

Using participatory methods in health research

Global health and social science website

Learning objectives

- At the end of the session students will be able to:
- Understand the theory relating to PRA
- Identify a range of Participatory Research and Action (PRA) techniques and some potential applications to health-related research

Participatory Learning and Action Techniques



RA and RRA/PRA/PLA: parallel developments

- **Rapid assessment procedures (RAP) (Scrimshaw & Hutardo, 1987)**
- Adaptation of methods from medical anthropology to enable 'rapid', low-cost collection of information on community norms, beliefs and practices
- Uses observation, informal interviews, and focus group discussions.
- Stresses the value of: field residence, unhurried participant observation and conversations, attitudes, behaviour and rapport,
- Focus on the validity and usefulness of indigenous knowledge, and the aim of starting from the frame of knowledge used by 'insiders' to a community

History: Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) techniques

- Dissatisfaction with top-down approaches to development; rural development tourism; inadequacy of surveys; difficulties in making correct appraisals particularly with low literacy levels
- Evolving acronyms....RRA, PRA, PLA, PR and AR!
- “A family of approaches and methods to enable rural people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act” (Chambers, 1992)

Acronyms decoded

- RRA: Rapid Rural Appraisal
- PRA: Participatory Rural Appraisal
- PLA: Participatory Learning and Action
- PR: Participatory Research
- AR: Action Research



RRR/PRA/PLA

- Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) (Chambers, 1992): Seeks “to enable outsiders to gain information and insight from rural people and about rural conditions, and to do this in a more cost-effective and timely manner”
- Use of visual, diagramming methods such as mapping, flow diagrams and ranking
- Aims: to encourage people with no education to participate in sharing insights, knowledge and experiences; to allow for the collective production and cross-checking of information

Critiques of RRA/RAP and development of PRA/PLA

- RRA/RAP criticised as largely ‘extractive’
- Development of PRA/PLA approaches drawing on participatory (activist) research (PR), including ideas of Paulo Freire (“The Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, 1972)
- Focus on the process of poor and marginalised producing knowledge/analyses and using these to drive action and change

Basic principles of PLA

- The poor and marginalised are capable of analysing their own realities
- They can and should be empowered to analyse
- The outsiders should act as convenors, catalysts and facilitators – ‘handing over the stick’
- Self-critical awareness of the facilitator is an essential prerequisite
- Learning should be experiential in nature

PLA as a Process

- An empowering and participatory process;
- BUT
- Whose analysis? Whose voices in the community?
- Can researchers/outsideers really empower communities – especially when programmes are often predefined by donors?
- The methods may be participatory but is the design of the research project from aims to analysis?

PLA as tools and techniques

- analytical
- iterative
- informal
- explorative
- interdisciplinary
- participative
- visual
- BUT
- technique driven
- need good research/interpersonal skills
- data management

PLA techniques

- Timelines,
- Trend and change diagrams,
- Mapping (geographic, social and body)
- Wealth and wellbeing ranking,
- Seasonal diagrams,
- Venn diagrams,
- Causal linkage diagrams (e.g. problem trees),
- Proportional piling, pile sorting
- Matrix ranking and scoring

Case Study: MAFESSTA Study, Malawi

- Epi-social science research project
- Based on the shores of Lake Malawi
- Objective understanding the factors that shaped vulnerability and resilience to HIV



MAFESSTA

- Methods used – in 12 villages in the Mangochi District of Malawi
- Venn diagram ; participatory mapping; transect walk; historical and seasonal calendars,
- Participatory workshops – participant checking; problem tree; development of intervention

Participatory Mapping

- Can be used to capture and explore information on different natural and socio-economic resources as well as to explore different groups perspectives on vulnerabilities, threats and opportunities within a community
- They are often used at the beginning of a study to provide broad information about a community
- We brought groups of men and women together in each village to draw maps; in these maps participants identified different nature resources available within the village as well as where people worshiped; where fish was landing and where health facilities existed – here is an example
- We recorded the discussions and transcribed them to provide more information about how people decided what was important within their villages
- There was also a note taker who noted any key interactions or any participants that dominated



Venn diagrams

- Venn diagrams help in understanding the role different institutions (formal or informal groups or key individuals) play in a community.
- They consist of touching or overlapping circles, each of which represents an individual, group or institution.
- The size of these circles represents their importance to the community (the bigger the circle, the more important the institution).
- Different colours can be used to show positive and negative relationships the community has with these institutions.
- Distance between the circles represents the links they may have between them.
- Circles touching or overlapping each other show a close link. The level of power or importance of each group is indicated by the size of the circle, and their degree of contact, accountability or control in decision making is indicated by the extent to which they overlap or enclose each other.
- In MAFESSTA we used the venn diagrams to map the key institutions that related to health



Participatory Calendar

- Participatory calendars depict various information according to the time they occurred in previous periods (year, month or days) and the time they are likely to occur in a current period or subsequent years.
- There are usually three types of calendars; Historic, Seasonal and Daily/Routine Calendars.
- In the MAFESSTA study, The Seasonal Calendar looked at the livelihoods, mobility patterns of constituents of the fishing community over the annual cycle and also assessed months of greatest opportunities, difficulties or vulnerability including how it contributes to their vulnerability and resilience to HIV/AIDS.

