

23

Time, representation and feedback in participatory programme design

by Steve Evison

with a response from Meera Kaul Shah

Feedback is a forum for discussion in *PLA Notes*. It features articles, which raise common concerns in fieldwork or training, together with a response from another PRA practitioner. Letters and articles are welcomed for this section, as are your comments on any of the issues raised by *Feedback*.

● Introduction

This article summarises a survey approach that was used in establishing a new programme for CONCERN Worldwide in Tanzania. The aim was to create a participatory programme and build on the ability of local people to achieve their own development. We planned to achieve this by transferring methods rather than messages, principles rather than precepts. These reflections are based on the first year of the project. It has now been running for 3.5 years.

Our first step was to *carry out* a participatory survey, which involved people in its design as well as implementation. The survey was seen as an important tool in involving and organising the community towards future development activities. This paper discusses the steps taken and how far our aim of a fully participatory survey was achieved.

● Developing the picture

Initially, the need for a programme was assessed using RRA. This provided us with a basic report on the area. The main question, however, was how to progress to a detailed proposal.

The initial steps were taken by a project team of two expatriates and three community development officers. We started by visiting the area to build rapport and held meetings with the village leaders. We also produced a short, illustrated handout to explain who we were and our belief in developing the programme with the people.

Building a fully participatory programme is a long process. Thus, we decided to use the survey to help increase awareness, motivation, commitment and understanding, as well as to simply fulfil information needs.

Preparation for the survey

We began with basic training in PRA. We started with the Ward and Division level government representatives and extension staff. A second course was run for the Village Chairmen and Executive Officers. Through these courses, we were able to build up an understanding of the information that we needed, how we hoped to get it, how they would be involved and most importantly, why.

To get people involved in the survey planning and decision making, we needed to identify a willing and representative group. These would report back to the village and represent village views and feelings to us. It was decided that the Village Government (VG) whilst elected, were not appropriate. This is because:

- they tended to only represent the more powerful sector of the village;
- they had many other tasks and therefore had little available time;
- they were almost all male;
- the groups were often large and unwieldy;
- the villagers expressed the view (informally) that they were not the best people for the survey work;
- the villagers felt that the government had too many pre-set and hidden agendas.

Discussions with the VO suggested a Village Development Committee (VDC). This would operate through them, but work closely with us. This group would comprise one man and one woman elected from each of the sub-villages. The new VDC drew up a basic constitution for operation. The selection of people and the content of the constitutions were left to them. The purpose of the VDC was:

- to assist the village in the collection of information;
- to act as a link with CONCERN staff;
- to identify key informants;
- to work on specific development topics which could be reported to the VG.

First steps in the survey

Through discussion meetings with the VG and VDC, we identified the information needed, why we needed it and how to attain it. Very soon, it became obvious that there was still a lot of information missing, especially relating to villagers' perceptions and analysis of problems and opportunities. Further surveying was planned. To maximize the benefits from the more detailed survey, we first needed to collect some outstanding basic statistical background information. The following were therefore carried out:

- the VDC produced village maps from their sub-village maps;
- the VDC collected basic information, such as the number of people per household;
- the project team analysed all the information collected so far and identified gaps relevant to us;
- district and other outside specialist staff (from government and other CONCERN projects) were encouraged to visit and identify areas which may have been overlooked or be of wider relevance.

The basic information assisted us in deriving some possible hypotheses to test. The project team put together a framework for the detailed survey, which focused on a 'links analysis' and the identification

of possible solutions and implementation methods. This was intended as a tool to help facilitate more rapid progress and was not, therefore, as participatory' as it could have been,

Running the intensive survey

The detailed survey was run in two blocks, with two weeks spent in lakeside villages and two weeks spent in five hill villages. The VDC was involved in the field survey work and plans on the day. But only the trained leaders helped to plan and assess the overall survey at workshops which were held before and after the field work,

The survey was initiated with a 2-day planning workshop. The Village Executive Officers (VEO), Ward Executive Officers (WEO) and Division Secretary (DS) were invited to assist. It was intended that they would represent the villagers and relay any plans and information to them. The workshop included: a review of the information gained so far, problem analysis, identification of gaps in our knowledge and methods of data collection.

The plans were intended to be flexible and to respond to field situations and developments. The VEOs were asked to report back to their villages on the outcomes of the workshop (through a VG and VDC joint meeting) and to prepare them for our visit. In reality, this did not happen at all in some cases, and only to tell villagers of our imminent arrival in most of the others.

The fieldwork survey ran according to a basic framework. We started with a pre-arranged meeting with the VDC, Village Chairman and VEO to reconfirm the aims and discuss places to visit. Subsequently, groups visited different sub-villages and used PRA to collect all the outstanding information. The team met for a brief discussion with villagers before leaving each village. Each evening, the team members wrote up their findings and met to reflect on the day.

After the fieldwork period, we had a further two day workshop with the DS, WEOs and VEOs. We went back through the findings and assessed our success at answering outstanding questions. The workshop ended with discussion amongst the village representatives of the best way of feeding back the findings to the villages. It was decided that the VEOs would hold a village meeting to inform the villagers about the survey and what had been achieved.

After the main survey

In reality, the VEOs never carried out the feedback meeting. Fortunately, we carried out village meetings ourselves to discuss the work to date. We also explained how the information had been used and produced a short written handout for distribution. While this was not ideal, it helped to overcome the problem created by the VEOs' lack of feedback. This had reduced villagers' involvement and encouraged a 'them' and 'us' (recipients and experts) situation.

The VDC continued to be involved in further stages of planning. It was intended that they would assist with explanations where there was confusion and provide feedback and maintain the village voice in all aspects of developing the plan. But there were time and practical constraints to writing a full proposal with the community. Eventually, the final ideas and proposal writing was done by the team and help was elicited as necessary from the VDC.

