INTRODUCTION

The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) method has been in use since the 1980s in many developing countries. Its successful application has encouraged the study and evaluation of the real situation in urban and rural areas for the creation of development plans. Since 1991, the Vietnam-Sweden Forestry Co-operation Programme has used PRA in the 5 northern provinces of Vinh Phu, Yen Bai, Lao Cai, Tuyen Quang and Ha Giang.

Implementation has been well-received by local people, and they have contributed to the development of the method and adapted it to meet local social and economic conditions. PRA is currently applied within many other programmes, including rural and urban projects with different topics and in varied environments.

The author of this paper has worked for SIDA for 5 years, developing, implementing and evaluating PRA in the field, particularly in the northern provinces. For the last year, he has worked for HELVETAS VIETNAM, a Swiss NGO, and has continued to adapt and develop PRA methodologies in Cao Bang and Quang Nam-Da Nang. This paper describes some basic principles and general observations about PRA, as well as presenting some personal experiences gathered from the field.

The paper begins by considering some underlying principles and methods of PRA.

WHAT IS PRA?

Introduction to the overall concept

There are many terms for different methods which involve participation, such as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Participatory Technology Development (PTD), Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), Participatory Learning Method (PALM) and Farmer Participatory Research (FPR). These methods originate from different places and each has its own tools. Nevertheless they are all participatory in nature. The objective of the methodology is to create conditions which attract the interest and involvement of farmers and others concerned in the development process. PRA is not only a participatory method, and it is important to realise that the use of participatory rural appraisal does not mean that participatory methods are being used. In this report we use the term PRA, and we hope that it will be clear that PRA is a process rather than an event.

Principles of PRA

PRA differs from RRA in that it moves away from investigation and explanation of information by outsiders, and instead it assigns responsibility, tasks and functions to the local people. The role of the outsider is to be a facilitator. In addition to the basic principles of RRA, PRA has certain other key principles (Chambers, 1997). Outsiders/facilitators should be prepared to work according in the following way:

- **Hand over the stick (pen or chalk):** facilitate the investigation, analysis, presentation and learning of local people themselves, so that farmers are the owners of their own designs. Outsiders should believe that farmers should be able to draw maps, make models, evaluate, score, analyse, make a plan and carry out the plan. In other words, facilitators should accept that farmers "can do it". It is usual for facilitators to merely initiate a process of presentation and analysis, after which they sit back and keep quiet.
- **Self-critical awareness:** this means that facilitators continuously and critically examine their own behaviour. This includes embracing error-welcoming it as an opportunity to learn and have to reflect on and evaluate their experience.
- **Personal responsibility:** PRA practitioners tend to take personal responsibility for what is done rather than relying on the authority of manuals or any rigid rules, in the spirit of the sentence, “Use your own best judgement at all times” (Peter, 1989).
- **Sharing:** information and new ideas should be shared amongst farmers, facilitators and between farmers and facilitators.
The above PRA principles are mainly personal: to do with behaviour, attitudes and self-awareness. This contrast indicates the emphasis in PRA on how outsiders should interact with local people.

In reality PRA is founded on 3 pillars: behaviour-attitude; method; sharing.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1:** The 3 pillars of PRA

The above 3 pillars of PRA have equal importance and are closely related. We should consider all three pillars.

The main objective of PRA is that people should learn from each other. When PRA is implemented, farmers' and local peoples' knowledge should be the starting point. External people (planners, administrators, managers) should learn from local people through the use of methods which are adapted by those local people according to local conditions. The main function of these external people is to facilitate and help local people to investigate and share their knowledge, information and experience with each other and with outsiders. They should also assist them to analyses present, prepare plans and become the owners of their plans. In particular, visual sharing of maps, models or diagrams which are drawn or created by local people using locally-available materials such as sticks, stones or seeds, can allow both the facilitators and the local participants to develop a better understanding of the situation. This allows cross-checking and supplementation of information within the learning process. This is why the PRA methodology has successfully encouraged illiterate members of the community (normally poorer, marginal groups) to undertake analysis and action. In northern Vietnam, for example, it has involved communities of H'mong and Dao farmers.

**The pillars of PPA in detail**

The three pillars of PRA are associated with a range of attitudes and behaviours, methods, and types of sharing. These are illustrated in Fig.2 below.
Fig. 2. The Three Pillars of PRA (from Chambers, 1997)

The pillars output in detail

Figure 3 below shows the output of PRA in Vietnam, which has been implemented by many projects.
Fig 3. PRA output in Vietnam

Some examples of how PRA in done in Vietnam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Programme/Project</th>
<th>Purpose/application are</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forestry/home gardens/land use</td>
<td>Rural Mountainous Development/SIDA</td>
<td>Village Development Plan (agro-forestry plans, breeding, credit, land-use planning)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lao Cai, Yen Bai, Phu Tho, Tuyen Quang, Ha Giang</td>
<td>PRA 2nd and 3rd cycles (prepare annual plans)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>PAM programme: Ha Giang, Bac Can, Cao Bang, Lang Son, Ha Bac</td>
<td>PRA on topics (Protecting forest, breeding, gender, consumer market.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>FAO Belgium/Quang Ninh; GTZ/Lai Chau, Son La; CARE Vietnam (Ha Bac, Son La)</td>
<td>Plan for forestry development at household and community level (selection Of species, developing nurseries, technical training.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Helvetas - Social Forestry Support Project (Xuan Mai), Production support in Cao Bang</td>
<td>Plan for Watershed Management Community agro-forestry development Land-use planning.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>World Neighbors</td>
<td>Social forestry training/ extension Plan for community development (agroforestry plans, animal husbandry, IPM/plant protection, veterinary, small irrigation system, clean water)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>CIDSE/ Bac Thai</td>
<td>Training of extension staff, village self</td>
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CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL PRA IN VIETNAM

