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Beauty is in the process and not in the name: an alternative approach for participatory planning

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Summary

From our experiences in practising participatory approaches for promoting sustainable agriculture, we have realised that some approaches for planning that claim to be bottom-up are not participatory. Furthermore, some approaches are not logically sequenced, while others are difficult to follow by grassroots level workers. Consequently, the planning becomes top-down instead of bottom-up. An alternative approach (AAA) for participatory planning was first used with an NGO, in Bihar, India and has since been expanded to several other NGOs. AAA is easy to follow for grassroots level development workers. By revisiting the stages in participatory planning, we have tried to enhance village participation. This has resulted in plans which are more grounded in reality.

• Introduction

Development projects often start with situational analysis, including problem identification and prioritisation. This is followed by planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. In many cases, people are involved in problem identification and problem ranking, but real participation may not be taking place. Therefore, it has become important to analyse why planning processes are not truly participatory.

On reflection, it is clear that development workers, at least on one level, want to follow participatory approaches. But it is partly the 'mind set' of practitioners and partly the sequence of events used in planning that make the process more top-down even though it is supposed to be bottom-up. First, most planners are the products of a conventional top-down system. Unlearning can be more difficult for them than learning. Second, and more importantly, a few common approaches that are being used for planning, especially in agricultural development, are far from being fully participatory.

Three common approaches to participatory planning include agro-ecosystem analysis (AEA), the system diagram and a systematic approach (ASA). In all these approaches, it is only the problems that are identified through participatory methods. But subsequently, a more top-down approach is used for project planning. Thus in the formulation of aims, objectives and hypotheses, villagers find it difficult to be involved and follow the suggested steps. It can be difficult to determine whose aims and objectives are being prioritised. This is problematic because the concerns raised by outsiders may not be the same as for those whom the development plans are targeted. Further problems can arise where planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation are not built into the approach.

Finally, in most approaches to planning, the normal procedure is to start with aims and objectives. These are often donor driven priorities, such as gender or sustainable agriculture. Yet if the aims and objectives are fixed, it follows that the problems and possible solutions are limited in scope. This can lead to a clash of interests such that a compromised project plan is imposed on a community under the auspices of participatory project planning. We feel that a shift in the approaches being used for project planning is necessary to enhance local participation. Furthermore, the approach must recognise the capability of the

community and the availability of local resources. This makes people self reliant.

An alternative approach (AAA)

