# Mobility, Participation, and the Location of the Development 'Field'

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> PRA [Participatory Rural Appraisal] needs anthropology to continue the process of reflection, self-critique and theoretical and methodological enrichment. An aloof disengagement or a negative critique of poor practice does not contribute to new learning and change for anyone. In the same way anthropology needs an applied context to work effectively and make the most of the discipline's insights. –Ian Scoones, (in Cornwall, et al. 1995: 20)

Around 1980, Robert Chambers and others began attempting to devise a 'people-oriented dimension to data gathering in rural development,' a speedy way to collect such data, and a form of development in which the 'rural poor' could help set the agenda and perhaps control results of development projects (Richards, in Cornwall et al 1995: 13). In response to practical experiences in the field, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) arose as a de-centered, flexible set of approaches that allowed local groups to define their development needs and goals. Chambers defines PRA as 'a growing field of approaches and methods to enable local (rural or urban) people to express, share, and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act' (Chambers 1994: 1253). He goes on to point out the important shift in development from –emic knowledge (generated by outsiders in older, top-down forms of development) to –etic knowledge, (generated in PRA by people inside the target community) (ibid: 1262). Making this distinction for development, Chambers references a key aspect of ethnography: its tendency to privilege information that emerges from within communities. For example, Mosse (1996) described India's Kribhco Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project, with its decentralized approach to creating 'needs-based village development plans' (Mosse 1996: 145). In that project, trained community organizers built initial rapport with local people and then helped them generate plans for improved farming based on 'organized participatory appraisal events' (ibid: 145). Participatory appraisal events might include mapping, organizing problems around local categories, or physically walking around a community (Chambers 1994: 959-961). In PRA, locals produce their own sets of problems and solutions, with outside workers serving the community as catalysts (Rahnema, in Sachs 1995: 117); the strategies for getting locals to empower themselves in this way vary from project to project, context to context.

While 'participant-observation' has been part of anthropology since its early days, the notion of 'participation' in development rose to prominence more recently, in the 1970s (see Guijt and Cornwall, in Cornwall et al. 1995: 3). Of course, 'participation' takes on different meanings when shifted from anthropology to development. Put simply, for anthropology, the participant is the ethnographer, who actively takes part in the daily lives of the people whom he or she studies. For some kinds of development, the 'participant' has come to mean one of a community of individuals whom a certain project empowers to help themselves (Chambers 1994). The concerns of anthropology and development might not seem to be similar enough to merit the application of one set of ideas to another set of practices, but as this paper will demonstrate, some the problems addressed in anthropology theory may exist also in Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). If Scoones is correct, anthropology needs application, and PRA could benefit from anthropological critique. It would seem worthwhile, then, to attempt to cross-pollinate ethnography and theory with this area of 'development.'

Like classic ethnography, PRA (as defined above by Chambers) changes to meet contextual constraints, engages with participants or informants, and locates itself in some identifiable local community. A striking similarity to ethnographic participant-observation makes PRA unique, and provides a link between what might appear to be dissimilar projects (Cornwall and Fleming, in Cornwall et al 1995, see also Mosse 1996). By combining ethnographic examinations of locality and participation in development projects, anthropological engagement with mobility and transmigration, and theories about spatial practices within anthropology, I will suggest that the translocal approaches of some recent ethnographers may benefit those in development who seek to generate empowering knowledge through PRA. Ethnographic studies of participatory development will fuse with theories about ethnographic practice itself, leading to a discussion of the possible benefits of connecting anthropology and PRA. Evidence will show that, while some development projects discursively locate 'participants' within imagined 'local' borders, the participants themselves may not understand their communities on purely 'local' terms. Furthermore, anthropological insights into the mobility of individuals and groups indicate that 'local' identity often depends on engagements with 'nonlocal' forces (see, for example, Gardner and Osella 2003, Ong 1999, Clifford 1997, Gardner 1993, Featherstone 1990,). Finally, there may be some benefit to applying theoretical ideas about the practice of ethnography to the work of 'catalysts' and participants in PRA.

