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Methodological complementarity

Creativity and compromise

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• Introduction

Can participatory learning and action methodologies be combined with more formal, academic approaches and still be effective? This question is being faced head-on by the contributors to this issue of the *PLA Notes*. The continued spread and scaling-up of participatory research and planning methodologies has been accompanied by many questions related to their effectiveness and impact. Do they provide decision makers, local people and desk-bound professionals alike, with the right kinds of information to make sound decisions? What can they not provide or achieve? What do we need besides methodologies like PRA to make a difference?

In *PLA Notes* 24, 'Critical Reflections from Practice', practitioners and academics signalled growing problems with the use of PRA. One recurrent issue was the need to return to conventional social science approaches to elicit certain kinds of essential information which cannot be gathered using participatory appraisal. Mosse and Schreckenberg (see *PLA Notes* 24) wrote that in some settings and for some purposes, conventional research and planning methods may be more appropriate than PRA. Asking PRA to fulfil every information and development need is asking for disappointment, as no methodology is comprehensive.

A better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of PRA is encouraging much-needed discussion about the need to broaden it by borrowing valuable principles and methods from other approaches. It has encouraged people like those contributing in this issue, to develop purpose-specific combinations and sequences of methods and methodologies. This issue of the *PLA Notes* discusses why complementarity seems to be both essential and effective, and offers a number of exciting examples from research and development practice. However, it also highlights areas where far-reaching and serious compromises seem likely.

• Changing objectives and PRA

What is driving the creative combination of methodologies presented on these pages? They appear to come from researchers seeking a more people-centred research approach, as well as from community-focused professionals seeking information that carries more clout in policy and planning. And some exciting combinations come from the need for better community-level planning and action (Mangan, Sewagudde *et al* this issue). To meet such different objectives, these people are seeking to overcome current methodological weaknesses by building bridges between participatory and more formal, academically-

acceptable research and planning approaches¹. No longer is it only a matter of community-level learning and planning processes.

PRA essentially grew with a community action objective in mind. Information was shared amongst community members and with development professionals, through discussions and an endless array of creative methods. This then led to local development activities (often with many limitations, as discussed in *PLA Notes 24*).

The methods, in particular, of PRA have proven so versatile that they are increasingly being adopted and adapted by those aiming to influence policy and rethink theories. For example, *PLA Notes 27* explored how experiential learning gained through PRA can provide policy makers with more accurate insights into local conditions. Articles in this issue highlight that researchers and academics require rigorous data, yet also value the perspective of local people (see Tacconi and Shanley *et al*). Decision makers need summarised data at the macro-level for evaluation or planning, but based on accurate insights about local diversity (see Carranza, Leach and Kamangira, Turton *et al*).

The information shared in community-based discussions is now being used for a range of different objectives and must therefore meet different standards. The changing objectives of participatory approaches means, in some cases, that the end-users of the information are no longer only local people. Other factors that have stimulated a methodological broadening include:

- different scales of information;
- changing research interests and ethics; and,
- limits to local knowledge.

- **Participation for policy**

A key contribution of participatory learning and action methodologies lies in revealing and bringing together a greater diversity of perspectives. Yet this often leads to complex, context-specific information. The detail of

¹ In so doing, the sharp divide between positivist scientific methodologies and constructivist perspectives is fading.

such findings can bewilder policy makers and hinder, rather than help, decision-making processes. How can they use effectively the diversity and micro-details of such information? Can they safely extrapolate from local level analysis to macro-level planning?

A common motivation for combining methodologies appears to be the need for data that show local concerns as well as a broad regional or national level perspective (see Leach and Kamangira, Turton *et al*).

Much PRA-type work is often undertaken in only a few locations within a region, perhaps based on a sampling frame that chooses 'representative communities'. The process of local analysis often follows a general structure but is strongly influenced by local people and therefore often changes during the course of the work. Without the clarity of a sampling frame, sampling strategy, and consistency of the approach across different communities, it is almost impossible to generalise such findings. Therefore, other research principles and methods are needed.

