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Using PRA in organisational self-assessment

Michael Edwards

• Introduction

The use of participatory techniques in development work is now widespread. Yet comparatively little use has been made of their potential in helping organisations to explore their own strengths and weaknesses, reflect on their performance, and identify priorities for change. This is a shame. Participatory methods, and the philosophy behind them, offer a powerful vehicle for analysing organisational choices, and organisational choices are a crucial influence over developmental effectiveness.

This obvious point is often neglected in programme evaluations. These tend to focus on the external environment and what is happening in the community, often to the exclusion of the characteristics of the organisations which are funding, supporting or facilitating the work. This approach is fundamentally flawed and can only give a partial account of the real forces at work. PRA methods in organisations often work best where they are used in combination with other techniques. The latter are helpful in cross-checking findings and analysing information (such as income and expenditure data for the organisation) which is difficult to explore using participatory methods alone. Using a combination of methods both enriches the information base and lends greater credibility to the findings. In organisations which are bureaucratic and defensive, the credibility of research is particularly important.

• Self assessment

This paper provides a brief account of one attempt to use PRA and other methods to analyse the impact, cost-effectiveness and sustainability of two Indian NGOs and two programmes run by Save the Children Fund-UK in Bangladesh. The aims of this study were twofold:

- to build capacity among the four organisations to undertake participatory self-assessment using PRA techniques and secondary research; and,
- to build up a comprehensive picture of the factors underlying organisational effectiveness in different contexts.

The working hypothesis was that impact, cost-effectiveness and sustainability are always the outcome of the interaction between internal factors (the choices each organisation makes about what it does and how it does it), and external factors (the wider political, economic and natural environment in which the organisation works). These interactions are complex and dynamic and so it is difficult to capture them at a single point in time. This was a flaw in this one-off study. However, the results show that mixing methods can be effective in generating credible research and in building people's capacity to reflect on and analyse the work they are doing. It appears that it is possible to achieve both objectives at the same time, though never perfectly.

The characteristics of the four organisations are summarised in Table 1. It shows that there is great diversity in the amount of money it takes to achieve different levels and types of impact. At one end of the spectrum, the People's Rural Education Movement in Orissa (PREM) has achieved spectacular gains at very low cost and across a population of 800,000 people. This is largely due to its strategy of supporting the development of strong, effective and sustainable grassroots organisations from the village level to the

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State. These have achieved impressive results for their members in both material terms (health and education services, credit, food security) and in political representation (allowing tribal people and fisherfolk a voice in decision-making and resource-allocation at each level of the political system). At the other end of the spectrum, Save the Children-UK in the River Project (Bangladesh) has found it difficult to achieve broad coverage and sustainable change. This means that its' programmes benefit relatively few people at relatively high cost. The reasons for this are complex, but revolve around a strategy which formerly focused on direct service-delivery with high overheads and little attempt to build capacity among the poor for self-organisation and action.

• **Approach**

A key question is: what underlies the significant variations in the impact, sustainability and cost-effectiveness of organisations which all aim to achieve more-or-less the same things? Is it because they work in very different contexts (partially, yes); is it because they adopt different approaches and strategies to achieve their objectives (partially, yes); or is it a combination of these things (in all situations, yes)?

Table 1. Costs and benefits of the different programmes[1]

Organisation	PREM	Urmul Seemant	Shariatpur	River Project
Target Population	Tribals in 9 districts of Orissa	One half of one block in Bikaner District (150,000)	3 unions of 1 District (48,000)	Population of project area (70,000)
Direct Beneficiaries	600 000 (approx population of villages 'fully-organised' by ¹POs	40,000 (women in IGP, men in farmers' groups)	4,000 (members of credit groups, trained TBAs and CHPs)	3,100 (members of credit groups, women in IES)
Indirect Beneficiaries	240,000 (approx population of villages 'partially-organised' by POs)	50,000 (as direct beneficiaries plus 10,000 for nominal knock-on effects)	40,000 (families in credit groups x 6 people per family, plus population of villages with access to 208 tubewells)	30,000 (families in credit groups and IES x 6 persons/family, plus nominal 11,400 knock-on effects).
Total Costs (Budget)	(1993/94) £145,363	(1993/94) £62,996	(1994/5) £109,499	(1994/95) £135,999
Programme Costs	£125,202	£56,695	£76,666	£112,333
Non-Programme Costs (Admin costs etc.)	£20,161	£6,299	£32,833	£26,666
Total Cost per Beneficiary	£0.17	£1.26	£2.74	£4.53

[1] IES Income Enhancement Scheme, POs People's Organisations, ICDS Integrated Child Development Services, IGP Income-Generating Programme, TBAs Traditional Birth Attendants, CHPs Community Health Practitioners. Exchange rates are UK £1: Rs 49.6 or Tk 55.

