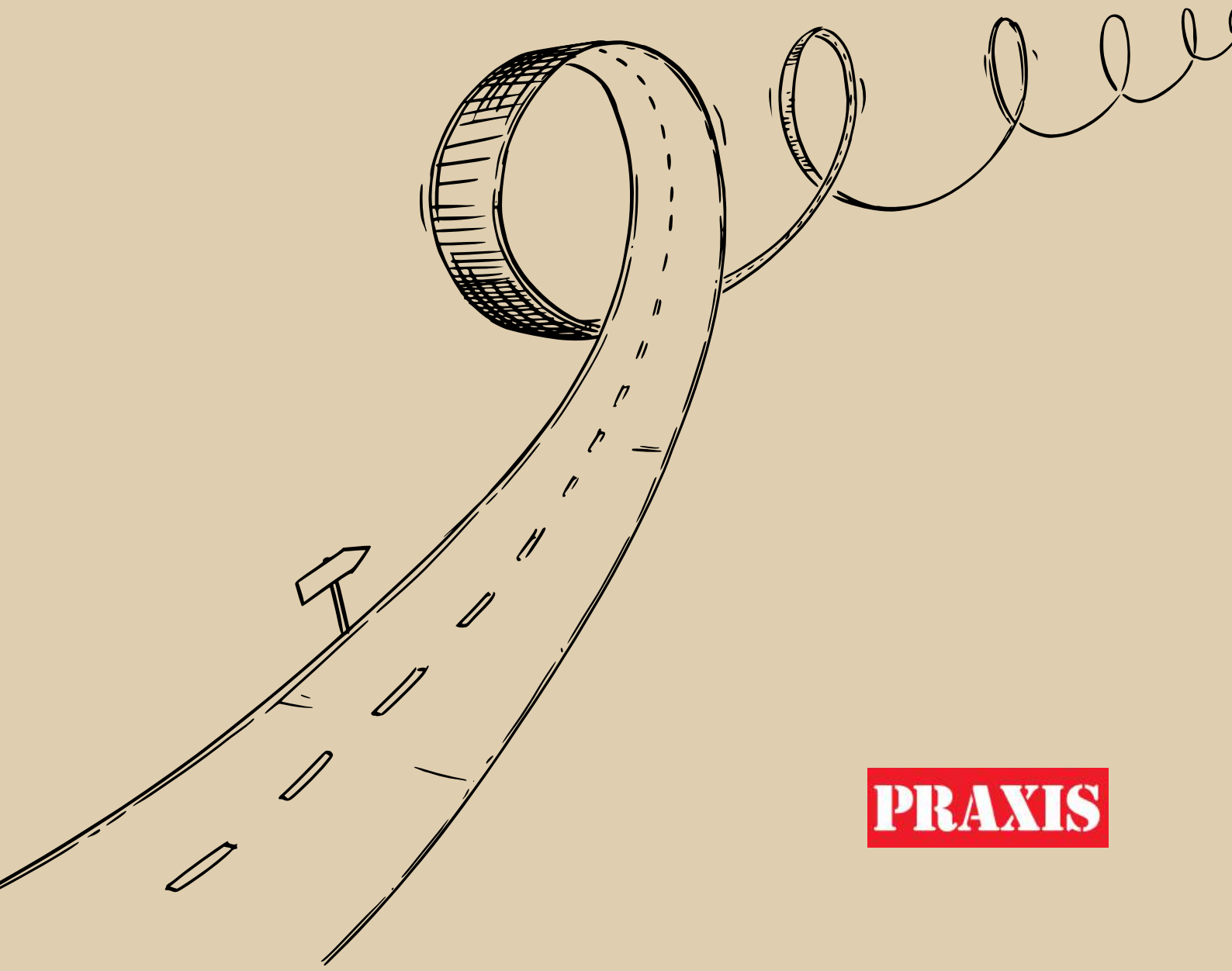


LEARNING THAT UNSETTLES

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF THEWORKSHOP



PRAXIS



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Learning That Unsettles: Celebrating 25 Years of TheWorkshop; Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices (2025)

Preface

This book is a celebration of experiences—25 vibrant accounts of using participatory methods shared by alumni of TheWorkshop, who facilitated, observed, and introspected their way through a lifetime of learning. The articles featured in this 25th anniversary edition document the praxis of participation in its true sense. They represent the voices of practitioners who have assimilated the philosophy of participation. They document memories from TheWorkshop and offer a peek into how they made the approach their own.

The Praxis international commune on participatory development is a collaborative and dialogical journey—one that is profoundly Freirean, where student-teacher hierarchies are broken down to create an environment of collective learning and critical inquiry. Taking the spirit of conscientisation into the field, practitioner-facilitators consciously break barriers between the researchers and the researched. Just as CEOs, frontline workers, interns, and seasoned development practitioners sit together in the workshop, facilitators emerging from the workshop redefine community engagement as spaces where everyone has a voice to critically reflect on lived realities.

Robert Chambers' presence and legacy centred the sessions on attitudes and behaviours, not just tools. Evening talks added layers of depth, capturing the cultural, social, economic and political nuances of each region, while practical components allowed participants to

learn from the ground—through field work in rural India, immersed in local realities, witnessing the diversity of language, livelihoods and cultures. Then there were share-fairs and cultural events—spaces where singing, dancing, and storytelling jostled with cross-learning and friendly competition. These exchanges fostered enduring partnerships, creating a network of learning and solidarity. TheWorkshop was built on collaboration, yes—but also on courage, conviction, commitment.

The book collates the diversity of experiences of using participatory approaches—from the villages of Iran to refugee camps in Sri Lanka, with women in Afghanistan to the indigenous communities in different parts of India, from the context of urban poverty to the context of disaster preparedness. The selection tries to reflect the diversity of the 1900+ alumni. Each author reaches into their experiences to reflect on how participation has shaped their work and worldview. Some recurring themes emerge: injustice is universal—across gender, caste, class, religion, and geography. Exclusion is not passive, and our response to it cannot be either. Participation is not a token; it builds equity, sustainability, and transformation.

This book is for those who believe that knowledge is not delivered, but shared; that learning is not an individual act, but a collective one; and that when we come together, we do more than practise participation. We practise hope.

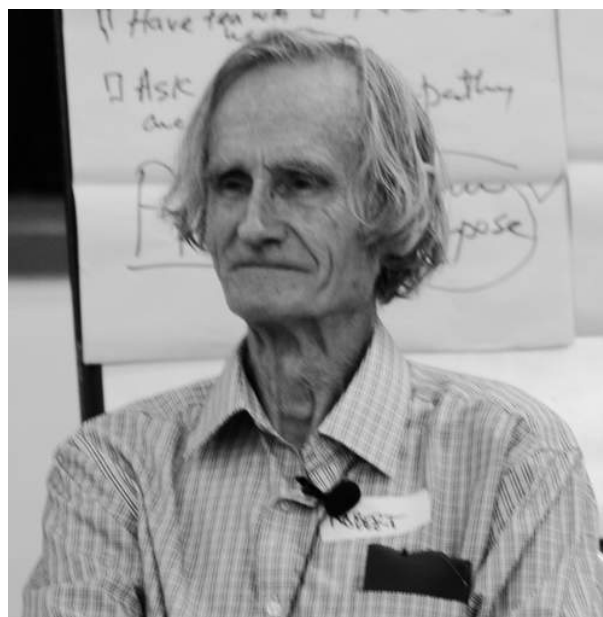
Foreword

It is both a privilege and a pleasure to be asked to contribute a foreword to this book. The annual international workshop convened by Praxis has been close to my heart since it began in 1998.

From the start, it has provided a rare and precious space. A space where practitioners can slow down, listen, and reflect. A space where the principles of equity and justice are not abstract ideas, but lived and practised. A space to question ourselves, our assumptions, our behaviours, and to ask how we can better serve those who are poor, excluded, marginalised, discriminated against, and left behind. Above all, it is a space to learn – to learn how to facilitate bottom-up processes, to respect knowledge from below, and to ground-truth development in the realities of people's lives.

What emerges, as this collection of articles makes so clear, is that approach and attitude matter profoundly. The difference lies in how we engage. When power relations are reversed and people are enabled to analyse, to speak, and to decide for themselves, the richness that comes forth is humbling.

Those who have taken part in Praxis workshops return to their contexts not simply with tools, but with a changed orientation: a recognition that voices from below are not only indispensable but are also diverse, colourful, and creative. These voices challenge and



enrich us, and show us that we are stronger when we learn together.

I warmly congratulate Praxis for nurturing and widening these pathways of practice, and all those who have walked them. Each of you brings your own insights and experiences, and together they form something much greater – a collective search for justice and equity in development. My hope is that this book, like the workshops themselves, will serve as a beacon: encouraging us all to experiment, to reflect, and to keep alive the vision of a fairer, more inclusive world.

Professor Robert Chambers is Emeritus Fellow and Research Associate at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK

From the CEO

This publication marks a milestone — 25 editions of TheWorkshop, an annual event that has brought together over 1,900 participants from across the globe to learn, unlearn, and act in solidarity with communities. Over two decades, I have witnessed the extraordinary breadth of learning it has generated both during and after the workshops.

Over time, much has changed. The two-week sojourn became one week, the field immersion shrank from four days to one, and now we see requests for three-day formats with no field at all. Yet, each year, participants leave saying, “We wish it were longer.” This tension between the constraints of modern professional life and the depth of transformation participatory learning demands is real. So too are the pressures of a world where AI can mimic the human voice but cannot replicate the messy, relational, and slow work of building trust and dialoguing with communities.

Our answers must remain rooted in the politics of participation. Participation is not an item to be ticked off; it is an act of democratisation, of shifting power and restoring voice. It draws on the Freirean conviction that education should liberate, and on Robert Chambers’ insistence that attitude and behaviour change matter as much as — if not more than — technical skill. At its



best, it is also a space for decolonial reflexivity — a conscious unsettling of the hierarchies of knowledge we inherit and reproduce — and a pedagogy of discomfort, where unlearning can be as transformative as learning. These principles are as urgent now as they were 25 years ago.

If this publication holds one message, it is that genuine participation is involved, relational, and political. We cannot shortcut our way to justice. The past 25 years have shown that when participation is authentic, it transforms both the process and the people involved. The next 25 must build on that truth — with courage, with reflexivity, and with communities always at the centre.

Tom Thomas is Chief Executive, Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices

Acknowledgements

The Editorial Team of TheWorkshop2024 would like to place on record its gratitude to all the alumni, Praxians and facilitators who have made the past 25 editions of the Praxis workshop on participatory development memorable. Without you, this journey would not have been as remarkable as it has been. We would like to thank each and every author for taking time out to reflect on their experiences of using participatory approaches and graciously sharing these with us. We would also like to thank all the communities in different corners of the world who patiently shared their wisdom and time with practitioners over the decades, making this learning journey meaningful.

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Memory Lane



1st - 1998



2nd - 1998



3rd - 1999



4th - 2000



5th - 2001

Essence of Participation
Community Ownership
And Resilience

PRA and community ownership: Unpacking long-term gains of people's participation

Santhoshi Srilaya Routhu writes about the relevance of participatory methods in the context of village plantation and watershed programmes highlighting the ownership that comes with creating spaces for people's participation and inverting hierarchies in knowledge and decision-making

My first real brush with participatory tools was during an interaction with a paddy farming community in Palakkad District, Kerala, as part of the field visit component of the Praxis Workshop. We were a team of two participants, assigned to use a causal loop map to understand the increasing costs of farming, with a few farmers. In the usual fashion of field documentation, I took out my notepad and pen, and began asking questions to the elderly men about various costs they incurred that season and what factors they were related to. As a few minutes passed, I figured we could start with a main card 'land preparation' and start branching its connections with a few other main factors. The exercise was going well. Or so I thought.

Five minutes later, my workshop facilitator visited us to check on the group. He looked at us sitting with an empty chart paper and writing profusely in the notepad. He intervened quickly. "No, No, close the notebook. Take out your sketch pen. Ask them where to start and write it on the chart," he instructed. "They can't see what you have written in your notebook."

This was far cry from the extractive research I was accustomed to, and it was a breath of fresh air.



"No, No, close the notebook. Ask them where to start and write it on the chart. They can't see what you have written in your notebook."

Thinking back to a few years, when I graduated as a development student, wanting to immerse myself into the field and work at the grassroots, I began to work as a documentation coordinator. My key responsibility was to 'gather data' from the field for presentations, proposals and reports. The women I worked with held vast knowledge on seeds, crops, trees, shrubs and foods. The only challenge then seemed to be to collect and organise their knowledge through my writing.

Experiments with Participation My organisation, the Deccan Development Society (DDS), has a considerable history of experimenting with visual communication to get across the barriers of 'the written word' in a setting where a majority of women, both in the community and on the staff were non-literate or semi-literate. Using participatory approaches was a deliberate part of planning, monitoring and evaluation of several community-based initiatives on food security, afforestation and water harvesting.

The inclusion of this perspective brought a marked difference in the design and implementation of programmes.

Consider the examples of village plantations and watershed programmes. While the 90s have seen an explosion of these programmes under rural development schemes, there was a textbook model being used with minor modification to suit the regional ecology and social contexts. When the district administration reached out to DDS as an implementing partner for the afforestation programme, they suggested a eucalyptus monoculture on village common lands as they require less maintenance and also suited a commercial purpose. Instead, DDS suggested involving the villagers in planning at the village-level and the results were astonishing.

Eucalyptus was rejected as water guzzlers in an already water-scarce area. Villagers demarcated grasslands as useful grazing lands instead of treating them like wasteland. Within the allocated area, they suggested up to 85 varieties of various trees, shrubs and plant varieties that have medicinal, food, green manure, livelihood, aesthetic and cultural uses.

Communities agreed that since they derived multiple benefits from these plantations, they would also take care of them. This programme took place across 20 villages spread across 8 mandals in the Zahirabad region of current-day Telangana, ran for 10 years and has increased green cover by 2,500 acres. These community plantations still survive 25 years later and continue to support the communities that live around them.



The same was the case with the 'Dalit Watershed' programme, initiated in 1996 in eight villages, in Zaheerabad region. Working with Dalit women who mostly had their lands on ridges, this was an alternative model that aimed to treat the ridges rather than just considering them as water sinks. Several mainstream watershed projects also ignored the end purpose for which the water was conserved. Without concerns of equity and food production, they mostly served to irrigate cash crops for rich farmers in the valley with chemical farming. However, when women were the main stakeholders, they preferred to grow food crops instead. Local knowledge on

construction of bunds, trenches and water streams was utilised and the materials for construction were also sourced locally. This project attained praise from state secretaries and was replicated in other blocks. Such sustainability across time and scale was possible only because of community mobilisation. Such community mobilisation and inclusion of priorities and perceptions was possible only through tools that were accessible to all.

Participatory methods make it possible to have such inclusion while still maintaining the rigour of standard documentation and research practices.



A Principle Worth the Perils After my experience at TheWorkshop, I have become more oriented towards using participatory approaches in my work. Given my organisation's context, it helped me to grow better into my role and improve my work. I have been part of a few social and resource mapping exercises to understand the perspectives of marginalised sections in the village with regard to situations around land use and what interventions they would like to see in the villages. The approach I knew earlier for such needs assessment was only conducting a baseline survey or organising Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The PRA exercises allowed me to see that the community can set the agenda of discussion and contribute to building project proposals in a truly participatory way with their knowledge and insights. Their role extends much more than just filling gaps in information.

When such work is presented elsewhere, I am occasionally questioned about 'how we deal' with disagreements within the community. While pushing for Community participation, there is danger of homogenising 'community' as a faceless mass with a single consensus, just waiting to be represented on the exercise. Anybody with even the smallest experience of field engagement, like me, can identify the cracks in this idea. There isn't always consensus; there are often disagreements, and these can also take the shape of conflicts. However, rather than 'manage' a way around such disagreements, the better way is to go through them.



Such community mobilisation and inclusion of priorities and perceptions was possible only through tools that were accessible to all. Participatory methods make it possible to have such inclusion while still maintaining the rigour of standard documentation and research practices.

This can make participatory methods seem to be slow and less efficient. However, in my opinion, the principle of inclusion is worth it. Lack of consensus can in fact enrich the discussion and signify that the conversation is not being dominated by a single group or member.

A lot of allegations have been made against PRAs since its inception – both at theoretical and implementation levels. Despite this, it continues to be one of the most favoured tools in the social sector for community mobilisation, planning and evaluation for the unique strengths it possesses in organically bringing together a variety of stakeholders on a single objective and providing the space for co-learning. The visual power of PRAs, where information lies bare on the ground for everyone to see the same and come to common interpretations, is much-needed to move forward collectively to a space where equalities prevail, knowledge co-exist and voices are heard.



Santhoshi Srilaya Routhu

Santhoshi Srilaya has been with Deccan Development Society since 2021 and currently works as Program Coordinator. She has a Masters' Degree in Development Studies from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai and a Postgraduate Diploma in Research for Social Action from Azim Premji University, Bangalore. She has worked with agricultural communities in Telangana.

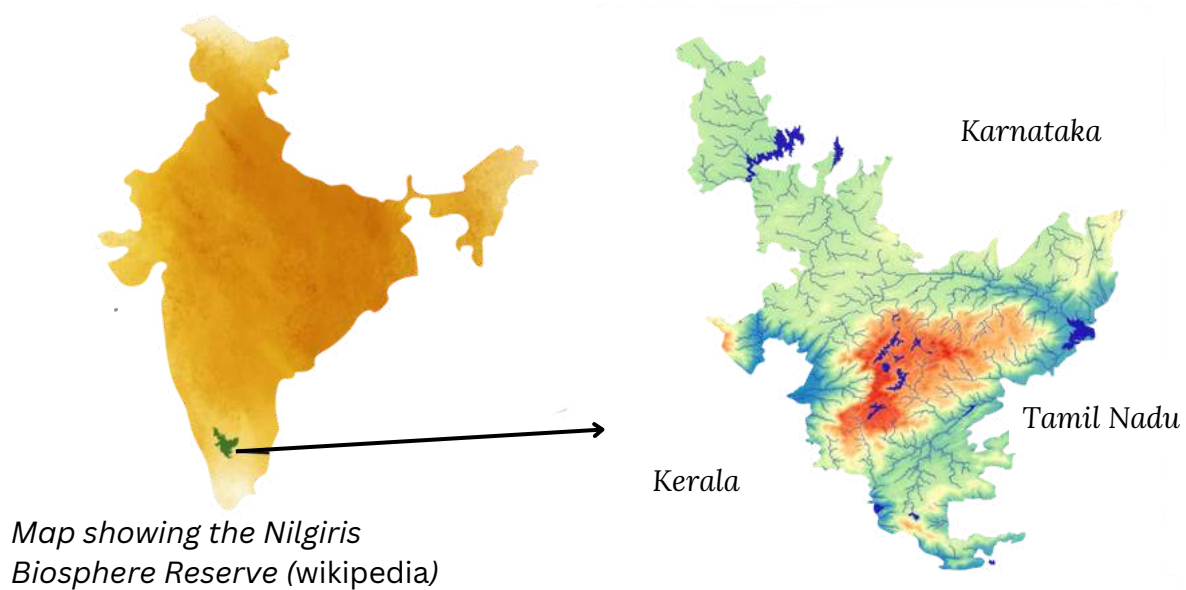


Key Takeaways

- Participatory methods enable true community ownership by creating spaces for communities to co-create knowledge and make inferences.
- Participatory approaches, such as the use of visual communication tools, help overcome barriers like literacy and ensure inclusivity in planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes.
- Involving communities in decision-making processes, such as rejecting eucalyptus in favour of diverse plant species, led to solutions that were better suited to local needs and environmental conditions, resulting in a more sustainable village plantation and watershed programme in Telangana
- Disagreements and conflicts within communities are an inherent part of participatory processes which can enrich discussions and ensure that diverse voices are heard.
- The long-term success and sustainability of participatory projects, as demonstrated by the Deccan Development Society initiatives, highlight the value of community ownership and the importance of creating spaces for genuine participation in decision-making.

Harnessing people power to build resilience: Experience with indigenous communities in the Nilgiris

Gokul Halan writes about working with tribal groups in the Nilgiris in southern India, bringing together traditional knowledge and scientific methods to build water-secure and resilient communities in a region with rich biodiversity but poor infrastructure



The Nilgiris District lies entirely within the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve in southern India. This region is renowned for its rich biodiversity, encompassing a wide variety of flora and fauna.

The district is home to several tribal communities such as the Todas, Kotas, Irulas, and Kurumbas, as well as indigenous communities like the Badagas. These communities have historically relied on land and its resources for their livelihoods. In recent years, there has been increasing competition over water resources due to historical land use changes and climatic factors, leading to conflicts over water and land between humans and wildlife.

I attended TheWorkshop in Bangalore in 2014. Since then, I have been using the tools and methodologies learned to work with tribal and other marginalised communities in the Nilgiris District. My efforts are focused on addressing water access challenges through participatory mapping of water resources such as springs, wetlands, and wells, along with their catchment areas. I am also involved in promoting positive climate action through sustainable land restoration practices.

We chose to use participatory approaches to ensure that the tribal communities in the Nilgiris District were actively involved in taking decisions that affect their lives.

Engaging the communities in mapping and data collection fostered a sense of ownership, empowered them with skills and knowledge, and ensured that the solutions developed are grounded in local realities and needs. This approach also helps in building trust and collaboration between the communities and external stakeholders, facilitating more sustainable and culturally appropriate interventions.

Drawing from the wide range of methodologies we used, I am sharing a few here. To document the water resources and land use in the Nilgiris, the communities were engaged in participatory mapping of their water resources, including springs, wetlands, and wells. Community volunteers subsequently used GPS equipment to map these resources accurately and then digitized the information using applications like Google Earth.

The Nilgiris is a home to India's largest population of the Asian elephant and other wild animals including leopards and the Bengal tiger. Growing development activities in the region causes human-animal conflict with stories of leopard and elephant attacks. In this context, the participatory mapping was also extended to track and understand wildlife movement in the area, aiding in the development of water security plans and mitigating human-wildlife conflicts.

Through our work, we have trained volunteers from the community to use modern technologies such as Google Earth satellite imagery to map their villages and the surrounding natural

resources. This training enabled them to create detailed and accurate maps that could be used for planning and advocacy. The communities were also involved in mapping the forests they forage, which is crucial for claiming Individual Forest Rights and Community Forest Rights under the Forest Rights Act. This participatory mapping also helped the communities document and claim their traditional rights over forest lands.



Training in progress

Our work also revolves around ensuring that perspectives of women were included in any kind of planning process. Women from the communities played a significant role in analysing the collected data and participating in collective decision-making processes. Their involvement was crucial in developing strategies to improve water and sanitation conditions in their villages, ensuring that the solutions were relevant and effective.

While they are part of all our mapping process, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were periodically conducted to gather information from the villages, particularly focusing on the challenges faced by women in accessing safe water, sanitation, and hygiene.

This method ensured that the specific needs and perspectives of women were central to the planning processes. By using these participatory methods, the project not only gathered valuable data but also empowered the communities, especially women, to take an active role in managing their resources and advocating for their rights.

In one of the remote villages with no road access on the eastern slopes of the Nilgiris, the Kurumba community faced severe water scarcity and infrastructure damage from wild animals. The women had to walk for hours through dense jungle to access their spring water source, frequently encountering elephants, gaur, tigers, and other mammals. Our team visited the village and trekked alongside the village women to see the water source first-hand.

By engaging the community in collective decision-making, we measured the water discharge from the springs, created separate water access points for wildlife, and implemented systems to store and channel water from the source to the village. Despite these efforts, we faced significant challenges due to the lack of involvement from the local panchayat. The remoteness and small population of the village led to non-participation from local governments, resulting in a lack of basic facilities like water and roads.

However, the outcomes were profound. Vellaricombai village is now water positive, and the women no longer need to make treacherous trips to the water source, avoiding dangerous encounters with wild animals. Janaki Amma and another community member were instrumental in mobilising the

Involving community members, especially women, to address water shortage in the hills



community, planning meetings, gathering data, and sharing insights and traditional knowledge to improve the water situation in the village.

The impact of using participatory tools to engage the community in solving their water issues was one of the significant achievements for me. This model not only succeeded in Vellaricomбай but also helped many other tribal villages in the district. The lessons learned from this exercise highlighted the importance of community involvement and ownership in achieving sustainable solutions, even in the face of challenges such as non-participation from local governments. This experience reinforced the value of participatory approaches in empowering communities and addressing their needs effectively.

Today, we have trained a number of community stewards who lead efforts in using participatory approaches in various aspects related to water, biodiversity, land, and forest rights. This informed decision-making process, which combines both traditional and scientific knowledge, has helped us achieve water security and build resilient communities. By empowering these communities through democratic participatory processes, we are fostering sustainable development and ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs are met across all our programmes.



Janaki Amma, who was instrumental in mobilising the community, planning meetings, gathering data, and sharing traditional knowledge to improve water access in the village, recently passed away, in a wild elephant attack.

For over two decades, she worked tirelessly as a midwife, healer, and advocate, playing a vital role in securing rights and preserving traditions in her community. Her profound impact on the Nilgiris will continue to inspire us all.

It feels fitting to honour her and the work we did together when I reflect on my experience with PRA.



Gokul Halan

Gokul Halan attended the Praxis Workshop in Bangalore in 2014. Since then, he has applied the tools learned to support tribal and marginalized communities in the Nilgiris District, focusing on water access and climate action through participatory mapping and sustainable land restoration.

A native of the Nilgiris and a member of the Indigenous Badaga Community, Gokul has dedicated his career to the service and upliftment of his homeland. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Commerce and a Master's degree in Social Work (Human Resources) from PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore. Specialising in hydrogeology, he has dedicated over a decade to water conservation, partnering with local communities to ensure water security and preserve local resources. His work reflects his commitment to environmental stewardship and community welfare.

The author would like to thank the team he worked with - Balachander T, Shanmitha Raghu, Selvi Nanji, Thanvish, Babu (Late) and all the water stewards.



Key Takeaways

- Engaging tribal communities in participatory mapping empowered them with skills and fostered a sense of ownership.
- Combining traditional knowledge with modern technologies like GPS and Google Earth allowed effective documentation of resources and forest rights claims.
- Women's involvement in data analysis and decision-making ensured relevant and effective water and sanitation solutions.
- Despite challenges like government non-participation and remote village locations, community involvement led to sustainable solutions.
- Vellaricombai village became water positive and safer for women through community-led efforts.
- The experience highlighted the importance of community ownership and participatory approaches in achieving sustainable development and water security.

Community participation to community ownership: Trajectory of a child rights-centered programme

Susmita Guha talks about using participatory approaches and seeing increased community uptake of a livelihood project and people's ownership of a humanitarian response initiative. Building community participation results in many kinds of solidarities

I heard about TheWorkshop through a friend who had attended a few years before me. She convinced me about the experience and I attended the 2016 edition in Bangalore. I was at that time leading New Horizons, a pioneering livelihoods project for the most marginalised youth in West Bengal as part of Save The Children. The project, which had been initiated in 2008, was encountering some roadblocks. We were struggling with failures. It was a time for me to introspect.

TheWorkshop was my first exposure to participatory approaches and it was a confluence of culture, knowledge and ideas from across the globe. The flow of the training was extremely well-thought-out in terms of the content, specialisation and the hands-on application of the tools on ground zero during field visits. I was part of a module facilitated by one of the greatest mentors of my life, Anindo Banerjee. Learning how to facilitate participatory social mapping from him was one of the key takeaways for me. He seamlessly linked theory with the practical application of the PRA tools.

The friendships that started there are buzzing till date and continue as shared spaces of new learning on practices and perspectives. We met people from very

diverse backgrounds, including people from academia, bilateral organisations, and civil society representatives from other sectors. While some brought their philosophical outlook, others brought their knowledge of implementation. Still others enriched us with policy work and funding realities.

