editorial

Welcome and news

Welcome to issue 47 of *PLA Notes*.

This issue is a 'general' one, allowing space for articles sent in by readers on a wide range of themes, contexts, and countries. We really value hearing about these rich experiences and the diversity of ways in which participatory approaches are being used, and would like to encourage more readers to write up their experiences and send them to us. Author guidelines are on the inside back cover of this issue and are also available on our website www.planotes.org, or email me and I'll send you a copy. We can offer editorial support and advice on request. Remember also that each issue of *PLA Notes*, even the themed ones, includes a selection of general articles so there is always a slot for interesting articles.

Before I come onto the articles in this issue, a quick update on what's new at *PLA Notes*.

Thanks to Holly

I'd like to start by giving a big thanks to Holly Ashley for minding *PLA Notes* whilst I've been on maternity leave (for the baby-minded, I had a beautiful daughter, Matilda). Holly finished off *PLA Notes* 44 on Local Government and edited issue 45 on Community-based Animal Health Care, and issue 46 on Participatory Processes for Policy Change. She has done a fantastic job on these issues, as well as overseeing the launch of the *PLA Notes* website. Her hard work has made my return to editing *PLA Notes* very straightforward and easy, and I'm pleased that she will continue to be a part of the PLA Notes team in the future (see below).

Goodbye to Cristina

Cristina Zorat, our Editorial Assistant for the past two years, left IIED in June. She has gone to work for a commercial company that develops and manages web sites for a range of clients, and will have the chance to acquire web design skills herself. Many of you who have written articles for *PLA Notes* will have communicated with Cristina, and will know that she was always calm, courteous and unflappable – despite the pressure of *PLA Notes* deadlines. She also did a fine job in supporting Holly whilst I was on maternity leave. We will all miss her at IIED. Holly will take over her role as Editorial Assistant, as well as continuing to oversee subscriptions and take the main responsibility for marketing *PLA Notes*.

Back issues on-line

Good news for those of you who want to access back issues of *PLA Notes* electronically – issues 1 to 40 of *PLA Notes* will soon be available on-line through the *PLA Notes* website. Go to the back issues pages, where you'll find a full list of contents for each issue and you'll then be able to click to a PDF of each article. You'll also be able to search for particular themes or subjects through the web site search engine. Unfortunately, we're not able to make the search function quite as sophisticated as we'd like. For better search facilities, the *PLA Notes* CD-ROM is still the best option, and that brings me to...

Free CD-ROM offer

Whilst stocks last, paying subscribers will receive a free copy of the *PLA Notes* CD-ROM if they take out a two-year subscription next time their subscription comes up for renewal. The CD-ROM is fully searchable, contains over 500 articles, and is a fantastic resource for practitioners, trainers, and researchers. New subscribers (paying and non-paying) who subscribe for two years will also receive a free copy of the CD-ROM, so pass on the subscription form in this issue to someone else who might be interested so that they can take advantage of this offer.

Forthcoming issues

We have been trying for some time now to plan our special theme issues well ahead and publish our plans in *PLA Notes*, giving you the chance to get in touch with us if you're interested in contributing. Below is a list of some of the themes we expect to cover over the next three years. If any of them are of special interest to you, or if you'd like to contribute to a particular issue, let us know. This will help us judge the level of interest in a theme issue in that area.

> **Box 1: Some themes for forthcoming issues**
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> - Poverty Reduction Strategy papers (PRSPs)
> - Learning participation: teaching and learning participation in higher education institutes
> - Community-based planning
> - Disability and participation
> - Linking rights and participation
> - Gender and participation
> - Older people and participation

In this issue

We start with a 'mini-theme' for this issue (reflected in our front cover): the generation of numbers through participatory approaches – and in particular aggregating and using those numbers beyond the community level, an area in which there is growing interest. As **Robert Chambers** points out in our opening article on participation and numbers ('parti numbers', as they are sometimes called), participatory

Triangulating the findings of a participatory exercise in Nepal
Credit: Nepal Water for Health (NEWAH)

methods have often produced numbers: what is different is finding ways of standardising the data so that it becomes possible to compare the findings and to aggregate the numbers for higher level planning and policy purposes. This raises questions of ethics, not least of which is whether using participatory methods in this way is necessarily 'extractive' or whether there can be something in it for communities. Chambers believes there is scope for learning and empowerment of communities – much depends on good practice, and he sets out his own shortlist for good professional practice. Unusually for *PLA Notes*, there is an extensive list of references accompanying this article, providing a rich variety of examples in this developing area of participation.

