'PA for all?' Issues concerning the use and development of Participatory Appraisal in UK

A summary of discussions at the Oxfam UKPP's Partners' Participatory Appraisal Review Workshop

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Oxfam

1   Introduction

The Oxfam UK Poverty Programme (UKPP) was set up in the mid 1990s in recognition of the growth of poverty and inequality in the UK, and of the importance of tackling poverty 'at home' as well as around the world. Our work in UK is guided by the same principles and approaches as our work in other countries. The programme is aimed at developing ways of working that empower people who are facing poverty to find solutions and change the policies which have created poverty in the first place. There are two areas of practice commonly used overseas that underscore Oxfam's work:
-    Voice poverty – increasing the participation of people experiencing poverty in decision making processes that effect their lives
-    Gender means men and women – increasing awareness and understanding of how poverty impacts differently on men and women

As part of our efforts in UKPP to address voice poverty, the programme has supported various partners in developing participatory ways of working and in particular in developing Participatory Appraisal (PA) skills. These partners and their projects have been all quite different in their nature, and they have used PA in different ways, as the sample of the partners and their work below illustrates:

>   Community Council of Berkshire: work originally started 2 to 3 years ago, using PA to carry out village appraisals.
>   Sustain and Food Mapping Project: working with Sustain and Development Focus to use PA to explore food poverty issues in three cities; partners included local authorities and voluntary sector.
>   East End Health Action: using PA to explore community health issues to develop Action Plans for the Social Inclusion Partnership Health Strategy Group; mainly working through focus groups and voluntary sector organisations.
>   Salford City Council: using PA to carry out wide ranging community needs assessment for New Deal for Communities bid. Working with Local Authority and voluntary sector.
>   Gellideg Foundation Group: community sector organisation, carrying out a gendered needs assessment for European Funds Objective 1 bid.

In April 2001 we held a workshop for our partners to bring them together to review and share their experiences of using PA. The discussions raised many issues and concerns about developing capacity in PA and also managing and using PA to develop community empowerment and action.

2   What is it we all love about PA?

There was, obviously, a huge enthusiasm for PA – it is fun, different, inclusive, flexible, challenging, empowering. It can achieve real positive change, proactive communities, address community conflict, change the way decision makers think and deal with communities, give voice to the voiceless, and so on. It can work in so many different communities and situations – from rural Indian communities to inner city regeneration schemes in UK.

3   What worries us about PA?

There were also broad ranging concerns about PA and its use, and these are summarised below in four sections:

3.1   Ethos and principles of PA
Participants felt that PA is not just consultation but is also about challenging the status quo, challenging existing power structures and empowerment, both of individuals and communities. This is a key issue in the concerns about the increasing use of PA – a downside of its success in a way – PA tools are becoming separate from the PA process. The

tools are easy to use and therefore easy to abuse. Abuse seems to come when the ethos and principles of the PA process are not being respected in some way or another.

PA needs to be rooted in community involvement, developing skills and confidence of local people and key policy and decision-makers. Time and support resources need to be planned into the process to ensure that people get the necessary support. The support is required throughout the process, to see through to results so that it can be sustained.

The outcome of PA should not be a report, but rather a change in the way decisions are made, more effective decisions made that benefit all members of the community and that action happens. Any reports produced need to be working documents that are endorsed by decision-making groups, such as those who may have the consultation. In addition, key decision-makers need to be brought into the process from the beginning.

Communities are not homogeneous nor do all people see things from the same point of view. When exploring issues at community level, it is very likely that there will be disagreement and conflict. It can challenge existing decision makers within the community – such as councillors, local community leaders ('spokespeople'), workers, community development staff and so on. Good PA is not just about finding the most representative views, but is about assisting communities to bring issues out into the open, to be discussed and considered. There might well be conflict, and the PA process should be prepared to deal with this, rather than abandon it. Unfortunately, very often there is insufficient time, resources or support to see such conflict through.

3.2   Standards and Quality
This is a real balancing act – how to establish and maintain standards and quality, without compromising PA's ability to be flexible, complex and responsive? How to be rigorous but not rigid? Much of this debate focussed on training, on ensuring that training given is of a standard, and that sufficient support and mentoring is available to support people engaging in a complete PA process, ensuring quality and rigour throughout. Focus was on promoting best practice, rather than dictating specific ways of doing things.

At the personal level, we all need to be reflective and self critical, asking questions such as, are we ensuring that the process is accountable to the stakeholders, have we reached the most marginal of the community, have we asked the right questions, have we listened, are we aware of various biases and prejudices (our own as well as any others) inherent in the process, have we understood the gender dimensions of the community as well as the age and ethnic diversity of the community, are we unnecessarily raising expectations, does the report adequately represent what was discussed, and so on.

To increase the potential of there being change and action implemented at the end of the process, there needs to be some early investment in engaging decision makers in the process – paving the way for the PA process to inform and be part of the decision making processes. Concerns raised about the credibility of PA often arise because people do not understand the process – they question its validity because it is not seen as statistically rigorous. To influence decision-makers there needs to be demonstrable credibility in the work carried out – good documentation, maps to illustrate who was involved and where they lived, and a transparent verification process.

In addition, there is considerable work required in identifying and raising awareness of good practice. Most of the work that has been carried out has not been evaluated or documented (other than the reports of the projects undertaken). So much of the experience and learning has not been collated or documented, and there are poor networks to foster the sharing of learning. This was identified as an area of great need. There is the opportunity to look elsewhere for models of good practice and learn how standards have been set and maintained elsewhere in the world.

