

Editorial

• The Readership Survey

A big thank you to everyone who responded to our readership survey, distributed with issue number 24 of *PLA Notes*. We had over 150 responses from 41 different countries. We were delighted to receive this feedback as we aim to focus *PLA Notes* to your needs. A readership survey is one method of hearing from you but we always welcome your views and comments, not only on the style and format of *PLA Notes* but in response to features and articles that are published.

Currently, we have 2341 subscribers to *PLA Notes*, 76 per cent from the South and 24 per cent from the North (see Box 1). Two-thirds of our distributions is to individuals or institutes with a total readership (through individuals sharing the *Notes*) estimated at over 7000 people. One-third of copies are held by resource centres and libraries. Through these institutions and local dissemination (e.g photocopying the *Notes*) we appear to reach many more people.

We would like to share our analysis of the collective responses and our proposed changes to *PLA Notes*. The main themes of your comments relate to four areas: the current situation, presentation of *PLA Notes*, changes and additions, and reflections on impact.

Current situation

One third of responses rated the issue of *PLA Notes* that accompanied the survey as excellent and two thirds of you rated it as good. More than half of you describe *PLA Notes* as 'essential reading'. While the publication is clearly filling a need, we want to continue improving it, especially the dissemination of information both to and between readers.

BOX 1

154 readership surveys were returned from 41 different countries. From Vanuatu to Vietnam, the Netherlands to Nicaragua and Canada to Cameroon, we thank all of you who responded.

17 per cent of returned surveys came from the North and 83 per cent from the South. This is similar to the distribution of our readership, although Southern readers were slightly better at returning their surveys than Northern readers.

Excluding issues of *PLA Notes* distributed to libraries and resource centres, each copy is read, on average, by 5 people. Furthermore, most of you photocopy all or part of the *Notes* to give to colleagues and friends.

On average, more than half of our Southern readers use participatory methodologies at least once a month as part of their work. Although used less frequently in the North, this may reflect our more limited readership in this area and a more recent introduction of participatory learning. The responses suggest that the balance between Northern and Southern authors and case-studies in *PLA Notes* is 'about right'. However, readers encouraged more Southern authors, particularly in Latin America, to share their experiences.

Presentation of *PLA Notes*

As for your views on the format of *PLA Notes*, here are the main points:

- keep the *Notes* informal and 'hot from the field';
- maintain the current length, content and language of articles, which was felt to be 'about right';
- maintain hardcopy distribution. Even those people who have access to Internet and electronic mail facilities prefer to receive a copy of *PLA Notes* by post. A hardcopy of

the *Notes* is easy to photocopy, share and use in training;

- use more illustrations/diagrams and cartoons to accompany the articles; and,
- use abstracts and key words.

We will try to incorporate your views on presentation into future issues of *PLA Notes*. However, we encourage you, as contributors, to be creative in compiling your articles and, where possible, use pictures rather than words. Illustrations can be used directly in training and make for easier reading of articles. We try to keep articles short to maintain the maximum number of contributions in each issue. Figures, cartoons and diagrams help you to get your ideas across and save space. We will also begin to use abstracts and key words to enable people to focus quickly on the main points of articles, so don't forget to write a summary.

Possible changes and additions

We received many suggestions for developing and improving *PLA Notes*. These are the major points and our response to them.

- *Create greater discussion in PLA Notes by publishing readers' letters and encouraging comments on previous articles.*

This issue includes a new section called 'Feedback' featuring articles which raise concerns that are commonly encountered in fieldwork and training. Feedback, in the form of tips, ideas and challenging reflection, is provided by another PRA practitioner whom we have asked to respond to the article. This is *your* forum to comment on any articles published in *PLA Notes*, so do send us your letters for inclusion. Don't forget that 'In Touch' is also your space to network and provide information and news to other readers. Please continue to send us your contributions.

- *Include summaries of long articles.*

Because we receive many more articles than we can publish, we have introduced another new section entitled 'Extracts'. This now allows us to share a greater number of inspiring

experiences with participatory approaches. Many readers express feelings similar to those of a Kenyan respondent: "*I would like to contribute [but] I need to make time to write*". This section contains short articles and should encourage you to put pen-to-paper and write a letter for the *Notes*. We will also highlight exciting and creative extracts from longer articles that do not meet all the criteria for full publication (see back page 'Guidelines for Authors'). Do send us short contributions for this new section.

- *Provide more information on training skills in PRA*

Beginning this issue, we will serialise our recently published '*Trainer's Guide for Participatory Learning and Action*'¹. This guide is written for both experienced and new trainers. It provides information and suggested exercises to help develop and improve training skills. We will cover a different topic in each issue, starting with Adult Learning. We will also maintain the feature 'Tips for Trainers' which contains short notes on practical exercises.

