

Rapid Appraisal in Humanitarian Emergencies Using Participatory Ranking Methodology (PRM)



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Introduction

Participatory Ranking Methodology (PRM) is a rapid participatory method particularly well-suited to assessments in humanitarian emergencies. It is a structured means, enabling affected communities and other relevant stakeholders to identify key needs and resources. It is an 'open' method shaped by the way communities themselves express their understanding of the emergency. However, crucially, it produces data in a form that can be promptly collated and analyzed, a key requirement in most emergency assessments.

In most cases when PRM is used in emergency assessments it is used alongside other measures such as key informant interviews and desk reviews.

This guide summarizes the key steps in conducting an assessment using PRM, including identifying the key framing question to be addressed, selecting participants, running a PRM group session, and collating, analyzing and presenting findings.



Identifying the Framing Question

PRM is a participatory method designed to provide detailed and elaborated information in response to ONE key framing question. It is vital that this question is both SPECIFIC enough to direct discussion towards the issues relevant to the assessment, but OPEN enough to encourage a full range of responses.

Listed below is a number of example framing questions. Your exact choice of framing question will depend on the focus of your overall assessment (e.g. sectoral or cross-sectoral; addressing the general population or specific groups). These examples should help you define an appropriate framing question for your assessment.

What are the main problems faced by the community at this time?

What are the biggest risks and dangers for children since the crisis?

How are people in the community coping with the problems since the crisis? (What are people doing to cope?)

Note that all these questions address general experience within the community. PRM is not a method where people are being asked to report directly on their own experience. They are reporting on common patterns in the community to which they belong.

Note also that questions that are difficult to phrase can be clarified by providing supplementary ways of asking this question (indicated in the brackets above). These are NOT additional questions, but clarifying statements that can be used as the framing question is repeated in the course of the exercise.

Each PRM exercise addresses ONE framing question. It is possible to run two or more PRM exercises with the same group, one after the other, for example one asking about problems faced by the community, and the next asking about ways of dealing with these problems. However, as with any assessment, you need to avoid discussions becoming too time-consuming.

One PRM exercise typically takes at least 30 minutes to complete with a group.

Selecting Participants

Identifying Communities

As a participatory approach to community assessment, the starting point for PRM will be identifying the communities from which you need to collect information. These will often be communities in a specific geographical area in which the assessment is to be a guide for programming response.

If there are relatively small numbers of distinct communities (villages, local government areas, camp blocks) in this area, it may be possible to visit them all. More typically, you will need to select a sample of communities to visit.

If information on locations is good and vehicle access relatively secure, to avoid unintentional bias it will usually be best to select sites at random (e.g. drawing a grid on a map and selecting numbered cells using digits on a banknote as a source of random numbers).

Otherwise, you will need to purposively sample communities. This simply means that you select communities based on a clearly stated purpose (e.g. choosing areas believed to be most affected by the emergency or visiting both rural and urban sites etc.).

Selecting Group Participants

There are three different ways of organizing a PRM exercise:

Convene Single Meeting of Community Leaders

When time and/or resources are severely limited, convening a single group meeting of local community leaders will usually be most efficient. This may involve chiefs, chairmen, women's leaders, religious leaders, youth leaders, teachers, health workers etc. Such a group can represent a wide range of insights into the experience of the community. However, it can be hard to manage the dynamics of such a group (some people may defer to the authority of others and not freely share views).

Meet with Key Leadership Groups within Community

With this approach you conduct separate PRM exercises with each significant leadership group within the community. This might comprise a men's leadership group and a women's leadership group, for instance. It might also include a youth committee, or perhaps a village health committee or child protection committee. Repeating the exercise with different groups in this way yields more data and ensures that diverse voices within the community are heard.

Convene Multiple Sessions with Key Groupings within the Community

If time allows, PRM sessions can be arranged with key groupings within the community (sometimes called 'strata') that may be of particular relevance to programming. Age and gender are common ways to define such 'strata', leading to groupings such as adult men, adult women, male youths and female youths, for instance. The exact basis of defining groupings will depend on the context and programming needs. In some situations you may wish to have groupings of displaced and non-displaced persons, for example. In another setting it may be appropriate to define groups by ethnicity or religious affiliation.

Any number of groupings can be defined with respect to variables (such as gender, age, displacement status, ethnicity etc.) but it is good practice to convene at least three PRM groups for each grouping defined. Even just using age and gender, as in the example above with groupings of adult men, adult women, male youths and female youths, requires at least 12 groups to be convened. In consequence, this strategy, although providing potentially the richest and most representative information about the experience of the community, is the most demanding in terms of time and resources, which may not be available in many emergency contexts.

