



**Participatory Rural Appraisal: Principle, Methods and Application.** N. Narayanasamy. Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, B1/I-1, Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area, Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044. 2009. 363 pp. Price: Rs 550.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approaches emerged in the late eighties primarily as an appraisal method. But over the years it has become an important strategy employed by development agencies for planning and evaluating rural development programmes. PRA has been particularly popular with NGOs for some time now. Recent years have witnessed its wider adoption among government organizations. PRA has evolved over the years and currently is better known as Participatory Learning and Action (PLA).

PRA is basically a method of learning that employs a wide variety of tools or methods. For effective deployment of participatory methods, those who use these tools should have a clear understanding of their merits and limitations. Much has been written about PRA methods and the *do's* and *don'ts* associated with each. However, a good resource book that illustrates the use of these different tools in varied rural settings had until now not been available. The book under review brings together experiences of using these different tools based on the author's intensive field experience in varied rural settings.

The first chapter deals with the origin and evolution of PRA. It also discusses the limitations of the top-down approach and the importance of participatory approaches for rural development. PRA, as we know it today, evolved through three significant phases – innovation (late eighties to early nineties); wider application and critical reflection (mid-nineties);

and increasing focus on social learning and participatory monitoring and evaluation (late nineties). Here, one would like to emphasize that its methods are still evolving. The second chapter discusses the concepts and principles of PRA, drawing heavily on the work of Dr Robert Chambers, who continues to remain one of PRA's key exponents.

The different typologies of the PRA approach are discussed in the next 18 chapters. This includes: participatory mapping, participatory modelling, transects, mobility maps, venn diagrams, flow diagrams, timelines, trend analysis, seasonal calendars, daily schedule, wealth ranking, pair-wise ranking, matrix ranking and scoring, force field analysis, SWOT analysis, pie diagrams, body mapping and interviewing and dialogue. Each tool under these 18 broad typologies is discussed in detail along with procedures of its specific use. Practitioners of this approach know that PRA gives best results when it is used as a combination of different tools. How each tool could complement other tools and varied approaches are discussed in detail in each of these chapters.

PRA is all about teamwork and each team member has to play different roles. These are discussed in the penultimate chapter of the book. The last chapter illustrates its application under various broad themes, such as participatory poverty assessment, sustainable livelihood analysis, analysis of hunger, vulnerability analysis, institutional analysis and participatory evaluation.

One of the major drawbacks of this book is its lack of discussion on some of the limitations of PRA. While PRA approaches can facilitate design and implementation of demand-driven rural development interventions, it is not sufficient to bring about the patterns of interaction among the large number of organizations needed for bringing about development. It is too inadequate to challenge the power relations not only within rural society, but also among different organizations that are critical for bringing and adapting new knowledge to deal with increasingly complex developmental challenges in rural areas. While PRA can potentially generate useful and critical information on different dimensions of the context that demands interventions, it is not a substitute for a wide range of consultations required among the different organizations that hold com-

plementary knowledge required for an intervention to sustain.

PRA has only a limited value in situations that are challenged by organizational, sectoral and policy-level constraints. This is not a critique of PRA, per se, but of its practitioners who identify and promote development interventions based only on findings of PRA. Rural communities, like each one of us, know only a part of the knowledge that they are closely linked to. Though this knowledge is very important, it has real value only when it is integrated with other sources of relevant knowledge. Only then can it bring about social and economic change in rural areas, which is what all donors, national governments, NGOs and development professionals aspire for.

The book acknowledges some of the bad practices and abuse of PRA that happened when it was promoted widely during the early nineties. However, the abuse still continues. Even these days, conducting PRA is considered an essential requirement for many rural development programmes. PRA has several advantages to its credit, but its over-emphasis in development programmes, without any reflection on either the rationale for using it or on the capability (personal attitudes and behaviour) of those using it in the field, has not been of much help. Though PRA has contributed to enhancing community participation in rural development programmes, it failed to bring about a paradigm shift in rural development that was its original intention.

The best part of this book is its liberal use of tables and illustrations (maps, diagrams), which were developed in the field during application of these tools. And, perhaps, this is what makes it stand apart in comparison to other books on PRA. This book would be of immense value to students and scholars working on issues related to rural development. It will also be useful to all those who work with rural communities and especially those who are engaged in training rural development practitioners.

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