

Editorial

The 3rd Readership Survey

Thank you very much to everyone who took time to complete the 3rd Readership Survey for *PLA Notes*, which was distributed to 2032 people with issue 37, February 2000. In total, we received 352 responses from over 47 countries (see Box 1), a response rate of around 18%. Your responses are crucial to the development of *PLA Notes*. We hope that the series will continue to be an important way of sharing and exchanging information about participatory approaches to development as well as continuing to promote methodological innovation and good practice. We would like to share the analysis of the readership survey with you and suggest some initial ways of how to respond to some of your concerns and suggestions. The main themes presented in this feedback are the current situation, presentation and content and, finally, outreach and impact.

The current situation

PLA Notes is currently disseminated to 2570 individuals and institutions world-wide. Of these 87% are Southern subscribers, with 13% in the North. Since February 2000, the total mailing list has increased by 21%. Most respondents rated *PLA Notes* as 'essential reading' and the majority of readers share their copies regularly.

Box 1 Readership profile from survey respondents

- Of the 352 surveys received, 89% came from Southern subscribers with 11% from Northern subscribers. This reflects the real geographical distribution of the readership.
- We received responses from 47 countries, 21 in Africa, 10 in Asia, 6 in Latin America, 2 from the Middle East, 4 from Europe, 2 from Australasia and 2 from North America.
- Of responses received, 34% were from NGOs, 24% University/Research Institutes; 16% non-OECD Governmental organisations; 9% Community based-organisations; 4% OECD Governmental organisations.

Presentation and content of *PLA Notes*

PLA Notes is designed to be used by trainers, practitioners and others working in the field. We aim to keep the language simple and accessible on all levels and to provide clear accounts of practical methodologies in each issue. Most people feel that *PLA Notes* is well organised and structured, but some improvements have also been suggested.

Language

"What I like best is the graphic presentation of information and simple language which our technical staff can follow".

Many of our readers use English as their second or third language. Therefore, it is important that we try to use simple, informal language. 92% of respondents felt that the language used in the Notes was clear and easy to understand, but it is important that we try to improve this standard. For example, *"More space in PLA Notes to field and support and consideration for publication to the people of developing countries who do not have good writing skills in English"*.

Illustrations

"I'm always looking for participatory drawings, diagrams and ways of co-learning while keeping discussion focused within complex topics. Most articles are words!"

Two-thirds of respondents felt that the amount of visuals in *PLA Notes* was 'sufficient', but just under a third felt that there were not enough. Many readers suggested including more diagrams, pictures, photographs and cartoons and to make them clearer with more explanatory notes. Some said that *PLA Notes* can sometimes appear too text focused, for example: *"Illustrations or visuals are needed, especially in developing visual aids for farmers/clientele. Please include/encourage illustration from your contributors"*.

Translation

"PLA should be developed in different languages and should be understandable enough to assist community leaders in rural areas e.g., chiefs; traal heads etc".

As it is currently produced in English only, *PLA Notes* excludes a large number of non-English speaking people who are using participatory approaches in their work. For example: *"Maybe the feedback – from Mozambique is weak – not because we don't want – language can be constraint"*.

Translation is a key challenge for *PLA Notes*. From the survey, the most popular language for translation was French, closely followed by Kiswahili, Hindi, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic. Many other languages were also suggested for *PLA Notes* to be translated into. This list ranged from Amharic to Afaa Oromo, Cambodian to Chinese, Tagalog to Thai, far more in fact, than can be

noted here. Whilst we are unable to translate PLA Notes into every language suggested, it is exciting and encouraging to note that many respondents said that they were already translating the material independently so that the material could be used appropriately with local communities.

"We find in PLA Notes, a practical handbook for all staff of RCF. Every article is carefully studied, discussed, adapted, simplified and translated into local languages for our target groups. This way the people are carried along and they enthusiastically participate in programmes and initiatives with PLA Notes..." The Rural Co-operative Foundation of Nigeria .

