PRACTITIONERS' CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON PRA AND PARTICIPATION IN NEPAL

IDS WORKING PAPER 122

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SUMMARY

The paper presents a diversity of views held by Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) practitioners in Nepal about the history of PRA, the challenges facing PRA practice and participation in development today, and the ways forward for participation in the future. The paper is intended to provoke further discussion and reflection about PRA by making this diversity of views available to a wider audience. The paper begins by briefly explaining the Nepali context into which PRA has been introduced and spread. Particularly important contextual factors are the rapid mainstream adoption of the language of participation within development organisations, and government democratisation and decentralisation. The paper then presents the views of practitioners about PRA as a tool for use within the project cycle framework, and its strengths and weaknesses when used in this way. A minority of practitioners question the possibility for meaningful empowerment within the project cycle, and so the paper presents their ideas about how PRA can be used to facilitate consciousness raising, social mobilisation, and empowerment when not applied within the project cycle framework. This alternate way of practising PRA raises the possible links between PRA and a rights based approach to development. Beyond understanding PRA as a tool for use in processes of social change, Nepali practitioners also see PRA as a 'way of life,' associating PRA with certain attitudes and behaviour that may influence one's personal life and management styles. Finally, practitioners raised three key challenges for the future of PRA practice in Nepal: continuing innovation; improving learning and training about PRA; and critical reflection on PRA as a means for further learning and improvement.

ISBN 1 85864 338 4

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PREFACE

This working paper is part of a series of papers arising from the **Pathways to Participation** project. The **Pathways to Participation** project was initiated in January 1999 with the aim of taking stock of experience with Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). In the ten years since PRA first began to gain popularity in development, it has come to be used by an enormous range of actors and institutions throughout the globe. Promoted as a common sense, inclusive, accessible and above all 'people-centred' approach, PRA has gained currency in diverse circles and given rise to as diverse an array of practices. Yet what 'PRA' means to the different people who use, commission and experience it has remained rather opaque. From the generalised promotion of PRA to generalised critiques, there is little of that clarity that Cohen and Uphoff (1980) argued so passionately for at the end of a decade in which participation first entered the mainstream of development practice.

The *Pathways to Participation* project grew out of a linked set of concerns. On the one hand, practitioners had been raising questions about issues of quality, depth and ethics for some years. With the rapid uptake of PRA, these concerns were deepening. On the other, with the multiplication of meanings and practices associated with PRA, it seemed increasingly important to gain a clearer sense of what was being done, as well as what worked, for whom and how. Building on the tradition of critical reflection that is embedded in many participatory methodologies, the *Pathways to Participation* project sought to set the meanings and uses of PRA within the particular contexts in which it is practised and with regard to broader currents in participation in development. As an action research process, the project has sought to catalyse and support processes that share the ultimate goal of deepening reflection in order to identify positive measures that could help enhance the integrity and quality of PRA practice. The variety of activities supported by the project range from collaborative case study research, national and international reflection workshops, networking activities, video and practitioner exchanges.

An initial process of open-ended dialogue with a spectrum of actors engaged in various ways with PRA in three focal countries – Kenya, Nepal and Mexico – formed a preliminary starting point for project activities. Three preliminary, agenda-setting country reflection papers were produced, giving rise to a series of focused case studies which explore different dimensions of participatory practice. Two of these initial reflection papers are reproduced in this working paper series; the case studies are to be produced locally. The third paper is to be published as part of a separate publication drawing together case studies from Mexico. The project also supported in-depth field research that sought to explore in depth the practices associated with PRA as set within particular organisational, cultural and social contexts. Studies in India, the Gambia and Vietnam provided further comparative material. National-level workshops and an international gathering of PRA practitioners served as fora for reflection and debate. The latter has given rise to two publications, a detailed workshop report and a collection of papers reflecting on individual practitioners' own pathways to participation, capturing both a diversity of perspectives on PRA and practitioners' views on current and future challenges.

This working paper series presents preliminary materials from the project. It includes an overview of key lessons learnt and their implications for practice, country reflection papers from Kenya and Nepal, and three case

studies from Kenya, India and the Gambia. The *Pathways to Participation* project was funded by Sida, DFID and SDC, as part of support to the Participation Programme at IDS. As a collaborative initiative, the project took shape through the involvement of numerous individuals and organisations, who played a vital part in realising project activities and in the processes of reflection that the project helped set in train. While these papers represent some of the formal outputs of the project, the project has given rise to a wealth of informal forms of sharing lessons learnt and reflections on the past, present and future. It is our hope that this project has helped serve as a stimulus for ongoing processes of critical reflection from which so much remains to be learnt.

Andrea Cornwall and Garett Pratt, IDS, November 2000

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Garett Pratt received an MPhil in Development Studies from IDS in 1999. Since then, he has been working as a Research Officer with the IDS Participation Group, coordinating the Pathways to Participation project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the people and organisations that made this research possible.

Let me begin by thanking the staff of ActionAid, Nepal. I risk leaving some people out by naming individuals, but I would like to thank Ramesh Khadka for opening ActionAid's doors to act as my host. I am particularly indebted to GB Adhikari of ActionAid, who oversaw the organisations of my itinerary, co-ordinated my visit with all the networks, and acted as one of my hosts during my visit to the Eastern Region. Thank you to Manvi Srivastav, who saw to the logistical arrangements when I arrived in Kathmandu. At the Western Regional Office, Khemraj Upadhya acted as a kind and generous host. I apologise for not mentioning everyone by name, but thanks to all the ActionAid staff in Kathmandu, Biratnagar, and Nepalganj for your help and kindness.

NEPAN played a vital role in organising my visit. Thanks to Hukum Singh, the Chair, and to the helpful members of his Executive Committee, many of who agreed to interviews to feed into this paper. And thanks especially to the staff, particularly Ravi Chitrikar, Sova, and Anju, who despite being in a difficult time of transition, managed to organise two workshops and a round of interviews in a matter of weeks. NEPAN has also organised the distribution of the paper, with the able coordination of Chetnath Kanel.

Thanks you to Geeta from FORCE for helping me to meet some development practitioners in the west, and for sharing the experiences of the network.

In the East, I am indebted to Kamal Sedhai, the co-ordinator of ERPAN, for arranging an excellent programme. Thank you to the Executive Committee, who spent some valuable time with me sharing their insights into the challenges of networking, and to ERPAN's members for participating in a brief workshop.

I would also like the members of PANDA for agreeing to meet with me for an afternoon, to hear about the Pathways project and to share their questions and ideas.

The research is made possible by funding from DFID, SIDA, SDC, and Danida.

Thank you to Kim Collins for so efficiently transcribing the interviews, and to Mel Speight for her assistance as a Research Assistant.

Thanks to Marion Gibbon, Robert Chambers, and Andrea Cornwall for valuable comments on a first draft.

Above all, thank you to the long list of contributors to this paper (see Appendix I). My name is on the cover of this report, and I take responsibility for the representation (or mis-representation!) of the issues in this paper. However, the heart of the paper is the experience, analysis, wisdom, and insight of the very busy people who made time to share their thoughts with me. I have not attributed particular comments to particular individuals throughout the paper, which was intended to allow people to speak freely. I apologise if it unfortunately underplays the contributors' ownership of the many wonderful ideas and arguments presented here.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, PRA has moved from being a marginal innovation to a part of the development mainstream. Around the world, including Nepal, the diversity of people and organisations using PRA has exploded. The claims made about PRA, and the different understandings and forms of PRA practice have also multiplied. After this period of excitement, promotion, and rapid spread, PRA practitioners from around the world are expressing the need to take stock of where we have come from, where we are now, and where we are going with PRA.[1] This paper is a synthesis of the critical reflections[2] of a group of approximately fifty Nepali PRA practitioners and supporters about their own experiences with PRA over the last decade, as recorded in open-ended interviews.[3] The paper aims to record the diversity of views amongst Nepali practitioners about what PRA is, how their thinking about it has changed over time, and the directions they see PRA and participation moving in the future in Nepal.

The paper will begin by giving a brief description of the process that led to the production of the paper. It will then give some context, from literature and also the interviews mainly drawn from the interviews, about the historical moment in which PRA has spread in Nepal. The paper then reports practitioners' views on the rapid spread of PRA in Nepal, and the issues that have arisen in association with this new 'fashion' for PRA. As more and more individuals and organisations have started using PRA, a diversity of views about what PRA is, what it should be, and what it is for, have evolved. The paper will review some of the widely varied views of practitioners on these issues, focussing on two broad schools of thinking about PRA: first, the majority view of PRA as a method for application within the project cycle framework; and second, the minority view of PRA as a method for working towards consciousness raising, social mobilisation, and empowerment outside the bounds of the project cycle framework. The paper will also explain how Nepali practitioners understand PRA as a 'way of life'. The final section will compile some of the challenges for PRA practice raised by practitioners for the future, including continuing to learn through critical reflection on PRA.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a series of conversations with people who have been practising and promoting PRA in Nepal (see Annex 1). Many of them have some previous association with the IDS Participation Group, through some contact with Robert Chambers or other IDS staff. Many of them made this contact through their membership in the PRA-related networks in Nepal, and as they explained, they have benefited from discussions with their colleagues in formulating their reflections on PRA as recorded here. For the most part, the people the author talked to are based in Kathmandu, Biratnagar, and Nepalganj, although many have worked for extended periods in remote areas, and/or continue to travel regularly to more rural places. The author chose to speak with people with a relatively long experience of PRA, as they were better able to comment on the development and changes of PRA over the last decade. There are notable omissions in the views included in the paper, particularly from government officers who have little representation, and academics who are omitted. The group interviewed

is also biased towards men, with 36 men and 11 women participating in the interviews. Of the 47 people interviewed, five people originate from countries other than Nepal, all of whom have been working in Nepal for several years.

The interviews were conducted in a very loosely structured way around three broad questions:

- From your own personal experiences, and what you have seen happening around you, what has been the story of PRA in Nepal?
- What is the situation and issues facing PRA today?
- What is the way forward for PRA and participation in Nepal?

The interviews flowed naturally from one of these questions to the next.

The interviewees were informed that direct quotations from the interviews would be used, but that they would not be attributed to specific people. This was intended to allow people to speak freely, and to raise controversial points without worrying about sparking unconstructive conflict. As promised, the names of the people who contributed their experience and ideas appear in the list of contributors in Appendix I, along with a breakdown of their institutional affiliations.

The structure of this paper was not decided in advance, but emerged from categorising the unstructured qualitative data obtained from the interviews. The paper aims to give a sense of some of the variety of views held by practitioners in Nepal. It also attempts to give a broad indication of which sets of views are more widely and less widely held about PRA, but as the group interviewed is not in any way statistically representative these claims must be taken only as roughly indicative.

SETTING THE SCENE - SOME CONTEXT

In thinking about the broad context into which PRA has been introduced in Nepal, it is important to note the significant changes in governance over the past decade, with the adoption of multiparty competitive democracy in 1991, and recent moves towards decentralisation. In 1960, the King overturned Nepal's first democratic government, formed just one year earlier, and instituted the *panchayati* form of party-less democracy. Justified as a form of governance in accord with traditional Nepali institutions, the four tier *panchayat* system was 'frequently manipulated by both King Mahendra and his son.' (Baral 1994). After mass public mobilisation, bolstered by international support in line with the third wave of democracy at the end of the 1980s, the *panchayati* form of local governance was replaced by a multiparty competitive democracy in 1991 (Baral 1994; Brown 1996). The new democracy is not without problems, as there have been frequent changes in government, and as politics has been characterised by increasing intra-party and inter-party conflict, resulting in 'erosion of popular faith in the democratic process.' (Baral 1994) The widespread Maoist movement in the rural areas of Nepal is one reflection

of this disillusionment that is an important day-to-day backdrop to the work done by development organisations in many districts in Nepal.

In addition to the shift to multiparty democracy, Nepal has embraced a new programme of decentralisation. Decision making powers and budgets have been decentralised to the District and Village Development Committees, starting from 1995. Many progressive local leaders are using this new opening to experiment with participatory approaches to planning local development. Encouraged by success, decentralisation has been enshrined in a Local Self-Governance bill passed by parliament in 1998 (Jalal 1999). Foreign donors have been supportive of this institutional change, through programmes such as the UNDP supported Participatory District Development Programme (PDDP 1999).

The acceptance of some version of 'participation' in development discourse in Nepal predates these broader shifts in Nepal's governance. 'Participation' has been a commonly used term in Nepali development policy for three decades, having been adopted in different sectors, at different times, by different development actors, and with different meanings. For example, as far back as the 1970s, Her Majesty's Government (HMG) of Nepal initiated participatory programmes with the support of many foreign donors. The Small Farmers Development Programme, started in 1975, was guided by the 'principle' that, 'people, particularly the poor, are simply not objects of development, but the poor…. have a primary role as active participants to play in bringing about their own progress' (UN 1990: 21). The mechanism for participation was organising cooperative farmer groups who would then be able to receive government services and assistance. This is not very different from the language and practice of participation in development policy today. More recent large scale programmes that rest on a process of forming and supporting groups of rural people to engage in development activities include the United Nations Development Programme supported Participatory District Development Programme (PDDP 1999), and South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme (UNDP 1998). As fashionable as participation has become in development circles over the last decade, it has been part of development thinking in Nepal since at least the 1970s, and there are continuities between the way participation is put into practice today and the way it was seen in the 1970s.

As in all aid recipient countries, donors carry their different approaches to participation and other aspects of programme management with them, and apply them in the particular places and sectors in which they work. As Nepal is highly aid dependent, the influence of donors on development policy is very important. For example, Kahssay writes that the health sector from the 1960s until the present has been 'characterized by the existence of un-coordinated vertical health programmes and the involvement of a multitude of foreign donor agencies acting without stringent policy guidance by the national Ministry of Health [resulting in] a patchwork of different approaches in different districts' (1991: 24–25). In the health sector, this was addressed to some extent by efforts of the government in the 1970s and 1980s to harmonise community health provision. But donors' influence in all sectors is similar, in that they create pockets of particular forms of practice reflecting different conceptions of participation in the places within Nepal where they work.

Through the influence of various donors, the way in which 'participation' has been understood and operationalised in Nepal is linked with changes in the global discourse of participation (Cornwall 2000). For example, the government adopted policies supporting community participation in forestry in the late 1970s, as international organisations such as SIDA, the FAO, and the World Bank were doing the same (Hobley 1996). And since then, both the Nepal-Australia Community Forestry Project (N-ACFP) and the Nepal-United Kingdom Community Forestry Project (NUKCFP) have supported and influenced the particular way the government has operationalised their policy of community participation in forestry management. (Gronow and Shrestha 1991; Hobley 1996; Bartlett and Nurse 1991). To take another example, in the irrigation sector, the government shifted their policy to support participation in the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985–1990). USAID influenced the way this shift in policy was implemented, as it supported the Irrigation Management Project through HMG/N. A new water policy adopted by HMG/N in 1992 shifted the emphasis towards private sector involvement, and emphasised participation as a mechanism that would 'decrease government responsibilities' for irrigation by 'promoting resource mobilisation and self reliance' (Shivakoti and Shukla 1996: 108). The version of participation put forward in the irrigation policy reflects a global neo-liberal agenda to reduce the role of the State by shifting responsibilities to community groups, as promoted by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and other international organisations (Cornwall 2000).

