Road to the Foot of the Mountain – but reaching for the sun: PALS adventures and challenges

Linda Mayoux November 2005

Introduction

Participatory Action Learning System (PALS) is an eclectic and constantly evolving methodology which enables people to collect and analyse the information they themselves need on an ongoing basis to improve their lives in ways they decide. PALS does this through producing an integrated set of diagrams and participatory processes adapted from a general repertoire of diagram tools and participatory principles and tailored to different literacy and skills levels, specific issues, contexts and organisational needs. Group and higher level participatory structures form a focus for linking individual and group learning into participatory programme decision-making, local lobbying and policy advocacy. The interlinked goals are both individual empowerment and pro-poor accountability of the wider development process.

This paper gives my own personal perspective on the 'PALS Road Journey' explaining how and why the 'PALS brand' of participatory methodology has evolved in the way it has, what I see as its main achievements, challenges and ways forward. I begin with the underlying emotional inspiration for PALS - response to anthropological fieldwork with very poor people in India and Nicaragua in the 1970s-80s. Following this academic inspiration came through contact with emerging participatory innovations during consultancy work on participatory research, impact assessment methods and gender issues in micro-finance. My own ideas took concrete shape from the late 1990s as a methodology for women's empowerment in micro-finance and developed in a series of papers for the DFID-funded Enterprise Development Impact Assessment Information Service (EDIAIS) website. 'PALS' as a named methodology was born in 2002 through work on impact assessment of enterprise and civil society development with Kabarole Research and Resource Centre (KRC) in Uganda. PALS has since spread through innovation and detailed adaptation for an increasing number of contexts and issues by NGOs in India, Uganda, Sudan and Pakistan. I conclude by examining the challenges now faced in the attempt to move to scale for lobbying and advocacy – a move necessary to really address the multiple contextual constraints which serve to perpetuate poverty and inequality.

It must be stressed that although I have been responsible for the original ideas, focus, design and documentation of PALS for different purposes and contexts, equally important innovation and adaptation are now being developed by women and men in villages and urban areas in Uganda, India, Sudan and Pakistan supported by local staff in local NGOs. Their perspectives and stories remain to be documented.

BOX 1: PARTICIPATORY ACTION LEARNING SYSTEM: DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

GOALS

to empower people (as individuals and communities and particularly very poor women, children and men) to collect, analyse and use information to improve their lives and gain more control over decisions which affect them.

to increase pro-poor outcomes, accountability and governance of development programmes, planning and implementation

PROCESS PRINCIPLES
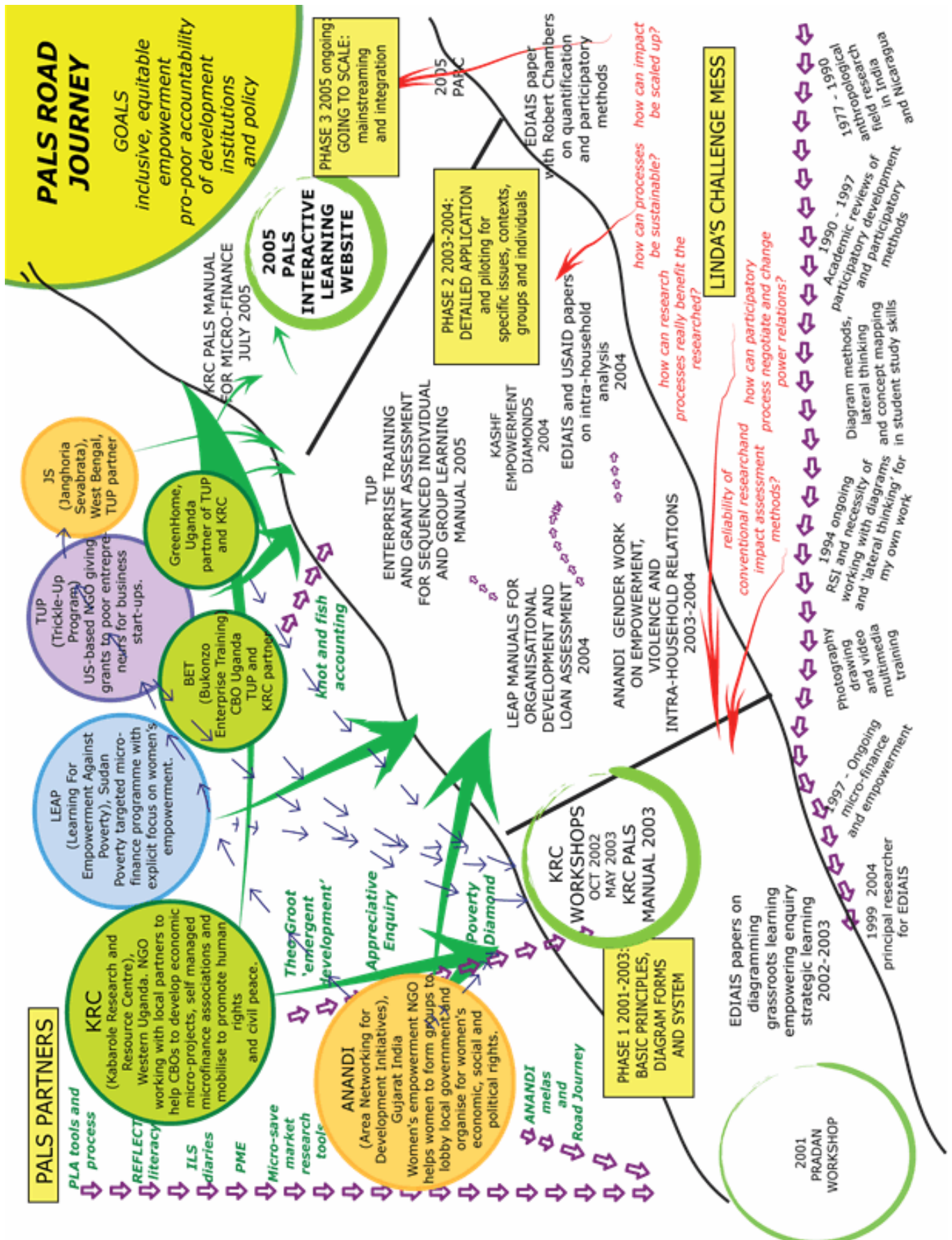
Participation for Empowerment

