ACTION RESEARCH FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION

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Abstract

This paper documents the process adopted in an action research project for poverty alleviation undertaken in two project areas of NGOs. After describing the process adopted to initiate action research, the paper discusses the methods conducted to acquire knowledge on processes generating poverty, and strategies adopted to alleviate poverty both by the poor and local organisations. Methods adopted to translate the knowledge into action are also discussed. Conclusions are provided at the end.

Introduction

Any intervention on poverty alleviation requires a thorough understanding of the processes that generate poverty. Such an intervention will have a good chance of success when it is designed on the basis of situation and needs of the poor. A poverty alleviation project must be able to answer the following questions before it is designed: Who are the poor? Why are they poor? What means do they adopt to overcome poverty? Which are the organisations involved in poverty alleviation in the locality? What are their poverty alleviation strategies? What is the impact of these strategies on poverty? What lessons can be learnt from these interventions? How to design an action plan by taking situation and needs of the poor into consideration? How will one involve government officials and representatives of local decentralised government in the discussions on development of action plans?

It is, thus, necessary to analyse the situation of the poor and assess their needs before a project is designed. This raises some questions: who should undertake the exercise? And, how? With regard to the question

on who should undertake the exercise, the answer can be either the initiator of the project (such as government, NGOs, etc.) or the people for whom the project is being initiated. If the people, along with the initiators of the project, are involved in the project from the initial phase itself, the former will have more clarity on the linkages between their situation and needs on the one hand, and the project design and its implementation on the other. This contributes to their participation, more stakes and the ultimate success of the project.

How can one undertake the exercises on the situation analysis and needs assessment? What methodology should be adopted to enable the people to participate in the exercises? Given the widespread illiteracy and lack of formal education, this question becomes all the more important. The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) appears to be the most suitable method to enable the rural poor to participate in situation analysis and needs assessment. But, following are the trade-offs:

- between quality considerations and time required for the exercises

- between the number of exercises needed to collect authentic data and the time that the people and NGOs can spare

- between sequences of the exercises and keeping the interest of the people in them alive.

The design has to face these trade-offs, if people are to be involved right from the beginning. Given that people's participation is recommended by all the development actors (donors, government and NGOs) for the maximum success of a project, the following questions become pertinent: What exercises are to be conducted to analyse the situation and needs of the poor? What should be their sequence? What is the time that is normally required to complete all the exercises? What should be the process? How will these exercises help design a project?

To find out the answers to these questions, an Action Research Project (ARP) was undertaken in the late 1997 with the support of GTZ/ SHPAP in the project areas of two NGOs (namely, Sanghamitra Service Society in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, and SHARE, Vellore, Tamil Nadu). The objective of the project was to enhance institutional capacity of NGOs and Self Help Groups (SHGs) to analyse different issues relating to poverty, contribute to the widened scope for sustained involvement of different types of poverty groups and ensure that their perspectives inform the policies and the concerned actions. Learning was in-built in this project to facilitate a continuous learning process where research leads to action; action leads to reflection; and, reflection leads to further research. This paper documents the process adopted in the ARP to share the findings and results with a wider audience. However, the process relating to knowledge into action is not included as this process is on going.

The Preparation

The First Step

The first step was to share the idea with all the stakeholders to have a shared understanding of the objectives and process that is going to be adopted, and thereby have collective ownership on the very process itself.

The Process Adopted

Before initiating the ARP, a letter was sent by the GTZ/SHF to five partner NGOs located in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu states requesting their participation. Four agreed to take part and were invited to a one-day workshop in Bangalore to discuss the objectives, activities and methodology of the project. They were requested to take the idea of ARP back to their organisation, and share it with other stakeholders - the Governing Board, staff and target group. They were also requested to collectively decide the villages where the exercises should be conducted, and who among the stakeholders in an organisation should be part of the ARP. Criteria to select the villages and the team were collectively evolved. In view of the frequent turnover of the staff within an organisation, it was decided to include target group members (those SHG leaders who could read and write a little bit) in the team.

The ARP was undertaken only in the project areas of two NGOs as the partnership in the case of the other two was coming to a close for different reasons. Each of the NGOs sent a list of villages where ARP was to be undertaken. These villages were different in socio-economic terms. In the project area of SHARE, one village had urban influence, the second had irrigation, and was dominated by dalits and the third was highly politicised, and sharply divided along caste lines. Of the three villages chosen in the project area of Sanghamitra, one village was dominated by dalits, while the other two had multiple castes, and commercial agriculture. As far as the ARP team was concerned, SHARE sent a list of six members. Of them, two belonged to the target group, while the rest were staff. The team from Sanghamitra consisted of 11 persons, four of these persons were target group members, and have had only primary education.

