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## Living up to Ambitions: for a more Rigorous Practice of Participatory Appraisals and Enquiries

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Participatory methodologies in agricultural research and development are undoubtedly one of the mainstays of the nineties. But do these methodologies really live up to their ambition to change the nature of the relationships between farmers and outsiders? Implicit populist and empiricist assumptions often lead to disappointing results. More rigorous practice in applying participatory methodologies requires better understanding of power issues and better knowledge of qualitative sociological enquiries.

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## Contents

ABSTRACT .....	3
I. INTRODUCTION.....	5
II. PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT: AMBIGUOUS CONCEPTS .....	6
III. PARTICIPATORY APPRAISAL AND ENQUIRIES AS INTERFACES BETWEEN PEOPLE AND TECHNICIANS .....	7
IV. PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL AS AN ARCHETYPE .....	8
V. THE POWER AND NEGOTIATION STAKES: THE ILLUSION OF COMMUNITY .....	9
VI. THE ENQUIRY SITUATION AS AN INTERFACE: THE ILLUSION OF TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION.....	10
VII. THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE: THE EMPIRICIST ILLUSION .....	12
VIII. THE DIFFICULT MOVE FROM KNOWLEDGE TO ACTION.....	14
IX. EMPOWERMENT THROUGH COMMUNICATION OR NEGOTIATION?.....	15
X. BEING RIGOROUS IN COMPROMISE: FOR A STRATEGIC PRACTICE OF PARTICIPATORY ENQUIRIES .....	17
XI. THE RIGOUR OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH.....	18
XII. TAKING INTO ACCOUNT SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION: FOR OPEN COMMITMENT.....	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	21



## **Abstract**

Since the 90s, all those active in development claim to adhere to participatory approaches and the goal of population empowerment. The legitimacy and the ability of people's participation is obvious. One can only agree with the goals, and cannot overestimate the importance of such occasions to listen and dialogue for many development agents or thematic researchers : the discovery of the knowledge that farmers have of their ecosystems and their analytic ability can be a true revelation.

However, these terms are ambiguous concepts and, too often, rhetoric about participation is more frequent than rigorous practices or sociological analysis of the concrete interactions between people and technicians. Weakness of the knowledge of local societies and of the social and political structures, insufficient taking into account of the stakes inherent in relations between local stakeholders and outsiders, empiricist approach which too often ignore the basic theoretical references about peasant societies and farming systems : these are three frequent biases which led to disappointing experiences, weak knowledge or failures in activities.

Development project are interventions in dynamics socio-political systems. If we want to achieve the ambitions of creating new kind of interactions with rural people, and to achieve better results in research or action, we have to take these issues seriously and try to find ways to tackle them : not everything is possible everywhere, depending on the political and institutional framework, of the objectives of the projects, and of the skills and habits of the teams. Dialogue with rural populations is not enough to avoid biases related to relations of domination between development institutions and rural populations. It is only on the basis of an identification of stakeholders and power relationships that one can, without playing God overmuch, play a committed but measured role in group dynamics and keep the actions "on course" so that they effectively serve the greatest number. Rigorous sociological analysis, know-how and experience about qualitative enquiries and interviews and skills in group dynamics are required.



## I. INTRODUCTION

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Future development history will undoubtedly record participatory methodologies as the mainstay of the nineties. While the idea of participation is far from new in development theory (Chauveau, 1994; Richards, 1985), it has hit the nineties with the strength of an unstoppable wave. This wave has reached far and wide, with renewed ambitions of changing the relations between peasants, researchers and development workers. First, scientific ambitions since some proponents of participatory methodologies suggest it as a new “paradigm”, likely to change radically the way development and science are done, even emancipating the former from the biases of the latter (Pretty, 1994; Conway et al, 1994)<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, political ambitions, since it aims at “empowering” the disadvantaged social groups and placing external contributors at the service of local communities.

In fact, once one becomes aware of the dynamics of local farming systems and of the knowledge that rural populations have of their farming systems, the reasons for numerous past failures and the limits of agronomics that do not take into account farming practices and peasant logic and knowledge systems are obvious. One can only agree with the objective of getting outsiders closer to local populations and outside intervention more attuned to the specific needs and expectations of insiders. The image of scientists as exclusive bearers of knowledge and providers of modern methods to farmers using archaic and inefficient techniques is now hopefully past. It is undeniably true that researchers’ own worldviews and analyses are also tied to specific cultural contexts (scientific rationale, professional culture, disciplinary specialisation, etc.) and that economic rationality and technical efficiency cannot be reduced to a technical vision. Similarly, no outside intervention can ignore the local populations’ knowledge of their own situation. Therefore any pretension from scientists or development practitioners to define “what is good” for farmers and to “convince” them has no theoretical grounding. It may not be very useful to clamour for a new “paradigm” (Sellamna, 1999), but this, in itself, really asks for a significant change in the relationship between farmers and development workers, a change that participatory methodologies are supposed to allow and to bring about.

But after some twenty years of farming system research, and some ten to fifteen years of participatory methodologies, can we say that such a change is really institutionalised? Do concrete practices of participation, in our research or development projects, really give way to significant changes in these relations? Do the main discourses on “participation” give correct theoretical and practical answers to these issues? Or is this only a case of “old wine in new bottles”, instrumentalising the rhetoric of participation to reproduce the same structural features of development system?

