



Helpdesk Research Report

Tools for participatory analysis of poverty, social exclusion and vulnerability

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Question

Review a selection of quantitative and qualitative tools and methods used by development agencies to undertake micro-level participatory analysis on poverty, social exclusion, or vulnerability. Identify the scope and intended application of these tools, the skills required to use them, and any lessons learned.

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1. Overview

Participatory approaches have been broadly advocated in development policy as means of enabling local people to share and analyse their conditions and experiences (See for example Chambers 1994; Leavy and Howard, et al. 2013). This report identifies and reviews a selection of participatory tools that have been used in micro-level poverty, social exclusion and vulnerability analysis. The approaches reviewed include:

- **Ranking:** Commonly divided into three approaches: problem ranking, preference ranking, and wealth ranking, which enable practitioners to gain an understanding of local perceptions and preferences on a range of issues, including poverty.
- **Seasonal Calendars:** Visual tools which can be useful for identifying periods of stress and vulnerability (United Nations 2006, p. 119).

- **Storytelling methodologies:** Recommended in complex social situations and involving participants verbally exploring issues they face in their lives.
- **Participatory theatre:** Recommended in difficult environments and when dealing with sensitive topics. This approach involves actors interacting with the public on a social problem, for example HIV/AIDS education or human rights issues (SFCG 2009).

Both experts and literature caution that **who uses the tools is as important as the tools themselves**¹. Qualities and skills recommended for practitioners include the following: cultural sensitivity and awareness; previous experience in using the particular methodology or adequate training in how it can be applied (Chambers 1994; Turnbull and Turvill 2012); a demeanour of respect, humility and patience (Chambers 1994); effective training in recording, reporting, synthesis, and analysis (Norton 2001, p. 31); excellent facilitation and communication skills (Chambers 1994, p. 1256; Turnbull and Turvill 2012, p. 13); and skills in advocacy and project cycle management (p. 13).

Drawing from the literature, best practices and lessons learned include:

- **Being aware of ethical issues:** It is important to carefully manage local expectations and ensure that communities are not disadvantaged by the process (Norton 2001).
- **Visual sharing:** Visual techniques, such as models or diagrams, can stimulate conversation, encourage the inclusion of marginalised community members (especially those with low literacy levels), and are often easier to triangulate than other approaches (Chambers 1994).
- **Accessibility:** The language used during the participatory process should be accessible to the widest possible range of participants (Norton 1998). Attention should be given to gender sensitivities and steps taken to include women, should their participation be socially difficult (Bell and Brambilla 2001).

2. Tools for participatory analysis

Oxfam and ActionAid have produced handbooks for practitioners, which give in-depth practical notes on participatory analysis of vulnerability (ActionAid, n.d; Oxfam 2012).

Definitions

There are three common approaches to participatory analysis: Participatory Poverty Analysis, Participatory Rural Appraisal, and Participatory Learning and Action.

Participatory Poverty Analysis (PPA) has been defined as ‘an instrument for including poor people’s views in the analysis of poverty and the formulation of strategies to reduce it through public policy’ (Norton 2001, p. 6). Such approaches aim to improve the effectiveness of policies that seek poverty reduction, through understanding poverty from the perspective of those who experience it (p. 6). PPAs have been used by the World Bank to complement Poverty Assessments and have spread rapidly – Riggeri Laderchi (2001, p. 5) notes that by 1998, half the completed poverty assessments performed by the World Bank include a participatory component.

¹ Expert comments.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), meanwhile, is a term used to describe a family of approaches and methods that 'enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions' (Chambers 1994, p. 1437). The implementation of PRA techniques is guided by a number of principles which include capacity building, utilisation of results, and the use of multiple methods (Duraiappah et al. 2005, p. 10). The advantages of adapting a PRA approach is that it is flexible and 'highly responsive to individual difference, situational changes and emerging information' (p. 11). It is also seen to enable researchers to collect a large amount of information in a relatively short period of time (p. 11).

Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) is similar to PRA. It is an approach to learning about, and engaging with, communities using participatory and visual methods, including interviews (Thomas n.d, p. 1). The approach has been traditionally used in rural communities, where it has been 'extremely effective in tapping into the unique perspectives of the rural poor' (p. 1).

Examples of tools used in participatory analysis approaches are listed below.

Seasonal calendars

Seasonal calendars can help reveal seasonal trends within a community and identify periods of stress². They are particularly useful for **mapping when vulnerabilities occur during the year** (ActionAid n.d, p. 18). Variations that calendars can measure range from rainfall and crop sequences, to labour demand and changes in employment availability. ACCCA conducted a seasonal calendar exercise in Mali to explore seasonal changes and priorities for adaptation strategies in the community, including: gender-specific workload; health issues; income and expenditure; and water availability³. In this process, participants were asked to draw a matrix indicating each month along one axis by a symbol. The facilitator asked a number of questions, for example 'at what time of the year is food scare?', and participants illustrated their response on the calendar with twigs.

ActionAid recommend that when using this tool, the concept of vulnerability should be adequately introduced and explained so as to avoid confusion (p. 18). In a report for the International Institute for Sustainable Development, Duraiappah et al. (2005, p. 10) note that visual tools such as **calendars can be effective in encouraging participation by socially excluded groups**, such as women, members of minority, and illiterate community members.

Transect walks

This methodology involves a walk, or series of walks, with local informants around their area to identify different conditions, problems, and opportunities (Adebo 2000, p. 14-15). The intended application of this approach is to gain an understanding of natural resources in a village, and identify any problems or opportunities associated, for example vulnerability to weather changes (KTN 2005, p. 7). Transect walks can be useful tools for stimulating and informing community dialogue on land use, resource distribution or conflicts⁴. They can also assist in locating settlements of socially excluded or economically deprived community members (Administrative Training Institute, nd, p. 11). The information obtained through

² See:

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTISPMA/0,,contentMDK:20190393~menuPK:415131~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:384329,00.html#trend>

³ See: <http://weadapt.org/knowledge-base/vulnerability/seasonal-calendar-exercise>

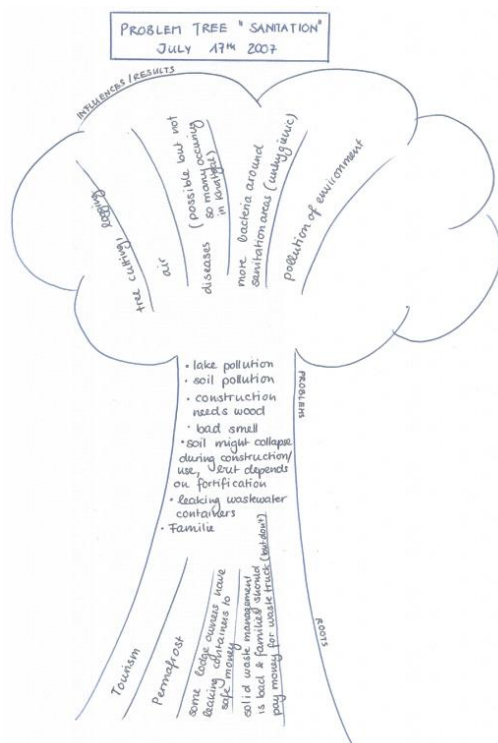
⁴ See: http://www.iapad.org/transect_mapping.htm

transect walks is presented in an illustrative diagram to be further discussed with community members to triangulate findings⁵.

