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Shifting perceptions, changing practices in PRA: from infinite innovation to the quest for quality

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Introduction

In the beginning, there were methods. For many of us in the circle of enthusiasts of participatory approaches in the early 1990s, maps and models, calendars and Venn diagrams, matrices and rankings and the interactions and insights they produced defined what we did and what we had in common. It was this, too, that made participatory rural appraisal (PRA) – and rapid rural appraisal (RRA) before it – something that was very different from anything we'd known before. PRA bridged barriers that might otherwise have kept a social anthropologist and an irrigation engineer like us apart. And it brought us together with dozens of others, from a constellation of disciplines and professions, who shared our excitement about an approach that seemed to offer much for 'doing development' differently.
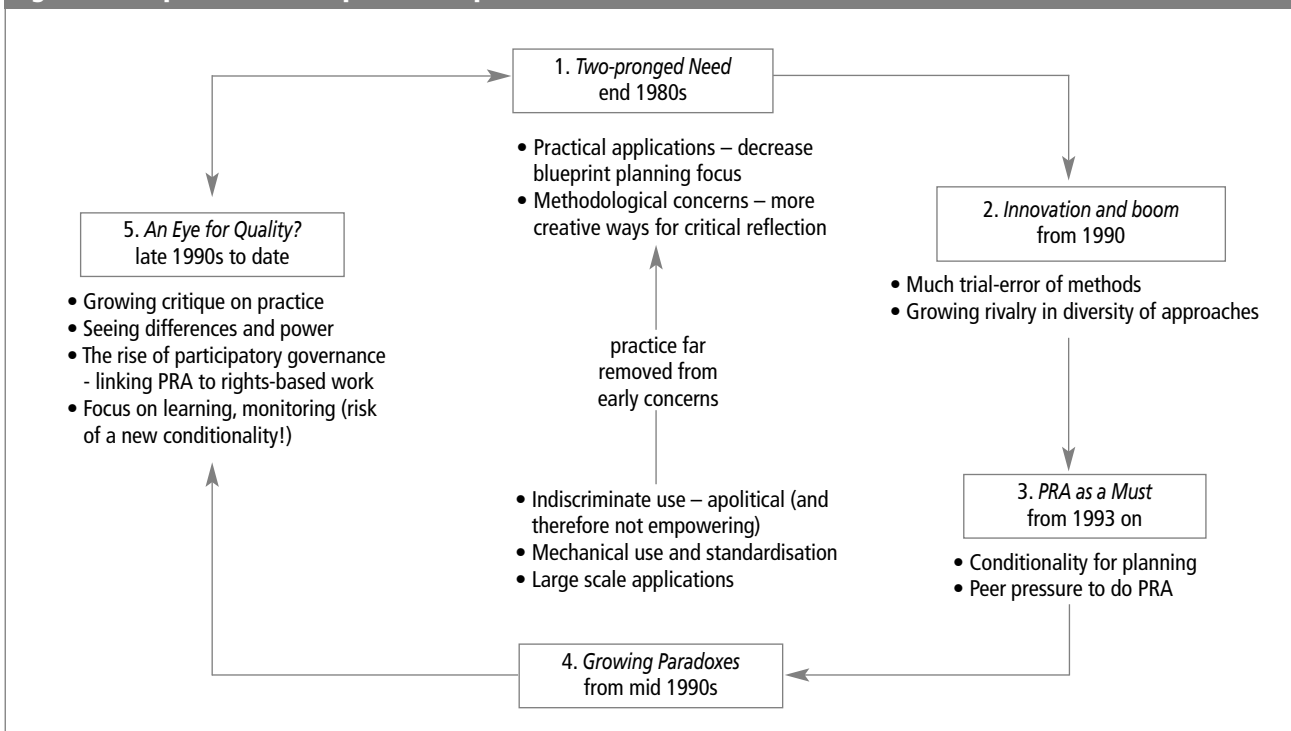
In 1995, we co-edited *PLA Notes* 24 on *Critical reflections on practice*, in which we sought to engage practitioners and advocates in debate about the looming crises of quality that were to become so much a feature of PRA practice in the later 1990s. In this paper, we look back over more than a decade of engagement with PRA as 'critical insiders'. *Participatory Learning and Action* has, naturally enough, served more as a vehicle for practitioners to share their successes and innovations than their critical reflections. Accordingly, we

draw here on sources that go beyond it, including reflections from the *Pathways to Participation* project (see Cornwall and Pratt, 2003a, in *PLA Notes* 47, and contributions to Cornwall and Pratt 2003b), from work with gender and participatory development (Welbourn, 1992; Guijt and Kaul Shah, 1998; Cornwall 2000), and from the lively debates that we have had for more than a decade with colleagues the world over.