At the beginning of the new millennium, researchers and practitioners need to turn back and reflect on the reasons for this success and whether it has lived up to expectations. It is obviously not a question of renouncing principles (better interaction with and empowerment of local communities) but of pondering the conditions of their feasibility and the circumstances in which they are implemented.

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<sup>1</sup> For a critical assessment of this claim, see Sellamna, 1999.

From our experience as social science researchers and development practitioners, it seems to us that the discourse and practices around participation considerably underestimate a certain number of questions that are fundamental if one really wants to modify the relations between rural populations and outsiders. In practice this too often leads to a sterilisation of ambitions. This is the purpose of this paper which focuses on participatory enquiries and appraisals<sup>2</sup>. Of course, appraisals are only one step in a participatory development process but all the challenges of building new interactions between researchers or field workers and rural populations are brought together in them.

## II. PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT: AMBIGUOUS CONCEPTS

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The very word “participation” has so many accepted applications that it no longer means anything at all. It covers meanings as different as: more or less voluntary and enthusiastic mobilisation at work; the fact that one is consulted before a project; contributing to an enquiry via a collective interview for the benefit of the project team; benefiting from an activity that is supposed to increase one’s power; and being invited to negotiations that may perhaps result in decisions in one’s favour. Despite the current apparent unanimity, practices vary from simple consultation or mobilisation at the service of an outside project (such as the participation of staff within a company) to an ambition to stand the relationship of domination between rural populations and technicians on its head.

It is logical that public agronomy research structures do not have the same view of “participation” as politically active NGOs (Farrington, 1998), and that the types of relations between “specialists” and rural populations are not the same in all cases. However, the lack of specific vocabulary to describe and qualify the nature of these modes of interaction maintains the confusion as to the real meaning of “participation” in any given context<sup>3</sup>.

Speaking of “empowerment” does not solve the problem because this term (also used in management) also has several meanings (James, 1999; Nelson and Wright, 1995). It often refers to simply the ability to express oneself within given relationships of domination, without the ambition of altering these relationships themselves. As long as one does not specify the kind of actors involved, their logic and social position, the nature of the system of action which links them and the type of interactions that they concretely have together, speaking of “empowerment” in general can only be vague. And that is precisely the point here: the participatory discourse is often relatively vague when it comes to the analysis of local social dynamics (and thus social and statutory inequalities) as well as of the effective relations between rural populations and contributors within an aid system. “Paradoxically, participatory research seems to be based on a limited theoretical understanding of processes of

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<sup>2</sup> This communication is based on a collective book on this subject: **Lavigne Delville, Ph., Sellamna N. and Mathieu M. eds., 2000, *Les enquêtes participatives en débat : ambitions, pratiques, enjeux*, Paris/Montpellier, Karthala/GRET/ICRA, 543 p.**

<sup>3</sup> The classical typologies in writing on participation are barely operational to clarify the emotional content in concrete situations. Based on criteria that are more akin to value judgements than to functional descriptions of modes of interaction between projects and “populations”, they generally focus on the “degree” and “quality” of participation along a linear scale, establishing differences of degree where in place there are differences of type.

domination and change, with potentially much to learn from anthropological theory” (Nelson and Wright, 1995: 59).

### **III. PARTICIPATORY APPRAISAL AND ENQUIRIES AS INTERFACES BETWEEN PEOPLE AND TECHNICIANS**

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Participatory methodologies often emphasise diagnosis and appraisal. It is only one step in a development project, but this is without a doubt a key element because this is where researchers or project teams elaborate the analysis of the situation on which they will elaborate their proposals. This is also where, in the case of initial contacts between the population and outsiders, the structure of their relationship is established.

The goal of participatory appraisal is two-fold: build an analysis of the situation that is shared both within the target populations and between them and the field agents, in order to define relevant actions and establish trust between these different categories of stakeholders. In that, participatory appraisals raise all the problems of participation: the purpose of intervention and surveys, the farmer-outsider relationship, the political and social stakes of development interventions, conflict of knowledge and language, the conception of “community”, the ability to grasp diversity, the dynamics of a survey situation, the reality of farmers’ ability to express themselves and assert their opinions in such a context.

#### **Box 1: From Technical Diagnosis to PRA**

Approaches to appraisal are themselves the operationalisation of a wider vision of the rural world and the role that development professionals should play in it. This vision has evolved in three stages: (Daane, *pers. com.*):

- In a first vision, rooted in the technological achievements of the Green Revolution, appraisal is essentially a technical diagnosis made by agronomists, animal scientists and economists with the purpose of identifying production factors likely to enhance farm productivity. Solutions to limiting factors are conceived of as uniform technologies adaptable by all. The researcher is the driving force behind innovation and needs to assess the situation and identify the variables of his research whose results are to be diffused by extension.
- A second vision is strongly influenced by system theories (Farming Systems Research, Recherche-Développement) which came to prominence in agriculture during the seventies and early eighties. Researchers (re)discover then both the farmer and his social, economic and cultural constraints. Appraisals become therefore a question of pinpointing those constraints and helping design technological packages adapted to them so as to improve adoption rates. Farmers are associated with on-farm experimentation to ensure that technologies are adapted to local conditions.
- A third vision is strongly dominated by the participation discourse of the 1990s. It attempts to go beyond the technocratic approach and to put peasants’ opinion and priorities first. It aims at empowering local communities and enabling a new kind of relationship between research, extension and farmers. Farmers are henceforth considered the best qualified to express their own needs, with research and development institutions acting as facilitators.