As part of the different forms of participation supported by development organisations in Nepal, some development professionals were using a variety of participatory approaches in their work previous to the introduction of PRA. Several practitioners mentioned a method developed in Nepal in the late 1980s, called Joint Treks (*Samuhik Bhraman*), which resembled RRA or PRA, in which scientists trekked with farmers, collecting and analysing information together (Gibbon 1993). As another example, one practitioner developed her interest in participatory development with grassroots mobilisation work that aimed to strengthen local people's position in their dealings with a foreign company implementing a government-backed electricity mega-project. That was around ten years before PRA was introduced to Nepal. Another practitioner with a long engagement with the left recalled Freirean adult literacy work predating PRA in Nepal:

> You might find a very few people who were saying we were doing similar to that PRA, but not specifically doing those twelve methods that people usually talk about … and they might relate it to Freire and the way he was doing research in the communities, this whole thing about how to listen, how to record … that bit of exercise in Nepal was there right back from 1982 … They could not come into the light due to the political scenario … It was literacy work, adult education, trying to get the context specific material for adults. How can you really make texts that identify with the heart and minds of the people, that they can really identify with?… What these people were playing around with was, let's not make a fixed curriculum in the form of a booklet. Let's make a curriculum that is possible to change each year as we go on. So they came with this whole idea of lets do it in leaflets rather than in book form, so we can change it, make innovation in there …

There continue to be many mechanisms besides PRA through which development professionals are putting the now mainstream concept of participation and development into practice. For example, there has been a vast growth in the number of programmes implemented through committees of community members, whether composed on the basis of a shared characteristic (ie. women' groups) or whether attempting to represent the broadest spectrum of people in the community possible. As another example, there are also emerging experiments with public auditing, where the accounts of a project are shared openly amongst these committees and must be agreed upon before more funds will be issued. This paper is focussing on only one mechanism, PRA, that has been used to operationalise participation in development in Nepal. It is worthy of special attention, because it is arguably far more widely spread than other participatory methods.

Outside of development organisations' official statements of policy, practitioners argue that we should not forget that there has always been some form of participation in Nepali society. Practitioners observe that

> People had the good participation in making trails, school buildings, this kind of social activities. In my experience there was good participation of the community … Sometimes it was imposed for schools building and road work … the village leader used all his assistants to gather the people. If they did not participate, they were made to pay a fine, or some kind of boycott. For example, their children couldn't go to school … There was participation before PRA, but it was somehow informal way, unsystematic way … and participation in terms of equality, not in terms of equity … Now we go in more proscribed way towards equity …

In a similar vein, another practitioner observed that development professionals are often blind to these previous institutions:

> … there are many instances in the developing world that the traditional method of interaction, traditional method of disseminating, the traditional method of empowerment does not seem to be understood by practitioners. So probably that is the reason why there is slight conflicts now. There for now people seem to have understood that there is PRA, but there are other mechanisms in the community that provide opportunity for interaction, that provide opportunity for decision making. Maybe PRA should be linking into that sort of traditional system …

Besides these general forms of social organisation that practitioners see as participatory, there are some specific local practices that tie very closely to what we think of as PRA today, such as visually recording information.

> If we go to the rural remote areas … people draw something on the flat stone while they're grazing their animals … this kind of activity, drawing something on the ground, I have seen many places …

As the next section will show, PRA was introduced to Nepal in 1990. As briefly explained above, it entered a political context that was about to enter a period of democratisation and decentralisation. Against this rapid

change, there was also some continuity between the ideas of participation reflected in PRA discourse and methods, and the policy discourse of participation prevalent in Nepal and influenced by foreign donors since the 1970s. But practitioners do see something new about the status of participation in development discourse since the 1990s. As one practitioner who was a pioneering figure in applying and promoting PRA said,

> The good thing is that we have realised we must have a certain process that recognises the people's needs, people's knowledge, people's context. It is not a mechanical process of development, it is human. So that has been reclaimed in many of the areas. There are many advocates now as compared to ten years back when there were every few and we were seen as black sheep. There are many people with whom we can communicate in the same language. A younger generation has come up with stronger voices, and that is a very good trend here.

As another practitioner said of the last decade,

> this participatory approach has got bigger appreciation in national level, bigger popularity and all. No-one can say that bureaucratic approach is better than participatory approach. Everyone is saying, well we have to follow-up participatory approach, and this and that. And also in Nepal, this constitution of the country has … people's participation through the means of decentralisation and wider participation of people, empowerment of people. These kind of things are spelt out by the constitution itself. That is why, even in government bureaucracy, people are favouring participatory approach - in all written documents this is highly appreciated. But while you look at the practice, people have still hangover of the past, hangover of the top-down bureaucratic type of working style. It is still practised in many places.

The challenges for change, for developing participatory practice in the context of deeply entrenched bureaucratic institutions, remain large despite the widespread use of the language of participation in Nepal. The next section will explore the way that practitioners see the spread of PRA during the 1990s, as the language and concept of 'participation' gained very rapid mainstream acceptance in development circles.

RAPID SPREAD OF PRA - NEW CHALLENGES, NEW ISSUES

The introduction of PRA

Although it has connection to earlier streams of work in Nepal, PRA was introduced to Nepal from elsewhere, through trainings conducted by foreign trainers. One early training that many practitioners identify as the 'origin' of PRA in Nepal was organised by WINROCK international and conducted by Robert Chambers from IDS and James Mascarenhas from MYRADA at Lumle Agricultural Research Station in 1990. At the time of the training, the distinction between Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), which had a longer history, and PRA, which was a very

recent innovation, was not clear. (As later sections will show, the difference is still contested today.) One participant in that early training recalls the way they 'rebelled' against the RRA slant of the training:

> If we are talking about participation, what is participation? If we are talking about needs and issues related to people, are they related only with soil types and plants and these things? Because that was the culture at the time- all they were talking about was agro-economics, very difficult and technical. I said the whole language and atmosphere is offensive to me … I would like to listen to the voices of the people, the language that people speak, the issues that relate to them … And I also challenged the process of rapidity … Jimmy [Mascarenhas] was also there, and then I started getting information that these types of issues had also started to be raised in the Indian context …

Another influential series of three trainings was held for ActionAid staff by Sam Joseph in 1991. One participant in those trainings argued that they were the first trainings that were 'really PRA'- 'Until that period, PRA hadn't been that participatory. Sam Joseph really involved the people …' With a series of three trainings spread out over the course of a year, there was more opportunity for the trainees to practice what they had learned, reflect, and to learn on their own with ongoing support from Sam Joseph.

The contrasts that practitioners make between the different version of PRA put across in these pioneering trainings foreshadows the diversity of views about what PRA should be that continues as PRA spread. One practitioner argued that the way in which people were trained about PRA in the early days set them into different streams of practice, and that these streams can still be seen reflected in different version of PRA practised today. He specifically argued that one school of PRA practice following from Chambers' RRA/PRA training can still be distinguished from a different school with its origins in Sam Joseph's version of PRA. Further sections of the paper will show that practitioners have many different versions of PRA practice, and some practitioners see these different streams of practice as having their origins in different versions of PRA that people learn from different trainers. But as we will see, practitioners also attribute different ways of doing PRA to many other factors, particularly different motivations and conceptions about what PRA is, and for what purpose it should be used.

Practitioners agree that there has been an explosion in the different organisations using PRA in Nepal:

> We have seen over the – let's say five, six years- a tremendous increase in the use of PRA by everybody. By NGOs, by INGOs, by multilateral agencies, by bilateral agencies, even by government officials. They all seem to be very keen on using PRA for various purposes. The consultants of course, all of them are using PRA for various reasons.

In the course of these interviews, people described the application of PRA in sectors as diverse as health, forestry, agriculture, natural resource management, nutrition programmes, HIV/AIDS, environmental health, early childhood development programmes, park management, literacy programmes, income generation, irrigation, sanitation, and gender relations. It is used for research, action research, project appraisal, project

design, monitoring and evaluation, impact studies, making project management decisions, even in local government budgeting processes. It is used in remote rural areas, and in urban centres.

The growth in PRA-related networks both reflects, and has driven, this spread. Networks grew organically as practitioners felt the need to share their experiences. As an early networker recalled,

> it was a wonderful opportunity for a person like me, who many times felt alone, who felt very weak and powerless, in a system where these ideas are not appreciated, where people are not client focussed. Then there were some other people who also had similar experience and understanding, and we started talking together here in Nepal. We started discussing about PRA, use and abuse, cultural appropriateness, and all these things since 1990–91. So it became a very frequent discussion point and sharing, and it became a mutual support team, let's say individual support group. Very informally, we started thinking on, we started developing literatures in Nepali. Whoever could give time, we supported each other. It went on for five years. … After a few years, we felt we must have formal forum where we share these things, where we support each other, where organisations can get some feedback if they need some, and advocacy can happen. And then (Nepal Participatory Action Network [NEPAN]) was established.

Since then, other networks have sprung up: Forum for Community Empowerment (FORCE) in the west, Eastern Region Participatory Action Network (ERPAN) in the East, PANDA in Dhankuta district, and other district level networks. These networks have all driven the further spread of PRA through offering training, documentation of experience, and attracting new people to learn about participatory approaches through sharing events.

PRA has filled a need for concrete tools at a time when development organisations have been looking for mechanisms to put their concepts of participatory development into practice.

> All the government and everybody was talking about participation. So to implement, to put that concept of participation into practice, PRA provided a good … something in the hand, you know … You go with this map, diagrams, and things like that, right, to provide something concrete …

PRA, it seems, has filled a space created by wider shifts in thinking about participation in development.

The emerging issues

As the next quotation illustrates, PRA practitioners in Nepal see both the positive and negative aspects of this rapid spread of PRA along with the enthusiastic mainstream acceptance of participation. As someone involved in PRA since the days of the pioneering trainings said

> We started advocating that there should be participatory needs assessment, participatory baseline assessment ... as the voices have been so loud and spread all over, then everybody, almost all, even government and international agencies and development players, thought that it is something that is a must in any development process, so it has become a prescription. So PRA has become a prescription for everything. And so even though we say that it does not have any blueprint, it has become some sort of blueprint type- very rhetoric, very much standard. So that is, over these five, six years of development trends in Nepal … PRA becomes a key word, and they say, we do PRA before we go there, we do PRA here, you can see PRA with us … And everybody who has some small exposure to PRA, they claim themselves to be experts on PRA, and they even qualify themselves to train other people in PRA skills … The other thing which is very positive is that participation has been taken as a basic prerequisite to any people oriented project. And that has been a very good trend.

Practitioners see the spread of PRA as a victory of their efforts to introduce more space for participation into development programmes. But they also see a connection between this rapid spread in PRA and many problems, such as rigid forms of practice, people overselling their skill in PRA, and generally a level of rhetoric about PRA and participation that may not be matched in practice. One danger which practitioners pointed out is that the simple equation of PRA with participation, and support from donors, may encourage ritualised performance of PRA. As one noted,

> They think that PRA is a good thing and so they apply some tools, and then they leave back, and after some time there is nothing. It is PRA for PRA … I think it is because they are more results oriented. They want to show that they have done so many PRAs in so many villages. And sometimes it has become ritual …

Some practitioners were critical of the rhetoric of large organisations, as compared to their practice:

> UNDP, the World Bank, these big international organisations advertise that it should be done through PRA, through participatory way, but if you see these big organisations, within there it is not internalised. But they want to see others being transparent, being participatory …

There was much more discussion amongst Nepali practitioners, however, about the personal dimensions of PRA practice. The section on PRA as a way of life will explore this in more depth. One practitioner observed that

> In my opinion, mostly people are talking, but PRA has become as a fashion. People think that if they don't talk about PRA, other people will not accept them. And so for the sake of making compatibility with people, so as not to be unaccepted or shown down, they just talk about PRA.

Or as another person said,

> Nowadays PRA is fashion in Nepal … Now they think if they don't know PRA they are not development workers, or something like that. So they must have a certificate in PRA, so that they can show, 'I know PRA, look at this'…

There is now a situation in which development professionals with many different, and sometimes conflicting, motivations and values all feel some pressure or advantage in calling the many different things that they do 'PRA.' For example, one practitioner said that

> People say one thing, and they do other things in the community … they are talking about the participatory, but they just call a few people, get some information, but they don't really do the PRA thing. Like if they have to know about the community, maybe they have to do the social map and resource map, something like that, because it gives a clear idea of the community, but they don't do that. They just ask five or ten men or people. They just sit and ask and make notes …

In this case, the practitioner feels some pressure to call what they are doing PRA when what they prefer to do in practice is something that resembles a small focus group discussion. It may be that they do not see any difference between PRA and a small focus group discussion. Or it may be that for the sake of legitimacy with their colleagues and their organisation, they need to call their work 'PRA' even if they would rather use other methods.

The universal language of PRA and participation makes it more difficult in some ways for practitioners who want to argue for particular views of change, for versions of participation more radical than those embraced by the mainstream, to do so.

> The threat now is… whether this participation just becomes a level of rhetoric that does not challenge what is going on … This has become a problem now. Papers are very good, they explain everything very well, but how can we really ensure that this is also translated into action.

As mainstream institutions have integrated the language of PRA into their discourse, it makes it more difficult for advocates of participation to take distinct position in arguments for improvement and change. As another practitioner said,

> Maybe the World Bank is worried about the voice of NGOs … They can control NGOs by funding them for the same things they are saying … Like with this Participatory Poverty Assessment … now we have taken funding from the World Bank, we will have to remain quiet about what we think on poverty issues … Because the World Bank has taken up PRA we don't have to think PRA is a great thing ….

The rapid spread of PRA through development practitioners and organisations has reached the point where people in communities are also feeling the effects:

> [PRA] is spreading all over the country. If you go anywhere, you find that people are using PRA, especially the villagers are aware of these things, because there are a lot of trainings …

As with development organisations and professionals, there may be some positive and negative aspects to this spread. Practitioners recounted stories of villages where they had started PRA exercises, and discovered that the process was eased as local people were already familiar with the names of the tools and what information they were good for discussing and recording. But there are also problems with repeating PRA in the same place:

> If you go again and again, it is very hard to get participation. Because they already know about PRA, because if you go for PRA with any community, they already have lots of ideas, what they are trying to do, what information are they trying to get from us. If you go again, people are not interested in that. People will tell you very frankly, we have done this already, you can get the information from there.

The following extreme case of this problem of PRA-burnout has become a common story amongst practitioners:

> There is a training institute … and they always used to go to the same village … and people got exhausted by these kind of things. Actually, PRA is saying only if you want to work go there, otherwise you raise their expectations …. And what they did, is they made a social and resource map with the help of concrete ….

Another practitioner told a similar story about a different place, where

> We were there three times to do PRA. All the villagers are aware of [PRA]. They have put [PRA diagrams] on the water tank so they don't have to draw it. They don't want any more PRA exercises.

From this research process it is impossible to say how widespread this phenomenon is, but only that many practitioners see it as a developing problem.

Frontiers for further spread

Many practitioners observe how universal PRA language and practice has become in development organisations, and that new problems have cropped up in association with that rapid spread. On the other hand, some professionals say that PRA has not spread as far as it should. As one practitioner said,

> The cover is … very limited … There are some NGOs who are the partners of some other NGOs or some other thing - they are using it. But out of the 4000 [Village Development Committees] VDCs … how many do we really have that kind of approach? How many do we have reached? Even with Nepal and others, we have reached to a few districts, a few VDCs. But all this covers goes maybe to a few hundred, not even a thousand. So as long as this doesn't go to the scale, it's impact will still be very low.

The next sections will look at three areas that practitioners identified as areas where they would like to see PRA spread further: amongst development professionals, to local people, and into government.

Development professionals

Many development professionals in Nepal are not familiar with, or using, PRA.

> Even now PRA is still I would say in the grip of certain professionals, maybe 150 professionals in Nepal. It has to go beyond that a little wider.

One person explained the limited number of PRA practitioners in Nepal as being partly the responsibility of the established practitioners.

