
Peter Linnell, B8 PRACTICAL; Examination of Participatory Appraisal

History.

Participatory Appraisal is a term of art used to refer to a collection of tools and working methods derived mainly from a radical criticism of development projects in less industrialised countries in the 1960's and 70's. PA began as an attempt to understand the needs of ordinary people who would be impacted by developments, and hence to determine appropriateness; both in terms of local impact and use of donor resources. The requirement for quick and inexpensive research methods led to a tool kit suited for rapid qualitative in- field assessments but with sufficient sophistication to be taken seriously by local, national and international policy makers and funders. Since original inception the tool kit has evolved into a recognised best practice and found to be suitable for wide ranging applications outside it's original focus area.

Practice.

The group used the PA toolkit to examine the question -

“What should be the entertainment for the next course module Saturday social ?”

A selection of the PA tools were examined and either rejected or used to seek an answer to this question, later the various groups' experience of using the tools was collated. An initial criticism was made that the question was too trivial to test the tools adequately, whilst an alternative view suggested that a simple question without strong emotional or political content allowed the tools to be tested in their own right.

Graffiti wall

In the context of this group, meeting for only a few minutes, indoors, face to face, it has to be admitted that this tool could not be properly tested, the session being essentially a brainstorming. However the results of this brainstorming yielded suggestions for party formats from all participants, some sparked off earlier suggestions. It can be supposed that a graffiti wall would work in the same way with the benefit of anonymity for participants, so more risky suggestions may be forthcoming. This makes the tool particularly valuable in determining responses from hard to reach groups such as disaffected youth; in other words it has high cultural relevance for some demographic groups.

Timeline

Because the question applies to a single event in time, this tool has little relevance.

Pie Chart

Again this is of limited value in the context of the test question. However if an analysis of quantifiable variables (such as time allowed for various activities or of budgetary issues) had been involved this tool would have greater value.

Evaluation wheel

As a method of testing preferences within the results from earlier applications this has some merit,

but relies on there being something to evaluate. In other words use of this tool MUST follow a more creative tool such as brainstorming or graffiti wall.

Pairwise Ranking

This tool provides a means of testing the relative merits of paired suggestions in a matrix so that all possible pairs are tested; and eventually quantifying the results. The greatest merit of this tool is that it could function as a dam buster for a stalled process, as it *can* yield counter-intuitive results. (not in this case.) Like the above it depends on having some items to rank.

Criteria Ranking

Another method for converting subjective feelings into quantity data within a group, allowing a more objective appraisal of opinions. By giving each participant several (3 in this test) “hits” against agreed criteria the strength of feeling preferences can be given numerical values.

Impact Ranking

Another tool for assessing suggestions rather than creating them; this allows ideas to be tested against possible impacts such as resource use, demands on participants, level of service provided. In the context of the question it helped to clarify why things have been as they have; ie music is easy to do with limited resources and satisfies the most people.

Post test assessment

The groups reported back using keywords or phrases summing up use of the tools and commenting on them. There was considerable agreement on core issues and no major disagreements. From a utility viewpoint, the tools offer speed of use, yielding results quickly, though this may not remain so for larger more diverse groups. The tools lead all participants to contribute, acting as a leveller against dominant personalities and giving group ownership of outcomes. A process gain seems to be operating to yield good group outcomes. The meta tool of triangulation was noted to permit rapid cross evaluation or self testing of initial findings and also a means of testing suitability of a chosen tool for inclusion in a given situation. Another process gain is that the tools are described as “inspiring”. There was consensus that the sequencing of tools is a vital issue to the process success.

For participants the tools offer accessibility, overcoming possible language or literacy barriers by use of visual representations. Variation between tools ensures that at least some tools will yield results for any group. Anonymity; such as with the Graffiti wall; offers participants opportunities to make socially or politically risky suggestions. It must be noted that some visual techniques are not trans- cultural, particularly the use of abstract diagrams or matrices.

Finally it was widely recognised that the tool set demands a skilled operator. From the outset some skill is required to set up initial conditions appropriate for the sample community in order to elicit a range of preferred choices without imposing an outsider/expert view on their situation. Within the PA process skill is needed to select and deploy appropriate parts of the tool kit to get at recordable results which can be given meaning to outsiders (policymakers, funders) as well as to the community itself. This introduces great risk of manipulation.

