REVIEW ARTICLE

WHO’S A GOODY? DEMYTHOLOGIZING THE PRA AGENDA

PHILIPPA BEVAN*
University of Bath, UK


These three books (hereafter Who Changes, Whose Voice and The Myth) all originate in workshops held at the IDS, Sussex, and were written by ‘development professionals’ for fieldworkers, practitioners and policy makers with an interest in PRA1 approaches and methods. The books contain a series of short pieces, some reflective, some arising out of case studies, and some describing issues raised in workshop sessions. They are a diverse, complex and sometimes contradictory set of writings, to which it is impossible to do justice in a piece of this length. They will be of use to development professionals engaged in the field, and in the first part of this review I will explore some of the important issues raised at this level. In the second part I will raise some wider issues relating to PRA more generally.

USING PRA FOR CHANGE

Robert Chambers suggests that PRA has three dimensions: it is a mindset, a philosophy and a repertoire of methods2 (Who Changes, p. xiv). PRA began in a small

*Correspondence to: Philippa Bevan, 81 Kingston Road, Oxford, OX2 6RJ, UK. E-mail: pipbevan@compuserve.com
1 Mostly translated as Participatory Rural Appraisal, but sometimes as Participatory Reflection and Action.
2 Mapping, ranking, scoring, interviewing etc

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way in small-scale projects in the late 1980s. Originally this ‘new paradigm’ set two goals: personal change in attitudes and behaviour on the part of development professionals (the mindset), and ‘empowerment’ of poor people they were working with (the philosophy). The 1990s saw a steadily growing global movement based on notions of ‘participatory development’, and the use of the repertoire of methods. Two of these books reflect a rise in ambition about what is to change using the medium of PRA; for *Who Changes* it is the organizations and institutional cultures involved in development, and for *Whose Voice* it is government policies and policy making processes.

While the methods used by PRA are at its core, these books have very little to say about them; the concern is with the ‘methodology’—defined as the mindset and philosophy of participation. ‘Participation’ has become one of an increasing number of ‘development tropes’; words surrounded by a confused and often contradictory penumbra of implicit assumptions, which are used to make both knowledge and moral claims, which often then lead to claims of a financial kind. As such words get bandied about in the cut and thrust of the politics of the development industry their initial meaning tends to get buried under a plethora of distortions. Gaventa (*Who Changes* p. 157) suggests a typology of ‘participation’: passive; information giving; consultation; participation for material incentives; functional participation; interactive participation; and self-mobilisation. Elsewhere we are told that ‘participation’ is often ‘ill-defined and meaningless’ (*The Myth*, p. 9); people are told what is going to happen, provide information, make a contribution or are involved in rudimentary consultation which actually hides manipulation and coercion. Most contributors to *The Myth* and some contributors to the other two volumes, were aware of discrepancies between fine ideas and some ‘how much’ practice on the ground.

*Who Changes* draws together ‘lessons and experiences from key development agencies around the globe on the institutional change needed to make participation a reality’ (back cover). The main issues are ‘adapting PRA methods from micro to macro organizations and the type of changes required by an organization to implement PRA effectively’. The main message of this book is that sustained participation in development using PRA tools requires the transformation of institutional cultures in government and donor organizations and NGOs. Scaling up of PRA requires major changes in decision-making processes, planning, funding arrangements, and implementing, monitoring and evaluation procedures. What the case studies show is that participatory approaches do not sit well with hierarchically structured organizations, and that institutional cultures are embedded in wider cultures that are not so easily transformed. Issues of power and value, which often seem to be ignored in smallscale PRA exercises, raise their problematic heads. However, it is difficult to daunt the true PRA enthusiast, and four major ways forward are offered: a commitment to change and to collaborate on the part of donors, NGOs, and governments; longer-term commitment by outsiders—to processes of ten years and more; high-quality long-term training; and the nurturing of local leadership.

Most of the participants in the *Who Changes* workshop demonstrate a commitment

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1. The mindset and philosophy underlying PRA have a very long history; what is striking about PRA is the rapid ‘globalization’ of the research tools, sometimes, but not always accompanied by the mindset and philosophy.