#### **IV. PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL AS AN ARCHETYPE**

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PRAs have become emblematic of participatory assessments. This PRA/PLA hegemony raises specific problems for objective analysis, because the term PRA is used to refer to a quite standardised series of field exercises and also as a generic term. Standard PRAs combine a series of characterisation tools (transects, land mapping, Venn diagrams, wealth-ranking, etc.), originally from agro-ecology research, to describe local agrarian reality in a few days. The implementation of these tools relies on group discussions and visual supports made by farmers and used as supports for dialogue. The pluridisciplinary nature of the team is supposed to provide an overall vision of local realities, and the (four to five person) team's stay in the village as well as the carrying out of interviews is supposed to make it possible to establish a relationship of trust with rural populations and thus favour open dialogue. Carrying out certain exercises in "focus groups" (mainly men, women and youths) should give access to the diversity of perceptions. The ensemble therefore relies on a qualitative approach based on dialogue with rural populations which is supposed to lead to knowledge and assessment that are shared by rural populations and outside contributors and allow the latter to choose the pertinent themes for action that have been negotiated more or less with the former. For this, the technicians must act as listeners and facilitators.

One can only agree with the goals-start from the knowledge held by rural populations on their situations and how they see them; use tools to facilitate exchange and dialogue beyond differences in points of view and language difficulties; and define actions that exactly match local realities and populations' aspirations. In addition, one cannot overestimate the importance of such occasions to listen and dialogue for development agents who are used to meeting farmers only in the framework of formal meetings designed to "transmit a technical message", or for thematic researchers who work mainly in research stations: the discovery of the knowledge that farmers have of their ecosystems and their analytic ability can be a true revelation. Even NGO technicians who have been working in a village for several years can be struck dumb by "our informers' aptitude to provide insightful analyses of the evolution of these strategies, not only to explain the past but also for the future" (Schoonmaker and Freudenberger, 1993). This reveals the extent to which classic working methods, even within NGOs, hardly favour dialogue.

Implemented by competent teams that are concerned with real dialogue with rural populations, in intervention mechanisms that authorise a certain measure of flexibility, and when the determination to give the "beneficiaries" real weight in decisions is not merely lip service, participatory assessments can undeniably have meaningful results in terms of planning and understanding of situations. However, the "participatory" character of an action is played out in the ensemble of the process and not in the assessment alone. In addition, one can often observe lazy and routine implementation, the standardised application of a method in which participation is limited to the initial enquiry, which leads to a report of questionable reliability and little impact on the following course of the project (*Cf.* Mosse, 1995a; Bedini *et al.*, 2000; Hitimana and Hussein, 2000; Mathieu, 2000; Mosse, 1995 b). One can also note strong resistance from institutions, both research (Baur and Chradi, 2001) and NGOs (Hussein, 1995; Lane 1995), to the modification of their internal operating modes. This can be due to political or institutional contexts that are incompatible with participatory approaches (Duchrow, 2000), or to technicians who refuse to give up their prerogatives-factors which are more frequent than is often said. Nevertheless, this is also tied to some of the method's implicit postulates that are emphasised too rarely.

The considerable number of publications relating PRA/PLA experiences has been matched by the increasing amount of criticism, which must be taken seriously (Mosse, 1995a; Scoones and Thompson, 1994). This criticism can be organised in two wide themes: the weakness of the knowledge of local societies and of the social and political structure; and the insufficient taking into account of the stakes inherent in relations between local stakeholders and outside contributors.

## **V. THE POWER AND NEGOTIATION STAKES: THE ILLUSION OF COMMUNITY**

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The participatory discourse places the emphasis on local “communities”. It is clear that local rural societies share a certain number of values and forms of social control and that external eyes often do not see social, statutory or economic differentiation within them. For all this, reasoning in terms of “community” idealises the local society and underestimates its dynamics, differentiations, and internal power struggles. All local societies are riddled with cleavages in status, gender, generation, income, personal trajectories, and political or religious affiliations; all societies are structured around systems of inequality and dependence and are filled with conflicts of interest. Whether one is speaking of managing a catchment basin, development priorities, or probably even a choice of varieties, the farmers one meets are never simply juxtaposed individuals; they are socially positioned stakeholders. Their approach to their interests, in the face of a given question, are determined by their social and economic situations. Thereby, no choice of action can be considered to be consensual *a priori*.

The risk of forgetting social differentiations is all the greater since most dialogue with rural populations takes place within group meetings. In practice, “participation” during PRA sessions is relative. Only part of the local population is present and/or effectively participates. Factors explaining the non-participation of some actors (practical concerns like time and distance, or social obstacles like factions and alliances) and the distortion of information this entails are often ignored by practitioners. Moreover, nothing is less informal than a village meeting. PRA sessions create extremely formal social contexts, within which freedom of speech is not equally shared but on the contrary reflects inequalities in power. “The paradox of participation becomes clear when large groups form to create diagrams or maps. While ostensibly encouraging a wider participation, most remain on the margin and the most powerful will “participate” – not the poor and rarely the women and children who will watch rather than speak” (Guijt and van Veldhuizen, 1998 : 11). Consequently, there is no incentive to take into account the point of view of women, “untouchables”, “outsiders”, etc. PRA sessions are often critical occasions in which the private stakes of powerful people are presented to outsiders as the general will. This is often matched by the implicit complicity of outsiders who are all too willing to accept what can appear as a consensual view, which they need in order to develop their action plans for the villages.