Returning from TheWorkshop, I was able to relook at my project. I saw that while we think we were inculcating bottom-up approaches, our approaches were actually top-down in some ways. We had to rethink the way we we functioned in many ways. As implementers, it is often difficult for us to think about our own shortcomings. We tend to become very protective about our projects.



TheWorkshop was my first exposure to participatory approaches and it was a confluence of culture, knowledge and ideas from across the globe. The flow of the training was extremely well thought out [...]

I was part of a module facilitated by one of the greatest mentors of my life, Anindo Banerjee.

To what extent do we engage with children and community to seek input and opinion while designing a project and not take an easy route and develop ideas simply based on our own understanding and observation?

Facilitating meaningful conversations with children and young adults can often be challenging. Many hesitate to share original thoughts or personal viewpoints, often due to a fear of judgment. Over time, they become conditioned to respond in predictable, clichéd ways, simply going with the flow. But this isn't their fault. For years, they have seen NGOs collect their input, hold discussions, and then disappear—rarely returning to share the findings or outcomes, which naturally leads to disengagement and reluctance to contribute.

It bothered me when we would say, we are doing FGDs for your betterment. It is such a vague thing to say. I started taking time to explain to them how things can change and used examples to bring clarity.

Along with my team, we tried to analyse what was working and what was not. We zeroed in on those who had an influence on their choices during the participatory planning exercises. We started thinking about long-term change and sustainable change. Before attending TheWorkshop, we used to decide on all possible skill options based on discussions with the training institutes and employers. We never thought about the adolescents as we thought they have less insights or experiences. However, when we asked them, we found they brought new



Before attending TheWorkshop, we used to decide on all options based on discussions with the training institutes and employers. We never thought about the adolescents as we thought they have less insights or experiences.

insights. These insights helped us bring changes to the programme and eventually led to reducing dropouts.

As we were working with young adults, we thought soft skill was enough to bring them out of their vulnerabilities. However, we later realised the importance of the influence of parents and life partners in their decisions.

As a result, we introduced a number of diversified trade options which we had never thought about before. Another insight that came from these processes with the different stakeholders was the setting up of Alumni clubs or peer support groups. These continue to function and identify and motivate marginalised youths towards better livelihoods. Parents started taking an active interest in ensuring their children stayed in the jobs. Community acceptance and trust was much higher towards Save the Children and as a result, dropout from the training was reduced.

Another example of community participation can go a long way revealed itself during the combined crisis of the COVID-19, Amphan and Yaas super cyclones.

At that time, as State Head of West Bengal I was leading a triple humanitarian response, while planning a response, we involved community members and youth leaders in identifying the humanitarian response on the ground. . This was to a large extent managed by the community groups.

When the lockdown started, project implementation reached a standstill and one donor offered to support an initiative to provide fresh milk to children in vulnerable communities. Up to that point, we thought that we had to be physically present to implement a project. We discussed the challenges with our child leaders. They sought some time and came back with a plan they chalked out. From taking the permission of the local authorities and the councilor to collection and distribution of milk, from guiding the community to save the milk from perishing to managing the risks and maintaining records, they came up with a foolproof plan. The entire 'project management' was done by them from risk assessment to risk mitigation and sending daily reports and keeping tabs. This was an eye-opening experience.

Now that I have moved to Destiny Foundation (working to disrupt the cycle of human trafficking) as Director of Program and Strategy, I have noticed a missing link between the think tank and the survivors we work for. We have now started working with young adults and children from red light areas, raising a lot of insights and learning along with them. The use of participatory approaches comes with its own set of challenges.

While working with colleagues and staff, you can regulate commitment; but in the community setting, it takes a lot of time to establish the trust, and bring them to the same page where they understand the need for their own involvement and participation.

Besides, many organisations and projects today are shaped by donor-driven priorities, often with an emphasis on quick, visible results. This creates significant pressure on ground-level teams, who must constantly navigate the tension between meeting donor expectations and fostering genuine community engagement.

Participatory approaches like PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) require time, trust, and sustained presence. They involve listening deeply, bringing communities together, and encouraging them to contribute meaningfully—something that cannot be rushed. Yet under current pressures, creating that space becomes increasingly difficult.

Communities are no longer passive recipients. With repeated exposure to NGOs, they have become more aware and strategic, often saying what they think is expected rather than voicing real concerns. This reflects a socialisation shaped by years of one-way communication. They also recognise NGOs' efforts and limitations, choosing how and when to engage. This underscores the need for deeper, trust-based engagement – focused on dialogue, not just delivery.

In these challenging times, we must find innovative ways to be enablers, without compromising our core values or the stand we take.



Susmita Guha

Susmita Guha brings 17 years of professional experience in project management and extensive expertise in child rights, child protection, sustainable livelihoods, and humanitarian response. Currently, she works as the Director, Program and Strategy, with Destiny Foundation. Her primary interest lies in integrating core project management tools into development practice to enhance efficacy.

Previously, Susmita worked with the Directorate of Local Bodies and several rights-based NGOs. She holds an MPhil in Women's Studies from the University of Calcutta and a Master's in Social Work. Susmita attended TheWorkshop in 2016.

Written as shared with the Praxis team.



Key Takeaways

- By involving adolescents in planning, her team discovered new insights that led to the introduction of diversified trade options and reduced dropouts in a project. The active involvement of parents and partners also played a crucial role in the success of the initiatives.
- Initially, the team believed soft skills alone could help young adults overcome vulnerabilities. However, they soon recognised the significant role of family—particularly parents and partners—in shaping choices and outcomes.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic and super cyclone crises, the community, particularly youth leaders, effectively managed humanitarian responses. This experience demonstrated the power of community ownership in project management.
- There are several challenges of building trust and engagement in community settings, especially in donor-driven projects where time and commitment are critical. Communities are increasingly aware of the roles and limitations of NGOs, which requires a conscious, balanced approach in civil society work.
- Building trust in community settings takes time. Unlike with staff or colleagues, commitment can't be regulated—it must be earned through sustained engagement and by helping communities see the value of their own participation.
- Civil society networks and grassroots alliances play a critical role in raising awareness of rights and enabling creative, adaptive responses to changing social realities.

Using PRA To Strengthen Community Participation in Local Self-Governance: The Sundarbans Experience

Nandita Jayraman writes about her experience of integrating learnings from the workshop in her work on community-centred development in the ecologically fragile Sundarbans region of West Bengal

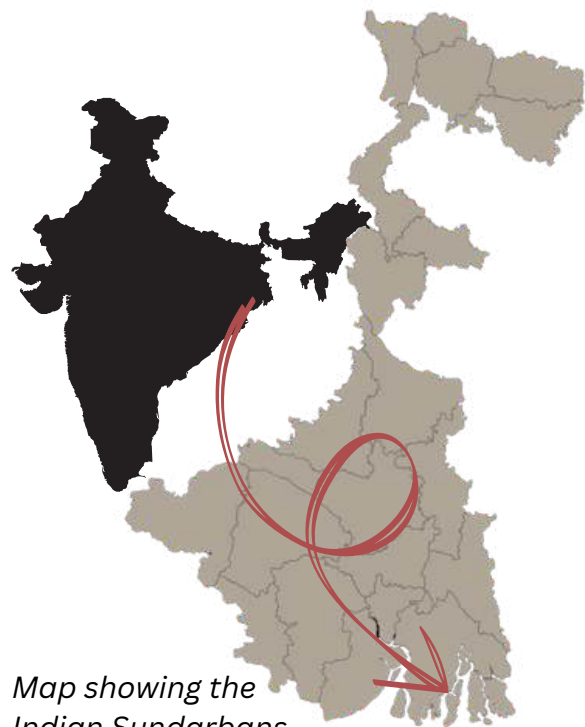
I work in the Indian Sundarbans, which lies in the vast delta on the Bay of Bengal formed by the super confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and the Meghna rivers. The place has always earned a special interest in the world map because of the unique the mangrove forests and the lifestyle of the local inhabitants. People have been mostly dependent on agriculture, fishing, and forest resources here. Owing to recent climatic changes, there is a loss of livelihood adding to the increasing vulnerability amongst all sections of inhabitants.

Our project is focused on a Gram Panchayat called Herambagopalpur located under the Patharpratima block in the Sundarbans area of South 24 Parganas where we are part of a consortium aiming to strengthen people-centred development.

Among the 15 Blocks in the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, Pathar Pratima is one of the largest and known as one of the most critical in terms of adverse social issues. Research has pointed towards the increasing adversities related to human trafficking, migration, insufficient alternatives to livelihood, and frequent disasters leading to severe adverse consequences on all sections of inhabitants. Herambagopalpur is located in the northern side of Patharpratima Block

and comprises four main villages, namely, Heramba Gopalpur, Dakshin Kashinagar, Kuemuri and Purba Surendranagar.

I attended the community-led child protection module offered by TheWorkshop where the concept of community-led approach was introduced through different participatory tools in the context of child protection. During the workshop, we not only learnt how to use some new tools; we also learnt the rationale of using those tools. While attending the module, I was able to relate back to our work in Herambagopalpur.



Map showing the Indian Sundarbans (wikipedia)

In the beginning, all participants collectively set expectations from the workshop through a card sorting exercise, simultaneously learning how to bring different perspectives and opinions in one place. Irrespective of power dynamics, this tool helped people actively participate in a discussion. We discussed the role of the facilitator as being non-manipulative or non-judgmental, having skills to identify the power dynamics in any group and taking initiatives to neutralise that power imbalance while ensuring participation of all the members in the groups.

The module facilitator introduced one child protection-related issue to the groups and we were told to have a detailed understanding of that issue by using some participatory tools. We used tools such as social mapping, transect walk, body mapping and problem tree to collectively dive deeper into the issue. Although each group did one exercise at a time, a collective sharing helped us learn multiple tools together. One of the most important things we all learned was that our focus should be concentrated on the process rather than the outputs of exercise. One tool can be used for different purposes or even similar purposes and can generate different outputs so it is important to focus on the way the exercise will be done. Once the community understands the process, they can use it to analyse different issues.

Our project aims to create leaders from vulnerable communities who can raise their issues and can take collective actions to resolve the issues by engaging with different stakeholders.



One learning that I related directly to my work is that we need to be very careful while shifting the power. As a facilitator, it is important to be conscious while transferring power to the community. Power must be transferred to the most vulnerable people in the community for participatory processes to be empowering.

Through the workshop, I learnt that the term community-led lies in process of building community's capacity, where they will gradually gain the agency of using participatory approaches to meet their own purposes. This process is nothing but shifting the power from the facilitator or the organisation to the community. One learning that I related directly to my work is that we need to be very careful while shifting the power. If we simply gave up power to the community, it might superficially seem that the initiative became community-led but there would be the possibility that the power could be monopolised by those among the community who are not vulnerable in any way.

From the outside, an initiative may appear community-led, but the true essence of a community-led approach can easily be lost in such situations. As facilitators, it is important to remain conscious and intentional when supporting power-sharing within the community. For participatory processes to be genuinely empowering, efforts must be made to ensure that the voices of the most vulnerable are included and not sidelined.

The workshop helped me understand our organisational role in the Panchayat where we work, to facilitate a community-led approach. From planning to taking direct actions, all will be done by the community, and we can play the role of a facilitator initially. Gradually, that assistance will be withdrawn when community takes over that role.

In the Sundarbans, we have formed groups of men, women, and children from different experiences of marginalisation. Of them, three groups actively engaged with the local panchayat members in the development of the Gram panchayat development plan (GPDP). People from different castes, religion, gender, age, livelihood and social status are part of these collectives. This process was facilitated through a participatory approach where the community took the lead.

A few members attended a village-level training organised by the National Centre for Advocacy Studies, where they learned about the structure of the Gram panchayat and how it works. They also learned about the panchayat calendar and how to participate in the GPDP process. These members then went back to their respective groups and shared their learning with the others and collectively took a decision to participate in the Para Baithak (neighbourhood) and raise issues.

After the Para Baithak meeting, when they reflected on the success of their participation in the village-level meetings, they found a gap - although they raised similar issues, the

information shared was different. After the Para Baithak meeting, when they reflected on the success of their participation in the village-level meetings, they found a gap - although they raised similar issues, the information shared was different.

They realised the need to provide detailed evidence-backed information about the issues and how these impacted them. They discussed several strategies and finally decided to use a social mapping exercise to document the conditions of the available infrastructure in the panchayat such as roads, drinking water units, lamp posts.

Two to three members from the group drew the local area map (naksha) and all the members jointly listed out the bad roads, the position of damaged tubewells and the places where streetlights were required. While the men initiated the drawing, the women members gradually took the lead and facilitated the entire discussion. Each member shared their inputs when the places near their houses came to the discussion. They also validated the inputs of others based upon what they saw. After making the entire map, they jointly revisited all the issues and added a few which were missed during the discussion.

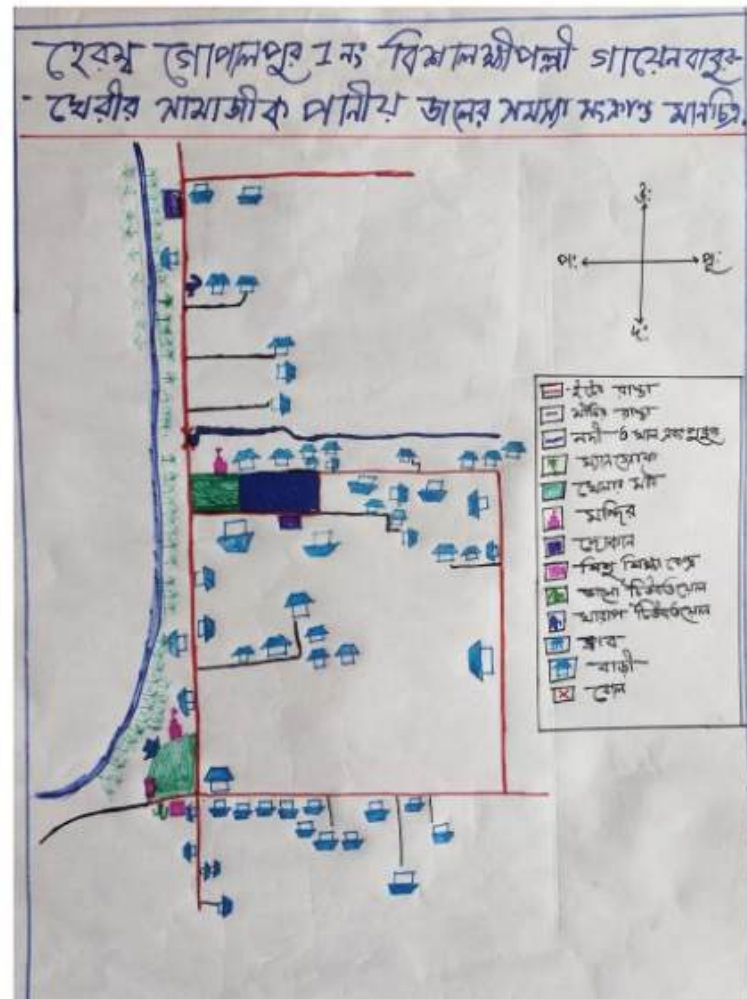


After the Para Baithak meeting, they found a gap - although they raised similar issues, the information was different. They realised the need to provide detailed evidence about the issues and how these impacted them.

The map they made jointly was presented at the Panchayat-level meetings at the Sansad level and the Gram Sabha level. They showed the map and explained every issue they raised and gave a clear justification of why they raised those issues and what solutions they wanted the GPDP to include.

Using a map, they were able to structure and consolidate their demands. During the Gram Sansad meeting, the community members were able to request the Panchayat members to list issues that were missed out by showing the map and explaining the demand. The Panchayat members approved their request made it a priority.

Collective members create a resource map (alongside) of their village to share at the Gram Sansad meeting to raise demands



The outcome of adopting a participatory approach was that initially, the process was controlled by a few members, who wanted to highlight issues which affected them. But when the women took the lead, they facilitated the process in a more non-biased way. Before highlighting any issue, they asked each member to share their opinion on that particular issue.

Despite this, a few issues were not prominently pointed out in the map because the representation of that particular area was limited as compared to the others. Future engagements must try to find a way of addressing this gap.

Among all the tools I learnt at the workshop, the transect walk exercise helped develop a completely new perspective in me. In social mapping tools where the geographical context of the issue can be identified in such cases, transect walk can help to explore the real/practical situation in comparison with the data shown in the map. This Using participatory methods helped the

community members build their own capacity to understand issues; it allowed them to use different perspectives to validate these issues. A space for exchanging views and opinions on a particular topic was created, and this contributed to building the confidence of people to get overall clarity about things that matter. Participatory approach helped them build their capacity to negotiate. It also developed facilitation skill among the community members and helped them collectively analyse issues that affect their lives.

Another significant learning from the workshop was knowing when to withdraw our intervention. Sometimes we unconsciously entrench ourselves in the process so intensively that it becomes very difficult to withdraw ourselves from the process. Thus, from the very beginning of the intervention, we must develop an exit strategy so that our presence does not develop a sense of dependency in the community.



Creating spaces for meaningful participation in the gram sabha process.



Nandita Jayraman

Nandita Jayraman works with Mukti as a program manager of a rights-based program. She started her journey with Mukti in May 2021. She is currently part of the implementation team of three ongoing rights-based projects and is dedicated to building an enabling environment for vulnerable communities where they can build their perspective on human, child and women's rights and can identify the violation of those rights in their daily life and can take individual or participatory, inclusive and sustainable approaches to address them. She is also pursuing a gender studies programme to strengthen her skill.



Key Takeaways

- Community involvement in an ecologically fragile region can help build the resilience of the community to identify their issues, analyse them and take steps to address them. Participatory approaches helps them to strengthen their ability to negotiate with stakeholders
- In Herambagopalpur, Sundarbans, the community effectively used participatory tools to present their data and ensure their voices were reflected in the Gram Panchayat Development Plan.
- The author talks about the responsibility of the facilitator in handing over power to the most marginalised through a process of building their capacity and their confidence
- The outcome of adopting a participatory approach was that a process that was initially controlled by a few members became a non-biased interaction.

Glossary

- **Gram Panchayat** A village administration unit in the Indian governance system which comprises a body of elected members governing a village or a group of villages. The Panchayat is tasked with formulating a Gram Panchayat Development Plan for the development of the Panchayat
- **Gram Sabha** A village assembly where important governance issues are discussed in the Indian decentralised governance system
- **Para baithak** Neighbourhood meetings

From Surviving to Thriving: Embracing Participatory Approaches to Empowerment

Md. Abdus Salam, who lives in Bangladesh, explores his transformative journey with participatory methodologies, emphasising empowerment, research, and survivor advocacy against human trafficking.

In 2022, upon returning to Bangladesh after experiencing the horrors of being trafficked, I found a renewed purpose in life. I am engaged with a human rights research consultancy, where I have the opportunity to work on research supply chain investigations related to human trafficking and training services for various stakeholders, including INGOs and NGOs worldwide. As part of this engagement, I used participatory approaches.

Drawing from our expertise, our company secured a project from the USAID Asia CTIP (Winrock International) programme in Bangladesh. The project involved conducting participatory action research with Anirban, a survivor-led organisation dedicated to empowering survivors of trafficking. I was entrusted with the responsibility of serving as the project's field leader, despite my lack of prior experience in research work. The concept of participatory action research was entirely new to me, but fortunately, I had the guidance of a colleague who had completed a PhD on participatory processes. Alongside two colleagues from Asia CTIP, we used these participatory approaches in engaging with Anirban.

Our work involved understanding how Anirban was formed, their growth, and their sustainability as a volunteer group over the past 13 years. By using a

participatory approach, Anirban members were able to express themselves freely, beyond the boundaries of traditional research questions.

During our collaborative research, Anirban members expressed their frustration with previous researchers who spent limited time with them and asked pointed questions before leaving. In contrast, our approach involved giving them the time and freedom to communicate openly, and listening to their ideas and experiences with respect. This participatory approach allowed us to learn from their perspectives without passing judgment.

Through our partnership with Anirban, we learned about their innovative ideas for becoming sustainable, including starting a social enterprise or venturing into businesses such as handmade products, mineral water, and cattle rearing. These ideas illustrated their entrepreneurial spirit and their dedication to finding sustainable solutions for their organisation and livelihoods.

Our participatory approach allowed us to recognise gaps in support that Anirban faced, providing valuable insights that traditional research methods may have overlooked.

During this engagement, my interest in participatory methods grew. The process is very different from traditional research practices, as we entrust control to the participants and the community to share what they think is relevant for the research. They take charge of the project, while we observe and record their actions, constantly learning from their insights. The experience of respectfully empowering participants as equal partners in the research process fascinated me, which then ignited the desire to delve deeper into participatory methodologies.

To nurture my growing interest, I attended the Praxis training on participatory methods in India in October 2023.

The Workshop was a comprehensive education in participatory methodologies, moving beyond our work solely with trafficking survivors in Bangladesh. I was able to explore broader applications, such as carrying out participatory processes in village communities. Engaging in activities like transect walk allowed us to discover different aspects of these communities, deepening our understanding of local contexts. I recognised how some of these tools learnt during The Workshop would be exceptionally effective in mapping the trafficking situation, shedding light on my personal experience and gaining crucial insights into the realities of trafficking on the ground.

Throughout the training, we encountered unique teaching techniques that expanded our knowledge base. For instance, Prof. Robert Chambers introduced us to

power dynamics and the concept of saboteurs and how to deal with them. These concepts resonated deeply with my field experiences, where we encountered individuals outside our groups attempting to hinder our progress. The importance of power relations came to the forefront, as I recognized how our interactions with survivors could unconsciously reinforce hierarchical structures. Reflecting on moments where power dynamics shifted even with minor things like when someone sat on the ground while I remained seated on a chair, revealed valuable lessons on building equal partnerships.

Following the training, I received an invitation to Bangkok as a panel moderator for an Evidence 2 Action summit. Taking advantage of this opportunity, I shared insights on emphasizing the vulnerability of survivors in programmes. By advocating for power-sharing with survivors and challenging top-down systems, I pushed for the potential of impactful and transformative change in projects,



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following these insights. During this workshop, I also co-facilitated discussions using some of the tools I had learnt earlier. These brought out rich insights from the participants.

I have been involved in several projects where I have emphasized the importance of participatory decision-making. By involving others in the decision-making process, we can benefit from diverse perspectives and avoid making potentially flawed decisions. We are currently planning a new project inspired by the work of Anirban, aiming to support survivors in Taiwan. The project will focus on empowering survivors to form their own groups to

combat human trafficking. I am also looking forward to the publication of our impact report.

Through my journey, from being trafficked to becoming a field leader and advocating for participatory approaches, I have realised the transformative potential of empowering survivors and valuing their expertise. Participatory methods not only educate us but also equip us with tools to make a tangible difference in the lives of marginalized communities. As I continue to learn and grow, I am committed to driving change through inclusive and empowering research practices.



Md. Abdus Salam

Md. Abdus Salam is a survivor of human trafficking and cyber slavery, who uses his life experience to work for the rescue, repatriation and reintegration of others like him. He works with Humanity Research Consultancy and carries out supply chain integration and trains others to work towards a trafficking-free world. He firmly believes in the role of survivors of trafficking and those belonging to communities vulnerable to trafficking in addressing this issue locally, nationally and globally.

Written as shared with the Praxis team.



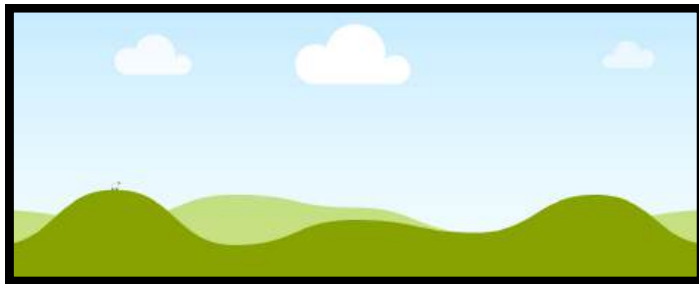
Key Takeaways

- The author experiences the transformative potential of participatory methodologies in his journey from a survivor of human trafficking to a development practitioner
- Participatory approaches enable researchers to learn from the perspectives of participants without judgment, fostering deeper understanding and connection.
- These PRA methods not only educate but also equip practitioners with the tools to create tangible change in the lives of marginalised communities.

Memory Lane



6th - 2002



7th - 2003



8th - 2004



9th - 2005



10th - 2006

Basis of Participation

Trust, Empathy, Solidarity

Public health and sanitation: Unpacking deep-seated social realities

Niladri Chakraborti writes about his journey with participatory approaches, emphasising its impact on community engagement, social work, and the quest for inclusion, as seen through his experiences in public health and sanitation programmes.

In 2012, I was working in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, as part of a health programme for the urban poor. I had had some prior exposure to social work through my time in Kolkata. However, I lacked formal training in participatory tools and community engagement. TheWorkshop came to me as a unique opportunity to learn and grow. It took place in September, and I distinctly remember being captivated by Bengaluru's soothing and lovely weather, a stark contrast to the scorching heat back in Bhubaneswar.

TheWorkshop I attended was organised at Ecumenical Christian Centre (ECC) in Whitefield, which was one of the booming extensions of the city at that time. The ECC campus was beautiful and peaceful, providing an ideal setting for learning and building connections. At TheWorkshop, I interacted with people from different geographies and also those with very different life experiences, including people living with HIV/AIDS. The strength and resilience they showed left a lasting impression on me and made me acknowledge my privileges. It truly opened me up to the world around me.

We delved into both theoretical and practical aspects of using participatory approaches and tools. The sessions were engaging and thought-provoking, with

ample opportunities for discussions. In addition, interactions with eminent guests, film screenings and fun activities made it a holistic learning experience. It was not just all work and no play; TheWorkshop fostered a sense of camaraderie and fun among the participants. I remain connected with many fellow participants through social media and often reach out to them for support and guidance.

From a professional standpoint, the experience helped me in ways I never anticipated. Participatory approaches, for me, went beyond simply using tools and became a philosophy of how to engage with communities. And, this philosophy continues to influence my work with urban communities in various states, whether it is in public health or WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene).

In 2020, I had the privilege of leading a citywide inclusive sanitation programme in Trichy in Tamil Nadu. This programme allowed us to dive deeper into issues surrounding urban poor, gender, and sanitation work. We discovered that sanitation behaviour is incredibly diverse, even within the same household. For example, some family members would use the toilet while others would not. We sought to understand the reasons behind the differences in behaviours and address core issues.

Similarly, while working with sanitation workers, we had to navigate through the complexities of multiple categories and sectors of workers, such as those who deal with solid waste, liquid waste, septic tank cleaning, drain cleaning, and railway track cleaning. Each category presented its own unique set of challenges and required tailored solutions. Participatory tools such as venn diagrams, social mapping, and mobility mapping not only helped us gain trust and break ice with the workers, it helped us to collectively understand the challenges and work towards solutions.

A key part of the work with sanitation workers focused on the discrimination faced by them on the grounds of caste and occupation. We unpacked the degrees of discrimination in different spaces and levels so that we could support research and intervention efforts with stigmatised and discriminated communities.

For example, there is a provision for pensions for sanitation workers above the age of 60. While government employees receive pensions irrespective of having children, sanitation workers are denied the entitlement if they have offspring. This underlying discrimination assumes that their children will provide financial support and thus renders pensions unnecessary. Such inbuilt clauses can be detrimental towards the quest for equitable lives of sanitation workers.

Initially, building trust with the sanitation workers proved to be a challenge

because of the stigmatisation they faced. However, through persistent efforts, we established a strong rapport and gained their confidence. They now actively participate in events have formed and run a federation, and contribute to creating lasting change. Our approach has always been to sit across the table and actively listen to their experiences. This is one of the greatest lessons from TheWorkshop.