Problem tree

The problem tree is a **useful tool for analysing the root causes of vulnerability** (ActionAid n.d, p. 21), and provides a way for communities to order these into 'cause-effect relationships' (Von Franz and Schall n.d, p. 2). Produced by the community with the assistance of a facilitator, the tree is structured with the main issue represented by the tree trunk, influences represented by roots, and outcomes represented by branches (p. 2). In a guide produced for GTZ, Von Franz and Schall (n.d, p. 4) note that the advantages of the problem tree approach are its simplicity and its emphasis on visualisation and discussion. They caution that one of its limitations is that it does not give indication of the 'magnitude' of the problem, and recommend that users and facilitators have previous knowledge of how the tool is used (p. 4). ActionAid suggest that prior to using this tool, practitioners should hold focus groups or interviews with the targeted community to understand the current situation of vulnerability. The problem tree can then be used as a means of understanding the *causes* of vulnerability (ActionAid n.d, p. 21).

Figure 1: Example of a problem tree drawn by the Khatgal community in Northern Mongolia



Source: <http://www.sswm.info/category/planning-process-tools/exploring/exploring-tools/preliminary-assessment-current-status/prob>

⁵ See: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTTOPPSISOU/Resources/1424002-1185304794278/4026035-1185375653056/4028835-1185375678936/1_Transsect_walk.pdf

Storytelling methodologies

An expert in participatory methodologies indicated that storytelling might yield more fruitful results in complex social situations than technical-rational approaches⁶. This approach involves participants verbally exploring issues they face in their lives – for example, telling stories of what it takes to have a good life, what challenges they see in their communities, and their hopes for the future⁷. An example of a storytelling methodology in practice is the Green Agenda, coordinated by Dutch and Macedonian NGOs, which targeted 18 communities in six Western Balkan countries (See Muñiz 2011, p. 89-94). Here, communities were assisted in making 15-30 films which communicated how environmental changes impact on their lives.

Participatory theatre

Participatory theatre was recommended as a useful tool, particularly in **difficult environments** or when **discussing sensitive topics**⁸. It can help to explore how and why certain people are more vulnerable than others, and penetrate spaces of social exclusion through interactions among participants and the audience (Kaptani and Yuval-Davis 2008). Search for Common Ground (SFCG) describes participatory theatre as an approach in which actors interact with the public, based on a real problem (SFCG 2009, p. 5). The approach can be used in a number of ways, including providing an opportunity for the public to think, ask questions and propose solutions about local issues (p. 5). An example from the DRC is Atelier-Theatr'Actions, which uses participatory theatre to address HIV/AIDS education and human rights issues⁹ (p. 10). A 'conductor' or facilitator should be present to act as a bridge between the actors and the audience members, and to keep the educational or research element of the performance on track (p. 37). Skills required in this role include: the ability to ask pertinent and stimulating questions to audience members; the ability to observe and be sensitive to the emotions of the audience; and the ability to maintain order, discipline and the respect of others during the play (p. 37).

“Rope technique”

The “rope technique” was employed during the Uganda National Household Survey (UNHS III) as a **measuring tool of absolute poverty** (Kagugube et al. 2007, p. 37). The process first involved focus group participants in rural sites discussing seven dimensions of poverty: assets for production; access to medical services; whether children are sent to school; food security; whether they have 'enough' money; how many dependants they have; and powerlessness (p. 38). For each dimension, participants were asked to discuss the topic and give their views (p.38). Then, they had to place village household cards (which had been produced during a previous mapping session) on different ropes to indicate household positions along the seven dimensions (p. 37). The ropes symbolised 'climbing out of poverty' and participants were asked to work with standardised definitions of the top and bottom of the scale. For example, for assets for production the bottom position (1) represented 'do not have any productive assets at all', while the top position (10) represented 'have all the assets they need to produce, the capacity to replace them when needed, and the quality of the assets is the best possible' (See p. 39 for a table of scale-end definitions). Once the household cards were in place, the ropes were divided into ten equal sections and each household given a poverty ranking (1-10) according to their position (p. 40). This approach should be carefully managed, as Norton (2001, p. 16) notes, discussing wealth differentials has the potential to inflame divisions.

