

IDS Working Paper 180

**Winning spaces: participatory methodologies in rural
processes in Mexico**

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Summary

This study examines the development and impact of participatory methodologies (PMs) in Mexico, and forms part of the wider research programme *Pathways to Participation*. The material for this paper was gathered from interviews and workshops with practitioners of PMs across Mexico, and includes three case studies drawn from contrasting initiatives promoted by organisations as disparate as research institutes, state and federal government, and the World Bank.

Mexico has a strong and distinctive participatory tradition stretching back to the 1960s, when currents of thought such as liberation theology and Freireian *concientización*, predating the arrival of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in the region, were influential in the development of endogenous PMs. The Mexican version of PRA and other PMs are thus different to those which have been introduced from Anglo Saxon cultures: in Mexican versions, there is greater emphasis on increasing the capacity for critical analysis and personal and social consciousness. These differences are found to contribute to the flexibility and adaptability of PMs and their potential to generate social action and transformation.

Generally, PMs and particularly PRA are found to have theoretical and methodological weaknesses in the Mexican context, in relation to knowledge and respect for rural reality and practices, and recognition of opportunities for its transformation. The study suggests a need to adapt these methods to the political context of conflict and socio-cultural diversity, and to address the challenge of developing an ethical code for implementing participatory processes, and of how to scale up and deepen the achievements of each intervention in the countryside. PRA has been adopted and modified by many practitioners to suit the local context, but the challenge of this modified PRA continues to be finding a balance between respect for the practice, knowledge and institutions of a community, and the use of educational methods that question and challenge injustices in the established order.

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Preface

This working paper is part of a series of papers arising from the *Pathways to Participation* project. The *Pathways to Participation* project was initiated in January 1999 with the aim of taking stock of experience with Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). In the ten years since PRA first began to gain popularity in development, it has come to be used by an enormous range of actors and institutions throughout the globe. Promoted as a common sense, inclusive, accessible and above all “people-centred” approach, PRA has gained currency in diverse circles and given rise to as diverse an array of practices. Yet what “PRA” means to the different people who use, commission and experience it has remained rather opaque. From the generalised promotion of PRA to generalised critiques, there is little of that clarity that Cohen and Uphoff (1980) argued so passionately for at the end of a decade in which participation first entered the mainstream of development practice.

The *Pathways to Participation* project grew out of a linked set of concerns. On the one hand, practitioners had been raising questions about issues of quality, depth and ethics for some years. With the rapid uptake of PRA, these concerns were deepening. On the other, with the multiplication of meanings and practices associated with PRA, it seemed increasingly important to gain a clearer sense of what was being done, as well as what worked, for whom and how. Building on the tradition of critical reflection that is embedded in many participatory methodologies, the *Pathways to Participation* project sought to set the meanings and uses of PRA within the particular contexts in which it is practised and with regard to broader currents in participation in development. As an action research process, the project has sought to catalyse and support processes that share the ultimate goal of deepening reflection in order to identify positive measures that could help enhance the integrity and quality of PRA practice. The variety of activities supported by the project range from collaborative case study research, national and international reflection workshops, networking activities, video and practitioner exchanges.

An initial process of open-ended dialogue with a spectrum of actors engaged in various ways with PRA in three focal countries – Kenya, Nepal and Mexico – formed a preliminary starting point for project activities. Three preliminary, agenda-setting country reflection papers were produced, giving rise to a series of focused case studies which explore different dimensions of participatory practice. Two of these initial reflection papers are reproduced in this working paper series; the case studies are to be produced locally. The third paper is to be published as part of a separate publication drawing together case studies from Mexico. The project also supported in-depth field research that sought to explore in depth the practices associated with PRA as set within particular organisational, cultural and social contexts. Studies in India, the Gambia and Vietnam provided further comparative material. National-level workshops and an international gathering of PRA practitioners served as fora for reflection and debate. The latter has given rise to two publications, a detailed workshop report and a collection of papers reflecting on individual practitioners’ own pathways to

participation, capturing both a diversity of perspectives on PRA and practitioners' views on current and future challenges.

This working paper series presents preliminary materials from the project. It includes an overview of key lessons learnt and their implications for practice, country reflection papers from Kenya and Nepal, and three case studies from Kenya, India and the Gambia. The *Pathways to Participation* project was funded by Sida, DFID and SDC, as part of support to the Participation Programme at IDS. As a collaborative initiative, the project took shape through the involvement of numerous individuals and organisations, who played a vital part in realising project activities and in the processes of reflection that the project helped set in train. While these papers represent some of the formal outputs of the project, the project has given rise to a wealth of informal forms of sharing lessons learnt and reflections on the past, present and future. It is our hope that this project has helped serve as a stimulus for ongoing processes of critical reflection from which so much remains to be learnt.

Acknowledgements

The research and writing of this document has been a truly collaborative effort. Partners included Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, UK; National Institute of Social Development, (INDESOL), part of the Ministry of Social Development, Mexico; Environmental Studies Group (GEA), Mexico; and Education, Culture and Ecology (EDUCE), Mexico. The first round of general information was gathered through interviews during the initial stage of the programme by Sally-Anne Way and Jutta Blauert and at the three regional workshops, organised or supported by core regional practitioners, particularly Gerardo Alatorre. Sally-Anne Way then produced the first draft, writing up the work undertaken in the first phase of the project (October to December 1999), which was translated into Spanish by Claudio Alatorre Frenk and circulated for comments amongst all the participants of that first phase. The current version was supplemented and edited by Xavier Moya García. He has taken the contributions from the three case studies and the fourth workshop, including the main conclusions arrived at in the workshops and the case studies. Further inputs were incorporated by Tajin Fuentes Pangtay, coordinator of the second phase (January to May 2000) Fuentes synthesised the lessons from the case studies and the national workshop, and presented them at the international workshop in the UK in April 2000. A summary of the history of PMs in Mexico was written by Alfonso González Martínez. Eduardo Terrazas Mata developed a map of participatory experiences on CD Rom (see Annex 2). The first full draft was translated by Anna Keene, and a subsequent edition was created by Shoba Ramachandran, Books for Change, Bangalore, India. A Spanish version of the report in book form was published in Mexico in November 2001 with editorial help from Margot Aguilar Rivero (see Annex 2). This final English version of the VEREDAS report was edited and updated by Jo Howard, Beth Harrison and Jethro Pettit (November 2002). Pathways to Participation, Mexico (VEREDAS) Steering Committee was composed of Graciela Arriaga, Jutta Blauert, Tajin Fuentes Pangtay, Sergio García García, Irma Gómez González, Alfonso González Martínez and Xavier Moya.

List of abbreviations and acronyms

CCMSS	Consejo Civil Mexicano para la Silvicultura Social. <i>Mexican Civil Society Council for Social Silviculture</i> : an NGO working on the development of national standards of forestry certification in Mexico and to influence public policy on forestry.
CEMEFI	Centro Mexicano de Filantropía. <i>Mexican Centre of Philanthropy</i> : Mexican NGO working through research and development projects for sustainable development and poverty alleviation.
CERES	Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Económica y Social. <i>Centre of Studies of the Economic and Social Reality</i> : an independent Bolivian social science research institute, working on national issues of development, collaborating with grass-roots organisations as well as providing consultancy services.
CESDER	Centro de Estudios Sociales para el Desarrollo Regional A.C ¹ . <i>Social Studies Centre for Regional Development</i> : an NGO with multiple education and sustainable development activities in the Sierra de Puebla.
CESE	Centro de Estudios Sociales y Ecológicos. <i>Center of Social and Ecological Studies</i> : a Mexican NGO working on environmental issues in campaigning and education, with a history of working with indigenous communities on water and fisheries issues of the Lake of Patzcuaro in Michoacán, its home base.
CESEM	Centro de Servicios Municipales Heriberto Jara A.C. <i>Centre for Municipal Services “Heriberto Jara”</i> . An NGO providing training to grass-roots organisations and local government bodies.
CONPAZ	Coordinación de ONGs por la Paz. <i>Coordination of NGOs working for Peace</i> : based in Chiapas, Mexico, this NGO aims to contribute to the coordination of human rights groups working in the state of Chiapas.
COPLADEMUN	Consejo de Planeación para el Desarrollo Municipal. <i>Planning Council for Municipal Development</i> : by Mexican law this is a multiple-stakeholder body, made up of members from civil, social and governmental sectors, where consultation and assessment of development plans for each municipality take place.

¹ A.C. Asociación Civil, *Civil Association*, is the denomination given to non-governmental organisations.

CREFAL	Centro de Cooperación Regional para la Educación de Adultos en América Latina y el Caribe. <i>Centre of Regional Cooperation for Adult Education in Latin America and the Caribbean.</i> based in Mexico, this NGO is an international organisation associated with the United Nations; it promotes capacity building for educationalists, monitoring and evaluation, research on education and dissemination with private, governmental and civil society organisations.
DISE	Departamento de Investigación de Sistemas y Extensión. <i>Department of Systems and Extension Research.</i> Part of the Faculty of Veterinarian and Zoological Sciences of the Autonomous University of Yucatán, home during the 1990s to the DIP group (Participatory Development and Research).
EDUCE	Educación, Cultura y Ecología A.C. <i>Education, Culture and Ecology.</i> an NGO with micro-regional participatory development actions in the Yucatán Peninsula (Yucatán, Campeche and Quintana Roo), Veracruz and Jalisco.
ERA	Estudios Rurales Ambientales. <i>Environmental Rural Studies:</i> this Mexican NGO, based in Oaxaca, has worked for many years with indigenous community producers for a sustainable forestry management and in participatory planning.
GEA	Grupo de Estudios Ambientales A.C. <i>Environmental Studies Group.</i> an NGO with a long tradition in participatory methodologies and approaches in working with community organisations. GEA works throughout Mexico on environmental and sustainable livelihood projects and policies.
IDS	Institute of Development Studies: at Sussex University, UK.
IEPA	Investigación y Educación Popular Autogestiva A.C. <i>Self-managed Research and Popular Education.</i> an NGO with development and education activities in Yucatán.
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development.
IMDEC	Instituto Mexicano de Desarrollo Comunitario A.C. <i>Mexican Institute for Community Development.</i> NGO devoted to research, systematisation and production of theoretical and methodological materials for use in popular education.
INAH	Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. <i>National Institute of Anthropology and History.</i> government department in charge of anthropological research and custodian of Mexico's archaeological sites.
INCA-RURAL	Instituto Nacional de Capacitación Agrícola. <i>National Agricultural Training Institute.</i> Government body charged with training in agricultural, fisheries and forestry issues in rural areas.
MAC	Misioneros A.C. <i>Missionaries.</i> NGO engaged in endogenous development activities in southern Yucatán.

NGO	Non-governmental organisation: also known as civil organisations or civil institutions. There are more than 2,000 registered in Mexico, of which almost half are working on development issues. In Spanish, described as <i>Asociaciones Civiles</i> and abbreviated as A.C.
PDRAM or PDS	Programa de Desarrollo Productivo Sostenible en Zonas Marginadas de la Huasteca Veracruzana. <i>Sustainable Productive Development Programme for Marginalised areas of the Huasteca region, Veracruz</i> carried out by various government departments and financed by the World Bank, this programme commenced operation in 1997 and continues today.
PPDP	Proyecto Peninsular de Desarrollo Participativo. <i>Peninsular Participatory Development Programme</i> Programme of participatory appraisal and planning carried out in five micro-regions of Yucatán, Campeche and Quintana Roo between 1995–1999.
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PRE	Participatory Rural Evaluation: Translation of the English name for <i>Participatory Rural Appraisal</i> . Coined by GEA, and used in parts of Mexico.
RRA or PRRA	(Participatory) Rapid Rural Appraisal
PRODERS	Programa de Desarrollo Regional Sustentable. <i>Regional Sustainable Development Programme, of the SEMARNAP</i> . The programme aimed to establish partnerships with multiple stakeholders to scale up participatory local planning to regional level, and for inter-institutional responses to regional sustainable development priorities.
SEMARNAP	Secretaría de Medioambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pescadería. <i>Ministry of the Environment, Natural Resources and Fisheries</i>
SAGAR	Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería y Desarrollo Rural. <i>Ministry of Agriculture, Cattle-raising and Rural Development</i>
SEDESOL	Secretaría de Desarrollo Social. <i>Mexican Ministry of Social Development</i>
SEDUVER	Secretaría de Desarrollo Regional Veracruzana. <i>Ministry of Regional Development of Veracruz</i> . Veracruz State government's department in charge of development.
TRL	Tropica Rural Latinoamericana. <i>Latinamerican Rural Tropics</i> : Mexican NGO, supporting small producer organisations in projects seeking to contribute to livelihoods of indigenous communities living in tropical forest regions of the Mexican Peninsula.)
UADY	Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán. <i>Autonomous University of Yucatán</i>
UV	Universidad Veracruzana. <i>Veracruz University</i>
WRI	World Resources Institute

Introduction

In Latin America, participatory methods in education, research and political action have a long tradition going back to the 1960s. Since the 1990s, however, this work has been enriched through contact with the British and US versions of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). In Mexico, as elsewhere, practitioners have been using and appropriating these methods for more than ten years, in activities such as rural development, socio-political organisation, nature conservation, health promotion, and the search for gender equity, amongst others. Thus both the positive and negative impacts are beginning to be analysed, which are providing key lessons for the design of development interventions in the twenty-first century. This is how the initiative Pathways to Participation (henceforth referred to as Pathways) came about, and evolved quickly into a Mexican process of exploring the broad-ranging experience of the twentieth century in development and participatory research, and improving future practice.²

Pathways is a research programme that seeks to evaluate the impact of participatory methodologies (PM), particularly PRA, in various countries around the world. The programme was launched by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex University, UK. To date, the Pathways programme has been applied only in India, Kenya, Nepal and Mexico, four countries with a long tradition of participatory methods. After the initial work by IDS researchers, the Mexican programme, VEREDAS, was run by a Steering Committee composed mainly of Mexicans with many years' experience in participatory development methodologies.

The Mexican programme evolved over two phases. In the first phase, the IDS staff³ and later the Steering Committee sought to contact and gather information and opinions from a wide range of people and institutions that have been involved in the construction and use of participatory methods, particularly PRA. Three regional workshops in Mexico City, Oaxaca and Xalapa were held to bring practitioners together to critically analyse and summarise these PMs. Representatives of projects and organisations from as far away as Sonora and Jalisco, and even from the Yucatán Peninsular, attended. The issues discussed were wide-ranging, in response to participants' proposals and suggestions. There was much recounting of project experience – both successful and otherwise – as well as in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of methods like PRA, and the way they are used by different institutions.⁴

² In Mexico, the project was given the name 'VEREDAS HACIA LA PARTICIPACIÓN', or 'VEREDAS' for short.

