



4.4 Participatory methods

Participatory research refers to both a set of methods and a methodological approach. Research strategies that emphasise participation have evolved from several sources. Models of development theory and practice that evolved in the 70's and 80's required new research techniques capable of gaining understanding of social complexity in rapidly changing and uncertain environments. These new methods drew upon features of *applied anthropology* and *ethnographic research*, to understand and validate different perceptions of reality, and the benefits of unhurried participant observation. Other origins include Freireian inspired *action-research approaches* that emphasise empowerment of poor people to take action, and use experiential learning to challenge theory and practice. The principle of local people's participation in research also owes much to *farming systems research*, which seeks to understand farmers' own decision making processes, especially in complex and risk prone farming environments. Many of the visual analysis techniques applied in participatory research today, stem from *agroecosystem analysis* which uses informal mapping and diagramming, ranking and scoring methods to explore patterns of time, space, flows, relationships and decisions affecting livelihood systems.

Some of the most influential methodological approaches developed since the late 1970's include RRA, PRA and PLA:

- RRA: Rapid rural appraisal: flexible progressive learning, multi-disciplinary research teams, community participation, outsiders gain information from rural people in a timely and cost effective manner
- PRA: Participatory rural appraisal: shift from extractive mode to empowering and facilitating active local participation in planning activities
- PLA: Participatory learning and action: more emphasis on mutual learning, attitudes and behaviour of researchers, and taking action on the outcomes



4.4.1 Guides for methods specific to participatory research

Mapping

- [Integrated Approaches to Participatory Development \(IAPAD\)](#).
- [Mapping Dialogue](#). A research project profiling dialogue tools and processes for social change. Prepared by Pioneers of Change Associates for GTZ (2006)
- [PPgis.net](#). Open Forum on Participatory Geographic Information Systems and Technologies.

Venn diagrams

- [IISD Venn diagrams, webs and trees](#)

Others

- Estrella *et al.* (n.d.) [Learning from Change: Issues and experiences in participatory monitoring and evaluation](#) (introductory chapter)
- Norton *et al.* (2001) [A Rough Guide to PPAs](#)
- Kanji and Greenwood (2001) [Participatory approaches to research and development](#). IIED
- [Participatory Action Research: A Menu of Methods](#)
- [Participatory Methods Toolkit: A Practitioner's Manual](#). Joint publication of King Baudouin Foundation and the Flemish Institute for Science and Technology Assessment (2005)
- [People and Participation](#). Involve (2005)



4.4.2 *Practicalities and difficulties in applying participatory methods*

- Raising expectations - one of the dilemmas of researchers working intensely with poor and powerless people to analyse their situation concerns mediating the stages between research and supporting those communities in taking action they have identified. Research facilitators need to express clearly the purpose of the inquiry and what role, if any, they will play in future activities. Experience has shown that people are prepared to 'risk' participating and remain enthusiastic when there is honest communication about what can (and cannot) be expected as a result of the research.
- Skills and attitudes - the accessibility and simplicity of some of the techniques makes it possible to apply them mechanistically without understanding of their use. Successful application requires good communication, facilitation and conflict negotiation skills. Users who are sensitive to local gender and power differences will bring these dimensions into analysis and reflect them in outcomes.
- There's no blue-print - choice and sequence of methods needs to be adapted to each situation. This requires good team working skills and has implications for training of researchers.
- Getting the right team - requires networking and preparation. Team building is crucial when combining local people, professionals, external researchers, government staff, decision makers
- Staying in the community - logistical practicalities if there is a high proportion of external researchers on the team
- Depth and spread - there are payoffs in terms of time, cost and outcomes in deciding between detailed research in fewer research sites and spending less time in a greater range of communities.