These thoughts are our personal reflections, from standpoints associated with the two institutions – IIED and IDS – that were so much part of early efforts to promote and institutionalise PRA in international development practice. Our account is, therefore, very much a partial one. We offer it here as a means of locating some of the threads that have run through debates about PRA since the first issues of *Participatory Learning and Action*, and some of the challenges that practitioners of participatory learning and action methodologies continue to face. In it, we reflect on distinct phases in the development of PRA (see Figure 1), during which a series of issues emerged as themes for critical reflection. The phases indicated in the diagram relate generally to the prevailing sentiment and practice. Clearly there are exceptions – there have been critical voices and some were using PRA to address issues of power from day one, just as there is still innovation and excitement in some quarters today.

Modest beginnings

PRA started with RRA – Rapid Rural Appraisal. And RRA

Figure 1. Core phases of development and spread of PRA[1]

1. *Two-pronged Need*
end 1980s

• Practical applications – decrease blueprint planning focus
• Methodological concerns – more creative ways for critical reflection

5. *An Eye for Quality?*
late 1990s to date

• Growing critique on practice
• Seeing differences and power
• The rise of participatory governance - linking PRA to rights-based work
• Focus on learning, monitoring (risk of a new conditionality!)

2. *Innovation and boom*
from 1990

• Much trial-error of methods
• Growing rivalry in diversity of approaches

practice far removed from early concerns

• Indiscriminate use – apolitical (and therefore not empowering)
• Mechanical use and standardisation
• Large scale applications

3. *PRA as a Must*
from 1993 on

• Conditionality for planning
• Peer pressure to do PRA

4. *Growing Paradoxes*
from mid 1990s

started with the recognition that those who make the recommendations and the decisions in development are often poorly informed about the realities of those living with their decisions. RRA was supremely modest in its initial conception, described by Robert Chambers as 'organised common sense'. It was about learning how to listen, about getting people out of the office to find out for themselves what poor people's lives were like, about finding out as much as was necessary in order to begin to act (see contributions to RRA Notes 1,2,3). 'Optimal ignorance' and 'appropriate imprecision' were its watchwords (Chambers, 1997). It didn't involve hiring 'PRA facilitators' to run large exercises or produce reports full of diagrams. And although it was as much aimed at empowering lower-level public sector employees as enlightening their bosses, it had little of the aspiration to 'empower' poor people or seed self-help community development initiatives that PRA was to embody.

We were as critical of RRA as many of the anthropologists who saw it as short-cut 'pseudo-science' (Richards, in *PLA Notes* 24), and the conventional researchers and bureaucrats for whom all this 'playing with beans' (Backhaus and

Wagachchi, in *PLA Notes* 24) was no replacement for 'proper research'. What we did not recognise at first, though, was that RRA was offering something rather different. When done well, it challenged deskbound people out of their offices and their mindsets, convening them in mixed teams and sending them out to listen to local people about their issues. The information that was generated was, in many respects, secondary to what happened to people as part of the process. In our first encounters with an approach that was already becoming *P*RA (via PRRA), we both have memories of professionals who experienced quite marked shifts in their perception of 'the poor' in ways that neither of us could have imagined changing without the fieldwork. It was these experiences that mesmerised us, as they did many of those who became 'converted' to PRA through field-based encounters.

Excitement in a growing community of practice
Our first encounters with the PRA scene were equally exhilarating. As we began to engage with PRA, now as trainers, in 1990/1991, we joined first generation practitioners who were inventing new methods, new ways of doing training, developing and promoting a whole new approach. These were heady times. There was the thrill of discovering a new

[1] Adapted from Guijt (forthcoming).

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way of doing things. And then there was the buzz, and the sense of belonging, that came from being part of the 'sharings' – which ranged from gathering in numbers to listen with rapt attention and note every detail, to trading slides and brightly coloured overheads with diagrams to be shown hot-off-the-press in the next training course, or producing the next collection of exciting novelties. We felt part of an evolving and growing 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998), a group of people who interacted intensely through their shared enthusiasm for a different way of doing development.