Problems Faced

- Leaving the decision to NGO leaders to select the team members from within their staff did not work out very well. The nature of work involved in the ARP and requirements in terms of time, commitment, group work and motivation were not properly explained. The decision on the composition of the team was influenced by the availability and training needs of the staff. Further, the assumptions on the continuity of the staff went wrong. As a

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result, there was a high turnover leading to problems such as a lack of continuity in terms of trained personnel and spending too much time to train the newcomers.

◆ Cohesiveness within the team was found to be lacking because of inter-personal relationships, resulting in group work suffering.

◆ A few staff members joined with the expectation of gaining mileage in terms of promotions and tenure. When they learnt that the ARP had nothing to do with the above, their motivation and commitment were affected.

◆ ARP was linked with the future GTZ/SHF support.

Learning Points

◆ Clarify that ARP is related to situation analysis and needs assessment, and that it is not linked to funding.

◆ Start ARP with a meeting where the nature of ARP, type of commitment needed and ownership of the project are explained to the entire organisation.

* Invite the voluntary participation of the staff. After considering commitment, motivation and capacity, prepare a list of probable staff members in the team. The final selection should be left to the NGO.

Training Programme on Concepts and Methods

The objectives of this step were to: a) explain the objectives, activities and expected outcome of ARP to the team members; b) familiarise them with concepts of poverty, causes of poverty, poverty alleviation strategies, local organisations and their characteristics; c) equip them in data collection through PRA techniques; d) prepare them to the fieldwork; e) enable them to prepare a list of 'dos' and 'don'ts' during the fieldwork; and, f) work out a method by which there is a possibility to have daily feedback and discussion during the fieldwork on the process adopted, problems encountered and how to sort out problems.

The Process Adopted

The training programme began with a discussion on the objectives, activities and expected outcome of the ARP. At this stage, the team members had many questions on methodology, time that they might have to spend on the project, the expected impact and the utility of the project. These questions arose because the NGO leaders either did not explain the project or left out some crucial details.

This was followed by a discussion on poverty concepts. Although it was decided very early that the definition of poverty or a list on causes of poverty should not be imposed on the team members, this became inevitable. This was followed by a discussion on various data collection methods. In the training programme conducted in Krishna district, the problems that the team might face in the field were brought out through role-plays, practical examples, group work and rehearsals. All these classroom exercises resulted in preparing a list of 'dos' and 'don'ts' in PRA exercises (Box 1).

Box 1: Dos and Don'ts in conducting PRA exercises

Dos	Don'ts
• Advance preparation for the PRA meeting.	• Do not pose a second question without completely listening to the answer for the first question.
• Ensuring clarity in questions.	
• Have patience (in the exercise) and listen (to people).	• Do not condemn their answer.
• Have very good understanding of the topic on which PRA will be conducted. For example, the facilitator conducting PRA on causes of poverty should have clarity on distinction between causes and symptoms of poverty.	• Questions should not hurt and belittle them.
• Discuss and decide the date and time (of PRA exercise) as per the convenience of the people in advance.	• Should not laugh when they are explaining their problems.
• Develop skills to mobilise people for the meeting and ensure that the discussion is interesting.	• Do not impose your ideology and views.
• Enable the people to develop self-confidence that they know, can participate and contribute to the exercises.	• Do not complete the exercise in a hurried manner just because time is insufficient. Request whether you could go back some other time.
• Should be attentive, sensitive, and sympathetic to people's opinions.	
• Follow good methods such as sitting on the ground along with the people and eating food along with them.	• Do not give lengthy speeches.
• Know well in advance your role in the exercise.	• Do not conduct PRA meetings in public places when sensitive information is to be collected.
• Enable people to understand the complications that may arise in the usage of locally available things such as foodgrains and pulses, colour, beads, and *rangoli* powder. Select items that are locally available.	• Do not take notes in front of them.

In Tamil Nadu, the team was taken for fieldwork on the last day of the four-day training programme to conduct wealth-ranking exercise. After a three-month break, training was provided on seasonality mapping and resource mapping before these were conducted in the field. As the staff was busy with organisational work, there was further delay in conducting the remaining exercises.

In Andhra Pradesh, the team completed the exercises on social mapping and tested out the remaining soon after the training programme. But, there was, however, a gap between resource mapping and wealth ranking, and between wealth ranking and focus group interviews. This gap was considered essential as some of the team members were near illiterate, and needed some time to digest the information. Another reason for the gap was that the exercises were organically linked; for instance, until the results of wealth ranking were processed and analysed, the focus group interview on seasonality mapping, causes for poverty and poverty alleviation strategies could not be undertaken. Some unforeseen factors (floods and untimely rains) resulted in longer breaks in the process.

The Outcome

- Strengthened the analytical and reasoning capacity of the NGO team.

- The NGO team learnt the concepts, causes and dimensions of poverty, types of poverty alleviation strategies, the difference between political and individual strategies, and why the poor found it difficult to adopt certain strategies.

