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Group Dynamics in Participatory Research Processes

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Abstract

Activities in and with groups are a central element of participatory research processes, particularly in the most popular approach, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). Ideally a research team comprises people from various disciplines, of both sexes and of different cultural origins. As regards the methods used in PRAs, group exercises are given preference over interviews and discussions with individual respondents. In the common PRA literature, these group processes are mostly regarded as key to successful engagement with local people. In practice, however, group dynamics on the side of both the researchers and the local stakeholders entail a range of challenges and potential pitfalls, particularly for young scientists. While there is a considerable body of literature on the effect of power differentials among local stakeholders on the process and outcome of PRA exercises, there is a lack of empirical studies on the impact of group dynamics within the research team itself.

This paper analyses social dynamics in interdisciplinary and intercultural research teams. It draws on experiences with several trainings and pre-tests of participatory research activities in the context of a collaborative agricultural research programme focusing on sustainable land use and rural development in mountainous regions of Thailand and Viet Nam. I participated in these events, which took place between 2001 and 2005, either as a co-organiser and facilitator or as a participant observer. The analysis of the social dynamics in the research teams draws on group relations theory which comprises certain core definitions, namely **(1)** task: what the groups wants or needs to achieve, **(2)** boundary: who is recognised as a member, **(3)** role: in which ways do group members act, and **(4)** authority: who is entitled to do certain activities.

Findings suggest that failures and dilemmas of many well-intended participatory inquiries are largely the result of unclear agendas, dissenting objectives, distrust among participants and the fear of losing one's voice in the research process. Common goals, mutual trust and democratic inquiry in participatory research teams can thus not be taken for granted, but require transparency of tasks, definition of boundaries among group members, clarification of roles, and a constant (re-)negotiation of authority.

Keywords: Group dynamics, group relations theory, participatory research processes, research teams