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## **CASE – II**

### **Beyond PRA: experiments in facilitating local action in water management**

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As a tool both for research and for structuring community-level interaction, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is now well embedded in development practice. This paper, however, argues that in order to play an enabling role towards community action, facilitators need to offer much more than the traditional PRA approach. Based on work with groups of women and of men in North Bengal, the paper describes how local politics and facilitators' strategies interact and complicate the use of PRA-like planning approaches. The article stresses the need for effective and long-term facilitation strategies that take into account organisational, methodological, and contextual considerations, and argues that organisations need to invest far more in ensuring the quality of facilitators than is generally the case.

#### **Background**

The last 25 years have seen a remarkable shift in academic thinking on rural development from working for to working with the rural poor. Alongside this shift, those working in the water sector have stressed the need for an integrated perspective, emphasising that water is required for a variety of local needs and that a successful intervention depends upon taking its political, social, economic, and technical dimensions into account. Increasingly, efforts are being made to enable local people, institutions at various levels, and external interventions to work together in practical and efficient ways that actually strengthen the role of the water users. Within this context, various methodologies are seen as practical and engaging means to work with communities and structure the process of interaction. The family of participatory methods, of which Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is a prominent member, emerged in the 1980s from dissatisfaction with 'technology transfer'-type models based on the idea that technologies are designed by scientists and can be transferred to farmers by extension workers (Schot 1999). PRA was based on a philosophy that rejected linear, positivistic, 'technology transfer' models, viewing reality as complex, continually changing, and open to different interpretations (Schot 1999; Chambers 1997). It therefore emphasised the need for systems of learning and action that can 'seek the multiple perspectives of the various interested parties and encourage their greater involvement' (Pretty 1995). PRA and other qualitative tools have since proved their value in research and development interventions. Yet, in the day-to-day reality of implementing projects, PRA is often used in ways that are closer to the 'old' linear models than one might like to acknowledge. Much of this has to do with the quality of facilitation, the lack of long-term commitment to strengthening

community groups, and the limitations of the tools and approaches used. Many of these issues are by now familiar and uncontroversial for anyone who has experienced PRA at the local level, but they have not yet been sufficiently reflected in changes in the overall strategies of PRA-based interventions at project or organisational level. Much can be gained from linking PRA approaches with broader reflections on group dynamics.<sup>1</sup> In this paper we use a case study from planning exercises with local groups conducted in the Indian state of West Bengal. This will illustrate the importance of finding a balanced and locally specific facilitation strategy through a process of intensive experimentation, reflection, and training of facilitators. Below, we identify three broad categories of concerns that deserve increased attention in planning PRA-based interventions.

### **Long-term involvement**

A major concern is that of the role of the facilitator and her/his involvement over time. While PRA tools are generally based on one-off or two-off sessions, facilitating local action requires a longer-term involvement in a process that goes beyond sharing knowledge and includes activities to form sustainable groups, build confidence, and provide conflict-resolution skills. Facilitation processes often lead to absolutely nothing. The community welcomes a team of facilitators with great enthusiasm, and after a highly stimulating PRA session, in which a range of (often sensitive) problems is identified, it is left without any tangible results. After the three-hour discussion time is up, people need to go back to their fields, start cooking, or take care of the kids. On the way back they wonder: what did I get out of all this? Often, expectations are raised (and disappointed), meetings become shopping-list sessions, and the ultimate aim of empowering groups to deal collectively with local concerns is nowhere near being met. Without fitting PRA into a longer-term coherent strategy for group development, local institution building, accountable leadership structures, and conflict-resolution mechanisms, all the mapping, diagramming, and discussion are in vain. PRA is too often seen as a 'stand-alone' toolbox and needs to be integrated into a larger context of work with small groups.

### **Dealing with community differences**

If PRA-type approaches are to play an empowering role, they need to take into account differences within community groups and between these groups and the external socio-political environment. Facilitators need the skills and strategies required to handle differences in power and status effectively. As Irene Guijt puts it: 'despite the stated intentions of social inclusion, it has become clear that many participatory development initiatives do not deal well with the complexity of community differences, including age, economic, religious, caste,

ethnic and in particular gender' (Guijt and Shah 1998:1). Besides internal group dynamics and differences, PRA-based approaches must also deal with the effect of the broader political and socio-economic context on the participating process. The general cultural and political environment is a key determinant for the way a community group positions itself, and becomes active or refrains from doing so (Kumar 2002).

