Side Trip

Early Childhood Counts

PLA (PARTICIPATORY LEARNING AND ACTION)

PLA represents a step in the evolution of a methodology that began in the 1970s as RA (Rapid Appraisal). The technique was developed by Robert Chambers as a way of gaining a timely, relevant, and cost-effective assessment of conditions within a community. This assessment was then used in the design of rural development projects. The technique drew from methods of participatory research, applied anthropology, and field research on farming systems, and soon became known as RRA (Rapid Rural Appraisal). While the local community was an active participant in the early forms of RRA, the technique was basically created for the use of outsiders who came and gathered information then took it away to design what they saw as an appropriate project. Over time, more and more control for the process was shifted to the community, and then became known as PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal). More recently, as there has been a shift from simply using the technique as a diagnostic tool to using it in actually developing a project with community participation, it has become known as PLA (Participatory Learning and Action). When it is done well, those from outside the community come as learners, conveners, catalysts, and facilitators of the community's definition of needs. Then they help the community design a plan of action to meet those needs.

Within PLA various methods are used to assist communities in 'telling their own story'. These methods come from social anthropology. They include a mapping of the community (housing, health facilities, schools, churches/mosques, water sources, etc.), focus groups, semi-structured interviews, diagrams and pictures, time lines (local history, seasonal diagramming), matrices, ranking of variables, as well as direct observation. The time frame for carrying out these activities varies, but the process is most commonly carried out in one to three weeks. The best results are achieved when a multi-disciplinary team is created, with each individual bringing a different perspective to the study.

Data are gathered prior to the visit to give the team some basic information on the community. During the visit, time is structured so that a variety of methods can be employed in gathering information and to cross-check what has been discovered. As information is collected it is used to modify the process. Thus, it is important for the team to build in time at the end of each day to meet with each other, to discuss what they have learned, and then design activities to gain additional information and/or check on ideas that have come up during the day.

The spirit of inventiveness which has gone with PLA is spreading, and helping people in different parts of the world to feel liberated and able to develop their own varieties of approach and method. People (local and outsiders), once they have unfrozen and established rapport, enjoy improvising, varying and inventing methods.

—Chambers, 1993

A key to successful use of the technique is the personal behavior and attitudes of the team members. This includes the ability to be self-critical, and to learn from mistakes. It requires respect for the people one is working with and having confidence in their ability to undertake the task. It involves sitting with and listening to others, not lecturing. It involves 'handing over the stick' to community members who become the main teachers and analysts.

The ultimate goal is to grasp an insider's perspective on the community and to understand the community as a whole. The process can be enjoyable for all involved, and it can yield useful information.

While PLA is a very rich tool in terms of providing relevant and timely data, at a relatively low cost, there are drawbacks to the technique.

- The validity of the information can be questioned.

While the PLA process can ensure that a variety of opinions are expressed, it does not provide data on the percentage of the population represented by that particular point of view.

- The reliability of the data can be questioned.

PLA does not necessarily provide a 'true' picture of what is happening in a village. The community will make an assessment of who the researcher is and what he or she represents. They may well shape their responses accordingly. A comment by a researcher in Morocco points out some of the difficulties:

> Drawing the map, putting all the inhabitants of the community on it, seeking information about household characteristics, etc., made the participants very suspicious. Even when we explained, they continued to maintain a great confusion between the researcher and the Government employees, especially those who work in the Finance or Agriculture Ministries. For people to trust you and to develop a mutual acquaintance needs time.

In addition to the issue of trust, there are people's expectations to take into account. Would the community discuss things in the same way if they thought you were there to build them a school, or provide loans for micro-enterprise projects, or simply to gather data with nothing coming back to the community? A researcher from India comments, "As word spread around amongst the villagers about what we were inquiring about, at times it seemed that they were giving answers which they thought would be more acceptable to us."

- While PLA can help enrich understanding, it does not provide information on the extent or pervasiveness of an issue, nor does it provide data from which generalizations can be made about a given population.

When quantitative data are available to provide such generalized information, then PLA can help add depth to your understanding. For example, in the case of Bolivia, researchers had national statistics and two research studies available to them before they began working in the communities. Statistical data were provided by the National Institute of Statistics (IN). The two research projects provided information on child development and ways of punishing children in different communities. Data for these two studies were collected through closed-ended questionnaires. The PLA process verified the research findings and provided a rich description of what had been found before. In addition it facilitated the discovery of details that enhanced understanding and allowed for community participation in the process. The difference between the

research projects and the PLA method is reflected in what one women in El Chaco said. "We never participated in this manner to know who lives here and who goes to school. The information was always taken from us, without our real participation."

Apart from these caveats, it is important to note that PLA is a useful tool when a description is required, and when what is sought is an understanding of attitudes, practices, and beliefs. It can help one understand quantified data already available on a community, and it is useful when the aim is to generate suggestions or recommendations, or when there is a need to generate questions for subsequent study. In the studies undertaken in this project, PLA served a particularly useful role in generating questions that require further investigation.

REFERENCE

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