ESSAY

Learning and Teaching about Participatory Development: The Practical and Theoretical Challenges

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Introduction

Since the 1970s, participatory development has become part and parcel of most practitioner-oriented development studies programs. This reflects a shift in the field of development that has been going on for the past few decades. "Participatory Rural Appraisal" (PRA) is one approach to participatory development that has received much attention and is the source of much debate. PRA represents a philosophy of or approach to development (specifically rural development) as well as a concomitant set of techniques, which places emphasis on local knowledge and local solutions. PRA sought to challenge practices within the development field, which relied heavily on assumptions about development expertise residing with outsiders-assumptions that PRA's advocates argued doomed development to failure. PRA emerged primarily from experiences in rural development and built on methods such as action research, rapid rural appraisal and applied anthropology. PRA places great emphasis on the role of the facilitator, and writings about PRA devote considerable time to outlining the attitudes and characteristics a facilitator should possess (Chambers, 1997). PRA techniques also rely heavily on mapping, diagramming and public dialogue about community problems and issues. One of the key expressed goals of such techniques was to make PRA accessible to the illiterate and others who might be left out of traditional information gathering processes.

Interestingly, some of the strongest critiques of PRA point to the reliance on such techniques and the public nature of these PRA exercises, as the source of PRA's major weaknesses (Kapoor, 2002; Mosse, 1994). For example, David Mosse (1994) argues that PRA techniques represent one approach to gathering knowledge and information, an approach that may be biased against women and that is often not conducive to the types of knowledge about agriculture embedded in the practice of communities. Ilan Kapoor (2002) argues that the reliance on public deliberation in PRA exercises ensures that dominant voices will prevail. He argues that PRA does not have any mechanism built into it to manage differences and that the public nature of PRA not only fails to address such difference but actually serves to gloss them over.

This paper will examine some of these critiques of PRA, as well as its practical challenges, by drawing upon the experiences of the author teaching about participatory development in a graduate level development studies program.

Background

Since the fall of 2002, I have been a lecturer at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. In this capacity, I teach courses in the Economic and

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Political Development concentration, a development studies program designed to prepare young professionals interested in entering the field of development[1]. In addition to teaching development related courses, I coordinate the "Workshop in Applied Development". This is a practicum in development through which teams of students undertake pro-bono consulting engagements for international development organizations. My comments in this paper stem specifically from teaching a course entitled "Program and Project Management for Development" (PPMD), as well as my experiences advising students in the Workshop in Applied Development. After a brief description of each of these courses, the paper will examine three key themes or issues which have emerged through these teaching experiences, relating them to broader debates about PRA in the literature on development.

The PPMD course is not a course about management in the traditional sense of the word[2]. Rather, it is a course about tools for and approaches to development work, with a significant amount of time devoted to discussions about participatory development and, specifically, PRA. In the fall of 2003, my colleague and I chose to have all students in the course work in teams to actually design and implement a PRA in class. In my section of the course there were six PRA presentations throughout the semester. Initially, we intended to have students use one of the development cases the course was designed around as the hypothetical setting for their PRA exercise. However, I gave my class the option of designing a PRA that would be more connected to the reality of their prior experiences in development. It was my hope that this would enable them to focus on process rather than content for role-playing. In the end, four of the six groups chose this option. In addition to the actual role-plays, the second time I taught this course, I had students write down some of their reflections on doing PRA and I draw upon some of these reflections here.

The large majority of the students who take PPMD go on to participate in the development practicum I referred to above, the Workshop in Applied Development (hitherto referred to as the Workshop). The Workshop is a course for second-year Master's degree students in our program. Students work in teams with a faculty supervisor to assist "clients" on a wide variety of assignments in international development. Some past projects have involved capacity building initiatives, poverty reduction projects, post-conflict reconstruction, micro-credit projects, marketing for local producers, and HIV AIDS programming. In recent years, projects have been arranged with a wide variety of international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration, the World Bank, UNICEF, UNIFEM, UNDP, and NGOs such as Trickle Up, World Neighbors, and Technoserve. In addition, we have undertaken projects with foundations, grassroots organizations, and US based agencies, such as the New York Association for New Americans[3]. Some of these projects are important practical experiences in the application of participatory development techniques. This year, for example, one team I have been working with conducted PRA exercises in villages in rural Ecuador in order to learn more about the ways in which people save money, traditional forms of lending, and local ways of coping with fluctuations in income, expenses, and financial crises.

Through both of these experiences--teaching PPMD and advising students in the Workshop--key issues emerge about the practical challenges of doing participatory

development. These issues have also been raised in some of the literature on this topic (Kapoor, 2002; Michener, 1998; Mosse, 1994). The following section then outlines three key issues, with specific reference to the context in which they emerged in the classroom or in the course of the practicum, and it draws parallels with writing on these topics by students and scholars.