- Based on information needs of people themselves developing their learning, analytical and participatory skills. All diagrams and analysis are done from scratch by people themselves to reinforce skills and confidence to do things (if necessary and all else fails) without outside support (or interference).

- Inclusive process prioritising the needs of the most disadvantaged and promoting awareness, participatory and listening skills of the relatively better-off.

- Builds structures for networking, mutual learning and collective action through careful sequencing of individual and group activities and inclusion of institutional analysis.

Action Learning

- Learning for future improvement, not policing past failure, through analysis not only of what has happened to whom, but why, followed by detailed discussion of practical ways forward.

- Focus on recording those things which are necessary for moving forward in a way which is accessible to all, including use of photos and video.

- Ongoing action learning. Diagrams include action targets to be tracked over time, as one attractively coloured large wallchart and/or as an individual or group diary.

Sustainable System

- No separate 'PALS' process but integration into existing training and follow up in staff/community interactions like outreach, monitoring and loan application processes.

- Dissemination through mutual learning. Skills, issues and networks are followed up and reinforced through discussion and action during group meetings and integrated into participatory decision-making structures.

- Additional information needed by programmes and donors is collected as a separate process in purposive studies and donor evaluations which build on the participatory information base, but also use other qualitative and quantitative methods.

- Information from the participatory system is aggregated in participatory planning fora like 'networking fairs' and/or AGMs as an input to lobbying and advocacy. This maintains dynamism and increases effectiveness in a cost-effective way.

PALS ROAD JOURNEY

GOALS
inclusive, equitable
empowerment
pro-poor accountability
of development
institutions
and policy

PHASE 3 2005 ongoing: GOING TO SCALE: mainstreaming and integration

2005 PALS INTERACTIVE LEARNING WEBSITE

KRC PALS MANUAL FOR MICRO-FINANCE JULY 2005

2005 PALS

EDIAIS paper with Robert Chambers on quantification and participatory methods

how can impact be scaled up?

PHASE 2 2003-2004: DETAILED APPLICATION and piloting for specific issues, contexts, groups and individuals

KASHF EMPOWERMENT DIAMONDS 2004

EDIAIS and USAID papers on intra-household analysis 2004

how can processes be sustainable?

how can research processes really benefit the researched?

LINDA'S CHALLENGE MESS

1977 - 1990 anthropological field research in India and Nicaragua

1990 - 1997 Academic reviews of participatory development and participatory methods

PALS PARTNERS

PLA tools and process

REFLECT literacy

ILS diaries

PME

Micro-save market research tools

KRC (Kabarole Research and Resource Centre), Western Uganda. NGO working with local partners to help CBOs to develop economic micro-projects, self managed microfinance associations and mobilise to promote human rights and civil peace.