As a public event, PRAs encourage the expression of what is general and normative to the detriment of what is specific and real. The PRA tools themselves and the structure of the sessions (group work followed by plenary presentations) encourage the expression of a seemingly consensual view, removing dissent and conflicts to the benefit of a homogeneous community. Such apparent consensus excludes those marginal groups (women, landless, small

holders, “strangers”, etc.) who cannot articulate their interests and opinions. PRA may even consolidate their exclusion by proposing a means of communication (groups, visual tools) that may be inappropriate to them.

The analysis of social relations in participatory approaches is often as weak as the determination to change them is ambiguous. Generic categories (“community”, “women”, “youths”, etc.) are much too vague to be pertinent as such, regardless of the situation or context under study. Yet, ignoring social differentiations or local power stakes opens up room for recuperation and manipulation that can be seized by stakeholders in their social and political competition strategies. Being unable to identify ones interlocutors as individuals within a specific social structure makes it impossible to understand the meaning behind a given statement, claim or silence-thereby making field workers incapable to truly understand the stakes involved in group discussions. If one does not take into account differences in power and interest, use of participatory methods runs a strong risk of strengthening the power of dominant groups or only serving their particular interests.

**Box 2: A Non-Sociologised Vision of Social Relations (Mosse, 1995b: 144)**

Much participatory development literature uses terms such as ‘local institution’, ‘community’, or even ‘management’ in a normative or prescriptive ways, divorcing ‘global’ development strategies from local social and historical contexts. What is often omitted is an analysis of the interplay of power through which global development concepts mould and are moulded by existing social and political relationships. Practitioners sometimes assume they are creating new local institutions when they are, in fact, recombining existing roles, relationship of power and social status. (...) In reality, participatory institutions are neither as new as they appear, nor a reproduction of the idealised past. They are constituted, negotiated and challenged in the context of existing structures of power which may simultaneously be supported and challenged by powerful project mediators pursuing their own ‘participatory development’ agendas.

## **VI. THE ENQUIRY SITUATION AS AN INTERFACE: THE ILLUSION OF TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION**

The fact that PRA methods are very different from classic intervention methods is not enough to make dialogue an occasion for transparent communication. In addition to the internal stakes of the “community”, the past development intervention experiences, the politico-administrative context, the prior relation between the team and the village, the intermediaries with which privileged ties have been established, and the expectations of local stakeholders vis-à-vis the project all influence heavily the modalities and content of the dialogue. For Mosse (1995a), the participatory rhetoric itself can be an obstacle to communication in so much as the vagueness displayed as to the intentions of the development workers may intensify the mistrust or worry of the people. All researchers in the social sciences has experienced this: everything that is said in an interview is deeply marked by the context of the discussion and, if the enquiry relation tends –even unconsciously– to reproduce a schema of

domination, the study subject will have a tendency to say not what he thinks but to give the answer that he thinks the investigator wants to hear. Such stakes are heightened by the very context of the development project which is operating or in preparation and the hopes and fears it inspires in rural populations. Believing that a “relaxed” attitude and discussions can be enough to establish trust and good communication is a sign of considerable sociological naivety.

More fundamentally, different systems of thought and language differences between farmers and technicians make mutual understanding difficult. Without efforts to identify the categories of rural thought and use them as a basis for discussion, there is considerable risk that rural people judgement criteria will not be perceived. The practical knowledge of farmers is not always the object of formalised knowledge that can simply be made explicit in collective meetings. Favoursing such emergence of local knowledge requires that the investigator have interview *savoir-faire*, and be able to get out of his technician mode of thought in order to put himself in the place of farmers. Not to mention all the times when farmers and contributors do not speak the same language, which makes comprehension even more complex. In short, information does not have an independent existence; it does not wait to be just collected or gathered (Mosse, 1995a).

The use of visual supports is only a partial solution. They do indeed facilitate dialogue but they can also trap the discussion in external thought categories that do not necessarily allow rural populations to express themselves freely. These graphic representation tools are in fact formalisations tied to scientific or at least technical referentials: no farmer reasons spontaneously in terms of transects, organic matter flows or Venn diagrams. Strictly speaking, the product of the exercise is not the restitution of the representations of the farmer(s) questioned. It is the graphic transcription of the information provided by the local informer – or by several informers who interact and influence each other – according to questions and ways of representing the situation that are proposed and structured by the investigators. More than the real vision of rural people, the knowledge that is made explicit in PRA is thus more the outcome of more or less acute interactions between outsiders and local populations. Too often, the former tend to favour and select, even unconsciously, what is more in line with their own modes of thinking and priorities; and the latter to react according to local stakes and to what they think to be the “right” answer for the interviewer. Thus PRA sessions may ignore information that is essential to action and the way information is structured in PRA may lead to strong biases.