³ The first stage was coordinated by Jutta Blauert (IDS, England and CIESAS, Oaxaca), who introduced the idea of the Pathways programme in Mexico before handing over coordination to the national steering committee.

⁴ Interviews and workshops were conducted in confidence with the understanding that the anonymity of informants would be respected in reports. This approach was used to encourage sincerity and freedom of expression. Quotes appearing throughout this report are taken from these interviews and workshops. Critically appraising participatory practice is highly sensitive as people's careers and professional reputations are at stake. Although presenting disembodied voices reduces the impact of the paper, the authors have decided that enabling people to speak in confidence was more important.

Moving into the second phase, the Steering Committee met in Mexico City, together with representatives of other organisations.⁵ The objective of this phase was a close examination of the experience of organisations that have used participatory methods. The Committee selected projects of three such organisations from the eleven proposed by participants at the regional workshop, from which case studies were to be developed. These were the Participatory Development Project (PPDP), in the Yucatán Peninsula; the Sustainable Productive Development Programme in Marginalised Areas of the Huasteca, Veracruz (PDRAM) and the Participatory Appraisal and Planning Programme in the Gulf of Santa Clara, Sonora. Comprehensive conclusions on the impact of participatory methods in Mexico were drawn from these two phases and are summed up in this document. At the workshop at the end of the second phase, major initiatives were proposed to the Steering Committee to move into a third phase of VEREDAS.

In total, 85 people from 70 different Mexican institutions and three independent individuals have been involved in the VEREDAS programme. There was a balanced gender representation along with people from both development and research institutions. There was relative participation (10 per cent) of government representatives from agencies for the environment, rural development and agricultural training. In the workshops and interviews there were researchers, independent consultants, advisors from production projects and environmental organisations, etc. Development “practitioners”, mostly belonging to civil or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), were well represented. In contrast, the representation from grass-roots organisations was sparse, as was representation of organisations using PMs in their work on urban, education or health issues, despite the attempts of the Steering Committee to draw them in.⁶

This document is divided into four sections: the context of PMs in Mexico, an analysis of PMs and their use in Mexico, summaries of the three case studies of how PMs have been applied, and some general conclusions.

Section 1 on the context of the various participatory methodologies in Mexico has two parts. The first focuses on the institutions, grass-roots movements and government agencies that have used PRA and other participatory methodologies in recent years. Special consideration is taken of the political, socio-cultural and institutional contexts that have facilitated or undermined the development of participatory approaches. The relationships, at times conflictive, between non-governmental research and development institutions and groups and the different representatives of the State have been very important in the current definition of

⁵ The Steering Committee was coordinated by Tajín Fuentes, who currently works for Transparencia S.C., a Mexican NGO which is the national chapter of an international NGO which monitors government and multilateral programmes and projects.

⁶ When the case studies for the second phase were chosen, the Steering Committee stressed that it would be advisable to also include an urban experience, but invitations to organisations in Guadalajara and elsewhere that had relevant experience did not come to fruition. The scope of the study was therefore limited to three rural cases, rather than the four cases mentioned at the beginning. Furthermore, invitations to the national workshop concluding the second stage went to several organisations working on urban issues and community health, but none could attend.

PMs and the ways in which they are being used. PRA and other PMs have been used in an attempt to transform those rather undemocratic practices and power structures that have evolved over centuries in rural and urban regions of Mexico. It seems obvious therefore to conclude that the Mexican version of PRA and other PMs are different to those which have been introduced from Anglo Saxon cultures: in Mexican versions, there is greater emphasis on increasing the capacity for critical analysis and personal and social consciousness of the people to whom PMs are directed.

The second part of Section 1 summarises the history of the various participatory methods used today in Mexico,⁷ and demonstrates how they have been influenced by two major approaches: the British and the North American. PRA was introduced by a team of the Environmental Studies Group *Grupo de Estudios Ambientales* (GEA) in the late 1980s, and then applied in and with several rural communities across the country during the 1990s. At the same time, British researchers from Wye College, London University, introduced it into the academic and development worlds in the Yucatán Peninsula, where it has been used for more than ten years in and with indigenous Mayan communities. Both initiatives have produced manuals, which adapt the methodology to the reality of the Mexican countryside, and have been organising or participating in exchanges between practitioners for the last six years. Both are now involved in the VEREDAS programme.

Section 2 is the most complex, as it seeks to critically summarise the current state of participatory methodologies in Mexico. The analysis commences with a definition of the concept of participation, constructed collectively over the four workshops. It also refers to the discourses and realities that may be found within the field of participatory research and development in Mexico, concluding that the concept today is rather delegitimised. A bird's eye view of the main organisational practices in rural Mexico and within the participating institutions is also provided. The next part describes the main impact of PMs in Mexico, highlighting the increasing democratisation of development projects and programmes and the new notion that rural populations have the right to participate in their own development.

Increasing the capacity for critical analysis and personal and social consciousness of the people to whom PMs are directed, are the main distinguishing factors of Mexican PRA.

As regards transformations in the political sphere, most practitioners tend to think that PRA does not really question unjust, racist or antidemocratic structures; some even say that this participatory viewpoint can function in any regime, even the most authoritarian.

⁷ This section owes thanks to the special collaboration of Alfonso González Martínez, member of the Grupo de Estudios Ambientales (GEA), who has worked to incorporate PMs into the work of several of GEA's teams for over 12 years.

Through analysis of the strengths of PRA and other PMs,⁸ which abound in the Mexican experience, it was found that PMs improve communication between the actors in a development process. They also legitimise reflection and analysis with people at the grass-roots, and break the traditional inertia found in intervention projects, while also contributing to positive changes in local practice and institutions. PRA is considered to be a flexible yet efficient methodology orientated towards action. This makes it particularly useful for interventions envisioning change in the way people use and exploit their natural resources.

Although both the negative and positive aspects were reflected on in the workshops, the authors decided to dedicate more time to examining and comprehending the criticisms directed at participatory methodologies, in the hope of improving them thereby. One of the weaknesses frequently mentioned was that PRA and other PMs create high expectations in the early project stage, which they are unable to meet later on when subsequent phases of intervention are not based on the same degree of local participation. Further, the lack of tools for follow up and/or accompaniment post-appraisal was highlighted. Participatory methods were criticised for their apparent simplicity, as they do not fully accommodate the practices, knowledge and world-view of the local community. Normally the method is applied with the most open or accessible sectors of the community, neglecting the most marginalised families and those who in some cultures tend to be left out of “development”, such as children, old people, women, etc. It was stressed that these methods require a very specific type of external facilitator who, in many institutions, are difficult to come by.

The third section contains the executive summaries of the three case studies carried out in the second phase of VEREDAS in Mexico. The first experience studied was the Peninsula Participatory Development Project (PPDP). This was an all-Mexican initiative launched by three NGOs (EDUCE, IEPA, MAC),⁹ supported by three research institutions. The project aimed to increase local participation and knowledge of available resources in four rural micro-regions in the Yucatán Peninsula. This project, albeit fulfilling initial objectives, has progressed at a snail’s pace, if at all, to the next stages of participatory development. Its heavy dependency on the NGOs makes it a difficult experience to replicate. However, interesting processes have emerged from it, such as participatory regional planning and local administration of governmental policies and programmes. This case study was carried out by a team from Yucatán coordinated by Xavier Moya García, member of the NGO team coordinating the PPDP.

The second case study was that of the Sustainable Productive Development Programme in Marginalised Areas of the Huasteca, Veracruz (PDRAM). The programme studied was promoted by several state and

⁸ The generic term Participatory Methods (PMs) refers not only to Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), but also to other methods used in Mexico: Popular Education, Participatory Technological Design, Peasant Farmers’ Self-Appraisal, Peasant Farmers’ Education, Environmental Education, Participatory Action Research and many others.

⁹ The institutions involved in the PPDP were: EDUCE (Education, Culture and Ecology) with two of the micro-regions, IEPA (Self-Managed Research and Popular Education) with one micro-region, MAC (Missionaries Civil Organisation) with one micro-region, and DIP (Development and Participatory Research) together with the Hideyo Noguchi Centre of the Autonomous University of the Yucatán, with one micro-region. The INAH (National Institute of Anthropology and History) also supported the project.

federal government departments. Initially, NGOs and grass-roots organisations were to be included in the design stage, but their participation was later blocked by government organisations. The PDRAM sought to transfer technical and financial resources to highly marginalised areas, to improve infrastructure and access to regional markets. According to a World Bank proposal, investment would be made through projects proposed by the local community, and to this end simplified versions of PRA were used. The disparate needs and interests of the participants in the PDRAM programme, together with its excessively grand scale, meant that the final results disappointed the most committed of those involved. This case study was carried out by Gabriela Guzmán Gómez.

A third case study was that of the Participatory Appraisal and Planning Programme in the Gulf of Santa Clara, Sonora, north of the Gulf of Baja California. This project was carried out by GEA (Environmental Studies Group), contracted by various Mexican and US institutions involved in the local issues of this strategic community, and aimed to help to resolve local conflicts in order to develop a plan for sustainable management of the Gulf. In this planning and appraisal exercise, innovative methods and techniques were required to get to grips with a complex situation of internal conflict, and to facilitate dialogue and negotiation between some of the parties. The Santa Clara case is an important example for projects aiming at areas where natural resources are being fought over. Often such problems are intertwined with major global problems, such as the drugs trade and the breakdown of local society. The case study was written by Alfonso González and Alexandra Aguilar from GEA, both having been directly involved in the actual project.

The general conclusions reflect the most important findings of the whole VEREDAS project regarding participatory methods and the way in which they have been applied in Mexico. They draw together recurring issues like the theoretical and methodological weaknesses of PMs in relation to knowledge of rural reality and opportunities for its transformation. We discuss the need to adapt these methods to the political context of conflict and socio-cultural diversity. Further, the main challenges of the participatory project are underlined: whether and how to develop an ethical code and how to scale up and deepen the achievements of each intervention in the countryside. Finally, we consider where our focus needs to be, in order to scale-up participation and democracy in our work.

1 Context and history of the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and other Participatory Methodologies (PMs) in Mexico¹⁰

1.1 *The context of PMs, particularly PRA in Mexico*

Participation in development, and the potential contribution of participatory methodologies, particularly PRA, have over the last decade achieved widespread international recognition. The manner in which these ideas have been taken up in Mexico has been shaped significantly by the national and regional political and social contexts. Our reflections with many of the actors involved in advocating participatory approaches in Mexico highlighted a wide range of factors that have contributed to, or limited, complex processes of change and greater acceptance of participation.

We define participation as a process of social interaction, which implies a personal and collective critical awareness reflected in how people achieve greater control over actions and decisions for their own development, and in the strengthening of local forms of organisation.

1.1.1 *State–NGO relations*

Shifting state-society and state-NGO relationships have significantly affected the context into which PRA as a methodology has spread. Several people consider that historically government attitudes towards NGOs and grass-roots organisations have been very negative, leading to relationships that are not conducive to participation. As one person said:

There are regions where NGOs have gained in strength, but the government is afraid of them, for example, in Chiapas they're really afraid. The government sees NGOs as terrible things with no perspective, and wants to organise them to control them. It is a very conflictive relationship.

When we speak of NGOs, we are referring particularly to the small and medium-size national institutions that have proliferated throughout Mexico since the 1980s and even earlier. The picture is therefore vastly different from that of other South American, African or Asian countries, since Mexican civil society has a substantial presence and capacity in the development field. Consequently, there are few major international NGOs here. However, this does hamper access to the main sources of international funding. As pointed out by one of the

¹⁰ For the full text of the Phase 1 report by Sally-Anne Way 'Critical reflections on PRA and participation in Mexico', Phase 1, Pathways to Participation Programme, Internal Report, IDS (1999) please contact the IDS directly: participation@ids.ac.uk The document is available in English and Spanish.

practitioners, the Mexican State has acted as intermediary for funding coming from foreign donors, thereby restricting the direct influence of international discourse on participation.

The state is very afraid of NGOs, seeing them as evaluators of government actions. There is much state resistance to donors giving funds directly to NGOs.

However, this situation is slowly changing. Internal pressure for social change and external pressure from multilateral organisations (UN, World Bank, International Development Bank) have meant that the views and experiences of NGOs and grass-roots organisations are now taken into account in some arenas of policy-making. According to the Oaxaca workshop participants, pressure from the increasingly strong civil society and social movements has been a key factor in bringing about changes and opening up greater space for participation. This is particularly true for the period since the emergence of the Zapatista movement in 1994. In addition, the professionalisation of NGOs and grass-roots organisations in the 1990s has also facilitated their influence in some quarters of national and regional policies.

Many people feel that an increase in participation is becoming a *political necessity* in order to reduce conflict and confrontation with the state. The experiments in citizen consultation and participation of some local and state governments in recent years (especially governments run by opposition parties) are good examples. The language of *human rights* has also strengthened civil society and enriched this shift towards enhanced participation:

With a strong tradition of struggle, little by little there is more trust, a climate of participation.

There is less conflict now between the state and the people. There are some political and social organisations that didn't have space for dialogue and fought with the state, but now they participate and the state listens.

Now there are legal instruments that allow groups to protest, whereas they may have been killed before.

On the other hand, several practitioners and government officials attributed the incorporation of civil society organisations into government policies and institutions to the *neoliberal orientations* and *trend towards privatisation*, which are shrinking the state and opening spaces for other actors like private enterprise and NGOs: 'Given the exit of many government institutions and the disappearance of much state technical support, people had no option but to get involved'.

Some of these new forms of collaboration have paved the way for adoption of participatory methodologies in government programmes and projects. It has also been suggested that the increasing use of participatory methods by some institutions is due to the many government programmes that have broken down for lack of participation. However, the way in which participatory methods have been institutionalised

so far has affected the way in which *participation* is understood. At times it seems merely a way to cut costs by making people implement their own projects.

The end of the six-year presidential period and the 2000 elections formed an unusual political backdrop to this study carried out between October 1999 and March 2000. In the context of elections, some people argued that interventions in development projects give the state continued opportunity for political paternalism and vote buying, while others believe this is already changing: 'In the past the government paid for votes; but now this happens less as the government is more democratic and the other parties are stronger'.

