



Columbia University  
MAILMAN SCHOOL  
OF PUBLIC HEALTH

PROGRAM ON FORCED MIGRATION

# PARTICIPATORY RANKING METHODOLOGY

A BRIEF GUIDE



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# PARTICIPATORY RANKING METHODOLOGY

A BRIEF GUIDE

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# PARTICIPATORY RANKING METHODOLOGY

## A BRIEF GUIDE

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

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#### 1.1 BASIC APPLICATION

Participatory Ranking Methodology (PRM) is a 'mixed methods' approach to data collection, in which a group of knowledgeable participants is guided in generating responses to a specific question or set of questions. It draws on both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to generate rich, contextualized data that can nonetheless be counted, ranked, and compared across or within groups.

This methodology promotes an engaged and participatory process, drawing upon local knowledge and perceptions. It is community-driven, in that the participants identify, support or negate what is most important to them. It provides a forum for debate of relevant themes among peers, the contribution of ideas and strategies, and identification of barriers to interventions that either exist or might be implemented. While each individual has an opportunity to 'make their case', it represents a consensus view, where the final product is a continuum of priorities or issues that is agreed upon by the group. Careful selection of groups and saturation can help to minimize outcomes driven by dominant members of the community, thus including the most marginalized perspectives.

PRM rapidly highlights key findings while providing the opportunity for deeper analysis as resources permit. Collected in a structured manner, results can be swiftly consolidated and used to develop action plans addressing identified priorities.

PRM can be used in a wide variety of settings, from a formal stakeholder meeting with trained humanitarian professionals, to a group of children in a rural village. It is applicable to many issues, especially those in which there is controversy or disagreement in what is most important. We hope that this manual serves as a 'working' document in the field, ultimately refined through its use and revised according to its adaptations.



# PARTICIPATORY RANKING METHODOLOGY

## A BRIEF GUIDE TO USE IN FIELD RESEARCH

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# 1. METHODOLOGY

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## 2.1. DESCRIPTION

Participatory Ranking Methodology (PRM) builds upon the tradition of participative rapid appraisal (PRA) methods. Indeed, the PRM acronym can be used to recall and present the key steps in use of the method: **P**ile, **R**ank, and **M**eaning. These steps are described in section 2.3.

The advantages of PRM are:

- **Efficiency** – whether PRM is used to initially ‘explore’ an issue, as a fully-developed systematic appraisal, or as a validation measure, it is relatively easy to organize, conduct, and analyze.
- **Diversity** – PRM is useful for almost any type of research question. From very sensitive issues to common problems, the PRM can be structured to fit many scenarios.
- **Low cost** – Running PRM does not require extensive resources. The materials, space and training of moderators needed for PRM are minimal.
- **Mixed methods approach** – it yields both quantitative data and qualitative data. Although there is a common tension in ‘choosing’ between these approaches, there is increasing use of complimentary methods to appraise not only ‘how much or many’, but triangulate and validate the numerical findings with the ‘why and how.’

Openness to using mixed methods allows researchers to address four key challenges of measurement that often present themselves, from a critical perspective: conceptualization, operationalization, prioritization, and power.

- Conceptualization      *What is...?*
- Operationalization      *How do you measure..?/what counts as evidence of..?*
- Prioritization      *How important is...?*
- Power      *Whose perspective counts most if there are different views?*

In response to these challenges, the use of methodologies such as the participative ranking described above allow the researcher(s) to work with communities to:

- confirm/amend/change conceptualization of issues
- provide varied evidence reflecting the operationalization of issues
- establish the appropriate prioritization of issues
- empower/access local/beneficiary/marginalized voices regarding all of the above

## **2.2. PREPARATION**

### **Research Definition**

As in any research project, the better the question or hypothesis under investigation is defined, the more likely to achieve a useful outcome. While PRM is by nature a semi-structured activity using open-ended discussion, this does not mean that the research objective should be nebulous. In contrast, the ultimate purpose of the activity and the utility of the outcome should guide the parameters of the investigation. The moderator, while being open to exploring all relevant themes, should guide each discussion topic towards a relevant conclusion. Given the efficiency of the method, it may indeed be better to structure a series of activities to discuss several research questions (or distinct aspects of a broader question), than to try and gain insight into every aspect of the research within one session. .

