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# Recruiting a PRA Team that Works

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In 1949 the World Bank sent 14 international advisers to Colombia. These experts in foreign exchange, transportation, industry, agriculture, and others represented the first mission of its kind to attack "underdevelopment" with a comprehensive program calling for intervention in all social and economic aspects of importance (Escobar 1995). While this interventionist strategy still clings tightly in many sectors, a new participatory approach to development has been spreading rapidly in the world. It marks a switch from an outsider, expert-driven, prescriptive approach to one that attempts "to enable local people to conduct their own analysis and often to plan and take action (Chambers and Guijit 1995)."

The term "participatory rural appraisal" (PRA) combines a group of approaches and methods designed to enable local people to share, enhance, and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act (Chambers 1994). Its rapid spread throughout the world has precipitated a similar spread in myths and dangers that have led to its misuse. One such myth says that communities can use information generated by a PRA to kick start their own development, thus relieving facilitators to leave as they please. Some practitioners (Selener 1996, Erhart 1996) argue that if local communities were able to carry out their own development with ease, they would have already done so.

Selener further posits that an appropriate institutional context must exist before any PRA can be carried out. That is, an institution must already be committed to helping a community before the PRA is undertaken. If no such commitment exists, then the PRA should not be done; at the least it would waste locals' time and at the most it would destroy their faith in the participatory process.

If this institutional context must exist, then one of the primary charges of a PRA is to convert the context into a relationship between the community and the outside agency by overcoming barriers of mistrust and misunderstanding. In theory the development process will then emerge and proceed

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from this fundamental relationship.

Thus the responsibility of outsiders to the target community shifts from technical omniscience to facilitation accompanied by a wide range of new attitudes, such as a recognition of the importance of local expertise and priorities, understanding, honesty, transparency, cooperative spirit and equality between local

people and facilitators. Each facilitator, then, no longer has to specialize in a single discipline but must have a variety of knowledge and skills that prove adequate and sensitive to the uniqueness of each situation. Promoting a participatory approach, therefore, requires a careful recruitment of the facilitation team.



*The community Pululahua rests inside its volcanic cradle.*

## The Pululahua Recruitment Experience

The Pululahua Geobotanical Reserve, created in 1966, is a state protected area 20 minutes north of Quito, the Ecuadorian capital, in the Andes Mountains. Pululahua's primary feature is a five-kilometer wide extinct volcanic crater that shelters a small farming community inside. On all sides steep volcanic walls rise up. The boundary between the naturally vegetated escarpment and the corn fields of the community delimits protected area from community members' privately owned property. The spectacular geology and patches of primary montane cloud forest, as well as a great variety of orchids and other plant and animal species rarely found near Quito, make Pululahua an important conservation site and a uniquely accessible tourist destination.

The Quito-based conservation organization, EcoCiencia, has proposed the establishment of an interpretation system based on Pululahua's natural and historical attributes. Due to the political disorganization of this community, EcoCiencia found it difficult to learn the community's own perception of local problems and did not know if EcoCiencia development ideas would be welcomed. Thus the group sponsored a participatory rural

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appraisal to obtain a better picture of the community's realities and interests.

To form the PRA team, the organizer (Kohl) recruited three other members based on technical knowledge, previous experience working with agrarian communities, Spanish fluency, and team gender equity. In June 1996, this group of Master's students from universities in the US and Canada arrived in Pululahua to carry out a PRA. The team worked in coordination with national Ecuadorian natural resource institute (INEFAN), the governmental agency managing protected areas and wildlife programs, and EcoCiencia. The team had two objectives:

- 1) To carry out a PRA that identifies and prioritizes the problems of the community and arrives at viable solutions to problems of highest priority.
- 2) To integrate the participation of EcoCiencia into the PRA framework in order to build a communication bridge between the community and the outside agency.

In order to achieve the second goal, we had to include in our team of outsiders Ecuadorian members of our sponsoring agencies. We solicited representatives from our principal collaborators, EcoCiencia and INEFAN. We also approached various offices within the Ministry of Agriculture (of which INEFAN is a division), the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction (IIRR), and a recent college graduate in sociology in order to add local people who could help to carry on the longer term relationship with the community after we departed.

Unfortunately, neither EcoCiencia nor INEFAN were willing or able to assign a person. Although we found an enthusiastic Ministry of Agriculture agronomist who had worked with women's groups in the area, bureaucratic delays prevented her participation. IIRR had a staff agronomist who had worked in the community of Pululahua and had an active proposal to create jobs there, yet he did not participate either. Finally, the sociology student, who had organized student field trips to the community with EcoCiencia two years ago, opted not to join.

Despite these recruiting shortfalls, the four-person team carried out six activities that resulted in a community map, transect, brief history of the community, seasonal calendar, institutional diagram, and tendency lines for several important variables mutually chosen by the team and participants. Results indicated that, among other things, there has been a long history of division within the community and that the relationship between INEFAN and the community was weak. Similarly EcoCiencia and IIRR were unknown in Pululahua, even though both had worked there. During the final assembly, community members prioritized problem areas and clearly voiced their priorities: the near absence of health and educational services (#3), lack of political organization (#2), and overwhelmingly the community's very difficult access to markets (#1). The community adhered to the idea of constructing a road as the only solution to facilitating their passage out of the fertile crater. The road would go from the crater floor, through the crater wall (destroying the popular overlook on the rim), and would join the nearby road.

