

PARTICIPATORY LEARNING AND ACTION (PLA)



Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) is a type of qualitative research. It is used to gain an in-depth understanding of a community or situation, and is always conducted with the full and active participation of community members. PLA is applied through a range of participatory tools and approaches. It is also a philosophy that emphasises reversals in power relations between communities and outsiders.

Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) is a type of qualitative research, which can be used to gain an in-depth understanding of a community or situation. It is widely used in work involving local communities. PLA is a participatory methodology, and should always be conducted with the full and active participation of community members. The main purpose of PLA is to support people within communities to analyse their own situation, rather than have it analysed by outsiders, and to ensure that any learning is then translated into action (Gosling and Edwards 2003).

PLA was originally called Participatory Rural (or Rapid) Appraisal (PRA). It became very popular in the 1980s and 1990s, and has since kept its popularity with many CSOs. PRA was originally designed for use during appraisals and needs assessments in rural areas. However, it can be used at any stage of the project cycle – design, planning, monitoring, review and evaluation – and is now used in urban as well as rural areas. The name was changed to Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) to reflect its broader application, and to emphasise that the process is designed to help set in motion locally-led action.

PLA can be described in two different, complementary ways. Firstly, it is a philosophy and a way of thinking that emphasises reversals in power relations between communities and outsiders (such as researchers, evaluators or programme planners). Secondly, it covers a range of participatory tools and approaches that can be used to work, plan and reflect with and alongside communities.

PLA as a philosophy

PLA is located within a broader field of participatory approaches, which can be described as a “*family of approaches, methods, attitudes and behaviours to enable and empower people to share, analyse and enhance their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, act, monitor, evaluate and reflect*” (Chambers 2008). In its pure form, PLA is a philosophy which emphasises the need for outsiders to learn about situations from insiders. This philosophy seeks to reverse power relations between communities and outsiders. It grew partly in reaction to the top-down planning methodologies of the 1960s and 1970s.

The fundamental idea of PLA is that communities are supported to analyse their own situation, make decisions

about how to best tackle their problems, and, as a result, feel empowered to take action. However, although the reversal of power relations is considered an important part of PLA, it is not always applied in this way. PLA is frequently – if incorrectly – used for studies that extract data from communities, but do not empower them to use that data.

Some of the principles of PLA, derived from the participatory philosophy, are described in the box below.

Principles of PLA

- PLA is designed to seek out multiple perspectives and embrace diversity. It is based around group analysis and learning.
- It is designed to be flexible, adaptive and innovative, rather than conforming to top-down or rigid methods of data collection and analysis.
- PLA is designed to encourage people to discuss issues, errors and mistakes in a non-judgemental environment.
- High ethical standards should always be applied within PLA.
- PLA facilitators should act as catalysts rather than as trainers or teachers.
- The languages and concepts of PLA should reflect the way a community thinks, rather than reflecting how those seeking the information think. This means the language and concepts of PLA should be appropriate to the local culture and context.
- PLA is designed to seek out the voices and opinions of the most marginalised communities and people, such as children, women, people of lower caste or status, or people with disabilities.
- PLA is based around triangulation. This means accessing information about the same things in different ways, and from different sources, to ensure it is reliable, and that different viewpoints are recognised.
- PLA is facilitated by multi-disciplinary teams, including people with different skills and different views. Teams should include members of the communities as well as outsiders.
- PLA is designed to provide insights and understanding that helps guide community development, rather than providing evidence that would be seen as rigorous in an academic article.
- Analysis and validation is done in real-time with communities. In PLA, teams review findings with communities on a regular basis, and validate data with communities before progressing.

How it works

PLA is designed to be a truly participative process, in which communities have significant influence over how work is carried out. This means it is not possible (or desirable) to provide a standardised methodology or process. However, the following steps are usually included.

Firstly, the goals and objectives of the PLA work are clarified and agreed with the communities. If there are multiple or conflicting goals then issues are resolved before proceeding. The goals and objectives should reflect the communities' needs as much as, if not more than, the needs of the outsiders.