### **Setting**

PRM can be used to explore many themes. Some of them, such as Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and rape, may be more sensitive than others, such as impact of a microfinance program. As such, the settings in which PRM should be conducted vary. In many places where this method is useful, finding a private, covered space may be difficult. It is important that participants feel like they can discuss topics openly. If there are privacy issues and power dynamics at play, such as strong gender dynamics, hierarchies of administrators/village leaders looking on, or competition between groups, then it will be important to respectfully segregate the activity from the public sphere. Using a tree in a field, a private house, a time when the men are away, a tent, mosque or church, can help protect the space. Often speaking with a village leader or a respected elder about the need to have privacy during the discussion allows them to be included in the process and enforce the space in a culturally appropriate and sensitive way, without them actually being part of the conversation.

### **Moderator**

Since PRM is a relatively simple technique, the 'leader' of the exercise does not require extensive training (although some guidance is always needed.) This allows for a broad range of choices in any given setting. In some instances, it will be better to choose peers or almost-peers as the moderators of PRM activities. In Haiti, training youth leaders allowed for young people to be leading the discussions. This meant that they could speak openly with each other about problems that affect them, and also allowed for many more groups to be conducted, raising the sample size, and as such, the validity and breadth of the research conclusions. In other instances, having a respected authority figure may prove to elicit better information. Sometimes it is critical to have the gender of the moderator match that of the participants. In Nigeria, the women's groups that were led by American female researchers had to be accompanied by a specifically female moderator. Each context will determine the most accepted leader. Often asking people in the community who they prefer and who would be the most appropriate can guide researchers in this decision.

### **Participants**

In choosing participants, the goal should be to equally and evenly include representative 'stakeholders' of an issue. Far too often, issues that affect children are discussed with only the parents. PRM is 'child-friendly' and can be adapted in many ways to work with children who are quite young. Additionally, failure to sample participants systematically weakens the findings, as



convenience sampling is always likely to exclude some groups. Especially when the perspectives of various groups are likely to differ by gender, conducting separate groups with boys and girls, or women and men, can show the differences in perspectives and priorities, and give the researcher key insights into how to address the issue.

The key idea that guides the number of interviews, focus groups or other methods to choose is saturation. Saturation refers to collecting data until further data collection adds little to the 'picture' that has already been established. It is obviously hard to know in advance how quickly this will happen. However, particularly if a number of different methods of collecting information are being used, twenty interviews or exercises (whether involving individuals or groups) with any particular methods will usually be sufficient to produce saturation. Depending on the goals of the research, PRM may be employed in an 'exploratory' manner, where saturation and validation is not the goal, but rather simply to elucidate themes for future research. It can equally be used as a robust, systematic methodology that will be the basis of intervention. The choice of sample size will be determined by feasibility, acceptability, timing and the purpose of gathering the information.

Three methods of sampling, random, quota and snowballing, are provided here. If good records are available then again beneficiaries can be selected at **random** to participate in qualitative discussions. More typically participants may be selected to fulfill a **quota** of beneficiaries defined by a particular set of characteristics (e.g. boys, in school, aged under 11; or girls, not in school, aged over 11). '**Snowballing**' can be used, using initial participants to identify others that fulfill certain criteria for inclusion (a particularly useful method when dealing with sensitive issues such as recruitment by armed groups or sexual violence)<sup>1</sup>.

## **Materials**

PRM uses objects to represent themes during the discussion. Objects can be as simple as a spoon, a rock, fruit, a toy, etc. In one variation described below, the moderator drew pictures instead of using objects with very young children to help them remember better. In this version, the organizers would need paper and writing implements. In a more formal 'meeting' setting, or with a very literate population, sticky notes can be used and taped up on a chalk-board or wall.

## **Note-taker**

Capturing the nuance of the conversation and connotation of theme labels is crucial in strengthening and interpreting findings. It is virtually impossible to fulfill the active role of moderator and take effective notes on decisions and discussions. For this reason, PRM should be seen as a method that requires a two-person team, to take the respective roles of moderator and note-taker. The role of the note-taker is to record the sequence of the elicitation of issues (and objects), to note whether prompting by the moderator was required for any of these issues, to list the ultimately agreed ranking of issues by the group and, especially, to record as close to verbatim as possible the statements of group members used to (re)prioritize issues with respect to each other. Note-takers should clearly possess a strong understanding of local terminology and colloquialisms, in addition to someone who can faithfully translate into the language of the researchers.

## 2.3. EXERCISE GUIDE

### Pile

The basic process of PRM is very similar to that of an open-ended focus group discussion: the facilitator, or moderator, first defines the scope of the research question for the participants, and then works to elicit responses from the individuals in the group. PRM uses objects that are selected by participants to represent key themes of their discussion instead of solely relying on a note-taker to capture the key features of discussion.