JS (Janghoria Sevabrata), West Bengal, TUP partner

TUP (Trickle-Up Program) US-based NGO giving grants to poor entrepreneurs for business start-ups.

GreenHome, Uganda partner of TUP and KRC

BET (Bukonzo Enterprise Training CBO Uganda TUP and KRC partner)

LEAP (Learning For Empowerment Against Poverty), Sudan Poverty targeted micro-finance programme with explicit focus on women's empowerment.

Theo Groot 'emergent development'

knot and fish accounting

Appreciative Enquiry

TUP ENTERPRISE TRAINING AND GRANT ASSESSMENT FOR SEQUENCED INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP LEARNING MANUAL 2005

LEAP MANUALS FOR ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LOAN ASSESSMENT 2004

ANANDI GENDER WORK ON EMPOWERMENT, VIOLENCE AND INTRA-HOUSEHOLD RELATIONS 2003-2004

Diagram methods, lateral thinking and concept mapping in student study skills

ANANDI (Area Networking for Development Initiatives), Gujarat India Women's empowerment NGO helps women to form groups to lobby local government and organise for women's economic, social and political rights.

ANANDI melas and Road Journey

Poverty Diamond

KRC WORKSHOPS OCT 2002 MAY 2003 KRC PALS MANUAL 2003

PHASE 1 2001-2003: BASIC PRINCIPLES, DIAGRAM FORMS AND SYSTEM

EDIAIS papers on diagramming grassroots learning empowering enquiry strategic learning 2002-2003

1999 - 2004 principal researcher for EDIAIS

reliability of conventional research and impact assessment methods?

how can participatory process negotiate and change power relations?

RSI 1994 ongoing working with and 'lateral thinking' for my own work and necessity of diagrams

photography drawing and video multimedia training

1997 - Ongoing micro-finance and empowerment

2001 PRADAN WORKSHOP

1. Eclectic beginnings: emotional inspiration and academic searching

PALS is unashamedly a constantly evolving eclectic methodology inspired by a wide range of (fully acknowledged) participatory processes and diagramming methods (see overview on the PALS Road Journey). Box 1 summarises the main features – some of which are common to most participatory methods, some building on specific innovations and others distinctive to PALS.

My own underlying emotional and personal inspiration came from anthropological village-level research over 10 years 1978-1989 in West Bengal, South India and Nicaragua. Officially focusing mainly on gender and enterprise development, the research rapidly came to include participatory processes in village level organizations, leftwing movements and government and NGO policy processes. As a young and inexperienced female researcher I was initially shocked by the terrible tragedy of hunger, sickness, continually dashed dreams and hopes and early death faced by many people I got to know. Over time, the more I got to know people, I was also inspired by the strength, heroism and determination of many of the people I met – very poor women and men in their daily struggles as well as local political activists, many of whom risked their lives to challenge oppressive structures and corruption. But I came to question much of the 'participation' in 'participatory development' and also the usefulness of even sincere and well-designed research which did not lead to any tangible benefits for people who gave up their time to work with me.

The mess of contradictory impressions, emotional reactions and 'conflicting facts' bombarding me during this period taught me many things. Firstly in relation to participation and participatory development:

- **Poor people are not 'communities' or 'victims' or 'good simple people', but just as complex and contradictory as everyone else, as individuals and in the ways they relate to other people.** Inequalities which caused so much suffering were perpetuated not only by the better-off or by men, but also by poor people and by women. It was not only the fragility of many friendships and the frequent eruptions of jealousies, conflicts and violence and the frequency of domestic violence and dowry deaths which shocked me. It was the fact that women generally blamed the women, and that women collaborated or were even the main perpetrators of the deaths. It was only over time that I came to more fully understand and empathise with the complex trade-offs between peoples' immediate and long-term needs, personal priorities and public interest. **Unless participatory methodologies seek to understand, acknowledge and address individual interests, diversity and potential conflict, they are unlikely to be effective in bringing about positive change.**

