

PRA and PLA Approaches: A Case Study with examples of participatory approaches employed by MAG and CMAC in Cambodia¹

Background

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) are approaches employed by development practitioners to enable effective interaction and planning with communities. The approaches are based on the philosophy of bottom-up participation and empowerment and recognise that if local people participate in the development processes of planning, implementation and monitoring, they can progressively transform their own lives and surrounding environment.

The Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, first introduced the concept of “conscientization” in his 1968 book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He referred to the process of raising people’s awareness through collective self-inquiry and reflection. Freire suggested that by looking critically at their own local situation, people would be able to take actions towards the improvement of their society. At approximately the same time, development practitioners were beginning to challenge the conventional top-down, centralised model of development and to advocate for the participation of poor, marginalised rural and urban communities in the development process. In the 1970s, development practitioners introduced Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), a technique for the rapid collection of data within rural societies. RRA allowed development practitioners to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the local level situation. In the 1980s, PRA emerged, followed closely by PLA in the 1990s. Robert Chambers has been a key exponent of participatory approaches and the idea that the people from whom data is traditionally collected could actually be recognised as legitimate “knowers” and thus be active participants in the research process. The name PLA further emphasises the use of the participatory process for community learning and action planning, but the philosophy and techniques of PRA and PLA are basically the same.

PRA and PLA stimulate a mutual learning process in which people from outside a community, facilitate a process with people from inside the community to gather and analyse local knowledge and formulate plans for action. The approaches help the primary stakeholders, often poor or rural communities, to take control of the process, to assess local level issues, to find ways to identify and prioritise problems and challenges and to draw up practical action plans to address the challenges.

Participatory Approaches in Mine Action

While PRA/PLA approaches have been used for a relatively long time in the development sector, it has only really been since the late 1990s that they have begun to be used within mine action. Mine action often tends to work through existing hierarchies of leadership at the local level based on the assumption that the local leaders represent the interests of the whole community. However, this often serves to reinforce existing inequalities and top-down decision making processes, resulting in decisions being made that do not adequately reflect the needs and requirements of other community members. With mine action, this omission can be particularly remiss as often it is the poorer members of society who have less voice but are liable to be more at risk from landmines or UXO because of livelihood pressures.

In the mid-1990s concern began to be raised within and outside the sector that mine action was too focused on the technicalities rather than on the affected populations. An international conference held in June 1997 in Bad Honnef in Germany led to the publication of *Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes from a Development Point of View*², also known as the Bad Honnef Guidelines. These guidelines, ratified in June 1999, examined mine action in the context of general development assistance, with mine clearance seen as part of the overall post-conflict reconstruction of a country. The guidelines advocated a move away from delivery focused methods of mine action towards a

¹ Written by Ruth Bottomley, Community Liaison Manager, Southeast Asia, Mines Advisory Group (MAG)

² Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes from a development-oriented point of view. Revised version integrating proposals made at the International NGO-Symposium from Bad Honnef 23rd, 24th June 1997, <http://www.minesactioncanada.org/techdocuments/bh2-e.html>

broader use of participation, taking into account the knowledge, experience and social aspirations of the mine-affected communities and ensuring that community participation takes precedence over bureaucracy and institutionalised approaches.

Today, participatory approaches in mine action are more common, particularly in survey, risk education and victim assistance. The Mines Advisory Group (MAG) was the first mine action operator to introduce participatory community approaches more broadly into their activities. MAG recognised that improved communication was needed between mine action operators and communities and that affected people should be more involved in mine action decision-making processes. MAG first pioneered the concept of Community Liaison (CL) in Angola in 1996, with the idea that the approach would help enhance information exchange with communities, thus improving the quality of information collected to inform the mine clearance operations. MAG believed this would help ensure community priorities were better met and that mine action resources were deployed more effectively and efficiently. CL is now the medium through which MAG collects and analyses information at village level in order to identify and implement the most suitable solutions to the blockages and dangers caused by landmines and other explosive remnants of war. CL aims to increase community participation at all stages of the mine action intervention - before, during and after clearance. The CL approach is now used in all countries where MAG is currently working. CL teams are small and mobile and work closely with affected communities, using a variety of participatory data collection techniques to ensure all voices, particularly the most vulnerable, are heard during the mine action process. Many of the CL teams use PRA/PLA methodologies to ascertain community priorities for clearance, to identify high-risk households and individuals, to discuss post-clearance development plans and to assess the outcomes and impact of MAG's work.