As well as translating articles from English, we are also aware that there are many experiences, projects, research and training programmes and networks in the non-English speaking world that cannot be shared through PLA Notes unless they are translated first. To maximise inter-regional learning and promotion of good practice in participatory approaches in a truly international sense, translation and possible regionalisation of the series needs to be addressed. We are currently exploring ways of translating PLA Notes into Spanish and French as a starting point, through our partners in the Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action (RCPLA) Network, with a view to developing a model which would enable local experiences within the region to be shared in those languages. Such accounts of participatory practice may then be translated into English. There is much to discuss regarding this issue but it is an extremely important area for PLA Notes to develop, particularly if we want to support information exchange on an inter-regional and international basis.

Authorship

"I have always been ready to share my experience with the rest of the world but that is only possible through my own hand written reports and posted to you, is that allowed? Please let me know".

82% of you felt that there is a 'good mix' of authors (practitioners, academics, North and South), but we would also like to encourage more southern and practitioner authorship. As to whether we would accept a hand-written, non-typed article for consideration in the PLA Notes series, the answer is an emphatic YES! Please send us your experiences. It is important that you think of PLA Notes as your way of sharing experiences, whether you have access to a typewriter, a computer or a pen.

Process

"I have the impression that sometimes authors put more emphasis on the tool used than on the process in which the tool has been used..."

Many of you commented that PLA Notes needs to have more focus on the process, follow-up and impact of participatory approaches. As one readers says, *"we always hear about X,Y or Z PRA exercise or tool but where's the follow up?"*. Some readers felt that the articles could be richer in scope and suggested a summary of key ideas at the start of each article.

In response to these concerns, we have reviewed our Guidelines for Authors (see back inside cover, this issue) to encourage articles which address issues of methodological innovation or offer critical perspectives on participatory processes. For example, *"Put in some more critical voices from time to time. Sometimes the PRAISE gets to be a bit overwhelming. What of an analysis of people who tried to use PLA but failed – for valid reasons!!"*. Participatory research should be recognised as having its own problems and weaknesses. By sharing critical perspectives we can learn more. We are interested in articles that look specifically at the practical outcomes, impact and follow-up of participatory processes, and what can be learnt from these. We also strongly encourage articles with illustrations and other visuals written in simple, clear language.

Box 2 shows some more of your suggestions for improving and developing the PLA Notes series.

Box 2 Some of your comments regarding format and content

- *"I appreciate issue wise publication. The section on more general topics should be enlarged so that more articles can be published."*
- *"Fine, except I get a little irritated if the 'theme' is not one of my interest then there's not enough for me and I have to wait for the next issue"*
- *"I like the informal manner – but still seems to be mainly research from those who publish – not so many practitioners. Quite okay, more best practices should be included"*
- *"Very clear, good to have feedback and info section at the back."*
- *"Sometimes I wonder if there could be more analysis."*
- *"Not enough consideration for feedback from readers. Feedback received from users and grass-root workers should be presented as they are actually doing the activity"*.
- *"...be more process oriented. I'm getting really bored with the series, as there is almost no process in it – we always hear about the newest tool [...] but there's no follow-up [...] What about local people's own methods of discussion problem-solving and decision making. Do they really need all these elaborate methods of visualisation? I doubt it!"*

Theme issues

"It would be more exciting if the PLA Notes balanced different disciplines instead of having each edition handling only one discipline... with sections addressing education, agriculture, health etc".