> Sometimes the professionals are selfish, they don't want to give it up, they survive on it … it is their power … they maybe worry, or even feel a certain threat. It may be an unconscious thing … maybe that is why PRA is abused and not used as an empowerment tool, because it is in the grip of certain consultants, maybe 150 Nepalis … If you look for training, there are only three or four organisations, that do training in Kathmandu, and it is very expensive …

The professionals who already have some knowledge of PRA are in some way responsible for this situation. But there are other institutions that could play a more positive role in training. For example, donors could provide more support to help interested practitioners pay for trainings. The universities and training institutes that are educating future development workers in Nepal could also include some training in their mainstream courses.

The limited number of practitioners raises practical difficulties for people who want to do participatory work:

> One of the difficult things at the beginning was finding people who were experienced at doing participatory research, or doing participatory analysis … It was very difficult to find people who were not so experienced that we could not afford them … I think the 'big' people in PRA are very much in demand, so it is hard to find those people …

Communities

At a deeper level, some practitioners raise questions about the political implications of the currently limited number of PRA practitioners.

> Dominating comes automatically because I am the PRA person, I know PRA. So that means people at the grassroots level, they don't know PRA, people who don't have a certificate don't have PRA knowledge … and slowly it become an indirect domination.

> I am seeing in general, in the name of PRA, the domination has come from the elites, from the educated people. To be a PRA expert, they think they should have a very close contact with Robert Chambers, people should have gone to Sussex [university], IDS, or finally in case of Nepal, NEPAN is the authority of PRA. Some people think like that. So that means the collective elites are dominating PRA. For me, PRA is not like that … PRA is a philosophy, and it should evolve from the very grassroots … so again, people are taking advantage of PRA, being an expert …

Paradoxically, PRA practitioners see themselves as being in some ways like other development practitioners, with technical expertise giving them a privileged position in relation to local people.

In response to this issue, some practitioners see transferring skills in using PRA techniques to non-development professionals as one way forward for PRA

> It's said, this thing that only NGOs and INGOs can use these tools … we want to transfer it to villages ... That's the basic ideology behind it is that they should own the information …

> If someone wants training, even if they have heard about PRA, then if want a training there has to be ample opportunity to learn on it.

> We are saying it is empowerment of the community… but to some extent, the main 'stick' is in the hands of the development workers… Though we conduct lots of training, we could not have reached what PRA should do to the grassroots.

They make the point that it is not enough for communities to own the information generated by tools brought from outside, but that local people should be facilitated to develop ownership over their own tools, such that they continue using them at their own initiative, not the initiative of development workers.

Practitioners recognise that transferring some ownership of PRA techniques to people in communities would be a very difficult task, and time consuming. It would require a large change from most current forms of PRA practice. As one practitioner said,

> Once there is no external input in terms of someone going there and asking lets do PRA again, or someone going and asking did you do another cycle of PRA to check everything … We thought, if this exercises is doing with the community, they will be used to doing it themselves, … they will be used to identifying need and demand whatever resources they needed from organisations within their access … So we thought that to empower community using PRA tools, only one cycle is not enough. So maybe two or three cycles and again, again external assistance. So it looks like it could be three cycles, maybe four cycles. That could be maybe two to three years phase. For many donor agencies that is quite a long time, let me be honest with you. Right, and the environment is such that people want to see this-this-this at the end. I still believe that

using the whole philosophy of PRA can empower the community, but one has to be very patient, and it may take three to four years.

Government

Practitioners are optimistic about the new space that has been created in Nepal for participation in governance, especially through the promulgation of the recent Local Government Act. This institutionalisation of participation in local governance is seen as a major step forward, as it promises to be more sustainable than NGO and donor led efforts. But practitioners see that the new space created through legislation is yet to be filled:

> One of the challenges is that in the government structure, people have their own set of mind, even though this participation and decentralisation has been a buzzword. Even in the ninth plan document, if you see, these words come very often. So at the policy level, there is very clear, this is very clearly written down. But when it come to the practical, and especially at the central level … there is some difficulty. But when you go at the grassroots, at the VDC or community, we don't have any problem … But sometimes, if they don't have orientation and training, at that level, they try to plan in the traditional way, that they sit together and they finalise the plans themselves … But we are trying to advocate very strongly, we try to convince them at the grassroots that this [participatory way] is the right way to do things …

Practitioners are taking on a number of different strategies to try and fill the space with practical ideas about how to implement more participatory approaches in government.

Some see a need for further advocacy at the top levels of government. As one practitioner observed,

> The people who are directly involved in the [PRA] exercise and who are sentimentally attached to the idea, they don't have the say at the policy level …

The person argued that it would improve the policy climate for participation if people at the highest level of policy were more strongly in favour of methods like PRA. Another practitioner thought that

> This participatory approach is very much popular in the middle level, middle class. If we look at the whole range of classes of country, it is very much popular at middle level- in the level of development professionals like us. We are not on the top- that's a decision maker … [There is a] possibility that we can influence the people who is on the top. We can do various advocacy role we can play, we can advocate, we can influence them to change their attitude …

The perception of practitioners is that a lack of support at the central level means that PRA and participation has not made much entry into the government's line ministries, but has made more impact at the VDC and District

Development Committee (DDC) level. Practitioners saw a role for high-profile international figures in influencing policy-level government officials. One person said

> When Robert Chambers was here, we had a one day workshop when the Secretaries were called, and some of the Directors. And they all suggested we should go through this kind of training more often … Because they have always been used to student-teacher relationships, we are thinking about getting some resource persons from outside. Then they will be really convinced of participatory approach.

Various donor and NGO programmes have had an influence on government by involving government personnel in using participatory approaches, and demonstrating good results. As one NGO staffer said,

> Before [the local government act] we worked on local government, but we talked about our project with them. But now we are talking about their project, how to involve the people in their project, how to use participatory tools and techniques …

These efforts to include staff can have a large impact. One practitioner said that they

> have been bringing in the district line agencies as part of the dialogue stage. Bringing in the district level is often forgotten as part of PRA …

Some donor-funded programme staff have explained that by working alongside government, their ideas for programmes have been integrated into the normal work of government. For example, the approach taken by the Participatory District Development Programme (UNDP) may soon be institutionalised in government legislation as general approach for the country. In other cases, participatory programmes in HIV/AIDS and nutrition are being taken up by local governments as they have seen the success of participatory approaches. One practitioners talked about the importance of a 'hidden strategy' for advocacy, creating successful pilot projects in association with government, that give government 'a flavour test' of participation. The programmes would then be owned and scaled up through government institutions.

Training in PRA and participation for government officials is also seen as a form of advocacy for more participation in governance. Many practitioners see NEPAN as continuing to play a key role in offering new ideas and skills to government officials.

> What could be strategy for advocating further use of participatory approaches, and I am seeing a value in the approach itself, in terms of advocacy. We see for example, that when people are working together, for example the government officials are joining hands with NEPAN, even joining NEPAN for that matter, and the VDC personnel, the DDC personnel are coming together. There is a shift in the attitude, and even the practice. And if this is done properly in the future, then probably the whole planning process of VDCs will be more participatory. That is my hope for that whole area. Once they start using the approach itself,

> that is a kind of advocacy, and kind of influencing process. The trend is this large number of elected officials right from parliament to VDC chairpersons, it could change their attitude and behaviour, and the way they implement, identify problems, and plan development initiatives in that area … The current strength of this tool is not only to reach the poorest of the poor, but to reach a different kind of people, like these elected officials …

The argument here is that training in PRA starts to open officials' way of thinking, and if they go and practice PRA themselves it will change their thinking further. Practitioners were very excited about a training recently conducted by NEPAN for the DDC National Association. Another route for training more government officials is through the Administrative Staff College, where NEPAN has been making efforts to further institutionalise some training in PRA and participation.

PRA FOR WHAT PURPOSE? - THE DIVERSITY OF UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE

Although some practitioners would like to see PRA spread further, the current rapid and wide spread of PRA already means that there is a very wide diversity of people and organisations calling what they do 'PRA.' This diversity of understandings is the basis for much disagreement, mutual criticism, and quiet conflict amongst participatory development practitioners in Nepal. This section will explore some of the main points of difference and discussion amongst Nepali PRA practitioners about what PRA is, what it should be, and why they are using it. As a focus for critical reflection, the question of why people are using PRA is a very useful one. One practitioner said,

> What I think is *what* PRA is not important- *why* PRA is what is important. And if they get an idea about it, then PRA will be incorporated into their work.

Or as another asked,

> What kind of strength you want to give behind this, depends on what kind of purpose you want to use them … and whether to make these tools powerful or weak is in our hands. Limiting the use of these- they definitely have positive aspects as compared to conventional methods, even for extracting information, I would not debate on that. But is that where we are going to take satisfaction from using PRA? Is that how we are going to limit ourselves? I think people need to question that.

Many Nepali practitioners are questioning the 'strength' that they, and others, give to PRA by choosing to interpret it and apply it in different ways.

This section will attempt to outline the broader conceptual frameworks within which practitioners explain their understanding of PRA. The section will begin by examining PRA and the project cycle. The project cycle is

one of the most universal concepts within which practitioners frame their understanding of PRA. For example, they describe the development of PRA in part as using PRA in more moments of the project cycle- not just appraisal, but monitoring, and evaluation. Almost all PRA practitioners who have contributed their ideas to this paper have to operate within the 'rules of the game' that make the project cycle, such as tightly defined time limits, setting broad objectives before interacting with communities, and a tendency to focus on tangible outputs within that period. Even those with other concepts to guide their PRA practice, like an action research framework, may ultimately fit their PRA practice within the project cycle, as the funds that make most development work possible are channelled through institutions formed by this concept. There are debates about empowerment within this framework, which for the most part is about people being empowered *within* the project cycle- to plan projects, to monitor them, and to evaluate them themselves. The next subsection will examine the role that practitioners see for PRA within this overarching concept, and the way that the purpose of PRA is framed within it.

Although the conception of PRA within the project cycle is by far the most common amongst the people who shared their reflections on PRA, some practitioners have other overarching concepts that lead them to see different uses for PRA. In a section called 'PRA, learning, empowerment, and transformation,' the paper will review some of these different ideas. The ideas of action research, a rights based approach to development, or consciousness raising with the marginalised lead practitioners to a very different idea about what PRA can and should be. There is a contrasting view of what the 'results' of using PRA should be- rather than smoothing the completion of projects, the aim is to create opportunities for people to learn about their social world. This view of PRA is also linked to a different view of action. Rather than the actions that are part of development projects such as building new infrastructure, or undertaking new income generation activities, in this view action may also mean making political demands on elite citizens or the government for the fulfilment of human rights.

The last subsection will explore a third way in which many practitioners have come to understand PRA, whether they are operating within a project-cycle framework or a learning and social transformation framework. The phrase 'attitude and behaviour' is used to encompass very broad ranging arguments about how people should act in their relationships with one another, whether personal or professional. Particular attitudes and behaviour is seen as both a necessary ingredient for PRA, and as something that can be transformed by PRA.

PRA and the project cycle

PRA had its birth within the concept of the project cycle, and to a large extent is still used within it. The framing of PRA within this overarching concept is so widely accepted in development circles that it is hardly a topic for discussion. When describing the development of PRA, people explain how it was initially used for appraisal, but has come to be used in planning, monitoring and evaluation. They see these as advances, because it has opened more space within this framework for participation by the people affected by, or formerly excluded from, development projects.

The project cycle is so universal that it is almost 'invisible'- like the air that practitioners breathe. Yet some practitioners have found that the PRA approach has led them to question the project cycle as an institutional framework for development:

> a development project is one which starts and which ends, which has a fixed time period, which has a set plan, which has a set goal and objectives, which has a set output to be achieved - everything is set within that frame. And they say this has to be implemented by participatory approach. I will say the whole concept is nonsense now, if we put this put this kind of project to a participatory approach. It's good that you apply participatory approach in every development field. But then you cannot put all these things - you have to make such and such things within this time frame, you have to have this much output, this must be like this, like this. You cannot think of a community and organise a community and you put a time frame. Some community may be organised, well organised. You maybe have to spend maybe one day, half a day or two days. Some communities you'll have to work for a year, just to organise one community. So you cannot simply put these kinds of number to this kind of development approach. But the unfortunate part is our national monitoring system or donor supported monitoring system, or whatever, usually they are numbered. And this is another aspect which is not matching with concept of PRA, and that is one area wherein we really have to fight, we really have to go further convincing people.

Although for the most part, practitioners use PRA within a project management cycle framework, this quotation reveals a number of tensions, particularly the unpredictable time scales and priorities of communities, versus the rigid and time-bound nature of projects. How do practitioners understand PRA to be useful within the project cycle, despite these possible tensions?

PRA for information collection to feed the project cycle

The project cycle is based on making decisions in clear stages, by gathering, analysing, recording, and using appropriate information. Practitioners agree that in the early days, PRA was seen quite specifically as data gathering tool that could be used to fill the need for information within the project cycle. As they point out, when used for this purpose, PRA was not clearly different in conception from RRA.

> At that time PRA was perceived as a tool to collect information from the village … The focus of PRA of that time was on data collection and report preparation and all this. It was not integrated as a development approach as a whole …

Or as another practitioner explained,

> I think when people started using it in Nepal, right from the start, before entering into any areas. It was used more like a baseline survey, more extractive. People go to village, gather different target beneficiaries, they would ask questions, they would draw a map, they had these semi-structured questionnaires, they had

these transect walks. Everything in the book they practised. They came out with thick reports, and beautiful maps, and based on that, programmes were launched.

According to many practitioners, PRA is still widely practised in Nepal in this way. They see many advantages in using it for information gathering purposes.

When PRA is understood as a tool for information collection to 'feed' the project cycle, people tend to argue that it is useful by comparing it to previous tools for supplying this information, particularly the questionnaire survey.

> Especially in the beginning of the programme... we need the baseline to monitor or assess the effects of the project ... To collect that information, projects mostly take a sample, then use a questionnaire survey. It doesn't come up with a good report. People get lost in data collection. This approach is still going on. We tried to introduce PRA, because it is very fast, very informative, and works case to case. It is very specific to a certain area, a specific place, a specific community. The community compile it, make their own charts and tables without having to analyse statistics with a computer. It gives quick results. You can have a lot of information, and it is more than 90% reliable. You don't have to spend time looking for a sample. You can immediately cross check, verify. It is very useful for a baseline, and even for monitoring and evaluation.

> … before, in questionnaire survey, it was published two or there years back by a researcher, and nobody was responsible to read that. Some other researchers may use [it] in future- maybe somewhere in the library, maybe report could be used by a project or donor agencies to develop project in the central level, but local people- villagers- were not actually see this information. That kind of practice was there…

> You know the real history of the people, you know the what is the… ethnic dynamic over there, who is the powerfullest, who is the less powerful- you know that … Not only do you know the base line information but you know that, how to work …

Another practitioner said,

> Those outcomes from this exercise are produced immediately for use afterwards, if it is more kind of extractive PRA. That still seems to be more, as compared to other methods … it tends to get used, the report comes out quickly …

So in sum, PRA is seen as a better alternative to questionnaire surveys because it is faster, brings out locally specific information, and the results tend to be more immediately useful. These benefits were seen to be true when PRA was first used for information collection, and are still cited by practitioners today.

But if PRA is understood as a tool for feeding information into the project management cycle, it is also open to some criticisms in comparison to other information gathering methods. Some practitioners think that

the language of PRA has often been used to mask sloppy research, that may be worse than the conventional methods that came before.

