



# PLA

Participatory Learning and Appraisal

Resource Pack with examples from a health research project

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## Introduction to the Resource Pack

This research pack has been designed to provide health researchers with information on both the theoretical underpinnings of participatory learning and action (PLA) and its practical application. It is divided into two sections; part 1: the theory of PLA and part 2: PLA in practice. In section one an overview of PLA is provided with key principles and tools for application in the field. Key critiques of PLA are also presented. Part 2 is focussed on the practical application of PLA. PLA tools and techniques are presented with examples from a health research project based in fishing communities on the shore of Lake Malawi. The project used PLA tools as a key method in the data capturing process.



## Part 1: PLA Theory

### 1.1 Overview of PLA

Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) is defined as a growing family of methods and approaches that enable local people to analyze, share and enhance their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, prioritize, act and monitor and evaluate (Chambers 2007). Central to the aim of PLA is to generate knowledge and information that represents the perceptions, understandings, concepts and practices of different groups. The emphasis is on generating knowledge from the perspective of, not only the researchers, but also of those being researched.

The term PLA was introduced in 1995 and the concept evolved out of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (see box 1 for more details on RRA and PRA).

#### **Box 1:**

##### **Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA)**

RRA began in the 1970s as a group of methods that could be used quickly to replace a large questionnaire survey or in-depth social anthropology. The methods used include semi-structured interviews, transect walk with observation, mapping and diagramming. Importantly, all these exercises were undertaken by outside professionals (Chambers 2007: 1).

##### **Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)**

In the late 1980s and early 1990s PRA evolved out of RRA. In PRA outsiders convene and facilitate the process. However, local people, especially those who are poorer and marginalised, are the main actors. It is these people, typically in small groups, who map, diagram, observe, analyse and act (Chambers 2007: 1).

Chambers (2007) points out that because of the continuities and overlaps in this methodological cluster or family it is sometimes referred to as PRA/PLA or even RRA/PRA/PLA. However, the key distinction for each of the terms is how participatory the use of the methods aims to be.

Further, Cornwall and Pratt (2003) argue that rather than viewing PLA as having a fixed definition some talk of PLA as a starting point for changing the ways in which development work is done, by directly addressing relationships of power that subordinate local people and local knowledge.

## 1.2 Key Principles of PLA

Chambers (1997: 156-157 quoted in Shah 1999) describes the following key principles of PLA:

- **Reversal of learning:** Learn directly from the local community, gaining from their local, physical, technical and social knowledge.
- **Learning rapidly and progressively:** Learn with conscious exploration, flexible use of methods, maximizing opportunities, improvisation, iteration, and cross-checking, not following a blueprint program but being adaptable in a learning process.
- **Offsetting biases:** Offset biases, especially those of rural development tourism, being relaxed and not rushing, listening not lecturing, probing instead of passing on to the next topic, being imposing, and seeking out marginalised groups within the community (the poorer people, minorities, children and women) and learning their concerns and priorities.
- **Optimizing trade offs:** Related to the costs of learning to the useful truth of information, with trade offs between quantity, relevance, accuracy and timeliness. This includes the principles of optimal ignorance - not learning more than necessary, and of appropriate impressions - not measuring what need not be measured, or measuring more accurately than needed.
- **Triangulating:** Learn from several (often three) methods, disciplines, individuals, or groups, locations and/or types of information, to cross check, compare and verify. Verification also involved asking different questions during the same conversation to further probe an issue or theme.
- **Seeking diversity:** Seek and enable the expression and analysis of complex and diverse information and judgements. This includes looking for and learning from exceptions, dissenters and outliers in any distribution. It goes beyond the cross-checking of triangulation, and deliberately looks for, notices and investigates contradictions, anomalies and differences.
- **Handing over the stick (or pen or chalk):** The local people themselves facilitate analysis of their information and make presentations so that they generate and own the outcomes, and also learn. This requires confidence that 'they can do it,': that local people are able to map, model, rank, score, diagram, analyze and act. The facilitator may initiate the process of analysis and presentation, but then sits back and observes while local people take over the process.
- **Self-critical awareness:** The facilitators need to continuously examine their behaviour and try to do better. This includes; embracing error; welcoming the opportunity to learn; facing failure positively; correcting dominant behaviour; and being critically aware of what is seen and not seen, shown and not shown, and said and not said.
- **Sharing:** Ideas and information are shared between local people, between the local people and the facilitators and of experiences between different communities and organisations.