- **Poor people are rarely stereotypical passive victims of poverty awaiting deliverance by NGOs or governments.** The more I got to know people and had the opportunity to observe processes over time, the more it was obvious that many very poor women and men have very strong and articulate philosophies of life followed through with great self-sacrifice and heroism, drawing on local egalitarian cultural and religious traditions as well as more recent Marxist ideologies – far in advance of my own ideas and actions. People constantly learned from and taught each other when skills had a clear and concrete use. The rapid spread of the handicraft industries through women marrying into new villages teaching eager neighbours and passing on contacts with middlemen/women, and silk labourers developing enterprises together, was in contrast to the very limited use of any of the skills taught in government or NGO training. Processes of change have rapidly speeded up as people take advantage of transport and road infrastructure and television, as well as education. In all these processes NGOs and development

agencies were largely absent, irrelevant or dismissed as corrupt – even those officially promoting participation. **Participatory processes need to build on the aspirations and strategies of very poor people, not as reliance on self-help but to identify how and where external support is really needed.**

- **'Culture' and 'tradition' are many-faceted and many-layered and constantly negotiated and re-negotiated.** Over time it became evident that many of the staunchest public supporters of tradition had very different (and widely known) private lives 'behind the hay in the barn'. Gender issues are particularly complex. Many women in Nicaragua as well as West Bengal turned with great fervour to religious ideologies which treated them as inferior as a refuge from the turmoil, corruption and violence around them. Gender inequalities and violence were 'taken for granted', as 'culture' even where (as in the case of Islam) there are clear religious prohibitions against it. On the other hand, initial sparks of new social ideas (as well as malicious gossip) spread very rapidly through extensive invisible networks – even amongst Muslim or Hindu women apparently observing strict norms of seclusion and subservience. Over time practices unquestioned as 'tradition' (even where like dowry they are actually quite recent) become replaced by new practices which 'everyone is doing nowadays' (even if only a few people have in fact broken the mould). **Participatory methods need to be 'culturally sensitive' based on in-depth understanding of cultural complexity, not 'culturally naive' taking at face value interpretations of culture by those in power. Simplistic cultural preconceptions and stereotypes hamper both finding out 'the truth' and discussing ways of addressing challenges.**

- **Generalised messages on 'peoples' struggle' or 'women's rights' are too abstract to engage people for any length of time** – even if they are demonstrably the underlying cause of serious problems. Many people, women and men, are only too conscious of their 'oppression' and do not need lectures from privileged outsiders. **Participatory methods need to help people explore their dreams for the future, identify those which are realisable, analyse linkages between the different challenges they face in reaching them, and identify immediate steps forward.**

Secondly in relation to research and research methods:

- **'the more I knew, the more I knew I did not know'** - what people said and what they did were often very different, and both changed over time or even from one day to the next in ways they were often unaware of. Even apparently simple facts like 'daily wage rates' which people quoted with ease in survey interviews were in reality negotiated, highly variable and bore little relation to what people received. Unpredictable daily incomes where people sold what they could at any price in order to get a meal for the evening were simply not knowable without daily tracking. Any rapid extraction of 'simple monitoring indicators' is therefore a pipedream – reliable information can only be obtained through helping people reflect and think through their answers in a way that motivates them to do this seriously and honestly. On the other hand it is possible through experience to probe, discuss and collect systematic information even on very sensitive and controversial issues like violence and sexuality, which are often omitted as too 'difficult' or 'culturally inappropriate'. This was often necessary to really understand peoples' experience of poverty.

- **Poor people have a right to benefit from the time they spend with researchers.** Many people enjoyed a good informal chat, but many demanded to know 'if I answer all your questions, what will I get out of it – lots of people have come before and just wasted our time'. This is not only a question which determines the reliability of any information given – but also a

moral imperative as response to 'empowered' challenging by respondents of extractive research processes which do not benefit them.

- **The role of outsiders with greater wealth and education is always difficult and contradictory.** Outsiders have much to learn from many people, but only if we stop assuming (or being granted) any automatic superiority. 'Poor people not listening' or 'learning from training' are often because leaders and trainers do not listen and treat poor people as equal – or even superior – in their knowledge and understanding of poverty. At the same time poverty restricts access to the wider pool of knowledge which poor people need – giving a difficult position of power to trainers and leaders in filtering and presenting this outside reality and its implications.

A second, more obvious and practical, set of inspirations then came from the mid-1980s from the range of participatory diagram methods which were then beginning to gain popularity in academic and NGO circles. After 1989 I was 'grounded' in the UK, unable to do field work because of my very young family. This gave me the opportunity to do some teaching, read widely and reflect on my experiences. From the early 1990s I started teaching for the Open University and was impressed by effectiveness of both their experiential learning and systems/cognitive diagramming approaches in Study Skills preparation. This approach often produced much clearer thinking and better essays than my more conventional teaching in Cambridge University. My interest in diagramming methods of recording and analysis was also born from necessity with sudden onset of Repetitive Strain Injury in early 1994 making me physically unable to write or type for any length of time. This enforced shift from linear to lateral thinking and visual representation of complex issues has in the end been very formative in experimentation with different diagram forms. It also prompted me to become much more interested in photography and video as a means of communication and systematic recording.

