

# Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in Extension

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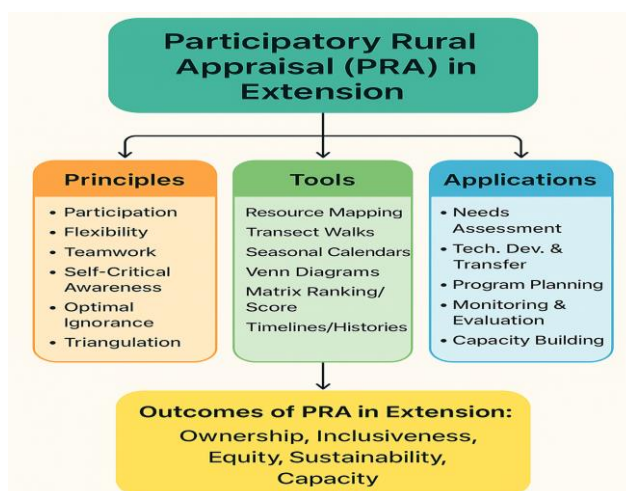
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## INTRODUCTION

Extension in agriculture has been characterized for a long time by a top-down transfer-of-technology system, wherein specialists came up with innovations and transferred them to farmers as end-users. While this strategy ensured that there was massive agricultural development, it tended not to reflect farmers' local knowledge, priorities, and socio-cultural context. Consequently, most technologies were underutilized or were not relevant to farmers' real needs.

In order to surmount such constraints, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) of the late 1980s came into being as a grassroots, participatory approach. PRA focuses on farmers' participation, local ownership, and mutual decision-making in farm planning and development. PRA enables rural people to become active participants instead of passive recipients, thereby making extension more demand-driven, participatory, and sustainable.



## Concept of Participatory Rural Appraisal

PRA stands for a set of participatory methods and approaches that allow rural people to exchange, analyze, and build upon local knowledge, and plan and act in response. In contrast to traditional surveys in which outsiders are in control, PRA is underpinned by the philosophy of "handing over the stick" a symbolic action in which facilitators transfer responsibility for the process to villagers.

In this method, farmers are considered to be specialists of their own surroundings, and extension staff act as facilitators as opposed to teachers. Through the encouragement of farmers to map their resources, prioritize, and examine the problems, PRA deconstructs the process of extension into a participatory learning activity.

### Principles of PRA

The effectiveness of PRA relies on a framework of guiding principles that influence its methodology and practice:

#### Participation

Farmers, women, young people, and marginalized groups are engaged actively in the identification of needs, diagnosis of problems, and suggestion of solutions. Guarantees participation and empowerment of usually overlooked voices in rural development.

#### Flexibility

PRA techniques are not prescriptive; they are modified based on local context, cultural norms, and preferences of the community. For instance, in tribal communities, visual approaches such as mapping and ranking will be more effective than structured interviews.

#### Teamwork

PRA entails multidisciplinary teamwork among extension workers, researchers, local leaders, NGOs, and community members. Collaborative

effort diversifies the process through varied viewpoints and expertise.

#### Self-Critical Awareness

PRA professionals need to examine their biases, assumptions, and attitudes so they do not take over the process. The facilitator's role is to facilitate dialogue, not determine outcomes.

#### Optimal Ignorance

Collect only key and pertinent information, without unnecessary data collection that wastes time and resources. For example, farmers' seasonal calendars are more applicable than collecting complete household data.

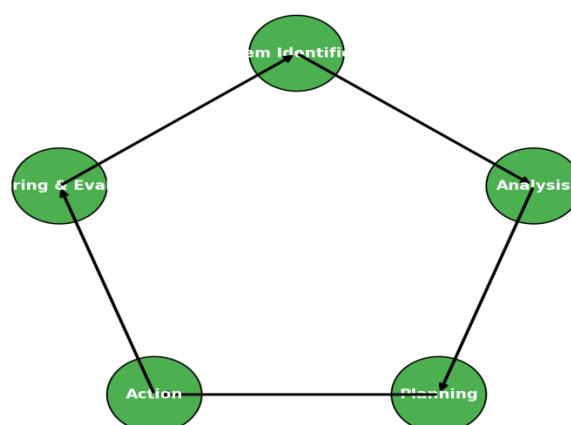
#### Triangulation

Findings cross-checked using several sources, instruments, and points of view. For instance, wealth ranking, focus group discussions, and field transect walks can all be employed to confirm the same concern.

