PLA - a catalyst for good local governance?

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Abstract

PLA stands for "*Participatory Learning and Action*" and is a label for people's participation in community and rural development. The method has been developed in the international development co-operation, and is closely linked to the well-known PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal). The PRA/PLA approach is being implemented since 15 years and has become very popular. Despite or because of its popularity the shortcomings and limitations need special attention. PRA/PLA has also spread to rural extension organisations in Europe. PLA (a specific procedure) has been tested in several communities in Switzerland. A few experiences have been made in German rural communities, of which one field experience is critically reflected in this paper.

There are several programmes and initiatives in rural areas building on the ",bottom-up"" approach, e.g., LEADER+ and the Local Agenda 21 process. Volunteering through participation in meetings etc. plays an important role in these participatory processes, which are sometimes difficult and time consuming. A PLA in an initial phase might smoothen this process.

PLA aims at supporting a dialogue between stakeholders, creating empowerment and initiating social learning processes. At the end of a PLA exercise a community would have 2 products, which are a situation analysis and an alert community with the desire to create or participate in development initiatives.

In order to fully take advantage of PLA in terms of a social learning process, there is scope for improvement. It is recommended to modify the presentation and feed back methodology and to fully integrate local actors into the PLA team during the analysis phase.

The actual debate on mainstreaming ,,bottom-up" approaches in rural development raises another question. One should think about how to scale up the human resources capacities in rural areas, that are able to guide these processes. In the case of PLA, which depends on voluntary work, existing volunteering programmes to further disseminate this methodology could be used.

PLA shouldn't be regarded as a binding principle in ,,bottom-up" processes, but one suitable option for analysing the situation of a rural community and/or for evaluating the results of integrated rural development projects.

Introduction

Rural communities in transition from the farming-based village to modern socio-economic structures face many difficulties. The traditional village, where people who live and work nearby would meet and communicate regularly, is rather an exception nowadays. Farmers, traders and craftsmen have been a majority in the community in the past. Today, these classic professions constitute only a small minority among many retired elderly people, families with commuting employees, and in some areas a large

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proportion of unemployed people. Agriculture is not anymore a specialised and dominant sector contributing to employment and the production not more than 25% in any of Europe's regions (van der Ploeg 2003). Farming is rather an integral part of a mixed rural economy.

This socio-economic change has impact on the cultural and natural diversity of the countryside. The post-modern and economical lifestyle of the rural society requires farmers (or other business) and local authorities to safeguard the rural areas "as places with rural character to live in and work and fulfilling recreational and ecological functions" (Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture 2003). Strategies range from marketing concepts for locally produced and supplied goods and services, to (eco)tourism and agro-environmental programmes to preserve the historically grown landscape including agriculture and natural resources.

These strategies are to be developed in a consultation process with local stakeholders ("„bottom-up" approach"). Good local governance is understood as a means for true democracy, and therefore seen as the "golden" way to reach sustainability. In sustainable communities, according to the President of the German City and Community Network, "people together with local government, administration, business and NGO's would plan and manage the future of their community together" (Schäfer 2002).

In this paper the Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) exercise is discussed as planning and analysis tool for developing rural communities in Europe. It starts with a short description of the participatory philosophy of selected initiatives in rural areas. Volunteering issues are briefly reflected, as voluntary work plays a key role in those initiatives. The background and main principles of PRA is discussed and its shortcomings in the international development co-operation reflected. Field observations from a PLA exercise in a rural community in Northern Germany are analysed and lessons learned drawn. It is finally concluded if, when and how PLA could support integrated rural development programmes in Europe.

People's Participation in Rural Development

„Bottom-up" Culture of selected Initiatives and Programmes

LEADER+ is a European Community initiative for assisting rural communities in improving the quality of life and economic prosperity in their local area. Partnerships of local organisations and people (local action groups) receive funds to identify development needs and to test small-scale, innovative pilot projects. One of the four LEADER+ pillars is the "„bottom-up"" approach with new forms of people's participation and decision-making structures. The actual debate emphasises on the full dialogue between rural stakeholders in the drawing up and subsequent implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes.[1] Rural development policy should be implemented in partnership between regional public and private organisations and civil society in line with the principle of subsidiarity by building on the lessons learned from the LEADER approach.

