



Participatory Rural Appraisal as a Tool of Development Communication: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is one of the most sought-after participatory approaches used in community development studies. PRA has undergone significant evolution in its application since its conceptualization in the 1980s. Although conceptualized as a tool of community empowerment, early studies used PRA primarily as a data collection tool. In the recent past, PRA has been recognized by various studies for its potential in development communication to empower communities, especially by fostering a participatory developmental approach. This paper, through a systematic literature review, analyses the methodological shift in PRA, tracing its evolution from a primarily data extractive practice to one rooted in community reflection. We analyse how researchers from various academic fields, including agriculture, community media, and public communication, have applied PRA effectively in encouraging communities to describe their situations, prioritize their needs, diagnose problems, and engage in effective participatory development. The paper summarizes the key contrasts and similarities of how PRA has been utilized in these studies, apart from identifying the chief criticisms that have been raised against it. By reviewing the recent studies that employ PRA, we examine the elements of the PRA, including transect-walks and grass-root level interactions that continue to remain relevant as chief tools of facilitating community-led development.

Keywords: Participatory Rural Appraisal, Community Media, Community Development, Community Media, Literature Review.

1 Introduction

Since the 1980's, Participatory Rural Appraisal has continued to be one of the most effective participatory methodological approaches to conduct participatory research in the areas of community development and development communication [1]. PRA uses participation as its main guiding principle and is described by Chambers [1] as a learning process that gives participants of a community developmental effort, opportunity to learn about their environment. Further, it provides the researchers with an opportunity

to shape their perception and attitudes towards community development and participatory communication. PRA has gained significant attention and application in the field of rural development as a mode of collective research rooted in local diversity that emphasizes the active involvement of local communities in decision-making and problem-solving processes, empowering them to identify and address their own needs [2] [3] [4]. This paper provides a systematic review of existing literature that either studies or applies Participatory Rural Appraisal. The paper summarizes the major aspects of PRA and how it stands apart compared to other such participatory approaches.

1.1 Objectives of this paper

This paper provides a detailed and systematic review of the existing body of work that deals with Participatory Rural Appraisal. The objectives of the review are as follows:

- 1.To systematically analyze the existing body of academic work that is centered around Participatory Rural Appraisal, its origin, evolution, and application.
- 2.To compare and understand how scholars across the years have theorized and approached Participatory Rural Appraisal as a tool of Development communication and Participatory Community Development.
- 3.To analyze the individual methodological components and data collection approaches that are subsumed under Participatory Rural Appraisal and their uses across various academic domains.
- 4.To analyze the merits and critiques of Participatory Rural Appraisal as put forth by existing studies to contribute towards a better understanding of how PRA can be used in contemporary and future developmental studies.

2 Tracing the Evolution of Participatory Rural Appraisal.

Studies have found that PRA methodology, through its evolution, has developed commonalities with many aspects of allied research, including Activist Participatory Research, Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and applied anthropology, among other such methods for developmental planning [5]. PRA, like the other participatory communication approaches, emerged from the critiques of conventional development approaches. It called for greater community empowerment unlike previous top-down approaches, that often looked at communities, solely as objects of study. PRA, therefore, also represents an evolution from earlier approaches such as Rapid Rural Appraisal, that failed to engage stakeholders in program and policy designing [6].

Adebo [7], observes that PRA empowers communities to effectively mobilize human and natural resources, collaboratively define problems, critically analyse past success and failure rates, evaluate priorities and opportunities, and ultimately develop a systematic and context-specific plan of action [7]. This is echoed by Chambers [5],

where he says that PRA analyses behaviour, methods, and relationships [8], to actively engage community members in the collection and interpretation of data rather than imposing external frameworks that may not capture local needs.

Studies have found PRA to be effective in giving flexibility to researchers and ability to communities in adapting to diverse cultural and social contexts. It emphasized the inclusion of the valuable knowledge and experiences that the local communities bring with them [9] [10] [8]. According to Lara and Fern [11], PRA enables stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of their local environment and social dynamics, empowering them to identify and address related problems. Further, according to studies [12] [13], PRA, by prioritizing participation and valuing indigenous knowledge and interaction, enables communities to exercise self-determination in assessing their needs, analysing their contexts, and planning for their futures.