Many people pointed out that it is difficult to generalise about *the Mexican State*, as it is not monolithic. The strength of the state varies from one region to another. Accordingly, state-civil society relations also differ, and each branch of the state, and each bureaucrat has their own intentions and *modus operandi*. For example, some bureaucrats use the spaces generated by the language of participation, while others do not. Some others commented that there is not always a clear-cut state–civil society dichotomy, as there is also a lack of participation in the civil organisations and local institutions. To conclude, the distinction between state and civil society projects is not always black and white, rather there is a continuum in the use of PMs and decision-making for development that runs from top-down to horizontal approaches.

1.1.2 Formal power structures and practices

Formal political structures or legally defined structures may, at the local level, inhibit change toward increased participation. According to one practitioner, PRA does not take into account the political complexities of pre-existing decision-making structures. For example, participation in local institutions such as *ejidos* (communal institutions of landholding and farming) is defined by the Law on Agriculture, and excludes non *ejidatarios* (owners within the system but without the protected *ejido* rights and titles), particularly women, from many decisions:

In the case of the *ejidos*, power relations are already defined by law... By law women cannot be *ejidatarios*. PRA hopes to include everyone, but there are existing structures of decision-making on which PRA has had little effect; these legal structures have not changed despite a more open political context.

Many NGOs have combined PRA with other PMs, such as popular education, Freireian “education-consciousness-raising” or contextual analysis (Castro and Valencia 1995), to achieve a more fine-tuned analysis of local and national formal power structures. In the Mexican context, like other societies where power is in the hands of the few, practitioners approach the problem of development from an *a priori* critical and politicised vision. Some of their input is reflected in the VEREDAS case studies.

Laws guarantee nothing; they will not become reality if there are no people who want it that way. If you don't know the law that explains your rights, you don't know that you can lobby the government or the World Bank.

One practitioner also mentioned the dangers of separating politics from economics: the increasing use of the language of participation in government circles is not reflected in people's access to resources. This is one of the dangers of institutionalising participatory methods: 'How can we make participation something that isn't empty, but that that has real impact for equity?'

Some believe the dissemination of PRA as a specific methodology in Mexico has been hindered because of ignoring the important earlier currents of participatory methodologies. To a large extent this has determined who has appropriated this methodology and how, since the combining of PRA with other methodologies turns out to be an essential factor:

This new thing discredited everything that came before.

The only thing that Chambers did was to package everything up neatly.

PRA can be very powerful, but often it cannot fulfil the expectations it creates, while methods of popular education serve us better in identifying actions.

1.1.3 Mexican variants of PRA: education and self-determination

Concepts from earlier theoretical schools – such as *autogestión* or self-determination and *educación* or informal education – are widely used by practitioners in virtually all the participatory projects in Mexico. These concepts have permeated our way of understanding PRA and participation. *Autogestión* in the sense of self-determination relates to community empowerment, which raises questions like whether it is possible for the government itself to support processes of autonomy and self-determination. For some, self-determination has political as well as economic roots and creates autonomous development projects, instead of accepting models imposed by the government or, in general, by the industrialised countries. On the other hand, the concept of *educación* (training) for many includes elements of *concientización* (consciousness-raising).

Some have enriched PRA by adding these concepts. Others, however, have resisted adopting PRA since it does not include these ideas and is therefore more limited than earlier methodologies that tend to have a more politically defined backdrop, perceiving change as a process of slow empowerment, with a strong educational element. Others associate PRA with a process of appraisal or a one-off planning exercise, although they accept that follow-up may be done with other methodologies more relevant to social and political grass-roots organisations, or to the concept of *popular education*. This is because of the way in which PRA was introduced and adopted in Mexico:

The difference is that PRA makes plans, whereas the ideological underpinning of other methodologies assume that people in this moment (at the start), do not have the capacity to do this.

People from some of the Yucatán NGOs said that PRA is a methodology that does not give intrinsic political direction to the social processes where it is used. By internalising it in their own ways of doing development and mixing it with other Latin American methods, NGOs and community-based organisations are injecting a political dimension into PRA that did not exist initially. They have turned it into a tool to facilitate long and deep processes, like engendering critical consciousness in the rural population, the appropriation of natural resources or the construction of a fairer and more equitable society.

There are still a lot of doubts and contradictions with regard to this “appropriation with modification” of PRA. Certainly one of the most serious doubts is how to generate deeper social change from the outside that is truly in the hands of the local people. This is hard if, as many practitioners say, we start from the supposition that the peasant-farmers have been unable to achieve this change unassisted, and require some type of “participatory” intervention. In other words, PRA modified in this way goes beyond its “functionalist” origin that has allowed its unquestioning use in virtually any context, even anti-democratic regimes. However, the challenge of this modified PRA continues to be finding a balance between respect for the practice, knowledge and institutions of a community, and the use of educational methods that question and challenge the established order, seen almost *a priori* as unjust.

*1.2 A history of participatory methodologies in Mexico*¹¹

The participatory approach or use of the “participatory” concept in political and social action in Mexico stretches back to the mid-1960s and the influence of philosophical currents towards transforming social action. The most important were:

- “Liberation theology” (from the Catholic Church, led by Latin American theologians such as Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez);
- “Popular-liberating-consciousness-raising education” (promoted by Paulo Freire, in Brazil, and influenced by Mao Tse Tung’s approach, particularly his *On Practice*);
- The making of the socialist “new man” (Camilo Torres in Colombia and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, in Cuba);
- The proposal for participatory research which would be militant and committed to intellectual decolonisation (Orlando Fals Borda in Colombia);
- The call for cultural-revolutionary and anti-colonial action (Frantz Fanon, from Algeria);

¹¹ This section was originally written by Alfonso González, from GEA, and worked on further by the authors.

- Communitarian anarchist action with a “participatory democracy” approach embodied in the idea of social ecology (put forward principally by Murray Bookchin, from the USA);
- The critical Marxist current of Herbert Marcuse, beginning with his *Essay on Liberation*;
- Socialist planning motivated by a “people-centred” rationale (developed by Chilean Pedro Varsavsky).

By internalising it in their own ways of doing development and mixing it with other Latin American methods, NGOs and community-based organisations are injecting a political dimension into PRA that did not exist initially.

Already by 1965, a dual current could be felt in some groups in Mexico. On the one hand, it was the religious groups based around liberation theology, and followers of Freire’s popular education, working with Christian Based Communities. On the other, it was the lay groups who worked with “consciousness-raising popular education”. From these currents, arising from a common ideological origin, a new vision of popular education for liberation grew, which continued to develop into the 1990s.

The transformative effect of this inclusive, participatory or alternative approach on the earlier authoritarian, top-down version, also had some impact on government institutions. For example, in 1972 the Mexican government developed a project for river basin management, where elements of an incipient participatory approach were applied, drawing on the work of Fanon, Freire and Vera Joana Burnstein. In 1975, a heterodox group known as ‘Work and Solidarity with Indigenous Communities’ received government support to work on systematic regional development and community participation. At the same time, Ricardo Pozas Arciniegas came up with a new form of working which he called “action research”, which would gradually be taken up as a participatory method for intercultural work with indigenous communities, and “adopted” by the National Indigenist Institute (INI).

In 1977, biologist Efraín Hernández Xolocotzi organised a major national conference on ‘Agricultural Ecosystems in Mexico’; where various styles of participatory approaches were discussed and elaborated, as well as traditional ways of natural resource management recognised as alternatives to developmentalist approaches of technology transfer. What emerged was a simple approach integrated into the “barefoot science” of the peasant-farmers’ own way of working.

In the latter half of the 1970s, Anton de Schütter, a Dutchman settled in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán (with CREFAL) developed a “Participatory Action Research” approach through adult education. This integral approach method spread across the region and is still implemented by the NGO CESE. Simultaneously, influenced by a team from FAO (UN Food and Agriculture Organisation), a participatory planning approach was developed at the Ministry of Agriculture (SAGAR) and applied by its training institute (INCA) between 1978–1982 (the INCA-FAO method). This approach made substantial headway in the world of bureaucratic

planning, and later programmes like COPLAMAR (Commission for the Support of Marginalised Regions) and PRONASOL (National Solidarity Programme), borrowed elements of the “INCA-FAO” methodology. Its influence is still felt in the Mexican government in what is termed “participatory action”.

In the early 1980s, via the National Association for the Study of Agricultural Problems and Solidarity with Peasant-Farmer and Indigenous Communities (ANEPA), a motley crew of citizens and many from academia, motivated by commitment to the people and independent from government initiatives, started to discuss participatory research and action. The outcome was a spirited “participatory action-research” current that spread well beyond the academic world. GEA participated directly in this discussion and enriched their work.

Towards the late 1980s, the English version of PRA arrived in Mexico via two different routes. Firstly, through a British team including Jennifer McCracken and Simon Anderson, who, through their academic links, specifically with the University of the Yucatán (UADY, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine), developed activities for the practical application of PRA, in thematic and broader community development issues. They set up the ‘Participatory Research and Development’ Group (DIP) within the Veterinary Faculty, so as to give their work an institutional base and to work with students and colleagues as well as with communities. Secondly, the US version of PRA arrived via the World Resources Institute (WRI) and its Mexican staff member, Aarón Zazueta. Both versions found fertile soil with groups working directly with peasant-farmer, indigenous and *mestizo* communities: mainly GEA (based in Mexico City), ERA (in Oaxaca), EDUCE (Yucatán Peninsula) and CESE (Pátzcuaro). The different versions of this particular participatory method, newly packaged and adopted from the English-speaking world, were effectively turned into at least two more Mexican-friendly versions. In Yucatán they called it *DRP* (*diagnóstico rural participativo*, or participatory rural appraisal), and *DP* (*diagnóstico participativo*, participatory appraisal), while in the centre and the south of the country *ERP* (*evaluación rural participativa*, or participatory rural evaluation) is often used. As it turned out, ERA, in Oaxaca, and GEA in Mexico City launched this new work simultaneously.

Box 1.1 Key methodologies in use in Mexico

Peasant-farmer self-appraisal
Participatory action research
Peasant-farmer education
Environmental education
Analysis of reality
Town planning
Community planning
Participatory Planning
PRA / PRE

It is worth noting that for ERP, the word “evaluation” arises from an attempt to find a translation into Spanish for the English word *appraisal*, which means not only a diagnosis, but also “valuation, weighing-up”. No direct translation exists in Spanish for appraisal. Hence the aim was to emphasise the need for the analysis of reality to be as complete and detailed as possible and to take on board the complexities of the different socio-environmental relationships, and *evaluate* situation and potential action, rather than stay within the realms of *diagnosing*. Although the word evaluation is commonly used to refer to the measure of a project’s final impact, many groups, including GEA have kept the Spanish word *evaluación* as equivalent to the concept expressed in English as *appraisal*.

The 1990s were like a laboratory with myriad versions of the participatory approach being tried out in Mexico. In 1995, GEA, WRI (from the US) and CERES from Bolivia, convened an international meeting and workshop to exchange experiences on participatory methods for rural development. The event, held on the Isla Mujeres, brought together organisations from the region and Europe and the USA. Over 30 groups, practitioners of participatory approaches from more than 13 Latin American countries attended, along with representatives from IIED, IDS and other British organisations, including donors such as the World Bank, British Council, ODA (now DFID). The exchange between the more than 15 Mexican groups present, and their Latin American colleagues, was a boost for participatory action.

Meanwhile, reforms of World Bank policies in the areas of good governance and social participation began to promote adoption by national governments of different PMs, particularly PRA. The influence of the World Bank on the development and poverty reduction policies of the Mexican government has led to the last administration in particular adopting PRA [often understood as *rapid* rural appraisal (RRA)], as a methodological tool for rural sector programmes. However, on this occasion and in contrast with the previous experiments (with INI and INCA-RURAL), the combined effect of scaling up PMs and the bureaucratic obstacles to bottom-up approaches in development meant that the impact of PRA was minimal and its results questionable. Critics suggest that incorrect use of PMs in some large-scale social programmes has decreased local organisational capacity and acted as a “vaccine”; that is, it has put people off trying to use PMs correctly in the future.

In the field of participatory regional development, various institutions have managed to adapt PRA to other methods, thereby creating powerful methodological tools such as GEA’s situational analysis, ESPL/R (Local and Regional Participatory Situational Evaluation), which includes local conflict management. In the Yucatán Peninsula in the late 1990s, several NGOs (EDUCE – Education, Culture and Ecology, IEPA – Self-managed Research and Popular Education, MAC – Missionaries Civil Association) together with DIP-UADY (Development and Participatory Research – Autonomous University of Yucatán), developed a participatory methodological package for micro-regions. This “package” included a PRA-style appraisal, detection of practices with endogenous development potential, community-regional planning, and the creation of forums

for the negotiation and management of plans and projects. These methodological inputs are described further in the VEREDAS case studies from Yucatán and Sonora (see Section 3).

2 Analysis of PMs and their use in Mexico: dialogue and conclusions from the Pathways project in Mexico

This section presents a synthesis of discussions and conclusions by participants throughout the VEREDAS project in Mexico. The discussions did not try to reach a consensus, but to identify those lessons most relevant to workshop participants and interviewees. Many opinions and experiences, above all by community folk and government and donor institutions, are still to be explored at some later stage.

2.1 Participation and participatory methodologies: meanings and discourses

Discussions on the concept of social participation in the four VEREDAS workshops produced multiple meanings of *participation*. The imprecise terminology gives the concept a malleability that can disguise different discourses and can serve different interests. Despite these drawbacks, there was consensus on the need to seek more local participation. One of the definitions of participation offered was of particular interest: 'It's a very slippery concept. It's a utopian ideal, but at the same time, we have to seek it'. For many, working in a participatory way does not necessarily imply using PRA. Indeed, when discussion turned to the specific ways in which PRA and PMs contribute to processes of social participation, the debate became quite heated. It was clear that civil society organisations employ totally heterogeneous routes to participation, and that PRA does not guarantee social participation.

The question, 'How can we help to raise levels of social participation in development?' sparked a debate around how to clarify the role of PRA and other methodologies. For some people, participation is part of a process of consciousness-raising and reflection:

Participation is getting people involved in taking responsibility for the consequences of their actions; raising their consciousness and opening their eyes to encounter a critical and self-critical space.

For others, it means being involved in decision-making and policy design, as well as having access to wider levels of political participation. Some emphasised the fact that the language of participation has been closely linked to the discourse on civil society and citizens' rights and obligations (citizen participation), although the government tends to focus more on obligations than rights. Several participants, including government officials, defined participation as a way in which the traditional paternalism of the Mexican State could be sloughed off:

In the past we had paternalism, and now we have participation, which means planning together. The key is that they find solutions to their own problems.

Mexico's history of paternalist practices is seen as an obstacle to the success of PMs, since rural communities still expect outsiders to bring them money and resources (and not just appraisal exercises for reflection and planning). Others felt that the language of participation is tightly linked to neoliberal discourse: 'we were very worried that processes of self-determination and participation ended up cutting costs for the state'.