Finally, all the information was put into a Baseline Report to assist in on-going monitoring and

evaluation. This is a major piece of work and it would be impractical to translate and give full copies of it to every village. Instead, it is intended to write a summary of the main findings and provide copies of some of the diagrams to each village.

Future developments

The survey was a first step and there is still a lot of further work needed to actually get started. However, it is felt that the methods used have:

- helped raise awareness;
- laid a foundation to help ensure some feeling of ownership;
- enabled us to collect more information than would have been possible by the team alone
- started to develop the local structures for development;
- started to raise questions regarding the leadership's capacity for development;
- enabled people to be involved with the surveying and its planning;

Now we are continuing to work with the VDC, and others, to:

- identify further solutions,
- develop an implementation methodology;
- build a participatory monitoring and evaluation system (of which the baseline report forms the first step).

We hope that by their continued involvement in the project, the VDC will mature into an important part of the programme implementation system. It is also intended to run village meetings to discuss the VDC's role. This is to ensure that the VDC is representative and does not become just another group operating outside the real needs of the villagers.

Observations and problems identified

The two biggest problems faced were the time taken to carry out the survey and the difficulties of ensuring local representation. Whilst some village representatives were present for most of the components of the work, it did not follow that they were informing or even truly representing' others.

The team felt that problems of representation centred on the effectiveness of the committees and to a lesser extent, peoples' attendance at meetings for planning and analysis of the information. Since PRA was used in surveying, it was felt that a good representation of opinion was gained, but that the analysis could have been more participatory. Some of the problems encountered during the survey are as follows:

- feedback was often not happening even though it was proposed by the representatives themselves. Perhaps the VEO was not a good choice because s/he is usually not local. Since they are employed by Government, they often see themselves as being superior and have different agendas to those of the villagers. They were keen to be involved with us, but showed no commitment to the villagers. Thus, activities, such as feedback meetings often failed;
- the selection of individuals for the VDC was left to the VG. In retrospect, it was felt that those

chosen did not necessarily reflect the different interests of the village;

- due to time and staff constraints, we did not put sufficient effort into developing a VDC constitution, identifying roles and providing training;
- minority groups were under-represented on the VDC. As became apparent during later wealth ranking, poorer people tend not to join committees or attend meetings. Thus their representation on the VDC was low:
- co-ordination is very important (there is a lot of thinking on your feet);
- there is a fine balance between participation and implementation (sometimes decisions just have to be made). For example, due to time constraints, the analysis, the survey framework and project proposal compilation were largely done by the team;
- level and scale of participation. Whilst many of the villagers are literate and should have been more involved in the findings, write-up and analysis, meeting fatigue and time commitments meant that this did not happen. Whilst the concept is sound, achieving it in practice was highly problematic.

• Conclusion

We found the community self-survey was valuable, not only in terms of the amount of information collected, but also in terms of the benefits of increasing local ownership, understanding and awareness in the programme. It required a lot of flexibility and management from the programme team and funders, as well as a high level of staff competence. If not carefully managed, it can lead to raised expectations and false perceptions.

The main benefit in this approach was that the people are involved in the planning of the programme. Furthermore, because people completed much of the survey themselves, more realistic results were obtained.

Finally I would add a note of caution. As with any exercise in 'participation', the result is greatly influenced by who participates, how, when, and where just because you talk to a group of women does not mean you will learn the problems of old women, poor women, etc. Community self-survey does not produce a fail-safe plan and does not reduce the work in planning, organising, managing and analysing the results.

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- **Time, representation and feedback: a response by Meera Kaul Shah**

This experience of involving the community in designing a new programme in Tanzania provides an interesting example of the kind of problems that are faced as a participatory process evolves. The need to start with understanding the problems from the community's point of view is crucial. This not only establishes rapport, but also helps to initiate long-term sustainable efforts in response to people's felt needs and priorities. In this process, participatory appraisal is not just a means to answer some of 'our' questions, or to fill gaps in 'our' understanding of the situation, but is the first step taken by the community to appraise its own situation and prioritise its own problems. The analysis of the situation, and the prioritised list of problems along with the suggested solutions, have to be carried out by the community themselves.

Outsiders can only help the community as facilitators in this process. If the information continues to be controlled, analysed and used by the outsiders, even if it is to plan development activities for the community, the process remains top-down. It also takes time for outsiders to try and analyse information for the community and draw conclusions from it. The process is more realistic when the analysis of the information is carried out by the community members during the appraisal itself. In this process, the participatory appraisal or survey cannot be separated from the planning process,

The problem of 'who to include in the appraisal?' arises when too much planning takes place outside the community and when the process is controlled from outside. As rightly pointed out by Evison, the VG or elected village representatives are usually not the most appropriate people to take charge of planning a participatory survey. In most cases, they tend to be the village elite and the most powerful. While it may be unavoidable to first enter a community without their involvement, the participatory appraisal process, should try and minimise their influence. This is where the role of facilitators is important: to understand whether the VDC is representative of all the different groups and whether they are acceptable to the community at large. This should become clear during the participatory appraisal process. Other 'leaders' and representatives can emerge, and should be encouraged, during the appraisal process. Clearly, the appraisal cannot be considered completed, unless all the different groups in the community are given a chance to voice their concerns.

Vesting too much responsibility in a VDC that is selected before the appraisal process starts, can be counter-productive in the long run. While they can be useful entry points into the community, the selection of representatives who will supervise the planning, implementation and monitoring of the development project in the community should be left till after the planning and appraisal process. Only after the community decides what they are going to do and what is expected from their representatives, should they be selecting people appropriate for the task. This makes it easier for the community to detail the role of the VDC and to clarify their expectations from the selected representatives,

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