This selection process is iterative, in that the facilitator works with participants to negotiate which object represents which theme. Depending on the tendencies of the group and the sensitivity of the research question, the moderator may need to prompt participants to elicit feedback and responses on specific issues. As participants' responses are linked to specific themes or topics, objects representing these issues are 'piled' in front of the group.

Often, a certain amount of time should be dedicated to 'original conceptualization,' meaning that spontaneous mention of topics should populate the first set of objects. Once the participants are satisfied with the topics, it may then be useful to ask about previously mentioned themes, or themes of particular interest to the program or topic under investigation. For instance, a facilitator could ask *"What about...? This was mentioned by other groups. Do you think this is important?"* Often it is pertinent to take note of those themes that are mentioned spontaneously and those that are prompted.

### Rank

The facilitator then defines a continuum along which participants can rank the importance of the issues represented by each of the objects in the pile. This can simply be a line drawn on the ground with a heel, or a string weighted with objects. Participants are then encouraged to place objects along the continuum in an order that reflects their relative importance. 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 (see Figure 1). The role of the moderator may vary depending on the circumstance. In some situations or cultures, it may appropriate and effective for the moderator to individually ask or encourage participants to confirm or re-position an object. In other places, participants may feel limited or 'quieted' by the interjections of a moderator. In this case, it may be better to explain the ultimate goal and let them debate internally. In this situation, the role of the moderator is to take notes and encourage the more passive participants to lend their opinions by asking them if they agree with certain positioning.



## Meaning

At each step of the process, responses are recorded. This includes recording all of the responses free-listed in the 'pile' section, as well as the final 'rank' of each agreed afterwards. Crucially, however, the note-taker records the reasons stated by any participant – their 'account' for the positioning of any object. These accounts – generally expressed as clear, propositional statements – often provide a rich insight into local circumstances, attitudes and challenges. Noting the differences in why certain objects maintain a certain rank or vary within and between groups is valuable in analysis.



*Figure 1: Children using pieces of paper held down by paperweights to 'rank' their concerns; the moderator's role can be vital in ensuring full understanding and engagement from the group (far right).*



## 2.4. VARIATIONS

PRM can be used to discuss many topics, among diverse populations. Depending on the setting and population, several variations of the methodology may be appropriate.

PRM can be used as a...

- *Start-point for research/program design*
- *In-depth exploration of issues for policy and planning purposes*
- *Evaluation of programs/interventions*
- *Validation of previously identified themes (across projects, locales or time periods)*

Several variations of the exercise format are provided below.

### VARIATION 1: Formal settings or trained professionals

- Depending on the literacy level of the group, responses can be written on pieces of paper, and these papers ordered along the continuum, in lieu of using objects (Figure 2).



- In a more traditional meeting setting, large sticky notes can be used to record participant views, then placed on walls in order to group and rank responses (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Large sticky notes can also be used to record, group, & rank responses.

Here, smaller blue sticky notes are used by participants to vote as a means of ranking responses

### VARIATION 2: Young children

- Young children have limited attention for long or formal activities. Making the exercise as much like a game as possible will hold their interest and encourage their participation. One researcher in Liberia found that selecting objects for themes was ineffective, as the kids could not remember which object represented what issue. Instead, she offered for them to draw the themes on paper. They had no interest in that, but became a captive audience when she started to draw the themes for them. The children were fascinated by the process. The researcher also noted that because she was speaking formal French, and

they were speaking a local African French dialect, her 'pictorial response' to what they were mentioning seemed to be a more appropriate and less intrusive or authoritative role.

### **VARIATION 3: Validation**

- If the purpose of the exercise is to take existing information and either refine the themes or confirm that they are in fact the most salient, then the objects, stickies or pictures are already assigned. The moderator then may want to ask what the designated list is missing. If a prioritization has already been established, then the objects would already be laid out on the continuum, and the participants would simply be asked to rearrange them.



## 2.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Since PRM is a 'mixed method' approach, some familiarity with the tenants of both qualitative and quantitative data analysis is useful. This guide is meant to provide a basic approach for this specific methodology, and will not explore methods of analysis in depth.

### Quantitative Outcomes:

**Compile the response data:** While the PRM responses are interesting and informative on their own, they are often more useful when compiled or 'grouped' into common themes or dimensions. This can be done in a variety of ways, from simple large group sorting techniques to quite sophisticated and structured statistical techniques. When selecting a specific technique, consider the ultimate goals for the data, available resources (e.g. time) and the skills of the staff who will be compiling and analyzing the data.