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The focus of this paper is on the methods used to unlock the complex interaction of internal and external factors. Three sets of methods were used in combination with each-other throughout:

- A *review* of existing documents including secondary literature (e.g. SCF files, NGO publicity material), annual reports and accounts, evaluation and research reports, outputs from monitoring systems, and staff profile over time.
- *Discussions* with NGO staff at different levels (individually and in groups), with others (e.g. local government, SCF staff), and with members of communities and participants in programmes (men, women, children and people of different castes).
- *PRA* methods used during meetings and field visits, including:
  - *direct observation* by mixed research teams;
  - *critical incident analysis* (asking people to recall something that happened to support a point they were making);
  - *organisational timelines* (to show how an agency or programme had developed since its foundation or the beginning of its work);
  - *diagrams* to show the structure of the organisation, its activities, and its linkages with other groups and organisations;
  - *time-allocation charts* (to map the time spent by staff in different tasks);
  - *flow-charts* (to show how one programme or activity is related to another);
  - *spider diagrams* (to evaluate progress towards different objectives); and,
  - *balance diagrams* (a method developed on-the-spot to examine different types of activity that comprise the complete programme).

To ensure consistency between the four programmes and to combat bias, a standard framework of questions was used (prepared and distributed beforehand) and the same exercises were used with each agency visited. The results were cross-checked against other sources of information and by repeating the same diagram with a different level of staff, or a different part of the organisation. Each visit began with a workshop for staff and involved the production of timelines, and structure/activity diagrams. The following three days were spent in the field (using more PRA exercises, including time-allocation charts), and the final day took the form of another workshop to explore the preliminary results (e.g. using spider diagrams, see Figure 1). The timelines, structure and activity diagrams, and spider diagrams were the most successful techniques used. In all cases, participants were encouraged to produce their own versions of diagrams rather than follow a set format.

• **Findings**

The PRA techniques were particularly useful for building capacity for self-reflection. Spider diagrams proved an excellent way of illuminating different views about progress among staff or in communities in a powerful and accessible way. PRA also provided a focus for group discussion around key points to emerge from the diagrams. For example, organisational timelines stimulated enormous debate about what had happened when, and why, and allowed different interpretations to be aired and challenged. By drawing timelines on large sheets of paper, it was possible for people to walk around and across them. In this way, they paused to identify critical moments in the life of a project and hold small group discussions about why they were important.

PRA also enabled large amounts of information to be codified, presented and analysed. The exercises produced hundreds of flipchart sheets and whole notebooks full of observations. Without visual ways of summarising this material, it would have been impossible to have a sensible discussion about the results.