"Does this ever work in practice?": Key issues and concerns about PRA

In my discussions with students and in their written reflections, three key themes recur again and again. These themes encompass concerns about: the reality of "local" differences, inequalities and power differentials; the practical challenges of dealing with these local disparities when doing PRA; the practical challenges of being "really participatory" given the reality of how development organizations and their work is organized; and the effectiveness of participatory approaches such as PRA given these challenges and constraints. I consider each of the three themes below.

1. Even people in relatively small and homogenous communities have different ideas and perceptions about what their priorities are, the causes of local problems and potential solutions or approaches to improving their lives.

As one reads through the range of literature that has emerged to critique or to improve upon participatory development techniques, a recurring theme is the failure to recognize or adequately address inequalities in local communities where development work is being undertaken. In their reflections, and our discussions, several of the students in my courses pointed to the challenges of managing differences and inequalities at the local level and the mechanics of doing this. Some understood this challenge as an issue of reaching consensus and wondered how one could reach consensus through PRA type exercises. One student, reflecting on the PRA in which she had recently participated in my class, felt that without the explicit goal of reaching consensus and a process for achieving that consensus, individual ideas could and did get subsumed by those in a group who were more vocal:

> Without explicit attempt to reach a consensus as a method, individual ideas may have actually been suppressed to a greater degree, and ownership in the final output may have been less by certain groups. (SG, written reflection for PPMD course, Fall, 2003).

Kapoor (2002) in his evaluation of Robert Chambers' writing on PRA raises similar issues. Kapoor critiques Chambers for his lack of attention to reaching consensus, arguing that the absence of any principles for addressing differences and for delineating what is community consensus fails to address ways of "checking power relations in PRA space" (p. 108). Kapoor argues that although Chambers addresses the issue of local differences and local inequalities, he assumes that methods of sharing information and sharing it in a public way will enable communities to address these differences and that competing claims will be managed by "better technique" (p. 108). David Mosse (1994), writing about his own experiences doing PRA, argues that the very public nature of PRA activities may in fact ensure that facilitators are only getting the "official" story about a community and that this inevitable ends up being the one shaped by those dominant in the community.

2. Given local power differences, how does one organize PRA participants and how explicit should a facilitator be about his/her intentions, particularly when the intentions have to do with taking on local power differences?

Closely related to the first issue raised above is the very practical issue of how one groups people for PRA exercises. In role-playing PRAs, students in my classes often struggled with how to deal with power differences in group formation. This question, which is caught up in the specific mechanics of "how to do PRA", is related to the concerns about consensus raised by the student quoted above and by Kapoor. The criticism is that not discussing how differences (inequalities, power differentials) should be handled leads to their being glossed over and neglected.

Students' concerns about grouping people for PRA exercises were typically posed as questions such as: should we put men and women in the same groups? Should government officials and poor farmers be involved in the same PRA activity? For example, one group of students in their role-play used the case of a poverty reduction program in Bangladesh--one the class had read about--to design a mock PRA. In setting up the PRA, they put all the program officials in a small group on their own, the poorest people from the community were in their own group, and other villagers were organized in a similar fashion. In the debriefing, some of their classmates argued that such an approach to grouping would not be effective because it did not allow for people with competing perceptions or priorities to address their differences. Again, this example points to the way in which the mechanics of how to do PRA have much to do with structural issues of inequality and power. This emerged again and again in our class role-plays and in discussions in the previous year's class.

A related question which emerged in thinking about group formation was how explicit facilitators should be about their "designs" for group formation. In other words, is it legitimate for facilitators to group people in a certain way without making it explicit or without ever discussing why they choose particular groupings? In my colleagues' section of the PPMD course, a major debate emerged about this as a result of an in-class role-plays. One of the teams clandestinely grouped people according to particular traits by giving them a particular color bean and then asking them to vote with their bean. They did not reveal to the participants that there was any design to the color of the beans until the class was over. Some of their classmates--the "participants"--objected to this method, arguing that this lack of transparency jeopardized trust between the facilitators and the participants. This experience enabled discussion and learning about two important dimensions of such work. The obvious one is trust between facilitator(s) or development workers and the communities in which they work. The related issue is how explicit a facilitator should be about trying to "tangle" with power differences in a community.