- In addition to inputs on local organisations and their characteristics, methods by which an organisation could be evaluated in terms of accountability, transparency, poverty commitment and efficiency were provided.

- A set of techniques (PRA, survey, interview and case study) was made available to establish rapport with the people, analyse their situation and needs.

Problems with the Process

- As the training on concepts and several methods took place in Tamil Nadu at different time points, the team could not see the continuity in the concepts and methods.

- The frequent turnover of staff implied that the composition of the team was different in each training programme, certain amount

of repetition was essential and considerable time was spent for the training itself.

- There were different perceptions between the ISEC and NGO teams on the importance (in terms of time) to be given to learning and internalising the concepts, and to field-testing the concepts.

- For a number of reasons, there were delays between one component of the ARP and another. This resulted in the loss of continuity, the team members losing interest in the process and the villagers losing track of the process.

- Although not intended, the classroom inputs dominated the training programme.

Learning Points

- Organising training and data collection at one stretch. Data collection to be taken up soon after the training is conducted to minimise the time gap. This implies that ARP is to be planned at a time when the people, and the organisations are relatively free, i.e., in South India, this period could be April to June. During the agricultural season (July to December), agricultural labourers and cultivators are busy with their work. Similarly, during February and March, the NGO staff are busy with the annual closing of accounts and writing of reports.

- After explaining the objectives, activities and expected outcome of the ARP, spend one day in explaining the concepts of poverty and local organisations.

- The discussion on the concepts of poverty and local organisations should build on the existing knowledge of the participants (Boxes 2 and 3).

- Relate the conceptual discussion on poverty and local organisations with the methodology by asking leading questions such as which methods are the most suitable to enable people to jointly analyse poverty and local organisation, and prepare action plans. If they mention the PRA techniques, discuss these techniques thoroughly.

- After providing a brief description, demonstrate how each of the methods is actually conducted. Explain also the purpose and output of the exercises. It is important to relate each of the exercises with the conceptual discussion on poverty.

* While the demonstrations on PRA methods are going on, keep building a list of 'dos' and 'don'ts' on one side of the blackboard.

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Box 2: Initiating a discussion on poverty concepts

Begin with a question on, 'What do the participants think poverty is?' The most probable reply will be lack of basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter. Pose them a question that 'if a household has access to food temporarily, is it out of poverty'. The participants are most likely to bring the vulnerability dimension. Slowly, enable them to bring non-material deprivation (such as vulnerability, isolation and powerlessness) into discussion.

In the second part, ask them, 'who are the poor in their villages?' They are most likely to come up with an answer that households belonging to dalits, tribals and backward castes are the poor. Direct the discussion on to the gender dimension of poverty.

Enable the participants to have a discussion on, 'why are they poor?' This will be the most difficult part for them as they will get confused between causes and symptoms of poverty. Hence, collect all the factors that they mention without making a distinction. Then, show how 'causes' are different from 'symptoms'. Take 'lack of land' as cause of poverty, and 'disability' as symptom to drive the point.

Finally, initiate a discussion on poverty alleviation strategies of the poor. The participants are most likely to come up with individual strategies such as wage labour and undertaking IGAs, and may not bring 'collective' strategies. Try to make a distinction between 'Political' strategies (i.e., those having an impact on structural causes of poverty such as powerlessness) and individual strategies (those having impact only on individual household's income). Also make a distinction between negative strategies (migration, beedi rolling) and positive strategies (milch animal, leasing in land).

The entire discussion may take 3-4 hours of time depending on the moderation skills. The participants are more likely to relate to the discussion if the deliberations take place around one or two case studies that they themselves come up with.

Avoid giving 'definitions'. Instead, write 'key words' on a chart to give some idea on what was being discussed and come back to the chart during the remaining process of data collection, analysis and action plan preparation. If needed, an attempt could be made at the end to arrive at definitions.

Box 3: Initiating a discussion on local organisations involved in poverty alleviation.

Ask the participants to list the organisations in the locality. From the list, ask them to identify the organisations involved in poverty alleviation. As most of the people do not think that organisations like gram panchayats and co-operatives have anything to do with poverty, there is a tendency to exclude them. One must be careful to include all the organisations connected with poverty alleviation, even if the contribution of these local organisations to poverty alleviation is insignificant. Also enable them to include informal organisations such as SHGs and chit funds. Encourage the participants to prepare their own criteria to assess these organisations. From various factors that they bring, enable them to prepare a list consisting of accountability, efficiency, poverty commitment, and transparency and help them assess an organisation.

Acquiring Knowledge

During this phase, data on magnitude and causes of poverty, and strategies adopted by the local organisations and the poor themselves to come out of poverty were collected through the following methods.

Social Mapping

This method, which was used as an entry point into the village, aimed to map the utilisation pattern of the resources available to the villagers such as housing and other infrastructural facilities (sanitation, water, electricity, school, child-care centre, PHC, bank, co-operative, etc). The purpose was also to map other characteristics such as female-headed households, handicapped, educated girls and boys, widows and child labour. This exercise was undertaken with all the people in a locality or a village.