2.1.1 Devaluation of the concept of participation

Participation is often thought of as synonymous with better implementation. However, participation becomes a pretext for manipulating and imposing exogenous ideas and projects when communities are excluded from the design and then given responsibility without the corresponding skills.

Giving [the community] responsibility without training or consciousness-raising is very dangerous. The government uses the word "participation" but most programmes go no further than setting up committees. They give money to a community, but only to do what the government already had in mind. They don't really listen to the community, though they call it participation.

Many participants felt that from the government's point of view, committees and courses constitute the key machinery of "participation". In recent years, government programmes for the rural sector have included training in PRA for project leadership. Often, however, this training has been little more than a two- or three-day course. Amalgamating participation with workshops and courses tends to imply consultation rather than decision-making, as a peasant farmer put it: 'they hold workshops but we don't take any decisions.'

On the other hand, amalgamating participation with community committees is for many a form of representative democracy or deliberative democracy. However, this does not necessarily bring about inclusion of those often unheard voices. All too often, to save time, the community's formal leaders run planning committees and processes. Grass-roots participation worsens when committees are formed at micro-regional rather than at community level. While representation is necessary in practice when participation is scaled up, the delegates do not necessarily represent the interests of the marginalised. Take the example of one of the VEREDAS case studies: the PDRAM case in the Sierra Huasteca in Veracruz: 'Leaders may make proposals, when really the people want something else.'

Box 2.1 Scaling-up and devaluing social participation

Reducing participation to workshops and courses tends to imply consultation rather than decision-making, while amalgamating participation with community committees is for many a form of *representative democracy* or *deliberative democracy*, but which does not necessarily bring about inclusion of those normally unheard voices. When calling spontaneous meetings, random interviews or open assemblies, external agents responsible for delivering a participatory project may overlook local forms of organisation and decision-making. When this happens in indigenous territories, the results can be negative, since the setting-up of committees and introduction of foreign organisational practices have weakened the communities' capacity to organise and stand up for themselves.

Sometimes the organisation chosen to participate is not necessarily the most representative: 'There has not been an opening up so that organisations representing more people can be involved'. One criticism expressed was:

The discourse is all very fancy but in practice the usual hierarchy is in control. They are making spaces for decision-making and debate, but they are not in touch with what's happening at the grass-roots. The process is still more representative than participatory.

This has also happened in non-governmental regional projects, like the PPDP in the Yucatán Peninsula, where the formal groups with whom the organising NGOs were already working with were preferred, sidelining other local institutions.

2.1.2 Local organisational practices

The debate over local institutions has also been a source of dissent. Some believe that work with traditional forms of organisation has also contributed to the persistence of representative democracy, seen by some as highly exclusive. This may be a moot point in the case of indigenous traditional and religious leaders; however, as regards gender inequality, empirical reality leaves little room for doubt: 'The day that women and men can sit down to plan things together is still far off.'

One of the most common local institutions in Mexico is the community assembly (the traditional decision-making body). Many workshop participants concurred that they are an important form of local participation, although rules vary from one community to another. For example, women's participation is permitted in some places and prohibited in others. Several practitioners said that power relations often determine assembly decision-making, and that many opinions, in particular those reflecting women's concerns are often not listened to. However, one participant felt that:

The assembly is much more representative because it is monitored by the whole community. Everyone can participate. Normally diagnostics are carried out only with community leaders because it's easier and they have the information.

PRA and other participatory methodologies tend to scorn local institutions and organisations. When this happens in indigenous areas, “participatory” interventions tend to undermine the community’s capacity to organise and look after itself, because traditional local institutions play an important role in the cohesion and internal organisation of the community. Even in the planning and implementation stages of participatory projects, the committees set up can easily ignore local institutions, which may lead to project failure. In their work with Mayan families of the Yucatán Peninsula, EDUCE and MAC are using ethnographic research methods alongside PMs, in an effort to understand the workings and potential of informal local institutions for development. This type of participatory approach is called “endogenous development”, and is documented in the case study on the PPDP in Section 3.

2.2 The impact of the use of PRA and other participatory methodologies in Mexico

An overriding question is whether the different types of PMs have had a significant impact on the lives of those involved. When dealing with relatively intangible outcomes, such as social participation and consciousness-raising, several people stressed the difficulty of measuring the impact of PRA and the other PMs. The impact depends on the commitment of both external organisations and local organisations, on the constraints described earlier, on the specific context of each place, and on wider social and political changes occurring. All of this makes the exclusive impact of PMs extremely difficult to isolate: ‘It is hard to measure the impact of the methodology, because you need to take into account other institutional contexts, NGOs and community groups’.

PRA was felt to be particularly effective in tackling technical questions and working in smaller and relatively homogeneous communities. However, difficulties arise when applying the methodology in situations of complex political conflict or mediating important financial interests, as in the case of illegal activities such as the drug trade or confronting a multi-national company. Here, the experience of GEA has greatly enriched participatory appraisal and planning methodologies with tools for conflict management and negotiation. The Tepoztlán, Morelos, and the Santa Clara Gulf, Sonora¹² exercises used tools for negotiation and analysis of each actor’s position, with the aim of resolving such conflicts.

Practitioners felt that, despite the weaknesses of the methodology, there has been a certain space in these projects to express the communities’ analyses and needs in the design stage. There are several examples of successful appropriation of the concept of participation by the communities themselves:

¹² See the case study on participatory appraisal and planning in Santa Clara, in part 3 and annexes.

We have never managed to get a community to continue using this methodology in its own strategic planning, but the need for local participation in the design of projects has become much clearer.

Cases of the people themselves demanding participation were cited: 'Now they feel that they have the right'. In the case of government agencies, workshop' participants observed that participatory methodologies are only used in places where the actors are weak. They considered that the state would not apply participatory methods in regions where major financial interests of the multinationals are at stake, or where landownership is in the hands of powerful people. In contrast, some grass-roots organisations have used the language of participation to improve their relations with external organisations, such as multinationals. A practitioner gave the example of one community's concerns with regard to bio-piracy, which led to the establishment of their own chemical laboratory and an arrangement whereby community representatives travel to the United States to negotiate directly over the community's resources. (Indeed now the community and the company employ similar discourses of participation). Unfortunately, these cases are exceptions to the general rule.

With regards to political change, the concern remains that PRA and some other PMs (e.g. participatory planning, peasant-farmer self-appraisal, participatory development of technologies) are ill equipped for the task. Grass-roots organisations, as well as communities, still do not really know how to use these methodologies to bring about concrete changes. Some suggested that changes in the language of the state and even the change of laws are inadequate to guarantee change on the ground: 'When you work at the grass-roots, the problems are the same as before'. Many felt that PRA in itself has not been able to overcome political obstacles:

PRA is not sufficient to face political problems and the interests involved, so it doesn't resolve problems in the end.

It doesn't work. The method hasn't broken through political constraints.

The spaces won just fit into the available spaces of power.

But in contrast to the methodologies listed above, other PMs such as action-research, popular education and context analysis were seen as more specialised and effective in addressing the political dimension and the problem of power relations. There is thus a temptation to classify PMs in two groups according to their position *vis-à-vis* political conflict – “committed methods” and “innocuous methods”. This would be an oversimplification that does not resolve the main issue, which is the need to adapt PMs to the reality in each region, and to the power dynamics of each context.

Box 2.2 PMs and political change

The challenge for PMs in the face of political change is their flexibility, that they can be reshaped and adapted to each socio-political context; in other words, we should adapt PMs to the reality we find, and not try to “reduce” our analysis of reality to a predetermined method.

However, several people mentioned in the workshops and interviews that PMs (including PRA) and the language of participation have had a significant impact upon many projects. They were optimistic about the possibilities of social change associated with the use of said methodologies. One of the most salient points was that debate should take place regarding communities’ priorities: ‘debate is the most important thing’. Participants felt that there has been an increase in space for negotiation, helping maintain more fluid power relations and making it harder for the state to control and manipulate people. Even so, it cannot be forgotten that negotiation and dialogue intersect with the machinery of power:

Thanks to this opening there are now more possibilities for negotiation between the government and local organisations. Although the methodology has many problems, we are still using it because now it is more difficult for the government to close its doors.

2.3 Strengths of PRA and other participatory methodologies

The workshops and case studies provided much more information and conclusions regarding the challenges of how to improve the quality and impact of participatory work. In addition to this, key points were highlighted when the practitioners reflected upon the strengths of PRA and PMs. The main advantage identified was their ability to *create spaces for understanding and communication* within the community and between the community and different strata of government, although these efforts have not been completely successful. They also acknowledged the need for a common language for mutual understanding:

(PRA) can generate space and time for communication in the community. It allows bridges to be built among those involved in development projects; for example between communities and state institutions.

Furthermore, PMs have given legitimacy to the need for self-reflection and learning, both amongst its advocates and in the community: ‘Participatory Appraisal initiates processes of reflection and analysis’. Others emphasised that traditional modes of planning and research are discarded in favour of listening to people and understanding that their points of view are valid: ‘PMs break the traditional mould of development, research and appraisal’. Several added that the use of PMs can instigate positive change in local institutions, for example in emphasising the need to be inclusive (in particular with women, adolescents and children).

One of the biggest expectations of PMs is that of empowering marginalised social sectors. Many commented that with PRA there is not necessarily progress towards situations of greater equality, and this type of change requires much longer processes. But participation can potentially be used as a tool by marginalised actors.

PRA in particular has flexibility as its key strength, given that it can be easily adapted to context. This means that the package is not applied as a uniform model but that each practitioner can choose specific exercises suited to the different working contexts: 'I take from PRA what I need. It is very adaptable to different conditions'. This flexibility has also contributed to PRA being used to differing extents on a range of issues, from environment to health or human rights. Indeed, many people felt that using PMs in a flexible manner and adapting them to the local conditions is essential if genuine participation is to take place.

Several practitioners remarked that PMs can be "efficient" in improving project design, if applied in the right way. What we mean by "efficient" here is that these methodologies give better results at a lower cost and in a shorter time frame; an assessment applied generally more to PRA than to other PMs. They are useful to ensure that the community bases the planning work on a more solid understanding of the process, and at the implementation stage, to improve communication among stakeholders. Finally, many considered PMs to be action-oriented, and useful to help communities analyse their own problems and to catalyse local action and self-determination. This depends, however, on proper implementation, basing action on reflection and analysis: 'They can generate or trigger mobilisation leading to concrete actions, if based on reflection'.

2.4 Weaknesses and problem areas of PRA and other participatory methodologies

This section presents the weaknesses of PMs that arose in workshop discussions, case studies, interviews, and throughout the VEREDAS project in Mexico. A rich variety of experiences and opinions are reflected, from which we can identify two key types of weakness: those inherent to PRA as a methodology (identified more by people who have experience of political work and consciousness-raising in the areas of self-determination and training); and those that result from the form of application (almost all the attendees experienced this). Either way, it was clear that results depend to a large extent on the context, i.e. the time, place and group dynamics: 'We have specific experiences of PRA, but with very different processes and results'.

2.4.1 High expectations, but exactly who really sets the agenda?

Many promoters find themselves trapped between opening up to the needs arising from communities and meeting the predefined priorities of the financing institution. This is one of the most common problems arising from the way in which PMs are applied: 'we always begin with the predefined priorities of the organisation, not of the community'. Participatory appraisals (PRA, RRA) as a methodology can be so open that they generate high expectations, which are for the most part impossible to meet because of time and money constraints, or because of the particular priorities or sectoral specialisms of the organisation involved.

According to one practitioner, 'when the Ministry of Agriculture is paying you, if people start to tell you that they want electricity or clean water, you have to stop them, and then they ask, why aren't we allowed to talk about this?' Practitioners see themselves obliged to shut the door on what the people want if it does not coincide with what they can offer:

You cannot address the problems that they want to resolve, when that's not what you are looking for. People have expectations way beyond what the state institution can meet – or wants to meet.

In reality, participation can generate more problems than solutions: it can prove counterproductive if expectations are created that cannot be met. In turn, this implies that practitioners have to organise PRA activities around objectives predefined by external actors, and not by the communities. Therefore, many practitioners consider it necessary to be as open as possible with the communities from the outset on what they can really offer: 'Normally what I do is to inform people that I come from this institution, and this is all that they can provide'. This often means that communities are reluctant to adopt or believe in PRA as a methodology, because they feel that their priorities are not taken into consideration: 'It is a very directed participation with the issues already decided. It's only varnish'.

This is still an issue when working in institutions with more flexible objectives, or that are genuinely concerned with people's priorities, as with some NGOs, since the activities proposed in a PRA exercise may outstretch the NGO's financial, technical and human capacity to respond. Perhaps an open dialogue could find joint solutions to the expressed needs and, most importantly, in this way local participants come to feel ownership of the participatory process.

Box 2.3 Weaknesses in the design of a participatory appraisal

In participatory appraisals, many practitioners found themselves trapped between opening up to the needs arising from the communities, and meeting the predefined priorities of the financing institution. In other words, a participatory exercise can end up simply being a way of justifying priorities that were established beforehand, and from outside the community.

2.4.2 Lack of follow-up and accompaniment: persistence of extractive exercises

In the words of a community representative, the community is 'just a laboratory' and PRA is 'good for getting information from the communities, but not for solving their problems'. The lack of follow-up is also a common problem stemming from the way in which PRA is used. In addition to the lack of resources to meet the needs expressed by the communities, many promoters also mentioned lack of time, as well as demands from the government and financing entities for quick results which makes it impossible to conduct a truly

participatory process: 'sometimes you have to do an appraisal in a week!' Others gave examples of rushed participatory appraisals done for regional plans. This lack of resources means that many participatory activities are nothing more than extractive exercises: 'they are just ways of getting information'. Even when they are more than that, without sufficient follow-up, participatory exercises become pure diagnostic exercises that end up making impossible promises. The communities contribute to the planning process, for example, but the tangible benefits promised never materialise. There is very little follow-up of PRA exercises to ensure that the commitments made are fulfilled. Frequently what happens has little to do with the agreements and analysis made in the appraisal.

These problems relating to lack of time and resources were detected particularly by those grass-roots organisations that traditionally have accompanied local communities in processes of self-determination and training. Many maintain that what PRA purports to offer is exaggerated, because it does not allow for accompaniment. There is all too little time for reflecting, for fostering local capacity of analysis with the people in a community or for developing a shared vision of the path to take.

