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# Now That I'm Here, How Do I Begin?

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*We asked Laura Meitzner, "When you began work in a new community, how did you quickly get an overall understanding of the nature and workings of that community to form the base for your future work?" Laura is co-author of ECHO's book *Amaranth to Zai Holes: Ideas for growing food under difficult conditions*. She has since worked with villagers and universities in Central America and Indonesia*

Our first task in a new location is to learn about the lives, needs, and priorities of the people there. Beginning as a learner allows the newcomer to better understand what topics community members feel are most important, so future proposed activities are more likely to fit people's needs and have a better chance of success. Even after years of working in a place, there will still be subjects we wish to understand more fully. But how can we begin to understand villagers' perspectives on ecological niches, cropping patterns, community history, or economic cycles in a region? And can we gather this information in a way that benefits the community, as well as enlarges our own understanding?

## Visual Techniques

There is no substitute for living in a location for an extended time, and spending time talking with people informally in their homes and fields.

But certain subjects are difficult to explain or to understand well just by using words. Using visual techniques—drawings, diagrams, timelines, or charts made by the villagers themselves—can help people communicate more clearly. Nonliterate or shy people are often much more comfortable having something visual to reference during a discussion than interactions involving written materials or direct conversation. Villagers gain confidence as they learn new ways to share their knowledge with each other and with outsiders. People appreciate when we begin by learning from their experience and use their local expertise as a basis for any activities.

## Participatory Methods

One common technique for learning about a new area is to ask specific questions to local leaders. But while it is important to enlist the knowledge and support of selected individuals, talking only with "local elites"—tribal representatives, religious leaders, and those with special positions such as teachers and village entrepreneurs—can give us a very narrow perspective on life in the community. Talking to people one by one can also be time-consuming when we want to understand what a large number of people know or feel about a topic. On

occasion, people may not answer interview-style questions accurately for various reasons; perhaps our questions are unclear, we ask about culturally sensitive subjects, or people may be unsure what we are going to do with the information they provide.

In such cases, **participatory methods**—activities carried out by groups of villagers—can provide opportunities for larger numbers of people to give their perspectives on a subject in an open setting, with some “cross-checking” built in to the process. This family of methods, called PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) among other names, can help field workers quickly obtain more accurate information from groups of people, in ways that are more interesting for villagers than surveys and more useful for villagers than supplying answers through interviews. These activities can help villagers communicate their knowledge and needs in a form understandable to outsiders, as well as provide materials useful for internal discussion and planning. Practical examples follow.

Complete handbooks in many languages are available on using PRA in different situations. You will find references to some at the end of this article. Here, we give an overview of some of the most common methods and how they could be useful in your work.

For all the techniques outlined below, field workers must be attentive to the involvement of villagers. Schedule activities for times and places most comfortable for the participants, and be aware of who attends and how active they are. For example, there may be times of day when most women are too busy or far from the village to join activities, or seasons in which most men are working away from the community. The most convenient times for villagers may be late at night, or on a certain day of the week (e.g., immediately following a worship service). Choose a location which is suitable for all intended participants; if government facilities or religious buildings are not acceptable for everyone, an outdoor space may be a better choice.

Pay attention to how many people of different social groups are represented: age, gender, educational levels, relative status, and other factors. Do some groups or individuals take over, while others remain in the background or leave after the activity begins? It is your responsibility to observe participation, to keep a record of who was (or was not) active in the activity, and to encourage those who are more reserved or with lower social status to be involved. Considering your cultural context, you will have to evaluate whether different groups should work together or do separate activities and then compare results, or you could assign different tasks for certain groups to fill in aspects in which they have special knowledge. (Handbooks provide many practical ideas to monitor villagers’ involvement.)

## Methods and Techniques

**Participatory mapping** is one of the most common starting points for learning about a community. Natural resource maps enable villagers to communicate about their environment and to indicate the places and features most important to them. Village maps can convey information such as population, family size and extended family relationships, educational levels and health status of different households, and locations of current water sources; or in discussing locations for new buildings, placement of new water taps, or community gardens. Individual field

maps can be made by a farm family to show what tree and annual crops are in their plots, to explain past planting patterns and future plans, and to indicate particularly fertile or problem spots in the gardens.