3.3   Managing PA locally:

The discussion focussed in particular on how to ensure that the PA process achieved impact in the way decisions were made. This would come about once trust and respect were established between the community and the councils/decision-making bodies. It was recognised that changing attitudes and beliefs of decision-makers (elected or otherwise), was a major and possibly long term strategic need. Many decision-makers hold entrenched views and are resistant to change. In order to support government officers in changing ways of working, it was suggested to:
- create opportunities for sharing and learning between local councils,
- profile/highlight positive examples,
- gain credibility through employing local residents,
- highlight examples in a non threatening way – sell PA as something that will help them get things right,
- identify allies, building on and forming personal contacts.
- at the beginning of the process, invest time in identifying the stakeholders and how you can bring them on board from the start.

If the PA process is to be effective, then those in the traditional chain of decision making will be challenged by the process. This has certainly been the experience of many of the workshop participants. One particular group – elected representatives – often seem to believe that 'citizen participation ends with the ballot box', and feel that participative approaches undermine their role. Rather than seeing participation as a way of strengthening their position and enabling them to be more representative and more effective, they feel threatened by such processes. Approaches listed above for government officers are equally useful for elected representatives, as indeed they are for self-selected 'community leaders' – another group that frequently feel threatened by PA processes and see them eroding their power base.

In addition to influencing existing decision-makers to change the way they work, there is a need to develop community capacity to engage proactively in all these processes. Budgets need to support training and also to invest in the development of community capacity. This is an area that was considered to be grossly overlooked; there is rarely an understanding amongst those who design spending plans that training to ensure sustainable and participative processes is required both within the community and also within the voluntary and statutory sectors. The funding priorities of local and national authorities need to change to support the development of community capacity and building of confidence. Budgets need to not only resource training, but also mentoring and accompaniment.

Investment in community capacity will foster sustainability and accountability. There is a need to promote self-organisation at community level so that there are robust structures within the community to engage in more participative decision making processes that are being developed. Training local people in PA is part of this, but there also needs to be a focus on good community development. It was suggested that there is a need to map out processes wider than just consultation and develop PA as a community development tool. Looking to work being done internationally would be useful, as PA has been used there for some time in community development. PA practitioners need to build their experience of this through networks – which in themselves need to be developed.

Changing the way communities are involved in decision making processes requires time and this is often the most restricted resource. There does need to be an element of trust and commitment to the PA process and this is often lacking within many marginalised communities. Time is required to get things moving, but if it takes too long for a PA process to reap its rewards, people might well get fed-up and demotivated. If there is external pressure (a dead-line for a funding bid, for example) that limits the quality of consultation, this can compromise the credibility of the process.

3.4   Scaling up and mainstreaming:

There is a real concern that PA is 'sold' and presented as a consultation tool and not as an empowering process that leads to action and change. In the current policy environment there is a real push for community led processes and participation. There are often several different perceptions and practices around community led processes, but also very little investment in supporting authorities in working out how best to achieve this. Consequently, they are quick to pounce on any tool or process presented to them that allows them to 'tick' their participation box. The PA tools are easy to use in an extractive and non-empowering way, and there are many examples of 'bad PA', both in UK and internationally. Consequently, rather than an empowering process, the people who participated often feel let down and are unlikely to invest their time, energy and trust in a similar process again.

Our commitment as PA practitioners should be to challenge the view of PA as a consultation tool rather than an empowerment process. This can be done at one level by ensuring that any PA work we are engaged in will be effective (because it will be rigorous, inclusive, and time has been invested in bringing on board decision-makers so that the process can lead to positive change). This is obviously much more than just using the tools. At another, it is about raising the debate about participation and challenging the status quo. This can be done locally, through the project work that we are all engaged in, but also collectively and nationally. To achieve this we need to be able to draw on good practice, ensure documentation, network and share learning, raise these issues at every opportunity available – in journals, in the media, at seminars, etc. The process of review and evaluation discussed in 3.2 is key in this process, continually asking 'How is PA actually leading to specific change/difference in people's lives?'

Much of what was presented in section 3.2 is very relevant to the issue of scaling up, as it will be necessary to use evidence of best practice and provide models of best practice in promoting PA. Essential too are the lessons learned about managing PA locally – what works, what doesn't, what resources are required, what is and is not realistic. This must all be immersed in a debate about community and participatory development, about changing the way decisions are made and about listening to the voices of marginalised people.

4   What now?

A lot of ideas were generated and things to do identified, and some clear pointers rose to the surface repeatedly:

Identifying and defining good practice; there is a clear need to carry out evaluation work on PA processes, that attempt to understand the impact that using PA has had on the stakeholders' involved. How do members of the community perceive what has happened? Do they feel that have been listened to? How do decision-makers perceive the impact? How to move the dialogue forward; considering what needs to be done to support different stakeholders, what do they need, and how to provide it? Support in developing evaluation and monitoring processes will be required to move this forward.

Sharing that learning with others; the opportunity for nine projects from all over UK to meet up and discuss the use of PA is rare. Everyone is busy in their own work, and often there seems no time to document what we are doing or to share information with others. These things are very seldom prioritised. We need to make time to document good practice to provide evidence of PA's impact. We all want to network, but how to achieve it? This is a key area, and needs considerable attention.

Promoting good practice: raising the level of debate both about PA but also participation and what it means. This is something we can all do in our own areas of work, but there is also an advocacy agenda to be developed at national and regional levels. This work must be based on the identification of good practice and shared learning. It should include

publications, attending and organising seminars and meetings, responding to government consultation papers.

Scaling up: there is an additional meaning to this – not just multiplying the use of PA around the country in urban and rural anti-poverty work, but also in opening up national and regional policy formation to participative processes. There is much to be learnt from some of the Poverty Reduction Strategy work being carried out through World Bank programmes about opening up policy debates to people in poverty.

Within all this there is much to learn from work carried out elsewhere in the world, but it is also important to remember that we are also forging new ground in UK, and much of what we develop here will be new and useful to others.

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