Table 1 Recent themes in order of preference

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|--------------|--|
| PLA Notes 30 | Participation and fishing communities |
| PLA Notes 37 | Sexual and reproductive health |
| PLA Notes 33 | Understanding market opportunities |
| PLA Notes 28 | Methodological complementarity |
| PLA Notes 35 | Community water management |
| PLA Notes 29 | Performance and participation |
| PLA Notes 32 | Participation, literacy and empowerment |
| PLA Notes 27 | Participation, policy and institutionalisation |
| PLA Notes 34 | Learning from analysis |
| PLA Notes 31 | Participatory monitoring and evaluation |

Since 1996, most issues of *PLA Notes* have focused on themes and topics suggested by the Readership. These are popular as they offer exposure to different areas of work. However, some respondents felt that it would be more useful to have a more general issue. One reader suggested that the general section of each issue should offer a wider spread of articles. This is a good idea, and in future general sections, we will publish a better spread of articles that appeal to a broader section of the readership, whilst maintaining our thematic focus. Of the recent themes presented in *PLA Notes*, the most preferred were: *Participation and Fishing Communities*, *Sexual and Reproductive health*, *Understanding Market Opportunities* and *Methodological Complementarity* (see Table 1). Your preferred themes for the future are shown in Box 3.

Box 3 Future themes

The most requested theme for a future issue of *PLA Notes* was *Gender*, with *Land Use Planning* coming a close second. Other key areas suggested are *Health* (including Women and Child Health, Sexual & Reproductive Health), *Participatory Methods for Poverty Alleviation* (including Participatory Poverty Assessments), *Community Planning and Development* (with emphasis on how to manage community-based initiatives in a participatory way), *Agriculture*, *Natural Resource Management*, *Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation* (reflecting concerns about follow-up and impact), *Education and Literacy*, *Biodiversity and Conservation* and finally, more focus on *Training*.

Other themes you mentioned include: *Conflict Resolution*; *Emergencies and Refugees*; *Marketing/budgets and micro-finance*; *Institutions*; *Livestock*; *Governance and Democracy*; *Children and Young People*; *Population*; *Forestry*; and, *Communication*.

Our three most recent themes, *Sexual and Reproductive Health* (PLA Notes 37) *Participatory Processes in the North* (PLA Notes 38) and *Popular Communications* (PLA Notes 39) respond to some of your needs. This issue (PLA Notes 40) looks at participatory processes for better governance (*Deliberative Democracy and Citizen Empowerment*). Future *PLA Notes* themes will include PM&E, Children's Participation, Gender and Biodiversity but other areas you suggest will also be considered in future. Please send us your contributions on any of the themes you would like to see in *PLA Notes*.

We also try to respond to new opportunities and areas of information. For example, see the new *E-Participation* section in *In-Touch*, (this issue). A common suggestion for new features in *PLA Notes* is increasing interaction with readers through more regular readership surveys, a *PLA Notes* Readers' Club, and a Readers' forum, where readers' views are encouraged to increase regional sharing and networking (see Box 4 for more of your ideas). Furthermore, we now send out mini-surveys with all free subscription renewal letters. Readers renewing subscriptions from *PLA Notes 40* have already sent back their completed questions about access to electronic media, email and the Internet.

Box 4 Readers' suggestions for future features

Allow more interaction with the Readership through:

- *Letters to the Editor* – to enable readers to express what topics they would like to see included in future issues and to give more informal feedback on issues arising;
- *Feedback Section* – expand to allow the *PLA Notes* audience a chance to share comments and views;
- *An expanded In Touch section* – to have more space for news on PLA and related activities; to include more training workshops and events, provide information and contacts regarding how to obtain grants; include more information on websites related to development; and,
- *Feature guest column* – to share informal feedback on previous articles, make recommendations and draw together key lessons; to accumulate a bank of information about on-going field work experiences and feedback regarding applying participatory methods, the 'how to do'.

Other suggestions include the following.

- To have more teaching aids in *PLA Notes*, such as posters, extension support material and booklets etc.
- To consider alternative ways of documenting processes
- To have a glossary of terms, a summary of key words and a list of acronyms at the start of each article to help readers select those which are most relevant to their work.