If you go ahead with multiple sessions, you need to decide how you will recruit participants for your various groups. The easiest strategy is convenience sampling, where you approach people to participate (who fit your criterion for a particular grouping) who are readily accessible. This is usually because they have some existing contact with a local organization with which you are engaged, or because they are congregating at a particular place at a given time (e.g. in line at a food distribution, waiting at a health facility, in school etc.).

A preferable strategy is a combination of random and snowball sampling. A 'convening' participant is selected at random in a similar fashion to the way communities to be visited may be selected at random. The community is roughly sketched on a piece of paper, and a grid of squares drawn over it, and numbered. Random numbers (from the digits on a banknote) are used to select the same number of squares as you will have groups for each grouping (minimum of three). Traveling to each area of the community corresponding to a selected square in turn, select a house at random by spinning a pen or pencil and visit the house which is pointed to. There identify if someone belonging to one of your chosen groupings is present. If so, invite them to participate in a group PRM exercise and also to 'convene' between 5 and 10 others of the same grouping (e.g. adult women) to join them.

Whatever strategy is used to recruit participants, it is important to explain the aims of the PRM exercise and make it clear that they do not HAVE to take part in the discussion, and that there will be no rewards for taking part, or penalties for not doing so.

Running a PRM Exercise

Before beginning the exercise, you will need to find a space where the group can meet. A 'private' space (such as an office, private house, church or mosque etc.) will usually be the best choice. In more 'public' spaces (such as in a school or hospital compound, or under a tree in a village) there is a strong likelihood of an audience to the discussions. In some instances this may not be harmful, but if sensitive matters are being discussed and if participants are likely to be influenced in what they say by such onlookers, such a situation should be avoided.

A team of two people is required to run a PRM session. One, the Notetaker, has a simple form to take notes of each PRM session. An example is given in Appendix 1. This is used to note the issues that are raised by the group (and any that are prompted by the facilitator), their final ranking (priority) of these issues and statements made by participants during the course of the exercise. The second person in the team acts as the Facilitator. This person's job is to pose the framing questions, and then help the group work its way through the steps of the exercise.

The three main elements in the exercise can be recalled using the **P-R-M** acronym, where P stands for Pile, R stands for Rank and M stands for Meaning.

Pile

The facilitator begins by putting the framing question to the participants. The facilitator then encourages participants to share suggestions regarding that question. As the question is about the general experience of the community (and not individual experience) participants will generally automatically suggest themes rather than very specific incidents. However, if someone mentions a very specific issue, the facilitator can ask something like 'Is that an issue for other people in this community?'

Once two or more participants have suggested a theme, the facilitator invites the group to suggest an object that can be used to represent this theme (to help people remember it). This object is then used to begin a 'pile' of themes to be identified by the group.

The facilitator then asks something like, 'what other issues are there?' Again, if two or more participants agree on the importance of something, get the group to select an object to represent it in the 'pile'. If an issue is raised which potentially links to one of the themes already identified, ask the group to clarify whether this issue should be 'counted' within that existing theme, or whether this represents a distinct theme (for which a separate object should be identified).

As the 'pile' develops, from time to time ask the group to recall what theme each object stands for. Continue in this manner until there are between 8 and 10 objects (representing distinct themes) identified.

If a key theme that you had anticipated has NOT been raised by the participants, it is permissible to PROMPT consideration of this issue by the group (e.g. with a question like: 'Some people may think XXXX; is that an issue here?' If the group agrees that it is important, an object representing it can be added to the pile. If the group does not see it as an important issue in the community, it should not be added. Either way, the prompting of this theme should be recorded.

Rank

Once the group has finished compiling the 'pile' of relevant themes, the facilitator then defines a line along which participants are asked rank the importance of the issues represented by each of the objects. This can simply be a line drawn on the ground with a heel, or a string weighted with objects, or any other way of presenting a line on which themes can be ranked by their positioning.

Participants are then encouraged to place objects – one at a time - at a point on the line that reflects their relative importance. If someone doesn't 'volunteer' straight away to position one of the objects from the 'pile' onto the line, encourage one of the participants to do so.

When an individual places an object, the facilitator asks others if they agree with its positioning, inviting others to reposition it as appropriate. Adjusting the positions of objects continues until a final ordering is agreed among the group.

Meaning

This third element of the PRM exercise is not a third 'step', but one that is happening throughout the exercise.

Throughout the exercise, participants are sharing experience to justify the selection and, subsequently, the ranking of a particular issue. These comments provide a valuable way to interpret priorities and ranking, giving an insight into the meaning of issues within the community.

