

## **25. Participatory rural appraisal and participatory learning methods: Recent experiences from MYRADA and South India**

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**This paper summarizes one of the most thought provoking seminars at the conference. Mascarenhas demonstrated the strong orientation toward community participation inherent in Rapid Rural Appraisal and went on to suggest that this orientation needed to become a defining tenet of what was being developed as "Participatory Learning Methods." The use of data gathering as a means of highly participative data gathering for better orienting planners and officials toward the realities of community life and the dynamism and complexity of rural villagers' concept of their life becomes a goal of the various exercises. The variety of techniques for assisting villagers to express the state of their social and physical surroundings, status, history, and plans are shown as a rapidly new set of tools for development planning. The tools and ideas outlined in this presentation continue to evolve and spread beyond rural India through the efforts of MYRADA and others. - Eds.**

MYRADA IS A non-governmental organization (NGO) which has been involved in rural development since 1968. It works in approximately 2,000 villages in South India, in the States of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. MYRADA initially started as an organization which resettled refugees from Tibet. Since then its role has expanded and today it has six major programme thrusts.

1. Participative *resource development* and management projects, (particularly *semi-arid* areas). These include *wastelands* and *watershed* development programmes.
2. *Resettlement* and *rehabilitation* of released *bonded labour* and landless families.
3. Development of *women and children* in rural areas.
4. Development of *rural credit systems*.
5. Development of *appropriate institutions and management systems* in the rural areas.
6. *Training* - evolving training methods which are appropriate to the *Indian context*, particularly in rural areas.

## **Rapid vs participatory**

In India, particularly in South India, 1990 was significant in the development of participatory methods to understand and assess rural situations - and plan for their development. In the course of applying Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) methods in its work, MYRADA came to the conclusion that "Rapid" cannot be "Participatory."

Prominent features of MYRADA's style of functioning are:

1. Its emphasis on the participation of village people in their own development; and
2. Its active and ongoing presence in a defined rural area not as "patron" and "benefactor" but as "catalyst" and "partner" in development.

What was required therefore was a method which did not stop just at "Appraisal" but which went beyond it into a shared analysis and understanding of rural situations. This, in turn, should lead to developmental activities that are creative, productive and sustainable over a period of time.

Thus, it was that PALM evolved - *Participatory Learning Methods*, and indeed there was plenty to learn about - from, with and about rural people and their situations. The PALM method complemented and integrated well with MYRADA's approach, and the results of this have been quite substantial.

## **The PALM experience**

PALM took off much faster than we expected. Since we adopted it a year ago, a little over 40 PALM exercises have been conducted. These have been a variety of topics and situations. The PALM programme thrust has been on rapid training and exposure, building up of training teams, developing new methods and applications, constantly reviewing and refining the methodology, analyzing and documenting experiences, and initiating participative developmental programmes based on the outcomes/outputs of PALM exercises.

### ***Applications***

Tentatively at first, and more confidently as we began to understand the methodology better, we worked out ways in which PALM could be applied to a variety of situations. Some of these are:

1. Participatory planning of natural resource development and management projects. These include programmes for the development of wastelands and watersheds, tank and lift irrigation and afforestation programmes.
2. Participatory planning of integrated rural development programmes, in which the different sectors such as agriculture, sericulture, animal husbandry, education, health, etc., are integrated into a single programme.

3. Tracking and identification of beneficiaries for appropriate programmes. These include child sponsorship programmes and programmes for health care, poverty alleviation, etc.
4. Studying the coping strategies/mechanisms of the rural poor - crisis management, credit needs and sources, and credit management.
5. Studying other aspects of rural life - customs and traditions, trends, conflicts and their resolution, health and nutrition, education, etc.
6. Participatory impact monitoring and assessment of developmental programmes, e.g., impact of a road, an agricultural research station, a health programme, etc.