Problem tree

- The problem tree is an exercise that allows participants to analysis the root causes of a problem and the impacts these problems can have on individuals and communities.
- In the problem tree a tree is drawn at the root participants discuss what the root causes of a problem are and at the leaves participants discuss the impact
- For MAFESSTA we convened participatory workshops to allow participants with an opportunity to discuss interventions to prevent HIV
- In these workshops we used the problem tree exercise with different groups to explore the causes of HIV in the villages; then the consequences and finally how this impacted people
- We then used the trees each group had drawn to explore what they felt could be done to prevent HIV

Challenges/ limitations

- Generation of a large amount of data – difficult to manage and analysis
- Who was speaking for who? We included groups of men and women but this may have led to some dominance from one group
- Also required including highly mobile groups such as fishermen – required conducting them in an afternoon after they had returned from fishing; missed vulnerable groups?
- Took time to train research assistants in methods; for the workshops little time to reflect on the quality as all conducted in the same two weeks



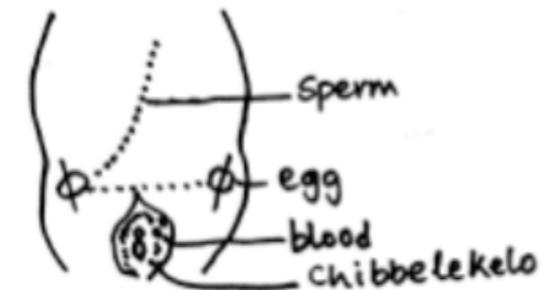
Additional PLA/PR methods

Body mapping

- Body maps can be used for gaining access to people's perceptions, of their bodies and explanatory models which people bring into encounters with health care workers.
- Representing this information visually can help to clarify ambiguities and provides rapid shared reference points. By using people's own representations of their body as a starting point from which to explore particular medical issues, body mapping can facilitate a less directive interviewing style than would otherwise be used (Cornwall 1992).
- Body maps should be carried out in sex segregated groups. Body maps can be prepared on large sheets of paper or on the ground using chalk.

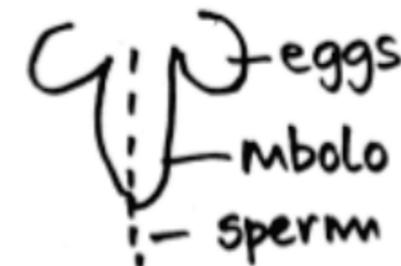
Body mapping by a group of school girls. Chawama Compound

FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM



Note: The girls explained that the sperm flows from the top of the body ("from somewhere") to one egg and then to the other egg.

MALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM



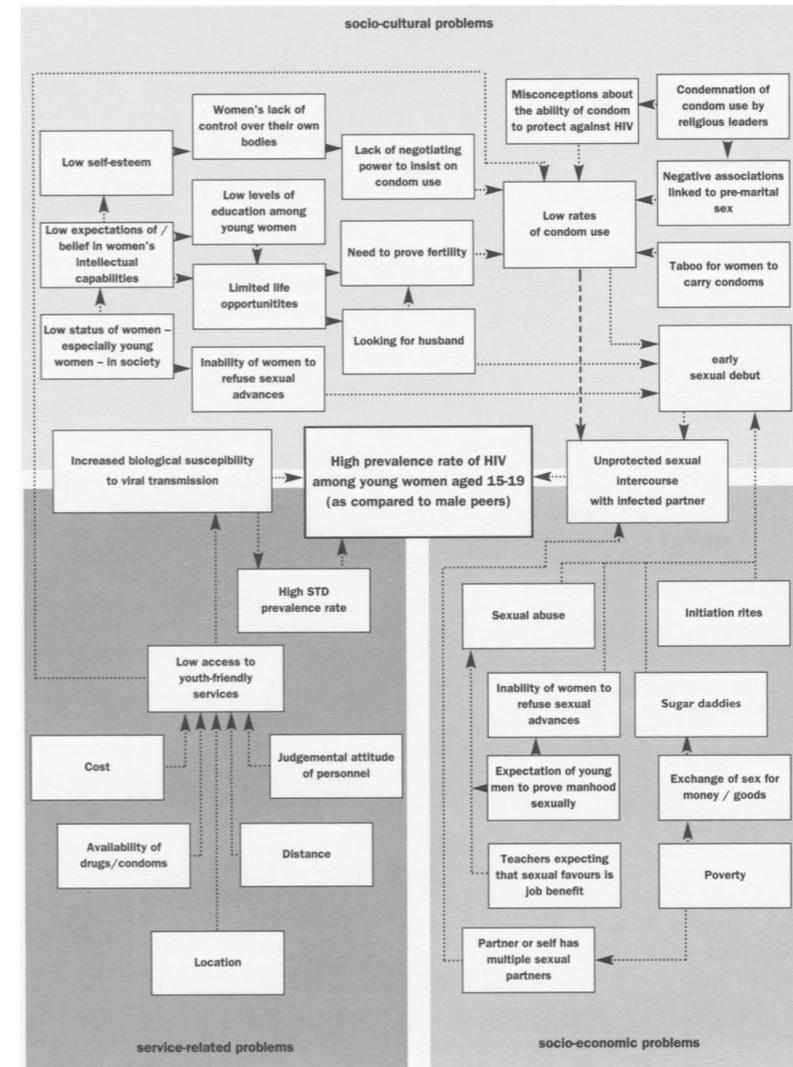
Shah, 1999

Problem analysis

- This is a tool that can be used to examine the causes of problems. It helps generate the widest possible
- range of factors or issues shaping a defined problem, and/or possible solutions, in a logical manner. The
- purpose of the tool is to brainstorm and organise contributing factors that can then guide the
- investigation of problems towards realistic options for solutions. First, a 'core' problem is identified
- and subsequent causes and effects of this problem can be arranged as branches around the core issue.
- The tool is useful for group brainstorming and planning. This example is a problem tree of factors
- contributing to high prevalence rate of HIV among women aged 15-19 (as compared to their male peers)
- in Malawi. In this problem tree the contributing factors have been clustered into 3 main groups: socioeconomic
- problems, service-related problems and socio-cultural problems.

Figure 1
HIV among women in Malawi: problem tree
Mette Ostergaard Strandlod

- The diagram below by Ostergaard Stradlord (2000) quoted in Theobald and Tolhurst (2001)



Timelines

- Timelines can be used to trace critical events through time from the perspectives of different community groups. They allow the researcher and participants to explore changes through time and the reasons behind these.
- For example you could explore community responses to the HIV epidemic, or the impact of HIV on communities from the late 1980s.

Example of a timeline

- The figure below is taken from Oxfam 1994 and shows an example of a time line detailing a team's response to critical events:

Dates			
Critical events (these can be external such as changes in government, laws, disasters, conferences, or internal such as new staff, workshops ect)			
Your team's response			
The gender element in responses			
Internal factors affecting your response			
External factors			

Ranking

- Ranking involves identifying with the group or individuals their problems and preferences in order of priority e.g. what factors influence people's quality of life. It can be used in various forms and as a tool to compare and contrast priorities between groups (female, male, age).
- Ranking exercises are frequently used for identifying wealth and poverty in communities (socio-economic ranking and other factors i.e. access).

Example of Wealth Ranking

- Priority Ranking of their Problems (Women) - Landless Action Aid May 1991, Bangladesh

Problems	River Erosion	Economic Problem	Health and Medical	Sanitation	Lack of Work for Women	Lack of Business Opportunity	Dowry System	Infertility of Soil
Infertility of soil	River Erosion	Economic	Medical	Sanitation	Work for women	Business	Dowry	X
Dowry System	River Erosion	Economic	Medical	Sanitation	Work for women	Business	X	X
Lack of Business Opportunity	River Erosion	Economic	Business	Business	Business	X	X	X
Lack of work for women	River Erosion	Economic	Work for women	Work for Women	X	X	X	X
Sanitation	River Erosion	Economic	Sanitation	X	X	X	X	X
Health and Medical	River Erosion	Economic	X	X	X	X	X	X
Economic Problems	Economic	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
River Erosion	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Economic - 7
 River Erosion - 6
 Business - 5
 Lack of Work for Women - 4
 Sanitation - 3
 Health and Medical - 2
 Dowry - 1

CAUSES:

1. In order to meet everyday necessities economic problems must be solved
2. River erosion forced them to move again and again
3. Income will increase if they can do business
4. Income will increase if women get work
5. Women need good sanitation
6. If other problems solved dowry itself will not be a problem
7. Infertile land doesn't matter here because landless now

Tips for getting started

- Using participatory methods for the first time can be quite nerve-racking. One question which often gets asked is “which method do I use first?” or “which method should follow which?.”
- But it is important to note that there are no fixed rules when conducting any form of participatory research. Flexibility lies at the heart of any application.
- Shah (1999) states that participatory mapping can be a good starting point. This can provide the facilitator with a general idea about the community.
- It can be a nice ice-breaker between the community and the facilitator because maps are easy to explain and the participants find them easy to prepare.
- Transect walks can also be a good way to physically understand the area and invite more people into the discussion. Shah (1999) states that only after the discussion warms and the facilitators are able to build a rapport with the community members, should more specific, and individual information be discussed (such as well-being ranking, ranking and scoring and venn diagramming).

Additional Resources

- PLA Notes <http://www.planotes.org/> is a journal devoted to PLA research and methods development.
- Chambers, R (1995) “Whose Reality Counts? Putting the Last First” Intermediate Technology Publications: London
- IDS Participation Resource Centre <http://www.ids.ac.uk/go/knowledge-services/our-services/participation-resource-centre>

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