Learning from analysis

Ensuring reflection in participatory processes

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• **Introduction**

This special issue of the *PLA Notes* looks at the tricky process of 'making sense of the information'. While it is easy to generate much interesting and unusual information through participatory processes, it is often very difficult to make sense of the mountain of 'data' with which we are left. Where does participation in analysis begin and end? When does it happen, and how and by whom is local learning represented? Critics of participatory development often point out the superficial and descriptive nature of such work, asking how conclusions were reached and whose conclusions they are. Facilitators can get carried away with visual methods while forgetting their main purpose - critical reflection. As Mukasa and Mugisha (this issue) write, this type of work can be: 'manipulation to make local people **feel** important without **making** them important'. How can serious analysis ensure that local people learn about the value of their lives and gain the confidence to represent their own choices?

Analysis is often a vague process in much participatory work, with steps that are rarely explicit. In these processes, some information is included but much is excluded; some people are involved while others are absent; conclusions are verified and local people recognise their own authorship of these conclusions, and sometimes they are not and local authorship is remote. Problems are prioritised, but how do we know if they are based on a thorough understanding of underlying causes? Plans are written but whose priorities are included?

The articles in this issue discuss what happens when data are 'collected', discussed, summarised and shared, when priorities are made, and action points are agreed. Insights are shared from community-based analysis of gender differences in Uganda, poverty assessment in the UK, and irrigation planning in Peru. Challenges are raised by experiences with the analysis of rural views for policy audiences in India and Malawi, and with municipal planning in Brazil. Facilitation-related questions are discussed by examining well-being assessment in London and training manual development in El Salvador.

• **Analysis and its benefits**

The Concise Oxford Dictionary describes analysis as 'resolution into simple elements'. But in participatory processes, far more is involved. An alternative definition was developed by PRA facilitators in Uganda: '*a critical look to deepen, clarify and structure information (ideas, facts, impressions), understand interconnections and examine cause-effect links, identify core elements, in order to arrive at conclusions that can lead to action/solutions to a given problem*' (Guijt 1996).

Thorough analysis, including by local participants, can make all the difference between a superficial descriptive report or simplistic feedback session, and one that is based on a deep understanding, with a broad ownership that motivates people to action, whether they are villagers, policy makers or professionals.

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What other advantages does systematic and ongoing reflection bring? The articles suggest that the time and effort invested is rewarded by many significant benefits (see Box 1).

BOX 1
BENEFITS OF REFLECTION

- To uncover new information – by discussing basic information, people's memories can be triggered and new information and insights can emerge (see van Dijk, Braden and Nelson, Phnuyal, Guy and Inglis, Chase et al)
- To limit biases – ensuring a thorough discussion about views and information means it is cross-checked and people can point out when they feel an issue has been represented incorrectly (see Faria, Rengasamy et al, Mukasa and Mugisha)
- To build a clear picture of a situation/event/process and reach consensus – by discussing data, contradictions can emerge and be ironed out (see Cornwall, Rengasamy et al)
- To avoid a superficial action plan – simply knowing, for example, the number of people who experience food shortages does not help understand why this happens – further analysis can reveal the structural causes of problems and solutions (see Mukasa and Mugisha, Phnuyal, van Dijk, Faria)
- To facilitate action that has broad ownership - understanding the causes and extent of problems, and how solutions can benefit individuals and groups, can motivate people more to invest in making the change happen (see van Dijk, Cornwall, Mukasa and Mugisha).

These outcomes are not guaranteed for each situation - it depends on many factors, such as the purpose of analysis. As Faria describes in the case of Brazil, analysis had a different purpose at different moments: first secondary data analysis helped develop the research methodology, then analysis focused on the quality and reliability of the information and identified gaps, followed by clarity about core problems, and finally it focused on possible solutions. For van Dijk and Mukasa and Mugisha, analysis was essential to create support for women's needs - empowerment through reflection by women and men. This brings us back to an important root of participatory learning and action methods,

Paulo Freire and his concern to focus on how participants benefit. Analysis can help ensure the *exchange* of learning between facilitators and participants.

Generally speaking though, irrespective of the purpose, analysis is using discussion and reflection as a 'filter' through which many ideas and fragments of information are funnelled and consolidated. It is a constant sifting and filtering of information, to create new insights.

- **Different types of analysis**

When it occurs

Analysis is often assumed to 'happen' automatically, during the construction of a map or the ranking of problems. But there are many smaller moments when information is filtered or changed and interpretations are made that influence the final outcome (see Box 2).