Initially, building trust with sanitation workers was difficult because of the stigmatisation they faced. However, through persistent efforts, we established a strong rapport and gained their confidence... Our approach has always been to sit across the table and actively listen to their experiences. This is one of the greatest lessons from TheWorkshop.

By working together to identify and combat discrimination, we can move towards building a more inclusive society. Breaking down caste dynamics in sanitation work is a complex and ongoing journey that requires time, persistence, and an understanding of local contexts. Take Tamil Nadu for example, the government has taken proactive steps by offering specific subsidies and benefits to support marginalised castes and address caste-based issues. This approach serves as a valuable example for other states in India to learn from and adopt.

My journey with Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has evolved over time. Looking at the history of participatory approaches from the 1980s until 2023, even the terminology has changed multiple times. Terms like Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Learning were used at different points.

During a field trial of Social Analysis Systems (SAS) with Carlton University, we were introduced to the concept by calling it a level higher than participatory approaches. However, SAS is more related to digitised data and forms. So, while it has benefits and limitations, it is a valuable addition to the participatory space.

PRA approaches have been an incredible learning experience from the beginning. Coming from a background in physics and environmental science, I didn't have formal education in social work or sociology. But as I started working with communities, I discovered the fascinating intersection of different disciplines within participatory approaches. These tools have a theoretical foundation, drawing from fields like



I didn't have formal education in social work or sociology. But as I started working with communities, I discovered the fascinating intersection of different disciplines within participatory approaches. Each tool has a theoretical foundation, drawing from fields like psychology, economics, and mathematics.

psychology, economics, and mathematics. It's not just about mapping or using colors or stones; there is a scientific basis behind it all that truly captivates me.

While using participatory tools, we blend two or three tools together because one tool may not provide adequate information or a comprehensive understanding of a situation. We remain open to adopting and embracing new tools and theories because it helps us better understand the issues at hand.

In my early days, while working on an eco-farming project, I used social mapping and wealth mapping exercises. These experiences helped me understand how the community can measure wealth while uncovering the connections between mobility, livelihoods, and daily life implications. As I delved deeper into public health and water and sanitation, which aligned with my background, I realised the applicability of participatory tools in patient mapping, epidemiological research, and outbreak investigations. These tools helped me analyse factors such as water supply, food habits, and community trends. Through hands-on experience, I discovered the versatility of participatory approaches in various contexts, including menstrual hygiene and WaSH programmes.

To this day, I continue to use these approaches in my work. I am open to embracing changes and advancements in the field while recognising the limitations and strengths of these approaches.

While digitisation may bring about new technologies and theories, I do not see it as a threat. Instead, it can be viewed as an opportunity to further enhance participatory practices. Even with advances in digital tools like artificial intelligence (AI), the internet of things (IoT), and real-time data collection, the core principles of participatory approaches remain unchanged. Development and progress cannot happen without actively involving the community and fostering participation. It is important for experts in digital technologies and participatory approaches to collaborate and find innovative ways to work together, just as photography has evolved with the integration of AI. This way, we can leverage digitization to strengthen participatory exercises, providing more

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Development and progress cannot happen without actively involving the community and fostering participation. It is important for experts in digital technologies and participatory approaches to collaborate and find innovative ways to work together

visual and accessible representations of data and outcomes.

History has shown that change is inevitable, and I am optimistic that participatory approaches will continue to adapt and be effective in the face of digitisation.

An inclusive sanitation programme under way in Tamil Nadu





Niladri Chakraborti

Niladri Chakraborti is a seasoned development professional specialising in WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), public health, and solid waste management, with over two decades of experience in the field. He has been instrumental in designing and executing large-scale WASH, solid waste management, and public health programmes across various Indian states, including West Bengal, Sikkim, Odisha, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. He is an Alumnus of TheWorkshop from the year 2012.

Written as shared with the Praxis team.



Key Takeaways

- Participatory approaches became integral to the author's professional work in public health and WaSH.
- Participatory methods not only uncovered discrimination but also helped find collaborative solutions and build trust with the sanitation worker community through persistent efforts and an understanding of local contexts.
- The author discovered the versatility of participatory approaches in areas like menstrual hygiene and WaSH, and their ability to adapt to different settings and challenges.
- Participatory tools are often grounded in theoretical foundations from various disciplines. In practice, blending multiple tools is often necessary, as no single method captures the full complexity of a situation.
- Despite the rise of digital tools, the core principles of participatory approaches remain deeply relevant. The author advocates for collaboration between digital and participatory practitioners to enhance impact.
- TheWorkshop fostered a spirit of camaraderie and fun among participants. The author continues to stay connected with fellow attendees through social media, often reaching out for support and shared learning.

Unveiling Resilience in Sri Lanka: Psycho-Social Support and Healing in the Times of War and Beyond

Shanthi Thambaiyah shares her journey in the humanitarian sector, focusing on the use of participatory approaches and tools to address the mental health and Psychosocial needs of individuals affected by the war in Sri Lanka. She reflects on her experiences, the lessons learned, and influences along the way.

My professional journey began in the private sector in 1998. However, in 2001, I transitioned to the humanitarian sector. This was a tumultuous time in Sri Lanka. It was during this period that I became involved in a psychosocial support programme as a translator/interpreter. I primarily worked with internally displaced persons, starting in the northern region and eventually expanding to the eastern region - both of which were affected by war.

As the need for Tamil-speaking trainers in the psychosocial support programme grew, I moved on to become an assistant trainer. It was during this time that I came across TheWorkshop by Praxis. At that time, it consisted of five to six modules, including topics such as participatory planning and training of trainers. As I had no background in

training, I believed that these insights would be beneficial in my new role, and the strategies in community development would greatly benefit our efforts in supporting people during the war.

During TheWorkshop, which happened in Hyderabad, I was introduced to Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). I was fortunate to have two days with Dr. Robert Chambers, who provided a foundation on the basics of PRA. It was my first exposure to PRA, and the facilitation by Sam Joseph had a profound impact on me and my work. I remember Sam staying up late while we were preparing for the Share Fair on the last day, even though he did not need to. His presence while we were working hard ingrained his sense of commitment in my mind. Another action which I

The author with Robert Chambers and Sam Joseph, who has profoundly impacted her work



subconsciously started emulating is carrying markers in a small box or a bag and arranging them before workshops and sessions just like he would do. Sam used to carry them in the pocket of his jacket and arranged them in a very organised way on the table.



Sam taught us to prioritise our learning experience above all else. I try to emulate that in my own trainings, putting the needs of the participants first and try to pass on those learnings as much as I can.

I also learnt the art of being prepared without PowerPoint presentations as – in the community, there can be power cuts or lack of facilities to use multimedia. The discipline and values of Sam have shaped me. He taught us to prioritise our learning experience above all else. I try to emulate that in my own trainings, putting the needs of the participants first and try to pass on those learnings as much as I can.

Upon returning to Sri Lanka, I started using tools like body mapping, resource mapping, well-being mapping, and others, adapting and using them in my regular work as a trainer in the psychosocial sector. In everyday situations, I found these tools invaluable in creating safe spaces for individuals and children to open up and express their emotions, talk about sensitive issues and overcome daily challenges, particularly in the confines of refugee camps.

In 2009, I became a full-time trainer in

the education sector, collaborating with the Ministry of Education in the heavily war-affected Vanni region. The programme addressed the needs of those who had experienced multiple displacements, some having been uprooted as many as 15-20 times. Many teachers and students suffered profound losses, with some having lost up to 20 family members. Although I lacked formal training as a counsellor, these tools provided a foundation for basic problem management and psychosocial support (like first-aid). My primary objective was to train teachers and students to enable them to support one another, analyse problems, and engage in meaningful conversations about their issues.

The project with the Ministry of Education was a 10-year-long project. Initially, we focused on psychosocial support and later transitioned into system building for the ministry's psychosocial and career guidance unit. Amidst this process, I came back to attend The Workshop in Delhi, during its 20th anniversary year, focusing on re-orienting and learning centred around M&E.



In everyday situations, I found these tools (like body mapping, resource mapping, well-being mapping and others) invaluable in creating safe spaces for individuals and children to open up and express their emotions, talk about sensitive issues and overcome daily challenges, particularly in the confines of refugee camps

We recognised the need for participatory approaches in working with the government – as the ministry interacts with students, teachers, principals, and so many officers at different levels. I trained officers and teachers in various tools, including evaluation tools, and applied what I had learned in my work in several districts across two provinces. I have trained hundreds of individuals, both in the education and development sectors, and a significant percentage (about 60%) of them are still active in their roles. And I believe these learnings that I gained from TheWorkshop are what allowed me to sustain myself and stay grounded.

The counselling that we did initially was very individual, one-on-one work. But as the war progressed it became clear that this was a collective trauma and individual counselling was insufficient. Moreover, as the number of people who needed support increased, individual sessions became unsustainable. Psychosocial support emerged as a holistic approach, addressing mental health and social needs. Sri Lanka pioneered this approach, using PRA methods for group analysis. Basic needs were prioritised, while individuals requiring specialised counselling were directed towards that as a next step. Integration with the health sector became crucial, and community support became necessary after the 2009 war. Government restrictions led to counselling being done under the guise of a career development programme or class room management. The shift to community-based support was vital for collective healing.



The counselling that we did initially was very individual, one-on-one work. But as the war progressed it became clear that this was a collective trauma and individual counselling was insufficient. The shift to community-based support was vital for collective healing

During the war, trust was high as we had to rely on our neighbours for survival. However, this trust quickly fell apart after the government declared unity. People started blaming and hating each other for their survival. The community took time to settle, and development work was limited. PRA tools were very helpful when we were working in the camps for internally displaced persons, as it helped us communicate, especially with children and understand how they could be supported better. It was not easy speaking in the presence of gun-wielding soldiers.

The tools were useful in resolving tension and allowing self-reflection and discussion. For example the body maps helped children open up to conversations.

Working with a group divided by the war, their cultural and ideological differences, PRA tools proved helpful in redirecting conversations and diffusing sensitive issues. They were particularly beneficial in training community members for governance and planning. However, regional biases and political

divisions continue to pose challenges to building trust and unity within the community.

Engaging with people affected by the war allowed me to gain deeper insights and analyse situations from multiple perspectives. Working with diverse ethnic groups, including Sinhalese and Muslims, helped me maintain a neutral standpoint on certain matters.

Working as a psychosocial practitioner during war time can take its toll. Even if I am not actively drawing or using a tool to deal with my emotions, while constantly using PRA in trainings with

others, something shifts in the head for oneself too. As a trainer, I find myself subconsciously utilising these approaches even for my personal analysis.

After working in the psychosocial development sector for 22 years, it can feel monotonous sometimes and there is a sense of fatigue. But I find ways to break that monotony. I come up with new ways to use the PRA tools to add variety to the sessions and prevent them from becoming too routine or uninspiring. It has become a part of who I am and how I operate. It has helped me innovate and adapt.



Participatory tools helped build trust and create a safe space for sharing one's experiences in a situation marked by dilution of trust.



Shanthi Thambaiah

Shanthi Thambaiah is a The Workshop Alumna from the years 2005 and 2018. She started her Career in the Humanitarian Sector in 2001, and has spent more than 22-years in the sector, starting with being a translator, to becoming a psycho-social support trainer and organizational development Advisor. She has worked both with non-profits and the Sri Lankan Government – Ministry of Education and Ministry of National Unity and Reconciliation. She has done significant work supporting civilians during the Sri Lankan war, providing psycho-social support and training.

Written as shared with the Praxis team.



Key Takeaways

- The author, as a PRA trainer now, emphasises prioritising participant learning in training sessions, a principle inspired by her PRA trainer at Praxis who valued and held paramount the learning experience above all else.
- Participatory approaches are increasingly recognised for their ability to bring diverse stakeholders—students, teachers, principals, and officials—into the same space, enabling meaningful dialogue and effectively capturing varied perspectives.
- Psychosocial support, pioneered in Sri Lanka – during the war, was introduced as a holistic method addressing both mental health and social needs. PRA tools were effective at this time --supporting group analysis, while individuals with deeper needs were referred for specialised counselling.
- During and after the war, trust within communities was deeply impacted. PRA tools proved essential in camps for internally displaced persons, helping facilitators communicate, understand their experiences—despite the difficult presence of armed soldiers around.
- Participatory tools helped ease community tensions, enabling self-reflection and dialogue. Tools like body maps allowed children to open up, and helped redirect sensitive conversations in conflict-affected, ideologically divided groups.
- As a trainer, the author continues to draw on participatory tools not only professionally but also for personal reflection, analysis and growth.
- To keep sessions engaging, the author finds creative ways to adapt and vary the use of PRA tools, ensuring they remain dynamic and meaningful.

समुदायों को सशक्त बनाना: जमीनी स्तर के विकास से अंतर्दृष्टि

समग्र सेवा, बिहार के मकेश्वर रावत और काजल ने द वर्कशॉप का हिस्सा बनने और सहभागी दृष्टिकोण के माध्यम से समुदायों को सशक्त बनाने के अपने अनुभव साझा किए।

मुझे (मकेश्वर रावत) हमेशा सहभागी ग्रामीण मूल्यांकन (पी. आर. ए.) के बारे में जानने की तीव्र जिज्ञासा थी, लेकिन मुझे कभी अवसर नहीं मिला। जब मैंने अपने सहयोगियों से आगामी पी. आर. ए. कार्यशाला के बारे में सुना, तो मैं इसमें भाग लेने के लिए रोमांचित था। द वर्कशॉप के दौरान, मैंने परियोजना की निगरानी और मूल्यांकन प्रशिक्षण पर ध्यान केंद्रित किया क्योंकि यह सीधे तौर पर मेरे काम से संबंधित था और प्रशिक्षण ने मुझे यह सीखने में मदद की कि मेरे काम को सहभागी तरीके से कैसे लिया जाए। विभिन्न देशों और संस्कृतियों के प्रतिभागियों के साथ अपनी बातचीत के माध्यम से, मैंने बड़ी दुनिया और उसके विविध दृष्टिकोण की व्यापक समझ प्राप्त की।

द वर्कशॉप के बाद, हमने अपने काम में सहभागी दृष्टिकोण को लागू करना शुरू किया, जिससे हमें समुदाय की जरूरतों का आकलन करने और समुदाय-आधारित समाधानों के लिए प्रभावी ढंग से योजना बनाने में मदद मिली। हमने सीखा कि समुदायों के साथ काम करते समय सुनना एक महत्वपूर्ण कौशल था, विशेष रूप से एक प्रभावी निगरानी और मूल्यांकन पेशेवर होने के लिए। हमने अपने सभी हस्तक्षेपों में समुदायों को शामिल करने का एक सचेत प्रयास भी किया।

उदाहरण के लिए, एक चर्चा के दौरान, हमने पाया कि कई लड़कियां मासिक धर्म स्वच्छता के बारे में नहीं जानती थीं और मासिक धर्म स्वच्छता उत्पादों तक उनकी पहुंच नहीं थी। पीरियड्स के दौरान उन्हें अपना समय अपने घरों के एक कोने में अलग-थलग रहने के लिए मजबूर होना पड़ा। हमने सैनिटरी नैपकिन वितरित किए और समुदाय में लड़कियों और महिलाओं के साथ इस मुद्दे पर बात करना शुरू किया। हमने पाया कि उनके पास साझा करने के लिए बहुत कुछ था, लेकिन किसी ने उनसे कभी नहीं पूछा था।

द वर्कशॉप के बाद, हमने अपने संगठन के भीतर एक आंतरिक मूल्यांकन किया जिससे हमें सुधार के क्षेत्रों की पहचान करने में मदद मिली। हमने संस्कृति, शासन, मानव संसाधन प्रथाओं, सीखने और विकास, निधि प्रबंधन आदि जैसे विभिन्न मापदंडों पर संगठन को अंक दिए। और कार्यशाला में हमने जिन सहभागी उपकरणों को सीखा, उनका उपयोग करके आने वाली कमियों को दूर करने के लिए आवश्यक कदम उठाए। समुदाय-संचालित हस्तक्षेप के हमारे मूल्य को मजबूत किया गया है, और हमने अपनी सभी परियोजनाओं में पी. आर. ए. पद्धति को एकीकृत किया है।

वर्कशॉप समुदायों के साथ काम करने के हमारे कौशल को रिचार्ज और तेज करने का एक अवसर था। इसने समुदाय के साथ विश्वास और एकता की भावना के निर्माण के महत्व को दोहराया। सहभागी दृष्टिकोण ने हमें उनकी जरूरतों का आकलन करने और जिन समूहों के साथ हम काम करते हैं, उनके साथ दीर्घकालिक समाधान बनाने में मदद की।

द वर्कशॉप ने हाशिए पर पड़े समुदायों के युवाओं के लिए छात्रवृत्ति की पेशकश की, जिससे मेरे (काजल कुमारी) के लिए इसमें भाग लेना संभव हो गया। द वर्कशॉप के दौरान, मैंने विभिन्न सहभागी दृष्टिकोण और समुदाय को प्रभावी ढंग से शामिल करने और जुटाने के तरीके के बारे में सीखा। ट्रांजैक्ट वॉक अभ्यास विशेष रूप से व्यावहारिक था। यह पहली बार था जब मैंने अपने काम में मानचित्रण अभ्यास का उपयोग किया था, और यह समुदाय के स्थानीय संदर्भ और परिवेश को ध्यान में रखते हुए बातचीत करने का एक शानदार तरीका साबित हुआ।

मेरे लिए केरल की यात्रा भी अद्वितीय थी क्योंकि यह पहली बार था जब मैंने हवाई जहाज से यात्रा की थी! यह एक यादगार अनुभव था, विशेष रूप से यह देखते

हुए कि मैं अपने परिवार में पहला व्यक्ति हूँ जिसे ऐसा अवसर मिला है। द वर्कशॉप ने न केवल मुझे मूल्यवान अंतर्दृष्टि प्रदान की, बल्कि मुझे मजबूत संबंध और दोस्ती बनाने में भी मदद की। आत्मविश्वास की मेरी शुरुआती कमी के बावजूद, अन्य प्रतिभागियों के साथ अंग्रेजी में संवाद करना सीखने का एक शानदार अनुभव था।

पूरे प्रशिक्षण के दौरान, हमें 11 सहभागी उपकरणों से परिचित कराया गया, जिनमें से कुछ को मैंने अपने काम में एकीकृत किया है, जैसे कि ट्रांससेक्ट वॉक, सोशल मैपिंग, बीजों का उपयोग करके मैट्रिक्स स्कोरिंग और ऐतिहासिक विश्लेषण उपकरण। प्रमुख प्रश्न पूछे बिना समुदाय और उसके इतिहास के बारे में जानने से कई बातचीत शुरू हो गई है।

समुदाय के साथ काम करने की अपनी चुनौतियां हैं, विशेष रूप से स्कूल छोड़ने वाले बच्चों, भेदभाव का सामना करने और हिंसा का सामना करने वाले समुदाय के मुद्दों को संबोधित करते समय। सामाजिक कार्यकर्ता के रूप में, हम यह समझने के लिए काफी प्रयास करते हैं कि समुदाय को प्रभावी ढंग से संवाद, प्रेरित और संगठित कैसे किया जाए।

एक प्रेरक उदाहरण बिहार के पटौना गाँव में हमारी परियोजना है, जहाँ, हमारे समर्थन और पहल के कारण, मुस्कान गाँव की पहली शिक्षित लड़की बनी। समुदाय के प्रारंभिक प्रतिरोध के बावजूद, हमने उनकी चिंताओं को संबोधित किया और एक नए दृष्टिकोण के साथ उनकी मदद करने में सक्षम थे। परिणामस्वरूप, अब अधिक लड़कियां शिक्षा प्राप्त कर रही हैं, और हम गाँव में और भी अधिक लड़कियों के लिए शिक्षा तक पहुंच में और सुधार करने के लिए प्रतिबद्ध हैं। यह निरंतर प्रयासों, समुदाय के साथ काम करने, विश्वास बनाने, निरंतर संचार और परिवर्तन की इस यात्रा में उन्हें समान भागीदार के रूप में देखने के कारण हुआ।



समुदाय के साथ काम करने की अपनी चुनौतियां हैं, विशेष रूप से स्कूल छोड़ने वाले बच्चों, भेदभाव का सामना करने और हिंसा का सामना करने वाले समुदाय के मुद्दों को संबोधित करते समय। सामाजिक कार्यकर्ता के रूप में, हम यह समझने के लिए काफी प्रयास करते हैं कि समुदाय को प्रभावी ढंग से संवाद, प्रेरित और संगठित कैसे किया जाए

Empowering Communities: Insights from Grassroots Development

Makeshwar Rawat and Kajal Kumari from Samagra Seva, Bihar, share their experience of being part of TheWorkshop and on empowering communities through participatory approaches.

I (Makeshwar Rawat) always had a strong curiosity to learn about Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), but never had the opportunity. When I heard about an upcoming PRA workshop from my colleagues, I was thrilled to participate. During TheWorkshop, I focused on project monitoring and evaluation training as it was directly related to the work that I do and the training helped me learn how to approach my work in a participatory way. Through my interactions with

participants from different countries and cultures, I gained a broader understanding of the larger world and its diverse perspectives.

After TheWorkshop, we started implementing participatory approaches in our work, which helped us assess community needs and plan for community-based solutions effectively. We learned that listening was a crucial skill while working with communities, especially to be an effective monitoring

and evaluation professional. We also made a conscious effort to involve communities in all our interventions.

For example, during one discussion, we discovered that many girls were not aware about menstrual hygiene and did not have access to menstrual hygiene products. They were forced to spend their time isolated in a corner of their homes during periods. We distributed sanitary napkins and started talking about the issue with girls and women in the community. We found that they had a lot to share, but nobody had ever asked them.

After TheWorkshop, we conducted an internal evaluation within our organisation that helped us identify areas of improvement. We scored the organisation on various parameters such as culture, governance, HR practices, learning and development, fund management etc. and took necessary steps to address gaps that came up using the participatory tools we learned at the workshop. Our value of community-driven intervention has been reinforced, and we have integrated PRA methodology in all our projects.

TheWorkshop was an opportunity to recharge and sharpen our skills of working with communities. It reiterated the importance of building trust and a sense of oneness with the community. Participatory approaches helped us assess their needs and co-create long-term solutions with the groups we work with.

TheWorkshop also offered scholarships

for young people from marginalised communities, which made it possible for me (Kajal Kumari) to attend. During TheWorkshop, I learned about various participatory approaches and how to effectively engage and mobilise the community. The transact walk exercise was particularly insightful. It was the first time I had used mapping exercises in our work, and it proved to be a great way to build conversations keeping in mind the community's local context and surroundings.

For me, the visit to Kerala was also unique because it was the first time that I traveled in an aeroplane! It was a memorable experience, especially considering that I am the first in my family to have had such an opportunity. TheWorkshop not only provided me with valuable insights but also helped me build strong connections and friendships. Despite my initial lack of confidence, communicating in English with other participants was a great learning experience.

Throughout the training, we were introduced to eleven participatory tools, a few of which I have since integrated into my work, such as the transect walk, social mapping, matrix scoring using seeds, and historical analysis tools. Learning about the community and its history without asking leading questions has opened up many conversations.

Working with the community has its challenges, especially while addressing vulnerable issues such as children dropping out of school, facing discrimination, and experiencing violence. As social workers, we put

considerable effort into understanding how to effectively communicate, motivate, and mobilise the community.

One inspiring example is our project in the village of Patauna in Bihar, where, due to our support and initiative, Muskaan became the first educated girl in the village. Despite initial resistance from the community, we addressed their concerns and were able to help them

with a new perspective. As a result, now more girls are now receiving an education, and we are committed to further improving access to education for even more girls in the village. This happened because of sustained efforts, working with the community, building trust, constant communication and seeing them as equal partners in this journey of transformation.



Makeswar Rawat

समग्र सेवा जमुई में समाज के सामाजिक-आर्थिक हाशिए के युवाओं द्वारा स्थापित एक समुदाय के नेतृत्व वाला संगठन है। संगठन के संस्थापक सदस्य गरीब परिवारों से थे और स्वयं बाल मजदूर थे, जो 8 साल की उम्र से सड़क किनारे के होटलों में काम कर रहे थे। एक बार जब उन्हें एक संगठन की मदद से अध्ययन करने का अवसर मिला, तो उन्होंने अपनी शिक्षा को आगे बढ़ाया और 1999 में संगठन की स्थापना के लिए वापस आ गए। पिछले 25 वर्षों में, उन्होंने जमुई और बिहार के अन्य जिलों जैसे मुंगेर, भागलपुर, बाँका, लखीसराय और पटना में बाल संरक्षण, लैंगिक समानता, गरीबी और कुपोषण के मुद्दों पर काम किया है। यह संगठन दल के अनुभवों में निहित है जो बड़े पैमाने पर दलित, आदिवासी और मुस्लिम परिवारों से हैं और सामूहिक नेतृत्व में विश्वास करते हैं।

मकेश्वर रावत समग्र सेवा के सचिव हैं। काजल कुमारी संगठन में एक शोधकर्ता हैं।

Samagra Seva is a community-led organisation established by young people from the socio-economic margins of society in Jamui.



Kajal Kumari

The organisation's founding members came from poor families and were themselves child labourers, working in roadside hotels since the age of 8. Once they got the opportunity to study with the help of an organisation, they pursued their education and came back to set up the organisation in 1999. Over the last 25 years, they have worked on issues of child protection, gender equality, poverty and malnutrition in Jamui, Munger, Bhagalpur, Banka, Lakhisarai and Patna. The organisation is rooted in the experiences of the team who hail largely from Dalit, tribal and Muslim households and believe in collective leadership.

Makeswar Rawat is the secretary of Samagra Seva and Kajal Kumari is a researcher with the organisation.



Key Takeaways

- Participatory approaches create space for voices that are often overlooked. The team found that many community members had valuable insights—they simply had never been asked.
- Following TheWorkshop, the organisation (Samagra Seva) conducted an internal evaluation using participatory tools, assessing areas such as culture, governance, HR, learning and development, and fund management. This process helped identify and address gaps, reinforcing the organisation's commitment to community-driven interventions.
- TheWorkshop served as a space to recharge, reflect, and deepen skills in community engagement—introducing newer, more effective ways to facilitate dialogue and participation.
- The experience also fostered meaningful connections and friendships across roles and hierarchies. It created an inclusive space where participants could learn from one another, regardless of background or confidence, including through overcoming language barriers.

Using Flowers and Stones: Navigating Intergenerational Conversations through PRA

Aminatou Sar recounts her journey with participatory methodologies, beginning with her experience at TheWorkshop. She highlights their profound impact on her career, community work, advocacy efforts, and personal development.

My experience participating in TheWorkshop on participatory methodologies in India was truly memorable. It was my first time in India, which made it even more special. I will always cherish the memories of this workshop, from the connections made with participants from all over the world to the delightful surprises in discovering the similarities between Indian cuisine and traditional dishes from my own country. There was so much wisdom in the room, and our trainers were able to build on those learnings and keep us grounded.



I will always cherish the memories of this workshop, from the connections made with participants from all over the world to the delightful surprises in discovering the similarities between Indian cuisine and traditional dishes from my own country.

I was able to learn new methodologies which changed the way I approached my work, constantly reminding me to create an enabling environment where individuals, regardless of their background or education level, could actively contribute and participate in important conversations. This was particularly relevant to my role at the time in Amnesty International, where I

was heading the Africa human rights education programme.

One significant aspect of TheWorkshop was the practicality of the methodologies learned, and we also got the opportunity to go out into communities and put into practice what we learnt, during our modules. As a trainer myself, I found them particularly helpful in breaking the monotony of formal and often boring teaching methods. I wished I had learned these fun and interactive ways of conveying messages and engaging even the shyest individuals during my own schooling.

Working with civil society and activists meant engaging with individuals from all walks of life, including women's associations in rural areas and tribal chiefs who did not speak the official languages due to the unfortunate legacy of colonization. In order to effectively communicate about rights, laws, and addressing violence and human rights violations, we had to utilize local languages. Participatory methodologies played a crucial role in this process.