### **Ensuring the quality of facilitators**

The quality of facilitation is of concern in most PRA programmes. PRA studies show a bias towards well-conducted exercises: generally the first and best-documented sessions are conducted by experts, researchers, or team leaders, but the overall programmes are then run by fairly inexperienced facilitators. Facilitators often know how to use the tools (although even this is often problematic), but are generally unfamiliar with the world of ideas behind the mapping and diagrams and so on. Less experienced facilitators tend to lean heavily on going through the motions of the PRA tools, approaching a mapping exercise, for example, more as a bureaucratic requirement than a way to generate common understanding. Ultimately, the issue of effectiveness and efficiency on a larger scale needs to be addressed; in other words, how to sustain a programme in a larger number of locations, while still remaining close to the original principles of PRA.

### **Our case study**

Our case study is taken from the upper north of the Indian state of West Bengal, and originates from activities conducted under the North Bengal Terai Development Project (NBTDP), a project sponsored by the Dutch government and implemented by a Dutch consultancy firm (Arcadis Euroconsult). The NBTDP was a fairly broad rural development project, working closely with the West Bengal Ministry of Agriculture. Besides installing irrigation facilities and supporting agricultural innovation, the NBTDP also initiated a number of group-based activities at the community level. One of these activities was the formation of women's microcredit groups and men's irrigation-management groups. The groups were also involved in a planning process aimed at improving village-level management of water resources for domestic use, fisheries, irrigation, etc. The fieldwork was conducted partly by the project's own Project Support Unit (PSU), and partly subcontracted to the West Bengal NGO IBRAD (Institute of Bio-social Research and Development). IBRAD worked in a total of 60 villages in the three districts of Darjeeling, Coochbehar, and Jalpaiguri, while the PSU conducted local planning exercises ('micro planning') in 15 villages in the same region. Monitoring and research took place alongside the programme to help identify some of the practical methodological constraints it faced, and to look at the

interaction of the groups with the larger institutional context. This article is based on that research. The original idea for the activity was for . . . groups of water users to, together with the local government, make a participatory assessment of local water resources and the opportunities and threats to them. Following this, micro water management improvements were to be identified, that would in the first instance be undertaken by the water users themselves. (Department of Agriculture 2000) The planning sessions used PRA tools to assess local circumstances and a planning matrix to define an action plan. These exercises were conducted with women's groups, groups using small-scale river lift irrigation systems (water-user groups), and in some cases with whole villages. During a workshop on micro-planning methodologies a joint definition was agreed upon by project facilitators: 'Micro planning is facilitating a planning process of villagers, in which local resources are identified, confidence is built, groups are formed and activated, information and training is supplied and action according to villagers priorities is supported'. Micro planning ideally embraced the idea of the development agency as a facilitator for change, whereby people initiate their own action on the basis of collective planning. While the study found that this ideal was often far-fetched, for reasons to do with the quality and experience of facilitators, it also found that the idea itself was limited in the sense that the socio-political context required much more than a shared problem analysis to activate and sustain coherent groups.

### **The North Bengal context**

Most of the population of North Bengal depends on agriculture, generally smallholdings cultivating jute, paddy, vegetables, and other crops. Tea plantations are common in the northern parts and in high-lying areas. The rice-cropping areas are characterised by scattered paras (clusters of homes) with a variety of trees and bamboo bushes, amidst a more or less open agricultural landscape of small, banded fields. In many ways water is a decisive factor for the rural landscape, which contains a range of large rivers, and countless small rivers, streams, and ponds in the rainy season. Water is both an opportunity and a constraint. The quality of drinking water is a major concern as water from local dug-wells tends to be highly contaminated, particularly during the monsoon, which results in high levels of disease. There is plenty of water available for agriculture, with continuing scope for the development of irrigation for dry-season cropping. Rivers supply a range of fish species, and there is great potential to boost production through pond-based fish cultivation. Water is also a threat; heavy rain or hail damages standing crops, while surface flows and shifting river courses endanger valuable agricultural land. In many areas (flash) floods occur, damaging fields, roads, and houses. The government invests considerable resources on building bridges,