Before data can be compiled into groups the responses need to be transcribed onto cards for sorting. Responses can be entered into a computer database so that they can be manipulated and printed or they can be copied by hand directly onto cards. Computer software like MS Excel or a 'label template' function in a word processing program like MS Word can be used to store the responses and print them onto cards. However, in most situations having the interviewers hand transcribe the responses onto cards is the simplest and most efficient method. Use whatever method works in your situation. It will usually be best to use a different color card (or, failing that, a different color pen) for different categories (for example, 'protection concerns' and 'resources'). To help compile information from across many groups list the 'rank' number (that is, the position on the priority list agreed by participants) on each card.

**Narrow responses:** Once the responses have been compiled onto cards or into a computer file you will need to reduce them to those that you believe will be meaningful for your purposes. In most first phase assessments you will be interested in identifying the major types of protection concern that are present. So, in a child protection assessment for example, you might include mention of specific concerns such as "rape", "domestic violence", "sexual abuse", etc. within a broader category of "gender based violence". You may want to have more detailed (i.e. narrower) categories for things that are likely to be the focus of potential interventions.

An individual can sort cards into groups in this way, but it is usually better to involve a number of people (who can discuss the reasons of putting certain issues together). *[Best of all is having two or more groups independently sort cards. This takes more time, but you can compare the piles or categories of items created by different groups to see if common themes emerge. It is a way of assessing the reliability of your compiled data].*

**Interpret Results:** The outcome of this process can result in two 'numbers'. First, you can achieve a 'frequency distribution.' This can be simply a hand-count of numbers of times an issue is mentioned, either within a group or across groups. It could also be computed with Excel or statistical software as part of a bigger analysis.

The second 'number' yielded by the process are the mean or median rankings of the themes. If there are only a few groups, then the rankings may be an indicator, but not statistically reliable. However, comparing across a larger number of groups will have greater validity and application, and can be treated as robust findings, just as in any other quantitative analysis.

## Qualitative Outcomes:

The analysis of qualitative data builds on the same general principles of the identification of patterns and trends. Qualitative data can suggest why a trend noted in quantitative analysis occurred, or give insight into what a pattern of responses means. For instance, a PRM frequency count might indicate that girls who were associated with armed forces are more likely to drop out of school than boys who were also recruited. Qualitative analysis may then suggest why this occurred, e.g. it is because they have babies, their families prioritize boys' education, and they are seen as 'dirty' and are ashamed to go to school.

Since thematic analysis is built into the PRM process, more attention should be given to contextualizing the prevalence and rankings of themes, and how that might affect program goals. The qualitative data from the sessions can provide information on which themes belong together or should be separated, which issues are correlated to one another and in what way, and under what circumstances barriers might be bridged.

Although PRM is a very efficient way of collecting qualitative data, it can still produce fairly large transcripts to analyze. Dealing with large amounts of qualitative data can be very time-consuming, and as such 'padding' the PRM themes with representative statements is quite common (i.e. 'cherry-picking' or 'choosing a couple of good quotes'). Sufficient time needs to be given to the analysis of qualitative data if one is to respect the time that participants contributed in its collection.

Transcription and translation of interviews (whether digitally recorded or from written notes) consumes significant resources. Generally, allow two to three times more time to analyzing qualitative data than collecting it. That is, if it took two days to run the PRM sessions, allow between four and six days for analyzing the transcripts from such groups<sup>1</sup>.

## Other Issues in Data Analysis:

**Language:** As previously mentioned, it is very important to understand local meanings of words, and the nature of comments made about themes. If there was any confusion, disagreement, or ambiguity, the facilitator should clarify with participants what is meant, and segregate categories if consensus cannot be reached. This also applies to grouping or collapsing themes during analysis. An issue as broad as 'access to education' can mean different things for different participants or groups. The notes, context and experience of the researchers should determine when there is truly a singular meaning of a theme that has been mentioned or when a similar theme might be representing different ideas. In addition to understanding the true context of the local language, when translating notes, quotes or findings, consider meanings carefully.

**Weighted scores:** Sometimes the sample engaged in PRM activities is not representative due to time, logistic or cultural constraints. A system of weighting scores can be used to address this issue, as well as when there may have only been data collected on 'frequency of mention' rather than formal ranking consensus. Methods of weighting will not be explained in detail here, but are perfectly valid if applied correctly.



