

## PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGIES AND PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES: ASSESSING PRA USE IN THE GAMBIA

David Brown, Mick Howes, Karim Hussein, Catherine Longley and Ken Swindell

### Abstract

*This research examines the conduct and consequences of the use of participatory rural appraisal techniques in four rural development projects in The Gambia. The research included a review of literature on PRA and the identification of a series of key themes that would allow an assessment of its utility. Fieldwork in The Gambia included reviews of project documentation, key informant interviews, and periods of village-based research using PRA methods. The conclusions of the study were presented and discussed in a national workshop.*

### Research findings

- *PRA has had some positive effects, particularly on the agency side. It has served to motivate rural development workers, and instil a spirit of enquiry into support agencies; however, it is not certain if this initial enthusiasm can be maintained and translated into continuing benefits.*
- *There are also some concerns about data quality and cost-effectiveness, as well as the high transaction costs of PRA use, particularly for villagers.*
- *PRA has encouraged participation of the poor in data collection and the direction of project initiatives, but an idealisation of the nature of 'community' and a bias towards the literate draw into question its use for community mobilisation.*
- *There is little evidence that PRA is effective in empowering the poor or challenging long-term power relations.*

### Policy implications

- *Although methodological instruments like PRA have some potential for capacity building in development organisations and communities, institutional structures and relationships are likely to be more important.*
- *Practitioners need to acknowledge the limitations of PRA as an analytical tool, particularly as a proxy for social analysis. PRA's capacity to relate norms and values to other variables in the social system appears very limited, as is its utility to explore and challenge established social relationships.*
- *PRA can help engender greater community participation in development, but it is necessary to guard against the substitution of tools and methods for more concerted efforts at changing social relationships; in addition, the use of PRA does not necessarily ensure equitable access by all community members.*

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## **Acronyms**

AATG	ActionAid-The Gambia
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CRS/GM	Catholic Relief Services-The Gambia
DELTA	Development, Education, Leadership, Training and Action
DFID	Department for International Development
GEC	Group Executive Committee
GGFP	Gambian-German Forestry Project
GoTG	Government of The Gambia
NAWFA	National Women Farmers Association
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PLA	Participatory Learning and Action
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
RRA	Rapid Rural Appraisal
SDRD	Support to Decentralised Rural Development
SGA	Sesame Growers' Association
SPACO	Strategy for Poverty Alleviation Coordinating Office
VDC	Village Development Committee
VDG	Village Development Group

# **PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGIES AND PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES: ASSESSING PRA USE IN THE GAMBIA**

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

### **Background to the research**

Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) has been defined as a: 'family of participatory approaches and methods which emphasize *local* knowledge and enable local people to do their *own* appraisal, analysis and planning. PRA uses group animation and exercises to facilitate information sharing, analysis and action among stakeholders.' (World Bank, 1995:175; emphasis in original)

In the last 15 years, PRA and cognate tools have become the preferred methodology for participatory development, and have been widely adopted by development agencies. They have been particularly popular with NGOs, to which their accessibility and freedom from complex technical demands make them especially attractive as outreach tools. However, the interest in PRA goes beyond the purely methodological. Its leading proponent, Robert Chambers, claims that it represents not just a set of research techniques, but rather a whole new paradigm of development. PRA offers, he argues:

'...a new high ground, a paradigm of people as people. PRA fits a cybernetic model of fast feedback in conditions of rapid change. Good PRA goes further, in empowering lowers. Its principles, precepts and practices resonate with parallel evolutions in the natural sciences, chaos and complexity theory, the social sciences and post-modernism, and business management... On the new high ground, decentralisation, democracy, diversity and dynamism combine...' (1997:188)

These are clearly elevated claims, and ones which, if they can be substantiated, have radical implications for development practice across a very broad front. Yet surprisingly, the virtues of the approach have more often been asserted than demonstrated. Most of the critical commentary, has come from within the PRA movement itself, as part of the 'self-critical epistemological awareness' which its theorists view as central to their ideology and practice (Chambers, 1997:32). But, as Cooke and Kothari (2001:5) note, such awareness is less a critique of the approach than one of its intrinsic facets. Aside from Cooke and Kothari's own edited volume (2001), and a few other broad reviews of participation such as that of Bastian and Bastian (1996), there have been very few systematic

attempts to examine the precepts of the participatory movement, and almost none which have looked critically at PRA as its dominant methodology.

Interestingly, however, the paucity of independent assessments has not prevented the international community from embracing PRA techniques, and widely promoting them. This has been as true of the major bilateral and international development assistance agencies as it has been of those closer to grassroots development practice, such as the NGOs. Very sizeable amounts of money have been committed by most international donors over the last decade to the promotion of participatory methodologies and aims. Much of this has been in support of community development programmes funded through NGO intermediaries, though many donors (the World Bank included) have sought to mainstream them into their own practices and activities.

It is in this context that the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) invited the Overseas Development Institute to undertake a systematic assessment of the use of PRA in one of its country programmes in The Gambia, West Africa. DFID support to PRA in The Gambia has extended over almost a decade, and has focused on the work of its principal NGO partner, ActionAid-The Gambia (AATG). Partly with DFID funding, this NGO has pioneered the use of the approach in grassroots capacity building in The Gambia. ActionAid has also played a pivotal role in introducing PRA techniques to other development agencies, and these are now very widely employed in rural development work throughout the country.

The brief that DFID gave to ODI was threefold:

- to take stock of the use made by AATG of PRA in the period 1992–2000 and to draw practical lessons from this which could be used to strengthen its capacity-building work;
- to consider the wider national experience of PRA and similar approaches to rural development, to determine the degree of inter-organisational learning which had already taken place, and to see what scope there might be for different organisations to improve their practice in the light of what others have been doing;
- to provide DFID with more general insights into

how it might support and promote participatory processes at regional level and beyond.

The research was to be structured around a set of case studies chosen for their contrasting characteristics. This comparison would not only serve to highlight the relative strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches in question, but also to illuminate PRA's potential as a research and capacity-building tool in an Africa-wide frame of reference.

The results of the study are reported in Brown et al. (2002). This paper provides a summary of some of the principal conclusions of the study. The rest of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 outlines some of the issues that are relevant to an assessment of PRA. Section 3 provides an introduction to The Gambia, a description of the projects that were used as case studies, and an outline of the study methodology. Section 4 summarises the principal findings of the study. Section 5 presents policy implications and conclusions.