- *Keep special or semi-special issues*

We plan that all future issues will have a thematic focus on topics suggested by you. Each issue will also include a general section, enabling us to continue publishing innovative experiences outside of the main focus of the issue.

Box 2 shows the main features and articles that you would like to see covered in the *Notes*. A popular request was for more critical reflection on both the successes and setbacks of participatory learning in practice. This would link theory, practice and evaluation and, ultimately, lead to better practice. Another key topic was how participatory learning can be used in formal and non-formal education (including training). This would help develop a culture of participatory learning and

¹ *A Trainer's Guide for Participatory Learning and Action* by Pretty, Guijt, Thompson and Scoones. Published by IIED. Price 14.95 + postage and packing (25% UK and Europe, 35% airmail). Available from Marilyn John, The Bookshop, IIED, 3 Endsleigh Street, London, WC1H 0DD, UK.

partnerships within institutions and schools and colleges.

We hope to address these topics in the future and welcome your articles. Theme issues scheduled for the next few issues include:

BOX 2
TOPICS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE
IN PLA NOTES

- Successes and setbacks in practice and experience
- Critical analysis of experience
- Participatory monitoring and evaluation
- Developing the theory of participatory learning
- PRA in the project cycle
- PRA in formal and non-formal education
- Methodologies and innovations
- Natural resource management

- Policy and Institutionalisation of PRA (drawing on a workshop that brought together PRA practitioners from around the world, held at Institute of Development Studies, Sussex in May 1996);
- Complementarity, the use of participatory learning in combination with other research and planning methodologies;
- Fishing communities and participatory learning experiences; and,
- Participatory monitoring and evaluation (as expressed by one of our readers "*And after PRA, then what??*").

• Please send us your contributions on any of these themes.

Reflections on impact

This is the 26th issue of *PLA Notes* published since 1988. We are particularly keen to encourage papers that reflect on and evaluate the role of participatory learning in development processes. In the words of one of our Indian subscribers:

"Many of the papers still show an excitement with the methods themselves and end with some general conclusions. Readers can be encouraged to write in with more information about what happened after the PRA exercises were completed and how the outputs were put to use to initiate some action".

While we are interested in methodological innovation, it is also time to reflect on where PRA has led us, the difference it has (or hasn't made) in the long and short term, and directions for the future.

Please continue to respond to any of the issues raised in *PLA Notes*. Do send us drawings and cartoons to illustrate your work. We look forward to hearing from you.

• About PLA Notes 26

This last general issue of the *Notes* covers a range of topics, such as economics, agriculture, health and methodological innovation using case-studies from eleven different countries.

This issue begins with two papers with an economic theme from Kenya. Emerton and Mogaka describe a method of valuing domestic resources using locally meaningful economic indicators. Simanowitz describes how PRA can be used to enable communities to explore the effects of macro-economic policies on livelihood strategies. His example explores the effects of Structural Adjustment Programmes on peoples' subsistence strategies.

Continuing the policy theme, two papers (Hürlimann and Jufer, Schmidt) describe the use of PRA in urban and rural communities in Switzerland, a country under-going massive changes in agricultural policy.

Several papers develop or adapt PRA methodologies. Kersten, working with Australian graziers, describes how illuminating discussions can evolve during matrix ranking. Östberg uses mapping to enable communities to project into the future and examine the impact of changing land use practices and settlement patterns. Using a village picture book, Mazzucato and Niemeijer share farming experiences between Burkina Faso and Dutch farmers. Shreedhar's article describes the use of a range of PRA methodologies by a Southern

NGO in India, enabling people to combat STDs and AIDS.

Timlin describes a participatory approach to rural livelihood monitoring developed by Oxfam in Southern Sudan. Using local enumerators and many different tools and indicators, the scheme is designed to provide early warning of displacement triggered by insecurity, food shortages or other impending emergencies.

Participatory learning within institutions is addressed by several papers. Gosselink and Hoerberichts describe their approaches to introducing PRA to international agricultural research at the IIMI, the International Irrigation Management Institute. Alembi, Nabwile and Mburu describe the use of PRA, particularly semi-structured interviews, by the Kenyan Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) to enable it to better focus its research activities to real, local needs.

Kumar outlines a proposal to promote a participatory institutional culture within organisations by adapting Japanese quality circles. Finally, Narayanasamy describes a method of process observation to document and evaluate the implementation of PRA and maintain high standards.

Extracts includes contributions by Baum and Mulla. Baum describes how coloured papers can be used to help find a common understanding for complex themes in natural resource management. Mulla describes her first experiences of participatory learning in Kenya.

In the new *Feedback* section, Million Gebreyes, from Ethiopia, considers the timing of consultation with local communities, particularly in large scale development projects. When should consultation occur? Parmesh Shah, from India, provides refreshing insights into the consultation process. We look forward to receiving other comments on this, or any of the other articles in this issue. Happy Reading!