The German Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture has launched a pilot programme "**Active regions – Shaping Rural Futures**". This project supports local concepts and strategies, in which the rural area itself acts as driving force through value adding activities. Genuine for all 18 pilot projects is a participatory process with all (local) stakeholders.

Local governments and their communities as key actors have been requested to formulate a local action plan for sustainable development which is being based on the problems and needs of the people of their

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[1] During the Second European Conference on Rural Development in Salzburg "Planting seeds for rural futures - building a policy that can deliver our ambitions" (12-14.11.2003) the participants have concluded that the future policy must mainstream the support for rural areas through bottom-up local partnerships.

community (**Local Agenda 21**). In 2003, more than 2,000 or 18% of all German communities have passed resolutions on intent to undertake a Local Agenda 21 process. (Agenda Transfer 2003). In the Local Agenda 21 processes local communities make use of participatory methods in order to improve communication between all stakeholders. User-friendly government administration and services, participatory planning workshops with local people, and participatory budgeting are common initiatives (punkt.um 4/2003).

Some Thoughts about Volunteering and People's Participation

The Local Agenda 21 process depends on volunteer activities, through the participation in conferences, action groups, projects, and round tables (Kaiser 1999). Most of the projects of the "Active regions - Shaping Rural Futures" programme have developed grass-root oriented partnerships. Local partners have made positive experiences with the participatory and transparent decision-making structures (IfLS 2003), but time consuming processes and inappropriate methodologies are major shortcomings so far.

Four kinds of people's participation can be distinguished: a) free elections and freedom of assembly as per constitution, b) public hearings, c) participation under the auspices of a formal organisation (association, political party), and d) informal participation through volunteer work in project-like activities. Participation through a formal organisation is loosing importance (Keupp 2002). In contrast, project-oriented volunteer involvement has gained importance. According to a representative survey of Infratest Burke in 1999 34 % of the Germans are actively involved in volunteer work. Moreover, there seems to be still a "huge sleeping resource" or an unused potential of potentially active volunteering people (von Rosenbladt 2000).

Participatory Approaches

Background

PRA - Participatory Rural Appraisal – and PLA – Participatory Learning and Action - are labels for learning, planning and decision-making methods, which encourage people's participation in community and rural development. They have been developed in the field of the international development co-operation. PRA and PLA are closely linked. RRA has been developed earlier, and is rather an assessment than a participatory tool.

Table 1 Main Features of RRA, PRA and PLA

	RRA	PRA	PLA
Name	*Rapid Rural Appraisal*	*Participatory Rural Appraisal*	*Participatory Learning and Action*
Since	1980	1990	1990
Developed by	Universities, UN	NGO's	NGO's
Aims at	• Quickly acquiring new information about rural life and resources	• Ownership through jointly defining priorities for plans and activities.	• Creating awareness • Supporting a policy dialogue • Empowerment of the civil society.
Used for	• Assessment	• Planning	• Social Learning

Source: Adapted from LBL (2001), Chambers (1997), Pretty et al (1995)

RRA is an exploratory survey, which aims at learning from the local population in order to identify research and development priorities. The RRA toolbox contains a variety of creativity and visualisation tools to facilitate and structure group (and individual) discussions.

10 years later, PRA has been developed by local NGOs in developing countries, of which India and Kenya played a leading role (Schönhuth, Kievelitz 1994). Using the IDS[2] terminology "PRA can be described as a family of approaches, methods and behaviours that enable people to express and analyse the realities of their lives and conditions, to plan themselves what action to take, and to monitor and evaluate the results." The main objective of PRA is to assist communities and planners in formulating local action plans, problem solving and project identification based on a community situational analysis (Leeuwis 2000).

Similar to PRA, PLA typically leads to development change in form of action plans. However, the process of the change is different. PLA emphasises on social learning. In the participation course social learning is referred to "the community members and stakeholders that have generated new knowledge, skills, confidence, resources, insight and perspectives on which action can be based" (Leeuwis 2000).

Principles

The main principles of PRA/PLA are summarised as it follows:

1. **Insiders (community members) are the experts:** Outsiders, i.e. the facilitation and interviewing team ask questions and listen to the community actors. The community members themselves communicate their experiences, needs and knowledge to others. This lays the ground for further action.

