

Participatory Learning and Action – A Review

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Abstract: This essay explores, through a review of *available* literature, the nature and development of *Participatory Learning and Action* (PLA), its methodological claims, its difference from conventional research methods, the reasons for its popularity as well as its criticisms. It argues that while participatory methods mark a shift in techniques and attitudes of researchers, there are important issues to be tackled, such as the quality of data, the relationship between the researcher and the subjects, and the limits of participatory methods. It concludes by saying that Robert Chambers' rhetorical question, '*Whose reality counts*' remains relevant despite PLA and participation alone cannot ensure that the *last is put first*.

Key words: Participation, Development, PLA, PRA, Social Research Methodology

Introduction and History

Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal represent a family of approaches to social research which have become popular in development practice in the last three decades, developed from agro-ecosystem analysis, applied anthropology and activist participatory research and have been applied to a variety of areas including natural resource management, agriculture, poverty removal and social programs, health and food security (Chambers 1994a).

In the 1970s and 80s, there was a disenchantment with in-depth social anthropology and large questionnaire surveys because of costs and time taken to organize such research, particularly among development professionals in the non-governmental sector. A 'coalescence of methods' which included semi-structured interviews, transect walks with observation, mapping and diagramming by outsiders came under the umbrella term Rapid Rural Appraisal (Chambers 1994b). PRA developed from RRA when it was felt that local people can be, and should be the main actors.

The journal PRA Notes (Later renamed to Participatory Learning and Action) was born in 1988, housed at the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the idea being suggested by Robert Chambers in an IDS-IIED workshop (Reitbergen-McRacken 2004). Participatory Learning and Action was conceived as a broader term, introduced in 1995, which includes similar and related approaches, not limited to rural areas. The term PLA points out that research is for action also, not only for appraisal (Chambers 2007).

A much fuller account of the development of PLA is provided in Cornwall and Guijt 2004. This paper is particularly important, because of Cornwall and Guijt's methodology, a participatory workshop among those who have been involved with PLA over the years! One of their arguments is that PLA practitioners were earlier bothered with creating new techniques for participation, but are now involved in ensuring quality.

Principles and Rationale

Campbell 2001 lists the five common principles of participative research which led to its acceptance and widespread use -

1. Optimizing trade-offs between cost, quality, truth, relevance, quantity and benefit of possessing information
2. Offsetting biases generated by '*developmental tourism*' and hurried visits by the urban professional [emphasis added]
3. Triangulating by using more than one method or source to obtain and cross-check information
4. Learning directly from and with rural people whose knowledge and capacities are generally under-rated but required for sustainable development
5. Learning rapidly and progressively through flexible, iterative and interactive processes aimed at the conscious exploration of local peoples' lives

Departures from Convention

According to Lilja and Bellon 2008, "Conventional research tends to package intervention methods and programmes into one-size-fits-all, off-the-shelf approaches, based on a notion of universal best practices". On the other hand, "participatory methods address the drawbacks inherent in that approach by actively involving end-users in the research process, incorporating their views and representation into the prioritization, review, conduct, and dissemination of scientific research".

Cornwall and Jwekes 1995 summarise the differences between conventional research and participatory research. Their table is reproduced below.

Table 1: Participatory and Conventional Research: A Comparison of Process

Criteria	Participatory Research	Conventional Research
What is research for?	Action	Understanding and perhaps action
Who is research for?	Local People	Institutional, personal interests
Whose knowledge counts?	Local People's	Scientists'
Topic choice influenced by?	Local priorities	Funding and personal agendas
Methodology chosen for	Empowerment	'Objectivity' and 'Truth'
Problem Identification	Together	Researcher only
Data Collection	Local People	Researcher
Interpretation and Analysis	Local concepts, frameworks	Researcher
Presentation of findings	Locally accessible, useful	To other academics, funder
Action on findings	Integral to the process	Separate, may not happen
Who takes action?	Local People, with/without outside support	External agencies
Who owns the results	Shared	The researcher, funding agency
What is emphasized	Process	Outcomes

Methodology

Chambers 1994a provides a detailed list of techniques used for PLA. A full description is beyond the scope of this essay. Some of the most important techniques are *Semi-structured interviews* (interviews around a topic, which are sufficiently 'open'), *Do It yourself & Asking to be Taught* (Performing a particular task along with local people after it being demonstrated), *Transect walks* (walking with local people, observing and asking questions), *Oral Histories and Ethno-biographies*, *daily time use analysis*, *Livelihoods Analysis* (stability, crisis, coping strategies, expenditure and sources of income), *Institutional or chapatti or Venn-diagramming*, *Matrix scoring and ranking* etc.

