

RCPLA NETWORK

In 1995, in response to the tremendous demand for ideas and information on participatory learning and action approaches generated, in part, by *Participatory Learning and Action* and its collaborative research and capacity strengthening activities, IIED established a resource centre to acquire and disseminate information on participation worldwide. It developed strong relationships with other resource centres, both South and North, and in 1997, the Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action (RCPLA) Network was formally established with 15 member organisations, with Tom Thomas of Praxis India as the convenor.

The original aim of this global network was to bring together, organise, synthesise and distribute information on participatory approaches in appropriate formats and languages and to exchange ideas, information and knowledge between members in order to promote more effective participatory learning and action at local, regional and international levels.

IIED and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) played fundamental roles in supporting the development of the RCPLA Network. IDS now hosts the Participation Resource Centre and in 2005, Ali Mokhtar of the Center for Development Services (CDS) was voted by network members as the next convenor.

More recently, funding challenges have meant that the network has been less active over the last few years. This section gives some thoughts from both Tom Thomas and from colleagues at CDS about ways forward for the network.

RCPLA and *PLA*: two sides of the same coin

by TOM THOMAS

The Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action (RCPLA) Network and *PLA* have been like two sides of the same coin – one practicing and researching, and the other documenting and reflecting on the action and research. The combination gave an apt institutional expression to the Freirian notion of Praxis. An attempt at building knowledge *a posteriori*, this combination was the pride of practitioners and a humbling learning for the academic. The *PLA* team worked zealously on the daunting task of turning passionate practitioners with an aversion to writing into published development writers and the result is evident in the 66 editions of *PLA*. The RCPLA team for its part continued its efforts at networking field practitioners from around the world to deepen both the theory and practice of participatory approaches. In a significant move, just a few years after its formation, RCPLA devolved its leadership to southern partners – Praxis India being the first southern secretariat and subsequently the

Centre for Development Services (CDS) in Egypt. This move gave additional impetus to the southern focus and built more south-south exchanges and dialogues. The southern writeshops saw the compilation of many critical southern experiences ranging from grassroots democracy to community radio.

PLA has completed 25 years and RCPLA's journey has been with it for over 15 years. One wonders whether in these two decades, has the world become participatory and are RCPLA and *PLA* now irrelevant? Far from it. Though every top-down and patriarchal institution has imbibed the lingo/jargon of 'participation', there is scant regard for its purpose. There is an urgent need to deepen participation at all levels if we are not to lose the gains of over two decades of learning together with communities.

I would like to see the current evaluation of the *PLA* series find a way for the continuation of *PLA* (as well as RCPLA). It is an opportunity to take a pause and recast *PLA* and RCPLA with

more vigour and purpose, both in form and content, to continue the true praxis of development practitioners and thinkers.

Salute to the entire *PLA* team of 25 years.

Until *PLA* 67,

Tom Thomas

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Beyond RCPLA

by LISA VAN DIJK and PASSINTE ISAAK

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.¹ 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) 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’.

¹ 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*.² This publication presents conceptual reflections on participation in development; analyses participation as an active process throughout the project cycle;

² See: 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*.³

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

³ See: 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 Initiative⁴ (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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⁴ See: dgroups.org/groups/pelican

RCPLA Network

News from the Participation, Power and Social Change Team (PPSC) at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS)

Participate

Participate, coordinated by IDS and Beyond 2015, is a global research initiative which focuses on the experiences of those living in greatest poverty. It brings together participatory research programmes in more than 40 countries, and connects the unfiltered voices of those most affected by poverty with UN and intergovernmental deliberations. Participate is filling a crucial gap in the current policy context, providing high quality evidence on the reality of poverty at ground level, bringing the perspectives of the poorest into the post-2015 debate. The Centre for Development Services (CDS), Cairo and Praxis in India are also members of the initiative.

To date, Participate has drawn out key lessons from existing participatory studies and global consultations;

provided methodological support to a network of organisations and 18 participatory research projects which are currently ongoing; developed a major programme of research using participatory visual methods; and engaged in international advocacy activities to ensure that knowledge from the margins is included in post-2015 policy-making.

In the second half of this year, Participate will produce a documentary of the research process, a synthesis of the findings from 18 research projects, and organise ground-level panels (to mirror the UN high-level panels on the post-2015 development agenda) in India, Uganda, Brazil and Egypt (see the update from Praxis below). It is also creating an exhibition of the synthesis and a collage of multimedia outputs from the research as a space for engagement at the UN General Assembly in September 2013. A series of reflections and methodology pieces will be produced, continuing ongoing efforts to ensure that

participatory research and knowledge from the margins is embedded in global policy-making.

