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A brief guide to the principles of PLA (I)

This section of the *Notes* provides training materials for participatory learning, exploring a different theme in each issue[1]. This issue examines how to ensure that training in participation covers more than the methodologies, but includes some theoretical and organisational issues.

A key concern for trainers is that trainees should be aware that participation does not simply imply the mechanical application of a 'technique' or method, but is instead part of a process of dialogue, action, analysis and change. The roots of participatory methods and approaches can be traced to many sources. Diversity is part of their strength. This section provides a brief outline of the concepts central to participatory learning and action, together with training suggestions for how to share these ideas with trainees. It highlights the emerging dangers and limitations, drawing out the key challenges that you, as a trainer, will need to bring to the attention of trainees.

You may be tempted to present issues of institutional context, history, key principles, theory and limitations in the form of lectures. Although lectures are an important element of any training course, they do have their limitations (see Trainers ... *PLA Notes* x). Remember to use buzz sessions and brainstorming techniques to enliven the debate and to enhance trainees' learning.

- **The development of participatory approaches**

A brief history

In recent years there has been a rapid expansion of new participatory methods and approaches in the context of sustainable development. These have drawn on many well-established traditions (such as activist participatory research, agroecosystem analysis, applied anthropology, field research on farming systems, rapid rural appraisal) that have put participation, action research and adult education at the forefront of attempts to emancipate disempowered people. Make a brief presentation of the history of participatory approaches to trainees[2] to emphasise the diversity of approaches. Stress that in a growing number of government and non-government institutions, extractive research is being complemented, or even replaced, by investigation and analysis by local people themselves.

Common principles

The interactive involvement of many people in developing participatory approaches in different institutional contexts has promoted innovation. There are many variations in the way that systems of interaction have been put together. For example, Participatory Rural Appraisal is one of the better-known approaches and it is practised in over 130 countries. However, there are many different approaches: this diversity and complexity is a strength.

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[1] Taken from a *Trainers Guide for Participatory Learning and Action*. Published by IIED. Price £14.95, plus p&p (25% UK and Europe, 35% airmail). See inside cover for details on how to order publications.

[2] See Chambers, R. (1992). Rural Appraisal: Rapid, Relaxed and Participatory. IDS Discussion Paper 311, IDS, Brighton, UK for a review.

Despite the different ways in which these approaches are used, most share common principles:

- *A defined methodology and systematic learning process*: the focus is on cumulative learning by all the participants;
- *Multiple perspectives*: a central objective is to seek diversity, rather than simplify complexity;
- *Group learning process*: all involve the recognition that the complexity of the world will only be revealed through group analysis and interaction;
- *Context specific*: the approaches are flexible enough to be adapted to suit each new set of conditions and actors;
- *Facilitating experts and stakeholders*: the methodology is concerned with the transformation of existing activities to try to improve people's situation; and,
- *Leading to change*: the process of joint analysis and dialogue helps to define changes which would bring about improvement and seeks to motivate people to take action to implement defined changes.

Training suggestions:
1. Encourage trainees to think of themselves as facilitators of other people's learning, particularly when they get to the village or urban neighbourhood.
2. Brainstorm on participation.
What does participation mean to you?
What are the advantages and disadvantages of participation?
3. Show a video of participatory methods in use.
Discuss positive issues and ways to improve the approach shown.

Criteria for trustworthiness

It is common for trainers to be asked by sceptical participants a question such as 'but how does it compare with the real data?'. Many people assert that participatory methods are 'undisciplined' and 'sloppy', and that their 'subjective' nature means that it is possible only to respond to selected members of communities.

In response to this, it is important that trainees reflect on the data collection process and the data themselves. Introduce the idea of

triangulation by multiple sources, methods and investigators, and the need for prolonged an/or intense engagement between various (groups) of people to build rapport and trust, and keep the investigator open to multiple influences. Use of participatory methods without, for example, triangulation and participant checking of constructed outputs, should be judged as untrustworthy.

Training suggestions:
1. Brainstorm on what makes information and data trustworthy
How do we normally ensure trustworthiness?
What criteria do we use to establish whether something is to be trusted or rejected?
2. Small group discussions on participants' own experiences of trustworthiness criteria.
Which criteria are most relevant or important?
3. Use a case study and/or video to analyse other organisations experiences with establishing trustworthiness.

- **Types of 'participation' in development**

The term 'participation' has different meanings for different people. The term has been used to build local capacity and self reliance, but also to justify the extension of state control. It has been used to devolve power and decision making away from external agencies, but also to justify external decisions. It has been used for data collection and also for interactive analysis. There are basically seven ways that development organisations interpret and use the term 'participation' (see Box 1). However, if the objective is to achieve sustainable development, then nothing less than functional participation will suffice.

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BOX 1
A TYPOLOGY OF PARTICIPATION

1. *Passive participation.* People participate by being told what is going to happen or what has already happened.
2. *Participation in Information Gathering.* People participate by answering questions posed by extractive researchers using questionnaire surveys or similar approaches. People do not have the opportunity to influence proceedings.
3. *Participation by consultation.* External people listen to the views of local people. External professionals define both problems and solutions, and may modify these in the light of people's responses.
4. *Participation for material incentives.* People participate by providing resources, for example labour, in return for food, cash or other material incentives. People have no stake in prolonging activities when the incentives end.
5. *Functional participation.* People participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the project. Such involvement tends to occur after major decisions have been made. These institutions tend to be dependent on external initiators and facilitators, but may become self-reliant.
6. *Interactive participation.* People participate in joint analysis, which leads to action plans and the formation of new local institutions or the strengthening of existing ones. Groups take over local decisions, and so people have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.
7. *Self-Mobilisation.* People participate by taking initiatives independent of external institutions to change systems. They develop contacts with external organisations for resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used.

Training suggestions:
1. Ask participants to give examples from their own work of different types of participation.
Why were they different?
What happened as a result?
2. One particularly important challenge for trainers is to find ways of moving institutions from the top half of the typology in Box 1 towards the bottom. Photocopy the typology and hand it out.
Ask participants to brainstorm on the types of processes that could help this transition.
What is needed? Who should be involved? How long will it take? Which elements are needed now, and which later?

Great care must therefore be taken with both using and interpreting the term participation.

It should always be qualified by reference to the type of participation, as most types will threaten rather than support the goals of sustainable development. What is important is to ensure that those using the term both clarify their specific application and define better ways of shifting from the more common passive, consultative and incentive-driven participation towards the interactive end of the spectrum.

The dilemma for authorities is that they both need and fear people's participation. They need people's agreement and support, but they fear that this wider involvement is less controllable, less precise and so likely to slow down planning processes. But if this fear permits only stage managed forms of participation, then distrust and alienation are the likely outcomes. This makes it all the more crucial that judgements can be made about the type of participation in use.

TRAINERS' CHECKLIST

- How will you draw out and build upon the existing knowledge and experience of the participants?
- How long to you plan to lecture before breaking up for buzz or brainstorm sessions, or for an energiser?
- Have you prepared any handouts ahead of time?
- How will you encourage participants to develop a deeper understanding of the word 'participation'?

Next issue: Principles of PLA (II)

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