## 2 PRA AND ITS CRITICS

Over the last two decades, the notion of 'participation' has become the dominant motif in international thinking on development, and one of its conceptual pillars. Methodologies such as PRA have helped to ground this movement in development practice. The spread of participatory methods in The Gambia reflects these changes, and is indicative of a trend that has touched the entire developing world. This section provides the wider context for the analysis of PRA use in The Gambia, by briefly summarising the rise of participatory practice in community-level development, and outlining some of the principal questions that are beginning to appear in the literature.

### The origins of PRA

That methodologies and tools of enquiry might be seen as a vehicle for community participation began to emerge in the 1970s and early 1980s with work on rapid rural appraisal (RRA). It was largely developments in university-level institutions (most notably at the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex and Khon Kaen University in Thailand) which led to the early popularising of RRA. The direction taken was strongly influenced by the intellectual drive and popularising zeal of Robert Chambers (1994a/b/c). The ways in which the concepts of RRA and PRA developed were closely bound up with his critique of conventional development practice, as first set out in consolidated fashion in his influential *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (1983).

He views RRA as having three main origins:

- dissatisfaction with the social biases of 'rural development tourism';
- disillusion with the normal processes of questionnaire surveys and their results;
- the need for more-cost effective methods of learning.

Initially, the accent in RRA use was on external learning (what has been called its 'extractive' or – more neutrally – 'elicitive' use), though, from the mid-1980s,

it began to be seen as one variant of a more inclusive concept of 'participatory development' (Chambers, 1997:113).

The union between the two concepts of RRA and PRA became ever more strong as aid agencies, mostly NGOs, laid claim to leadership in the drive to popular empowerment through participatory approaches, and began to integrate PRA methods into their field programmes. By 1994, the methods were in use in at least 40 countries and in a wide variety of public and private agencies, both national and international.

The core principles of RRA and PRA have been identified as follows:

#### *Core principles of RRA:*

- reversal of learning: learning from local people, not just mere transmission of knowledge to them;
- rapid and progressive learning: with the emphasis on flexibility and adaptation, not blueprint learning;
- offsetting biases: particularly the centralist biases of 'rural development tourism';
- optimising trade-offs: between quality, relevance, accuracy and timeliness;
- triangulation: learning from several sources and disciplines;
- seeking the expression and analysis of complexity and diversity (emphasising variation over statistical averages and norms).

#### *Core principles of PRA ('but also applicable to RRA'):*

- 'handing over the stick': surrendering authority to local people in learning processes;
- self-critical awareness: critical examination by and of facilitators of their own roles and learning;
- personal responsibility: 'use your own best judgment at all times';
- sharing: of ideas and information, very widely (Chambers, 1997:156–8).

Chambers also sees the stimulation of 'community awareness' as central to PRA's aims (1992:9), a view endorsed by Weber and Ison (1995:110).

From these principles has gradually emerged the view of PRA not just as a useful research methodology, but also as a way of stimulating a more general process of political change and empowerment. Central to this proposition are claims as to the superiority of PRA to more conventional research and development techniques in areas such as the following:

- It has the ability to overcome the biases of 'rural development tourism' particularly the anti-poverty bias; it follows therefore that PRA makes claims to better reach the poor than its predecessors and competitors; this is based on its use of visual rather than verbal techniques; by recognising and attempting to assimilate the complexities of rural livelihoods (particularly those of the poor); by promoting group-based activities; and by seeking 'reversals in learning', whereby the poor become the experts, and the 'experts' facilitators.
- By promoting 'reversals of learning', PRA privileges local constructs and indigenous knowledge.

- It promotes a form of action research in which the aim is not just increased understanding but popular empowerment and social change.

Participatory research methods have gained immensely in popularity in recent years, and tools such as PRA/PLA (Participatory Learning and Action) have become the preferred research methodologies of many agencies active at grassroots level. RRA methods have now become well-established as tools of empirical research in a wide range of institutions. By contrast, PRA remains more closely associated with activist NGOs, as one component (albeit an important one) of a wider concept of participatory development. More broadly, the participatory movement has also evolved in other cognate directions. The World Bank, for example, has adopted a definition of participatory development which puts emphasis on broad issues of resource control ('Participation is a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, and the decisions and resources which affect them' (1995:3)), and has used an eclectic approach to the tools, institutions and structures through which this influence can be developed. It has made widespread use of PRA, as well as other methodological approaches to participation, particularly Beneficiary Assessment (Salmen, 1987) and Social Analysis (Cernea, 1991). The work of the World Bank's Learning Group is seen by some as at the cutting edge of participatory thinking (e.g. Nelson and Wright, 1995). The 'Participation Group' at the IDS, while retaining its strong interest in participatory tools, has widened its interests to focus increasingly on issues of citizenship and governance, and the institutional dimensions of participation (IDS, 2000). In Australia, PRA has been linked to soft systems theory and incorporated into a radical challenge to orthodoxy in agricultural education, at Hawkesbury College and elsewhere (Ison, 1990; Weber and Ison, 1995).

The rise of PRA and related tools has been linked to a significant increase in the accessibility of social research. The justifications for the use of these methods in terms of cost savings and efficiency would appear to be very strong. However, the benefits in relation to issues of equity and empowerment are more contentious, and this may have implications for the use of the tools in capacity building at community level.

### **Critiques of PRA**

Until recently, there has been little by way of literature critical of PRA. However, this has now begun to emerge, albeit in a fairly piecemeal way.

Critiques of PRA tend to be made at one of two levels. On the one hand are those criticisms which are broadly sympathetic to the movement, and aimed at improving its rigour and range. On the other hand are the radical critiques which question what is seen as the messianic claims of its proponents to represent a new form of popular empowerment, unencumbered by the restraints of positivist science.

Critiques of the former type tend to focus on the effectiveness of participatory *tools* in relation to questions of *access* and *equity*, pointing to the failure

of many attempts to target specific categories (women, for example (Guijt and Kaul Shah, 1998)), and calling for more imaginative usage of the tools and more careful targeting. Mosse notes the often highly public orientation of PRA exercises, and argues that this may limit their ability to reach the socially marginal and to address issues of equity (1993, 1995).

Several authors are concerned that PRA processes might be coopted to agendas which, far from being genuinely participatory, are in fact tightly controlled by the centre (e.g. Christophos, 1995). Chambers warns of the danger of a 'naïve populism in which participation is regarded as good regardless of who participates or who gains' (1994c).

