

Editorial

Welcome to *PLA Notes* 39! First, we would like to thank all the readers who have taken time to complete and return the 3rd Readership Survey. There has been a great response with many very interesting and innovative ideas about how to move *PLA Notes* forward and we look forward to sharing these ideas and thoughts with you all in the future. For those who have not yet been able to complete their questionnaire, there is still time – so please do complete and return your questionnaire to us. Your views and opinions on *PLA Notes* are invaluable. We will be reporting back the findings of the readership survey in a future edition of *PLA Notes*, so watch this space! Second, we would like to apologise for the delay in the arrival of this issue.

Theme issue

The special theme for this issue is Popular Communications, drawing on a workshop held at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) – UK, in May earlier this year. This workshop drew together a wide range of international development and community practitioners who use innovative popular communications media in their work. The most important theme was, not that people use a variety of both new and traditional media to communicate, such as for example, art, drama, poetry, video, photography etc., but that each person already has the capacity to communicate in a creative and innovative way. Each person has their own '*well of inspiration*' and such capacity is developed further through access to alternative ideas around communication. An important issue is to examine in which context popular communications can be used to engage with local people and bring the views of those who are generally excluded to a broader arena for sharing and exchange (this is illustrated in many of the stories presented in this issue). As Maurice Leonhardt points out in his article, '*Using video for squatters' rights in Phnom Penh*', their use of video was more as a tool for advocacy, rather than as a method of empowering local communities per se, as the editing, script writing and filming was predominantly done by Maurice's organisation (this was also due to time constraints), rather than by the communities they were working with. However, this does illustrate how popular media can act as a powerful mechanism to bring policy makers and local people together. It also emphasises the potential for both community empowerment through popular communications and for future work in this area to be developed by and with local communities.

This issue is guest edited by Joanna Howard and Patta Scott-Villiers. Jo Howard is currently working as a research assistant with the Participation Group at the Institute of Development Studies. Previously she has worked in Central America for six years with Coda International. Her work involved supporting processes of community organisation, participation and popular communications in both English and Spanish-speaking media. Patta Scott-Villiers is a member of the Participation Group at the Institute of Development Studies working on understanding and sharing different ways people communicate. She is a trainer and facilitator in participatory approaches and for three years she has helped organise the IDS participation information activities, which include a website and a resource centre. Before joining IDS, she worked for 14 years in various NGOs in Africa and Asia, including running a small NGO in Kenya and Somalia which focused on supporting traditional methods of participation, planning and communication.

In this issue

As usual, this issue opens with a suite of more general articles. In the first article, Gregory Ira introduces a simple, participatory tool to assess water security and equity in rural coastal watersheds at the household level. Next, Janis Alcorn discusses how mapping with communities can be used as catalytic communication tools if created and used strategically. This is followed by an article in which Gavin Jordan and Bhuban Shrestha discuss a participatory Geographic Information System (GIS) with community forestry user groups in Nepal and the importance of 'putting people before technology' in order to make GIS a truly participatory process. Continuing the GIS theme, Giacomo Rambaldi et al. present participatory 3-dimensional modelling and show how, when combined with GIS technology, this technique can be used for participatory monitoring and evaluation with communities. Finally, Peter Ejautene Okiira of the Uganda Participatory Development Network (UPD-Net), also a member of the Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action (RCPLA) Network, presents a review of UPD-Net's annual meeting, where the theme was 'Sustaining Participation – what are the challenges?'

Regular features

The *Tips for Trainers* section introduces an 'icebreaker' exercise when working in a bilingual context. This icebreaker has been used successfully in workshops held as part of the Common Property Resource Management in the Sahel project (IIED/SOS Sahel), where the main working languages are French and English. It aims to reduce inhibitions and increase confidence when working in a bi/multilingual environment.

Finally, the *In Touch* section at the back of the issue publicises new training courses, events, reports and other sources of information. The *RCPLA Pages* provide information and updates about the network partners as well as news from the recent Cairo workshop, held between 23rd- 30th September 2000.

New features

As ever, we are always keen to hear ideas from our readers for new features in the *PLA Notes*. From the next issue onwards, we will be presenting a new information section, entitled *E-Participation*, which will specifically list information sources, websites, email discussion lists and other electronic products around participatory approaches to development. We would be interested to hear your views on this and any other features you might like to suggest (although we will also be referring to your suggestions from the Readership Survey). We look forward to hearing from you and particularly welcome any feedback you may have (as letters or emails) on the *PLA Notes* series. Happy Reading!