In *PLA Notes 27*, Schoonmaker Freudemberger recommends that PRA findings from a few communities should not be extrapolated directly to a larger population. It is not effective when used at a regional or national scale. Instead, she suggests that PRA stimulates a more accurate debate about a policy issue by identifying the diversity of local conditions. By combining PRA with questionnaires or remote sensing techniques, that capture broader spatial information, can provide 'an attractive combination of range and depth of information'.

Conventional methods are important for ensuring scientific rigour. Sample surveys have the advantage of providing data that can, with appropriate statistical caution, provide planners and policy makers with scaled up information that is easily interpreted.

By contrast, participatory learning approaches provide local level information with which to interpret quantitative data and explain differences between findings at different sites. However, Turton *et al* (this issue) note that they can also provide quantitative information, for example on the relative importance of

different land use practices. Additionally, participatory research enables local people to be involved in the analysis of data acquired through more conventional approaches. It provides an opportunity for researchers, development practitioners, and local people to give each other feedback and thus improve the findings.

- **Research and participation**

We were surprised by the number of articles submitted for this issue that had a research focus. It seems that a growing number of students wish to use more 'people-centred', less-extractive research methodologies. There is a growing appreciation of the value of local knowledge and the dangers of interpreting local realities as a researcher unfamiliar to the local situation. Such issues were highlighted at a recent one-day workshop held at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS, November 1996) that explored best practice for using participatory methodologies in postgraduate research².

But combining a participation ethic in a research context requires careful thought. McGee (this issue) explores the ethics and practicalities of using rapid, people-based, appraisal for academic research. Recognising the extractive nature and lack of follow-up in academic research as compared to development-focused research, she stresses the importance of finding local collaborators and ensuring a good dissemination strategy for the research findings.

Nevertheless, Davis (this issue) notes that even where there is no explicit development planning component, local people may be able to use participatory research findings. His article describes how villagers initiated activities as a result of discussions they shared during the research process.

Another example showing how research findings can serve local needs is the

² An IDS Topic Pack (annotated bibliography) on 'PRA and Research' will be available from February 1997. This explores the challenges of using participatory methodologies for academic research. Contact IDS at the address given on the inside cover of this issue of *PLA Notes*.

environmental education booklet developed by local people in El Tamarindo (see Gammage, this issue). Using the research findings to create *Como es la vida en El Tamarindo* as a community education tool provided a focus for the community's interests and energies.

- **Different objectives, scales and methodologies**

Using participatory research to deliver local-level information to policy requires careful consideration about the appropriateness of specific methodologies. McGee (this issue) notes that each methodology is more effective in exploring some contexts with some people/groups at certain levels, than others. One challenge is to find methodological approaches that bridge the gap in policy-oriented research between those who make policy and those who are the 'object' of policy.

One possible solution is found in the article by Tacconi (this issue) which addresses the problem in reverse. It shows, not how to make policy based on people's needs but how participatory approaches can be used to adapt a macro-level policy to the specific local context and needs.

Linked to the importance of understanding at what level one is working, is the question of the unit of analysis. Davis (this issue) considers that the group-based methodologies, common to many participatory approaches, work well at the level of the community or sub-section of the community. However, he adds that conventional methodologies are important to focus more specifically, for example on households or individuals, and explore topics which may not be expressed freely in groups.

Do we therefore need methodologies for understanding the sub-community level as well as the macro-level, as suggested by Schoonmaker Freudemberger? Is PRA only, or most, effective in the community level discussions?

- **Limits to local knowledge**

The eagerness of researchers and policy makers for more local level information has

stimulated many methodological marriages. Exploring and valuing local people's understanding of their environment and conditions were central in that process, and are key principles of participatory learning and action. However, four articles in this issue discuss how the limits of local knowledge and skills spurred the search for complementary methodologies. Mangan (this issue) shows how little farmers may know about local pests. He describes the intensive long term training process that he uses to help farmers recognise crop pests and know when and how to apply integrated pest management.