In the proposed alternative approach, AAA, people plan the activities they wish to achieve before narrowing their focus to donor-driven aims and objectives. This approach attempts to overcome the defects of other approaches to project planning.
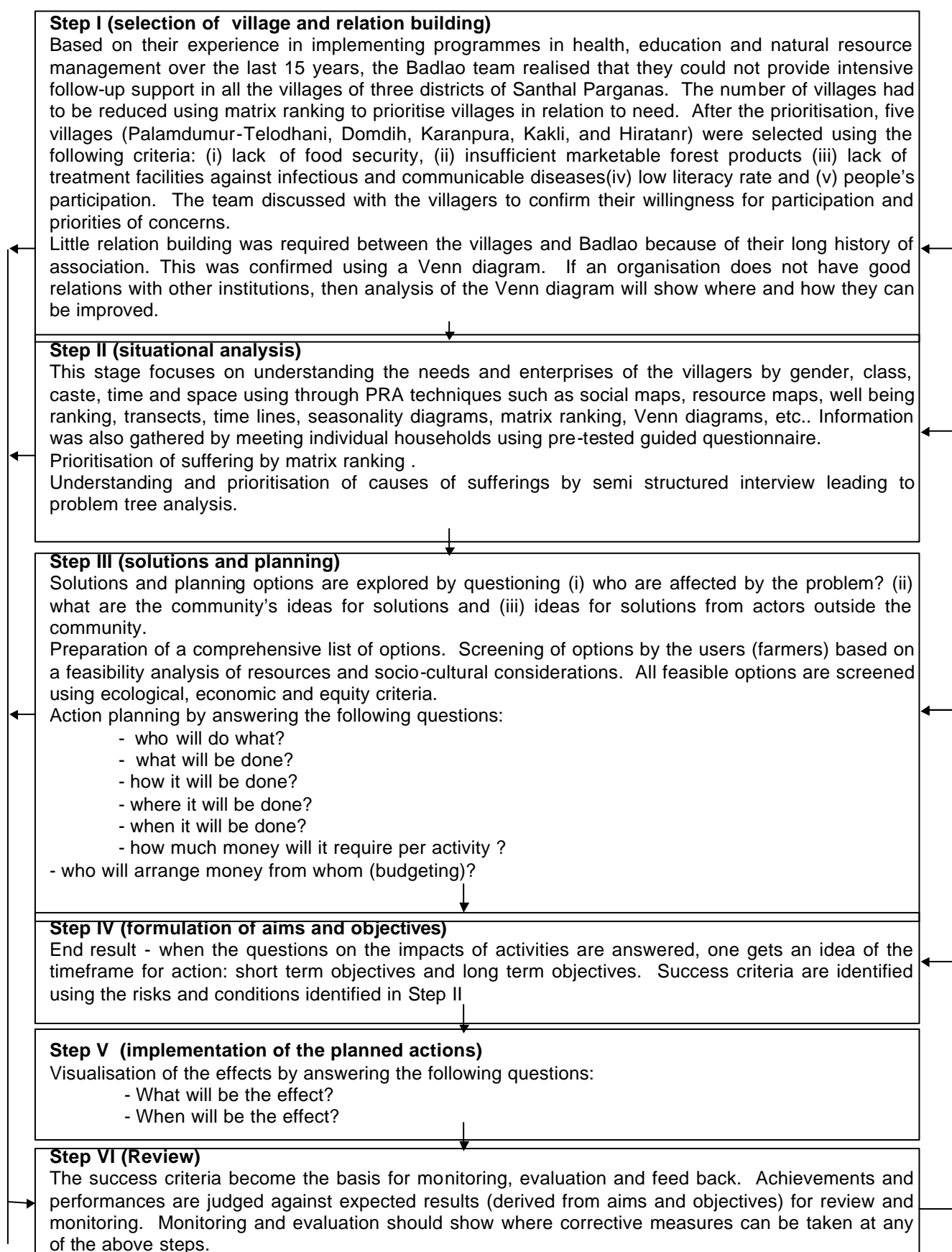
To pilot the participatory planning process, we used AAA in Badlao, a rural development organisation in Mihijam, Bihar (India). Badlao started in 1982 with the vision of participatory development aimed at upgrading the quality of life of two ethnic groups, the Paharis and Santhals, and other poor communities, living in the Division of Santhal Parganas. Activities were initiated in education, health and food security, including ecological agriculture. This last component is supported by NOVIB, a Netherlands based co-funding agency. NOVIB provided funds and Badlao hired us to help them in preparing the project plan in a participatory way. We followed the process shown in Figure 1.

In the participatory planning process a local development organisation (NGO) was involved. They helped us to arrange the logistics of the planning and provided follow up support. Their familiarity with the area also helped us in the initial 'rapport building' stage with the community. The second stage of the process, situational analysis, included transects, social mapping and resource mapping. These activities were undertaken with the whole community and the information was transferred onto charts and into pictorial form. The situational analysis can span over several sessions, but can be completed in a long day (about 12 hours). What is most important, is that the pace of activities matches that of the community.

In a follow-up session, the findings from the social maps, resource maps and transects were presented to the villagers. This provided an opportunity for villagers to voice any questions or concerns. They then prioritised their problems. This required special attention to ensure that the affected group or groups were represented and consulted first. Later on, the priorities were verified with the entire village. The villagers were then asked to identify the most important two, three or four problems they would like to tackle first.

Sometimes, recent incidents can influence the prioritisation and as a PRA practitioner, it is important to enable the villagers to distinguish between temporary and long term problems. For example, in Karra village, Ambikapur, a few cattle had died of foot and mouth disease a week before the planning exercise. Naturally, the control of this disease became the most important problem. To ensure that the priorities were not just a reaction to recent events, we allowed a time gap of three to four months and repeated the problem prioritisation exercise. When the priorities identified were consistent, it indicated that the problems were chronic, that is long term in nature. The reconfirmation of problem prioritisation took about three hours.