**Development and the 'Local Participant'**

This section will explore participatory development further by giving two examples of ethnography that reveal the (often misleading) discursive placement of participants within bounded localities. These examples, placed alongside analysis from Ferguson of the nature of NGO practices (unpublished), will show that, though some development projects emphasize local solutions to locally defined problems, 'locality' itself is difficult to define. As Fisher argues, 'Amid their wide range of translocal connections, all NGO practices remain discursively constructed through reference to the "local." Yet while a notion of the local remains centrally important to the legitimacy of NGOs, it is frustratingly illusive' (1997: 454). Ferguson (1994) investigated the difficulties that arose when the World Bank attempted to localize Lesotho as a 'Less Developed Country.' In participatory development, as an example from Green (2001) will show, individual knowledge can be both traditional (local) and Western (or nonlocal). In her example, Tanzanian individuals saw the most noticeable improvement in their lives when they acted for themselves, rather than within a 'participatory' community development scheme (2000: 1). Finally, Ferguson's look at the translocal nature of NGO power structures (unpublished) reveals that NGOs sometimes depend on straddling imagined borders in order to effect social change. Green and Ferguson describe an emphasis on locality that seems to mask the essential translocality of some development organizations and the people whom they aim to empower.

Much work goes into generating knowledge about communities to be developed, whether or not a development strategy involves PRA. Ferguson's (1994) study of development in Lesotho demonstrates this, and his analysis of World Bank reports about the country's economy reveals the limitations of a geographically- and culturally-bounded analysis. Though males in the Thaba-Tseka district had migrated to South Africa seeking mining work for many years prior to the World Bank's report, making this part of Lesotho an international labor-reserve, this fact was almost completely ignored by the Bank in its assessment of the country as "'untouched by modern economic development"' (Ferguson 1994: 27). In order to be a target for development, Thaba-Tseka was portrayed as a bounded locality, rather than as a set of communities with complex relations to other states and

translocal economies. In speaking of empowerment and education, Freire asserts that 'the form of action men adopt is to a large extent a function of how they perceive themselves in the world' (Freire 1972: 71). In other words, if an individual or group is engaged as local or untouched, it might begin to see itself as such. This kind of learning, according to Freire and evident in Ferguson's example, can counter participatory development's goal of empowerment. For PRA, the location of participants and their knowledge in a bounded 'local' context could, hypothetically, have an equally damaging effect. It seems important to note, however, that PRA has managed to improve upon earlier, 'top-down' development schemes in the area of empowerment through knowledge (Chambers 1994). By allowing participants to set agendas, it offers a chance for individuals to tell their own stories and map their own experiences. The risk, even for PRA, appears in a pre-existing institutional privileging of an imagined, unique, 'local' experience over a translocal one, like that of mine workers from Thaba-Tseka.

Anthropological inquiries into participatory development, particularly from Green, emphasize the misleading quality of locality[1]. As Mosse explains

> [I]deologically rooted polarities (state/community; officials/people; insiders/outsiders; us/them) divert the attention of planners away from the politics of development 'interfaces.' This not only underestimates the strategies of local social actors and their wider networks, but also masks the substantial political role of outsiders in the 'local' development events. (1996: 139-140).

In her study of a poverty-reduction program in Tanzania, Green attempts to problematize the idea of the 'local participant' by examining the 'wider networks' that help shape individuals' understandings about themselves. She points out that for her informants the notion of modernity, or *kisasa*, (or 'now-ish') can be invoked to achieve personal status, as it indicates a familiarity with the Western, imported, non-local knowledge (Green 2000: 68). In other situations, 'traditional,' or locally-generated, knowledge may grant a person status. But Green does not find these two types of knowledge in binary opposition; rather she suggests that aspects of each help form a way of living 'here and now (*palahapa*)' (2000:78). Further, she points out that for the district in question an emphasis on 'personal development' was favored over 'collectivist' participatory development (Green 2000: 81). In the participatory scheme that Green encountered, too clear a distinction was made between local and non-local knowledge about what it was to be 'developed.' She finds that 'aspirations to achieve personal development were neither constrained nor facilitated by "local" knowledge' (2000: 83-84). 'Local' knowledge in this example takes on an ambiguous character. Such knowledge may be a source of empowerment, but it seems clear that, even within communities that seem bounded, ideas about participation and even community may be transformed by translocal experience. In this example, individuals' engagement with a world beyond the local community helped shape an individualized notion of development, making a participatory emphasis on purely local knowledge insufficient for fulfilling personal needs.