Where PRA workshops are undertaken too rapidly, they do not manage to awaken the necessary consciousness and commitment to the objectives of the institution. For example, a practitioner asserted that there is not enough time to raise awareness or to explain *why* they should reforest and conserve a particular place, as there is scarcely enough time to decide who is going to do the work. In these cases, there is a clear disjunction between the appraisal-planning stage and educational and "empowerment" processes of local subjects. Others commented that using PMs to help communities to make their own plans is meaningless unless they also receive help in securing resources to meet their expectations: 'you leave the community with a plan, but you don't stay with them to help them find the resources'.

2.4.3 Lack of training for negotiation

Practitioners also expressed the concern that in rapid PRA workshops there is little time available to motivate for social action, or to build skills to strengthen communities' capacity to negotiate with the government and funding organisations for themselves: 'design of an action plan is not the same as social organising or negotiation, which are political processes involving power relations and requiring time'. Several people indicated that one of the major weaknesses of PRA and other PMs is the lack of *tools* for conflict resolution and negotiation. If communities lack training in negotiating directly with external organisations, the PRA facilitator will always be responsible for those tasks, and the communities will become mere objects of participation, instead of active subjects:

We have to develop negotiating skills and facilitate independent community-level organisation. This is a big gap in the methodology. It raises a lot of expectations, but then leaves people without the tools to fight for what they want.

Box 2.4 Weaknesses in the depth of application of PMs

Lack of time, along with the demands of government and funders to get quick results, makes it impossible to carry out a truly participatory process. The common lack of follow-up also causes poor outcomes for the communities. The use of PMs to help communities make their own plans is meaningless unless they also receive help in securing resources to meet their expectations.

The latest versions of PRA used in Mexico include aspects of negotiation and conflict resolution. Application of those methods is still not generalised, but so far the results are surprisingly good, as practitioners from GEA described from their experience in Tepoztlán, Morelos, and Santa Clara, Sonora (see Section 3).

2.4.4 Are the methodologies and products too simple?

The simplicity of the tools used in a classic participatory appraisal is important to encourage participation of those who for example, cannot read, or speak a different language to that of the practitioner. However, according to some practitioners, PRA methodologies cause tensions when applied in the communities: to more educated people, it could prove to be boring or even offensive having to sit down in a public place to draw pictures: 'they think PMs are stupid, something really basic'. On the other hand, PMs can be hard to use with poorly educated people, despite the visual aids, since much of the information is written down and therefore inaccessible to them. Groups with heterogeneous educational or skills levels are problematic also, because it is hard to find a common language for all.

Some practitioners also brought up the issue of invasion of community privacy. It is hard for people to reveal personal information to strangers, for example when we want to classify income levels in a community, or discuss issues that may be sensitive for political or moral reasons. In these situations, participants agreed that it is useful to have locally recruited facilitators in the team, who can give advance warning of the issues that may be problematic in the local culture. Another problem is that excessively basic questions are seen as a waste of time and an offensive top-down extraction of information.

In some places, communities have become suspicious of PRA, either because they never see the final product, or because they do not feel satisfied with the outcomes of the workshops: 'What are you going to do with that information? We never find out the results. They wanted something more professional; not these little drawings . . .' One practitioner suggested that people want a more professional end product, and in particular, well-presented written documents that they can use to negotiate with foreign donors. The challenge is to produce professional and useful products for local and external levels, without sacrificing people's involvement. Some practitioners were of the view that working out the expectations of each participant's appraisal-planning exercise is essential to avoid slipping into an extractive attitude. Then the team can proceed efficiently towards the agreed products: studies, plans, technologies, and so on. Even so, as others pointed

out, PRA does not have the capacity to provide certain products that are very useful for the community, like understanding how the market works and how to compete in it beyond their community.

2.4.5 Lack of inclusion: who really participates?

Lack of time clearly affects the depth and grass-roots democracy that PMs seek to achieve. By trying to do things quickly, 'you can simplify the methodology so much that you end up getting incorrect information'. Some practitioners emphasised the importance of available resources in a community. The people who attend are those who have the time to devote to the process of PRA and the practitioner's work (the very poor cannot pay others to work for them), or those selected by the authorities to organise the workshops. Thus it is highly possible that the people participating are not a representative sample of the community:

... (those who participate) ... continue to be those who are powerful. The poorest peasant farmers cannot attend a three-day workshop. In the end, many of the conclusions are reached by two or three people, so who really participates?

Even when attendance is good, often the results tend to reflect the opinions of those who talk loudest, or have most authority in the group. For example, it is still difficult to get men and women together in the same planning exercises, as women and other marginalised groups tend to be silenced in a group discussion. It is hard to foresee the dynamic of a workshop without thorough knowledge of community power relations, and this sort of knowledge comes only from long-term relationships with people. It is still not easy to deal with these issues of voice and power:

You have to know whom you are inviting to the workshops and what the power relations are, because otherwise the consensus, agreements or plans made will have little validity.

On the other hand, it might also be necessary to ask whether the communities understand what the right to participate really means:

When do the peasant-farmers, the people who we work with, realise that they have the right to participate? The discourse says to them: 'you can participate', but who realises that they have the right to participate?

Practitioners tend to face the dilemma of needing to respect local forms of discussion and decision-making and ensuring the right of marginalised groups such as women or children to participate. The solution perhaps could be that PRA methodologies become more flexible, borrowing from other PMs derived from endogenous development and popular education approaches. This implies detecting the local decision-making and participation practices for different local groups, as well as undertaking an analysis of local power

management. Recent experiences of EDUCA and MAC in the Yucatán Peninsula show how these methods are perfectly compatible. In this way, sessions and spaces for thinking about and choosing activities are adapted to these practices, instead of following the conventional PRA method of sorting out everything in a public assembly. This would be a way of giving voice to the marginalised sectors of the community, while respecting their own ways of decision-making.

Box 2.5 Weaknesses of PMs for promoting grass-roots democracy

It is very likely that the people who participate [in the appraisal] are not representative of the community. It is hard to foresee the dynamic of a workshop without thorough knowledge of community power relations, and this sort of knowledge comes only from long-term relationships with people, or else by applying other complementary research methods. It requires identifying the local practices of decision-making and participation, and studying how power is managed in the local context.

2.4.6 Imagined communities and the impossibility of consensus

Some people consider that most PMs (including PRA) fail to handle differences, power and vested interests, and that outsiders tend to view the community as a single entity, with one voice and homogeneous interests and priorities. That is why PRA was designed to work in relatively small and homogeneous communities. Lacking the right tools for dealing with issues of power makes PRA ineffective in more complex communities divided by political or economic conflicts. Indeed, there are several examples of PRA failing in situations of complex power interests and relationships.

This is not a problem specific to PRA, but is shared by the majority of participatory methodologies since their perception is that society is formed by different entities that interact to complement each other and work better. This functionalist analysis highlights relations of cooperation above conflict, power, and domination. Hence these methodologies alone are not especially useful in identifying and analysing conflicts over control of development processes, of natural resources, of trade, of the means of production, etc.

In contrast, methodologies like “popular education” and “action-research” originate from the Marxist-structuralist current that stresses relations of contradiction in any appraisal. These tools, as explained earlier, can complement PRA to delve into situations of domination and conflict. Combining methods from different theoretical currents requires the practitioner to be creative, open-minded, and even sometimes eclectic. Work like that of the PPDP in the Yucatán Peninsula is an example of this type of combination.¹³

¹³ The organisations responsible for the PPDP in the late 1990s (EDUCE, IEPA etc.), had been using methods such as popular education and participatory research for many years before PRA arrived in Mexico. For this reason, they were able to combine the different methodological schools with ease.

Given the importance of seeking consensus in the PRA methodology, the lack of tools to really deal with conflict is under fire. Hence, the challenge is to develop tools that help communities reach agreement on difficult issues. As already mentioned, GEA is working on this, supplementing the conventional package of participatory appraisal with internal conflict analysis and negotiation (González 1996). However, there are those who hold that this type of change is beyond the scope of PRA, and that rather it is part of a broader process of structural change: 'A workshop is not the place to resolve conflicts; this needs much more time and awareness-raising to be able to see and then change'.

The question of whether an NGO or a grass-roots organisation takes the side of some local group or else stays neutral is also a key issue that has to be examined. It may be that an organisation takes a selective focus, supporting the faction which most identifies with its own values, but then, how *participatory* is its work? There are also organisations that try to be neutral but end up allying themselves with a particular sector of the community. This may be a conscious decision, but may also occur involuntarily, because of their minimal comprehension of local politics. There are examples of sectors of communities being reluctant to work with organisations that have developed a participatory plan with just one faction of the community: PRA needs to be supplemented by the right tools from other PMs to achieve this analysis and pave the way for negotiations between different groups within the community, and with external actors.

Box 2.6 Complementarity between different “families” of PMs

Methods such as popular education and action-research stem from the Marxist-structuralist current, which emphasises contradictory relationships in any appraisal. These tools can be used to complement PRA if we wish to assess situations of domination and conflict.

2.4.7 Poor understanding of local forms of participation and organisation

There are also tensions over the failure to understand local and/or traditional ways of making plans and decisions, and the manner in which PRA inserts into these processes. In practice, using exogenous models of decision-making (normally western style democracy) does not always work. PRA needs to be used to fit better into forms of political organisation. As one of the practitioners said:

You have to take local structures into account because that is the way people live on a daily basis, and to impose another form of decision-making is limited because in the end it will depend on the traditional ways of doing things. Practitioners who are familiar with local forms of participation can be very useful inside the community.

This is why people often work with community assemblies, often seen as a formal method of participation, organising workshops in association with, or through them and ensuring that conclusions reached have the assembly's approval. A representative of one community felt that it was very important to use this forum, so that all the members of the community can vote, because very often the PRA exercises are done only with the leaders or a non-representative sample of a community:

The assembly is much more representative because the entire community is involved. Everyone attends. Usually appraisals are done just with the leaders, because it's easier for the people coming from outside.

On the other hand, there is the risk of idealising local forms of participation, because the community is also subject to power conflicts and may not have been able to embrace open forms of participation. However, it is important to distinguish between formal and informal practices inside the community:

Due to lack of time and resources, and often lack of research tools, we practitioners only take into account formal structures like the assembly, the municipal delegate, *ejidal* commissioner, etc. Many of us have found that taking the results of our PRA work to the assembly was disastrous because not everybody can speak.

In this sense, PRA cannot have an immediate impact on local norms and practices: 'It does not manage to affect aspects related to local informal institutions'. The general consensus is that it is necessary to analyse more thoroughly local styles of decision-making and that PRA practitioners need time to understand them. Several projects have demonstrated the great value of informal practices of participation and decision-making to achieve really consensus-based plans.¹⁴ These include the council of elders (in traditional indigenous communities), family groups, clans, geographical neighbourhoods, ceremonial or informal religious spaces, professional and labour associations, sports teams, etc.

Box 2.7 PMs and local forms of participation

Using exogenous models of decision-making (normally western style democracy) in participatory workshops, does not always work. The general consensus is that it is necessary to analyse more thoroughly local styles of decision-making and that PRA practitioners need time to understand them.

¹⁴ This is the experience of the MAC-INAH project, in the southern tip of Yucatán, where they are using informal organisational practices to achieve consensus for the development plan for this micro-region.

Thus, representation is an important factor, but so is understanding the strength and level of organisation of different communities, which can have a significant impact on any kind of participatory work. It is also important to consider the motivations behind each local organisation, which can affect the sustainability of a development project:

There are problems with the local organisations. For example, a co-operative can be set up, disappear and then reappear. Basically, organisations don't always have strong roots and don't always fulfil their promises.

2.4.8 The facilitators: capacity and commitment

For many, the level of personal commitment and the capacity of facilitators in a research or development process is essential to the successful use of PMs. It is fundamental to motivate and develop a relationship of trust with the communities and thus generate commitment from the community itself. There have been many experiences of failure and resistance from the communities in cases where the external facilitators are not accepted by the population. In this context, grass-roots organisations and regional NGOs have significant advantage *vis-à-vis* external consultants. The latter come for just a short time to a community and usually cannot speak the local language or understand the local culture and ways of the community. Often the technical and scientific experts do not have the right training to be able to interpret the social aspects of projects and hence arrive at disastrous conclusions. For example, in one recently created protected natural area, the consultants stressed conservation needs but neglected sustainable alternatives, which meant that the conservation project was not socially sustainable: 'The technical experts find it really hard to relate to the peasant-farmers. They hire people who are not experts at organising workshops'.

Furthermore, the pressure towards greater professionalisation of the NGOs and their involvement in strategic planning and institutional strengthening are changing the context and the manner of their participatory work. The general feeling is that as the scale and scope of participatory projects increases, grass-roots work is devalued and the ethical code that practitioners so valued in the past is lost in the slipstream.

2.5 The challenges of PRA and PMs

Ideas to improve the various participatory methodologies and the ways in which they are used in Mexico were discussed during the four workshops in the first and second phase of the project. This was particularly true of the last workshop held in Mexico City from 23–24 March 2000. Working groups were set up to arrive at conclusions on different issues, which are presented in this section.

2.5.1 Criteria to measure participation in programmes and projects

The first challenge practitioners face in Mexico is the lack of a system to evaluate participation. Criteria and indicators of participation in development and research projects were discussed at the workshops, and divided into two categories according to the length of the process in which PMs are applied: short-term projects (less than one year) and medium-term (two to five years). Time is an important variable, which has a direct impact on the ways in which participation can be encouraged in local groups and communities. The following criteria for participation in short-term projects were proposed:

Understanding local problems and conflicts: an integral part of PRA or any PM is to understand the problems and internal conflicts in a community before implementing a participatory appraisal.

Identifying networks and local groups before applying PRA: to avoid a simplistic and obtuse vision of the rural community, identify the different groups that have a role in local development. The aim, then, is that no group in the community is marginalised, especially those who have less negotiating ability in rural structures, such as women, children, youth and the elderly.

Formulation of community projects or plans by the participants themselves: a basic indicator to measure participation in short-term PM exercises is the role that local agents have in formulating final projects or plans. Hence having a good project as a final product of PRA is not sufficient. Rather, a project or plan made directly by the community is needed.

Openness about the agenda or interests of the external agent: the external groups or institutions that apply a PM always have a consciously or unconsciously defined agenda. In order for local people to make free and informed decisions, this agenda should be shared openly with the group/community.

Participants' clarity about the economic, political and social contextual problems: exercises that apply PMs frequently forget to analyse the context in which the community or local group is immersed. This produces unrealistic results (projects and plans), which disappoint and put people off participating in future similar exercises. Hence, providing professional accompaniment for any PM includes informing the participants, and analysing these contexts with them.