**The three pillars or foundations of PLA** are (Chambers 1997: 105-106 quoted in Shal 1999: 33):

- the behaviour and attitudes of outsiders, who facilitate, not dominate;
- the methods, which shift the normal balance from closed to open, from individual to group, from verbal to visual and from measuring to comparing; and
- partnership and sharing of information and experience between insiders and outsiders, and between organisations

### **1.3: PLA Methods**

PLA methods are visual, tangible and usually performed by small groups of people. Using earth, sand, stones, seeds, twigs, chalk, charcoal, paper, pens and other materials, and objects as symbols, women, men and children make diagrams to represent many aspects of their communities, lives and environments.

PLA methods include timelines, trend and change diagrams, wealth and wellbeing ranking, seasonal diagramming, Venn diagrams, causal linkage diagrams, and proportional piling. Matrix ranking and scoring are used for complex and detailed comparisons. There are many variants and combinations of these and other methods or tools. It is also important to remember that new tools continue to be innovated and designed to meet specific needs in particular context.

### **1.4: Critiques of PLA**

#### **i. Community and Participatory Processes**

The broad aim of PLA is to increase the involvement of socially, economically and often politically marginalized people in decision making about their own lives (Kanji 2004: 53). Further, PLA is promoted as a relatively neutral process. However, critics note that public processes are not implicitly neutral. In particular, public events frequently exclude women and less powerful members of the community (Mosse 1993). Cornwall points out “all too often [participatory processes] boil down to situations in which only the voices and versions of the vocal few are raised and heard” (Cornwall 2003: 1325). As Guijt and Shah (1998) state “despite the stated intentions of social inclusion, it has become clear that many participatory development initiatives do not deal well with the complexity of the community differences, including age, economic, religious, caste, ethnic and in particular, gender (Guijt and Shah 1998: 1).

Of importance in these critiques is how does one arrive at a plan or a programme which embodies multiple interests? Is the process to be repeated with different groups within a community? Is it necessary to arrive at a consensus? How far does a consensus simply represent the views of the dominant community members?

#### **ii. PLA and Empowerment**

Questions have also been raised about the role of empowerment in the application of PLA methods. Can we as outsiders empower insiders? In PLA discussions the role of the outsider tends not to be addressed. Villarreal states: “The ‘outsider’ is hardly ever studied as an actor struggling to project particular images, to set boundaries that are constantly being challenged by the ‘beneficiary population’ ... even within the context of ‘participatory’ development approaches. An analysis of development endeavors cannot therefore avoid an examination of the complex power processes and battles over images and meanings that take place at the interface between ‘outsiders’ and ‘local groups’ in the arena of intervention situations” (Villarreal 1992).

There is also concern about the degree to which, where a participatory process is initiated by institutions such as those in health sector, they are committed and able to respond to the demands

generated (Cornwall 1996). Where institutions are insufficiently flexible, expectations may be generated that can not be met.

### **iii. Application of Methods**

A common concern about the application of PLA has been about the 'routinisation' or 'standardisation' of participatory methods, which come to be used as a technical approach rather than with the flexibility and reflexivity that are core principles of participatory research (Guijt and Shah 1998). Guijt and Shah (1998) also find that PLA processes tend to focus more on involving communities in appraisal rather than planning, where more conflicts often arise.