Process Adopted

The ARP team visited the selected villages (on the day of appointment made with the villagers earlier), and encouraged the people to draw a map of the village with the help of 'rangoli' powder supplied to them by the team. The villagers were encouraged to use different places such as school premises, pathway and the courtyard of a house (Box 4).

Outcome

- Each of the villages produced a map with available resources and facilities, which provided a view that was not available to them before.

- The map helped the villagers to realise the magnitude of the problems, such as the presence of child labour, low enrolment rates among girls, sanitation and where the facilities were concentrated.

- The social maps provided initial ideas relating to the situation of the poor in the villages. They also provided clues to the questions such as: 'Who are the poor?' 'Where are they located?' 'What type of poverty do they have?'

Problems Encountered

The social mapping was different from the rest of the methods in two respects: first, it was the initial exercise conducted by the team and also done in a village. Secondly, the exercise was conducted openly. Because of these, the following problems were encountered.

- Lack of preparation not only in terms of material needed to conduct the exercise but also in terms of inability to expect different types of questions/objections/problems from the people and provide appropriate responses was a common problem.

Box 4: Conducting Social Mapping

Requirements

- A team of three persons should conduct the exercise: one to facilitate the exercise, one to immediately copy the information on to a chart including the legend and, one to support the process. The last person could explain the purpose, utility and end-use of exercises to curious onlookers.

- Rangoli powder of different colours to draw the map of roads, houses and different facilities

- Charts, brown sheets, small cards and colour pens to transfer the information collected on to charts and brown sheets.

- Emergency lights if the exercises are conducted during the night-time.

Find out

- the most convenient time for the villagers.

- the village size since, in large villages, it may be necessary to conduct social mapping in two-three localities and make the combined map later.

- a place to conduct social mapping. The school premise is good if the mapping is done during the night or on a holiday. The courtyard of a house is good if the household is acceptable to all. To the extent possible, avoid pathways.

Steps

- Go to each of the household and invite the woman/man of the household for a meeting.

- When about 20 people from the locality are present in the meeting, explain the purpose, utility and end-use of the exercise.

- Encourage someone from the group to start drawing the main road, and locate important facilities.

- Once this is complete, encourage those present to draw their own house (whether it is non-durable, semi-durable and durable) and other social characteristics.

- Encourage them to use locally available material such as seeds and different types of stones to give details on the number of children, school or non-school going children, etc.

- Copy the data immediately on to a chart, and cards.

- One of the points emphasised in the training programme was the use of locally available material (such as stones and seeds) in the mapping exercises. The team encouraged the villagers to use seeds to make a note of village characteristics. This being the first exercise in the village, the team was busy explaining the exercise to the participants, and also onlookers, and hence, did not copy down the information on to a chart paper. As it continued till midnight, the team members retired with the hope that they

could continue on the following day. In the morning, all the cereals and pulses kept as legend were eaten by hens and cows and valuable information was lost! The exercise had to be redone.

- People objected to the conduct of social mapping exercise on some pretext or the other.

- In one of the villages, Muslim women refused to use 'rangoli' powder as it is widely regarded as sacred powder used by Hindus for religious and festival purposes.

Learning

- Conducting PRA methods in NGO target villages does not mean that everyone co-operates. As some of the PRA methods are conducted for the entire village, one has to patiently explain the purpose, utility and the end-use.

- While conducting PRA exercises, socio-culturally accepted means and locally appropriate material are to be used.

Wealth Ranking Exercise (WRE)

Purpose

The main purpose of conducting the exercise was to: i) know the number of poor and poorest in the villages; ii) learn how the people themselves look at poverty, i.e., what characteristics would make a household poor, poorest, and so on; iii) select the key informants for the remaining exercises on seasonal mapping and Focus Group Interviews; iv) build baseline information.

Process Adopted

The team first prepared (or obtained) a list of households either from NGO records or from electoral rolls, and wrote the names of heads of households on cards mainly to identify the households (Box 5). The team made an appointment with those women or men (numbering about 10-15) who could articulate on the wealth situation in the locality, and those belonging to different socio-economic groups in the locality.

The team met these key informants in a private house, school building or gram panchayat office and provided an explanation on the exercise. Subsequently, the team asked them whether the households in the locality could be classified into some wealth categories. If yes, how many categories and what should they be? If they readily came up with the categories, the team adopted the categories. Otherwise, the team facilitated a process to enable the key informants to come up with a

Box 5: Wealth Ranking Exercise

Requirements

- A complete list of the households in a village where ranking will be done.

- Cards with names of heads of households and identification details such as door number, surname and family name.

- A person who could draw pictures to convey the criteria evolved by people.

Find Out

- The most convenient time for the people.

