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

- **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.
Timelines and time trends are constructed to show changes over time. This makes them particularly useful for M&E – seeing not just how things have changed, but also understanding the reasons and contributing factors.

**Timelines**

A timeline is an illustration of key events in the life of an individual, household, community or organisation over a specified period. Often this will involve drawing a linear timeline, and asking people to mark the timeline with key events. Timelines can be used to plot the progress of a project or programme over time, highlighting achievements and challenges faced along the way.

**Time trends**

Time trends are graphs that show how things have changed over time. They can be used for many variables such as crop yields, areas under cultivation, livestock population, prices, and rainfall.

Calendars can show key events and how they change over time – years, seasons, months, days and hours.

**Seasonal calendars**

These are useful ways of representing seasonal variations in climate, crops, income-generating activities, nutrition, health and diseases, debt, etc. They can help identify times of shortage – of food, money or time – and the best time of the year for particular kinds of development work.

**Daily schedule**

A daily schedule is a diagram to show an individual’s pattern of labour over the course of a day. This usually shows the type and distribution of workload and enables comparisons to be made between men and women, young and old, domestic and agricultural roles etc.

Many kinds of performing arts can be used to encourage people to discuss and analyse their situations in a relaxed and light-hearted way. However, it is always important to make sure that people are comfortable with performing in these ways.

**Role play**

Groups role play a situation or a change in the community. Different groups (e.g. men, women, young or old people) may role play the same situation from very different points of view. People can then compare how different groups see the same problems or challenges.

**Theatre**

Particularly effective when working with children, theatre might involve discussing issues with children, selecting a key issue on which to make a play, developing a drama, and performing that to a wider audience. Issues arising can then be discussed more widely.

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**Strengths and weaknesses**

PLA can help provide a good, in-depth understanding of a community, including its capacities and problems, from its own perspective, including the perspectives of different groups or sections of the community. For M&E purposes, it can also provide different perceptions of the changes occurring within a project or programme, and the reasons for those changes.

If carried out properly, PLA supports the empowerment and mobilisation of local communities and the people within them, whilst at the same time providing information for outsiders, including project or programme staff. One major benefit of PLA (for M&E) is that analyses and results are immediately available in a form which can be fed back to, and discussed with, communities.

However, PLA can also be time consuming, not least for community members. It is therefore important that the benefits of the work to communities outweigh the costs.

This is one of the reasons why PLA should not just be carried out for data extraction.

PLA is also difficult to do well. Participatory approaches are not inherently ‘good’, and as with any development work they can be carried out in a sloppy, biased, rushed, uncritical or self-serving way. An essential element for good PLA is good facilitation skills. PLA work may expose tensions in communities, and may arouse false expectations if not handled well. The role of the facilitator is therefore very important. The facilitator (or facilitators) needs to make sure that PLA is carried out to high quality and ethical standards, ensuring that attitudes and behaviours are conducive to learning, and that the needs of the community are placed before the needs of outsiders.

One potential disadvantage of PLA work is that results are usually specific to a local community. This means it is not always possible to make wider generalisations. PLA is not appropriate when a large amount of quantitative data is required.
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.

References


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