3 PRA in application against other participatory approaches

PRA shares similar foundational principles with other approaches including Participatory Action Research (PAR), and Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). While all three methodologies aim to empower communities and utilize local knowledge, they have varying degrees of community involvement and participation that can significantly influence research outcome and subsequent application of findings [8] [14]. PRA emphasizes co-learning, community engagement, and the use of various tools and techniques such as focus group discussion, mapping, transect walk, and key informant participation [15] [8]. Moreover, unlike CBPR and PAR that have been applied across a wider range of societal and community structures, PRA is largely focused on rural development contexts [15][16].

Participative approaches recognize the value of local knowledge and aim to empower communities to identify and address their own needs [4]. For instance, using a combination of PRA techniques such as focus group discussions, key informant interviews and field observation, among others, Parvin et al [17] in their research explored how the residents of Southwestern Bangladesh used collective local knowledge to learn from tropical storms due to changing climatic condition in the coastal part of Bangladesh to adapt pre-cautionary practices. This included storing emergency food, improving house construction approaches and others, even as they continued to face significant challenges. According to the study, the methodology enabled the researchers to actively engage with the community, allowing for a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in mitigating these challenges, based on first-hand information collected from those affected by disasters. In a study [18] from Sri Lanka, PRA was used to mitigate human-elephant conflict by using focus-group discussions, seasonal calendar, mapping and scoring system taking into account the socio-economic condition of the local residents.

The application of PAR by Januarti and Harris [19] in their study on COVID-19 prevention contributed to multiple aspects of adopting health protocols including training the communities in adhering to health protocols, bringing about family empower-

ment to influence collective behaviour, utilizing community leaders and religious leaders of villages to convey health protocols, and increasing quantity and quality of dissemination of information, among others. Lara & Fern [11], similarly employed a year-long PRA workshop in an indigenous community of Mexico to bring together various stakeholders for the promotion of sustainable development. The research in the context of an unsustainable fracking and hydroelectric plant project was attended by various stakeholders. The employment of local language and the assimilation of various viewpoints in a participatory manner contributed to changing attitudes towards development projects that posed threat to the native culture and its biocultural heritage [11].

One of the chief criticisms against PRA is that it was prone to be used merely as a data collection tool, just to facilitate information extraction from communities rather than to facilitate meaningful dialogue and collaborative action. Cornwall [20] argues that PRA was used as an alternate for questionnaire survey, giving development researchers templates to mediate participants preferences [20]. Webber [21] notes that Robert Chambers envisioned the PRA framework mainly to stimulate community awareness and that it was not focused on formulating problems, thus posing inherent limitations.

But in recent years, there has been a methodological shift in PRA making it a versatile tool, which is made evident in the growing body of research that has applied the approach in diverse contexts. This ranges from agriculture [22], disaster management [17], Public Health [12][19], digital media [6], tourism [23] and sustainable development [31], among others. This interdisciplinary application illustrates the versatility of PRA in addressing complex social issues by promoting local ownership and facilitating critical reflection among community members about their circumstances and needs, ultimately enhancing their capacity for self-determination and collective action [32].

4 Mapping in Participatory Rural Approach

Participatory Mapping is a distinct tool of Participatory Rural Appraisal that helps researchers seek visual representations of social and demographic resources from community members. Mapping involves the creation of maps or visual representations by the community members themselves. This process lets the community members contribute to empowerment efforts irrespective of their literacy levels. It allows the usage of any medium including paper, charts, black boards, or even ground to communicate and visually depict scenarios to enhance the stakeholder's understanding and awareness of the subject at hand.

Participatory mapping has been found by researchers to be effective in bringing about social cohesion. It is found to have facilitated towards collaborative problem analysis and project matrix design [17]. For instance, in a study by Jeet et al. [13] that aimed to enhance land and water productivity of an agricultural community in Madhya Pradesh, India, the researchers used a combination of agro-ecological, resource and mobility mappings to understand available resources and identify location-specific problems. This helped the researchers identify issues such as soil sickness, mismanagement of water resources, water scarcity, pest control issues, and crop diseases as major

causes of poor productivity of land and water. Based on the PRA approach, the research was able to formulate a comprehensive Village Agricultural Development Plan (VADP) to aid the village in its development [13]

Mapping methodologies allow the creation of forms of visual representations, such as community resource maps, problem and solution maps, and seasonal calendars, which enhances participants' understanding of their respective socio-economic condition, while also encouraging dialogue and negotiation among diverse stakeholders [32].

The use of visual tools, such as mapping and seasonal calendars, can help elicit local knowledge and facilitate inclusive dialogue. Furthermore, the approach's focus on understanding community dynamics and power structures can contribute to more equitable development interventions [4].