culverts, dykes, and protection works. Villages are generally constructed on higher land or land that has been raised artificially, in order to prevent any flooding of homesteads. Generally some 20–50 homes are grouped together to form a para, with the village's agricultural lands lying around it. Some households comprise an extended family including parents, several brothers, and their wives and children. Communities are distinguished by the caste or tribe to which people belong and/or their origin or ethnicity. Minorities include people of Nepali or Assami origin, the 8–10 per cent Muslim population, and many who originally came from Bangladesh. In the northern blocks, tribals form a large part of the population, often working in the large commercial tea gardens, or involved in forestry. A majority of the non-tribal rural population is scheduled caste, so-called Rajbansji, who see themselves as the 'original' inhabitants of the region, speaking the Rajbansji dialect of Bengali. There is a higher percentage of other (higher) castes in the towns, usually with higher incomes, better education, and government jobs. In practice, it is difficult to tell whether differences are based on caste alone or on a combination of caste, income, education, and the rural–urban divide. West Bengal, like many Indian states, has adopted the three-tier panchayat system of local government. This provides for direct elections at gram panchayat (local), block, and district level. The structures of the major political party(s) play a significant role. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) has an overall majority at all levels. Over the years it has developed a finely mazed party structure, which has its base all the way down into the para level. This structure exists 'independently' of the panchayats and provides electoral candidates. The leftist parties owe much of their local credibility to the land reforms in the early years of their Left Front rule, the impact of which was due not so much to an administrative vigilance as to the direct intervention of organised political movements in the countryside (Chatterjee 1997:86, 147). The panchayat regulations require a quota of general and chairperson (Prodhan) positions to be allocated to women and members of scheduled castes, on a rotational basis. In practice, many of the positions for women go to candidates with limited political capabilities, often manipulated into the position by a powerful vice-chairperson. This vice- Prodhan then basically makes the decisions, while ensuring that the woman takes the blame when things go wrong. (Such Prodhans are locally nicknamed Kathr Pudl, or 'wooden doll'.) Some of the women chairs are, however, very capable, particularly those who gained their seat through the regular political process. The panchayat system has brought politics to the villages and has fully entrenched village–government relations in party politics. Most local political strategies evolve around the panchayat's budget for rural development. Support for the party is often rewarded by

becoming eligible for benefits such as wells, latrines, seed packages, loans, or government housing schemes. The parties' standard election campaign strategy is to target the doubters and create an atmosphere of expectation of material benefits. After the panchayat and political system comes a range of government officials active in the rural areas. Unlike the local politicians, most of these officials live in the towns, even if their work is in remote rural areas—as is the case for most of the teachers, agricultural extension workers, health workers, and administrators. The picture of the local teacher taking the bus from town to village and back characterises the divide: generally, government employees see themselves as educated and aware, and refer to villagers as backward and unaware. The way in which villages and government interact exerts a strong drive towards keeping the villagers dependent: both through the promise of material benefits (from politicians) and in terms of cultural differences (in relation to the civil service). The challenge for facilitators working in this politicised, divided, and fairly dependent rural context is to create an atmosphere in which collective action might flourish.

### **Project approach to facilitation**

During the evaluation of the programme, it emerged that facilitators, project staff, and consultants had very different expectations of what the programme was meant to achieve: . to match local needs with what the government has to offer; . to create local 'awareness' and get people involved in a programme of largely pre-set activities; . through one-off sessions to give local groups ideas and motivation to take action; . to strengthen and activate group structures. What happened on the ground was generally that facilitators would organise meetings with a group of women (and sometimes men), introducing them to the idea of forming a group, whether for a group saving or microcredit system or for water-management activities. If the group agreed, the facilitator in a second or third meeting would use simple PRA tools, such as mapping, historical diagrams, and other exercises, to identify local problems and jointly build a plan of action. The plan would be a simple matrix stating the action required, who would be responsible, the timeframe, and who would monitor implementation. Common activities would include various measures to ensure clean drinking water, such as applying bleach in dug wells, lifting sediment, and repairing cracks. Some groups, for instance, built local bridges, negotiated with the government for irrigation facilities, or collaborated with health workers on improving child health. Groups would usually build a meeting hut and make joint savings for local emergencies and small business activities. After (PRA) planning sessions, groups would be supported in taking forward their plans by a mix of regular meetings, group monitoring, cultural programmes, and local

