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French student poster 1960s

Robert Chambers' ox: a personal reflection on participatory work

By John McKinnon
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Over the past 35 years I must have carried out, supervised, trained facilitators for, or observed more than a hundred participatory exercises, nearly all with small holder farmers in rural settings in Asia and the South Pacific: Cambodia, China, India, Thailand and Vanuatu. Although I remain convinced that the method works, critical events that sabotage what might have been achieved follow so closely on the heels of such exercises that they ought to be considered part of the phenomenon rather than a deviation. Since Robert Chambers has been feted as the single most important person associated with all the forms and applications of PLA/PRA (Participatory Learning and Action/Participatory Rural Appraisal) it is fitting that the technique should be called 'Chambers' ox'. How did I come by this idea?

For me 'farmer first' goes back a long way. Long before Chambers and PLA/PRA became a magic bullet, there was Rapid Rural Appraisal. First it was Paulo Freire in the 1960s speaking, as it were, to the student, advocating radical confrontation. Next it was the transition to what would work. Then it was 1978, the year in which I was running a rural development project not far from Khon Kaen, northeast Thailand. Terry Grandstaff and David Thomas were recruiting lecturers from Khon Kaen University from a wide range of disciplines to interview farmers and learn how they managed their resources and why they preferred certain strategies above others. As an anthropologist, Terry Grandstaff was well aware that what they were beginning to call RRA could be seen as a "cheap and nasty way of doing participatory observation". The objective though was quite clear and made perfectly good sense: to establish an understanding of resource use that would fully account for the farmers' conceptualisation and perceptions of how they farmed.

Who could ignore such good sense? My colleagues, principally lecturers from the engineering and agricultural faculties of Khon Kaen University, quickly adopted aspects of the RRA approach and, in full consultation with resettled farmers, a few expatriate

Australian and Dutch advisors were employed at local rates. Project personnel designed assistance packages that involved animal husbandry, small scale commercial cropping, agroforestry, water supply — in which we advocated for the optimisation of ground water — and a host of flexible, farmer-sensitive and scientifically credible interventions.

The buzz that flowed out of the first two years of engagement was both exciting and rewarding. Unfortunately the high wasn't to last.

Local Thai administrators were unhappy about aid resources being exclusively channelled to farmers, when they clearly expected a cut. Allowing farmers to choose their own development strategies diminished civil servants' control over resources. Once the Bangkok academic entrusted with responsibility to negotiate a better understanding realised the nature of the conflict, and read into it an opportunity for himself, it was easy for him to draw the anti-imperialist trump card against the foreigners who were “experimenting with peoples' lives”.

Neils Mulder, the anthropological advisor to the project, was helpful. “John, reports are just words and words are not enough for the master class”. I was caught in a game of what today we might call dissonant cultural cognition. The leader of the opposition, as a member of a strongly hierarchical tradition, simply aligned his ideas to agree with those with whom he most closely identified: the local administrators, his local, fellow countrymen. With the help of a single, off-shore, Dutch friend and patron responsible for his appointment in the first place, his coup could not fail.

Such is the politics of aid work. A seminal lesson. My belief that the success the project enjoyed with local farmers would provide a counter to any criticism was naive. Farmers had no say in the matter. Officials wanted that silence to continue. Donors are primarily interested in avoiding trouble and maintaining good relations with those in power. Development companies in pursuit of continuing high, profitable returns need to curry local support to secure the next contract. At home the donations that go to political parties keen to support business are not called corruption but an acknowledgement, and part of neo-liberal practice. Keep it cool: no hot ideas allowed.

So how do farmers fare when everybody talks about their needs and nobody serves them? And what about PLA/PRA? Can this ox, the lumbering purity of PLA/PRA, this much celebrated mode of intervention correct the structural bias against farmers?

I know what a well-trained ox in the hands of focused and competent farmers can achieve. PLA/PRA can plough the figurative field, encourage and enable farmers to review, analyse and articulate their needs, and generate a plan of action. Farmers often complained,

however, that they saw too many agents from projects who said they were visiting to learn from the people and then neither listened nor waited long enough to learn anything. Too many untrained, uninvited, visiting oxen trampled on their hope that privileged strangers cared enough to help. Villagers know that untethered livestock are a danger to crops and livelihoods, and are best kept out of the village.

I am a believer in competently conducted PLA/PRA but it is still an ox. What does the ox know of politics, privilege, exploitation and avarice? After we had given our hearts and minds to Paulo Freire and, in the name of peace and order and good sense, voluntarily stepped into the mental straight jacket of political correctness and silence and said goodbye to direct action, where did we end up? Have we travelled no further than 1968 waving placards on the streets of Paris?



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Because I believe in the ox does not mean it is my destiny to become the ox: silent and faithful to the end. Let us keep talking. Let us be critical. Let us remember. Let us learn from experience and face up to negative reports that offer little room for optimism. Let us be realistic about the circumstances in which this work is done and do our best to make it better.

In northwest Cambodia, according to bank loan contracts signed and sealed, national Treasury officials quibbled for two years over delivering promised financial assistance directly to communities that had prepared plans under carefully conducted PLA exercises. When money was eventually released, it was stolen by the very extension workers who were

supposed to help.

In Yunnan, China, a Hani planning project was checked and verified as a truly participatory project two years after planning was completed and follow-up assistance provided.

Unfortunately, the local government officials who had arranged entry to the community took land to plant a huge walnut plantation and set up a piggery of such dimensions that it polluted the local water supply.

In Gujarat, India, the director chasing fame as a latter day Gandhi saint turned a blind eye to all that did not contribute directly to his elevation. He ignored: the beating of impoverished local house wives by forestry officials if they were caught collecting fuel so they could cook; the pay-off provided by households who could afford to bribe local officials when they extended their farms into the protected forest; the continued preference to hold planning exercises on sacred ground to which the entry of non-Hindu tribal minorities was prohibited. He could only hear the voices of the worthy and faithful.

In north Thailand, a Karen community, politically aware and active in the Assembly of the Poor, was denied assistance and farmers were imprisoned by forestry officials for clearing land they had worked for more than a hundred years.

In Vanuatu, follow-up and back-up were denied as too much trouble and it was hardly a surprise that project funding was abruptly terminated following a change in policy. It's easy to forget the end-of-line recipients when they neither count politically nor diplomatically.

Such simple accounts cannot do justice to the subtleties of failure, but again and again I hear the words of the guru Chambers, part of the search for a purer, more perfect exercise in which only a better understanding of the small holder farmers will count. On its own, all alone, it is not enough. We need to report again and again the circumstance under which yet another well-trained ox met its death. I hear Neils Mulder reminding me that on their own, words and action plans will not hack it.

I see a long tall figure like Lao-tse riding into the sunset on a dumb ox. There is plenty of time for reflection and philosophy. So much to learn and so many to be taught. In this quest, detachment is a sensible strategy.

John McKinnon has worked in many Pacific and Southeast Asian nations in both research and practical undertakings specializing in rural development, informal urban settlements, indigenous highland societies, with a principle focus on participatory planning. His current work involves PhD supervision, writing and assignments as a consultant.

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John McKinnon commenced work as a development practitioner in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate in 1968. Since then he has worked in many other Pacific and Southeast Asian nations in both research and practical undertakings specializing in rural development, informal urban settlements, indigenous highland societies, with a principle focus on participatory planning. John has worked for the Dutch, French and New Zealand governments and in the 1990s set up the Development Studies Programme at Victoria University of Wellington. His current work involves PhD supervision, writing and assignments as a consultant.

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