Outreach and impact

Around half of respondents stated that they use *PLA Notes* for practice, training and information purposes, for example: "Initially I learned almost all I know about *PLA* from *PLA Notes* and have gone on to use it in 5-6 countries and train hundreds of people". 25% said that they use it for research, 24% for networking and contact information and 29% for the listings section. Some respondents have also used it for advocacy and lobbying, radio broadcasts and sharing knowledge with the community. We do encourage sharing *PLA Notes* through photocopying articles and sharing individual copies, so that its information can reach a wider audience, as in the above example. The majority of respondents currently do this as a matter of course (see Box 5). We also encourage subscriptions to libraries and Resource Centres where information can be accessed and used by a larger number of people.

Box 5 Sharing the information

- From the data received, 39% of respondents share their copy of *PLA Notes* with more than 10 people and many of you photocopy articles regularly. If 39% of the entire mailing list shared their copy of *PLA Notes* with 10 or more people, this alone would lead to a potential readership of more than 10,000.
- Also, 49% of respondents stated that over 50 people have benefited from the *PLA Notes* (through training, workshops, networking etc.). This could potentially have an impact on 62,965 people.

Whilst open to some assumption, this demonstrates how *PLA Notes* is reaching a wider audience than the mailing list alone. More importantly, this is due to the activities of the readership itself, rather than through any specific activity developed by the team at IIED. However, over the past 18 months, we have increasingly focused our attention on how to get the *PLA Notes* to a wider audience, through presenting the information in both electronic and paper formats, in different languages, and through targeting new groups.

Electronic media

*"The idea of internet based *PLA Notes* is quite good but faces drawbacks in the South where connectivity and service charges are prohibitive. In rural Kenya internet access is only a dream (as of now) yet many beneficiaries to *PLA Notes* live/work in such areas".*

55% of respondents (from the South) stated that they did not have access to the Internet, although 32% of Southern respondents said that they did. Of that 32%, two-thirds would still require a hard copy of *PLA Notes*, even if these were available on the web. Very few respondents who could access the Internet said that they would not require a hard copy of *PLA Notes*. Currently, *PLA Notes* goes out in hard copy only, although we are investigating electronic means of publishing, for example, the *PLA Notes* CD-ROM. Many respondents stated interest in this way of electronic dissemination, as they may not have access to the Internet but do have access to a computer with a CD-ROM drive. Whilst we will be putting the *PLA Notes* on-line in the near future, the Internet is not a solution for everyone and we will also be maintaining hard copy distribution for those who prefer to, or can only, access the information this way.

Subscriptions

"On subscription charges – I would be willing to pay more to ensure that Southern readers get it for free".

Just under half of respondents felt that the subscription charges were 'about right', although 25% still felt that the subscriptions were 'too expensive'. The revenue received from Northern subscribers helps to support the free dissemination of the series to the South and we have recently introduced a two-tiered system of subscriptions for OECD subscribers, including an institutional and individual rate. We hope that the added revenue generated from this will continue to support and expand the southern dissemination, so that *PLA Notes* can continue to be accessible to its southern readers.

Conclusion

The 3rd Readership Survey will help us to develop *PLA Notes* through responding to your needs. Without your input, this development would be meaningless. As 'a voice from the field', its development is also guided 'from the field'. We hope that this information has been interesting and we welcome any feedback you may have,

so that we can start on one of your many recommendations: *to have greater interaction between the PLA Notes and its audience.*

Why is PLA Notes useful to you?

Box 6

"PLA Notes have made it clear that community participation is no longer a theory. It has given clear and practical examples of communities lifting their living standards by using locally available resources under technical guidance, facilitated by Government and NGOs. PLA Notes have been a source of material, a guide and a morale booster. It has chronicled the fact that dreams can become reality to those willing to work together regardless of community, class, education and other varying backgrounds".

Last but not least, we ran a competition for you to tell us in less than 100 words why *PLA Notes* is useful to you. There were many wonderful, interesting and insightful contributions and sadly, we are unable to publish them all. After much deliberation, we chose the above entry from Dr. J. Ochieng Manyonge from Kenya (see Box 6).

