



# Beyond tools and methods: reviewing developments in participatory learning and action

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**SUMMARY:** *This paper reviews recent innovations in the use of participatory tools and methods that are relevant to urban areas. This includes the use of participatory approaches for understanding poverty, involving children, identifying livelihood opportunities, and monitoring and evaluating projects. It also highlights recent literature which discusses how participatory and conventional research and planning methodologies can be combined, and how institutional and policy contexts can be changed in order to be more supportive of participatory learning and action.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

**PLA NOTES** (NOTES on Participatory Learning and Action) is an informal publication series with three issues a year that seeks to enable practitioners of participatory methodologies to share their field experiences, conceptual reflections and methodological innovations. The series aims to publish frank accounts, address issues of practical and immediate value, encourage innovation and act as a "voice from the field". Although the series initially developed in response to the lack of participation within most rural development projects, the focus has widened to include many papers of relevance to urban development. In 1994, a special issue of *PLA Notes* was dedicated to the use of "participatory tools and methods in urban areas", in response to demands for information on the use of participatory research and development approaches in community development programmes in urban areas.

Since the publication of this issue, participatory approaches have continued to evolve and have been used in new ways to address a broad range of issues. In addition, there has been increased reflection on the value of participatory approaches for community development. This paper was prepared in response to a request from the editors of *Environment and Urbanization* to consider which papers and themes published within the last five years of *PLA Notes* have relevance for practitioners working in urban areas.

## II. NEW CONTEXTS

### a. Understanding Poverty

**A NUMBER OF** articles have used participatory approaches to understand the causes and local perceptions of poverty. In *PLA Notes* 28, Edward Breslin and Peter Delius describe an approach to identifying poverty in South Africa that starts with the diversity of households and identifies the features of a “proper” household: who would be in it? What would they be doing? Why is it “ideal”? The approach provides important clues to local responses to deprivation, areas of cooperation and conflict between and within households, and an idea of participants’ visions for the future. Working in Accra, Ghana, Dan Maxwell et al. (*PLA Notes* 30) used participatory concept mapping to investigate the complex determinants of malnutrition: food, health and care. The approach helped to establish a sophisticated group analysis of childhood malnutrition and facilitated discussions about potential entry points for addressing problems. A third article, by Anne Jellema and Marc Fiedrich (*PLA Notes* 32), explores how to build common ground from the diverse realities and networks of the urban poor. Drawing on work in Dhaka, Bangladesh and Kampala, Uganda the authors argue that instead of approaching urban neighbourhoods as if they were “villages”, participatory methodologies have to be adapted to find common practices and, hopefully, interests amongst people who live in the same neighbourhood but often have marked economic and cultural differences. Their work shows how a flexible approach, which builds on people’s specific experiences, “...makes the most of diverse, ‘messy’ urban contexts”.

### b. Thinking Small

Children are some of the most vulnerable members of society, yet working with them to identify and address their needs is also challenging. *PLA Notes* 25 explored issues of children’s participation and the ethical, institutional and methodological challenges of research with children. One article (by Rachel Baker) explores the use of participatory research with street children in Kathmandu, Nepal and compares children’s ill-health and dietary habits in three different environments: their homes, living on the streets, and while based at an NGO support centre. The article also discusses the limitations both in terms of the type of enquiry and the methods that could be carried out. Like many of the articles in this special issue on children’s participation, it discusses raised expectations and the disillusionment that can occur when children do not experience immediate outcomes or changes as a result of their participation.

### c. Thinking Big: Beyond Projects

Scaling up participatory research to influence policy and linking it to an internal process of understanding and capacity-building is explored in *PLA Notes* 27 on “Participation, Policy and Institutionalization”. The papers explore the policy environment and institutional culture within which PRA is undertaken which influence, if not determine, the long-term success, sustainability and replication of participatory processes. It also highlights that

PRA is not simply a collection of tools for data-gathering but should be seen as part of a process of broader individual and institutional reorientation and transformation. The issue includes an article (by Somesh Kumar) which focuses on practitioners' attitudes and behaviour as "*the foundation of true participation*".

#### **d. Mixing and Matching**

The continued spread and scaling-up of participatory research and planning methodologies has been accompanied by many questions related to their effectiveness and impact. One recurrent theme is the need to return to conventional social science methodologies to gather some kinds of information or to gain a statistical confidence that cannot be achieved using participatory appraisal. *PLA Notes 28* explores what is driving the creative combination of methodologies, and what are the losses and gains when different methodologies are used together or hybridized. The articles suggest that the combining of methodologies can improve understanding of local conditions but can also throw up new challenges, particularly for those who are keen to enhance local participation throughout the research and planning process. The blurring of methodological boundaries calls for increasing clarity about the principles, methods and, above all, objectives that guide participatory approaches.