The transactional environments in which participatory methods are often employed may also make for difficulties (see, for example, Moore et al., 1998; Brown, 1990). Where NGOs are involved in multiplex relationships with village communities, training them in participatory methods at the same time as they provide them with valued goods and services, it is unlikely that the information generated will be free from distortion and manipulation. In such circumstances, the assumption that the methods can reveal the 'true' values and interests of the community must be doubted. The ease with which PRA methods can be manipulated, with no possibility of external checks, is also of concern (Brown, 1998).

The high opportunity costs which the use of participatory methods may entail, particularly for the rural poor, have been noted by Johnson and Clark (1982). A similar point is made by Richards et al. (1999). They argue that the ability of rapid and participatory research tools to provide accurate information (in this case, economic information) is dependent on the degree of variation in the underlying data.

Criticisms such as the above are sometimes severe, but all stop short of any fundamental questioning of the value of the techniques, even if only on utilitarian grounds, and all suggest ways in which the use of PRA can be modified and refined. However, the more radical critiques go further, and question both the theoretical foundations of PRA and the class interests which it is likely to promote. This group of writers tends to be equally unsympathetic to the ideology of 'participation' in general, seeing it as a very qualified form of democracy, and one which is eminently prone to cooptation by the elite (Olivier de Sardan, 1992; Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

Several authors have questioned the idealisation of the community implicit in the approach and the danger of confusion of social and geographical communities (Biggs and Smith, 1998; Francis, 2000; Stirrat, 1996). The limitations of PRA in dealing with situations of unequal power relations have been raised by Nelson and Wright (1995). They warn of the danger of using the term 'community' as if it covered a homogeneous, idyllic, unified population with which researcher and developers can interact unproblematically.

Henkel and Stirrat (n.d.) question the way in which PRA methods allow practitioners to disown

responsibility for their own constructs by requiring 'participants' to engage in imposed behaviour for the consequences of which they will nevertheless be held accountable (see also Sellamna, 1999). There is concern that, in the guise of support for democratic involvement, responsibility may be transferred onto rural communities for decisions in which they have played only a very limited part.

PRA has been criticised methodologically, on at least two grounds. On the one hand, there are concerns over the potential reductionism which derives from PRA's preference for the visual over the verbal, and the simplification that this implies. The second aspect of the methodological critique concerns the lack of any 'objective' standards of assessment and quality control, by which one might know whether a PRA has been well or badly undertaken.

The above criticisms are directed at the PRA movement, largely on its own terms. However, beyond this is a wider concern about the promotion, in aid-funded environments, of notions of participation, as well as debates as to the conditions and characteristics of truly 'participatory development'. A leading theorist here is Tandler (1997) who has investigated the relationships between strong government, decentralisation and public participation. Other authors, most notably Ribot (1996; see also Schroeder, 1999) have asked whether attempts to promote popular participation in resource management are supportive or destructive of more fundamental principles of democracy. To date, such debates have been largely separate from concerns about participatory tools, though with increasing interest in the links between participation and public governance, it may be expected that these different strands of thinking will tend to converge.

### **Taking stock: some questions for the review**

There are, then, some widely divergent views on the value of PRA, and a sharp polarisation between PRA activists and enthusiasts and those more or less hostile to the whole participatory enterprise. Such differences are unlikely to be easily reconciled. Their value in the present context lies in the ways in which they illuminate the four case studies, and the questions they pose for the evaluation.

The study focused on nine principle themes:

- 1 *How has PRA been understood?*: how different organisations have understood PRA and how it has been incorporated into wider organisational procedures and practices.
- 2 *PRA Training*: how staff have been trained, and how effective their training has been.
- 3 *PRA in the field setting*: how PRA has been used in practice, in its applications in the field.
- 4 *PRA and community capacity*: the effect that PRA has had on the capacity of community-based organisations.
- 5 *Who participates?*: who has been able to participate in PRA-supported processes, and how they have

contributed to poverty alleviation.

- 6 *Sustainability and cost-effectiveness*: how sustainable are PRA-supported processes, and are the tools cost-effective in use.
- 7 *Recognition by government*: whether PRA is recognised by government and its influence at this level.
- 8 *The alternatives*: whether there are successful alternative approaches to promoting participatory community development in The Gambia.
- 9 *Is PRA still used by villagers when donors move on?*: whether PRA is used by communities or community-based organisations (CBOs) when the external donors have moved on.

### **3 THE GAMBIA, THE CASE STUDIES, AND STUDY METHODOLOGY**

The Gambia is situated on the west coast of Africa, extending some 350 km along the lower reaches of the River Gambia and varying in width from 50 km in the west to only 30 km in the east. Apart from its Atlantic seaboard, it is completely surrounded by Senegal. These unusual geopolitical features have meant that doubts have often been expressed about the country's political and economic viability. But The Gambia remains defiantly a sovereign entity. At the same time, the national boundary is extremely porous. Economically, socially and culturally, The Gambia has a much larger hinterland, or sphere of influence than indicated by its boundaries. It has long had a fluid and mobile population which provides a vital component of the life of the villages, and of the households within them.

The role of the community figures strongly in the plans of most development agencies working in The Gambia, governmental, inter-governmental and NGO. However, the Gambians' sense of community is influenced by many factors – most notably ethnicity, residence, kinship and association.

The country has great ethnic diversity for such a small riverine enclave. Gambian villages may comprise more than one ethnic group, as well as 'strangers' of various origins. The main groups are Mandinka, Fula, Wolof, Jola and Serahuli. Residence patterns are heavily influenced by ethnic identities and traditions, as well as farming patterns and trading activities. (For example, the Fula are strongly associated with cattle rearing and herding, and also fuelwood production.) Rice is extensively cultivated, as are millet, sorghum, groundnuts and a variety of garden crops. Gender division of labour is the norm in many activities, including agriculture and associated economic, social and cultural affairs.

In most Gambian villages there is considerable social and economic differentiation. Of importance are district Chiefs, headmen and imams. Other functionaries include teachers and dispensers, and traders can be influential. The extent of the powers and competence of each of these is variable, as are the constituencies they represent. While subject to controls from village authorities, households also have important spheres of autonomy.



The unfavourable environment and precarious livelihoods are reflected in very low per capita incomes (amongst the lowest in the world), although distribution is, by international standards, relatively equitable.

Labour is frequently the main constraint on agricultural production, and numerous mechanisms exist to share or hire labour. Outside of the main urban areas, land is vested in the community and administered by local chiefs. As population has increased, so has competition for land, although the state of the groundnut economy also has a major influence on land availability. The downturn in the market for groundnuts in the 1980s led to lowered pressure on the land, and this has been a factor in increasing villagers' interest in land-demanding community projects, such as the community forestry programme which forms one of the case studies for the present report.

