Team formation: poker style

Françoise Coupal

Introduction

This exercise is used to form teams based on criteria set by participants. I have particularly used this exercise in PRA/PLA workshops, which involve practical three-day community assignments that enable participants to apply the PRA/PLA tools learned in the workshop. The exercise is very efficient and effective in forming teams and ensures that teams contain a balance in terms of gender, skills, and experience.

Objective

To form multidisciplinary teams in a participatory and transparent fashion.

Materials

Flipchart paper, markers, 20 small strips of different coloured paper or multicoloured 'poker chips' or multi-coloured tokens. If you don't have 'poker chips or tokens' simply use multi-coloured paper or different colour beans. In addition, prepare community assignment profiles that give a brief description of the community and/or project where participants will undertake their community practice.

Steps

Prior to the exercise place the names of the different community assignments on regular-sized paper and post them on different parts of the wall of the workshop room.

Ask participants to read the community assignments and to write their first three choices of assignments or priorities on a piece of paper. Remind participants that they may not necessarily get their first or second choice of their community assignment.

After participants have written down their choices for community assignments, brainstorm together key criteria they think would be important to ensure balanced and multi-disciplined teams.

For example, when we did this in Cameroon with the World Food Programme (WFP), workshop participants came up with the criteria listed in Table 1. In order to ensure that all groups were balanced and that not any one group had, say,

all managers or national counterparts, we assigned a different poker chip or coloured paper to each criterion. For example, for gender we gave yellow chips or pieces of paper to women participants and white to men etc. All those with prior experience of PRA methods were counted up and given a different coloured piece of paper and so on.

It is important to keep track of the number of persons per criteria. Thus, if there is a total of five teams and only four village leaders, then villagers must each choose a different community assignment to ensure that there is balance in all of the teams with one team only without a village leader. Similarly, if there are only 12 men, each team, if it is to be balanced, should ensure a roughly equal number of men. If there are five participants with prior PRA experience, this would mean one participant per team. It is possible that one person may have many different coloured pieces of paper.

At this point, have all participants stand on one side of the room looking at the community assignments posted on the wall in front of them.

Table 1: showing an example of group brainstorming

Criteria for multidisciplinary teams	No. of participants	colour paper or chips
Gender balance in teams	12M 12 F [1]	F=yellow, M=white
Prior experience with PRA methods	5	Pink paper or chips
National counterparts	8	Blue paper or chips
Village leaders	4	Orange paper or chips
Gender focal points	4	Green paper or chips
Directors/managers or WFP	5	Red paper or chips
Specialised sectoral knowledge	5	Light green paper or chips

The facilitator should begin with the criterion which has the fewest slips of paper. In this example, it was village leaders. Ask the village leaders with orange pieces of paper to select the community assignment of their choice by walking towards the posted sign announcing their community assignment.

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[1] F = Female; M = Male

Ensure that their first, second or third choice or priority has been met. If not, see if other villagers would like to switch with them. If necessary review the priorities of the other village leaders by referring to the piece of paper where their priorities were written down. Suprisingly, this system has never resulted in all the participants choosing the same assignment.

After ensuring that the village leaders are satisfied, move on to the next criterion with the fewest participants. In this case it was those with prior PRA experience. Thus, five participants with pink chips or coloured pieces of paper are asked to select their community assignment, remembering that each team should contain one person with prior PRA experience. Ensure that the gender balance is also maintained, and that those with PRA experience are satisfied with their choices.

Move on to the criterion, ensuring that participants are satisfied with their choices after each criterion and coloured chip or piece of paper is called. Remind participants that they do not always get their first or second choice.

At the end of the exercise ensure that all teams are balanced according to criteria and number of persons per criterion. Finally ask participants to place the names of the team members on the sign announcing their community assignment.

Notes

The exercise takes up to 30 minutes and participants are usually pleased with the results. Criteria for the teams are set by the participants and they get to select their teams according to the criteria that they listed. Each workshop and different set of participants may have different criteria. In some countries, language can be a very important issue and you may want to ensure that each team has the right language mix. There are other more sophisticated tools for team formation that explore personality traits of individuals more intensely and match individuals accordingly. However, this can sometimes be subjective. For example, participants who consider themselves 'leaders' may not turn out to be the leaders in their team. In helping participants, I have tried to avoid this type of subjective criteria, as it is generally difficult to measure in such a short period of time.

Françoise Coupal, Director, Mosaic.net International, 705 Roosevelt Ave, Ottawa, Canada, K2A 2A8. Email: coupal@mosaic-net-intl.ca; Website: www.mosaic-net-intl.ca