In the mid 1990s I did critical reviews of both published and NGO participatory development literature and later specifically on participatory diagram methods, for the Open University. From this reading it was clear that participatory research methods were no panacea – they suffered from the same dilemmas as other types of participatory development I had earlier observed. Their practice did not necessarily address the methodological shortcomings of more conventional quantitative and qualitative research methods. Shortcomings were particularly acute in relation to gender issues (Mayoux 1995; Guijt and Shah eds 1998). Nevertheless it was also clear that participatory methods, particularly the then emerging Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) version as documented by Robert Chambers (1997) and PLA Notes, represented an attempt to address the challenges of power relations and inequality and give greater weight to the voices and perspectives of the poor. Like many others, I became convinced that, when well facilitated, the richness of information gained in a very short time made participatory methods a viable more empowering alternative, or at least complement to, conventional anthropological or survey methods (Johnson and Mayoux 1998).

In the late 1990s these two strands of work on gender and poverty reduction and participatory methods began to take more concrete and practical shape in the context of my work on micro finance programmes and women's empowerment for DFID, UNIFEM, Open University and other funders. Firstly evidence was increasingly showing that savings and credit alone was unlikely to significantly increase women's incomes or address inequalities within households, markets and communities. Secondly this increasing questioning of micro-finance had led to growing pressure from donor agencies for impact assessment. However most existing impact assessments were 'policing activities' imposed by donors and resented by programmes. They often appeared to have limited relevance, reliability or contribution to practical decision-making. Even participatory assessment was often an extractive exercise, consisting of little more than requiring people to spend time attending one-off Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercises and focus group discussions to meet the information needs and process

requirements of donors and NGOs. There was a need for a new approach to impact assessment which focused not so much on 'policing and measuring the past' but 'improving future practice' (Hulme 2000).

This led me to argue that there was a need for a methodology for women in self-help groups which would help women plan livelihoods more effectively and give group discussions more strategic direction in meeting needs and challenging inequality[1]. This could at the same time, if based on systematic use of participatory diagram techniques accessible to non-literate women, also provide much of the material for more reliable and empowering monitoring and impact assessment for the new 'improving practice' focus (Mayoux 1998). From 2000 my work as principle researcher for DFID-funded Enterprise Development Impact Assessment Information Service (EDIAIS) enabled me to develop these ideas further, not only in relation to micro-finance but other areas of development.

My work at this time also drew on a number of emerging innovative methodologies which were actually being implemented and in different ways provided part of what I envisaged as ways forward:

- *Reflect*, using **participatory diagrams** for literacy and individual and community **diaries on an ongoing basis for lobbying and advocacy** (See Chapters 1 - 5, this volume).

- Participatory monitoring **system** being developed by Small Enterprise Foundation (SEF) in South Africa and promoted within the Micro-credit Summit campaign (Simanowitz 1999).

- Participatory **market research** diagram methods for micro-finance programmes developed by Micro-Save Africa

- Internal Learning System (ILS) (Noponen, 19xx, and Chapters 6, 7 and 8, this volume) using individual as well as group level **diaries and recording as a basis for impact assessment and local level lobbying**.

All these methodologies, themselves evolving and dynamic, continue to inform and inspire development of PALS.

This phase culminated in 2001 when Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN) in New Delhi asked me to facilitate and edit a book of papers for a workshop bringing together people working on participatory learning methodologies for women in micro finance (Mayoux ed 2003). This gave me the opportunity not only to learn more about ILS and PRADAN, but also Area Networking for Alternative Development Initiatives (ANANDI) working on women's empowerment in Gujarat, who would become one of the key subsequent contributors to PALS. Their 'area networking events' (*melas*) for women's empowerment are effective means of bringing together local experience for training on a large scale and advocacy and lobbying.