2. **Learning in and from the community:** While listening to the perceptions of the community members, the team is expected to be fairly neutral. They neither have the role of an advocate, nor an expert, mediator or extensionists.

3. **Appropriate instruments and degree of precision**: Methods and tools are used flexible in accordance with the actual situation. The team therefore should have strong emphatic abilities. The team should not aim at "absolute accuracy" (Berg et al 1997) or statistically significant data sets. They rather want to understand perceptions, behaviour and communicative mechanisms in the community. Therefore qualitative research methods are the basis of participatory methods.

4. **Triangulation** is a form of cross-checking in order to get a comprehensive insight of the situation. For this purpose, the team composition, the sources of information, and the techniques are varied (Theis/Grady 1991). A multidisciplinary team contributes to this well-balanced approach, as things are approached from different viewpoints.

Critical Reflections

The power and popularity of PRA and its mainstreaming into all programmes has derived in a paradigm shift in international development co-operation thinking. However, the scaling up and mainstreaming created a diversity of meanings and practices. PRA/PLA is not always used as a "true" participatory tool. A Kenyan user describes it with the following words: "everyone is doing something and calling it 'PRA'" (Cornwall 2001).

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[2]   IDS is the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton. The main PRA concepts have been developed by this institute, of which Robert Chambers is one well-known PRA researcher.

The nature of PRA is non-dogmatic, informal, and self-critical. This might explain the intensity of discussions about its practical limitations. Recurring empirical shortcomings have been summarised below.

- **The participation debate is dichotomised into efficiency or empowerment** (Cleaver 2001). One would either consider participation as a means (in order to increase project efficiency) or participation as an end / goal (in order to empower the people). If the efficiency argument dominates the idea of empowerment, the risk of abusing the people is high. This is characteristic for a PRA forum in the beginning of a project (mainly for data extraction purpose) with no PRA follow up process (due to lack of interest or lack of funds).

- The "**tyranny of methods**" (Cleaver 2001), "**fetishism of methods**" (Freyhold 2002) which simply symbolises the very dogmatic and non-reflected application of participatory tools is widely criticised. Often - due to unqualified or inexperienced PRA facilitators - PRA tools are being applied in a text book way. PRA facilitators often tend to perform a messy tool spectacle instead of making use of PRA tools as a means for a genuine dialogue (Chambers 1997).

- "**Dominant and superior behaviour**" (Chambers 1997) of PRA facilitators is the most common fault and one explanation for the abuse of PRA by outsiders. In PRA training, it has not been put enough effort to "attitudes and behaviours". A code of conduct, which can be best described with the attributes "hand over the stick", "sit down, listen, learn, respect", "don't rush", "be nice to people" (Chambers 1997) is required.

- The "**myths of the solidarity in the community**" (Cleaver 2001) ignores conflicts and diverging interests within social or strategic groups, i.e. between individuals. It also does not fully ac-knowledge the conflicts and diverging interests between so-called strategic groups. Individuals are squeezed into categories, which are sometimes far away from reality.

- **PRA/PLA tries to involve all stakeholders or all strategic groups**. If there are strong conflicts between or within social groups productive decisions and further action are impeded (Leeuwis 2000).

- The conceptual weakness of PRA is **its inadequacy representing positions and actions of individuals**. PRA doesn't tackle the issues of **conflict between individuals and groups**. Leeuwis (2000) suggests to extend the participation concept through the negotiation and conflict approach. This would also require a new definition of the role of the PRA facilitator, who would no longer act as a "fairly neutral figure" (Leeuwis 2000) but may follow an active strategy in order to find agreements and to make contracts. In the French debate, e.g. Olivier de Sardan (1999) has contributed towards the divergence of interest discourse.

- "**Putting the last first?" as a principle hasn't really materialised** after 20 years of participation (Chambers 1997). There is no sincere social change for the most vulnerable strata of the population as a result of PRA. PRA is a good promising thing *per se*, but its outcome is unpredictable and not easily replicable (Cleaver 2001). PRA forums principally aim at involving everybody in the community. In fact, the most vulnerable part of the population are often unable to participate, as they even have no time to participate (Korf 2003).