- Size of the village. The WRE could be conducted in one meeting if the village consists of less than 100 households. If it is big, conduct the exercise in homogenous wards/localities, and in small groups. Important criterion for organising such meetings is that people need to be aware of the poverty status of other households living in their ward/locality.

Steps

- Prepare the list of households.

- Write down the names of household heads if WRE is done on the basis of household characteristics. If ranking is done with perceptions of individuals, the names of individuals are to be written.

- Conduct the meeting in a private and/or closed place.

- Explain the purpose of WRE is to have better understanding of the society, which would help to initiate appropriate programmes for their development.

- When people come up with categories on the cards use stones or other devices so that the categories become clear to the people present. Place the cards in front of them.

- Read out the names on cards and place them where people want them. Do not push them to arrive at a judgement. Allow them to think about the placement of cards. Ask whether everyone present agrees with the placement.

- Ask the people to count the number of cards in each category. Write down the initial count.

- After all the cards are placed, request them to come up with reasons for ranking the households (Box 6). One facilitator should ask the reasons for categorisation, and the other should take down the notes.

- When providing reasons for categorising the households in each category, prepare the pictures relating to reasons.

- Place the pictures relating to reasons in front of them. Then ask the people whether they would like to reconsider the placement of cards.

- After revisiting the cards, request the people to count them once again. Write down the revised count.

- Answer any questions relating to the exercise and purpose.

- Through all this, remember to be a friend.

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categorisation. The names of these categories were written on a card and kept for everybody to see. Pictures depicting different categories of the poor were drawn to help them to easily identify.

One of the key informants was asked to read out the names, while others were encouraged to point out to which category the household belonged. In most of the cases, the decision was easily arrived at; but, categorisation of a few households was not easy, and resulted in a debate among the key informants. Whenever there was controversy between two persons on whether a particular household was the poor or poorest, they were encouraged to keep the card between these two categories and were requested to have a second look.

After the categorisation, one of the key informants was encouraged to count the number of cards in each category. Then, they were asked to share the criteria adopted in the categorisation. The key informants, until then, had some criteria at the back of their minds and this was gradually shared with others. The team made a note of this criteria, and tried to put the criteria in the form of 'images' or 'pictures.' At the end, the team members read out the criteria and/or showed the pictures to get their confirmation (see Box 6, for a checklist).

When the key informants confirmed the criteria, the team proceeded further by requesting them to have a second look at the cards. This time, one of the team members read out the name on each card, and asked them whether the card should remain where it was or whether it should be shifted to another category. The key informants were encouraged to come up with the reasoning for either of the options and were requested to justify this. The team quickly wrote down these details on the back of the card. The details were: assets (land, house, livestock, etc.), education (number of children going to school, and which type of school), employment and unemployment, government assistance, number of salary earners, number of consumers to workers, etc. This became the baseline data.

After the re-classification was complete, the team encouraged one of them to count the number of cards in each of the categories, and made a note of the cards in each category during the second round. Further, the key informants were encouraged to mark these households on the resource map prepared earlier. The key informants were then asked to analyse this information. After the analysis was complete, the team shared the information on what would be the rest of the exercises with them, and thanked the respondents.

Outcome

- At the end, the team had a list of households categorised into different wealth groups (i.e., the magnitude of poverty in the village).

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Box 6: Checklist for criteria on categorisation

Note that one should not prompt the people with the following. After obtaining their reasons for placing the cards, one may remind them if they have not covered any of the following points. If members mention factors other than those mentioned below, they should be welcomed.

- Female-headed or male-headed households.

- Food availability in a year (Are members in a household able to secure three meals all through the year?)

- Whether the household has higher number of children and dependants (including the disabled).

- Number of adult working members. Are children forced to work in agriculture or non-agriculture?

- Employment availability (yearly, seasonal, casual or permanent).

- Ownership of land and type of land owned (irrigated, dry, cultivable waste, *patta* land, *poromboke* land, etc.)

- Income of the household.

- Type of house (hut, thatched roof or concrete house with *pucca* roof). Whether the house is non-durable, semi-durable or durable.

- Indebtedness

- Type of jewellery.

- Are women working as agricultural labourers or in any non-agricultural work?

- Are people with illness treated in the local hospital first or city hospital first?

- Savings habit: are savings useful to tide over difficult times during rainy season?

- Do they send children (male and female) to school?

- Ownership of productive and consumable assets.

- Clothing: do they have only one pair or several pairs?

- Availability of ration card and whether the card is mortgaged.

- The team could have a list of criteria to categorise the people into very poor, poor, better-off and well-off. The criteria was useful not only to understand the poverty generating processes in the village but also as a method to categorise the people in any other village.

- The method also provided some idea to the team on what aspects they should concentrate in their remaining exercises with the people. In other words, the team already obtained ideas on dimensions and causes of poverty.

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- The team also had baseline information, the basis on which the impact of future interventions (if any) would be assessed.