### ***What is a PALM training exercise like?***

A typical PALM exercise has about 25 to 30 persons participating. The participants are drawn from various organizations - NGOs, Research and Training Institutions, the Government, etc.

A village is selected as a location for the exercise. This village is usually one where there is already an established ongoing presence by an outside agency and where developmental programmes are taking place or are being proposed. This stipulation is made out of respect for the villagers whose curiosities and expectations are raised by such exercises, and to leave the village without a concrete response to expressed needs would not be appropriate.

The participants stay in the village. This helps in several ways. Apart from simplifying logistics, it gives the "Outsiders" a feel for what the village is really like. There is also a greater opportunity for Villagers and Outsiders to access each other and interact - especially in the evenings after the day's work is done. A strong rapport is developed and the degree of sharing extends over many more aspects of village life which are more intimate to the Villagers than only their work. Village camping thus has a definite impact on participation.

Participation is also enhanced by introducing the Outsiders to a "code of conduct." There are several Dos and Don'ts but the most important ones are:

1. Choosing a time suitable to the Villagers.
2. Following necessary cultural protocol as required by the situation.
3. Taking care not to raise the Villagers' expectations - particularly if those expectations cannot be responded to.
4. Initiating a few "equalizing" exercises - simple everyday tasks, (basket weaving, transplanting rice, house construction etc.) with the Villagers as the teachers. The Outsiders who are usually "qualified" and "experts" find that these "simple" village tasks are not so simple after all. The Villagers on their part begin to feel less inferior and begin to see that their skills have a value and status in the eyes of the "educated" Outsiders. This gives them greater confidence and increases

their willingness to participate in the exercises and tell us more about themselves and their situation.

5. Exercising discipline in the mode of interaction is another item aimed at stimulating participation. To be avoided are the superior modes - lecturing instead of listening and learning and so on.

### ***Layout of a typical PALM***

#### **DAY I: INTRODUCTORY**

- History of the Village
- Village layout
- Village infrastructure
- Preferences, etc.

#### **DAY II: EXPLORATORY (SIMPLE)**

- Study of resources
- Livelihoods
- Trends, etc.

#### **DAY III: EXPLORATORY (SIMPLE)**

- Seasonality
- Identifying resources
- Wealth ranking
- Class and cast stratification, conflict, etc.

#### **DAY IV: CONVERGENCE**

- Identifying opportunities
- Listing priorities and best bets
- Identifying roles and responsibilities (defining participants of the various partners including the people.)
- Causes & effects, etc.

#### **DAY V: CONCLUDING**

- Operational plan
- Documentation, etc.

(Note: These are only a few of the possible items; nor is this a fixed format. Variations are not only possible, but they are recommended. Refer to RRA Notes for descriptions and illustrations of methods and outputs.)

## ***Tips***

Apart from the actual topical exercises, early morning review sessions followed by briefing sessions for the day's work are held. Evenings are reserved for group presentations. These are the times when most of the Villagers are free after the day's work is done. Presenting this information in the large evening forum has the advantage that it is up for everyone's scrutiny and is subject to correction. Thus there is a reasonable chance that at the end of the day we have an end product that is accurate and reliable, having been refined several times over from the initial discussions in the sub-groups, to the final presentation. Such gatherings are usually lively with the village folk correcting one another and arriving at consensus on various issues, events, practices and other information. Thus an important principle of PRA/PALM is met - that of "*triangulation*" of information.

There are many other aspects and elements that go into the making of a PALM programme. For obvious reasons all these cannot be described here - many have to be experienced. There are also standard group processes and techniques, which have not been described in detail but are very much part of the methodology which MYRADA follows in its PALM programmes. Some of these are ice breakers, Outsider and Villager ratios, group sharing, evolution of topical agenda, interviewing techniques, role plays, "buzz" sessions, "dummy" exercises and so on.

## ***Some methods and their applications***

### TIME LINE (Annex I)

- Time and events, history, evolution of a village, agricultural practices, health care practices, etc. (Done by constructing a chronology of events that have taken place in consultation with the people.)