> But there were also people who didn't understand these things but they adapted this, [it] being a new word, a new fashion… you have to follow PRA methodology. And if somebody says, 'OK I followed PRA,' then this fellow, they say, 'OK, I'm the one commissioning you or asking you to do something for me, write something for me … you have to come out with a PRA practice, you have to use PRA methodology and tools.' And [the person he hired] said, 'OK, I'll do that,' and [he] come[s] back and say[s], 'I used PRA methodology and tools,' just in the methodological chapter, and then [he] presented a report. And if [he is] a very good writer, I'll say, 'Yes, this is a very nice report.' What I have found … was when I have been involved in seeing the people, watching them closely, what they were doing, they're violating a lot of things which is PRA. Some of them were simply taking up like - if you go for a formal research, like survey sampling, you have to follow certain steps … and sampling frame and all this. But what they did was, with using PRA, they said we don't need to follow this sampling frame. But they did was, instead of going for triangulation, collecting sample methods, having their full participation and all this, what they were doing is simply having some sort of interview or focus group discussion. Simple, why do tools?- very simple, very small sized, and they were coming with a very nice report. And a person like me who commissions you doesn't know what PRA [is] will [think] … 'That's OK - very nice report.' And this is misleading. Those were the documents we were taking as the planning documents, the basic documents for formulating some project ...

If PRA is judged mainly as a tool to supply reliable information with which development professionals can make decisions at various stages in the project cycle, then PRA is vulnerable to these criticisms as a 'cover up' for quick and shoddy research practice.

If PRA is going to be used as an information gathering tool, it requires complementary skills in analysis and report writing. Some practitioners see this as a gap, because while focussing mainly on facilitating the tools, training may not help new practitioners develop appropriate skills in these areas. A practitioner and trainer with a background in anthropology saw this as a major challenge:

> I think another main lesson for us now is the analysis part … One of the very positive things about using participatory methods for research, anyway, is that you do find out a lot about the community you are working with, and it generates a lot of information … but then you just have mountains of information to analyse …

Even experienced practitioners may overlook the difficulty of training and doing analysis well, as the same practitioner admitted.

> I think its very easy in the design part of the participatory research to focus on the kinds of methods you'll be using, and not to think enough about the analysis … I think we knew that at the beginning, but because of time pressures and so on, you tend to think we can deal with that when we come to the analysis ... Often you are limited by time and resources, and you can't spend enough time analysing the material to the depth to justify the time you spent talking with people.

One of the reasons it is difficult to develop the skills to make good use of information generated through PRA is the lack of discussion and materials about training for analysis in PRA. The same trainer went on to say that,

> You get a lot of training about how to facilitate a method, but you get very little about how to train people to do analysis … And people don't write about what they do with the analysis. I was becoming quite suspicious at one stage what is happening to this information, because it is just not written about at all … From a research perspective it is easy to take something one person said and generalise it to the community … We keep coming back to asking who said this, who was in this group. But if you don't have a detailed process documentation it is very difficult to judge whether this was a broad issue for everyone, or whether it was just one person's view …

These basic steps in recording and analysis are often overlooked in current modes of training. Perhaps this is because PRA is being used in reality as an information gathering tool within the project cycle, but is being presented by trainers as a tool for 'empowerment' or consciousness raising, in which case the analytical and recording skills needed would be very different. There is experience to draw upon, however, in training people to analyse and report well for project purposes. The author met practitioners who are investing intensive effort in transferring analysis and report writing skills to PRA trainees, through close mentoring and guidance.

Practitioners suggested that analysis and report writing is an area where practitioners could benefit greatly from sharing their ideas and experiences. Someone who is providing training in research skills herself said,

> How do you analyse this kind of qualitative data?… I think we need some kind of 'support group' or network group where you could actually discuss how do people deal with the amount of information they generate …

It could be that the problems with analysis are linked to inappropriate ideas about report writing, that distract from analysis. A practitioner with a foreign academic training observed that many Nepali practitioners struggle with report writing.

> There seem to be a real - or at least we found - I was going to say obsession- but perhaps that's over the top- with actually writing a formal report … We were encouraging people to write rough field notes, that it doesn't matter. It sounds like a small issue, but ... this was a real barrier because people would struggle to produce polished looking reports, and it became a barrier because of the amount of time people were

spending instead of doing day to day analysis. That is more important than having a nice output. This may be linked to the education system where if you write anything, it is expected to be a nice looking report.

If PRA continues to be used as an information gathering tool to feed the project cycle, appropriate skills in analysis and report writing may be another area for further capacity building. There is also interest in addressing quality standards for analysis and report writing when PRA is used for research through shared reflection amongst practitioners.

Is PRA for information collection also empowering?

If PRA is used for information collection within the project cycle, does it still have empowering effects for the local people who participate? The answer to this question depends largely on the answer to a previous question: in what sense is empowerment understood when PRA practitioners work within the project cycle framework?

Some practitioners say that increasing confidence in one's knowledge and ability to represent that knowledge is a type of empowerment. There is ample room for this within the project cycle framework, as the following quotation illustrates.

> In the beginning, you know, in many communities, when we wanted to practice this kind of thing, people used to say 'Well, we cannot do this. If you need to map, well we'll ask so-and-so here to make it because making a map, and all these kinds of figures is out of our capacity and knowledge.' Slowly we convinced them, well why not you try once again on the ground making… using very local things … which are available around the village. Then when they completed, constructed - 'Well you are right. We did, it is possible, which we were not thinking before' - that kind of realisation is a kind of learning in other words, and a kind of empowerment. Then the next time, even the illiterate farmer who can't read and write, they are quite happy to await us - 'Let us have a transect walk together, and let us see the things …'

This benefit of increasing confidence in having and being able to represent knowledge may be realised during PRA exercises held for purposes of the project cycle. If the 'product' of the PRA is used by other outside professionals, it can provide an even bigger boost to the confidence of people in their knowledge. For example, one practitioner recalled a case in which a map made by community members was used by engineers to plan the placement of electricity poles.

Other professionals go onto say that the experience of *sharing* knowledge amongst community members is an empowering process. For example, people can achieve empowerment through re-creating their shared history, through rediscovering their shared understanding of their community:

> [people] remember once again about their village, about their situation and they talk among each other … it is actually done with a group of people so they discuss together, say it together, construct something together and then they perceive something more.

In the course of data collection, local people can see what is around them with fresh eyes, which may interest them in taking advantage of the opportunities around them:

> We found that it is very good … to find the community needs in a short period of time … We went to the village for three days, and we found in that period we got lots of information. And also we found people were empowered from getting that information, because they know, they have the results of all the things … We found that people said, 'Oh- we have these things, but we cannot manage our things.' And that's they expressed, the villager, they expressed in that way …

This experience of people rediscovering their knowledge of their own community is made more powerful by the use of visual diagrams. One practitioner compared PRA to a mirror:

> If something is wrong on my face, I can't see it. I have to see it in a mirror, or someone needs to tell me. I need a mirror to see what is going wrong and what is going right.

People gain a new perspective by representing their knowledge visually.

Some practitioners suggest that it may be more empowering for people to share some aspects of their local knowledge than others. They explained that the empowering potential of PRA is particularly realised when it is used with marginalised groups to explore the social relations within their communities.

> For example, with the Venn diagrams, they start looking at the size of these chapatis, and the influence of the people who have the bigger ones. And they begin to see who holds the power in the community. And eventually that would encourage them to discuss further about what that person was, and the political space that person was having, the influence over the local economy, decision making, and that whole question about power. Showing that the other people, the poorest, the marginalised, they didn't have any power in that. They could visualise that. Previously, they knew it maybe, but when you see it, within a picture, that seemed to make some sort of difference.

Within the project cycle framework, however, discussions of social relationships tend to be instrumental to discussions about implementing the project, whether it is aiming to improve natural resource management, services, infrastructure, or livelihoods. Using PRA to gather information about social relationships and power is often left to the discretion of field workers who need to know the community in order to navigate through local politics and conflicts as they implement projects. They do not necessarily share their own social analysis process with community members. For example, practitioners explained how they would observe group dynamics during PRA exercises that were not explicitly about social relationships, and draw their own conclusions about the relationships of power within the group. And they rely on their analysis from informally observing interactions in the community outside of PRA exercises as well.

Is PRA for backstopping top-down projects?

One practitioner currently working in an international organisation reflected that there is good reason to implement some development activities in a top down way. As an example, the practitioner said that it may be best to build a school on the assumption that it is a community need so that it can be done faster. If one were to follow a bottom-up approach, the community would first need to negotiate until they agreed that a school is a shared priority through a PRA process, and then approach government or another source for assistance with its construction, which might introduce a delay of years. As the practitioner argued,

> This is the dilemma we have been facing in practising PRA. It is a very slow process … But looking at the past some of the past or high speed development projects, that has proceeded only in a high speed way, I believe PRA can provide some backstopping. Otherwise [the development project] comes- ZOOM! - and disappears- ZOOM! And that is not what we want …

If one is working within the 'rules' of time constraints and targets that come with the project approach to development, then PRA may be understood in this way, as a mechanism for producing some understanding and feeling of ownership for top-down development projects. A feeling of community ownership may be particularly important when there is need for ongoing community maintenance of the infrastructure created through the project, as in the project where the practitioner who put forward this view gained his experience in PRA.

Should PRA change the 'content' of projects and programmes?

A challenging question was raised by practitioners about the impact that PRA has had on the *content* of the programmes supported by development agencies, not just the mechanism by which they are implemented. As one practitioner from an international NGO said of his own organisation,

> The programme that we implemented after this PRA was not very different than what we used to implement in the past - without PRA, you know. So although there's a difference in the approach and processes … in terms of the project activities, it didn't really bring much change …

Another practitioner raised a similar point:

> What difference has this made to [our NGO's] planning or implementing of programmes between using conventional methods for gathering information and using PRA? Where, in terms of programmes and planning has there been a difference? Are we using PRA merely as a rhetoric, or are we really using it … this kind of study would lead us to really reflect on what we are doing. And I would think that we are not so different.

Implicitly, these quotations suggest that PRA should change the *content* of projects and programmes, not just the way that they are planned, implemented, and monitored. It raises questions about what level of decisions are

opened for participatory discussion through PRA, when PRA is being used within the framework of the project cycle. Although the 'ideals' of PRA as often presented in training situations argue that major decisions, such as what sector to work in, are open to discussion with the community, in reality the project framework for development means that these decisions are made in head offices by development policy makers. This can lead practitioners to manipulate situations, as they feel the need to give the appearance that there is a blank slate for discussing development projects with the community, when in reality major decisions have been made for them. One freelance practitioner saw this as a widespread pratice in Nepal:

> Let me give an example, like an ongoing project, and the objective of my project is to work in the education sector, and I go in some community, but the problem is different from education there. The community says, 'Oh, we have this problem,' they identify some problems, they prioritise some problems. But like me, my objective is just to work in the education sector, so I just impose on them. This is the main problem. Actually, it is not a good thing. …. What they have their objective behind, but only they want to go there in that way …

PRA and the experiential learning cycle

Some development practitioners in working within the project cycle see PRA as a tool that can help them move through the experiential learning cycle. The cycle proposes four stages in experiential learning: find out (or explore); analyse; decide; and act. This cycle can be embedded within the project cycle framework, to think about the decision making process at all stages, from planning a meeting to taking major decisions about implementation. As one practitioner explained,

> Everybody learns and relates to situations differently … and a lot of it relates to your learning style. There are some who don't spend much time finding out and leap in. Others find out and analyse and never get around to doing anything. Academic types are terrible for that … If you spend an appropriate time on each step [in the cycle], decisions will be better.

They explained that many different methods can be useful at different stages of the cycle, including RRA, PRA, and others. They explained that RRA would only be useful in the 'finding out' stage of the cycle. They argued that PRA when badly used is much the same as RRA, as a poor practitioner will be able to use the tools to gather information, but will not reach as far as analysis. They argued that if PRA is well used by a skilled practitioner, it can be useful for exploration, analysis, and possibly even starting the transition into making a decision. They argued, however, that PRA is not the only tool, or necessarily the best tool, to use at these different stages. For example, managing the transition from analysis to decisions can be very problematic, and PRA may not be a good tool for facilitating people through that transition.

PRA and better dialogue

As the project cycle depends on gathering and using information, it also depends on good relationships amongst the many different stakeholders involved. Some practitioners see that PRA is one mechanism to improve the dialogue between the many different people involved in development projects. It may facilitate dialogue between people in communities and the development professionals working there, and between people or groups within a community.

Practitioners see some PRA processes as a way of opening a respectful dialogue between local people and development practitioners, particularly by making an opportunity for development professionals to become familiar with different points of view in the community. For example, one practitioner described a research process using PRA, in which the researchers had decided an issue to explore in the community. They used PRA to learn what different community members thought about that issue. Then the researchers went away for a process of reflection on what they had learned. They then returned to the community to enter a distinct dialogue phase.

> They presented back the finding and discussed them with the community members … They introduced 'outside' ideas, raising them in community discussion. 'Some people think this about [the issue]. What do you think?,' and tried to get into a discussion … That is not to say you are right or wrong but to understand the community perspective …

PRA enabled the development professionals to start a dialogue based on a thorough understanding of community perspectives, before offering their own. For this to work, the head researcher said that PRA training had to, 'concentrate on … the facilitation skills for having a discussion with people … so much of PRA misses out the central part of it, which is getting into a discussion with people.' For the same practitioner, this emphasis on dialogue is what changed the research process from being extractive to being participatory. 'It is very much about trying to involve people in some process of analysis, of what their concerns and priorities are,' and that is what differentiate PRA from more 'extractive' research.

The type of open discussion that happens between development professionals and local people through PRA can reduce conflict in the future. As one practitioner recalled,

> We were having so many problems at the community level- there was a lot of conflict. They thought it was [our NGO's] road, [our NGO's] school, [our] tap … People used to come to the office and accuse the staff of taking bribes … We were convinced that if the need comes from them maybe later on there won't be conflict and later on the programme will go ahead smoothly … We used to sit with the people and refer to the baseline survey together, so the conflict lessened to a large extent …

Other practitioners focussed on the dialogue that PRA can start between different groups of people in communities. For example, one practitioner recounted a PRA training in which men and women began

discussing their relative workloads. Tempers became heated, as women 'accused' men of playing cards rather than working, and men resisted. In a large group discussion, the men agreed that this was true about them during certain months of the year. When men had agreed this point, according to second hand reports heard by the facilitator, the men made some small changes by helping their wives more with their work at slack times of year.

PRA and action - by whom?

One of the main points of criticism amongst PRA practitioners is the link between using PRA and some kind of action. When PRA is used within the project cycle framework by development organisations, the responsibility for action and the type of action 'required' by PRA tend to be seen in a particular way. Taking this particular type of action is seen as an absolutely vital ingredient in PRA practice. As one person said,

> We cannot say that, OK, this is a measurement for good PRA, right? … But I think if you have produced, you have come up with the sort of action implemented, then your PRA is good … If you have done nothing except writing a report, that PRA is … I mean that's PRA but we are not looking for that kind of PRA.

Why is it so important to practitioners that PRA is followed by some kind of action? Some practitioners say that if PRA is used to gather information, it creates added obligation from the outside organisation to the community that a questionnaire survey does not. As one person said, 'PRA… must have benefit to the community if we make lots of people participate and they give lots of time.' PRA is seen to create a responsibility of the *development agency* to do something *for* people. The following quotation illustrates this view:

> In my experience, if you just conduct PRA only to generate, to gather information, and you don't go back there, *you don't launch any activities* with that information, you finish your job and go back and there is nothing for the community, I think this is a bad way of using the community- whether it is exploitation or what, I don't know … [emphasis added]

So when working within the project cycle, using PRA creates an obligation for the development practitioner to launch activities, rather than arresting the project cycle at the appraisal stage. If there is not a development project, as we think of it, following from the activity, then the community is left with 'nothing.' The same point of view is put forward by another practitioner who said,

> Most of the information are collected, are just being collected, they are not being used … If we collect information, it should be used, otherwise why collect the information?