Along with many others, we were both increasingly critical of some of the practices that we saw being presented as 'participatory' and 'empowering'. We were disconcerted by the consensus-thinking and information-focus that characterised much PRA practice. And yet both of us saw what could happen in the encounters people had with PRA in the field. Focusing our energy on realising the potential of PRA, for us, meant finding ways of bringing more attention to issues of difference and more critical analysis into PRA practice. *RRA Notes* 13, published in 1991, was a watershed issue, bringing into the debate more southern practitioners than had ever been part of previous publications and the tremendous energy and enthusiasm from innovators in India. But it was *RRA Notes* 14 of 1991 that, for us, was at least as significant, with articles by Welbourn and by Jonfa *et al.*, that began to open up questions about difference, that were to be taken up in later editions of *PLA Notes*, such as Welbourn and Guijt's contributions to *PLA Notes* 19, Seeley *et al.*'s in *PLA Notes* 26, Mukasa and Mugisha in *PLA Notes* 34 and many of the articles in *PLA Notes* 37, as well as publications such as *The Myth of Community* (Guijt and Kaul Shah, 1998) and *Stepping Forward* on children's participation (Johnson *et al.*, 1998)

This period saw growing debate about PRA's purpose, practice and politics. Ian Scoones captured some of the critiques and confusions, penning ten commonly held myths propagated by practitioners and academics alike, and asking anthropologists to engage constructively 'to continue the process of reflection, self-critique and theoretical and methodological enrichment [of PRA]' (*PLA Notes* 24, 1995; see also Scoones and Thompson, 1995). By and large, however, the critique was rather less constructive. Critics were dismissive, mocking even, of the earnest PRA crowd, finding them a little too credulous, a little too naïve about power and social change, and a little too willing to let anything pass as 'research'. Many of those engaged with PRA viewed their critics with scepticism and no small measure of disdain: how could they, who knew so little about the diversity of the practice that they were criticising that some seemed to barely know what the acronym stood for, how could they *understand*? And yet many of the criticisms that were made at that time echoed the doubts shared by practitioners out of the arena of public debate.

Use your own best judgement: seeding diversity

It didn't take long for the second generation of PRA practitioners – those trained and inspired by the pioneers – to begin to operate in unexpected ways, encouraged by the prevailing message of 'try it out, make it up and see what happens'. Some marvellous things happened, which would then make their way round the training rooms, told and retold with relish. Open-ended encouragement, given without constraints by Robert Chambers who shared PRA with countless others around the world, gave rise to some fantastic innovations, as practitioners were inspired to carry

PRA into uncharted sectors and settings. This was a time, too, of collecting dozens of acronyms for related methodologies as each new organisational or sector-related application seemed to produce a methodological offspring that built on the earlier RRA and PRA innovations. But sometimes, unsurprisingly perhaps, those whose exposure to PRA was sometimes as little as a day's intensive workshop simply went off and did what they were used to doing, adding a few diagrams into the mix and calling it 'participatory' (see Cornwall and Pratt, *PLA Notes* 47, 2003).

At the time, the emphasis was still on the methods. Most of us were so caught up in the belief that the tools themselves could bring about personal and professional transformation that we could barely imagine them simply being incorporated into 'development business as usual'. Even when a much-cited article (Mosse, 1994) equated the poor practice of a group of Indian male technicians with the methodology as a whole, the lesson this might have taught us didn't really hit home. Doesn't it stand to reason, after all, that people with different backgrounds might be expected to slot the tools into the frames of reference and ways of working with which they were familiar?

Reports of 'bad practice' and 'abuse' began to trickle, and then flood, in. This included formulaic applications of set strings of methods irrespective of context or purpose, as well as haphazard use of random methods. The critics rubbed their hands with glee: *told you so*! Critiques of PRA focused largely on the poor examples – and not as much on a balanced portrayal that included examples that worked. But 'insiders' were becoming quietly alarmed by what was going on. In May 1994, at a time when there was still what might be regarded as a 'PRA community', a cluster of practitioners came together to produce a statement *Sharing Our Concerns*, which was published in *PLA Notes* 22, of 1995.[2] They said:

Many donors, government organisations and NGOs are now requesting and requiring that PRA be used in their programmes and projects. This brings opportunities and dangers. The opportunities are to initiate and sustain processes of change: empowering disadvantaged people and communities, transforming organisations; and reorienting individuals. The dangers come from demanding too much, in a top-down mode, too fast, with too little understanding of participatory development and its implications. (Absalom *et al.*, 1995)