#### Tools and Techniques of PRA

PRA utilizes a wide array of visual, interactive, and participatory methods that stimulate active rural people's participation in examining their realities. Not only do these tools make the process inclusive, but also reduce complex data into forms that communities can directly comprehend and act upon. Some of the most common PRA techniques used are:

PRA Cycle in Extension



**Social and Resource Mapping:** This method assists communities in visually mapping households, farms, natural resources, infrastructure, and institutions. It indicates available resources like water bodies, grazing areas, health centers, schools, and agricultural facilities. Social and resource mapping also leads to discussion regarding the distribution of

resources, inequalities, and possibilities for improving management.

**Transect Walks:** In this approach, extension workers and local farmers walk together through the village and surrounding areas to view land use patterns, soil types, cropping systems, as well as constraints like erosion or water shortage. It offers first-hand information on farming

practices, environmental issues, and socio-economic conditions.

**Seasonal Calendars:** These calendars record changes in agricultural activities, labor requirements, disease outbreaks, pest occurrences, income and expenditure levels, and migration levels in different seasons. This is a crucial tool for crop cycle planning, organizing extension interventions, and determining stress periods (e.g., lean months or peak labor shortages).

**Venn Diagrams (Institutional Analysis):** Venn circles of different sizes are used to illustrate institutions (government departments, cooperatives, NGOs, banks) and their relative influence or significance to rural communities. The Venn diagram facilitates the visualization of institutional connections, power relationships, and service delivery gaps.

**Matrix Ranking and Scoring:** Farmers rank and compare various problems, technologies, or alternatives according to locally applicable standards of cost, availability, effectiveness, and cultural acceptability. The approach helps in decision-making and guarantees that extension advice is consistent with farmers' priorities.

**Timeline and Historical Mapping:** Through the creation of timelines of important events, communities mark shifts in agriculture, natural resources, livelihoods, and socio-cultural patterns over a period of decades. It assists in comprehending long-term patterns in development, repeated challenges, and resilience-building strategies.

### Applications of PRA in Extension

PRA's participatory nature allows it to be extremely flexible for various aspects of agricultural extension and rural development:

**Needs Assessment:** PRA allows extension workers to identify farmers' felt needs, ascertaining that interventions are driven by demand rather than imposed. It brings to the surface latent or marginalized issues, like those of women's workload or landless laborers' requirements, that might otherwise go unnoticed.

**Technology Development and Transfer:** PRA creates a forum for farmer–scientist collaboration, where native knowledge and scientific investigations come together to co-develop context-related technologies. The dual verification improves adoption and adoptability of innovations.

**Program Planning and Implementation:** Extension programs formulated using PRA are

specific to community resources, socio-economic situations, and priorities. This facilitates greater acceptance, eliminates wastage of resources, and enhances program delivery efficiency.

**Monitoring and Evaluation:** Through community participation in monitoring progress, PRA enhances transparency and accountability. Success indicators, in addition to quantitative measures, are included, providing a comprehensive view of development impacts.

**Capacity Building:** PRA enhances leadership, negotiation, and problem-solving capacities among rural communities. Through dialogue and decision-making, communities develop confidence and capacity to undertake their own development projects.

### Advantages of PRA

Application of PRA in extension has several advantages over conventional methods:

**Improves Ownership and Sustainability:** As communities are engaged in planning and decision-making, they become more committed to it, resulting in improved long-term sustainability of projects.

**Documentation of Indigenous Knowledge:** PRA legitimates and incorporates indigenous knowledge, agriculture practices, and cultural values with scientific suggestions. It makes this hybrid method more relevant and adoptable.

**Strengthen Trust and Linkages:** PRA establishes farmers', extension workers', researchers', and policymakers' mutual respect and cooperation. It shifts extension from a pedagogy to a partnership approach.

