

Methodological rigour in assessing participatory development

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Abstract

There have been few rigorous assessments of the effectiveness of participatory processes for natural resource management. In Bangladesh an approach known as Participatory Action Plan Development (PAPD) has been developed and applied. By combining problem identification and solution analysis by separate stakeholder groups with plenary sessions it is claimed to result in consensus and more effective community based management. Methodological issues in assessing the effectiveness of such development are discussed and good practice illustrated. Under the same project there were sites where PAPD had been used and others without its use so a comparative assessment could be made. However, for an appropriate assessment it is important to identify clear testable hypotheses regarding the expected benefits, appropriate measures, and other factors which may affect or confound the outcome. The paper illustrates how participatory assessment involving both individual opinions and focus groups can be systematically recorded, quantified and used with other data in statistical analysis. By using statistical modelling methods at an appropriate level of aggregation and controlling for other factors, benefits from PAPD were found to be significant. The systematic approaches and practices recommended from this example can be applied in similar situations to test the effectiveness of participatory processes using participatory assessments.

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1. Introduction

Although the literature on participatory research and development (Chambers et al., 1989; Gonsalves et al., 2005) continues to bring in new ideas and methods for exploring research and development agendas aimed at improving the livelihoods of the poor, there is little documented evidence to demonstrate that any new approach is more effective than a previously used approach. Part of the difficulty arises because researchers have difficulty in bridging the qualitative–quantitative divide and are unaware of how they can produce a good evidence-base to back-up any claims on the benefits of their recommended approach. Although Holland and Campbell (2005) provide a number of papers illustrating methods used to combine

qualitative and quantitative approaches, there is a general lack of examples of studies where good statistical evidence of the effectiveness of participation is given to back up research conclusions. Where used, the techniques are often quite simplistic, relying on descriptive statistical summaries and presentations, or on non-parametric approaches (Sprenst, 1993). Whilst there are occasions where these alone would suffice, there are many other occasions where sampling aspects and data analysis methods are limited even though standards of rigour have been applied to other aspects of the participatory research process. Recognition of these aspects can lend better credibility to research findings by bringing into the analysis advanced procedures such as statistical modelling. There is therefore a need to include, in the social science literature, examples that clearly set out and illustrate the methodological steps needed. This will encourage better recognition and adoption of systematic approaches to study design, data collection and data analysis in social research.

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In this paper, we discuss methodological issues needed to address this gap and illustrate the process using a case-study from Bangladesh. This illustration concerns the use of an approach named Participatory Action Plan Development (PAPD) for systematically building consensus among stakeholders in natural resource management that has been developed and used to support and initiate community-based fisheries management (Barr and Dixon, 2001; Sultana and Thompson, 2004). The method has been promoted for uptake and adoption through a series of projects funded by the UK Department for International Development's (DFID) Natural Resources Systems Programme (NRSP). It has been used successfully in Bangladesh and Vietnam. Sultana and Thompson (2004) discuss the process in the context of building social capital through consensus and study its effectiveness in terms of indicators of social capital.

The overall effectiveness of the PAPD process has been demonstrated by Sultana and Abeyasekera (submitted for publication). Here we discuss the statistical issues involved and approaches undertaken in the process evaluation, highlighting each step needed to establish evidence of the effectiveness of a participatory process, here PAPD, using sound statistical techniques. The lessons have wider application in the context of adding statistical rigour to data arising from participatory field exercises.

2. The PAPD methodology

Since this paper aims to illustrate a methodological approach that can be used to assess a newly developed participatory approach, we first provide a brief outline of the PAPD methodology.

The PAPD approach was first developed in Bangladesh for building consensus among diverse stakeholders using natural resources in the floodplains through two projects supported by DFID (Barr et al., 2000; Barr and Dixon,

2001). It has since been applied in a range of situations, and of particular interest for the research was its use in the second phase of the Community-Based Fisheries Management Project (CBFM-2), supported by DFID and implemented by the WorldFish Centre working with several NGO partners and the Department of Fisheries (WorldFish Center, 2003). There the NGOs worked with communities to develop participatory fishery management, in some sites using PAPD and in other sites without using PAPD.

PAPD recognises the varied nature of livelihoods dependent on natural resources (floodplains) and aims to be inclusive of these diverse interests. The methodology involves a series of linked local workshops where different stakeholders participate separately and then together to develop a management plan for the common natural resources they use (Barr and Dixon, 2001). The process is designed to ensure that poor people's interests are voiced and represented on at least an equal footing with more powerful stakeholders.

Fig. 1 (based on Sultana and Thompson, 2004) summarises the steps in PAPD and how this phase fits into the overall process of establishing community based natural resource management. Stages four to eight involve participatory workshops with separate stakeholder groups and in plenary, and form the PAPD proper. The principle is that members of any stakeholder category, but especially the disadvantaged (such as fishers in Bangladesh) are better able to express their views separate from other (dominant) categories of people, but that this will fail to develop a shared understanding of common problems and possible win-win solutions (consensus building). Participatory planning just through multi-stakeholder plenary workshops is unlikely to give the poor a fair opportunity, or to result in an understanding of differences or common problems. Therefore, PAPD is structured to have two rounds of divergent and convergent sessions. Through this, solutions that address problems shared by all stakeholders are found.

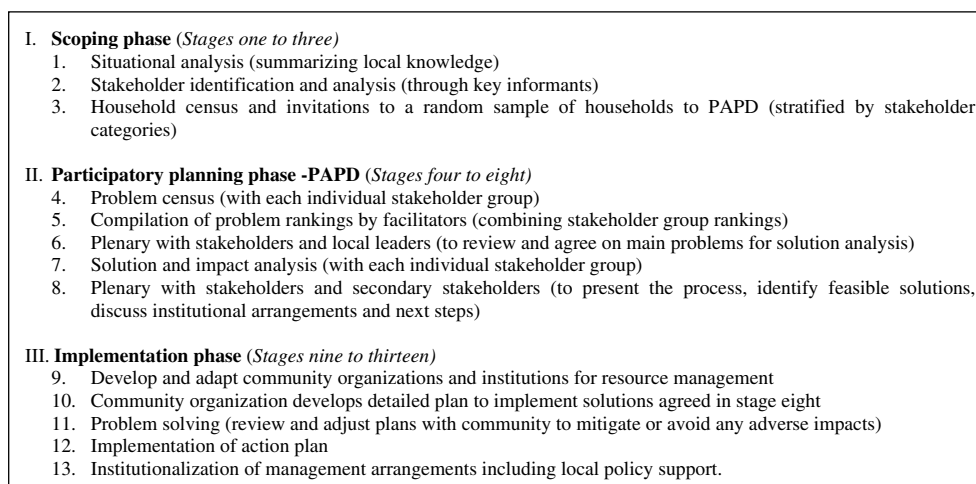


Fig. 1. PAPD within the CBFM process.

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