

# Beyond RCPLA

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## Background

The RCPLA Network was established in 1997 to bring together a collection of organisations from around the world to promote participatory approaches for development.<sup>1</sup> The network aimed to enhance the exchange of knowledge and ideas between member organisations, and help promote effective participatory approaches in different contexts and in local languages. Each member of the network brought its own strengths, and the network was united in its desire to provide access to a variety of resources on participatory learning and action (PLA).

Since its creation, the RCPLA has helped to facilitate the development of ideas, organise workshops and seminars on PLA, provide training and assist with participatory research. This sharing of resources has encouraged the spread of participatory methods around the world and members have also influenced the

development and application of participatory methodologies on local, national and international levels.

## The Center for Development Services

The Center for Development Services (CDS) has been part of the network since its early days – representing the North Africa and Middle East region in the RCPLA Network steering group. CDS, or as it was originally called, the Learning Resource Centre, was established by the Near East Foundation (NEF) ([www.near-east.org](http://www.near-east.org)) in 1990 as a regional resource centre in Arabic-language development services as a result of the Local Development Practitioners Network implemented by NEF and partially funded by the Ford Foundation. CDS was established with the mission ‘to support people and organisations to realise their full potential and foster self-determined, self-sustaining change’.

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<sup>1</sup> The Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action (RCPLA Network) was established in 1997 by IIED with funding from the UK Department for International Development (DfID) and the UK National Lottery.



Photo: Milad Moawad

**A participatory community needs assessment, Sohag, Egypt.**

In 2006, CDS was registered under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in Cairo as an employee-owned (shareholding) company. The change in CDS's identity was sought to assure that the organisation was better able to prosper, grow and make a greater contribution to development in the region. The CDS philosophy continued to revolve around participation and towards linking participatory processes, tools and techniques into development practice.

From 2005 to 2009, CDS became the RCPLA Network coordinator. The coordination of the network rotated among steering group members (founding institutions) as the regional advocates and representatives of the network in different continents of the world. Each term of coordination lasts three years and selection was done by an election process held during the annual steering group meeting. During the board meeting held in Sri Lanka in August 2005, RCPLA members nominated Ali Mokhtar from CDS as the network coordinator. In this role, CDS expanded the network membership by arranging bilateral meetings with potential members who were interested in joining the network to

discuss how they could add value to and benefit from the network. CDS further developed the RCPLA website as a hub for information on participatory approaches. Different sections were added, such as cases studies and e-discussion sessions. Through the website, a series of e-discussions took place. The aim of these was to develop a communication network among participants. Every year the RCPLA e-forum hosted one or two discussions on different themes related to PLA. It served as a space to promote the e-discussions concept and attract new RCPLA participants. The themes for discussion were agreed with the steering committee and after each discussion RCPLA issued a synthesis report that was posted on the RCPLA webpage along with a list of other relevant reading.

A series of good practice case studies focusing on the power of participation was also developed and published on the RCPLA website. Additionally, the RCPLA published *Deepening participation for social change*.<sup>2</sup> This publication presents conceptual reflections on participation in development; analyses participation as an active process throughout the project cycle;

<sup>2</sup> See: [pubs.iied.org/G02726.html](http://pubs.iied.org/G02726.html)

Photo: Milad Moawad



Village mapping in Wadi El Saaida, Aswan, Egypt.

and identifies the challenges in deepening the use of participatory approaches. It also includes tips on how to monitor and evaluate the process of implementing participatory approaches. And in 2010, CDS facilitated the translation into Arabic of *PLA 60 Community-based adaptation to climate change*.<sup>3</sup>

### Beyond the RCPLA network

CDS has seen clear benefits of being part of the RCPLA network in terms of cross-regional exposure, South-South learning and the multiplier effect of learning from the experience gained by other practitioners. Over the years, the number of RCPLA members has increased, yet limited activities have been conducted over the past five years. In 2008–2009, an action plan was designed for the RCPLA Network, however no action was taken due to lack of funding. A network's success depends on its members' ability to interconnect, share

information and lessons learnt, and benefit from the experience and capabilities of each other. For many members, the benefits of being part of the network has been limited in the past few years and the RCPLA Network would not be the first network that collapses when funding stops and members do not see specific tangible benefits of being part of the network. As the network has not been active in the past five years the question is whether we can still speak of a 'way forward' or do we need to go beyond the RCPLA Network?

- Does the purpose of the network still stand or do we want to go beyond a network of resource centres and evolve to a network that benefits a large group of practitioners (for example a participatory practitioners' network).
- How can a network sustain itself beyond its initial funding, and what is the capacity (organisational, institutional, technical) of the member organisations

<sup>3</sup> See: [pubs.iied.org/G02730.html](https://pubs.iied.org/G02730.html)



Photo: Milad Moawad

**Village mapping in Wadi El Saaida, Aswan, Egypt.**

which could be mobilised to strengthen and drive this network? Would it be possible to link the network and its objects and actions to specific projects that are already implemented by the member organisations?

Thoughts of one way forward have been inspired by the model of the Pelican Initiative<sup>4</sup> (see In Touch, this issue). This is a diverse and active network and could provide ideas of how the RCPLA network might potentially evolve.

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<sup>4</sup> See: [dgroups.org/groups/pelican](http://dgroups.org/groups/pelican)