On this later issue, Hazel Johnson and Gordon Wilson (2000), drawing on a case of a community waste management project in Zimbabwe, argue that:

> Social divisions have to be overtly recognized, actively negotiated, and represented if there is to be a.) greater coherence of action & b.) inclusion of hitherto excluded groups in development interventions. (p. 1891)

Furthermore, they argue that development cannot be sustainable or institutionalized without explicitly addressing these divisions/differences. In recent discussions with students in a seminar on development, some students argued that such an approach--namely, the approach which insists that participatory development should take on local differences, seek to change structures or to empower those who are disenfranchised--was unrealistic within the context of what most development projects set out to do. However, they acknowledged that this may be the unsaid aim of some activities such as forming a women's microcredit group.

Trying to tackle issues as sensitive as local inequalities is not unrelated to trust. When there is no relationship with a community, PRA activities can raise suspicions and concern in a community, particularly one with a history of bad experiences with outside "officials". Mosse (1994) refers to such an experience, one in which the PRA facilitators had to leave the community because of the level of resistance. In the spring of 2004, a group of our students participating in the development practicum had a similar experience while conducting PRA activities in two different villages in Ecuador. The team of students went to each village for two days to gather information about local strategies for saving and borrowing in order to make recommendations to their client about appropriate microfinance approaches for rural communities in this region. In the first community, the team's client had a long and positive relationship with the community. In the second village, there was no relationship such relationship and the community was not convinced of the benefit of participating in the PRA. Lacking a relationship with the client organization and the students (representatives of the client in this instance) the community initially refused to partake in the PRA activity questioning the motives of the team and the usefulness of an exercise that would take them away from their work for several hours. The students managed this by reiterating the purpose of the exercise and making sure not to promise anything they or their client could not deliver. In the end, in response to demands from the community, they also agreed to reciprocate the time by teaching an English class to local school children.

In situations where there is no established relationship with a community and a lack of trust, the goal of seeking to change or upset local social structures does seem lofty if not ridiculous. However, what Johnson and Wilson (2000) argue is that acknowledging and addressing differences must be part of every development process and from the inception.

3. How participatory can participatory be?: Can participatory development ever be as bottom up as the PRA literature would have us believe? How can one do participatory development - PRA - when faced by the practical and organizational constraints of doing development work?

When one reads the literature on PRA (e.g., Chambers, 1997; Selener et al, 1999), one understands that it is about a whole process, about building a relationship with a community because of a philosophy or attitude that prioritizes local knowledge and

know-how. Thus, the community is involved in identifying needs, prioritizing them, and thinking through solutions; they are full participants in an integrated development process. PRA--at least by its founding proponents--was never really envisioned as a set of tools to pick and choose from in a piece-meal fashion.

In reality, however, this is how such methods are typically employed. For those of our students who have done development work, they know and have experienced the reality of the often piece-meal approach to participation. Most are committed to participation or being participatory in their work, but know first hand about the challenges of being "truly" participatory when for example, needs, or at least fundable programs, are already predetermined by the organizations for which they work. Similarly, they are aware that development workers are sometimes placed in situations where an employer might ask them to conduct PRA exercises (which can take several hours) without any sense of what a follow-up process might be or if there will even be one. In such circumstances, one is put into the situation of asking local people to give up valuable time without any clear stake in it for them.

Concerns about such challenges have emerged clearly in my teaching, through role-plays and in activities related to the development practicum. I describe two examples briefly here. In one of the PRA role-plays that students did last semester, a group simulated a scenario in which efforts to undertake PRA were compromised by lack of follow-up in an earlier phase of a project. The students pretended to be undertaking a PRA exercise--a mapping exercise--in a local community that was to be significantly impacted by the building of a major highway. In the scenario they created, they told their classmates (who were the "villagers") that there had in fact been another group of development workers brought in 12 months earlier to do a similar exercise and that nothing had come of that earlier effort. In setting things up this way, the student facilitators were hoping the villagers would be agitated and that their role-play would demonstrate the uncomfortable sort of situations that one is often put in as a development practitioner who is supposed to engage a community in genuine participatory processes.

In another incident, a group of students was concerned about being put into a similar situation to that just described in the role-play. Through our development practicum, this group of students had been asked by a United Nations organization to develop and conduct "participatory benchmarking" workshops with local communities in two countries around select "Millennium Development Goals" (MDGs). Students were wary about engaging local communities in discussions about the MDGs as they had no indication from their client organization as to how the client would be following up with the communities. They did not want to be put in the position of running another workshop that would be a one-time affair. In the case of one country, the students were particularly concerned as they felt that this particular community was already quite cynical about development organizations coming in to do "participatory" workshops. In this case, the team worked to pressure their client to be clear about follow-up. However, when it became clear that no real resources had been committed in country to follow up, the team rethought the goals of the workshop in this particular country and decided to present the workshop as an effort to bring local development actors together to discuss

how their efforts could be better coordinated and the local assets of the community better employed in pursuit of the MDGs.