# PARTICIPATORY RANKING METHODOLOGY

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### 3. EXAMPLE

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THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXAMPLE OF HOW PRM HAS BEEN USED WITH CHILDREN IN A REFUGEE CAMP, IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY CONSIDER TO BE THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS FACING THEM.

First, the set of problems are identified and represented by a PILE of objects:

- The moderator explains that aim of the group is to understand what are the biggest problems facing children in the camp or community.
- The note-taker lists 'problems' in the sequence they are suggested (numbering each clearly in turn). Continue until ten separate problems have been identified, or until there are no additional suggestions.
- The moderator and children then select objects (e.g. stones, pencils, leaves, cloth etc.) to represent each of the problems identified.
- The moderator goes through each concern in turn and decides together with the children what object can be used to represent it.
- Once linked with a concern, the objects are put in a pile on the ground in front of the moderator.

Next, the moderator works with the participants to RANK the objects:

The moderator asks the group to agree which are the biggest problems by ordering the objects in a line on the ground: the biggest problem at one end of the line, and the lesser problems at the other. Throughout, the note-taker is recording the justifications – the MEANING– for placing objects in a particular position.

The methodology offers many different ways to analyze responses documented as above:

Frequency: Once you have sorted the responses, you can determine which priority concern has been listed most frequently. For example, if “child recruitment” was the one concern mentioned in every focus group, that is a strong indication of a high priority concern.

Average Rank: A concern may be listed very often but, as indicated by the ranking exercise, may not be seen by participants as the biggest concern. The average ranking that a concern (or resource) receives will usually be the best measure of its importance for action. To calculate the average rank for an issue mentioned by the group—for example, “child recruitment”—simply adds up the ranking number from each group and divides by the number of groups.



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FGD DATA COLLECTION FORM (CHILDREN) – BLANK

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DATE:

MODERATOR:

CAMP/COMMUNITY:

AGE RANGE:

NOTE TAKER:

NO. CHILDREN IN GROUP:

GENDER: Girls/Boys/Mixed

**Key Protection Concerns Identified:**

Free list:

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Rank Order:

1. 

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2. 

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7. 

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9. 

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10. 

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COMMENTS:

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(Write down what the children say exactly like they say them).

**Key Coping Strategies/Resources Identified:**

Free list:

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Rank Order:

1. 

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COMMENTS:

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(Write down what the children say exactly like they say them).

DATE: 6 DECEMBER 2008  
 MODERATOR: JEAN APERU  
 NOTE TAKER: JOHN SITU  
 CAMP/COMMUNITY: AWEA  
 NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN GROUP: 9  
 AGE RANGE: 10-13 GENDER: GIRLS/BOYS/MIXED

**KEY PROTECTION CONCERNS IDENTIFIED:**

Free list:	Rank Order:
ATTACKS ON GIRLS/RAPE	1. SICKNESS
SOLDIERS TAKING CHILDREN TO BUSH	2. LANDMINES
SICKNESS	3. ATTACKS ON GIRLS/RAPE
BEATING (TEACHERS AND PARENTS)	4. FIGHTS (BETWEEN YOUTHS)
LANDMINES	5. LACK OF FOOD
FIGHTS (BETWEEN YOUTHS)	6. SOLDIERS TAKING CHILDREN
LACK OF FOOD	7. FIGHTS (BETWEEN YOUTHS)
CROWDED HOUSES	8. CROWDED HOUSES

**COMMENTS:**

(Write down what the children say exactly like they say them).

MY BROTHERS AND MY SISTERS, THEY ARE ALL SICK. THEY HAVE FEVERS FOR MANY DAYS.

THE SOLDIERS CAME LAST MONTH AND TOOK TWO BOYS AWAY FROM THE HOME OF MY COUSIN

THERE IS TOO MUCH SICKNESS HERE. MY BROTHER AND MY AUNT HAVE BOTH PASSED AWAY SINCE WE CAME HERE.

A YOUNG BOY DIED WHEN HE WAS PLAYING BY THE ROAD AND HE STEPPED ON A BOMB LEFT BY THE MILITIA.

THERE ARE MINES EVERYWHERE. WE ARE AFRAID TO GO WALKING FROM OUR SHELTER.

GIRLS ARE NOT SAFE HERE. A GIRL WAS DEFILED YESTERDAY BY A MAN WHEN SHE WENT TO COLLECT WATER.

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## 4. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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**Program on Forced Migration and Health**

HEILBRUNN DEPARTMENT OF POPULATION AND FAMILY HEALTH



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