### **Choice of case studies**

In line with the brief provided by DFID, the main case study was to be the review of PRA use by its main NGO partner in The Gambia, ActionAid-The Gambia. The other case studies were selected following a survey of the uses made by development agencies throughout the country of participatory methodologies. The four cases are:

*1 ActionAid-The Gambia* is an international NGO with a general remit to support community capacity building and target rural poverty. AATG works with mixed-sex, village-wide Village Development Groups (VDGs) and has prioritised, since the early 1990s, the promotion of PRA as a key element of a systematic capacity-building methodology. AATG was already ten years old when PRA was adopted (in 1991), as part of an attempt to move the organisation from a classical service-delivery style of operations to a less dependent, more community-led approach. A number of positive outcomes can be observed. Village development committees (VDCs) have developed. Access by different groups (including women and the poor) to the new opportunities has been good, and they have generally emerged from the encounter with AATG in a somewhat stronger position than they enjoyed before.

*2 Support to Decentralised Rural Development (SDRD)* is a joint initiative by the Government of The Gambia and the European Development Fund designed to support national strategies for decentralised rural development, as outlined in the national decentralisation policies. It involves a number of government departments and has a broad focus, in line with its community welfare aims. It is implemented by the Department of State Finance through the Local Government Authority with the assistance of local sectoral and NGO partners working at divisional level. The SDRD approach has been largely successful in promoting capacity for decentralised rural development at grassroots level. The role of PRA in this process has been small but not insignificant, primarily limited to the identification and prioritisation of local problems. Of some concern is the uniformity of outputs produced

by the different communities, both in terms of development plans and actual interventions.

*3 The Gambian-German Forestry Project (GGFP)* is a joint Government-donor initiative which focuses on environmental protection and rehabilitation specifically in relation to forest resources (chiefly woody biomass), and uses community capacity building as a means to achieve these ends. An interesting feature of the project is the sub-contracting to local NGOs and community associations of extension services, including PRA-type techniques. It is a sectoral programme involving the government extension organisation and has been supported by Germany since 1979. Aided by the GGFP, The Gambia has put in place a well-organised structure of forest administration, with competent staff, and a strong national legislative framework for community involvement in forest management. Participatory methods have figured in the community forestry programme as a set of tools for 'Participatory Learning and Action' (PLA), based largely on PRA-type methodologies. PLA has been promoted by the Forestry Department with the support of a number of quasi-independent local partners, which have functioned as the project's extension arm. The ambition in using PLA tools has been fairly modest: they have been applied primarily to create awareness of the community forestry policy, and only secondarily as a vehicle for a broader form of capacity development. The methods have contributed to the project's success. However, their use has closely reflected the institutional context of their operation (essentially a directive government bureaucracy).

*4 The Sesame Growers' Associations (SGAs)* have recently been brought together under the umbrella of the National Women Farmers Association (NAWFA), with significant support from the Catholic Relief Services – The Gambia (CRS/GM). The SGAs represent an independent rural women's movement of some potential. To date, they have made little use of PRAs (though neither they, nor their two support organisations, are opposed to their use). CRS/GM does not base its support for capacity building on a specific methodology. It has, since the late 1980s, worked through the women's groups it originally established to manage sesame oil expellers. These groups evolved into SGAs, which are women's organisations set up to promote the production of this crop. Their approach to participation and empowerment has been anchored in a 'Women In Development' approach, supported by organisation-building initiatives and investments in economic activities and training (management, literacy, leadership, income-generation). Participatory methods have not been a central feature, although techniques such as PRA and DELTA<sup>1</sup> are recognised as having a useful supporting role. This example provides a counterpoint to the methodology-driven approaches of the other three case studies. It shows that an alternative organisation-building approach, based on reliable financial support, production of a commodity,

training and institutional strengthening, can be effective in increasing participation.

### **The research methodology**

Implementation of the research was constrained by two major factors: firstly, the need to work in close relationship with ongoing development programmes, and to adapt fieldwork methods to these operations, with minimal interference to them. And secondly, the limited time and resources available to carry out primary fieldwork investigations. In outline, the methodology entailed:

- use of the available literature relating to the context and the specific agencies under review to structure the research;
- systematic collection and analysis of secondary data sources held by the agencies both locally and nationally;
- periods of village-based field research, using PRA methods, choosing as far as possible villages which had already been subject to some previous investigation, and about which a reasonable amount of information was already known;
- key informant interviews at national, divisional and village level;
- particular emphasis on key social categories such as women and the poor.

A feature of the research was the use of participatory methods to assess the effectiveness of the same. There is an obvious paradox in using the tools in this way. Should their use tend to introduce distortions into research findings, then there is a danger that these distortions would only be magnified in a study which treated the methods both as the subject and the means of the research. However, it was felt that the approach offered a number of important advantages in this particular context. Firstly, use of the methods would help assess their effectiveness in the programmes under study (for example, permitting the testing of field staff's familiarity with, and use of, the methods). And secondly, their use would provide an opportunity to help staff further develop their capacity in participatory methodologies. Involvement in the study was not without cost to the Gambian partners, and it was felt important to offer them some concrete benefits from the exercise.

The AATG case study was undertaken in February–March, 2000, and this culminated in a workshop with over sixty participants. The other three case studies were carried out in March–April, 2000. The limited time available for these studies, together with some logistic and transport constraints, meant that the research was rather more geographically confined than would have been ideal. Draft case studies were written up by the lead researcher in each case, and then revised in consultation with the local research partners.

The work culminated in a country workshop at national level, involving staff of all four partner agencies and other leading development figures in The Gambia. Preliminary findings of all four studies were presented, and key conclusions discussed. All four case studies

were then revised (and in each case, re-revised, to take account of the further comments of research partners), and the final report assembled.

### **4 SYNTHESIS OF CASE STUDY FINDINGS**

The four case studies illustrate different approaches to participatory development practice, all of them using PRA tools to a greater or lesser degree. In one case (AATG) this usage was given a high profile, in two others (SDRD and GGFP) it was seen as an important component of the strategy, while in the fourth (SGA), it was seen as a minor tool in a strategy defined largely in other terms. This section draws together the findings of the case studies.

#### **Overview**

Overall, the picture is rather mixed. PRA has had a number of positive effects, particularly on the agency side. It offers a useful set of techniques, which can (with certain reservations) be employed by non-specialist field staff to help them develop research-type skills. It has contributed to a greater awareness on the part of extension agents as to community interests, and of variations of perception and interest within the community. There has been some strengthening of village capacity (particularly in the AATG VDCs), and an increased commitment to participatory development among support agencies. Village-level workers see PRA as a means to help them better understand their beneficiaries' interests and to strengthen their relationships with them, and its powers of visualisation are felt to be an aid to communication. The community involvement which it seeks to promote is felt to be essential to long-term sustainability. PRA has also helped to create a common language and cement a common sense of purpose among development practitioners in The Gambia.

