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## A brief guide to the principles of PLA (II)

This section of the *Notes* provides training materials for participatory learning, exploring a different theme in each issue<sup>1</sup>. Continuing from *PLA Notes* 31, this issue examines some of the training and institutional pressures for participatory learning that you, as a trainer, need to bring to the attention of trainees.

### • Training for transformation

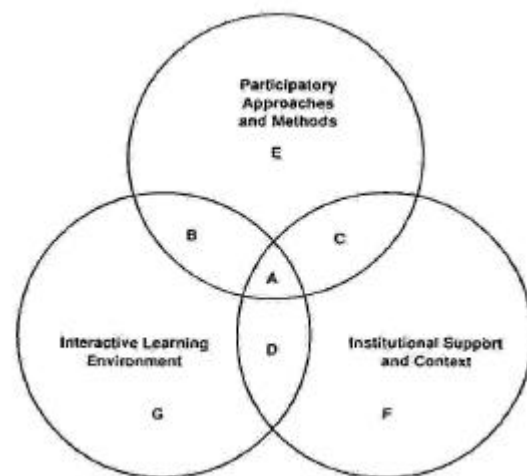
There is rapidly growing interest in participatory approaches and methods. The demand for training far exceeds the supply, but despite the growing enthusiasm, many institutions are facing some common and pressing problems. One of these is how to train sufficient numbers of staff to use the methods properly and effectively, as part of their standard working practices. It is one thing for an organisation to discover the power and potential of participatory approaches, but quite another for it to be able to train its own staff to tap that potential and use it with some sensitivity and consistency.

Intensive field-based training courses alone will not ensure that the trainees have a satisfactory grounding in the basic concepts, principles and methods to use them competently in their work, let alone the capacity to train others. This is because training does not take place in a vacuum. It happens within a particular policy context and organisational culture with its own management structures, professional norms and field practices. Training alone will not convert a conventional, technically-oriented institution into a more people-centred and sensitive one.

There are 3 essential areas to tackle. These are new methodologies for field-level work, new learning environments for professionals and rural people to develop capacities, and new institutional environments, including improved linkages within and between institutions.

These three areas for action are shown in Figure 1 as intersecting circles. The most effective actions lie in the overlapping central sector.

**Figure 1. Training for transformation**



The following assumptions underpin this conceptual framework:

- participatory approaches and methods support local innovation, respect diversity and complexity, and enhance local capabilities, represented by the ECAB circle;
- an interactive learning environment encourages an open-minded and sharing attitude, creates interest and commitment, and so contributes to agreed courses of action, represented by the GBAD circle; and,
- institutional support encourages the spread between and within institutions of participatory methodologies. This is represented by the FDAC circle, which occurs when a whole organisation shifts towards participatory methods and management, and where there are informal and formal linkages between organisations.

In this perspective, sectors G, F and E represent starting points and preconditions, but none is likely to spread well unless it receives support by moving into D, C or B, and then into A. Thus participatory field methods, as in E, are likely to be abandoned unless there is institutional support or a learning environment. This has been a recurrent experience with field training workshops in participatory methods. Those who have taken part may be convinced and wish to introduce participatory methods into their organisations, but find they cannot do this alone. Partly they may lack confidence or clout, but also their colleagues may be sceptical or hostile.

It is important for your trainees to understand the training they are involved in is only one part of a wider organisational shift. This may help them to readjust any unrealistic expectations and to identify follow-up support they might require.

**Training suggestion:**

1. Ask trainees to identify examples from their own experiences of sectors A to G.
  - What kind of changes have recently taken place in their organisations?
  - What is good and bad about the different types of organisation.

• **Issues for institutionalisation**

Institutionalising participatory approaches can take many years. Training is an integral element in the learning process of developing organisational learning and so, it is important that you deal at some point with some of the issues that participants are likely to face. Some prior knowledge of the most common issues can help to overcome or at least avoid problems likely to prevent success:

1. *Quality assurance*. It remains very difficult to assure quality in training or practice, as there are no 'standards' by which to judge performance. Anybody can claim to be an 'expert' in participatory approaches and there is no easy way to determine his/her authenticity until after the work is done.
2. *Contradictory donor policies*. Participatory approaches have become extremely popular among donors, who remain interested in

saving money and achieving tangible results quickly. As a result, these approaches are increasingly making their way into terms of reference and project guidelines, whether or not they are appropriate. Unfortunately, although they are promoting participatory approaches, many continue to set physical 'targets' as measures of success. This mode of investment and expenditure makes it difficult for programmes to apply participatory approaches appropriately, as they are expected to initiate visible 'projects' almost as soon as funds are allocated.

3. *Mechanistic applications*. Simply because an organisation has made a policy decision to follow a participatory path does not mean that it is using it in a flexible way. All too frequently, 'participatory approaches' are applied within rigid and standardised hierarchies that constrict decision-making, limit the range of possible development or research options, and ultimately, diminish the effectiveness of the efforts.
4. *The search for short cuts*. Participatory approaches are not substitutes for the thorough preparation, long term planning, constructive dialogue and sustained interaction that any development process requires. No participatory approach offers a quick solution to complex processes. There are no shortcuts to success.



