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# A RESEARCH & APPLICATIONS JOURNAL

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GREGORIO BILLIKOPF-ENCINA

S. PAK YOONG AND R. BRENT GALLUPE

MALCOM C. BURSON

KAI R. T. LARSEN, CLAIRE MCINERNEY,  
CORINNE NYQUIST, ALDO A. ZAGONEL  
AND DONNA L. SILSBEE

LANCE ROBINSON

BRIAN AUVINE, BETSY DENSMORE,  
MARY EXTROM, SCOTT POOLE, AND  
MICHAEL SHANKLIN

FREEMAN MARVIN AND JOHN BUTCHER

REVIEWED BY JULIANNA GUSTAFSON



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Fax: 612-891-1800  
office@iaf-world.org  
www.iaf-world.org

**Editor:** Sandor Schuman, University at Albany  
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## Believe in Doubt

### Sandor P. Schuman

*Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who find it.* — Andre Gide

We live in a contentious world. Diversity of beliefs and values is the norm and we can expect to encounter conflict more frequently than consensus. The presence of conflict often stimulates each party or interest group to impress its version of reality on the others in an effort to achieve a change of mind and win agreement. However, even when agreement is reached there is no means for assuring that it is right.

One's understanding of the world is not based on careful reading and unequivocal interpretation of technical manuals but rather on socially derived and communicated knowledge and values. In the words of Peter Checkland, "Social reality is the ever-changing outcome of the social process in which human beings, the product of their genetic inheritance and previous experiences, continually negotiate and re-negotiate with others their perceptions and interpretations of the world outside themselves" (Checkland 1981, 283-284). Giovanni Battista Vico said it more succinctly, "To know the world, one must construct it." (Shrage 1990, xvii).

Too often in the search for truth, too many are too sure too early. Most of us are too comfortable with our views, our status quo, and are reluctant to change. Our truth, our internally consistent system, supports and sustains us. Few understand, as did Anais Nin, that "We don't see the world as it is; we see it as we are." This insight leads us to a key paradox: because the truth in which we believe is unique to who we are, we should not trust its generality.

If we should not believe in truth, then in what should we believe? We could say, "believe in doubt." Indeed, in this world of multiple, conflicting realities we need far more individuals who willingly exercise doubt, cultivating more openness, more questioning, more learning; people who listen carefully to each and every perspective—to understand fully but to believe doubtfully—even to doubt that they really understood at all! Still, it is critical to strike a balance between believing and doubting: too much belief and there is no learning; too much doubt and there is no action. So if we "believe in doubt," on what shall we base our action?

Perhaps we could "believe in groups"! Let's give this a try by making explicit two key premises and examining their implications:

1. Each individual in a group has the potential to make a valuable contribution.
2. Some group members might have more valuable contributions to make than others—more expertise, greater insight, better judgment—on at least a few of the tasks at hand.

The problem is that we rarely know which individuals are more expert at which tasks. There is no objective way to distinguish between one good contribution and another to determine which is better, or to know how to combine individual contributions to produce results that are better than any of the individual contributions taken alone.

Although we often rely on one person to integrate the group's thinking, this may result in that person's views dominating all others—and that one person might not have it right. Alternatively, we can allow the group to decide how best to make use of the contributions of each of its members. This requires that we help group members learn from one another, so they can correct one another's errors, enabling—at least theoretically—the group to perform better than even its most capable member. (Although this potential exists, such performance is rarely documented. For example, see Reagan-Cirincione 1994.) To reach conclusion requires consensus, because this requires that everyone must come to terms with each and every person's unique contributions. We have no better potential for attaining the best possible outcome. A critical proviso of believing in groups is that groups be representative of all pertinent perspectives, interests, and expertise. Since it is so much easier to reach consensus with a homogeneous group, members are often selected for the similarity of their views. To believe in the efficacy of groups to solve our most complex and conflictual problems, we must select group members for their diversity, for their unique constructions of reality. While we might *believe in groups*, we nonetheless should *doubt* whether the group is fully representative of all relevant interests, beliefs, and values. Consistent with this concern, we must keep in mind Norman Maier's admonition, "Reaching consensus in a group often is confused with finding the right answer." (Maier 1967, 241).

Let's strive to bring together people representing all relevant points of view. Let's fully put to use group interaction methods that encourage tolerance and respect, listening and questioning, independent thought and group conversation. Believe in doubt; believe in groups.

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# Introduction

Learning organizations, five disciplines, dialogue, Quaker tradition, consensus, Participatory Rural Appraisal, coherence, electronic meetings, caucusing, mediation, values and ethics: these are the things that this issue is made of!

The discussions of IAF's Ethics and Values Think Tank have precipitated a number of controversial issues. Among them is a fundamental question about whether consensus is a fundamental part of group facilitation, or is it just one of the options for making decisions. In this issue's *Essays on Consensus*, Freeman Marvin, *Consensus is Primary to Group Facilitation*, and John Butcher, *Consensus is Situation Dependent*, explore this issue in depth.

Authors Kai R. T. Larsen, Claire McInerney, Corinne Nyquist, Aldo Santos, Donna L. Silsbee make the assertion that "...not only do facilitators possess exactly the values and intrinsic skills required to help facilitate the transformation needed for organizations to become learning organizations, but that most successful transformations will indeed be conducted by external facilitators." In *Learning Organizations: A Primer for Group Facilitators* the authors review the "five disciplines" at the core of learning organizations and provide insights particularly useful for group facilitators.

