



# Overview: Local governments – potentially the most important day to day real-world users of innovative participatory approaches

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## Why a 'local government' special issue?

Since its inception in 1988, *PLA Notes*<sup>1</sup> has published hundreds of articles on the design, application and assessment of participatory methodologies in a broad range of settings. Yet there have been very relatively few articles devoted to the use of participatory methodologies in local government bodies, which is surprising given the mandate of these institutions in meeting the needs and interests of local people.

One reason explaining this situation might be the fact that there has been little to write about since local government bodies started using participatory methods and tools after other institutional players. Participatory approaches for engaging with people and facilitating development have been used in different ways and to varying effects since the 1980s by multilateral and bilateral agencies, NGOs, research institutes and central government departments. Yet it is only over the 1990s that local government bodies have started to apply them with any consistency despite the fact that in many countries they probably have the greatest role in facilitating local development, with explicit responsibilities, often stipulated in law, to consult their citizens in the delivery of appropriate services to meet their needs.

Another reason might be that in many parts of the world,

particularly in poorer countries, multilateral and bilateral agencies continue to cover part of the remit of local government, and often end up operating in parallel and undermining local government. It is also the case that the academic world in general is weak on working with and/or for individual local government bodies in their own countries<sup>2</sup>. It appears that they do not consider them to be big enough players (or payers) in the domestic policy arena.

However, although the situation is improving and there are more and more examples of local governments using participatory approaches in their work, it is equally true that in many parts of the world it is still the norm for these bodies to use traditional ways of working which are extremely bureaucratic and formal in their dealings with citizens and local communities. Why this should be the case, and what are the constraints preventing local government bodies applying more participatory methods in the ways in which they deal with their citizens, is a key issue addressed in this issue of *PLA Notes*.

What does this participation consist of and is it worth it? What levels of participation are required, by whom and for what purposes? What are the different methods and tools being used? Are they of value and can they be replicated in

<sup>1</sup>It was initially called Rapid Rural Appraisal Notes and changed its name to *PLA Notes* in 1995.

<sup>2</sup>The situation is changing particularly in the Sahel where there are examples of university departments from the UK, France and the USA implementing large programmes of action-research on a range of issues in collaboration with local government bodies.

different contexts? Are different approaches and methods required for urban and rural settings?

These are just some of the questions frequently asked not just by local government officials in the course of their duties, but by practitioners using participatory approaches, politicians, the business community and ordinary citizens. The authors of the articles published in this issue reflect this diversity of interest as well as a variety of political and institutional settings, and seek to share information of a practical and immediate value between those working for or with local government.

### What is local government?

First, it is important to consider what we mean by 'local government'. Most countries have a level of government, which is recognised to be closer and more responsive to local needs than either state or central government. In this issue of *PLA Notes*, local government bodies are considered to be 'locally' elected bodies which are town, city or metropolitan councils, regional and district administrations, communes, municipalities, town and city corporations and authorities, county councils, etc. These institutions can own and manage property, land, and other capital resources. They may be responsible for the delivery of services, although this is tending to decline in many parts of the world. They often have responsibility for vital functions such as education, planning, community development, social inclusion, dealing with social problems, managing transport infrastructure, providing conflict resolution services, collecting local revenue and managing its expenditure.

Despite these important roles and responsibilities, and the fact that in many parts of the world local government bodies are operating in increasingly decentralised and devolved political systems, for the majority of citizens their experience of local government is of agencies and institutions with outdated, conservative and non-participatory ways of working. This is unfortunate because if local government institutions could operate in more participatory ways for all their functions, they could offer citizens the opportunity to have their first real taste of meaningful engagement, discourse and interaction with officials who control key processes that affect their daily lives.

### Issues arising from the articles

Most of the articles in the local government special section focus more on the practical ways local government officials and those working on their behalf have sought to engage with their citizens on issues of concern to them. In view of this, the issues that arise concern more the 'hands-on' ways of seeking genuine and useful participation than the under-

lying academic debates about such issues. The guest editors make no apologies for this – the authors of the articles were asked to focus on practicalities as it was felt that these are the details that are of most interest and usefulness to the practitioners who read *PLA Notes*.