Next, a set of relevant tools and approaches are selected. PLA comprises many different tools and approaches, some of which are described in the next section. The tools and approaches should be applied in a participatory manner. Often, this involves a series of exercises, carried out in the field. These exercises are normally carried out with the help of a trained facilitator. Any information acquired through the tools and approaches is triangulated (cross-checked) and is validated by the community.

In PLA, data analysis is done cumulatively in the field by community members and facilitators. PLA contains no specific methods for analysis, but it is important that any analysis methods used can be applied by community members. Analysis typically includes the identification of connections, relationships, gaps, contradictions and new areas of inquiry. Often this is based around:

- interpreting descriptions, stories, statements, pictures, maps, diagrams and other visual data;
- identifying themes and patterns emerging out of the data collection;
- assessing the frequency with which particular ideas or themes are mentioned;
- testing the strength of feeling about specific issues;
- identifying points of convergence or divergence between different sets of data, collected through different sources, methods and perspectives; and

- identifying gaps in the data where further information needs to be collected, or where more probing of existing data is needed.

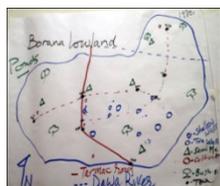
Two important concepts in PLA are **optimal ignorance** and **appropriate imprecision** (Chambers 1983). These mean that people involved in PLA should only collect and analyse information that is needed, to the level of accuracy needed to inform decision-making and action in the community. This contrasts with many M&E and research methodologies which are aimed at establishing findings to very high levels of precision to meet the demands of academic audiences.

When the point of optimal ignorance is reached, the next step is to develop a community action plan, or for the community to take specific action based on the analysis. Often, this means presenting work in different ways to different audiences, such as community leaders, community-based organisations (CBOs), local government agencies or other potential service providers. This might also involve presenting findings for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) purposes.

There is a long list of tools and techniques that can be used within PLA. Many of these are standard tools for data collection which are described elsewhere in the M&E Universe. They include direct or participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, photography, video, case studies, and the use of secondary data sources.

However, there is also an extensive set of tools and techniques designed specifically for PLA. Many of these are based on visual aids such as pictures, diagrams, charts and maps, often developed using local materials. These tools and techniques are especially appropriate for participants who are illiterate, or who are unused to reading and writing. Some of the tools and techniques are described below (see Slocum et. al. (1995), Mikkelsen (1995), Gosling and Edwards (2003)). They are flexible tools which can and should be adapted depending on the purpose, the context, and the culture of the people using them.

PLA tools and techniques



A community map is a drawing of an area, used to describe the area and identify key features from the perspective of the community. It is frequently produced on the ground or on flip-charts, using local resources (e.g. stones, plants, wood). The type of information shown often depends on the group producing the map. For example, men might highlight different features of an area than women or children. There are many kinds of maps, including the following.

Transect diagrams or maps

These are diagrams of the main land use zones in a community. They compare the main features, resources, uses and problems of different zones. Transects can be constructed by walking in a line through an area with a key informant, using direct observation to note specific features and factors, and talking to people met on the way.

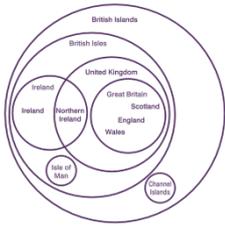
Social maps

These are maps of a village or area which show where groups of people live (for example, rich, poor, different ethnic or religious groups etc.). Again,

maps drawn by different groups may show different features that highlight issues which are important to them.

Mobility maps

These record, compare and analyse the movements of different groups in a community or area, and are a useful indicator of these groups' contacts with other groups and communities. Historical maps can be drawn at different points in time, showing how movements of groups, or access of groups to different areas, have changed.



Diagrams present information in an easily understandable form. They are usually developed in a participatory way. Like maps, they can be developed using local resources. It can be useful to compare diagrams developed by different groups. Some examples of diagrams are as follows.

Daily routine diagrams

These help to compare the daily or monthly routines of different groups of people, and their different roles and responsibilities. They usually show the type and distribution of workload, and can enable comparisons to be made between men and women, young and old, domestic and agricultural roles etc. They can be useful in assessing the impact of a programme over time (for example, in changing women's workload, or children's school attendance). They can also help to identify suitable times for community meetings, project visits, M&E events, training courses, etc.