'cleaning-drives'. Some activities were organised beyond the para level, involving various dignitaries. This helped to build the status of women's groups in relation to the 'outside world', and sought to give the groups recognition and confidence. After various experiments with different approaches to facilitation, it became obvious that a clear strategy for more long-term interaction and group strengthening was needed. In cases where facilitators had experimented with adopting a more laid-back stance, leaving the initiative to come from the group after in-depth PRA-based group analysis, very little happened. Action would then depend on the leadership of a VIP or large farmer in the village. In cases where the facilitator took the group along in small (but relevant) activities, more diverse leadership roles could emerge. In the more successful cases, facilitators worked with groups to organise small activities on a regular basis and build social pressure for action through group checks and balances. By doing this over a period of time, the activities became habitual in both group and household behaviours.

### **Effective facilitation strategies**

To a certain extent the programme has helped to address some of the concerns that had been voiced. In particular, several women's groups successfully addressed the need for clean drinking water and health-related issues. It was much more difficult, however, to address problems in the management of 'open-access resources', problems beyond the boundaries of the para, and problems requiring infrastructural investments, which are typically the domain of panchayat. These issues, traditionally male responsibilities, were not addressed by any of the groups, although both men and women had mentioned these as major concerns. Addressing individual family concerns (drinking water, health, education) through group activities was feasible, whereas the activities that would require engagement in larger-scale, politically sensitive domains was something few felt compelled to do. The newer and less consolidated groups in particular felt ill-equipped to get involved in these issues. Facilitators experimented with a variety of strategies. In some cases PRA was left rather open ended, leaving it up to the group to take further action, in others agreements were made with the local government to follow up on the planning sessions; in some cases the project even supplied some inputs, while in others long-term group building was the main focus. Ultimately the key to success was the building of long-term group structures. Groups that were not too large, had shared interests, and well-established group structures and norms had a reasonable chance of achieving their local planning exercises. Where planning was conducted with whole villages rather than with women's or men's groups, or on a more casual basis, very little action followed. There was fairly strong guidance from facilitators in

the initial phases, for example in terms of suggestions for activities to be initiated, and in stimulating accountability and mutual social pressure towards compliance with the plan. Overall, the approach that evolved has yielded fairly good results, while experiments with fully open-ended approaches (with initiatives completely left to the group) have failed, even in groups with members who were initially highly motivated. Some of the reasons for failure included the role played by perceived hierarchies, whereby groups actually expect outsiders (whether facilitators or local political figures) to guide the activities and thus tend to wait for instructions. Many local people say they see themselves as ‘unaware and uneducated’, a view encouraged by city dwellers who see the rural population as backward, and which is further entrenched by a politicised rural landscape in which the aim is to keep voters dependent. Group leadership is often weak, and usually dependent on local VIPs, large farmers, and/or political figures. This in turn renders groups dependent on the larger political context rather than taking up activities themselves. In addition, people are often just too busy with other tasks, and will devote energy to group work only if direct tangible results are in sight. Finally, there is a great deal of mistrust within the current political climate. People would often not understand the outsiders’ interest in problem analyses at village level and suspect the facilitators’ intentions: ‘why are you so interested in all this information . . .?’. Facilitation became a complex process of fine tuning. Too much guidance resulted in inflexibility and limited group involvement; too little guidance was insufficient to build cohesive groups, give the weaker members a chance, and encourage group independence and selfconfidence. Altogether, initial small-group activities helped to create an atmosphere in which people felt they could handle problems themselves rather than calling on the government. Through the starter activities, often based on facilitators’ suggestions, the groups could build confidence that they themselves—as a group—could address some of the larger concerns as well. The small activities helped to pull the group along quickly, gain confidence and get things going, to create a sense of movement, and of action not dependent on outside political forces. Facilitators appointed a group member to monitor implementation of the planned activities and supported the negotiation of clear rules and procedures. Groups were stimulated to arrange award ceremonies for those individuals who showed the best results and to organise cultural programmes, religious ceremonies, and other occasions aimed at increasing social cohesion and applying pressure for actual implementation. Good results were obtained when local planning exercises were combined with long-term binding elements, such as a group savings and microcredit programme, because everyone had an interest in continuing the management of the common bank account. However, in cases where local government