"What we did not recognise at first, though, was that RRA was offering something rather different. When done well, it challenged deskbound people out of their offices and their mindsets, convening them in mixed teams and sending them out to listen to local people about their issues"

The meeting discussed the dilemma of encouraging more diversity versus controlling quality, of continuing to foster or reigning in the spread of PRA. Our own naivety on this quickly exposed, we hoped to trigger a by then, desperately needed discussion on issues of quality. Six core problem areas are highlighted in the *Sharing Our Concerns* statement:
- *personal and professional values, norms and behaviour* that we, 'as PRA professionals' [sic], had a responsibility in ensuring or trying...;
- *community issues*, including the ethics of joint work, seeing differences, clear preconditions for engagement, aspects of practice to ensure quality, and investing in local human resource support and development;
- *organisational structures, styles and practices of management,* in recognition that adopting PRA as a core strategy would often entail extensive refocusing of the organisation;
- *approaches and methods in training*, to reduce the chance of a 'take the method and run' message being imparted;
- *networking and sharing* between all actors, to offset the Northern-professional domination of the discourse and the ownership of acronyms and methodologies; and
- *the policies and practices of donors*, who we viewed as particularly instrumental in pushing a quick-fix approach to PRA that they could dictate.

How many of those at that meeting realised the degree to which their concerns would be amplified in the years to come as the development industry took on PRA as a new technology?

'Scaling up' – PRA meets its nemesis?
Much of what practitioners raised as concerns for the future was happening as a result of the rush to go to scale (see Figure 1), as donor agencies and international NGOs caught on to the potential of PRA and its quick route to 'participation'. Beneficiary participation had been talked about in

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[2] The signatories were: E. Absalom, R. Chambers, S. Francis, B. Guèye, I. Guijt, S. Joseph, D. Johnson, C. Kabutha, M. Rahman Khan, R. Leurs, J. Mascarenhas, P. Norrish, M. Pimbert, J. Pretty, M. Samaranayake, I. Scoones, M. Kaul Shah, P. Shah, D. Tamang, J. Thompson, G. Tym, A. Welbourn.

Box 1: Sharing Our Experiences: an appeal to donors and governments (in *PLA Notes* 27, from a workshop in Bangalore in 1996)

... We welcome the efforts to mainstream participation in donor agencies such as the World Bank, and the increasing stress on participation by Governments and Government departments. Participation has become a requirement in most donor-supported projects, and is more and more stressed in Government programmes. This has led to some good results. Much more common, though, has been the abuse and bad practice. This has occurred on a huge scale. Again and again, in different countries and contexts, with different donors and Governments, we have found dependency created and participation destroyed by:
- *pressures to scale up PRA rapidly, sometimes to a national level*
- *demand for instant PRA training, one-off and on a large scale*
- *low quality PRA training, limited to routine methods*
- *the rush to prepare projects and programmes*
- *top down procedures*
- *drives to disburse funds*
- *time-bound targets for products, neglecting process*
- *inflexible programmes and projects*
- *neglect and underestimation of the knowledge and capabilities of local people*
- *neglect of local capacity building and institutional development*
- *lack of staff continuity*
- *penalisation of participatory staff, and above all failure to recognise the ABC of PRA – primacy of personal behaviour.*[3]

mainstream development for decades, but what had been missing were the instruments for putting it into practice, tools that were as politically neutral as they were easily transferable. This was a time in which neo-liberal 'do-it-yourself' ideology met the donor romance with NGOs, and as public sector reform met the cry for demand-driven development (see Cornwall, 2000). PRA's potential to deliver 'locally owned' and 'community-based' solutions led to meteoric uptake – in speed and scale. Stories were shared in the mid-1990s of PRAs being made mandatory for planning efforts throughout certain countries, and apocryphal tales were told – such as that of Indonesia, where PRA facilitators were accompanied by the military as they swept through thousands of villages. Reports of 'bad practice' and 'abuse' began to trickle, and then flood, in. This included formulaic applications of set strings of methods irrespective of context or purpose, as well as haphazard use of random methods. The critics rubbed their hands with glee: told you so! – and about simply rounding people up and giving them flip charts and

pens, then cobbling it all together to rubber stamp an already-funded-and-planned project. And some expressed their deep concerns (see Box 1).