We used these methodologies for a range of important topics, such as discussing female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriages, and access to heritage and land for women in certain communities. The participatory nature of these methods allowed for

intergenerational conversations and helped in breaking cultural barriers. For example, one particular engagement involved bringing together young people and their mothers and/or grandmothers to have meaningful discussions about their life journeys. We facilitated an exercise where they used their experiences by placing a flower on the timeline for positive moments and a stone for difficult times. This allowed them to reflect and share with each other the joys and challenges they faced.

During these conversations, the participants openly talked about difficult topics such as early forced marriages at the ages of 13 or 14. They shared how painful and desperate these situations were, highlighting their lack of agency and how they struggled to confront their parents about it. They also spoke about the challenges they faced during their first pregnancies, even as they reflected on the joy and enlightenment that came with the birth of their first child. Amidst the tears, there were also moments of laughter. The participants shared funny anecdotes and displayed their resilience and cleverness in navigating through these challenges.

By bringing together young people and their elders, an important exchange takes place. The young people have the opportunity to listen to the stories and experiences of their mothers and grandmothers. This connection enables them to gain insights and build empathy. The dialogue spans issues in communities where practices of Forced Genital Mutilation (FGM) or forced/early marriages are prevalent and accepted as a norm. So the convers-

-ations open up safe spaces of engaging with time-honoured traditions as well as family hierarchies.

Bringing together multiple generations to discuss these practices fosters dialogue and empowers individuals. It shows the strength of resilience and the power of shared experiences. These participatory methodologies help us bridge the gap between generations and make strides toward addressing the challenges that community members face.



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Games are a powerful tool for community engagement and understanding. When used with government officials, participatory approaches can have a strong impact on their thinking and decision-making.

During one such workshop I conducted on preventing stock-outs of medicines used in treating non-communicable diseases, we used participatory exercises to understand the issue. By mapping out the supply chain, officials realised the importance of each

stakeholder and how the breakdowns were impacting them. This exercise led them to question their own behaviour and contribution to the breakdown. Based on the workshop, the officials developed a strategy, which included allowing smaller health facilities to distribute certain medicines and reassessing the treatment algorithm for diabetes. These decisions were made by challenging existing approaches and putting patient needs first. Participatory methodologies helped them think creatively and find innovative solutions to bridge the gap between decision-makers and communities, leading to more effective healthcare solutions.

It is important to consider the participant group and their dynamics when engaging officials. In our contexts, mixing male and female participants can be challenging, and hierarchies can affect team dynamics. Separating decision-makers from technicians and bringing them together later helps overcome these challenges.

Building rapport with high-ranking officials can be tough, but patience and persistence are key. Addressing disruptive behaviour, involving the saboteur in leading the discussion/facilitation and offering

guidance, helped officials embrace participatory approaches.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has impacted my career by giving me the confidence to discuss sensitive topics before unknown audiences, and has transformed my thinking and problem-solving abilities. Thus, it has opened up diverse opportunities for my advancement. As a journalist, it has taught me the importance of effectively conveying information and understanding what needs to be communicated. This holistic understanding of communication has proven invaluable in my career.

PRA has also played a crucial role in developing my ability to build trust within teams. It has taught me how to engage and motivate team members, fostering open-mindedness and encouraging innovative thinking. This mindset has allowed me to challenge myself and think beyond traditional approaches. For example, when I applied for a position without the required master's degree in public health, I approached the job description differently. I highlighted my skills in team management and my ability to help teams work together to achieve objectives. This approach proved successful and demonstrated that PRA had provided me with the confidence to pursue new challenges.

Now, as I embark on my new role as the resident coordinator for the UN system in Benin, I continue to use PRA. My new role involves influencing policies and bringing together various stakeholders to support the government in achieving



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development goals. Participatory approaches will be instrumental in breaking down barriers, building trust, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders.

While my new role will be more formal and diplomatic compared to my previous work in the sector, I believe that my ability to bring people together is what made me successful in getting this job. Participatory methodologies are more than just technical skills; they are behavioral competencies, soft skills that are necessary in any situation.

I have personally experienced the transformative power of participatory methodologies in my own family.



I have personally experienced the transformative power of participatory methodologies in my own family. As an African woman, I wasn't raised with the idea of creating safe spaces for children to express themselves and be involved in decision-making. However, I consciously adopted this approach in raising my own children, and I'm proud of the strong and independent decisions they've made.

As an African woman, I wasn't raised with the idea of creating safe spaces for children to express themselves and be involved in decision-making. However, I consciously adopted these methodologies in raising my own children, and I'm proud of the strong

and independent decisions they've made. For example, my eldest son pursued a career as a chef, while my second son aspires to be a sports coach. Despite deviating from societal expectations, I believe in them having the freedom to decide and supporting their dreams.

Participatory methodologies have value beyond the professional sphere. They encourage open conversations and active involvement in decision-making, empowering individuals and creating an environment of accountability.

In today's context, a bottom-up approach is crucial. People no longer accept being told what they need and how to do things. Training individuals in participatory approaches equips them with the skills to adapt to changing dynamics. It's no longer effective to interact from a position of superior knowledge. We need to empower individuals, foster inclusivity, and build capacity and confidence to demand accountability.

In Africa, breaking down barriers and challenging power dynamics is essential. With a young population, we must create opportunities for meaningful participation and bridge the generation and gender gaps. Participatory methodologies facilitate collaboration, highlighting that everyone has a role in achieving common goals.



Aminatou Sar

Aminatou Sar of Senegal is the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Benin, West Africa. Previously, she served as PATH's Country Director for Senegal and West Africa Hub Director. At PATH, she focused on health system strengthening and managed projects across multiple countries, collaborating closely with global teams.

Aminatou has extensive experience managing national and regional offices, multi-country programs, and resources in diverse cultural contexts. She has a strong background in multi-country network management, development issues in Sub-Saharan Africa, and strategic analysis. Before joining the NGO sector, she worked as a journalist in Senegal.

With over 16 years in human rights and child rights, she held roles at Plan International and Amnesty International, promoting child rights and human rights education across Africa. A #SheDecides champion, Aminatou is a staunch advocate for women's and girls' rights. She is fluent in English, French, and Wolof, and is based in Dakar, Senegal.



Key Takeaways

- Participatory tools create spaces for discussing sensitive topics like early marriages, FGM and forced pregnancies, fostering empathy and understanding across generations.
- Use of tools and visual imagery facilitated a deep introspection and reflection amongst stakeholders who may initially seem to be holding strong and contrary positions, especially in the contexts which are culturally invested
- Participatory methods essential for fostering inclusivity, adapting to changing dynamics, and empowering individuals to demand accountability, particularly in regions like Africa with diverse demographics and socio-political landscapes. Participants felt safe to cry, laugh, and share personal journeys
- The methodology enabled intergenerational dialogues—such as between mothers, grandmothers, and daughters—creating space for stories of pain, joy, and resilience to emerge.
- When used with government officials and bureaucrats, games and interactive tools opened up new ways of thinking and led to more responsive decision-making.
- These aren't just technical tools—they are behavioral skills that transform how we engage with others. They foster trust, encourage problem-solving, and open up space for innovation.

Empowering Change: Reflections on PRA, Leadership, and Bias

Barsha Chakraborty talks about the impact of The Workshop on her life, exploring experiences and learnings from the field and the use of different PRA tools, highlighting a journey from breaking biases to empowering communities.

Attending the Praxis Workshop back in 2012 marked a significant turning point for me, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity so early in my career. Undoubtedly, it still stands out as one of the best workshops I ever attended.

What stood out was the exposure to a diverse group of individuals, some of whom I think are going to remain lifelong friends. Interacting with people from various backgrounds, including a sex worker activist, offered me a truly profound experience. Engaging with them allowed me to ask questions and address my own preconceived notions, which ultimately broke down many biases I held. This experience enabled me to reach out to people and gain a nuanced understanding of different dynamics and issues related to my own identity.



Reflecting on my experience at the workshop, I recall how it fundamentally transformed me into a critical thinker. The sessions were expertly designed, emphasising fundamental values, active listening, recognising and managing biases, and fostering openness and negotiation. Moreover, empathy was a core component of the workshop, teaching us through action the importance of generating evidence from the ground up. It emphasised the need for policies based on bottom-up approaches, deriving information by actively listening to the community. The workshop honed our technical skills while encouraging us to perceive data in the context of ground realities and utilise it for analysis and further progress.

As someone who deeply believes in the efficacy of PRA tools, my experience using them during my time working at ActionAid has only solidified my belief in them. Engaged in community outreach work, I collaborated closely with Panchayats Raj Institute members and women leaders, relying heavily on participatory tools. What sets participatory approaches apart is its flexibility and the creative freedom it offers practitioners.

Under the guidance of our facilitator, Anindo Banerjee, during the workshop we were encouraged to invent our own tools. He became a mentor for me,

effectively upholding the ethos of PRA by not providing ready-made solutions. While initially frustrating, this approach taught us the importance of self-discovery and problem-solving. Instead of spoon-feeding us answers, Anindo equipped us with the tools to find solutions ourselves. Facilitating personal growth and empowering us to become independent thinkers and innovators.



Throughout my career, I have consistently employed the learnings from the Praxis Workshop. Power analysis tools, in particular, have proven invaluable.

Throughout my career, I have consistently employed the learnings from the Praxis Workshop. Power analysis tools, in particular, have proven invaluable. By employing organic materials and avoiding technical jargon, participation fosters a natural and organic probing process. This ensures that desired results are consistently achieved, even when transitioning from a more contained environment like a workshop setting to real-life field situations. The customisable nature of participatory tools promotes a deeper understanding of the local context and encourages practitioners to utilise their critical thinking skills rather than relying on preconceived notions or rigid methodologies.

After joining Breakthrough, my work in digital media, policy, and SBCC (Social and Behavioural Change Communication) has significantly increased. However, I

have also been heavily involved in media literacy programmes. While my scope of work may not always allow me to directly apply participatory tools, the principles of participatory approaches are deeply ingrained in how I operate. Even during activities such as a Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), I instinctively think like a PRA practitioner.

A few years ago, I was tasked with developing a media literacy curriculum for the Ayushman Bharat programme under the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT). And I was explicitly instructed not to use any media tools due to the limited resources in the 200 most backward district schools where the curriculum would be implemented. This compelled me to create innovative tools, such as games and modules, from scratch. I relied on the principles of participatory approaches to make the best use of available resources and tailor them to the specific context and desired outcomes.

In my SBCC work, particularly in bystander intervention, PRA has been very insightful. Beyond traditional views, it helps explore intersectionality, understanding bystanders' intentions even when there is no action taken. This expanded perspective contributes to the bystander intervention dialogue. Yet, it's crucial to avoid over-categorising discussions and consider nuances.

Examining bystander intervention often focuses on successful instances, neglecting why some people don't intervene. Non-intervention is complex, influenced by factors like identity, knowledge gaps, fear and missed

opportunities. PRA training uncovers these nuances, and deepening our understanding.

It can be challenging to pinpoint which specific works I have applied participatory tools to, whether it is understanding a subject better, implementing initiatives more effectively, or fostering collaboration within my team. PRA has been instrumental throughout my career. I have now transitioned into a leadership position in a prominent NGO, I have always strived to be an enabler rather than a traditional leader. Participatory practices provided me with the perspective to view leadership as a means of empowering others and equalising the dynamics within a team.

It has influenced numerous aspects of my life and thinking. An example from my experience with PRA on the ground is implementing initiatives alongside women PRI (Panchayati Raj Institutions) members. During one particular interaction in Bundelkhand, my colleague and I conducted a leadership mapping exercise. We asked the participants, both women and men, to score various criteria related to leadership. Interestingly, the women consistently scored themselves much lower than they did men. Similarly, when scoring the women, the men also tended to give them lower ratings. This pattern caught our attention, and we delved deeper by asking additional questions, and it came to light that it came from general biases around women having poor leadership abilities. And in further probing and asking them about specific instances of leadership and support within the community the names

of the women were taken for various functions. As they contemplated their responses, we witnessed a shift in perception, with some members realising the need to revise their scores upwards.

One of the most beautiful aspects of participatory approaches is its ability to empower individuals and communities to become agents of change by reflecting on their own perceptions and values. This approach is particularly effective in addressing societal misconceptions and breaking down norms, opening up conversations around the nuances of gender roles and power dynamics, challenging traditional notions of leadership and encouraging inclusivity.



One of the most beautiful aspects of participatory approaches is its ability to empower individuals and communities to become agents of change by reflecting on their own perceptions and values.

This approach is particularly effective in addressing societal misconceptions and breaking down norms

A particular experience stands out in my memory. I was sitting with women in Uttar Pradesh, asking for their names, and they all burst into laughter. Confused, I asked why they were laughing. They explained that they rarely heard their own names because they were always referred to as someone's mother or wife. This insight, coming from an urban background, made me realise the significance of individual names and



Participatory practices push you to think beyond what you hear and encourages probing and exploration while setting aside biases.

the impact of societal roles. Participatory practices push you to think beyond what you hear and encourages probing and exploration while setting aside biases.

PRA is not limited to these types of issues and is applicable in a range of scenarios. For instance, I have found it to be useful in addressing the spread of misinformation and fake news, particularly among young people. By using these methods to deconstruct the logic behind viral messages and encouraging individuals to critically reflect on the information they receive, we can build a sense of logic and rationality that is essential to breaking down false narratives.

The initial days of using participatory methods involved a lot of exploration and following the rules. I remember

Anindo guiding me to think about problem-solving and suggesting two tools that could be helpful. This mentorship extended beyond the workshop and was instrumental in shaping my professional journey. Looking back, I believe that this workshop and the people I met through it played a crucial role in not only developing me as a development sector worker but also as a better human being. Over my 15 years in the sector, I have learned that working on biases and personal growth is essential to becoming an effective development worker. This is the greatest takeaway I have from my experience with PRA.

I feel fortunate to have been exposed to these values early on in my career. Sadly, I see younger colleagues today who may not have the opportunity to learn from mentors like Anindo. I believe that TheWorkshop goes beyond social development; it is a workshop on basic values and social justice. Even those who are not working in the development sector can benefit from attending. It truly is an invaluable experience.



Barsha Chakraborty

Barsha Chakraborty is an Alumna of The Workshop from the year 2012. She has about 15 years of experience working in the Human Rights sector as a Gender and Public policy specialist. She has for over the last 6 years been working with BreakThrough India, currently in the role of Head of Media. Previously she worked as a Campaign Manager – Gender Equality, ActionAid.

Written as shared with the Praxis team.



Key Takeaways

- The workshop was transformative, fostering critical thinking and self-reflection.
- PRA has taught the author to see leadership as means to empower others, being enabling and collaborative, shaped by participatory values.
- Facilitator Anindo Banerjee's mentorship encouraged the creation of custom tools, promoting self-discovery and problem-solving skills, fostering personal growth, independence, and innovation.
- Using participatory approaches unpacks several nuances that may otherwise go unnoticed. Conversations can reveal deep-rooted patriarchal norms such as the perception of women, how they are addressed or the roles society ascribes to them. These nuances create a powerful shift in community as well as facilitator.
- TheWorkshop transcends social development work, serving as a workshop on basic values applicable to various professions, providing an invaluable experience.
- The customisable nature of participatory tools promotes a deeper understanding of the local context and encourages practitioners to utilise their critical thinking skills rather than relying on preconceived notions or rigid methodologies.
- A lasting impact of PRA is the emphasis on working through personal biases and continual self-growth as a development practitioner.
- These approaches also help deconstruct misinformation, especially among youth, by encouraging critical analysis.

Memory Lane



11th - 2007



12th - 2008



13th - 2009



14th - 2010



15th - 2011

Breaking Barriers

Democratising Research

Redefining Leadership in Peer Teaching: The Shift from One-Person Leadership to Shared Leadership

Anna Daniel writes about using participatory methodologies in her work with students. She highlights how she used one participatory tool, the Body Map, to understand leadership and the relationships amongst students who are part of a peer teaching programme.

Involve Learning Solutions Foundation, based in Bengaluru, India, envisions all children having the agency to thrive. We believe that creating student agency spaces within school systems and enabling teachers to create such spaces leads to more effective and fulfilling learning experiences. This empowers students to take charge of their learning and support their peers. Our key programme, Peer Teaching, facilitates peer learning spaces in government schools and communities, fostering a

self-sustaining support ecosystem.

This pedagogy enhances foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) skills and helps students develop essential 21st-century skills. At Involve, we design interventions around peer-based learning to create an environment where students support and inspire each other, driving their educational success.

As an emerging force in the education

Peer Teaching, facilitates peer learning spaces in government schools and communities, fostering a self-sustaining support ecosystem



sector, our five-year-old NGO recognises the pivotal role of evidence-based programme interventions in driving sustainable impact. Through meticulous pilot research studies, we actively embrace evidence generation as a cornerstone of our organisational ethos. This commitment empowers us to tailor interventions to the unique needs and contexts of the communities we serve, thereby maximizing positive outcomes and long-term sustainability.

We primarily work in government schools with students from 1st to 9th grade. Engaging students in research proved challenging, so we experimented with various student-friendly data collection formats to ensure evidence-based interventions. We used different survey methods, including pictures, Likert scales, multilingual questions, various interview formats, from close-ended to open-ended, and even drawing and painting. Despite these efforts, we faced hurdles such as literacy constraints, copying patterns, communication barriers, and complexities in data analysis.



My experiences at TheWorkshop 2023

Attending the Praxis Workshop on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and getting introduced to PRA tools and data collection methods opened a new area for exploration for us.

Traditionally, our Peer Teaching programme selected leaders based on academic performance and willingness to volunteer, with leaders managing groups at a 1:4 to 1:5 ratio. They were responsible for teaching, managing conflicts, conducting activities, administering exams, checking homework, taking attendance, and engaging learners. For five years, we chose top performers as leaders but realised this didn't align with our educational philosophy. Thus, we embarked on a transformative journey to redefine leadership within our Peer Teaching programme. Through a year-long action-oriented research project, we explored the efficacy of introducing co-leaders in our peer teaching groups, thereby sharing leadership responsibilities. This initiative was guided by principles that extended beyond academic success.

One of the key methodologies we used was Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and its tools, such as the Body Mapping exercise. In this exercise, we asked students to draw and mark human body parts on chart paper and reflect on what each part was doing or feeling during Peer Teaching classes. This was intended to understand the changes in the Peer Teaching (PT) environment and our programme by introducing shared leadership responsibilities to students. We conducted the activity in two groups: with leaders and with learners.

The reflections revealed a stark contrast. Leaders associated their actions with teaching and managing the peer groups, while learners' reflections were unrelated to learning.

For instance, leaders mentioned using their mouths to re-establish classroom rules, shout at learners, teach, and ask for homework. In contrast, learners described using their mouths to talk and play with friends or share comments on funny incidents.

When considering the heart, learners typically felt free and happy, whereas leaders felt satisfied when learners answered correctly but also experienced boredom, tension, anxiety, sadness, and anger due to classroom management challenges.

This exercise highlighted that facilitation in our peer teaching programme often involved one-way communication, with the responsibility for learning and teaching lying primarily



Thoughts on the Peer Teaching Programme that emerged from the Student Leaders and Students (Learners) During the Body Mapping Sessions.

with the leader. Learners were mere recipients of the teaching, taking little or no ownership of their learning. This realisation made us question whether we were replicating a traditional classroom structure within our peer groups. However, the experience of using the tool was truly unique. Through the students, we got a chance to visualise our Peer Teaching class. We received a spectrum of answers ranging from truly engaged in learning to fighting in class, excitement, boredom, and so on. Apart from the rich data we collected, what truly made me happy was the students' response to the tool.

Benefits of using body mapping exercises

- **High Engagement** Students participated actively, using their body parts to express their actions and feelings rather than passively answering questions.
- **Inclusivity** The visual representation method allowed all students to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.
- **Empowers student agency** Enabling students to express their views and insights, the tool fostered a sense of ownership and agency as students as respondents became active participants from passive subjects of the study.
- **Enjoyable Process** It felt like a game, making them comfortable and willing to share their opinions.
- **Two-Way Communication** It enabled on-the-spot discussion and clarification.
- **In-Depth Insights** Unlike conventional surveys or interviews, body mapping delved deeper, showing a bigger picture of our programme and how different elements were connected.

Children using Body Map Tool to share their thoughts on the Peer Teaching Class



- **Rich Data Collection** The tool captured minute details that might have been missed with traditional data collection formats.
- **Immediate Feedback** The visualisation aspect of the tool allowed participants to engage with the information during the exercise, rather than waiting for the researcher to analyse data later.

Shared Leadership As next steps, we repeated the body mapping exercise but asked students to share any changes in their feelings and the peer group environment after introducing co-leaders. They reported significant positive changes. According to student leaders, co-leaders reduced the time required for preparing activities, helped manage classroom discipline, and ensured continuity in the leader's absence. Co-leaders' involvement in note-checking, homework, and warm-up activities allowed leaders to focus more on engaging learners. This shared responsibility reduced leaders' tension and anger, fostering a more positive learning environment.

Our study revealed that the one-person leadership model, where a single individual holds most of the decision-making power and responsibility, can lead to burnout for the leader and a lack of engagement among learners. In contrast, shared leadership distributes responsibilities among multiple students, emphasising collaboration, collective decision-making, and shared accountability.

The Body Mapping exercise provided critical insights into the benefits of

shared leadership, showing reduced tension, improved classroom management, and enhanced student ownership. Inspired by these findings, we are committed to redefining leadership in our Peer Teaching programme. From next year, we will share leadership roles among all learners, assigning specific responsibilities to ensure everyone has the chance to lead and learn together. This approach will lighten the load on individual leaders and encourage all students to take ownership of their learning, fostering a more inclusive and effective educational environment. The transition to shared leadership marks a significant step towards empowering all students with leadership responsibilities, ultimately creating a more supportive and collaborative learning community. This paradigm shift signifies our commitment to fostering collective responsibility for meaningful and lasting improvements in learning.

Challenges and Barriers Despite the benefits, implementing the Body Mapping exercise faced some challenges.

- **Time-Consuming** The exercise took almost four hours to complete in two group sessions, in one school.
- **Scalability of the tool** The time-consuming nature makes it difficult to collect large-scale data quickly.
- **Facilitation Skills** Effective use of the tool requires good facilitation skills to engage participants, unlike straightforward surveys.

Conclusion The Body Mapping exercise, despite its challenges, provided

profound insights into our Peer Teaching programme and highlighted the benefits of shared leadership. It allowed students to express their experiences vividly and revealed the need for more inclusive and collaborative approaches to leadership. As we move forward, we are committed to refining our methods and embracing

tools that engage students meaningfully, ensuring that our interventions are both effective and empowering. The shift to shared leadership marks a significant step in creating a supportive, collaborative learning environment where every student has the opportunity to lead and learn together.



Anna Daniel

Anna Daniel works as a research manager in Involve Learning Solutions Foundation. She attended The Workshop in 2023. She studies and designs interventions promoting student agency and Peer Teaching Pedagogy and works towards the vision of building age-appropriate agency in students.



Key Takeaways

- *The Body Mapping exercise provided critical insights into the benefits of shared leadership, showing reduced tension, improved classroom management, and enhanced student ownership*
- *Using participatory tools provided benefits such as greater inclusion, involvement of more students, immediate feedback and a process that was very enjoyable.*
- *Some concerns about the use of participatory tools include the duration of time required to do it, concerns around scalability and the need for participants to have good facilitating skills*
- *PRA helped uncover deeper insights that traditional methods could not*

Reimagining Research Space in Singapore: Addressing Power Dynamics Through Participatory Approaches

Lee Siew Ling reflects on her efforts to integrate participatory approaches in her work as a Service-Learning Educator in Singapore, highlighting her use of experiential learning and participatory methods in student projects focused on gender issues. She discusses the importance of creating inclusive learning spaces and empowering students and community partners to actively engage and reflect on their experiences.

Personal statement and context setting

Participatory approaches are still not quite “mainstream” in Singapore, thus it can feel rather lonely in journeying this through here as a practice. In this regard, Praxis played a significant role in making me feel that there is a community that I can lean on for guidance and being part of a bigger movement with fundamental beliefs that it is the people (and their ground-up voices) that matters. This humanistic philosophy made me persist in finding ways to integrate the participatory approach in my previous work within university settings. As a Service-Learning educator-practitioner, I was reflexive about working hand in hand with students in designing any educational or developmental endeavour. Though the work that I do is in no way is that of an activist in its nature, I’m largely influenced by Robert Chamber’s teachings – in my work, this translates to prioritising the development of each student’s critical self-awareness as a key part of the learning and education process.

Use of participatory approaches I would like to share two examples of how I have utilised participatory approaches in my previous work within the university settings – mainly integrating

experiential learning principles and participatory approaches in students’ group evaluation of their gender-focused community engagement (CE) project; and how I have utilised participatory approaches to design student reflection activities.

Advancing gender equality: Applying experiential learning principles in the development of university community engagement project

shared at the International Conference on Service-Learning (ICSL2022), co-authored with Dr Razwana Begum and Dr Grace Chee from the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

In 2021, a group of university students worked on a public education campaign “Project Behind the Screens” (PBS) to address issues of gender and technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV), in collaboration with two community partners. I had integrated the design and inclusion of experiential learning principles and participatory approaches in evaluating this community engagement project.

Critical reflection is a key aspect of Service-Learning – to facilitate our students’ and partners’ group evaluation of their project experiences,

I designed two learning circles. The circles format learning space was intended to build psychological safety for authentic conversations, to encourage active participation, and to ensure equity of voices for students, partners, and university staff alike.

Amid the implementation of this community engagement project, it was apparent that our community partners were not just focused on the project outcomes, they also cared about the development of our students. They were keen to understand what youths think and feel about gender-focused issues.

As a facilitator of the sharing circles, I was mindful that I needed to set up the learning space (for both our students and community partners) that would encourage and elicit more reflecting and thinking about what they have learnt – so we regard everyone as a learner in that sense.

Another consideration was that we had two university faculty members assisting with the project evaluation through a qualitative survey. However, I was conscious of the social dynamics within the learning space. It was important that the students and partners didn't see our faculty as experts coming in to "grade and evaluate" their community engagement efforts. To preserve the integrity of the learning environment, the power dynamics needed to remain balanced, ensuring that students, partners, and university staff were all seen as equal participants.