### PARTICIPATORY (Annex II)

#### ***Social mapping***

- Village layout, infrastructure, population, chronic health cases, handicapped, malnourished children, family planning cases, vaccinations, widows, destitutes, etc.

#### ***Primary Resource (Mapping & Modelling)***

- Land, water and tree resources, land use, land and soil types, cropping patterns, land and water management, productivity, watersheds, degraded land, treatment plans, etc. (Done by the villagers themselves with paper and pens when it is to be mapping on paper or coloured chalk or coloured powders [Rangoli] when it has to be mapping on the ground.)

### TRANSECTS (Annex III, IV)

#### ***Straight Line; Nullah; Sweeping*** (Annex III)

- Perambulatory/observatory walks to study natural resources, topography, soils and vegetation, farming practices, problems and opportunities which are cross tallied with the resource mapping and modelling. (Done by walking through the area, with a group of villagers - either following a particular course, cross country or covering the area in a combing or sweeping motion.)

### ***Historical*** (Annex IV)

- Pictorial/graphic representations of the area at different points in time, to give evolutionary trends in land use, vegetation, erosion, population, etc. (Done by interviewing older people and asking them to recap the landscape of a given area at different points in time.)

### SEASONALITY (Annex V)

#### ***Diagramming***

- For obtaining seasonal patterns of rainfall, employment, income and expenditure, debt, credit, food and nutrition, diseases, fodder, milk production, marketing, etc. (Done with the use of stones, sticks and different coloured seeds to represent months" quantities of rainfall, number of days of employment, income, etc.)

### RANKING (Annex VI)

#### ***Pair wise; Matrix; Preference; Scoring***

- For ranking items such as: crops, varieties, types and breeds of livestock, trees, fodders, supplementary income generating activities, etc. (Done by asking farmers to list different items ea. species of trees or vegetables and different criteria for evaluating them. Each class or category is then given a rank or score by the villagers. This is done by means of quantification with pebbles or seeds.)

#### ***Wealth***

- Establishing economic order of members of a community. (Done by interviewing a suitable villager(s), who then classifies different members into separate groups identified as distinct economic classes in the village.)

### DIAGRAMS (Annex VIII)

#### ***Venn (Chappatis)***

- Used as a means of identifying and establishing relationships between a village and its environment in order of their relative importance.

#### ***Linkage/Relationship Charts***

- Also for mapping processes, causes, effects, linkages.

## *General*

- Pie diagrams, flow diagrams, trend dia grams, graphs, etc., for depiction data about various topics.

## *Extensions and hybrids*

Constant and extensive use of PALM in our work in a variety of situations has helped bring about progress in PALM methodology.

- *New applications*: Like applying the time line exercise to areas other than just the history of the village. For example, it is used to record the evolution of health and agricultural practices, education, etc. One interesting recent application was its rise in the profiling of a poor family. Another prominent application has been the use of participatory village mapping to see patterns of caste, asset ownership, family size and to identify households with handicapped persons, persons having chronic ailments, family planning cases, etc.

In one recent exercise while the village was being mapped by women, a discussion on malnutrition was initiated, and the symptoms described. After this the women began to point out and mark on the map, the houses which had children suffering from malnutrition.

- *New Extensions*: Such as the evolution of participatory mapping on the ground to participatory modelling on the ground. From this point the method was extended further by making models of what a particular area such as a watershed looked like 50 years ago, what it would look like 20 years hence, and so on. Treatment plans for land development have also been shown on the maps or models.
- *New Methods*: For instance in the use of transects for planning development of village lands, a new method used was the "Sweeping transect." Here groups of farmers and Outsiders comb different blocks of the area to bring out information about indigenous technology, problems and opportunities. Using this method, site specific plans can be made even on a plot by plot basis.
- *Hybrids*: It has been possible to evolve new methods by combining two or more methods. For instance, participatory village mapping has led to participatory wealth ranking. This was further developed to include participatory resource mapping, with land ownership, land use, soil types and productivity of each plot of land indicated. Later attempts were made to correlate wealth to productivity.