Step III involved searching for solution(s) for each prioritised problem. A problem tree was prepared to enable the causes(s) of the problems to be identified. In most cases there were multiple causes. For each cause, possible solution options were identified by villagers. Here again the affected group(s) were consulted first and their findings subsequently verified by the larger mixed group of villagers. For example in the case of fuelwood and drinking water, women were consulted first; for ploughing, men were consulted before discussing the issues with the larger group.

Figure 1. Key stages in 'An alternative approach' to planning

Step I (selection of village and relation building)
Based on their experience in implementing programmes in health, education and natural resource management over the last 15 years, the Badlao team realised that they could not provide intensive follow-up support in all the villages of three districts of Santhal Parganas. The number of villages had to be reduced using matrix ranking to prioritise villages in relation to need. After the prioritisation, five villages (Palamdumur-Telodhani, Domdih, Karanpura, Kakli, and Hiratanr) were selected using the following criteria: (i) lack of food security, (ii) insufficient marketable forest products (iii) lack of treatment facilities against infectious and communicable diseases(iv) low literacy rate and (v) people's participation. The team discussed with the villagers to confirm their willingness for participation and priorities of concerns.
Little relation building was required between the villages and Badlao because of their long history of association. This was confirmed using a Venn diagram. If an organisation does not have good relations with other institutions, then analysis of the Venn diagram will show where and how they can be improved.

Step II (situational analysis)
This stage focuses on understanding the needs and enterprises of the villagers by gender, class, caste, time and space using through PRA techniques such as social maps, resource maps, well being ranking, transects, time lines, seasonality diagrams, matrix ranking, Venn diagrams, etc.. Information was also gathered by meeting individual households using pre-tested guided questionnaire.
Prioritisation of suffering by matrix ranking .
Understanding and prioritisation of causes of sufferings by semi structured interview leading to problem tree analysis.

Step III (solutions and planning)
Solutions and planning options are explored by questioning (i) who are affected by the problem? (ii) what are the community's ideas for solutions and (iii) ideas for solutions from actors outside the community.
Preparation of a comprehensive list of options. Screening of options by the users (farmers) based on a feasibility analysis of resources and socio-cultural considerations. All feasible options are screened using ecological, economic and equity criteria.
Action planning by answering the following questions:
- who will do what?
- what will be done?
- how it will be done?
- where it will be done?
- when it will be done?
- how much money will it require per activity ?
- who will arrange money from whom (budgeting)?

Step IV (formulation of aims and objectives)
End result - when the questions on the impacts of activities are answered, one gets an idea of the timeframe for action: short term objectives and long term objectives. Success criteria are identified using the risks and conditions identified in Step II

Step V (implementation of the planned actions)
Visualisation of the effects by answering the following questions:
- What will be the effect?
- When will be the effect?

Step VI (Review)
The success criteria become the basis for monitoring, evaluation and feed back. Achievements and performances are judged against expected results (derived from aims and objectives) for review and monitoring. Monitoring and evaluation should show where corrective measures can be taken at any of the above steps.

Out of the possible solutions, feasible options were identified and prioritised by the villagers particularly affected the problem. This is Step IV, and involved introducing new concepts, such as objectives, to the villagers. Each feasible option was called an activity. It was explained that when these activities are pursued for a period for time, it is hoped that sustained positive change(s) will occur. These changes are actually the objectives of the project. This stage took about three to four hours to complete for each activity.

Each activity was sub-divided into logical steps. For instance, if a person wanted to start a dairy unit, he or she would have to collect information on: the availability of a particular breed, fodder, where to keep the cattle, regulate cleaning, health care, insurance, milking, marketing, loan, repayment, savings, etc. Each of these steps is a sub-activity. For each sub-activity, success criteria can be fixed by asking questions about what the effects of the sub-activity will be and when they will happen (Step V). The planning of subactivities took three to four hours.

Obviously during the discussions there were differences of opinion. To resolve these differences, we facilitated the discussion in such a way that each party understood the view point of the other party. This allowed everybody to speak and listen. This was a long process but, finally, we succeeded in reaching a consensus.

