From rapid to reflective: 25 years of *Participatory Learning and Action*

by ROBERT CHAMBERS

In her Foreword to *PLA* 50 – *Critical reflections, future directions* – the first editor of the series, Jenny Rietbergen-McCracken, remembered its birth in a workshop held in IDS in 1988. At that time we were all excited by the evolution of RRA (rapid rural appraisal). She wrote:

… the idea of sharing notes from the field was discussed. The question was – who would coordinate, edit and disseminate an informal 'RRA' journal? All it took was an expectant raising of Gordon Conway's eyebrows, a quick nod of my head, and the Sustainable Agriculture team at IIED had taken you on!

At that time we had no idea of what we were starting or that *RRA Notes* would evolve into *PLA Notes* and then into *Participatory Learning and Action*. Nor could we have imagined the scale or scope of the contribution these would make. The list of titles speaks for itself (see Box 1 overleaf). The content has kept pace with the expanding range of participatory methodologies,

and has reported and disseminated innumerable innovations, and inspired adoption, adaptation and creativity in turn. The impact has been immense.

This is now a time for celebration and thanks to those who brought all this about: those who managed and edited these 66 issues – initially Jenny Rietbergen-McCracken and Jules Pretty; then Irene Guijt, John Thompson, Ian Scoones and Jules Pretty; then Joanne Abbott and Laura Greenwood; and finally Angela Milligan, Nicole Kenton and Holly Ashley, together with all the guest-editors of themed issues. This is, too, a time to recognise the vision and commitment of those in the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and Irish Aid, who realised the key role that the series could and did play in the evolution, diversification and spread of participatory approaches and methods and who have been champions in providing support. And thanks must go too to IIED for

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Box 1: List of *PLA* themed issues

66 Tools for supporting sustainable natural resource management and livelihoods

65 Biodiversity and culture: exploring community protocols, rights and consent

64 Young citizens: youth and participatory governance in Africa

63 How wide are the ripples? From local participation to international organisational learning

62 Wagging the dragon's tail: emerging practices in participatory poverty reduction in China

61 Tales of shit: community-led total sanitation in Africa

60 Community-based adaptation to climate change

59 Change at hand: Web 2.0 for development

58 Towards empowered participation: stories and reflections

57 Immersions: learning about poverty face-to-face

55 Practical tools for community conservation in southern Africa

54 Mapping for change: practice, technologies and communication

53 Tools for influencing power and policy

51 Civil society and poverty reduction

50 Critical reflections, future directions (double issue)

49 Decentralisation and community-based planning

48 Learning and teaching participation

47 Participatory numbers

46 Participatory processes for policy change

45 Community-based animal healthcare

44 Local government and participation

43 Advocacy and citizen participation

42 Children's participation – evaluating effectiveness

40 Deliberative democracy and citizen empowerment

39 Participatory communications

38 Participatory processes in the North

37 Sexual and reproductive health

35 Community water management

34 Learning from analysis

33 Understanding market opportunities

32 Participation, literacy and empowerment

31 Participatory monitoring and evaluation

30 Participation and fishing communities

29 Performance and participation

28 Methodological complementarity

27 Participation, policy and institutionalisation

25 Children's participation

24 Critical reflections from practice

23 Section on participatory approaches to HIV/AIDS programmes

21 Participatory tools and methods in urban areas

20 Livestock

19 Training

16 Applications for health

15 Applications of wealth ranking

13 Proceedings of the February 1991 Bangalore PRA trainers workshop

11 Proceedings of a local level adaptive planning workshop, London

7 Proceedings of second joint IDS/IIED RRA review workshop

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having provided a home for 25 years for such an outstanding journal. With all its issues now permanently accessible on the Internet, it will remain as a lasting jewel in the crown of IIED.[1]

Much from the past can and will continue to inform and inspire: the semi-structured, evolutionary interviews and conversations of RRA, so in tune now with the complexity concept of emergence; the versatility and power of the visualisation of agro-ecosystem analysis and then its empowering transformation in the group mapping and diagramming of PRA; the inclusive versatility and diversity of PLA as a broad umbrella term, hosting a cornucopia of participatory methodologies and their combinations.

Let us see this moment now as a fertile opportunity: a pause for breath, for rethinking, for seeing new needs and opportunities, and for visionary champions and funders to come forward. Let all who are committed to participatory approaches and methods be proactive to ensure that this hiatus in publication will be no more than a brief interlude. Let us make this a seminal period that will give birth to and nurture a reincarnation in a new and fitting form. For participatory innovations continue to proliferate. The needs are there. The niche is there, crying out to be filled.

Forming and framing this niche, much is new. Change is ever faster. Our digital age has opened up a wider range of participation:
• methodologically, with participatory

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[1] For a full list of back issues – all free to download online – visit: www.planotes.org

geographic information systems (PGIS),[2] mobile phones[3] and the like;
• creatively, with accelerating innovation in developing countries (as with M-Pesa and Ushahidi, both born in Kenya);[4][5] and
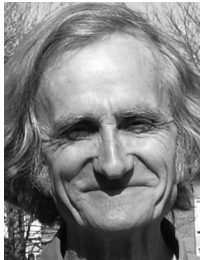• socially, through the connectivity increasingly of many poor people.

Complexity theory resonates with participation, and the two together promise countervailing alternatives to the excess of top-down targets and linear determinism which have increasingly dominated so much development practice.

In 1988, we were energised and enthralled by the sense that big things were happening and about to happen. Now in 2013, as change accelerates, we are swept along faster than ever we were 25 years ago. All over again, I have a similar sense of imminent innovation. More than ever we need learning and unlearning, and keeping in touch and up-to-date, not least with the realities of poor and marginalised people; and we need ways of communicating and sharing which fit our age.

Certainly, let us take this last issue of *PLA* as a cause for celebration of all that has gone before. Let us use this space for standing back, seeing where we are, what we have, and what we need. Let us be vigorous and creative in seeing what needs to be done and in making it happen. Let us see how we can follow *PLA* with new initiatives to realise more of the huge potential that participation and participatory methodologies have to make our world a better place. For the need and opportunity are not less – but more – than ever before.

CONTACT DETAILS

Robert Chambers
Research Associate
Participation Power and Social Change Team
Institute for Development Studies (IDS)
University of Sussex, UK
Email: R.Chambers@ids.ac.uk

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[2] See e.g. *PLA* 54 *Mapping for change: practice, technologies and communications* (Rambaldi *et al.*, 2006).
[3] See e.g. Samii (2009) in *PLA* 59 *Change at hand: Web 2.0 for development*.
[4] M-Pesa ('M' for mobile, *'pesa'* is Swahili for money) is a mobile-phone based money transfer and micro-financing service for Safaricom and Vodacom, the largest mobile network operators in Kenya and Tanzania.
[5] Ushahidi is a non-profit technology company that specialises in developing free and open source software for information collection, visualisation and interactive mapping. See: www.ushahidi.com and also Ory Okolloh's (2009) article in *PLA* 59 *Change at hand: Web 2.0 for development*.