Again, in this case, 'we,' the development organisation, collects the information, which implies that it is for 'our' use, and 'we' must use it for starting an activity. In a similar vein, another practitioner argued that analysis done

through PRA is often halted by the outside agency before actions are followed through, due to a lack of foresight about, and willingness to provide, the resources needed for follow up.

> You go to work with the people. If you are looking at them broadly, you enumerate, you analyse, you problem pose and all that, you analyse what they want to do. Then this donor agency comes and says, OK, this is what you have analysed my colleague, my friend. You want twelve taps in your area, two wells, or this primary school, or this. Where is the money? Somehow, we are bringing that process of analysis to an end.

That is, the exploration that happens through PRA is geared to starting projects. If the agency does not follow through with a project, the community is left with little benefit by the process.

If actions taken by development agencies following PRA are integral to the PRA approach, then it is very damaging if people are misled about the actions that will follow a PRA process. As the quotation above demonstrate, PRA within the project cycle being linked closely to the information needs of development agencies, which will lead to action primarily led by them. Yet as the following quotation shows, the language of PRA even when used within the project framework does not acknowledge these underlying motivations for initiating PRA. One international NGO staff member argued that

> If you are very openly saying you are using it as an extractive tool, with no other expectation, no other question about it, then I don't see much damage about it. When right at the beginning you talk to the community, you explain that is the purpose, then that is it. If you say PRA is an empowering too, we have opportunity to discuss, we have opportunity to prioritise, then all these thing we give the wrong message …. And it definitely sends the wrong message to the community. And the community may refuse to participate in future exercises.

If practitioners use the open ended language of 'empowerment,' 'discussion,' and 'prioritisation' when introducing PRA that is being used within the framework of the project cycle, they may create unrealistic expectations about the scope of discussion, and the types of actions that will follow. The project approach to development makes the development agency a key actor in whatever activities are taken up. The development agency may work 'for' the people' or it may work 'with' the people, but in either case the responsibility for action rests largely with the development organisation.

PRA and generating information for policy advocacy

In the conventional view of development, the policy that guides projects and programmes is developed by professionals in development organisations, based on rational use of the information available to them. Development organisations, including the government, can use PRA as an active way of seeking out the views of the people they are meant to serve, rather than waiting for citizens to come to them with demands. This raises

the use of information generated through PRA for policy advocacy, to affect the high-level decisions of government and related agencies. As one practitioner said,

> I would tend to say using these tools with bureaucrats, policy makers, at least to bring the working level down - I would tend to see making use of these tools on behalf of the people who are using it, or using these tools to advocate or say something for the people. The people themselves may not have that link, but we could bridge that.

PRA can be a mechanism for governments or development agencies with some interest in making policies that reflect the priorities and interests of citizens to gain their views. The professionals who gather local peoples' views and funnel them into policy making processes are important actors in this process. PRA can be a very useful tool for those professionals in this process of speaking 'for the people.'

Some large agencies are already actively seeking the views of local people to feed their own policy making, and are using PRA to do it. One example is the Participatory Poverty Assessment conducted by the World Bank. As with the project approach to development, the initiative rests in the hands of the development organisation rather than local people. As one practitioner sees it,

> My own feeling about the World Bank doing PPA, is they are trying to give the perspective and aspirations of the poor themselves. And largely now, since they are doing this WDR, they are trying to come out with the voices of the poor people. Again for me it is extractive in a sense. [Citizens] have the right to take action at a local level. They need to mobilise themselves to take action to correct whatever is wrong in the society. They need to put pressure to the service providers, whether it is World Bank, or the government, or the likes of us. I don't think [the World Bank] are going to [the] extent [of encouraging those demands]. My own reading of it is that [the World Bank] want to hear, they want to listen to the voices of the poor. Previously they were listening to the voices of the economists. And now there is a shift, if there is a proper shift, to hear the voices of the poor, to enrich their projects, to enrich their documents, so that they can design better projects.

The practitioner makes the distinction here between development organisations seeking people's opinions using PRA tools, versus using PRA to empower local people to make demands for policy change on development organisations. PRA is a useful tool for development professionals who want to influence policies made within their organisations, to make them more friendly to poor people. PRA is seen by decision makers in positions of power, such as within the World Bank, as a legitimate way of gathering and representing the voices of poor people, and practitioners can and do make use of this in presenting arguments for policy change.

Some practitioners are sceptical about the practice of development organisations collecting the views of people through PRA, and aiming to make policy on the basis of that information. They view PRA as falling far short of being 'participatory' when used in this way.

> We thought of using these tools and techniques to find what did people think of poverty? How did they define it? What did they think of it? … We had all this raw data and information, and I was quite sceptical … over how it was conducted … It cannot be done in a matter of five or six days, I mean you give training to ten or thirteen people, you say to people you go and use these tools and bring us information. I mean, in a sense, you are pretty much doing it the way conventional research was done. The only think you are changing is where you were doing it with a questionnaire, you are doing it with a certain set of tools. But what you are asking the standard questions that you are asking in maybe twelve or thirteen group is the same standard question. In the different ethnic groups it is the same question - it does not reflect the cultural aspect … So what kind of information we got, I really don't know …

This quotation raises several points- mainly that when PRA is used to gather information for policy making purposes, it is not obviously different from using any qualitative research methods, except that it is labelled 'participatory,' and that it may be less rigorous in some ways. The practitioner argues that the advantages of the locally specific nature of the information gathered through PRA may be lost when trying to build a policy-relevant national picture.

Despite these problems with addressing policy level questions through PRA, practitioners see a need to find some way to engage in policy level debates with participatory methods. One practitioner made a strong case for the need to address macro issues that affect local people, not only micro issues, in a participatory way. He gave an example of a situation where micro-oriented work with PRA threatened to be overwhelmed by a major policy level decision that his project had no strategy for engaging with:

> Actually that was the area where this huge hydroelectricity project was proposed - this mega-project …. It has quite a lot of discussion, and it has created quite a community momentum. The whole community is anticipating now, if there is a huge hydroelectricity project, we have job opportunities, we have access to so many things. So suddenly that concept of the mega-project changed the whole [PRA] process. Imagine if that project had started what would have happened, from these PRA tools, or whatever project planning mechanism or cycle. It would have swiped [the PRA process] away, the whole mega-project. Sometimes this mega or macro issue will really affect … But fortunately or unfortunately that project didn't come in that area, but definitely in other areas in Nepal that thing is happening.

A practitioner used a metaphor to explain why he thought it was important for participatory development practitioners to find ways to deal with macro policy issues. As he explained,

> There is one saying in Nepal, I don't now how I will translate it. You know this goldsmith who has a very small hammer, a very small tool. To make a piece of gold flat, he has tot hit it maybe a hundred times …. But if it is a blacksmith's hammer, he hits it maybe one time and makes it flat. So what is to say that, one hundred strikes of a goldsmith and one strike of a blacksmith …

His argument was that PRA as commonly used now as a 'goldsmith's hammer,' and that practitioners need to think about dealing with the 'blacksmith's hammer' of policy, whether it is with PRA, or other more appropriate participatory approaches.

It could be that PRA is simply not an appropriate tool through which citizens can engage in policy debates. Perhaps PRA can only be used to deal with macro policy issues in the sense of helping citizens to develop coping strategies, rather than seeking to change the policy decision itself. Speaking again about the areas where a hydroelectricity project was planned, the practitioner recalled that

> Though ultimately what we wanted was that whatever was there, the people should be able to get a benefit out of it. Roads, whatever, that they could get benefit out of it in a more informed, conscious way. So initially we thought that maybe our project, if the hydroelectricity project did come, maybe we should give people more about different aspects of hydroelectricity projects … this is another immediate issue. People would they use productive land, would they get health system, whether these people would get better service, government system would have interest in their demands, whether poor people would have access to government services or only private health, and then access to school. Whether people are coming from outside the community and sending their children to school, whether the local people have access. Or they will buy the land, will the poor people have access to land in their own area. So we thought it was the priority thing to do …

If PRA was applied in this way, people may have made the best of the opportunities presented by the mega-project.

But perhaps there are avenues to combine PRA methods with large-scale grassroots organisation that would be sufficient for citizens to engage with policy decisions that affect them, whether the development organisation has welcomed their views (perhaps through conducting PRA) or not. This type of approach to influencing policy better fits within the next section, which will explore a distinct set of views about the overarching development framework within which we should use PRA.

An alternative view of PRA: consciousness raising, learning, empowerment, and social change

Although for the most part, practitioners understand PRA as a tool for use within the project cycle, others have views of PRA informed by very different conceptual frameworks. They speak about PRA in the context of action research, consciousness raising, social analysis, human rights, and taking political action, rather than implementing development projects and programmes. They see PRA as a tool to be used with and by marginalised people, rather than whole communities. This is definitely a minority view amongst the practitioners interviewed in the production of this paper, and likely amongst Nepali PRA practitioners as a whole. It is difficult to label this set of concepts as clearly as the 'project cycle framework' was labelled in the previous section, as

often practitioners did not explain their underlying view of development in any detail. The end of the section will draw out some of the underlying similarities between the various views presented here, by contrasting them with the view of PRA for use within the project cycle. As a starting point for outlining this alternate set of ideas within which some practitioners frame PRA, the next section will present some critiques of the way PRA is commonly practised within the project cycle.

Critiques of PRA in the project cycle

Before going onto explain the way they think PRA should be used, some practitioners start by critiquing the claims made about PRA as conducted within the development project cycle. Practitioners with an alternative view of PRA explain that they are not convinced that using PRA tools for information collection within the project cycle is inherently empowering for the people who participate. As one said, 'It's just like a survey. They get people to draw the pictures, they just take them away … They don't use them in a participatory way.' For various reasons, they argue that doing PRA exercises for information gathering purposes fall short of their idea of 'empowerment.' One practitioner said,

> Many people have used PRA, even now, as basically an exploratory tool, rather than as an empowering tool. Therefore many community have not benefited from the empowerment aspect of PRA. They might have benefited having one or two projects in their area, but the real empowerment should come through the whole process hasn't come, because it has just been used to explore, an extractive tool.

He went on to explain further that the type of 'confidence' people gain through PRA does not equal empowerment by his definition.

> Even the community people, I think what I have seen is maybe there seems to be more confident in terms of talking, and sharing their views … Whether it is the PRA, or whether they get to interact regularly, looking at the PRA … maybe it is the process of PRA that helped people to think systematically and openly … But that really doesn't mean that they have been empowered, that really doesn't mean that they are going to go on organising themselves in a way that they can demand state or government sufficiently …

Similarly, another practitioner said that PRA for information gathering is only 'empowering' if we give a very weak meaning to 'empowerment.'

> Maybe it releases people's energy to see things that they might not have said or spoken using other tools and techniques. I would tend to say yet, it might open them a little bit. But again, to put this all in to the notion of empowerment, I think again we are making the whole notion of empowerment weak, not strong. So I would not say empowerment - I mean, lets not use the term empowerment so loosely. Using twelve, thirteen techniques in the community for twelve days, and saying the community is empowered in the

course of the analysis, I would really question that … You would have to redefine empowerment, what do we mean by empowerment.

These quotations begin to suggest that there is a different view of 'empowerment' from the way it is used by people working within a project cycle framework.

Some practitioners go beyond suggesting that PRA as commonly used within the project cycle is not empowering, to argue that its use actively reinforces the status quo. As reported in the earlier section on the spread of PRA, some practitioners think that PRA is another tool that rests in the hands of a few elite professionals, and is thus another type of specialist knowledge that gives control to members of the elite. Some practitioners are critical of the way that some of their colleagues are seemingly unconscious of their power in relation to local people.

There are some big issues around - some people do have the expectation that there will be a programme afterwards … [the researchers] were often seen as someone who had some outside, better knowledge … People want to pretend that you are all there as equals when quite clearly you are not.

So at one level, PRA may not challenge the relationship of power between development practitioners and community members, although the language of 'facilitation' and 'bottom-up approaches' may lead practitioners to overlook the relationship of power that is still there.

Some practitioners also said that certain ways of practising PRA reinforce relationships of power *within* communities, rather than empowering people to challenge powerful community members. This unwillingness to use PRA in a way that challenges power within communities may have its route in the framework that development practitioners bring to their work. The following quotation clearly articulates this point of view.

… I am making some statements that I am not so confirmed about myself, but something that I feel - I think the whole aspect of development, the way it has been conceptualised, the way it has been implemented, has been looked at in a very simplistic manner. You have certain programmes, you are an expert, and this whole notion that the expert is always coming from the West, and that the West has the answer to our problem. That is the mainstream thought here. Why I am saying mainstream, because it is the elite … class that are in the development agency, in the educational institution, so it is this group of people who shape and form this opinion. And so they form this opinion of PRA and how PRA should be used.

The same practitioner goes on to argue that

tools are not neutral … We are talking of a community, and there are power relations, of so many forces interplaying there, that gives this whole aspect of psychology that we have not even touched upon. And then drawing of those information and basing your entire response on that, I feel it is quite superficial. It does not go to the depth of the matter …. I would say it is not neutral if we would say that the logic behind

> PRA is that we need to base our actions on the basis of information is generated. And I would question how is that information being generated … bringing a number of people within the community, and using these tools to bring out some of their understanding of their community is one aspect, but what after that? Where are the other dimensions in there? A husband, wife, boy, children - lets say the landlord and the worker there. There are so many classes among that small community. And people do not express themselves as much as they would if they had their own interest group of people, who shared similar socio-economic, political situation. What happens is if you bring those people together, what happens is you tend to listen to those dominant voices who tend to speak out. So what you are bringing out, extracting again is those ideas that somehow represent a certain group of people as to how they perceive the community, how they define the community, how they define their problems. So that is where I think PRA has not been used to the extent of going in depth. That's why I say it has been used very superficially. I think it has got strength, but I don't think the strength it has got is explored to the level it should be.

This argument suggests that contrary to the claims of PRA, the way PRA is commonly practised may reinforce the voices of the powerful. But it also suggests that PRA could be practised differently so that it did not have this impact- but how? What if PRA is framed in terms of analysis by local people of their own social position and relations, human rights, and political action, rather than doing development projects?

A case study of PRA and consciousness raising, empowerment, and political action

The following case study is an excellent starting point for exploring the alternative view of PRA as a tool for consciousness raising, empowerment, and political action. Out of it, we can draw a very different picture of what PRA could be, and what for what it could be used as compared to its more familiar application within the project cycle. This example comes from an INGO that used PRA tools within the REFLECT process of adult literacy, to facilitate discussions amongst a group of *dalits* over a period of months.

> For example, the Chamars in [Village X], they were doing the normal REFLECT process. And they said they were untouchables, they were not touched by the other untouchables in the community. And they came to this analysis, that since they were removing the dead carcass from the community, and since that was assigned to them right from the ancient time, they thought that they were untouchable because of that, they were marginal because of that. And they immediately made a resolution that they would not remove the carcass anymore from the community as a community. And they would go to any length to resist the pressure from the high caste in that way. And they were successful in doing that. It was immediately after that that somebody's horse died. The horse belonged to a higher caste person. They came to the Chamars. Eventually, he had to remove it himself. And now I hear that these people in the rich community passed another resolution, which says that, recently I heard that, these rich people wouldn't allow these Chamars to walk through their land, and they wouldn't hire them to work for them, and these Chamars were very

> prepared. They would take another action. So it sounds like a conflict or confrontation. But to change the status quo, some conflict like this you can't avoid. So the conflict itself is not bad- how you resolve the conflict is what is important. Some of these activities, like REFLECT, that empower the marginal people, could be very useful at the local level, changing the perception of people at the local level. So the removal or not removal of the carcass is not that important. That they can take action at the local level is much more important. That's what we are seeing kind of things happening with these tools … and it is not just one time PRA, it is a continuous process over nine months. That is one important thing, not go to that area, do PRA and think that now the people are empowered, now they have beautiful maps hanging on their wall and all that … it is that continuous follow up, that continuous exploration of issues, and the resolve to take action within that community is more important. That's where this additionality that PRA, REFLECT, PPA, can bring, could bring, and that's what we are banking on in the foreseeable future to implement.