Some PLA tools are more participatory than others and working with different groups requires excellent communication skills, the ability to resolve conflict and the need for assertiveness training with community members (particularly those not used to raising their voices in public places). Cornwall argues that these skills are often underplayed in participatory research (Cornwall 2003: 1338).

Data recording and management of PLA data can be challenging. When undertaking PLA methods in the field it can be fast paced and ensuring all discussions are noted can be challenging (Shah 1999: 72). Researchers produce a large quantities of material, much of which is descriptive. Analysing and documenting information generated through a participatory process is far more difficult as compared to more conventional methods (like questionnaire surveys).



## Part 2: PLA Practice

### 2.1 MAFESSTA Study



The MAFESSTA study is a combined social science and prospective epidemiological study based in the Mangochi District of Malawi. The study villages are located on the shore of Lake Malawi where fishing is the main occupation in the area. Drawing on recent literature, which has highlighted the high risk people living and working in fishing communities face from HIV, one of the objectives of the study was to determine and understand the transmission dynamics of sexually transmitted infections including HIV in the communities.

The study team used the following PLA methods to explore this objective:

1. Community Mapping
2. Venn Diagrams
3. Transect walk
4. Seasonal Calendars
5. Historical Calendars

The following section provides a broad discussion of each tool and then an illustration of each from the MAFESSTA study.

## 2.2 Participatory Mapping

Maps are used to compile an inventory of resources. The objective of using sketch maps in a participatory manner is to arrive at people's perception of their natural resource situation. Maps can be more or less complex depending on the objective of the activity. They can include information on who is more likely to use a particular resource.

The mapping exercise is done by community representatives who are knowledgeable about the natural and socio-economic resources, issues, perspectives, vulnerabilities, threats, and opportunities. The mapping exercise is usually one of the baseline participatory tools for further qualitative research during community situational analysis.

The community mapping can also take the form of mobility map. This gives a visual representation of the movement of various categories of people and why they move or where they go and can depict their opportunities, threats and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and other aspects of life.

The MAFESSTA study's community maps showed key informants, gatekeepers and community leaders, types of groups/committees, selected households, household members by sex and age, livelihoods of community members, location of health services including HIV related health facilities, immigration and migration patterns and depicted how the above areas of interest contribute to the vulnerable/resilience of the constituents of fishing community to HIV/AIDS.





### 2.3 Venn Diagrams

Venn diagrams help in understanding the role different institutions (formal or informal groups or key individuals) play in a community. It is possible to analyze the relationships among these institutions, how important they are in peoples lives and how people perceive their relationship with them (Shah 1999: 33). They consist of touching or overlapping circles, each of which represents an individual, group or institution. The size of these circles represents their importance to the community (the bigger the circle, the more important the institution). Different colours can be used to show positive and negative relationships the community has with these institutions. Distance between the circles represents the links they may have between them. Circles touching or overlapping each other show a close link. The level of power or importance of each group is indicated by the size of the circle, and their degree of contact, accountability or control in decision making is indicated by the extent to which they overlap or enclose each other.

In the MAFESSTA study, the Venn Diagram mapped the key institutions formal and informal that exist within and outside the community, level of contact and importance to the community. The emphasis was placed on key institutions related to health services including HIV/AIDS.



## **2.4 Transect Walk**

A transect walk is a structured walk through an area. The transect walk is a tool that allows direct observation of the physical and socio-economic characteristics/differences within the community. It depicts the main land use zones and their socio-economic status. The achievements, problems, solutions, threats and opportunities with regard to the land zones are also depicted on the transect walk diagram. If a map of the area has already been prepared it can be used to decide the route of the walk. The transect walk should be used as an opportunity to meet with different people on the way, and to stop to have discussions with them. It is important to be observant on this walk and to ask probing questions. Also ask the guides what they would like to show you.

It is also helpful to revisit the social map (if it has been prepared earlier) after a transect to see if any additional details can be added. If the map was not prepared before the transect, it can be prepared after the walk by the local guides who participated in the transect.