officials were involved during planning and took on a role in addressing problems that perhaps could not be solved at a local level, the results were disappointing. Whenever such officials (e.g. panchayat members) were involved in the planning exercise itself, they would make a range of promises that often remained unfulfilled. The result was that the groups became demotivated, more dependent, and less active. In order to build confident, independent, and sustainable groups it proved better to involve the government in terms of encouraging improved regional policies based on information from the villages, rather than pushing for local politicians to solve individual problems, which tended only to strengthen existing patron–client relations and group dependency. It was also more effective to involve politicians and civil servants in such a way that their role vis-a`-vis individual groups was to stimulate and facilitate rather than to provide things. Well-established and independent groups could, later in the process, collectively take up possibly beneficial contacts with various departments and the panchayat without losing their own independence and action orientation. Keeping this interaction focused on exchanging knowledge and ideas rather than material needs also made it less of a political minefield of lost promises and placed the emphasis on the provision of facilities, such as irrigation. Various health workers and agricultural extension workers found a great audience and discussion partner in some of the more cohesive and active groups. Involving politicians in roles other than providing things in fact turned out to be quite useful, for example in monitoring the group’s activities, mediating conflicts, or forming a communication link between the project teams and the groups. Besides working with individual groups, the project gathered the information from the local sessions to form the basis of several policy debates with panchayat, local teachers, youth clubs, health workers, block-level administration, and representatives from the local women’s groups. The stronger women’s groups were particularly active in these meetings, which further strengthened their profile in the general political environment.

### **Timing of PRA sessions**

While participatory tools are time efficient for researchers and facilitators, to farmers they are often time consuming. It can sometimes be difficult to get everyone together and interested for a whole exercise. In North Bengal, with several harvests a year, either the men would be working on planting or harvesting, the women on planting or post-harvest processing, or both were otherwise occupied. If a PRA approach seeks only to gather information it may be perfectly satisfactory to undertake exercises with different subgroups in the village. For the purposes of action planning with village groups, however, it is important that most people attend so that the plan has some legitimacy. Sessions of more than three or four hours would

generally be a problem, because many people had other things to do. Splitting up the sessions would not help, as the resulting split between analysis and action planning would leave members without anything tangible after the first meeting, making it unlikely that they would attend subsequent sessions. Combining problem analyses and activity planning in one session would generally leave too little time for the activity planning, so that this part of the meeting became rushed. Short PRA sessions had a tendency to become rather problem oriented, which tended to generate a negative atmosphere. It therefore proved useful to limit the time spent on analysis of local needs and focus more on guiding a process that would build common understanding and motivation for collective action. This also helped to avoid shopping-list sessions. Overall, it was better not to dwell too long on needs and problems (which PRA exercises sometimes elicit . . .), but to get on with probing the actual situation and lead people to a discussion focused on opportunities beyond the problems. This is certainly possible if facilitators know the area well (perhaps because they grew up in similar villages) or if the programme has already done more extensive work in the region. The advantage is that enough time is allowed for a discussion of a timeframe for action, the division of tasks, and monitoring responsibilities.

### **Action orientation**

Emphasis on planning, negotiating, and writing a formal plan that is agreed upon by all participants, and less on lengthy enquiries, tended to strengthen the process. Priority ranking on the basis of possible actions rather than needs (the usual content for this PRA tool) can help to create the necessary sense of purpose and collective determination. Enthusiasm generated during a meeting is often more relevant to action planning than is the full and impartial analysis of local circumstances. Indeed, the latter could even be counter-productive in North Bengal, where needs assessments by panchayat or party apparatus are common bureaucratic requirements, but are seldom followed up with concrete action. A clear action orientation during the whole meeting is hugely important for a facilitator. The main point is to find local solutions, to motivate, and to make feasible joint plans with specific commitments for action. All the rest—the PRA tools used, the analysis of the situation, in-depth discussion of the issues—should contribute towards that goal. An action-oriented PRA would need to start out with a broad picture, but move soon to prioritisation and then quickly narrow down to two or three priorities that look promising for action planning. Later, once these issues are being addressed in practice, new concerns can be fed into the process in follow-up planning sessions. Many of the concerns mentioned by village groups are determined by highly problematic socio-economic bottlenecks: politically stubborn systems,