Community map-making can be done with paper and pencil, chalk on wood, or whatever materials are around such as stones, bamboo, leaves, flowers, and branches. In situations where few people are literate, drawing on paper might be dominated by the literate individuals who are comfortable holding and using pencils, so other techniques may be more likely to achieve broader involvement. Village maps using local materials can be fun and usually draw quite a crowd. One village in Indonesia used sand piles to build contours over an area six meters square; bamboo channels with water for the path of the river; large leaves to indicate houses; stones and seeds to indicate the numbers and types of animals owned by each family; and different flowers lined up behind each house for the parents, children, and other relatives in each house, as well as symbols for children who had died.



Villagers in West Papua (Indonesia) completed a natural resource map of their tribal lands. The map shows rivers, mountains, and plants and animals of the region. Photo by Laura S. Meitzner.

Doing activities directly on paper provides an immediate and "original" written record, but usually includes input from only the few people who can fit around the paper. In addition, many villagers feel that something written on paper is no longer open to correction, so they may not suggest changes as readily

as when they can debate and agree on where things are, then rearrange physical symbols. Using moveable symbols involves many more people and can be used in a large area, but can be quickly disrupted if an animal races through the map or it starts to rain. In order to have a permanent record of the villagers' map, the field worker or an assistant will have to copy the map onto paper, being careful to pay attention to scale and completeness of the drawing. Always take a photo of the map with the villagers who made it, and return multiple copies to the community.

You will have to adapt the technique to the immediate situation, combining some of these ideas. In one map which covered a vast region of forest, villagers used chalk to draw rivers, mountains, and land boundaries on the wood floor of a school room. Then they had one day to review, discuss, and correct other people's sections of the map. Once those natural features were agreed upon by everyone, villagers gathered again to "fill in" the map with locally important plants, wild animals, and

historically important places. People included unexpected features, such as the places certain birds go to drink water or the best places to find pet animals for children.

In all these methods, the primary participants are the villagers. The role of the field worker is to prepare for the activity, by talking with individuals and explaining the process to local leaders. Once a time and place are set and publicized, the field worker or local counterpart can outline the purpose and mapping process to the villagers who will be making the map. Once people begin making the map, the community takes the active role, and the observer should ask questions (“Are there other sources of water in different seasons?”), but not give directions (“Now put in the mango trees by the path there”). Having an outsider directing what should or shouldn’t be in the map causes people to lose initiative and become passive or dependent on outside instructions. The process will be more vibrant and the product more internally legitimate and useful if villagers feel it is THEIR map. A village and natural resource mapping activity usually takes two to three hours, plus time to draw the map on paper and check the accuracy of the drawing with local people.

It is important to be clear with the villagers beforehand what will happen to the map, and to return a good copy to the village for safekeeping once the process is completed. Some people may fear that the map will be used to increase their taxes, “give away” the secrets of their local resources, or somehow be used against them. Sometimes, a map or other activity is best carried out separately by groups of villagers (women/men, young/old, newcomers/long-term residents), for comparison and to allow each group to share their perspective and knowledge as basis for a discussion. Work with local leaders beforehand to clarify the process and answer questions. If people are uncomfortable with the results of their activities being shared with others, we need to respect their wishes.

Maps may be used as foundations for diagrams, to trace labor patterns of different family members or to highlight connections among various parts of the farm. One community researcher in Honduras helped village families sketch local maps, then used different color markers to trace walking paths and areas of activity for men, women, girls, and boys. This helped her understand who had responsibilities for pasturing animals, planting and weeding fields, selling produce, fetching water, gathering fuelwood from different sources, and caring for disabled neighbors. Diagrams at the regional level can trace the diffusion of new plant varieties, or the flow of income through the community.

**Calendars** are another useful technique for gathering information about seasons, agricultural cycles, labor availability, and perceived relationships (such as the connection between rain and illness, or drought and pest outbreaks). Annual or multi-year calendars can show patterns over time. A calendar can visually identify seasonal shortages in different kinds of foods, and can help begin discussion about crops which may alleviate the hungry season. Drawing the crops produced in individual fields over the last decade can help clarify rotation and fallow patterns.

