



INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM  
**TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS AND  
ECOSYSTEMS IN MOUNTAINOUS REGIONS**  
7-9 March 2006, Chiang Mai, Thailand

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**Call for Contributions to a Special Session entitled “20 years after Khon Kaen – Has the PRA and ‘farmer first’ movement benefited the poor in upland areas?”**

**Wednesday, 8 March 2006, 13.30 – 15.00 h**

Participatory approaches to rural development, natural resource management and agricultural research have been widely discussed and promoted from the mid-1980s onwards. A major landmark in the emergence of participatory approaches in Southeast Asia was the International Conference on Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) in Khon Kaen, Thailand, in 1985, at a time in which the words ‘participation’ and ‘participatory’ started to enter the RRA vocabulary (KKU, 1987). Under the new label “Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)” these approaches quickly gained popularity and have made an unprecedented career in the development industry, where PRA has been linked with claims of broader empowerment of the poor and marginalized, and transformation of rural livelihoods in disadvantaged regions. For the past 20 years, PRA and its techniques have been applied in virtually all agro-ecological zones, within hundreds of rural development projects and in thousands of villages around the globe. While critique of sloppy practice, naivety of practitioners and misuse of PRA has been occasionally voiced even by its proponents, a more fundamental criticism has recently been lodged against participatory approaches to (rural) development, culminating in warnings against a “new tyranny” of participation (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Critics argue that participatory approaches have often failed to achieve meaningful social change, shying away from deeper engagement in issues of power, inequity and politics (Hickey and Mohan, 2005), or – even worse – becoming tools in the hand of illegitimate power.

PRA and its various branches and derivatives, such as Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), Participatory Plant Breeding (PPB) and Participatory Technology Development (PTD) have also become a common practice in agricultural research under the keyword ‘farmer first’ (Chambers, 1997). Their benefits, though, have been discussed more controversially in the science community than among development practitioners and donors. Opponents of participatory approaches to agricultural research dismiss them as ‘non- or pseudo-scientific’. They fear that ‘the purity of science’ may be jeopardized by such populist approaches. Local and scientific knowledge are regarded as basically incompatible and the latter as superior. Notwithstanding this strong opposition, a growing number of scholars regard participatory approaches to agricultural research and natural resource management as a necessary complement to conventional research (Buhler et al., 2002; Sumberg et al., 2003), especially in marginal areas such as mountainous regions. The CGIAR System-Wide Program “Participatory Research and Gender Analysis (PRGA)”, in particular, has contributed to a more widespread acceptance of participatory approaches within the international agricultural research centers (e.g. Pound et al., 2003) although the recent outline of the CGIAR Science Council on research priorities for the period 2005-2015 does not assign a

prominent role to participation in international agricultural research (CGIAR Science Council, 2005).

Given the on-going controversies around participatory approaches to agricultural research and rural development 20 years after Khon Kaen, we believe that it is time again to take stock of the experiences accumulated by scholars, development practitioners and NGO workers as to the values, benefits and successes of PRA (and its 'extended family') and weigh those against the shortcomings, costs and failures. In order to focus the contributions and discussions, we want to put particular emphasis on the impact of participatory approaches on the poor and marginalized in upland areas.

Specific questions to be addressed by the contributions and in the discussion:

- How does the emergence of RRA/PRA fit into the broader historic evolution of participatory approaches? Have the expectations raised in Khon Kaen been met? Do we need to rewrite the history of PRA?
- What are success stories of specific approaches and methods which have benefited particular groups, such as ethnic minorities or women in upland areas? What are prerequisites for success?
- Have participatory approaches been applied as a motor or a substitute for wider issues of empowerment, such as good governance, justice and respect for minority rights in upland areas?
- What are the experiences with the institutionalization of participatory approaches in government bureaucracies? Has participation enabled critical assessment of external interventions and enhanced downward accountability?
- Has the mainstreaming of participatory approaches influenced the approaches and their implementation? Have they been simplified? Has PRA become a standardized routine business? Have PRA tools developed further?
- What lessons can be drawn from two decades of (participatory) highland development in Thailand for other places? Whose voices were heard? Who benefited and who was hurt?
- Are participatory research approaches and cutting-edge science antagonistic or complementary? What are the potential trade-offs?
- What are specific experiences with blending local and scientific knowledge in agricultural research and natural resource management?

It is planned to have several short contributions of 5 to max. 10 minutes in order to kick off a broader, moderated discussion on the questions raised above. These questions can certainly be modified, and other issues can be added upon suggestions by participants. Given sufficient interest, the one and a half hour session could also be extended to a whole afternoon session.

We suggest that contributors prepare a written contribution of not more than four pages which will be included in the conference proceedings. Depending on the quality and scope of the contributions, these could be brought together either as a joint journal article or, in extended versions, as contributions to a special issue in a refereed journal.

Please send your expressions of interest, abstracts and full papers to the Symposium Secretariat (E-mail: [uplands@loxinfo.co.th](mailto:uplands@loxinfo.co.th)).

## Important dates:

15 December 2005: Expression of interest

15 January 2006: Submission of one page abstract (not more than 500 words)

15 February 2006: Submission of full paper (four pages maximum)

## References cited

Buhler, W., Morse, S., Arthur, E., Bolton, S. and Mann, J. (2002) *Science, Agriculture and Research: A Compromised Participation?* Earthscan, London.

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Chambers, R. (1997) *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the Last First*. Intermediate Technology Publications, London.

Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (eds.) (2001) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* Zed Books, New York, London.

Hickey, S. and Mohan, G. (2004) Relocating Participation within a Radical Politics of Development. *Development and Change* 36(2): 237-262.

Khon Kaen University (1987) *Proceedings of the 1985 International Conference on Rapid Rural Appraisal*. Rural Systems Research and Farming Systems Research Projects, University of Khon Kaen, Thailand.

Pound, B., Snapp, S., McDougall, C. and Braun, A. (2003) *Managing Natural Resources for Sustainable Livelihoods: Uniting Science and Participation*. Earthscan, London.

Sumberg, J., Okali, C and Reece, D (2003) Agricultural research in the face of diversity, local knowledge and the participation imperative: Theoretical Considerations. *Agricultural Systems*, 76: 739-753.

**Note: Please check for regular updates of the Symposium Program and the Special Session on our symposium website [www.mountainsyposium2006.org](http://www.mountainsyposium2006.org).**