For any (sub)activity to be successful, a number of factors must be considered, including time, budgets, environment, ethical/equity issues. Interestingly most of these parameters were identified by the villagers themselves. For example, in Vardapura village, the timely repayment of loans was considered by the women's group as the most important criterion for success. This would enable the group to revolve the fund among the other members. In Kakimadgu village, Andhra Pradesh, the success of a soil fertility management activity was linked by the farmers' group to higher fodder availability and tree plantation on field bunds. These activities are associated with increased organic manure availability and are therefore potential indicators of the success of increasing soil fertility in the area. The linking of success criteria to objectives provides a basis for reviewing the programme and assessing its performance (Step VI).

Since September 1995 we have used this method in several places in both North and South India. With different partners, the group size has varied according to who is affected by the prioritised problems. In some cases the group size has been very large, up to 300 people. The larger the group, the more challenging the facilitation role and the longer the facilitation process.

- **Case study**

As an example of implementing AAA, we describe briefly Varadapura village, Karnataka where CRUES, a local NGO, is working with poor people in a food security programme. The average landholding size of the programme beneficiaries is less than 3 acres. The land quality is also poor, with low fertility and no irrigation. The land is not sufficient to support the farming family. For alternative sources of income, the men in the household migrate to the nearby city, Bangalore. But this has introduced problems, including alcoholism and domestic violence, which have had negative impacts on the family, particularly the women.

To try and improve the situation CRUES facilitated the formation of a women's group, *Mahila Sangha*, which introduced savings and credit activities amongst its members. Through this group, CRUES has undertaken a number of activities, including vegetable gardening, tree planting etc.. When AAA to participatory planning was conducted with the group, there were about 40 members. The problems contributing to food insecurity were identified as poor soil fertility and low income. The women's group identified animal (buffalo) rearing as an activity which could tackle both these challenges together. Fortunately, fodder was available in plenty locally.

Previously, when activities are initiated, the group members have obtained grants from either the NGO, CRUES, or the government. This has raised their expectations. But a buffalo unit costs about Rs.7,500/- (UK£125) which was a sum that the group didn't have and too large for the CRUES to support. In a

group meeting, CRUES disclosed that it would not be able to provide financial support for the venture and that the money had to be raised by the group or borrowed from other sources. However, CRUES expressed its willingness to provide any other support needed to successfully implement the activity. This announcement, we feel, was necessary for improving the real participation of the villagers and to increase their stake in the development.

Before applying this approach, the CRUES team were concerned that the beneficiaries (selected women farmers) might continue to ask for financial assistance to implement the buffalo rearing activities. But after the exercise it surprised them because none of the women asked for financial support. Instead, the women asked CRUES to establish contact with an insurance company which could repay the group if the animal died. This was a role that the women were not confident to play as few of them can read or write. Moreover, the insurance agent is situated in the town, and CRUES was therefore better placed to make contact.

By themselves, the Sangha members decided upon how to raise money for the buffalo activity and decided upon the beneficiaries, the amount of loan to be granted, the mode of repayment, the rates of interest, etc.. During a half day session, the women planned all the subactivities and determined their success criteria. Planned sub-activities related to buffalo rearing, such as information collection (breed, milk yield, cost, availability), arranging money, veterinary check-ups, purchase, insurance, housing, feeding, management, breeding, milking, preparation of milk product, home consumption, marketing, repayment of loan and savings. Their ability to plan has opened the eyes of the CRUES team.

• **Conclusion**

AAA is an evolving process. Several formats (like sub-activity planning) for improving the levels of participation are being developed. But the main challenge concerns the development of appropriate skills for the facilitators regarding their behaviour and attitudes. The following key skills are required:

- an ability to listen;
- ensuring everyone gets an opportunity to participate and share their experiences; and,
- allowing people to talk.

Our experiences suggest that AAA is practicable even for grassroots level practitioners. Thus, the system is participatory at all levels of planning. This helps villagers to plan activities, with their aims and objectives intact, and to think about how to solve their problems using local resources.

The NGOs apply this process with the villagers, which gives us confidences that the villagers have understood the process and internalised it. For example, in Patathanpatty village, the villagers even commented that the process was easy and that they could replicate its implementation. They joked that they would follow the same procedure and one day compete with the facilitators. This reflects the level of confidence they have in the process. When asked, they told us clearly that they had never previously been involved in the planning process. Now they were not only involved but they themselves drove the process.

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