financial or social dependency, a need for technological innovations, internal conflicts, a lack of constructive interaction with levels above the village, a lack of interest in or mechanisms to address problems in managing common resources, natural disasters, and so on. The assumption of some 'PRA practitioners' that PRA in itself, by enabling common analyses and increased insight, almost 'automatically' empowers needs to be challenged; it is generally a risky assumption. For the facilitator, and particularly researchers and consultants involved in a few PRAs in one area, sessions may be highly enlightening, and lead them to assume that this is equally true for the group involved. Our own experience is that many groups want to please (particularly white-faced or highranking) outsiders, and will express interest and learning to please them. On many occasions, it appeared that great learning had taken place, but resulted in very little action. It should not simply be assumed that PRA sessions will help a group to gain new ideas from outsiders: farmers are not stupid, but generally face real and intractable constraints. These constraints may be economic, technical, environmental or political; they may also include social divides or a lack of options to work collectively, rather than a lack of ideas. There were several cases where I (WS) as an outsider, and other 'experts', were involved in a brainstorming session with a group of farmers to generate new ideas for solving a certain village problem, but every single idea that we came up with they had already thought of earlier but had discarded for good reasons. The best that a session can deliver is a sense of determination and enthusiasm to take up group action where individual action had so far failed, not radically new solutions or ideas.

### **Group heterogeneity**

The facilitators chose to emphasise typical 'women's issues' (education, sanitation, health) with the women's groups. This generated enthusiasm with the groups, for whom these were important topics. But it also meant that facilitators missed the opportunity to involve the women's groups in issues beyond the 'traditional' domains. Expectations quickly formed: women will work on clean drinking water, health, education, sanitation, and keeping the village roads clean, whereas men will work on irrigation improvements, flooding, or fisheries. In their daily lives, many women do have an important role in the domains ascribed to men, but in the end the facilitators reinforced traditional gender roles. Within the groups, the young women were the most active participants and usually the driving forces behind the group's activities. They tended to be the secretary or cashier, the most influential positions in the committees. They are also better educated than the older women (women's average literacy rate is 33.2 per cent compared to 56 per cent for men) (Government of West Bengal 2001). In the men's groups, however, it was those between the ages of 40 and 60 years who

generally dominated. The young men would be quiet, while the old babus generally did not speak much, having already partly withdrawn themselves from the world—whenever they do speak, however, everybody listens. It was therefore important for facilitators to use these internal dynamics, but also encourage less outspoken members to come forward. Groups contain a heterogeneous mixture of opinions, interests, and/or hidden agendas. The ‘reality’ that presents itself through PRA is seldom the reality. The notion of ‘community needs’ can also be quite deceptive. Every villager has his/her own ideas of what the needs of ‘the community’ are; the outspoken, politically influential people will try to impress their own concerns and needs on the discussion. Groups also tend to adapt their perceived ‘needs’ according to what they think the facilitator wants to hear, or to the areas in which they think the facilitator can help. The way meetings are set up, the specific questions asked, and the categories used in PRA charts (e.g. the historical transect), influence the direction of the meeting and the action plans. A good way to deal with this, when working in teams of two or three facilitators, is for one member not to participate directly but observe who is involved and who isn’t, what biases emerge, and how the group responds to the facilitator.

### **Quality of facilitation**

The approach described here depends upon maintaining the subtle, flexible, and difficult process of facilitating and guiding a planning process, guarding against blueprint sessions and activities. The mismatch between local needs and group activities generally results from the lack of listening and facilitation skills. Used properly and in a flexible manner, PRA can help to structure a discussion on local realities. However, things can go seriously wrong when using PRA becomes an end in itself. The training of facilitators should therefore focus on the principles of PRA and facilitation strategies rather than on the tools, which is where the emphasis tends to be placed. Sadly, although most development workers now realise the importance of good facilitation, many organisations still hire anyone off the street, only to put them back on the street again a couple of years later, when the project has ended. Much more needs to be done to build management systems that are geared to developing good facilitators, through training, monitoring and evaluation, long-term human resources management, and integration with government institutions/programmes. Certainly, PRA helped to provide an insight into the realities of the villages in North Bengal, and to elicit some interesting issues, particularly in the sessions conducted by more experienced facilitators. However, some of the disadvantages of using a typical PRA-type approach were also encountered. First was the dangerous assumption that if a facilitator knows the PRA tools, s/he can facilitate community meetings effectively. Second, PRA is essentially a

