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**In search of a new impetus: practitioners' reflections on PRA
and participation in Kenya**

Andrea Cornwall, Samuel Musyoki and Garrett Pratt

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INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
Brighton, Sussex BN1 9RE
ENGLAND

Summary

From tentative beginnings in the late 1980s, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has spread through Kenya 'like a bushfire'. In response to growing demand for 'doing participation', PRA has been popularised and marketised to such an extent that, as one Kenyan practitioner put it, 'everyone is doing something and calling it PRA'. PRA has become a routine requirement for development organisations, many of which have done little to change their ways of operating to accommodate a more participatory approach. Discussions with Kenyan PRA practitioners attest to a growing sense of unease: a feeling that something has gone wrong.

The paper explores some of the different visions and versions of PRA as it has taken shape in the Kenyan context, highlighting differences that are rooted in the different pathways that have brought practitioners to use PRA, and in the enduring development institutions that have shaped practice. It suggests that the sheer variety of meanings and practices associated with PRA pose a serious challenge for efforts to enhance the quality of participatory practice.

Practitioners focus on consensus building and peer pressure as a means through which to articulate and uphold 'good practice'. Given tensions between different schools of practice, and differences in the ways in which people conceive of PRA, this raises the question of whether it would be possible to arrive at a single vision of what PRA is or ought to be. It also makes it difficult to see how to enforce any quality standards that might be agreed upon. But, the paper argues, deliberation on these issues is in itself valuable – even if no clear agreement is reached. Particularly where it extends beyond small circles of practitioners to those who fund and use PRA, such a process of deliberation can open up space for alternatives to be articulated and debated. This in itself may serve to build new understandings and alliances that can be 'the new impetus' for which Kenyan practitioners are looking.

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We would like to sincerely thank the many participatory development practitioners whose voices are presented here (see Appendix 1). We are indebted to you for so generously sharing your knowledge and insights.

Preface

This working paper is part of a series of papers arising from the **Pathways to Participation** project. The **Pathways to Participation** project was initiated in January 1999 with the aim of taking stock of experience with Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). In the ten years since PRA first began to gain popularity in development, it has come to be used by an enormous range of actors and institutions throughout the globe. Promoted as a common sense, inclusive, accessible and above all ‘people-centred’ approach, PRA has gained currency in diverse circles and given rise to as diverse an array of practices. Yet what ‘PRA’ means to the different people who use, commission and experience it has remained rather opaque. From the generalised promotion of PRA to generalised critiques, there is little of that clarity that Cohen and Uphoff (1980) argued so passionately for at the end of a decade in which participation first entered the mainstream of development practice.

The **Pathways to Participation** project grew out of a linked set of concerns. On the one hand, practitioners had been raising questions about issues of quality, depth and ethics for some years. With the rapid uptake of PRA, these concerns were deepening. On the other, with the multiplication of meanings and practices associated with PRA, it seemed increasingly important to gain a clearer sense of what was being done, as well as what worked, for whom and how. Building on the tradition of critical reflection that is embedded in many participatory methodologies, the **Pathways to Participation** project sought to set the meanings and uses of PRA within the particular contexts in which it is practised and with regard to broader currents in participation in development. As an action research process, the project has sought to catalyse and support processes that share the ultimate goal of deepening reflection in order to identify positive measures that could help enhance the integrity and quality of PRA practice. The variety of activities supported by the project range from collaborative case study research, national and international reflection workshops, networking activities, video and practitioner exchanges.

An initial process of open-ended dialogue with a spectrum of actors engaged in various ways with PRA in three focal countries – Kenya, Nepal and Mexico – formed a preliminary starting point for project activities. Three preliminary, agenda-setting country reflection papers were produced, giving rise to a series of focused case studies which explore different dimensions of participatory practice. The project also supported in-depth field research that sought to explore in depth the practices associated with PRA as set within particular organisational, cultural and social contexts. Studies in India, the Gambia and Vietnam provided further comparative material. National-level workshops and an international gathering of PRA practitioners served as fora for reflection and debate. The latter has given rise to two publications, a detailed workshop report and a collection of papers reflecting on individual practitioners’ own pathways to participation, capturing both a diversity of perspectives on PRA and practitioners’ views on current and future challenges.

This working paper series presents materials from the project. It includes an overview of key lessons learnt and their implications for practice, country reflection papers from Kenya, Nepal, and Mexico, and three case studies from Kenya, India and the Gambia. The **Pathways to Participation** project was funded by Sida, DFID and SDC, as part of support to the Participation Programme at IDS. As a collaborative initiative, the project took shape through the involvement of numerous individuals and organisations, who played a vital part in realising project activities and in the processes of reflection that the project helped set in train. While these papers represent some of the formal outputs of the project, the project has given rise to a wealth of informal forms of sharing lessons learnt and reflections on the past, present and future. It is our hope that this project has helped serve as a stimulus for ongoing processes of critical reflection from which so much remains to be learnt.

Andrea Cornwall and Garrett Pratt, IDS, November 2000

1 Introduction

‘We’re at a stage where a new impetus, a new push needs to be given.’

‘[The problem is that] we don’t see it as part and parcel of a larger struggle in which we are trying to change the world.’

Two Kenyan PRA practitioners

Over the last decade, interest in participation in development has fostered a phenomenal growth in the use of participatory approaches. Now an increasingly evident part of the landscape of development, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has its origins in methodological innovation in Kenya and India in the late 1980s (Kabutha *et al.* 1989; McCracken 1988). From early experiences of the use of visual methods for analysis with and by local people, primarily in the agricultural sector, PRA has grown and spread across sectors, giving rise to diverse understandings, practices and applications (Chambers 1997).

A confluence of influences has fostered the uptake of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) over the last decade. The rapid growth and increasing reach of the NGO sector into arenas previously occupied by the state (Hulme and Edwards 1997), from service delivery to stakeholder participation in policy, has carried with it a proliferation of experiences of involving primary stakeholders in project implementation, planning and evaluation. Shifts in donor policy and practice have, equally, brought participation into the mainstream, both through an emphasis on the use of participatory methods within the context of the project cycle and commitment to civil society participation in determining development directions (Tandon and Cordeiro 1998; Blackburn *et al.* 2000). As the use of the term ‘participation’ has become virtually mandatory in development projects, programmes and policies, the promotion of PRA as a way of ‘doing participation’ has fallen on fertile ground. Over the last ten years, hundreds of thousands of people have been trained in PRA, consultancy firms specialising in PRA have mushroomed and PRAs have become routine instruments for development agencies.

In this climate, PRA has been adopted at a bewildering pace in Kenya, spread through formal training, networking and promoted through donor pressure and the influence of national and international advocates. As one practitioner commented, ‘It became a bush fire quickly’. After an exciting decade of innovation, many practitioners are now reflecting on the problems that have been associated with this rapid growth. As a long-standing PRA practitioner, who has championed participation as he moved up the ranks in the NGO world to a policy position, complained, ‘We’re in a mess. Everyone is doing something and calling it PRA.’ Another practitioner expressed a concern that ‘people are going towards discrediting the whole participatory thing’. Highlighting a danger of the pendulum swinging back against participation, many practitioners in Kenya echoed calls from other parts of the world for a need to take stock, to critically reflect on what participation means in practice and within that, how PRA has been interpreted and used.

Since the early 1990s, practitioners in Kenya as in other parts of the world have contributed to lively

debate about the uses and abuses of PRA (Absolom *et al.* 1995; Guijt and Cornwall 1995; Adhikari *et al.* 1997). From its inception in 1994, the Participatory Methodologies Forum of Kenya (PAMFORK) has played an active role in facilitating sharing, reflection and debate in Kenya. This paper draws on a series of open-ended interviews facilitated through collaboration with PAMFORK with over eighty people involved in the practice of participatory development in Kenya, within government, local and international NGOs, consultancy firms and donor organisations (see Appendix 1 for a list of contributors). It builds on a preliminary analysis of challenges and concerns identified by those involved in practising, promoting, commissioning and funding PRA.¹

2 PRA, Participatory methodologies and participation in KENYA

The active and direct participation of Kenyan people in processes of development has played an important part in Kenya's history over this century. While a history of popular participation in Kenya is beyond the scope of this paper, this section briefly reviews currents in participation that form a backdrop to practitioners' reflections on PRA.

2.1 Roots of change: participation in Kenya

Participation, we were reminded by a number of those we spoke to, is in itself nothing new for Kenyans. Indigenous forms of consultation and self-help form a backdrop to contemporary participatory development initiatives, particularly those that seek to engage community members in building strategies for self-reliance. Local leaders have long sought legitimacy and support by involving their constituencies in decision-making processes through informal localised mechanisms of consultation, deliberation and consensus building in public gatherings. *Harambee*, co-operative self-help, is equally an enduring institution, used to harness resource support from both within and outside the community. While these institutions need to be set within the shifting terrain of the political interests they have been used to serve at different times in Kenya's past, their influence on the dynamics of participation at the local level remains significant. At the same time, the relationships of Kenyan communities with external institutions, particularly those of the state, embed current participatory initiatives within a long history of interaction, one that has been marked by the expectation of provision, as well as resistance and distrust.

¹ This paper was originally produced as a report and was circulated to PAMFORK members and participants in the initial round of consultations on which it is based in November 1999. Subsequent activities in Kenya have included case study research and a reflection workshop, the outcomes of which are to be published and disseminated in Kenya in the near future. In rewriting this report, we have sought to retain as much of the original content and emphases as possible; we have included here some of the suggestions made at the Pathways workshop, hosted by PAMFORK in Mombasa in September 2000.

Tensions between popular and induced forms of participation run as a current through Kenya's recent history. Through the decades of colonial rule, Kenyans participated by successfully mobilising popular protests against unfair colonial policies, some of which involved non-participation in or a more active disruption of state-run development schemes. It is perhaps ironic that some of the variants of participation promoted by state and donor institutions in contemporary Kenya can be traced directly back to colonial efforts to counter popular resistance. Presley (1992), for example, documents how community development came to be used as a tactic in the last decade of colonial rule to address what was perceived as the 'fanaticism' of women for the nationalist cause. Institutions were created in rural areas in order to elicit and meet needs that 'rebellious' women were voicing for access to health, education, water and childcare, acknowledging for the first time the colonial government's responsibilities for social welfare (Presley 1992). The struggle for independence was waged around social and economic rights, giving rise to an expectation of the state as guarantor of rights to health, education and welfare services. These experiences have left their imprint on popular responses to contemporary changes in policy and provisioning, as on the growing tide of participatory initiatives.

In post-colonial Kenya, waves of support for popular participation from within and beyond the African continent form a backdrop to the current enthusiasm for participation in development. The promise of a shift from top-down technocracy to 'bottom-up' people-centred development, heralded in the 1970s by such prominent African leaders as Julius Nyerere, has given rise to decades of interventions that espouse the ideas and ideals of participation. As Chambers' (1974) analysis of rural development project management in East Africa suggests, however, these initiatives raised – and indeed continue to raise – considerable challenges. Chambers argues:

There are many ways in which 'participation' accentuates inequity. Greater local participation in planning tends to widen regional inequalities ... Participation in planning is also likely to mean plans drawn up either by civil servants or by civil servants together with a few members of the local elite. Participation in development committees can mean that those who are already well off approve projects and programmes which favour and support those who are already well off. Participation in self-help labour can mean that the women, already overworked, turn out while the men find excuses. Participation through 'voluntary' contributions can mean an income-regressive flat rate tax which hits the poorest hardest; and failure to pay... may be penalised through the denial of public services (1974: 108–9).