- It is assumed, that social institutions formalise collective interests and represent the grassroots population (Cleaver 2001). In project practice, however, **social institutions are often accused for fraud** (Freyhold 2002): They use PRA in order to legitimate their own ideas and projects rather than representing the local communities.

- "**Handing over the stick?":** The project practice allows a **decentralisation of power and funds up to a certain degree only**. A decentralised budget is for example often excluded from the

participatory approach. Then, a PRA at local level without decision makers could therefore easily become a farce. PRA facilitators might raise expectations that can not be fulfilled later on (Leeuwis 2000). This is particularly true in very hierarchic environments or bureaucratic governments.
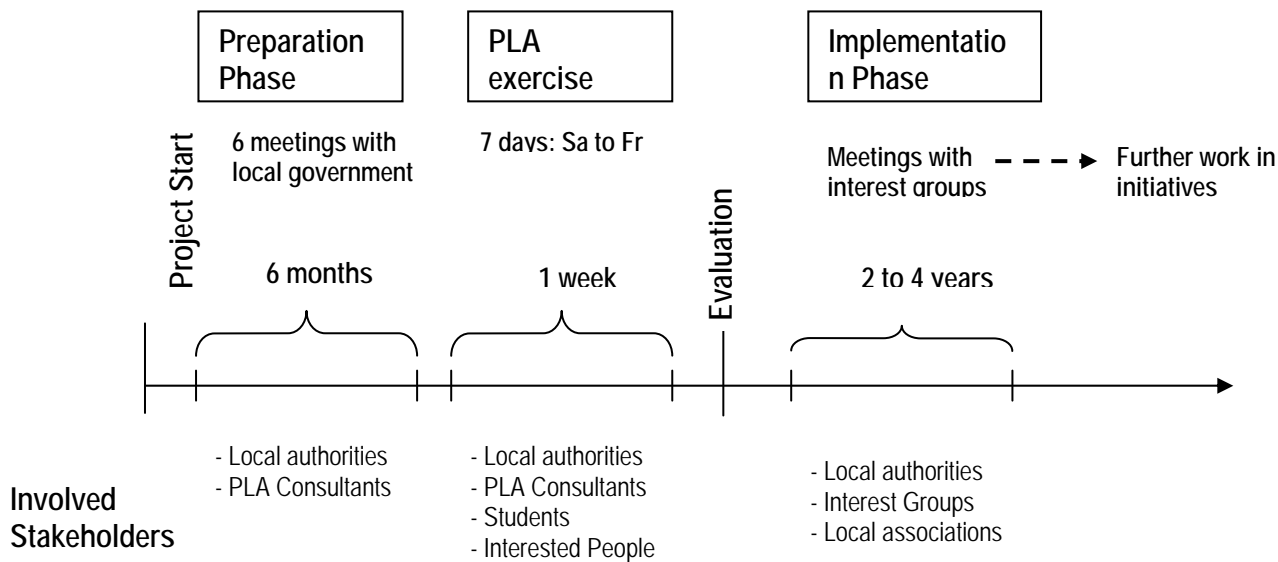
PLA concept in Europe

Process and practice of PLA

The Swiss Center for Agricultural extension (LBL) is applying PLA as participatory method in Swiss rural communities since 1990 (LBL 2001). PLA has been also tested in at least three German federal states: Lower Saxony, Schleswig-Holstein, and Baden-Württemberg (Chamber of Agriculture 2003; Delius and Currle 1998; Friedrich and Kügler 1999; KDA 2003; Korf 2003).

LBL has developed a very much standardised PLA process for rural communities. The process has 3 major steps and is illustrated in Figure 1. PLA consultants typically assist during a preparation phase of 6 months. They also facilitate the 7 days PLA exercise. The PLA exercise is conducted by a voluntary team of students and other interested people. The multidisciplinary team conducts interviews, analyses the generated data and prepares for a final presentation.

After the PLA exercise an evaluation meeting follows. Then the initiative groups, start planning and implementing the projects for a period of 2 to 4 years. During this phase, the rural communities are mainly self-responsible. However, consultants might support the implementation.