⁶ Expert comments

⁷ Expert comments

⁸ Expert comments

⁹ See also: <http://www.societecivile.cd/membre/ata>

The rope approach was successfully used in rural communities, where participants knew each other and could triangulate rope positions, and less successful in urban communities, where participants did not have the same level of awareness (p. 42). The Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) found that the data collected using this methodology was 'richer than standard quantitative poverty measures because it originates from in-depth discussions characteristic of participatory approaches' (p. 46).

Ranking

Ranking tools can be a useful way of identifying social exclusion and poverty. The World Bank identifies three types of ranking exercises: problem ranking, preference ranking, and wealth ranking¹⁰. **Problem ranking** is used to elicit local perceptions of the most important problems they face. A simple task in this vein can involve participants listing the six main challenges they encounter in a particular area or project and ranking these in order of importance. **Preference ranking** is similar, though involves participants assessing different options using criteria they have selected themselves. A common approach is a matrix with options along a horizontal axis and criteria on a vertical axis. **Wealth ranking** is useful for learning about the socioeconomic stratification of project beneficiaries and can **help to identify the most vulnerable or excluded people**, from the perspective of the community (See for example Leavy and Howard et al. p, 12). The process involves participants identifying and analysing the different wealth groups in a community through focus groups and score cards. Results obtained through ranking processes can be triangulated by follow-up discussions with participants (See Chambers 1994, p. 1259).

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviewing, though perhaps not entirely participatory, appears in most literature on participatory approaches (See for example Turnbull and Turvill 2012, p. 22). It is often used in conjunction with other tools to follow up, or explore further, the community's message (p. 22). The approach can be a useful tool for **obtaining a deeper level of understanding** than is often possible through quantitative methods (Schoonmaker-Freudenberger, n.d, p. 74). Interviews are partially structured, with the interviewer have a limited number of pre-set questions, but flexible and able to adapt as the conversation flows (Shillingford, n.d, p. 41). Tools, such as maps or other visual diagrams, can accompany the interview process and can be useful for prompting discussion and building rapport (Schoonmaker-Freudenberger, n.d, p. 74). Literature recommends that interviewers should: avoid closed ended or oriented questions (that is, those that introduce bias by encouraging the respondent to answer in a particular way); recapitulate and echo respondent answers; and show encouragement through body language such as nodding, leaning and verbal cues (p. 75). Oxfam (2012) makes a number of recommendations on how to conduct a successful semi-structured interview. These include:

- **Identifying the right people to interview:** This will depend on the research topic, whether there are identifiable key informants, and the advice of colleagues and partners on local customs (p. 1). Securing the participation of women is also important and interviewee selection should take into account any gender issues (p. 1).
- **Setting up an interview:** Interviewers should carefully consider the location and timing of the interview, and ensure that participants give informed consent (p. 2).

¹⁰ See:

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTISPMA/0,,contentMDK:20190393~menuPK:415131~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:384329,00.html#ranking>

- **Interviewing techniques:** Interviewers should give the task their full attention and avoid asking multiple questions at once (p. 3). For sensitive topics, it may be useful to get local advice on how to phrase difficult or personal questions (p. 3).

3. Gender sensitivity

A gender sensitive participatory approach is noted as one which acknowledges that there are obstacles to women's participation and introduces mechanisms to address such obstacles (p. Gurung and Leduc 2009, P. 1). In a report prepared for the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMD) Gurung and Leduc (2009) recommend that in communities where there are social or cultural barriers to joint male/female participation, it might be more effective to work with women separately from the beginning (p. 2).

Bell and Brambilla (2001) have produced a comprehensive paper for BRIDGE that explores issues of gender and participation, and provides practical examples of how participatory tools and techniques have been used (p. 29-34). Some of the identified recommendations and lessons learned from literature include: understanding the practical conditions that may affect women's involvement, such as household work (p. 5); avoid processes that favour a select group of women (p. 5); and use clear and commonly agreed terminology to avoid confusion over terms such as gender, participation and community (p. 5).