In conjunction with the growing interest in "learning organizations" so also has there been increased interest in "dialogue" as evidenced by a number of recent books on the topic. *Finding Clarity in the Midst of Conflict: Facilitating Dialogue and Skillful Discussion Using a Model from the Quaker Tradition*, by Malcolm Burson, integrates contemporary thinking about dialogue in organizations with traditional practices in the Quaker tradition and provides an illustrative example.

In *Participatory Rural Appraisal: A Brief Introduction*, Lance Robinson explains the origins and application of this facilitated approach to community development. The author emphasizes the participatory nature of PRA, the importance of facilitators' attitudes, biases, and behaviors as well as the tools that are typically used.

*Coherence in Face-to-Face Electronic Meetings: A Hidden Factor in Facilitation Success* by Pak Yoong and Brent Gallupe focuses on the relationship between the activities within a meeting as well as between the meeting and other activities. The authors report on a study involving conventional meeting facilitators who were trained to become electronic meeting facilitators.

"What is the difference between mediation and facilitation?" is a question that arises repeatedly. Gregorio Billikopf-Encina takes us for a closer look into the world of mediation in *Contributions of Caucusing and Pre-Caucusing to Mediation* and enables us to ask the question, "does caucusing have a role in the practice of group facilitation?"

First published nearly 25 years ago in *A Manual for Group Facilitators, What We Mean by Facilitation* by Brian Auvine, Betsy Densmore, Mary Extrom, Scott Poole & Michael Shanklin provides a fundamental statement about the nature, values and purpose of group facilitation. It suggests a code of ethics for group facilitators, highly pertinent as the International Association of Facilitators considers formal adoption of its own statement of values and code of ethics. This book chapter is reprinted here in our *Classics for Group Facilitation* section.

Each issue of *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal* represents two major activities. First, developing the content: working with authors and reviewers, providing feedback on manuscripts, accepting completed papers. Second, changing that content into a presentable form and distributing it to our subscribers within our financial constraints. The first is the responsibility of the Editorial Board, while the second is that of the Publisher. With this issue we extend our welcome and thanks to Bill Staples, who has valiently taken on the role of Publisher. He brings years of experience in publishing, including his work as publisher of *Edges* magazine. In addition we welcome Ronnie Seagren, Copy Editor. We look forward to working with all of you.

— Sandor Schuman, Editor

# Participatory Rural Appraisal: A Brief Introduction

Lance Robinson

## Abstract

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is an approach to facilitating community development whose family of techniques — such as Venn diagrams, matrix ranking, and matrix scoring — rely heavily on visualization and diagramming. However, what distinguishes PRA more than any of its techniques is its emphasis on participation. PRA practitioners generally believe that only when participants are in full control — of needs assessment, goal-setting, planning, policy-making, implementation, and evaluation — can a process be considered fully participatory. PRA, which emerged first in the global South, is increasingly being used in developed countries, and it is in this commitment to participation that PRA has the most to offer facilitators practicing in the North. Facilitators using any approach are encouraged to ask themselves reflective questions such as, *Are my actions and methods as a facilitator contributing to the ability of the participants to take control?*

## Key words

rural development, appraisal, community meetings, matrix, community, participatory rural appraisal, rapid rural appraisal, participatory learning and action

## Introduction

*Because the many methodologies for facilitating group endeavors in scanning, planning, decision making, and team building have been developed in diverse and often unconnected contexts, the opportunities for mutual learning and cross-fertilization are great. This is particularly true across the regrettable divide that separates many of those practicing in the global South, or so-called "developing countries," from those in the North. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is an approach to facilitating community development that emerged in developing countries and is as yet little known among facilitators practicing in the North. It is hoped, therefore, that a description of the history, principles, and techniques of the PRA will benefit those interested in group facilitation in any context.*

*In 1992, Robert Chambers, one the most well-known proponents of PRA, described it as "a family of approaches and methods to enable rural people to share, enhance, and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan, and to act" (p. 1). While the particular focus on rural settings has for the most part been set aside, the definition is still apt, and even when Chambers gave this definition, he and other practitioners of PRA had already moved beyond mere "appraisal."<sup>1</sup> This*

*paper, after outlining an example of a typical PRA process, briefly describes the history of the approach. This is followed by a discussion of the PRA practitioner's understanding of the term participation, and then a description of two commonly used PRA techniques. The paper concludes with a series of reflective questions that PRA practitioners, or indeed facilitators using any approach, might ask themselves about their praxis.*

## History

Because of the emphasis on ongoing learning and on adaptation to the needs of each particular situation, there can be no blueprint for all PRA processes. A PRA process can focus on an entire community, on particular sectors or stakeholder groups in a community (or across several communities), or on an organization. It can be applied to "communities of place" or "communities of interest." For those readers unfamiliar with PRA, it may be useful to briefly list the components of a typical PRA process. For example, the staff of a non-governmental organization (NGO) using PRA over a period of several months to assist the members of a small community to analyze their socio-economic situation and needs, to plan and take action, and to evaluate and reflect might typically do the following:

1. **Introductory visit** – NGO staff spend a few days living in the community, conducting informal interviews, identifying community-based organizations and marginalized segments of the population
2. **Identification and training of local co-facilitators** - community-based organizations identify members to act as co-facilitators; NGO staff give special attention to ensuring that marginalized groups are represented, and then provide training
3. **Data collection and analysis** of history and current situation in small groups - NGO staff and local co-facilitators, over a few days, work with subsets of the population — e.g., women, men, youth, different ethnic groups, farmers, herders
4. **Community meetings** - small groups present their findings to the community, local and NGO facilitators lead further discussion and analysis
5. One or more community-based **organizations identify and plan** actions, assisted by local co-facilitators
6. Community-based **organizations implement plans** - occasional meetings are held to monitor progress
7. **Evaluation** - some weeks or months later, with assistance from NGO staff, members of community-based organizations gather and analyze data to evaluate their activities
8. **Community meeting** - results of evaluations are shared, and local and NGO facilitators assist with analysis and discussion of further action