Source: LBL (2001)

Figure 1 PLA Process

Objectives of a PLA exercise

Local actors of a community formulate their individual strengths, problems, potentials, and project ideas. This information is analysed and structured and finally leads to a situational analysis. A social learning process takes place, in which information and ideas are shared. Community actors receive feed back from the outsiders (interviewing team) and other actors within the community. Through a

communicative action process (by giving feed back and self-disclosure) the arena where action can be based on is opening up.[3] The objectives of a PLA exercise are

- To show development potentials
- To develop realistic project ideas
- To develop a joint vision of the community
- To advocate for active involvement/engagement of people in the community
- To support a dialogue between various interest groups within the community

PLA Tools

In the standardised PLA exercise as described above, only two tools of the RRA/PRA toolbox are applied[4]: The first day starts with a **transect** (village walk). It has the "purpose of becoming acquainted with the community and its people, by way of informal talks, and some information about the situation 'on the ground' " (Berg et al 1997).

Another tool is the **semi-structured interviewing with individuals and groups**. Individual talks are very informal and may take place in the kitchen. Therefore they are called "talks at the kitchen table". The community walk is usually the first activity of a PLA team in a village. For presentation purposes and to structure group discussions, visual sharing in form of maps and diagrams are used.

First-hand experience from a PLA exercise in Northern Germany

Objectives and procedure

The objectives of the PLA exercise in the community Bookholzberg were to motivate the population, to integrate the youth, to network the interests between government and local population, and to request the local government for further action.

To gain partners for an interview, the PLA exercise has been announced in local newspapers and flyers. Multipliers have been recruited on a voluntary basis for all identified interest groups (farmers, traders, elderly people, youth, etc.). Their task was to motivate their "peer" group to enrol for an interview.

Actors and their main interests

Bookholzberg (estimated population of 5.000) belongs to the rural community Ganderkesee which is located between the 2 cities Oldenburg and Bremen in Lower Saxony, Northern Germany. It is a community in transition. It is well connected to cities, where people would work. There are only marginal job opportunities within the community. A small number of full time farmers produce on the agricultural land. Part-time farmers make up a good part of the population and seem to positively influence the rural landscape, e.g. through the planting of hedgerows. Table 2 contains the functions and major interests of the stakeholders involved.

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[3]   Good interpersonal communication facilitates social learning. In order to illustrate the effects of self-disclosure and feed back to increasing personal and interpersonal awareness the psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham have devised the Johari Window. The PLA process makes use of the two mechanisms self-disclosure and feed back. In individual talks PLA focus on self-disclosure, while in group presentations it focus on feed back.

[4]   The RRA/PRA toolbox contains a wide range of facilitation and creativity tools. These have been described in various manuals and training guides (e.g. Theis/Grady 1991; Pretty 1995; Berg et al 1997).

Table 2 Functions and interests of stakeholders in the PLA exercise

Stakeholder	Number of persons involved	Function within PLA exercise	Major interest
Local council Ganderkesee (Mayor)	1	• Donor (50% or 5.500 Euro)	• Feed back from community • Improve local government performance (elections!)
Managing committee of Local Agenda 21 association	3	• Fund raising from local authorities and District government • Commissioning party	• Publicity for Local Agenda 21 initiatives • Guidelines and justification for future activities • Social learning process
Chamber of Agriculture	1	• PLA consultant/trainer • Facilitation of process	• Dissemination of PLA methodology
Multipliers	25	• Gain partners for an interview • Organise accommodation for PLA team	• 200 interview partners • Any other interest?
Interviewing and facilitating team (voluntary work)	15	• Conduct individual and group interviews • Presentation of findings	• In-house training • Training and personal interest
Interviewed individuals and families	100	• Provide information	• Talk about problems / solutions • Any other interest??
Interviewed groups	18	• Provide information	• Talk about problems / solutions • Any other interest??
People in Bookholzberg	~ 5.000	• Invited to interviews and presentation	• ?

The commissioning party (local agenda association) did not fully understand why the participation of some people did not take place (indicated with questions marks in table 2). Some multipliers were not successful enough in stimulating "their" interest group. This was the case for the business-people for instance. It was suspected that there were **too many conflicts within the interest group of business-people.** People are then less interested in participating as they do not expect much of the outcome. The same phenomenon was observed within the group of new citizens and vulnerable groups (e.g. refugees seeking asylum).

