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Participatory Learning and Action – the coproduction of knowledge and action in the Global South

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[This is a short note produced in the context of exploring the origins and forerunners of the current emphasis on ‘coproduction’ of academic research in the UK. It was prompted by the development of a book on the legacy of the UK Research Councils’ Connected Communities programme.]

Here I discuss an important tradition within the coproduction ‘family’: one which has attained mainstream status in its own field of international development but whose relationship with current developments in researching with communities in the UK is unclear. It merits examination in the context of coproduction as a forerunner (with its heady developmental days in the 1980s and 1990s), for its success, and for the ensuing critiques and debates which foreshadow many of the current concerns over the ethics and politics of coproduction. As with coproduction in the Global North, the participatory turn in ‘development’ in the Global South was a family of loosely related and interconnected approaches. While they drew to some extent on different theoretical and practice traditions, they shared value commitments (Chambers 2008) and their principal distinction was disciplinary, as researchers and practitioners applied the basic principle of ‘farmer first’ to agricultural research, integrated pest management, seed storage and so on. Here I focus on one particular strand, the stream of approaches and acronyms that started as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) in the 1980s, became Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in the 1990s and settled down as ‘Participatory Learning and Action’ (PLA) in the 2000s¹. The focus is prompted by this being the strand which achieved dominance in the development practice world as it was taken up not only by non-governmental organisations but (somewhat controversially) by the World Bank and other major donors. It is also the one with which I am most familiar, as a minor player in the story working in participatory forestry and agriculture, and PLA training, in Sudan, Sri Lanka and Eritrea in the early- to mid-1990s.

This was a very dynamic field, the evolution of which was to a large extent driven by evolving values and changing understandings of what was and should be possible in the field. As an approach it always wore its values on its sleeve, and these were explicitly central to the elaboration of the methods. The creation of knowledge was always a central aspect, as a foundational tenet was the superior knowledge rural people have of their own situation and their ability to analyse and explore it. Yet the aim was always developmental, and usually tangible: knowledge creation was a means to an end, and empowerment was usually secondary to technological or economic improvement.

PLA’s origins lay in a growing frustration with the perceived lack of success of mainstream post-World War II approaches to international development in tackling rural poverty. By

¹ I use ‘PLA’ as shorthand for the approach from here on.

1980 expensive, highly technical projects, designed and executed by 'experts' from the global North were being challenged by practitioners arguing for, and starting to practice, approaches which involved poor people in the planning and design of development interventions (Cohen and Uphoff 1980). Initially fragmented and with little coherence of understanding or even definitions of what 'participation' might be (Cohen and Uphoff 1980), RRA emerged in the early 1980s as a systematic critique of existing development practice. It comprised a set of new practices based on 'putting the last first', both when learning and in the implementation of projects (Chambers 1983). Robert Chambers – an academic at the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University – was central, and rapidly attained 'guru' status in the evolving movement. For it was a movement – explicitly ideological, 'a highly political movement for transformational change embedded in a radical view of the world' (Myers and Hobley 2013: 12), with inspirational leaders and evangelical converts. There was no central body, however – instead there was a commitment to innovation, creativity and sharing, and a corresponding flood of 'how to' publications emanating from projects and NGOs across the South and development institutions in the North. At its heart (in the Anglophone world, at least) were the 'thinker-practitioners' (Myers and Hobley 2013: 12) in academic and non-government research institutes such as IDS, IIED and ODI who pioneered the methods in the field and established key dissemination hubs, pre-eminently IIED's *RRA* (later *PLA*) *Notes*.

While RRA was based in a critique of mainstream knowledge-gathering approaches and emphasised observation, semi-structured interviewing, and taking care to avoid (male, elite) biases, it was still rooted in a paradigm of 'better knowledge for better project planning by outsiders'. However, as practitioners spent more time engaging with rural people they became bolder and PRA emerged, with much more of an emphasis on 'handing over the stick (or pen)' – having the confidence that 'ordinary people' can articulate their ideas, analyse their own worlds, and plan to make them better if they are provided with the opportunity and the tools. The outsider was cast as facilitator, and a myriad new exercises and tools were developed which emphasised visual representations such as mapping and diagramming, analysis by groups, ranking rather than quantitative measurement and – most importantly – a privileging of local interpretations over outsiders' assumptions and expertise (Chambers 1994; Pretty *et al.* 1995). It was an exciting time: as one leading 'thinker-practitioner' recently recalled, there was 'a freshness and energy bubbling up, seeking to test out new ways of learning and understanding how to engage a more bottom-up process of decision-making and development' (Toulmin 2013: 3).

Chambers in particular made clear PRA's theory of change: the necessary large scale changes in international development had to be rooted in value changes by professionals, in particular because otherwise PRA would become merely methods toolkits which replicated existing power relationships. The difficulties of institutional change, and of scaling up from the project level, were increasingly recognised (Blackburn and Holland 1997), and the importance of existing power and entrenched interests were acknowledged. However, although there were dissenting voices within the movement (K Singh, pers. comm.) and

increasingly outside it (see below) the analysis remained focussed on individual value and behaviour change as a necessary condition for structural change.

To some extent this reflects origins in practice: the multiple realisations by scattered individual practitioners that what they were doing wasn't working, and their search for a better way to 'do development'. According to Chambers, this was not a theorised process: '[p]ractice was driven and drawn not by academic analysis, nor by a reflective analytical book like *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1970) but by the excitement of innovation, discovery and informal networking' (Chambers 2008: 89). Elsewhere, particularly in Latin America, Marxist ideas were more prevalent, and participatory approaches, such as 'participatory action research' (Fals-Borda 1987), were often more political, rooted in struggles over land. Not everyone would agree with Chambers: certainly there were theoretically-informed, left-wing PLA activists in South India and Sri Lanka, and Freire had global influence through his work in the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (Freire 1979). Nevertheless, this origin is perhaps an important difference from much current coproduction: PLA did not start from academic research projects, even if some of the drivers were academic-practitioners or had academic partners.