2. Others that currently spring to mind are ‘sustainable rural livelihoods’, ‘good governance’, ‘civil society’, ‘social capital’.
to the use of PRA to ‘empower’ local people in a way that brings the latter some direct benefit. ‘Extractive’ PRA is frowned upon. Most participants in Whose Voice recognize that extractive PRA to inform policy in one locality might lead to considerable payoffs for a wider set of people with no voice. Whose Voice ‘demonstrates the far-reaching implications’ of ‘a quiet revolution in policy analysis’ (back cover); the increasing use of PRA to influence policy by bringing in the voices of the poor, either by carrying messages from poor to powerful, or by bringing the two together in PRA activities. ‘Participatory policy analysis questions conventional policy making procedures, challenges the behaviour and attitudes of policymakers and influences the style and substance of policy itself’. Until recently ‘participatory development’ was something NGOs did. In the early 1990s NGOs were often ideologically and politically head-to-head with the IMF and World Bank, whose discourses were dominated by tropes such as ‘market’, ‘economic growth’, ‘human capital’ and ‘poverty’ defined as inadequate consumption. But as the 1990s unfolded the World Bank became the home of Participatory Poverty Assessments and the purveyor of Poverty Eradication Action Plans. Vocal NGO-spawned ex-critics can increasingly be found in Washington DC, and new ‘social development tropes’ can increasingly be found in the Bank grey literature. These converts have decided to exchange ideologically pure, but essentially ‘micro’, approaches to poverty, for risky but potentially much more widely effective ‘macro’ approaches.

The new PRA agenda, then, involves change in four different areas: in the mindsets and behaviour of development professionals, in the poor themselves, in organizations involved in development, and in policies and policy-making processes.

**WHO INDEED CHANGES?**

Of all these changes those in ‘mindset’ are most basic. The Myth, which is not to be regarded as belonging to the ‘dominant PRA discourse’ analysed below, reveals how difficult it is to achieve such changes.

The widespread uptake of participatory approaches among governments, NGOs, community-based organizations, and academic institutions across the development sector has created a need to assess more critically if the work undertaken is benefiting women and men equally. Community differences are simplified, power relationships poorly understood, and conflicts avoided or ignored. The losers from this participatory naivety are often women.

The Myth, an attempt to integrate gender analysis with PRA approaches, is the book with the most realistic rhetoric. The IDS Workshop on which it is based was held in December 1993, and it is interesting to enquire whether the other two books (based on IDS Workshops held in May 1996) took note of the criticisms raised over two years earlier. Evidence, using the index from Who Changes shows that none of the eight references under ‘women’, or the five under ‘gender issues’ deals with the

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5 The Bank’s use of these tropes involves distortion of the original meanings so that they can be inserted into the still-dominant economics paradigm.

6 This is associated with a general shift in the role of NGOs in development.
substantive gender issues raised in The Myth. Only one of these references is in Part 3 ‘Where do we go from here?’, and in this section there is nothing at all about the need to institutionalize women’s participation at any level. Further evidence of gender-biased mindsets comes from a gender analysis of the Workshop participants; the contributions to Who Changes are overwhelmingly male—out of 23 contributors I only identified one author, writing jointly with a man, as unequivocally female.7

Whose Voice does a bit better: 21 male contributions, 7 female and 2 unknown. But of the 7 indexed references to women (‘see also circumcision, female; domestic violence; dowry; gender; girls’ education; and invisibility’) six refer to chapters written by women.8 Furthermore, the problems for genuine participation in policy processes and making posed by the global existence of gendered institutions and unequal gender relationships are not highlighted at all. Perhaps this is because they have not been tackled ‘at home’.9

The Myth exposes the real challenges that even the first element of the ‘participatory agenda’ faces: even those who are extremely publicly committed to ‘reversals’, and to putting the last first etc do not yet seem to have crossed ‘the final [personal] frontier’ (Who Changes, p. xvi), at least when it comes to gender matters. But, while this is an important issue, not least for those whom ‘goodness’ implies a close coincidence between rhetoric and reality, I think it is rather a red herring. Real progress of effectively mainstreaming the PRA agenda depends less on arguing about who or what is or is not good, but on the use of a much more ‘academic’ (theoretically-informed, rigorous and empirical) approach. This should involve the analysis of local and global power structures, of the differential power and interests of the different actors located in those structures, and of the dynamics and ongoing consequences of change. It is useful to begin by looking at the problems raised by the unrealistic and simple world that the dominant PRA discourse imagines.10