In working through the process, some sessions are conducted in small impromptu gatherings, others in pre-planned meetings with selected participants, and others in general community meetings. Facilitators make use of many of the group techniques that are associated with PRA, including time lines, seasonal calendars, mapping, wealth ranking of households within the community, Venn diagrams of the community's institutional context, transect walks to observe the natural and built environment, and a variety of scoring and ranking techniques. PRA practitioners generally agree, however, that PRA cannot be equated with these techniques. For example, one popular manual for PRA trainers emphasizes instead the emergence and gradual acceptance within development agencies of the belief that empowerment and participation are critical to all development efforts:

The popular and visible image of PRA is the array of techniques that have emerged [since the mid-1980s].... However, methods are only part of a wider shift being seen within development agencies, both government and non-government. These have much more far-reaching and radical implications than the adoption of particular approaches.(Pretty, et al., 1995, p. 69)

Manuals such as the this one, as well as the most respected PRA trainers, typically put as much emphasis on facilitators' attitudes, biases, and behaviors, as they do on any of the techniques they commonly use.

The PRA approach originated primarily among non-governmental organizations in South Asia and East Africa. Its diverse ancestry, however, includes the methods used in the anthropological work of the Manchester School in southern Africa from the 1940s (Pretty, et al., 1995, p. 70), and participatory research (e.g., Freire, 1968; Fals Borda, 1979). Chambers (1992 p. 2) names five traditions which have had a significant influence: activist participatory research, agro-ecosystem analysis, applied anthropology, field research on farming systems, and Rapid Rural Appraisal.

The relationship of PRA to this last methodology — its most immediate and direct predecessor — illustrates the values that led to its emergence and that still guide it. Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) is a collection of techniques developed by rural development practitioners for the collection of useful agricultural, social, and cultural data on their target populations without the unwieldy investment of time usually required for formal, scientific studies, traditional anthropological participant observation, and tedious and often inaccurate questionnaire surveys. In the RRA approach, researchers work more closely with subject populations than has been typical of agricultural research. Together with the local beneficiaries, they undertake such activities as diagramming aspects of the farming system and drawing maps of a village's farming land and other natural resources. With these techniques, Chambers writes, Rapid Rural Appraisal:

was, and remains, less exploitative than extractive questionnaire surveys where much is taken by the outsider, and little or nothing is given back. All the same, like most past farming systems research, its normal mode entails outsiders obtaining information, taking it away, and analysing it.(1992, p. 9)

During the mid-1980s, many RRA practitioners began to emphasize participation and to speak of "participatory RRA" as a distinct sub-type (Chambers, 1994, p. 957). By the late 1980s, the term *Participatory Rural Appraisal* had emerged. The PRA repertoire includes several of the RRA techniques, and the difference between the two approaches lies not in any of the techniques but in the emphasis that PRA places on participation. This is the distinction between extracting information versus assisting participants to assemble, analyze, and use information for their own purposes; the distinction between the agenda of the outside agents versus that of the people they are ostensibly attempting to help.

The emphasis on participation is closely linked to, and is sometimes in tension with, a concern about power relationships — between the community of participants and outside structures such as government or NGOs; between groups

of participants within the community; and within groups of participants at the level of group dynamics. This concern influences, for example, decisions about how groups will be constituted during a PRA process. A relatively common approach is to have separate sessions for various stakeholder groups within a community — for instance, women, men, and youth — and later in the process to hold a plenary session at which each group can present its findings, recommendations, etc. Working in this way can be an important means of helping marginalized segments of the community to develop some confidence and solidarity before having to speak before those whom they perceive as more powerful. PRA practitioners, aware that communities are not monolithic and are often characterized by significant disparities in wealth and power, may need to identify stakeholder groups themselves in a non-participatory way, often before doing almost anything else. While general participation is, on the whole, desirable, they must also ask themselves, "Participation by whom and for what?"

### Participation: Policy and Program Planning

This emphasis on participation applies at two levels, the policy and program planning level and the facilitation and group process level. PRA's conceptualization of the terms *participatory* and *participation*, as they apply to policy and program planning, has benefited from attempts to identify when participation is in fact merely *involvement* and to form frameworks that emphasize understanding where control lies in planning processes. For example, PRA practitioners have borrowed Sherry Arnstein's "ladder of participation" (1969) to express their understanding of participation. A similar typology of participation, based on experience applying PRA in developing country contexts, has been advanced by Jules Pretty (1995)<sup>2</sup> is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: A Typology of Participation (Pretty 1995)**