Seeking to address these issues of equity and to give the poorest more of a voice in determining their own development, small-scale participatory initiatives took root in the 1970s and 1980s in many parts of Kenya. Principally supported by NGOs and church groups, these initiatives drew on and contributed to the development of indigenous methodologies for self-development. Perhaps the best known of these approaches is Development Leadership Teams in Action (DELTA), which originated in Kenya some two decades ago and

grew into the Training for Transformation approach that is now widely used in other African countries. Learner Centred Problem Posing Analysis (LEPSA), Participatory Educational Theatre (PET), Participatory Evaluation Process (PEP), SARAR (Self-esteem, Associative strength, Resourcefulness, Action planning and Responsibility) and Methods for Active Participation (MAP) all have roots and applications in the Kenyan context.

The Kenyan Government's District Focus for Rural Development (DFRD), instituted in 1983, reflects moves away from top-down planning and the concern with local resource mobilisation that has come to characterise rural development in Kenya. With the DFRD, the government sought to make space for a 'bottom-up' approach to planning and to 'encourage local participation in order to improve problem identification, resource mobilisation and utilisation, project design and implementation' (Republic of Kenya 1995). Yet it has been the subject of increasing criticism as a mechanism for participation (Thomas-Slayter 1991; Musyoki 2000; PAMFORK 1996). The model of participation reflected in the way the DFRD is implemented has been to involve local people in centrally driven initiatives, and to act as a downwards-directed mechanism for command and control rather than a system of bottom-up planning. Many development practitioners see the DFRD as a barrier to the State's ability to respond to local initiatives, rather than as an enabling mechanism.

2.2 Contemporary trends

In Kenya today, the range of meanings of participation extends beyond the sphere of participation at the development project or programme level. There are also sensitive and complex changes in political participation in Kenya, where the shift to a multi-party system has changed the political landscape in the 1990s. There is an ongoing debate in Kenya about reforming the constitution, a debate that centres largely on the issue of who should be allowed to participate in the redrafting process. These broader debates, like debates about reforming the DFRD, surface quickly in discussions about participatory methodologies in Kenya.

Over the last decade, user participation has been institutionalised in a number of bilaterally supported sectoral government programmes (Thompson 1995). As in other African countries, macro-economic reform lent a new exigency to these moves, as state provisioning of the social sector came increasingly to rely on these forms of participation. Within this 'users as choosers' approach (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000), people's participation is cast as a move towards the co-production of services, widening access and choice by transferring some of the costs, along with limited control, over service provision. As a corollary of this approach, service users increasingly have come to be regarded as 'stakeholders'; invited participation in planning and delivery is now commonplace, and has been an important site for the use of PRA. Project 'islands of success' and the innovative practices associated with them have had growing influence on mainstream development practices, growing policy from below.

These policy shifts have supported participation in development, yet it is not clear that their success is what drives the current mainstreaming of participation. Instead, government officers attribute enthusiasm for participatory approaches in part to what one official called their many 'previous nasty experiences' in implementing centrally planned and implemented projects. Even the DFRD gives the background to the adoption of a 'participatory approach' as the past 'shortcomings' of centralised planning, rather than the past strengths of participatory approaches (Republic of Kenya 1995). The record of failed top-down projects is well known within Kenya. In some cases, large government programmes were funded for many years to carry out activities that did not address the root of community problems, and were plagued by failure on their own terms due to the lack of support from local people.

The Kenyan state is now less able to carry on delivering top-down projects that fail on their own terms, as state spending has been squeezed by Structural Adjustment and market liberalisation, leaving government-driven development activity heavily reliant on donor agencies. The role of districts in setting their own development agenda has been further undermined as the development funds allocated to district level have recently dried up – now funds are almost exclusively available to district governments through vertically driven programmes in the hands of the line ministries, funded by bilateral donors. Drawing on the international discourse of good governance, donors are increasingly stating their unwillingness to work through the government of Kenya. Foreign resources that were channelled through the state have been cut, and in part have been diverted to flow to international and Kenyan NGOs. Partly through external pressure and partly through design, the role of the state is changing from implementation to regulation (Ng'ethe and Kanyinga 1992).

Community members continue to associate donors and NGOs with the provision of assistance. This provides an obstacle to more self-reliant participatory development initiatives that practitioners struggle to surmount. The increasing marketisation of services and the widespread practice of 'cost sharing' in government programmes is seen by some as a stimulus to increase community engagement in development programmes: as one observer put it, 'communities want to see results, as it is their own money at stake'. Many practitioners are very critical, however, of the way the language of participation is being used to justify these kinds of programmes. As one said, 'participation should be more than labour contribution and cost sharing', and as another pointed out, grand sounding language often masks the fact that government wants to hand failed projects, like water projects with no water in the pipes, to communities and thereby make them responsible. As one government worker observed, participation can become a way for government to abdicate their responsibility, and makes it easy for them to neglect things that communities cannot do alone.

In Kenya, as elsewhere, the main use of PRA is in the context of the project cycle, primarily for project appraisal and planning. Increasingly, however, practitioners are looking beyond the narrow confines of traditional, project-based development. For some, this has meant using participatory methodologies for policy advocacy, and to open up spaces for participation in national and international policy arenas. For others, the

under-explored potential of participatory methodologies for improving inter-sectoral and inter-agency collaboration was another departure. Others still reflected on the wider limitations of traditional approaches to participatory development, arguing for an approach that would encompass issues of citizenship and democratic decision-making. For them, instrumental uses of induced and invited participation were part of the problem, not the solution. In their view, participation meant empowering people to make demands on government, and *that* should be practitioners' goal. As one international NGO staff member, and long-standing PRA practitioner argued, 'we should stop doing projects, we should do PRA and empower them to make demands – projects don't solve problems'. And a freelance practitioner asked, 'can we use PRA to do our elections right? Most of us are busy doing our projects and forgetting that we can do civic related issues'.

2.3 A proliferation of practices

The growth in popularity of PRA in Kenya, as elsewhere, has taken shape alongside shifting meanings of participation and ever broadening contexts for the use of participatory approaches that have been promoted by these wider changes. Changes in the capacity of the state to deliver services, the proliferation of non-state service providers and the governance issues thrown up by the reconfiguration of relationships between citizens and the state raise a series of questions about the nature and practice of participatory development. As we suggest earlier, the current popularity and legitimacy of PRA and participatory methodologies in Kenya suggests that more and more development actors are recognising the need to engage citizens more actively in the development process. Yet the shape that citizen involvement should take is a matter of lively debate.

The emergence of PRA in Kenya at the end of the 1980s came at a time when interest in people's participation in projects met with the need to find ways of capturing local perspectives and enabling people to play more of a part in project appraisal and planning. As PRA came to be taken up and institutionalised in large-scale programmes, used across a range of sectors and for policy research, monitoring and evaluation, as well as project appraisal, applications and understandings have diversified. Just over a decade after PRA first emerged on the Kenyan development scene, the proliferation of uses and users of PRA has given rise to an entire spectrum of practices, some of which have little more in common than a handful of shared methods. What 'PRA' and 'participation' actually boil down to in practice and what people understand by these terms becomes increasingly important to understand.

In the following sections, we draw on practitioners' reflections on PRA and participation to explore this diversity of meanings and practices, from questions of methodology and practice to the institutional contexts in which participatory methodologies are used, and to examine some of the challenges raised for current and future practice.

3 Critical reflections on PRA

The uptake and use of PRA in Kenya has produced a wealth of positive changes, against which contemporary critiques need to be set. The potential practitioners see for further transformation emerges clearly in their critical reflections on the past and current practice of PRA. By drawing attention to aspects of practice that are dissonant with the principles of participation to which so many practitioners are committed, these reflections offer an important starting point for exploring ways of addressing concerns about quality, depth and the integrity of practice. We return to the suggestions practitioners made on these issues later in this paper. In this section, we lay out some of the key themes that emerged in our discussions. We highlight some of the issues that were of greatest concern to practitioners before going on, in the following section, to contextualise these concerns with respect to the different streams of thinking and practice that exist in Kenya and the institutional challenges that realising the potential of participation invokes.

3.1 Doing PRA, doing participation?

‘Doing participation’ has, in some circles, become practically equivalent to doing PRA. A number of people highlighted the inherent dangers of conflating the two. ‘Donors want PRA, *not* participation’, one practitioner complained: they want a clearly delimited product that would serve to meet the procedural obligation for consultation, not a process that could throw up challenges and possibilities beyond the bounds of the projects they had in mind. As an international NGO worker reflected, ‘it seems like PRA is a thing you do to communities, rather than something about participation’. A consultant complained, ‘you realise they didn’t mean they wanted participation ... [they exert] pressure to deliver ... not realising that participation may mean slowing down’. Another argued ‘what people call PRA they change to suit. Donors come and ask for services we can’t cope with’ – such as short-run, one-off PRA exercises with large and complex populations that are supposed to generate coherent plans for action.

The understanding of those who commission PRA clearly exerts an influence on practice by setting the parameters for what is asked of practitioners. Directives from above, requirements for proposal writing and the exposure of staff to PRA through short introductory talks or courses of a few days have all contributed to the uptake of PRA and with it to positive change. But there have also been costs. One, as we go on to discuss, is that PRA is simply slotted into existing practice, providing little challenge to institutionalised patterns of behaviour. Another is that without a closer understanding of what PRA involves in practice – that is, without *doing* PRA – it is easy enough for people to latch onto elements of the approach. In so doing, they come to regard ‘doing PRA’ as equivalent to, for example, applying a set package of tools or as an event, ‘a PRA’, rather than as part of a process that has other aspects and entailments. The rapid spread of PRA has exacerbated both of these tendencies. As a donor observed:

As more people come to use PRA they're reducing it to a mechanism or one-off intervention... [and not using it on an ongoing basis] to heighten their dialogue and communication.

An international NGO worker argued that donors should not just ask for 'a PRA',

They should look at participation in a broader sense beyond these tools alone. If you look at the community and they are participating, they're empowered, they are the ones that are leading. You can do PRAs but at the end if the community is not deciding, PRA is just a short cut.

One issue that many felt strongly about was the tendency to treat 'PRAs' as if they constituted the beginning and end of 'participation', and to go no further in involving the community in decision-making. A particular focus for critique was one-off 'PRAs' for project identification or proposal preparation, with no clear sense of where this was going to lead. One NGO worker commented, 'big organisations do PRA and no follow up, no clarity on how the process is followed up. It is an abuse'. Yet it is not only donors and large organisations that come under fire. NGOs were also criticised for conducting 'speculative' PRAs in order to write proposals to donors for funding they have not yet secured, manipulatively exaggerating the surety of benefits which will follow from participation to local people in order that they will attend PRA exercises.

When practitioners told stories that illustrated the dangers of regarding 'doing PRA' as 'doing participation', a welter of concerns emerged about the ways in which 'PRA' was understood. An international NGO manager commented,

Some have interpreted it as bringing a crowd to talk – put their problems, prioritise – in crowds of two hundred to three hundred people. This is just talking, not participation.

Stories were told of people being summoned to a gathering with the help of local leaders and 'PRA-ed' en masse on the spot. All the 'usual' tools were used, a comprehensive report was produced and this PRA event gave rise to a Community Action Plan. For some, these are the key ingredients of a PRA, so this kind of example does not present any cause for concern. For others, it is emblematic of an approach in which rapid and superficial consultative exercises are used in the name of participation, an instance that exemplifies 'bad practice'.