On the other hand, in most instances PRA has been employed in rather a mechanistic way, has not been used by staff outside of structured events, appears almost never to be used independently by villagers, has not contributed to communities developing their own independent projects and programmes, and its use – as a set of techniques – is judged unlikely to be sustained once the external stimulus is withdrawn. Weighed against the high expectations of PRA and the relatively large investments in PRA training in The Gambia, the benefits accruing would appear rather limited. The belief in some circles (including some donors) that the introduction of PRA would herald a new era in responsive, transparent and accountable development practice, effectively a new form of public governance, seems more than a little wide of the mark.

The study's findings, as regards the case for and against PRA, are summarised in Table 1.

#### **The nine research themes reviewed**

##### *1 How have the organisations understood PRA/ incorporated it into their practice?*

All four organisations studied have adopted what is, to a

greater or lesser extent, a 'people-led development process', and PRA is part of a package of measures designed to support this perspective. All four would regard their central focus as institutional change, with PRA as a useful adjunct to this. All of them would appear to view the 'people' orientation as implying, firstly, a shift from an imposed 'top-down' to a more responsive 'bottom-up' approach, and secondly, an attempt to relate their own interventions to broad considerations of local well-being. Notions of 'participation', (local) 'ownership', (community) 'empowerment' and 'long-term sustainability' are now part of the received wisdom of community development.

At the same time, this universal pledge of support for people-centred development belies the extent to which these processes are being driven by outside donor agencies. While AATG's 'Tendaba Declaration'<sup>2</sup> was a positive development and did receive widespread support from within the organisation, the drive to incorporate PRA nevertheless came largely from external sources, and can be seen as not altogether dissimilar to the various other packages which have been imposed upon the agency from the parent organisation and elsewhere.

This being the case, it is hardly surprising that staff tend to focus on the tools and techniques, to the detriment of participatory processes. This is particularly true of those working in the lower levels of the agencies,

who are most restricted by the demands upon their time, and the need to deliver measurable outputs.

To all of the agencies in question, the notion of 'community' figures strongly in the model of participatory development, and this has a primarily geographical frame of reference. In the case of GGFP, this is relatively (though not entirely) unproblematic, in that the resource to be managed is also defined in geographical terms, and there is a natural (though not complete) congruence between the community and the resource. The same argument can be applied to other situations where the focus of development efforts is on a physical resource (a well or school, for example). But in other instances, it must be wondered whether the physical community does provide a meaningful point of reference for the actors involved. This is most obviously the case where economic activities extend beyond the immediate locality (among Fula herders, for example); but labour markets are also complex in The Gambia, and belie the image of the village as a socially homogeneous entity.

*2 How have staff been trained and how effective has their training been?*

It would seem that one of the attractions of techniques such as PRA to the NGOs derives from the way in which they allow for training activities to be

**Table 1 The case for and against PRA**

**The case for PRA**

1. Utilitarian considerations:  
More effective and efficient data collection; low overall cost; not perfect but better than the alternatives, particularly in action research and policy-relevant contexts.

2. Community mobilisation:  
Enhanced participation of the poor in data collection and analysis, and in the control and direction of initiatives intended to benefit them.

3. Motivational benefits:  
Motivating and a 'spur to action' for development workers and community members alike. Greater empathy and sharing by professionals.

4. Empowering the poor:  
An important means of achieving popular empowerment and a vehicle for social change. Offers the prospect of self-sustaining community-based development. May lead to important changes in personal behaviour and attitudes on the part of development agents. At the organisational level also has radical potential.

**The case against PRA**

1. Utilitarian considerations:  
Data suspect; methodologically weak and without adequate safeguards; high opportunity costs to the poor. Undiscriminating.

2. Community mobilisation:  
Participation biased to certain categories, not necessarily the poor.

3. Motivational benefits:  
Risks over-inflated expectations, with negative repercussions. Encourages just the sorts of amateurish development tourism that it was intended to counter.

4. Empowering the poor:  
Such claims are overblown. Offers no means, on its own, to challenge power relations. Patronizes the poor in the guise of transformation. Unlikely to be sustainable.

**Conclusions of this study**

1. Utilitarian considerations:  
Some benefits in this regard, in that a wide range of individuals have become involved in 'formal' data collection (individuals who would probably not otherwise have had the opportunity to do so). But there are still concerns about data quality, and cost-effectiveness (both training costs and opportunity costs for the poor and to field agents).

2. Community mobilisation:  
The balance-sheet probably positive, though some concerns about the idealisation of 'the community', and privileging of the literate.

3. Motivational benefit:  
Definite motivational benefits for staff, and – at least in the short term – for villagers, though likely to be diminishing returns, particularly for the latter. There is a danger that the tools will be used in a superficial way, as a form of development tourism, and there are few if any safeguards against this.

4. Empowering the poor:  
Serious concerns in this area. Little evidence of any serious challenge to existing power relations, and the techniques are easily subordinated to the status quo. Major doubts about long-term sustainability, particularly as regards self-initiated use by villagers.

systematised and given form and meaning in a context in which 'community facilitation', 'helping villagers to develop' or 'empowering' them seems otherwise excessively abstract and vague.

AATG has been quite heavily involved in training other organisations, which has contributed to the emergence and coalescence of a community of PRA practitioners in The Gambia with a strong sense of identity and cause. These developments would seem very positive.

At the same time, it is striking that AATG staff, in particular, often claimed to be under-prepared in PRA, and admitted to a lack of confidence in their understanding of the techniques. This is despite the fact that the more senior and long-serving members, at least, had often undergone several trainings, and might have been expected to have passed their experience on. In other cases (SDRD, for example), there was also a sense that PRA demands high, possibly excessive, investments in training. A review of the SDRD facilitation process in 1998 highlighted the conflict between the time necessary to work in a participatory manner and the demanding programme schedule, but the review's call for an extension of PRA training was never taken up, and indeed, the tendency in this programme was largely in the reverse direction.

The AATG case study indicates some of the limitations of the PRA trainings and suggests ways in which they could be improved. These include strengthening of the visualisation techniques and other participatory facilitation skills. At the same time, it is likely that the very openness and informality of the approach is itself part of the problem. The fear of condemnation on the grounds that what has been proposed or put into practice is either 'not real PRA' or alternatively, 'not PRA but merely RRA', also does little to instil confidence in the novice. (It is notable that the fear of 'not doing it right' was reported as one of the disincentives to greater PRA use in the SDRD programme.)