BOX 2
ANALYSIS HAPPENS WHEN…

- reviewing secondary data to identify a checklist (e.g. Faria, Rengasamy et al);
- noting down or including only part of what is heard or filmed (e.g. Braden and Nelson);
- copying diagrams from the ground onto paper, or from large onto small version (or vice versa);
- when synthesising information at community feedback meetings (e.g. Faria and van Dijk);
- when probing one part of the discussion and not another;
- when compiling the final report (e.g. Cornwall, Rengasamy et al);
- when using one method (e.g. a questionnaire) and not another (e.g. a flow diagram).

At each step, some judgement is made, conscious or not, about what bit of information is more important than another. While it is impossible to become conscious of every act of judging and filtering of information in a complex process, it is possible to become more aware of when it is happening. Particularly for participatory development, knowing what makes 'good analysis' happen, can help to

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structure the process and get the best out of the efforts.

The timing and sequence of analytical steps is also influenced by the level for which the final output is intended (see Box 3).

BOX 3
LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

- micro-level: local analysis for local solutions (e.g. van Dijk, Faria, Mukasa and Mugisha; Phnuyal)
- meso-level: local analysis with summarised conclusions that are used outside the community to secure support for local needs/solutions (e.g. Braden and Nelson, Cornwall)
- macro-level: local analysis for policy-level support and insights (e.g. Chase et al, Rengasamy et al).

The higher up the information moves, the more it will be filtered and presented in different ways to suit different audiences. Maintaining information that represents the opinions of the people becomes increasingly difficult, as Rengasamy et al warn. That is why in Brazil, many opportunities were planned to ensure that people recognised their views in the final conclusions (see Faria, this issue). So analysis becomes a continual cycle of 'construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction' of information, until it is ready for writing up as a plan.

• Who's involved?

For whom is the outcome of analysis in participatory processes intended? If it is local people and their lives, then how are they involved at each step in the analysis? If it is policy makers, then how are they linked into the learning process? Many important questions about who participates must be considered. Who sets the agenda? Who decides who to invite to meetings? Who is invited? Who is recording? Who checks the conclusions? Who writes the plan or report, or edits the video images? The articles offer different answers to these questions. They work with large community meetings or small groups of representatives, with many facilitators or with one, and with external or local facilitators.

Sometimes, the first step, the setting of the agenda, on which subsequent analysis is based, starts with community level input. Mukasa and Mugisha explain how a local agenda emerges through the use of an 'issues matrix', while in Brazil, the newly elected local council defined the core concern - a solid municipal plan. But agenda setting is not always in the hands of local people and can start with external organisations. For example, Braden and Nelson discuss how government departments and research institutes formulated the basic research problem. They explain how the research team then negotiated a broadening of this agenda to be more inclusive of local concerns. van Dijk describes a similar situation in Peru, with the external organisation initiating the contact and determining the broad natural resource management focus: '*Within the topics defined by the facilitators, the [irrigation water] users defined the bottlenecks and important issues and also decided when to have meetings and who would participate*.'

Some may jump to the hasty conclusion that this external agenda-setting is 'bad' practice. However, it is not precise agenda-setting that has taken place, but rather some limiting of the scope of the work to fit within the mandate of the external organisations that initiate the process. This offers great potential for influencing policy through participatory research and planning (see also *PLA Notes* 27, October 1996).

At the heart of participatory analysis, lies the question of who is making sense of the data. Often, work that may initially have been inclusive can shift towards analysis by facilitators or researchers. If this shift goes far, then concerns are justified. However, external people can play an important role. Rengasamy et al and Faria write that external researchers undertook the task of synthesising community information, that would have been too tedious or time-consuming for farmers. Cornwall describes another experience: '*In the first phase, with the listening survey, most of the analysis was **mine** and most of the learning was one-way* (original emphasis)', but as she continues '*… the knowledge I acquired helped me to facilitate better what was to follow*'. The notion that initial analysis by facilitators, be they local or external, can help to construct a

better subsequent process for others is also illustrated clearly by Phnuyal. Therefore, analysis is rarely a process and product only of 'the people'. It inevitably involves a mix of community members, facilitators, community representatives, and others.