Dr. Ochieng Manyonge will receive a selection of publications from the Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods programme. Once again, many thanks to those who contributed to the 3rd *PLA Notes* Readership Survey. We look forward to hearing from you again!



About PLA Notes 40

The theme for this issue, *Deliberative Democracy and Citizen Empowerment*, focuses on how to engage 'the public' in policy formulation. Currently, there is increasing interest from Civil Society in ideas regarding good governance, deepening democracy and citizen empowerment, particularly how to bring the public or 'lay' perspectives into areas where traditionally, the public has had little or no involvement. This issue draws together some key thinking around public participation, using a range of techniques known as 'Deliberative and Inclusionary Processes' (DIPs), including mechanisms such as Citizen's juries, Citizen conferences and the like. The majority of experiences with these processes has been in the North, although increasingly, these are being adopted and adapted in the South, as the review by Scoones and Holmes (this issue) shows. This issue is guest edited by Michel Pimbert and Tom Wakeford.

Michel Pimbert previously worked in agricultural research focusing on the agro-ecology of small farms and has conducted policy research on the links between biodiversity, livelihoods and cultural diversity. Currently a Principal Researcher in the Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods (SARL) programme at IIED, Michel is involved in action research on the management of agricultural biodiversity in the context of localised food systems and rural economies. He also co-ordinates an international research programme on 'Institutionalising participation in natural resource management'.

Tom Wakeford taught and researched biology. He gradually became interested in issues of the democratisation of science and, in particular, citizen empowerment initiatives in both the North and South. He currently works on Citizen-governance of Biotechnology at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, and as an adviser on participatory technology development techniques to Action Aid in Brazil, India and UK.

This issue benefits from generous additional support from ActionAid and The Commonwealth Foundation. ActionAid works with over five million of the world's poorest people in more than 30 countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Founded in 1972, ActionAid is now one of the UK's largest development agencies with over 120,000 supporters. The material presented in this issue of *PLA Notes* is complementary to the work of the Citizens and Governance Programme of

The Commonwealth Foundation, and in particular, their Civil Society in the New Millennium Project. For further information on their work in this area, please refer to their website at www.commonwealthfoundation.com

Notes

Analysis of Readership Survey by Laura Greenwood and Holly Ashley, IIED.

In this issue

This issue opens as usual with a selection of more general articles. In the first article, Joanna Busza et al. examine the dilemmas and challenges faced by a community development project in which participatory techniques are used with debt-bonded sex workers in Cambodia. This is followed by an interesting account by Garcia and Neyra on participation in the formal education sector, where participatory tools have been integrated into an Environmental Education course in Peru. Next, Georg Felber et al. present the potential of a Research-Action-Capacity building approach for malaria control activities in urban West Africa, looking at how the introduction and promotion of the use of insecticide-treated bednets for malaria control is being supported through a participatory approach. The last feature in the general section is written by Robert Chambers in memory of James Mascarenhas, who sadly passed away recently.

Regular features

In the *Tips for Trainers* section, Neela Mukherjee presents a set of generic guidelines for trainers, relating specifically to their behaviour and attitudes, how to deal with groups of participants with mixed levels of experience in participation and of the importance of self-reflection and criticism.

This is followed by the *In-Touch* section, which announces new training courses, events, reports and other sources of information. A new feature in this section is the *E-Participation* section, which focuses on electronic information resources for participation. Lastly, the RCPLA Pages provide a brief summary of the workshop proceedings from the recent RCPLA Network meeting, held in Cairo, September 2000, which looks at the challenges and concerns around information networking to promote participatory development world-wide. It also provides an update of the Institute of Development Studies Participation Group, UK, and UPD-Net, Uganda.

If you have any comments on this, or other, issues of the *PLA Notes*, we would love to hear from you. We will try to publish these in a 'Letters to the Editor' feature in the next issue. Happy Reading!