### *3 How has PRA been used in a field setting?*

In all the agencies researched, it would seem that PRA activities are largely concentrated in the early phases of contact. This makes sense in terms of the need for staff to gain a good initial understanding of the partners (through collection of baseline data, etc.), though there is also a suggestion that such activities may be necessary to provide proof that one has 'a participatory orientation', in a fairly token way.

With regard to the partner communities, three observations are striking: Firstly, that villagers almost never use PRA themselves, without the stimulus of the agency. Secondly, in no instance did researchers discover that either staff or villagers were using PRA to help investigate problems or resolve conflicts or other difficulties that they had come up against in the course of their development efforts. The fact that many VDGs in one of AATG's former target areas had ceased to exist following AATG's withdrawal (and that trust funds decapitalised even more frequently) also suggests problems with this approach to capacity building.

Thirdly (and this is particularly evident in the SDRD case study), use of PRA does not seem to have led to any significant innovations in the definition of development aims or approach. Indeed, comparing the projects identified through participatory methods used by the SDRD programme with those identified and implemented in earlier European Development Fund-supported programmes, no differences of substance could be detected.

### *4 Effects of PRA on CBO capacity*

An AATG Internal Review Report (July 1999) mentions a number of common perceptions of changes in the communities which can be attributed to PRA. These included:

- greater unity within communities;
- increased community participation and resource mobilisation;
- more understanding of the community and its real problems;
- improved linkages with development agencies.

One community presented a flow chart which indicated eight areas of benefit as flowing from PRA.<sup>3</sup> More or less similar views were expressed by villagers in the other case studies.

These changes were only of perception, and were not necessarily reflected in any change in material or social circumstance. They were also reported in the context of an investigation which was led by agency staff, where one presumes that other, 'non-objective' considerations might have been involved. They are nevertheless indicative of a generally positive orientation to the use of the tools. The AATG case study also indicates a number of positive aspects of capacity building, although these are not necessarily attributable to PRA.

In these and the other instances, it is difficult to disentangle the effects of PRA from other aspects of the programmes, particularly where material inputs are supplied. Had the techniques been used more extensively, and over long periods of time, to diagnose problems and to seek to resolve them, then it might have been possible to judge their effectiveness in capacity building. As it is, the evidence is lacking which would allow one to assess whether the sorts of explanations that staff and villagers come up with in using these tools are likely to make a positive contribution to village life.

### *5 Who has participated in PRAs and what have been the effects on poverty alleviation?*

Participation in PRA and related activities presents a rather mixed picture. Women's participation, for example, would seem to have been generally good. Women are recorded as well-represented in all four of the case studies. It is not possible to assess the relative effectiveness of PRA and other approaches to capacity building and participation (for example, the SGA commodity-based approach), though both would seem to have merits.

Similarly, the fact that AATG credit programmes did reach the poorer members of the community, although

not as well as they reached the better-off, was suggestive of a relative degree of success in ensuring wide participation.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, while participation in the GGFP programme was greater on the part of the relatively well-off than the poor, the latter were not excluded from benefits.

Participation of the poorest of the poor, on the other hand, is likely to be low, as these often comprise temporary migrants ('strange farmers', Fula herders working on a contract basis, and the like, who are not necessarily seen as part of the local 'community'). Whether this represents a problem rather depends on the circumstances. Where, for example, the individuals in question are short-term migrants, their participation in the direct benefits from fairly long-cycle activities such as community forestry and the income-generating schemes would not seem a priority issue. Whether they should be required to contribute their labour to public works, without the promise of future benefits, is something of a cultural question, and difficult to judge externally.

Of greater immediate concern, perhaps, are the complaints from permanent members of the village regarding the usefulness of PRA exercises. On the one hand, the tools may be difficult to conceptualise in local dialects, and on the other, the reports which arise from them tend only to be written up in English. The AATG case study also indicates that PRA tends to privilege the literate, because it is possible to move further and faster with literate people, and visual and verbal literacy probably go hand in hand. Given that PRA was initially seen, as a way of reaching non-literate people, and that this advantage is still widely assumed, these findings may represent a significant challenge to the use of the methodology.

Villagers have also reacted strongly against the use by AATG of PRA to help with targeting (in the sense of rationing) benefits within the village, fearing the opprobrium that would be incurred by denial to their fellow villagers (and perhaps also denial to people like themselves). So great has been the opposition on this issue that the organisation has had to rethink its targeting strategy. It could be argued that, within limits, the generally relatively egalitarian distribution of assets at village level in West African countries like The Gambia favours blanket coverage of all households, rather than (as would be more advised, say, on the Indian sub-continent) differentiation of households on the basis of variations in capital assets.

#### *6 Sustainability and cost-effectiveness*

Analyses of the cost-effectiveness of PRA use have not been possible in the case-study situations, as the methods tend to be used by all staff, though only as a limited proportion of their working time. Hence it has been impossible to disaggregate costs. However, there are concerns about the levels of benefits derived from what, especially in the case of AATG, have been significant investments in PRA promotion. Equally, there are concerns as to the substantial inputs of time which use of the methods has required of staff and

(particularly) villagers. The phenomenon of 'community fatigue' reflects these excessive demands. SDRD staff question the cost-effectiveness of PRA partly on such grounds. In the case of GGFP, the problem has related more to the underlying community forestry activities which the GGFP has supported, than to the use of PRA methods as such. These activities are extremely time-consuming, but offer trivial cash returns, particularly in the early years.

#### *7 Has PRA been recognised by the Government of The Gambia (GoTG), and has it been influential at this level?*

One area where AATG is to be strongly commended is the extent to which its own use of PRA has influenced the wider development community in The Gambia. PRA is now well established in a number of government programmes, and in most of these cases, AATG staff have played an influential role. The GGFP is one such instance, the SDRD another, and the GoTG participatory poverty assessment surveys (conducted by 'SPACO', the GoTG/United Nations Development Programme/donor-sponsored 'Strategy for Poverty Alleviation Programme/Coordinating Office') a third. There is also a wide recognition within the NGO community of the positive role which AATG has played in introducing participatory techniques to The Gambia.