In the MAFESSTA study, the transect walk was conducted to understand the key facilities and institutions in the community with emphasis on HIV related facilities/institutions. The transect also triangulated secondary data from the social and resource mapping.

## 2.5 Calendars

Participatory calendars depict various information according to the time they occurred in previous periods (year, month or days) and the time they are likely to occur in a current period or subsequent years. There are usually three types of calendars; Historic, Seasonal and Daily/Routine Calendars.

The historic calendar depicts events or changes that occurred over the past years some of which have a bearing on the present day. The seasonal calendar depicts the events (activities, problems, threats, opportunities) over the annual cycle. The daily calendar depicts daily activities. The calendars assist in depicting years/months/days/times of greatest opportunities, difficulties or vulnerability.

In the MAFESSTA study, the Historic Calendar looked at the changes and events overtime with regard to livelihoods, existence and access to health related facilities/services and programmes including HIV/AIDS facilities/services and programmes and participation in any research and research related to HIV/AIDS and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

The Seasonal Calendar looked at livelihoods, mobility patterns of constituents of the fishing community over the annual cycle and also assessed the months of greatest opportunities, difficulties or vulnerability including how it contributes to their vulnerability and resilience to HIV/AIDS.

## 2.6 Additional Tools

There is a wide variety of PLA tools and the MAFESSTA study did not use all of these tools. The following tools might be useful when conducting health research.

## 2.7 Body Mapping

Body maps can be used for gaining access to people's perceptions, of their bodies and explanatory models which people bring into encounters with health care workers. Representing this information visually can help to clarify ambiguities and provides rapid shared reference points. By using people's own representations of their body as a starting point from which to explore particular medical issues, body mapping can facilitate a less directive interviewing style than would otherwise be used (Cornwall 1992).

Body maps should be carried out in sex segregated groups. Body maps can be prepared on large sheets of paper or on the ground using chalk. Below are two examples of body maps taken from Shah 1999.

### A PREGNANT WOMAN

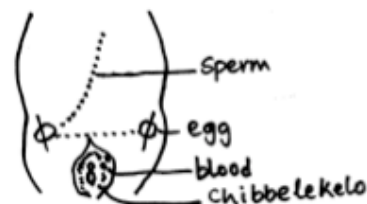
*drawn by a group of  
13-year old girls (not attending school).  
Old Kanyama Compound*



*Note: The fetus is shown as a baby in a dress and also has a hair-do! When we asked what this woman is carrying in her hands we were told - "Her handbag and a basket of fruits. A pregnant woman must eat a lots of fruits."*

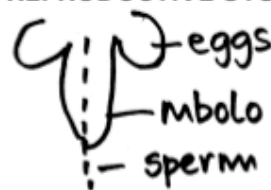
Body mapping by a group of school girls. Chawama Compound

### FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM



*Note: The girls explained that the sperm flows from the top of the body ("from somewhere") to one egg and then to the other egg.*

### MALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM



## 2.8 Livelihood Mapping

Taken from PLA notes 1998: 33:

### BOX 1

#### LIVELIHOOD MAPPING

##### Objective

To identify the products/services that the participants consider as very important in the livelihood of their community.

##### What to do

The participants are asked to list all the products/services that they consider as most important to the community's livelihood. The products/services can be from their homes, workplace or recreation. 'Importance' can refer to necessity for daily use, status or luxury. Participants must mention products/services and not issues. A participant can be asked to write these products/services on a flip chart. The next step is to have participants indicate where each of these resources come from. A large circle representing the community boundary is drawn on the ground or on a flipchart and pieces of paper containing the names of the products/services listed are then placed beside the 'map' of the community. The participants should be able to provide this information through discussion based on the following:

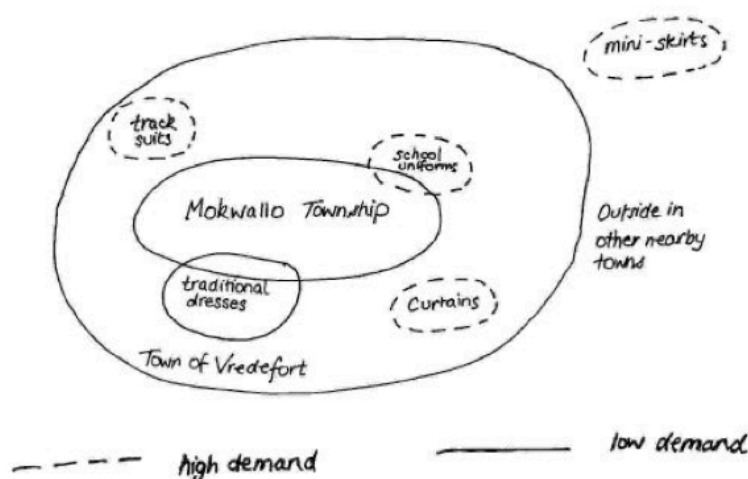
- whether a particular product/service is available within the community boundary and is sufficient in quantity;
- whether it is partially available in sufficient quantities within the community;
- whether it is completely unavailable within the community and has to be acquired from outside

All the products/services which are available within the community are placed inside the 'map'. All the products/services which are partially available are placed on the border of the 'map'. The resources which are completely unavailable within the community are placed outside the 'map'.

##### Application

Livelihood mapping of a given community is an indirect way to investigate the needs and desires for particular products/services. In this process the participants identify the most important products/services that can be produced or 'imported' and sold in the local community.