Leonie Postma, **Christine wan Wijk**, and **Corine Otte** describe an example of generating numbers from qualitative information using a standardised scoring system developed to assess the sustainability of community-managed water and sanitation projects. After working through a participatory assessment using tools such as social maps and welfare grouping, communities score themselves against a standard set of indicators. The indicators and scales are fixed so that the results can be analysed statistically. The scores produced can be used by the communities themselves to monitor their progress towards, for example, greater representation of women and the poor in decision making about water and sanitation, or greater equity in payments systems for water, but they are also useful at district and national level. If carried out as part of on-going work with communities, this approach can be a source of learning and empowerment for communities, as well as providing other decision makers with the numbers they need.

Sarah Levy writes from her experience in Malawi about the difficulty of using relative measures of poverty – which is the commonest approach in participatory wealth grouping and ranking – in projects and programmes that try to reach the poor. When communities come up with different categories and groupings, how can we know how the poorest in one village compare

with those in another, and whether or not we are reaching the poorest overall? In this case, researchers defined simple, meaningful indicators of poverty, which can be used in participatory work with villages, but allow the results to be compared across villages, and enable decision makers to judge to what extent projects and programmes are reaching the poorest. Levy emphasises that indicators must be carefully defined in discussions with communities, and are likely to be specific to different parts of a country. She also raises ethical considerations in relation to parti numbers, and points to the need to find ways of involving participants in the analysis and use of data generated at village level.

Generating quantitative data is also an important part of a methodology for participatory assessment and action developed by **Vicky Johnson** and **Robert Nurick**, in partnership with disadvantaged communities and statutory organisations (e.g. local government) in the UK. A key part of the approach is to develop coding systems which allow the characteristics of each participant or contributor to be coded according to locally relevant axes of difference, for example gender, age, relative wealth, and ethnicity, which are defined during the research process. This information is used to ensure that different groups' interests and views are represented, and reveals where there is agreement and disagreement between groups. It also provides quantitative information about the numbers and characteristics of those consulted, which gives the research outcomes credibility with decision makers, and meets statutory monitoring requirements. The

communities themselves make use of the data in their negotiations with local bodies over the implementation of action plans developed during the participatory process.

Sonia Blaney and **Marc Thibault** focus on a very different kind of project – trying to protect areas of tropical rainforest in Gabon, Central Africa. The team used participatory approaches in their work with communities to demarcate *terroirs villageois*, or buffer zones, around the forest. They then recorded geographic coordinates for the *terroirs*, which could be fed into a geographic information system (GIS) and used to monitor changes in the *terroirs*. In this case, the PRA work did not itself produce numbers, but was combined with other methodologies to produce quantitative information.

Robert Chambers raises the issue of maintaining quality, both methodologically and ethically, in participatory approaches intended to produce numbers. However, concerns about maintaining quality as PLA spreads are not confined to parti numbers, nor are these concerns new. Drawing on a recent project, Pathways to Participation, which asked practitioners to take stock of PRA and its current status, **Andrea Cornwall** and **Garett Pratt** highlight the very different understandings practitioners have of what good PRA practice is and – more fundamentally – what PRA is really about or for, and what makes it distinctive. Whilst for some PRA is about visual sharing of knowledge, views, and ideas, for others, PRA is a 'way of life' and its underlying values should influence every activity practitioners undertake. Given the broad range of views on what PRA is, they question whether it is

possible to agree what is meant by 'good' PRA and therefore to develop broadly applicable guidelines or codes of conduct for good PRA practice. They place greater emphasis on the importance of practitioners having opportunities to reflect critically on their experience and share those experiences with others, as a means to learn and continually improve their practice.