2. Basic Road Map: From broad ideas to PALS as a coherent system of principles, processes and tools

Focused development of PALS tools and processes beyond my own writing and imagination started in October 2002 with a training workshop on participatory monitoring and evaluation with Kabarole Research and Resource Centre (KRC) and their partners in Uganda. KRC was under donor pressure to produce better documentation of their achievements. KRC was looking for a participatory organisational learning process which would not only produce information for donors but contribute to

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[1] For overviews of these debates in micro-finance see http://www.genfinance.info .

their main programme goal: empowerment and civil society development. Some of KRC's partner groups – mainly local NGOs and CBOs – were using *Reflect* for literacy, and were drawing community natural resource maps and body maps for HIV/AIDS awareness. Matrices and tree diagrams were used for awareness-raising around gender and civil peace issues. Staff had also recently been trained in Appreciative Enquiry and Open Space methodologies. The participatory monitoring and evaluation training workshop refined KRC's vision and mission statement using the newly acquired 'Open Space' skills, and resulted in the first draft Manual for (then) Sustainable Participatory Action Learning System (SPALS) – incorporating ideas from both Appreciative Enquiry and Open Space. KRC then undertook field training, piloting and dissemination of SPALS principles with its partners building on the tools with which they were familiar as the start of a long-term capacity-building process to increase participation and equality in their groups.

A second and much larger (now) 'PALS' workshop in May 2003 brought together the pilot experience of KRC itself and local CBO partners involved in developing and adapting PALS, including GreenHome and Bukonzo Enterprise Training (BET) who have been part of my own PALS Road Journey. Funding was found to invite ANANDI to contribute their experience of area networking fairs, and Port Sudan Small Enterprise Development to present experience with Micro-Save's market research tools. It was at this workshop that the main diagrams and processes currently used by PALS participants, shown below in Box 2 were brought together and subsequently written up as the first full PALS Manual (Mayoux 2003) and further developed in a series of papers for EDIAIS (Mayoux 2003a,b,c). KRC then undertook much more extensive training of partner organisations and local community trainers using their own adaptation of the manual.

BOX 2 : DIAGRAMS AND PROCESS IN PALS METHODOLOGY

DIAGRAMS

Road Journeys (developed from ANANDI) chart a journey from point a to point b, generally over time. Vision Journeys are forward-looking journey to the future. Achievement Journeys look back to the past. The road is divided into stages with quantitative targets which can be tracked. External opportunities and constraints are presented as signposts or bugbears along the way to assess attribution. Action strategies are marked for tracking.

Diamonds (emergent from second KRC workshop) show distribution around an average. These identify local criteria for an issue starting by contrasting extremes (eg most versus least powerful, richest/poorest), then progressively moving to centre ground. Then numbers of people/objects/incidence are marked at each level. Finally strategies for bringing up those at the bottom are discussed.

Trees (PLA) start from a trunk representing an issue or an institution like a household or community. Inputs are shown as roots and outputs as branches to analyse challenge/solutions, incomes/expenditures and so on. Both roots and branches can be of different sizes and quantified, arranged, coloured, grouped and ranked for qualitative analysis.

Circles (PLA Venn or Chapati) show the relationships between different elements represented as overlapping circles. Circles can also be quantified as pie charts, of different sizes, colours, fills, lines for qualitative analysis. Action strategies are marked for tracking.

Also used are PLA physical maps, matrices, calendars and many new locally emergent diagrams. Quantitative information can be recorded by facilitators in the same way as surveys – except participants think through responses and retain the original diagram. All diagrams include trackable action targets revisited at a later date.

EMPOWERING ENQUIRY: THE PROCESS OF PALS

The following steps underlie the use of individual diagrams and/or sequencing of diagrams in order to move from analysis to action planning:

Step 1 Analysis of difference and inclusion through stakeholder analysis to identify lines of difference, consensus and conflict of interest

Then with different key interest groups:

Step 2 Visioning change: What are people aiming for? What do people want to be changed?

Step 3 Appreciating achievements: What positive changes have been achieved and how?

Step 4 Identifying challenges: What negative changes are occurring and what challenges need to be addressed?

Step 5 Identifying strategies: How can positive changes be further increased? How can negative changes be avoided? By whom?

Step 6 Negotiating change: How can the different views and potential conflicts of interest be negotiated in practical programme or policy change?

