. The *bhajan* group was dominated by older men and drawn from a clan-based social group (headed by a village faction leader) who claimed a measure of separation and social superiority over other villagers. The project's incorporation of the *bhajan* only served to underscore the (self) exclusion of other groups in the village.

</td></tr>
</table>

The important point here is that public participatory research methods are unlikely to prove good instruments for the analysis of local power relations since they are shaped by the very social relations which are being investigated. In fact, a fairly good understanding of local social networks, the nature of dominance, patterns and styles of leadership, faction and alliance, and gender relations is a necessary pre-requisite for the organisation of effective PRA based work.

Significantly, in KRIBP, understanding of these relations came not so much from the direct use of PRA methods, but rather from participant observation and critical review of the PRA activity itself. Sometimes this is difficult. How can non-attendance, silence, or passive agreement be recorded? And yet the essential material for our social analysis is not found so much in the agreed output (on map, chart or diagram), but in the absences, the gaps and corrections, the after-thoughts, the errors and false starts, the disagreements or conflicts, even the complete failure of a PRA exercise (as recorded in Mosse, 1994). Through these we get glimpses of how power operates in the community. This highlights the importance of observation and review of project activity more generally as a source of knowledge on social relations.

- **Social knowledge through project action?**

Project action and the observation and analysis of events can be an important source of social learning. As Appadurai (1989) has pointed out, conventional interview-based research techniques (and, one can add, PRA methods too) usually try to capture the identifiable net outcomes of social processes, like organisation and leadership structures, new linkages, input supply lines, and community decisions. However, much important social data are found, not only in the *post facto* outcomes, but also in the quality of transactions, in the relationships implied and in the aspirations and expectations involved. Implementing small project activities, and observing and recording some micro-events or transactions around these, can, in new ways, help us understand social relations and power. In essence this is the objective of *process documentation*.

The KRIBP project was able to use small project actions as part of a strategy for 'village entry' and 'rapport building', to generate social information. These activities included farmer crop trials, medical camps, animal health camps, well deepening, and starting informal schools. They began as responses to direct requests to project staff from villagers, 'expressed needs' (from initial PRAs), KRIBP-initiated ideas and activities, available government programmes, responses to technologies seen during 'exposure visits' and so forth. Although at times *ad hoc* in their implementation, we now know that these activities also provided a way for the project to challenge misplaced expectations and explain and negotiate its participatory approach and poverty focus. However, I want to focus here on the usefulness of these entry-point activities for acquiring social knowledge.

Early on, field workers were encouraged to observe patterns of participation and non-participation in these activities. In a team workshop, for example, they developed contrasting profiles of active and non-active individuals, households or social groups based on these observations. We were able to link wealth, power and participation in two ways. Firstly, active participants in the project tended to be the better endowed, socially prominent

3

and articulate members of the villages. Secondly, participation and access to the project was itself a manifestation of power and prominence in local communities.

By distinguishing between 'active' and 'non-active' villagers a range of social differences were highlighted: in wealth (assets), security, degrees of dependency, social status, kin group membership, the ability to participate in social networks (eg. those used for labour sharing or for mobilising marriage payments), education, influence and articulateness. Non-economic dimensions of 'wealth', such as access to social resources, were especially important in accounting for patterns of participation. Better placed individuals were, moreover, perceived as speaking for others and being knowledgeable, open, innovative, cooperative, clear sighted and in other ways easier to work with. 'The poor' by contrast were perceived as having no standing, being spoken for by others, lacking knowledge or clarity, being irresponsible and pessimistic, and pursuing immediate benefits. Project workers understood better why it would be harder and more risky to work with 'the poor' (Mosse *et al.*, forthcoming).

Observations on the progress of project activities also helped to reveal the dynamics of power and influence and the quality of social relationships involved. One important area concerned styles of leadership and patterns of influence (Box 2).

Often headmen and leaders were able to influence some, but not all, sections of their village. Through the partial collapse of project activities, or the collapse of collective action, it was possible to observe the patterns and styles of influence of given leaders. Examples include the selective withdrawal of households from tree planting or a crop loan scheme. In other cases influence was expressed in the capacity to distribute (rather than obstruct) project benefits. By re-positioning themselves in terms of the project's stated 'poverty' goals and its intention to direct benefits to the poor, for example, leaders aimed to ensure that it was *their poor* who benefited.

