Participatory learning and action or Participatory acting?

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Prologue

PLA Notes encourages practitioners to share information and experiences 'in the field', emphasising innovation and timely reporting on recent activities. While this is a useful function, we believe that in many cases, self-reflection (one of the supposed mainstays of PLA approaches) can only come with the benefit of longer and more sustained hindsight. In this article we reflect on a participatory project that took place over two years ago: a project that in many senses we felt 'went wrong' and one that we have thought and talked about quite a bit since.

PLA is a family of methodologies that is supposed to enable stakeholders to learn and to take action for positive change. There is a danger, however, that a project using participatory methodologies can get stuck in 'theatre play', where the stakeholders, including PLA practitioners, take up roles that are well rehearsed and where the outcome has already been written into the script. With the benefit of hindsight, this is exactly what happened in the project described below. The process which we will describe contributed only to personal development, but not to systemic transformation.

Act One: PLA – Tantalising expectations

In late 1996 the Sustainable Economic Development Unit (SEDU) at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad and Tobago, was contracted to evaluate the 'partnership approach' that UNDP had developed with two NGOs in the North East of Trinidad. Using this 'partnership approach' UNDP had funded a number of different projects in the region, mainly via the GEF Small Grants programme, such as developing a small loans scheme, the training of 'eco-tourism guides' and the construction of a community radio station.

UNDP argued that this was a new and innovative approach and one worthy of study. The objectives of our research project were to both evaluate the extent to which UNDP's investments in the North East region had contributed to 'sustainable human development' and to enable the organisations to learn lessons from their experiences to enhance their future work. Given these objectives, the four-person project team proposed a participatory methodology: a proposal actively supported by the Resident Representative of UNDP.

The partnerships between the NGOs and UNDP was very young and it was clear to the project team that the desired effects of the projects could not have been achieved in time periods of 1-2 years and certainly could not be 'tested' or 'confirmed' by field evidence. Nevertheless, the Resident Representative of UNDP was adamant that, as well as playing a role as enablers of organisational learning, we should also evaluate the role of the 'partnership' in fostering 'sustainable human development': a concept he defined by referring us to a jargon laden UNDP document outlining a series of 'principles' for 'sustainable human development' (UNDP, 1996). The key principles were detailed in an alarmingly wide ranging set of 14 objectives, stretching from 'promoting organisational forms that encourage people to realise their full potential' to 'reducing poverty and increasing equity'.

With these instructions in mind the project team met and developed a workplan. Given our concerns about evaluating the project's impact on 'sustainable human development' in the region we decided that we should concentrate our efforts on an evaluation of the 'partnership approach' itself. The principles of 'sustainable human development' included a number of objectives relating to development of institutional capacities (UNDP, 1996) and it was here that we decided to focus our attention. It was clear to us that the primary aim of our project was to facilitate learning among the partnership members (according to Resident Representative, 70% should focus on learning) and that traditional evaluation (for accountability purposes) would only play a small role in the project. As the UNDP Resident Representative was not only funding our project, but was himself one of the two major players in the partnerships, we sought his direct feedback on our proposed workplan.

Act Two: Unresolved conflict sends players back to the trenches

At first, our meeting with the Resident Representative of UNDP seemed to go fairly well. He was supportive of our approach, the use of participatory methods and the emphasis on learning. However, the meeting took an unexpected turn when we raised the issue of evaluating projects that were only in the initial stages of implementation.

We had thought that the Resident Representative may have been unhappy that our approach concentrated only on the 'capacity building' elements of UNDP's definition of 'sustainable human development' and that we would not be able to evaluate the impact of the projects on, for example, reducing rural poverty in the North East of Trinidad. As it turned out, the Resident Representative became extremely angry with us for daring to suggest that it was possible that the projects were not having a positive impact on all elements of 'sustainable human development'. The Resident Representative's perspective seemed to be that if the 'partnership approach' was 'working', then, by definition, it had to be fostering 'sustainable human development'. The meeting ended on a very angry note, with the Resident Representative instructing us to 'go and do the work and write-up the results'. From that point on it was clear that he had withdrawn his sponsorship of the project and that he just wanted us to get the project over with and submit a report.