Typology	Characteristics of each type
<b>1. Manipulative participation</b>	Participation is simply a pretence, with "people's" representatives on official boards who are unelected and have no power.
<b>2. Passive participation</b>	People participate by being told what has been decided or has already happened. The administration or project management makes unilateral announcements without listening to people's responses. The information being shared belongs only to external professionals.
<b>3. Participation by consultation</b>	People participate by being consulted or by answering questions. External agents define problems and information gathering processes, and so control analysis. Such a consultative process does not concede any share in decision making, and professionals are under no obligation to take on board people's views.
<b>4. Participation for material incentives</b>	People participate by contributing resources, for example, labor, in return for food, cash or other material incentives. Farmers may provide the fields and labor, but are involved in neither experimentation nor the process of learning. It is very common to see this called participation, yet people have no stake in prolonging technologies or practices when the incentives end.
<b>5. Functional participation</b>	External agencies see participation as a means to achieve project goals, especially reduced costs. People may participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the project. Such involvement may be interactive and involve shared decision making, but tends to arise only after major decisions have already been made by external agents. At worst, local people may still only be coopted to serve external goals.
<b>6. Interactive participation</b>	People participate in joint analysis, development of action plans and formation or strengthening of local institutions. Participation is seen as a right, not just the means to achieve project goals. The process involves interdisciplinary methodologies that seek multiple perspectives and make use of systematic and structured learning processes. As groups take control over local decisions and determine how to use available resources, they have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.
<b>7. Self-mobilization</b>	People participate by taking initiative independently of external institutions to change systems. They develop contacts with external institutions for resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used. Self-mobilization can spread if governments and NGOs provide an enabling framework of support. Such self-initiated mobilization may or may not challenge existing distributions of wealth and power.

According to this perspective, a meeting, workshop, or other group event in which everyone present is involved and has an opportunity to speak and to be heard, cannot be said to be participatory if the agenda is set by the facilitators or the agency that employs them. In other words, participation is more than mere involvement in some sort of interactive group event, and any intervention in which the supposed "beneficiaries" of the process do not have significant power and control, cannot legitimately be called PRA. Only when the participants are in full control — of needs assessment, goal-setting, planning, policy-making, implementation, and evaluation — can a process be said to be fully participatory.

The task of achieving and institutionalizing true participation in the context of non-governmental organizations working in developing countries has been one of PRA's biggest challenges, and one of the greatest obstacles in this pursuit has been intra-agency culture. PRA practitioners have identified such problems as:

- 1) Development agencies adopting only the outward form of PRA techniques and applying these techniques mechanistically (Pretty, et al., 1995, p. 65) or in isolation from larger decision making processes
- 2) Development agencies or their funders allowing insufficient time for a truly participatory process (Gibbon, 1999, p. 74)
- 3) Agencies making it difficult for local people to integrate their needs, once expressed, into a specific project framework and the agency's bureaucratic system (Arasu, 1997, p. 87)
- 4) NGOs, like governmental and UN agencies, cannot but have their own agendas. Beyond this, most agencies also bear some responsibility to funders. Therefore, ensuring that programs are participatory has involved finding the common ground where agency goals and the goals of the target population intersect.

One technique that helps define agency-community and facilitator-participant relationships and identify common goals, is to develop early in the PRA process, "a formal commitment as to what each party agrees to do and when they will do it" (Gibbon and Shrestha, 1998, p. 27). Attempts to realize meaningful participation at the level of policy and program planning have also contributed to an emphasis, among many agencies, on local institution-building (Pimbert, 1999, p. 75). Successful local institution-building programs enable beneficiaries to more effectively negotiate, plan, and pursue their own development goals, not only as individuals but also as organizations and communities, thereby making their participation more fruitful. One way in which some agencies

attempt to ensure that their own institutional climates are favorable to participatory approaches such as PRA is to relax rigid program timelines and evaluation indicators and adopt open-ended processes "of participatory appraisal and planning; allowing time for negotiation and bargaining between various stakeholders" (Pimbert, 1999, p. 77).

### **Participation: Group Process and Facilitation**

At the level of facilitation and group process, the emphasis on participation is characterized by the maxim "pass the stick." Over the years, development efforts have suffered from too much of the expert syndrome — the "expert" who comes to the village as a sort of visiting schoolmaster, pointing his baton at strange flip-charts and posters, as he attempts to deposit information into the heads of the uneducated peasants. The schoolmaster/expert must be persuaded to give up his baton, to pass the stick to "local experts" who will use it to point out what they feel to be important and to draw maps and charts on the ground for the mutual education of all.

While the aims of individual PRA practitioners may vary, a widely shared perspective, and the perspective that underlies this paper, is that the goal of PRA is the empowerment of its participants. This goal is achieved, at least in part, by allowing the participants, collectively, to take control. This is what "passing the stick" means. In working with groups, methods are preferred that do not require overly complex or rigidly structured sequences of activities and active facilitator involvement at every step. Ideally, the facilitator fades into the background as quickly as possible. A common activity typically used in analysis and problem-identification, for example, is the creation of a map of the participants' community. This can be accomplished with minimal facilitator involvement — an initial explanation followed by occasional probing questions. This is not to say that effective facilitation is not important, only that PRA tends to favor facilitation of a non-interventionist variety.

The importance of "passing the stick" was illustrated for me during an experience facilitating a session with a group of about eighteen recent immigrants in a North American city. For one of the activities, the participants were divided into three groups of six, a facilitator encouraging each group, after ample discussion of the difficulties that they had faced as immigrants, to depict their difficulties in a collective drawing. I was not involved in this particular exercise, and was able to sit back and watch as one of my colleagues, a novice facilitator, led his group in a very animated discussion. Then, as he explained that they were now to draw, on the flip-chart paper on the table in front of them, a picture showing or symbolizing some of the ideas they had discussed, silence descended upon the group. He explained the exercise again, paraphrasing himself. A longer silence. Then another of my colleagues, who, like me, was sitting out, noticed

that this group's marking pens were still sealed in a box. The only pen that was out of the box was in the novice facilitator's hands as he fiddled nervously with it. The colleague beside me passed the novice a note: "Put the pen down!" He did, and in a moment one of the participants tentatively picked it up and suggested something that their drawing might contain. The others nodded, and within another minute the other pens were out of the box, the participants busy at work, needing no further instructions.