In the case of projects applying PMs over longer periods, the indicators need to be more in-depth. In addition to those presented above, the working groups that discussed this issue proposed the following *criteria for medium-term participatory interventions* (2–5 years):

More coordination and strengthening of the community/locality: coordination is not the same as uniformity. Within a heterogeneous collective, the critiques and actions that are certain to arise need to be faced in a coordinated

manner, to reach positions and actions of mutual interest. Such agreements and collective actions strengthen the community to face situations where a united front is necessary, such as competing in regional and global markets, broader environmental problems, lack of public services etc.

Strengthening of networks, formal and informal groups (e.g cooperatives, unions, savings societies, neighbourhood committees): PMs should recognise and seek to understand the diversity within a community. Further, they should respect and strengthen local institutions, above all those that have potential for endogenous development.

More social participation and control in local organisations and projects (grass-roots democracy): it is vital to work with the grass-roots as well as with group leaders to improve internal communication and information flow, making use of and always respecting local practices. Many participants insisted on including this criterion to overcome the problem discussed earlier, whereby some PMs actually strengthen anti-democratic structures within communities.

Training and strengthening local democratic leadership. “popular education” methodology can greatly enrich other PMs with techniques that help to train or strengthen local leaders. This criterion is closely linked to the previous two, since leadership is a product of group dynamics. It has been presented as a separate criterion to emphasise the immense value of leaders who can promote endogenous development in rural areas.

Negotiation skills provided or improved for local actors: a medium-term participatory intervention should build on skills needed for communication and negotiation with the state and other external organisations. People should be able to use products from PRA and other participatory methodologies to improve their position as regards other social and political agents. As discussed earlier, PRA alone does not generate these skills, but when complemented with other methods it is possible.¹⁵

Improved quality of life: discussion underscored the fact that local people must define their own quality of life indicators, for which the basic ones are: the number of jobs created, the increase in income, health and housing improvement. Others such as improvement in inter-gender relations, increase in self-esteem and reaffirmation of cultural identities are also of importance.

Improved local technical skills: these are of great importance to project participants, but many development projects neglect them in favour of more theoretical or ideological aspects. Any development activity requires good technical quality, and so improving local technical skills is essential for the overall outcome of development interventions.

¹⁵ GEA has achieved interesting results with an adaptation of PRA, that they call Local and Regional Participatory Situational Evaluation (ESPL/R). They also use the ‘Education for Peace’, methodology employed by several civil CONPAZ organisations in Chiapas.

Increasingly integrated development proposals. in the short term the most pressing needs should be addressed. However, in the medium term, projects and plans should increase the level of analysis with the local population and deal with all aspects necessary to achieve the changes that they aim for: e.g. environmental, cultural, socio-political, financial, household and personal. The proposals (projects or plans) arising from medium and long-term implementation of participatory methods should become increasingly integrated.

Box 2.8 Criteria for measuring participation in rural projects

Short-term (under a year)

- problems and conflicts should be identified before the PM is introduced
- local networks and groups should be identified in earlier stages of using any PM
- community projects/plans should be developed by participants themselves
- the agenda/interests of the external agents should be clear
- the economic, political and social contexts should be clear to participants

Medium-term (1–5 years)

- greater coordination and strengthening of the community/locality
- informal and formal local groups/networks should be strengthened
- greater social participation and control within local organisations and projects
- local democratic leadership trained and strengthened
- local actors trained and strengthened in negotiation skills
- quality of life improved

In the plenary of the fourth VEREDAS workshop there was a long discussion about these criteria and indicators. In conclusion, it was deemed essential that each experience of PM implementation be evaluated for local participation. The consensus was that each project or process requires its own evaluation system, with these and/or other criteria, which also require qualitative and quantitative indicators, means of verification and measurement, analysis of inherent concepts, and so on.

Spheres of action for the evaluation of participation are also necessary. The fourth workshop suggested three:

- self-evaluation, where the local population has a high degree of participation and external agents are only facilitators.
- field evaluation of the project carried out for the external institution or team in charge of the intervention, which tends to be the most exhaustive and complex and where local people participate in specific moments, either as informant or analyst.

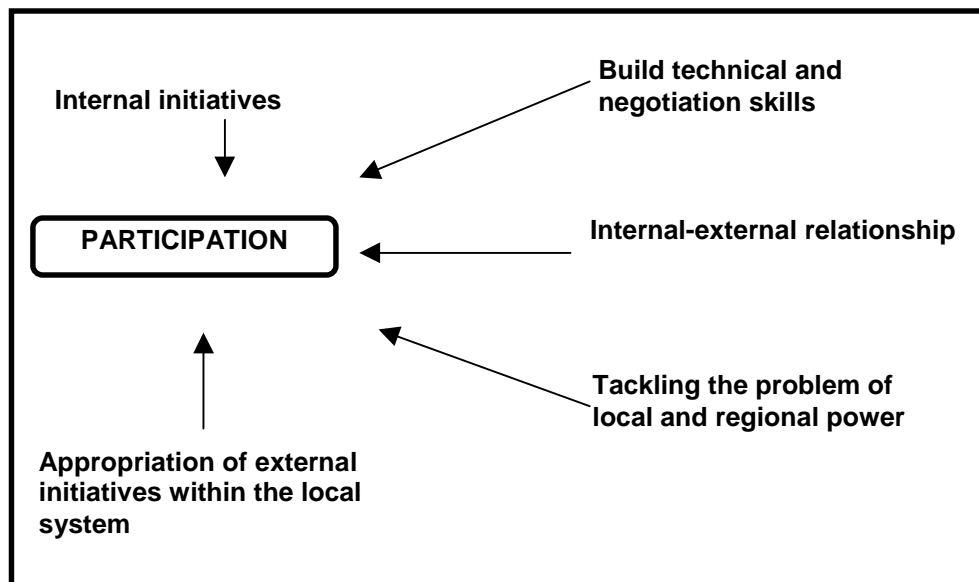
- evaluation within the intervening institution or team itself. This level is important, several participants agreed, since ‘it would be quite incongruous to preach values like democracy and co-responsibility and then not practise them personally’.

2.5.2 An ethical code for participation

The issue of an ethical code was discussed in all the VEREDAS workshops and directly or indirectly was also developed in the three case studies. The last workshop tried to construct a ‘. . . knowledge base from which to create action strategies for an ethical intervention’.¹⁶

The working group identified a number of prerequisites for a participatory intervention. The *first task* would be to define as clearly as possible the type of participation being looked for. The conceptual framework represented graphically (see Figure 2.1) recognises that participation is a process, with two desirable extremes: *internal* or *local initiatives* at the starting point, and the appropriation of the *upcoming external initiatives* at the end. In both cases, success means that local people’s participation steadily increases in both quantity and quality until they come to control the majority of decisions.

Figure 2.1 The process of social participation in its deepest form



¹⁶ This phrase was taken from the fourth workshop report (12–13 March 2000), drafted by a team coordinated by Tajín Fuentes.

As a process, and in its most radical definition, participation has a strong educational and awareness-raising element, with three core aspects:

- 1) *Building negotiating skills*: these refer to technical and theoretical skills that allow the local subjects to effectively take on the necessary tasks to make the process their own, including relations with governmental and financing organisations.
- 2) *The relationship between the external and internal agent*: here it is important to overcome the naïve concept of “disinterested aid” and mutual understanding, and instead develop a more critical relationship based on communication and the effort to know and respect the other person, their culture and interests, giving due value to difference.
- 3) *Local and regional “empowerment”*: it is important to overcome this historical shortcoming of PRA and many other PMs, by including the analysis of actors, forces and interests, conflict resolution and the co-existence of the logic of cooperation with that of struggle for power. The local subjects/community should collectively define their plans and have the skills to carry them out and the power to make them a reality.

Once we have clarified what is meant by participation, there is a need to define “non-negotiable principles”. These include both practitioners’ collective values (such as environmental sustainability, gender equity) and institutional constraints and norms. Decisions of the working team are much easier if “non-negotiables” are clear from the beginning of the project. It is important to remember though, that many “non-negotiables” in local cultures will not be clearly discernible at the outset.¹⁷

Next, and of course linked to the previous point, the intentions (aims and interests) of all involved in the participatory exercise need to be clarified. Personal and collective expectations must be clear for all team members in order to create mutual confidence, especially between local and external agents, and/or different institutions involved. However, practitioners recognised that in every development intervention, participants do not want to share their feelings with the rest. As some said:

There are always some hidden interests, both individual and institutional. Further, cultural differences between local and external agents mean that from the outset each side’s intentions are not clearly spelt out.

¹⁷ In rural cultures,+ both indigenous and otherwise, “non-negotiables” are fundamental to local identity. They are sometimes linked to religious or metaphysical beliefs, and are difficult to communicate to outsiders. This difficulty requires us to make the greatest efforts to interpret and understand such principles, in order to respect them.

During discussion in the fourth workshop, we identified the actors with whom we should develop our ethical code: the facilitator and practitioners' team, the consultants, the community groups and grass-roots organisations, as well as public officials and donors. With this classification the following table was designed through a self-critical analysis. It represents current conditions and obstacles to creating an ethical code for participatory methodologies in Mexico.

Table 2.1 Obstacles to establishing and complying with an Ethical Code for Participation¹⁸

Level: sphere of action	Government and foundations	NGOs and others	Consultants
Common characteristics of the three types of actors	Not open to self-criticism	Little disposed to self-criticism	Little disposed to self-criticism
	Dishonest	Dishonest	Dishonest
	Lack of transparency	Lack of transparency	Lack of transparency
	Intolerant and exclusive	Intolerant and exclusive	Intolerant and exclusive
	Arrogant	Arrogant	Arrogant
Structural	Rigid and inflexible	Bureaucratic	Rigid and inflexible
	Bureaucratic	Opportunistic	
	Opportunistic (re: finance and trends)		
Internal relations "intra"	Discrimination	Nepotism	No solidarity
	Nepotism	Irresponsible and indolent	Discrimination
	Attitude of questioning everything (except selves)	Mercantilist attitude	Mercantilist attitudes
	Top-down and Managerial	Ethnic, professional, gender, age, hierarchical discrimination	Top-down and managerial
		Lack of solidarity	Dislike being questioned
Relations with the other sectors "inter"	No respect for pace and timing of NGOs and grass-roots groups.	Top-down Managerial	Do not share all the information
	He who pays the piper calls the tune	No respect for others	No commitment to specific grass-roots processes.
	Not interested in sharing decision-making power.	Lack of commitment	
		Attitude of questioning everything (except selves)	

Current competition for resources for participatory development programmes sometimes means that one person has to assume more than one identity (for example, practitioner and consultant). In this case, each person has to approach the ethical code from his or her own situation. But despite the issue of multiple

¹⁸ Taken from a workshop report by T. Fuentes, March 2000.

identities, there was consensus that promoting an ethical code of conduct with regard to participation must be a primary responsibility for NGOs, as they frequently use PMs. This can be difficult, especially in bigger organisations. For this reason, it is important for practitioners who advocate participatory development to include in their ethical code the option to take on projects or not, especially those that make bad use of PMs.

In the case of grass-roots groups, variability regarding an ethical code is even greater. The socio-cultural, economic and political context of each region strongly conditions the type of ethical values that colours people's participation in development projects. What for some cultures is a corrupt act, for others is simply justice for specific people in payment for community services which occasionally have nothing to do with the project being worked on. As one participant said: 'Participatory methodologies are closely linked to concepts and values; but often the values of the external institution are not the same as those of the local population'. Not all values termed "universal" are recognised and practised in the same way by all the peoples of the world. This explains why the projects where there has been the most participation, begin necessarily from knowing and recognising the ideas and values that underpin local practices of organisation, production or natural resource management.

Box 2.9 Steps to start up a participatory process using an *ad hoc* ethical code

- The external team defines its concept of participation, and the level they wish to achieve in the process;
- The team defines its "non-negotiables" and communicates them to other actors within the project, at the same time learning theirs;
- The actors both internal and external to the participatory process are open about their intentions, aims and legitimate interests;
- Focused efforts are made to deal with the obstacles (see Table 2.1) encountered when trying to define and follow an ethical code;
- All maintain an open mind *vis-à-vis* the different values of each culture, especially between the external team and local cultures.

2.5.3 Scaling-up to regional level

Participation in micro-regional processes has been one of the most cherished goals of the participatory projects in Mexico. This is essentially because the local population already has a degree of control over community level development, but a lot of the problems they face require larger-scale intervention. One single community cannot deal with problems such as a river drying up, or lack of roads to get to market, the cultural identity crisis of an indigenous people or the presence of diseases and pests in their crops. Participatory action at the micro-regional level carries greater costs, but in the long term makes local management and implementation of public policies more efficient.

Even so, the VEREDAS project faced a major obstacle: who defines what a micro-region is? A plethora of proposals were suggested to answer this: some theoretical and others based on experience. The consensus was that the final decision lies with the local people, and that they should employ multiple criteria, such as geo-environmental, economic and socio-cultural. Usually micro-regions have formed gradually over time; existing micro-regions do not always coincide with formal demarcations such as the municipality or federal state. In other cases, where the various criteria create contradictory divisions, time and social practice must define what is recognised as a new region.

Unfortunately, despite some progress made by the social sector in scaling up from the local to the micro-regional, there is to date precious little experience of effective coordination with government agencies. In the words of one participant, 'the state has made no space for us to negotiate our micro-regional plans with them'. Others commented that historically, the NGOs have had a bias against work with the government, something that did not change until the mid-1990s. This has been the rule, but there are exceptions, as seen for example in the PPDP case study, in particular for the "Poniente de Bacalar" micro-region in Quintana Roo. In that case the local NGO (EDUCE) and a people's development council elaborated a micro-regional development plan. Currently they are showing it to several governmental agencies, and are negotiating significant resources in order to carry it out.

Most participatory experiences at the micro-regional level originated from community projects. As a consequence, participants identified the following as conditions for micro-regional intervention:

- Previous existence of local processes of reflection and organisation in several of the communities that make up the micro-region.
- The local population is aware of the fact that they cannot tackle certain problems without the collaboration of neighbouring communities, and therefore, they need to act in a broader framework (e.g. micro-regional).
- Existence in the communities of a minimal identification of common problems, needs and solutions. The scaling-up process will be very artificial and forced from outside if there is not a shared purpose across the communities that integrates the different endeavours.
- Existence of a formal or informal social entity that can represent the micro-region and study potential activities, take decisions, and implement planned activities. Equally, the state and the NGOs require a counterpart at the micro-regional level with whom they can negotiate.