Although PRA methodology originates from outside Vietnam, I believe that these methods are suitable for adaptation to the social and economic conditions of our country to facilitate the development process in both rural and urban situations. Over the last few years a lot of practical experience in using PRA has been built up by technicians and field staff in different parts of the country and in different sectors. On the basis of this field experience, it is possible to identify some limitations which need to be overcome as well as pre-requisite conditions for successful use of PRA approaches and methods in Vietnam in the future.

Training and capacity building

Good quality training is one of the keys to success in using PRA. Training needs to be practical and based on direct experience because it is very difficult to train people in PRA by theory or classroom teaching. It requires changes in attitudes and working practices, and so, when the method is newly introduced, quality skills-based training and time are needed for all participants to become familiar with the methods and to change their vision of the way they work. If careful attention is not given to practical training of field staff and PRA facilitators, the farmers with whom they work may not accept or understand the process and this may lead to reduced involvement and poor progress and quality of development planning.

Building up the capacity of training institutions is also a very high priority at this point in time. With the support of the Swiss Government, the Social Forestry Support Programme is working with the Forestry College (at Xuan Mai) and four forestry faculties from other universities to include PRA in their long and short duration teaching programmes. In the future these students will be the core of the forestry extension service in Vietnam.

PRA is a long-term process

Some staff and some organisations think that all that is involved in PRA is to make a "one time" community development plan at the beginning of a particular project or programme. In fact, what happens after the first community planning exercise is equally important. PRA is only one step in a cycle of activities. Effective follow-up and training all need to be arranged by the support services. In addition, experience from projects that have been using PRA for several years shows that good quality planning skills emerge only in second planning cycle when PRA is also used for monitoring and evaluation. Effective use of, PRA is therefore a continuous learning process which takes place over time.

Appropriate follow up is essential

The PRA methodology should be adapted to the capacity of local staff in terms of their ability to use the material. For example, it is no use doing very broad PRA exercises (covering lots of different topics such as crops, livestock, forestry, irrigation etc.) if the project or organisation cannot provide follow up and support.
This means the staff of the local agriculture and forestry extension service, and local people, can initiate and carry out PRA themselves actively, either within a project framework or in their daily work activities without depending on the input of external persons. This should also lead to sustained capacity of field staff and members of the local community to continue to use of PRA beyond the life of a particular project.

**Flexibility and adaptation are needed**

Some people see PRA as a fixed package and do not apply it flexibly. In these cases, they may not care about the realities of the farmers or their participation in the process. Due to the varying social and economic conditions throughout the country, it is important that PRA methods are adapted to suit the local situation. This is so they can be fully accepted by local people, as this will lead to an increased willingness by participants to select, improve and apply methods and tools which are most appropriate for the achievement of their own objectives according to their local conditions. For example, tools that rely on written material can be used in communities with high literacy rates, while visual methods (such as diagrams and maps) are much more appropriate and effective in communities where many people cannot read or write in the Kinh language.

**PRA should also be used for local organisational development**

PRA is not only a tool for planning. It is also a way of supporting the development of local organisations, particularly at community level. These organisations (for example village management groups, interest groups, extension workers, trust groups etc.) manage a plan they built themselves based on participatory principles. The ‘planning’ and ‘organisational development’ aspects of PRA should always go hand in hand.

**Creating awareness amongst planners and policy makers**

PRA methods are well known by technical and field staff. However, they have not yet attracted sufficient attention from planners and policy makers. Changes in the policies of the government are resulting in a new appreciation of the economic role of individual households and communities and a move away from the command economy to a market oriented economy. In this situation, PRA in roves the ability of local people to plan and manage their own resources and to determine what fits their needs.

**Use of PRA in local government systems**

So far, PRA has mainly been used in international donor and NGO-funded projects. One of the main challenges for the future is to find ways of using PRA to improve the local government planning system. Outputs from PRA, for example village development plans, should be respected and used as a basis for supporting farmers (local people) by all departments, organisations and state programmes which have a responsibility to provide logistic and financial support for community development (such as agroforestry extension services, women's union, farmer's association, the Bank for the Poor). It is vital that funds are available so that outputs resulting from the activities of PRA can be paid for.

**Scheduling**

For PRA to be effectively used by local government, schedules need to coincide with the schedules of local government. However, sometimes the most effective time and season for PRA (e.g., avoiding peak farming times such as planting or harvesting) may not coincide with the annual planning mechanisms of provincial or local government.

**Flexible funding arrangements**

Because the outputs from PRA are based on the demands of local people for different services, it is necessary to have flexible funds that can be used to support the community development plans. One of the main constraints in using PRA in the government extension system today is that extension is tied to fixed technical packages and budgets.