There are, however, concerns as to the multiplicity of development efforts. For example, AATG has used PRA to promote its own 'Village Development Groups', which are parallel to the government-sponsored 'Village Development Committees'. Government workers tend to regard the AATG-supported VDG as a 'poor people's group' and its establishment was perceived to involve a radical transformation of local structures. On the government side, the VDC is felt to be more in line with local structures and more representative of the community as a whole. In 1994 a task force was set up by the Department of Community Development and AATG to harmonise VDG/VDC concepts. This task force advised that the Group Executive Committee (GEC) was the VDG element closest in structure to the VDC. AATG and the government have continued to discuss this problem, and to seek ways to overcome it, so far without success. Should the issue not be resolved, it may create difficulties when the Local Government Bill and the establishment of VDCs become law. The point at issue here goes beyond the use of PRA, and concerns wider issues of NGO independence and capacity-building strategy.

#### *8 Are there successful alternative approaches?*

It is probably mistaken to imagine that any agency in The Gambia nowadays sees PRA as the sole means to promote participatory community development. All of the cases studied treat PRA as but one of many components of a programme with underlying aims relating to institutional development. This was one of the main messages of the review workshop. Equally, those programmes which have never used PRA as a central technique (e.g. CRS/NAWFA) have not necessarily

been hostile to its use as part of a broader package to promote participatory development. One of the benefits which can be identified from the heavy investments in PRA in the country in recent years is that it has helped focus the attention of development agencies on effective methods of public participation and democratic representation, whether or not the immediate outcome is the further promotion of PRA.

The SGA case study presents an interesting example of an alternative approach. Building participation around activities in the agricultural sector (in this case, sesame production) commends itself as one way to counter the imbalance in power between the agency and its beneficiaries, and to help 'empower' the latter. As this review notes, however, the investments in the SGA programme have been extremely high, and its cost-effectiveness is still uncertain. The high dependence of the programme on the fate of one commodity also increases its vulnerability, in that the organisational gains may be difficult to sustain in the event of further erosion in the market competitiveness of sesame.

The experience of the SDRD, in attempting to link PRA to processes of local government decentralisation, is an interesting one, in that it places the greatest emphasis on democracy as a motor for public participation, and uses PRA tools to bolster this. Democratic local government, in theory at least, offers less potential for elite capture than does an externally managed intervention, and public involvement in regulatory processes may be a superior form of participation, with greater potential for sustainability.

One of the difficulties of a tools-based approach to participation is that it is difficult to transcend the class context in which the participatory processes are immersed. Thus, rather than increasing the awareness of extension staff of the underlying interests of their partners, the tools may serve to reinforce class perceptions. By contrast, where the agricultural producers see value in organising themselves, and gain concrete benefits from so doing, then the impetus to local participation is increased. Such autonomous pressures for change clearly have an advantage over methodological tools in that they create their own constituency, and run less risk of mirroring external interests. They are not, however, of a type that can be easily generated in a project-based approach.

### *9 Is PRA still used by villagers when donors move on?*

A study of the present type is not very well-suited to addressing this particular question, for the field research reported here was largely contained within the structures of on-going external interventions, and in villages which were actively supported by them. A longer time perspective is required to answer the question fully.

Only in the case of ActionAid did the scope of the research permit a broader and longer-term view to be gained with any confidence. The evidence here is not very encouraging. PRA techniques have not been taken up by the villagers, even in areas which would benefit from a strong community input into agency-led

processes (for example, preparation of community action plans). Thus, it seems altogether improbable that villagers will make use of them for any future purposes. In only one instance was there evidence of the techniques being used by villagers independently of the agency. Some ActionAid staff would contend that there has been a degree of uptake nevertheless, in that, while villagers may not be using the classical visualisation techniques, they are more likely to try and identify problems on a communal basis, and may organise what are, in effect, 'focus group discussions' and similar fora to do so. These views may have some justification. One has to wonder, though, whether it is the villagers' planning capacity which has changed, or merely the idiom used to characterise it to outsiders. Equally, there are risks in attributing to PRA forms of public discussion which are pretty near universal, in spirit if not in name.

In such circumstances, there is little to support the notion that PRA might play the determinant role in strengthening village institutions and triggering processes of community empowerment, after the withdrawal of the agencies. Indeed, there is a danger that using the techniques may result in the reverse. Villagers may well find themselves pressured to fit their aspirations into externally driven planning models which are geared to outsiders' interests (particularly as regards the use of visualisation techniques to obtain 'tangible results', as well as the channelling of community planning into discrete and packaged events), to the detriment of the forms of dialogue and debate with which they are familiar and already at ease. This point may not have been reached in the present case studies, though there is certainly a tendency to treat empowerment processes as yet another form of deliverables.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE**

This research was conceived within an action-research framework, and intended to provide policy-level conclusions, as well as an assessment of project investments to date. The main policy findings which can be drawn from the study are the following:

### **Policy findings**

*1 Institutional structure vs. methodological tools*  
*Donors should focus their attention much more closely on questions of institutional structure and systems than on the promotion of particular techniques and tools.*

A greater focus on issues of 'institutional architecture' – in the sense of the demands created by the structure and functioning of the institutions in which the change agents have to function – would imply a concomitant subordination of methodological concerns to a more secondary and supportive role. The idea that participatory methodologies can, of themselves, act as the vanguard of a movement for radical reform (in the words of some of its leading proponents, 'a philosophy,

a way of life, and a set of behaviour and attitudes') finds little support in this study. Arguably, such views are becoming something of an impediment to the rational use of PRA, and obscuring both the underlying – and more critical – institutional constraints, and also the (perhaps modest) gains which can be obtained from the use of the techniques.

### *2 Strategies for capacity building*

*Attempts to ally RRA/PRA with local capacity building are likely to be most effective when they start from very modest beginnings, and are unencumbered by other demands. The techniques are likely to be more effective in small experimental organisations than in large multifunctional ones.*

Where this is possible, the techniques may have value as tools of 'social development'. However, the situations in which this is possible are probably rather few in number, given the present ideological climate, with its emphasis on inter-agency competition, the delivery of pre-assigned outputs in an objectives-oriented framework, and the premium which is placed on NGOs proving themselves by rapid scaling up and effecting short-term impacts.

### *3 PRA as a tool for social development training*

*PRA and related participatory tools are likely to have limited potential as proxies for social analysis.*

Their capacity to analyse values and to relate norms and values to other variables in the social system appear very limited, as is their usefulness in exploring and challenging established social relationships. These are the foundations of social analysis, but are arguably better learnt through professional training, in dialogue with social science specialists and an academic literature as well as through contacts in the field, rather than through practical but unstructured action research (in all probability intermixed with other relationships, including various forms of input supply). While it is accepted that good quality social analysis is expensive (and often rather locality-specific), PRA does not provide a very promising short cut to such understandings, and should be seen more as a means to stimulate an interest than to substitute for professional skills.

