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Participatory assessment for people with disabilities

by David Thomforde

with responses from Sulemena Abudulai and Deb Johnson

> *Feedback* is a forum for discussion in *PLA Notes.* It features articles which raise common concerns in fieldwork or training, together with a response from another PRA practitioner. Letters and articles are welcomed for this section, as are your comments on any of the issues raised.

• Background

The number of associations of people with disabilities has increased greatly in the last few years in Uganda. Government and NGOs have encouraged this growth as a way of channeling technical and funding assistance. The goal of most of these associations is to improve the lives of the members. As the number of associations grows, the competition for assistance also grows. Funders need methods for deciding which associations have been most effective in helping the members. Currently, funders depend on subjective measures such as site visits and conversation with group leaders and members. This paper outlines a method that was developed during a series of participatory sessions for associations of people with disabilities. The method is designed to let members of the associations give their opinions on how well they are being served by their association.

• Method

As a group, the participants choose about six criteria for judging well-being. Common criteria chosen are wealth, health, degree of disability, amount of schooling and feelings of unity. For each criterion, the participants are asked to judge if their individual conditions have improved or declined since the association was formed, and if the change is due to the association or to outside factors.

During the first seminar, each participant expressed his or her opinions to the group, and the opinions were marked on a large chart posted on the front wall - the chart had symbols to represent the different criteria. However, there was a tendency for participants to be influenced by the group. When a participant voted that his or her life had been improved by the group, there were cheers. When he or she voted that his or her life had declined, there was silence. In addition, the many layers and boxes on the chart made it confusing. The result was that the association was credited for making changes in areas which it had not even addressed.

Therefore, during subsequent seminars, individuals marked their opinions on a modified chart, placing a bean for each change due to the association and a kernel of maize for each change due to other factors. Each person's opinions were recorded and then the beans and maize were removed from the chart before the next person came up to vote. This succeeded in greatly decreasing the group influence - the assessment became an individual rather than a group activity. The result was a much greater variety in the voting pattern, with the association credited for changes by some participants and blamed for declines by others.

After all the opinions were recorded, the votes were tabulated and presented immediately to the group for discussion.

Critique of the method

Some weaknesses of the method include:

- confusion on the part of some participants, particularly those who were illiterate. The chart and the choice of a bean or a kernel of maize was difficult for some participants to grasp. Most of the participants required

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individual explanation of where to place their beans or kernels of maize. This made it a tedious process for the facilitators and, as they were often the more educated leaders of the associations, their personal biases may have influenced their explanations.

- a tendency for some participants not to reflect on the individual criteria, but instead to vote according to a pre-determined view of their past. Participants who were leaders in the associations tended to rate their lives as having improved, and credited the association for the changes. Participants who were peripheral members of the associations, or felt more negatively about their disabilities, tended to rate their lives as getting worse. At times, they blamed the association even in areas where the association had had no planned or actual role, perhaps for lack of action.

Strengths of the method include the ability to:

- compare two associations to see which has made more difference in the lives of the members e.g. by comparing how different criteria for well-being have changed and what percentage of the members of the association have shown improvement according to the different criteria;
- determine the impact of assistance by comparing the type of assistance given to an association with areas where the association has made positive changes;
- highlight progress made by members of an association; and,
- use the results to prioritize which problem areas the association should address: those areas where members' well-being has not improved, or is declining, can become the first priority for discussion and action by the association.

• Impact of using the tool

Discussions with group members indicated that the activities of the associations had not changed significantly as a result of using this tool. This is probably a reflection of the difficulties of the association, rather than a weakness of the tool: the areas where the association was seen as having made progress were the easier issues e.g. improving unity or increasing awareness,

whereas the association was not seen as having made much progress towards issues that are more complex or long term e.g. declining health or income.

Further refinement of the tool should come in the following areas:
- developing a system of recording the votes that is less confusing for illiterate participants;
- steps to minimize voting according to a predetermined mind set e.g. through providing more time between introducing the activity and registering of opinions, so participants have more time to think about individual changes
- asking participants to provide justification for their choices in front of the group (although this may increase the group influence);
- emphasizing that people should vote according to their own situations, and not their view of members in general; and,
- some system of including criteria which could not have changed over the past few years, or which the association could not have influenced, in order to identify those people voting for reasons other than their own experience. Their votes can be eliminated or analysed separately.