- The community would come to know 'who were the poor in their village', and why they are poor'. In other words, the WRE made the people start thinking in terms of the poverty generating processes in the village.

Problems

- Since conducting one WRE for a large village was difficult, locality-wise exercises were done. In such a case, aggregating the data for the entire village was difficult.

- Quarrels between two key informants with regard to placing of cards in a particular category. These quarrels took place mainly because some of them thought that WRE was being done to select beneficiaries for a government programme.

- The WRE raised expectations among the people. In those cases where there was a delay between the exercises, the expectations persisted, and had a negative impact on the process.

Learning

- The facilitator has to play a crucial role even in those villages where the NGO has been working for a long period to avoid raising of expectations.

- Do not compare the results of WRE from one locality with that of the other as this may lead to wrong conclusions. For instance, the poorest from the SC locality are different from those in the upper caste locality as the yardstick used is different across the localities.

Seasonality Mapping

This exercise maps a seasonal pattern of employment and wages, disparities in employment and wages of men and women, savings, expenditure, credit and diseases in a year. The main purpose of the exercise is to understand the severity and depth of poverty in a locality.

Process Adopted

The team made an appointment with a small group of male and female agricultural labourers, and employers. The team could find who among the villagers were agricultural labourers and employers from the WRE. Key informants were encouraged to map month-wise variations in

employment, unemployment, wages, expenditure (on account of known and unknown factors) and credit needed. They were also encouraged to locate the months in which the household members went without food and in such cases who among the household members were the most affected.

Outcome

- The severity and depth of poverty in the villages were obtained.

- The information on employment opportunities in the village, gender differences in employment availability and wages, seasonal variations in the outbreak of diseases, savings potential and expenditure was obtained.

- It became possible to decide savings amount, seasonal variations in credit requirement, repayment schedule and amount and if and when a micro-finance programme started in the village.

Problems

- In large villages, seasonality mapping was done in 3-4 localities. Since the months followed by Muslim and Hindus were different, aggregation of data for all the localities proved to be difficult.

Focus Group Interviews

In all the villages, interviews were conducted with focus groups, i.e., the poor and poorest belonging to the dalit community, the Muslim community and others. These interviews were conducted to enable the focus groups to map:

- relative importance of local organisations (both state and non-state) for the poor to come out of poverty

- future strategies that the poor would like to adopt to come out of poverty

- causes of poverty, and enabling them to rank the causes

- poverty alleviation strategies (individual, collective and political) adopted by the poor

The purpose of conducting the focus group interviews was to identify the causes of poverty. The mapping on poverty alleviation strategies adopted both by the poor and local organisations was done to analyse the pros and cons of strategies for future replication. The objective was also to understand the strategies that the poor would like to adopt in the future, and to prepare the ground for an action plan to alleviate poverty.

Process Adopted

In all the villages, the focus groups were selected from the data on socio-economic status collected through the WRE. Care was taken to ensure that at least a few of the persons participated in WRE and seasonality mapping for the sake of continuity. It was sought to find out whether they would be in a position to spend about 2-3 hours with the team.

On the day of appointment, the team met the focus group and explained the purpose. The exercise began with the display of pictorial information on wealth ranking and seasonality. The focus groups were asked to analyse the information. After the analysis was complete, they were asked to list the causes of poverty. Whenever the focus groups mentioned the symptoms as causes, there was discussion to make a distinction between these two, and the causes were listed in cards. The focus groups were then asked to rank the causes of poverty. This information was written on a chart and displayed in the room itself.

The focus groups were then asked to list the strategies that they adopt to come out of poverty. Whichever strategy was mentioned, the team simply transferred it on to a chart. When the focus group did not mention about collective and political strategies, the team members tried to lead the informants to divulge information on these strategies. The team members provided some pictorial representation of the strategies mentioned, and encouraged the informants to rank them.

Subsequently, the informants were asked to list the strategies that they would like to adopt to come out of poverty, and rank these strategies. If the informants provided only individual strategies, the discussion was continued to find out whether the people would like to adopt any collective and political strategies. After encouraging them to analyse the information, brainstorming on future strategies was done to include the same in the action plans.

Output

- The team had information on causes of poverty, poverty alleviation strategies adopted by the poor and local organisations, and strategies that they would like to adopt in the future.

- This information helped the team to see whether there was continuity in terms of linkages between magnitude and causes of poverty on the one hand, and past and future strategies of the poor and local organisations on the other.

- This information was helpful to the team to have some idea on the likely action plans for the village or for a particular group.

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Problems

The team found this exercise to be difficult because all the people did not participate in the exercise. Subsequently, the ranking by one articulate person became the ranking of the entire group in one or two cases.

Triangulation Exercises

Additional information from the households is needed to authenticate the data collected from the households. Further, since expectations may have influenced the results of WRE and causes of poverty, the following additional exercises needed to be conducted.