Related to this issue of "how participatory can participatory be" are questions about the basic effectiveness of PRA as an approach, again with particular concerns about the constraints under which development practitioner's work. In discussions with students, this has also been expressed as a question of whether the fruits of "successful" PRA or other participatory processes can ever be scaled up. As one student put it:

> While the exercises seems to be instructive and stimulating in many ways, it is less clear how the outside facilitator would be able to use the experience to make concrete conclusions germane to the project design, implementation, impact and so on. This is perhaps a larger question that I have about PRA. It is not difficult to imagine the value of PRA for a project leader who is working in the field and who can be much more effective with a fuller and more informed picture of the local community. However, I wonder how qualitative insights and more nuanced understanding of a specific local milieu that can be gathered by PRA facilitators can then be transformed into information that is actually used to guide design and inform project evaluation, especially in large organizations with numerous and dispersed decision makers. If PRA exercises merely become the subject of a summary narrative report sent in from the field, I suspect that such reports will only be one among many sources of information used to make decisions, and may lose much of their special significance. (AM, written reflection for PPMD course, Fall 2003).

Conclusion

"I have to believe that all this focus on participation is a good thing."

Each time I have taught the PPMD course or discussed participation in other development courses, some of the most interesting soul-searching discussions about "doing" development work emerged in discussing the weaknesses of PRA and the challenges of doing participatory development more generally. When I say "soul-searching" I do not exaggerate. For students making a career change or taking on thousands of dollars in loans because they are committed to development as a cause, they want their classes to help them figure out how to do it well and how to do it in a way that is really participatory. Students are troubled by the critiques we read of participatory development and of the development enterprise more generally, but they are committed to trying to address development challenges. Thus, I have found it useful to share their insights here.

I conclude with some reflections on the teaching of participatory development and working with students who want to be development practitioners. I begin with a general observation about the belief in the "power of participation" and the depths of this sentiment among students. As alluded to above, students believe that the focus on participatory development is an important and good trend in development. Their commitment to participation in principle is sometimes so strong that participation is romanticized or idealized. Thus, for example, there is sometimes a tendency to think that PRA is the right approach to any project or a belief that incorporating "local voices"

can redeem any project. The development practicum in our program proves to be an invaluable experience for exploring the real challenges and constraints to doing participatory development. The in-class role-plays begin to unpack such challenges as well, especially when there are others partaking in the same exercise who may have had more experience in actual development work before coming to the program.

What has been striking through this reflection on the teaching of participatory development is the extent to which class role-plays and some written reflection help to elucidate issues which parallel prevailing critiques in the literature on PRA and participatory development. Such hands-on types of exercises have been very effective in identifying core issues for doing participatory development. Also, much more so than in merely reading an article, the lessons about participatory development challenges are more actively experienced and as a result more fully understood and internalized. Reading some of the relevant literature along side such exercises is a good strategy, but just as important is to facilitate discussion (debriefing sessions) and reflection on such activities.

The quote that opens this section ("I have to believe that all this focus on participation is a good thing") conveys what is almost a sense of urgency from a student reacting to critiques of participatory development. Frustrated with critiques of participatory development, she argued that "academics" seem to wait for each new development trend so they can critique it and write it off as another failed attempt to improve upon development. For students such as this one, who view themselves as development practitioners, it is vital to create opportunities for them to construct their own knowledge and critique of development. In such a way, they will become more critical and thoughtful practitioners themselves and hopefully contribute to the improvement of PRA techniques, as well as participatory approaches more broadly.

Many of the students who come through comparative education or international education and development programs will move on to careers in development. As educators in such programs, we must struggle with the balance between teaching about the very real critiques of development, while providing students bound for development jobs with the critical skills needed to do this work and to do it better than it has been done by building on past lessons. Participation has become a keystone of development and one with great potential to strengthen development efforts. However doing participatory development is wrought with many of the same challenges development continues to face. Thus in teaching about participatory development (and in this case I have been speaking specifically about PRA), we must point out these issues and also create opportunities for our students to learn about these challenges on their own and to struggle with ways to move forward.

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Notes

1. For some students enrolled in our program development is a new field, but many of our students have had some development-related experience.

2. This course was initially developed by my colleague Coralie Bryant, the Director of the Economic and Political Development Program at Columbia University. She and I both taught this course last semester - each of us taking one section - and conversations with her throughout the past two years have been key to my reflections on participatory development and approaches to teaching PRA.

3. I have been coordinating this Workshop for four years now. I identify potential projects (with the help of colleagues and students), negotiate initial terms of projects, create student teams, and coordinate a team of faculty advisors, each of whom supervises two teams. In addition, I advise two teams each year.

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