The article by Shanley *et al* outlines the benefits and shortcomings of local knowledge to ecological research. General information on local resource use was readily available and provided the focus for the research project. 'Key informants', such as hunters, provided information about the species they pursue and use. But local people were often unable to provide reliable quantitative data on the production and yield of key forest products. Yet these data are essential to identify sustainable harvesting and management practices with local people.

Shanley *et al* suggest that the significant 'gaps' in local knowledge can be complemented by more conventional biophysical methods. In this case, long term ecological methods were used alongside participatory appraisals that were completed relatively quickly.

But what happens when such methodological combinations reveal differences between local knowledge and 'objectively' collected scientific data? Lindblade (this issue) describes an example from Uganda where long term ecological data show environmental improvement, while local people describe how yields are declining and fallow land is decreasing.

Lindblade discusses whether there is room for consensus when two data sets differ so sharply. Do researchers overestimate the ability of participatory research to enable effective communication between outsiders and local people? Have local people become attuned to saying what they believe outsiders want to hear, thinking that painting a worse picture of problems can increase the chances

of development projects? Do villagers believe the 'conventional wisdoms' of overpopulation, soil degradation and declining soil fertility because of the legacy of past development projects and an education system that perpetuates these beliefs?

While Lindblade's article does not provide all the answers, like Shanley *et al*, it urges us to take a more 'discriminating attitude towards information gathered from communities using rapid methods'. This highlights a point made by Tacconi (this issue), that the different ways in which people perceive their realities poses real challenges to any research process, not to mention a participatory process which aims to reconcile these views into a workable solution.

Another way to view the limits of local knowledge is by recognising that communities lack skills for their own planning. Sewagudde *et al* describe how Redd Barna Uganda (RBU) has slowly developed a tailor-made sequence of methodologies for their work in community-based planning. They recognise that 'PRA alone cannot stimulate all the desired changes in the community'.

For example, local communities have difficulties resolving gender- and age-based conflicts and are generally not skilled at planning large-scale activities. They lack ways to integrate children into community planning. Thus RBU staff are using other methodologies, not so much to overcome limited local knowledge, but to address gaps in local capabilities thus ensuring that the outcome is beneficial to all those involved.

• Sequencing

Not only are the combinations of methodologies important, but so is the sequence in which they are used. Sewagudde *et al*'s article is a carefully thought out blend of child- and planning-related methodologies, where community participation remains central. Three other experiences describe combining questionnaire surveys with participatory research methods (see Davis, Leach and Kamangira, Turton *et al*). They show how the sequence of methodologies influence the degree to which local people contribute to, and benefit directly from, the findings.

Leach and Kamangira began their evaluations in Malawi using a pre-designed questionnaire. This addressed the issue of adoption of soil conservation methods, which was of importance to the project. This was followed by an innovative 'in-field' analysis of the questionnaire, which allowed the enumerators to be involved in the analysis of data they had collected. The analysis also provided the focus for the PRA work that followed, by identifying issues for further investigation and clarification.

In his Mauritania-based work, Davis adopted the reverse sequence. He began with open-ended, participatory methods to understand the local terms used for exchange practices in local communities (see also Turton *et al*). He then designed his questionnaire, more confident that the questions were relevant and could therefore provide an effective assessment of the extent of local exchange practices.

• Timing and the use of PRA

Methodological complementarity has also arisen due to concerns about using PRA and other participatory approaches too early on in the planning or research process. McGee urges strongly that participatory approaches should not be used on first contact with communities. She suggests that a longer presence in the area can prevent ill-designed, ethically unsound research that creates local mistrust and spurious findings.

