

Executive summary

Developing participatory rural appraisal approaches with disabled people

A pilot project by Disability Development Services Pursat (DDSP) in Pursat province, Cambodia

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Executive summary

The inspiration for this research project was the recognition of flaws in DDSP's prior experience of so-called participatory research with disabled people in Pursat. DDSP, like many other community development NGOs, aims to empower its target population in the development process, which can in part be achieved through realising the target population's genuine participation in assessing the community's needs. Disabled people are often the most marginalised people in the community and enabling their participation in community assessments presents additional challenges. Experience from other NGOs suggested that disabled people were similarly excluded from community assessments even though approaches used were described as 'participatory', eg. participatory rural appraisal (PRA). PRAs were too dominated by well-educated, mostly urban NGO staff and local authorities, while the voices of rural disabled people were not sufficiently heard.

The goal of the research project was to examine rural disabled people's role in all stages of a PRA exercise. The project aimed to maximise the control of the research process by rural disabled people and the participation of disabled people in village PRA activities. The project assessed the implementing team's performance in gaining PRA skills and facilitating PRA activities, and the village disabled people's participation in these activities. Recommendations were made on training rural disabled people in PRA, improving their facilitation of PRA exercises and increasing the participation of all disabled people (including women, children and people with severe disabilities) in the exercises. A secondary goal of the research project was to collect useful data from the PRA which DDSP could incorporate into its action plans for the villages involved.

The research project appointed a 'PRA team' to plan, coordinate and facilitate the PRA exercises. The majority of the team-members were inexperienced, uneducated rural people with severe disabilities such as paraplegia, double leg amputation and learning difficulties (it was possibly the first research project in Cambodia to include a person with learning difficulties in the implementing team). The team planned and implemented a complete PRA process, including training in PRA, planning and design of the PRA, fieldwork, monitoring and evaluation, presentation of the results, and visiting other NGOs to learn about their PRA practice.

The research took place in Pursat province, a poor, mostly rural province of western Cambodia. PRA fieldwork took place in three villages over a period of two weeks. Two of the villages were in very remote parts of the province and one of them has only recently been demined.

The main results of the research project were as follows:

1. Coordination of the PRA exercises by rural disabled people

Most of the team-members had no experience of PRA or similar community surveying approaches so a basic training was first provided. The training was adapted to the team's needs and included confidence-building, experiential learning, non-reliance on written documents, frequent review and repetition. Care was taken to create a conducive environment for learning. Difficulties in the training included the trainees' non-literacy, shyness and lack of confidence, the learning difficulty of one member of the team, and the team's lack of experience to take control of such a development process (as marginalised people in their communities, they were more

used to being receivers of charity rather than being active decision-makers and planners in development).

The team's performance in facilitating PRA activities varied according to the type of activity and the skills involved. Activities which proved difficult included those which involved literacy skills (eg. using questionnaires), interviewing influential people in the community, complex facilitation skills such as problem-solving, role-plays and giving presentations. Activities which the team performed well were simpler facilitation exercises such as problem identification and identifying income-generating activities, and some individual activities such as household-wealth surveying and drawing time-lines for disabled people's daily activities. No great accessibility or logistical difficulties were encountered working with the disabled team-members in rural areas because they themselves came from rural areas and were used to living and working in such an environment.

2. Participation of disabled people in PRA activities

The project succeeded in increasing the participation of disabled people in PRA activities. The PRA team were made aware of accessibility issues in the training and in general they showed sensitivity to disability issues and made great efforts to ensure that all disabled people could join in the PRA activities. This included people with hearing impairment and severe physical mobility, disabled women, children and elderly people. Modifications and adaptations to increase disabled people's participation included use of drawings and minimal use of written documents, assisting with transport, speaking clearly and slowly and repeating key points. Attendance at PRA meetings was generally good in all three villages, which suggests that the villagers found the meetings informative and useful.

3. PRA results

The three village PRA exercises provided data on:

- disability prevalence, classified by type of disability, age and gender
- community attitudes towards disabled people
- disabled people's problems and priorities
- disabled children's education
- comparative wealth of disabled and non-disabled people
- disabled people's life histories and daily routines
- services available for disabled people in Pursat and disabled people's perceptions of them.

While some of these findings had limited significance outside of Pursat, others had wider importance, for example:

- The highest disability prevalence rate appeared to be in the least isolated village with the best social and economic opportunities, which raised questions about the links between poverty and disability.
- Quantitative data on relative wealth of households with and without a disabled person was equivocal, although it appeared clearer that households with a disabled woman have fewer livelihood assets than households with a disabled man.
- Disabled people are able to rise to high positions of authority in the community, and other community leaders have disabled family members which may influence their opinion on disability issues.
- Inclusive Education projects have some impact on teachers' knowledge and practice regarding disabled children.

The research project evaluated the use of different PRA tools in terms of ease of facilitation, understanding by villagers and the quality and type of information gained from them. Problems such as bias and villager manipulation of the research process were identified. The contribution of PRA tools to Sustainable Livelihoods analysis was discussed.

4. Impact of research project

The research project raised awareness about disability in the communities targeted, highlighting disabled people's ability to play a leading role in community development. It was also a valuable capacity-building exercise for some key disabled people in Pursat who DDSP hopes will become disabled people's representatives, advocates and planners/implementers of village development projects in future. The project also provided useful information to DDSP to help plan its strategy for 2005 and identified some new disabled people who were previously unknown to DDSP fieldworkers. The research also contributed to a change in the traditional power relations between NGO staff and clients as DDSP strives to change from a client-providing to a client-empowering approach. The PRAs presented a challenge to DDSP to become more flexible in its action-planning and to consider addressing general community development issues instead of focusing only on disabled people.

The research findings will be disseminated throughout the disability sector in Cambodia via the Disability Action Council. The research will serve to highlight current insufficiencies in disabled people's participation in the design of projects which concern them and will open a debate on how government and non-governmental organisations working with disabled people can take steps to bring disabled people more into the development planning process.