**Encourages Equity and Inclusiveness:** The participatory approach of PRA brings marginalized sectors like women, small farmers, and landless farmers into planning and sharing the benefits, leading to social justice and balanced rural development.

**Fosters Comprehensive Development:** PRA is not confined to farm productivity alone but covers health, nutrition, education, natural resource management, and diversification of livelihoods, thereby attending to rural development holistically.

**Enhances Relevance and Effectiveness:** Focusing on just what is necessary (maximum use of optimal ignorance) and cross-checking findings through multiple viewpoints (triangulation) ensures data collection and program development efficiency.

### Challenges in Implementation of PRA

Despite the proven success, implementation of PRA in extension is faced with challenges. Some of the key limitations are:

**Requirement of Trained Facilitators:** PRA needs trained facilitators who will be able to balance participation, avoid dominance by local elites, and facilitate marginalized groups (including women and landless farmers) to provide their opinions. The absence of trained human resources generally leads to skewed outcomes.

**Time-Consuming Process:** PRA relies on conversation, group discussion, and consensus decision-making, which require significant time and patience. Rapid results-oriented development agencies might view PRA as slow compared to standard survey techniques.

**Elite Capture and Power Dynamics:** In most rural environments, collective opinion leaders or influential people (wealthy farmers, community leaders) could potentially dominate discussions and silence weaker or marginalized members. This lowers the process's inclusivity.

**Risk of Tokenism:** PRA is sometimes implemented as an occasional activity to meet donor conditions instead of as a continuous process of participation. This casual application undermines its participatory nature and sustained benefit.

**Scaling-Up Challenges:** Outcomes of PRA are extremely location-specific. Though it guarantees contextual applicability, it becomes challenging for extension agencies to scale up lessons to regional or national levels without compromising their local relevance.

**Cultural and Social Barriers:** Where there are strict social hierarchies, gender disparities, or caste stratification, it can be extremely difficult to provide equal participation in PRA exercises. These are best overcome by sensitive facilitation.

**Resource Constraints:** PRA takes time, human resources, and occasional logistical assistance (training, visual aids, documentation). Extension systems with little resources might not be able to use PRA effectively.

### Future Prospects

The relevance of PRA to extension is certain to increase in the years to come in light of international trends in agricultural growth and rural management:

**Bottom-Up Planning:** Governments and development partners increasingly support participatory and decentralized planning. PRA serves to fit right into this format by making sure that farmers' needs shape extension interventions.

**Participatory Governance:** PRA enhances grassroots democratic processes by empowering

people to participate in decision-making and resource management. This is compatible with policies supporting community-driven development (CDD).

**Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA):** As vulnerability to climate change grows, PRA can support communities in identifying risks, recording indigenous coping strategies, and planning adaptation strategies together. Seasonal calendars and resource mapping are particularly valuable for these purposes.

**Integration with ICT Tools:** PRA can be integrated with new digital technologies like mobile applications, GIS, remote sensing, and digital mapping to improve accuracy of data, visualization, and presentation of results. For example, digital maps of resources developed with farmer input can facilitate precision agriculture and improved resource management.

**Institutionalization of PRA:** Universities, agricultural training centers, and extension departments are starting to integrate PRA into curricula and operational procedures. This institutionalization will make PRA practices professional and ensure regular usage.

**Cross-Sectoral Applications:** PRA techniques are being borrowed and applied to health, education, nutrition, and natural resource management beyond agriculture, making it a powerful tool for sustainable rural development.

### CONCLUSION

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is not just a method it is an agricultural extension philosophy paradigm. Beyond the top-down, prescriptive approach, PRA focuses on learning from farmers and not teaching them, thus honoring local knowledge and promoting collective problem-solving.

By facilitating rural communities to examine their own context, rank needs, and plan actions, PRA enhances extension programs to be more pertinent, participatory, and enduring. It encourages ownership, accountability, and empowerment, such that development efforts do not become donor-driven but community-owned processes.

For extension professionals, PRA is not a collection of tools but a philosophy of humility, facilitation, and collaboration. When blended with contemporary scientific understanding and ICT innovations, PRA can enable agricultural extension to become a genuinely participatory, equitable, and forward-looking system.