In designing the two sharing circles (with the first held online due to COVID-

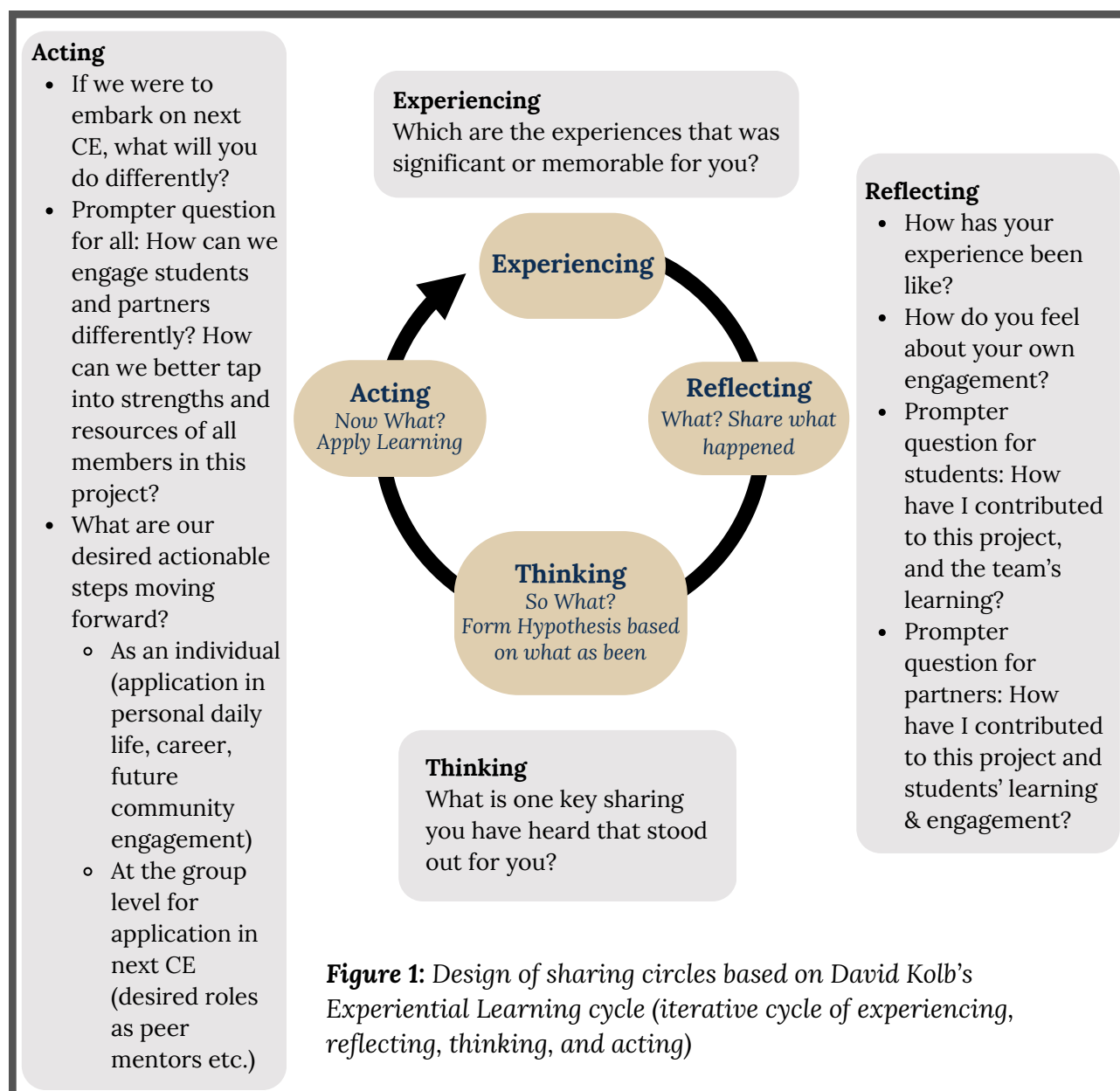
19 restrictions), the goal was to guide participants through a comprehensive learning cycle. The first circle focused on group reflection, where participants discussed their experiences in the project and on how they felt about their engagement. This reflection formed the "reflecting" phase of the learning cycle. Participants were then encouraged to process and make sense of insights from others that resonated with them, which corresponded to the "thinking" phase. They were also asked to consider, if they were to embark on a new project, what they would do differently, representing the "acting" phase of the cycle. Participants recorded these thoughts on Google Jamboard using sticky notes.

The second sharing circle built on the first. We planned for our university faculty to present their evaluation survey findings, and students shared insights from a campaign survey they conducted with their project's Instagram followers.

Apart from this, we also had the group consider if they have any inputs to the evaluation findings, and what are some actionable steps that they would like to take – so again, this nudges them through the reflecting, thinking and acting of the learning cycle.



To preserve the integrity of the learning environment, the power dynamics needed to remain balanced, ensuring that students, partners, and university staff were all seen as equal participants.



On Circle Processes in Higher Education: Insights from Students and Community Partners in Reciprocal Learning and Community Building

Presented at the 9th Asia Pacific Regional Conference on Service Learning 2023 in Bengaluru, co-authored with Liauw Yong Sheng, Mateo Kazairah Clarisse Fauni and Mavis Lee Xin Er from the Singapore University of Social Sciences; and Ms. Sia Vic-ki from the Lutheran Community Care Services.

In 2021, a group of students initiated a community engagement project aimed

at raising awareness about the importance of respectful relationships between genders in university settings, utilising restorative processes. The varying dynamics between two different batches of students prompted a critical reflection on what makes circle processes impactful for participants. This reflection also highlighted the crucial role of our community partner in empowering students to actively participate in and facilitate these community-building circles.

To deepen this exploration, I employed

Experiential Learning cycle	Reflection Questions for Students
Experiencing	To visualise the circles experiences that were most significant or memorable for you
Reflecting What? <i>Share what happened</i>	How has your experience been like? What stood out for you? Has the circles processes been easy or challenging for you?
Thinking So What? <i>Form hypothesis based on what has been observed and discussed.</i>	What is one change that you have experienced from your engagement in this circle so far? Small, moderate, or major? What is one key sharing you have heard that stood out for you?
Acting Now What? <i>Apply Learning</i>	What is one change you would like to see for your upcoming planned community circles for SUSS students? To elicit from students: What are our desired actionable steps moving forward, to enhance circle processes and experience for SUSS students?

Figure 2: Design of experiential reflection activity based on Kolb's EL cycle (Iterative cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting)

participatory approaches to design two reflection activities, which are outlined in Figure 2 above.

A total of six students took part in an experiential reflection activity. To set the context, I emphasised that this session was an opportunity for students to consolidate and critically reflect on the circle processes they had engaged in within the community circles, facilitated by our community partner and students. In alignment with Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Figure 2), the focus was on the "thinking" and "acting" phases of their learning.

Reflection Activity 1 Students were

asked to visualize their participation in the community circles and verbalise what stood out most for them. They reflected on experiences from circles hosted by our community partner and students.

Building on these reflections, I laid out three concentric circles on the floor. Students were asked to consider whether the circle processes they experienced were easy (inner circle), moderately challenging (middle circle), or very challenging (outer circle). They then stepped into the space that best represented their perceptions and shared their thoughts with their peers. They were encouraged to engage with

others in the same concentric circle, exploring commonalities and deeper insights.

Reflection Activity 2 Students were asked to articulate one aspect of change they experienced as a result of the circle processes. Similarly, they assessed whether this change was small, moderate, or major, and stepped into the corresponding concentric circle. They engaged in conversations with peers in the same circle space to further build on their thoughts and share perspectives.

After the experiential reflection activity, the students and I transcribed the audio recording and used the transcript to unpack their reflections and perspectives.

Participation in this analysis was optional, and five students chose to cluster emerging themes from the reflection data, define final insights, and identify key learning takeaways.

Personal reflections In critically reflecting on my own engagement in the two project experiences, I have gained valuable insights into how, as an educator-practitioner in Service-Learning, I can be more intentional in applying participatory approaches. I recognise the importance of curating effective learning spaces for students



Students were asked to visualize their participation in the community circles and verbalise what stood out most for them. Next, students were asked to articulate one aspect of change they experienced as a result of the circle processes. Their reflections and perspectives were subsequently unpacked

and involving community partners in facilitator, coaching, and expert roles. This empowers students to become independent learners and amplifies their voices. The impact of their participation will ultimately manifest in their behaviour change.

I would like to thank Praxis for keeping me in mind to share my learning takeaways in applying participatory approaches within the university settings; as well as my experiences in learning from and being part of the Praxis community. As I write, I am reminded of what Robert Chambers shared during the Praxis Commune 2021, the importance of embedding an awareness of relationships in democratic listening. He emphasised that professionals and universities should move away from the notion of being the “most knowledgeable” individuals in the room.



Lee Siew Ling

Lee Siew Ling resides in Singapore and currently works as a Senior Lecturer in the local polytechnic. She is an Alumna of The Workshop from the year 2021 and 2022.



Key Takeaways

- Participatory approaches are not yet mainstream in Singapore, making it challenging to apply them, especially in educational settings, but being part of a collective provided the impetus to explore and apply them.
- Creating psychologically safe and equitable learning spaces that encourage authentic conversations and active participation is critical.
- The participatory approach helped balance power dynamics, ensuring students, community partners, and university staff were equal participants in the learning process.
- Reflection activities and sharing circles were key tools in facilitating deeper understanding and critical thinking among students.
- The involvement of community partners in the facilitation process was crucial in fostering meaningful engagement and learning outcomes.
- Through TheWorkshop the author learnt to imbibe the principles of participatory approaches such as levelling power dynamics, active listening, etc. into the design rather than attempt to artificially use all the tools

Breaking Down Hierarchies: Learning New Ways of Democratising Research

Monica Biradavolu shares her initial doubts about attending TheWorkshop and how the experience reshaped her perspectives about people-centered research through the sessions on the field, in the classroom and in-between

I first encountered the work of Praxis around 15 years ago when I was a postdoctoral researcher at Yale on a project funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) for HIV prevention among marginalised communities in India. Around the same time, Praxis was also funded by BMGF to develop a self-administrable tool that communities could use to monitor their own paths to change. I was struck and impressed by Praxis' commitment to put the communities at the centre of all research – the tools were co-designed, co-implemented and ultimately owned by the communities themselves.



What I learned at TheWorkshop was that I could minimise the distance between the researcher and the 'researched' even more. Data does not need the mediation of experts. I saw the potential of co-creation and co-production of knowledge.

I came to know about the annual workshops that Praxis runs and was cautiously curious; cautious because I wondered whether I would learn anything new if I attended TheWorkshop. After all, understanding societal power dynamics was not novel to me – I am a sociologist and unpacking how power operates is at the heart of all sociological research. I was part of a

research study on female sex workers and felt that I had spent time understanding the inequities of caste, class and gender and the stigma surrounding sex work. I had moved to Rajahmundry in coastal Andhra Pradesh for the research project after completing my PhD, and had experienced living, working, and trying to understand parts of India that were unfamiliar for my Delhi born-and-raised, and US-educated self. In Rajahmundry, my co-researchers and I conducted years-long ethnographic research and we held dearly the ideas of open explorations and empathetic understanding of the worlds inhabited by those we wished to study. What would TheWorkshop teach me that I did not already know or had not already experienced?

I attended TheWorkshop in Siloam in Meghalaya in 2011. By being invited to write this piece, I am glad to be given a chance to reflect on what I came away with, what has stayed with me, and what I still wish to achieve.

First, it was instructive to observe first-hand that analytical skills are not just the domain of researchers. As part of TheWorkshop's field visit component, we conducted a community resource mapping session that laid bare the inherent power dynamics of the village in a session that lasted about two hours.

This was not because of any particular skill of the team in moderating the session, but because we came to the session with a handful of simple PRA tools and strategies and the belief that, people, regardless of education levels, are very good at analysing themselves and the societies they live in. A room full of villagers from different segments of society became animated and engaged in mapping who had access to what resources, and importantly, why, and had very effective suggestions on how best to depict visually the complex landscape of community relations.

Second, I am a qualitative sociologist, so the centrality of empathetic listening to break the cognitive barriers between the researcher and the interview participant is baked into me, but what I learned at TheWorkshop was that I could minimise the distance between the researcher and the 'researched' even more. Data does not need the mediation of experts. I saw the potential of co-creation and co-production of knowledge.

Third, TheWorkshop participants were from around the world and from across India. The majority worked for NGOs or

foundations and there a handful who worked in government. Of course, being amongst development professionals from different countries was not a new experience as such. However, because it was a workshop and not a conference or a work project, there were ample opportunities to engage in long conversations and exchange ideas about our experiences, background and what we were learning and absorbing during the sessions. I truly cherish the time spent with the other participants.

Fourth, looking back, I think that the main goal of TheWorkshop was to initiate a shift in attitudes among the participants to end the hierarchies that separate the expert from the subject, the state from the citizen, and the donor from the receiver. It was not clear to me at that time that all participants were eager to embrace, or even to fully comprehend, the message. However, I also like to think that just as TheWorkshop left enough seeds within me that could be sowed later, the ideas that were shared in those few days quite possibly left a mark in others as well.



Monica Biradavolu

Monica Biradavolu is the CEO and founder of QualAnalytics. She has an undergraduate degree from the University of Delhi and a PhD in sociology from Duke University and has held academic appointments at Yale, Duke, and American University. She specializes in qualitative methods and brings a sociological lens in mixed-methods teams on a variety of research topics in the development sector. She has worked in over 15 countries on projects funded by the World Bank, UN Women, UNICEF, USAID, J-PAL, CGIAR and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Her publications have appeared in AIDS Care, American Sociological Review, Global Health, Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, Social Science and Medicine, and World Development. Monica attended TheWorkshop in 2011.



Key Takeaways

- The community resource mapping session highlighted that analytical skills are not exclusive to researchers; community members, regardless of education levels, effectively analysed their own societal dynamics and power structures.
- She learned that empathetic listening and minimising the distance between researchers and the "researched" could be further enhanced through the co-creation and co-production of knowledge, reducing the need for expert mediation in data collection.
- TheWorkshop aimed to challenge and shift participants' attitudes towards breaking down hierarchies that separate experts from subjects, state from citizen, and donor from receiver.
- Monica acknowledges that TheWorkshop reshaped her understanding of the importance of community agency in research and the potential to rethink traditional research hierarchies.
- While the author couldn't immediately embrace all the learnings from TheWorkshop, many experiences planted seeds of transformation that took root and blossomed over time.

Making Pathways Where None Exist: Documenting the History of Nomadic Tribes in Tamil Nadu

Vardini Sukumar talks about her pioneering work researching and advocating for the rights of nomadic tribes in Tamil Nadu rooted in Participatory Research Practices

When we embarked on this journey researching nomadic tribes in Tamil Nadu, our goal was clear - to shed light on their struggles and challenges. We were driven by the desire to ensure that these communities receive the welfare schemes and support they deserve from the government. Our aim was to conduct research that would be practical and useful to the people, not just for academic purposes.

As we started, we were motivated by the realisation that there were few academic articles and no concrete data on nomadic tribes in Tamil Nadu. Our added inspiration was the desire to bring their narratives to the forefront and understand various aspects of their lives, their struggles, needs, and pain points. We wanted to gather comprehensive data and highlight these issues.

Personally, I wanted to make sure that I had the right tools for this research. That is what brought me to the 24th edition of TheWorkshop in KILA, Thrissur. At TheWorkshop, I met people from different backgrounds which gave me rich and diverse perspectives on how to approach my work. I could see clearly how different tools we learnt could be used in multiple contexts. I also got an idea on how to capture not only qualitative data but also the stories of people, and how to make sure that their

voices are heard and represented accurately.



At TheWorkshop, I met people from different backgrounds which gave me rich and diverse perspectives on how to approach my work. I could see clearly how different tools we learnt could be used in multiple contexts.

Conversations with nomadic communities during the pilot revealed gaps in our initial questionnaire, particularly in questions on livelihoods and debts. We revised the questionnaire and reached out again to the community members. We had to stay focused on our research goals despite the compelling stories of struggle and perseverance we came across.

Each study built upon previous learnings, uncovering deeper insights. Collecting and analysing qualitative data was time-consuming and complex, but we strived to do justice to the experiences shared with us.

One significant challenge we encountered was the inconsistency in numbers provided by the respondents. We realised that these fluctuations were not deliberate misrepresentations but inherent to the oral storytelling tradition. We then made sure to maintain a fair distribution of the



Involving community members in data analysis was difficult because they would always be on the move. Thus the team collected data with a small group and shared it with the larger community for their inputs when they were available.

numbers we collected, while prioritising the preservation of the narratives.

Upon analysing the data, we recognised that our report lacked the personal stories that initially inspired our research and data. We firmly believed that these stories were essential to document people's struggles. So we included powerful case stories and narratives for each section of the report, highlighting the challenges faced by nomadic tribes in accessing education, obtaining community certificates, securing water connections, and more.

Throughout this journey, we received support to use participatory research methods effectively. Research scholars provided valuable feedback on our report, enabling us to enhance its impact. It is worth mentioning that this report was unique as it was produced and released without any financial support.

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The impact of our report has been significant. The Department of Tribal Welfare through the Centre for Social Justice and Equity has initiated a census survey of nomads in the state, and Vanavil Trust has been asked to provide consultation. We hope this is just the beginning and that we can continue making a difference in the lives of nomadic tribes, amplifying their voices, and advocating for their rights.

The objective is to identify these tribes and create a comprehensive record to inform policies and welfare schemes.

Using participatory tools and approaches in our research had a significant impact. When I initially conducted research with the children, it was a challenge to get younger respondents to talk about their experiences of discrimination. They carried a sense of shame associated with the discrimination they faced. However, when we used participatory approaches, we observed a remarkable difference.

By shifting the focus from the individuals to the tools, we created a more comfortable environment for participants to collectively share their experiences. This also helped transfer the discrimination from the person to the space. For instance, during a village

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By shifting the focus from the individuals to the tools, we created a more comfortable environment for participants. The tools helped transfer the discrimination from the person to the space.

mapping exercise, children willingly spoke about being prevented from bathing in a particular lake or being allowed inside a temple only to receive food, but not to pray. The participatory tools made it easier for them to externalise their experiences and talk openly without embarrassment or intimidation.

One of the things that I found challenging while using participatory

Community discussion in progress



approaches with the nomadic community was how to involve them in the analysis of the data we collected. Since the community is always on the move, it was difficult to gather them in one place for discussions. To address this, we used a small group of people to collect the data. We conducted household surveys and marked access to various resources on a map. When the community members returned in the evening, we presented the data to the larger group and asked for their input.

Another challenge we encountered was that the final report was available only in English. This meant that we couldn't easily disseminate it among the community members. I am planning on translating the report into Tamil and making it more concise, so that it is accessible.

Apart from our participatory study, I have also started attempting to reconstruct the history of the nomadic community with the help of the social engagement fellowship from the Inlaks Foundation. I have discovered that the first settlement was in Cuddalore in the 1960s on land given by upper-caste land owners. I am currently researching further to better understand the history, as I believe it is an important aspect to consider in addressing the community's needs. I have tried using the timeline analysis tool to understand their history and encountered a unique challenge. The events that I was aware of were unknown to the respondents and they were aware of incidents that I did not know. In what became a practical demonstration of the Johari window concept, we unravelled aspects that

were previously unknown to both parties.

Due to the negligible impact of political changes on these small communities, I was unable to establish a connection between the timeline and their lives. However, in recent times, their increased political activism enabled me to explore the timeline more effectively. Yet, when it came to earlier events, such as the settlement's origin in the 1960s and 1940s, the timeline proved unhelpful. Instead, I turned to conducting group discussions and case study analyses, which have been key in my current research.

Gaining information from nomadic tribes is a lengthy process, often requiring multiple visits. One encounter during my third visit proved fortunate. I received a document dating back to the 1960s, which showcased land ownership in Cuddalore, providing valuable historical evidence.

This research initiative on nomadic tribes has inspired me to pursue full-time research. By documenting the experiences of nomadic tribes, I aspire



While using a historical timeline, the events that I was aware of were unknown to the respondents and they were aware of incidents that I did not know. In what became a practical demonstration of the Johari window concept, we unravelled aspects that were previously unknown to both parties.

to empower both the present and future generations to champion their cause. It excites me to envision young individuals from nomadic tribes attending college and taking up this subject as they navigate a brighter future.

Reflecting on the application of participatory methods throughout my research journey, one key takeaway is the importance of patience and attentive listening. Even the slightest overlooked detail can alter the narrative significantly. Understanding the significance of allowing people to share their stories without imposing preconceived questions or relying solely

on quantitative data has been a crucial lesson.

Attending the participatory research workshop opened my eyes to various contexts and approaches. It was intellectually rewarding and led to meeting and forging lasting connections with other like minded researchers.

Overall, engaging in participatory methods deepened my understanding of nomadic tribes and enriched my research journey. It gave me purpose and a sense of commitment to highlight the lives of marginalised communities for a more equitable society.

Community map created during a discussion with the nomadic tribe community





Vardini Sukumar

Vardini Sukumar is an Alumna from the 2021 edition of TheWorkshop. After working with Vanavil Trust, researching on the Nomadic Tribal Communities in Tamil Nadu, she is pursuing a second Master's degree at the London School of Economics through the Atlantic Fellowship for Social and Economic Equity. She finished her education with a MA in Elementary Education from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

Written as shared with the Praxis team.



Key Takeaways

- Vardini's extensive research on the nomadic tribes in Tamil Nadu is driven by a desire to bring the narratives of nomadic communities to the forefront as there is a dearth of data and information available on them.
- Participatory tools helped identify gaps in initial questionnaires, data collected from nomadic communities, leading to meaningful revisions informed by community narratives. The study's outcomes prompted the Department of Tribal Welfare to commission a census survey through the Centre for Social Justice & Equity, with plans to collaborate with academic institutions for future policy research.
- The transformative impact of participatory methods was visible in, the importance of patience, attentive listening, and intellectual growth gained from the research journey.
- The research also created an acknowledgement of the knowledge resource of the nomadic community as well as the researchers, thereby laying the foundation for shift in perspectives
- PRA helps externalise their experiences, making it easier to share personal stories and perspectives.

Where Philosophy Takes Precedence Over Tools: A Social Worker's Insights into Transforming Learning

Dr Baiju P Vareed writes about being part of The Workshop and his journey after, exploring Paulo Freire's principles both as a practitioner and researcher on-ground in India and as an educator in Canada.

I was working with the Sector Reforms Project of Rajiv Gandhi Water and Sanitation Mission, Government of India, supported by the World Bank at Kasaragod district in Kerala, at the time I attended The Workshop at the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA), Thrissur, in 2003. I remember participatory approaches being deeply ingrained in our initiatives in Kerala. We used participatory methods to make monitoring and evaluation inclusive of all stakeholders.

The Workshop proved to be a game-changer. Meeting Robert Chambers and

learning from him was a milestone; it kickstarted a transformative journey in my work. I was so happy to show him the photos of the community-based PRA workshops we conducted for various projects. In the past twenty-two years, I have transitioned through several roles in the development sector to research to teaching, which is what I do now. I have also moved across the globe from Kerala to Canada.

But during this time, my link to participation has only grown. I still use several participatory tools in my community work, courses and

Participatory approaches were ingrained in initiatives in Kerala as early as 2003



workshops. I continue to show my students pictures from Kasaragod, where I used these methods extensively, as a field researcher more than two decades ago. When I moved to Canada 11 years ago, I was keen on continuing my work in participatory approaches.

The contexts are slightly different here, as are the terminology and approaches. In India, PRA is often seen as encompassing all principles, approaches, and tools of engaging with communities, whereas in Canada, participatory research is just one of many community engagement methods.

For me, the most valuable lesson was not just about the tools of participatory research, but rather the underlying philosophy. The key learning for me has been understanding how to consider all stakeholders and acknowledging multiple layers of power dynamics, privileges, and operations that are at play. It is crucial to critically analyse and understand these dynamics to navigate them effectively. This understanding has greatly influenced my academic learning and writing practices.

I currently teach a course on human rights and social justice. As this course was partly developed by me, I made sure to incorporate Paulo Freire's philosophy into one of the classes. Interestingly, the students in the programme had never heard of Freire. In developing countries, there is a strong emphasis on learning about Freire, as well as other critical thinkers. These ideologies have played a significant role in shaping my own identity.



The most valuable lesson was not just about the tools of participatory research, but rather the underlying philosophy. The key learning has been understanding how to consider all stakeholders and acknowledge multiple layers of power dynamics, privileges, and operations [...] This understanding has greatly influenced my academic learning and writing practices.

My association with participatory methods goes beyond my work and professional space. For instance, when I participate in discussions at my church, I speak differently from many others there. I understand the importance of considering power dynamics and involving all stakeholders in decision-making. These values of transparency and accountability are not traditionally associated with the church, but they stem from my fundamental learnings and belief in participatory values and thinking.

I have been also witnessed the use of participatory approaches in various community engagement activities, such as community consultations for a new suburban train line in my city, Edmonton, Alberta. I have also witnessed the use of different engagement methods and include them as teaching materials in my classrooms.

In social work, the fusion of participatory approaches and critical



Pictures from PRA Workshops Dr Baiju conducted in Kasaragod, Kerala.

thinking isn't just an academic concept. Introducing Freire's methodology to my students isn't just about broadening perspectives; it's about instilling a sense of empowerment in students and encouraging them to question and challenge the status quo.

In the evolving landscape of India, I note the growing strength of critical approaches, including feminist and Dalit movements. However, a concern lingers about the limited visibility of these movements within the social work profession.

As an educator in social work, I advocate for integrating critical social work approaches to facilitate the incorporation of participatory practices across various levels of social and administrative life in India. India's social landscape is complex, with deep-rooted issues of oppression and patriarchy. The application of critical thinking in social work is a method to address the

underlying root causes, not just the symptoms. Anecdotes from the field highlight the limitations of traditional approaches and emphasise the urgent need for transformative change. The call for a more inclusive government machinery in India isn't a distant idea; it's a yearning, a dream for a society where participatory principles are not just on paper but ingrained in administrative practices.

As I reflect on the journey, it's not just about tools and methodologies; it's about the people — the faces, stories, and struggles that shaped this participation journey. To conclude, participatory approaches are not just about changing the way we work; they're about changing the way we live. It's about challenging power dynamics, promoting transparency, and envisioning a future where participation is not just a method but a way of life rooted in personal insights, contexts and human experiences.



Dr Baiju P. Vareed

Dr. Baiju P. Vareed is a 2003, Alumnus of The Workshop. Currently, an associate professor at the School of Social Work at MacEwan University, in Canada – he has done extensive work as a social worker, educator, and a consultant over the last two decades, in both India and Canada. Integrating participatory practices into projects with communities on-ground, developing monitoring and evaluation tools, and later transitioning to teaching.

He completed his Ph.D. research from the University of Kerala in ‘The Participatory Practice of NGOs in Wayanad district of Kerala’. And continues to write academic papers around the subject, the latest one being around Identity, Power and Social Work Practices in India.

Written as shared with the Praxis team.



Key Takeaways

- The most valuable learning was not just about participatory research tools, but the philosophy behind them—centering diverse stakeholders, recognising layered power dynamics, and embedding transparency and accountability into practice.
- Participatory values, especially those shaped by Paulo Freire’s ideology, have deeply influenced the author’s personal and professional identity—extending even into non-traditional spaces like church discussions, where such values are often absent.
- Teaching social justice and human rights through a participatory lens revealed the absence of Freire and critical pedagogy in mainstream curricula—highlighting the need for more inclusive, reflective education, especially in the Global South.
- In the Indian social context, participatory approaches combined with critical thinking are essential for addressing root causes rather than surface-level symptoms—challenging traditional, top-down models in social work.
- Participation is not just a method but a way of living—reshaping how we relate, think, and act in everyday spaces, with an emphasis on shared power, context, and human experience.
- The piece ends with a strong call for a more inclusive and responsive government machinery in India—where participatory principles are not peripheral but central to governance and administration.

Memory Lane



16th - 2012



17th - 2013



18th - 2014



19th - 2015



20th - 2016-17

Participation Pathways

Adaptations and Innovations

Navigating Transformation: Anchoring Community-Led Evaluations in Development Initiatives

Shashi Sudhir writes about being part of TheWorkshop in 2002, her experience with UNDP-MoRD's pioneering Community-Based Pro-Poor Initiative (CBPPI), reflecting on her journey in the development sector and working with community-based initiatives over the last 20 years.

The Workshop was a unique experience for me. Everything was new... living in a hostel room at my age (I was 40 at that time) ... sharing it with a stranger... being surrounded by a group of vibrant, young people who were either students or just stepping into their careers in the development sector. At this point, I was well into what I then considered my mid-career. My head with a fair smattering of grey hair made me stand out in that mostly youthful crowd.

The learning curve, however, was steep, and it took me back to my student days. But this was not typical academic learning from textbooks. It was a process of absorbing insights from peers and community women with so much knowledge and diverse perspectives. TheWorkshop, held at the NIRD campus in Hyderabad, was an intense immersion into theory, followed by the challenge of translating that theory into real-world practice during our field visits.

During the workshop's field component spanning two days, armed with notes from our sessions and a somewhat bookish confidence, we found ourselves struggling to ask probing questions and engage with the community in a participatory manner. The women we spoke with were patient, but we were just not getting it right.

