

Workshop on Participatory Rural Appraisal

An intensive, nine-day, field-based workshop on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) was held at Bandarawela, Sri Lanka in June 1992, in support of the Second Badulla Integrated Rural Development Project (SBIRDIP). It was

coordinated by the Regional Development Division of the Ministry of Policy, Planning and Implementation (RDD/MPPI) of the Government of Sri Lanka, and was conducted by the Sustainable Agriculture Programme of the International Institute for Environment and Development, London, and HJP International, Ledbury, UK.

The objective of the workshop was to provide the participants with direct experience of the uses and application of PRA for village planning in the SBIRD. The training involved three stages: (1) introduction to PRA concepts, principles and methods, and small group exercises; (2) fieldwork in villages, analysis of local problems and priorities, and presentation and discussion of findings in community meetings; and (3) report preparation, evaluation of the workshop, and consideration of the potential applications and limitations of PRA in participatory village planning in the SBIRD and elsewhere.

Participants represented the Regional Development Division of the Ministry of Policy Planning and Implementation, NGOs and other agencies with an interest in participatory research and development including IIMI.

During the first week, participants were introduced to PRA concepts and methods. A wide range of PRA techniques such as secondary information review, semi-structured interviews, participatory mapping and modeling, transect walks and matrix ranking were discussed. These techniques are currently used for the diagnostic analysis of development problems, planning and evaluation of different development activities with the active participation of the rural people. This approach is much more than simple application of PRA techniques and it involves self-critical awareness of the attitudes and behavior on the part of the investigator with whom local people interact. The interactive learning, shared knowledge and open dialogues make these research methods and techniques more effective than conventional approaches. Each day, in addition to lectures and discussions, there were group exercises to understand the importance of mapping, modeling, diagramming and visual sharing in data collection and analysis.

During the second week and part of the first week, participants were divided into two interdisciplinary teams. Each team visited a village and applied a wide range of PRA techniques to collect information for the analysis of local problems and priorities and then prepared and presented community development plans to villagers. On the final day of the workshop, two teams presented their community development plans to the invited key government officials and local politicians. The following is a description of

how some participants of the workshop including us used PRA techniques to understand potentials of irrigation development in a village in Badulla over a period of three days.

PRA and Irrigation Research

On the first day, we interviewed different groups of villagers— young, old; men, women; rich, poor — to discover their priorities, of which water for agriculture was ranked among the highest in all cases. In addition, we examined historical, ecological, and sociopolitical aspects of access and control of local water sources with the people using participatory maps and models, systems diagrams, historical trends diagrams, Venn diagrams of institutional relations, seasonal calendars and other PRA methods.

On the second day, we asked a group of male villagers to take some of our team members on a transect walk of the area and show them the potential water sources (springs and natural streams) which they had mentioned the previous day. During this walk, the team noted topography, soil conditions, vegetation, land rights, and other important factors. On returning to the village, the men were asked to draw a map of the four main water sources and indicate the proposed irrigation system leading from each one. Once done, they prepared a matrix with which they compared and contrasted each of the four systems using their own criteria, including the amount of land that could be irrigated, nonirrigation uses of water, financial cost, time for completion of project, intervillage conflicts, and water availability over the past five years. Although the criteria were unweighed, the most feasible design clearly emerged during the matrix scoring.

The village men who had prepared the transect and matrix presented their work to their neighbors at a community meeting the next day. This led to a great deal of discussion and debate, out of which emerged a consensus as to which design would be best and what strategy would be necessary to gain the proper technical support. The most important result of the meeting was the decision by the villagers to form their own organization to coordinate the development of the system. Officials of the SBIRD will work with that organization in the coming months.

Over the past decade, quite a number of studies on irrigation management have been conducted using PRA, some of which have been documented by IIMI. Far fewer have employed PRA actively involving local people in the analysis of their irrigation systems or potential systems. Our experience in this workshop leads us to conclude that PRA holds great promise of irrigation research, but many questions remain: (1) how can PRA best be used in irrigation research?; (2) what specific

PRA methods are most valuable for conducting irrigation research studies?; and (3) what are the limitations to using PRA methods, either by themselves or in association with other methods (e.g., formal surveys) for irrigation research? If a participatory approach is to be adopted it must be supported by a political commitment not to interfere and distort the activities and programs which emerge when villagers are involved in participatory planning according to the views of the majority of participants.

[John Thompson, Research Associate, Sustainable Agriculture Programme and Amarasena Gamaathige, Research Associate, International Irrigation Management Institute]