Livelihood analysis diagrams

These can help to interpret the behaviour, decisions, and coping strategies of households with different socio-economic characteristics and / or living in different types of agro-ecological or pastoral systems.

Flow diagrams

Flow diagrams are a visual tool for tracking the flow of resources, benefits or negative effects in order to explore the potential or actual impacts of a project, or a wider change. People, institutions, resources and so on are represented diagrammatically, and arrows are drawn to indicate the flow or the linkages between them.

Venn (or chapati) diagrams

These can be used to show the key institutions and individuals in a community, and their relationships and importance for decision-making and/or their influence on different people or groups. Different sizes of circles are drawn, indicating different institutions and individuals and their relative influence. The circles can be placed closer or further away to each other depending on the level of contact, or closeness of the relationships between the different institutions or individuals.



Ranking and scoring exercises are good for comparing the preferences, priorities and opinions of different community groups or social actors. They are a good way of stimulating discussion.

Preference ranking

People vote to select priorities. For example, a few issues or options are listed, and people allocate a score out of 10 for each one.

Pairwise ranking

In pairwise ranking a matrix is used to compare different options against each other to identify which is the preferred option, and the reasons why. Scores are then aggregated to find out the overall favourites.

Direct matrix ranking

Direct matrix ranking is used to generate different criteria for decision-making and to score different options against these criteria. It can be used as a means of understanding the reasons for local preferences for such things as different seed or crop varieties, tree species or types of food.

Wealth ranking

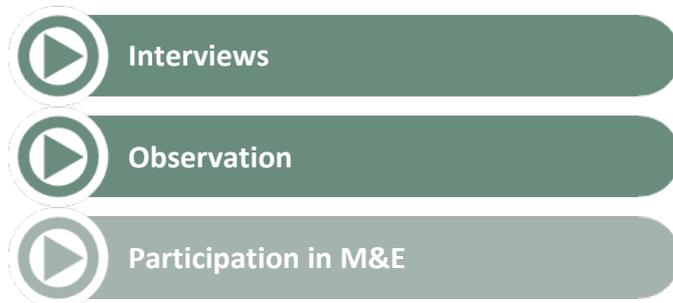
This can be used to investigate perceptions of wealth differences and inequalities in a community, in order to discover local indicators and criteria of wealth and well-being, and to establish the relative wealth of households in the community. Wealth ranking can be useful if a project is trying to target the poorest people. It is done by making a list of all households and asking different people to sort them into categories according to their own criteria of wealth or well-being. Like all participatory tools, this must be done sensitively and appropriately to avoid stigmatising particular groups.

In summary, if done well PLA can be a very effective way of acquiring a deep understanding of the situation within communities, and can be a very effective M&E methodology. But PLA is, at its heart, a participatory

methodology that seeks to empower communities. This should never be ignored in the drive to extract information for project and programme M&E.

Further reading and resources

Some more general M&E tools used within PLA include interviews, focus-group discussions, observation and case studies. Links to these are provided below. Two other papers in the M&E Universe deal with subjects mentioned in this paper. One is participation within M&E and the other is triangulation.



Many of the ideas, concepts, resources and materials on PLA have been developed from work by Robert Chambers, a leading PLA practitioner and academic since the 1970s and 1980s. One useful resource is a paper called “*Relaxed and Participatory Appraisal: notes on practical approaches and methods for participants in PRA/PLA-related familiarisation workshops*,” *Participation Resource Centre at IDS*” which is available freely from the internet.

An excellent PLA training resource is: Pretty, J; Guijt, I; Scoones, I; and Thompson, J (1995); *A Trainer’s Guide for Participatory Learning and Action*, IIED Participatory Methodology Series, International Institute for Environment and Development, London, IIED. This can be downloaded at <http://www.iied.org/participatory-learning-action>

IIED has an online archive that has collected four decades of learning and experience documented on Participatory Learning and Action (PLA). This can be found at <http://www.iied.org/participatory-learning-action>. The IDS website <http://www.participatorymethods.org> also contains useful guidance on a range of participatory methods and tools used in PLA.

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Author(s):

**Alison Napier and
Nigel Simister**

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