

Foreword

When I first joined the International Institute for Environment and Development more than 25 years ago, I found myself on the 3rd floor of Endsleigh Street in the next door office to Gordon Conway. It was the best place to be, as there was a great buzz around the promise and practice of participatory methods. Gordon, Jenny Rietbergen-McCracken and Jules Pretty would return from the field having spent an invigorating fortnight in Tigray, or in Senegal, hanging out with farmers, and walking the landscape with them. Many of such field visits involved Robert Chambers, who has inspired so many of us to trust our instincts and turn established assumptions on their head.

Reading through the early issues of *RRA Notes*, there is a freshness and energy bubbling up, seeking to test out new ways of learning and understanding how to engage a more bottom-up process of decision-making and development. The methods and approach firmly rooted analysis at the level of the people who actually plan and manage fields and land-

scapes on a day-to-day basis. It helped put 'experts' in a better place, and legitimised a different way of working.

It was also an approach whose time had come in many different regions. In the Sahel, for example, where I had been working since 1980, I had been intrigued by the very beautiful coloured maps showing different landscapes and pasture types produced for government and development agencies. The most elegant of wallpapers, I couldn't quite understand how you might use them in practice, since the people actually taking their herds north and south had no access to these maps and relied on a very different information system. After the droughts of 1983-4, there was much discussion about the future of the Sahel – many experts considered that it would be better to move people to higher rainfall coastal regions and abandon this large dry region. Many farmers and herders had not been waiting for such instruction, but had been moving into southern Mali and northern Côte d'Ivoire for generations. But there were

many who stayed behind, and evidence showed that they were managing their patchy resources with remarkable ingenuity, despite the uncertain rainfall.

The ‘participation’ rhetoric was taken up across the Sahel, with donors pushing the idea of *gestion des terroirs* (management of village lands) but no-one really knew how to do it. So it was lucky that a group of Sahelians led by Bara Guèye from Senegal and Mathieu Ouédraogo from Burkina Faso built a network to train trainers in RRA methods (known in French as *méthode accélérée de la recherche participative* (MARP)). This body of people has been central to the spread of locally driven decentralised management and control of land and natural resources that has offered such promise across the Sahel – most recently in the various greening the Sahel initiatives now documented.

After 25 years of publishing *PLA*, we have decided to take a break. We are reviewing its achievements over the last quarter century, celebrating the multiple and diverse impacts, and thinking about next steps. Clearly, the space *PLA* has occupied is of huge importance – offering space for shared learning, strengthening local power, legitimising local expertise and decision-making. We are reviewing the best means to work on this agenda, engage a wider audience and make trans-

parency, accountability, tools and tactics central to whatever follows *PLA*. We are examining new forms of communications technology, and asking what others are doing in this space. We’ll come back to you with our proposals for next steps as soon as we can.

As we take a break from publication, I would like to pay a particular tribute to the three co-editors Nicole Kenton, Holly Ashley and Angela Milligan. They have played an enormously important part in bringing *PLA* to where it is today, creating a vision and plan for each issue, and nurturing the many contributors. I must also thank all our contributors and subscribers, and especially the guest-editors, the Strategic Editorial Board and the International Editorial Advisory Board. We are also very grateful to the donors who have supported the series over the years, in particular the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and Irish Aid, which has enabled us to provide free copies to many individuals and organisations around the world. We’ll be sure to let you know how we plan to move ahead once the evaluation is done.

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