The innovations and learning continue. Lately we have been experimenting with different ways in which the PALM exercise can be conducted. For example, in several cases we have had the farmers themselves draw the village and resource map and indicate possible interventions. This was done without any Outsiders being present, while the exercise was going on. The results have been extremely encouraging. Similarly, we now have farmers conducting their own exercises, interviewing one another and so on.

We continue to learn. We are learning to "embrace" error and to listen instead of lecturing - not very easy tasks. We are learning how to handle "dominant" participants - including some from the village who have vested interests. Sequencing our questions during interactions, sequencing of topics during a PALM exercise and sequencing of follow up activities - whether to do with the village programme or to do with the development and institutionalization of PALM - all these and many more are areas where we are engaged in a continuous process of learning.

## **Lessons**

There have been several lessons. Enough has been said elsewhere about the qualitative differences between the information generated in the PRA/ PALM method and the conventional survey method. The latter is unfamiliar to the people and therefore non participative. What do we do with Villagers who have ideas and perceptions far different from our own, which are also expressed differently and do not fall into any of our existing formats?

We have found, as others have, that Villagers are capable of collecting far more accurate information than Outsiders. They can also correct it, order and analyze it and start a process of development if given the opportunity to do so. Alongside this realization, there is also the growing realization that people in the rural areas are extremely skillful managers forced to live as they are under extremely marginal and vulnerable conditions. Their decision making has got to be precise; hence, their perceptions about their situations are absolutely critical inputs in any planning.

There is a need to understand and appreciate traditional management systems, livelihood systems, indigenous technologies, and the ways and reasons for how people feel, see, think and act in rural areas. PALM offers a way in which both Outsiders and Villagers try to discover the situation through a process of joint observation and interaction and shared analysis. The focus is on relationships rather than on any single event, aspect or activity. We have found that PALM is a method much enjoyed by both Villagers and Outsiders alike. It not only enhances participation, it also enhances the generation of both information and ideas. And we find that the village has begun to grow on us.

Villagers are increasingly emerging as resource persons in our PALM exercises. This includes small and marginal farmers, landless, tribals, women and even children. The latter have often participated actively and have demonstrated their expertise in terms of identifying different types of grasses and trees (particularly fruit trees). They also help identify school dropouts, handicapped children, etc.

The PRA/PALM field is a new unexplored and seemingly open ended frontier. Several possibilities exist - in methodology development, applications and generation of information - particularly local knowledge. But there is a danger - that of a lack of quality control and the consequent propagation of wrong methods. There is an urgent need to rapidly increase the use of good PRA methods and introduce this approach in mainstream organizations and institutions.

And finally, there is a need to train more and more people in PRA/PALM. But where are the trainers and how do we go about achieving this?

## **Endnote**

1 Correspondence can be sent to MYRADA at No. 2, Service Road, Domlur Layout, in Bangalore 560 071, Karnataka State, SOUTH INDIA.

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## **Annex I: Time line**

### **[Pidow-Myrada Gulbarga](#)**

## **Annex II: Social mapping**

### **[Ramenamally village](#)**

## **Annex III: Sweeping transect**

### **[Sweeping transect](#)**

## **Annex IV: Historical transect**

### **[Historical transect](#)**

## **Annex IV: Historical transects**

## **Annex V: Seasonality diagramming**

### **[Seasonality diagramming](#)**

### **[Seasonality of rainfall](#)**

## **Annex VI: Ranking**

### **[An exercise in ranking](#)**

## **Annex VII: Livelihood ranking**

### **[Livelihood ranking for Harizanamada Guddavela Gupra](#)**

## **Annex VIII: Diagrams**

### **[Trends in mother and childcare and childbirth](#)**