

**Mapping for change: practice, technologies and communication**

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Giacomo Rambaldi, and his fellow guest editors - together with the series editor, Holly Ashley - have an achievement to be proud of in this latest PLA publication. Not only is the issue carefully constructed – from what must have been a mound of competing material from the September 2005 conference in Nairobi– but they have achieved this feat in a remarkably short turn-around time. *Mapping for change: practice, technologies and communication* provides, basically, an overview of the state of the art regarding the practice of PGIS. “What is PGIS?” You may ask. It is, put simply, the merger between geographical information systems and participatory mapping. I say put simply, because we are told in the opening chapter that PGIS has not *always* been digital, and GIS is not the *only* technology that underpins PGIS. But that is something the reader needs to find out for him or herself. And he or she will find it an eye-opener.

With respect to mapping, the 1990s was a decade of paradoxes. On the one hand digital mapping (based on GIS) and global positioning systems (GPS) were making huge differences in terms of computerised precision. On the other hand participatory approaches to mapping were abandoning the time-honoured and scientific concept of ‘accuracy’ in favour of local expression, and enhancing ownership of space and resources. Each of these apparently competing schools recruited its practitioners and supporters – and a chasm divided the two. This publication shows how (astonishingly to many of us), the keyboard and the mouse can be reconciled with the stick and the dust. What’s more, value can be added to each approach. But as we learn, this unlikely marriage comes at a cost: the first is the demand on human capacity and the second is to do with the potential minefield of ethics and good practice.

The booklet opens with an overview of the topic, written by the team of guest editors. They lay out their stall at the beginning by their description of the 154 people who attended the conference: “*what unites these practitioners is their belief that PGIS can have profound implications for marginalised groups in society*”. After explaining the concept of PGIS the editorial takes us on a trip to the conference, and then a tour of the booklet’s content. There follows a section on tool-based case studies – where we find, for example, chapters on mapping traditional knowledge in Indonesia, and on the relevance of PGIS to resolution of land use conflict in Ghana. Then we have another thematic section, this time covering issue-base case studies. Here there are examples from working with indigenous peoples (“First Peoples”) in Canada,

and experiences from the Caprivi strip in Namibia – home to the San communities. In many ways the following section “Theory and Reflections from Practice” is the most fascinating – and demonstrates how PGIS opens a Pandora’s box of issues. Chapter 14 is a carefully thought-through and well written guide towards good practice and PGIS ethics: but it would have been more fittingly located *after* the next chapter which is intriguingly entitled (and cleverly argued) “Precision for whom? Mapping ambiguity and certainty in PGIS”.

What a long way this series - originally ‘RRA notes’ back in 1988 – has come. It has always been the recognised authoritative mouthpiece for participatory approaches and methods, but the content of this current issue could easily have qualified for publication as a book. However, it is not just the main content that makes PLA 54 so valuable. The careful design, the inclusion of a glossary, follow-up contacts, interesting boxes, line drawings and photographs make this a real resource-rich package. Returning to the subject matter in conclusion: it may take more than a thorough read of this CTA-IIED publication to become an expert on PGIS - but there could be no better starting place.

William Critchley, Amsterdam, June 2006

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