

## **PARTICIPATORY LEARNING AND ACTION (PLA): SHARING THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE: A DISCUSSION OF KEY ISSUES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this article it is argued that PLA can do much to promote grass roots development in South Africa if it is adapted to local conditions. However it is not easy to promote this practice theory in South Africa at this point in time due to some of the reasons outlined below. Some principles of this practice theory are scrutinised briefly as well as some stumbling blocks that inhibits the growth of PLA and participatory development in South Africa in general. These problems are part and parcel of the local development culture and it emphasises how complex it is to promote participatory development if it is not well established in development practice.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

For more than a decade Participatory Learning and Action (also called Participatory Rural Appraisal, PRA) has done much to promote local capacity building and empowerment through grass roots research and development action in many poor countries. It has been used with great effect in many parts of the Third World (Chambers 1997:130-161). Unfortunately this issue seldom gets the attention it deserves in development practice in South Africa.

PLA is one of the spin-offs of the post community development debate. It is based on some principles of community development such as local action and control of the development process, participation by the local population and limited intervention by outsiders (Kotzé & Swanepoel 1983).

PLA originated in Africa and spread rapidly to Asian and even some Northern countries too. In Africa and Asia in particular it soon made an impact on various sectors such as agriculture, nature conservation, education, forestry and land tenure. However due to the isolation during the previous political dispensation,

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South Africa was excluded to some extent from this initiative. However since the nineties, information on PLA/PRA has been freely available in South Africa, especially via the internet. There were also a few attempts to launch a PLA network. Although PLA has had some impact on development in South Africa, development practitioners and academics are generally reluctant to make use of this practice theory. This basically occurred since the PLA philosophy is to a large extent in conflict with the dominant development culture in South Africa compared to other countries such as, India, Kenya, Tanzania etc where PLA has been successfully implemented. Development practitioners and academics should accept the challenge to adapt PLA to local conditions. A greater emphasis on PLA training can be a useful point of departure.

This paper will consist of two sections. In the first section some of the principles of PLA will be discussed briefly, such as participation, the role of the facilitator and linking research to development action. In the second section specific attention will be paid to some of the factors that inhibits the growth of PLA and participatory development in South Africa. The following are examples of these issues:

- The dominant development orientation of development practitioners and bureaucrats,
- Academic conservatism and academic empire building,
- Limited political support for grass roots initiatives,
- The role of consultants.

This discussion is therefore of a very practical nature and is based on the authors' own assumptions in the field as PLA practitioners. It also incorporates discussions with other PLA practitioners and with people in the field. It is of crucial importance to incorporate these issues into the mainstream development debate. Very few sources are available on the issues that are raised.

## **2. THE DOMINANT INTERPRETATION OF PLA AND SOME OF ITS PRINCIPLES**

PLA is an umbrella concept for various participatory approaches to development which stresses the importance of local action learning and research for development. In this context it has done much to give the poor a voice in the Third World and it has done much to move beyond earlier development

paradigms, especially those that linked development to western modernisation (Chambers 1994: 40-45). PLA attempts to take the local culture and particularly the indigenous knowledge of the local population as a point of departure for development. In this regard the local population is regarded as the professionals of the local social and environmental systems. They have been in a position to evolve with a particular social and ecological system. If local indigenous knowledge is prevalent it can contribute greatly towards development (Norgaard, 1994:158-171). The assumption is therefore made that if local skills are mobilised collectively it can assist substantially towards addressing specific needs at grass roots. This has certainly proved to be the case in many poor areas of the Third World (Chambers 1997:102-128).

PLA is very much based on open-ended action learning and on a radically different power relationship between the locals and the so-called development professionals from outside (Scoones & Thompson 1994:16-31). It is important to note that this is the more radical interpretation of PLA. However this is easier said than done in development practice since there are various trends that inhibits equal participation in development. The behaviour and attitude towards women in many cultures is a classical example of this state of affairs (Jackson 1995:109). There is a need for South Africans to address this issue.

PLA has also been particularly successful to promote more people-friendly research methods. The emphasis has shifted from social research as the task of a professional social scientist to research that is carried out and controlled by local people who are often illiterate. In cases when there is a need for research of this nature the locals have shown that they are extremely creative researchers. Their analysis of local needs can often be done in a more cost-effective way which may sometimes be “quicker and cleaner” compared to the conventional research methods (Chambers, 1992). In the following section some of the principles of this practice theory will be scrutinised very briefly.

## **2.1 The issue of participation and local control of the development process**

PLA emphasises that the local interest groups should identify needs themselves according to their own values and norms. The emphasis is on a collective approach to grass roots development. It is therefore a timeous process to involve sufficient people involved in the process of felt needs identification. The emphasis is also on participatory development. This process is very much open-ended and it embraces error. It therefore leaves sufficient room for experimentation and to change course when necessary. In contrast to what many people believe it is clear that a participatory approach to development practice

is not cheap. It takes a substantial period of time to get people involved in ventures of this nature and resources are vital to keep people involved. Issues such as transport, catering, an appropriate venue and timing of the activity are of critical importance to determine the success of a PLA venture (Düvel, 1999:5-8). It should be borne in mind that the poor are often pressed for time. An alteration of their daily schedules may be extremely risky for them. Cultural and social obligations limits the available time for development initiatives (World Bank, 1996 and Inter American Development Bank, 2000). The PLA team should therefore plan any activity with great care. Furthermore it is not always clear who should carry this initial cost burden of a participatory development venture. It is often a development agency or the state that fulfils this role and in the process it inhibits the independence of the initiative as such.