3.2 Situating 'bad practice'

In their reflections on the conflation of PRA with participation, practitioners highlighted the incongruities of donor behaviour as a particular cause for concern. They pointed out that for some agencies PRA has, it seems, simply become a bureaucratic requirement – a box that needs to be ticked for a project to proceed. One dimension of this was a perception that donors are simply following fashion or directives from above, with little real commitment to or understanding of what is involved in adopting a participatory approach. A staff

member of a Foundation said, for example, that traditional donors 'have all paid lip-service. They force you to have a paragraph on participation, gender and sustainability ... but they find it easier to fund projects'. Another commented

Big offices in Nairobi talk well about PRA but they don't believe in it. It's PRA on command because the donors want it. It's not people centred. People are just left there.

On the one hand, they suggested that donors were disingenuous in their use of the rhetoric of participation to dress up 'business as usual'. They drew attention to a range of concerns, from the co-option of the language of participation to lend legitimacy to agendas driven by other considerations, to the desire to be seen to be fulfilling obligations to 'participate' people without relinquishing authority or control. This would imply a degree of intentionality, of the kind that Arnstein (1971) referred to in her analysis of participation as tokenism, manipulation or therapy. In this respect, donors are seen as acting in bad faith. For some, this in itself constituted the main problem.

On the other, it became evident that what some practitioners would regard as 'bad practice' was motivated by the best of intentions, but informed by a partial or incomplete understanding of what 'participation' entailed. A number of practitioners felt that donor agencies lacked the specialist expertise to know what to ask of consultants, and to make informed judgements about their work. A number of people commented on feeling the pressure to follow a set routine in which they applied a series of recognised PRA tools for any work that is commissioned, regardless of their applicability. As one put it, 'PRA tools should not be followed religiously', yet people feel they are being required to do so by donors. A glimpse of some of the consequences of latching onto the label, without an understanding of what a participatory approach involves emerged in an incident where a contract was lost when participation consultants offered services that would have been as appropriate, just because they did not call it 'PRA'. The term they used was not one that the donor recognised.

Implicit in the debate on the responsibility of donors in promoting 'bad practice' is a sense that if only donors were more consistent or aware or if only more care was taken to do PRA 'properly', many of these problems could be addressed. The potential of PRA to do all the things that were expected of it as a methodology was never questioned: for these commentators, the problems lay in the *practice* of PRA. In raising concerns about 'bad practice', many practitioners reasserted an idealised version of PRA that *could*, if used properly, do all that was expected of it. For a number of other individuals and organisations, however, this in itself was part of the problem. For them, PRA could only ever form part of a process of participatory development: and their concerns lay as much in the expectations that were attached to PRA, as the shortcomings of PRA as a methodology.

One organisation, for example, highlighted the problem focus that generally accompanies the use of PRA as a particular shortcoming (see also Ngunjiri 1998): 'as a result of PRA you can only see a water project, for

example. You can't see what people already do'. A number of others pointed to the lack of critical analysis and depth that was characteristic of PRA, contrasting it with other participatory methodologies which placed more emphasis on exploring the root causes of poverty and powerlessness, facilitation skills, engaging active participation and sustaining longer-term community planning processes. A researcher evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of PRA highlighted the lack of a visioning component to PRA practice. The way PRA is used, they argued, 'lacks the drive to draw people beyond what exists'. As another person put it, 'PRA opens you up and leaves you hanging ... You leave them in the middle. It is a big weakness'. And another still commented, 'I always feel a sense of loss [at the end of PRA] – like what next?'.

3.3 The price of popularity

The problem with us is that very few have gone beyond the rhetoric, beyond what it all is ... we have not internalised it ... it's just a way of making money and therefore because we want to survive we'll move with the times.

Popularity has had its costs. Organisations may commission PRA because to do so has become *de rigueur*. A trainer, frustrated by the superficial way that PRA was taken up by her colleagues, said, 'it's a kind of password because you think it will be funded and it looks like you're up to date on what's happening in the world'. In an era where proclamations of commitment to participation resound in the international development community, participation has become the new panacea to all development ills.

One of the consequences has been its increasing value as a commodity. PRA is now offered by an ever-growing number of consultants, drawing people out of government and NGOs and from within conventional consultancy agencies into an expanding niche market. Many people noted the negative effects of the growing commercial viability of consultancy in PRA. As one put it, 'PRA is becoming commercialised. People harvest a lot of money and villages are left in limbo'. As a consultant pointed out, there have been some benefits from commercialisation – most notably the level of competition that has been introduced into a now vibrant marketplace, which has forced consultants to sharpen up their skills and improve their practice.

Demand-driven provision and competition within the market for services has also had implications for the integrity of PRA practice. One consultant noted the tendency of some to tailor PRA to suit the purse of the client: 'we have colleagues who tell us: "I can do a PRA version of one month, of one week, of one day. I pick my tools according to what the client wants"'. Others pointed out that swelling competition had reduced the willingness of practitioners to share and learn from each other, pitting them against one another in the marketplace. Others still highlighted the difficulties this posed for those who were unwilling to undertake assignments that they considered unethical: there were always others in the wings who would gladly do the work.

In the midst of this, abuse is reportedly rampant. We heard stories of people fabricating the results of PRA exercises in order to make their proposals to funders look legitimate. Donors often have no way of checking. One consultancy firm complained that people can bring representatives from a whole sub-location to one place, divide them into ten groups, and have each do a PRA tool in an afternoon. This they would then present as having consulted ‘the community’, with a fancy looking report that made all the right noises. The funder would never know the difference. The tendency of donor agencies to commission PRAs without any apparent commitment to participation, simply because ‘doing a PRA’ has become the order of the day, further exacerbates the problem. If little more is expected of these exercises than the rubber stamping of pre-existing proposals, lending them the legitimacy and moral authority that has come to accrue to the use of participatory approaches for consultation, there is clearly little incentive to move beyond the most superficial application of the methodology.

One consultant observed that one of the strengths of PRA has, ironically, become a weakness: rather than using diagrams and other visuals as a means communicating better with local people and understanding their realities, there has been a tendency to focus on the production of attractive outputs. These may lack any real purpose or usefulness. Stories were told of practitioners going through the motions and applying set sequences of methods, then presenting strings of diagrams as ‘findings’ with no analysis or story behind them. As several people pointed out, PRA is being used in some places to gather masses of data that is not made sense or use of, simply to fulfil the requirement to use particular methods. Little is learnt from the process. In a context where PRA has come to be used as the basis for development planning and consultation over policy, much is at stake. One international NGO worker spoke for many, arguing that: ‘it is dangerous if people use this method half-baked’.

3.4 Participation of whom, for whom?

For those on the receiving end, the mechanistic use of PRA can serve to confirm rather than redress the experience communities have of decades of induced participation in development projects. Tales of the rapid ‘PRA-ing’ of communities, the hasty cobbling together of Community Action Plans and the lack of any follow-up on issues diverging from those the donor or agency want to fund abound. These stories indicate that despite the rhetoric of community empowerment, PRA is often used by organisations for their own purposes without much more than a hint of genuine engagement. In a context where so many organisations are using PRA, there are further consequences. As one international NGO worker commented:

Organisations come in, do their PRA, take it all away and the community does not get to see what has been done, there’s no record so the next time an organisation comes they need to go through it all again.

It was only a matter of time, some suggested, before villagers would refuse point blank to take part in yet another PRA. Yet, as they pointed out, a simple step towards addressing this situation would be to set up ‘data

banks' in villages where materials from PRA exercises were retained and could be passed onto new organisations. These could also be updated and used by villagers themselves, to monitor changes and identify new priorities. Organisational territoriality and sectoral divides, however, would present significant challenges.

What a 'data bank' like this would be contingent on, however, is not only co-operation between agencies. It would also require interest and commitment from community members. One concern that emerged from a number of people was about the extent to which the rhetoric of community empowerment matched the practice of PRA. People pointed out that although there is much talk about communities doing it themselves, little effort is made to give them the skills to do so and barely any examples exist where communities have taken up and made use of PRA for themselves. It was observed that local people might just see PRA as a 'game' that outsiders play with them rather than something they would find useful.

One consultant questioned in what sense PRA was participatory in some communities, in the face of 'the leadership structure, where the oldest person has to be listened to, and the second in line is the most educated'. The use of rapid PRA exercises to develop Community Action Plans came under particular criticism for taking the kind of consensus produced in public space events for granted: 'when you talk of priorities, it is not a real consensus'. As others pointed out, as a result it is all too easy to work within local power structures rather than to challenge or change them. One practitioner observed: 'Robert Chambers says hand over the stick – but you can hand the stick to the wrong person'.

An idealised image of a cohesive, harmonious community is deeply embedded in PRA practice (see Guijt and Kaul Shah 1998). As a number of people, in Kenya and elsewhere, have pointed out, there is nothing about PRA that is automatically sensitive to issues of difference within communities. Indeed, the converse is often the case. As one practitioner commented:

There is a sense in which participation implies very homogeneous communities. If you are an outsider to that community, you do not know where the divisions lie.

Several people highlighted the shortcomings of treating 'communities' as if they were somehow able to speak with one voice. This, they felt, simply replicated old biases and further entrenched the status quo within communities. One of the most serious concerns, some felt, was a consequent failure to take on board issues of gender difference. As one international NGO worker pointed out, 'PRA is gender blind. It stops at the household. Who is 'the community'?'. Without an awareness of the differences that make a difference, several people argued, the use of participatory methods may reinforce existing patterns of exclusion rather than enabling the participation of the otherwise marginalised.

In raising these concerns, practitioners highlighted the danger that PRA has simply come to serve the interests of development institutions and be used within the context of already familiar institutional practices of mainstream development. As yet another top-down technology, it becomes no less subject to the critique it makes of other approaches to development: a failure to take into account and build on local knowledge,

institutions and practices. Indeed, a practitioner and networker who has worked throughout Kenya argued,

You come in with the issue of induced participation, the PRAs and all that, you wonder if you're in danger of killing the naturally occurring participation.

3.5 Issues and concerns

Critical reflections on the practice of PRA in Kenya reveal a spectrum of concerns, many of which find echoes in the experience of development workers in other countries (see, for example, Way 1999; Pratt 2001). Yet some aspects of current practice are distinctive to Kenya. One of the most striking features of the practice of some Kenyan PRA practitioners is the creativity with which they bring together PRA and other participatory methodologies, playing to the strengths of these different approaches. Another aspect that is by no means unusual to Kenya, but particularly pronounced in this context, is the importance accorded to external donor agencies, both as vectors for the spread of PRA and as the source of many of the problems that practitioners identified. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of all in debates on PRA, however, is a much clearer articulation of differences in philosophy and practice than is evident elsewhere. It is to this that we now turn.

4 Visions and versions of PRA in KENYA

Commentaries on the practice of PRA make direct reference to a set of ideals, against which the practices of others were held up and found to be lacking. Implicit in practitioners' critical reflections are divergent perspectives on what PRA ought to be about or for. These are differences that can be located historically, in the emergence of current PRA practices from earlier, more research-oriented, forms. But they also represent distinctively different approaches to PRA and participation.

4.1 Streams of thought, shades of practice

The influence of two distinct streams of thinking about PRA is evident in Kenya. One stems from the use of PRA as a rapid research technique to assess community needs and use this to build Community Action Plans. This school of practice is associated with Egerton University and Clark University, USA. The other places more of an emphasis on attitudes and behaviour, the personal dimensions of participatory practice. It articulates a more flexible version of PRA, and is associated with India, PAMFORK, and IDS. One practitioner recalled how he was often asked 'are you using the Indian model or the Egerton model?' Some drew parallels between different schools of PRA and different forms of religious practice, each with its own liturgy and rituals.

In practice, however, lines between these two approaches are often blurred. As an experienced consultant who draws on different participatory methods and works internationally said:

PRA is as diverse in the way it is adopted as the cultures we have, as the tribes we have.

