

**Participatory Research Methods and Gender Data Base  
Bangladesh country paper**

**Amina Mahbub  
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**Research and Evaluation division  
BRAC  
75 Mohakhali C/A  
Dhaka 1212  
Bangladesh.**

## **Abstract**

Application of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in rural development as well as in agricultural sectors is quite recent in Bangladesh and most of the PRAs are conducted by NGOs. The review of participatory researches explicitly shows that majority of them were conducted to date for evaluating current status and future potentials of different programs. Few researches were done to explore the baseline situation of the villages. However, the creation of a gender sensitive database based on participatory process is required to assist in the development of gender sensitive technical programs for rural development. In this regard, some measures can be taken to increase women's participation in the participatory process. Yet, for gender sensitive development planning to improve the value of participatory research, the analysis should be done individually along with data collection from men and women's group separately. Community involvement with the overall process of data collection to analysis is considered an effective way in this regard. In this context, Participatory Assessment, Analysis and Action (PAAA) is useful approach to development planning and implementation. It involves all stakeholders from the community people to Thana level officials in a participatory process of assessing, analyzing, and acting on multifaceted problems of rural development.

## **Introduction**

Ensuring people's participation in planning, implementation and monitoring of development projects has been a cornerstone of rural development for a long time. To that end, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is appeared to be instrumental, but in Bangladesh the history of application of PRA in rural development and as well as in agricultural sectors is quite recent. However, the experiences with the application of participatory methods explicitly show that impressive results can be achieved if rural people are listened to properly and are allowed to take charge of their own development process. In recent years, different sectors in the Government and NGOs in Bangladesh have acquired the knowledge of PRA and some of them especially the NGOs apply the participatory techniques in various programs/sectors.

This paper attempts to review the present situation of the application of PRA particularly in rural/agricultural sectors to generate gender sensitive information to enhance rural development. The review reveals that both of the Government and NGOs have some experiences in the application of PRA in rural/agricultural communities. The following experiences provide an overview of the existing relevant situation.

### **PRA in the Government sectors**

Presently for rural development and several agricultural programs the Government of Bangladesh is increasingly convinced of the need for greater people's participation in ensuring success and sustainability of the process of development. As a result along with the NGOs the Government's projects also tend to embark on participatory approaches in planning and implementing their programs. Even the new agricultural extension policy of the Government concentrates on decentralized and demand-driven extension to meet

farmers needs and encourages effective links between research and extension. It indicates complete participation of the stakeholders of development in a effective manner and it also emphasizes on empowering the local community because the diffusion of new technology requires development of local institutions and farmer organizations (Ministry of Agriculture 1996). However, to give an impression, illustration of participatory approaches and information collection process at the Government level of Bangladesh an activity called the Agricultural Support Service Project is described below.

The Agricultural Support Services Project (ASSP) is an institutional reform and strengthening project, specifically focused on the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE). ASSP began in 1992 with the initial objective of improving DAE services to farmers. It is a partnership between the farmer, the Government of Bangladesh, NGOs, the Department of International Development and the World Bank. In this project over 13000 DAE staff and agricultural researchers work with group of male and female farmers operating both small and large farms to promote sustainable livelihoods, address gender inequality and respond to the problem of poverty. They are involved with preparing local extension programs to respond to local needs. They work in a partnership through the New Agricultural Extension Policy, to promote environmentally sustainable agriculture development and improve natural resource management.

As a working strategy, ASSP has developed a participatory model for extension development. In collecting information regarding needs assessment and constraint identification of the farmers, they usually use a participatory method called problem census. Every year ASSP conducts four problem censuses among different groups of

male and female farmers<sup>1</sup> in each block by the block supervisors. The information is then analyzed through a compilation sheet in the Thana agricultural office and finally those are used for local level planning. Three types of opinion are considered during planning. Those are: solutions from the farmers, opinion of the Thana agricultural officer, and suggestions from other partner NGOs.

In applying participatory methods for need assessment and constraint identification, ASSP encountered certain obstacles in the preliminary stage. Indeed, application of PRA for extension development was not compatible with the bureaucratic attitudes of the Government officials. Nevertheless, as an effort to overcome the relevant reluctance, guide and VDO cassettes related to PRA were distributed to different Thana offices. Afterwards in 1993, ASSP achieved success in conducting problem census among the farmers on a pilot basis in one region in Bangladesh. To consider the success of this pilot Programme DAE accepted the idea conceptually and it had been implemented all over the country in 1996. In 1997 ASSP developed a training manual from the guide book of needs assessment for the benefit of their training.

Some difficulties arise in implementing participatory approaches in the working process of ASSP in present days. Since the block supervisors receive training through the Thana officials a kind of system loss has been observed in this regard. Besides, a lack of proper skill of the block supervisors in conducting participatory methods in the field also appeared as a major obstacle in this process. Besides since there are a limited number of female block supervisors in the Thana, the problem census with the female farmers are mostly conducted by the male block supervisors, which is a hindrance to the complete

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<sup>1</sup> Two groups are consisted off rich and middle class farmers and the other two groups include small and marginal farmers. Male and female farmers are dealt with separately in this regard.

participation of the women. Yet, women's involvement is an important priority in the project as thirty percent of the budget of DAE is allotted for female farmers. However, according to ASSP the situation varies from region to region in the country, because in some places the female farmers are far more outspoken and in those cases the gender of the block supervisors do not obstruct the working process. In addition, the skill of the person who is facilitating the participatory methods is significant here as well.

Currently, ASSP has decided to develop some core trainers in order to provide training to the block supervisors directly and for that purpose a new training manual has been prepared. In that training manual they have incorporated nine PRA techniques i.e. social mapping, wealth ranking, seasonal calendar, transect, daily time use, etc. These methods will be exercised with both male and female groups and the information will be preserved for local level planning. In this way it is expected to be gender sensitive data base for further agricultural extension development activities.

