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Whither children's hour? An experimental PRA among labouring rural children

N. Narayanasamy, B.R. Dwaraki, B. Tamilmani and R. Ramesh

• Introduction

Normally in any village meetings, children are the first to come and last to leave, no matter what the meeting is convened for, who are to be addressed and what are the transactions. However in the use of PRA, the emphasis is normally placed on adults and the elders. Children are considered more of a hindrance than a help.

This is counter to our experience at Gandhigram Rural Institute in Tamil Nadu, India where it has been seen that children are potential informants. Our observations on many an occasion in villages have been that children could be directly used in PRA exercises as active participants and not mere spectators. As a result it occurred to us that it would be worth trying a PRA exclusively with children.

Thus a three day workshop was held in June 1994 with the stated objectives being to:

- Explore whether the different PRA methods could be used with children.
- Examine whether children have an understanding of the various dimensions of family and social life.

We collaborated with an NGO called Peace Trust based at Dindigul which is serving children in particular. They chose for the workshop a village 10km from Dindigul, called Gandhinagar where they ran an Education Centre for Children (ECCL).

The PRA team included 10 members of staff from various faculties of Gandhigram Rural Institute and 4 field staff from the Peace Trust.

Figure 1. We know what we are doing....



There were around 75 children - both boys and girls, most of whom were in their early adolescence (below 14 years). Although there were three above 14 years of age, they realised that the programme was meant for children and hence did not interfere in the process.

On all three days, the PRA team formed three groups, each one conducting a particular exercise which included village mapping, time-use analysis, key indicators of well-being and poverty, seasonality analysis, semi-structured interviews, matrix, case analysis and focus group discussions. A selection of these exercises are described here.

• **Time use analysis**

Objective

The objective of this exercise was to know how children spend their time.

Process

As we reached the village around 6.30 pm we met only a few school going children. The working children were yet to return from their work; so we waited for them. After some time, we could see the working children returning from the nearby town after the day's work. It was around 8.30 pm. The children looked tired, but they joined us straight away without even going home. They started participating in the PRA exercises with eagerness and enthusiasm.

A small number from the PRA team interacted with them, asking what they felt about their work and their family condition. Initially, there was some reluctance on the part of the boys and girls to talk. Later they come closer and their initial hesitation disappeared. Gradually, they started talking and giving views and opinions on many matters.

After some time, we interviewed three working children at random. All three children vividly described what their activities are in a day and how they use their time. One example is shown in Box 1.

BOX 1

DAILY ROUTINE OF ARUMUGAM (A BOY WORKING IN A VERMICELLI FACTORY)	
6 am	Wake up, bathe.
6.45 am	Breakfast.
7 am	Comb hair and dress.
7.15 am	Go to work (vermicelli factory)
8 am	Start work.
2.30 pm	Lunch break.
1 pm	Work starts again.
7 pm	Leave work with Rs.1-50 (daily rate), buy groundnuts or biscuits for 50 paise. Play with friends on the way home.
8pm	Reach home, wash, supper.
9 pm	Sleep or sometimes attend ECCL
10 pm	Sleep.

Observations

- The boys are made to cook food at home before they for their regular work.
- The hours of work is more than 11 a day.
- Girls below the age of 14 years are shouldering the responsibility of a 35 year old women.
- There seems to be virtually no scope for mental or physical development of working children.
- Working children are blissfully ignorant of their bleak future.

• **Case analysis**

Some of the key informants from the time-use analysis exercise were chosen to be case studies. The situation of one child is described in Box 2.

BOX 2
CASE STUDY OF
MS. C (A GIRL TENDING BUFFALO)

Ms. C dropped out of school after she failed in the third standard. Her parents, both landless agricultural labourers, are unlettered. Her family consists of eight members, including her parents.

For Ms. C the day starts at 6 am. She sweeps the house, helps her mother cook, fetches water from a far-off well, cleans the vessels and takes care of her younger sister and brother. Her most difficult job is carrying water from a far-off well, two pots every time, one on the head and the other on the hip, three times in the morning. After her mother leaves for work around 8 am Ms. C has her breakfast and cleans the vessels before taking the buffalo for grazing. She plays with her friends while the buffalo are grazing and returns home around 3 pm. for lunch.

She says that during the summer they often do not have enough food to eat three meals a day. When asked whether then she does not feel hungry, she says that she is accustomed to it and that if she plays with her friends she forgets the hunger.

When asked whether she does not like to go to school she says, she would like to very much as she dreams of becoming a teacher one day, but poverty does not allow her dreams to come true.

Key indicators of well-being and poverty

Objective

To understand children's perceptions of well-being and poverty.