Locality appears as a limiting category, 'illusive,' as Fisher (1997) says, because of the tendency of individuals to engage with a world beyond the borders of their communities. Just as individuals in rural settings can and do engage with a wider world, NGOs that may be located in such settings depend on such engagement for their survival. Ferguson (unpublished) discusses the illusiveness of the border between state and civil society, pointing

[1] Space limits a more throrough discussion of ethnography about local knowledge. See Mosse, 1996; Taussig 1980; Hannerz 1987; Hansen 1999; Miller 1998.

out that such a border probably should be questioned. 'One might think, for instance,' writes Ferguson

> Of the myriad South African local women's groups that are bankrolled by USAID or European church groups…or of the profusion of 'local' Christian development NGO's in Zimbabwe, which may be conceived equally well as the most local, 'grassroots' expressions of civil society, or as parts of the vast international bureaucratic organizations that organize and sustain them… (Ferguson, n.d.: 18)

Just as Green's example demonstrates the contextual contingency of local knowledge about 'development,' Ferguson's analysis reveals the illusive locality of some development NGOs. He suggests above that the power of such development organizations comes from their ability to manipulate their own status. At times, one might guess that being viewed as 'grassroots' would provide legitimacy and benefits to an organization. (Compare this to the benefits that Green mentions of being 'traditional' in South Tanzania.) At other times, though, connections to the knowledge and resources of the transnational world could provide aid to a development organization. (Again, think of the benefits of nonlocal knowledge in Tanzania (*kisasa*).) In these examples, both development organizations and participants manipulate and move between local and nonlocal interests, and knowledges. This tendency to work on a continuum of contexts, serves as an unspoken, often unrecognized, link between some participatory development and those whom it marks as 'local participants.'

## Migration to Mobility

Above, I cite Ferguson's work on 'topographies of power,'[2] in order to demonstrate the tendency of some seemingly 'local' NGOs to make connections to a national or global network of knowledge and power. Anthropology now recognizes a similar transnationality in those whom it studies, and one only need look at the selection of journals dealing with the subject to see that the discipline actively seeks to engage with the movements of populations (eg. *Global Network, Diaspora*). The interest in transnational experience, much like the developmental interest in participation, has grown in the last two decades and is reflected in a variety of anthropological and sociological texts (Giddens, 1990; Kearney 1995; Featherstone 1990; Schiller, et al., 1995; Gardner and Osella 2003; Gardner 1993). The subjects of anthropological inquiry, as this body of work shows, are anything but isolated; instead individuals' relationships to one another as well as to others outside their communities have become 'intensified' (Giddens 1999). The nature of this intensity is complex, but in ethnography, the attempt to engage with groups as parts of a global community has led to an investigation of migration and its effects. Borrowing from Fortes (1971), I will attempt to look in this section at ethnographic examples of rural 'mobility' which reveal the porosity of rural/urban, rural/rural, and indeed national borders. Examples will show that such mobility, much like the locality that Green and Ferguson discuss, is a problematic process rather than a social fact.

A common-sense definition of 'migration' indicates movement from one's home to another place, likely unfamiliar and foreign.[3] Since Malinowski, anthropologists have

[2] Ferguson defines such "topographies" as "the analytic 'levels' of local, national, and global." He attempts in his paper to "[call] into question this vertical topography of power" because such action "brings into view the transnational contexts of both 'state' and 'civil society,' and opens up new ways of thinking about both social movements and states" (Ferguson, n.d.: 1).