5 Focus Group Discussion as a tool in PRA

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in PRA involves bringing about group discussion among people of the community under study, on a specific subject matter [6]. It allows the researcher to involve multiple stakeholders and their diverse viewpoints in gauging community awareness, especially on a particular subject matter [33]. Focus Group Discussions are being employed in PRA based research to avoid misinterpretation of individual opinion as generalization [34]. Beyond mere data collection, FGD is also used by contemporary PRA research to refine the research objective [35]. In studies that have been employing Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat (SWOT) analysis to gauge Rural Community or any of its aspect, FGD has become one of the key sources for their formulation [36] [37]. For example, in a study on climate change knowledge of a community, FGD enabled the researchers to identify the knowledge gap among some members of the community and also validate their findings [38]. Similarly, a study [17] applied Focus Group Discussion as its chief data collection strategy while applying PRA to elicit response from local communities. This study particularly focused on coastal hazards in Bangladesh and was able to derive through Focus Group Discussion, local information including their problems, awareness, precautionary measures taken, among others to facilitate the implementation of proper disaster management strategies.

6 Transect Walk in PRA

Transect-walk involves systematic walk through the community along with community members, in order to observe activities, survey surroundings and resources, visit different topography to understand situation firsthand, and to inspect technologies among others [1]. According to Dooley [37] transect walk offers a visual point of reference for outsiders in the local communities, their practices, activities and resources. It also gives scope for discussions among the researchers and localities irrespective of their literacy skill and thereby gives a scope for local voices in research.

Transect walks build collaborative discussions that lead to better understanding of local issues and priorities within the community. Sushama et al [39] argue that the method helps bridge the gap between ‘scientific’ and ‘local’ knowledge systems. In a study [40] the researchers employed transect walks in their research to assess women’s health problems, alongside their needs and cultural beliefs. The research by holding transect walk and focus group discussions along with community members, studied the status of water supply and sanitation in the houses at a village being studied. The study eventually allowed researchers to recommend decision makers to provide access to purified drinking water and public transport to the community.

The method serves as a data collection tool for community development, and also to empower community members by involving them directly in the assessment process, making them co-creators of knowledge for their own situation [22] [25] [26] [27] .

7 Ranking Exercise as a PRA Method

Ranking exercises help community members prioritize scarce resources, such as water, land, or funding, by visually demonstrating their relative importance [1]. Given the priority of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) to get the true voice of the locals in the research, ranking methodology contributes towards knowing the needs of the community from its own perspective [1] [12] [28] [30] [17] [24].

Preference ranking allows community members to express their values and priorities explicitly, thereby enabling researchers to identify the most pressing issues and desired outcomes from the perspective of local stakeholders, which is essential for designing effective and culturally sensitive interventions [25]. In the study by Garane and Kibuuka [25], PRA’s combination of mapping and problem ranking exercises were used to aggregate local business communities’ concerns towards preventing copyright infringement. Ranking also enables researchers and communities to gauge the increment progress made during the developmental activities. For instance, in the research into the case detecting childhood blindness, the matrix ranking indicated that the PRA intervention had shown improvement in the health, lifestyle and utilization of health care system among children in a year [12].

Ranking methodology also enables researchers to receive intersectional information from the study group. In PRA research focused on the capacity building of the fishery community in West Bengal in India, the wealth ranking data indicated that 30% of the target group household were ‘very very poor’. The financial position directly demonstrated its inter-relationship with their access to quality of fisheries inputs and technology, access to micro-finance, storage, business scalability and low productivity in fisheries [30].

8 Conclusion

In summary, the paper highlights the relevance of PRA as a valuable approach in community development through participatory approaches. The role of PRA tools such as

transect-walk, focused group discussion, mapping and ranking have facilitated community members to claim ownership of community-led development. PRA approaches have proven effective in encouraging communities to describe their situations and list out their needs, which will eventually enhance their capacity for self-determination and collective action.

In many parts of the world, rural developmental issues are still situated around issues connected with agriculture-oriented economy, transportation-connectivity, drinking water, sustainable job and income [41], sustainable development, disaster management, health and hygiene, and sanitation facility [42], among others despite local governmental interventions and international collaborations. The review also depicts a shift from PRA's application as a tool of data collection to a multi-dimensional and mature participatory methodology, wherein rural communities are enabled to reflect on their problems and empowered to find long-term, sustainable and developmental solutions for their communities. The review also shows that the scope of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) need not be limited to villages alone, and that it can also be applied in urban developmental research. It can be surmised from the existing literature that PRA can be implemented in all of these avenues and illustrates how people's active participation can act as a source for community reflection and action to solve this problem

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