

Welcome to the 57th issue of *Participatory Learning and Action*. The theme for this special issue centres on experiences of learning about poverty face-to-face, often referred to as immersions. Immersions are opportunities for development professionals to spend a period of time living with and learning from a poor family.

You will see that there are no 'general interest' articles in this issue. This is because we felt that the theme articles would be relevant and of interest to all our readers, whatever field they work in. There are also no 'tips for trainers' in this issue, but we hope that you will find many practical pointers in the articles and extracts that follow.

About the guest editors

The guest editors for this special issue are **Izzy Birch** and **Raffaella Catani**.

Izzy worked with Oxfam's Africa programme for many years, and recently helped ActionAid develop a resource pack on immersions. She is currently working with SOS Sahel UK and Fahamu, a Kenyan NGO working for social justice.

Raffaella is working with Praxis India to promote and network around immersions at both national and international level. She has over seven years of field experience in the development sector, mainly in social and community-based programmes in Africa. Her initiation into participatory approaches started with REFLECT, a participatory methodology aiming to empower communities through literacy.

Izzy and Raffaella have been supported by **Robert Chambers**, Institute of Development Studies, UK. Robert has written about and practised participatory approaches

extensively since the early 1980s, and is interested in the potential of immersions to allow the voices of the poor and powerless to be heard, and to bring about personal and professional change in those working with the poor.

About the special issue

This special issue is a timely reflection of an emerging trend in development practice. It draws together the richness of immersion experience to:

- reflect diverse experiences of immersions;
- identify the challenges and opportunities presented by immersions;
- begin to explore their impacts; and
- inspire people to have immersions, and help make them a regular practice for development professionals.

As is clear from the issue, many different models of immersion are being developed. Some are more structured, often based around a specific theme; others are more experiential and open-ended. But their common purpose is to bring immersion participants face-to-face with ordinary people, giving these participants the chance to test old assumptions, develop new perspectives, and strengthen their commitment to the challenge of poverty eradication.

Immersion approaches have been challenged on a number of grounds. Some favour other ways of giving the poor a voice and question immersions as the best means of influencing policy to take account of the poor and their needs and priorities. Some have doubts about the degree to which individual participants can really influence their employers' priorities and ways of working on return, given

underlying organisational biases and power dynamics. But a critical mass of interest is now gathering around the idea of immersions among major donors and civil society groups. The impact of immersions is only now being tested, and this issue explores both their limitations and their potential.

The structure of this special issue

The issue begins with an overview by **Robert Chambers**. Robert describes the many forms immersions can take, and the way in which they have slowly spread and been adopted by different organisations over the past few decades. He looks at the benefits of immersions – for individuals, organisations, and in promoting pro-poor development programmes and policies – and examines the reasons why there is resistance to the idea and practice of immersions. In his closing section, he makes a powerful case for the widespread use of immersions by development professionals.

After the overview, a short article by **Ravi Kanbur** describes his immersion in a village in Gujarat in 1999 organised by SEWA, a membership organisation of nearly one million women who work in India's informal economy. The Exposure and Dialogue Programme in which Ravi participated was designed as part of the process for developing the World Bank's 2000/01 *World Development Report: Attacking Poverty*, which he was leading. This description of his experience in Mohadi village has become a seminal account in the history of immersions. Ravi himself said that it was 'one of the most educational and moving experiences of my life.'

Following on from these introductory pieces, there is a range of full-length articles and short extracts by key proponents and participants in immersions. This part of the issue is divided into four sections.

- **Section 1** sets the scene, telling the story of how immersions have evolved within the four institutions most actively involved in this area of work to date: the Exposure and Dialogue Programme Association (EDP), SEWA, the World Bank, and ActionAid.
- Having examined the wider historical context in Section 1, we look in **Section 2** at the experiences of particular individuals in immersions, in their roles as host families, interpreters and facilitators, and guests.
- **Section 3** stays with the individual, gathering together a collection of personal accounts written by immersion participants, and showing that immersions can have a profound impact on the individuals involved.
- **Section 4** explores how organisations are using immersions for different purposes: for staff selection, orientation, and training, for programme development and accountability, and to shape policy or strategy.