**Box 3: Wealth-Ranking and its Ambiguities (Mathieu, 2000)**

Wealth-ranking consists of asking farmers to classify the village’s farms (represented by a small card) in function of wealth. “Wealth” is not defined beforehand in order to allow rural criteria to emerge. During small group discussions, the few farmers involved end up establishing a classification. The problem is that local conception of the very notion of “wealth” is not necessarily univocal and is even less exclusively monetary. In addition, one proposes a linear classification whereas there are surely several ways of being rich and undoubtedly several ways of being poor. Therefore, and without even considering the strategic stakes possible in making oneself seem more rich or more poor, there is a good chance that the rural population imagines a linear classification to fit the question raised by the investigator more than it transmits its own idea of wealth.

## **VII. THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE: THE EMPIRICIST ILLUSION**

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Contrary to enquiries with questionnaire, PRAs emphasise observation and dialogue with farmers who transmit their knowledge. But one can understand and interpret what farmers say only if one knows their farming and production systems sufficiently well. Visual tools such as transects or work calendars can only be interpreted if one knows how to analyse them, that is to say, if one relies on an implicit or explicit theory of rural farming and if one knows how to compare the elements involved. The use of individual and collective interviews makes it possible to rely on farmers' knowledge but can not fully replace prior thematic and theoretical skills. Indeed, while farmers can obviously explain these relationships (why crops are distributed this or that way throughout the landscape; how they manage the constraints of the crop year; and which crops are priorities), it is very likely that they will not do so unless they are guided on these questions, perhaps because these things are so obvious that they go without saying and are not discussed spontaneously, or on the contrary, because they implement them without the underlying reasons necessarily being explicit. In addition, while PRAs provide standard tools for initial characterisation of production systems, this is no longer the case when one tackles other, less general subjects such as modalities for access to land, fertility management, crop variety rotation, etc.

As soon as one wants to get beyond generalities, mobilising farmers' knowledge requires one to be sufficiently competent in the subject at hand to ask the right questions and understand what one's interlocutor is saying, without remaining trapped in one's own logical framework. As Floquet and Mongbo (2000) say, "to be of value to both parties, access to local knowledge requires PRA practitioners who are competent in the disciplines relevant to the objectives and actions aimed at by the PRA exercise" because "villagers are good 'teachers' only if their 'pupils' have a solid knowledge [...] that allows them to ask the 'right questions' and confront this knowledge with the farmer's, thus forcing them to refine, validate or contradict their own theories".

Contrary to the empiricist postulate that assumes that the realities are there, pre-existent, and ask only to be revealed, one only reads agrarian realities (and indeed all complex realities) through "filters" that emphasise certain aspects of the reality and leave others in shadow. An agronomist working on technical itineraries is highly likely to inquire about soil fertility but not very likely to ask about labour or cash constraints that can, even more than technical parameters, determine farming practices for any given crop. Interviews with farmers will thus leave him with a biased analysis, but convinced that it is really what peasants think, because they told it to him. The more that questions address sensitive subjects or are complex, the lower one's chances are of discovering them spontaneously: this is the case for all aspects of social relations, land issues, natural resource management practices and more. The investigator's assumptions, his analytical framework, his previous knowledge, and his implicit or explicit questions on the subject at hand determine his results to a great extent. However, few agronomists have understanding of farms as systems and even less as social units.

**Box 4: Is the Discovery of Land Management Systems Due to PRA? (Lavigne Delville, 2000)**

In Senegal, a fascinating study carried out using PRA (Schoonmaker Freudenberger, M. and K., 1993) revealed that natural resources in the study zone were managed on the scale of a cluster of seven villages with historical ties. This discovery surprised the development agents who considered villages to be land management units and customary regulations to have crumbled. But can this discovery be considered to be a result of the PRA method itself? The ability to observe and analyse things in terms of land tenure rules and procedures requires one to take an interest in rules for managing resources and therefore that one know that there are rules, that these rules are specific for each resource (trees, pastures, farm land, etc.). This is not something one “discovers” as quickly if one does not know to look for it. If it were, this would have been discovered much earlier and by many people! It is clearly the presence of an anthropologist specialised in land issues on the team that made this possible, much more than PRA in itself.

“Optimal ignorance” requires optimal prior knowledge, including an awareness of the limits of one’s own and farmers’ local knowledge. Resorting to interviews (especially group interviews) allows researchers to grasp farmers’ knowledge but does not, in itself, substitute for personal competence: interviews are only productive if we manifest our own knowledge (Olivier de Sardan 2000). The richness and the limits of local knowledge can only emerge through the confrontation of analyses, interpretations and dialogue (Floquet and Mongbo 2000, Castellonet 2000). Otherwise, there is considerable risk that PRAs only result in occupying farmers for a long time, to rediscover a few generalities about local farming systems that are biased by the team’s assumptions.