In this same period, some PRA advocates had set their sights on transforming the World Bank's practice by introducing PRA into its everyday work. The discourse of the PRA 'community' resounded with the idea of 'shifting from projects to policy', and 'policy influence' became the new mantra. Quite what the World Bank was to do with PRA hadn't occurred to anyone at that stage. By the mid-1990s, the Bank had begun to incorporate 'participatory methods' in what came to be called 'Participatory Poverty Assessments' (PPAs, see Dogbe in *PLA Notes 27* for an early example; also the forthcoming issue, December 2004[4]). With aplomb befitting an institution that sought to make itself 'The Knowledge Bank', the Bank was to stage the largest, and most audacious, of PRA-based studies ever conceived, the *Consultations with the Poor* (Narayan, Chambers, Shah and Petesch, 2000). The jury is still out on whether this study was something to be celebrated, or whether it served to drain the last vestiges of credibility out of a methodology that was, for many, symbolic of an alternative to the very orthodoxies that the Bank used all those thousands of poor people's voices to affirm.

The mid-1990s also saw ongoing work at local level where PRA was inserted into ongoing engagement, often complemented with other methodologies and perspectives, as the *PLA Notes* 28 special issue on methodological complementarity (1997) demonstrates. In some contexts, organisations incorporated PRA into longer-term processes of community-based change work, complementing it with popular education methodologies inspired by Freire, advocacy or community organising (see Archer, this issue; Chapman, 2003). In others, approaches were developed that combined research approaches, using participatory methods with carefully selected samples or as discussion-starters in focus groups and so on. As PRA went to scale, then, it was also 'scaled out' (Gaventa, 1998), being used in increasingly diverse ways for ever-expanding purposes. By the end of the decade, what 'PRA' had come to consist of had become increasingly difficult to define.

Critical for shaping the understanding of what PRA was and wasn't, what it stood for and didn't, what it could do and couldn't, was the role of documentation and publicity. Other applications of PRA – or PPA – at the same time as the

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[3] It was signed by G.B Adhikari, Robert Chambers, John Devavaram, Rashida Dohad, Farhana Faruqi, Gemechu Gedeno, Shashigo Gerbu, Haryo Habirono, Fiona Hinchcliffe, Lars Johansson, Kamal Kar, Somesh Kumar, Shen Ramos Maglinte, Saiti Makuku, Abu Hena Mallik, James Mascarenhas, Neela Mukherjee, N Narayansamy, Kamal Phuyal, S Rangasamy, Mallika R Samaranayake, P V Satheesh, Sheelu.

[4] *Participatory Learning and Action* 51 will be a special issue on evaluating the effectiveness of civil society engagement in poverty reduction processes, with articles from Africa, Asia, Latin America and elsewhere.

widely publicised *Voices of the Poor* study (Narayan *et al.*, 2000), for example, were not so publicly or widely shared. For example, as part of its rights-based approach to development ActionAid India undertook a PPA study in 1998 to understand the politics of poverty (Praxis, 2001). This was followed up by PRA-based planning in 344 villages in Bolangir District, Orissa State. The planning consisted of a vulnerability analysis based on PRA methods, to identify practical needs and strategic interests. This micro-level planning exercise in Bolangir was also PRA-inspired but was not published widely and so has not shaped the public's perception on PRA as much as those experiences that reach the bookshelves and conference halls.

Many PRAs, many pathways

By the late 1990s, the term 'PRA' had acquired associations that represented some of the worst fears of those who had shared their concerns and experiences in 1995 and 1996. Amongst some, it had come to be seen as an instrument and funding conditionality imposed by mainstream development agencies and a label for the latest addition to the consultants' toolkit. For others, though, years of practice and of innovation had deepened their use of the approach, adding a new maturity and depth to the kind of work they did. Recognition of the associations people had come to have with the label 'RRA' and the need for something more all-encompassing that went beyond PRA to embrace other approaches, from participatory theatre and video to Participatory Action Research and popular education, had led IIED to change the title of this very journal some years before, to *PLA (Participatory Learning and Action) Notes*. Soon enough, though, the acronym 'PLA' became the latest means used by people to distinguish what they did from the shortcomings that had come to be associated with much of what went by the name of 'PRA'. Just as RRA had become almost a term of abuse by the mid-1990s for not being 'empowering', so too PRA was going out of fashion for not being 'empowering' enough! In some quarters, PLA became the latest new-and-good thing, counterposed to old, jaded, co-opted and abused PRA.