Consideration needs to be given to issues of quality assurance. The lack of quality assurance standards is a significant problem for PRA use in at least two ways. Firstly, there are evident opportunities for 'abuse' of the tools, in the sense that they may be used to pursue partisan interests in the guise of responsive, participatory development. And secondly, it can be profoundly dispiriting for development workers to be asked to use techniques for which there are ostensibly no external standards of assessment (other than to 'use one's own judgement at all times') – particularly in circumstances in which they are likely, nevertheless, to find their performances judged by others. The frequent reports of field workers that they perceived themselves to be under-trained in PRA methods (despite the fact that, in some cases, they had already undergone several such trainings) reflects this difficulty.

There is no doubt that the concept of 'quality assurance' is a challenging one in this context, in that the techniques are intended to be used in a dynamic way, unencumbered by external rules. There is a need, nevertheless, to develop measures of judgement which do not depend only on peer-group assessment and self-criticism, and which therefore offer some prospect of routinisation and standardisation beyond the confines of PRA advocacy. This study highlights some of the dilemmas.

### *4 PRA in support of community action*

*PRA tools tend to work most effectively when there is a high degree of congruence between the geographical and the social, and the physical community provides a confident basis for social action.*

Conversely, there is a danger that their use will reinforce presumptions to this effect, even where these are unwarranted. As techniques which rely heavily on visualisation and condensation, in a primarily local frame of reference, they are likely to have rather limited value in understanding the subtleties of power relationships, and in comprehending relationships which are unconfined by their physical context.

### *5 PRA tools and 'participatory development'*

*'Participation' is not reducible to participatory tools; however, the latter may have value both in underscoring the need for the community voice to be heard, and in helping to give that voice expression. That said, it is most unlikely that PRA tools will play the leading role in community empowerment; other conditions (most notably, institutional systems and wider societal dynamics) are likely to be the primary influences.*

Participatory tools can be an aid to a more encompassing goal of 'participation'. But this is itself a rather under-conceptualised notion, whose primary value is in a negative frame of reference: to warn against manipulation and imposition of ideas and objectives, in a wide variety of situations marked by an inegalitarian distribution of power and imperfect democracy. Thus, those who seek to promote 'participatory development' need to go beyond this rhetoric, to show how their aims and methodologies will factually contribute to a change in social relationships. Such a change cannot be presumed, and is certainly not reducible to techniques and tools.

Equally, such a change in relationships is unlikely to occur if the underlying concept of development is one based on a unidirectional model of causality, which sees the role of the support agency as leading community organisations through a series of stages from incapacity to self-awareness and maturity. The message which such images convey, to both staff and partners, is likely to be profoundly 'non-participatory'.

### *6 PRA tools and poverty targeting*

*The present studies do not allow firm conclusions to be drawn as to the utility of PRA tools in poverty targeting.*

However, early evidence suggests that, while community participation may be quite broad, there is a tendency for benefits to become concentrated in the hands of the better-off.

There are several findings of this study which, from the perspective of social targeting, warn against too great a complacency in the use of PRA tools: most notably, the tendency of the techniques to privilege the wealthier small farmers (to the detriment of marginal members of the community, such as immigrants and migrants), and to favour male participation over female (though this latter is less pronounced than had been expected, and may largely be attributable to other biases in the society, albeit ones which PRA finds it difficult to transcend). There is also some evidence of an association between visual and verbal literacy, such that PRA may privilege the literate. All of these factors emphasise the importance of deeper understandings of the sociological context of the intervention, and warn against a presumption that these understandings can be easily gained by rapid means, or through the efforts of agencies with other primary purposes.

### **Conclusion: institutional context is more important than tools and techniques**

Thus, the major conclusion of this research is that the institutional dimension needs to be addressed before attention is given to the question of which tools should be employed and for what purposes. Unless the organisational rules and dynamics are themselves favourably disposed, it is most unlikely that participatory methodologies will be able to re-orient organisational learning unaided. Where the institutional architecture is inimical to open-ended development, but rather imposes the demands of the centre upon the periphery, then PRA-type tools are likely to function only in the most restricted way. Their use may not be without merit nevertheless, though it is likely to generate turbulence at the periphery, and runs the risk of seeming to betray a higher ideological calling. Conversely, where a commitment is made to the promotion of participatory aims, attention needs first to be given to clarifying and simplifying the institutional structure, so as to ensure minimal interference between relationships. Even then, it is unlikely that participatory tools will themselves be able to transcend the ideological context of their application, so the outcomes are unlikely to satisfy those who see such transcendence as their fundamental rationale.

In contexts like these, the lack of structure in the methods is a mixed blessing. It does allow scope for creativity in the field setting, and helps break down disciplinary barriers. It offers field workers the chance to think laterally and innovatively. However, it also makes the methods rather difficult to pin down, which all but the most confident individuals tend to find disquieting. At the same time, it makes the techniques vulnerable to manipulation and distortion, and prone to subordination to partisan interests. In the worst-case scenario, it allows them to be used for what are essentially propaganda purposes.

A picture thus emerges in which PRA can be seen as a useful servant but a rather poor master, and it seems that all the agencies have come, sooner or later, to have diminished expectations of it. The evaluation does consider, nevertheless, that they could make more use of the tools, and in three cases (AATG, GGFP and SGAs), the study makes recommendations as to how this might be done.

All in all, therefore, the endorsement of the value of PRA, judging from the Gambian research, must be qualified. While the study has found PRA to have potential value for agencies with a grass roots focus, rather little of this potential has yet been realised. The reasons for this lie partly with the context of its application, partly with the limitations of the techniques, and partly with the ideological pressures which have both inflated expectations of it and yet heavily constrained its use.

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 DELTA (Development, Education, Leadership, Training and Action) is an approach to community animation, heavily influenced by the philosophy of Paulo Freire. It has been widely promoted in Africa, particularly by Christian development agencies.
- 2 This was AATG's 1991 Mission Statement (named after the Tendaba tourist camp, where the relevant staff meeting was held), which reoriented the organisation to people, not sectors, as the focus of development.
- 3 These are unity, development, good health, increased production, increased income, reduced school dropout, increased food, shorter hungry season.
- 4 For example, in one village, non-poor households accounted for 11% of the village population, and 21% of the VDG membership, but received 25% of all loans. The similar figures for 'poor' and 'very poor' households were [poor] 27%, 36% and 38%; and [very poor] 62%, 43% and 38%.





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