ANALYSING THE PRA DISCOURSE: ONTOLOGY AND RHETORIC

The recent ‘post-modern turn’ has taught sociologists to be more aware of the importance and ultimate relativity of ‘meanings’. In this context this has two important aspects, ‘ontology’ (the science of being) and ‘rhetoric’ (how people persuade). Ontology concerns the kind of world we imagine we are dealing with before we go out to explore it. For example what sort of people are we dealing with? What sort of societies? How does social change take place? In order to imagine our world we have to look at it through lenses supplied by concepts and theories. To persuade people of the ‘truth’ of our position we use various rhetorical devices, including the ‘development tropes’ alluded to earlier.

What sort of people? Despite some references to difference, the dominant description of people is as ‘the poor’, although we also come across ‘the weak’, ‘the vulnerable’ ‘the poorest’, ‘ultra poor’, ‘marginalized people’, ‘villagers’, ‘poor communities’, ‘beneficiaries’. These words are sometimes put in inverted commas to demonstrate some

7 I was not sure about 4 contributions due to ignorance of the gender of names foreign to me.
8 The seventh to a male-written summary of findings from the South African PPA.
9 The Myth was gender-biased in the other direction: 24 contributions from women and 6 from men, only one of whom (Robert Chambers) attended both ‘male-biased’ and ‘female-biased’ workshops.
10 A picture which is challenged by many of the contributions to The Myth.
unexplained unease with them. We have no sense of a division of labour—between men and women, between landowners and wage labour, between hawkers and thieves, or of the diversity of economic activity often undertaken by the same person. In rural societies the PRA method of wealth-ranking regularly reveals structured hierarchies of inequality based on differential access to, and control over, resources such as land, labour, technology and cash. These differences are recognized in some workshop case studies, but there is no analysis of the relationships of exploitation, conflict and exclusion that, in many ‘poor communities’ underlie these unequal distributions. Words such as ‘class’, ‘status’, ‘patron–client’, and social exclusion do not figure in this discourse.

*What sort of societies?* The dominant concept is ‘community’; a word that carries with it implications of homogeneity, social inclusion, and participatory decision-making. Despite Norton’s critique of such ‘dangerous assumptions’ (*Whose Voice* p. 190), the IDS Workshop recommends as a ‘principle’ ‘Build on existing community management and decision-making practices’ (*Whose Voice*, p. 196). While funders, NGOs, government and ‘the poor’ have to change, the need for (and possibility of) change in local hierarchies and factions is rarely mentioned. The idea that genuine participation is likely to lead to the triumph of local hierarchical values over ‘universal human rights’, and the ethical issues raised by this ‘culture clash’, are usually skated around. There is also little acknowledgement of the problems of including and benefiting those ‘poor’ who are destitute, marginalized, adversely incorporated, excluded, or objects of deliberate physical attack or ethnic cleansing.

*How does change take place?* The impression is that ‘good change’ depends on development professionals coming in to a situation with their participatory development repertoire of methods. Recognition of ‘processes’ of change is not accompanied by appreciation of the significance of internal dynamics, path dependence, unintended consequences, knock-on effects etc. An ontology based on complex dynamic theories recognizes the non-linearity of much social change; planned interventions and new organizations enter a ‘river’ (*Uphoff*, 1996) of on-going relationships and activities. History matters, power structures matter, agency within those structures matters, and unintended consequences matter.

**ANALYZING THE PRA DISCOURSE: EPISTEMOLOGY, PRAXIS, VALUES, AND INTERESTS**

There is confusion in these books as to what ‘methodology’ means: sometimes it refers to the PRA approach (contrasted with other participatory approaches), sometimes to the methods, occasionally (correctly) to epistemological issues. In this respect *Whose Voice* has a very bad discussion revolving around a distinction between ‘positivism’ and ‘post-positivism’.

The contemporary research community operates largely within a prevailing positivist paradigm, in which the scientific status of statements is determined through the formal construction of theories or hypotheses capable of empirical
verification ... Within this paradigm a conventional research methodology would typically use the sample survey as its main method of enquiry. The post-positivist paradigm ‘encompasses a fundamentally different school of approaches ... Whereas conventional enquiry is ‘linear and closed’ ... (Whose Voice, p. 170).