In 2000, the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC) developed the Community-Based Mine Risk Reduction (CBMRR) project. Studies on intentional risk taking in Cambodian villages had highlighted that those communities often felt disempowered by agencies that acted to define the problem for them rather than working collectively to better understand local level complexities and to find solutions acceptable to both parties. The CBMRR project aimed to put village populations living in contaminated areas at the centre of the mine action process, through a network of local-level committees at village, commune and district level, and through the use of PRA/PLA methodologies. Using PRA/PLA activities to help the networks and communities to define, analyse and address their contamination problems, CMAC helps villagers to develop community action plans and assists with linking them to mine action, development and victim assistance services that can support the implementation of the plan and contribute to overall risk mitigation.

Implementing PRA/PLA

PRA/PLA is usually conducted at community level with the aim of gaining consensus from the community on particular issues that affect them. However, the methodology can also be used with specific groups of people with similar characteristics, for example, women or individuals identified as high-risk takers, to analyse issues specific to them.

PRA as a technique emphasises the re-orientation in the relationship between the outsiders and the insiders. The outsider becomes a facilitator, handing over control to the insiders. This is often referred to as "handing over the pen." Both the MAG Community Liaison teams and the CMAC CBMRR staff are trained facilitators. Their job is to encourage the community to take the lead in defining the information to be provided and how that information will be used. The facilitators have to avoid dominating the proceedings by, for example, talking too much or telling people what to do. They need to be open and willing to respond to participants in a supportive way that accepts local knowledge and belief systems in a non-judgemental manner. CMAC also goes one step further in that the volunteer networks are trained to conduct participatory activities within their villages, and the CMAC staff act purely as support and assistance to that process.

PRA/PLA use a varied set of tools, such as community maps, Venn diagrams, historical time lines, matrices and seasonal calendars to facilitate the sharing of information. The use of these tools and community participation in these activities helps to act as a catalyst to support communities to collect, present and analyse their local knowledge. Most of the tools use pictures, images, diagrams, drawings, maps and other visual representations of knowledge. Unlike written material, which can often exclude people in areas where few people can read, visual materials ensure that everybody is involved and understands what is happening. Pictures and diagrams can help to give a voice to those who have little status and limited education. They can allow a relatively large group of people to participate in the research and to see what is being recorded. The diagrams and maps can be corrected and modified as the data collection proceeds. Even in a community where most people are literate, the use of symbols, pictures and diagrams can encourage people to become more directly involved in the activities. The visual tools can be constructed in a variety of ways, using the earth and natural materials in the surrounding environment, such as stones, sticks and leaves. Seeds or beans can be used as counters in ranking activities, allowing people to change their opinions during the process of discussion until a final agreement is reached. However, the use of natural materials also means that the diagrams are transient. Therefore, after the activities, they need to be recorded either by photograph or by transferring the image to paper. Large flipchart paper and marker pens also suffice in many communities and are commonly used in the Cambodian context.

Based on experience, both MAG and CMAC have developed a number of PRA/PLA tools that can effectively be used to collect and analyse information related to mine/ERW contamination and risk. These include:

- Village mapping: Villagers map their village including information on mined areas, accident locations and high risk households. Agricultural land and natural resources can also be indicated to show how these are impeded by contamination. Village maps are useful for identifying land that needs to be cleared and prioritised. The CBMRR volunteers also annually update their village maps using plastic overlays to provide a record of change within the village as land is cleared or development activities occur. This information then provides a visual record for the villagers of what they have achieved since setting up the mine/UXO committees. It also serves as a useful monitoring tool for CMAC.
- Seasonal calendars: These show the activities villagers do at different times of the year. The calendars can be further elaborated to show which activities put people at risk from mines/ERW and if there are particular times of the year when these activities are undertaken.
- Risk ranking matrices: Based on scoring and ranking matrices, these help show which groups of individuals conduct which high risk activities. This information is particularly useful when designing MRE interventions with specific target groups.
- Village history time line: A time line that documents the history of the village in terms of periods of conflict and peace, population movements, years with severe drought or flooding and other significant events.
- Problem tree analysis: A tool to help villagers identify the main problems within a village and to analyse the root causes and the possible solutions. This tool can help to reveal which problems are linked to mine/ERW contamination, and also, whether this contamination is considered by villagers to be a priority problem.
- Well-being analysis: Collects information on household data, financial and human capital, vulnerable groups and local concepts of well being. This tool can help identify households that may be especially vulnerable to mine risk, and it can also be used in gauging the impact of mine action interventions if implemented at periods before, during and after clearance.
- Transect walk: This comprises a walk through the village, or a particular part of the village, with key informants to gain an overall picture of land use, social-economic conditions in the village and contamination. It results in a transect drawing which can be cross-checked with information recorded on village maps.
- Institutional mapping: Often done with Venn diagrams, this can show the different institutions or local level organisations existing in a village, their relative importance and their inter-connectedness. For mine action this can reveal information about existing systems that could

be used for reporting ordnance or that could play a role in risk reduction activities in the community.