That facilitators should to a certain extent disengage and pass the stick is a central principle of PRA. It emerged, in part, from the discovery by early PRA practitioners working in rural, developing country contexts, "that villagers have a greater capacity to map, model, quantify, and estimate, rank, score, and diagram than outsiders have generally supposed them capable of" (Chambers, 1992, p. 20). Facilitation in this mode requires that the facilitator have confidence in the ability of the participants as well as a great deal of patience, humility, and detachment. For this reason the approach has been described as "both an attitude and a methodology" (Joseph, 1991, p. 132).

**Some Group Techniques Used in PRA**

While, as noted above, PRA cannot be simplistically equated with any of the group techniques that are typically associated with it, these techniques *are* the primary vehicle for carrying out PRA. Many of these group techniques have been borrowed from elsewhere, such as brainstorming and Nominal Group Technique. Other techniques, however, are more closely identified with PRA, and two of these are described below; but even these do not represent part of a standard facilitator tool kit. Facilitators are encouraged to adapt, improvise, and be creative, and while some techniques might be considered *typical* of PRA, there are no *standard* techniques. What is standard is the use of techniques appropriate to the particular situation and materials, props, and recording methods appropriate to the local context. In rural village settings in developing countries, for example, maps and charts are usually created not on paper but on the ground, using seeds, stones, or sticks.

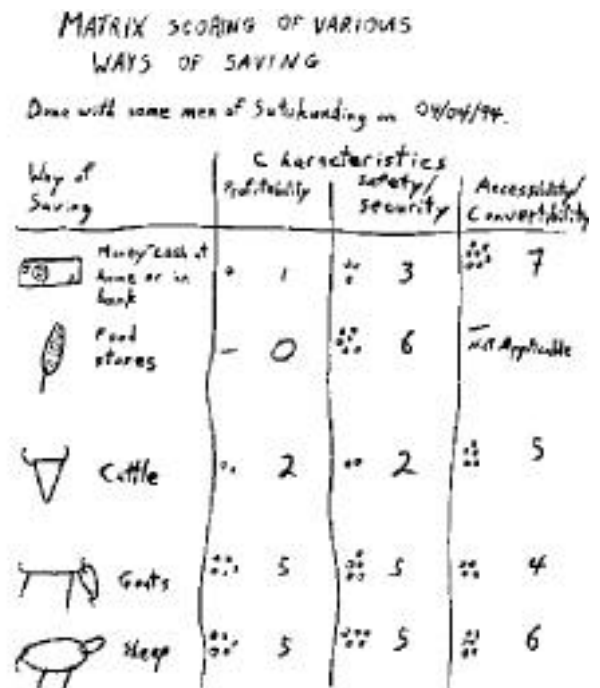
**Matrix Ranking and Matrix Scoring**

Matrix ranking and matrix scoring are typically tools for analysis of a problem or issue. According to the situation, the list of objects to be ranked or scored may be the logical result of an earlier part of a planning process or an earlier PRA exercise, or they may be elicited from the participants at the time. After the objects have been identified, seed varieties, ideas for income-generating activities, the NGOs serving the community, or whatever, the next step is to discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of the objects. Usually during such discussions, participants begin to speak, at least implicitly, of the criteria on which they are basing their assessment of the objects. The next

step is to identify these criteria and make them explicit. In the example shown in the figure below, drawn from work done in the Gambia, the objects to be ranked were various ways that rural people would save and invest; the participants identified several criteria - profitability, safety and security, and accessibility or convertibility.

The matrix is constructed with these two sets of elements, the objects to be ranked or scored forming the rows and the list of criteria the columns. Depending upon what is appropriate for the context, the matrix may be drawn onto flip-chart paper — preferably on a table or on the floor in front of everyone rather than hanging on a wall — or traced in the dirt with a stick. The objects and criteria may be indicated with words, or, if the participants are not literate, with appropriate symbols, or with both.

Then, column by column, according to group consensus, each cell in the matrix is filled with a number representing a rank or a score. In the matrix scoring example shown in Figure 1, five ways of saving were identified. These correspond to the "objects" referred to above. In addition, three characteristics were identified, corresponding to the "criteria." Focusing on one criterion (column) at a time, they came to a consensus on a score from one to ten for each object. They depicted scores by pebbles