This is a highly distorted and ill-informed view of the extensive research relevant to poverty and powerlessness, institutions and policy being undertaken in many social scientific fields. The underlying agenda here is to present PRA methods ‘as legitimate alternatives to the conventional research approach’. This is the participatory poverty research movement challenging the ‘econometric poverty movement’ for legitimacy (and funds?). In some ways the processes which produce much PRA-based knowledge are very similar to those which produce economic poverty information from household surveys: they are ahistorical, they focus on only a tiny part of the overall complex reality, and they result in a product which de-politicises the concept of ‘poverty’.

For many practitioners the importance of the PRA repertoire of methods lies with their contribution to an anti-poverty ‘praxis’ based on empowering the poor, rather than to an anti-poverty ‘knowledge’ used to reduce poverty. With regard to the first we lack unbiased evidence relating to the real effects of PRA interventions on local behaviour and relationships: there is little research that analyses such interventions as one element in larger ongoing processes of change. With regard to the second, it has not been sufficiently recognized that PRA methods are much more effective knowledge generators when used as elements of an integrated multi-disciplinary research programme. Both these problems have a similar root: the fact that the PRA agenda has been organized around a highly moral rhetoric and is located in an NGO movement which has been unwilling to acknowledge the role that power and interests play in its agenda.

THREE KEY PROBLEMS WITH THE PRA APPROACH

The first fundamental problem arises because there is little recognition of the fact that poor people are diversely embedded in unequal meso, macro and global economic and social power structures, or of the fact that the passing of time entails trends, shocks and conflicts which lead to changes in structures, and in the positions of people within those structures. Evidence from the recent World Bank ‘Consultation with the Poor’ (World Bank, 1999) shows that many poor people are aware of these matters, though it is likely that others are not. However, in most countries there are universities with historians, social anthropologists, economists, sociologists, political scientists, international relations specialists, lawyers, etc. who often do know a lot about the way poverty is mapped spatially, economically and socially within the country, and about the causes and dynamics of that poverty. There are also a myriad of ‘Northern’-based academics with relevant knowledge. Not to integrate the use of this knowledge and (at least) local academics into the participatory movement is inefficient and also likely to lead to unnecessary perverse effects. Unfortunately many in the PRA movement are more interested in insulting academics (sometimes explicitly, more often implicitly) than in using the academic knowledge they have generated or working in partnership with them.
The second (related) problem arises from the likelihood of scanty local knowledge on the part of most PRA practitioners. In both rural and urban areas local power structures and the politics generated are usually complex and busy, particularly in times of rapid change. There are lots of relevant things that people won’t say in ‘public’ or won’t say to strangers they don’t trust. Pictures that emerge from PRA are rarely pictures of social inequality, social exclusion, adverse incorporation, factionalism and violence, and where such problems are recognized there is no acknowledgment that they are often generated and sustained by some at least of ‘the poor’—the intended ‘beneficiaries’. With scaling up these issues will come to the fore, and practitioners might usefully think of using research and intervention techniques other than PRA to explore them.

The third problem can be characterized as one of ‘moral confusion’. A recognition of the prevalence of non-linear dynamics in social life brings with it a recognition that there is always a gap between intentions and outcomes. In conditions of uncertainty and on-going path dependence, where the actions of other actors cannot be predicted (often even by themselves), an act committed with the best of intentions can produce the worst of outcomes and vice versa. A rigid commitment to ethical principles of behaviour, such as we find among some PRA practitioners, focuses attention on the ‘development professional’ rather than ‘the poor’. This commitment has costs of its own: time wasted in ethical agonizing; an excluding culture of (mostly useless) guilt; lost opportunities where ‘bad behaviour’ might have done some good; lack of recognition that participatory approaches can’t do everything; alienation of the ‘impure’ who do recognize this. This is a field whose rhetoric has far too long been dominated by the romantics (the goodies) and their binary opposites the cynics (the baddies). It is time to increase the space for the pragmatists.

A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO PRA

Pragmatists recognize that divisions of labour raise productivity, but that they need co-ordination; these books show that there are four areas where PRA practitioners could work co-operatively with other expertises for the greater benefit of people without power.