- Time related mapping to trace the important socio-economic changes in a village was done with two or three elders in each of the villages. The yardstick used to recall the changes (in irrigation facilities, crops grown, employment opportunities, infrastructure, land values, health and education facilities) was different in each case. Some used important events in their lives (such as birth of a child). Some used their age (i.e., when the person was 15 years old, 28 years old). One person used different political rules (such as congress rule, etc.). In these exercises, PRA techniques were used to facilitate the respondent to recall the changes, and quantify the extent of change.

- Collection of primary data by canvassing a questionnaire to crosscheck the information obtained from PRA exercises.

- Collection of data (on loans and assistance received) from government offices and banks to crosscheck the information on mapping of local organisations. This information was also useful to build the capacity of the poor with regard to what exactly they were getting from the government. Though this information was useful to triangulate the PRA exercises, the NGO team was not positively inclined towards these exercises, as it took a long time to collect and analyse the data.

Knowledge into Action

After data collection, action plans were prepared for the entire village or only for the poor. The ARP mainly focused on the preparation and presentation of action plans at the levels of village and block (sub-district). The NGO from Andhra Pradesh has been preparing action plans for a large number of SHGs in the district in collaboration with other NGOs.

Village Level Action Plan

Purpose

The main purpose was to bring different village level development actors together to prepare an action plan aimed at initiating, implementing and monitoring the poverty alleviation efforts. This exercise was conducted with members and leaders of SHGs, elected leaders of gram panchayats, village level officials and bankers. In the control villages, there were women and men, and leaders of youth associations. In Tamil Nadu villages, traditional leaders attended the meetings as the system of traditional leadership is practised here.

Process

The process adopted in Andhra villages was different from that in Tamil Nadu villages in the sense that action plan preparation in the former took care of problems noticed in the latter. Hence, the process adopted in Tamil Nadu was as follows.

Responding to the invitation by the NGO leader, traditional leaders, representatives of gram panchayats and leaders of youth associations attended a one-day meeting in each of the three villages. Of about one hundred participants in each of these meetings, 60-70 were women. The programme was conducted in two sessions. During the first session, an introduction to the ARP was given and the team presented the research findings with visual aids like overhead projector and charts. The participants were invited to comment on the methodology and end-results. There was no discussion on methodology of wealth ranking, seasonality mapping, causes of poverty and strategies that they adopted. But, a few doubts were expressed on mapping of local organisations as the participants understood the distance in geographical terms rather than in terms of poverty orientation. Barring this, the people present expressed that the information was correct and accurate.

The discussion on action plans was initiated with the focus on causes of poverty and future strategies of the poor. The discussion initially concentrated on the identification of needs (individual and group). An effective facilitation was needed to direct the discussion towards strategies and action plans. The predominant view of the participants was that undertaking of certain income generating activities and awareness building activities was needed for the time being, and long-term strategies aimed at poverty reduction could be given a thought later. The traditional leaders and elected representatives of the gram panchayats contributed considerably to the preparation of action plans.

Output

- At the end, the SHGs together with the other development actors at the village level developed an action plan based on the situation and needs of the poor.

- The villagers had been meeting the ARP team in small groups for data collection. They did not have much idea on what would be the end product. With an action plan emerging and other development actors present in the meeting, the interest of the people in the process was more than doubled.

- For the villagers, the workshop was first of its kind which provided a ground for the people and elected leaders to come together in one meeting to discuss the issues relating to poverty alleviation.

- The meeting also helped the people to demand accountability from the elected representatives. In one of the villages, the poor asked a few questions to their ward member in the gram panchayat regarding whether the gram panchayat could support the activities identified and incorporated in the action plan. She was not able to answer the questions and admitted in the meeting that she was not very much aware of the panchayat activities. The participants also added that she was not a person who could decide for the panchayat nor could talk in the panchayat for the people.

- The meetings also helped to question the elected representatives with regard to their biased activities. In one of the villages in Tamil Nadu, one person alleged that the ward member was showing favours towards his own community in the distribution of milch cows. This resulted in considerable debate and discussion among the people who attended the meeting.

Problems

- There was a dilemma between inviting as many people to improve the ownership, and inviting only a few selected villagers and important development actors in the village to have a meaningful interaction. In Tamil Nadu villages, the preference was for the former, which has had its own problems. The participants' strength was quite high to begin with; but, slowly, people started to move out of the meeting, and at the end not many were left in the meeting.

- The elected leaders of gram panchayats did not stay until the end. They left soon after the presentation of the results was over.

- With the number of participants being large, the workshop could not discuss the issues seriously. It became more of information sharing and brainstorming rather than preparing for an action plan.

- The availability of space to conduct this kind of meeting was a problem in rural areas. The most convenient place was the school building. But with school functioning during the entire week, the

workshop had to be conducted only on Sunday. Also getting the village-level officials on Sundays was difficult.