■ To find out more, please visit: www.participate2015.org or email: participate@ids.ac.uk

The Big Push Forward

The Big Push Forward provides space for discussion, debate and the exploration of appropriate approaches for assessing transformative development processes. Evidenced-based results, rigorous data, conclusive proof and value for money are terms promising clarity about what works and what should be funded in international development. For some donors, certain ways of knowing and assessing impact are considered more legitimate than others. Yet increasingly people are recognising the need for multiple and mixed methods and approaches to better understand complex change and that, compared to imposed standards, are more likely to lead to fair assessments to support a fairer world.

The PPSC team at IDS, Praxis and CDS are all members of the Big Push Forward – an informal international network of practitioners seeking constructive ways to advance conceptually and methodologically international development aid's support of a fairer world, beyond the narrow bureaucratic protocols that assume guaranteed predictable outcomes.

Rosalind Eyben, a fellow at IDS and member of the PPSC team, is one of the co-convenors of the Big Push Forward. See the In Touch section of this issue of *PLA* for more information on the conference on The Politics of Evidence held at IDS in April 2013.

■ For more information on The Big Push Forward visit: bigpushforward.net

Other news from the PPSC

There has been a great deal going on in the PPSC team in recent months. In

addition to the Participate and Big Push Forward initiatives, they have been involved in a variety of projects, publications and events. Accountability may seem like an obvious part of the relationship between a state and its citizens yet accountability mechanisms are often weak or absent. Working with HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, they have been undertaking a multi-country study which aims to gain insights into accountability and its contribution to development and local democratic governance.

■ See: IDS Working Paper 422 *Local accountabilities in fragile contexts: experiences from Nepal, Bangladesh and Mozambique*. Available online (350kb): www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/Wp422.pdf

Rosalind Eyben has been looking at how unpaid care work across the world is rarely acknowledged within development agendas, and investigating how to get this important aspect of peoples' lives included in development policy and programmes.

■ See IDS Policy Briefing Issue 31: *Getting unpaid care onto development agendas*. Available online (1mb): www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/IFPB31.pdf

The PPSC team recently launched a new book which explores how people can, and are, using participatory methods to create their own statistics and influence policy. *Who counts? The power of participatory statistics* is published by Practical Action (see our In Touch section for a review and more details).

In addition, Zed Books have just published *Organizing women workers in the informal economy: beyond the weapons of the weak*, edited by Naila Kabeer, Ratna Sudarshan and Kirsty Milward, as part of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Consortium. This is the first in a Zed Books series on feminism and development.

Since 2009 we have been working with Oxfam on tracking the social

impacts of economic crises. This project has just produced a report called *Squeezed: life in a time of food price volatility, year 1 results*.

■ Available online: policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/squeezed-life-in-a-time-of-food-price-volatility-year-1-results-292412

New website

Supported by the Swiss Development Corporation, the PPSC have set up a new website on participatory methods at www.participatorymethods.org. Focusing on participatory approaches to strategic analysis, programme design, monitoring and evaluation, it also includes resources on participatory learning, research and communication in organisations, networks and communities. The Participation Resource Centre is included in the site – many of the resources are electronic and others can be sourced by emailing: ppsc@ids.ac.uk. The centre also continues to operate as a physical space at IDS where visitors are very welcome.

The PPSC blog goes from strength to strength: recent postings have discussed the lack of accountability in the garment industry following the tragic collapse of the factory in Dhaka, how communication in development, particularly using images, can worsen a charitable ‘us and them’ mentality within richer countries, and how men are risking their lives for gender justice. Read more online:

participationpower.wordpress.com

■ For further information about any of the above, or if you wish to visit the Resource Centre please email ppsc@ids.ac.uk or call +44 1273 915879.

Update from the Centre for Development Services (CDS), Cairo

As mentioned above, CDS is part of the IDS Beyond 2015 Participatory Research Group, a consortium of organisations who are working to coordinate and strengthen participatory research projects

which engage people living in poverty directly in the post-2015 debate. The group aims to draw local initiatives together to produce rich, in-depth qualitative evidence, co-produced with people living in poverty, on what their priorities are, what they see as pressing development needs, and what they might need from a post-2015 framework. CDS bring into this group its extensive participatory research on youth in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

■ For more information on CDS activities visit: www.cds-mena.com



Update from Praxis India

Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices is a not-for-profit organisation committed to mainstreaming the voices of the poor and marginalised sections of society in the process of development. Based in New Delhi, with branches in Chennai, Patna, Hyderabad and London, Praxis works to promote participatory practices in all spheres of human development. Praxis carries out research and consultancies, and also engages in several self-funded initiatives to further the cause of development.