So, we kept going back to them after brainstorming among ourselves on what we did right and what we missed out, after each session. The hapless women grew really concerned wondering what they had done or said wrong, not realising that it was not them, but us. This marked my first real experience of using participatory tools on the ground, having been rooted in my donor organisation background.

I also remember the pleasant experience of watching community women asking for compensation for their time. Those were initial days, the concept was foreign to all of us but I have carried it with me ever since as standard practice.

Later, when I ventured into the field for my work, I found the participatory tools learned during the workshop, such as web diagrams, to be powerful allies in building bridges with the communities. For example, the Kheria Sabar women in Purulia, West Bengal, embraced these tools with enthusiasm; we learned and practised the tools together, making the learning mutual and dynamic.



It (TheWorkshop) was a process of absorbing insights from peers and community women with so much knowledge and diverse perspectives

Since then, this approach has become an integral part of my toolbox for interactions with women of diverse social/cultural groups, geographies, and languages. They have aided immensely in my commitment to working with communities in a participatory way.



This approach has become an integral part of my toolbox for interactions with women of diverse social/cultural groups, geographies, and languages. They have aided immensely in my commitment to working with communities in a participatory way.

I became a part of a network of people with diverse perspectives, experiences, and social contexts. The network became a source for collaborations. The tools and methodologies I learnt still resonate in my work. I went to Bhatinda in Punjab in September 2023 for an impact assessment. I am happy to say that the participatory tools come naturally to me now.

I was fortunate enough to be working with an international agency which had a facilitating environment for out-of-the box thinking. This allowed me the luxury of trying out new ideas for integrating participatory methodologies into our work. A casual conversation with a colleague gave birth to the idea of a community-led evaluation. The notion of involving the community in every aspect of the study, from formulating questions to analysing findings, was exhilarating and daunting at the same time.

The idea was for a 3-pronged evaluation process for the UNDP-MoRD 'Community-Based Pro-Poor Initiatives (CBPPI)' programme with independent evaluation by community evaluators and external evaluators feeding into the comprehensive evaluation of the 13 sub-programmes. I proposed this to my then Supervisor, Dr. Neera Burra, a champion of community-centred initiatives. She helped it pass at UNDP and the Ministry of Rural Development round-ups. Thus, UNDP championed this innovative approach with MoRD as a partner and Praxis as a technical collaborator.

The response of the UNDP staff showcases the magnetic pull of participatory processes. The operations team, which had limited exposure to the programme work, got curious about what we were undertaking when we approached them for logistical support for travel, accommodation, and financial arrangements for the community evaluators. The team felt that they were part of something very meaningful.

Some of the Operations Team travelled to the field to help with arrangements. During the final presentation, after seeing and conversing with the community women who were swarming around the office building, UNDP staff, including a large portion of the Operations Team, came out in full strength to listen to the experiences and findings of the community evaluators. We were so proud then that we had witnessed something that was truly unique. The energy and liveliness the women brought to the UNDP office was palpable. It made a lasting impression, showing how community-led projects



Community-led projects have the power to refresh and energise people, especially when they are caught up in the drudgery of bureaucratic work that is part of the development world

have the power to refresh and energise people, especially when they are caught in the drudgery of bureaucratic work that is part of the development world.

Another striking moment from the evaluation happened in Jodhpur. In the middle of sessions that stretched into the late hours, a woman from the community stood up and shared something that the evaluating teams and facilitators had missed. It was a wake-up call, a realisation that, given the opportunity, everyone could contribute to the discourse of development, and that is the way forward. This has been the whole point of participatory exercises, all along! We have seen such moments happen time and again. It showcases the power that exists within communities to shape the very definition of development.

The experiment with participatory development continued with an attempt at participatory monitoring with partner NGOs being part of the team that monitored the work under the UNDP-MoRD programme 'Social Mobilisation around Natural Resource Management' in the next programming cycle.

Large-scale participatory initiatives, whether in government or with

agencies like the UNDP, hinge on the passion and drive of individuals in leadership positions as well as the ethos of the organisation. The institutionalisation of such innovation by embedding them into the core practices of the organisations is a complex challenge, especially with the ever-changing dynamics and environment of large institutions. While individual personalities drive initiatives, a facilitative policy environment is a must for their success.

The success of this approach encouraged many of us to think more innovatively. It became a catalyst for transformative thinking, the ripple effect of which continues, inspiring new avenues and approaches in the realm of development work. The Workshop contributed to a transformative journey that allowed me to shed preconceived notions, embrace humility, and truly become a lifelong student in the ever-evolving field of development studies.



In the middle of sessions that stretched into the late hours, a woman from the community stood up and shared something that the evaluating teams and facilitators had missed. It was a wake-up call, a realisation that, given the opportunity, everyone could contribute to the discourse of development, and that is the way forward. This has been the whole point of participatory exercises, all along!



Shashi Sudhir

Shashi Sudhir is a 2002 Alumna of TheWorkshop. She is a Development Professional with more than 30 years of experience in programme formulation, management and monitoring of development projects specialising in rural development, poverty reduction, social inclusion. She has worked extensively with UN agencies, the government, civil society organisations and community-based institutions.

Shashi was instrumental in the pioneering community-led evaluation of UNDP-MoRD's Community-Based Pro-Poor Initiatives (CBPPI) programme.

As shared with the Praxis team



Key Takeaways

- TheWorkshop triggered a transformative journey of questioning the normal, exploring the new, and continuing the unlearning & learning cycle. Twenty years later, the author still goes to the field and uses participatory methods to connect with the communities.
- As part of UNDP, the author was able to pitch an idea of community-led evaluation in a development programme under the UNDP-MoRD across 13 sub-programmes involving 13 NGOs/CBOs in 11 states. This evaluation process brought together the Ministry of Rural Development, the UNDP and other civil society actors into a journey of innovative use of participatory methodology bringing community evaluators to the table.
- Large-scale participatory initiatives, whether in government or with agencies like UNDP, hinge on the passion and drive of individuals in leadership positions as well as the ethos of the organisation.
- Community-led projects have the power to break through bureaucratic fatigue and re-energise institutional spaces. When community voices take center stage—their presence can deeply impact even operations and administrative teams, reminding everyone of the real, human purpose behind development work.

The Road Less Travelled: Taking Participatory Rural Appraisal to Urban Spaces

Dr Indu Prakash Singh writes about how PRA has become a part of the life he lives through his adaptation of using it in diverse contexts and his conviction that it is the only way towards an inclusive and sustainable world

At times, intuition hints at the importance of things. When it does, the applicability of the thing may not be clear. But you feel the need to do it. It may turn out to be a blind alley, but it is comforting to know that you tried.

This is what happened with me in connection to PRA – Participatory Rural Appraisal/ Participatory Reflection and Action / Participatory Learning and Action. In 1998, I was the Regional Advocacy Manager with ActionAid India (AAI) Bhopal. Mid-year, Praxis announced the PRA training. I asked the concerned Regional Manager to allow me to participate in the training, but he declined my request. I eventually left ActionAid, with one of the reasons for leaving being that I was not allowed to attend the PRA training.

By March 2000, I joined as Director of Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan (AAA), a programme funded by ActionAid, to initiate ActionAid's first ever intervention with the homeless in our country. Praxis announced their 10-day PRA training in September that year. We decided that at least four team members from AAA should attend the training that year and the rest in subsequent years. Once again, AAI hesitated in sponsoring us because they felt that Participatory Rural Appraisal was suited to rural settings, while our programme focused on urban areas and hence the training

would not be useful. We persisted and managed to convince them.

Four of us from AAA finally attended the training that year and initiated our work in a genuine participatory style, sharing ownership of the programme with the homeless, ultimately leading to them fully owning the programme. Over the years, our colleagues also underwent PRA trainings. In fact, our community workers also received PRA training through Sandhan, a month-long workshop conducted by Praxis in Bihar. That was our exposure to Robert Chambers, who anchored the PRA journey in many ways.

At TheWorkshop, I asked Robert, how can we use PRA in urban settings. He told me he did not know and asked me to use it in our work and share our learnings with him. I later realised that he was not being ignorant, but encouraged us to find our own pathways.



At TheWorkshop, I asked Robert, how can we use PRA in urban settings. He told me he did not know and asked me to use it in our work and share our learnings with him. I later realised that he was not being ignorant, but encouraged us to find our own pathways.

Many years later, Robert acknowledged that we had opened up a new trajectory (to understand urban homelessness) to participatory methodologies. Even after transitioning to the Indo-Global Social Service Society in 2009, I continued to insist on the teams being trained in PRA. I attended a Training for Trainers (ToT) workshop, in 2006; and subsequently led numerous training sessions. I also went on to facilitate modules in many editions of TheWorkshop between 2007 and 2023.



With Robert Chambers at TheWorkshop

The PRA training had a profound impact on our team at AAA, shaping our approach to addressing homelessness. It was not just about the technical aspects such as PRA Basics, Participatory Poverty Assessment, Micro-level Planning, and Monitoring & Evaluation; it extended to the Training of Trainers (ToT), Participatory Action Research, and more. This training elevated our work from assisting the homeless to empowering homeless citizens. We used participatory approaches in mapping different aspects of people's lives. We tried to

listen to them and to document their knowledge. From documenting evictions to understanding the day-to-day lives of the persons living in night shelters (now 24 hour shelters), from discussing police brutalities and using this to sensitise the police, we created a body of work that was useful to build a narrative around homeless persons. They came to be acknowledged as CityMakers because of their role in a city's functioning. based on which we got two shelters to be run on a module basis from 2003. In 2011, we submitted our report on police brutality against the homeless in 2011 before the Delhi High Court, thereby taking steps for reduced mistreatment. We used our learnings from participatory approaches with the CityMakers to seek important rights and entitlements for the homeless across the country.

The formation of Beghar Foundation in 2010, registered by the CityMakers themselves, marked a significant moment in this journey.



As we integrated ABCD (Attitude, Behaviour, Change, Demanded) of PRA throughout our work, the challenges became valuable learning experiences. Despite the temptation to take the lead, we consciously allowed space for the CityMakers to spearhead the process. This approach led to sustainable actions, with CityMakers actively participating since the inception of our work in 2000.

We were invited by the CityMakers to advise them, highlighting their agency in the initiative. Through their leadership, and large number of friends, the work expanded nationwide.

The Workshop experience fortified our commitment to ethics and values such as truth, humility, empowering people, practising what we preach (walking the talk), maintaining a positive outlook, avoiding ridicule, being open to criticism, active listening, never leading but facilitating, not rushing, learning from everyone, understanding power dynamics, rejecting prejudices, injustice, stigmatisation, and caste & class biases.

PRA brought us together, emphasising the importance of building and sustaining teams. It also helped us stand rooted in justice, uphold principles of equity and dignity, and ensure the inclusion of the last person, following Gandhi and Ambedkar's ideals. PRA, for us, is not just a tool – it is a philosophy of action and life. We practised and seeded it, shaping ourselves to be better and honest in our endeavours. This approach contributed to our success, as it instilled a sense of optimism and resilience, teaching us to view challenges as opportunities and encouraging us to demand our rights.

The transformative impact of PRA extended beyond our work on urban homelessness. I have used it in lectures, turning them into group activities. This approach has had massive impact, with students expressing themselves more openly, with clarity and thought. PRA's emphasis on participation can be applied universally to enhance



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knowledge, deepen practice, and lead to sustainable action. It has taught me to listen to all irrespective of what they are saying, and to speak purposefully with intention. We used it in our day-to-day operations in AAA, ActionAid and even in IGSSS. It has led to impactful initiatives such as 360-degree appraisals and credit sharing.

As an avid PRA practitioner and trained sociologist, I have applied PRA principles to diverse social causes, spanning women's rights, issues affecting the elderly, children, the poor, and the homeless, as well as environment and biodiversity.

Since 2000, PRA has been central to our work, extending beyond Delhi to various regions in India and has also been showcased on international platforms in South Africa, Brazil, Germany, the UK, and the USA.

The foundation of Participatory Approaches lies in facilitation, focusing on genuine participatory processes. It embodies the idea that what we achieve is a result of sincere collaboration, making participation a natural and an

integral part of the process. PRA's ABCD (Attitude, Behaviour, Change, Demanded) mirrors age-old wisdom, reminding us that personal growth is fundamental to effective community engagement. Personally, PRA has not only enhanced my professional skills but also shaped me into a better person. It's not just an approach; it's a way of life

which guided and influenced my work with CityMakers. I staunchly believe that if everyone were trained in participatory approaches, we would have a better world where nobody is left behind.



Dr. Indu Prakash Singh

Dr Indu Prakash Singh is a teacher, trainer, facilitator, movement builder, advocate, author and evaluator with decades of experience in institutionalising participatory approaches. He is a TEDx & Motivational Speaker and has written seven books on women's issue and on homeless CityMakers. He is leading facilitator in workshops on Participatory Methods and Approaches. From the lens of community participation, he holds experience not only on theories of participation, but also on challenges in putting those theories into practice. He attended the workshop as a participant in 2000 and 2006 and has subsequently facilitated modules such as participatory action research, community-led child protection and participatory methods and approaches in The Workshop.



Key Takeaways

- Indu adapted Participatory Rural Appraisal in the urban homelessness context, showcasing its flexibility and relevance.
- Participatory approach helped shift the team's focus from assisting the homeless to empowering them, fostering agency, positioning homeless persons as vital contributors to urban life - as CityMakers.
- Indu has applied principles of participation to a wide range of social issues, from women's rights to environmental concerns. This versatility highlights PRA's universal applicability and its potential to enhance engagement across diverse social contexts.
- PRA is not just a professional tool—it transforms personal philosophy as well. It evolves into a way of life, shaping how they engage with power, people, and everyday decisions both within and beyond work.

Rethinking development: Building trust and spaces for community involvement in Afghanistan

Ahmad Jawid Amin draws from his experience of working as a civil society activist for international organizations in the last two decades in Afghanistan to write about how participatory approaches helped build community ownership of issues, especially in the context of women's rights

There is an active presence of INGOs in Afghanistan that have been playing significant role in the development space. At the same time, the local NGOs have a considerable role to play to support communities in rural areas which are especially hard to reach. Most local NGOs have been sub-partners to INGOs, and funded to implement small scale donor-driven projects.

Aga Khan Foundation-Afghanistan had a similar component of supporting local NGOs to build their capacity to promote the development of vibrant and accountable civil society organisations or to ensure the development is locally led by these organisations. The common complaint from the communities were that that the projects implemented by these local NGOs were not usually as per their needs and that they were not consulted prior to the implementation. Another most prevailing criticism was about the behaviour of Local NGOs staff towards the communities' needs and wants, which was seen as patronising.

I joined the Agha Khan Foundation in Afghanistan as a programme coordinator in 2009. My responsibility involved capacity building of local NGOs, which was a great need in the country. We had to provide trainings on systems thinking, building templates, policy development, micro-grants for

practical knowledge and how to build a new organisation that can be sustained. The main purpose of these trainings was to strengthen organisations so that they can lead development in rural and local areas based on the needs of the community. However, in most cases, community needs assessment was overlooked by development actors in the country as the donor programmes tended to be largely top down.

It was in this context that I attended the Praxis Workshop in Siloam, Meghalaya in 2011. It was a great learning opportunity for me. Besides the tools, the perspectives on Attitude, Behaviour Change and the approach to community participation greatly informed me. As a civil society coordinator and manager, I became more aware of the changes we would have to bring in. As part of the training package to these partners/ local NGOs, I wanted to add fresh knowledge and skills learned from



It was a great learning opportunity for me. Besides the tools, the perspectives on Attitude, Behaviour Change and the approach to community participation greatly informed me. As a civil society coordinator and manager, I became more aware of the changes we would have to bring in.

Praxis, especially PRA focusing on behaviour change and attitude shifts.

In 2013, I started training around seven local NGO partners across the Northern Provinces of Afghanistan on participatory rural appraisal. The focus was on how to involve communities, listen to them, discuss their needs, and how to find solutions together with communities in a participatory manner. In these training sessions, we taught new techniques of PRA to enhance the active involvement of communities, both men and women, in identifying their needs and issues.



As a result (of the trainings, the local NGOs), they were able to design projects together with the communities using basic PRA tools. The needs assessment process aimed at obtaining the satisfaction of those communities

Following the series of trainings, organisations started building closer interactions with communities. As a result, they were able to design projects together with the communities by using some basic PRA tools. The needs assessment process aimed at obtaining the satisfaction of those communities. Finally, all those projects were implemented successfully in these remote rural communities.

As the local non-governmental organisations (LNGOs) were not located within the rural communities where the projects were being implemented, they missed the nuances during planning.

For example, several construction projects were implemented but there was limited uptake. We used participatory approaches to understand the reasons behind the low uptake and address the course of implementation. Schools were built in areas which were far from the villages; in the buildings, there was no quality control. The community development councils, bodies responsible for the development and stability of their villages, were not involved at the planning stage. As they played the role of gatekeepers, the community did not take ownership of the schools and the roads. In some cases, the projects got shelved midway or were not maintained. Thus, we learnt that with community participation in all stages of project implementation, including at the stage of needs assessment and planning, these problems could have been overcome.

In some cases, the donor's approach was not in tune with the socio-political realities of Afghanistan. For example, donors were keen to introduce awareness-building on issues such as women rights, gender-based violence, which are very sensitive issues. These are not unique to the Afghan context and exist all over the world. However, each country will have several different factors impacting women's rights based on the socio-political and economic realities. These have to be handled in a very careful manner, considering the sensitivities of the community.

During my time at one of the INGOs, we followed a human-centric approach to design an awareness-building programme on the economic

empowerment of women. This approach prioritised community participation and took into account the three different contexts of the three different districts in the northern provinces where the project was being implemented.

We used tools such as social mapping and wealth ranking involving diverse stakeholders, including the rich, the semi-rich, the poor, the very poor, women, and especially those suffering from the lack of employment opportunities. We also identified the root causes of violence in each location as poverty, lack of opportunities and addiction. The respondents identified the need to enhance the skills of women. This exercise was eye-opening for the communities as well as the organisations.

One success story comes to mind. In location B, where embroidery was identified as a solution, the women were also provided a financial incentive of around 50USD to help them balance household chores. In one of the households, the man of the house was unemployed and suffered from addiction. He was selling household wealth to buy land. His wife not only made money for the family after receiving the training, she helped her husband set up a shop selling scarfs and sweets for children. After three months of the training, the husband started recognising her support. She also reported that her husband had started taking an interest in her needs and taking care of her. By contributing to the family financially, she started seeing herself differently.



During my time at one of the INGOs, we followed a human-centric approach.

This approach prioritised community participation and took into account the three different contexts of the three different districts in the northern provinces where the project was being implemented.

Today, the issue of gender-based violence is a taboo topic in the country. Afghan society, especially women, face several restrictions. These have only increased in the recent past. International Organisations including different UN agencies, which work with local organisations, try to work in a way so as not to endanger the women-led organisations. In this atmosphere, it is important to build networking and trust with the organisations on the ground and for the organisations to build trust among communities. Once trust is built, a strong foundation for any work is set. It is fundamental to the participatory approach.

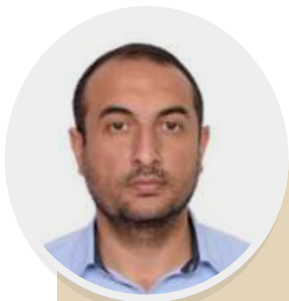
Our work aimed to involve men as well as women in PRA processes so that their voices are heard and their role in decision-making processes is institutionalised. We have to be very careful in the way we engage in the community so as not to overlook them. For example, we must have separate structures for consultations (with men and women) keeping in mind that women may find it difficult to speak in mixed groups.

Currently, the women-led community development councils are not very active but those structures exist and it is important to keep engaging them.

Development actors in Afghanistan understand the challenges imposed by conflict over the years. Even at times when there is no active fighting, the socio-economic conditions are poor. Thus, those who are already struggling in their day-to-day existence deserve to hear their voice and find solutions

together. I have been listening to the voices of the communities in remote areas for more than a decade, now.

They have been deprived of all their rights. Thus, the fundamental approach of any development actor should not be to impose their own agendas but to consult with communities and create spaces for these consultations. I believe that the problems exist among the communities and so do the solutions.



Ahmad Jawid Amin

Ahmad Jawid Amin as a civil society activist used to work for international organizations in the last two decades in Afghanistan, writes about the top-down development space in Afghanistan and how participatory approaches can help build community ownership of issues, especially in the context of women's rights in Afghanistan .

Written as shared with the Praxis team.



Key Takeaways

- International and local NGOs play crucial roles in Afghanistan's development, especially in rural areas. However, local NGOs often faced criticism for implementing top-down projects that don't align with community needs and for their patronising approach. This highlights the urgent need for truly participatory approaches that prioritise community voices, respect local knowledge, and align with actual needs rather than assumptions.
- Lack of community participation in planning has led to issues like poorly utilised infrastructure and lack of community ownership
- Building trust with communities is key to any form of development. If needed, separate consultations with men and women must be held to ensure all voices are being heard

Building Inclusive Cities: The Journey of Child Participation and Urban Citizenship in Odisha

Preeti Prada Panigrahi explores the significance of urban citizenship and participatory approaches in addressing India's urban challenges. She draws on her extensive experience leading community-led innovations and government missions to emphasise the role of citizen engagement in shaping sustainable and inclusive urban development.

India is navigating significant challenges in the face of climate change. While progress has been made in reducing poverty, the rapid growth of urban populations presents both opportunities and uncertainties. This surge in urbanisation could be a source of strength or potential confusion. However, the country also stands at a pivotal moment of opportunity, as most of the future infrastructure will be designed and built in cities and towns by 2050. As India undergoes the largest urban transformation of the 21st century, a young and eager workforce is ready to step in and shape this future.

One of the key challenges posed by urbanisation has been its impact on people — how they move, live, experience spaces, and engage in the economy within cities.

Here, I have highlighted how I have utilised participatory approaches in large-scale programmes with cities, states, and the national government to tackle the challenges of rapid urban growth in India, ensuring that policy priorities are aligned with the needs and aspirations of communities.

Humara Bachpan Campaign [2012-2015]

My journey into participatory democracy began with leading the Humara Bachpan Campaign, a national

policy advocacy initiative focused on young children growing up in urban poverty. At the time, children, especially the 7.8 million under six years old living in informal settlements, were largely invisible in the policy landscape. Urbanization was just beginning to make its mark in India, and the need for action from policymakers was becoming increasingly urgent.

This context led us to explore the paradigm of future citizenry, resulting in the creation of one of India's first national child-led urban campaigns in 2012. The campaign's primary goal was to highlight the critical connection between children's environments and their health and well-being. We developed a child-club methodology that could be implemented across 23 cities, bringing children together to share their experiences. Using participatory methods, we uncovered a collective understanding of living conditions, demonstrating that children's safety, security, and well-being are directly linked to where they live and grow.

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We developed a child-club methodology that could be implemented across 23 cities, bringing children together to share their experiences

The campaign brought national attention to the conditions in urban poor settlements, pushing for necessary policy and programme changes. One of the campaign's significant successes was empowering both children and adults, especially mothers, to articulate their issues more effectively to city government representatives. Children's concerns — such as safe housing, access to basic services like water, sanitation, and lighting — mirrored those of adults, but with added emphasis on recreation, nutritious food, and learning opportunities for younger siblings in anganwadi centers*.

These early successes created a sense of empowerment and collective action, with child leaders emerging as recognised public problem-solvers. Micro-campaigns within various geographies gained momentum, and children began making their voices heard at international urban convenings like Habitat III. This advocacy eventually influenced the Government of India to include children's needs in urban renewal policies. For instance, the

Smart City Mission incorporated children's requests into place-making initiatives, while the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) prioritised parks and open spaces alongside water and sanitation. The campaign also sparked conversations around early childhood brain development, with children aged seven and above taking on a more prominent role as future citizens. Their advocacy expanded beyond immediate living conditions to address broader issues like disaster-proof housing, climate action, and challenges in urban governance.

As the campaign evolved, it became clear that child-led participation in urban planning was not only feasible but also crucial. However, to scale this participation, facilitation aids and technical experts such as architects and urban planners had to align with the community's understanding. The process needed to be resource-efficient to be sustainable at scale. To ensure the campaign's longevity, it was registered as a trust and continues to influence children's agendas today. However, it is

Children sharing their vision for a safe neighbourhood using a mapping exercise

* Anganwadi centres were conceived of as rural child care centres focused on health and nutrition needs of children in the 0-6 age group and operated under the Integrated Child Development Services programme



essential to recognise that participatory approaches can bring out valuable insights that often go unnoticed or underfunded because they are not typically mandated as part of project plans. Many of the lessons learned and questions that arose during this campaign found a new home in my subsequent work with JAGA Mission, where I led the Slum Infrastructure Upgradation and Community Leadership.

JAGA Mission, Government of Odisha [2020-2023]

The JAGA Mission is a groundbreaking initiative by the Government of Odisha, aimed at transforming 3,000 urban poor settlements into livable habitats. This mission provides land tenure security and upgrades slum infrastructure by delivering essential civic amenities and integrating communities through participatory planning and governance. As the world's largest slum titling and upgrading process, JAGA supports 25% of Odisha's urban population.

A key element of JAGA's success is its templated participatory approach, which standardises the slum infrastructure upgrading and delisting process. This approach empowers city leaders to engage with communities, identify service delivery gaps, and collaborate with local leaders to ensure the feasibility and saturation of required improvements. Central to this effort is the formation and strengthening of Slum Dwellers Associations (SDAs)—ten-member teams of community leaders who work closely with city administrations to facilitate the upgrading and delisting process.

The mission also leverages technology to manage and streamline these processes across 115 cities.

The outcomes of JAGA have been remarkable. SDAs have played a pivotal role in addressing governance and development issues within their communities. Over the past three years, many SDA leaders have gone on to become corporators and councilors following the 2022 municipal elections. These leaders credit their participation in SDA activities with giving them a comprehensive understanding of urban service delivery gaps and the opportunity to engage more effectively with city governments and their communities. To date, nearly 900 slums have been upgraded into livable habitats.



The reliance on technology, while promising, has not yet overcome the barriers to accurately capturing community aspirations, particularly in city governments that lack the necessary skills to manage and utilise open-source data effectively

However, challenges remain. Linguistic, ethnic, and religious minorities are often excluded from these community-led platforms due to the standardised processes that lack local customisation, real-time facilitation, and thorough documentation. The reliance on technology, while promising, has not yet overcome the barriers to accurately capturing community aspirations, particularly in city governments that lack the necessary skills to manage and utilise open-source data effectively.

Looking ahead, it's crucial to address these challenges to better engage with the diverse and transient urban poor populations where community cohesiveness is weaker. Technology should be reimagined to serve these needs more effectively, and participatory processes must be leveraged to their full potential.

My journey into participatory approaches was significantly shaped by my experience at the 2014 Praxis Workshop. It allowed me to sharpen my understanding on delving in participatory approaches in communities. The teachings of Robert Chambers instilled

a rigour to my framing of participation in the context of sanitation, rural process and livelihoods. Tom Thomas was equally inspiring, with his work with communities and nuanced excerpts on entitlements of the poor. I think a lasting memory from TheWorkshop remains to be from my interactions with the late Anindo Banerjee, whose patience and delivery helped me design participatory processes.

From testing participatory approaches with young children across cities to driving government missions at scale, these experiences have empowered me



SDAs as implementing partners of JAGA Mission

to engage more deeply with communities and support governments in doing the same. However, scaling participatory processes presents challenges, including the need for broader storytelling, evidence collection from diverse communities, and effective engagement of citizen cohorts and Ward Committees. Additionally, design thinking is becoming increasingly relevant in addressing the complex issues associated with urbanization, which offers ecosystems of wisdom waiting to be leveraged and aligned with citizen needs.