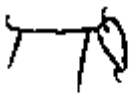



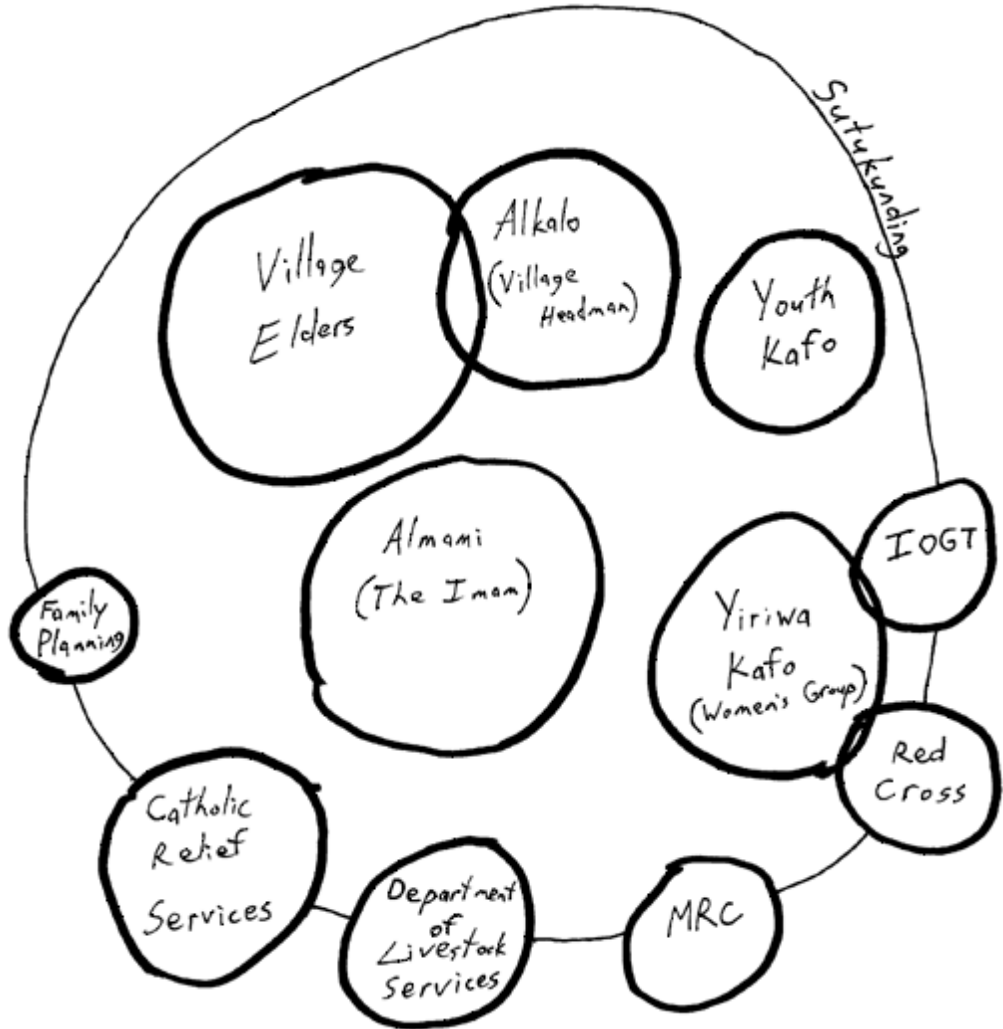
**Figure 1 : Matrix Scoring**

Hand-drawn facsimile of a matrix scoring chart done in Sutukunding, The Gambia, during discussion of land tenure, livestock ownership, and livelihood security.

# MATRIX SCORING OF VARIOUS WAYS OF SAVING

Done with some men of Sutukunding on 04/04/94.

Way of Saving	Characteristics		
	Profitability	safety/ security	Accessibility/ Convertibility
 Money-cash at home or in bank	• 1	•• 3	•••• 7
 Food stores	- 0	•••• 6	Not Applicable
 Cattle	•• 2	•• 2	••• 5
 Goats	•••• 5	•••• 5	••• 4
 Sheep	•••• 5	•••• 5	•••• 6



Venn Diagram for Sutu Kundia

Done with some women on 05/04/94.

as well as a numeral. In another variation of matrix scoring, the participants are given a fixed total number of points for each column to distribute among the objects as they wish. If the objects are to be ranked rather than scored, for each criterion the least beneficial or preferred object is given a "one", the next is given a "two", and so on. In both matrix ranking and matrix scoring, the values assigned to each cell are marked at first with some type of moveable counter, such as beans, pebbles, or poker chips, rather than with written numerals. This allows the participants to quickly and intuitively see the entire chart at once, and also makes it possible for the group "to change its mind" as the discussion progresses.

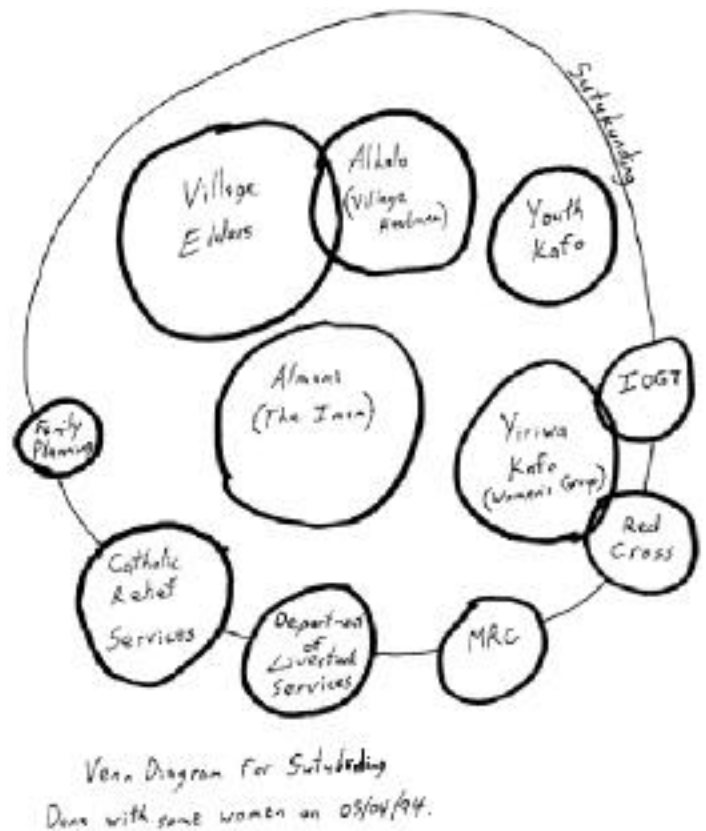
In keeping with the maxim "pass the stick", it is important for the facilitator to disengage to an extent, allowing the participants themselves to decide how to represent the objects and criteria, and to place the counters into the matrix cells themselves. The facilitator's role, beyond simply explaining the mechanics of the matrix, is to animate and provoke discussion. At the end of the activity, if the matrix has been drawn in the dirt or constructed in some other temporary way, one or more participants are asked to copy it onto paper so that the information can be saved for any follow-up activities. Typically, however, the value of the exercise lies as much in the discussion it generates as in the data in the matrix.