TheWorkshop2013

Praxis will be hosting its 17th Annual Commune on Participatory Development from 21st–28th October 2013 in Thrissur, in the southern Indian state of Kerala. This year's format offers participants the opportunity to learn about participatory methods and attend modules to see how these approaches work in different contexts. The thematic application modules on offer this year include: project cycle management; public accountability; participatory

The Workshop 2013

17th Praxis Annual Commune on Participatory Development

communication; participatory monitoring and evaluation (with a focus on sustainability); campaigning, advocacy and networking; and community mobilisation.

■ For more information visit: www.theworkshop.in or email Praxis at: info@theworkshop.in

Ground-level panels

As part of the Participate global initiative, Praxis hosted a ground-level panel, integrating voices of poor and marginalised people in India with recommendations on development policies. The panel was made up of 14 people who experienced poverty and exclusion in their day-to-day lives. This panel deliberated on the recommendations of the United Nations high-level panel on 14th–18th July 2013 and their report was shared at an event attended by representatives of civil

society, the media and government bodies. The panellists were not members of any government, private or non-governmental organisations or associated with any political parties or trade unions. Instead, they drew on their own experiences of marginalisation and exclusion to provide a ‘ground-level’ reality check to the high-level panel. Read the ground-level panel report online: www.praxisindia.org/?q=node/245

Recommendations made by a ground-level panel of 14 people from poor and marginalised communities from across India echoed demand more generally for a corruption-free society and a state that focuses on removing barriers rather than just handing out benefits. The recent mood in the country seemed to find resonance at a meeting hosted by Praxis in July 2013 called Voice for Change: A Post-2015 Development Agenda by People Living in Poverty.

The panel included *dalits*, tribal people, religious and sexual minorities, differently-abled people, children and the elderly. The panel met in Delhi to



Photo: Praxis

The ground-level panel's exhibit at the Voice for Change meeting.

Photo: Praxis



Ground-level panel participants collectively reviewed the recommendations and agreed 15 overarching action-oriented goals.

deliberate on the United Nations high-level panel recommendations for the post-2015 development agenda. The panellists, who experience poverty daily, used a participatory process to collectively review the recommendations, agreeing 15 overarching action-oriented goals:

- establishing a corruption-free state and society;
- promoting equity;
- establishing robust accountability mechanisms;
- providing identities instead of goals;
- creating institutional spaces to promote people's participation in local governance and policy-making processes;
- an end to stigma and discrimination;
- abolishing traditions that uphold discrimination;
- creating stringent restrictions on the sale and promotion of alcohol and other addictive substances;
- facilitating collectivisation, awareness and sensitisation of citizens;
- promoting a safe and secure home environment;

- promoting the interests of agricultural labourers, poor farmers, peasants, tribal peoples and slum dwellers and their rights;
- protecting the environment;
- enforcing mechanisms to prevent tax evasion by corporations;
- creating and rigidly implementing systems that protect workers' rights; and
- promoting gender equality and safety in public spaces.

As Raghunath Sada, a panel member from Dabhang district of Bihar said:

Promises of food, housing, health, employment and education have been repeated in different forms since the 1950s. We want action now. We want goals to be written in such a way that they address all barriers that prevent the realisation of these promises.

The panel also stressed the need to include a ban on nuclear armaments and to address the domination of the United States in the United Nations.

The panel shared its recommendations with social activist Ms Aruna Roy,

planning commission member Dr Syeda Hameed and seasoned journalist Mr Vinod Mehta. Dr Hameed said she would raise some of these issues when the planning commission next met on discussions of the post-2015 development agenda.

To commemorate the event, a postage stamp was released and two books documenting the narratives of sexual minorities, sex workers and poor people living in cities was released. The Voice for Change series includes two titles: *Collective action for safe spaces by sexual minorities and sex workers* and *Citymakers seeking to reclaim cities they build*. These books document the experiences of marginalised groups and their struggle for an inclusive development process.