### 1. Social inclusion

A major issue that appears in nearly all the articles, be they from Africa, Asia, Europe or the Americas is the one of social inclusion. The question of how, in practice, local government bodies actually implement their rhetoric of participation clearly is problematic. Diakit 's article (Mali) highlights some of the challenges in reaching highly mobile groups such as pastoralists, while Humphries' (England) shows the limitations of consultative procedures that focus just on conventional meetings or on consulting 'local opinion leaders'.

The **cost of participation** is a subsidiary issue of social inclusion. The articles highlight several perspectives on this issue. First, the cost to the public of giving up their time to attend meetings or to fill in questionnaires without any assurance that their views and proposals will be taken into consideration, versus the cost to local government in running a highly participatory consultation process. Turner's 'Clean Edinburgh' article (Scotland) and Serwatko's (Poland) show how **good methodology design and common sense facilitation** can lead to the cost-effective use of participatory approaches. The issue is less to do with trying 'to meet everyone', which is clearly unrealistic, and more to ensuring that the consultative process **reaches a representative cross-section of the community**. Identifying and dealing with local people's immediate problems and needs is also critical as shown by Turner and Humphries.

Conversely, Bangaly's article (Mali) shows how participatory planning exercises that have been carried out with **external support** have created a surge in demand for services and projects for social infrastructure which the rural councils cannot hope to meet from their own budgets. This has led to situations where rural council leaders, mindful of the need to satisfy as many of their constituents as possible, have approved a multitude of very small, partly funded activities that collectively do not contribute to the economic or social well-being of the local residents. And pragmatic local leaders are now asking questions on whether they can sustain the costs of an intensive participatory planning process when external donors retire. The participatory budgeting articles by Menegat (Brazil) and Hordijk (Peru) illustrate attempts to solve problems like these.

### 2. New styles of leadership

All the articles point to the fact that **good governance** is the

critical issue if **local government** is to deliver pertinent and cost-effective services to their citizens. Good local government is as much to do with relinquishing control and devolving responsibility for certain tasks – to other bodies such as private sector, community groups, etc. as Burra and Patel's (India) article explains – as it is to ensuring visionary leadership and long-term planning that go beyond the specific political mandate they have received (Diakité, Hordijk, Hercz, Humphries). Principles of accountability and subsidiarity are essential. Local government bodies can and should have multiple roles ranging from decision making to facilitating dialogue among multiple stakeholders (Hercz, Humphries, Diakité, Reid, Bangaly and Serwatko).

However, there are major political as well as technical challenges to overcome in changing local government and others' attitudes. To date more attention is paid to building the technical capacities of local government staff in participatory planning (e.g. how to develop a plan for the construction of a community health clinic) than to broader processes of civic education and building the capacity of local people to participate in public affairs and facilitate participatory processes themselves. Yet it is only when ordinary citizens have the confidence and the skills to hold local officials to account that one moves from a situation of 'participatory' to an 'accountable' government.

Experience has shown that accountability is of prime importance in ensuring the cost-effective delivery of appropriate services to local people. Local government bodies do need to acquire the skills to implement participatory planning processes to ensure that the interests of all their constituents are taken into account. But, more importantly, they need to be held to account through a system of incentives and sanctions, baseline studies and monitoring (which of course can be participatory – see Turner's article) to deliver appropriate services.

In general, there are major problems with regard to the degree to which local leaders are genuinely accountable to their constituents. In some cases this is because local people are unaware of their rights. In other cases local people are unaware who their community representatives are, especially when they are not elected. There is a long tradition in many parts of the world for self-appointed activists to be the only contact with officialdom (a situation which usually suits both parties very well) and where activists and the most vocal citizens are the main players (sometimes even the only players) in processes that are called 'participatory'. In many such situations there is no felt need and no attempt made to engage beyond activists:

- elected representatives tend to come from activist backgrounds so do not perceive any problems with minimalist

engagement processes;

- in the local media there is no pressure to change because activist-only systems tend to sit very well with conventional journalism.

So it is sometimes left up to local government officials to make the case for wider participation and to try to build capacity to change attitudes and broaden the process of consultations (for examples of this see Humphries and Turner). Occasionally enlightened, non-traditional political party leaders come to the fore and they can be an effective catalyst for improving social inclusion mechanisms (see Hordijk).