A donor argued that the positions taken up by different ‘schools’ of PRA as to their differences with each other reflected prejudice by the practitioners in one camp about the practice of those practitioners in the other camp. This, he argued, was often not informed by any knowledge of what the other people’s practice actually was or how it was different. He suspected that in reality, what practitioners from both schools do on the ground is not very different.

What was evident, as we talked to more and more people about what they understood PRA to involve, was that there is an entire spectrum of understandings of PRA, which are far more complex than a neat division between two distinct schools of thought. Some expressed their sense of confusion. For example, a group of government officers we met couldn’t decide whether PRA was an extension technique, or a research method following from RRA. When asked to describe his training in PRA, a field worker started describing questionnaires and interviews. He stopped to ask, ‘I don’t know – is that PRA?’ Although many others identify PRA with the techniques that it has become popularly known by, such as maps, some practitioners challenge this understanding. Others defined PRA in broader terms, placing more of an emphasis on the process than on techniques, such as the view of one that ‘PRA is anything that will enhance more people to get involved, and will allow more people to give their ideas’. An experienced practitioner, who has used PRA in different international NGOs since the early days, commented:

People think they are tools – they’re not. The most important thing about PRA was going in and listening ... Just getting staff members to go to peoples’ houses and listening to them was the revolution.

For him, as for a number of others, methodological issues were secondary to the values and principles that PRA is seen to embody. Reflecting on the diversity of people who have come to use PRA, one practitioner commented: ‘there are those who take it out of personal commitment. It takes a belief in people, their capacity to change’. Yet, as others pointed out, the personal dimensions of participatory practice were often lacking. One of the issues highlighted by some practitioners was the degree of congruence between what people professed to be doing and their actual day-to-day practice. This extended beyond doing development appraisal or planning to how people lived their lives. As a long-standing practitioner now based in a donor organisation commented, ‘are we seeing PRA like a baseline survey that gets packaged into reports or a way of life?’

One former NGO director and PRA trainer highlighted some of the paradoxes involved, noting the way in which some development professionals ‘turn it on and off’ depending on where they are:

One minute you are this very concerned, sensitive, development practitioner who is keen to listen to people and the next minute you scream at the driver or the office staff, or the way you treat your wife or spouse.

They went on to argue: 'there has to be a value base that drives these approaches. And if that is lacking, we are just a bunch of mechanics'. Further echoes of this emphasis on values emerged in discussions:

We should forget the methods. It's the values that matter. If you get that right, you can use whatever methods you like.

The question is not what [PRA or participation] is but your beliefs and values.

I see PRA as an ongoing interaction and dialogue ... one that doesn't just understand community needs but goes into the heart of problem identification, resource identification, planning, management, implementation ... it's really a way you do business that allows you to see people's perspective.

The version of PRA that these practitioners espouse highlights the shift that has taken place in one influential strand of discourse on PRA from a focus on methods to one that emphasises the underlying values of participation (see Chambers 1997). Yet, as we note here, this is only one of a multiplicity of versions and indeed discourses of PRA and participation that co-exist in Kenya today.

4.2 Dimensions of difference

One of the principal sources of tension between practitioners' versions of PRA is the relative emphasis that is placed on tools and techniques. For some, the mechanical use of PRA tools was identified as the major problem with much contemporary PRA practice, echoing the shift in discourse from an emphasis in methods to a focus on attitudes and behaviour. Their concerns centred on with the contradictions between the rhetoric of innovation and creative adaptation, an overemphasis on techniques and technicalities and the rigidity of much of PRA as practiced. Others drew attention to rather different concerns. They highlighted the superficiality and sloppiness of much of what passes for 'PRA', the dangers of the 'use your own best judgement' and 'do it yourself' approach and the dubious claims that are made for processes that produce nicely packaged reports that lack any real substance or systematic analysis.

These differences in emphasis reflect significant differences in perspective on what PRA is or should be. For some, PRA is a systematic methodology that consists in the application of a particular set or sequence of methods in a structured learning process. For them, it is precisely because it consists of relatively invariant, replicable techniques that it can be taught to others and used to generate relatively reliable, comparative data. For others, this very systematisation and the use of PRA as a data gathering tool is part of the problem. The use of the same basket of techniques in the same order, with little attempt to incorporate other methods or evolve new ways of doing things, contradicts what they see as key tenets of the PRA approach: flexibility and

responsiveness to context, and an emphasis on empowerment rather than the extraction of information.

A number of people ascribed these differences to tensions between the first generation of PRA practitioners and later generations. An international NGO worker commented:

It's the first generation of PRA people who have the problem. They are poisoning it. The new generation people are creative, trying out new things. The older ones just stick with what they were doing in the early days, they are so rigid about the tools, they refuse to learn from other people.

This observation was echoed in differences others drew between generations of PRA practitioners: 'new generation' practitioners were much more likely to mix and match approaches, rather than only use PRA. Members of this 'new generation' complain that first generation practitioners claim that what they do is a 'pure' form of PRA that is legitimate because it is 'authentic'. For them, one of the main problems with current practice is that people have 'basically got stuck with PRA' and have not been able to move on.

These claims to authenticity run across different streams of practice and rest on a range of attributes, many of which are expressed in vigorous critique of the practice of others. Religious analogies were used by some to describe the ways in which particular forms of practice have gained legitimacy and acquired the status of almost ritualised practice. With this come professions of expertise, some of which are based on proximity to particular sources of PRA – as, for example, those claiming to have been trained by Robert Chambers. One practitioner, who has been involved in PRA practice from the early days, said, 'it has become like a sect... we have high priests' and when Robert Chambers visits 'it is like when the Pope comes'.

A further dimension of difference emerges from 'new generation' critiques. This is between those for whom PRA, however they interpret and practice it, is in itself sufficient and those who regard PRA tools as useful only when combined with other processes for facilitation, analysis and planning. PRA then becomes one of a range of strategies, rather than the only way of doing things. A number of these practitioners commented that they would not think of using PRA alone, arguing that other approaches are needed to enable community members to engage in critical analysis of their situation, to tackle issues of difference, to plan and to be able to take action. This line of difference extends to those who argue for other methodological complementarities to strengthen the quality of data generated through the use of PRA, such as the parallel use of surveys, focus groups or ethnographic research. As we go on to suggest, these differences are significant when it comes to debates about quality. Put simply, for one set of practitioners the main concern is the abuse of PRA and failure to use it properly, while for others even the perfect PRA would fail to address their concerns about the quality of the process or the product.

4.3 Pathways to PRA

The way in which people relate to and practice PRA is intimately bound up with their experiences as development professionals, their background and training, and their use of other methodologies and approaches. These include the use of survey methodologies, methods for consultation that derive from commonly found uses of public meetings for other purposes, and the use of qualitative research to inform project appraisal and evaluation. They also include the rich tradition of participatory research, learning and action methodologies in Kenya, whose history predates the emergence of PRA. Practitioners' own pathways to PRA and participation, their own biographies of practice, equally condition their critiques of current practice and their visions of 'good practice'. In accounting for the differences in perspective and practice that currently exist, one significant factor is how people came to know about and use PRA.

As elsewhere, PRA has been promoted in Kenya through training. Organisations have trained their staff in PRA as part of the drive to institutionalise participation and research and training institutes offer short courses in participatory approaches, from which hundreds of students have graduated. This proliferation of PRA training has served to entrench some of the problems people identified with current practice, as multiple versions of PRA have been promoted and spread in the process. The content and style of such courses plays a crucial part in shaping trainees' perceptions of what 'doing PRA' involves. Training conveys a particular way of doing PRA, which trainees come to replicate in their practice. Much depends on the values and approach to learning that training seeks to impart to trainees and on whether it challenges or further entrenches their pre-existing attitudes and practices.

In their analysis of the contributory factors to current concerns about practice, a number of practitioners were especially critical of the training practices of some individuals and organisations. One charged that one of the main sources of the problems with current practice lay with 'PRA experts' who 'discard the attitudes and just take the tools, do it in three to five days' and 'produce manuals saying do this first', going on to contend:

There's nothing about attitude and everything about the tools. They are stuck. They are very rigid. They are so mechanical.

Others argued that the style of training to which people are exposed offers in itself a poor model for participatory practice. As they pointed out, lectures and standardised instructions on how to use particular methods in materials and handouts do little to challenge or change trainees' own approach to research or development practice. A freelance practitioner commented on the narrowness of the curricula used for training, with their emphasis on PRA tools rather than on the skills needed for participatory practice. He argued: 'we don't need to wait for IDS to change the curriculum'. This point was echoed by others, who pointed out how old many of the examples used in training were. The upshot of all this, as one NGO-based practitioner commented, is that 'a lot is happening. People are saying that they've got PRA. But it is an abuse. They've got PRA tools without facilitation'. If people are taught the tools in a particular order and are

provided with specific instructions on how to use them, the most obvious outcome is that they will go out and repeat what they have learnt. Training in any other methodology would seek to achieve just this. Yet the effective use of PRA requires much more than competence in applying methods. As one NGO manager said, 'When you train people in PRA [this way] they will go to a village and use all of the tools, when none of them have any particular purpose'.

At the same time, training is no 'magic bullet'. There is a limited degree to which training alone can change people's attitudes and behaviour, or indeed shape 'good' practice. Many experienced trainers recognise that even the most successful training interventions will fail to enable some of those who participate to become effective practitioners. While efforts may be made to create a distinctively different learning environment and to instil trainees with some of the principles and values of PRA, what they end up doing may come to be rooted in patterns of practice with which they are more familiar. For example, trainers may place an emphasis on innovation and creativity. But for first-time users the uncertainties of 'using your own best judgement' may be assuaged by the security of simply repeating what they learnt. If the training contained one day of fieldwork, for example, trainees may go off and do just exactly what they have been taught to do: PRA, to them, comes to involve one day of fieldwork.

A particular problem identified by many people in this respect was the expectations attached to short, one-off, training courses. As one practitioner and trainer pointed out: 'we have to take some responsibility – including the Robert Chambers' of this world... It is not the sort of thing that people learn in a four-day workshop'. Rather, he argued, a longer-term process geared at personal change is required. The process of training, he suggested, 'is about me learning about me, appraising myself' and for that time is needed. Several people expressed concern about the effect of doing half or one day 'introductions' to PRA, which people would then treat as having been 'trained'. A practitioner commented that he had come across people who would claim to have been 'trained' by Robert Chambers after attending one of his 'PRA clinics'. These clinics were also commented on by other Kenyan trainers and advocates of PRA, who said they had resulted in people saying that PRA could be done in a couple of days. As a result a lot of work had to be done to convince people that it wasn't possible to do PRA in such a short time.

Several people highlighted the role universities could play in supporting and promoting the use of participatory approaches in development. As one long-time practitioner commented: 'we should take the war to the doorstep of the culprits – the universities'. Several people pointed to the potential of involving students in participatory work while at university, commenting on the irony that when students went abroad they learnt about PRA, but at home there was little on offer in university curricula. Yet it was apparent that the current position and practices of universities were perceived by many as problematic. The style and nature of university education does not lend itself easily to fostering participatory practice. Practitioners complained that students graduate with the view that they are 'experts' and that 'they know' and thus they are not open or sensitive to participatory approaches. Further tensions were identified in the tendency of those from

universities to focus primarily on producing research outputs, rather than to seek involvement in facilitating processes of participation for social change. Cast as regarding PRA simply as ‘a research methodology that has some empowering aspect’, academics were regarded by some as part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Outside formal learning contexts, further dilemmas for practice arise from the use of how-to manuals that provide templates for practice without addressing some of the more fundamental changes in attitude and behaviour that can only come, some practitioners argued, from hands-on training. It became clear that a number of practitioners had simply taught themselves, something that changing the style of training would not necessarily address. As one person pointed out: ‘A lot of people say “I’ve just learnt it from the books” – not from experience’. While the production of manuals has broadened access to PRA beyond those attending training courses, this has also led to the kind of ‘chapter and verse’ application of the methodology of which many practitioners were so critical. Both those trained from manuals and those who taught themselves PRA from such manuals were regarded by a number of commentators as lacking some of the core attributes of what they would regard as ‘good’ PRA practice. Staff at an organisation that recruits consultants to work with CBOs, for example, said, ‘those with the manual are the worst – they say that they can’t do a wealth ranking unless they have done a transect walk first. They are so rigid’.