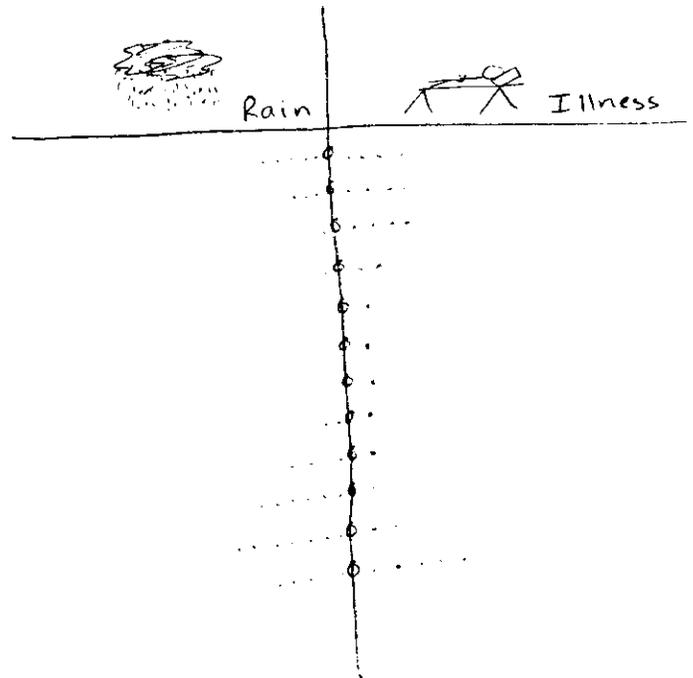
**Timelines** help record community history. In areas where people do not keep track of calendar years or people’s ages, a timeline of important events (earthquakes, droughts, or changes in political leadership which can be verified through other sources) can help newcomers correlate occasions which mark time for the villagers

with other events. Many communities have never had a written record of their history, and they appreciate this activity. Timelines can be posted in schools or public buildings and gradually completed. Using pictures in addition to words will make the information accessible to children and adults who cannot read.

For understanding local ecological zones, a transect can give a quick sketch of the different production areas. A transect diagram (as used in PRA) is a drawing of the features across some distance, such as a mountain slope or a river valley. For example, the diagram would point out the different vegetation types and changes in altitude in a region.

Another common PRA technique is "transect walks," in which you draw the terrain on a "guided tour" with villagers. A transect can highlight information on natural vegetation and agricultural activities of different zones, as well as localized production problems (flooding, erosion, etc.) or valued products (fuelwood, edible snails, medicinal plants, building materials, etc.) from different regions.

**Matrix scoring** is a powerful tool for villagers to compare various options and to evaluate them. For example, Honduran farmers from the same region created a matrix to compare varieties of native maize. Sample ears and names of the varieties are across the top of the matrix, and important characteristics are listed down the side. Then the group discusses how each variety performs for each trait, and gives a score of 1 to 5, with 3 being average and 5 always being the "positive" or "best" score. This information can then be used by plant breeders to learn what traits are most important to farmers, to identify native varieties with exceptional traits for breeding programs, or to understand what needs could be addressed in a native maize improvement program. In Honduras, some farmers learned of other local varieties with traits of interest to them, and they exchanged seed and carried out their own crosses to incorporate the new traits. The matrix exercise provided the opportunity for farmers to discuss maize characteristics in detail and to learn from each other's experience, as well as to communicate their knowledge and needs to plant breeders.



Calendars can illustrate villagers' perception of relationships between different factors, such as the connection between rain and illness.

↓ Characteristics	Local maize varieties →		
	"A"	"B"	"C"
Resistance to leaf fungus	..	.	.
Resistance to wind/ledging	...	..	...
Resists weevils in storage	..	..	..
Good husk cover to tip of ear	..	..	..
Planting to harvest (#months)	3	4	4
Kernel color	white	white	yellow
Resistance to drought	..	..	..
Resists stem borer	..	..	..
Production after flood	..	..	..

Matrix scoring: farmer evaluations of local maize varieties.

### For More Information...

A Technical Note which is a more detailed account of a participatory mapping project is available from ECHO.

*Challenging the Professions: Frontiers for Rural Development* by Robert Chambers provides a thorough theoretical background and history of techniques for learning about communities. If you are a new field worker, Chambers alerts you to various factors which can make your questions and observation much more effective as you learn about your new area. (Chambers told me they printed this short book specifically to be inexpensive enough for people in the field, and I'd put it on my Top Ten list of recommended reading for departing workers and all interns. Very digestible).

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) is an excellent source of information on techniques and uses of PRA. <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/>