Process of the PLA exercise

In 168 hours or a 7-days week a PLA team of 15 persons conducted a situational analysis reflecting the perceptions of the community actors. The exercise started with a 2 days training on people's participation and interviewing techniques. 3 subsequent days were spent to conduct the interviews. For data analysis and the final presentation the team had another 2 days.

In small teams (2 to 3 persons) 100 individual interviews and 18 group discussions have been conducted. The appointments for the interviews were made by the commissioning party well in advance.

An interview lasted between 20 minutes and 2 hours. The essence of the interview was documented on an appropriate number of cards (maximum 10). Table 3 shows how the documentation was structured.

Table 3 On the Spot Analysis of the Interview

White cards	What works well in the community? (**Strengths**)
Yellow cards	What should be improved? What is a problem? (**Weaknesses**)
Green cards	What do we want? (**Wishes**)
Blue cards	What do we do in the community? (**Project ideas**)
Red Cards	What vision do we have for the future of our community? (**Crazy ideas**)

Source: Chamber of Agriculture Weser Ems (2003)

All cards have been clustered into 6 major fields of interest, which were: a) children and youth, b) infrastructure, c) traffic and transport, d) agriculture, environment and recreation, e) administration and local government, and f) people's co-operation and communication.

Posters have been created for all fields of interest and sketches have been designed to be performed the other day. The final presentation was attended by an audience of 160 people. Besides giving feed back to the community, this event intended to provide a forum for further discussion and the informal meeting of local action groups.

Lessons Learned

In order to fully take advantage of the **<u>social learning process</u>**[5], potential users should be especially aware of:

- **A good PLA wakes up the "big sleeping human resource".** "People in Bookholzberg are braver now" stated the manager of the local agenda committee. They have increased their awareness and understanding of the community, the development options, may even changed their attitudes and became definitely more self-confident. This interest has created the desire to further develop or work in initiatives.

- **Guidance during project planning and implementation is the key factor for success.** Since the exercise, many people have contacted the local agenda committee and talk about initiatives and new grass-root projects. New groups have been formed, some projects and interests have been even materialised or are at a planning stage. It is important that these first initiatives get guidance from an agency (consultant, association or local government) in order to keep motivating the people and to advise in project implementation.

- **The final presentation should be designed as first forum for further action.** The participants were overwhelmed by more than 40 posters and a couple of sketches that gave feed back on the conflicts and interests in a rather entertaining way. A fruitful discussion in front of the boards was more wishful thinking than it really took place. It is essential to further develop a feed back concept that those meetings are used more efficiently in direction action forum. The fairly flexible Open Space methodology, where people would meet and determine themselves, what and how long they want to talk about, might be a suitable alternative taking into consideration the social learning process.

- **Public relations is essential.** Public relation work was well organised through the involvement of newspapers, radio stations, television right from the beginning. The produced video can be used for training purposes as well as interested people from the community in order to further disseminate the results. As the PLA exercise stands rather at the beginning of the social learning process, media are an important tool to raise attention.

- **Individual talks increase people's authenticity, but group processes are essential for social learning progress.** People in individual interviews talk about things they would also tell their neighbours and friends, which gives a very authentic picture of the reality. Group discussions are so effective in terms of social learning, and initiating projects. Therefore, the balance of individual and group discussions is essential for a good PLA.

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[5] Suitable indicators for social learning are the level of alert/attention, interest, desire and action (A-I-D-A) in the community, which could be captured in figures (number of people involved, calling, taking part etc. before and after the PLA exercise and or number of initiatives, hearings, meetings, etc.).

- **Interview should deal with as many personal interest and solutions as possible.** The content of the interviews – if not guided well – would focus very much on higher level problems. People tend to complain about general frame conditions and its limitations. To fully take advantage of a social learning process, the interviewers must gear people towards their personal problems, interests, wishes and solutions. It should deal with aspects, that people are able to influence, decide, to create, and to change. Moreover, at least 30% of the time of the interview should deal with the future.

- **A volunteering PLA team is a trust-building measure.** Community members are able to talk frankly to volunteers (as they are usually less superior and less dominant). It might be also a fact, that volunteering has a good reputation in the rural areas.