**Training suggestions**

1. *Ask participants to produce their own list of how to recognise good practice in participatory development and what should be avoided.*
2. *Ask participants to buzz on what external conditions make it difficult or impossible to adopt participatory learning.*
3. *Ask participants to reflect on the internal conditions that encourage or discourage innovation and adaptation of participatory planning.*
  - *Is the method likely to be applied in a mechanistic way, or will the methods be continually adapted?*
4. *Ask participants to reflect on how their institutional processes should be changed to ensure that capacity is built up over time.*
5. *Brainstorm on why shortcuts do not work and why they are so popular.*

- **Training for analysis**

The use of participatory methods can lead to the collection of excess information which does not feed into an action plan. On many occasions, there has been a tendency for participants or trainers to get carried away with the use of the methods, while neglecting the importance of analysis. To lead to change, analysis is a crucial component, one which many people find difficult to deal with.

There are 3 critical questions about analysis that require attention in training and in practice: who analyses? what is analysed? when is it analysed?

**Training suggestion**

1. *Ask the group to identify who they feel should be involved in the analysis of each stage, and why. If the output is not very participation-oriented, you can challenge this as a trainer in further discussions.*

**Who analyses?**

During participatory work, there are many moments when it is possible to see two different sets of 'analysts': the external facilitators and local women, men and children. Usually, the external group start the interaction and so initially have more control

over the process. While it is relatively easy to encourage trainees to hand over the discussions and the diagramming to the local people they are meeting with, this is much more difficult when it comes to analysis.

Thus, the training workshop should focus on encouraging trainees to understand how to stimulate local analysis, rather than imposing their own forms of analysis. Trainees need to be aware that participatory fieldwork is not a fact-finding mission, but is about facilitating learning and analysis by local people. If this is not sufficiently emphasised in training sessions, then the fieldwork can become a mad rush for useless information and the whole purpose of participation is distorted. This does not mean that the external agent is neutral or does not engage in discussions. The issue is a more subtle one of relative power and devolving analysis and decision-making consciously. This is what becomes important to emphasise in training.

**What is analysed?**

The second aspect of analysis is about what is analysed. There is a real risk of simply focusing on analysing 'data', rather than reflecting on the process that develops during discussions. This is just as important in the development of a community action plan as the 'data' themselves. However, becoming aware of this aspect is often difficult for many newcomers to participatory methods, and trainees can find it difficult to know what 'process' aspects to document. Critical reflection on the process, therefore, allows for an understanding of whether local knowledge and capacities were enhanced.

**When is it analysed?**

In participatory fieldwork, there is no single appropriate phase for analysis. There are many steps that contribute to the overall analysis of issues and opportunities, each of which needs special attention in a training setting. Several steps in analysis can be followed in documentation, through probing, team analysis, plenary analysis, and community feedback meetings. Participatory analysis must be context specific, in terms of both content and process.

## • Misconceptions and dangers

### Some dangers

The use of participatory approaches in research and development has not been without its constraints. Practitioners have encountered a range of difficulties and dilemmas when working with local people to analyse their situation (Box 1).

The intense involvement of local people in research and development tends to generate much enthusiasm and anticipation about the action that they have identified. Although this is, in principle, a positive aspect, it can cause problems if any support promised by the facilitating agency is not forthcoming.

#### BOX 1 IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES

- When facilitated by outsiders, participatory approaches can raise expectations of local people for continued involvement;
- The outcome depends on the attitude and vision of the persons facilitating the process;
- If carried out too quickly, they can lead to incorrect insights;
- The choice and sequence of methods needs to be adapted to fit each situation;
- In most cases, they will not lead to quantifiable results;
- They will never provide final answers! (but then, no approach ever will)

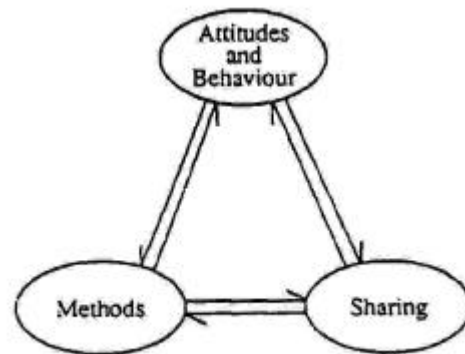
Although participatory learning and action is not simply the mechanical use of methods, this does occur. Participatory methods can be applied without an appreciation of the reasons for their use. The outcome will therefore depend on the attitude of the people employing the methods. For example, if the user of participatory methods is not conscious of gender differences within a community, then it is highly probable that the analysis will not deal with such issues. Likewise, if they are not aware of local power differences, then these are likely to be overlooked in the findings.

The downside of flexibility is that participatory approaches need to be adapted to fit each situation. Those who are looking for a

fixed, blue-print approach will not find it in participatory methodologies. Also, the type of information that generally results from the use of participatory approaches is usually qualitative, reflecting the diversity and complexity of the situation it is describing.

#### Training suggestion

1. Ask the group to develop a list of possible limitations and benefits of participatory planning.



#### TRAINERS' CHECKLIST

- What are the five key lessons you want participants to remember from any session on principles and institutional challenges?
- How do you plan to get participants to reflect on their own organisation's constraints to add adopting participatory approaches?
- How will you bring up the issue of quality assurance?
- How will you encourage participants not to use the methods mechanistically?

1. Taken from a *Trainers Guide for Participatory Learning and Action*. Published by IIED. Price £18.95, plus p&p (25% UK and Europe, 35% airmail). See inside cover for details on how to order publications.

*Next issue: Training in participatory methods in the workshop*