4.4 Breaking the mould

Despite the rhetoric of reversal, it would seem that in many contexts PRA tools are simply being slotted into existing forms of practice rather than providing new ways of doing development. Yet as is evident from the different perspectives on PRA described in this section, there is no clear consensus on quite what kind of transformation is envisaged, nor indeed on what ‘good practice’ might involve. Rather, different streams of thinking on PRA emphasise principles and practices that would seem to be almost mutually exclusive. This has implications for how ‘quality’ is defined, as we go on to suggest. Yet much else comes to depend on the institutional contexts in which PRA comes to be used or experienced, both within organisations and communities.

As a practitioner involved since the earliest days of PRA in Kenya said, ‘when we first started this, we saw this as a movement to change the way we do business ... It was about changing the way we see and do development’. Yet, as several people commented, simply using participatory methods without having internalised changes in values and principles offers the prospect of a quick slide back into business as usual. An NGO worker reflected on a water and sanitation project, where ‘the PRA tools were very good for planning... but once we decided what would be done, we fell back into a traditional top-down mode’. A researcher told us that she spent time with an organisation that would ask the views of farmers on agriculture, but if they were in contradiction with the views of agricultural officers, they would simply take the view of the officials. The *Pathways* team met a community group, hosted by a field practitioner who was recently trained in

PRA. When we asked how we might gain local people's views on PRA, she asked whether we had prepared a questionnaire. These are all examples of people slipping back into familiar patterns of institutionalised behaviour. What is clear, then, is that transforming the practice of PRA to realise its participatory potential requires more than simply conveying the 'right way' to do it: it also rests on changing institutions that are deeply embedded in everyday development practice.

5 Beyond business as usual: the challenge of institutionalising participation

The challenge of institutionalising participation strikes at the very heart of the ways in which development organisations 'do business', bringing with it challenges that go beyond adopting appropriate tools and techniques. Participatory methodologies like PRA are now so widespread, it is easy to forget how new the principles that inform them are in relation to the forms of practice embedded in many organisations. Changing taken-for-granted practices not only pulls away the comfort blanket of familiarity, it also invites threats to established interests. While participatory approaches are often presented as consensual and enabling, the conflicts of interest provoked by the kinds of changes needed to institutionalise participation can act as major barriers to change.

The changes required to make participatory development work are often described in sanitised, managerial language. But they are about shifts in power, and thus are conflict ridden, threatening, and risky. As the manager of a donor-funded, government-implemented project commented, creating new forms of administration in which local people have more access to information and more control will threaten field officials' livelihoods. Politicians who secure their power by offering patronage to loyal followers will lose one mechanism for holding power if they are no longer the ones to come to communities 'with development in their pockets', as one person put it. Donors, government agencies and NGOs may be more comfortable with calling the shots than 'handing over the stick', especially if it is taken to pursue projects that are out of step with the implementing agencies' priorities. Reflections on these challenges highlight some of the paradoxes of participation, as well as shedding light on the limits of current practice. Moving beyond business as usual brings with it a host of dilemmas to which Kenyan practitioners' critical reflections on PRA and participation continually returned.

5.1 Transforming institutions

As many practitioners pointed out, efforts to institutionalise participation run up against practices of administering development assistance that are embedded within the procedures and practices of the very organisations professing the need for change. This paradox was felt by practitioners to be most acute in relation to the bureaucracies of large organisations, from government departments to bilateral and multilateral donor and lending agencies. The very size and complexity of these organisations means that entrenched ways

of 'doing business' have become institutions that are especially difficult to challenge and change.

As we note earlier, over the last decade, there has been a shift in emphasis amongst advocates of PRA and participation from micro-level interventions to scaling up participation within large bureaucratic structures (see Thompson 1995; Blackburn with Holland 1998; Blackburn *et al.* 2000). With ever-shrinking government expenditure, efforts at promoting participation within government gain both a new exigency and increasing support from donors and lenders. In this context, PRA has been regarded by many donor and lending agencies as a vehicle for bringing about a shift towards demand-driven development, and as such for enhancing the responsiveness of government to local needs. Offering a means to bring government officials closer to the people they are supposed to serve, PRA has been regarded as a means of catalysing these wider shifts in practice: as one donor commented, 'PRA was only a tool for something bigger'.

While NGOs increasingly talk of the importance of linking their micro-planning activities with mainstream government activity, increasing recognition of the limits and limitations of NGOs has brought a new impetus to donor efforts to work with and within government agencies. As one donor official observed, many people have begun to call into question the automatic association that has been drawn between participation and NGOs. As initial enthusiasm for the leading role NGOs can play in operationalising participation has given way to a more measured realism, institutionalised forms of practice within NGOs are beginning to come under closer inspection. The NGO sector has been the site for much innovative participatory practice and as such offers a rich site for learning. Yet there is increasing recognition of its heterogeneity (see Hulme and Edwards 1997). Concerns range from hierarchical command structures driven by charismatic leaders, to the ambiguities of NGO accountability, to the extent to which the participation they preach is mirrored in their own internal procedures and practices. Transforming the ways NGOs do business is, for some practitioners, as live an issue as seeking to change government and donor behaviour.

The challenge of transforming institutions at the community level may appear less evident, particularly given the celebration of these institutions as the motors of self-reliant and demand-driven development. Yet forms of participation embedded in local institutions such as the *baraza* and *harambee* can also be regarded as 'business as usual' at the community level. Just as within organisations, simply bolting PRA onto existing institutions can reinforce, rather than challenge or change, existing power relations, attitudes and practices. Take, for example, the practice of calling on local leaders to convene community members to take part in a PRA exercise. Coming together in a public space to generate a consensual view of priorities and needs so closely mirrors the existing institutionalised patterns of interaction between community members, it would be hardly surprising that those who usually remain silent have little space to speak. Haugerud's (1995) close analysis of public meetings held for *harambee* reveals tactics for subversion as well as for the rebuttal of those who disagree by casting aspersion on the legitimacy of their opinions. What this, and other similar studies (see Murphy 1990) suggest is that while voices 'off stage' may articulate dissent, these public space events formalise a consensus that is almost by definition exclusionary.

5.2 Changing ways of doing business

From the boardroom to the *baraza*, PRA has been introduced into organisational contexts with sets of procedures designed for a completely different way of doing business. Many of them have not changed. For many practitioners, the behaviour and procedures of foreign donors and multilateral lending agencies were a particular focus for criticism. The populist promotion of PRA, which many associate with IDS, was regarded as instrumental in producing a situation where donors were pushing PRA without essentially making any real changes in the ways they operated. As one practitioner in a donor organisation noted, advocates of PRA initially underplayed the need for these kinds of changes:

IDS promoted participatory methodologies at superficial level. Donors have the books, but not procedures to create an enabling environment.

Of course, the problem does not only rest with donors. 'PRA is a completely new idea for government. We need to change people's thinking completely,' said one official on a donor funded, government implemented project: 'we're trying to impose a process project into a system that says you have to do x, spend so much, etc.' This particular project was plagued by slow disbursement procedures. While communities were waiting for the money to be released to implement their plans, they would lose momentum and trust in the programme. A change in procedures took two years, as feedback about the problem was fed up through the project management, was then communicated across to the Ministry of Finance and down to frontline staff. This change foreshadows much broader changes that would be needed to create an enabling environment for government-administered participatory development.

One aspect of donor practice that participatory development practitioners are especially critical of is the distribution of donor funds between 'process' versus 'activities' or 'non-tangibles' versus 'tangibles'. After investing months in a participatory analysis and planning process, an international NGO in Kenya received a two-line note from their international director, simply saying, 'this is very expensive dialogue'. The director of the same Kenya branch of an international NGO fought long and hard to have staff time classified as an investment activity, not as overhead. He argued that participatory development is about people, and thus expenses on people should be viewed as a productive investment in itself. Donors are charged with putting pressure on practitioners for quick results to lower their expenditure. In the process, 'participation' may be reduced to a tangible, measurable, short-term output. As an NGO staffer contended, 'managers want to see how many maps have you done this month, how many transects'.

The pressure for results to match promised-for outputs creates a self-sustaining paradox, which can only be broken, as one Foundation staffer argued, through block grants, enabling some mix of intangible outputs and initially unspecified tangible outputs. There are indications that donor agencies are taking some of these criticisms on board and making time for more open-ended learning phases (see Forster 1998; LaVoy 1998;

Blackburn *et al.* 2000). It will, however, take time for these innovations to trickle through into mainstream development practice; Kenyan practitioners offered few examples where they had experienced such flexibility.

5.3 Taking time

The way organisations manage time and resources is bound thickly in established institutions. Annual budget cycles and the idea of time-bounded projects are deep and enduring institutions; cost effectiveness and efficiency concerns set parameters for the success of interventions in terms that mirror institutionalised priorities. A long standing issue in participatory development has been the tension between the need to show proven results within delimited time periods to secure or justify funding and the difficulties of producing, and indeed measuring, ‘empowerment’ to order.

While donors complain of the costs of participation in time and money, practitioners see time pressure and time constraints as a major barrier to sustainable, effective change at the community level. Required by organisations to facilitate participatory processes within very short periods of time and pressured to show quick results, organisations and individuals who are not prepared to compromise on the quality of their work can end up losing out. One organisation working on capacity building for CBOs, for example, reported that since their process took a long time to show results, it was hard to interest donors in funding it. Another group of consultants found that a donor was unwilling to budge on terms setting out three days for a PRA exercise. Caught between not wanting to lose the contract and not wanting to do a half-baked job, they ended up spending several days of their own time on the project.

In scaling-up participatory methods from small or pilot projects to large programmes, the pressure to spend money on ‘tangibles’, and to cut corners on the process of planning, implementing, and monitoring the results in a participatory way increases alongside budgetary pressure to do things faster and with less personnel. In the pilot stage of participatory projects, there are more excuses to slow down and spend time interacting with communities, as the project staff and management are learning about participatory approaches as well as the local people. In the replication process, though, it is easy to lose the participatory elements that made the original process a success. There is budgetary pressure to reduce the time spent on awareness raising, local organisation, and participatory planning. Since the implementing agency feels that they know how to do it from their experience in the first phase, they may be tempted to move more quickly. But while participatory processes are now familiar to them, they are still new to the people in communities where they intend to work.

The importance of taking the time to make sense of community priorities and perceptions has been undermined by the institutionalisation of ways of doing PRA that profess to provide definitive directions after only a few days of engagement. One consultant, for example, condemned another for conducting a PRA meant to include a whole district in only three days. Another practitioner commented on the tendency for short-run consultative exercises to include within them the production of a Community Action Plan, noting

with frustration, ‘what can you do with CAPs unless there is engagement [over a longer term]’. Yet government officials pointed out the constraints on their time; one chief suggested that it would take him ten years to work his way through a location if they took as much time as they did for their first PRA planning exercise in each village.