### **PRA at NGO level**

In comparison to the Government activities PRAs in Bangladesh are mostly conducted by the NGOs. In this connection BRAC's initiatives appeared to be significant. In reviewing the participatory researches in relation to rural development at NGO level some of the BRAC's initiatives are illustrated here in brief. BRAC, the largest national NGO in Bangladesh, has been using PRA extensively from 1991 onwards to assess the impact and future prospects of its rural development program.

In the initiation of using PRA, BRAC tried to assess the impact of its deep tubewell group. In that study several participatory techniques were used i.e. transect, timeline, social map, seasonal calendar, economic relationship chart and impact flow chart. The

investigated area were: popularity of irrigation, the dynamics of irrigation group, yields and return, seasonal effects on income and employment, management skill and empowerment of the group members, its implications for women and non BRAC members and environmental effects (Banu et al. 1991). Subsequently application of PRA has been gradually increased in BRAC for different research activities regarding rural and agricultural development, such as evaluation of the present status and future prospectus of the sericulture program (Banu et al., 1993); assessment of the impact of the oxbow lake project on fishermen (Ahmed et al., 1996); and so on. Presently in every year participatory methods are considered as major tools for case studies in assessing the impact of BRAC's rural development program. In addition to different research being conducted on rural development a study was also done in BRAC to test the feasibility of using PRA to obtain some baseline information regarding some socioeconomic issues, and also to identify indigenous indicators of poverty and crisis situation. Information was collected from both the male and female groups of the village (Mahbub et al., 1995).

The PRAs which have been conducted in BRAC so far dealt with both male and female groups simultaneously. Yet the application is mainly limited in the Village Organization (VO), formed with the target people and in that sense overall participation of the villagers is sometimes absent.

## **Gender database and rural women in participatory process**

Clearly, the participatory researches in Bangladesh have been mainly conducted to date with the purpose of needs assessment, evaluation of the present situation and future prospects of the programs and so on. Some of the participatory researches revealed certain baseline information through describing the situation of the villages. Nevertheless, a comprehensive database has not been established yet through participatory process which can assist to develop a gender sensitive technical rural development program including in the agricultural sectors.

Although despite the several sociocultural restraints women's participation in participatory processes is relatively satisfactory in Bangladesh. However, certain factors have been noted in several research experiences which obstruct women's active participation to a certain extent. Researches revealed that as the women in rural areas are mostly overburdened with household work, so they often consider it an additional activity to attend a participatory exercise (Adams et al.,1995; Adams and Mahbub 1996). Yet, sometimes in spite of their eagerness to participate due to their limited mobility they are unable to attend sessions which are held at distant places. Additionally, due to the presence of male facilitators, women's are uneasy about expressing their opinion. Moreover in the case of data collection the facilitators are often preoccupied with patriarchal biases, assumptions, values and attitudes. As a result, women's opinion is not valued appropriately, particularly in agricultural research.

To improve women's active participation in participatory research the following measures can be taken.



- The participatory research should be designed in a culturally sensitive way, and female facilitators should be employed for exercising participatory methods with the rural women.
- To ensure the participation of the women an appropriate time of the day should be selected i.e. their leisure time. In addition, the place chosen for the exercise should be where the women have easy access. In this regard women's suggestions should be considered.
- There should be flexibility in entering and leaving the participatory session so that the women feel at ease to participate.

### **Strategies to improve the effectiveness of participatory research to be gender sensitive for planning programs**

In terms of improving the effectiveness of participatory research to be gender sensitive for planning programs in agriculture, diversification of the community as an important factor should be taken into account and gender as an important axis of such diversity should be understood. In this regard not only should information be collected from men and women group separately, but the analysis should be done individually as well. Otherwise, any value which might arise from the equal consultation of men and women in a participatory process is lost when the findings disappear into the melting pot of community average, obscuring any possible gender differences (Guijt, 1994)

Concurrently, community involvement with the overall process of information collection to analysis can be regarded as an effective way to improve the value of participatory research for local planning and implementation of a program. In this context Participatory Assessment, Analysis and Action (PAAA) is a useful approach to development planning

and implementation that involves all stakeholders from community people to Thana level officials in a participatory process of assessing, analyzing, and acting on multifaceted problems of rural development. It is a bottom up approach which is the contrary to the top down model of the usual decision making process, existing in Bangladesh (Adams and Mahbub, 1996).

The starting point in applying the PAAA approach to development planning and implementation is identifying local needs and problems and whom they concern. The process of assessment is done by working closely with the community and by addressing the local needs and problems from the community's point of view. The second step of this process is to analyze the causes of the problem. The process should be done at the village level. This process helps to justify critically the findings to participatory assessment and identify origins of underlying causes of the problems. The last step of this process is to develop an area based action plan. During designing and implementing action participants need to think about the nature and underlying causes of specific problems and consider possible solutions with available resources.

Necessary information of the village and the villagers for assessing, analyzing the problem and implementing the action plan is needed to be collected in a participatory way through the enthusiastic villagers. A sound local level organization is required to be developed for this purpose. The information should be preserved which will be identified as a village level data base, which is sensitive to gender needs and priorities differences.

## **Recommendations**

In conclusion I would like to place following recommendations for FAO.

- FAO could provide the financial and technical assistance in collaboration with the Bangladesh Government in developing local gender sensitive database from participatory findings which will assist to develop different initiatives for rural development.
- A sound local level organization can be developed for this purpose. Through several participatory methods they would collect the information seasonally, monitor the situation and conduct PAAA with the villagers. They would also place the action plan to the local administration for developing necessary programs.

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