The same group of *dalits* has taken action to pressure the government, demanding that the state meets its responsibility to fulfil their citizens' rights. This story was recounted by another staff member in the same organisation.

> These are untouchables, they are living in the fringes of the community … What happens there, about a year back, in these REFLECT circles, what happened was the children of the *dalits* were not in school. And the central government has some policy of giving some remuneration in cash to the children of *dalits* so that they can go to school. So what we did is we took this message to these centres. See this is what it is, your children should be going to school. You are bringing them with you in the evenings here in the classes. So with a lot of discussion, debate over this, these guys organised, and they went to the district education office to claim that they should be given this amount to send their children to school. And it has to be- see these tools have to be linked with some actions.

Out of this short example, we can begin to see an alternative vision for the use of PRA, outside the project cycle. The next sections will present some of the different ways that practitioners see PRA as a tool for use outside the project cycle, for learning, consciousness raising, empowerment, and social mobilisation.

PRA for action research

One alternative framework within which practitioner see a use for PRA is 'action research.' It may sound familiar to practitioners operating within the project approach to development, but action research has some important differences. Action research is a contested term, but in a broad sense, it is a process of analysis, planning an action, taking the action and observing how it plays out, reflecting on the action and replanning new action in a repeating cycle. It may be undertaken as a collective process and thus called participatory action research (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000: 595–600). A practitioner who developed their thinking about action research during studies overseas explained how they used PRA as tool within an overall framework of action research.

> How I understand it is we do the research of the local institution … together with the people. And then, the idea is that while doing research you come up with the issues, problems, opportunities, etc. - you know, as findings of this research. So this has to be put into the action so that it can improve the situation … So the whole action research processes is about identifying the thing - you know, situation, problems, issues and potential, and then putting that into action. This has to be like action reflection process.

This will sound familiar to most PRA practitioners who work within a project cycle framework. Perhaps what is slightly different is the emphasis on *cycles* of reflection on previous actions, through which peoples' consciousness is raised to new levels of analysis and action in a spiral. This process is termed conscientisation in the writings of Paulo Freire (1970). As a practitioner explained from his own experience,

> And then the second phase would be to reflect up on this action again- again analyse the situation, and then go further in all these … This is a kind of cycle where we go, dynamically into higher levels … Because consciousness is … it's about how people believe and understand their situation …. So PRA [is] very useful tools to do this, to do the analysis of the existing situation. And, you know, plan the action points … So that was the context I used.

Many practitioners working in the project cycle aspire to this kind of spiralling learning, but in practice, due to tight time frames of development organisations and changes in staff, it is difficult to follow through in reality. PRA conducted for action research may place the responsibility for action in the hands of local people rather than so much in the hands of the development organisation, which distinguishes it from PRA as commonly used in the project cycle. The emphasis on learning and consciousness raising as a product of PRA is also distinct from PRA within the project cycle, that puts more emphasis on action in the sense of tangible outputs.

PRA for social analysis

If PRA is practised as in the case study of the *chamars* recorded above, it is targeted primarily at helping local people to understand and change social relationships. If the objective is to understand and change relationships, analysis of these relationships needs to be brought more into the centre of the way PRA is practised. When used to supply information for the project cycles, often PRA analysis focuses on the physical environment, or the livelihood system, without making strong links to the social differences, struggles, and relationships within communities. One way to encourage a new focus on social relationships is through different forms of PRA training. A few PRA trainers in Nepal start their trainings by talking about social analysis, from a class perspective, before going on to discuss how PRA fits within this conception of society and social change. Another researcher said,

> I found that the most difficult thing in training is how to train people in social analysis … there is a lot to learn from gender training, but how to train for everything, like caste, class, age … it is a big issue … Maybe it is time to get rid of the name PRA and just call it social analysis … that's what it is all about …

She argued that the most difficult and important thing when introducing new people to PRA, was to convince them the importance of focussing on 'who says what,' and what different views are linked to different social positions in the community. She argued that this awareness could have a valuable affect on the way development practitioners do their jobs.

Taking sides

Within the project cycle, development professionals often must make accommodations with existing power structures in communities to get projects done. In line with this need, the language of PRA often refers to working with 'communities' as a whole. Social analysis is often applied to understanding relationships of power within communities in order that development professionals can avoid running up against them, as they pursue the implementation of projects. As the case study above shows, however, some practitioners argue that PRA applied in the pursuit of consciousness raising, human rights, and social change, should be a tool used particularly with marginalised people. As one practitioner said,

> The true spirit of PRA for me, is one - again, if PRA is a tool of the marginalised. And I am using it from that sense, a tool of the poor, then this is a tool that should help their life one way or the other. I mean, PRA is not used for people from the World Bank, or business- the corporate sector. I mean, if they can find some meaningful ways of using it for their purposes that's it. But the concern is who is the poor, who is the powerless. For me a true spirit would be one where PRA itself had a very strong conceptual founding upon which it rested for these people, or that it was for these people that it is taking sides. That it is not neutral. That people may want to make it neutral, but it is not. That it is to magnify these voices, the concerns of these people. That's how I would tend to look at it.

If PRA is not neutral, it may be for working with sub-communities at the bottom of the social ladder, to help them analyse their situation and develop the resolve to change it. In the Nepali context, the caste system means that there are often very clearly defined groups that live in a discrete geographical area, and face common forms of social exclusion and exploitative economic relationships with the rest of the community. As in the case study above, PRA may be used as part of a process that guides marginalised people could direct their demands for change at the powerful people in their community, or local representatives of government.

PRA and a rights-based approach to development

If PRA is a matter of consciousness raising, taking sides with marginalised people, and making demands on government, it suggests that PRA can be used as a tool within a rights-based approach to development. The short case study above, of *dalits* making demands for access to school for their children can be conceptualised as an example of rights-based development. What is a rights based approach to development? One practitioner explained it as follows:

> The community organisations, they are trained, and given these things. They are told, 'Government is yours. You have elected them, they are supposed to provide services to you. They are not your masters, they are your servants …' The government people cannot disagree with this. Theoretically they know this is right. They cannot come out openly and tell you that this is not right … we are not supposed to serve the people. So they cannot oppose us … not openly.

The focus is on stimulating demand from citizens of the state for better service provision from their government. It is assumed that stronger demand will lead to improvements in the supply of services over time.

Although rights based approaches are increasingly becoming a new fashion in development, they are not completely new to development thinking. In the 1960s and 1970s, talk of participation as a human right was common (Cornwall 2000). Nor is the language of rights and its association with participation new to Nepal. For example, one practitioner talked about working on rights-based donor programme in 1989

> We were exploring participatory tools and techniques and strategies to strengthen community based organisations in the country so they can come and bring out demands to the government, and strengthen governance.

Currently, there are not many development professionals or organisations, including PRA practitioners, taking a rights based approach in their work.

> Not many - hardly any I would say … because when you talk about rights approach, it is only very few people who are thinking of changing the whole approach of development from service delivery, providing services to the people based on whatever kind of information is collected, whether through PRA or any other approach. Change from that and start talking about that and start talking about the people themselves, and take the rights approach. We have certainly changed the policy. Even for us it was take some time for us to start a full-fledged kind of rights based approach … But there are a lot of these human rights organisations, who talk about human rights, although they are talking about a different kind of human rights. Although they are related, we are also talking about rights approach, we are talking both about civil and political rights, and also social and economic rights of people. And the rights provided by different declarations, UN declarations where the government is a signatory. And provided by the constitution …

> and the basic rights, we are saying basic needs or basic rights, rights to education or rights to security, that should be the basic rights of people. And they should fight to get it from the government. That's the rights were are talking about in this sense.

This rights based approach is new to most mainstream development organisations. With its focus on social and economic rights, rather than political and legal rights, it may break new ground for many existing human rights organisations as well.

Some practitioners think there is potential to use PRA within a rights-based development framework.

> I think it is only a matter of time before we see a shift from this service delivery to rights based approach, when we see the people are empowered to take action, to put pressure on service providers. And that's where I can see these tools … can help people to help assert their rights … Its not a trend, but it's the beginning of that trend. To complete that again, you need certain approaches, and what is available right now to do that? You can't just go out and start taking quantitative information and exploring structured sort of interviews with people. You need to go there and take some time, you need to interact with them on a long-term basis … like REFLECT exercises, with PRA based techniques and tools …

This may be a frontier for further innovation and adaptation of PRA methods in the future. Perhaps PRA can help citizens to explore their own conception of rights, the corresponding responsibilities they see for the state, and how they can act politically to see their rights fulfilled.

A recap - PRA inside and outside the project cycle

This section presents the views of some Nepali development professionals who argue that PRA can and should be applied outside the framework of the project cycle. For the purpose of illustration, the following table poses a version of PRA seen as fitting within the project cycle against this different view of what PRA should be.

	In the project cycle	Outside the project cycle
PRA is used	At key moments in the project cycle - when appraising, designing, monitoring, evaluating.	As an ongoing process, in cycles of action and reflection on that action.
PRA helps learning by	Development professionals and local people about the natural environment, infrastructure, sectorally conceived development issues like health and education, economics. Local people about how to plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate projects as per the project cycle. Development professionals about social relationships as far as they impede/facilitate the implementation of projects.	Local people about social relationships, oppression, power, their rights, how to act collectively, how to organise acts of resistance against locally powerful people or the government.
Responsibility for action rests with …	Development agency 'for' or 'with' communities.	People.
Action is	Mainly the responsibility of development organisations In the form of development projects or activities	Mainly the responsibility of local people. In whatever form people decide will help them address the issues important to them. It may be political activism, such as organised acts of resistance against the powerful within the community, or making political demands on the State to fulfil peoples' rights. It may be in the form of development projects.
PRA is used with	The poor and marginalised, or 'the community,' to bring people forward together harmoniously, while making small steps towards equity.	The marginalised, which may mean taking sides with them against powerful people, and may bring conflict.
PRA affects policy	By providing reliable information demanded by development policy makers about the priorities and needs of people, which development professionals can use in making decisions.	By mobilising people to pressure government to fulfil their responsibilities to people.

PRA and the personal

In the early days of PRA in Nepal, PRA was primarily seen as a tool to fill the needs for information presented by the project cycle. As the previous section suggest, there are those who see PRA as a tool to be used outside the project cycle, in the pursuit of participatory learning, empowerment, human rights, and social change. Somewhat separate from the debates about what purpose PRA is good for, is a debate about appropriate 'attitudes and behaviour.' It stemmed from questions about different practitioners' motivations, but not in the sense of whether they were pursuing project-based development, or the kind of broader social change outlined in the last section. It is about a much more personal level of motivation rather than political values. A practitioner involved in PRA since its introduction to Nepal traces the increasing importance of attitudes and behaviour in discusssions of PRA:

> Somewhere along the line, people started to say there was much more misuse of PRA. That just to legitimate a certain project proposal, just to enhance the CV of a particular person, people started misusing it. They started putting rapid PRA, short PRA, exploratory PRA, whatever all these things. Although that was some sort of innovation there, but there was also distortion … and people became to question what was the motive behind some of these initiatives, when it was not properly used. And I think it was after the establishment of NEPAN, people began to raise questions, because they could come together in one group, practitioners, and institutions also, in one forum they started exploring these larger questions … and it was very timely that people began to question the motives behind some of these issues … and I think when people started asking questions about the motives of some of the people who started using PRA, although all the behaviour or practitioners or institutions was very non-participatory, they became the trainers of PRA. And that's how I think it began. And people thought it is not the tools and techniques and approaches - these tools and techniques do have their own place in development - but it is the attitude and behaviour of those who practice, and the culture of the organisation itself that matters. And people started exploring this further. There was a workshop in India … I think PRAXIS was involved in organising it, Robert came, some people from Nepal came, some members of NEPAN came. So I think this was a major breakthrough in PRA, looking at the attitude and behavioural aspect.

As the conclusion of this quotation points out, the new focus on attitude and behaviour is not exclusive to Nepal, but is linked to a general shift in the discourse about PRA around the globe. However, Nepali practitioners have given the phrase 'attitude and behaviour' its own meaning in their context, as the following sections will show.

What is attitude and behaviour?

What do people mean by attitude and behaviour? Practitioners do not tend to include their disagreements and criticisms about the purpose of PRA - the different uses they see for it within the project cycle or without - in their discussion of attitudes and behaviour. It is more about the way in which practitioners interact with others while pursuing their different goals, than about the activities they are engaged in. They tend to use attitudes and behaviour to mean a way of interacting with other people, that can be carried through all spheres of their life.

> Basically we're talking about attitude - it starts with me, what I am. I have to be someone who can follow the ideals … I am very friendly, very open learning and all this in the presence of you or another group or maybe in a group of friends always. But how do I behave in my family? How do I behave in their personal life? That also counts … If I don't have anything, if I don't have the right attitude, if I don't have good attitude, how can I express and how can I give it to others?

The practitioners lists being friendly, and open to learning as two aspects of good attitude and behaviour. Another practitioner said,

> For me, philosophy means life-style … If I understand PRA as a philosophy at least I should have patience to listen to other people in my life, in my general life. When I am at home, I should listen to my family, listen to my neighbours, also be very much participative.

This practitioner mentions patience, and listening as key factors in good attitude and behaviour. As these quotations show, practitioners argue that even if one is not actually conducting PRA, there is space for practising the attitudes and behaviour they have come to associate with PRA.

> If attitude is positive, I can listen to the person who is very closer to me … Maybe some higher level person, and living at the district headquarters, he may not be able to listen to all poor people who are living far from him at remote villages. But he can listen to his very closest poor people- maybe that guy, maybe at his office, a junior person, maybe his neighbour, maybe his worker at his home …

Again, the practitioner emphasises listening as a key trait, and especially to people who are officially in a lower position. Aside from listening, practitioners see openness and transparency as very important for PRA practice.

> Practitioner: We have to tell them very frankly, during training some would say, we talk about transparency … and sometimes we also give example. Like you don't know how much money I have. OK, Garett-ji, let's go to the hotel and eat, I will ask. What will you answer, what will you like to eat?
> GP: A full meal, a beer, and some sweets.
> Practitioner: And if I show you these things, and I ask you what would you like, what would you like to eat now? I have seven rupees. Now what would you say?
> GP: I'm not very hungry right now, maybe I will just have some tea.
> Practitioner: Yeah, sometimes we also do it this way in training. So we have to be very frank or very transparent. How much resources do we have, and in what sector can we work? …

For Nepali practitioners, the language of attitudes and behaviour reflects the importance that practitioners place on traits like listening, treating people as equals, being friendly, being honest, and inviting others to share in decisions even if one is in a place of power to make them alone.

Practitioners see a complicated relationship between the type of attitudes and behaviour they value, and practising PRA. Good PRA practice depends on having the right attitudes and behaviour, but at the same time, PRA practice can encourage the development of these good attitudes and behaviour in people. Practitioners shared their personal experiences of changing their attitude and behaviour through the experience of practising PRA.

> My personal learning, I joined [an NGO] when I was fresh from university. I am an agriculture graduate, I have been studying for four years. I thought I was the one who knew everything about agriculture … when I have been staying with them [people in the community], I really changed.

As another practitioner recalled,

> I grew up in Kathmandu, and somehow, in my early days twenty years ago when I was still studying, somehow I knew I wanted to work in rural areas … I thought I was the person to do development. Then … I had training in PRA. I use it in income generation programmes. I realise that people can analyse their situation. Then I got changes in my attitude. Before, I thought I was the one who could do development, so PRA can affect attitudes.

