

Editorial

● Theme issue

Welcome to this, the first issue of *PLA Notes* of the new Millennium. IIED would like to take this opportunity to wish all our readers a healthy and prosperous Year 2000.

Since it was established in 1988, this series has reported many trends and changes in social science research and development work. As the 20th Century came to a close, interest in participatory approaches had grown from a fad to a phenomenon. We have also seen the spread of participatory approaches from the South to the North, where increasingly, projects are seeking to adopt a 'bottom-up approach' to ensure greater involvement in, and ownership of, the development process by communities. This also comes at a time when citizenship, empowerment and social inclusion are becoming increasingly important to policy-makers and practitioners of community development alike. Today, the use of participatory approaches is now viewed as critical to the success of community development efforts worldwide. Similarly, in action-oriented research, participatory approaches are being applied in wide range of sectors and contexts, both rural and urban. This, in turn, is leading to new methodological innovations.

Fields such as health, micro-credit and finance, planning and assessment, adult education and literacy, small enterprise development, and gender analysis, amongst others, adapted and developed their own powerful sets of participatory tools and techniques. Many employed visualisation methods as part of this growing family of approaches. To reflect this growing diversity of approaches and applications, *RRA Notes*, the original name for this series, was renamed *PLA Notes* in 1995.

With the rapid increase in new methods and approaches invariably comes the explosion of new terms and acronyms to represent them. In *PLA Notes*, the Editorial Team has chosen to use the term '*Participatory Learning and*

Action' or '*PLA*' in a generic sense. Thus, we view it is an umbrella term under which the vast array of participatory approaches now being used throughout the world (e.g. Participatory Action Research (PAR), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Participatory Technology Development (PTD), Theatre for Development etc.) can be encompassed.

However, as the Guest Editors of this Special Issue note in their overview (Cornwall and Welbourn, this issue), the term '*PLA*' has been, and continues to be, interpreted differently by practitioners in different places, according to their own experience and understanding. Some view *PLA* very much as an overarching term covering all participatory research and development approaches, while others see it as an approach in its own right. Thus, our Guest Editors have chosen an open-ended definition of *PLA* to reflect this range of opinion.

At the start of this new century, what is perhaps important to keep in mind is not how we develop and maintain clear 'brand names' for our methodologies nor how we get our terminology right. It is how we can now find ways to learn together, to observe good behaviour and attitudes in our work and ultimately, to ensure good practice and quality in the use of participatory approaches, whatever we may decide to call them. If this is where we concentrate our efforts, then this can only be a good thing for the future of participatory research and development.

This issue of *PLA Notes* is devoted to an assessment of the use of participatory approaches in Sexual and Reproductive Health. It builds on previous *RRA/PLA Notes* issues on Health (*RRA Notes* 16, 1992) and HIV/AIDS (*PLA Notes* 23, 1995).

The Guest Editors for the theme section are Andrea Cornwall and Alice Welbourn. Andrea Cornwall is a Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

Her current work focuses on the use and abuse of participatory approaches, public participation in health and issues of difference in participatory development. She has guest edited two previous *PLA Notes* issues on 'Critical Reflections from Practice' (*PLA Notes 24, 1995*) and 'Performance and Participation' (*PLA Notes 29, 1997*). Alice Welbourn works as a part-time writer, adviser and trainer on issues focusing on sexual and reproductive health, (including gender, HIV, communication and relationship skills). Based on her 16 years of community development experience, mainly in Africa, she is starting to look at ways in which local projects in Britain can benefit from what she has seen and learnt elsewhere in the world.

● In this issue

As usual, this issue opens with a general section. The first article provides an overview of the relatively recent developments in participatory research in China and the work of the Yunnan PRA Network (Xing, this issue). The author discusses how participatory approaches were adopted in the region and presents a review with examples of where they have been used, but also, sets out what is required in terms of attitudinal and institutional change for them to be successful.

The second article in this section provides a review of the recent 'Dare-to-Share Fair' held in The Hague, The Netherlands, October 13th-14th 1999. This event provided the opportunity for practitioners of participatory development world-wide to present their work, and offers insight into the variety and spread of participatory approaches around the world. (Lammerink, Posthumus and van Weperan, this issue).

Regular features

The *Feedback* section for this issue is provided by William Fielding and Janet Riley, with an interesting account of comparing scoring and ranking techniques. With a thoughtful response from Robert Chambers drawing from his work in the field, he emphasises the equal importance of non-numerical aspects of ranking and scoring techniques and states that numbers, whilst undeniably useful, should not be used to side-track practitioners from

looking at process and learning. The *In Touch* pages towards the back of the issue share experiences and publicise new and relevant materials and training events. Please feel free to send items for this section to the *PLA Notes* Editorial Team at IIED.

The *RCPLA Pages* provide information concerning the first Francophone Exchange to be held in Dakar, Senegal, later this year, co-organised by RCPLA member, IIED-Senegal. This event will provide a space for practitioners of participatory approaches to share and exchange experiences, to review the use and development of participatory methodologies in the Francophone world and to suggest ways forward in the future. This section also announces a new publication from another member of the network, the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), with the arrival of the first issue of '*Face-to-Face – notes from the network on community exchange*', a new journal in which strategies for exchange and participation between the many levels existing between and within differing communities are identified and explored.

Finally, you will find a *Readership Survey* enclosed with this issue. This is the 3rd Readership Survey of the *PLA Notes* series since its birth in 1988. We would be very grateful if you would spend some time to complete the questionnaire, as it is the input of the audience which keeps the *PLA Notes* up to date with new experiences and innovation in the world of participation. The deadline for returning the questionnaires is July 31st 2000 and we are planning to report back the findings in the October 2000 issue of *PLA Notes* (issue 39).

As always, we do welcome your comments and contributions for any of the sections in *PLA Notes*. Happy Reading!

Call for experiences!

We have planned some new theme issues of *PLA Notes*. In June 2000, we will explore the use of participatory approaches in community development in the North, learning from the long history of participation in the South. October 2000 will look at GIS, mapping and modelling. Please send us contributions on any of these themes. Articles should reach us at least two months before the publication date.