Figure 1. Mapping demand for Mokwallo Township in Vredfort

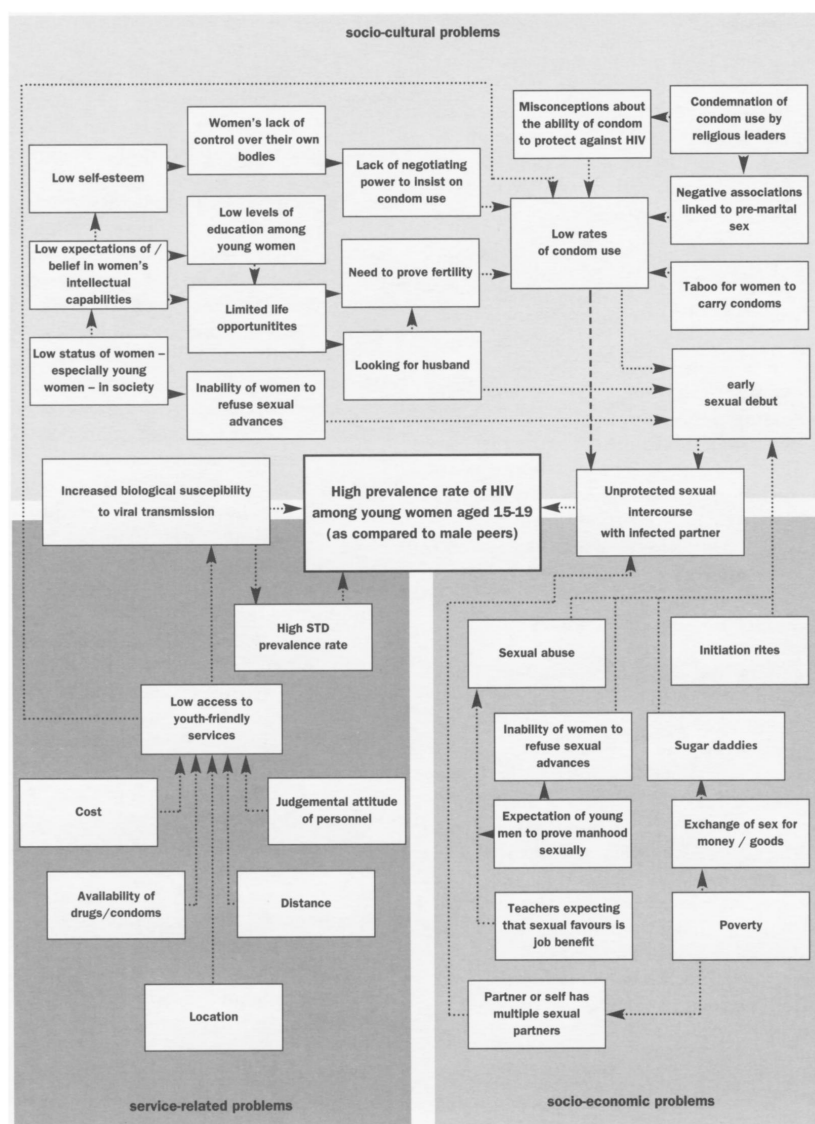


## 2.9 Problem Analysis

This is a tool that can be used to examine the causes of problems. It helps generate the widest possible range of factors or issues shaping a defined problem, and/or possible solutions, in a logical manner. The purpose of the tool is to brainstorm and organise contributing factors that can then guide the investigation of problems towards realistic options for solutions. First, a 'core' problem is identified and subsequent causes and effects of this problem can be arranged as branches around the core issue. The tool is useful for group brainstorming and planning. This example is a problem tree of factors contributing to high prevalence rate of HIV among women aged 15-19 (as compared to their male peers) in Malawi. In this problem tree the contributing factors have been clustered into 3 main groups: socio-economic problems, service-related problems and socio-cultural problems. The diagramme below by Ostergaard Stradford (2000) quoted in Theobald and Tolhurst (2001).

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Figure 1  
HIV among women in Malawi: problem tree  
Mette Ostergaard Strandlod





## 2.10 Timelines

Timelines can be used to trace critical events through time from the perspectives of different community groups. They allow the researcher and participants to explore changes through time and the reasons behind these. For example you could explore community responses to the HIV epidemic, or the impact of HIV on communities from the late 1980s. The figure below is taken from Oxfam 1994 and shows an example of a time line detailing a team's response to critical events:

Dates			
Critical events (these can be external such as changes in government, laws, disasters, conferences, or internal such as new staff, workshops ect)			
Your team's response			
The gender element in responses			
Internal factors affecting your response			
External factors			

## 2.11 Ranking

Ranking involves identifying with the group or individuals their problems and preferences in order of priority e.g. what factors influence people's quality of life. It can be used in various forms and as a tool to compare and contrast priorities between groups (female, male, age). Ranking exercises are frequently used for identifying wealth and poverty in communities (socio-economic ranking and other factors i.e. access). **Example of wealth ranking**

Priority Ranking of their Problems (Women) - Landless

Action Aid May 1991, Bangladesh

Problems	River Erosion	Economic Problem	Health and Medical	Sanitation	Lack of Work for Women	Lack of Business Opportunity	Dowry System	Infertility of Soil
Infertility of soil	River Erosion	Economic	Medical	Sanitation	Work for women	Business	Dowry	X
Dowry System	River Erosion	Economic	Medical	Sanitation	Work for women	Business	X	X
Lack of Business Opportunity	River Erosion	Economic	Business	Business	Business	X	X	X
Lack of work for women	River Erosion	Economic	Work for women	Work for Women	X	X	X	X
Sanitation	River Erosion	Economic	Sanitation	X	X	X	X	X
Health and Medical	River Erosion	Economic	X	X	X	X	X	X
Economic Problems	Economic	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
River Erosion	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Economic - 7

River Erosion - 6

Business - 5

Lack of Work for Women - 4

Sanitation - 3

Health and Medical - 2

Dowry - 1

CAUSES:

1. In order to meet everyday necessities economic problems must be solved
2. River erosion forced them to move again and again
3. Income will increase if they can do business
4. Income will increase if women get work
5. Women need good sanitation
6. If other problems solved dowry itself will not be a problem
7. Infertile land doesn't matter here because landless now

The figure shows that 'economics' is perceived as the biggest problems for landless women in Bangladesh. Like all these tools the end product (the actual ranking) is important. However, the

process of conducting the ranking and the discussions that occur are usually very revealing. Was their consensus in the ranking? What were the points of discussion, disagreement?