#### **e. Enterprising Livelihoods**

Much of the work to date on participatory approaches has focused upon the involvement of community members in assessing and prioritizing their needs rather than on the opportunities that are available to them. Drawing on work from small enterprise development activities, *PLA Notes 33* explores market opportunities and how resource-poor people can operate in a fast-changing and unpredictable environment. It describes a variety of development efforts to enhance the capability of groups involved in income generation activities to understand some of the financial aspects of their enterprises, and to explore some of the options and consequences for change. One article, by Mathilda Roos and Mampone Mohatle, describes how a sewing and knitting group in a township in South Africa has taken a fresh look at both the needs of local consumers and the strengths and weaknesses of their competitors. This information enabled the group to consider adapting their production away from what they know how to make, to what they believe they can sell. Their work is part of the Free State Department of Agriculture's support for the development of small businesses in those communities previously disadvantaged by the apartheid regime.

#### **f. New Challenges**

"Critical Reflections from Practice" was published in 1995 (*PLA Notes 24*) in response to the many questions that the use of participatory methods has raised. Reactions to participatory methods are rarely neutral; participatory approaches are either glorified or vilified. For some, they have become a "flagship of necessity" with which to seek funding, devoid of any real commitment to community empowerment. For others, they represent a superficial pseudo-science, a poor replacement for the real thing.

How to Obtain *PLA NOTES*  
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*PLA Notes* is published in February, June and October each year. A one-year subscription costs UK£ 20 (US\$ 30) but is available at no charge to individuals and institutions in non-OECD countries, from bookshop@iied.org. Back issues of *PLA Notes* cost UK£ 8 each plus postage and packing (for orders from the UK, add 20 per cent; for Europe, 25 per cent; for all other places, 40 per cent). Individual articles can be sent on request by contacting Jo Abbot at IIED (jo.abbot@iied.org). Articles are welcomed, particularly those that assess the impacts of a participatory process on local livelihoods. Guidelines for authors are available on request.

For others still, participatory approaches offer exciting new ways of working that challenge conventional roles and hierarchies by creating opportunities for people themselves to plan and to analyze. This theme issue describes and analyzes both the positive changes and the concerns that have arisen from practical experiences with using the approaches. It brings together social anthropologists, policy makers, NGO development workers, economists, ecologists and trainers to reflect critically on the practice of PRA.

### g. Monitoring and Evaluation

Participatory methodologies for appraising natural resources and local living conditions are increasingly widespread. But approaches that involve local people in evaluating projects or monitoring local conditions are less well-developed and documented. Recently, more organizations are aiming to develop local level monitoring and evaluation due to the need to be accountable about money spent, the demand for "community participation" throughout the planning cycle and the need for more information to improve planning. Much is already claimed of participatory monitoring and evaluation: it is "cost-effective", "empowering", "more accurate", "more relevant", etc. However, too little is known about participatory monitoring and evaluation to confirm these claims. Drawing on an international workshop, *PLA Notes* 31 shares experiences of participatory monitoring and evaluation representing a range of purposes, organizational contexts, approaches and methods. In addition, an overview "Tracking Change Together" draws on the discussions at the workshop and other literature, and shares key innovations, practical issues and emerging challenges.

## III. MOVING FORWARD

**PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES ATTEMPT** to bring together different disciplines to promote an integrated vision of livelihoods and well-being. But many of the articles in *PLA Notes* come from experiences in the rural environment, particularly the natural resource sector. Practitioners working in an urban context or crossing the rural-urban divide are encouraged to share their experiences within the *PLA Notes* network and promote a cross-fertilization of ideas, methods and approaches.

Tools and methods were the original focus of participatory approaches, such as rapid rural appraisal and participatory rural appraisal, and the early issues of *PLA Notes* (including the special issue on their use in the urban context). A review of the content of *PLA Notes* over the last few years suggests that there is still great interest in methodological innovation. However, increasing emphasis is placed on participation as a process, exploring the policy environment, the institutional context and critically reviewing the outcomes. What is clear is that participation is not a panacea for community development nor is it a substitute for thorough preparation, long-term planning, constructive dialogue and sustained interaction. Participatory tools and methods can only initiate what should be a long but mutually beneficial process of joint analysis, critical reflection and capacity-strengthening for both insiders and outsiders.