A manager in an international organisation that support PRA training said that we have to accept that practitioners are not all perfect, but that by giving them PRA training and encouraging them to practice, they will naturally self-improve and learn over time. This would suggest that the problem of attitudes and behaviour is likely to be greater with people new to PRA. Perhaps the large number of people who have very recently started using PRA explains the general perception that attitude and behaviour is a problem - it may begin correcting itself as more practitioners all become more experienced, and grow through practice and reflection.

Motivation for 'speaking' versus 'doing'

Although attitudes and behaviours may be gradually self improving, in the meantime, it seems that as the practice and language of PRA has spread very quickly, many more people have learned to say the 'right things' about participation than have learned to act on them in their day to day lives. When talking about attitudes and behaviours, what seems to bother Nepali practitioners the most is hypocrisy about participation, from people who are inconsistent in their words and actions. Practitioners often focus on hypocrisy about attitude and behaviours, not within the framework of doing PRA, but in the rest of people's personal and professional lives.

> People say very beautiful things, beautiful words. People write very beautiful phrases and sentences using participatory approach of development - it is more than PRA, bigger than PRA, and it is a holistic approach and all. But while looking back to him or her and these activities at office, maybe at home, the approach is not being practised. That is complete nonsense. For me it does not make any sense- what you say you have to follow.

So why is it that people speak about the attitudes and behaviour associated with PRA and participation, but do not follow basic values of participation, like listening to people around them, or being honest about their own agenda?

There are a number of pressures that explain why people use the language of participation, and other pressures that may explain in part why they do not act as they speak. Some interviewees thought that some practitioners may behave inappropriately for unconscious reasons. They may have a sense of their own role in development that drives them to take the lead, rather than working in a participatory way with local people.

> We find the kind of people who do these participatory approaches, they are not really participatory. The main hurdle is more of attitude and your way of doing things. So sometimes we don't find good people who have that attitude. In the name of participation, they do everything by themselves, in the name of the villagers. That doesn't empower them … They try to accomplish something in a given length of time, or they try to be ahead of others, but in fact they are behind others …

As another practitioner said,

> I don't think the most difficult thing was not to get the community involved - it was to stop the staff from doing it for them. Now people [from the project] have taken over, devised things. They women say, You do it dear, and [the staff] do it.

Many of us share this attitude:

> My personal idea is that we also very fond of making things ourselves ... taking decisions ourselves, not listening to many other poor people. This is a matter of attitude.

It may be that in wanting to take a leadership role, to be creative, and to give ideas, people unintentionally close space for participation by the people with whom they work.

Other practitioners may choose to speak the language of PRA and participation as a conscious strategy for gaining personal benefit. For example,

> There are some people who are just making PRA their job. After they leave the office, they never use the word PRA … The other people are using PRA philosophy in their development profession, not only when they are doing PRA, but when they meet other development professionals …. Others take it as a philosophy of life. The problem is that most people are here [in the job mentality category] … which is not PRA, it is more RRA. People want to have PRA in their biodata so they can get a job …

PRA has become a valuable skill in Nepal - valuable in the sense that it can open doors for employment and professional advancement. As the quotation argues, people who take up PRA for these reasons are less likely to transfer the attitudes and behaviour outside the context of actually practising PRA. Another practitioner gave an example of people who feel pressure to adopt the language of participation to make themselves marketable.

> I want to say a very small example from Robert Chamber's workshop last year … These were very big people … I found that the people who have a big voice at that time have a small voice. I don't know why they want to be nice in front of Robert Chambers … Other times they have big voice, but there they were speaking with a soft voice, very nicely, like that … I find that some people talk one way and act another way …

So in some cases, people may act with the attitudes and behaviours positively associated with PRA in order to impress powerful people who may be able to influence their job prospects or other career opportunities. One practitioner argued that there may be more incentive to behave well when one is around development professionals than when one is working unobserved with local people.

> In the community nobody will say, come to my place and conduct a PRA training ... But if you conduct [training] for any NGO or INGO, if you are nice, maybe they will invite you back to conduct another training … If you have the chance to make maybe ten [professional] people you can make happy [during a training] then maybe you can get ten opportunities, ten contracts …

In this case, practitioners may treat local people badly because there is no advantage for their future marketability by treating them well.

In other cases, practitioners may give a falsely encouraging impression to community members because their main objective is to convince local people to cooperate with them in some PRA exercises so that they can complete their consultancy work.

> [Some] of the PRA practitioners, they're violating other things though. They started promising people false promises. I think we also discussed at the last workshop. And they said OK, I will meet with this fellow and inform him that you have to have this, or I'll try to influence that fellow, or I'll try to send somebody or other to deliver you this and that. And what I was doing is basically just trying to convince them that they should co-operate with me, and once I am done with my job I left the place, nothing that I have to do.

The responsibility for this situation may be partly in the way the PRA work was first commissioned- if an honest representation of the purposes and (lack of) benefits to local people cannot convince them that it is worth participating, then consultants may resort to this strategy.

In a similar way, people may be commissioned, or feel pressured to use PRA, in a way that gives the impression their agenda is open, when really the practitioner knows the agenda has already been determined.

> Let me give an example, like an ongoing project, and the objective of my project is to work in the education sector, and I go in some community, but the problem is different from education there. The community says, 'Oh, we have this problem,' they identify some problems, they prioritise some problems. But like me, my objective is just to work in the education sector, so I just impose on them. This is the main problem. Actually, it is not a good thing. …. What they have their objective behind, but only they want to go there in that way …

There may be a combination of factors that leads the practitioner to hide the constraints under which they are working in this way. Perhaps the practitioner thinks that 'proper' PRA must give the appearance of being completely open-ended. Perhaps the organisation that has commissioned the PRA has made it clear through

their history that they only want to hear certain views from the community, and the practitioner accommodates this. Of course the practitioner could act differently, by being more open with local people, refusing to take the work if the organisation requires some level dishonesty, and so on.

In considering this general criticism of people's motivations, which are clouded by the personal benefit they gain by practising PRA, it is worth remembering that to some degree, most people who practice PRA are motivated in part by their own personal interest. They are receiving a salary for what they do and their organisation considers PRA a part of their job, or they have consultancy contracts which specify the use of PRA, or they stand to gain donor funds that will enable them to continue working. There are very few people who do not stand to gain personally in any way from practising PRA, although for some people the benefits are less than others.

> The VDC people, they don't get any funds from outside. The NGO people, they won't get money if they don't use PRA. There is a question - would people use PRA if they didn't get any money from outside? … I am very impressed with the VDC people - they are doing it for their own reasons.

But even in this case, their 'own reasons' may be self serving to some degree, in that using PRA may prove a popular way to plan, helping them to maintain their elected position.

The consequences of hypocrisy?

Some practitioners think that the hypocrisy of other professionals can have a damaging effect on the further progress of participatory approaches. The image it creates of participatory practitioners may turn others away from wanting to associate themselves with participatory approaches.

> People look at you, at what you are doing, actually. Then people will believe in you and your saying, your writing. If you write something else and do something other, and people may not trust you and the approach will be flying somewhere in the sky. It will not be practised on the ground. That is the frustrating thing.

It also has an effect on people in the communities where hypocritical practitioners work.

> I have to supervise people working at grassroots and I have talked with local people - very illiterate, very poor people. They are quite capable to evaluate you, you know, as a development professional, coming from somewhere else … Who is doing what? Who is supporting the poor? Who is supporting the villagers? Or who is just grabbing his salary and doing nothing? They're very much clever evaluators of the development professionals.

These critical reflections are very negative, but the picture is not all so bleak. Professionals were careful to say that, 'In Nepal, there are people accepting it as part of their life. It isn't' everyone who is using it as a tool, or just a way to make money.'

PRA and management styles

In the previous section, the paper reported that many practitioners thought that the attitudes and behaviour associated with PRA should not be limited to PRA exercises. They argued that practitioners should maintain the same attitude and behaviour in the other spheres of their life, including interactions with other development workers in their own organisations. This section will present the argument that some practitioners have made, that the lessons from the PRA movement about attitude and behaviour have started to feed people's thinking about management styles. People gave day to day examples of this type of managerial thinking.

> Even in my new office, I have a colleague from a business background. He isn't familiar with these [participatory] things. My boss likes this participatory approach. He arrived first [at our new office], but didn't buy any furniture - he waited until we arrived weeks later and let us choose our own. My friend with the business background thought he was just being lazy. But after long discussions he realised that this way we would have the furniture we wanted, and if the boss had chosen the wrong ones for us, we would have been uncomfortable from then on. It's not [my colleague's] fault - he hasn't been exposed to such realities.

Another manager gave a similar example:

> I made a decision yesterday about the venue for my management meeting. And before deciding the venue we discussed with everybody. And at the end what happened was the drivers thought the road was not good to go to that area …. [to] go to that area was risky. So that was the deciding point. Nobody consults drivers for management meetings, but … if they are saying no, that is very good information. Although it is very technical, people are very empowered at this lower level. They voice their opinion …

These examples are about minor day to day decisions, but when this participatory style is applied to project management, it can have major effects on the way people experience their work.

One practitioner explained at some length the benefits he saw from the participatory mode of management at his previous workplace, although at the beginning he was frustrated participatory management.

> The good thing about that was the team leader of the project … really a believer of PRA - participatory approach. In all our practices, for a small decision we used to even have one-day, two-day discussions sometimes, and … all of our staff has to be present in that meeting. We had to have half a day meeting every week where we say everything. Even in our very lowest staff to the team leader, everybody has to be present and everybody has to share … Let me confess this, that I used to be irritated. There are so many

> important things, but why we are meeting here spending so much of our valuable time every week? There is basically nothing … I know what she is going to say, what he is going to say. The strength of this was that nothing was hidden. We were all close, there was like a family, we shared with each other all the things - sometimes even our personal matters, but not to everyone maybe but then there were trusts built up among us so much, and then we knew each others strengths and weaknesses and then we tried to help each other. That made our team so strong, we were really strong. OK, there were ups and downs - there were times, various strains and weaknesses - what we trying. But there was a lot to learn in that project I would say … And personally for me that fact is that every week meeting and all this, that was much better than having a team building - simple team building - once every six months, or maybe once in a year … Well we were successful in several things, we were a failure in a several aspects. There are a lot of criticism, but still the project was unique to me, I really enjoyed it.

PRA may have been one influence on thinking that decisions normally taken by managers with little input can be shared with a team in this way.

Another manager gave several examples of instances in which he took a very participatory approach to making decisions that we normally see as being up to individuals in power. For example, he explained how his NGO had used PRA tools to facilitate the selection of a partner NGO at district level. Through a matrix ranking, representatives of all the eligible organisations in the district had collectively agreed which one amongst them should be the project partner, based on agreed criteria. The same manager used PRA to decide a location for a new field office, by consulting the development workers and government officers in the area as to how they would rate the various possible locations. To choose the districts where they would work, they developed a matrix together with other development agencies, with criteria like the Human Development Index scores for various places they could work. The same manager also finds a matrix a useful way to make hiring decisions when interviewing possible candidates.

It is difficult to judge how far these views on participatory management have spread. I met many practitioners who complained about the lack of room for participation in the management of their own organisations. Yet perhaps participatory management is slowly spreading. One manager said that he noticed a trend when doing interviews for management positions.

> I ask them what kind of management style do they have. All of them, surprisingly, say they use participatory management style. And it seems that even in the organisational culture, in management, this participatory approach is there … even in the management practices, people are using it very much for realising the importance of this approach in managing organisations, in terms of making decisions … we encourage people to give their views, consulting with all levels of staff before coming to decisions, allowing them to come together. And even using some of the [PRA] tools, like preference ranking, to solve problems. So I also think it is coming to be a preferred option for doing management …

It may be that PRA has had some influence on this trend in management thinking, or as mentioned in the quotation, has given some specific tools that can be used to make collective decisions within organisations.

Attitudes and behaviour run deep

The attitudes and behaviour that Nepali practitioners associate with PRA touch on very deep levels of their personal lives. For some Nepali practitioners, practising PRA has important spiritual dimensions beyond what we normally call 'attitude and behaviour.' As one practitioner said,

> I think I would recommend you also study something from the Hindu mythology - some concepts or something like this. This helps sometimes … And if you really work with this PRA this goes anything in this line also, the Hindu believe that you're contributing something for your soul - help the poor and you'll get all the benefit. In the next life, in the next generation, maybe in the heavens, wherever you are. So if we can believe in this, this can contribute. Maybe somewhere, some other friends of mine may criticise you, but I don't see any harm in it.

This quotation makes reference to Hindu beliefs. But other practitioners also drew lessons from Buddhist philosophy to explain their understanding of good attitude and behaviour, such as reacting with equanimity to people and events. People understand PRA in a way that relates to their deepest held beliefs, and thus is imbued with rich and deep layers of meaning. This is one source of the incredible diversity of views about PRA presented in the sections above.

CHALLENGES FOR PRA PRACTICE

When practitioners shared their reflections on PRA, they named some over-arching challenges for PRA practice that they thought deserved more attention and reflection. These include the challenges of innovation, training and learning about PRA, and the importance of further critical reflection.

Innovation

PRA has spread very far, very fast, and as the sections above has shown, people view it as a tool that can be used for many different purposes. The application of the tools across sectors, phases of the project cycle, and with very different underlying philosophies has brought many innovations. For example, one practitioner described how they were

> trying to - I wouldn't say invent, but devise tools for the process, because we don't depend on these traditional tools. The may not be useful for our things, because health may be different from the traditional things. We need the social map and these kind of things, but there are many tools that are not useful … So we are trying to devise these little, little tools … we are trying, what works and what doesn't work, to see for ourselves … and then we are expanding them to other villages.

Yet some practitioners feel that there is not enough innovation - that the speed with which PRA practice has multiplied has not been matched by a similar rate of learning, improvement and change.

> The development agents are not so much involved in innovating things, in copying things and using tools and techniques. That is the problem with PRA also, people are not thinking how this could be used at a particular place, with a particular time, for a particular task , and how this could be combined with others for a particular task. It is just that we are used to copying.

Further innovation is a continuous challenge for PRA practice.

As one practitioner said,

> My own feeling is that it is shouldn't remain static, limited to some of these tools and techniques. It should be dynamic, as it deals with the society, as it deals with the process, and attitude and behaviour, it should be able to combine this approach with many other approaches. And innovation should be constant depending on who is using it, with whom you are using it, and with what purpose. And, that is the principle I believe in with regard to PRA. Unfortunately, that is not what I have seen happening over the years … It can still be innovative, people can use it, they can adapt it, they can combine it with other approaches, and they can innovate. And that's how it should develop. Otherwise the life of any of these other approaches is at its end. Otherwise it remains much more distorted than it becomes intact.

There is an argument that PRA must innovate or become a relic from a past time that no longer suits circumstances.

Why isn't there more innovation in PRA? Perhaps the pattern of rapid spread of a fairly standardised approach reflects the institutions of development generally, rather than the specific nature of PRA.

> If there is a good idea anywhere, it spreads around so quickly that people use it. It is very difficult in the development field to have innovation. It is very easy to have innovations copied rapidly, but people are not so much concerned about innovating in this field … This is one thing I have seen in this whole development field … not only in PRA …. It is just propagation of the same approaches everywhere. That is what we are good at.

It may be that people are more comfortable with maintaining a standardised form of PRA that is widely recognised by other professionals, rather than moving forward.

> Lack of desire to experiment is something missing in the whole gamut of PRA. They don't experiment with something else, or combine it with something else. They don't want to lose the purity of PRA … other might not think it is valid, because you have done something different from PRA. The fear - because so

> many people are doing it and saying it is fantastic. The person in a remote area who says they can do it differently would stand out from the mainstream …

It may have something to do with the mechanisms by which it has spread, such as manuals.

