



Foreword

by **JENNIFER RIETBERGEN-McCRACKEN**

Congratulations on your 50th issue, *Participatory Learning and Action*! I can still remember when you were just a twinkle in Robert Chamber's eye at an IDS-IIED workshop back in 1988, when the idea of sharing notes from the field was discussed. The question was – who would coordinate, edit and disseminate an informal 'RRA' journal? All it took was an expectant raising of Gordon Conway's eyebrows, a quick nod of my head, and the Sustainable Agriculture team at IIED had taken you on!

Since then of course you have grown in leaps and bounds, to incorporate PRA and PLA. And it's great to see that you haven't taken on any grandiose or glossy airs over the years. You have stayed true to the idea of sharing cutting edge experiences, straight from the field – a field that has expanded to include every imaginable sector, in both the North and South.

My own field for a few years was in the World Bank when participation was making its first real inroads into the organisational culture there. A group of highly committed staff came together as the Participatory Development Learning Group to develop policy recommendations and practical guidelines for promoting participation in the Bank. Implementing these policies and practices meant trying to remove or circumvent the barriers to participation that were operating in the Bank (that Robert Chambers describes very accurately in his book *Whose Reality Counts?*).

Through the very small role I played in this participatory work, I was struck by the delicate dilemma inherent in mainstreaming participation in such a complex institution.

The initial strategy of developing special programmes to promote participation (including a Participation Fund to encourage participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation activities) was very effective in the early years, in kick-starting participatory activities across Bank operations. The downside though was that these special programmes tended to support a limited 'add on', 'optional extra' kind of participation and did little towards developing an overall corporate responsibility for participation.

Yet, without such programmes, project staff often got little or no support from their managers for spending the additional time and money necessary for participatory initiatives.

The challenge of moving from special support to real mainstreaming requires other measures, including strong supportive messages from the top, clear policies and effective incentives. Promoting a culture of participation also involves shared learning – from both positive and negative experiences. This may be the hardest part of all for performance-oriented staff of a high profile institution – to discuss any failures or shortcomings they have had in their participatory work. Maybe an in-house version of *Participatory Learning and Action* would help – in recognising the value of informal, experimental learning about the reality of participation. Perhaps we should start thinking of a *Participatory Learning and Action* franchise system...?

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