

## Introduction

After working for 10 years in the 'South' for various international NGOs, bilateral agencies and the UN (FAO), I made the decision to become self-employed to try to bring innovative participatory approaches being used in the 'South' to the 'North'. I wanted to do this because I was feeling increasingly uneasy and hypocritical about being part of what appeared to me to be a one-way PRA crusade, as if civic life the 'North' was already participatory enough and there was no room for improvement in public consultation and community empowerment practice there. I also increasingly felt that the participatory methods would be particularly effective in reducing what I saw as the democratic deficits in my own country, Scotland.

So seven years ago I started a 'Northern' training 'journey' which started in Canada (see *PLA Notes* 19, February 1994) has taken me all over Scotland and also to Albania, Austria, England, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, New Zealand and Wales. So far I have designed and facilitated over 40 Participatory Appraisal (PA) training workshops and managed and facilitated over 100 on the ground PA events in the 'North'. This article is a reflective summary of my training journey: where I was in the mid-1990s, where I am now and where I would like to go in the future.

## Where I was....

The journey got off to a slow, uphill start. When I first began telling people about the participatory approaches being used in the 'South' and how I wanted to start training people in them in Scotland, there was some positive interest, but mainly scepticism and often opposition. This was because of a combination of different factors, which included the following.

- Officials and in-country social change professionals were not interested in how things were done elsewhere.
- The approach of the established public consultation profession, not the market research profession, but those within public relations (PR) and planning who called themselves public consultation experts. Their way of working was (and still is) very reaction-management and conflict-resolution based: smoothing the way, overcoming/undermining opposition to proposals – and the way they lead public officials to believe this is all there is to public consultation.

- Officials felt threatened by the concepts involved (especially the perceived lack of 'control').
- In-country social change professionals felt threatened by the concepts involved (especially the onus on reaching and meaningfully involving people who were not activists or in established community groups).
- Those who were explicitly racist and did not want to see any similarity between the 'North' and the 'South' and were very uncomfortable about comparisons.
- Having to compete against established packages such as Planning for Real, Future Search, etc.
- Being immediately associated with the promoters and practitioners of participatory approaches who appeared to officials as only being subversive and a source of opposition and criticism.

So I quickly found myself looking for partners, anybody who would take PA seriously or find it politically difficult to reject. Most of the initial demand for training was from postgraduate (mainly MSc) students from the 'South' or with international career aspirations, development consultants and forestry and rural development NGOs that I was in contact with for other reasons. To ground the training and build the confidence of participants (and to further my own agenda of proving to others its appropriateness and effectiveness for the 'North'), I insisted that each training workshop had local real life assignments built into them. Local people from these assignment locations were invited to be training workshop participants (free of charge) and they were usually local activists.

A typical PA training event I was designing and facilitating in the mid-1990s had the following characteristics:

- was run over five consecutive days (the maximum amount of time most people were prepared to take off/give up);
- was based in a university;
- included 'real-life' assignments for the workshop participants to design and facilitate; and,
- had 20-30 participants, mainly postgraduate students and NGO workers/officials, with the other participants made up of researchers/academics, community activists, local and central government officials and consultants.

A typical PA training 'real-life' assignment in the mid 1990s had the following characteristics:

- was focused around forestry or woodland management; and,
- was conducted for an NGO or community group.

## Where I am now....

After 30 of these workshops I realised there were some recurring experiences and features that I wasn't happy about.