> For God's sake, don't create a manual of tools … People taking the tools and just using them word-for word and not developing them for the situation is a big problem. Here are the tools that Robert Chambers has given you, but how can you develop them to use in reproductive health?

Through asking these questions, professionals can make it an explicit target to adapt their practice to different circumstances.

Perhaps one final reason is that the methods themselves have not been seen as something open for participatory creation. That is, most professionals see tools as something they learn from elsewhere and apply as they were taught, rather than something they develop together with community people as fits the situation. One person said, 'The practice here in Nepal seems to be to go and teach a tool. They learn how to use it and we take it away.' The practitioners suggested an alternative. Their methods were innovative because, 'the community developed them. We said, this is the information we need. How can you help us with it? How can you do it?' Perhaps if practitioners shared the challenge of innovating methods with the people they worked with, there would be faster change and development.

Another way to innovate would be to take the lessons from PRA and to explore new media for participatory interactions. As one person said,

> It's not only tools, it's beyond that thing … Especially in REFLECT, we have gone beyond PRA, we are using songs and drama …

Other gave examples of participatory video making, that gave a way for local people to share their views with one another, and with policy makers in far-off Kathmandu. Perhaps this exploration of other methods may help to answer the questions raised above about addressing policy making in a more participatory way. Beyond even the national scope, another practitioner said that we should consider the new kinds of global networking that are necessitated by our global age.

> I think maybe we need to find some participatory tools to work through electronic media. There are women's networks in Asia. People are online all the time. We should not limit ourselves to rural participatory processes. Maybe we should also have something else when we cannot be face to face, so we don't have to travel individually around the globe. World Bank is into electronic discussion, but can we as the other part develop something, that gives accurate information and has something participatory to capture what we are doing?

Some practitioners see room to move beyond PRA, by taking the participatory principles but applying them through new media. This may allow us to engage in whole new levels of debate and policy making through in a participatory mode.

Formal training and learning about PRA

When practitioners discussed PRA training, and learning about PRA, they did not restrict their thinking to the details of formal PRA training as it is currently available in Nepal. As reported in the section on spread, some see that there is a higher demand for formal PRA training than there is a supply, and they see a place for formal PRA training in sharing PRA with more people. Yet they do not want to see this demand filled by just anyone. Practitioners were very critical of inexperienced practitioners who have rushed to fill this high demand by over-selling themselves as PRA 'experts'.

Practitioners already share many ideas about what good formal PRA training is. They thought that trainers must teach by example, not just through their words. They thought it was important to have trainers who were practitioners themselves- some practitioners were very sceptical of trainers who only do training. They emphasised the time element- that training needed to be long enough for practical exercises, because

> People really didn't kind of get it until they had the field experience, of really trying to facilitate PRA.

Some practitioners emphasised the need to start with some discussion of concepts before moving onto tools, concepts that will guide practitioners with some underlying philosophy about why they are doing PRA.

> A number of people take PRA training … they just complete one event of PRA training. They try to learn only the tools and techniques of PRA. If you ask people why do you use them, its because you are considered a good person … but what is the main use of these tools? The main ethic of these tools is not mentioned.

This 'main ethic' might be explained in terms of concepts of participation, poverty, and particularly changing unequal social relationships between different groups in the community, such as richer and poorer sections, or gender relations.

Practitioners see good quality PRA training as important, but they also see limits as to what people can learn about PRA through these formal trainings. Many professionals complain that formal PRA training, rather than practical experience, is seen as the main experience that qualifies professionals as knowledgeable about PRA, and often gives practitioners an unjustified sense of expertise.

> Sometimes I tell you there are different training institutions who have one session on PRA/RRA - two hours. I have been invited to conduct that session. And after that two weeks or three weeks training, wherein there was only one session on PRA or RRA. They will say they already got PRA. And sometimes

> they only had one day or two day session on PRA and they believe that they are very good expert in PRA and they even write very beautifully in their CV that they are expert at PRA.
>
> From the individual side, if you do ten days training, they don't have to do more extensive field practice, but they want to show their certificate … People who have learned about the participatory approach, they might not have applied it.

The common perception in Nepal that PRA training is the most important source of knowledge about PRA can also lead people's PRA practice to become 'frozen' in the form that they were taught during their training course.

> One of our learnings was that the best people were those who had no training in PRA. The people who had some training in PRA were so rigid that they wanted to do it the same way …

Some practitioners are further sceptical about training, because they do not think it can instil the most important qualities for being a good practitioner. Much of the most important learning has to happen through gaining experience.

> OK, I don't mean that you have to have a very formal training for years to know PRA or something. Maybe one day or one session can only inspire you and you have to learn more, and then if you really proceed and practice and then learn and learn, probably you can do that.

And perhaps some of the important qualities of a PRA practitioner are deeply embedded in their personalities, rather than something that can be picked up through a training course.

> The emphasis should be on training, is one aspect. People are always looking at how important training is … but also in term of the kind of person that's actually involved in a participatory process. To a very large extent, its dependant on how much they enjoy talking to people, and how much they enjoy finding out about people's lives. I don't really know the answer to that … How do you actually find that out about a person when you go through a process of interviewing or selecting people …

This might lead to an emphasis on finding people who already have suitable qualities for participatory work, and working with them, rather than trying to instil those qualities in people who do not have them already. Or it might imply mechanisms for people to develop suitable qualities that go much deeper than formal trainings.

Perhaps there is need to explore alternative models of training, such as protracted mentoring with more experienced practitioners.

> The level of support has to decrease slowly, never at once, at one point of time. It has to decrease slowly when they start taking up their responsibility slowly, higher and higher. If I'm working with a community I have to tag along probably with one community – PRA practitioners - and then slowly when he has made

> aware certain people there, I have to hand over what I was doing there to certain persons there. And once I know that they can do it now – I'm confident, I have to slowly face up, I have to go out. But still, maybe, I have to watch. If there are problems I have to go and try and tell them support and come back, and slowly, finally this will be something that will be stable.

Or perhaps, as the next section suggests, various models of critical reflection will complement training to accelerate learning about PRA and participation.

Further critical reflection- one way forward?

This paper has presented many dilemmas facing PRA practitioners. As PRA has become so fashionable, practitioners are wrestling with the diversity of understandings of PRA, and the resulting diversity of PRA practice. This paper reflects the depth of critical reflection of a few PRA practitioners in Nepal - practitioners who have been asking themselves difficult, challenging questions about PRA, and who have been struggling to find answers for themselves. From what practitioners said during the interviews, it was clear that the idea of learning through critical reflection is well-established in Nepal. As one practitioner said,

> Well, what is right and what is wrong- I analyse myself. What am I doing right during the day? … What I did wrong? This kind of analysis … My feeling is that if I cannot analyse myself, based on the things that I had read, that I had heard from other people, it does not make any sense … And if I cannot analyse myself, I cannot analyse other people and other colleagues that I have been working with …

Practitioners see critical reflection as one way of internalising the values associated with PRA in their lives.

> We should remind ourselves, am I a real participatory person? Am I following PRA in my personal life? This reminding enables a person to follow the philosophy …

> So it has to start with me, and this is where we really lack much - all of us, and very few of us really have time to reflect back, learn from our own mistakes, learn from our own practices. Very few of us really do this. Am I right? Maybe I cannot say that I'm the ideal person. I have all the witnesses. At least I try to reflect it back and try to realise, OK these are the areas where I have to improve. This holds true for individuals, this holds true for the practice of PRA …

Through personal critical reflection, practitioners can come to better understand and transform themselves, and their PRA practice. They can touch the deep layers of themselves that may make them a good practitioner, layers that may be impossible to touch through formal PRA training.

Practitioners also argue that they can improve their understanding of PRA, its potential, and its limitation, through critical reflection on their own practice.

> It's not that PRA is the panacea. It is not. We have to admit that PRA has its limitation. We have to use its advantages in the best possible way … Unless we realise its strengths, weaknesses, then perhaps we can use PRA more effectively …

This kind of reflection may be undertaken by individuals, or it may be done in collaboration with others.

> It's really an area where we need to reflect and look back, to make these tools and this weapon more powerful. But if we do not stop and look at it, thing can fizzle out. PRA is just like this. I think it is high time we take critical stock of our PRA practice, and for that we would definitely need to collaborate with some people who can look at it more objectively. And I would say because we are involved in it, we would tend to look at it more positively.

Practitioners feel they can benefit by having an informed opinion about their work, to raise new ideas and questions about what they could do better.

Some practitioners think that it is easiest for high-profile individuals who are well respected for their knowledge and experience of PRA to play a role in sparking reflection.

> [It] needs some of the small group of people who can think and who can be accepted by other people in line with the PRA philosophy ... like I say, when we see Robert Chambers, similarly there could be other people in this part of the country also who have been using PRA as a part of their life. Such a type of team, a small group of such type of people, could be somehow the example for these other people, who could take a lead to remind, to make a critical analysis of what is happening, so other people could reflect themselves to say, 'Yes, that is what is happening' ... but it is very difficult to find someone who could make a very strong statement, who could make an unbiased judgement. It is difficult, but it is possible ... Also they should be able to hear others' criticism about them, and listen to them, so that others can see they are hearing the criticism and they are adopting it. This could be a theoretical thing, but ... I take it as a positive part, that at least people know something about [PRA] and at least some good people are using it. At least of out a 100,000 people, there could be one or two good people, at least without big biases ...

As the quotation explains, for individuals to play a role in sparking critical reflection, it is helpful if they are both highly respected practitioners, and if they set an example by being open to critical comment themselves. The example they present by being critically reflective may be as important as the feedback and advice they give. FORCE sometimes invites someone to act as 'a judge'. They invite an experienced and respected PRA practitioner, to listen to accounts of people's work, and to ask questions that help peple to think about what they could have done better.

It may be helpful to have someone else provoke critical reflection, but the catalyst for critical reflection need not be a very senior, experienced practitioner. Practitioners explain that people can learn by sharing ideas

and reflections with colleagues who have a similar level of knowledge and experience. On this basis, some practitioners approach training as an opportunity for learning through critical reflection.

> We have a refresher training every six months. We bring [frontline development practitioners] together and we try to discuss, how is their progress, what problems are they facing, what has worked well, what has not worked well. So we try to take feedback from them also. And we try to give feedback to them also …. If someone is doing fine, we try to encourage them to do even better … these kind of relations we try to encourage … they discuss themselves and realise …

Perhaps training as 'recurrent critical reflection' is one response to the challenge raised by practitioners, to improve training and learning about PRA. In a similar fashion, the sharing sessions organised by participation networks in Nepal offer a similar opportunity.

> We should try somehow to enforce each other in a group, when we come together, we meet and understand ourselves, and how we are able to do this philosophy in our personal life …

This idea of learning through face-to-face discussion and sharing with colleagues is a well-entrenched practice in Nepal's networks.

There may be other routes to help people see their own practice more objectively, and to face their own weaknesses in order that they can address them. One method is documentation.

> We want to try to document the whole process in detail, to try and say these are the pitfalls of the things we did, and these are the things we would like to improve … It's such a sensitive thing to write as well, because I could very easily write my perspective, and probably be very critical about all our inputs into the process … but to get the rest of the team to reflect and agree on some of out shortcomings, that would be a very sensitive thing …

Recording critical reflections may be more sensitive if it is a matter of one practitioner making judgements on another's work.

> One of the hardest things is the self critical thing afterwards, to actually get people to be very honest about what their mistakes were, and there is a great sensitivity we have found, to trying to be critical in a constructive way … we've tried to tape discussions, we've tried to video people … so we could give them critical feedback afterwards …

The sensitivity here arises because one person is directing criticism at another. But through video or documentation, done by themselves or by others, practitioners can have a record of their practice without critical

comment, leaving practitioners to reflect on their own practice afterwards themselves. They may see new things about their own practice without having them pointed out directly by others.

These thoughts from Nepali practitioners show that the Pathways to Participation project is building on a strong tradition of critical reflection in Nepal. Over the coming months, IDS hopes to collaborate with Nepali colleagues to support further debate, discussion, and critical reflection, as a way of continuing to move forward with PRA. As one practitioner suggested, 'I believe that PRA gives a better meaning when we say participatory *reflection* and action … That is really what we have to do.'

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

	Name	Organisation
1	Ashok Vikram Jairu	FORCE
2	Buddhi Tamang	SAGUN
3	Binod Bhatta, Dr.	WINROCK
4	Brian Hedley	TLDP
5	Chet Nath Kanel	Freelance- now NEPAN
6	Chhing Lamu Sherpa	Freelance/Mountain spirit
7	Dilip Pariyar	SAFE
8	Drona KC	Freelance
9	Frances Winter	DFID
10	Gita Saha	FORCE
11	Guheswori Shrestra	Lumanti
12	GB Adhikari	ActionAid
13	Gopal Sherchan	UNDP- SCDP, GEF
14	Hukum Singh	NACRMP
15	Indra	ActionAid, ERO
16	Indirai	Helvetas
17	Johanna Hill	SCF US (former AA)
18	Kamal Phuyal	Freelance
19	Kamal Sarai	ERPAN
20	Katy Pepper	AVSC consultant
21	Kedar Prasad Badu	NPLAP
22	Keshab Gotam	ActionAid
23	Khagendra Siktel	SDC
24	Khemraj Upadhya	ActionAid
25	Kulchandra Dahal	RRN
26	Mahesh Sharma	HIV/AIDS
27	Manvi Srivastav	ActionAid
28	Man Bahadur Thapa	UNDP
29	Mohindra B. Thapa	Dhankuta DDC, Participatory Planning officer
30	Nani Ram Subedi	PDDP
31	Mukta S. Lama	Sagun (Social Action for Grassroot Organisation)
32	Neil Walton	Helvetas
33	Netra P. Upadyaya	Plan Int'l
34	Prakash Pokrel	NPLAP

35	Prashan Khati	NPLAP
36	Purna Bahadur Chemjong	TLDP
37	Rajendra Gupta	Freelance
38	Ram Kamar Kamat	Conscious Society Building Centre
39	Ramesh Jung Khadka	ActionAid
40	Saloni Singh	Didi-Bahini
41	Som Raj Acharya	UNICEF
42	Sudarshan Mathema	Freelance
43	Sushma Barakoti	HIV/AIDS
44	Uddhav Rai	Plan
45	Uddhav Raj Bhattarai	ActionAid
46	Uma Acharya	SDC programme official
47	Usha Jha	PACT

Table 1: Breakdown of interviewees by Institutional Affiliation

Institutional affiliation	Number of interviewees
Freelance	6
Bilateral staff or programmes	7
International Organisations	6
Government organisations	3
Nepali non-governmental organisation	11
International non-governmental organisation	14

ENDNOTES

1 In response to this moment, the Institute of Development Studies initiated the Pathways to Participation project in January 1999. The project aims to encourage critical reflection on PRA in order to improve the quality and impact of participatory work. IDS has been seeking to enter collaborative relationships with individuals and organisations around the globe in order to promote further critical reflection on PRA. The Pathways project activities have evolved to include different combinations of research, workshops, documentation, video making, and international exchange in many countries, including China, India, Kenya, Mexico, The Gambia, Nepal, and Vietnam.

2 In our conceptualisation of this project, critical reflection means asking challenging, difficult questions about our experiences, and answering them honestly for ourselves, as a way of learning and moving forward. This process of reflection has the potential to draw out both the positive and negative aspects of different practitioners' experience with PRA, and to allow us to share them with one another.

3 The interviews were opportunities in themselves for practitioners to critically reflect on their experiences. And they have enabled this documentation of Nepali practitioners' reflections in order that they can be shared, both within Nepal, and internationally. The interviews were also an entry point to start generating ideas for future collaboration between IDS and colleagues in Nepal.

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