



## No. 1.5 Assessment Methodologies: Participatory Rural Appraisal

### What is participatory rural appraisal (PRA)?

Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) is an approach used by many humanitarian and development NGOs and agencies. *It aims to incorporate the knowledge and opinions of stakeholders in the design, monitoring and impact of programmes that will have an impact on their lives.*

The term can be misleading as PRA is applied in urban and rural settings. PRA is increasingly used in the developing and developed world and as a result, very innovative techniques are being created.

PRA can be used throughout the project cycle and in research studies (e.g., for businesses as part of consumer studies). Box 1 outlines key principles that underlie all PRA activities, regardless of the desired outcome.

This Rough Guide outlines several of the tools that are commonly used in PRA, and their potential usefulness to EFSL assessments.



Fig. 1: Women's meeting in a Darfur camp to discuss their needs and concerns with the Oxfam team  
(Credit: Adrian McIntyre/OXFAM)

### What data gathering techniques and tools does PRA involve?

Tools commonly used in PRA include **seasonal calendars, community mapping, semi-structured interviews, ranking, proportional piling, observation and triangulation**. These are outlined below.

#### Box 1: What are the principles underlying PRA activities?

There are five basic principles underlying all PRA activities, regardless of their intended outcomes.

1. **Participation.** PRA relies heavily on stakeholders' participation, so tools and techniques need to be designed to involve participants as both information sources and partners in data collection and analysis. Providing feedback to the community is key to fulfilling this principle.
2. **Flexibility.** Techniques used should be appropriate to the context of analysis (e.g., levels of literacy). The context and key aspects being investigated should also determine team composition in terms of technical area and applied tools.
3. **Teamwork.** The team needs to be made up of people that reflect the topics investigated and that can to work together. Whilst one member is leading on a discussion, one teammate can note responses whilst another observes behaviour.
4. **Optimal ignorance.** This is key to reducing bias and determining a complete understanding of the situation. Assumptions and bias will contribute to findings and conclusions that do not truthfully reflect participants' opinions.
5. **Systematic.** PRA data tends to have low statistical relevance (given its largely qualitative<sup>1</sup> nature and relatively small sample size). However, there are ways to improve the data's validity and reliability. These include systematic sampling based on community stratification (e.g., by geographic location or relative wealth), and cross-checking data using a number of collection techniques (e.g., using a final community meeting to discuss the findings and correct inconsistencies).

#### Seasonal calendars

Seasonal calendars graphically represent livelihood activities and their seasonal component for a specific group of people who share core production activities. They provide representation of multiple concurrent events (e.g., Fig. 2). Specific seasonal calendars are often drawn up for particular livelihood groups, as data will vary across these groups.

#### Why do we need seasonal calendars?

Households frequently undertake multiple livelihood activities in a single year. Understanding the relative importance of these activities and their timing, as well as who undertakes them, is **critical to well-timed and appropriate programming and for establishing viable early warning systems**.

Seasonal calendars can be used to gather information on a variety of topics during assessments, (e.g., rainfall, agricultural activities, seasonal migration, labour patterns, market purchases and sales, food availability, gender based activities etc) and to triangulate other information gathered during PRA.

### Community mapping

A community map is a user-generated, visual representation of a geographical area that is used on a regular basis at any one point of the year.

The map should indicate which resources are located in the area, how and when they are used, and by whom. The perception of the area and the resources available by different users is also collected.

Visual validation of the map is possible using transect walks (see 'Observation', below) and secondary data (e.g., the use of ordinance survey maps, etc.).

#### *Why can community mapping be useful?*

Involving community members in the mapping of their environment can be useful because it:

- Provides a community perspective, encouraging discussion across ages, gender and wealth groups;
- Provides information for triangulation (below) with other key informants;
- Can be an ice-breaker at the start of an interview and help to 'focus' participants on a geographical area that will be discussed in greater detail;
- Identifies areas of importance to the community, sources of conflict, potential development areas, tenancy issues and power relations between 'users'; and,
- Identifies geographical marginalisation of groups.