### 3. Appropriateness of pre-packaged participatory tools

Interestingly, only one article (Bangaly) explicitly raises the problems associated with local government structures in Mali using pre-bundled participatory 'tools' and pre-determined prescribed processes in a mechanistic way. This is probably because we set out by trying to find and illustrate examples of innovative, specially designed use (fit for purpose) participatory methods and processes rather than the unthinking use of pre-packaged systems. Our selection therefore probably doesn't highlight enough a major real-world problem – the pressure put on local government officials to adopt off-the-shelf participatory planning processes, which are claimed by their disseminators to be suitable for all purposes.

In the Sahel these were first introduced by the World Bank in the 1980s within the context of the *Gestion de Terroir* local development approach. In East Africa an example is the eight-step PRA process introduced and disseminated by Clark University. Off-the-shelf packages like these, despite their well-recognised weaknesses, are now being mechanistically promoted by multilateral and bilateral agencies and national governments for local government planning within the context of decentralisation. In the UK similar problems exist for packaged processes such as Planning for Real and, to a lesser extent, Future Search.

In Mali, for example, local consultants have been hired by central government with the support of the FAO to design and test a 'toolkit' of participatory processes to enable rural councils to establish council-level environmental management plans. The approach and the majority of the tools being proposed come from the PRA/PLA family and are to be used on a village-by-village approach to build up a council level environmental plan. This approach fails to consider a number of key issues.

First, the cost of applying these packaged participatory approaches on a regular basis in order to monitor and plan for the dynamics of environment change in Mali. These tools have been designed and used by resource-rich Northern organisations to support participatory processes within well-

defined project areas. This will not necessarily be the case for poor rural councils in Mali whose populations may be scattered over thousands of square kilometres.

In the first instance efforts must be made to convince existing users of these packages that they are not sacrosanct and that they can and should be adapted to meet local financial realities and political contexts. Secondly, the promotion of these pre-packaged processes must be curtailed. It is more important that local government bodies, which are intended to be around for the foreseeable future, are given good, effective, grounded, tailored advice and support even if this will take longer than advocating the quick-fix use of off-the-shelf packages.

Second, the tools have been designed for sedentary populations on the assumption that local people derive their livelihoods from using resources within the village territory. In Mali, as the rest of the Sahel, the majority of rural people have highly diversified livelihood strategies which often depend on gaining access to resources that may be hundreds of kilometres away from their home (e.g. transhumant herders). Similarly, the resources upon which communities may depend, particularly common property resources such as forests or rangelands, do not neatly fall within the jurisdictions of the rural councils, but may transcend several council or regional boundaries. To overcome these problems training must be given to local government officials to be able to be flexible and innovative in their use of participatory approaches and methods (e.g. given awareness of basic participatory working principles and basic process design skills).

Third, there are no plans to transfer the skills associated with pre-packaged models of participatory planning below the level of local government to communities and their associations. Participatory planning thus remains a process controlled by local government according to their values and interests. They frame the issues around which local people will participate rather than supporting processes whereby citizens are given the skills with which to identify and respond to their needs. As some of the articles show (Serwatko, Humphries, Turner) it is not difficult to add value to participatory processes and also build significant local social capital by recruiting and

training local citizens and stakeholders to be facilitators (although care has to be taken in terms of ensuring neutrality and there will inevitably be some issues for which the deployment of local citizens as facilitators will be perceived to be inappropriate).

### Conclusions

A point, which has struck us from the articles in this issue, is that it appears that local governments in the North could learn a lot from those in the South in terms of trying to use participatory approaches to empower their communities and citizens (rather than just consult them) through direct involvement in major decision making (especially participatory budgeting). On the other hand it looks like local government officials in the South could learn from those in the North about the use of participatory approaches to get beyond 'the usual suspects' (self appointed activists, most vocal and confident individuals, etc.), and also with regard to building local capacity (e.g. training local government officials and workers and local citizens to be participatory approach facilitators) instead of building reliance on (usually) expensive consultants and (usually) unaccountable NGOs.

In terms of the importance of this *PLA Notes* special issue, the initial lack of interest by the majority of local government officials in participatory approaches seems to have been matched by the initial lack of interest and priority given to engaging with local governments by the proponents of PRA/PLA, capacity builders and trainers in participatory ways of working.

This is changing, and the guest editors of this special issue have tried to capture examples of these trends in a way that will give a helpful pulling hand to those local government officials trying or wanting to work in more participatory ways... and to give a gentle push, hard shove or even a wake-up call to those participatory approach advocates and good practice disseminators looking for people to collaborate with whose legitimate day to day work involves trying to change people's lives for the better and making society and public services more open, participatory and accountable.

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