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Figure 1. Spider diagram produced by senior staff at Shariatpur
CHP Community Health Practitioners, TBA Traditional Birth Attendants.
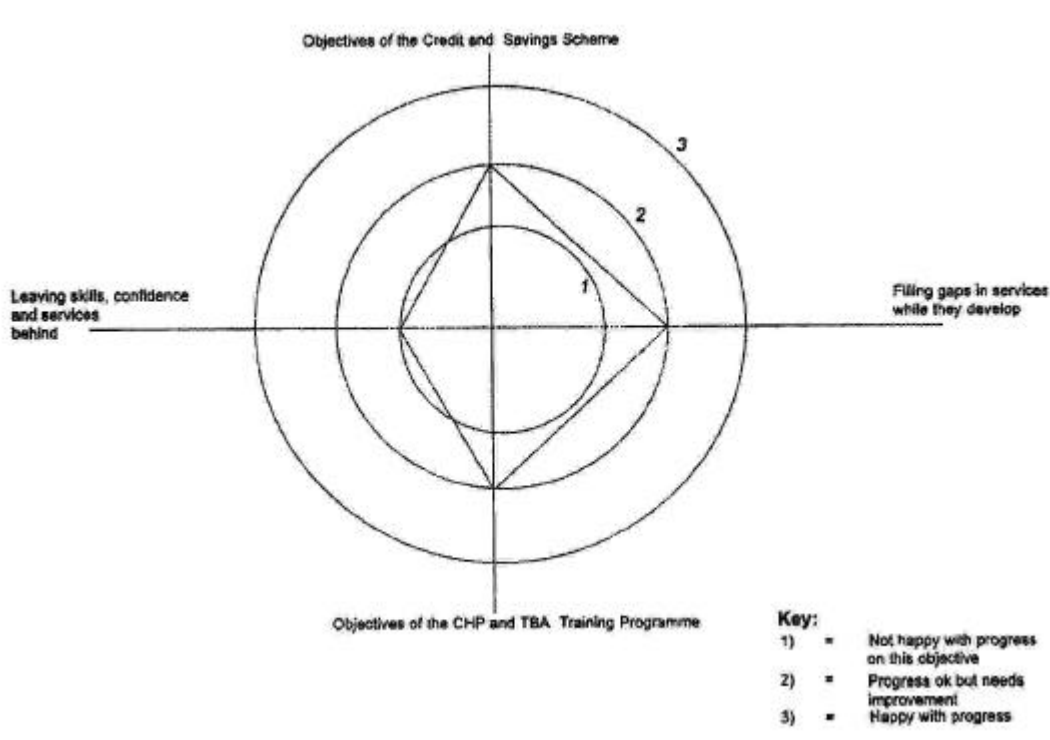
For example, the spider diagrams produced by different groups of people were overlain to produce one version. This represented the consensus scores along each objective. Time allocation charts for large numbers of staff were pooled to reveal the average amount of time spent on each activity. And, secondary data on costs and benefits were re-calculated from budgets and annual reports, and presented in a single table.

In addition to the PRA, the 'hard' data from secondary research and budget analysis, such as the number of beneficiaries and programme costs, proved very influential, especially inside SCF. It was the combination of striking visual results (from the PRA diagrams) with cost-benefit data that was important. One without the other would not have been so powerful. Bureaucracies need numbers as well as pictures if they are to take notice, even if, as in this case, the results (especially the averages and cost-benefit calculations) were highly imperfect.

The trade-off between rigour and accessibility was, in my view, a reasonable one. The study produced a set of empirically-based conclusions which are robust, reliable and representative. Simultaneously, it provided a vehicle for critical reflection and analysis among staff and communities. This resulted in both increased capacity for organisational self-assessment in the future and valuable insights into NGO performance. These should make a useful contribution to the wider literature.

This is not to say that the balance between rigour and accessibility was right - it wasn't. There was not enough emphasis on training and capacity-enhancement (something which is being corrected in the next round) and the interpretation of results (the key area) was too dependent on myself. Thus, this paper very much represents my own views of what the results tell us. Furthermore, the follow-up was disappointing, although feedback from the eventual report was positive in most cases.

• **Final reflections**

There were suspicions among some of the organisations as to the motives of the exercise ('just another academic from outside who's come to take our knowledge', as one put it to me). It took a full day of discussion to air these

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feelings and find a consensus from which to move forward.

The approach used in this exercise did not resolve this dilemma which is faced by all external agencies who use participatory techniques in their work. The 'extraction' of information for agency use went hand-in-hand with the 'empowerment' of staff and others through the process of capacity-enhancement. Indeed, these dual goals were always, and transparently, a part of the exercise.

We were honest about the motives of the exercise from the beginning. We only worked with organisations who actively requested that they be included. We pre-circulated a framework of questions and encouraged each organisation to discuss them independently of the research team. We asked them to be honest about those which they felt were relevant, those which could be dropped, and what others might be included. We tried to be open and flexible in terms of timing, techniques and reporting back and stipulated that nothing would be published without the explicit consent of all the agencies involved.

As the results emerged (especially in the preliminary written report) it also became clear that there would be substantive disagreement in some areas. This affected the SCF programmes in Bangladesh in particular. Some staff felt that we had underestimated the importance of decisions taken by SCF Headquarters in London, and apportioned too much responsibility for disappointing results to factors internal to the organisation in the field. It took four months or so to negotiate a form of words in the final report that satisfied these concerns, while remaining true to the actual findings of the fieldwork.

The use of PRA techniques in organisational settings should only be contemplated by organisations which are prepared to reflect on their performance seriously and openly, and to change themselves as a result. For NGOs (or other agencies) which are committed to putting their participatory principles into practice, such methods can be invaluable in identifying ways forward. This project suggests that PRA methods are particularly effective when used in combination with other approaches which can give the results the 'credibility' that may be required in bureaucratic settings.

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