Short cuts are sought for all sorts of pragmatic reasons. One way that development practitioners reduce the time involved is to convene participatory planning meetings for larger administrative units, rather than working at village level. Relying on representatives rather than a more direct engagement with community members, this mode of practice builds on established institutions – but may offer even less potential for the voices of the more marginalised within communities to be heard and further entrench the interests of local elites. Another time-saving measure we refer to earlier, that one group of consultants reported as especially problematic, is to simply round up a mass of community members, divide them into groups and present each with the task of completing a diagram. While at first sight this may represent the worst excesses of bad practice, if the PRA is being carried out for the purpose of rubber stamping a preconceived project such interventions certainly save the time (and its opportunity cost) of community members – a consideration that is rarely taken into account.

5.4 Crossing sectoral divides

Another deeply entrenched institution in government, NGOs and donor agencies alike is the sectoral organisation of administration. This too has been a long-running obstacle to the use of a more open-ended participatory approach. Practitioners highlighted the dilemmas this raised, where generic PRA exercises gave rise to priorities and plans that extend outside and across sectoral boundaries. One consultant argued that donors fund PRAs, and thus open things up at the community level, but then either don’t deliver funding if the priorities that come out are not in line with their sectoral priorities, or provide funding for their predetermined sectors anyway. A practitioner commented, ‘donors are the greatest handicap. They want quick results, they have money that is already targeted and people may not want it’.

Since there are hardly any opportunities when donors will fund whatever sector comes out of a participatory planning process, some people argued that the way around this was to design sectorally specific PRAs, and to be more transparent about what sectors for which money was available. Others argued that if the initiating organisation was limited to funding activities within a particular sector, it should play a more active role in linking local people to organisations that could meet different sectoral demands. Others still contended that a more radical approach was needed, rethinking completely current sectorally-specific funding mechanisms.

These dilemmas are further complicated by differences in donor approaches to sectoral funding. On the one hand, the adoption of Sector-Wide approaches has the merit of introducing a more ‘joined up’ approach to sectoral planning, addressing the constraints of the ‘project-by-project’ approach and the dangers of

undermining coherent sectoral policy (Norton and Bird 1998). On the other, the adoption of alternative approaches by some donors, driven by new concepts such as Sustainable Livelihoods, offers opportunities not only for a more holistic approach to policy but also for greater coherence and enhanced collaboration between local government officers.

Where donor-funded participatory projects have sought to bring together teams from across sectors, there have been positive impacts. For example, District level government officials said that they have benefited from a general improvement in the effectiveness of their work since being brought into a team by a participatory inter-sectoral project. While these two approaches appear to offer competing prescriptions for the organisation of service delivery, complementarities might be sought and built on to optimise collaboration across sectors without compromising the internal coherence of sectoral policy. As several practitioners commented, by bringing multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral teams together, PRA offers opportunities for building bridges across sectors and for enhancing communication between them.

5.5 Managing participation and participatory management

Participation is often seen as something that happens in the interactions between a development agency and the community. There is a truism however, that the relationships and ways of doing business within an organisation are usually replicated in that organisation's interactions with people outside the organisation. As an NGO manager said, 'you sort out your organisation first and foremost before you go to communities and mess them around'. His message to people who preached participation without addressing internal management issues themselves was: 'stop messing around with things – stay out of it. You make it worse for the rest of us [development practitioners]!' If organisations want to have participatory interactions with the people they serve, people argued, they need to bring participatory management into their own way of working.

There have been some positive experiments with participatory management in Kenya. One international NGO started receiving demands from its staff to make its hiring procedures participatory and transparent. The staff argued that if they were going to be participatory 'out there' they must bring the same practices 'home' too. In response, community members from the place the practitioner would work were given the opportunity to develop the selection criteria along with the director and other staff, to interview the candidates, and to contribute to the decision. The same organisation also made their staff appraisals more participatory, with staff members suggesting members of their own review panels. The director from that time said, 'originally, I thought, "I'm the one who is supposed to be making this decision"'. But, as he went through the process, he said, 'going through that, it freed me'.

For all the harsh criticisms levelled at donors by practitioners, the *Pathways* team also observed the positive side of donor activities. We heard stories of a number of large donor-funded projects, implemented through government, in which donor inputs made a real difference to shifting management practices from an entirely top-down to a more participatory approach (see, for example, Musyoki 2000). One Kenyan donor

organisation spoke of how their grantees are invited to evaluate them as donors, and of how their partner CBOs are make their own choice amongst consultants offering various skills packages in participatory development. The communities' satisfaction with the consultant is sought before funds are released. A government programme has adopted similar measures, where project management committees select their own trainers from amongst government extensionists, and must give the final approval before the officers are paid their allowances. These innovations provide some small answer to the larger question of who controls resources in 'participatory' processes; they also offer examples of extending the principle of participation into the heart of management, opening up the most contested of all areas, that of resources.

5.6 Accounts and accountability

Changes in the ways in which roles and responsibilities are understood, and in influence and control over financial resources, have taken place in a context in which other kinds of reforms have impinged on institutions for service delivery. Shifts in the ways in which government services are delivered have turned beneficiaries into consumers. It was suggested by some that cost sharing has meant that local people can now place far more stringent demands on project staff to deliver. With or without contributions, people noted, once budgets become more transparent to the public, graft becomes much more difficult, improving the accountability of government to local people. At the same time, others noted that the use of the language of participation and self-reliance could serve to diminish other aspects of accountability of government to the public, legitimising the neglect of activities that communities are unable to do for themselves.

In this context, there is considerable ambivalence about the use of external funds to support development processes. On the one hand, practitioners argue that it impairs the capacity for self-reliant, sustainable change, putting a brake on the potential of participatory processes to enable people to empower themselves and take control of their own development. For example, practitioners from the NGO sector said, 'this nonsense of our problems, our solutions, their money – it can't continue'; 'you go into the community and you are seen as [an international NGO] with a chequebook ... You shun away completely their idea of their own struggle'. One consultant went as far as to say, 'remove the money and everyone will do OK with participation'. On the other hand, there was considerable criticism of instances where resources are not attached to participatory processes initiated by donors. 'Participation won't fill my stomach', a community resource person pointed out; and practitioners are quick to note that many communities do not have the resources internally to fulfil many of their pressing needs.

Further complexities arise, however, when it comes to the source of these funds. While organisations may take on the mantle of participatory development, most have their own donors or constituencies to account to; and, with this, priorities and agendas that go beyond responding to community needs or priorities, however they are framed. Sectoral priorities are, as we note earlier, a case in point. But there are wider issues of accountability at stake. Donors may not necessarily see the difference between their priorities and those a

community might have as problematic, or as something they can change. One donor representative was transparent about the fact that, 'our constituency is not here. Our constituency is the [home country's] public. I am not really accountable to villagers'. As he said, donor organisations, 'are always looking back to see if what we do meets the mandate that [our national] Parliament has given us'.

NGOs may be reliant for funds on donor organisations whose guidelines for funding precondition the possibilities for responsiveness to community-identified priorities. One critic of foreign donors argued against what he called 'this nonsense of partnership': when an organisation is 'begging' for money from a donor, he pointed out, it cannot put forward its own agenda. An innovative solution to some of the dilemmas of external funding is the fledgling movement in Kenya towards creating alternative donors, in the form of indigenous foundations. This would remove some of the problems of accountability to far-off constituencies. These foundations have more scope to invest in the 'intangible' capacity of organisations rather than project activities, which means if other donors do fund 'tangibles' they are likely to get a higher return for their investment. They are already working to help CBOs to build their own local assets, which may eventually remove the need for outside funds entirely.

5.7 Moving beyond business as usual

The challenges for participation highlighted in this section set a broader context for the critical reflections and the visions and versions of PRA described earlier in this paper. They provide on the one hand some sense of the complexity of the challenges that practitioners face, and on the other a backdrop against which 'bad practice' might be recast as tactical accommodation to difficult circumstances. What is most striking from practitioners' reflections on the institutional issues at stake is the power that donors are accorded: as promoters and spreaders of practice, as well as drivers and directors who set the conditions for participatory work.

'Educating the donors' has long been on the agenda of those involved with the promotion of PRA. Some of the first steps taken to legitimise this approach involved familiarisation and exposure activities with donor agencies, which 'champions' within these organisations could use to lever the adoption of this approach. Valuable as this strategy has been, its consequences have ushered in a new generation of challenges. Going back to the state of crisis identified by a practitioner who is cited at the start of the paper as saying 'we're in a mess. Everyone is doing something and calling it PRA', we turn to consider reflections on issues of quality and suggestions from practitioners of ways to move forward, beyond business as usual.

6 Questions of quality

The participation idea has gone so deep that everyone is talking of participatory methodologies. How well and how effectively people are carrying them out is something we don't know yet.

(An international NGO worker)

Concerns about quality are at the heart of contemporary debates about PRA and participation. These concerns take many different forms, from the issues that practitioners raise about the 'abuse' of PRA to the challenges of ensuring 'quality' as PRA is institutionalised. Where there appears to be consensus is on the scale of the problem and on the need to do something about it. When it comes to determining what 'high quality' PRA would actually consist of, or to working out where to look to assess the quality of practice, however, things become more complex and contested.

As is evident from earlier discussions, the diversity of practices that come under the label 'PRA' would suggest that arriving at a single definition of what PRA *is* would be problematic enough. The normative judgements that assessments of quality depend on require more than a common definition. They require a common set of principles against which PRA practices can be judged: agreement on what PRA *ought* to be. What, then, do the diversity of practitioners we spoke to in Kenya think can be done to improve the current situation, one in which it appears that there is a crisis of quality? We turn first to their suggestions, and conclude by unpacking some of the issues that arise in addressing the thorny issues that questions of quality raise.

6.1 Improving quality: practitioners' perspectives

Practitioners' critical commentaries on current PRA practices in Kenya reflect a concern for strategies that will make a difference to the quality and depth of participatory work. Unlike the critiques posed by academics and those outside the field of participatory development that often end on a note of disparagement or despair, they are 'critical' in Freire's (1972) sense: probing and challenging in order to arrive at new understandings and new, improved, practices. This shared concern for improvement exists alongside a strong impulse towards collective action to promote and maintain forms of participatory practice that seek to make the promise of participation real.

A strategy that many practitioners converged on is the creation of more opportunities for interchange and debate. For some practitioners, the starting point for these discussions should be the core concepts underlying interpretations of 'participation'. Conceptual clarity would, they suggested, help practitioners to differentiate between different forms of practice, and also to see the potential of using different participatory methodologies to pursue the broader goals of participation. Others argued for the establishment of non-threatening spaces in which practitioners could interact around the dilemmas of practice. These ranged from

‘problem clinics’ at which less experienced practitioners could gain support and advice from their more experienced peers, to open sessions to which practitioners bring recent experiences and explore together ways to resolve problems they face. Others still suggested starting from a discussion of outcomes, from which debate might be generated around indicators of impact, particularly for non-tangible outcomes like ‘empowerment’. This could also take the shape of an open discussion of standards for practice – whether framed in terms of minimum standards, a code of ethics, or what a commitment to best practice actually involves.

Common to these different strategies and entry points was a strong belief in the possibility of resolving current concerns through dialogue and consensus building amongst practitioners. This was envisaged as working through the creation and extension of a common set of norms, and through the extended use of fora such as workshops at regional, as well as national, level. A number of practitioners voiced the need for a body of some kind that would take the lead in convening these discussions, and looked to the national participatory methodologies forum, PAMFORK, to provide leadership.

PAMFORK’s performance in recent years came under criticism from a number of its members, some of whom had withdrawn from engaging in network activities; many of them felt it has lost momentum and has been reduced to a ‘family business’ offering opportunities to a small club of friends. But many practitioners returned to the idea that has informed PAMFORK’s existence since its constitution: the need for a common forum to share ideas that is not itself the home organisation of any small group of practitioners. People had practical ideas for strengthening the network, such as beginning with a capacity audit of members to inform the programming of activities to their needs. They suggested drawing on volunteers from universities who could both contribute to the work of the network and learn about participation issues. Several practitioners supported moves to regionalise the sharing of experiences rather than maintaining one national forum, a strategy that PAMFORK has since pursued with the establishment of new regional branches.