Typically, in the 'ranking' part of the exercise, participants will give particularly concise, vivid justifications for the (re)positioning of an object. It is crucial that the notetaker records these comments fully – if possible, using the precise words of the participant. In this way the statements can provide rich insight into local circumstances, attitudes and challenges.

Collating, Analyzing and Presenting Findings

PRM sessions produce four types of data.

- They define CATEGORIES of relevance and meaning for the community
- They produce FREQUENCIES of the times these categories are raised in group discussions
- They indicate RANKINGS of these categories in terms of perceived importance
- They elicit vivid personal STATEMENTS justifying and contextualizing the importance of specific issues

The first and fourth types of data are qualitative. However, the second and third are quantitative forms of data, assisting in identifying programming needs and priorities.

Categories

Make a list of all the themes identified by groups. Some groups may have used exactly the same words for themes, others may be slightly different, but basically saying the same thing. These clearly need to be grouped together. In other cases it will be harder to decide if themes should be grouped together or listed separately. Discussions amongst those who led PRM exercises will be helpful to decide which themes should be put together, and which should be kept separate. You are generally working towards a manageable number of categories that reflect the range of issues in the community.

In the example below, six major categories have been developed. Some of these could clearly be split into separate categories.

Themes					
<i>Attacks on girls</i>	<i>Roads blocked</i>	<i>Market closed</i>	<i>Drought</i>	<i>Girls dropping out of school</i>	<i>No medication at clinics</i>
<i>Violence after rations</i>	<i>No buses operating</i>	<i>No food for sale</i>	<i>Not enough water</i>	<i>No money for school books</i>	<i>Pregnant women at risk</i>
<i>Fear of soldiers</i>	<i>Cut-off</i>	<i>No trade</i>	<i>Well access</i>	<i>Schools destroyed</i>	<i>No roof on clinic</i>
<i>Riots</i>	<i>Bridge down</i>		<i>No clean water</i>	<i>Poor attendance at school</i>	
<i>Gangs</i>			<i>Water</i>	<i>No teachers to take classes</i>	
<i>Defilement</i>			<i>Long lines at pumps</i>		
<i>Shooting at night</i>					
Category					
INSECURITY	TRANSPORT	TRADE	WATER	SCHOOLING	HEALTH ACCESS

Here, themes are grouped together to create broad categories. You should bear in mind how the data will be used and the nature of the conversation to decide which themes belong together.

Frequencies

After you have established the categories, count the number of themes falling within each category. The total count should equal the number of themes identified across ALL the PRM exercises conducted.

Category 	Count
WATER	25
INSECURITY	16
TRANSPORT	13
TRADE	8
HEALTH ACCESS	7
SCHOOLING	4

Count the number of times a theme within a given category was placed on a 'pile' within a PRM session

Using the same categories, you can compare the frequency of themes identified by different communities, or by different groupings (with respect to the 'strata' identified earlier) in the same community. This indicates whether there are similar concerns across all members of the community, or whether there are particular concerns for some groupings.

Rankings

Using the information provided during the 'ranking' part of the exercises provides additional information on the priority of specific issues. The issues mentioned most frequently may not be the ones given the greatest priority (especially if community coping resources are effective for some major challenges, but not others). With '1' representing the highest rank position a theme can have been given in the course of discussion, it is LOWER average rank scores that indicate the top priorities.

Category 	Average Rank	Count
INSECURITY	1.4	16
WATER	2.1	25
TRANSPORT	3.5	13
TRADE	3.8	8
SCHOOLING	5.5	4
HEALTH ACCESS	6.9	7

Within each category, add the rank given to each theme considered by a group. Divide this by the frequency of themes in that category, to get an 'average rank' of that issue, when considered by groups.

Again you can compare findings across different communities, or for different groupings (with respect to the 'strata' identified earlier) in the same community. This time, you are looking at differences in the average ranks given to themes within a given category. Are the 'top priorities' the same across communities and groupings, or are there some themes that particular groupings (e.g. women, or displaced men) identify as particularly important?

Statements

The statements made by participants and recorded by notetakers will be a valuable source of information in understanding the priorities identified by participants.

This information can itself be analyzed in a systematic way. However, in the context of a rapid assessment this information is particularly crucial as a basis of vivid quotations which can 'give voice' to the experiences of people within the affected communities.

Such statements are thus both a key source to illustrate the themes identified and prioritized, and also provide greater insight into the experience of communities in a way that may assist planning humanitarian response.

PRM DATA COLLECTION FORM

Framing Question:

Facilitator:

Notetaker:

Location:

Number in Group:

Date:

Group Details:

(e.g. positions, age, gender etc.)

Key Issues Identified:

Free list:

Rank Order:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

Comments:

(Please write down what people say, using their own words – don't paraphrase).