**Box 5: A Study of Rice Seeds or the Weight of Assumptions**

In Madagascar, a study of the rice seeds used by farmers was carried out according to PRA principles. The team concluded that farmers use traditional varieties exclusively and do not know the improved varieties. This was a serious error: other studies on the same region revealed that farmers use a range of varieties, including a series of varieties from research disseminated approximately fifteen years previously. Farmers know and appreciate these varieties but, quite simply, they had not been able to renew them as the dissemination schemes were in deep crisis. Implicitly assuming that everything that exists in the farming milieu is “traditional” (and thereby old) whenever it does not come clearly from research and development, the team did not notice that these varieties – obviously not called by their scientific names locally– were “modern” varieties that had been integrated by farmers long ago. Farmers did not tell them, merely because the researchers’ questions did not make this information seem interesting to share. Attention to the history of varieties in the region and to the ways varieties circulate (how long has this variety been used? where does it come from?) would most likely have made it possible to discover this.

**Box 6: Scattered Lands (Mathieu, 2000)**

During a PRA, the team of a natural resource management project in Mali did not see that the village farmers that they were studying had lands scattered in several zones, some of which were a few dozen kilometres away. During the rainy season, some of the farmers would move to this zone, which was the most fertile. Accordingly, their image of the village, land saturation and food balance was heavily skewed. Starting from a vision of “village territory” as the area surrounding the village, the team did not think to ask up-front questions about the areas cultivated by the villagers.

## VIII. THE DIFFICULT MOVE FROM KNOWLEDGE TO ACTION

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One does not go straight from knowledge to action. There are necessarily choices to be made when moving from appraisal to decision-making. Can we imagine that consensual priorities emerge spontaneously from the diagnosis? Is it realistic to ask populations to make long-term, binding choices right after presentation of findings without allowing them time to digest results and reflect on priorities? How can one set priorities between the diverse, often contradictory, interests of different groups? How to deal with the contradictions brought to light by appraisals? The questions relate most directly to the illusion of dealing with harmonious “communities” underlying much participatory appraisal work. This is perhaps the source of this “implicit complicity of outsiders with the rhetorical expression of community”: it allows one to act as if there were no diverging interests.

Choosing to work on one or another topic, deciding that this is more important than that, is always a political choice. It means that the interests of a given interest group are considered to be higher than the interests of another, whether the latter group was already excluded from the debate or its opinion did not prevail. This is a very concrete problem for participatory methodologies because it raises the question of the involvement of the team and their own choices in favour of one or another social group. This does not seem to be clearly addressed by PRAs for which this stage in choices seems to be fused with the restitution of the diagnostic. However, animation methods and even the appropriate people to call on are not the same when it is a matter of elaborating an analysis as they are when it is a matter of arbitrating between different options and making decisions.

**Box 7: From Appraisal to Planning: Some Missing Links (Moity-Maïzi, 2000)**

In the experience of Participatory Eco-Development (PED) promoted by the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), a comprehensive team-led appraisal attempts to stimulate participatory planning processes for natural resource management, conservation and environmental protection through a series of diagnostic activities, combining sociological and historical surveys and cartography. The result of the appraisal is a micro-regional study comprised, among others, of a typology of systems and socio-tenurial mapping. But this complex appraisal, once completed, reveals a gap

between intentions and reality, and between the detail of knowledge and the ability to engage in certain types of actions. The restitution to villagers shows that some villagers have difficulty understanding the charts and figures, and they do not react very much to the restitution: all this information is quite foreign to them at that stage, even if the project says it is their own. Moreover, how does one move from a description of reality to planning, which supposes thinking to the future? The implications of knowledge gained from the socio-tenurial mapping and farm surveys in terms of action are not clear, even for the team: are they simple steps in the procedure whose objective is to help outsiders develop a better understanding of the complexity of land tenure arrangements or are they supposed to help define better and more focused planning? How does one deal with land tenure conflicts that are revealed by the survey in natural resource management planning?

## **IX. EMPOWERMENT THROUGH COMMUNICATION OR NEGOTIATION?**

Some authors suggest that expressing one's own views is enough for empowerment in that local communities (or some social groups within these communities) can thus improve their decision making procedures, strengthen their negotiation skills and, thereby, be in a better position to deal with development institutions. The debate about the value of communication for negotiation must not overshadow the paramount issue of political and institutional constraints to the empowerment of local populations. This issue, while often mentioned, is rarely dealt with. Much of the writings about empowerment in the current participation literature is based on the assumption that communication and negotiation are, in themselves, enough for local populations to advance their interests, with no need for arbitration and political mediation. Yet experience has shown that, however well thought out they are, communication strategies are not enough to convert all individuals to the idea of participation, let alone to change their behaviour. Participatory enquiries can be a tool for this but only inasmuch as they are integrated in a more political process with clear commitment from certain stakeholders (Castellanet, 1999).

In Tigray, Bedini et al. (2000) report the scepticism with which PRA was received by local institutions and professionals. "The scepticism was borne out of the feeling that, in Tigray, the level of participation of local communities is already significant in terms of hands-on involvement and expression of ideas and that new 'participatory methods' have only contributed to increase staff work burden without bringing significant results". Rather than taking stock of the local structures and working through them, PRA practitioners organised their own sessions and thus found themselves in contradiction with the Baitos (community based democratically elected councils). "Officials of the Baito are directly involved in discussion with farmers on a day to day basis and therefore have very good information about local realities and expectations. Living with communities means that these are not seen as target areas but rather as a complete day to day experience of discussion, feedback and information exchange. Much diagnostic work is carried out at the level of the Baito by tapping local information networks and adopting



information collection techniques more adapted to local cultural realities. The Baito therefore can be seen as a facilitator body through which grassroots basic needs can be realized.” By ignoring this local potential, PRA promoters cut themselves off from an essential institutional power base.