[3] *Webster's New World Dictionary* includes the following definition for 'migrate': 'to settle in another country or region' (Guralnik 1987).

attempted to understand how individuals move 'in and through social systems' (Fortes 1971: 2), but as I state above, citing only highlights from a growing literature, engagement with migration in ethnography is a more recent phenomenon. Scholars have come to understand 'transmigration' as 'an ambiguous experience with winners and losers, bringing benefits and prospects of mobility for some, but increasing inequality and dependency for others' (Gardner and Osella 2003: ix). This 'mobility' is central to the discussion in this paper, because it has less permanent connotations than 'migration.' Fortes distinguishes between the two by saying that migration is used for describing 'movements of people—individually or in groups—*across* boundaries, and "mobility" for movement *within* boundaries...anything recognized by the actor as a boundary' (Fortes 1971: 1). I suggest that translocal experience (whether or not it is transnational) comes as a result of *mobility* rather than *migration*, because when individuals beyond their 'local' communities, ties to home may remain strong, and boundaries between home and away can become stretched or even erased.

Since PRA often deals with populations designated 'rural,' it seems beneficial to investigate how members of a rural population might be involved in the kind of mobility Fortes and others suggest. Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan (2003) offer the example of circular migrants in India, those laborers who leave home for work and later return, perhaps moving from a rural area to an urban area, or from one rural setting to another. They use the term 'rural cosmopolitan' to describe 'those who originate in rural areas and who, having become bearers of *cultural versatility*, turn this to some advantage in either their rural source areas and/or their non-rural destinations' (in Gardner and Osella 2003: 345, emphasis added). For the authors, that *cultural versatility* makes the Indian circular migrant a 'cosmopolitan,' mastering 'that art of being which is able to straddle a political world of difference and deploy the technologies of one to some advantage in the other' (ibid). One can imagine a hypothetical participant in a PRA scheme--armed not only with local knowledge but also with experience and knowledge gained as a rural cosmopolitan--making quite dynamic contributions to development. Indeed, though these authors do not pronounce any universally measurable effects rural cosmopolitanism might have on a community, it may be that a member of a community who has moved away will return to make significant changes at home.

The phenomena of transmigration, rural to urban shifts, and rural cosmopolitanism seem important to understand for PRA, because social change can happen when mobility increases. To explain rural cosmopolitanism, Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan discuss Vankar, a Dalit community in Gujarat. The elder generation of Vankar, considered socially docile and deferential by higher castes, found steady work for itself in rice paddies. Many (usually male) descendants of that generation, as the authors discovered, began seeking access to education outside Gujarat. The physical movement of the younger men led to access to non-farm labor, both in and outside the home community, coupled with a decrease in the social submissiveness for which their elders were known (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, in Gardner and Osella 2003: 354-355). By moving outside the local area for education, these Vankar, especially the males, appear to have achieved a new mobility in both geographical and social space. Caste has become less important to their self-definition, as has the tie to rural farmland. If such profound changes can occur in one community over the course of one or two generations, it would seem that the sum of 'local knowledge' about technology, identity, and hierarchy might as well. In this case, physical mobility, as Fortes describes it, depends on the actor's perception of borders. The act of moving physically helped the individuals to break down the border between rural farm labor and other forms of work, as well as the imagined line between upper and lower castes.

I suggest that if such borders can be subverted, so too might the border between the 'local' and (its binary opposite) the 'nonlocal,' as perceived by PRA. Gidwani and

Sivaramakrishnan's close look at rural experience demonstrates the difficulty of defining and confining the rural space. Even within national borders, as the above example shows, spaces become defined by practice. Clifford explains that 'Once the representational challenge is set to be the portrayal and understanding of local/global historical encounters, co-productions, dominations, and resistances, one needs to focus on *hybrid*, *cosmopolitan* experiences as much as on rooted native ones' (Clifford 1997: 24, emphasis added). Clifford was speaking about ethnography, but one might ask if PRA, with its emphasis on local knowledge, might benefit also from engagement with hybrid or cosmopolitan experiences. It may be the case that 'cosmopolitan' participants already contribute to PRA projects, but some, such as the Tanzanians in Green's (2001) example, appear to view the *personal* development that cosmopolitanism produces more favorably than participatory, *community*-based development. In the next section, I will explore how anthropological critique of the creation of 'field' sites reveals the privileging of a certain kind of knowledge—one discursively rooted in the 'local' and the 'rural.'