**Fig. 3: Making a community map, a key tool in PRA**

(SOURCE: Community Development Society 2007 [www.scn.org](http://www.scn.org))

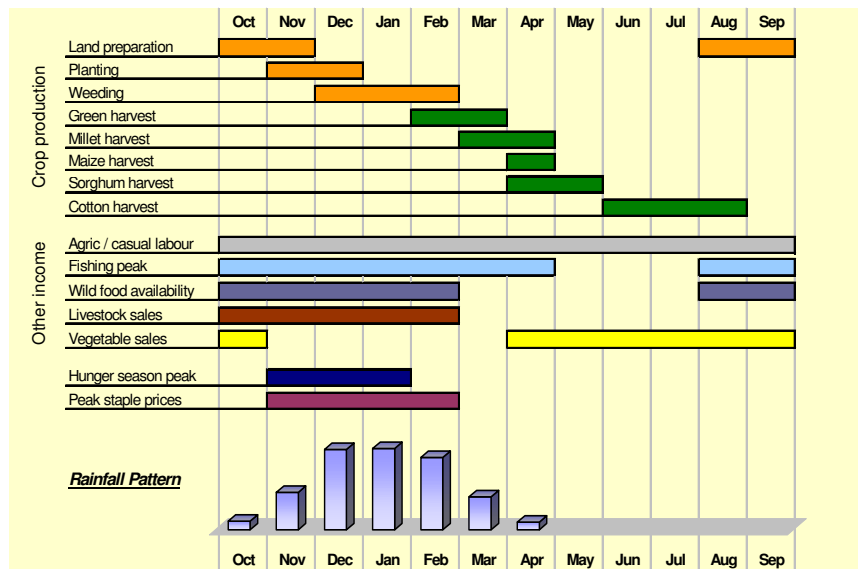
### Ranking

When used in a participatory manner, ranking is used to elicit people's perception of the importance of a topic by evaluating it against a set of pre-determined criteria. Commonly a score is allocated to the item being valued against the criteria. The criteria used would be established either externally or by the group undertaking the ranking exercise.

#### *How can ranking be useful?*

Ranking can be useful because it:

- Can be used in assessments to understand the relative importance of sources of food, income, coping strategies and so on, and humanitarian responses and development priorities;
- May elicit community values (since the criteria used may reflect values or worth); and
- Enables cross-checking and the challenging other information and opinions.



**Fig. 2: Seasonal calendar for the Gwembe Valley livelihood zone, Zambia**  
(SOURCE: Save the Children UK)

### Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviewing is a guided interviewing technique in which the interviewer knows exactly what questions ultimately need to be answered.

This information is not obtained through a pre-defined list of questions but by using flexible, open-ended ones. Interviewers commonly used checklists as aids to ensure all topics are covered in the interview.

The interviews appear to be informal discussions but are actually carefully controlled and structured. Box 2 provides some tips for successful interviewing.

### Proportional piling

Proportional piling allows participants to score or weight the value of an item, service, activity, or resource against a pre-determined aspect. It uses percentages, and although it does not provide accurate quantification, it can illustrate the relative importance of more than one variable (e.g., the relative importance of growing tomatoes and onions as cash crops in terms of household income).

#### *How to do proportional piling*

1. Identify the items, activities, services, etc. that will be used in the piling exercise.
2. Identify the main aspect that will be used to compare the relative value of the items.
3. Use 100 beans, nuts or marbles (or anything else readily available, easy to handle and of the same size) to represent 100 percent. It is good to use something that participants can identify with.
4. Explain to participants that you would like them to indicate how important each item is in relation to the others. The idea is that they should put more beans into a pile that represents an item that is more important, and fewer beans in a pile that represents an item that is less important.
5. The informant must use all the beans. Label the piles with pieces of paper for your reference. Ask if they are happy with the piles before you start discussing them, and stress that they should feel free to modify them if they do not look right.
6. Once they have split the beans into different piles, you can count them, using the numbers you get as an **approximate** percentage of relative importance for each item.

### **Box 2: General tips for semi-structured interviews**

- ✓ **Finish enquiring into one topic** before moving on to the next. But also follow the conversation's flow, keeping track of leads that can be followed up later.
- ✓ **Ask follow-up questions.** Questions should be linked to the answer of the previous question. Listening to answers is key.
- ✓ **Only ask questions** to which the interviewee can be expected to know the answer to or have a valid opinion about.
- ✓ **Keep track of the story** you are being told. Is it consistent? Clarify inconsistencies.
- ✓ **Crosscheck** as much as possible, by asking the same question in different ways and/or comparing different peoples' responses.
- ✓ Where possible, **use participatory methods** – this can relieve boredom and ensure everyone's point of view is heard.
- ✓ Evaluate **the interview** afterwards. How well did it go? Do results seem reliable? How could tools and techniques used be improved?
- ✓ As you do more interviews, **identify knowledge gaps** before each interview, to become alert to seeking answers to those questions.