PRA/PLA tools are flexible, adaptable to different situations and can be used according to the requirements of the data gathering. The activities can take place over a number of days to ensure they remain fun and do not take up too much time. A number of repeat visits to collect the information tend to be preferable for most communities rather than long sessions. The tools can provide very detailed information, both qualitative and quantitative, on the local level situation and the priorities of the people. However the data cannot be extrapolated to other villages as each village will have its own unique set of data.

PRA/PLA is intended to be an inclusive approach that encourages as broad a representation from the community as possible. Both MAG CL and CBMRR teams are trained to ensure that a cross-section of people from all socio-economic levels within the village are involved in the activities. Often it is particularly important to ensure that the poorer families or newcomers are included in the sessions as they are the ones most affected by mine risk but least likely to attend more formal meetings with the community. Women are another important group, not only because they make up half the population, but also because they are often affected by mines and ERW in different ways to men because of their gendered roles and responsibilities. Generally the use of participatory approaches can encourage more women to attend sessions, as the tools are fun, less threatening and easily accessible to people with little education. However, even in participatory sessions, men tend to dominate the proceedings. Female facilitators are essential to try to encourage female participation, and activities can also be conducted with single sex groups to allow for a comparison of the concerns, roles, mobility levels and different viewpoints of men and women. While aiming to achieve community consensus, PRA/PLA activities are a social event and shaped and influenced by social processes, so there will be dominant views prevailing that may not reflect the views of all the participants.

Undertaking participatory approaches is relatively cost effective as there is no outlay on expensive equipment. Local natural materials or simple stationery can be used, the main input being the need for high quality staff with good facilitation skills and empathy when working with communities. However, the approach does take time to implement properly, especially if it has to be organised to fit around the schedules of communities. Villagers are often too busy during planting and harvest seasons to participate and so activities have to be scheduled for periods when villagers have more free time. Achieving genuine community participation and ownership does take time and does not always fit well with traditional project or funding cycles.

PRA/PLA may not be the most appropriate method in all communities and cultures. The decision about whether or not to hold a participatory exercise should always be negotiated with the villagers themselves. If they have no interest, then an exercise should not be attempted. Communities may not be responsive or willing to participate for various reasons. Post-war communities often lack cohesion and people are frequently more transitory. Fun activities may not be deemed appropriate. Some people, particularly those who have been living in refugee camps for long periods of time, may be used to being dependent on outside interventions and may be reluctant to take the leading role. It may also be difficult to motivate people to become actively involved in programmes aimed at improving the overall community rather than individual interests. Social class, caste or divisions in communities may also act as a barrier to community participation and consensus, and in some societies, men may be reluctant for women to be involved in such activities. Ensuring the participation of the poorest people is often difficult, not because they feel the work would not be of use to them, but because they lack the time and resources. Communities with more exposure to the outside world through television, radio or as a result of a relatively developed pre-war society, may also be less inclined to focus on local level activities.

Communities may not want to participate freely in PRA/PLA activities if they have already had a bad experience or the results of the activities have remained negligible to them. In areas where there is a lot of development assistance, communities could be called on frequently to participate in PRA/PLA

activities, which they could come to see as a waste of their time if there are no tangible outcomes. Another danger arises when facilitators become very familiar with the tools and there is a tendency for them to skip over the participatory principles and to go straight to the task of collecting information. This may be the case if facilitators have become jaded in conducting PRA or they are under time constraints. The approach then becomes more of a rapid appraisal, with no real element of participation, no building of confidence or trust, and with no interest in strengthening the villagers' ability and interest in running their own affairs. The activities become routine and devoid of real meaning.

Analysis

MAG uses the information generated through the participatory activities to gather data and understanding on the contamination situation in villages and to facilitate a prioritisation process with villagers to identify the contaminated areas most in need of clearance. The data can also be used to inform marking, survey or mine risk education activities and to provide information on the outcomes and impact of MAG's work. The use of participatory tools to collect data on the mine problem can help to enhance the quality of information available about the mine threat and local level values which will also help to ensure that mine action interventions have more impact and relevance.