An example of such reflection comes from the **SEDAWOG team** (Socio-Economic Data Working Group), who describe some of the early misunderstandings they faced when starting up participatory monitoring of Lake Victoria fisheries. They describe honestly the errors they made in their initial contact with one community and the lessons learned from this, which were applied in subsequent work with communities. Whilst one might question whether the monitoring was truly 'participatory', the communities involved do seem to have benefited from contact with the researchers and gained the confidence to take action to manage the fisheries more effectively as a result of the monitoring.

A quite different participatory process is described by **Kenneth Storen**, **Nthabeleng Lephoto** and **Colleen Dunst**, writing about orphaned children in rural Lesotho whose parents have died of AIDS. The focus here is very much on empowerment. The authors describe how they worked with a group of these children, and their carers, in one village, to build the children's self-confidence and ability to support each other, as well as to act as a unified body in the community. The children gradually built up their own skills and the strength of the group, becoming increasingly independent

of the external faciliators. These children have since supported children in other villages in developing similar kinds of groups. As the full effects of HIV/AIDS are felt in Lesotho, these kinds of support networks will have an important role in supporting the growing number of orphans in rural communities.

We return to the issue of whether or not programmes are reaching the poorest in **Dipankar Datta** and **Iqbal Hossein**'s article which looks at the success of a Concern programme in Dimla, Bangladesh in reaching the poor. Their participatory research showed that the programme was more effective in reaching the poor than the extremely poor. It also looked in more detail at those classified as 'extremely poor' through well-being ranking and found that, within this category, there were groups with quite different characteristics and that one of the groups identified could not really be regarded as 'extremely poor'. The article goes on to discuss the way in which the extreme poor can be inadvertently excluded from programmes without a good understanding of their situation, and advocates a specifically targeted 'pro-extreme poor strategy'. This study also produced quantified information in the form of tables and percentages of households, but in this case it is not clear whether absolute or relative measures of poverty were used.

Almotalib Ibrahim, **Sara Pantuliano**, **John Plastow**, **Wolfgang Bayer**, and **Ann Waters-Bayers** describe a participatory evaluation of the Red Sea Hills Programme (RSHP), which is working with pastoralists in Sudan. The evaluation was a joint exercise, involving external reviewers, members of the RHSP, and the pastoralist communities themselves, and analysis and feedback was carried out at all three levels. Analysis by the village development committees of their organisational capacity was a particularly important part of the evaluation and led to much learning and action by the community to strengthen the capacity of these organisations to manage development activities.

Our last article in this issue, by **Rajiv Saxena** and **Subir Prahdan**, describes some innovative participatory tools specifically developed for evaluating training provided under a World Bank-funded project. The tools enabled extension staff to analyse their jobs in real depth, which the authors regard as an important first step in evaluating the relevance and effectiveness of training. The article goes on to look at ways in which the effectiveness of training can be assessed, and how the training might be improved to increase the amount of learning from the training.

Regular features
Tips for trainers this time comes from China. **Li Ou**, who works at the China Agricultural University, Beijing, draws on his experience of training in China to present 'tips' for conducting PRA training workshops. His feature provides some fascinating insights into the use of PRA in the Chinese context, where PRA is still very new, and we hope to have more from him in future issues.

There are no **RCPLA pages** in this issue of the *PLA Notes*. This is because the RCPLA is currently reviewing its objectives and membership. We hope to have a bumper RCPLA section in the next issue.

I hope you enjoy reading the articles in this issue as much as I have. Thanks to all the authors, especially Robert Chambers, Sarah Levy, Andrea Cornwall, Garett Pratt, Leonie Postma, Christine wan Wijk, and Corine Otte who produced articles at short notice. Special thanks go to John Thompson for his help with this issue and to Cristina Zorat for preparing the In Touch section before her departure.

Happy reading!

Angela Milligan, Editor

Correction
In the last issue of *PLA Notes*, we published an article by Giacomo Rambaldi and Le Van Lanh entitled, 'The seventh helper: the vertical dimension. Feedback from a training exercise in Vietnam'. Giacomo has asked us to point out that the views expressed in the article do not necessarily reflect those of the Asian Development Bank, where he has been working since September 2002. The web address for the ASEAN Regional Centre for Biodiversity Conservation, where Giacomo previously worked, is www.arcbc.org.ph