**Anthropology, Development, and 'Fields'**

Just as recent ethnography has expanded into exploration of the transnational experience, as shown above, anthropology theory has begun to question what Clifford calls the 'spatial practices' in and of the 'field' (see Clifford 1997; also Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus 1995). This set of theories deals with two important aspects of fieldwork that have analogues in development practice. First, the theorists point out the necessity of mobility for the anthropologist: the separation of travel ('getting there') from ethnography ('being there') (Clifford 1997: 23). Second, they problematize the 'field' by arguing that spaces are never bounded or natural; Gupta and Ferguson, borrowing from Gordon, Visweswaran, and Enslin, remind us that 'location is not just something one ascriptively *has*…it is something one strategically *works* at…' (1997: 37). These critics call for a further exploration of mobility, both of those who practice ethnography and of the people studied. If locality cannot be bounded, then the existence of purely 'rural' or 'traditional' spaces must be questioned. The 'getting there' that Clifford mentions contains more than just empty, fleeting moments of movement. Social and political conditions limit the mobility of individuals, even anthropologists, from space to space (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 10; see also MB Mills 1997; Osella and Osella 2000).

I would suggest a connection between the kind of field creation that Clifford, Gupta, Ferguson, and others describe and the carving out of locations for Participatory Rural Appraisal. Since the practice of PRA entails facilitating localized production of local knowledge, including the *mapping* of specific areas (Chambers 1994: 960), it would seem that identification of a 'field' is essential to this form of development. Methods for gaining knowledge about rural areas to be appraised may vary, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to suggest that all PRA shares this characteristic. But as Cornwall and Fleming (1995) have shown, the connections between participant-observation and PRA are neither coincidental nor unintentional. To be successful, it seems that development now requires some form of participation in its plan; and participation has allowed aid organizations to achieve 'much more…with much less' (Rahnema, in Sachs, ed. 1995: 117). But participants must 'be part of a predefined project…in order to qualify' (ibid). Like fieldwork, PRA requires planning and training on the part of change agents (development workers). But if such training concentrates on individuals within a single-site, ignoring the findings of ethnographers about transmigrants and rural cosmopolitans, it risks facilitating the generation of a knowledge which is as illusive as the locality of the 'field.'

Despite the shared tendency of classic ethnography and PRA to select single-sited fields, there remains a crucial difference between the two practices. The work of anthropologists, especially those coming from academic settings, tends to be extractive: knowledge is collected and 'written up' at home (Clifford 1997). PRA, on the other hand, focuses on the generation of knowledge by local people for the use of local people (Chambers 1994). To some extent, its goal is to empower groups more that it is to teach outsiders about 'home.' More recent anthropology has learned to engage with fields in what Marcus calls 'strategically situated ethnography,' which

> Attempts to understand something broadly about the system in ethnographic terms as it does its local subjects: It is only local circumstantially, thus situating itself in the context of a field quite differently than does other single-sited ethnography. (1995: 111)

There does not seem to be a direct parallel within PRA to this version of locational thinking. As the work of Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan demonstrates, studying the kinds of mobility that individuals manage to achieve, even in rural areas, shows how ways of knowing one's place in the 'home' community can be changed by the experience of travel (see also Mills 1997; Caplan 2001). Mobility may not always have positive effects, but for both ethnography and PRA, finding ways of capturing those effects through methodology seems beneficial.