4. Skills required to use tools

Both experts and empirical studies emphasise that the **behaviour and rapport** of facilitators are crucial factors in the effective use of all participatory tools¹¹ (See for example Chambers 1994, p. 1256). An expert in participatory approaches commented, 'tools are only as good as the people wielding them – you might have a perfectly useful tool, but used by someone with insufficient cultural sensitivity, or insufficient experience and confidence to adapt it to the needs of the specific context, it still may not work well'¹². Qualities and skills recommended for facilitators include:

- **Honesty** about who they are and what they are doing, and a personal **demeanour of humility, respect and patience** (Chambers 1994, p. 1256).
- Effectively trained in **recording, reporting, synthesis, and analysis** methods (Norton 2001, p. 31)
- **Confidence and previous experience** in using research techniques (Shah et al. 1991, p. 3.20; Turnbull and Turvill 2012, p. 13).
- **Excellent facilitation and communication skills** (Chambers 1994, p. 1256; Turnbull and Turvill 2012, p. 13)
- At least one team member should have **skills in advocacy and project cycle management** to guide the development of the action plan (p. 13).
- Facilitators should have an **awareness of cultural sensitivities** and, if necessary, **language skills** (p. 14).

¹¹ Expert comments

¹² Expert comments

5. Lessons learned

The literature identifies a number of lessons:

- **Local peoples' capabilities:** Chambers (1994, p. 1255) notes that local peoples' capacity to generate and analyse information is often notably greater than outsiders suppose it to be. To enable such capabilities to be expressed, the author contends that facilitators should 'assume people can do something until proved otherwise' (p. 1256). Relatedly, the author finds that local people who are familiar with PRA approaches can often be better facilitators than outsiders (p. 1256). The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in India is cited as an example of where village volunteers have been trained as PRA facilitators (p. 1445).
- **Visual sharing:** Visual means of data collection (such as maps, models or diagrams) are often easier to triangulate than personal, individually collected, information (such as that obtained through questionnaires). In shared diagrams or maps, triangulation occurs as participants crosscheck or correct each other (Chambers 1994, p. 1257).
- **Fieldworker agency:** In a study of Action Aid PRA techniques in The Gambia, Holmes (2001, p. 8) found that the organisational structure of the NGO meant that fieldworkers were often unable to use their agency effectively. For example, time constraints applied from above were found to discourage full community participation (p. 26).
- **Being aware of ethical issues:** There are a number of ethical issues of which those engaging in participatory processes should be aware. These primarily relate to the demands on participants' time and the dangers of raising participant expectations (Norton 2001, p. 16). Less documented but equally important are concerns that discussions on issues of poverty may stir up or inflame divisions in communities that have to be carefully managed (p. 16). For example, openly discussing the wealth or the excluded status of others, in the community may be sensitive.
- **Explaining concepts:** ActionAid recommend the concept of vulnerability should be adequately introduced and explained to avoid confusion (ActionAid n.d, p. 18).
- **Employing experienced social researchers:** The use of rapid investigatory techniques to address complex social issues has risks. Drawing from experience of PPAs in Zambia, Ghana and South Africa, Norton (2001, p. 28) recommends that research teams should include highly experienced social researchers with an interest in poverty analysis. Researchers with experience in synthesis and analysis of qualitative data are noted as particularly useful (p. 28).
- **Accessibility:** The language used during participatory processes and the methods of analysis should be accessible to the widest possible range of participants (Norton 1998). Consideration should be given to gender and social dynamics that may impact of peoples participation (Bell and Brambilla 2001).
- **Facilitation team:** The facilitation team should include both men and women, and representatives from the main stakeholders involved – for example a community leader, representative from a CBO or NGO worker, or local government representative (Turnbull and Turvill 2012, p. 13). It is recommended that the team have four to six members, including the team leader (p. 13).

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Key websites

- IIED – Participatory Learning and Action: <http://www.iied.org/pla>
- IDS – Participatory Methods: <http://www.participatorymethods.org/>

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