Overview – participatory processes in the North

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Introduction

This special edition of PLA Notes focuses on participatory approaches and processes in the North. Historically, the majority of articles in this journal have primarily focused on participatory practice in the South or the so-called 'developing world' or on sectoral themes. So looking at Northern experiences per se is a new area for the *PLA Notes* series.

We believe this to be significant for several reasons.
• It seems that experiences from Southern participatory practice (in particular Participatory Rural Appraisal) are filtering back to Northern countries through returning ex-patriot development workers and cross-visits/exchanges with southern practitioners which encourage South-North learning.
• Beyond communication of particular approaches, there has been relatively little assessment of innovations, experiences and impacts in Northern practice in order to encourage more debate in the North on the value of participatory processes.
• Northern development agencies working in the South (and in particular their ex-patriot Northern staff) are often de-linked from practice in their home countries, yet they are adopting participatory approaches in their work in the South. This is an area where they should derive some moral legitimacy. For example, a returning field worker may have a wealth of experience in participatory methodologies in the Southern context, but may not have any experience in his/her own country in the North.

> **Box 1 The 'North' and the 'South'**
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> It is important to consider what we mean by the 'North'. The terms North and South have been widely adopted within development language but as with other alternatives for describing the developed and the developing worlds, these are not without imperfection. However, for the purposes of *PLA Notes*, we adopt the definition of Northern countries being those within the OECD group, thereby those most industrialised nations [1].

Within the majority of Northern countries, people benefit from established and solid governments, a long history of welfare states and generally successful democratic structures in governance. For the majority, economic living standards and social welfare are good but poverty remains – the so-called 'South in the North'.

Sadly such deprivation may also be increasing. For example, research from the UK Treasury show that the number of children in relative poverty in the UK has trebled in the past three decades[2]. It is also now recognised that poverty does not solely exist in economic terms – but also in terms of social exclusion. This is not just about the lack of money but also about the lack of engagement in societal processes and ultimately, the lack of mechanisms to facilitate such engagement. People may well have access to financial state benefits, for example, but they are still excluded from decision making at different levels (especially for certain groups such as ethnic minorities and refugees) which have direct influence on their lives. Whilst national or regional elections occur once every four or five years, the globalisation of economies are further eroding the control of people on aspects of their own lives.

The transfer and spread of participatory processes

Participatory approaches to development in the North are certainly not new and have been rooted in the development of adult education as an emancipatory tool since the late 19th century:

> *'Indeed, social purpose adult education has a long and distinguished history of involvement in civil society from the work of the National Council of Labour Colleges and the Workers' Education Association in the UK, to that of the Highlander Centre and the Antigonish Movement in North America…to the Study Circles of Sweden and Denmark[3]'.*

The developing philosophies have been centred on the concept of learning from experience and an acknowledgement of the pluralist knowledge that results from individual experience and perspectives. But this has not developed in isolation. The influence of the Brazilian, Paulo Freire, has been enormous over the last twenty years; his work was framed within the context of poverty in the South and has been important in developing links and

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[1] Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development.
[2] UK Treasury. 2000. Quoted in http://news.bbc.co.uk/low/english/uk politics/newsid_512000/512761.stm
[3] Johnston, Rennie. 1998. *Adult learning in civil society - exploring roles for adult educators?* Paper presented at the 28th Annual SCUTREA Conference, Research, Teaching and Learning: making connections in the education of adults, University of Southampton, UK http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000000728.htm

solidarity between poverty in both North and South (see Box 2). PRA developed out of this philosophy of empowerment and the inherent ability and right of those in poverty to fully participate in fighting poverty and oppression. Most of the development of this approach has been in the South, and more recently it is being introduced into community development in the North to add a methodological voice to an existing strong philosophical foundation. Some examples of these have been documented in past issues of *PLA Notes* and have emerged particularly in the health sector (for example, see Batchelor, Kim. *Introducing participatory methods to HIV prevention workers in the Southwest United States. PLA Notes* 37: February 2000. pp.81-82).

Over the last few years, participatory approaches have certainly been increasingly used in the more affluent Northern countries and this has occurred for a variety of reasons.
- Across much of the North, centre-right governments that dominated during the 1980s and 1990s have been replaced with centrist and social democratic-orientated governments with more pluralistic rhetoric and programmes.
- As Helen Poulsen (personal communication) states, *"Furthermore, the political and economic crises of the contemporary welfare state, increasing inequality in the North, combined with the 'rolling back of the state' makes bottom-up, participatory, community-focused approaches from the South seem increasingly relevant.[4]"*
- Combined with frequent failures of previous approaches to community development and anti-poverty measures,

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[4] Helen Poulsen, Cambridge Education Consultants, Demeter House, Station Road, Cambridge CB1 2RS, UK. Email: hp2@mm-camb.mottmac.com
[5] Warburton, Diane, 1997. Participatory Action in the Countryside: A literature review. Countryside Commission, Cheltenham, UK. 57pp. p.51.

the continuing disempowerment and poverty of many marginalised groups within communities has prompted many groups to re-think the way they work.