- Most of the local community activists who came to the workshops were finding it very difficult to understand the need to be (and when it came to the assignment difficult to be) objective, neutral, effective facilitators. I found myself thinking that many of them had a very dysfunctional role in terms of wider community empowerment, and wondered about the ethics of giving them these powerful methods.
- Professional researchers and academics were more difficult to train than others—they would typically come with a lot of theoretical baggage, preconceptions and arrogance—and I became increasingly aware and uneasy of what they would use the approach and methods for. As participants in the assignments they were not focused or disciplined enough, often had and revealed their own agendas, were not always honest with local people and as assignment clients they were disconnected to and not trusted by service deliverers.
- The majority of social change (in Scotland usually known as 'community education') professionals seemed to be very stuck in their ways, and were less open-minded than other workshop participants to working in different ways to engage with local people—I found them to be less open minded than technically trained professionals (e.g. architects, planners, engineers, foresters, etc.).
- NGOs were finding it difficult to understand that participation was a means of empowering, not educating, people and some of them appeared to be trying to follow the dysfunctional 'Southern' NGO model of acting on the ground as if the government doesn't exist, and no real interest, capacity or commitment to follow up on outcomes.
- I was becoming increasingly unconvinced that individuals being trained ex-situ (away from their colleagues and managers) was a worthwhile exercise - how often did individuals going back to non-supportive environments really use the new approaches and methods they had learnt, and was there not a better way to facilitate institutional capacity building?

Fourteen of the first 30 workshops had been open to anybody who paid. I gradually came to the conclusion that the vast majority of my growing worries and concerns emanated from these 'open-to-anybody' training workshops, as there was no follow-up monitoring or management systems to ensure effective and ethical practice. In particular I was alarmed that there were:

- officials and academics apparently only coming to learn about PRA/PLA/PA so they could criticise, argue against, and prevent it being used by their organisations; and,

- consultants coming to trainings to immediately set up as trainers themselves, even though they had no experience or obvious competence as practitioners.

Reflecting on these earlier workshops, I wonder if there were times I was too polite. For example, I wouldn't tell people straight to their face, "*look for goodness sake, don't even think about using these methods/working with the public*", etc., etc.. I would generally ask the whole group to be honest and ask themselves if they had the necessary personal skills and aptitude, but not the specific individuals I was concerned about.

However, one thing that stopped me doing this was a concern that after only five days I could be wrong about somebody, and while it was relatively easy to get a perception of who would be a good or bad practitioner, it was impossible to tell who would be good, effective trainers. For instance, I have seen great practitioners who are terrible trainers and somebody who was a terrible practitioner in the workshop go on to be an immediately apparently successful trainer.

I often wondered if I should have named names, and said "*watch out*" by email or whatever when I saw people who I had trained that I had worries about advertise themselves as trainers, but the shareware ethos of the approach and times stopped me. I am now changing my mind on this and now I do say something when this happens. Box 1 is the text of an email I sent recently in response to a request from an 'open-to-anybody' workshop participant to borrow/buy some of my training materials:

### BOX 1

Dear XXXX

I don't normally lend out or give copies of my training materials. I think I have only ever done it once or twice, to people I felt comfortable and confident about, i.e. people who had I felt shown a genuine interest, had had enough experience as practitioners, had indicated that they had the potential to be good trainers/managers and had displayed an aptitude and discipline for PA type work.

It is my strong opinion that you did not have/display any of these in the time you were at the training workshop, and I am actually quite distressed to hear that you are going to be doing some PA training. If you have gained the work on the basis of being trained and proficient in PA, then it would have had to come from a lot of experience you have gained, plus significant personal and professional changes that you have gone through, since attending the training course.

To be frank I would have been surprised if you had become a proficient practitioner by now, but I feel very uneasy that you are considering training others—sorry to be so blunt but I feel it's my responsibility to be honest with you.

Furthermore, last year I stopped doing 'open-to-anybody' training workshops in universities. Now I try to do most of my training work for institutions with resources, mandate

and commitment and a history of delivering services and/or change. These are mainly local government departments, because they have a clear mandate and statutory responsibilities for democratic public consultation and facilitating sustainable development.

A typical PA training event I facilitate now has the following characteristics.

- has five days training, but is made up of two phases of 2/3 days (this allows more public officials to get permission and find the time to attend);
- has a real life assignment for the training host ('service delivery') institution;
- is based in local authority or local service delivery agency headquarters; and,
- has 10-20 participants, consisting mainly of local government officials, local people (activists and non-activists), NGO workers/officials and/or central government officials.