Three aspects of local participation in analysis require some attention. First is the question of who should be involved. The presence of some and the absence of others when agendas are set, cause and effect are analysed, and priorities determined, points out consideration of gender-balanced representation and that of the poor, the young, and the less mobile. Mukasa and Mugisha offer a powerful example of how a commitment to gender-balanced development motivated their organisation to find an approach for negotiating gender and age-related differences as part of community planning. Cornwall and van Dijk worked with separate community and interest groups.

Second, is the question of who wants to be involved in what can be quite a tedious task. External organisations often assume that there is a high degree of local desire and willingness to undertake analysis. But not everyone has the time or inclination, as Rengasamy et al note. Nor should this be considered a problem, as 100% participation is neither practical nor possible. Several contributions suggest using smaller groups to synthesise information or make initial suggestions for possible action plans (Faria, van Dijk, Cornwall, Braden and Nelson). What all stress, however, is giving the opportunity to as many as possible to voice their views on priority concerns or action points.

Third is the question of who has the capacity to analyse. In participatory development, there is a tendency to romanticise the existence of the 'village analyst'. Not all community members might have that capacity. One aspect of this limitation is highlighted by van Dijk, and Mukasa and Mugisha, when discussing the involvement of women. They stress that simply offering women the opportunity to debate and reflect did not mean they grabbed that chance. In Peru, exchange visits helped women to see '*that it is possible to tackle certain problems successfully, such as overcoming the fear of public speaking, and being able to express their ideas and points of*

view in assemblies' (see van Dijk, this issue). Self-confidence is needed before participation is possible.

- **Tools for analysis**

If the findings from participatory research are important for local people, then by inference they should be involved in analysis, which brings us to the question of the choice of appropriate methods. A common criticism of PRA and similar approaches is that it imposes the use of certain tools and contexts (mainly groups), which are often culturally alien forms of analysis. Furthermore, as Rengasamy et al write: '*one of the very advantages of participatory methods is also a major drawback - the very wealth of information that is generated*'. How are the methods selected and applied to produce analysis? And which ones are effective at achieving the different purposes of analysis described above?

Two challenging insights about methods come from El Salvador and Peru. In El Salvador, the idea of finding good, analytical tools by opening a manual was rejected by a group of local facilitators (see Phnuyal, this issue). Instead, from their own understanding of local concerns and communication, they selected and created more appropriate methods and sequences. van Dijk takes an equally critical stance, stressing the valuing of local analytical methods: '*More important are the moments without the facilitators, when villagers are able to discuss in their own private or public space the issues raised ... and reflect ....*'.

Unfortunately, few concrete examples exist about the link between such local forms of discussion and externally-facilitated moments and methods.

External methods are not, by definition, problematic. It lies more in how they are used. The H-form, for example, is a simple and effective tool for sharing views (see Guy and Inglis in Tips for Trainers, this issue), as are card-clusters (Schmidt, 1996). Video, too, as an external method offers potentially new ways of analysis, as shown by the 'Rivers of Life' work in Devonport (see Chase et al, this issue) and the video transect from Malawi (see Braden and Nelson, this issue). Capturing and transmitting local people's voices on film

4

limits the interpretation and filtering of words that inevitably happens when writing notes. However, in the editing of video images still lies the power to filter and it is, therefore, an analytical step. As Sam Swaby notes (see Chase this issue), he enjoys *'picking a jewel from miles of tape'*. It is his perception, then, of a 'jewel' that stands as a summary of 'miles of tape'.

The articles reveal some striking similarities between the methods and sequences. In south London, Brazil, and India, PRA methods were used to elicit local views and information, which were then registered on cards and grouped per topic (see Cornwall, Faria, and Rengasamy et al, this issue). In both Brazil and India, a matrix-based analysis was combined with flow diagrams to structure the data and highlight cause-effect linkages. A third similarity is the use of synthesised reports for checking and probing further in London, Brazil, and Uganda (see Mukasa and Mughisa), although the form in which these reports are presented are, of course, distinct.

When planning which method to use, the different analytical purpose of each method needs to be considered. Which tools are used for opening up and exploring the range of local agendas? These can be seen as 'process tools', which introduce topics, and break down themes. And what are the tools for defining (narrowing and agreeing specific agendas)? These are designed to produce what we call 'data', which are used as the basis for action by participants and outsiders. In the Devonport example (see Chase et al, this issue), 'Rivers of Life' was used as the former and mapping as the latter. The maps were used for hard data about the agreed boundaries of 'our patch' (or neighbourhood) and about the resources that were available within 'our patch' and those that were not. In Malawi, maps were used to open agendas, and transects and drama to focus on key problems (see Braden and Nelson, this issue). In Brazil, mapping, seasonal calendar, 'dreams' and semi-structured interviews were used to open agendas, and card clustering and a linkage matrix to narrow the focus around action priorities (see Faria, this issue).