Process

After creating an informal setting and favourable environment by asking one of the children to sing a song, the interviewer asked every boy and girl in the group the amount of money each one has in his/her pocket at that moment. Each one showed 10 paise, 25 paise, 50 paise etc. while some did not have any money. Then the interviewer enquired as to who among them was rich/poor at that moment. They showed the boy who had many coins as rich and showed those who did not have any money as poor. With these examples, the interviewer asked whether there are rich and poor people in the village.

All of them answered in the affirmative. Then the interviewer asked them whom would they call rich and poor in the village. The interviewer asked them to explain the indicators they use. They made a visual presentation on the ground (Figure 2). Then they listed out the indicators for the poor and rich. These are shown in Table 1, arranged as narrated by the children themselves.

Figure 2. A proud presentation.....**Table 1. Key Indicators of well-being and poverty**

INDICATORS OF WELL-BEING	INDICATORS OF POVERTY
Own a pumpset	Fetch water from public tap/hand pump or from a far off place where there is a public well
Own a cow or bullock	
Own farming land	Landless or own a small piece of dry land and without any money to undertake agricultural operations
Have regular bank transactions	Own a sheep/goat/hen or nothing at all
Own a house	Live in a thatched house with a leaky roof or homeless
Consume rice as the staple food	Eat <i>jowar</i> and <i>bajra</i> regularly but rarely take rice
Have all stainless steel vessels	Have vessels more of mud pots, some in aluminium and a couple of stainless steel
Own jewels	
Purchase grocery items on a monthly basis	Purchase grocery items and rice daily
Possess a radio, TV, cupboard, fan and clock	
Own a motor cycle or moped	
Send their children to standard schools	
Own a latrine	Use open air defecation
Own plots either locally or in town	
Have installed a borewell in the house	
Work at a bank/office, run a big business and earn thousands; have additional income from bribe-taking	Do jobs such as weeding, daily wage earning, share cropping, transplanting, harvesting, construction works, stitching sacks, loading and unloading lorries and other odd jobs
Wear neatly washed clothes	Clothes are not properly washed and may be torn

Observations

- Children have their own clear perceptions on the indicators of well-being and poverty.
- Almost all the indicators suggested by them are quite realistic and interesting.
- In their view, owning a latrine is also an indicator of being rich.
- Children even in their early adolescence know about the corruption prevailing in the country.
- They enjoyed depicting indicators using stones, leaves, flowers, sorghum, rice, coins, etc.
- When they used a material to indicate something, they ensured that the material had some relevance to the subject under discussion. For example: bullocks were indicated by straw (i.e. feed for the bullock); goat/sheep by leaves (feed for the goat/sheep); hens/ cocks by sorghum (feed for the hen/cock); harvesting by blades; construction works by small bricks and unlettered people by charcoal.

• Focus group discussion

Objective

Focus group discussions were conducted to find out the children's understanding of the ECCL's functions.

Process

Twenty working children aged below 14 years participated. Of this 12 were female. We gave a brief introduction with some stories to ensure their attention before starting the discussions. The children grouped well and answered the questions very enthusiastically (Box 3).

BOX 3 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION ABOUT ECCL

A heavy burden is placed on the children at work. In recognition of this the ECCL tries to provide for their working needs as well as their educational needs. As perceived by the children the benefits of ECCL are that it provides books and stationery, teaches them how to sign, do arithmetic and write simple words and also helps them understand bus routes and timetables.

The children were keen to have an association and willing to pay Rs.5 each month as subscription. In addition all the children contribute 10 to 50 paise every day to a saving fund set up by ECCL. At the end of the saving plan they get something of equivalent value, like a sari, shirt or suit.

• Conclusions

Since the PRA exercises, the children's attendance at the ECCL has increased. However participation in the exercises is itself unlikely to induce significant changes in the children's life as their situation is so dependent on that of their family. However some changes have been seen after a follow-up workshop was done with the children's parents - ECCL successfully encouraged a few children to move away from child labour and back to school.

If the experiences described here are compared with ones of working with adults, it can be said that the children's ability to do most of the PRA exercises compare well with the ability of adults. For example, the children's visualisation of the village was almost as clear as it might have been among adults. In addition there is a general level of awareness of the social forces that govern their life. Their limitations are apparent only when it comes to analysing deeper problems and when it comes to thinking in specific directions.

We found doing PRA exercises with children to be real fun. Rapport building was much easier with children than with adults, possibly because they are relaxed and uninhibited, have no expectations and assume less about the facilitators and about the PRA exercises

themselves. In short the experience was a thrilling one with benefits that far outweighed the effort involved on our part.

- **N. Narayanasamy, B.R. Dwaraki, B. Tamilmani, and R. Ramesh**, PRA Project, Gandhigram Rural Institute, Gandhigram - 624 302, Tamil Nadu, India.