Another important medium for facilitating debate on meanings and practices of participation, and on quality and impact, was felt to be documentation. As one practitioner said, ‘The other weakness has been the area of documentation. Our best practitioners tend to be people who do not document well’. Practitioners had creative ideas about types of case studies that they thought would provoke practitioners to improve the quality of what they were doing. These, they argued, should include not just success stories, but also honest assessments of failures from which others could learn. Some called for in depth case studies of village level PRA that would explore the perspectives and experiences of those on the receiving end of these processes. Others argued for a need for case studies that show how an organisation’s understandings of participation and their procedures translate into practice on the ground – studies from which donors in particular could begin to appreciate the ‘trickle down’ effect of their procedures and demands. Others saw the need for studies of organisational change, sharing the experiences of Kenyan organisations (including government departments) that have tried to adapt their way of working to fit with participatory concepts and values.

In general, practitioners also placed high hopes on improved training as a mechanism for improving the quality of participatory practice. They suggested that through the kind of collective dialogue described above, practitioners should agree on some minimum standards for training. They thought that training should include discussion on the various dimensions of good practice, not just on tools, and should pay more attention to concepts and their relation to local language and culture. This, practitioners felt, could help highlight the complexities of participation and serve to enhance quality. Rather than one-off, methods-focused training courses, a longer-term process through which new practitioners were supported to learn through practical experience, unleash their own creative potential in experimenting with and adapting PRA, and come together in ‘problem clinics’ with more experienced practitioners to reflect on what they had learnt. Several practitioners argued that training needs to engage with deeper levels of personal change. As one practitioner commented:

If we are defective development workers, we inevitably end up integrating something into a defective system. We need to look at it and see what it is we are bringing this thing [participatory methodologies] into.

This means training that also starts with some reflections on trainees’ perceptions of themselves as development workers, and their broader ideas about development. And it means that the mode of training should reflect the principles of participation, taking a participatory pedagogical approach and not relying on manuals and lectures.

In discussing ways to improve the quality of participatory practice in the future, practitioners also saw the need to heighten the level of interaction and debate between themselves and donors. Some referred to the process as ‘educating donors’. As many of the accusations for poor quality practice were directed at donors’ limited or different understanding of participation and their inappropriate policies and procedures, they were seen as a key target for lobbying in the future. For some, the problem was a lack of understanding, either of the theory and practice of participation or the implications of logistical and procedural constraints imposed on practitioners. For others, the issue was a lack of political will to do more than pay lip-service and continue with business as usual. Engaging with and ‘educating’ donors was regarded as a way in which they, too, might become part of a consensus on good quality practice and take seriously their responsibility for producing conditions under which this kind of work might be difficult, if not impossible, to do.

Despite differences in perception about what PRA is about or for, this set of strategies for improving the quality of practice are widely agreed upon amongst practitioners. What assumptions underlie these ideas about improving quality? What hope do these strategies have in succeeding, given the complexities of defining and pursuing ‘quality’ participatory practice? The concluding session will attempt to unpack, if not to answer, these difficult questions.

6.2 What counts as quality?

Tackling the ‘crisis of quality’ that so many practitioners point to in the current practice of PRA rests on arriving at some kind of common perspective on ‘good quality’ PRA. Practitioners focus on the potential of processes of deliberation, sharing and consensus building for arriving at definitions of quality and tactics for improvement. This is consistent with the belief that underpins PRA as practice, that if only people were to share what they thought, it would be possible to arrive at a common vision and strategy for action. In this respect, then, it directly mirrors the assumptions that underpin work with communities. In essence, it involves actively creating a ‘community’ who will then abide with a common set of norms and values. As the reflections we draw on in this paper suggest, this might prove difficult for a number of reasons.

Vagueness over what ‘good quality PRA’ might look like has been driven by constant changes in practice, as practitioners have continued to expand their ideas of what it is possible to do under the rubric of PRA and thus what best practice can and should be. Making what PRA *ought* to be clear, by setting guidelines and stipulating non-negotiables, appeals to many practitioners. These may include a minimum amount of time needed, of numbers and types of people to involve, or the behaviour that should be demonstrated by the facilitator. Or they may require particular activities, such as holding a public session to feed back to the community, follow-up work with funds committed prior to the PRA exercise, the production of an action plan and so on. Indicators might be developed for intangible aspects of PRA processes and practices assessed according to whether they, for example, have ‘empowered women’. ‘Good quality’ PRA would take the shape of following a checklist of sorts that could be ticked off, monitored and evaluated.

Yet, as is clear from the different versions of PRA that co-exist in Kenya, arriving at these non-negotiables might be more tricky than it seems. For it is unclear whether there is agreement even on basic principles. To give an example, popular PRA ‘slogans’ like ‘use your own best judgement’ may be seen by some as an essential part of stimulating creativity and innovation, while others might regard them as an open invitation to pass off anything at all as ‘PRA’. The terms used to criticise the practice of others – such as ‘mechanical’ or ‘unsystematic’ – reflect more than a difference of emphasis. They imply an entirely different frame of reference according to which applications of PRA might be judged.² These differences of opinion are more than differences in degree: they reflect more fundamental differences in what people think PRA is about or for. A single set of criteria according to which ‘good quality’ PRA might be assessed depends on a single definition of what PRA is or should be. Clearly reaching consensus on a checklist for ‘good practice’ is going to be fraught with difficulty.

Take, for example, the view that ‘good quality’ PRA depends on the attitude and behaviour of practitioners. In principle, there ought to be little conflict between a ‘good quality’ interaction and that of

² This, of course, raises a number of epistemological issues. These go beyond the scope of this paper and have been discussed elsewhere with respect to PRA (see Cornwall *et al.* 1993; Pretty 1995), and more widely with respect to forms of qualitative inquiry (see Lincoln and Guba 1985; Denzin and Lincoln 1998).

generating ‘good quality’ information. Indeed those of all theoretical persuasions would argue that the two are closely linked, although there is considerable divergence of opinion on what a ‘good quality’ interaction might involve.³ But a number of confounding factors operate in practice. Most PRA exercises are intensive and short in duration. If the emphasis is on giving those who take part an experience in interacting differently, what they come up with in terms of data outputs does not really matter that much. But if these short-run interactions are to give rise to information that is going to be used to inform plans or policies, then the trustworthiness of the data they produce becomes more of an issue. Indeed, most processes are multi-functional in the sense that they try to achieve both these aims, so the contradictions between the two become highlighted frequently in practice.

Focusing on attitude and behaviour shifts the emphasis from *what* is known to *how* people come to know. As such it highlights the implications that the process of learning together has for relationships between and among development workers and community members, and for building participants’ self-esteem and sense of agency. But if this process gives rise – as it does in many cases – to information that would be judged as ‘poor quality’ by any other criteria for assessment, what then? Many of the tactics used to improve data quality are exactly those that critics of the ‘mechanical’ use of PRA object to, such as the systematic application of pre-determined methods or methods sequences with different groups so as to triangulate findings.⁴ Clearly there are ethical and epistemological differences here that are not easily reconcilable.

One answer lies in side-stepping these differences in perspective by focusing on building consensus on what PRA should *not* be. Common ‘rules of thumb’ might be found to marry different perceptions – many of the ‘attitude and behaviour’ prescriptions, for example, are ones that few would disagree with. For example, almost everyone would agree that ‘good quality’ PRA practice requires an open and non-judgemental attitude from the facilitator. Researchers might see this as essential for ‘objectivity’ or empathy, activists might see it as a precondition for engagement and managers might see it as the route to ensuring the acceptability of project interventions. The reasons why they regard it as important may be entirely different, but they can agree on

³ For positivist PRA practitioners, a ‘good quality’ interaction may involve remaining completely neutral and taking care to counter anything that might bias the outcomes. Others might argue that empathy is a precondition for understanding and producing knowledge is always an intersubjective process, so ‘good quality’ interactions necessarily involve the relationship a facilitator builds with participants.

⁴ It is worth noting an inconsistency in the epistemological relativism that the discourse of PRA seems to promote – i.e. the value of exploring different versions of the way in which the world works and not trying to reduce them to a single ‘truth’ – and residual objectivism in the use of positivist techniques such as triangulation. This is exacerbated by the use of the term ‘triangulation’ by different PRA practitioners in ways that describe two apparently contradictory activities. In the first usage, ‘triangulation’ means seeking to arrive at a relatively reliable (if not ‘true’) account of any given issue by comparing information gathered by different investigators, or through the use of different techniques or means of interpretation. In the second usage, it refers to the importance of seeking out different perspectives, with the intention of highlighting differences in viewpoint. The former corresponds with what is generally understood by ‘triangulation’ in sociology; the latter with a commitment in PRA to making sure differences of perspective are not buried under singular versions of ‘the community thinks’. Both versions may be found in training materials and videos in Kenya.

what ‘bad practice’ would look like. This approach has some appeal, as it would allow people to differentiate what they do from ‘conventional’ development processes, yet still permit differences within. However, it would run the risk of being a lowest common denominator approach that fails ultimately to bring the kind of consensus on norms that would defuse the concerns practitioners raised.

6.3 Different objectives, different criteria for quality?

Where the tensions between perspectives seem most marked is with respect to the objectives that practitioners are pursuing when they use PRA. For, at times, people seem to be talking about a number of basically irreconcilable purposes. One way of dealing with this is to separate out objectives and assign purpose-specific indicators. With this, ‘good quality’ PRA for Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs), for example, would involve different quality criteria than the use of PRA for community planning. This would seem an appealing solution. Again, it would allow for a checklist against which practice could be monitored and evaluated. This might come to resemble something like a set of ‘objectively verifiable indicators’ that could be applied to applications that fell within certain predetermined parameters. It would provide, in many ways, a way of dealing with diversity. If internal consistency with declared purposes is what is being sought, it would become much easier to arrive at common definitions of ‘quality’. And, indeed, a number of PRA practitioners called for their practice to be evaluated according to what they wanted to achieve.

This strategy would side step awkward questions of differences in politics and perspective. Multiple frames for determining what counts as quality could co-exist. Dissonance would be dealt with by treating different kinds of applications as distinct forms of practice. There are, however, three major problems with such an approach. First, it would in effect generate something like a logframe. Purposes would be clarified, indicators would be established and a sense of order and purposive rationality would prevail. That is, until it was put into practice. Objectives can be artificially separated on paper, but in practice their intersections are more significant than any logframe would allow. With PRA this is more complex still, as different actors involved in the process may be pursuing many objectives at the same time. Secondly, the very unpredictability of participatory processes means that the set of objectives that may be defined at the outset may evolve into quite a different set of objectives as a result of unintended outcomes. And thirdly, such an approach would depend on transparency about objectives. This, as many PRA practitioners recognise, would put paid to the ‘Trojan horse’ strategy where a request for information provision on the part of a donor is used to open space for a process of participation that might not have been on the donor’s agenda in the first place.

The implications of an approach that sought to deal with dissonance by separating out forms of practice in such a way go further than this. The objections practitioners raised about the use of PRA for particular purposes or in particular ways are not going to be resolved by designating different criteria for different forms of practice. For the disagreements about purpose that lie behind these criticisms are not simply technical ones, they are about moral and political choices. As such, they cannot easily be ‘legislated’ over by the adoption of a

set of consensual 'rules'. And, perhaps most awkwardly of all, any attempts to establish quality indicators imply the need to fix what PRA ought to be, which runs counter to the ideals of flexibility and creativity that for many is at the heart of PRA. It is perhaps for this reason that practitioners have resisted having any set definition or such a checklist of 'do's' and 'don'ts' up to this point.