In each of these examples, the outputs from one method determine which method is most appropriate for the next step of analysis and synthesis. But for Rengasamy et al the tools proved multi-functional. Those that had been useful for collecting initial information, also *'proved to be useful tools to assist in disaggregating raw data, presenting it back to key informants, identifying key themes and finally identifying policy options'*.

Coming full-circle

In the quest for analytical methods, the purpose of participatory learning must remain central. How do we avoid ending up with a mass of material, which due to the sheer amount, may not get analysed either by insiders or outsiders (see Rengasamy et al)? This calls for a more careful choice of methods and planning of sequences to ensure that some meaning emerges. The use of methods should provide a series of building blocks for thinking and with which to discuss. Fewer tools, with more in-depth discussion, may be the way forward (see Braden and Nelson, this issue).

After a phase in the development of participatory methods when everyone was publishing handbooks and collecting games, tools, and diagrammatic evidence, this issue of the *PLA Notes* brings us back to the original idea - that the methods we use are only intended to help us think. Focusing on methods as carriers of information. from inside the community to the outsiders, was never the original idea behind participatory *learning*.

• The quality of analysis

The benefits that can, in theory, result from well-structured analytical processes - understanding, consensus and action - only happen after long and persistent efforts in discussing the meaning of collected data and uttered statements. Lengthy engagement is a striking feature of all the experiences described here. None happened in one session, a week or a month, stretching instead from six months to two years. Longer engagement also improved facilitation skills, and thus the depth and breadth of analysis (see van Dijk, Braden and Nelson). Perhaps then, one criterion of recognising participatory work that has been based on sound analysis is long term engagement?

However, overdoing 'analysis' is easy, as Mukasa and Mugisha warn. Too much discussion and no action is a sure recipe for 'participation fatigue', with drooping motivation and dropping numbers. They stress the importance of supporting small local initiatives, while pursuing ongoing negotiation about intra-communal difference and consensus. It remains a tricky balance, though, to ensure that enough is discussed, deepened and understood, without it being stranded in a 'talk feast'.

Local motivation is also affected by the flexibility of the agenda to change as analysis progresses and new insights are gained. Fixed, externally-determined agendas from the onset may well narrow the discussions in such a way as to make it uninteresting for others. If the topics do not relate to their own lives and work, then participants, whether they are villagers or bureaucrats, will understandably be less willing to stay involved.

Not only the available time and flexibility affects the quality of analysis. The size of the area, distance between participants, and language are other practical considerations. Mukasa and Mugisha, and van Dijk, both worked in a limited number of communities, enabling them to invest much time in personal relationships and small group discussions. This would not be possible if participatory research or planning extends to cover a large geographic area. In El Salvador, however, development organisations managed to cover large areas as well as develop close relationships by working through trained local facilitators (see Phnuyal, this issue). Distance between different participating groups is another a factor. In Malawi, one village dropped out in the last stage of analysis about rural energy policies. Distance from the city, bad roads and poor weather conditions had thwarted its contribution to the last meeting (see Braden and Nelson).

Language is, of course, a well-known obstacle. It enters in the very first step. Alien concepts like 'sustainable agriculture' (Rengasamy et al) or 'well-being' (Cornwall) need to be (re)defined locally for them to be recognised and analysed. When translation is required, analysis can become particularly problematic as this creates at least two more filters through which words pass – from facilitators to translator to participants, and back. This can sometimes totally alter the meaning or original sense of urgency.

Careful selection and sequencing of steps and methods can sustain interest and participation, thus increasing the chances of meaningful analysis. Safe ways, based on local negotiation and decision-making structures, are needed to ensure that access can be gained by those that are normally excluded. Observation is vital to understand the culturally-specific avenues through which such challenges can be made, for example drama (Braden and Nelson), formalised speech opportunities (van Dijk), symbols (Mukasa and Mugisha), local themes (Phnuyal), or polished reports (Cornwall). And all this hinges on whether the attitudes and behaviour of facilitators make people simply *feel* important for a while or *make* them and their concerns important. Good analysis requires more than a good discussion (Mukasa and Mugisha).

• Learning for improvement

By revealing the purposes, sequence of methods, and participants in analysis, the articles here offer many ideas for improving analytical processes of change. Two other aspects require further attention, that of the match between good local analysis and outside expectations, and of facilitation for analysis.