This solution, however, would not prove easy. The road faces several engineering and legal challenges. Foremost

of these, such large-scale alteration violates the conservation goals of a protected area, thus resulting in INEFAN's strict prohibition of the road. With these limitations in mind, the facilitators attempted to steer the discussion to alternative cheaper and more efficient ways of getting agricultural products out of the crater. The community, however, demonstrated no patience in such discussions. The meeting ended without having defined either viable alternatives or an action plan.

The team prepared the proceedings of the PRA and distributed copies to key members of the community and organizations with development interests in Pululahua. The team left Ecuador without assurance that further action would be taken by the community, EcoCiencia, or INEFAN. PRA results showed that the community is politically divided and their interests may conflict with those of INEFAN. Further research might focus on community participation potential and awareness of conservation and natural resources. In short, we concluded that written proceedings distributed to development agencies were no substitute for first-hand experience — an agency cannot know a community through a paper document. Although our charge was to construct a bridge between the community and outside agencies, we worried that this bridge would be one of paper.

### Framework for Recruitment of a PRA Team

We have identified four selection characteristics for a successful PRA team. While we do not pretend that this list is complete, these four basic characteristics are generalizable for many PRA situations. The examples here are hypothetical and not meant as criticisms of agencies or people.

#### *Four General Characteristics of Ideal Team Recruits*

##### 1. Cultural Similarity

The more culturally similar team members are to the local community, the better able they will be to ask useful questions of locals, make accurate interpretations of data, and understand and empathize with the views and interests of local residents. Some have argued for the essentiality of host nationals on PRA teams, but the term "outsider" has a more useful function than "national." Since a continuum of cultural similarity exists, a dichotomy between nationals and foreigners does not prove useful in this case (Figure 1).

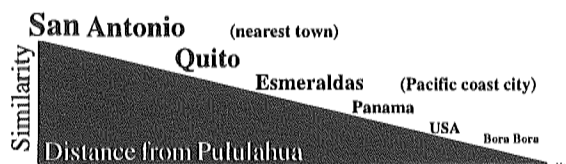


Figure 1. Cultural similarity varies along a continuum.

CASE EXAMPLE: Had the sociology student with experience in Pululahua participated, we might have been better prepared for the eventual outcome — staunch support for the road — which she had foreseen.

## 2. Diversity of Technical Knowledge

Members from different disciplines facilitate the asking of more useful questions about complex problems. Such knowledge also dispels confusion surrounding technical debates on appropriateness and feasibility.

**CASE EXAMPLES:** Although we knew the road presented technical challenges, we could not offer the scope of legal or engineering considerations that a representative of INEFAN could have provided. Also, the participation of IIRR's agronomist might have helped to identify real problems and solutions. For example, in his Quito office he had mentioned ways to increase efficiency of pack animals as an alternative to road construction. His credibility and presence in the field, moreover, might have helped to avert the abrupt ending of the final assembly.

## 3. Experience in Participatory Methodology

Participatory methodology requires experience across a gamut of skills such as activity execution, communication, facilitation, conflict resolution, and cross-cultural understanding (Institute of Development Studies 1996). Such experience goes far in the process by which the facilitator team constructs the bridge between community and outside agency.

**CASE EXAMPLE:** The participation of the government agronomist, who had experience with area women's groups could have improved the participation of Pululahua's women in the PRA. Women's contributions to the PRA dialogue could have deepened the understanding of the community and influenced the outcome in many different ways.

## 4. Agency Representation

A relationship cannot be established by proxy and in participatory methodology, it is not pre-arranged. Representatives of the outside agency play a crucial role in motivating the community, PRA team, and collaborating agency itself. "Including policy makers themselves as members of PRA teams seems to be one of the best ways of generating the commitment needed to motivate real change... One report from Guinea speaks of 'the profound effect this had on the perspectives of the government functionaries who participated'" (Institute of Development Studies 1996, World Resources Institute 1993). Agents officially convey the parameters of help the outside agency is willing to commit so as to reduce false community expectations and doubt. Such enhanced mutual understanding would be crucial to all post-PRA follow-up.

**CASE EXAMPLES:** Had EcoCiencia participated with the team

in Pululahua, the participant group could have been motivated to consider alternatives, possibly averting the final outcome. Certainly, the independent PRA team could not officially represent the organization. Had INEFAN been present, they could have clarified the government's position regarding the road and saved the community time otherwise wasted in argument mired in misinformation. Also had INEFAN officials attended the final meeting, they would have a better understanding of the community's passion for the road and could have engaged in a meaningful dialogue which, according to PRA results, lacked in the community.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the other two PRA team members, Christine Housel and Kelly Charnetski. Also we owe our thanks to the community of Pululahua, Mario Garcia of EcoCiencia and Guillermo Romero of INEFAN, without whom this project would still be just an idea. I (Kohl) also direct my gratitude to Dr. William Burch for his influence in the ecosystem management approach I used. Last, we are grateful to the Tropical Resources Institute whose support got this project off the ground.

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Pululahua contains one of the last primary cloud forests in the valley of the capital city, Quito.