In the context of a society which, like Albania, has undergone decades of authoritarian rule and strict top-down planning, bound to secrecy and exclusion of dissenting voices, appraisals using public meetings and collective decision making turned out to be impossible to manage (Duchrow, 2000). Open communication during public meetings proves unrealistic, and is systematically overturned. The younger villagers adopt the position of active “saboteurs”, questioning the relevance of the meeting, trying to derail the process and mocking the facilitators. State representatives try to take control of the meetings when they felt that their own work or their institution were being criticised. The old party officials revert to their usual style of dominating debates, monopolising speech and using public meeting for authoritarian ends. In the absence of the basic conditions of trust and free speech, the objectives of participatory appraisals, PRA-style (open debate, transparency, collective decision making, community planning), prove therefore unrealistic and empowerment through communication remains a utopian endeavour.

Even in other contexts, “empowerment” is therefore more about changing the present power structure than it is about “giving” a particular group power to speak. This has more to do with institutional frameworks than with participatory enquiries (even if they may play a role). This implies that outsiders clearly commit in favour of some groups and try to make dominant groups accept some changes. Doing this requires knowledge that cannot be generated by PRA-style appraisals. As Floquet and Mongbo point out, “the simple perception by outsiders of stakes, and dealings within the local populations around these stakes, requires on their part a more than superficial preliminary knowledge of the socio-political and economic realities of the village and of the region in order to grasp the turn of events from village actors’ choice of words and small gestures.”

So, is there an escape from local power politics? No, in that no public event will ever express a consensus within an illusory community. Yes, in that, where tensions are not too strong, outsiders equipped with the necessary skills can be of help. Discussions in homogeneous groups and public reporting can promote open debate on issues that would otherwise not be talked about publicly. They can force some actors to recognise the legitimacy of others’ points of view, thus giving them an opportunity to negotiate new conditions. But this requires that they move away from naïve communication ideology that assumes that simple interactions, however well organised, will solve conflicts of interest. This remains a sensitive exercise because, as Floquet and Mongbo (2000) point out, “if PRA practitioners cannot pretend to modify power relations through some social engineering, they give themselves the means to analyse what is negotiable and what is not. If they have enough room for manoeuvre, they can encourage discussions likely to facilitate changes that are otherwise difficult to envisage, if only by allowing topics that are taboo to be voiced and on the condition that they offer opportunities that can be seized upon [...] by some actors.” It is therefore a question of outsiders assuming interference in local social relations by opening up opportunities for debate whose stakes they can grasp so as not to play a would-be sorcerer by opening a Pandora’s box of power relations and conflicts the villagers cannot deal with on their own. One has to be able

to explicit different actors' stakes (including outsiders') if one is to facilitate and interpret such social events.

Negotiation is at the centre of various appraisals carried out during a participatory action research project in Brazil by Castellanet and his colleagues. This action-research was conducted by a team working for the Laboratoire Agro-Ecologique de la Transamazonienne (LAET) in partnership with a Peasants' Union, MPST. A joint programme was gradually formulated, and formalised by a written contract, after long negotiations. In this process, all the joint activities was negotiated, from the choice of topics to that of data collection procedures and presentation of results. Various types of appraisal were conducted depending at different the stages of the project. The LAET team, despite the Union's assertion that it already knew the region's problems, insisted on conducting its own preliminary appraisal so as to develop its own understanding of the local situation. A first workshop with a small group helped validate their analysis. A second workshop with a larger group was the opportunity to engage in a wide debate. The appraisal, approved by part of the audience, led on to a discussion that highlighted the contradictions in the Union's policy and publicly raised issues that had previously been kept in the shadows. Other appraisals were conducted later on the priority topics negotiated by MPST and LAET, with specificities and a degree of producers' involvement dictated by each topic, but always a debate during the public presentation of results. The real stakes of participation do not lie so much in the production of raw information as in the definition and processing of topics on the one hand, and their presentation and confrontation of analyses of results on the other. The contribution of researchers to change lies precisely in the different perspective they offer, in their ability to deal with things systematically and to put on the table issues and problems which, although known, were not dealt with openly before. It is therefore inappropriate to talk about a "common" appraisal: peasants and researchers do not share the same social positions, and communication however well done, does not erase differences. As Castellanet notes, given that they are keen to an open and grounded analysis of rural realities and of peasant practices "it seems a healthy attitude for researchers to claim their specific professional skills, to assume their own worldview, to accept as normal the fact that their assessment of a situation never coincides exactly with the worldview of peasants and of their representatives. It is precisely through these differences and confrontations that one makes progress." Such a view is all the more justified since there is not one "peasant appraisal" either. Social and economic positions are varied, peasant representatives have their own strategies and the priorities they put forward are not necessarily those of their power base. In the same way, researchers have their own disciplinary and institutional perspectives. Rather than looking for an illusory consensus, it is better to recognise the diversity of viewpoints, interests and analyses, and organise a productive confrontation.