**Venn Diagrams**

Venn diagrams, also known as *chapati* diagrams or pizza diagrams, assist participants in visualizing relationships among institutions. Participants are first asked to identify important institutions that operate in or affect their village, neighborhood, own organization, or some other relevant community or region. They then rank these institutions according to how important or influential they are. If a particular issue is being investigated, they can rank the institutions according to their specific influence on that issue. Then the names of the institutions are written on paper circles of various sizes (prepared by the facilitator beforehand), with the most important institutions represented on large circles and the least important on small circles. When a significant number of the participants are illiterate, some sort of graphical symbol is used in place of, or in addition to, the written name of the organization.

A large circle to represent the village, neighborhood, or the participants' own organization is drawn on a sheet of flip-chart paper or the ground, and the paper circles are placed on the diagram in relationship to it. As in the Venn diagram from mathematics, the circles are made to overlap according to their degree of contact in the real world. Those institutions that are local — local community groups, departments within the participants' organization, etc. — are placed completely within the large circle. External institutions that affect the participants'

community or organization are placed overlapping the border of the large circle.



**Figure 2 : Venn Diagram**

Hand-drawn facsimile of a Venn diagram done in Sutukunding, The Gambia, during discussion of land tenure, livestock ownership, and livelihood security.

As with the other group techniques used in PRA, much of the value of the diagram that is created lies in the discussion and new ideas that it generates. The Venn diagram can also be used as the first step in a larger analytical process. For example, participants can be asked to identify detailed criteria by which they would assess the importance and success of the institutions in their diagram, and then to rank each institution either in a matrix, or by placing seeds, poker chips, or some other counter directly on the paper circles. The Venn diagram also helps identify and visualize differences in perception among subgroups of a community. For example, small groups of men, women, and youth respectively (or of managers and workers, or any other relevant subdivisions) can be asked to each create their own Venn diagram for later comparison with the others. It is not uncommon, for example, to find that men and women have very different ideas as to which institutions working in their community are important and successful.

## Challenges for PRA and Prospects for the Future

The challenge of institutionalizing PRA and participatory approaches in general, has been mentioned above. A related challenge has resulted from *participation* having become a buzzword in international development circles, so that PRA has become quite fashionable among development agencies. This has led to a number of agencies and practitioners adopting only the outward form of PRA, using the techniques mechanistically without understanding what participation really means. One result has been that many agencies have continued to implement projects and programs that do not reflect the needs of their supposed beneficiaries. A certain degree of disillusionment among both beneficiary communities and funding agencies has followed. Many PRA trainers have responded to this problem by emphasizing training that is ongoing and context-specific, as opposed to discrete, one-off training *events*, and focusing not on PRA techniques but on incorporating the principles of participation into the trainees' work.

PRA was, in part, a reaction against the expert syndrome, and the focus of PRA processes has been largely on the articulating participants' knowledge, making it community knowledge, and then analyzing and utilizing it within the community. A continuing challenge for PRA has been finding appropriate ways to integrate outside and expert knowledge into participatory processes. A key aspect of meeting this challenge (expressed in deceptively simple terms) has been assisting engineers, agronomists, and other experts to *listen* and to appreciate the knowledge of the local experts. A related issue is the way that education intersects with the facilitation of community and economic development. One of the most interesting and promising developments in this regard has been the emergence of REFLECT, a method of literacy training that combines the Freirian theoretical framework with the PRA methodology (*PLA Notes*, 1998, no. 32 — entire issue).

PRA is no longer practiced only in developing countries or only in rural areas. In fact, *PLA Notes*, a popular journal on PRA and participatory approaches generally, will devote an entire upcoming issue to experiences using PRA in the developed North. But if PRA has a contribution to make for practitioners in the North who are using other facilitation approaches, it lies not in the PRA techniques, as effective as some of these may be, but in PRA's conception of and commitment to participation. In this connection, skilled PRA practitioners ask themselves a number of questions that a facilitator using any approach might well ask.

- Where does the meeting or event that I will be facilitating fit within larger decision making processes?
- What kind of "participation" am I facilitating? (cf. The typology of participation advanced by Pretty, et al., 1995.)

Are my actions and methods as a facilitator contributing to the ability of the participants to take control over decision making and their ability to self-mobilize?

- Will this particular technique that I plan to use require active facilitator direction and control at every step, or will it allow me to disengage and "pass the stick"?
- Is my role as facilitator empowering people or am I promoting a new type of expert knowledge and a new type of dependence?

## Selected Contacts and Sources

There are numerous useful sources of information on PRA. A few particularly good ones follow.

**pra@listserv.uoguelph.ca** — Internet discussion forum on PRA and on Participatory Learning and Action in general. For information: [www.oac.uoguelph.ca/~pi/pdrc/discuss.html](http://www.oac.uoguelph.ca/~pi/pdrc/discuss.html)

**www.iied.org** — The web site of the International Institute for Environment and Development. Includes a searchable database on Participatory Learning and Action, and information on a number of publications that can be ordered.