It was also towards the latter end of the 1990s that the next fixation was to hit the decks: participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E, see *PLA Notes* 31, 1998; see also Estrella *et al*., 2000). Everyone had to do it, all projects needed a PM&E system or component, it was a conditionality of loan agreements – and yes, the World Bank too, took hold of this phenomenon. Now that micro-level planning using PRA was methodologically 'taken care of', the idea of

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feeding ongoing cycles of planning and of holding people, groups, and the state accountable to its plans led to the popularisation of participatory M&E. Here the slogan shifted from that of PRA – 'whose reality counts' (Chambers, 1997) to that of PM&E – 'who counts reality' (Estrella and Gaventa, 1998). Applications run the gamut from work on farmer experimentation to engaging citizens in tracking government budget expenditure and undertaking social audits. Just as with PRA, there was and is a huge diversity of understandings of what PM&E is, and what it contributes. The wave of critical thinking about PM&E has, however, yet to hit the development discourse.

Beyond methods

The late 1990s saw a growing shift of attention to questions of governance and politics, still with a small 'p', in ways that simply would not have been possible – or desirable – in earlier times. During the 1990s, development orthodoxy spoke of the importance of 'civil society' and prescribed a range of 'do-it-yourself' solutions to community-level problems, in which participation was writ large. The convergence of strands of the 'good governance' debates with debates amongst PRA practitioners about local governance, adaptive planning and moving beyond the 'users and choosers' approaches of the mid-1990s struck a chord with those who had become increasingly restless and critical with what was seen as a continued fetish with methods. Participatory governance brought terms like 'Citizenship', 'Rights', and 'Democracy' into focus; it turned attention to advocacy and to rights-based action, reflected in a number of *PLA Notes* special issues such as *PLA Notes* 40 on deliberative democracy, *PLA Notes* 43 on advocacy, and *PLA Notes* 44 on participation in local governance. It is only more recently that the attention of those from the 'PRA community' who shifted

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focus and direction has begun to return to questions of method, and that a new wave of innovation is beginning to take place in the context of rights-based approaches (Action-Aid, 2001; Pettit and Musyoki, this issue).

As some PRA practitioners moved into engaging more with questions of governance – as testified by the growing number of related articles and special issues of *PLA Notes* – others began to delve more deeply into questions of learning. Many problems of sustainability and inequity are so-called 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber, 1973). These problems cannot be solved in traditional linear fashion, as the understanding of the problem evolves as solutions are tried and the very diversity of potential stakeholders adds complications. To tackle such societal challenges requires new mindsets and out-of-the-box inspirations, plus a trial-and-error approach to solutions. Thus the idea of 'social learning' as a means of overcoming such challenges has gained in currency (cf. Leeuwis and Pyburn, 2002). This entails more than simply group-based learning, but rather bringing together a range of unlikely comrades in multi-stakeholder processes of joint fact-finding, negotiation, planning, reassessing, and refocusing. PRA can play a significant role in these processes, as practitioners have begun to discover

(see, for example, Florisbelo and Guijt, 2004), but in no way has methodological primacy.

A new pluralism?

Over the course of the 1990s, the 'community of practice' that involved those developing, promoting and spreading PRA grew rapidly. Despite their differences, first and subsequent generations of practitioners were still connected as a loose network through a shared appreciation of the power of a way of working that, by now, had mutated into a variety of forms of practice. By the end of the decade, the imperative to hold together had gone. Some of those involved in its innovation and spread had gone on to other things; others had developed practices in which PRA played only a minor part; others still were mixing and merging aspects of PRA into their everyday work and no longer using the term to describe what they did (see contributions in Cornwall and Pratt, 2003). Times had changed. It was no longer necessary to defend practices that one might consider to be problematic, no longer necessary to protect PRA from the assault of the mainstream. And with this recognition came a new openness, out of which new possibilities could be born.

These moves have given rise to a new pluralism, characterised less by 'anything goes' than by a recognition of the cleavages within the 'PRA community' that no longer needed to be held so closely together. Some of those who were involved with PRA ten years ago have moved on to pastures completely new. Across a spectrum of areas of development work now are people who have engaged in some way with PRA. Participatory learning and action approaches have come to be used in myriad settings, in ways that are so diverse that they have given rise to entire new areas of work – whether in policy research, learning, participatory governance or rights-based development work. In many respects, we've come full circle. Looking to the future, the challenge is how to recapture the kind of excitement, energy, and creativity that gave rise to PRA and turn it to animate a new generation of innovators and pioneers to help us meet the challenges that development now faces.

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