3. Reaching for the Sun: Underlying Principles to concrete visions and tangible change

Since 2003 PALS has been adapted for a range of issues in a number of countries, largely through organisations attending the second KRC workshop. The next major set of innovations were in relation to **gender issues**. ANANDI invited me to do a five-day Participatory Review of ANANDI's approach and gender work, using PALS methods and including PALS training for staff. The Review not only demonstrated the usefulness of the poverty diamond, road journeys, food security calendar and institutional circle maps in 'rapid assessment', but also resulted in adaptations of the diamond for identifying local concepts of empowerment and investigating domestic violence[2]. The initial visioning for the empowerment diamond was the first time I had encouraged individual drawing for women who had never held a pen before. This showed how, if left to themselves without staff peering over their shoulders, these women overcame initial hesitation and supported each other to start to put down their ideas – and enjoy the process. For domestic violence the combination of the Diamond and Road Journey were able in about three hours to help women move from denial of any existence of domestic violence, to discussing their distressing experiences for the first time, to proposing solutions which were then followed up by ANANDI (Mayoux and ANANDI 2005). In 2004 PALS was again used with different ANANDI groups to look at very complex issues of intra-household relations. This proved difficult in the half day available with each group: not only had many of the women never held a pen before, but they had also not thought about intra-household gender inequalities. Nevertheless from a qualitative research perspective, far more was learned in that short time than from conventional anthropological methods about the considerable variability in women's household situations, how women felt about each other, about gender inequality, incidence of family planning and abortion and a range of other issues (Mayoux 2004).

The work for ANANDI was paralleled by gender work with Port Sudan Small Enterprise Development (PASED) from April 2004 to start a new poverty targeted micro-finance and empowerment programme

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[2] For details of ANANDI and the participatory review see www.anandiindia.org.

for women, Learning for Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) [3]. PALS training has been an integral part of development of the programme from the start as an awareness raising, planning and organisational learning process. Over 600 women have now used PALS diagrams. PALS has been very effective in helping LEAP Women's Centres think through and identify ways forward for the many challenges they face. Women's Centres are now using the diagrams independently of LEAP staff (LEAP 2005). PALS training was also given as part of gender training for Pakistan Micro-finance Network. Following this Kashf Foundation did some very interesting work using empowerment diamonds (Sardar and Mumtaz 2004).

The next big step was the development of an effective methodology for ***individual level learning*** to feed into group learning. In 2004 I worked with a US-based NGO, Trickle-Up Program (TUP) giving start-up grants to very poor entrepreneurs. Their Africa Program Officer, had attended the second PALS workshop and then done a study of three mutual CBO partners of KRC and Trickle-Up. This concluded that PALS had resulted in impressive levels of self-confidence, full participation of all members with no leadership dependency, effective self-evaluation of progress, increased collaboration and unity in the group and within households. It had also led to viable solutions to problems being implemented at individual, household and group levels (van Riet 2004). Importantly another impact study had questioned the effectiveness of TUP's existing training programme, and recommended that this be given some attention.The collaboration with TUP offered the opportunity to address some of the challenges that were arising and design together:

- a training programme for very poor non-literate people fully integrating PALS diagrams to enable people to decide how best to use a TUP grant to improve their livelihood

- an in-built monitoring system using these diagrams which both benefits entrepreneurs and fulfils TUP's very specific information needs

- a participatory process which can be self-generating and sustainable through inspiring entrepreneurs to use the methodology as individuals and groups with very limited support from either local staff or TUP.

The training and piloting began September 2004 with Jamghoria Sevabrata (JS), a local CBO and TUP partner working in one of the poorest tribal areas in West Bengal, accompanied by staff from ANANDI. This was followed in December 2004 by training and piloting with Green Home in Uganda, accompanied also by staff from KRC. During these trainings, new local innovations in teaching numeracy (ANANDI) and symbol-based recording of business information (BET) were shared and included in the TUP PALS Manual. The TUP Manual has subsequently been further field tested and simplified. Field reports from TUP and my own probing discussions in May 2005 indicate that the methodology is now effectively used by staff to do their own training of new batches of TUP grant beneficiaries.

The TUP process demonstrated very clearly that even people initially afraid to speak up in front of outsiders could, within the space of a few hours as part of a batch of 15-30 trainees, progress to quite sophisticated Road Journey analyses of their businesses. This included recording simple calculations on profit and loss using lines and circles. They were then very eager to make their full contribution to group challenge/solution trees which could quantify incidence of different problems and identify solutions. A snowballing process was introduced whereby instead of 30 women all arriving at the same time, they would arrive in groups of 10 at intervals. This meant the first batch received sufficient attention. Those who rapidly progressed were able and very proud to be able to train the next batch as they arrived, their

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[3] See LEAP website www.leap-pased.org

own needs then being followed up once training the last batch had been properly started. This enabled much better training of more women, and also developed their confidence that they did not need to wait for the NGO to come next time before starting. For some participants, both non-literate and educated, the diagrams were the first time they had been able to really analyse the complexities of their business decisions. The diagrams have also improved communication between programme staff and participants, enabling people to express themselves much better and promoting a more equal relationship.