research tool, developed to generate knowledge of local realities efficiently and in a participatory way. But while it emphasises that joint knowledge and awareness are the agents of change, it focuses less on other bottlenecks. Without negotiation, group-building, and motivation skills, PRA facilitators ultimately have very little to offer. PRA should thus be embedded in an extensive strategy for working with groups over a longer period, so that through experimentation, research, monitoring, and training, context-specific strategies for the whole process can evolve. These strategies should be action oriented and challenging, but also practical, flexible, and simple enough for relatively inexperienced facilitators to use. It is vital to involve the facilitators in developing this so that the strategy connects with the skills and opportunities of the fieldworkers. While the facilitators are often the lowest-paid employees within a project, the quality of the project itself depends on them. Obviously, if an organisation preaches participatory practices in its fieldwork, then it should apply the same principles to the way it treats its own staff.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

Micro planning sought to achieve the dual goal of activating local groups and involving the government in addressing local concerns where local communities could not do so themselves. In practice, however, these two goals tended to clash. Groups would wait for the government to act and then try to get as much as possible out of any participating representatives (and project workers), often resulting in disappointments later. This tendency was further strengthened by the political system in North Bengal, which emphasises the government's role as 'provider' (or promising to provide) and uses this to consolidate its own political position. However, many established groups will survive (at least for a few years), and we feel that they have helped to strengthen social cohesion, reinforce people's feeling of independence, and establish some good water-management practices. Facilitating local action through micro planning in the context of North Bengal did occasionally have the intended 'empowering' impact, but for the impact to be more lasting and on a larger scale the socio-political mechanisms of dependence need to be taken into account and challenged, where possible, by the groups themselves. The link between government departments and village groups can be a healthy one if it is focused on discussion and the exchange of information, rather than revolving around material benefits. The same goes for the contact with the panchayat system, where results were good when it played a monitoring rather than a providing role, particularly among 652 well-established and confident groups. Action took place where facilitators were able to help create a sense of collective responsibility and a shared vision of a collective solution to a given concern. In conclusion, local planning should

start at the beginning of a project cycle, allowing time for local concerns to feed back into the design and management of the project, and with opportunities to scale up information from the village level to regional policies. Micro-planning groups require a framework, a set of group-binding elements and focused goals that link into the planning process (water-users' group, microcredit, etc.). There must be sufficient time and expertise to build a context-specific strategy through experimentation, reflection on the fieldwork, and research that involves all the fieldworkers. PRA may provide some useful tools, but more importantly it should foster a commitment to take seriously the realities of groups themselves. However, PRA needs to be part of a broader strategy for the facilitation process, and facilitators need to keep a critical perspective on the ways in which PRA tools contribute to the overall dynamics of working with the group. Facilitators need to be well trained and to operate within a long-term strategy for human resources management. Training should take into account the underlying principles of PRA, not merely its tools, and should also highlight the ways in which PRA can be improved at low cost, and offer both facilitation skills and strategies for the process beyond PRA. If a project or programme is to be conducted in a participatory fashion, then the organising agency should also work in a participatory, open, engaging, and transparent manner, seeking to bridge its own hierarchical divides. Fieldworkers should be treated as partners and taught the principles of PRA, and not just the tools and techniques. Finally, it is important to foster an enabling political-institutional environment and to guard against unrealistic expectations raised by the project or NGO staff, or the government officials involved. Bringing in the government and guiding it into a facilitating role can be useful, provided this can be done without creating dependency on individual politicians or departments. At its best, however, such collaboration can provide a communication channel through which to advocate on specific concerns through the higher echelons of government.

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### **Note**

1. A range of useful ideas on group dynamics can be found in the sociological literature pre-dating the emergence of PRA (e.g. Mills 1967; Phillips and Erickson 1970).

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