**www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/index.html** — The web site of the Participation Group at the Institute for Development Studies in Sussex, U.K. Includes links to other useful sites, downloadable papers on various topics related to PRA and participatory approaches generally, and contact information for participation networks in over fifty countries.

**www.oac.uoguelph.ca/~pi** — The web site of Participatory Initiatives. Includes numerous links to a wide variety of information on PRA and facilitation generally. A good starting point for Internet searches.

**www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html** — Action Research resources site at Southern Cross University of Australia

**PLA Notes** — Formerly known as *RRA Notes*, this is the key journal for practitioners of PRA. For subscription information contact: Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods Programme, International Institute for Environment and Development, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD, United Kingdom; e-mail: [sustag@iied.org](mailto:sustag@iied.org)

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The growth of the approach beyond the limits of mere "appraisal" and of exclusively rural settings is reflected in the emergence of a new term, *Participatory Learning and Action* (PLA). This new term is used by some as a replacement for the term *PRA* (Cornwall and Welbourn, 2000, p. 17) and by others as "an umbrella term for a wide range of similar approaches and methodologies, including Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), Participatory Action Learning Methods (PALM), Participatory Action Research (PAR), Farming Systems Research (FSR), Méthod Active de Recherche et de Planification Participative (MARPP), and many others." (Source: *PLA Notes*, editor's message on inside front cover, all recent issues.) In this paper I have adopted the latter understanding, and therefore, in referring to the specific methodology that is the subject of this paper, I continue to use the term *PRA*.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that such typologies, while useful in many respects, are also problematic, implying that the most comprehensive forms of participation are always preferable, oversimplifying real world situations, and giving insufficient attention to power dynamics within groups of participants. See Guijt and Shah 1998.

**Lance Robinson** is Ghana-based consultant specializing in community resource management, participatory community development, and the development of training programs. He was one of the founding members of the Canadian non-profit organization, Participatory Initiatives, and has been instrumental in the recent establishment of the Olinga Foundation for Human Development, a Ghanaian NGO which frequently makes use of PRA in its community development activities. One of his current areas of interest is the use of drama and folk art in community development. Contact at The Olinga Foundation for Human Development, P.O. Box 7726, Accra, North Ghana; Tel: +233 (21) 232335, Fax: +233 (21) 231822; E-mail: [LanceWRobinson@yahoo.com](mailto:LanceWRobinson@yahoo.com)

# Group Facilitation: A Research & Applications Journal

## Aim and Scope

*Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal* is a multi-disciplinary publication focused on the art and science of group facilitation. The aim of Group Facilitation is to advance our knowledge of group facilitation and its implications for individuals, groups, organizations, and communities. It is published semi-annually.

The *Group Facilitation Journal* is intended for facilitators, mediators, organizational development and training specialists, managers, researchers, and others who seek to use facilitation skills in their practice. Articles represent diverse perspectives, including organizational learning and development, group and system dynamics, collaborative technology, negotiation, mediation, leadership, decision-making, conflict resolution, cross-cultural contexts, and education. Possible topics include, but are not limited to, facilitator roles within the group, interventions for conflict management, descriptions of specific facilitation methods, approaches to facilitating specific tasks such as idea generation or priority setting, using computer technology to support facilitation, increasing participation in organizations, exploring the underlying values, beliefs and models of facilitation, and applying facilitation skills and concepts to various settings.

The journal is comprised of the following sections, which are described below in more detail: Application and Practice; Theory and Research; Edge Thinking; Book Reviews.

**Application and Practice** is devoted to articles that reflect on facilitator experience. Articles appropriate for this section include reports on experiences gained and lessons learned presented in a reflective case study, and discussion of facilitator roles, problems encountered by facilitators or their clients, and intervention methods and techniques. Studies should be both descriptive and evaluative and should draw on existing literature appropriately.

**Theory and Research** is devoted to articles that explore, propose, or test practices, principles, or other aspects of facilitation models. Such studies are typically based on survey, experimental, ethnographic, or other research methods.

**Edge Thinking** is intended to stimulate thinking on new concepts and issues. Contributions may be less formal than the other sections, and might include dialogues, essays, editorials, and proposals for new areas of inquiry.

**Book Reviews** presents critical and comparative reviews of recent and classic books related to group facilitation.

### Submission Guidelines

Submission guidelines and other information about the journal may be obtained on the journal website [www.iaf-world.org/Journal](http://www.iaf-world.org/Journal) or from the Editor (see below).

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### **Writing the Review**

#### ***When writing a review, please include:***

- overall impression of the book
- the highlights and structure of the book
- for whom the book would be appropriate
- what you found particularly helpful, unclear, weak
- your personal learning, if any
- particular benefits to you in your facilitation, if any
- value of the book for facilitators, if any
- significant contribution of the book, if any, to the field of facilitation
- your recommendation of "must read" portions of the book, if any
- a summary or wrap-up of your reading experience.

#### ***In addition:***

- provide definitions of terms, acronyms, references, and background summary statements where appropriate.
- where necessary, be sure to include complete citations and attributions.
- identify specific texts (usually a sentence or phrase) for possible use in pull quotes.
- publisher; ISBN designation; price (\$US); where to purchase (i.e. all major bookstores or telephone number for direct ordering if the book is not widely available commercially).
- background about the book author: facilitation experience and/or other writings.

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- people familiar with the conceptual and practical sides of facilitation and who are willing to spend the time required to write interesting and thought provoking reviews.
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