Preeti Prada Panigrahi

Preeti Prada Panigrahi leads the Urban Systems Lab within Socratus Foundation for Collective Wisdom, a pioneering philanthropic organisation that works with an ecosystem of partners to create implementable actions and streams of collective wisdom for the next generation of wicked minds. She is a trained psychologist with professional training in management and urban studies from London School of Economics & Political Science, including specialisation in Urban Management & Law and Child Rights Law. She has also completed a leadership on Early Child Development from Harvard University.

Over the last 16 years she has anchored – government led missions, nationally, and in states to design and develop community-led innovations, strengthen local leadership and support addressing issues of urban poverty through citizen engagement. She attended TheWorkshop2014



Key Takeaways

- Preeti has used participatory approaches in the context of urban planning in two specific contexts- child-led urban planning as part of the Humara Bachpan campaign and institutionalising community participation through the Slum Dwellers' Associations for the world's largest slum titling and upgradation process as part of the JAGA Mission
- She worked on building and documenting a collective understanding of living conditions in urban slums through child clubs and mothers' groups and covered not just the immediate environment, but also intangible needs such as disaster preparedness and safety.
- Development of community leadership and participation in participatory slum development channelised the way into formal governance systems and structures
- She acknowledges the challenges of technology and draws attention to the need to work towards mitigating them. The use of technology must reimagine ways to overcome challenges of using participation at scale, especially challenges of inclusion and equity and the risk of conflating demands as divorced from rights
- Our work with PRA on the ground revealed that children are not just passive recipients of development but active thinkers and future citizens. When given space, even young children engage meaningfully with complex issues like urban governance, climate action, and housing—challenging the widespread notion that they are incapable of ideating or contributing.

The Camera As A Political Tool: Incorporating Values of Participation in Film-Making

Srijan Nandan reflects on his experiences of learning by doing and using participatory approaches in his work. He emphasises the significance of valuing people and incorporating participatory principles in his career as a documentary filmmaker.

When I joined Praxis, we were a small team. I got a couple of weeks to settle in during which I was given a number of publications to read. I went through these before being sent to a remote village in Jharkhand for a project. Saileshji, who was heading the project, took me under his wing and pushed me to do things on my own. I learned so much by being thrown into the deep end. He warned me that PRA will become an addiction, seeping through all aspects of life. Engaging in sincere, genuine conversation and seeking to understand others' perspectives became the crux of my understanding of PRA.



He (Sailesh Singh) warned me that PRA will become an addiction, seeping through all aspects of life. Engaging in sincere, genuine conversation and seeking to understand others' perspectives became the crux of my understanding of PRA.

My experience with TheWorkshop started soon after. In my very first year at Praxis, I was a member of the coordination team. The next year, I led the coordination of TheWorkshop. I handled everything related to administration and communication, sending emails, dealing with visas, and more.

One of those years, we had participants from Afghanistan and Pakistan. There were challenges such as reporting to the police station everyday, going through their post-workshop plans and being on top of everything. Despite the administrative nightmare of coordinating such a big workshop, the fun began once the workshop started.

I have always felt that TheWorkshop is crucial for anyone working in the development sector globally. The coming together of 110 people from so many diverse backgrounds was incredible. The modules covered topics such as monitoring, evaluation, and the basics of participatory rural appraisal. But the core value and the lens for addressing issues left a lasting impact. Meeting new people, making friends, and experiencing the Praxis culture during the workshop were memorable. Even after 11pm, we would still be gathered together having fun. Editing a film overnight for the Valedictory was a tradition. The whole experience was a real education for me, more valuable than my college and postgraduate years.

The mindset inculcated during those initial days has remained with me even later in my career, and even after I moved away from Praxis to become an independent filmmaker.

I continue to actively employ PRA principles. Participation encourages an open-ended approach, allowing individuals the space to express their realities based on their understanding of what they think is important, to whatever level and depth they choose to share. This technique fosters in-depth understanding by delving into the intricacies of people's lives, questioning assumptions, and probing for critical thinking.



Participation encourages an open-ended approach, allowing individuals the space to express their realities based on their understanding of what they think is important, to whatever level and depth they choose to share.

In the world of documentary filmmaking, it is crucial to capture the essence of a subject's reality, to go beyond surface-level interviews, and dive deep into their experiences. PRA provides a valuable toolset that enabled me to gain in-depth understanding and build meaningful connections with various subjects. I continue to use the spirit of enquiry and in-depth understanding rooted in participatory approaches.

One of the things we learnt was about having a political opinion. I have come to realise that our political values and ethics need to be unwavering. If we lose that, then we lose ourselves. Even in my work, I reject unethical requests and refuse to exploit people's vulnerabilities for the sake of a good shot.

One such example was being asked by a client to make someone cry to capture a 'perfect shot'. In such cases, I make it known that we will, at all costs, engage with individuals as equals, treating them with respect and dignity.

As an introvert, participatory approaches have been instrumental for me in breaking barriers and establishing rapport with communities. By approaching interactions with genuineness, respect, and humour, we are able to create a comfortable and welcoming environment. It is essential to provide a safe space where respondents can share their realities without feeling or being coerced or pressured. There needs to be consent and it needs to be ensured that no trauma is unnecessarily probed. These values build trust and authenticity in the storytelling process.

Invisibilising the tool (camera) Through my exposure to participatory methods, I am very conscious about power hierarchies. During my Praxis days, it was the hierarchy between the researcher and the community. In documentary filmmaking, it is the delicate power balance between the person behind the camera and the person in front of it. As a filmmaker, I have a responsibility to create that safe and empowering space for those I am interviewing. When I am in the community with the camera I am very conscious about keeping external influences at bay and keeping the focus on the subject and their authentic selves.

My focus lies in exploring deeper experiences rather than surface-level achievements, aiming to understand how individuals perceive their lives. My goal is to make the camera invisible, thereby allowing the individual's story to take center stage.



When I am in the community with the camera I am very conscious about keeping external influences at bay and keeping the focus on the subject and their authentic selves. [...] My goal is to make the camera invisible, thereby letting the individual's story to take centre stage

I believe in an open-ended approach, allowing individuals to express themselves. Often, the most important insights emerge when we least expect them or when we think the conversation is over. Often, at the end of an interview, before wrapping up, I ask if they would like to share anything else. It is often then, that gems of wisdom and stories emerge, making the process both surprising and delightful. This too is a learning from my PRA days.

As a learner of participatory approaches, I initially focused heavily on the tools and structures. However, the key lesson over time was to understand the soul of PRA – to grasp the essence of capturing people's experiences, knowledge, expectations, and realities. Departing from conventional research methods, PRA emphasises the diversity of approaches rather than a fixed structure.

The crux lies in genuinely allowing for various interpretations and representations and being unrushed. There is no single right or wrong way; the focus is authentically capturing the essence of people's lives, be it through PRA or my films.

Over the years I have watched closely and seen TheWorkshop evolve over time, adapting to new issues, ideas and approaches. Core modules included Participatory Methods and Approaches (PMA), Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), and Systems Mapping, while other modules on Human Rights Due Diligence, CSR and participation, Public Accountability, Participatory Communication, and many more modules have been included. It has become a dynamic entity, continuously incorporating fresh perspectives. It has managed to stay relevant over the last 25 years and I am glad to have walked a part of this journey.

Srijan uses the 'soul of PRA' while filming





Srijan Nandan

Srijan Nandan is an Alumnus of the Praxis India team. He coordinated TheWorkshop in 2006 and 2007 and has been a resource person subsequently. He worked with Praxis between 2006 and 2010. Subsequently, he started his own film company called 'Jholawala Films' – rooted in rights, justice, and advocacy.

Written as shared with the Praxis team.



Key Takeaways

- TheWorkshop was unique in being able to bring together such a diverse group of people to learn about participation. It was an intense process of learning, which was fun as well as rigorous.
- PRA principles learned two decades back, continues to influence Srijan's thinking and career, especially his work in documentary filmmaking. He acknowledges the importance of being true to one's political values and ethics in whatever work one is doing.
- The camera is often seen as intrusive, making communities self-conscious or guarded, leading them to say what they think is expected rather than what they truly feel. But PRA helped shift this dynamic.
- By building trust and making the camera feel 'invisible', PRA created a safe space where people felt comfortable being honest, introspective, and vulnerable – enabling authentic, meaningful storytelling.
- TheWorkshop has evolved and adapted over the last 25 years, to stay relevant in these changing times.
- Real conversations often begin where formal discussions end. The approach creates space for authentic, unfiltered dialogue—especially with marginalized groups—unlocking deeper insights that structured formats may overlook.

Memory Lane



21st 2018



22nd 2020



23rd 2021



24th 2022



25th 2023

Key To Relevance
Introspection And
Critical Reflection

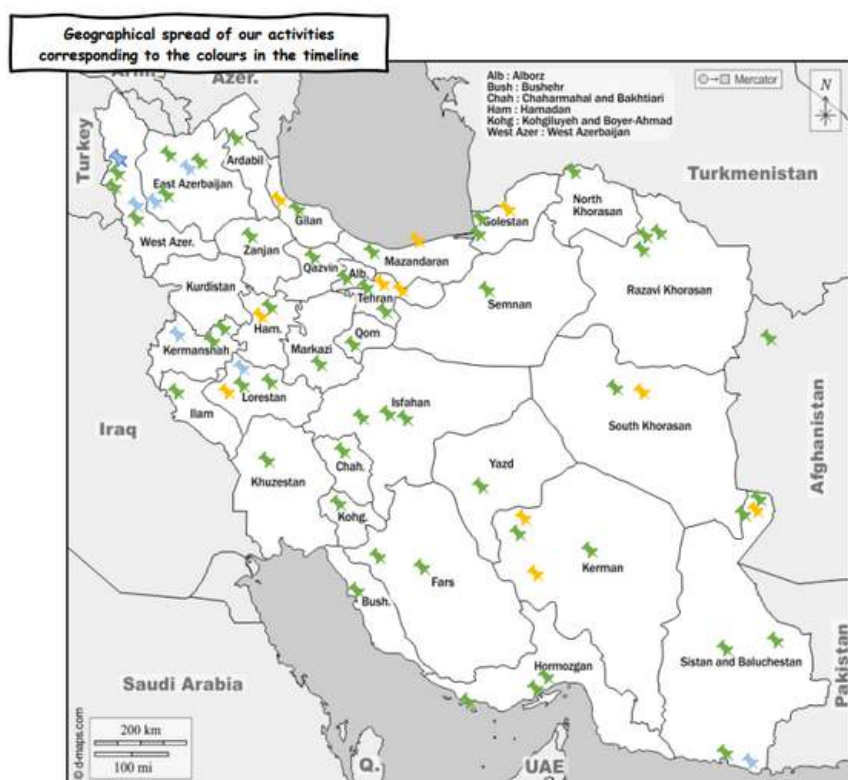
The Evolution of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in Iran - A Chronicle of Reflection and Insights

Sara Bagheri and Seyed Babak Moosavi Nejad discuss their 25-year journey in promoting Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in Iran, highlighting key projects that illustrate the impact and challenges of implementing participatory approaches in diverse sectors such as wildlife conservation, agriculture, and local governance. They emphasise the importance of community involvement in achieving sustainable outcomes and reflect on the evolving demand for participatory practices in the country.

We present a chronology of our participatory work, as well as some of the events that have impacted our individual and joint paths, that can shed light on the PRA story in Iran over the past 25 years.

Apart from our own varying roles over the years, our scope of work has also been diverse: social work and welfare, agriculture, refugees, environment and wildlife, local enterprise and entrepreneurship, and small-scale urban decision-making and improvements. Our

trainings on participatory approaches have ranged from one-off workshops with very little follow-up and very little information about their impact to sequences of workshops and reflection gatherings spanning over longer periods. Sometimes we have been fortunate enough to witness real-life applications and impacts too. We need to emphasise, though, that none of this is meant as a comprehensive representation of participatory endeavours in Iran. We know there are many excellent teams and practitioners applying participatory



concepts and methods to invaluable work on employment, education, children, microcredit, industry, charity, as well as the topics mentioned here.

Robert Chambers' trip to Iran; formation of PRA learning group at RRC

1997

1999 - 2002

The RRC team conducted PRA workshops for extension staff of Ministry of Agriculture, Women Affairs Bureau and the Department of Environment, as well as for NGOs working on environment and with refugees,

1999-2003

Collaboration of RRC team with Asian Productivity Organisation (APO) on integrated community development training workshops, seminars and case studies

1999

2004 - 2005

PME training and field practice for staff of Women Affairs Bureau in 5 provinces

Participatory management workshop for Ockenden Int'l personnel in Herat, Afghanistan.

2004

2010 - 2011

Part of facilitation team working on equitable reconstruction with local people in SiMetri neighbourhood in Tehran

PRA workshops for facilitation teams working on rehabilitating deteriorating neighbourhoods in urban areas

2009

2011-2012

Facilitated neighbourhood conflicts on the location of common dustbins in Parvin Alley in north Tehran

2011

Training workshop on participatory planning using PRA tools for the MENARID project team

A 7-day training for the facilitators of the sustainable agriculture project around lake Urmia in August instigated a 5 year capacity development programme for the implementers and partners of the project , culminating in the participatory documentation training conducted by the PRAXIS team.

2015

2016-2018

Capacity building programme for Iranian and Afgan NGOs working with refugees in Mashhad and Tehran on participatory approaches. An online version of the programme was repeated during the COVID-19 period in 2020

Facilitated online Trinity of Management training by Ernesto Sirolli for rural women entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic

Publication of Sara's article on PM&E in "Solving social problems"

2021

Publication of "Entrusting agriculture to whom it belongs" based on the PTD experience in Lake Urmia

2023



Exposure to PRAXIS & PRA approaches

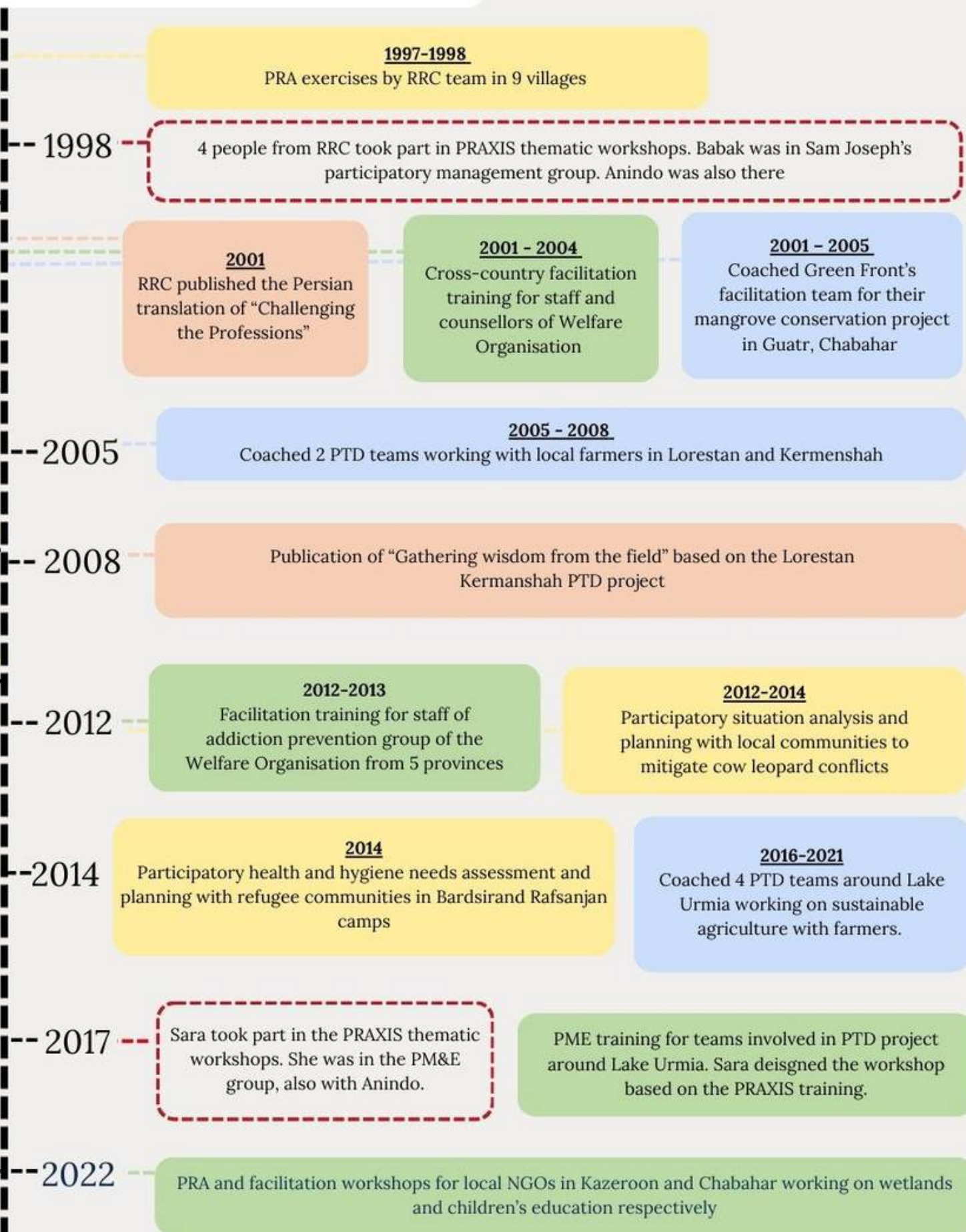


Publications



Training

nd Sara's PRA journey



Among the diverse work we have been involved in, two particular experiences illustrate how far and deep participatory

approaches have managed to go in Iran. These two projects could also be viewed as cornerstones of our team's lifecycle.

Managing the leopard-cow conflict in Dorfak

Project: Sara led a team, coached by Babak, doing extended PRA work with local communities over two years to understand and mitigate the conflict between conservation of the Persian leopard and pastoralists' livelihood in Dorfak, Guilan.

The issue: Leopards were being killed by villagers, but contrary to common perceptions, not because of their ignorance on wildlife. Rather, their livelihood was being threatened by the increased crossing of leopard and cow grazing paths.

Commissioned by: Iran Cheetah Society (ICS), an Iranian NGO working on wildlife conservation, usually through training and awareness building activities.



Diverse groups in three villages in Dorfak analysed the problem of cow loss

Managing the leopard-cow conflict in Dorfak

What did we change in terms of approach?	Frorraining and raising awareness of local people on wildlife to engaging local communities in analysing and managing wildlife-pastoralist conflict
Major 'ahha's and insights owing to the participatory tools	The critical issue was not the loss of leopards, but rather the loss of cows, which directly affected local livelihoods. The leopard-cow conflict was intensified by the government's resettlement of households living in and around the forest.
	With the sharing of personal histories and experience through the PRA tools and the facilitators' newsletters, local families became aware of each other's effective initiatives which they had, till then, been pursuing individually. Pastoralists then started to contemplate joint action.
	Previously less known sources of damage and loss to cows emerged. The main causes of cow loss turned out to be different from village to village. Other than being killed by leopards, cows were also lost to theft by passing motor bikers, and to plant-related infections and diseases.
	The pastoralists compromised on their stance against the environment department and wildlife as threats to their livelihood and acknowledged their own responsibility in managing the cow-leopard conflict.
	As the PRA tools, and especially the problem tree, went round from family to family and village to village, the men started to realise how informed the women were about the local realities and the root causes of local problems.
Significant change	The Department of Environment had come to 'inform' the people and 'demand' their cooperation on leopard conservation. Several months, meetings and negotiations later, they acknowledged local problems and agreed to joint action with the pastoralists, such as setting up camera traps. Officials who claimed to have nothing to do with wildlife were able to see where they could contribute. For example, based on the problem tree completed in the three villages, the animal husbandry department offered to provide training on livestock disease identification for the pastoralists. Local analyses led to local action, such as pastoralists pursuing the insurance of their cows, and mapping cow grazing paths together in order to work out common shepherding timetables.
Praxis footprints	Apart from the facilitation skills and the PRA tools, the Participatory Technology Development teams applied soft systems thinking adopted from Sam Joseph's participatory management training

Participatory Technology Development (PTD) in Lake Urmia

Project mode: Babak and Sara coached, over four years, local PTD teams developing adaptable technologies and sustainable practices with farmers around Lake Urmia.

The issue: Despite the increasing pressure on the lake's water resources, the water-saving technologies and techniques provided by conventional research bodies were not suited to small plots, or to uncertain or varying water sources, and some of the inputs were unaffordable for many of the farmers.

Commissioned by: Conservation of Iranian Wetlands Programme (CIWP), a joint programme between Iran's Department of Environment and the UNDP office



PTD project – An expert farmer shows other farmers how to work with the new irrigation system, while the facilitator (second from left) observes.

Participatory Technology Development in Lake Urmia

What did we change in terms of approach?	From the normal practice of extending 'research-endorsed' technologies to 'avant-garde' (read more resource-rich) farmers, to identifying priorities with farmers and facilitating on-going farmer-researcher collaboration to seek potential ideas to experiment with
Major 'ahha's and insights owing to the participatory tools	Apart from the technical outcomes of the experiments, farmers' interaction with experts and researchers became far less top-down. Many of the experts actively committed to the process of seeking and experimenting with ideas. Some even took local ideas back to their own stations.
	Three years into the project, the facilitator teams realised farmers were developing technologies and connecting with researchers independent of them.
	Another thing we learned was that you can rely more on individuals within the different levels of the research and extension hierarchy who buy into the idea and are willing to go beyond their formal job description, and less on the formal structure of extension policies and services intended to support farmers.
Significant change	Probably the most important transformation was the changing role of the farmer, from (occasional) recipient of inputs and guidance, to experimenter, negotiator, and also extensionist for new ideas and technology, leading to sometimes different context-specific solutions to the same problem. Farmers would sometimes come up with cheaper alternatives to the relatively expensive technology being pushed by research institutes. In some cases, farmers from up to thirteen other villages (some as far as 50km away) would come to seek the advice of experimenting peer farmers on the new ideas and technologies.
Praxis footprints	Apart from the facilitation skills and the PRA tools, Sara trained the PTD teams on Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation and we added the PM&E component to the latter stages of the project.

Hopes and fears Up until 2016, there was a growing country-and sector-wide demand for participatory training and mentoring. More significantly, some of the individuals and teams trained would show genuine perseverance in adopting a participatory approach to their work with local communities. Apart from Robert Chambers' visit in 1997 and the PRAXIS trainings, this has probably been the most important driving force for very fulfilling periods of good participatory practice.

Optimistically, teams like ours have added value to the spread of participatory approaches. We have supported meaningful participatory work in the field and in some organisations. We have encouraged and facilitated self-reflective processes, with promising signs of change in professional mindsets. Also, we have contributed to the documentation of good field experiences and the publication of literature on PRA and participation.

Looking back at the timeline, though, there has been a visible fall in in-depth fieldwork and in the demand for

extensive training and coaching since 2020, and this could reflect the wavering level of patience and resources afforded to participatory capacity development. It is difficult for local organisations to access training and mentoring, and local teams intent on doing intensive participatory fieldwork are finding it more challenging to elicit support and endorsement for their projects. This is not to mention the long-winded negotiations that repeatedly end with no results, thus seeping good practitioners of their motivation and limited resources.

Many of the organisations that have commissioned our work have failed to follow-up on the activities and changes, leading to a gradual fading of any impact. The approaches and terminology have entered government plans and discourse, but real and sustained participatory practice is still too reliant on individuals who might move or retire. More worryingly, there is a miserly reluctance to invest in developing and keeping good participatory practitioners.



Seyed Babak Moosavi Nejad

Seyed Babak Moosavi Nejad's PRA story started with using the tools in rural areas in Golestan, Lorestan, Khorasan and Hamedan. This was after Robert Chambers visited the Rural Research Centre (RRC) in 1997. Soon after, four members of RRC, including Babak, participated in the inaugural PRAXIS thematic workshops in Ranchi. This was the catalyzer for the RRC team to begin training and advising GOs and NGOs on adopting PRA.

Sara Bagheri

Sara Bagheri had been working on urban economics and environmental training since 2006, before focusing on facilitating participatory processes with local communities in rural and urban areas. She participated in the 'Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation' Workshop by Praxis in 2017.



Babak and Sara have worked together since 2010, more and more as a freelance team focusing mainly on coaching facilitator teams and enhancing individual and institutional capacity for participatory change. Their last 'big' project was coaching the PTD teams around Lake Urmia, culminating in the publication of a Farsi PTD guide book in 2023. Babak and Sara are currently supervising the translation of Robert Chambers' *Revolutions in Development Inquiry*, facilitating a reflection-cum-team development process with a kindergarten's teaching staff, and negotiating a pilot project with a charity group on the use of PRA tools for needs assessment and planning with beneficiary communities in East Azerbaijan.



Key Takeaways

- Despite initial enthusiasm for participatory approaches in Iran, there has been a decline in in-depth fieldwork and training demand since 2020, partly due to resource constraints and lack of follow-up by commissioning organisations.
- Use of PRA led to significant changes, such as improved collaboration between local communities and government bodies, and a shift in the role of farmers from mere recipients of aid to active experimenters and decision-makers.
- The sustainability of participatory practices in Iran currently hinges on individual practitioners rather than institutional support—highlighting the urgent need to institutionalize participatory approaches to ensure long-term, systemic impact.

Criticality of Institutional Support: Building the Case for PRA with a Sceptical Team

Sanjukta Moorthy shares her experiences of advocating for the use of participatory methods in monitoring and evaluation and the challenges in creating an enabling environment for the use of PRA. She attended the online edition of TheWorkshop in 2021

It can be a struggle to get a team to try a new methodology for monitoring and evaluation (M&E), especially when it costs more, takes longer, and involves more work. Demonstrating the various whys takes time before you can even begin to design a truly inclusive PRA process that is properly localised. This case study examines my work in bringing the card sorting approach to a project whose information is protected for privacy reasons.

I work in the non-profit sector and social businesses as an M&E consultant. Part of my work also involves building more inclusive organisations for whom I built a Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion programme. In my experience, when done right, participatory approaches strengthen the organisation overall with inclusion efforts that go far beyond the programme or M&E departments.

A few years ago, I worked with a global feminist NGO that wanted to measure their work with a specific group of marginalised rural people in various countries. I proposed a method to replace their existing central system of questions translated from English, which formed online surveys or telephone interviews, and which were not developed with the community – meaning the metrics may not have been

as relevant to the most important people affected. Convincing my client of a fresh perspective alone took me three months of ‘advocacy’, so one lesson learned is for all practitioners to prepare for a long road ahead.

We wanted a better understanding of the women’s realities and priorities around which interventions would be built. The organisation was considering work to tackle public narratives around this group of people, and wanted to assess the changes that they had helped facilitate around social stigma. In such a space, bringing in a creative, multi-sensory tool open to whatever level of engagement people feel comfortable with can be invaluable in building trust between community members and national NGOs. Local NGO staff applied the ‘card sorting’ tool in multiple languages to engage more organically with communities that may be more naturally shy to share their perspectives or need encouragement to express their opinions.

Teams were given a central brief that outlined the overall goals and how the card sorting would help evaluate the strategic plan. We asked each facilitator to design their activity according to their cultural and linguistic expertise so that this new activity would not follow previous models of a central system

implemented by local teams. We conducted training for anyone unfamiliar with the approach and remained available for support, leaving the bulk of the power (and work!) to teams working directly with communities.

We noticed that the community repeated ideas year after year and hadn't mentioned any more profound changes they had observed around public narratives. This could be due to the wrong questions or data being asked, or perhaps the strategic approach to narratives needed an upgrade. The card sorting showed us that it was the latter, and we identified two new programmatic focus areas. In this case, demonstrating to the client the need for continued engagement with PRA. However, the process took much longer than anticipated and required rounds of ideation with local partners and donors.

The entire process took eight months—far longer than anticipated—because I assumed the value of PRA would be obvious. However, for organisations rooted in traditional evaluation methods, the value of participatory approaches is often not understood. This underscored the need to actively demonstrate and communicate PRA's relevance and impact from the outset.