Discussion

Just from this simple and rapid testing of some of the PA tools it is clear that some scheme of

application must exist prior to their deployment. Immediate issues are raised in terms of the setting of questions at the very start of the process. This is obviously true of all consultative processes, especially in the political/social policy arena where the powerful command the resources of communication and persuasion and have the capacity to set the agenda for the entire process. PA was developed largely to help overcome this kind of top down agenda setting, but there is enormous risk of simply replacing one kind of imposed agenda with another one. Much depends on the personal and political integrity of the practitioners carrying out the PA process in the field.

A training manual for PRA published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (THEIS and GRADY 1991) emphasises the crucial importance of diversity among field workers, as well as competence in the practice of PRA workers must also come with as wide a range of individual competence as possible. A diversity of disciplines enables a field group to respond to changes in their situation (or that of their study community), to respond to changes in the appraisal scheme as a work in progress, and to respond creatively to challenges arising.

The same manual identifies hazards to the PA process;

Possible Dangers and Shortcomings of PRA

Difficulty finding the right team

Going too quickly may lead to superficiality

Desire for statistics and quantitative data

Desire for the security of a fixed questionnaire

Difficulty of finding the right questions to ask

Difficulty of finding the poorest and least educated, esp. women

Failure to involve community members

Lack of rapport within the community

Failure to listen, lack of humility and respect

Seeing only part of a situation or problem and not getting the full picture

Making value judgements about others

Being misled by myth and gossip

Generalising based on too little information and too few informants

Overlooking the invisible

Lecturing instead of listening and learning

Raising expectations in the community where the PRA is carried out

Imposing "our" ideas, categories and values without realising. This makes it difficult to learn from "them", makes "them" appear ignorant when they are not.

Male teams and neglect of women

If the approach is wrong PRA will not work. The right attitudes and behaviour are key to the success of a PRA.

As well as offering a specific workshop on these hazards the manual at all stages offers cautionary notes relevant to each element of the design and implementation of a PRS scheme. The manual is clearly based on both a thorough knowledge of the PRA process and a solid grounding in its use in some extremely sensitive situations. The manual imparts a strong sense that PRA was able to uncover aspects of needs which could never have yielded to more conventional field surveys.

A more refined form of PA has been proposed combining elements of PRA with Issue Structuring Methods (ISM). This combined technique called P A N D A (Participatory Appraisal of Needs and the Development of Action) is proposed in a paper by White and Taket (1997). The background to the paper was a field study undertaken in Belize.

Illustrations of methods for use within PANDA

From PRA

Secondary sources
Semi-structured interviewing

Transects
Trend analysis
Venn diagrams
Wealth ranking
Analysis of difference
Ranking
Stories/drama
Brainstorming/SWOT

From ISM

A I D A (analysis on interconnected decision areas)
Stages from Team Syntegrity, such as Problem Jostle and Hexadic Reduction
Comparative advantage
Strategic Assumption Surfacing and Testing
Mapping and influence diagrams
Commitment packages
Action methods

(from White and Taket 1997)

Clearly the objective underlying this new framework is to progress from needs appraisal to development of action and its implementation to meet the identified needs. The authors point out that PRA only identifies needs on the ground without offering suggestions for interventions by agencies such as NGOs. By introducing components from ISM tools can be deployed which deal with issues of

“representing and exploring causality, networks of influence and compatibility; none of the techniques associated with PRA do this. “

and in their summary;

“P A N D A seeks to emphasise the elements concerned with option formulation, evaluation and selection, i.e. the move to action, and it is in this that it is most different from PRA.”

In view of both scale and urgency of the task facing us all, I am persuaded that PANDA is a more immediately useful tool than PRA alone, provided that its deployment shares the commitment to quality and caution evidenced in the IIED Training Manual.

References;

THEIS, JOACHIM and GRADY, HEATHER M. 1991

Participatory Rapid Appraisal for Community Development, A Training Manual Based on Experiences in the Middle East and North Africa.

London, International Institute for Environment and Development.

L WHITE and A TAKET 1997

Beyond Appraisal: Participatory Appraisal of Needs and the Development of Action (PANDA)
Omega, International Journal of Management Science; **Vol. 25**, No. 5, pp, 523-534,