- The meeting was conducted in the village itself as it was felt that this would be convenient to a large proportion of the people, including men and women. But, conducting the large meeting created another kind of problem, namely, people could not sit in the meeting, and kept going and coming.

Learning

- It is important to develop a draft action plan in the small meetings and present the same in the larger ones as it is difficult to involve people to prepare the action plan in large meetings. In any case, the villagers may not be in a position to spend so much of time for the meeting. This can be done till the villagers develop the capacity to prepare action plans on their own.

- There is a need to prepare very well for the workshop.

- It is better to involve all the development actors, including government officials and bankers, at the village level in the meeting.

- The people normally come up with only activities resulting in individual benefits. They may not come up with strategies or any action plan having significant impact on the structures prevailing at the village level. Hence, this needs to be taken up as a continuous process.

Block Level Action Plan

Workshops were conducted at the block level involving people from selected villages and block level officials (elected leaders of gram panchayats, bankers, leaders and members of SHGs, traditional leaders, the poor and the ARP team from the NGO) to strengthen the action plans developed at the village level. The second objective was to share the information, obtain feedback from the concerned officials, and commitment for resources, if needed. And, finally, to lobby and advocate the utility of the ARP and the need to look at the problem holistically and bring various actors together for sustainable poverty alleviation.

The Process Adopted

The workshop to develop block level plans was conducted for three days, each day meant for one village. Every day, the meeting began with a welcome and a brief introduction to the ARP given by the NGO. This was followed by the presentation of results by the ARP team members, and

presentation of action plan by the leaders of SHGs. The visual aids like OHP and charts were used in the presentation. The officials sought a few clarifications on the methodology and results. For instance, one official asked why data on four categories of people were presented when the focus was only on the poor.

In the afternoon, the participants were divided into 3-5 groups for discussion on the action plan. Each of the groups reworked the action plans prepared at the village level and added new activities to the list. The final output contained far more detailed information on resources and how to go about acquiring the same. The group reports were presented in the plenary, and all the participants provided comments on action plans.

Lack of close relationship between causes and action plan caught the attention of one or two officials. Similarly, the action plans reflected the individual strategies, and not political strategies. It was noted in the workshop that there was need to think of political strategies once the immediate needs of the poor were met.

Output

- At the end, the SHGs, elected representatives to gram panchayats, officials and the ARP team had an action plan to be implemented in a time-bound manner.

- Helped the different actors to come together on a single platform. The ARP data, which conveyed certain scientific look, objectivity and seriousness, helped the officials to make up their mind with regard to the implementation.

- Convergence between people's needs and programmes of different development actors (government departments, banks, gram panchayats and co-operatives) could be achieved.

- Higher acceptance of SHGs by the officials.

- Helped further the linkages between SHGs and government departments.

Problems

- People gave priority to only programmes that benefited them individually.

- People did not think of those actions which will have an impact on structural aspects conditioning poverty. For instance, neither the people nor the team thought that it was their right to access the resources, and that there should be concrete action plan towards achieving that goal.

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- The follow-up of action plans suffered because it was felt that the ARP team should take a lead in monitoring the action plans. In the context of problems discussed with the team (see section 2), this meant that there was no effective monitoring of the action plans.

Conclusions

The ARP provides valuable inputs to those organisations, which want to become learning ones. It also enables the project initiators to understand the situation of the poor, their needs, and prepare an action plan to alleviate poverty based on situation and needs. For poverty reduction to take place, the process of learning, action, and reflection should become an integral part of an organisation. It is not sufficient if this is taken as a one-time project and follow-up is not adequate.

The PRA techniques are particularly helpful to enable peoples' participation. But, there are limitations such as longer time needed if the exercise is to be conducted in larger number of villages and difference between these methods and survey. The survey would capture the views of several people on what strategies need to be adopted, while the same may not be possible in PRA exercises if effective facilitation is not done. Thus, there is trade-off between survey and PRA if the exercise were to be conducted in a larger number of villages. This could be sorted out by conducting social mapping, WRE, seasonality mapping and focus group interviews, and canvassing a short questionnaire on strategies and local organisations. The difference between the results of survey and PRA could be sorted out with the help of a daily review of the process.

There is a danger that the needs-analysis may result in coming up with a shopping list and that people may show preference to poverty alleviation rather than poverty reduction. It is also possible that the poor may come up with individual strategies aimed at their survival and security. They may not come up with the political strategies that will have influence on structures that perpetuate inequality and that generate poverty.. Hence, this aspect needs to be borne in mind from the beginning, and effective facilitation assumes importance.

For significant and sustainable impact on poverty reduction, situation analysis, needs assessment and preparation of action plan should become integral to the intervention process adopted by an organisation. Where this is difficult, there is need to collaborate with Gram Panchayats, which are also supposed to prepare area plans based on the methodology outlined in this paper. If these two actors can come together in this area of action research, the benefits to the community can be enormous.