During the 1990s the use of PLA expanded enormously, in particular in the development NGO world. It made sense: people could see real results on the ground, and increasing numbers of people, including Southern technical experts and administrators, were experiencing almost Damascene conversions to adopting participatory approaches (Henkel and Stirrat 2001)². Inevitably, perhaps, the large international development organisations started to pay attention, including the World Bank (widely reviled by those considering themselves progressive in the development field). From early in the 1990s, workshops on participation (some run by Chambers) were held within the Bank (Bhatnagar and Williams 1992; World Bank 1996), and after an internal struggle (A Shakow, pers. comm.) participation became Bank orthodoxy. It was easy to portray this as cooptation and a threat to PLA's emancipatory potential, and reinforced growing academic criticism of participatory development. The catchily-titled *Participation: the New Tyranny?* brought together significant critiques centring on participation as 'a set of practices which are at best naïve about questions of power, and at worst serve systematically to reinforce, rather than overthrow existing inequalities' (Cooke and Kothari 2001). More constructively some academics then attempted to recover participation's potential by linking their analyses and prescriptions to explicit recognition of the politics of development, in order to 'propose...ways forward for relocating participation as a genuinely transformative approach' (Hickey and Mohan 2004).

These were useful criticisms (with relevance to current discussions of coproduction) though, as Chambers rather tartly pointed out (Chambers 2008: 91), some were based on a significant lack of practical experience, and there were other weaknesses which the PLA

² The religious metaphor is intentional. Henkel and Stirrat draw attention to the evangelical religious qualities of the participatory turn, including Chambers' 'missionary habitus' and his followers' tendency to 'routinize the teachings of the prophet' (Henkel and Stirrat 2001: 178).

community itself was well aware of and attempting to address. (Bad practice had mushroomed along with PRA in the 1990s – in particular the adoption of the methods without the (more fundamental) attention to either behaviour change or institutional constraints (Chambers 2008).) The critiques also bring out a deeper, discipline-based divide between critical development studies academics and (thinker-)practitioners. The former clearly privilege participation's role in achieving political change over material developmental change, emphasising political empowerment and relatively uninterested in the achievement of goals such as food or financial security (Hickey and Mohan 2004). From a practitioner perspective this is odd: even in a politically oppressive society it is arguably empowering for a poor household to become more self-reliant and less vulnerable to, for instance, debt-incurring shocks.

The academic critiques had rather little impact, however; perhaps predictably given both the limited reach of much academic writing and the momentum of participatory practice. Mainstreaming continued along with innovation, most recently in finding novel participatory uses for digital technologies (Ashley *et al.* 2013). There was also increasing transfer of the practices Northwards, in part as individuals with Southern PLA experience took up work as academic and consultants. Gaventa's guidance for British urban regeneration (Gaventa 2004) is a very obvious example, as is Tippet's Ketso tool, developed in Lesotho and now widely used in the UK (Ketso 2010) and there must be other, less visible academics (like myself) who have brought PLA's ethos and some of its practices 'home'.

For more than thirty years PLA and its precursors have involved the coproduction of localised knowledge, and in some cases better lives for poor people. Any generalisable substantive knowledge was a by-product, however – what spread through the development field were values, principles and methods which could be adapted to their context. The outcomes were largely tangible contributions to reducing poverty and insecurity – not negligible achievements, particularly in contrast to the negative impacts of much mainstream 'development'. I conclude by raising some questions about parallels and contrasts between PLA and the current wave of coproduction of knowledge by academics and communities, for example in the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council's *Connected Communities* programme.

A clear parallel is the ever-present tension over power and control. It is questionable whether 'handing over the stick' completely was ever possible, and it may be that the language of 'coproduction' is more helpful in that it emphasises collaboration rather than a full transfer of power. While this does not resolve the issues, it perhaps makes them more visible, and less likely to be ignored though misplaced idealism. The two fields perhaps also have parallels in their institutional location. Arguably PLA could spread so rapidly because it was based in donor-funded projects, directly engaging with poor people in ways which could bypass an often-weak local state. In contrast much community participation and development in the UK has been restricted by the presence and involvement of (relatively) powerful and well-organised (local) government (see e.g. Shaw 2003: and an enormous critical community development literature). It might be argued that academic research projects, with their light-touch reporting requirements and the funders' principal interest in

academic research, are relatively autonomous from the local state in a way more akin to Southern participatory development projects.

Where the two fields differ starkly, however, is in their substantive content and goals. On the one hand engagement in PLA – at least in its rural applications – potentially offered poor people increased control over the means of production, and thus direct improvements in quality and security of livelihoods. On the other, participation in the UK's much more highly governed and less-subsistence-oriented economic context offers fewer opportunities for such control and improvement, though clearly participation (perhaps especially in art-based activities) offers other, less tangible benefits. Finally there is the issue of who is involved and why. In the South, PLA was a practitioners' response to the failure of the post-WWII development paradigm, and was primarily concerned with achieving development through other means: in this the aims of the outsiders and rural participants more or less coincided. On the face of it the situation is different when the spur for coproduction of knowledge is principally intellectual rather than developmental – as for example in the AHRC's mission to 'understand the changing nature of communities...and the role of communities in sustaining and enhancing our quality of life' (AHRC 2012). This potentially introduces tensions between research and developmental goals, and also - though not *necessarily* - between academic researchers and community participants in coproduced research.

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