This takes us full circle. Why does it matter whether a 'PRA' is one afternoon long or takes six months? Why does it matter if young people are or are not included in discussions? To advocate any of the practices on a list of indicators of 'good quality', practitioners must frame their explanations with a rationale that makes reference to the purpose(s) they are pursuing, or an impact they are trying to achieve. These purposes or desired impacts in turn reflect a broader view held by the practitioner about development and social change. Extending debates over the quality of PRA practice to this level quickly reveals the tendency of the PRA quality debate towards vagueness about exactly what they believe 'participation' is about or for. The need to explore perspectives on the underlying concepts and principles of participation is one that many practitioners raised as part of strategies for improving quality. But the assumption that such a debate would lead to agreement is at best naive: for these are political issues that the proponents of PRA have so skilfully skirted around for their potential to disrupt consensus.

6.4 Decentering the PRA practitioner

Working from clarity about practices and clearly stated objectives towards clearer ideas of quality in practice puts the objectives of the practitioner at the centre of the definition of quality. And when asked for strategies to improve participatory practice in the future, practitioners themselves tended to focus on their own role in defining and driving desirable change. Through workshops, sharing documented experience, and improved training for new facilitators, practitioners see the possibility of producing a new consensus on 'good quality' participatory practice, and a new commitment amongst practitioners to toe the collective line.

Essentially a normative approach, one that works through creating a 'community', producing consensus within it and then exercise of peer pressure, this strategy places the practitioner at the centre. But one of the defining characteristics of PRA is that it is a *collaborative* process in which many different actors are involved. This is not to deny that the hand of the facilitator and their influence on the process, through their choices of emphasis or focus, their presentation of purpose, their facilitation skills, and their interventions. Facilitators do not, however, have unimpeded agency; PRA is, after all, a *participatory* process in which people are not simply enlisted, but become actively involved. Other agents and *their* projects, interventions and choices, form part of a more complex picture.

PRA processes are terrains of contestation in themselves: arenas in which different agendas, visions and versions of participation are negotiated and acted out. The shaping of a PRA process begins long before it reaches 'the community'. It includes other contests and negotiations: over the number of days consultants will be funded for and how long 'a PRA' ought to take, over topics and foci considered legitimate or relevant, over

what kind of follow-up is possible or desirable and so on. The PRA exercise itself is simply one – often small and relatively insignificant – part of something where other agendas, outcomes and interests come into play. Long after the maps are drawn and the diagrams are copied into notebooks, actors within and beyond the community formulate arguments and strategies to co-opt others into their own projects on the basis of the ‘findings’ of the PRA. Different actors set and challenge the boundaries of the PRA process as they frame, practice, and later represent the process in pursuit of their different projects.

Participation is a political process, which by its very nature defies the logic of pre-set conditions and rules intended by those who commission or facilitate PRA processes. The best ‘quality’ outcome may arise from a chance by-product of a diagramming exercise, just as the best conceived process can fizzle into a reaffirmation of a static status quo. Chance as much as choice determines what might happen; a complexity of other factors come into play in producing outcomes besides the original intended objectives of the facilitator. People may enter into a PRA process with one set of objectives, and emerge from it with an entirely different sense of what they were doing and why. Clarity of purpose at the outset can become clouded as different actors enter the terrain, bringing with them a host of other agendas. People may engage in the process for entirely different reasons, subscribing to a common vision and pursuing other ends within it.

In the midst of all this contestation over the objectives of any PRA practice, the most skilled and committed facilitator may find her/himself with a lonely and uphill struggle. If our discourse on ‘good quality’ practice places the main responsibility for quality in the hands of the facilitator, yet in reality practitioners are unable to wholly determine the shape of their own practice due to the control exercised by the many other actors involved (not least funders), practitioners are left in an indefensible situation. Practitioners might find themselves saddled with responsibility for processes they themselves do not view as ‘good quality’ practice.

There are other issues at stake. Practitioners may hold views on what ‘good quality’ PRA practice *might* involve. As we note earlier, providing services in PRA has become a highly marketable commodity in Kenya. The pragmatic practitioner may find her/himself making limited, and thus acceptable, requests for changes to terms of reference rather than seeing the contract go to one of the legion of competitors who are willing to do what a donor asks without challenge or question. Strategic accommodations make the best of a less than ideal situation, but also involve compromises that can so easily be regarded as ‘abuse’. Idealised versions of PRA ‘best practice’ may be completely beyond the reach of most of those whose use of PRA takes place within the parameters of particular institutions, be they consultancies or organisational strategies for poverty reduction. Experiences that seem at first sight to offer examples of the worst of bad practice – such as the instance given earlier of rounding people up under a tree and giving each group a diagram – might be seen as in many ways a more honest way of working. If the donor has no particular interest in funding or supporting things that fall outside the particular project they’re ‘doing a PRA’ to legitimate, why waste more than half a day of people’s time?

Whatever happens, it is clear that responsibility for the final shape of a participatory process cannot be held by the facilitator alone. By placing the practitioner at the centre of the quality debate, we make them mainly accountable for processes in which they are only one actor, and not necessarily the most powerful one at that. Kenyan practitioners' ideas for educating or lobbying the funders of their work is a partial answer to the limitations of exclusively focusing on facilitators as the guarantors of quality in participatory processes. In suggesting this strategy, Kenyan practitioners present a view of themselves as a body of professionals with both some common understanding of 'good quality' practice, and some collective commitment to advocating this understanding to donors and government. This makes strategic sense. But the difficulties raised by the diversity of, and the relationships between, objectives and participatory practices makes taking a collective line rather more difficult.

If practitioners accept ideas of quality in which different objectives are acknowledged and accepted, and practices are tailored in pursuit of those goals, then the picture of quality they will present to donors must be complex and thus difficult to communicate clearly. Donors may be asked to make their goals more explicit, but have many reasons to be unclear. Even given a clear position from donors, a diverse group of practitioners will have difficulty presenting a united front in arguing for change to either the suitability of practices to meeting those objectives, or for altering the objectives. The contestation over those goals will not be between a united body of practitioners and a united donor organisation. Each is a complex agent and neither can be represented as having a singular, uncontested agenda. And ultimately, the form practice takes is influenced by factors that lie beyond the reach of in-country donor staff and participatory development professionals. Donor organisations will be accountable to participatory development practitioners only in some very weak sense, alongside other accountabilities to social actors who hold different visions of participation.

7 Pathways to change

The dialogue over quality envisioned by Kenyan practitioners, both amongst themselves and between themselves and other actors who influence the shape of participatory practice, is unlikely to produce any clear consensus over what 'quality' participatory development is. Nor is it likely to produce institutions with any strong means of enforcing this vision of practice on practitioners across the country. What is to be gained through this discussion? Why do practitioners place their hopes for improving quality on more communication, analysis, and debate through workshops, documentation, and training?

It may be that by encouraging various practitioners and commissioners of participatory work to be more open about their objectives, the different understandings practitioners hold of PRA and participation will become more public and clear. More open discussion will make it more obvious when individuals' or organisations' professed support for a particular type of participation is at odds with what they practice. It may

create spaces where practitioners can debate and be forced to defend the objectives they pursue in their work, as well as the effectiveness of the means and methods by which they pursue them. There may be more common understanding of what range of practices are 'acceptable' to other professionals and what is beyond the pale. In its simplest sense, accountability means that one actor has a right to ask another to explain their actions and to have an answer. Discussion makes more space for those questions to be raised and debated amongst participatory development practitioners and those who fund their work. Through this debate, actors will find others who share their vision, and will have opportunities to develop and enforce one another's views about what should change. New alliances will continue to compete for the high ground, claiming different versions of practice as 'good PRA'. But deliberation can serve not only to create space for dissenting voices and alternative versions, but also to highlight the gaps between rhetoric and practice that loom so large in practitioners' critical commentaries. The energy generated through this debate, refining of positions, forging new alliances, and travelling ahead on more clearly defined pathways towards distinct destinations may serve as the new impetus Kenyan practitioners feel is needed.

Appendix 1

Contributors

Irungu Houghton (ActionAid)
Martin Oloo (Aga Khan Foundation)
Daniel Mwayaya (Aga Khan Foundation)
Elkanah Odembo (African Regional Philanthropy Learning Initiative, Ford Foundation)
Officers from the Agriculture and Livestock Department, Teso (8)
Fatuma S. Abdikadir (Arid Lands Resource Management Project)
David Adriance (AVSC International)
Adrin Mutenga,(Community Based Trainers and Development Consultants (COBTRAD))
Nathan Ambunya (Community Organisation Consultants)
Henry Ikatukhu (Community Organisation Consultants)
John Ndezwa (Community Organisation Consultants)
Jacinta Wamiti (Community Resource Mobilisation Initiatives)
Kirsten Havermann (ex-Community Based Nutrition Programme, Min. of Social Services)
Grace Maina (Community Based Nutrition Programme, Ministry of Social Services)
Peter K. Iduuri (Dept. of Fisheries, Bungoma)
Ogolla Aggrey (Dept. of Fisheries, Bungoma)
Moses Ongoro (Dept of Water, Bungoma)
George W. Sudi (Dept. of Livestock, Bungoma)
Pauline Wendo (Dept. of Livestock, Bungoma)
Richard Hogg (Department for International Development, UK Government)
Bella Bird (Department for International Development, UK Government)
Officials from the Forestry department, Bungoma (12)
Francis K. Lelo (Egerton University)
Njeri Muhia (Egerton University)
Alberto Gallacchi (HESSP)
Dorothy McCormick (IDS University of Nairobi-UON)
Kaendi Munguti (IDS-UON)
Winnie V. Mitullah (IDS-UON)
Karuti Kanyinga (IDS-UON)
Florence Omosa (IDS-UON)
Jon Fox (Intermedia)
Margaret Ombai (Intermedia)

Josiah Omotto (ITDG)
Rita Joldersma (Kenya Agricultural Research Institute)
Gregory Kunusia Naulikha (Kenya Community Development Foundation-KCDF)
Margaret Kitonga-Lubaale (KCDF)
Nora Mwaura (KCDF)
Caren Vincent (Lake Basin Development Authority)
Josephat Ngaira (Mission Moving Mountains)
Margaret Ngaira (Mission Moving Mountains)
Nobert Sayuna (Chief, Mukwa)
Alice Mudiri (National Council of NGOs)
Peter P. Kisopia (Oxfam)
Mohammed Elmi (Oxfam)
Thomas N. Barasa (Oxfam)
Sammy Musyoki (Intermedia)
Mercy W. Chiuri (Participatory Training Promotions Institute)
Charity Wamahui (Participatory Training Promotions Institute)
Kisuke Ndiku (Precise Communications)
Dorothy Kamau (Precise Communications)
Suzanne Kiamba (Premese Africa)
Enoch Oppuka (Premese Africa)
Bernard Sirengo (SACRED Africa)
Eusebius J. Mukhwana (SACRED Africa)
Wenslause Khaoya (SACRED Africa)
Pamela Sagina (SACRED Africa)
Metrine Makobi (SACRED Africa)
Fridah Wanyonyi (SACRED Africa)
Assa Ndanyi (Social Services, Bungoma)
Dorothy Owino (Social Services, Bungoma)
Rose Om'malia (Social Services, Bungoma)
John Van der Walle (SNV)
Charity Kabutha (Winrock)
Kimanzi Muthengi (World Neighbors)
Christine Kilalo (World Neighbors)

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