In many countries, local and regional government is opening up its policy apparatus with the increasingly fashionable 'stakeholder involvement' and is working more in collaboration with the community/voluntary sector. Many of these programmes are seeking to tackle the multiple causes of social and economic decline through more 'bottom-up' approaches and increasingly involve communities and the voluntary sector in government-led programmes. As a result, catch phrases such as *empowerment, participation, social inclusion and exclusion* are growing in popularity in policy formulation.

But, it would appear that there is only a limited amount of practical information and skills available on participatory development in many countries. Participation *"…has become mainstream in principle but not universal in practice"* as concluded one recent study of the UK[5]. Where practice has become more participatory, one of the key questions remains as to whether these processes are bringing substantial improvements to the lives of local people?

Major issues arising in the articles

The eighteen articles in this themed section come from many Northern countries and illustrate the range of sectors in which participatory approaches have been used. Some describe 'classic' participatory tools and techniques (see Foss & Aune and Ross & Coleman, this issue), others describe other processes taken directly from southern practice and tested in a northern context (see Lopez and Dart, this issue). Chakoian's article will bring instant recognition to anyone working in natural resource management in the South and adopting a farmer-to-farmer approach in their work. Examples of participatory evaluation are also included (see Foss & Aune and Eckman et al., this issue). A number of the articles address the issue of community planning processes (Harper, Naylor et al. and Gillespie et al., this issue). Walker and Cavanagh describe reflective methodologies and both Gant and Garthwaite outline the combination of community arts and video as empowering techniques that enable communities (either of interest or neighbourhood) to express their needs and ideas (this issue).

Many of these examples illustrate new approaches to using participatory techniques; others highlight the intense similarities and parallels between development work in the South and North.

- **PLA being used by excluded people.** One of the criticisms of PLA methodologies is often in the way that it is used; control *can* be very much in the hands of the facilitators or practitioners. The articles by Nicholls & Watson, and Ross & Coleman (this issue) provide very powerful illustrations of how two groups of extremely

excluded people, mental health service users and teenagers, used PLA to reflect, analyse and propose solutions and begin to make those happen. Both these groups are frequently considered incapable of making personal decisions, let alone decisions to do with service provision or their communities. They note, as do Garett & Stokes and Foss & Aune, working with drug addicts, how self esteem and confidence amongst community members involved have improved considerably through being able to engage with decision makers – not only being 'heard' but also engaged in dialogue.

- **Change in practice.** The process of empowerment described above is not limited to the most excluded. Foss & Aune and Dart describe the use of participative techniques in evaluating projects and programmes and show that the impact of these approaches is not just a relevant and effective evaluation, but also a change in motivation, with a notable gain in confidence of those involved, along with a greater understanding of what they are involved with as professionals.

- **Time.** One of the many lessons from development work in the South is the need for time – and this seems to be no different in the North. Hosaka's description of participatory urban development in Japan (this issue) details a process that took many years and considerable commitment from the professionals concerned so much so that they moved in and lived in the project area themselves.

- **Balancing action with process**. Given all that has been said about cynicism with decision makers and the time needed to see a development process really establish itself, it is important to develop trust and respect between partners and actors within the process. As Naylor et al. describe, it is important to balance the need for short-term action in response to a perceived need with developing a long-term and sustainable process. Much of the regeneration work to date has seemed superficial to many residents and communities and they look for long-term commitment from partners. However, the opposite of this is the need to avoid quick solutions to a problem, when very often communities want to see some sort of tangible outcome in the short-term.

- **Values.** The example from Japan (Hosaka) and the article by Gillespie et al. in Scotland illustrates the use of traditional and cultural values in development work. They have developed on what is there and what is strong and positive within a culture, as well as going outside the professional sectoral boundaries that often restrict looking at problems to merely dealing with the symptoms.

- **Community strengths**. Likewise, using what is positive and good within a community, such as the Neighbourhood Treasures in Ross & Coleman. and the emphasis on the skills and values of immigrant women in Calgary in the paper by Lopez reinforces the capacity and confidence of the community to become involved in their own development.

- **Ownership and expression of the community vision and people's views.** It is often assumed that, due to the developed nature of Northern countries, people are well-informed. However due to exclusionary forms of communication (consultancy reports are a typical example of this), marginalised groups and individuals often find it hard to access information regarding on-going processes. Likewise, the outputs of grassroots participatory processes are often difficult to articulate with other groups.