A problem identified by participants is the assumption that the sum of the community appraisals leads automatically to appraisals and plans of micro-regional scale. However, more complex tools are required for the latter, which are not included in the conventional participatory package. In this sense, the CESDER (Social Studies Centre for Regional Development) experience in the Sierra de Puebla, EDUCE's in the Chenes

(Campeche), Poniente de Bacalar (Quintana Roo), and GEA's in the Tepoztlán municipality (Morelos) are all useful experiences and may be viable to reproduce elsewhere.

2.5.4 Participation in public policy and self-government

Participation of the local population in policy-making is a stand-alone issue. However, it is also an issue that is closely related to the tension between negotiation and the logic of cooperation *versus* the struggle for power. What has to be acknowledged here is that a regional government adopting a participatory focus will face a series of constraints. The first constraint is that of the inertia (even in those cases where change is underway) produced by top-down and authoritarian planning styles. This was detailed in the PDRAM case study in the Huasteca area of Veracruz, where the same top-down manner of executing public policy was imposed on many participatory exercises carried out with communities as part of that programme. Furthermore, the sincere efforts for change that we have witnessed in recent years have come up against the so-called “feudalisation” of sectoral policies, manifested in contradictions within or between different government departments, and which limit any possibility of institutional coordination. This problem is not exclusive to government agencies, as we have also observed this in the NGOs and research and teaching institutions, where it has had serious consequences for local projects. Given the national reach of the state apparatus, and the almost chronic lack of coordination, it would seem an obstacle of the first order to be dealt with if social participation in development is to be achieved.

The second constraint identified in many of the interviews conducted for the VEREDAS project, is the major lack of information and awareness at all levels of government regarding the positive aspects of the participatory approach to development. Some participants said this is especially serious in the case of middle to high-ranking officials with decision-making power: ‘. . . the technical field staff are more open, but they lack support from their superiors’. However, the participants also spoke of numerous examples where more than lack of knowledge, it has been the logic of power at work in the rejection of social participation in public decisions, whether openly or not:

Regional leaders and chiefs (caciques) are part of the structure of state power, and do not want to share decision-making. They feel PMs can diminish their power.

Potential actions were discussed that might encourage social participation in public policy-making and government/society collaboration. Generally it was agreed that the starting point of this process has to be the recognition and incorporation of the different civil (NGOs) and community (individuals and grass-roots groups) actors that already have successful participation experiences. Participatory policy-making is essentially a dialogue that leads to building consensus and integrating the diverse objectives of all the social actors involved. This dialogue should recognise all the differences and is, by definition, an intercultural process. For

this reason it requires more time as well as methodological and technical know-how to make it the reality from which many practitioners are today still rather distanced:

. . . this is why many of the government attempts to get the local people to participate fail or end up in cruel simulations, even while laws and programmes exist to support them, for example the COPLADEMUNs (local government coordinating bodies) in many areas of the Mexican south-east.

Social participation should happen not only in the public policy design stage, but also at the promotion, implementation and evaluation stages. This can be problematic because the local population needs technical skills and financial resources to be able to participate with a minimal chance of success at the municipal and regional government levels. This type of “deep” participation requires not only the political will of the decision makers, but also time and training. However, according to some participants, people will only be prepared after years of experience of grass-roots organisation, and only then will have the political clarity and technical capacity to negotiate their inclusion in government processes. One of the conclusions of this working group was to try to disseminate the experiences based on participatory methods that have allowed the local population to reach such levels of decision-making, successful or otherwise.

The role of NGOs and regional grass-roots organisations in this process is uncertain. Due to their autonomy *vis-à-vis* the government and their greater opportunities for training and information, they are called upon to provide important leadership at the level of social participation. However, on many occasions they act as power elites themselves, and have limited and even reduced the space for negotiation by people they work with. A possible solution identified in the fourth VEREDAS workshop is to strengthen training and consultancy institutions specialising in municipal and regional self-government (there are several in Mexico),¹⁹ as they work to support intermediary organisations (NGOs and grass-roots) in their move towards a more participatory approach. We sincerely believe that the greatest effort must come from the grass-roots and intermediary organisations; participation is built from below, especially in political and power issues.

As part of these recommendations, as with the other thematic areas, the challenge of updating PMs to address political issues was identified, understanding this not as a choice between parties or factions, but as a wide-ranging search for the common good of a social group. As one participant said:

Participatory methods have no ideological or political character; the first is good, because it denotes respect for socio-cultural heterogeneity, but the second is disastrous for people, as it turns participation into a tool that can be used equally to empower or oppress . . .

¹⁹ An interesting case is the ‘Escuela de promotores municipalistas’ (municipal promoters school) by the CESEM (Centro de Servicios Municipales Heriberto Jara A.C.), directed at grass-roots organisations and NGOs that have the potential to reach government at local and municipal levels, and need the technical and methodological skills to plan, implement and evaluate in a participatory way.

This was a consistent theme in all the VEREDAS workshops and case studies.

Box 2.10 Participation and political neutrality

An intervention with a clear ethical code, that aspires to call itself participatory, cannot be politically neutral in countries like Mexico. This is not to do with electoral politics, but about working for a fairer and more plural society, where the foundations are laid for real participation. As has already been commented, universal participatory methods need to be enriched with the specifically Latin American contribution, such as the analysis of the correlation of forces, popular education and methods for the formation of critical consciousness.

3 Three case studies of implementing PMs in Mexico

This section is devoted to the executive summaries that the authors drafted for each of the three case studies on participatory methodologies of the Pathways project. The case studies were chosen by the members of the Steering Committee of VEREDAS, the Pathways project in Mexico, composed of representatives of NGOs, government, research institutes, among others.

3.1 Summary of the Peninsular Participatory Development Project (PPDP), in the Yucatán Peninsula

The PPDP took place between 1995–98, and was implemented by three NGOs and two research institutions. The communities that took part had formed relationships with the NGOs before the start of the project. During the project's lifetime, the PPDP team developed a process of appraisal and planning, as well as training of local facilitators, in five micro-regions in the Yucatán Peninsula. Of the 20 communities that started the process, 14 completed it. Key to the success of the PPDP was that the project was able to combine the experiences and methodological orientation of several NGOs, and different styles of community participation. The exchange of ideas and experiences between the organisations involved, led to the use and combination of PRA and other methodologies [including Freireian popular education and “teaching-learning”, ZOPP analysis (problem and solution trees), operative groups (organisational dynamics) and logical framework (for planning)]. Considerable time was also spent in the initial stage to research training needs and set up collective organisations for decision-making comprising representation from the different organisations involved.

The objective of this project was to promote and/or strengthen processes of ‘healthy development’²⁰ in the rural communities of five “micro-regions”²¹ of the Yucatán Peninsula. This was to be based on participatory research into local resources and opportunities, and the delivery of training necessary for the community groups to be able to carry out their own appraisals and planning. Some of the NGOs had already been working for almost six years in their respective micro-regions prior to commencement of PPDP. Thus, today, even after the project’s end, the NGOs are still working in four of the micro-regions, with a total of 31 communities, including the 14 that have concluded the project. As a process, the PPDP is still working through community and regional development plans. There has even been talk of repeating the experience in other communities.

3.1.1 Achievements of PPDP

The PPDP was created through the initiative of NGOs which had been working with Mayan communities, in an attempt to create a space for exchange and complementation between the various community and micro-regional processes that were already in place. It took shape over a three-year process of parallel work in five micro-regions, of which only four were completed. Throughout the process, the proposal became more flexible and less structured, while the participation of local people in decision-making increased. The project’s major achievements were:

- Training of community facilitators for 14 settlements, as well as tutors and other field personnel from the local organisations and NGOs.
- Strengthening the position of women in communities and organisations (not in all the communities).
- Implementation of 14 complete participatory appraisals, for the same number of communities, as well as four micro-regional appraisals.
- Implementation of eight participatory development plans for as many communities, as well as four micro-regional development plans.
- Strengthening grass-roots organisations and NGOs through training of some of their managers, exchange of information and the capacity to make development proposals, which in the past, was only done by the State.
- Creation or strengthening of informal collective subjects in each micro-region, made up of people from the communities and the NGOs. The organisers did not explicitly foresee this phenomenon.

²⁰ In the project documentation, “healthy development” is defined as socially just, economically viable, environmentally sustainable, gender equitable, technologically appropriate and culturally respectful and enriching.

²¹ In the context of the PPPD, micro-regions are defined as a group of communities sharing one or more of the following: environmental conditions, cultural traits, geographic proximity, and economic unity, among other factors.

Beyond these results, directly or indirectly resulting from the originally proposed goals, there are other interesting factors worth highlighting about PPDP. These were discussed and approved by consensus during the evaluation workshop held on 6 March 2000, and explained in continuation.

3.1.2 Spheres of action and impact

The PPDP attempted to go beyond the community sphere of action, unlike most PRA. One of the planned results was to develop diagnostics and proposals, which would act as channels of communication between the local and regional levels. They even managed to form a collective social subject at the regional level that did not exist prior to the project in some micro-regions. However, the project's shortcoming is that plans have not always translated into practice, since the local groups and NGOs lack the real power and capacity to act. This problem was not adequately anticipated or dealt with by the project; for example, the role of the market and the government were not properly covered in the workshops. The PPDP lacked spaces for analysis of national and international contexts, either in practical (e.g. markets for the groups' products) or abstract terms (e.g. identification of other peasant-farmer and indigenous movements).

Analysis of the projects' outcomes in terms of networks and civil society empowerment, also produced contradictory results. The NGOs that participated in the PPDP developed an alliance that was important at many levels, for financial, methodological and technical reasons. Also, together with other NGOs from the Yucatán Peninsula, they have set up the Peninsula Network for Sustainable Development (ROSDESAC) which has helped them to access funds directly, and to channel these to grass-roots groups. However, these networks still lack sufficient capability to conduct dialogue or negotiations with the state.

3.1.3 Dichotomy between educational and development aspects

The two main aspects of the project were the training workshops, and the community participatory appraisals and development plans. Although both aspects were planned as complementary, in practice there were very different levels of ownership. The workshops were more easily understood and made use of by all the facilitators. This was not the case for the appraisals, especially the development plans, as the objectives were not clear to everybody, nor did everyone have the same objective capacity to make use of them. Certainly, the proposal to have appraisals and development plans, in a context where the situation in some of the communities did not warrant it, was unclear. The consensus is that there could have been more dialogue, and that adequate proposals for each situation could have been negotiated and obtained. It was a major challenge, since the educational proposal had a curriculum and planning in terms of themes and timings, while the development proposal was more subject to each group's process, each NGO and each facilitator.

Some facilitators could not resolve the conflict between the two proposals. The rhythm of the workshops, although flexible and often modified, imposed its timings for the appraisals and planning. In general, if a similar project were undertaken, this dichotomy must be addressed from the opposite viewpoint:

starting from the processes and needs of each community. This will facilitate the “localisation” of the process, although it represents great pedagogical and technical challenges for the organisers.

3.1.4 Development: participatory but not endogenous

The PPDP was devised as a participatory project. The members of the invited grass-roots groups were consulted and gradually brought on board. While grass-roots groups took – to differing degrees – ownership of some aspects of the project (techniques, theories, attitudes, training, etc.), they did not manage to internalise the project process. In other words, there was a high degree of participation, but the proposal was still owned by the NGOs. This confirms some of the limitations intrinsic to PRA and, in general, to participatory development. PMs represent an invitation by outsiders to the local population to “be a part of” something which was conceived from outside. Taking the example of the PPDP, the facilitators, as well as the members of their groups and communities, were invited to participate in a project drafted by external NGOs. This was unavoidable given that the proposal was prepared for uniform and simultaneous implementation in 20 communities of five different micro-regions. We must recognise, nonetheless, that the organisers’ flexibility and ability to listen meant the project was often modified, in the direction of an endogenous proposal.

The project’s development focus was able to overcome this shortcoming of PMs, but at the same time it requires more skills, resources and time. More needs to be known, through dialogue and observation about each community and its proposals, plans, institutions, practices, knowledge and standards. After analysis and a process of negotiation, the decision was made to give project support to those local elements with the most potential for endogenous development. This makes the project more diverse, attempting to respond to the local conditions in each case. It also means that the use of participatory techniques such as PRA will be slow, and used together with other techniques such as observation, dialogue, ‘bridge activities’²² and so on.

The PPDP was not conceived, then, as an endogenous project, since it did not begin with the knowledge, respect and strengthening of what the population already knows, does, and wants.

3.1.5 Methods: an end in themselves or a tool?

The PPDP essentially employed methodologies merely as tools in the development process. This is due, as we explained, to the background of the participating NGOs – their rich experience of methods and techniques for rural work. PMs, and in particular PRA, constitute a package of methods and techniques so powerful and rich that it sometimes becomes the focus of an intervention project. This is much more likely when there is a lack of method for the operation, monitoring and evaluation of the activities arising from the appraisal. As we

²² In EDUCE methodology, inherited from the stage when it was part of ‘Fomento Cultural y Educativo’ (cultural and educational promotion), “bridge activities” were defined as small interventions with a start and a finish, with clear goals, proposed by local people, which aimed principally at creating mutual trust between internal and external agents.

have seen, the methods do not themselves guarantee participation or “localisation” of development projects, but should be used to fortify already existing processes.

3.2 Summary of the Sustainable Productive Development Programme in Marginalised Areas of the Huasteca, Veracruz (PDRAM)

The aim of this case study is to analyse the potential of using the participatory rural appraisal in large-scale government programmes. The PDRAM is part of a broader programme being carried out in 24 regions of Mexico, financed by the World Bank and part of the Countryside Alliance Programme coordinated by the Ministry for Agriculture and Rural Development. It has been implemented in the Huasteca area of Veracruz since 1997, by the local State Regional Development Secretariat, which has operational responsibility for implementation.

The design of the Programme (initiated in 1995 by consultants from the World Bank and Food and Agriculture Organisation), aimed to use PRA to formulate plans for the community from an integral, production-orientated, sustainable and participatory vision. Social participation in regional level decision-making was contemplated with the creation of Regional Councils for Sustainable Development. These are organisations in which producers’ and community organisations would have equal representation with the government departments involved, so that they would jointly be in charge of the Programme ‘under a shared scheme of co-responsibility between government and civil society’. With this focus PDRAM was supposed to develop new capacities within the government institutions, grass-roots organisations, as well as the peasant-farmer communities.

3.2.1 Implementation

An event that determined the course of the Programme, was the State Government’s decision to veto the creation of the Regional Councils for Sustainable Development. From the outset, the PDRAM programme in Veracruz was deprived of this key space for dialogue and negotiation that had been included in the World Bank’s original proposal. As a result of this decision PDRAM centred its attention on the community level. The programme has been running for four years and has 38 technical staff who live in the region and advise 124 communities on the development of production projects.