These new methodologies and processes have now been incorporated in the most recent KRC Manual for its Micro-Finance Association Programme.

4. Moving beyond Base Camp: Challenges of scaling-up

The PALS journey so far has been slowly but steadily upwards and outwards. In all partner programmes funding limitations have restricted my personal involvement in PALS to at most 5 or 6 day staff field trainings. These simultaneously train programme participants and pilot local adaptations, sometimes following a separate programme evaluation. Trainings are followed by production of a tailored Manual for the specific organisation, issue and context based on any new innovations from piloting and the broad pool of diagrams and processes from the original PALS documentation and other participatory literature. The Manual is then sent to programme staff to use as best they can. Programmes have so far generally been too busy training and disseminating PALS along with their other work to systematically monitor use and impact of PALS. This paper has therefore relied on scattered information on numbers of trainees in some trainings and anecdotes from the more visible groups. Full documentation of local innovation and critical evaluation remain to be done.

The PALS Road Journey encourages people to vision and dream and 'reach up for the big sun circle at the end of the Road'. It has so far been most successful in relation to individual and group empowerment - significantly increasing peoples' learning and analytical skills, self-confidence and group participation. The diagrams, basic process and concepts are easy for people at all levels to understand and use even after only a half day training, although more sophisticated diagrams and analysis results from a longer period. Local staff and entrepreneurs have been able to continue this process, innovating with the diagrams and showing other people in their groups. The poverty diamond, for example, has been used in India, Sudan and Uganda for poverty targeting, investigating impact over time and social inclusion, and led to groups developing concrete strategies for including the poorest in their communities. PALS is now spreading quite quickly to new areas, groups and issues through enthusiasm of those involved and as an integral part of programme activities.

However reaching nearer the sun may mean not just journeying along a pretty country lane, but learning to climb a mountain without a clear path. There is inevitably a very difficult balance between:
- participation: facilitating open exploration of tools and ideas and methods
- leadership: guiding a process and standardising diagrams to produce both usable information for programmes and the most informative analysis for participants to help them improve their lives.

A few spontaneous local adaptations have not worked so well. But the TUP process highlighted what could be achieved in a short time once diagrams have been properly designed and piloted. PALS must inevitably be a staged process over a couple of years from initial exploration and innovation to more systematic analysis, planning and documentation. It takes time to develop self-sustaining skills, capacities and participatory structures at both participant and staff levels whilst maintaining the focus on concrete actions for empowerment. Until local skills are sufficiently developed, detailed Manuals need to be adapted for each specific issue, then continually revised in the light of experience and changing needs.

The biggest challenge is the move to scale for lobbying and advocacy – to move beyond mountain Base Camp. The nature of poverty means that poor women and men can only do so much through self-help,

even when supported by committed NGOs. Significant improvements in their lives will require changes in the economic, social and political context including women's property rights, informal sector regulation and global trade agreements. This will require not only further expansion of PALS, but credible aggregation of information fed into strong networks of informed people. Quantitative and qualitative data can be collected and extracted from PALS diagrams and process observation, then aggregated and documented by groups or staff in the same way as data from survey questionnaires or interviews. But how far KRC's current work with Ugandan government on large-scale integration of PALS into its Poverty Resource Monitoring and Tracking process will be able to maintain the empowerment focus in the current political climate is unclear. A systematic combination of PALS with ANANDI's lateral learning fairs is planned for LEAP in 2006. More systematic use of visual media: photography and video are also envisaged to increase communication at all levels. However design, initial facilitation, and higher level analysis and documentation of aggregated PALS data require the same levels of experience and skill as more conventional research methods. These research skills are still to be developed in the organisations involved, involving both participants and staff.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge of all will be, not expansion or aggregation of reliable information, but ensuring that the findings influence policy makers. This will require reversing the donor thirst for easy shortcuts which target nearly all the resources towards macro-level 'expert'-determined strategies, one-off quantitative impact assessment or at best financially sustainable programmes for 'the better off enterprising poor'. It requires adequate investment of effort and resources into developing the capacities and networks of those at the bottom of the power and resource hierarchy to make an ongoing and informed contribution to decision-making and increase the accountability of development institutions. This is an inherent and inseparable part of any serious agenda for pro-poor development and good governance.

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