## **2.2 A paradigm shift for the change agent**

Development workers are often appointed to pursue specific goals of the state as a development agent or of a specific Non-Government Organisation (NGO). After some time they have to prove that their appointed has been worthwhile and that it is cost-effective to continue with the venture. This technocratic mindset often equates development with western progress. This is in direct conflict with the dominant interpretation of PLA where the locals share ideas on how to utilise local conditions according to their priorities and their own tempo. Professionals from outside should therefore be able to learn from the local people in an attempt to familiarise themselves with the local social and environmental system. This is a tremendous challenge for extension officials in agricultural development. In the process various biases have to be unlearned. It is often a very painful process for outsiders since the relevance of their training may be questionable. Mutual vulnerability is of critical importance in this context. Outsiders should realise that development is a phenomenon which is extremely value-laden and of a contextual nature.

Role reversals of who the professional really is may be fundamental to understand the development dynamics at grass roots. It is important to move away from universal assumptions about the nature of the development problem. Within the context of PLA the unique nature of development problems and solutions comes into the spotlight. This is shaped amongst others by the values of the interest group. An orientation to development which promotes an openness to learn from and with other people without the tendency to dominate is crucial to the success of PLA. Development should not be equated with change. Local interest groups should decide for themselves what should remain the same and what should be changed without the pressure from a development agency

from outside. The challenge is to create an enabling setting at grass roots (Kotzé, 1997:71-73). It is not always easy to sell this issue to donors from outside. They are often preoccupied with results and time frames for development initiatives which may inhibit indigenous, generative and often spontaneous development forces at grass roots.

### **2.3 Need oriented research methodologies**

Conventional quantitative research methodologies often has little meaning and use for poor people at grass roots. They are seldom involved in the research process and the data often has little meaning for them. This is where PLA has made a huge difference to development practice. It is through the application of appropriate participatory research methods that the local people have become highly competent researchers irrespective of their training or status. Various alternative research methodologies have proved beyond all imagination to be able to generate a substantial amount of information (Chambers, 1992). The following serve as examples in this regard.

- Historical transects and time lines have proved to be very useful research tools if applied correctly. Development is often shaped by historical events and transects that have been particularly useful to unearth these issues.
- Community mapping is probably the most well known PLA research method. Mapping can be used for a wide variety of purposes such as land-use planning, agriculture, township layout and health. In this process unconventional tools and utensils may be used. Sticks and stones may serve an important purpose in a mapping exercise. Potentially useless things such as beer bottles may also serve an important purpose during a mapping exercise. These methods have to be adapted to suit the particular situation. A mapping exercise can also be triangulated by using other research tools to cross check the quality of the information.
- There are basically an unlimited list of participatory research tools which are at the disposal of the PLA practitioners and there is unlimited potential to develop more. The following tools are part of this nearly endless list. Focus group discussions, the use of pictures in discussions, short questionnaires, matrices, flow diagrams, Venn diagrams, pie charts, etc. It is a challenge for the PLA team to adapt these to suit local conditions.

Although it is clear that these tools have great potential in terms of their use in development practice it moves a step closer to adapt research methodology and

development action to the local context. It is a great pity, however, that academics are somewhat reluctant to use them or to integrate them into the mainstream development debate.

#### **2.4 The promotion of development through action learning**

In PLA the emphasis is usually not on research as an isolated activity. Research is done with a specific purpose in mind such as to determine the scope of resources or to determine for example what the nature and extent of poverty is in a specific area. The emphasis is also not on precise information. As long as the people involved collected sufficient information to identify a trend, then development action could be initiated to address the problem. There is a trend to minimise the gap between research and development action. It must however, be acknowledged that PLA research does not automatically guarantee that development action will follow. This depends on various factors such as group dynamics within the group, leadership and the timing of activities.

Development action is also very much open-ended and there is therefore scope to change course if and when necessary. Mistakes that are made in the process are part and parcel of the learning curve which is vital for capacity building and empowerment for everyone concerned.

#### **2.5 Self-reliance**

Although PLA does not exclude intervention from outside, the emphasis is predominantly on self-reliance. As soon as professionals from outside enter the arena they may not always promote the local control of development initiatives. Their inputs may be of a technical nature and in the process local initiative can be nullified. Inputs from outside may be vital to the success of a PLA venture, but it should be approached in such a way that the local interest groups remain in control of the initiative. It should be noted that outsiders invariably have their own agendas and their behaviour and attitudes are not always conducive for participatory development.