> **BOX 2**
> **THE DYNAMICS OF POWER**
>
> In several villages, headmen who had initially expressed support for the project and even hosted PRAs, began (in various covert ways) to withdraw support or to obstruct project ventures when it became clear that the kind of activities KRIBP would undertake (low cost, self-help measures and community action) were not those which would support their existing styles of leadership. This leadership is often exercised through patronage and through brokering the delivery of high subsidy government schemes or public assets (eg., wells, roads, buildings, electricity connections) to villages. In fact, some initiatives such as crop loans directly threatened existing money lending and land mortgaging activities. In several cases leaders attempted to capture resources made available through the project in, for example, withdrawal from agreements to share saplings from tree nurseries

In sum, patterns of participation are not only local networks of influence. The implementation of small scale activities highlights the significance of factors such as clan and religious difference, patronage, factional conflict, and leadership struggles. In this way critical reflection on project action generated knowledge about social relationships which is generally not easily accessible through conventional interview methods, or those of rapid appraisal.

- **Strategies for action**

In KRIBP, the social dynamics were highly local. Knowledge of these through an analysis of events helped in the formulation of village, or hamlet-specific development strategies. Understanding local social structures also helped define the best opportunities for project work and helped determine the social conditions for effective participation. In certain villages, Community Organisers tried to avoid manipulative leaders and the problems of working with groups of poor who are clients of village leaders, and to identify spaces within the social structure where the project could gain some foothold.

A recurring component of success in early project activities was the ability to bypass but not confront unsupportive leaders, and yet

_____

obtain the authoritative backing which new ventures in these villages required. Finding the right spaces in which to work was often a matter of identifying an appropriate combination of authority and independence from patronage. A general lesson from early project work was that it was most effective where it left formal structures intact, and found informal contexts for innovation. In some cases this meant shifting attention from the older to the younger generation, from the central to marginal hamlets, or to work with independent clans or returned migrants (see Mosse *et al.*, forthcoming). From the community's point of view this was less risky. New ventures could be tried without risk of disrupting formal social relations, and leaders could observe and change their attitude to the project without losing face. Similar, more subtle shifts were also needed to identify the most appropriate ways of working with women.

It became clear from project practice that the quality of decentralised planning depended upon responsiveness to local social contexts, but that these were far more variable, rapidly changing and inaccessible than the agro-ecological contexts on which the project had gained information through PRA. It was necessary to complement PRA-based planning methods with a form of participant observation, critical (and self-critical) reflection and constant information feedback. What is significant is, firstly, that social insights were derived from a wide variety of informal settings. Secondly, these insights were necessarily external and analytical, rather than participatory.

This sort of 'process monitoring' did not meet all the project's needs for social information. But it did identify the most appropriate contexts for further learning and planning. Critical reflection on project activities resulted in a shift away from village-wide PRA towards generating information in particular hamlets and in the more informal and private space of the neighbourhood and home (Box 3). These social contexts not only broadened participation and the quality of discussions in planning, but also enabled the project to acquire social information which were difficult to handle in the earlier more 'public' PRA.

BOX 3
INFORMAL CONTEXTS FOR ANALYSING DIFFERENCE

The project needed a better grasp of *difference* within communities, among other things to monitor its gender and poverty focus, and more detail on assets, flows, labour deployment, migration and decision making.

To meet these needs neighbourhood, kin- or hamlet-based wealth ranking exercises were organised with different groups of men and women. These identified socially significant indicators and broad categories of relative disadvantage from which a very small number of individual households were selected for detailed profiling. Project workers spent time getting to know individual households, staying with them and, using a broad checklist developed for the purpose, produced descriptive profiles of representative households together with analyses of their livelihoods. Through being generated over a longer period, by focusing on informal contexts, and by taking place while other activities were in progress, the social understandings emerging from these 'livelihood analyses' were qualitatively different from those produced from the early project PRA activities. For one thing, through much improved women's participation, the gender division of labour and women's areas of influence were better understood. It was also easier to generate information which was more clearly relevant for planning.

Much of this data would not be required on a continuous basis, or from any but a few sample villages/households at the beginning of the project. But the *process* of such research nonetheless helped project workers broaden their contacts in villages and shaped their understanding of the more dynamic elements of society. House-to-house work facilitated informal conversations through which fieldworkers gradually built up a picture of local social relations on issues such as relations of debt, social obligation, land mortgage, social conflict (eg., historical feuds and witchcraft accusations) or political ambition which were less accessible to public PRAs.