This has been highlighted in a number of the articles; basically trying to avoid the 'another report for that dusty shelf' syndrome. Gant talks of Community Arts techniques creating a product that the community recognises as its own. The use of video by Garthwaite and stories with Australian farmers and extension officers (Dart) are other examples of this. This work builds on a heritage of participatory communications in the North, for example, see the participatory communications initiatives in Fogo Island, Newfoundland, Canada from 1967 onwards and the present day initiatives in Newfoundland[6].

Many of the articles in this issue are also attempting to use modern information technology to overcome these barriers. At first this may not seem appropriate, but for some members of society it may be an accessible route into the process. Reports in the British press recently indicated that for many Muslim women, the Internet was opening up their access to information from their own homes. In Northern Ireland, Naylor et al. describe a rural scene with isolated farm households where the Internet has also opened up their access to information. It is not obviously accessible to all, but it has potential as one of many different ways to inform people and enable them to participate in decision-making debates.

- **Diversity.** One of the criticisms of the 'quick fix' solutions to participative approaches is that they are not truly representative and how do they provide access for the unheard voice? This is addressed in the article by Gillespie et al. in remote rural Scotland: taking a bus out to remote areas to provide feedback to communities, holding meetings, but also telephoning people, putting notices in the post to all households, knocking on doors etc. Similarly in Walsall, UK, Gant describes talking to people in the street, in shopping centres and in bars. This is equally as important and difficult to do in an Indian village as it is in an inner city area in Europe and requires exactly the same commitment to ensure that 'the silent' are heard.

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[6] See http://www.nf.sympatico.ca/ryakuga/history.html , http://www.snowden.org/fogo.cfm and http://www.web.apc.org/~ryakuga/ryakuga.html for further information.

- **'Developmental tourism'**. People in deprived areas in the North talk about the 'shiny cars' in their estates that come in during the day and leave by evening. This situation is no different to the set of biases that PRA practitioners try avoid in the South, whereby the project and government Land Rovers whistle in to a village and whistle out a few hours later, the professionals within returning to their own reality and carrying with them their own set of perceptions and prejudices.

- **New applications**. The articles in this issue illustrate the huge scope that PLA methodologies have, from personal through to community development. The experience of the WALKWAYS project in Walsall (see Garratt & Stokes) is a fascinating therapeutic use of participatory techniques, facilitating the personal development of very troubled young people.

Eckman et al. outline the use of participatory approaches in health and safety issues in industry. This is a really interesting innovation and has huge potential for development in labour relations and safety issues in industry the world over. The use of participative processes in business and industry is developing under the 'creative management' banner, but many of the principles to participation are very similar.

Threats and opportunities
Moving beyond methods
The terms 'participative techniques' cover a wide range of different approaches in the Northern context and the definition of participation itself is very broad, as illustrated in the variety of methods presented in the articles of this special issue. Many of these techniques are 'rigid' almost prescriptive ways of carrying out an activity, like a formal dance. Planning for Real follows a procedure, Future Search the same and Citizen's Juries and Panels are also very structured in their approach. They are all pooled together under the banner 'participative' but are very different in content, approach, and in the manner and level of participation. In terms of criteria such as who participates, who sets the agenda, who uses the information generated and who takes the process forward, they differ considerably (see Harper this issue).

This is not a criticism of the techniques themselves, but the expectations that the word 'participative' creates amongst different actors. Politicians will say they have empowered communities through the use of these participative techniques; whilst the marginalised and excluded might be extremely cynical about that. The danger is that 'consultation fatigue' (Harper) sets in, and both sides will become cynical about all participative techniques as well as

the process and even maybe the reputation of those involved. The 'more of the same' that Harper refers to is not so much 'more of the same tools' but 'more of the same rhetoric'; people are consulted but do not see their views and opinions reflected in what actually happens.

The opportunity, of course, is to use all these techniques creatively and effectively, pulling together a range of different activities that engage with different communities and individuals in a way that is comfortable and accessible for those individuals. Some may prefer the formality of a set piece, others the informality of sitting in a local café carrying out a matrix ranking exercise of issues in their community, while their children play in the crèche nearby.

Capacity building and support systems
Given the politics of the North, there is a huge demand for a rapid change and this in turn has generated a huge demand for training that is extremely difficult to meet. As Inglis suggests in his paper, there are many trainers who have very little experience with PLA methodologies and they do not provide a very good service. Poorly trained practitioners provide a poor outcome and people will not try participatory approaches again after a disheartening experience. The question is, therefore, can that demand be met, especially at the moment, as the only training available is by a handful of consultants. Experience has shown elsewhere that one important contributing factor determining how practitioners use and develop PLA methodologies is the type of training that they received or indeed, the way they were first introduced to it[7]. It is important that there are networks of practitioners available to foster and facilitate learning and reflection so that people can develop their skills, and the tools can be developed appropriately for different sectors and areas.