In conclusion, this tool has potential to be used by funders in determining objectively how membership in an association of people with disabilities is affecting the members. It requires further field-testing and modification. However, it could be used with other groups and as part of a broader participatory organisational assessment.

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Disability and assessment: a response from Sulemana Abudulai

Following on from the *Feedback* in June 1998, I hope this interesting article spurs readers to think both about working with people with disabilities and about innovative methods of organisational assessment.

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My concern is that the use of participatory methods to assess the impact of associations of disabled people may well be flawed if they are used with associations that have not had a participatory approach from the outset. If, as the experience in many countries show, the associations have been started by well-meaning but often self-interested people, the initial objectives are often not "owned" by the wider membership. It is then difficult to come along after several years and assess the impact of the association for members.

This article demonstrates the need to assist disabled people and disabled peoples' organisations (DPO's) to revisit the objectives of their organisations with the wider membership. This re-assessment should include questions, such as why associations are needed, what activities should be carried out, what leadership structures are appropriate, what decision-making systems are most transparent and how financial accountability can be promoted. The need for this re-assessment is supported by the observation that members reacted differently to questions in the presence of different people. Members are unlikely to criticise an association if the "founder" is present at the meeting. However, if the origin of the association was based on more shared objectives, then self-criticism may well come freely as the members understand the process as one aimed at making things better for all members.

Monitoring the adverse or positive effects of project activities is important for long-term sustainability. However, it is never an easy task for an outsider to determine inter- and intra-community social and economic dynamics during a short visit. For example, the extent of unity, co-operation and cohesiveness within and between groups spontaneously formed or promoted by a development agency as a medium for implementing, say, agricultural credit schemes may not be apparent from participatory methods. Disability, gender, age and other socio-cultural differences will tend to be down-played only to surface in covert efforts to undermine agreements arrived at community-wide meetings.

Thus, PRA should be used selectively. It may not always be the best way of obtaining information. In this case, a semi-structured questionnaire may have generated more useful information as it would have provided a more confidential environment.

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Disability and assessment: a response from Deb Johnson

It is my pleasure to take part in this critical look at the application of participatory tools in evaluation. I believe critical self-examination of how, when, and where we use participatory methods is essential to our growth and understanding of how to create an environment for empowerment. It is encouraging to see David Thomforde and Sulemana Abudulai push the discussion further. There are some basic weak points about the method used and about the concepts of participation noted in both articles. It is important to highlight these as they have an impact on the strengths and weaknesses of the method described. These key points are listed below.

- ### Stakeholder involvement

David notes in the beginning of his article that the tool described was meant as a way for *donors* to assess the capacities of Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs) for possible support. This is a key point as it highlights that the information is meant for the donors, and hence the motivation for collection is for external use. The participation of the association's members is more of a 'temperature gauge' for the donors to make decisions about which DPOs to fund. Any benefits (such as lessons learned, analysis, skill development, etc.) derived from the tool by the DPO members are secondary to the donor's need for information.

Sulemena does not talk directly to this premise, but he does pick up on the point that it is an assessment tool which is based on some faulty assumptions. He points out that the tool misses some important preliminary

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questions, i.e., 'Do the criteria for a "good" association actually reflect the original objectives of the DPO? and, taking his point further, 'Do they reflect the reasons why people are members now?' The underlying assumption is that the donor already knows *why* disabled persons have joined/created the DPO and that the reasons are straightforward. Experience shows that people join membership organisations for a wide variety of reasons and, as noted by Sulemena, these organisations do not frequently revisit their basic objectives to see if these objectives still fit their current membership.

Of course, this does not mean that this method, or other participatory methods, cannot be used to revisit these assumptions. Nor does it mean that because the motivation to critically examine the strengths and weakness of DPOs is external that the method of assessment should be dismissed outright. It does mean, however, that the facilitator needs to think carefully about how to meet the needs of both the major stakeholders in this kind of an assessment - the donors - and the DPOs.