As noted above, much of this social information, like that from observing activities, did not arise from *participatory* appraisal. It was not a type of 'people's

_____

knowledge'. Indeed, these insights (in some cases represented by fieldworkers in their own analytical Venn or chapatti diagrams of villager groups, factions, alliances etc.) were not, and probably *could* not have been, generated in *group* discussions by villagers. Like other analytical models, and like the knowledge gained from the critical reflection on project activities, they represented an external viewpoint. They were necessary guides to outsiders' planning interventions, but not the same as the models-in-use of villagers themselves. Of course, local people already have the sophisticated knowledge necessary for everyday social life. Often this knowledge remains tacit and need not, or cannot without risk of conflict, be made explicit. The often-used polarity between 'extractive' and 'participatory' research modes thus overlooks the fact that certain types of knowledge employed in participatory projects is *necessarily* external and analytical. Indeed, knowledge of social relationships which helps project workers identify the conditions for participation itself, to bargain with villagers on issues of equity, gender, or cost recovery, for example, is of this kind (Mosse, 1995b).

• **Conclusions and implications**

I have suggested that PRA methods need to be complemented by critical reflection on events to generate information on local social relationships. This sort of social analysis is, to an extent, external and analytical (rather than participatory), and within KRIBP, involved facilitated participant observation and process documentation of project action. PRA training had only a small part to play in developing fieldworkers' ability to acquire a sophisticated understanding of social dynamics and to apply this knowledge in village-specific development strategies.

This form of process documentation is not, however, particularly demanding of project resources, and in practice amounts to no more than giving attention to and placing value on what is going on anyway, namely outsider fieldworkers engaging in rural communities and adapting their approach in the light of their experience of local social life. Field-level reviews draw on and make explicit the practical knowledge of social relations used by project staff working at the village level. This does, at least initially, require external facilitation in the form of some trained social scientist who can introduce key questions, prompt analysis and document important observations. Moreover, to be of value to the project as a whole this requires a monitoring system which regularly feeds such observations back into project decision making. But most importantly, it requires a management system which is supportive of critical reflection and responsive to information feedback.

In practice, however, the support of self-critical information feedback is extremely difficult in most organisations. Organisational cultures which value, reward and use sociological insight in programme decision making and strategy development are rare in both public and NGO sectors, where there are still strong tendencies towards uniform prescription, centralised decision-making and the reporting of success. Decentralised analytical skills are often precariously placed, viewed with suspicion, and easily undermined or routinised into standard procedures. As has been the experience with PRA, the effectiveness of new research methods ultimately depends upon the institutional context in which they are used.

It is, perhaps, unrealistic to expect that the polarity between the 'positive practitioner' and the 'negative academic' (Chambers, 1983) will be resolved in the person of the self-critical fieldworker on a widespread and institutionalised basis.

But this may not be necessary. Process monitoring of the kind illustrated here is not required everywhere, or at all times. It is important under particular conditions, such as when developing and testing new field methods, or prior to major expansion; when starting work in a new area; when initiating complex activities or introducing innovation; when selectively reviewing strategy; or training new fieldworkers. All of these conditions apply to the KRIBP project.

- **David Mosse,** Centre for Development Studies, University of Wales, Swansea, UK, and **KRIBP Project Team,** Kribhco Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project, Dahod, Gujarat, India.

REFERENCES

Appadurai, A. 1989. Small-scale techniques and large-scale objectives. In: *Conversations Between Economists and Anthropologists: Methodological issues in measuring economic change in rural India*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Chambers, R. 1983. *Rural development: Putting the last first*. Longman, London.

Howes, M., 1991. Beyond chapattis. *RRA Notes* 12. IIED, London.

Mosse, D. 1994. Authority, gender and knowledge: theoretical reflections on the practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal. *Development and Change* 25 (3): 497-526.

Mosse, D. 1995a. Local institutions and power: the history and practice of community management in the development of tank irrigation systems in south India. In: Nelson, N and Wright, S. (eds.) *Power and Participatory Development: Theory and practice.* Intermediate Technology Publications Ltd., London.

Mosse, D. 1995b. 'People's knowledge' in project planning: the limits and social conditions of participation in planning agricultural development. *ODI Agricultural Research and Extension Network Paper* 58. ODI, London.

Mosse, D., Ekande, T., Sodhi, P., Jones, S., Mehta, M., and Moitra, U. (forthcoming). Approaches to participatory planning: a review of the KRIBP experience. *KRIBP Working Paper 5.* CDS, University of Wales, Swansea, UK.

Mosse, D. and Mehta, M. 1993. Genealogies as a method of social mapping in PRA. *RRA Notes* 18. IIED, London.

Nelson, N. and Wright, S. 1995. *Power and participatory development: Theory and practice.* IT Publications Ltd., London.

Pottier, J. (ed) 1993. *Practising Development: Social science perspectives*. Routledge, London.

7