A few days later we had another surprise. UNDP requested that one of the team members be replaced by somebody else with 'more experience of participatory methods'. The team refused to accept this request from UNDP, especially as the person they suggested be replaced was actually the most experienced PLA practitioner in the team (though he had not worked in Trinidad and Tobago before this project), and the person UNDP suggested as a replacement had no specific PLA experience (though wide work experience in Trinidad and Tobago). The team did, however, agree to add a fifth team member (not the person recommended by UNDP) who had wide fieldwork experience in Trinidad and Tobago.

These two incidents had a serious impact on team morale. We decided that we should simply go through the paces and carry out the planned participatory sessions in accordance with our workplan. At least then we could say we had done the project, submit a report and get paid.

Act Three: PLA as evasive action

Going through the motions was not always as easy as expected. It soon became apparent that the major partner NGO, or more specifically, the charismatic leader of the NGO, simply did not want us to be there. In initial meetings he re-iterated his opinion that there was 'nothing we could tell them that they did not already know'. We tried to explain that our role was to facilitate reflection and learning, so as to further develop the partnership and distil lessons for others. This message did not seem to be heard by the leader of the NGO. Throughout the project, the leader of the NGO, and his closest collaborator/sponsor within UNDP, attempted to alter our workplan and to disrupt the process through both subtle and not so subtle means. The tensions between the project team and the NGO and UNDP were played out in the familiar realms of 'insider and outsider' and of class, generation, gender and race.

Despite all of these problems we pressed ahead and, with much difficulty, we managed to hold meetings with a number of different groups who had been formed around specific projects, as well as with the National Steering Committee of the GEF Small Grants Programme and other NGOs in the area. In these group sessions we used the 'basket of PRA techniques' we had brought along with us, including Venn diagrams, timelines, participatory mapping, ranking exercises and other familiar participatory tools.

The sessions themselves went well and project team members felt comfortable in the familiar PLA environment. Participants in the sessions produced a series of posters capturing the issues discussed in the group meetings and we had some output on which to base a report. This initial report was circulated prior to a second meeting of all the 'stakeholders'. At this second meeting, which was attended by all stakeholders expect UNDP and senior management of the partnerships NGOs, all the posters from the various sessions were put upon on the walls of a local school and their contents discussed by all the participants. This meeting produced a further set of posters, which formed the basis of our findings and recommendations in a final report.

Despite all the difficulties, we had got through the process and produced some tangible outputs. Even more encouraging was the positive evaluation we received in a final feedback questionnaire from workshop participants. It confirmed that we had achieved a 'participatory' evaluation in which those who were engaged learned.

Predictably, neither the UNDP, nor their partner NGOs, were happy with our final report. Despite the fact that we based our conclusions on the posters constructed in the final group meeting, we were told that our report painted too negative a picture of the major NGO and its work in the area. At a final meeting with UNDP, members of the GEF Small Grants Programme Steering Committee and representatives of senior management of the NGO, we were asked to 'massage' the data presented in the report to also reflect the views of the players who did not participate in the final workshop (i.e. UNDP and the senior management of the major NGO). The revised version was accepted without further comment and we suspect that it has now found a secure space alongside other scripts on UNDP's shelves.

Epilogue

We are confident that the play we describe here is familiar to other PLA practitioners and players in the development industry. Participatory methodologies are usually presented as a way of defusing conflict through the promotion of participation. However, the literature says little about the conditions under which learning that transforms relationships can be achieved. Learning for transformation needs to avoid the path of least resistance, which simply involves the acting out of well-rehearsed roles.

Practitioners of participatory approaches need to take a more realistic view of transformation: one that sees transformation not as a linear crisis free process, but one that allows for and indeed expects crisis and conflict in the journey of transformation. The major insight from our own experience is that, as PLA practitioners, we need to go beyond the confident handling of particular techniques and develop our specific capabilities to manage our role as facilitators and consultants. Only in this way will we be able to manage the process in a way that achieves the transformation potential that participatory methodologies hold.

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