Analysis and funding agencies

Several authors have written about the role of funding agencies, organisations or agencies involved. The irony is this: many organisations increasingly seek approaches that can improve the quality and outcome of analysis, yet the parameters within which they operate also, unwittingly at times, impose conditions that limit what is possible. As van Dijk points out, when discussing the importance of allowing locally-paced discussion: '*From an intervention point of view, it is crucial to include such moments of 'non-intervention'. But the consequence is a more time-consuming process than most development organisations are willing to allow.*'

But it is not only timing, it is also their models of analysis or the focus of attention. For

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example, the logframe that many funding agencies insist on for formulating projects and programmes, imposes a structure of cause-effect thinking that is quite alien in some contexts. Also, pre-determining a narrow research question that assumes certain concerns or definition of problems, will often need to be broadened to make it locally relevant and therefore, stimulate participation in analysis (see Rengasamy et al, Cornwall, and Braden and Nelson).

Does the Malawi case study (see Braden and Nelson) offer one way forward, despite taking much time? It was a participatory approach designed to find information on a predetermined agenda. Nevertheless by insisting on a multi-disciplinary approach and by including as many of the donors and partners in the process as possible, they became joint owners of the process. They began to understand 'time invested' in relation to 'benefits'.

Facilitation for analysis

Facilitators, be they local or external, also play a critical role in analysis. They suggest, they probe, they encourage, they redirect, they take notes. Yet their roles and how they learn to facilitate analytical processes are seldom documented and analysed in detail.

What is their role? As mentioned above, several authors note that the more skilled the facilitators, the more able to hand over and guide, and the more local the analysis became. Does, therefore the role shift from initiator and co-analyst to process guide? But sometimes facilitators need to help create the willingness to listen within organisations for whom these ways of working are new. *'My direct involvement helped create confidence in the methodology: ... Having laid the groundwork, I was able to build capacity and shift control to community members and local workers in subsequent work ..., limiting my input to training and advice on the process'* (see Cornwall, this issue). This implies perhaps that a much wider set of skills are needed, not only to make analysis possible within and between different groups, but also to create the space for the outcomes of analysis to be heard.

Second, how can facilitators be trained in the 'art of analysis'? Are facilitators being trained to perpetuate the use of a method, or should they understand the purpose of 'deconstructing and reconstructing' knowledge so that local people can critically review their own lives (see Phnuyal, this issue)? If it is the latter, then diagrams and videos are not so important for the descriptive outputs they produce, but rather to enable people to see choices. Facilitating analysis without sophisticated methods is possible, but not without insights about how analysis happens.

Analysis is a much more complex and culturally-specific skill than is often assumed. This raises a problematic contradiction for those organisations that expect rigorous results from facilitators of participatory processes. Fieldworkers are commonly on the bottom rung of the organisational career ladder. That is not usually a satisfying place for reflective, analytical people. If analysis through participatory process is to be scaled up into organisational learning, and into a better level of dialogue and response between the grassroots and policy makers, it is crucial that the role of the fieldwork is integrated into the career structure of organisations. Fieldworkers need to have on-going support, encouragement to publish, and to feel that what they experience in the field is integrated into organisational policy. There is a danger that, as long as fieldworkers and policy makers within development organisations are seen as working on different career scales or structures, there is little chance of upgrading and integrating critical learning from the field at the policy level of organisations. This raises the danger that the calibre of fieldworkers will be impoverished. In order to benefit fully from the potential of local level analysis, more understanding is needed about how to deal with the position of facilitators of analysis within organisations.

• Rethinking assumptions about analysis

What complexity is hidden in that one word 'analysis'! Many assumptions appear to be made that have been questioned in this issue of the *PLA Notes*. It does not happen automatically, it has to be structured; it is not contained within a method but in sequences

7

and debates. It does not rely on 100% participation but can still be inclusive. It is not about listing priorities after a week of methods, but about consciously and publicly filtering information until a broad consensus for future action is reached.

By discussing the detailed processes 'inside' the participatory work, the experiences here show us that analysis does not have to be superficial. They encourage us to create meaning, in more conscious and critical ways, out of the mounds of information that emerge through diagramming, videos and discussion. Analysis becomes valuable when it helps local groups to take action or seek support. Information that is not useful for anyone is, after all, a waste of time. Participatory processes without prioritising analysis is a lost opportunity for external organisations and communities alike.

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