If the emphasis lies on the key principles of PRA "**Putting the last first**" and "**Handing over the stick**", this would require paying more attention towards a number of issues:

- **Roles and responsibilities must be well defined.** One impression from the exercise was that the role of the Local Agenda team as multiplying agency was not satisfactorily clear. They are responsible for all preparatory and follow up work, but haven't been integrated well into the PLA week. The PLA consultant justified the exclusion of the managing committee by the fact that interviews should be treated anonymously and neutral. Still, during the course of the week many misunderstandings came up and the Local Agenda 21 board felt excluded and could not participate in the process as they wanted to do.

- **Insiders should be involved in data analysis phase**. The Local Agenda 21 association felt excluded from the process itself, and therefore missed some important steps to fully understand the whole process. While the interviewing team, which has increased its understanding of the communication within the community, goes back home, the insiders are left with a bunch of posters. The integration of local people, especially in the data analysis, would be very beneficial for a sound follow up process.

- **Marginal groups must be invited for an interview explicitly.** In general, they would not come voluntarily, if they do not feel part of the community and that their voices count as well. Multipliers for these groups are essential and they even need a special training to motivate those groups to participate.

The PLA methodology has its **limitations**, which are related to its appropriateness as planning and conflict solving tool.

- **PLA is less effective as planning method.** During interviews, people prefer letting off steam than looking for productive solutions. On the other hand, the PLA team was instructed to direct the interview towards ideas and projects. This creates an dilemma which is often difficult to overcome. The instruction on the degree of guidance during the interview must be well communicated in advance. The purpose of the interview must be well explained to the interviewers and the interviewed. This is particularly true if PLA should be used more in the sense of a planning tool. It is then also required to modify the method.

- **PLA is not solving conflicts.** Interest groups which have internal conflicts, e.g. business-people in the case study, were not enrolling for interviews, neither as group nor as individuals. They did not believe, that a situational analysis could be a good start for further action. Conflict assessments in an initial stage would have had helped to better understand the participation behaviour of certain groups. In a conflict situation, complementary conflict management/mediation tools are necessary.

The **costs** of a PLA are rather low.

- **PLA is quick and efficient.** Whether a PLA exercise is cheap or expensive, this question shouldn't be raised here. One thing is assured: A comprehensive situational analysis of a rural community can not be realised with a budget of 11.000 Euro. It must be stated once again, that all 15 interviewers have worked on a voluntary basis. If they had received a daily rate of 150 to 200 Euro, the costs of this exercise would have had been doubled or tripled.

Conclusion

PLA "made in Switzerland" has been tested in a few communities in Germany. The experiences are generally positive, therefore the question of the heading must be answered with yes: PLA is a catalyst for good local governance. An evaluation in Swiss communities gives related answers. It increases subsidiarity and transparency, and offers a new informal way of participation (LBL 2001). PLA helps to initiate a communicative process in the rural areas, and therefore definitely supports decentralisation endeavours.

PLA delivers enough information in a short period of time about the problems and potentials of the local actors and serves as basis for local action plans. It is an appropriate tool for a situational analysis. It would be also suitable for evaluation purposes.

In the same time, it creates a fertile ground and a desire of local actors to further participate and initiate local action plans. However, whether real action materialises would very much depend on a qualified implementation guidance through local institutions or consultants. In order to improve the social learning effect, the full integration/participation of local stakeholders during the exercise would be necessary. Better feed back mechanisms between local people, e.g., during the final workshop are needed.

For researchers, planners and advisors in rural development programmes good facilitation, conflict management and feed back skills are needed more than ever. It is not only the skills, but the attitudes and behaviour, that will make participatory processes successful.

Managing „bottom-up" processes in small programmes like LEADER+, Active Regions (Germany) or Local Agenda 21 initiatives is relatively easy. If „bottom-up" approaches in rural development programmes will mainstream and scale up rapidly, there would be a high danger of abuse. One pitfall would be to tick off the participatory process as necessary evil from the long list of project implementation issues (similar to the experiences in the international development co-operation). A standardised, yet locally adaptable and flexible procedure for mainstream integrated rural development programmes should be further developed.

Volunteering plays a vital role in „bottom-up" planning processes. Adequate promoting structures to further encourage participation would be very beneficial. Existing volunteering programmes such as the Voluntary Ecological Year among others could be further extended/promoted to assist in processes for sustainable rural development.

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