Chambers asserts that a single formula of approaches and techniques should be avoided, not only because it hinders creativity in the field, but also because the guiding principle of PRA is to use "your own best judgment at all times". If this guideline is strictly followed, to talk of a methodology for PLA is questionable, since nothing is static. The only methodology would be to

keep a creative mind, a lot of exercises handy and to spend sufficient time with local people in carrying out these exercises. Indeed, a lot of practitioners seem to have done exactly this.

Chambers 2007b identifies a number of methodological issues, especially with regard to 'participatory numbers' generated through quantitative participatory numbers –

1. Standardized, close-ended data for comparability and aggregation versus open, diverse, site-specific and empowering data
2. Scale, Quality, Time, Resources and Ethics – all parameters which affect quality of data and are frequently neglected
3. Ease and spontaneity of convening groups versus representativeness
4. Quality of facilitation versus speed, scale and cost of implementation

Chambers also makes the claim that PRA methods are only a part of the methodology of Participatory Learning and Action. Two frequently neglected areas are behavior attitudes and sharing (Chambers 2007a).

Behavior attitudes are regarded by many practitioners as more important than methods. In a book called *ABC of PRA* (Kumar 1996) published after a South-South Workshop on PRA, ABC refers to Attitude and Behavior Change. *Sharing* initially referred to villagers sharing their knowledge, all sharing food, and the sharing of training, ideas, insights, methods and materials between organisations, mainly NGOs and government. By the mid 2000s, the sharing circle has come to include relationships. The key phrase 'sharing without boundaries' came out of an international workshop of PRA practitioners. It was a pre-emptive strike against the claims of branding and exclusive ownership which go with some methodologies.

Claims and Criticisms

Recent literature on participation has raised a number of criticisms which I summarize below.

1. Participation creates a 'new tyranny', as participation may translate as more effective incorporation in agendas set elsewhere (Buhler), and 'result in forms of control that are more difficult to challenge, as they reduce spaces of conflict and are relatively benign and liberal' (Kothari 2001)
2. The motivation of the 'facilitator' may be as dubious as that of the researcher, and both can stand in the way of genuine dialogue and exchange. The facilitator controls a variety of factors in PLA, and the relationship remains hierarchical, though a little less than previously (Mohan 2001)
3. "An over-emphasis on formulas and techniques, and a neglect of the ways in which unacknowledged dynamics of participation and exclusion, both outside and within

formalised instances of participation, shape the outcomes of ‘participation’” can be found (Buhler Undated)

4. Group dynamics can influence outcomes towards those more assertive or powerful, sometimes ‘dysfunctional’ group consensus and the creation of exclusive groups mars participatory processes
5. The simplistic and quasi-religious dichotomization of research approaches, with participatory approaches on the valued side creates a situation where non-participatory practitioners feel almost guilty, despite doing relevant and good research
6. There is a need to distinguish data generated in a social mapping exercise or an interview from the competencies and knowledge of rural people, and the two seldom are the same (Campbell 2001)
7. An overstated Hawthorne Effect as a result of participation – an expression of ‘local need’ by local people can be shaped by local perceptions of what the agency in question can be expected to deliver (Mosse 2001)

Conclusion

As is clearly shown by the criticisms of Participatory Learning and Action, the reality of poor people may still not count in development thinking, despite a plethora of innovation in research methods. That is not to say that significant gains have not been made out of participatory learning and action, but to accept that still more needs to be done. The challenge before PLA enthusiasts is not only to strive for quality in existing research, but to radically alter the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

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