Each of these sections has a brief introduction by the guest editors, bringing out key insights, and pointing out links between sections. Each article also has a short summary or introduction to give a flavour of its contents.

The guest editors' closing editorial (pp. 133-139) reflects further on the articles in this special issue, drawing together learning and providing ideas for ways forward. They identify four

key elements of good practice in immersions:

- adequate investment in preparation and orientation;
- appropriate facilitation and interpretation;
- a willingness by participants to embrace the unexpected and personal; and
- support from employers and managers.

They also discuss the ethical dilemmas raised by immersions – the burden they place on the host families, the right of host families to privacy versus the need of participants to share and reflect on experience – and suggest some responses to these dilemmas.

A common thread running through the articles is the difficulty of assessing the impact of immersions, and this challenge still lies ahead, although the editors identify efforts to start to meet this challenge. Looking again to the future, the editors note the importance of 'moving beyond the converted', and of making immersions an accepted rather than exceptional part of good practice.

We hope that you enjoy this special issue, learn as much as we did about the principles and practice of immersions, and are inspired by the accounts of personal experiences and insights it contains.

Thanks

This issue is the result of a huge amount of work on the part of the authors, the guest editors, and the special adviser for the issue, Robert Chambers. We would particularly like to thank the guest editors for their continuing commitment to the issue as their input extended far beyond our original expectations. The extensive range of experiences and

perspectives captured in this issue is testament to their good-humoured perseverance. We would also like to thank the many authors and others who have contributed to this special issue for their patience with our many queries and requests for 'more'. A full list of contributors can be found on page 7. Thanks to Robert Chambers for first suggesting this issue, for his continuing support for it, and for triggering a heated debate about the current *PLA* format (to be taken up in our forthcoming readership survey). Lastly, we would like to thank Andy Smith, from our designers smith+bell, for his help and advice on the formatting of this issue.

Regular features

In touch

Much of our *In Touch* section is dedicated to resources relating to immersions, including books, tool kits, and videos. It also includes our usual reviews of new resources and our dedicated e-participation pages.

RCPLA pages

Find out the latest news from our partners in the *Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action Network*.

Other news from the *PLA* team

Forthcoming issues

Originally billed as issue 57, our next issue (*PLA* 58, June 2008) will be on the unspoken dilemmas of participation. It will be guest edited by Tom Wakeford and others. This issue will reflect critically on 'citizen participation' and its impact on policy-making processes, and look at ways forward.

- What can we do to promote improved policies and practices?

- Why are some participatory processes more oppressive than empowering?
- How can participatory processes become part of the solution?
- What is the power imbalance between those who are affected by new technologies and those who develop and control them?
- What can cross-cultural learning and global solidarity offer both North and South?

The issue will also include a general section with a selection of articles from practitioners.

In December 2008, *PLA* 59 will look at the emerging practice of using participatory web for development, often called 'Web 2.0' – free or very low-cost interactive web applications and services can enhance the ways we create, share, and publish information, and the ways we collaborate and share resources.

The articles have been selected from presentations made at the Web2ForDev 2007: Participatory Web for Development conference, held in Rome, 24th–27th September 2007.

The guest editors for this special issue are Jon Corbett and Holly Ashley. Jon Corbett is Assistant Professor at the Centre for Social, Spatial and Economic Justice at the University of British Columbia-Okanagan, Canada, and also a member of the Web2forDev Steering Committee. Holly Ashley is one of the co-editors of *Participatory Learning and Action*.

Some of the key questions that this special issue will seek to address include:

- How can Web 2.0 applications be integrated with participatory development approaches?
- How can they facilitate and contribute to people's participation and decision-making?