## **X. BEING RIGOROUS IN COMPROMISE: FOR A STRATEGIC PRACTICE OF PARTICIPATORY ENQUIRIES**

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These analyses do not mean that participation is impossible, and should not discourage one from working towards one's objective. But they mean that, if we want to achieve the ambitions of productive work with rural people, we have to take these issues seriously and try to find ways to tackle them. Not everything is possible everywhere, depending on the political

and institutional framework, the history of development interventions, the objectives and means of the projects, and the skills and habits of the teams. The goal is to have a clear vision of the issues, find the best compromises for a given context, and try to go further.

Contrary to what the discourse on participation seems to affirm, dialogue with rural populations is not enough to avoid biases related to relations of domination between development institutions and rural populations. The main new elements in participatory assessment approaches are: advancing qualitative approaches and interview use, and the desire to modify the relations between rural populations and outside contributors. However, the first ambition is part of the social sciences and their application by agronomy or animal rearing specialists has not been accompanied by sufficient knowledge of their implementation conditions and modalities. And the second also requires some skills in social relations.

Participation does not allow one to avoid the difficulties of qualitative studies. On the contrary, it carries within itself all their wealth and also all their difficulties. The determination to emphasise discussion and listening, the principles of triangulation, iteration, etc. are of course necessary but they are not sufficient to avoid numerous biases that run the risk, if one is not wary, to lead to the opposite results of those desired.

Of course, these risks depend on the intervention themes: less is at stake socially speaking in the description and analysis of a transect than in a study of land access modes; and the criteria for choosing varieties of rice are *a priori* less dependent on the diversity of social and economic positions than the discussion of net income in microfinance. But even this remains to be proved: farmers who grow crops for self-consumption or who only have poor lands may prefer other varieties than those who cultivate the best lands or sell a large portion of their harvests. It is only by posing these possible biases as starting postulates that one can then, possibly, verify that they are indeed limited for a given action.

Working in participatory enquiries is demanding. It requires one to build a true animation and research strategy and mobilise considerable savoir-faire for qualitative enquiries and group leadership and dynamics.

## **XI. THE RIGOUR OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

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The production of validated knowledge demands that a certain number of rules be followed. The rules for qualitative approaches are not the same as those for statistic analysis, but they exist and are demanding. If one does not take into account the conditions for “qualitative rigour” (Olivier de Sardan, 2000), if one does not work on the problematic and hypotheses, if one does not pay careful attention to information gathering methods and their potential biases, one runs a strong risk of producing false or mediocre results with little practical use. The participatory nature of the enquiry in no way attenuates this demand, and actually has the opposite effect because it adds the intervention’s own stakes and the farmers’ expectations. The acknowledgement of the relativity of academic models (Pretty, 1994) must not lead to the rejection of all modes of validation and objectivization.

The ability to step back from one’s own analysis schemas is not innate. The difficulty in qualitative enquiries lies in the fact that they are above all a matter of savoir-faire and experience. Adding experienced sociologists to interview techniques so as to learn to carry out

these interviews better and avoid the most massive biases is often necessary. A survey on a given subject can not be content with group work alone. If the resulting analyses are to be sufficiently reliable, it must intelligently combine diverse modes of data production: individual interviews, direct observations, inventories, etc. The room accorded to collective interviews or focus group in the research process, the way one prepares and animates them, and the people one mobilises differ according to whether one aims to elaborate an initial framework, test hypotheses from other sources, or resituate and debate conclusions. The PRA “package” can not replace research strategies.

## **XII. TAKING INTO ACCOUNT SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION: FOR OPEN COMMITMENT**

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Opinions and priorities are dependent on social and economic positions and local societies are never undifferentiated. Ensuring that certain groups are not excluded from the process, understanding the different participants’ interventions, understanding the stakes in collective meetings, and being able to advance the points of view of dominated groups all require one to be able to situate interlocutors in social networks and local economic differentiations. The standard categories of men, youths and women are not enough. It is more operative to reason in terms of “strategic groups” (Bierschenk and Elwert), that is to say, stakeholders who share the same interests and opinions in the face of a given issue. These strategic groups are dependent on the type of issue: they will not necessarily be the same when it comes to rice varieties as for pig fattening, and even less so for irrigation. They are founded on a variable combination, to be determined empirically, of family relationships, political or religious affiliations and economic or social categories.

It is only on the basis of such identification of stakeholders and power relationships that one can, without playing God overmuch, play a committed but measured role in group dynamics and keep the actions “on course” so that they effectively serve the greatest number.



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Le monde change, les façons de travailler en coopération aussi. Au Sud comme au Nord, effervescence associative, libéralisation économique et décentralisations administratives renouvellent le paysage institutionnel. Les revendications légitimes des citoyens à plus de prises sur leurs conditions de vie amènent à inventer des articulations originales entre démocratie participative et démocratie électorale. Pour rompre les logiques d'exclusion, pour assurer un accès équitable aux services et aux opportunités économiques, de nouvelles articulations entre État, marché et société civile sont à créer, et à consolider institutionnellement et juridiquement.

La légitimité d'actions de solidarité internationale est d'y contribuer, aux côtés des acteurs locaux engagés dans de telles démarches. Mais le système d'aide favorise trop souvent les modes, les impositions de problématiques, les solutions toutes faites. Coopérer aujourd'hui implique de travailler en phase avec les dynamiques sociales, politiques et institutionnelles locales, avec une exigence accrue en termes de qualité et d'efficacité à long terme.

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