McGee undertook over five months of careful ethnographic research which revealed sensitive information that may not have surfaced using rapid appraisal techniques. But the time cost of this approach is a luxury that probably only a handful of doctoral researchers can afford.

But evidence from a development organisation supports McGee's suggestion. Sewagudde *et al* report on their experience that 'PRA is not a rapid affair' but one that can take up to 18 months in some communities. They also recommend that PRA is more effective when not used immediately, nor in isolation. It should at least be preceded by an understanding of basic communication skills, which they consider an essential complementary methodology. These enable

the grassroots organisations they work with to appreciate the importance of trust, respect and dialogue. Until good communication skills are established, it is difficult to develop solid and sustainable partnerships with local people.

• Participation versus science?

Many of the articles in this issue suggest that quantification for scientifically-minded audiences and policy uses occurs at the expense of local people's participation.

We were struck by the fact that many of the articles we received referred to RRA or rapid appraisal, rather than PRA. This seems to reflect a shift in emphasis from participation to information. Several authors in this issue are clear that many of the methods they used did not necessarily have a planning component, due to research demands and the need to be both extensive and intensive in their research. Whiteside (this issue) explores the RRA-PRA dichotomy and discusses the value of each methodology. Like McGee, he stresses that circumstances will determine what is appropriate. He suggests that in certain situations, RRA is more appropriate than PRA and should not be 'left out in the cold'.

Nevertheless, several articles in this issue suggest that combining methods does not have to reduce the level of participation. Sewagudde *et al* demonstrate how a mixing of methodologies can instead reinforce participation, as long as the methodologies are adapted to serve primarily communities' needs rather than outside information needs. Similarly, Mangan (this issue) shows how multiple approaches help to build the skills of local people. His approach centres on a belief that the developing of local skills is central to developing effective and long term participation. Gammage (this issue) shows how extremely effective a combination of science plus PRA can be to stimulate local action in El Salvador, as is clear from Tacconi's work (this issue) in Vanuatu.

• The compromises of complementarity

The articles in this issue suggest that the combining of methodologies can often

improve our understanding of local conditions. But they also throw up new challenges, particularly for those keen to enhance local participation throughout the research and planning process.

Without a commitment to local people's capacity-building, their participation can quickly revert to one of information sources for planners or decision makers. This form of participation clearly has its purpose, but if carried out under the banner of collective action, it is far from the truth. While the drive for more 'extensive' or 'rigorous' information is helpful for policy, what's in it for local people (other than, perhaps a less inappropriate policy)? Can they still help to drive the research, development or planning process? Perhaps one could maintain participatory principles alongside conventional techniques throughout the research and planning process. This would enable continuous feedback and clarification of issues raised but requires much time. And time constraints were the very reason for some of the innovative methodological combinations described here (see Leach and Kamangira, Tacconi this issue).

To ensure that rapidity is maintained, the philosophies underlying participatory learning and action approaches are neglected in favour of the innovation offered by the methods. Many of these methodological combinations arose to fulfil the objectives of other, non-local people's needs: policy makers, planners, donors, evaluation officers, project managers, PhD supervisors, etc.

The creative use of exciting mixtures of methods and principles are sincere attempts to enhance participation within conventional forms of research and planning. However, they can, if used carelessly, move the local people who are central to development out of reach of the analysis and planning process. Several authors make no attempt to hide the limited effectiveness of their work.

When exploring the complementarity of methodologies, we must keep our eyes open to the potential of these new 'hybrids' to strengthen local people's capacities and opportunities to mark out a better future for themselves. These articles provide new ideas,

initial lessons, and important guiding principles. They suggest that there are only inadequate substitutes for long term interaction with those people whose livelihoods are being researched and planned.

The simple acronyms of RRA, PRA, PALM, PTD, PAR, etc that have served us to date can no longer describe the context- and purpose-specific methodologies that are emerging. The blurring of methodological boundaries as described in these articles, calls for increasing clarity about the principles, methods, and above all, objectives that guide our work.

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