The ranking exercise below is taken from Shah 1999: 40:

“Following is an example of a ranking analysis carried out by a group of boys. We first started with a focus group discussion (FGD) on whether they perceived any differences in the risk of contracting STIs among the boys. When they started mentioning different categories of boys and how they differed in their sexual behavior and attitudes, they were asked to prepare a list on a large sheet of paper. Once the list was ready, they were asked to rank the different categories according to the risk they carried.”

**RANKING DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF BOYS ACCORDING TO  
THEIR RISK OF CONTRACTING STIS**

(Prepared by a group of boys in Lubuto Compound, Ndola)

<b>RANK ACCORDING TO RISK OF CARRYING AN STI (1=HIGHEST RISK)</b>	<b>DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF BOYS IN THE COMPOUND **</b>
1	<b>Yooos</b> – those who wear fashionable big clothes and like music. They move in groups and move with knives. They also wear earrings.
5	<b>Niggers</b> – They don't fear anyone, they only fear God and only God can judge them. They dress smartly. They don't go for girls because they are homosexual.
3	<b>Gangsters</b> – These are 'young' brothers of niggers. They move in groups and they have a leader of the gang known as 'Stalin'. The members of this group move with dangerous weapons like knives. Usually they share their girlfriend amongst them – even nine of them could be having sex with one girl, by turns. It will be up to the girl to keep a timetable for each one of them, so as to not annoy the others.
4	<b>PLO (Posse Lazy)</b> – these put on nice clothes but they have no money. They come from poor families and like to have friends from rich families. For them to have clothes, they do piece work and spend all the money on clothes and beer.
2	<b>Rasta</b> – These smoke dagga, listen to reggae music and they are vegetarians. Rastas propose girls but girls don't like them because they are dirty, are slaves, and walk to town.
6	<b>Home Guys</b> – these are ordinary boys, they go to church sometimes and some may have girlfriends.

**\*\* NOTE:** The terminology and the language presented above is the same as used by the adolescents who carried out this analysis. Please note that some of the terms used by the adolescents do not carry the same meaning as is understood in general.

The above analysis shows how the boys categorize themselves in different groups. They do not perceive 'home guys' and 'niggers' to be at risk of STIs. They feel that homosexuals and those who have few girlfriends are relatively safe from STIs.

## **2.12 Tips for getting started**

Using participatory methods for the first time can be quite nerve-racking. One question which often gets asked is “which method do I use first?” or “which method should follow which?” But it is important to note that there are no fixed rules when conducting any form of participatory research. Flexibility lies at the heart of any application. Shah (1999) states that participatory mapping can be a good starting point. This can provide the facilitator with a general idea about the community. It can be a nice ice-breaker between the community and the facilitator because maps are easy to explain and the participants find them easy to prepare. Transect walks can also be a good way to physically understand the area and invite more people into the discussion. Shah (1999) states that only after the discussion warms and the facilitators are able to build a rapport with the community members, should more specific, and individual information be discussed (such as well-being ranking, ranking and scoring and venn diagramming).

## **2.10 Additional Resources**

PLA Notes <http://www.planotes.org/> is a journal devoted to PLA research and methods development.

Chambers, R (1995) “Whose Reality Counts? Putting the Last First” Intermediate Technology Publications: London

Eldis

IDS Participation Resource Centre <http://www.ids.ac.uk/go/knowledge-services/our-services/participation-resource-centre>

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Villareal, M. (1992) 'The Poverty of Practice: Power, Gender, and Intervention From an Actor oriented Perspective', in N. Long and A. Long (eds), *Battlefields of Knowledge: The Interlocking of Theory and Practice in Social Research and Development*, London: Routledge