■ For more information on the ground-level panels, please contact Anusha at Praxis. Tel: +91 997 1116536 Email: anushac@praxisindia.org

Beyond 2015

As mentioned earlier, Praxis is part of the Participate initiative, which enables voices from the margins to be heard by policymakers and sector experts working on the post-2015 development agenda. Praxis facilitated participatory video processes with sexual minorities and urban poor groups in Tamil Nadu. The

participants debated on the development framework that should replace the millennium development goals in 2015.

■ Watch the film online:
youtu.be/O-oMKwKIX38

To request a copy email: communications@praxisindia.org

Participatory disaster management planning Praxis helped to formulate a district disaster management plan, working with the District Disaster Management Authority in Bihar, India. Praxis mapped 18 diverse indicators across 1248 villages in Samastipur district, using an open-source GIS platforms. The most significant aspect was that the plan, unlike other disaster management plans, focused mainly on 'disaster risk reduction' and 'preparedness' elements. Instead of planning post-crisis interventions in the wake of disasters, the project sought to prepare 19 line departments and agencies to pre-empt potential threats posed by disasters. It customised existing government departmental allocations to creative uses for dealing with disasters, without requiring any extra budget.

Development of self-administrable tools for measuring vulnerability reduction

Praxis is associated with a programme for measuring community mobilisation among female sex workers, men having sex with men, transgender people and injecting drug users in six Indian states (Nagaland, Manipur, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu). The aim is to enable an effective transition of the HIV/AIDS intervention programme from donors to the state and the communities themselves. The design was evolved with comprehensive inputs from members of these communities. Data collection and analysis for the final year has been completed.

As a logical progression from the community mobilisation monitoring study, Praxis created a set of self-administrable



Participate

Knowledge from the margins for post-2015

tools to monitor community mobilisation with sustainability as its goal. The self-administrable tools were piloted at community-based organisations in Tamil Nadu. The tools are meant to guide an organisation towards self-sustainability under the different parameters of leadership, governance, resource mobilisation, project cycle management, networking, financial and legal risk management, provision of rights and entitlements and engagement with society.

The toolbox is called *From beneficiaries to agents of change – self-administrable tools to assess community preparedness for vulnerability reduction*. Download online: www.praxisindia.org/?q=books

■ For more information about Praxis and its work, visit: www.praxisindia.org
The Praxis YouTube channel includes videos of previous workshops as well as other films made by Praxis:
www.youtube.com/PraxisIndia


Updates from IIED

Smallholder innovation and traditional knowledge






The Agroecology Team at IIED and partners are collaborating on a project to strengthen biocultural innovation for food security in the face of climate change. In October 2012, a planning and methodology workshop was held in China to launch the Smallholder Innovation for Resilience (SIFOR) project. This brought together the research partners – the Centre for Chinese Agricultural Policy (CCAP, China), Asociacion ANDES (Peru), Lok Chetna Manch (India), Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI, Kenya) and IIED (UK).

The goal of this five-year project, funded by the European Union and UK aid, is to improve food security and resilience by enabling smallholder innovation and traditional knowledge systems to thrive in developing countries.

SMALLHOLDER INNOVATION FOR RESILIENCE (SIFOR)



A five-year project to strengthen biocultural innovation for food security in the face of climate change.

Project partners

The project will conduct research with traditional farmers in areas of significant crop diversity: potatoes in the Andean Potato Park, Peru; maize and rice in the Karst mountains of southwest China; rice and millets in the Himalayas, India; and indigenous vegetables in coastal Kenya. It will generate new evidence of the role of local landraces and traditional knowledge in adaptation to climate change; develop practical approaches and tools to strengthen local innovation systems and rights; and promote more enabling policies to support smallholder innovation. The project will revitalise biocultural innovation for adaptation and food security through participatory action research, including: the development of seed registers, value addition and novel products; strengthening farmer organisations; and participatory plant breeding (PPB).

■ For more information, download the project information: pubs.iied.org/G03557.html or contact Krystyna Swiderska: krystyna.swiderska@iied.org

New blog series: In Our World

IIED has launched a new blog series called In Our World. Each week, we publish links to top content about environment and development that we have seen online in the past few days.

Here are recent editions:

In Our World, 30th August (cities, ecosystem services, food, forests and more) www.iied.org/our-world-30-august-cities-ecosystem-services-food-forests-more

In Our World, 23rd August 2013 (land, climate, cities, forests and more) www.iied.org/our-world-23-august-land-climate-cities-forests-more

In Our World, 16th August 2013 (natural resources, cities, business and more) www.iied.org/our-world-16-august-natural-resources-cities-energy-business-more

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