- What are the challenges and barriers to people's participation?
- How do we address factors such as access, equity, control, and oversight?
- Can Web 2.0 applications challenge fundamental social inequalities?

This special issue aims to publish a collection of articles, which provide working examples from practice.

Readership survey 2008: coming soon!

Should we redesign *Participatory Learning and Action*? Is the format still right for our readers – the size, the binding, the 'informal' look and feel of the series? And what about the content? Should we become more or less formal? Should we be more critical, more reflective?

We will be asking our readers all these questions and more in the next issue, in our 2008 Readership Survey.

News from the *PLA* editorial board

We are very pleased to welcome Peter Taylor to our strategic editorial board. Peter Taylor is leader of the Participation, Power and Social Change team at IDS. Peter is involved in research and advisory work linked to transformative learning and teaching approaches; higher education, participatory development and community change; and cooperative inquiry into capacity development challenges. He also convenes the MA in Participation, Power and Social Change at IDS. Peter co-guest edited issue 48 of *Participatory Learning and Action* on learning and teaching participation, and has been an active member of our international editorial advisory board since 2005. We very much look forward to working with him in 2008 and beyond.

Multimedia multilingual training kit on Participatory Spatial Information Management and Communication

Following on from the success of *PLA* 54: *Mapping for change: practice, technologies, and communication*, and the subsequent multilingual CD-ROM of the issue, we will be collaborating on a project to support the spread of 'good practice' in generating, managing, analysing, and communicating spatial information.

Practitioners, activists, and researchers have identified a lack of training materials as a major constraint in the spread of good participatory mapping practice. To address this, a consultative group is being set up to oversee the development of a modular multimedia and multilingual training kit on participatory mapping practice. The content of the kit will cover tested methods, tools and technologies for designing, delivering, facilitating, practising, and evaluating participatory mapping initiatives, grounded in *PLA* approaches.

The product of this project will ensure that participatory mapping and communication practices evolve and spread in an ethically conscious manner, ensuring that indigenous and other marginalised communities are effective in documenting, representing, and communicating their spatial knowledge, while taking a high degree of control over the process.

The project will be carried out in collaboration with CTA (the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Development), based in the Netherlands, and is being jointly funded by CTA, IFAD, and the Ford Foundation Brazil, who were among our partners on the special multilingual CD of *PLA* 54. We are

also seeking additional funding for this project.

Case study series: 'What happens to the outputs of participatory processes?'

PLA and IKM Emergent (www.ikmemergent.net) are interested in producing a series of case studies illustrating how outputs from participatory processes can be fully used.

The last thirty years have seen a steady growth of the use of participatory methodologies in work with local populations for development research and development assistance programmes. Although such practice has often attracted criticism for its quality and depth, there is by now a substantial body of real achievement and communities of practitioners

dedicated to learning from and improving practice.

In most cases, participatory methodologies are used for a purpose. However, by definition, handing control of a discussion to a local community will alter the nature, focus, and reference framework of the discussion. Properly conducted participatory processes, even if they do result in outcomes close to the original purpose, almost invariably include a wider range of insight and local opinion than their original 'subject heading' might suggest.

What happens to the outputs? Are they used outside of their original purpose? If they relate to some research, that research is published. If they relate to a project, they are used to help plan or evaluate the project – are they then filed away? Due to limited awareness of their existence,

they will often not be used for related work, even within the same development organisation which funded or organised them, or, ethical considerations allowing, more widely by the sector. Local people may invest considerable amounts of time and efforts into processes designed to give them a voice, but the results are only partially used. This seems to constitute a waste of very valuable resources.

We are interested in good or bad examples of how such outputs can be used. See page 145 in our **In Touch** section for more information.

We hope you enjoy the issue and find much to stimulate your own thinking, as well as ideas to put into practice. Your feedback on the issue is very welcome, as always. Happy reading!

Holly Ashley, Nicole Kenton, and Angela Milligan