#### **2.6 Sharing and spread**

In the world of development documents are usually protected by copyright. Various PLA practitioners have tried with some success to reverse this trend to the benefit of PLA in general. This has been vital for the success of the PLA network that exists in many poor countries. Information is shared and distributed at the lowest possible cost to ensure easy access. The Institute for Development

Studies at Sussex University has played a vital role in this regard. However only time will tell how long publishers and authors will be willing to share and distribute ideas without any restriction (Singh, 1997). Agricultural extension officials can take this issue a point further and experiment with local networks and newsletters in an attempt to share and spread ideas at the lowest possible cost.

### **3. AREAS OF CONCERN THAT LIMIT THE GROWTH OF PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA**

There are certain trends in development practice in South Africa that limit the growth of participatory approaches such as PLA. Some of these issues will be discussed here. This does not imply that PLA has not shown any impact. There are success stories such as the PLA initiatives in KwaZulu-Natal Province where PLA is used with great effect.

#### **3.1 The dominant development orientation of development practitioners and bureaucrats**

Devolution of power to grass roots is vital to ensure local control of the development process (Conyers, 1986). However in South Africa there are signs that centralisation is by far too dominant in general (Singh, 1997). In the process it also has an important impact on PLA initiatives.

At this point in time the emphasis in terms of development in South Africa is strongly focused on redistribution of resources and to rectify the imbalances of the past. This in itself is not anti-PLA and its experience elsewhere has proved to be vital in the process of redistributing scarce resources such as land (Singh, 1997). It has been experienced on numerous occasions during PLA activities locally that it is expected of the state to “deliver development”. This has a detrimental effect on grass roots initiatives and local self-reliance.

Development activities are seldom properly co-ordinated with those of NGO's. This leads to much confusion at the local level and puts people like agricultural extension officials in a precarious position. It is difficult to promote mutual trust at the local level when government activities are poorly co-ordinated internally and furthermore if government and NGO's work against one another (Düvel, 1999:6).

This trend is strengthened by initiatives such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) which was very top-down to start with. Perhaps

as the realisation grows that the state's capacity to "deliver development" is extremely limited; it may pave the way to change this dominant perception. This may create a more enabling environment for participatory approaches to get a stronger foothold in South Africa. People should be encouraged to take collective responsibility for their own circumstances and should not rely too heavily on the state. It has proved difficult to convey this message during PLA exercises.

It is interesting to see that PLA is flourishing in areas that have obtained their independence from colonial rule many years ago. This is particularly evident from discussions with PLA practitioners abroad. Local interest groups are expecting less support from the state in those countries and accepted own responsibility for grass roots development. This is evident from the rural development experience in Sri Lanka (Singh, 1997). Perhaps the tide may turn in South Africa in a few years time when there is a greater realisation of the limitations of the state as a development agent. It is hoped that more interest groups will make use of that which PLA has to offer.

### **3.2 Academic conservatism and empire building**

There exists a large measure of consensus relating to the holistic and multi-disciplinary nature of development. However in practice it has proved extremely difficult to launch development studies with a multi- and an interdisciplinary component. Academics rather opt for the basic disciplines instead of working together in a way where disciplinary boundaries are fluid and even collapsed where necessary. Academic empire building which focuses on a single discipline is rather the name of the game. Various academic institutions in South Africa tend to promote intellectual poverty in the process. It is argued here that the establishment of development studies with an interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary component is vital to create a climate that is conducive for participatory development and PLA specifically. Very few institutions offer training opportunities and at the moment consultants are by and large filling this gap.

### **3.3 Limited political support for grass roots development initiatives**

There is also a large measure of consensus that rural development is of vital importance to promote development in general. Unfortunately the functional model of field administration (a colonial legacy) is still firmly in place in South Africa. This model promotes the centralisation of power in government departments (Kotzé, 1987:36-44). It also ensures that little co-ordination takes place at regional level. In the process the most junior officials end up in the rural



areas which are deprived of funding and experience. This sentiment is also not conducive to PLA. Perhaps it is time to learn from countries like India and others where it is clearly a privilege to work in the rural areas.

This can also have a detrimental effect on need oriented policy making since experienced staff at grass roots can be a vital link in the policy making process.

### **3.4 The dominant role of consultants**

The dominant role of consultants is very well established in South Africa. This is not always conducive for participatory development. PLA stresses that outsiders should be familiar with the local people and the conditions where they live. Consultants usually try to complete a job quickly before moving on to the next one. This is contradictory to the philosophy and principles of PLA.

The consultation industry is also characterised by very limited transparency and accountability. To make things worse practice has shown that there is a renewed emphasis on the role of consultants from abroad to make an input in the development industry in this country. These consultants are seldom sufficiently familiar with local conditions and it is doubted whether the value of their input can be justified against the huge cost to get them up and running. In the process indigenous consultants are often ignored due to historical reasons.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

In this article it has been argued that PLA has shown explicitly that it has much to offer to promote development in various parts of the Third World. It should however be adapted to suit local conditions in this country. Unfortunately there are various stumbling blocks that impede the growth of participatory development in South Africa. In the current time frame it will be complex and perhaps somewhat unlikely that some of these patterns will change quickly. Some of these problems cannot simply be rectified by reconstruction. It relates to complex bureaucratic behaviour and attitudes which have a definite impact on development.

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