Once the senior leadership and programmatic teams supported the idea those who worked with communities and the M&E teams were quick to help with the concept and understood, specific approaches and tools. The training served as a foundation to



When done right, participatory approaches strengthen the organisation overall...

ensure that we were on the same page regarding the assessment's overall goals and to build rapport among the team.

One of the biggest hurdles to overcome was the additional costs and time involved in using the card sorting tool in a localised way. Translating a central document, extracting information, and speaking to local staff is much faster and does not need rounds of feedback, validation, or sense-making. Convincing people to change this approach using the argument of 'it's more equitable this way' does little when your client depends on donor funds to operate and, therefore, has budget limitations.

PRA can also be disruptive to peoples' time. Finding the appropriate people from the community committed to the exercise and getting a representative sample rather than the most outspoken voices can be challenging without financial compensation.

With time and demonstrating the wide-reaching uses of participatory lenses, I assured the client and community of the mutual benefits of thoroughly thinking through this activity's results. It took some time to build trust between both groups to assure the community that their investment would help the organisation build better work, which, at the very least, would be informed by their expertise and values.



Sanjukta Moorthy

Sanjukta Moorthy is a monitoring and evaluation and DEI consultant who helps the non-profit sector design meaningful projects with their communities and partners, and measure their impact innovatively. She works exclusively with participatory, decolonised, intersectional, and inclusive. Her work reflects on the role of power and history. It is grounded in and centres our communities' context and expertise.

Sanjukta provides bespoke technical support, skill building, and workshops. She brings cross-cutting expertise from journalism and the ethical fashion industry and also supports organisations with Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. The SMC Group also creates bespoke tools and processes freely to break the elitist paywall they normally hide behind.



Key Takeaways

- *Gaining support from senior leadership was crucial for the success of the new approach, fostering collaboration among various teams.*
- *Engaging a representative sample of the community can be difficult without financial incentives, highlighting the need for careful participant selection.*
- *Building trust between the community and the organisation is essential for ensuring that participatory methods yield meaningful outcomes and that community voices are valued.*
- *Inflexible donor funding often restricts use of appropriate approaches like PRA*

Balancing Lived Reality with Organisational Scope: Navigating Community-Centred Advocacy with Women's Groups

Shreya Sen shares her experiences of the transformative power of participatory approaches in community-led development work, highlighting challenges and strategies for success

As an intersectional feminist and human rights practitioner with over ten years of experience in the development sector, my work has always been centered around supporting and amplifying grassroots efforts. I've had the privilege of being exposed to social movements from a young age, including those advocating for sex workers' rights, right to food, and queer feminist movements. These experiences shaped my ideology and the work I have done since then.

Throughout my career, I have focused on working with community-centred organisations and local movements, aligning their advocacy goals and helping fulfill them in any way possible. For example, I have developed training modules for children to prevent sexual abuse and integrated gender sensitive literature into medical textbooks for the MBBS curriculum. For many years, I was working on implementing social justice initiatives, simplifying laws and policies, empowering communities to access entitlements and partner with government support systems. I have now co-founded an organisation called Zariya with some of my peers. At Zariya, we provide end-to-end services for grassroots organisations, helping them with fundraising, strategic goals, advocacy, and mapping. Our approach has always been community-first.

In 2017, I had the opportunity to attend

TheWorkshop organised by Praxis in Jaipur. It was a transformative experience to be in a space with people from different organisations, using participatory tools and facilitative practices in various contexts. I attended the module on Participatory Methods and Approaches, while my colleague focused on Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation. We exchanged notes and got excited about the possibilities and potential of these tools.



It was a transformative experience to be in a space with people from different organisations, using participatory tools and facilitative practices in various contexts. My colleague and I attended two modules. We exchanged notes and got excited by the potential of these tools

What I appreciated most about TheWorkshop were the conversations that took place alongside the hands-on exercises. We discussed the significance of the tools, their history, and how they have been applied in different contexts. It was inspiring to witness TheWorkshop's emphasis on reflecting the wisdom and knowledge of communities in reports and overcoming language and cultural barriers.

One of the most valuable takeaways from TheWorkshop for me, was the prioritisation tool. This tool helped us better understand what was truly important to the communities we worked with and challenged our preconceived notions. It allowed us to have meaningful conversations and negotiations with communities, shaping our advocacy efforts and collaborations.

Using these tools, we were able to redefine our advocacy strategies, collaborating with other organisations and government entities. We documented different advocacy approaches, including engaging with local government workers and informal grievance filing methods, and even recommended their recognition as legitimate forms of advocacy.

This journey has been transformative for me personally and professionally, affirming the importance of community-led approaches and the power of participatory tools. By centering communities and prioritising their needs, we can make a significant impact in the pursuit of social justice and human rights.

Reflecting on my experiences working within a community-led approach, I recognise the intricate challenges that arise when aligning organisational objectives with community priorities.

One significant hurdle I encountered was the delicate balance between the organisation's scope of work and the genuine needs expressed by the community. It became apparent that societal norms often influenced what



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communities deemed as their top priorities. For instance, while maternal health and sexual and reproductive health rights were deemed essential from an organisational standpoint, conversations with women revealed a primary need to focus on issues such as securing pensions for their parents, ensuring quality education for their children, or addressing unfair labour practices affecting their husbands. As an organisation, it becomes important to understand this dynamic and determine where to draw the line between the issues you can support the community with and those you cannot.

Sustaining community-led action poses challenges. It can be unclear who is responsible for driving the progress – the organisation or the community. There may come a point where the organisation needs to step in and take the lead when the community faces competing priorities. Factors such as day-to-day challenges and external circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic can make it difficult for the community to prioritise certain initiatives. Negotiating this balance and determining when to take charge while

ensuring community involvement can be an ongoing challenge.

In our work, we made a point of having candid conversations with community members about what was feasible, what was not, and why certain constraints existed. We strived to maintain transparency by sharing budget allocations and demonstrating how the funds were being utilised. We made it clear what we could offer and what was beyond our capacity. We also actively listened to the community to explore alternative means of support beyond financial assistance. This approach fostered a sense of genuine collaboration and support, rather than a transactional relationship based solely on monetary exchange.

Supporting grassroots and community-level organising went beyond financial incentives. Our team provided end to end assistance with accessing critical social security, facilitated partnerships for community members with government departments, and offered recognition and validation for their work. We organised events to publicly acknowledge the contributions of women advocating for their community, respecting the sacrifices they made in the face of familial opposition and time constraints. Acknowledging their efforts within the larger community was important in cultivating a sense of respect and validation for their work.

Utilising participatory tools and methodologies has been integral to our approach. We emphatically relied on tools such as community mapping, which proved invaluable in identifying

issues related to access to resources such as ration shops and sanitation facilities. We also incorporated body mapping exercises to address occupational health hazards and daily mapping for various purposes.

Our approach, overall, was centered on prioritising participatory processes and fostering a less transactional relationship with communities. By employing these methods and engaging openly with community members, we strived to offer genuine and sustainable support beyond mere financial transactions.

In my experience, engaging in political spaces or issues using participatory processes comes with certain risks and challenges. When communities choose to use these tools, they must navigate a delicate balance. On one hand, participatory methods allow for collective action and can bring about long-lasting change. On the other hand, the slow nature of these processes and the need for sustained engagement can make it difficult to achieve immediate results.

Engaging in politically sensitive spaces automatically puts you in a certain level of focus and can lead to potential risks. To address this, we implemented risk mapping exercises to identify potential hazards and strategies for mitigation as suggested by the community themselves. It was crucial to tailor the strategies to the community's specific circumstances.

Another important aspect we considered was the prioritisation of

issues. We assessed the risks involved and looked for opportunities to start with less risky endeavors that could help us gain familiarity with the space and build momentum. Informed consent was also crucial. We made sure all participants were aware of the purpose, risks, and potential outcomes of their involvement. This transparency was key in maintaining trust and ensuring everyone understood the implications of their participation.



Engaging in political spaces or issues using participatory processes comes with certain risks and challenges... We made sure all participants were aware of the purpose, risks, and potential outcomes of their involvement.

Participatory methods are increasingly being recognised as important in the philanthropy and nonprofit space internationally. Ideas such as systems thinking, design thinking, and human-centered design all revolve around the core principle of participation. These concepts are gaining traction and relevance. However, the future of these methods in India remains uncertain due to increasing legal obligations that make it challenging for smaller organisations and philanthropies to work effectively. These concepts are gaining traction and relevance. Despite these obstacles, participatory tools are increasingly considered essential in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors.

In my previous roles, I had the opportunity to implement and integrate participatory tools in our programme. Being in charge of the implementation allowed me to incorporate these approaches and tools at every step, from team meetings to various entry points. We heavily relied on these tools to drive our work.

Now, in my current role, I focus more on building support systems for community-led organisations and engaging with different stakeholders. I help organisations map their strategic goals, advocacy goals, safety measures, and fundraising goals. While I am not directly involved in implementing the participatory tools, I support organisations in utilising them, such as through training programmes. I have also taken on more facilitation work, which has given me the chance to explore a variety of participatory approaches. I have been learning tools like ‘World Cafe’, which further expand the possibilities for applying participatory approaches in different contexts.

Before encountering Praxis, I already had a value system aligned with participatory approaches. However, Praxis showed me how to actually live and implement these values. It was a liberating experience to discover that we can genuinely involve communities in decision-making, capturing their ideas in a fair and inclusive manner. Praxis has been a catalyst for my journey, and TheWorkshop was

instrumental in shaping my perspective. It taught me that innovation and out-of-the-box thinking depend on the individuals in the room, the right questions, and the appropriate tools. By creating the right conditions, meaningful innovation will naturally emerge.

I believe we are at a critical moment where participatory approaches are gaining widespread attention and focus

on collaboration is increasing. While these concepts have become fashionable buzzwords, practitioners like Praxis have been meaningfully engaging in this work for many years. As the interest in participatory tools grows, there is a need to build resources to address the challenges and uncertainties that the sector and the practitioners are encountering being actively engaged in this space of social change.



Shreya Sen

Shreya is a feminist and human rights practitioner with over 15 years of experience in South Asia, focused on community-led advocacy in healthcare, education, and gender-based violence. She currently runs Zariya Collaborative, which uses a community-first approach to provide end-to-end services for grassroots organisations. And also contributes to activist collectives fostering support networks and safe spaces. Shreya is an Alumnus of TheWorkshop, 2017 edition.

Written as shared with the Praxis team.



Key Takeaways

- Balancing organisational scope with community needs, sustaining community-led action, and navigating politically sensitive spaces require transparent communication and risk assessment.
- Utilisation of participatory tools like community mapping and body mapping exercises strengthens community engagement, driving genuine and sustainable support.
- There is a critical need to build resources and institutions like Praxis address challenges faced by practitioners

Traversing the Journey Between Use of PRA Tools To Genuine Participation: The North-East Experience

Syed Ruhul Kuddus critically differentiates between tick-box participation and the genuine use of participatory approaches for social change through his experience of working in the north-eastern states over the past ten years.

I joined Praxis in 2012 and was there for two years, before I moved on to explore development work in the north-eastern states of India. At Praxis, everything was about PRA. We used participatory tools in much of our research and the idea of participation was core to our work.

At the workshop, which I attended in Kerala in 2013, I was oriented to using participatory methods in a wide range of contexts including how to use PRA in monitoring and evaluation.

One experience that I recall from the workshop was when I was accompanying an international participant outside the campus to sort out an administrative issue. When we returned from the trip, she asked with genuine confusion "All women in the hoardings are fair, but I don't see fair people around me". That made me think deeply about how little we observe the realities around us and require an external lens to trigger critical thought. It also changed the way I started observing things around me.

In the past ten years, I moved back to my hometown in Assam and worked with organisations in different parts of the North-East. I was not able to use participatory tools for data collection on a regular basis but what I steadfastly integrated into my work ethos was my attitude towards community work. I

have also consciously and deliberately tried to impart the philosophy of participation to my colleagues.

What I have encountered over the years within the development space is the sentiment that 'we are the experts, we know best and the community, villagers don't know'. While we were exposed to this through our session on the ABC of Participation, I have seen this during my work, too. We expect that when we share our knowledge with the communities we work with, they will transform magically.

In my current capacity as an area manager for the Centre for Microfinance & Livelihood, an implementation arm of Tata Trusts, I have the opportunity to train my team in following a participatory approach to the work and also to cover the gaps in the programme based on my past learning and experience.

Though I don't work directly with communities anymore, I frequently visit villages where my colleagues are implementing projects. Community mobilisation and institution building are our key areas of engagement. We have found value in creating an enabling environment for the participation of communities. When we break down the barriers of knowledge hierarchy, and try to learn alongside the community, there

is a lot of acceptance from them.

While there are several verticals that our programme works on, such as health, WaSH, nutrition, I find that the engagement of the livelihood vertical is much more intense in comparison with the others. I credit this to our use of participatory approaches in designing and implementing the programme.

Ours is a five-year programme that started in 2017 and got extended. It is a livestock and horticulture-based programme. Unlike the previous programme in the same geography, the rationale for this programme came from the ground.

During the needs assessment process, we used participatory tools such as problem analysis and daily activity chart to identify the challenges and opportunities with the community and their key priorities. The daily activity chart, for instance, highlighted the current distribution of work in the communities and helped them identify whether there will be manpower to execute the programme.

We used the tools in an unbiased way in a strong sample that covered the geography. Through this process, the community was able to critically analyse the kind of support that they required from the donors. In fact, livestock was a component that came from through the community interaction.

A very powerful tool is the Daily Activity Chart. By using it, women and men acknowledged the amount of work both genders do and brought about instant

recognition and mutual respect. While the unit of implementation are households, 100 per cent of our primary stakeholders are women.

Our work follows a service delivery model and not a rights-based approach. However, the changes that using participatory methodologies can bring about in power dynamics within the community are significant. Initially, some women reported facing conflict at home when they came to attend meetings. Over time, with their increasing contribution to household income, and their participation in the meetings, the dynamics changed. Women who were initially shy to speak in public became very vocal.



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In our interactions, especially with a large women community resource person base, women take a stand in their households, especially when they have to negotiate decisions with their husbands or in-laws.

There is one particular memory of a woman whose husband was suffering from a neurological illness which required medical treatment and expenses. She single-handedly managed the healthcare needs of her husband, challenging the traditional gender role

within the households. He is currently fit and fine and the woman has become a leader in her community institution. People look at her and acknowledge that a woman can also provide access to healthcare for the family and manage expenses.

In the areas I work in, across five states in the North-East - Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal and Tripura - there are a lot of development projects, including those implementing by the government. However, they all go to the field with the perspective that 'they know and the community does not know'. This translates into how communities perceive projects. They also respond to this mentality and go to receive a service.

There are already several power dynamics inherent. When someone goes from a city in a vehicle to their villages, they tend to agree vocally with any idea that is suggested to them out of respect to the visitor. However, in reality, they may not agree with them at all. In our experience too, we have understood the importance of building trust by respecting them and their knowledge. We have also recognised the importance of understanding the power dynamics within the group. If there are 30 women in a meeting, they do not form a monolith. Power dynamics operates through political affiliations, economic differences, association with panchayats and zilla parishads, and much more. You find those with such invisible power dominating the discussion and affirming to visitors that their view of reality is indeed the reality. We acknowledge this

dynamic and try to create a space where everyone's voices are heard. This makes a lot of difference in creating a space where difference people can share their perspectives.

Over the years, I have realised that there is a huge gap and need when it comes to the use of participatory methods and approaches in the North-East. From government schemes to civil society interventions, everyone talks about participation but administration of participatory tools is not done properly. Use of participatory methods is mandatory in many places, but how effective it is remains debatable. Barring a few exceptions, most talk about it but don't practice it in the right way. There was a watershed development programme where much hue and cry was raised about the use of PRA across several villages. However, the exercises were done in a very short and hurried timeline. So, PRA became more of a tick-box.

Those who plan and decide programmes may not understand the possible impact participation can bring. Hence even when the researchers may be trained, the value of participation is missing. PRA tools in themselves cannot bring actual participation or community ownership. Besides this, there are several training gaps that I have observed. Trainings themselves are top-down and focus more on the tools rather than the spirit of participation. Thus, it is very important that PRA is rescued from this check-list mentality that it is falling prey to.



Syed Ruhul Kuddus

Ruhul is from the north-eastern part of India. With a master's degree in Development Studies, he manages multiple project teams in the livelihood sector. He is passionate about fostering social change through participatory approaches, believing that sustainable development can only be achieved when communities are actively involved in the process. Outside of work, he enjoys traveling and fishing, which allows him to connect with new places and people.

Written as shared with the Praxis team.



Key Takeaways

- The mere use of participatory tools does not guarantee genuine participation that can bring about transformation. There has to be right intent and attitude along with knowledge of tools.
- Often, very good participatory researchers may not succeed in using participatory methods in their work because they may lack an enabling environment in the form of support from their organisations. This happens when those in positions of power within organisations do not have faith or knowledge in the impact participation can bring
- In the North-East, barring a few exceptions, most practitioners believe they know better than the community.

Unpacking Participation Across Geographies and Contexts: Prioritising Process Over Tools

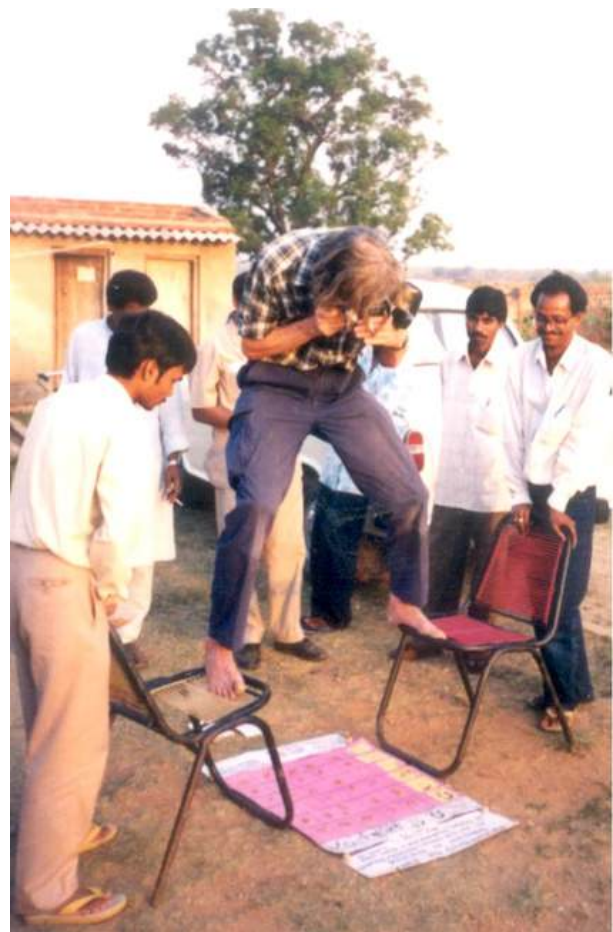
Colin Fernandes shares his thoughts on navigating diverse cultural contexts and evolving methodologies, underscoring the importance of community empowerment, active engagement, and adapting for effective outcomes in sustainable development.

The core area of my work is disaster risk reduction and addressing the impacts of climate change and I have worked in South and South-East Asia over the last two decades. Disaster risk reduction involves helping communities understand and address their risks to natural hazards such as storms or cyclones. Similarly, in terms of climate change, it is crucial to make communities aware of how changes in climate systems manifests in their areas. Often, communities may not directly experience these impacts or may struggle to connect the dots between the causes and effects of climate change.

I have been using participatory methods in my work for a very long time, even before I attended TheWorkshop. Yet, the learnings from this workshop that I attended in 2007 in Hyderabad have stayed with me over the years. It was a valuable experience that reinforced my commitment to participatory work and community empowerment. TheWorkshop emphasised the importance of re-educating oneself, listening to the communities and working with them by handing over the stick to let them lead the way.

For me, the highlight of TheWorkshop was the session facilitated by Robert Chambers. His expertise in participatory

approaches made him the marquee speaker. Robert's passion, energy and interactive teaching style reflected a valuable pedagogical approach. His style of avoiding PowerPoint presentations and focusing on activities and reflection resonated with me a lot. It is something I have carried forward in my own work. Other sessions on participatory research and community engagement were also insightful. I still use some of



Robert Chambers' legendary energy and passion captivated one and all (Praxis)

those activities and resources I learnt in trainings to help teams understand participatory approaches, even today.



Participatory approaches are not just about the tools and outputs but also about empowering communities through the process.

By bringing people together and creating a platform for knowledge exchange, we enable them to question, raise issues, and take action.

Another significant memory from the workshop was the cultural diversity among the participants. People from various countries and sectors came together, sharing ideas and experiences on how they implemented participatory approaches in their work. This diversity added richness to TheWorkshop and created a learning environment where we all left with a broader perspectives.

Participatory approaches have enabled me to see the interconnectedness of various factors and understand the bigger picture. It has made me realise that isolated solutions may not address the root cause of the problem, as issues often stem from multiple sources. Through participatory exercises, we can analyse and delve deeper into the different factors contributing to the problem.

In fact, this defines my approach to working with communities on disaster risk reduction. We use participatory tools such as dream mapping, stakeholder analysis, and resource

mapping to bring people together to identify, understand, analyse, and take action towards addressing risks.

Similarly, in understanding climate change, too, we use participatory tools such as seasonal maps and trend analysis to help communities visualise the impact of climate change on their environment and daily lives.

For example, in Aceh, Indonesia, we conducted a trend analysis and discovered that fish catches were decreasing in shallower depths as fish stock was moving to deeper depths of the sea. This insight led to discussions on how to address the challenge and find solutions, such as providing larger boats to reach deeper fishing areas and relevant systems to support them. These exercises not only addressed food security and livelihood concerns but also highlighted the need for those causing climate change to take responsibility and mitigate the impact of their activities.

Participatory approaches are not just about the tools and outputs but also about empowering communities through the process. By bringing people together and creating a platform for knowledge exchange, we enable them to question, raise issues, and take action.

Over the years, I have used these approaches in a wide range of geopolitical contexts. This has taught me the importance of adapting the tools to effectively engage with different communities and in varied contexts, being aware of limitations imposed by the local realities.

This is especially true in South Asia, where politics is deeply ingrained in society, comprehending the operating context is an integral part of the process. A nuanced understanding of when to push, pull, or exercise caution is essential as each country presents a unique context that requires tailored approaches. A simple example demonstrates this. In several Southeast Asian countries I have worked in, women have better representation and spaces for participation. But in countries like Bangladesh, the social dynamics differ and may call for separate group discussions with women to hear their perspectives.

Similarly, while India may provide democratic spaces such as gram sabhas¹ for people to question authority and engage in discussions, this scenario was entirely different in Myanmar, particularly for the marginalised Rohingya community. The Rohingyas, confined to limited spaces with restricted access to information and little or no space to voice their concerns, face significant challenges in discussing their vulnerabilities. Understanding the specific political landscape and actors is fundamental when conducting participatory approaches as an external person, it gives us scope for negotiations.

The political environment in which we operate determines the way of engagement. In Vietnam, for instance, the political space is quite regulated / has limited room for public opposition or debate and decision-making is limited to the provincial government. During my work there, I realised the

significance of involving government representatives throughout the process. Similar restrictions were evident in China, where it is necessary to adapt your words to the operating context without diluting the essence of the purpose of participatory approaches to drive empowerment of communities.

Working within a restricted environment can be challenging. The fear of repercussions and power imbalances often hinder community members from freely sharing information. It becomes crucial to create small openings for hope to seep through, allowing communities to question and challenge the status quo without causing disruption. It's a delicate balance of finding ways to empower communities while respecting the limitations of their reality.

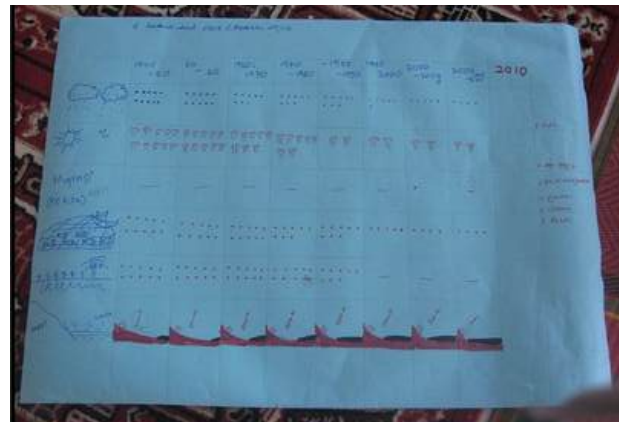
However, the social impact sector, has become more 'professionalised' over the years. This has led to a detachment from the communities one works with. While implementing monitoring and evaluation systems is crucial, if it becomes too mechanical and distant from the community, it defeats the purpose. Participatory approaches help to eliminate this gap and identify ways of working together and designing programmes based on community needs.

It seems that we, as professionals, are becoming increasingly project-driven, transforming participatory methods into extractive processes. We tend to focus solely on generating information for our own needs or for the project. This shift in perspective undermines the true

purpose of participatory approaches.

It is fascinating to witness the adaptability of techniques in different contexts. I recall an experience in the mountainous areas of Nepal, where we used chalk and colour to create a resource map for a village. This method worked well because it allowed flexibility and easy modifications on the ground. On the other hand, in South-East Asian countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines we use transparent sheets of Google Maps. We use digital tools, such as GIS mapping or open street mapping, especially in urban contexts. However, the focus is always on building social cohesion by bringing people together, encouraging questions and discussions. In urban areas, mapping faces challenges because of the high population density. In medium-sized cities with around 18-20 lakh people, we use open street mapping with an emphasis on fusing technology and human input. After the initial mapping, we involve the larger community to fill in gaps.

It is important to recognise that there are human aspects that may not be captured through technology alone. For example, human interface is necessary to determine broken taps, damaged infrastructure, or garbage dumps or even to effectively capture perspectives and experiences. By involving the community, these valuable insights are incorporated into digital maps, creating a more holistic representation of the area. In this process, collaboration between technology and human perspective is crucial. One cannot replace the other, as they both



A climate trend analysis done with the community in Banda Aceh

contribute unique perspectives and information.

Incorporating Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methodologies in disaster risk reduction and climate change initiatives raises questions about how those in positions of power respond to these approaches.

At their core, participatory approaches empower communities by involving them in decision-making processes and promoting sustainable development. Using participatory approaches has also contributed to my journey as a researcher. With each exercise I undertake with communities or stakeholders, I learn, change, and improve. My analytical and facilitative skills continually develop, enhancing the overall process. My experience of working with communities has taught me the importance of active listening and understanding subtle messages that may not be explicitly expressed. Learning by doing has been fundamental to my growth, strengthening my problem-solving skills and enabling me to engage with teams and communities more effectively.



Colin Fernandes

Colin Fernandes is an Alumnus of TheWorkshop from 2007. He started his career in Disaster Relief with ActionAid in 2006 and currently works with the American Red Cross as a Regional Preparedness Advisor, based out of Bangkok, Thailand. He has spent 17+ years working in Disaster Risk Reduction and is deeply passionate about this area of work.

Written as shared with the Praxis team.



Key Takeaways

- Participatory approaches is not just about the tools and outputs but about the process, which can be empowering for communities
- A growing trend of ‘professionalism’ in the development sector—often expressed as emotional detachment—has created distance between practitioners and communities. Tools like PRA can help bridge this gap, enabling professionals to reconnect and engage meaningfully with the people they serve.
- It is important for the facilitators to understand the socio-political context in which the research is being conducted as no two countries or societies have similar realities
- Working within a restricted environment can be challenging because of the fear of repercussions and power imbalances. It becomes crucial to create small openings for hope to seep through, allowing communities to question and challenge the status quo without causing disruption
- Technology can be a great enabler, but it is important to bring in the human element to strengthen perspectives and understanding of issues

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