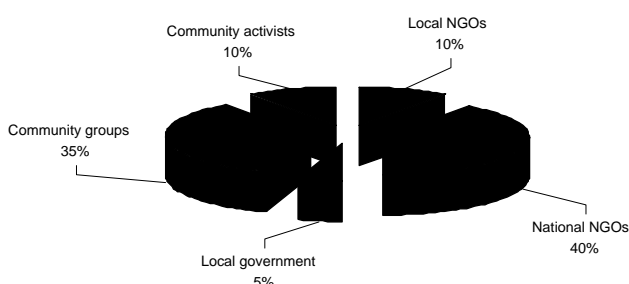
Therefore three groups have disappeared since the mid 1990s: post graduate students (the previous largest group), consultants and undergraduate students. The NGO section is greatly reduced, the local government section is much bigger and there is a new category – non-activist local community members.

While I had reservations about training dysfunctional local activists, I was keen to build local capacity by training local people who were not activists to be PA facilitators. I have now trained over 30 'real people', mainly by recruiting them through local work providing agencies for the unemployed and paying them during the training (one of the adverts was for 'fieldworkers' and one young man (who became a good PA facilitator) turned up thinking he was going to be picking rhubarb for a week.

The real life assignments now have the following features:

- the client is usually the training host;
- they cover a wide range of topics and issues, from community wide to single sector processes;
- they have a direct link to a service deliverer with follow-up resources who is aware of, is committed to, the process; and,
- is mainly done with or for a local government department or service (see Figure 3 for current training assignment clients).

**Figure 3. Assignments in the mid-1990s**



Now, in my 'real organisation' training workshops, if any participant causes concern or doesn't seem to be able to be an effective practitioner, the managers are there during and after the training to limit any damage and prevent any misuse of the approach/methods etc.. Having worked with many different departments and professions, I much prefer to work with the technical implementation type departments such as park managers, transportation managers, and service delivers such as housing officials and recreation officials rather than youth workers, community education professionals, etc. because they have less baggage.

## Where I am trying to go in the future....

My thinking about the social change bigger picture in the 'North', of which PA training and other forms of capacity building is a part, is that participatory approaches should be used more for improving governance and enriching and adding value to representative democracy ('democratising democracy') rather than being used for research or initiating civic social change movements. Box 2 presents a campfire analogy to show who I think participatory approaches should be used by to increase the chances of achieving sustainable social change and development.

### BOX 2

There are several ways to start and maintain a fire in order to cook a meal on a campfire. Some fires will burn longer and hotter than others, depending on the equipment and fuel you use.

1. If you build a fire with just paper (researchers) and matches (participatory approaches, concepts and theories) you likely won't be able to cook a meal.
2. If you build a fire with paper (researchers) and kindling (NGOs) and matches (participatory approaches, concepts and theories) you might be able to cook a meal.
3. If you build a fire with paper (researchers) and kindling (NGOs), logs (government officials) and matches (participatory approaches, concepts and theories) you will cook a meal.
4. But you can also start a fire using these new fangled fire starters (participatory approach practitioners), logs (government officials) and matches (participatory approaches, concepts and theories) and you can cook a meal and no kindling or paper is required.

I now have the following training policies/objectives.

- To continue to not do 'open-to-anybody' training workshops and only do training for real organisations/institutions with a management structure and feedback/monitoring mechanisms.
- To minimise the work I do with universities and research institutions.
- To reduce/minimise training of academics, community activists and NGOs (especially pressure groups).
- To continue to try to find workshop participants through government local employment agencies ('job centres') and paying people to do the training and the real life assignment.
- To increase the amount of training I do for local government.

- To try to maximise the chances of sustainable changes within a single department/service by training senior managers and back-up administrative staff as well as on the ground facilitators, and by providing with mid-to long-term technical support/back up.
- To try to work more and if possible always include elected representatives (councillors, MPs, etc.) as well as officials in training events.
- To continue to insist on a minimum of five days training. I have read that there are those who feel that this is too short a time. My experience after over 40 workshops is that if a participant has 'it' ('it' being composed of a mixture of common sense, confidence, motivation, being a 'people person', etc.) and wants to understand and use the concepts and methods involved, five days is more than enough. If they don't have 'it' and/or don't want to understand and use the concepts and methods involved, then there is no difference if the workshop lasts for five days, five weeks or even five months.

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