(i) At the micro level: using PRA as the basis of a wider knowledge of the causes of poverty and powerlessness. This requires realistic assessments of local patron–client structures, factional conflicts, and exclusionary processes, of what local ‘policy demand’ actually is, of the wider national and global processes which perpetuate and create local poverty, and analysis of both intended and unintended consequences of PRA and other interventions.

(ii) At the meso level: working to institutionalize participatory approaches in collaboration with other expertise, for example social development, management and policy analysis. Most important is to find approaches which ‘connect’ (Dia, 1996) in some way with elements of local practice.

(iii) At the macro level: using PRA techniques to inform policy, to change the attitudes of policymakers, bureaucrats, and other macro and mega actors, and to facilitate processes of change, recognizing that there are different kinds of government,
not all ‘developmental’, and that in many countries politics has not so much to
do with government as conventionally imagined.

(iv) At the ‘global level’: using PRA techniques to produce a more realistic poverty
rhetoric for the international policy discourse. This piece ends with a brief exam-
ple of the potential of extractive use of PRA methods for such a purpose.

the World Bank undertook 95 participatory poverty studies. The findings reinforce
my argument for (yet another) new paradigm within which PRA might find an
important role: one which uses words that recognize that life for the poor is bad and
embedded in the bottom of power structures. A recent paper based on the studies,
reporting a ‘striking communality of experience across countries, cultures, rural and
urban areas, and age and gender divides’, found that ‘poor people’ describe four
pervasive and systemic problems that affect their lives adversely almost everywhere:
corruption, violence, powerlessness and insecure livelihood.

In country after country, and community after community, poor people spoke
of corruption in the distribution of seeds, medicines and social assistance for
the destitute and vulnerable; corruption in getting loans; corruption in getting
teachers to teach; corruption in customs and borders crossings; corruption in
the construction of roads; corruption in getting permission to move in and out
of cities or stay in certain areas; corruption in street and market trading; and
corruption in identity cards. In many places the poor reported having to pay
managers, hooligans and the police ‘protection’ money to save themselves from
the worst forms of harassment, theft and abuse. Even humanitarian assistance
is often waylaid when channelled through corrupt state systems.’ (World Bank,
1999, p. 32).

The new paradigm would also recognize the relatively minor role played by outside
intervention, and that such interventions can have perverse effects. The World Bank
study found that while ‘participation and the peoples’ voice have become part of the
‘development lexicon’ by and large poor people are excluded from decision-making
and equal sharing of benefits from government and NGO programmes. The poor are
tired of being asked to participate in other people’s projects on other people’s terms.
And when asked to rank important organizations what mattered most were unions,
farmers associations, credit groups, midwives, traditional institutions and networks,
and religious organizations.

RE-POLITICIZING THE POVERTY AGENDA

This World Bank report has placed some new words and ideas squarely in the centre
of the international development discourse, and given the potential ‘leverage’, this
might be of huge importance for ‘outcomes’. There is currently a feeling among
‘development academics’ that, to use a complexity metaphor, we are at an important
point of bifurcation. Paradigm choices made now will mean that future development
efforts go in one direction rather than another. In a recent book, Michael Edwards,
the erstwhile scourge of development academics, has just sent us a simple message.
‘The first priority is not to be stupid’ (Edwards, 1999, p. 218). I think academics have
been guilty of two kinds of stupidity. First, failing to co-operate in an inter-disciplinary way (to do to some extent with competition for ‘users’ resources). Second, working with de-politicizing concepts: welfare when we mean illfare, state when we mean kleptocracy, market when we mean land-grabbing, community when we mean ethnic cleansing, household when we mean dowry murder. Being collectively de-politicized prevents us from saying that unequal global capitalism is important (and we benefit from it), criminal global capitalism is important (and the demand for drugs arises from the dysfunctions of our societies), international political insecurity is important (and the British economy benefits from it and contributes to it through its arms sales). The PRA movement has played an unwitting role in this de-politicization, which makes the ‘Who’s a goody?’ question one they have to reckon with.12

REFERENCES


12 This is also true of the ‘econometrics poverty paradigm’, although the basis of their knowledge and funding claims is scientific rather than moral superiority. This scientific superiority is equally challengeable (see Bevan and Joireman, 1997).