Just as anthropologists now recognize the utility of abandoning the single-site, single-culture model, PRA might do well to consider how projects of local improvement may benefit from information that comes from translocal sources. This seems especially important, considering that projects of development can often unintentionally promote the kind of mobility that diffuses communities. According to Billsborrow, 'policies may increase incentives to out-migrate or physically facilitate it, for instance, by improving road connections with other areas or expanding educational opportunities in areas of origin and thus raising aspirations' (1998: 16). The possibility that development projects may have a hand in increasing individual mobility points to a need for involving the mobile person, whose moves may not be permanent, in participatory development. Since out-migrants can and often do return, whether after a lifetime in another setting or simply by way of a daily commute, they will continue to impact their places of origin (Afsar, in Billsborrow 1998: 323). Further, those who come from outside to act as 'change agents' in PRA constitute a mobile subset of actors in any given project. They will become translocal as soon as they arrive for an extended stay in a given rural setting. Movement by development workers from a modern, urban 'home' space to a rural 'away' in order to facilitate the generation of 'local knowledge' might be critiqued as 'spatialization of difference' (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 32). Because PRA insists on the production of local knowledge, presumably distinct from non-local knowledge, it risks ignoring the potential for generating a common knowledge whose roots straddle the boundaries between home and away, like the rural cosmopolitan.

## Conclusion

In speaking of the complicated connection between anthropology and development, Hoben remarked:

> The most important contribution of Anthropology to theories of development lies not so much in Anthropological theories per se as in the ways that Anthropological findings have confronted key assumptions in both the earlier, arational 'tradition

> bound' and the more recent 'rational peasant' variants of the dominant development paradigm. (Hoben 1982: 367)

Though this statement appeared before PRA emerged as a distinct form of practice, it points the importance of allowing ethnography to feed criticisms of development practice. Thus critiques of development as discursively constructed around the 'local' (Fisher 1997, Mosse 1996), or of development as a force that buttresses imagined borders between rural and urban, 'traditional' and 'civilized' (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994) were merely a starting point for this paper. Instead of using such critiques to assess all projects of development, I have tried to follow them with ethnographic examples of both 'local' experience with participatory development (from Green) and transmigrant mobility in process (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan). Finally, breaking with Hoben's statement, I have tried to apply anthropology theory about the creation of the field to point out some of the risks, particularly for PRA of spatializing difference.

Two key parallels emerge between modern ethnography and PRA. First, as Rahnema defines it, 'participation' requires 'change agents,' outsiders who act as catalysts for local generation of knowledge (in Sachs 1995: 117). Like the ethnographer, the change agent is more than what Clifford (1997) would call a traveler or tourist. He or she will 'dwell' in a certain place for an extended period, learning along with informants. Next, as Ferguson (unpublished) has shown, NGOs depend on translocality for funding and recognition, yet their legitimacy depends on maintenance of close ties to local communities. The translocal actors whose stories emerge in the growing anthropological experiment in what Marcus (1995) terms 'strategically situated ethnography' share this tendency to straddle local and interlocal identities. For Green's informants, there existed a continuum between being 'modern' and being 'traditional,' and for the Vankar, increased mobility helped change men's local identities.

Despite these remarkable similarities, PRA as Chambers has defined it does not seem to follow ethnography in expanding and questioning the boundedness of its target site, or 'field.' As Gupta and Ferguson remind ethnographers, 'Clearly geographical contiguity and boundedness are insufficient to define a "local community"; otherwise, high-rise buildings in urban metropolises would automatically qualify' (1997: 15). Applying this statement to PRA, one might say that defining places as 'rural' or 'urban' creates artificial boundaries around communities that may have multiple locations, indeed multiple identities, depending on the context of approach. If PRA attempted to engage communities, or 'fields,' in a more strategically situated manner, it might stand a better chance of aiding communities in creating more holistic 'maps' of their interests and needs. The locality of participants, like the locality of ethnographic subjects, appears more complex than mere presence within the boundaries of a single community. Boundaries themselves might not be best understood geographically; rather, a processual, ethnographic reckoning of communities and their physical and social limits appears more useful. By understanding locality as a continuously redefined state, one might begin to question the benefits of asking participants in PRA to map their 'fields' on purely 'local' terms.

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