• Goals of the assessment

The purpose of the tool discussed by David was to evaluate the DPO's contribution towards meeting the members' criteria for well-being. It must be appreciated first that one organisation cannot meet all of the well-being needs of a diverse membership, especially given that the label of 'disability' covers the blind, the deaf, and a whole range of people who fall under the category of being physically or mentally impaired. It is unrealistic for a single DPO to be judged on its ability to ensure well-being for all of its members (a feat not possible by governments, let alone generally poorly-resourced NGOs). Thus, the method may have been comparing apples with oranges.

Based on the short description of the tool and its strengths and weaknesses, it may have been a more effective process if the facilitator(s) assisted the group members to critically reflect on their expectations of the organisation's goals and objectives. Upon deciding what goals and objectives they expect from their

organisation, they could then judge the organisation's performance accordingly.

It would seem that the facilitators attempted to accomplish too many aims with one tool - organisational evaluation, wider appraisal of the institutional environment, and a capacity building assessment. A common and dangerous fallacy of promoters of participatory methods is the belief that the application of one or two *participatory tools* is sufficient to accomplish their goals and they neglect to focus on the participants' discussion, analysis, and learning. The application of participatory tools without local reflection, analysis, and learning results in highly questionable data and damages the concept of *empowering* participation. Cases of the application of methods without reflection justify Sulemena's comments of caution about the selective use of participatory methods as the information collected may not represent a true picture of the sitution.

• Creating a safe assessment atmosphere

A final point is that organisational assessments and evaluations have and, in many cases, still do bring lots of concerns and insecurities. They are seen as something that must be lived through and that do not offer very much in terms of learning and growth. Until organisational assessments are seen as part of a learning and growth process, the members and staff will always be cautious in commenting on an organisation. It is true that assessments can be used by some members of the organisation to sabotage projects and people within the organisation.

For example, Sulemena suggests that organisational members will rarely speak out when the founder is present. People speaking out about their organisation depends greatly on how much they feel they *own* the organisation, how important the issues are to them, and how *safe* they feel if they are open and honest. This is a primary function that an outside facilitator can provide - it is not 'objectivity' but the advance preparation by, and ability of, the facilitator to create a safe atmosphere. A safe atmosphere is defined here as a place where

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issues can be discussed openly, honestly and where they are not personalised or used as attacks.

As David observed, some of the participants can greatly influence (even intimidate) others during large group meetings though cheers, silences, or various forms of body language. This influence can be attributed to the type of atmosphere that is created at the assessment - an open and self-critical atmosphere without fears of retribution could reduce the amount of undue influence members have on voting, but creating this atmosphere takes time. The decision for the participants to vote individually first, then come together for analysis can be a quick and effective way of dealing with negative influences. David suggests some good additional steps to improve the effectiveness of this method.

It must be clearly stated that participatory assessments should be very careful in pushing difficult issues. If the facilitator is external to the organisation and not able to provide long-term support to the organisation, s/he cannot assure that those encouraged to talk openly are not victims of retaliation later. The facilitator is obliged to provide methods which allow the participants to discuss difficult issues without putting them at risk.

• Conclusion

I hope these comments provide supplementary discussion 'fodder' concerning the use of participatory methods for organisational assessment. One of the main points is the crucial role that the facilitator plays in any participatory activity. It is an unavoidable fact that the facilitator's preparation, abilities, and underlying beliefs and principles will greatly colour the outcomes of any participatory activity, especially when the participants lack self-confidence or a sense of self-awareness or worth. A facilitator can either try and provide an atmosphere for safe exchange and movement or s/he can manipulate the process to gain her/his own desired goal.

In this case, more thought could have been given to reconciling the assessment objectives to meet the needs of both the DPOs and the donor(s). This would give the facilitator an opportunity to further develop the method to support the needs of the DPOs and create a better learning atmosphere for the assessment.

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Author's response: David Thomforde

Deb has correctly noted the emphasis in my article on the use of this tool by donors. The tool was originally developed as part of a sequence of PRA activities which DPO members used to determine the problems their DPOs had, and to formulate strategies to address those problems (see *PLA Notes* 32). The use by donors was not part of the original programme, but was noted later on. I believe that a skilled facilitator could create the atmosphere of trust necessary so that the same tool could be used to assist the DPO with self-examination, as well as collecting information for a donor.