### Observation

Observation is a very powerful and important tool for gathering and crosschecking information gathered in an appraisal.

One method of observation is to undertake a **transect walk**: start from one point in the study area and walk in a straight line to another point. Along the line you draw on a piece of paper what you can see on both sides of the line.

A transect walk is useful in exploring any differences in land use, vegetation, soil types, cultural practices, livestock, water availability and infrastructure.

The following are useful examples of what look for on the walk:

- Look at the *cultivation area*: how big an area has been cultivated around the house? Does this add up to the information on the size of the farm? You can also look at the condition of the crop and the number of different crops grown in the area.
- Look at the *foods around and in the house* (if invited): are wild foods crops dried or threshed around the house? Is there any evidence of food storage?
- Look for *evidence of livestock*: pegs, shelter or droppings.
- Observe *who is performing which activities* (gender, age) and where.

## Triangulation

Triangulation is a process of validating diverse views/opinions to improve data accuracy. The assessment team should be conscious of triangulating: *team composition*, the *units of observation* and *tools* used to gather information; or using *primary data* and *secondary data* as well as *observation*. For instance:

- **Team composition.** To gather and understand different perspectives, teams can be *multi-disciplinary* (where a variety of disciplines relevant to the study are represented in the team) and/or include *insiders and outsiders* (since people who know a situation or an area well offer great advantages to a team while outsiders can add a fresh perspective).
- **Units of observation.** As a large number of participants alone does not ensure a diversity of views, a wider range of viewpoints can be included by paying attention to the units of observation in a group. Depending on the topic of the PRA people who can be included consist of mixed genders, ages, ethnic groups, livelihood and wealth groups, professions (e.g., pastoralists, agriculturalists, teachers etc.), NGOs or civil society organisations.

It is often worthwhile to search out people who for some reason may have an unusual or unpopular perspective on a problem since their views may bring up issues that are otherwise overlooked.

## Are there any programme examples using PRA?

PRA has been used in various Oxfam GB programmes, including when identifying income-generating activities, making decisions about humanitarian distributions, and planning disaster-risk reduction activities.

Two programme examples using PRA are:

- Cambodia 2004. As part of a drought response programme, Oxfam GB and its partner staff used PRA (as a wealth ranking process) to determine which criteria should be used to identify beneficiaries for its various EFSL interventions (which included cash for food and work, seed and tool, and other in-kind distributions).
- Sudan 2008. Conflicts and various other factors have led to the collapse of traditional livelihood options in South and West Darfur. As part of an integrated humanitarian programme approach, Oxfam GB has used PRA in combination with conflict analysis when planning livelihoods interventions, particularly where tribal tension over scarce water and land is prevalent.

## Where can I find further reading and more detailed information?

Robert Chambers, PRA founder (there are various titles): <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Chambers R. 2007. <i>From PRA to PLA and Pluralism</i>, IDS Working Paper 286, Brighton: IDS</li><li>– Chambers R. 1997. <i>Whose Reality Counts? Putting the first last</i>. London: Intermediate Technology</li></ul>	Oxfam publications: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Oxfam Food Security Assessment Guidelines (via <a href="http://intranet.oxfam.org.uk">http://intranet.oxfam.org.uk</a> and on request)</li><li>– EFSL Rough Guide 1.1—EFSL Assessments</li></ul>
	Food and Agriculture Organisation (includes PRA tool box and case studies of PRA and gender analysis in agricultural development planning): <a href="http://www.fao.org">www.fao.org</a>
Further details of HEA methodology (including how it relates to qualitative livelihoods analyses like PRA): <a href="http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/54_6781.htm">www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/54_6781.htm</a>	International Institute for Environment and Development (includes link to <i>Participatory Learning and Action</i> (PLA) magazine and other information on PLA): <a href="http://www.iied.org">www.iied.org</a>

## Who can I contact for more information and guidance?

Camilla Knox-Peebles, Senior Emergency Food Security and Livelihoods Adviser, EFSL Team, Humanitarian Department, Oxford—[cknox-peebles@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:cknox-peebles@oxfam.org.uk).

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Recent developments have led to quantification of qualitative data so that at programme-level, statistical analysis is possible.