An example of one such network is the Walsall PRA Network. Within the network itself, there are only three or four members who train, with both the experience of using PLA methodologies in many ways and the training skills and experience to facilitate good capacity building (Eleanor Chell[8], personal communication). The network provides those using participatory approaches in Walsall with a wide net of support and it is no accident that there are three articles from Walsall in this issue (Gant, Garett & Stokes, Nicholls & Watson). The Editors did question the inclusion of three articles from one town, but in addition to their being very different in content and interesting in their own right, they have added value because they illustrate the impact of the Network and how the way of working within statutory bodies is changing.

At one end of the diverse range of stakeholders are the statutory bodies' workers themselves. They are very important stakeholders in the equation and their impact on the process needs to be clearly understood. In Northern Ireland, Naylor et al. found it important to ensure that councillors and other decision-makers were not involved in many of the community meetings because they willingly or

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[7] 'Reflections on PRA and Participation in Kenya; feedback from the Pathways to Participation consultative meetings'; July 1999, IDS and Participatory Methodologies Forum of Kenya (PAMFORK).
[8] Eleanor Chell runs the Walsall PRA Network; she can be contacted at theelectricpalace@hotmail.com

otherwise tended to lead the discussion. Inglis emphasises the need to ensure that professionals and decision-makers are trained in new ways of working to ensure that they change policy and practice to facilitate active involvement of communities in decision-making processes.

From the margins to the mainstream

As participatory practices become more accepted by institutions, issues of scaling up and mainstreaming emerge. The challenge is how to develop processes that work at the local level that also feed into and engage in processes on a larger scale. Many of the articles attempt to tackle this in terms of facilitating the community in setting the agenda with statutory bodies. The challenges that face them are many; for example, how to ensure commitment to the process from all partners, how to engage the (often cynical) community, how to make the process on-going and sustainable etc.. They rightly stress the need for time, capacity building and the use of a range of appropriate participative tools. As Naylor et al. describe, it is beneficial to balance a few high profile, achievable and tangible outcomes in the short term with good quality capacity building and development of sound mechanisms for shared decision making in the long-term. Capacity building at both the community level and within the statutory organisations is important (see Inglis).

Seeking diversity

Another aspect of diversity is within the communities themselves or how they are defined. The articles in this issue feature a great many actors; farmers, young people, workers, women etc., each defining their issues and needs. We should not forget the power relations within communities themselves, which can be mediated by gender, for example (Helen Poulsen, personal communication) and, whilst this is often an issue addressed in work in the South[9], it is more seldom considered in the North. It seems, in the UK anyway, that despite three decades of equal opportunities legislation, the many government schemes to tackle poverty are still not gendered in either their analysis or strategic approach.

Participatory methodologies provide an ideal and suitable approach for this reason. In Caldwell's article (this issue), participatory appraisal techniques allow the men and women, boys and girls to articulate their views and ideas to each other in an open and non-judgemental process.

For this reason, PLA should provoke long-term dialogue and engagement, both between and inside communities and their support systems, and such approaches must not be seen as solely as a commodity to bought and implemented in a short period of time.

Conclusion

Ultimately, participatory approaches will be judged by their impact at different levels; on individuals, organisations and services and the environment. The authors have shown a variety of positive qualitative and quantitative impacts in using participatory processes and approaches both in the short-term and over a number of years. For this, approaches cannot be divorced from the context in which they are embedded.

We would like to end with an analogy; that of the regeneration of a particularly valuable tree, kiaat, which grows in the savannah woodlands of southern Africa. Because the timber is so valuable, the kiaat resource has been heavily depleted, but despite best efforts, it has proven almost impossible to replace lost trees with the usual forestry solution of tree planting and plantations. This is to do with the way kiaat regenerates in nature and its particular adaptations to the harsh, arid environment that it grows in.

Natural regeneration only seems to occur sporadically, and on investigation, it seems that as it needs a particular sequence and combination of conditions – no fire for about 10 years, sufficient rain for the first few years, good seed year, etc., and as these things only coincide once every 50 to 100 years, a window of opportunity for regeneration is only available during that interval. Some of these conditions can be managed – you can try and protect it from fire and disturbance for a few years, but others can't be, such as rainfall, for example. Good participatory processes are a little like this – you cannot regenerate it or create it with a technical fix (plantations) but can create conditions in which it can happen, be aware of the conditions that are operating and recognise and provide the necessary support when needed. However, as with so many organic processes, much is down to 'muck and magic'!

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[9] See for example, World Neighbors programme partners in Nepal. *Helping NGO staff (& then community groups) analyse reproductive health & gender issues.* In: *PLA Notes.* 37: February 2000. pp.31-37).