In the methodological blueprint, Rapid Participatory Rural Appraisal was proposed as the tool of analysis accompanied by participatory formulation of production projects and community planning. The implementation stage of the participatory proposal began by thorough training of technical staff and fostering and ensuring people’s participation in the programme by creating three community organisations: community practitioners, project committees and the Community Council for Sustainable Development. However, after four years the PDRAM had not generated a new governmental approach, because of the lack of autonomy of participating community councils and the project committee, whose functioning depended completely upon

programme interventions. They were set up on a par with local forms of organisation and decision-making and to respond to the need of the executing agencies to channel social demands. In some cases though, the community projects undertaken have opened up space for productive alternatives for local families.

3.2.2 Analysis

The initial process was based on the genuinely committed intervention of the technical field team. Using PRA exercises they achieved some incipient participatory community dynamics. However, management staff turnover and differing ideas about how PMs were to be used undermined the commitment of technical field staff. In the long run, progress was threatened by the generalised institutional dynamic in government programmes, the timing and political and administrative priorities of which took precedence over the needs and rhythms of the communities.

Compounded to this, the local population has little sense of ownership of the programme: the participatory process needs a boost. The first technical team trained in PRA and other PMs was worn down by the tension between their commitment to the communities and institutional priorities. The technical experts who recently joined the team have received less training and in some cases no training on the PDRAM participatory focus. During the case study one of the major constraints of the programme was found to be lack of training in PRA of the current middle and senior management. This had led to a lack of synchronisation between the dynamics created from below by the technical team and the top-down style that historically has predominated in government departments.

To improve the methodological proposal, the coordinating team should include a specialist in PMs to systematically train all the stakeholders in the programme and to support the development of coherent organisational methodologies locally and regionally.

3.3 Summary of the Participatory Planning and Appraisal in the Santa Clara Gulf, Sonora

In 1998 and 1999, staff from the Mexican NGO GEA supported and provided methodological advice to a “consortium” of civil, governmental and international organisations, as well as community groups and the local government, in a participatory appraisal and planning exercise with the coastal community of the Gulf of Santa Clara in the north of Mexico. The objective of GEA’s intervention was to help frame a plan of action based on consensus in a conflictive situation, starting from the fact that the community and its environment display very peculiar characteristics: The Gulf of Santa Clara is located within a Protected Natural Area (PNA) noted for its enormous wealth in marine resources of both the sea and the estuary at the mouth of the Colorado River. The social dynamics of the community are subjected to the effects of two economic activities involving very powerful interests: fishing and the narcotics trade to the US. The presence of governmental and other institutions is very precarious in the community.

To approach this complex situation, GEA applied its own methodological package, Local/Regional Participatory Situational Evaluation (L/R PSA). The exercise received financial support from Conservation International (CI), and sponsorship from the US Mulago Foundation, and from the National Ecology Institute of the Mexican Government (INE) plus collaboration and support from IMADES, the Sonora civil institute, and from the Santa Clara Gulf municipal government agency.

The great interest of this experience for all the organisations involved was the application of the participatory process to generate a chain reaction in the community. The idea was to encourage the local inhabitants to tackle certain common problems for themselves, looking for new alternative consensus-based actions to activate some alternatives of local development consistent and consonant with the character of the region. The Santa Clara Gulf has some singular characteristics that conditioned this project experience. It is a micro-region populated by fisher people in a desert area, where the Colorado River enters the Cortes Sea, more than 100 kilometres from the county town on the US border. It is quite an isolated micro-society, quite heterogeneous, although with a particularly fragile institutional structure, its economy dependent on the over-fished resources of prawn and other marine products and the powerful dynamics of the illegal drugs trade. Hence, a very singular package of strategies for participatory action was called for, bearing in mind the serious constraints of the situation.

The following paragraphs detail some of the key lessons learnt from the experience:

a) Lack of coordination among the “sponsors” and lack of interest

Problems of communication between the “consortium” and GEA caused difficulties in terms of coordinating workloads, cross-fertilisation of ideas, and promoting participation in the community. The experience in Golfo de Santa Clara showed that, even when the sponsoring agencies are not opposed to a participatory experience, there is no certainty of success. The lack of communication among the agencies to clarify the objectives and the role of the facilitating institution, define common interests and agree to the possibility or appropriateness of such cooperation within a participatory process, caused a serious setback to the experience. Indeed, it is not possible to encourage or convince a community to take part in a Local/Regional Participatory Situational Appraisal (L/R PSA) when the “sponsoring” institutions display “crossed wires”.

b) The problem of timing: how to ensure that each stage takes place with enough time to be effective, while taking the minimum amount of time?

GEA spent insufficient time (one week) in the community, to identify the local problems. This was due to the lack of documentary information on the local situation. Added to this was the complexity of local interwoven interests associated with the three overlapping economies; legal and illegal fishing activities, the drugs trade and its “invisible” consequences on the community, and the management of investment and ambitions associated with tourism development. It was not possible in the time allocated, to gather sufficient

information, or even to visit the relevant actors at local, regional and federal levels. The time required to launch a participatory experience must allow for the local sponsoring team (or consortium) to understand and accept the proposed participatory focus, and for an agreement to be reached between this consortium and the external team regarding the local situation, so that together they can be formulate some preliminary hypotheses explaining the local situation in context, identifying the main social forces, interests and actors affecting the regional dynamics. A participatory planning exercise cannot substitute these conditions, but rather should be preceded by such research. This is important for all the actors involved, and also for the sponsors, so that they can be clear about the risks involved in their “investment” in a participatory process.

Regarding the issue of timing, there is the additional challenge of designing workshop routines for the evaluation processes (appraisals). The usual scope cannot be followed by the local population, which is not used to spending so much time (10 to 15 days in a row) “doing nothing”. A set of stages for L/R PSA must be designed, for each case, finely attuned to the possibilities, rhythms and habits of the local stakeholders. These cannot be very long periods, nor too closely spaced.

c) An institutional team which has not effectively understood, and has no enthusiasm for a participatory approach, cannot decide to adopt or enact such a process

The delicate problem of “enthusiasm” for participatory approaches is very common in public sector institutions where the members who take part are sometimes assigned to the process because of the enthusiasm (or official commitment) of the institutional leaders. Once the full, practical implications of this involvement become clear (such as having to engage in a dialogue with “ignorant peasants”, losing the leading role usually associated with bureaucratic authority, or worse, that they will have to work on an equal footing with their “underlings” in an environment with infrastructural limitations), this type of participant often begins to resist the experience. As a result, as was the case here, they suddenly slacken the working rhythms of the process, they have “personal emergencies” which cause them to leave the team for certain periods, or even leave the team entirely.

Additional economic incentives are not sufficient to overcome this problem. If the essence of the approach is not understood and shared as a prerequisite to the participatory experience, it is not advisable to launch it with such a team. Furthermore, a facilitating/advising organisation should clearly envisage such conditions before considering or encouraging the launch of a participatory experience, implying a commitment to community actors. Also, they must be aware that if such an experience is started, it cannot be stopped halfway without a very high cost for the sponsoring institution.

d) A process of L/R PSA should not be started unless the main local actors are involved and committed from the start

It cannot be assumed that “the community” as a whole is interested and has access to a participatory process. In this instance, a significant number of the main actors involved were unwilling to facilitate access to other community actors, wanting to be the main beneficiaries of the experience themselves. It is therefore important that the sponsoring parties in a participatory process should take the time to verify that the main actors of the community understand and accept at least tacitly, what such a process will entail.

It is equally important that the sponsoring parties explicitly declare their institutional interest in such an experience. In this case, GEA should have taken time to take part in a dynamic *of mutual understanding and persuasive dialogue* with the local society, in order to clarify the advantages of the proposed methodological approach and to establish from the outset the explicit support for a participatory process from all the main social forces, personalities and representative organisations.

e) The perpetual challenge: to get an adequate interdisciplinary team at the local level to support the participatory process of appraisal-planning

It is important that the facilitating organisation – in this case, GEA – should contribute and ensure that a sufficient group of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary people should join the team on a permanent basis, to deal with tasks related to community work. This implies an adequate mix of people trained in dealing with conflicting social, cultural and economic situations, as well as those with knowledge of the ecosystem, basic infrastructure, environment, fishing and general government policies, and of border areas and cross-border situations such as that of the Reserve. Not much attention was paid to these requirements, since GEA assumed that a large institutional team would be involved. However, during the key Community Workshop, many of the experienced members of the inter-institutional team were away. In fact, that is why GEA became responsible for the field operation of the workshop.

f) Another challenge: to ensure that the participatory action experience will be led by an agent with enough training to take on that role on a continuous basis, whether it is local or external

In this case, the leadership of this part of the project changed from CI, to INE to GEA. GEA learned as facilitating team, the importance of delaying the operational phase until a suitable local agency has been identified and secured to take on responsibility for the various phases of the participatory interaction, and also the additional phase of monitoring and evaluation. If this is not achieved, for whatever reason, there is a risk of losing continuity, consistency and credibility in the eyes of the local people. They see the legitimacy of the “leaders” of the institutions with which they are familiar, replaced by the “operational leadership” of external agents who will leave in the short term. Even if things work out well, there is a degree of uncertainty as to whether the local population has enough expertise at hand to build on the achievements. Out of respect for all

parties, for the stability and legitimacy of the local institutional operational agents, and for the community itself, the facilitating team must clarify and support local capacity. At the same time, the external team must not be seen by the community to be taking on direct responsibility for the operational phases, unless this has been made clear from the start and they can guarantee sufficient continuity in the role to follow up on the tasks and commitments generated by a participatory workshop.

g) An on-going need: to adapt and cross-fertilise the concepts, language and usage of the methodologies and tools of the participatory approach to local idiosyncrasies

Some of the conventional terms used to explain the methodology of the L/R PSA process, were not the most appropriate. Insufficient time and care had been taken to find a “cultural” translation for each tool and key dynamic in the process. Those who were perhaps most successful in this had already been working with local children and managed to use their own language for new tasks. In working with adults, the most successful approach was to identify similar examples of things that closely resembled the task in hand. It would seem that having only had one person from INE and one from CI attending a course on participatory methods was insufficient. It would have been better had community members from the region also participated in the initial course in Mexico City, so that they could have explained, with their own examples and to their community members, the methodological-practical aspects of the process. They could then have directed some of the activities of the workshop themselves.

4 General conclusions

Throughout the first and second phases of VEREDAS (the Pathways to Participation programme in Mexico), the main strengths, weaknesses and challenges of participatory methodologies have been highlighted. Despite the democratising intentions of PMs, the external agent can continue to control a substantial part of the process. Although participation has made headway in the institutional sphere, both in the government and beyond, there is still no recognition that participation is a right of the local population, and not a gracious concession by the institutions.

Neither PRA, nor many other participatory methodologies so far include tools to train local people to negotiate the management of their own development. This has been seen to be essential; otherwise, these methodologies allow and even reinforce existing situations of dependency and lack of local autonomy in much of rural Mexico. GEA’s work towards constructing a method for appraisal and planning in conflict situations based on collective negotiation (exemplified in the Santa Clara case study) constitutes a first attempt to deal with this major methodological gap. Complementing the current participatory package with this type of tool is a strategic necessity in this first decade of the new century.

Another in-depth criticism of participatory methods is their excessive simplicity *vis-à-vis* complex intercultural and political phenomena; their analysis does not go to the heart of the matter, where development processes are defined. This problem stems from their preference for universality and efficiency. The growing popularity of these methods, and the progressive investment being made in them, taken with the contrastingly poor results, call for a slowing down and search for less simplistic results, together with a professionalisation of services of those of us implementing PMs.

The fact that a development process is called “participatory” does not guarantee that it should have other attributes such as environmental sustainability, gender equity, social justice or political autonomy. Given the reality in Mexico of great inequality and so many years of failed paternalist programmes, PMs cannot afford to be politically neutral. True social participation in Mexico requires a fairer and more plural society, and the results achieved in that respect will depend to a large extent on the methodologies employed. The experiences gathered in the PPDP case study suggest that participatory appraisal and planning can produce substantial social and political change if used in combination with other methods such as popular education, platforms for negotiation and the like. PRA and other PMs have tremendous political potential in this sense. They are powerful tools. However, their “functionalist” character certainly has to be superseded, complementing it with other compatible methods that accentuate the critical analysis of reality and serve to accompany the local population in the subsequent stages of an authentic process of endogenous development.

Real participation is a process, not a stage, which is constructed from within (facilitators and practitioners), from below (the local people) and also from the sides (NGOs and social organisations). We also argue for working from the personal, human level, because the search for participatory development is not a mechanical task. Like the majority of social activities, work in favour of participatory development as a right should originate from an ethical code, but this is still not clear to many of its advocates, and fails to be promoted publicly in the institutions and groups that are beginning to use PMs. While it might be obvious, it should be stressed that participatory development is built from below, through dialogue, mutual learning, respect and trust of the local people. It would be a big mistake to abandon those aspects that have been the wealth of the PRA, by looking for wider impact. Finally, participants should not forget the right degree of self-criticism: while participation is promoted at the grass-roots level, often it is absent at the institutional level. Though this is more pertinent for larger organisations and government departments, it also holds for the smaller NGOs, where top-down and undemocratic attitudes are reproduced. Participation needs to be built simultaneously at these three levels – if any one level lags behind, it will put a break on the progress of the rest.

Annex 1 Contributors to the research in Mexico

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Annex 2 Note on additional material available

The VEREDAS experience has been published in book form in Spanish, with additional annexes and interactive map of the experience in CD Rom: Moya García, Xavier and Way, Sally-Anne, 2001, *Ganando Espacios. Las metodologías participativas en procesos rurales en México*. INDESOL, GEA A.C. y EDUCE, A.C.: México.

The CD Rom contains the following annexes:

- The complete case studies, summaries of which are found in Section Three of this paper.
- A map of the participatory experiences identified by the VEREDAS group.
- A document describing an experience of applying PMs in planning with Zoque communities of the forest of Chimalapas in Oaxaca, provided by the Mexican NGO *Maderas del Pueblo*. This document was not received in time to include it as a case study.

These resources in both English and Spanish are available as free downloads from the Pathways to Participation web page: www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/research/pathways.html

Copies of these materials can also be ordered from:

In Europe:

(English and Spanish)

Participation Resource Centre at IDS

Participation Group

Institute of Development Studies

University of Sussex

Brighton BN1 9RE, UK

Tel: + 44 (0) 1273 678690

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