The greater involvement of mine-affected people in the mine action processes through the use of PRA/PLA methodologies has helped to promote an improved understanding by local people about the mine action process. A gender study conducted by MAG Lao PDR in 2008 demonstrated that the participatory approach used by MAG Community Liaison teams did have a clear benefit in terms of ensuring equitable participation in the prioritisation process and that those who attend the meetings have a good understanding of the selection criteria. In villages cleared by MAG, 80.2% of the study group (85.1% men and 75% women) reported attending prioritisation meetings, significantly higher male and female attendance than in villages cleared by other operators. Similarly the participatory community meetings held by MAG CL also meant that villagers were better informed of the prioritisation selection criteria, enabling them to contribute in an informed way to the prioritisation process. In MAG villages, a significant 91% of respondents reported understanding the selection criteria, which was a significantly higher percentage than with the other operators.

Participatory methods in themselves are not sufficient for sustaining the empowerment of participants. At best, empowerment will be fleeting and limited unless the research is followed up and there is a more general move towards decentralisation of decision-making at institutional level. The CBMRR networks, having completed their participatory activities, develop a community action plan that prioritises the problems, outlines the solutions, identifies those who will lead the action and determines the period for the action. The action plan may involve outside interventions such as clearance and development assistance, but will also include activities that the communities will undertake themselves to address the identified problems (for example, ensuring newcomers to an area are informed about the dangerous areas, submitting requests for clearance of UXO and providing specific MRE messages to identified high risk groups). The CBMRR project maintains all the PRA/PLA materials at local level with the volunteer network. This ensures that the materials are used actively as a local level resource. Changes in the situation can be easily recorded and updated by the villagers, and other mine action or development agencies visiting the village can also use the materials for reference.

With the shifting of the power structure between the outsiders and the insiders, PRA/PLA has the potential to "empower" communities through the realisation of their own potential and subsequent building of self-confidence and decision-making abilities. The participatory activities employed by CBMRR have helped the communities take on more management responsibilities and decision-making. It has helped to equip local residents with the skills and knowledge that they can use in other aspects of their lives. The fact that the materials remain at village level means that the villagers maintain control, and outsiders come to ask them for information. As the CBMRR network has become increasingly well-known, other mine-action and development agencies have begun to work with the committees at village level and to consult them as part of their data collection processes.

This cooperation has helped to endorse the value of the volunteer network and the quality of data maintained at village level. An evaluation of the mine-risk education sector in Cambodia noted, “the CBMRR network is seen by external stakeholders as a source of good and reliable information regarding mine/UXO related information”.³ The use of participatory techniques and the promotion of local level capacities and decision-making through the CBMRR project has helped to develop self-reliance and has encouraged villagers to work together to improve their communities.

References

- Bottomley, Ruth. (2003) Crossing the Divide: Landmines, Villagers and Organizations. Norway, Oslo: PRIO
- Bottomley, Ruth. (December 2005) Community Participation in Mine Action: A Review and Conceptual Framework. Oslo: Norwegian People’s Aid.
- Cancian, F.M. (1993) Conflicts between Activist Research and Academic Success: Participatory Research and Alternative Strategies in *The American Sociologist*, Spring 1993, pp.92-105
- Chambers R. (1994) Rural Development: Putting the Last First. Essex: Longman Scientific and Technical
- Chambers, R. (1995) Paradigm Shifts and the Practice of Participatory Research and Development pp. 30-42 in Nelson N. and Wright S. (eds) (1995a) Power and Participatory Development: Theory and Practice. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Durham, Jo (October 2008). Evaluation of Mine Risk Education in the Kingdom of Cambodia. Phnom Penh: CMAA and UNICEF
- MAG Lao (March, 2008) Assessment of Gender perspectives in UXO Action in Lao PDR, Vientiane: UNDP
- Mikkelsen, Britha. (1995) Methods for Development Work and Research: A Guide for Practitioners London: Sage Publications
- Nelson N. and Wright S. (eds) (1995a) Power and Participatory Development: Theory and Practice. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Nelson, N. and Wright S. (1995b) Participatory Research and Participant Observation: Two Incompatible Approaches pp.43-59 in Nelson N. and Wright S. (eds) (1995a) Power and Participatory Development: Theory and Practice. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Pottier, J. (1997) Towards an Ethnography of Participatory Appraisal and Research pp. 203-228 in Grillo, R.D. and Stirrat, R.L. (1997) Discourses of Development: Anthropological Perspectives. Oxford: Berg.
- Schrijvers, J. (1995) Participation and Power: A Transformative Feminist Research Perspective pp. 19-29 in Nelson N. and Wright S. (eds) (1995a) Power and Participatory Development: Theory and Practice. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- UNMAS, 2003, International Mine Action Standards: Glossary of Mine Action Terms. IMAS 04.10, New York: UN

³ Durham, Jo. Evaluation of Mine Risk Education in the Kingdom of Cambodia. Phnom Penh: CMAA and UNICEF, October 2008.