PA ‘Movers and Shakers’ Retreat

Charney Manor, 21 – 22 April 2004

Oxfam

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Introduction

The purpose of the Retreat:

1. To reflect on the development of PA in the UK over the last 10 years
2. To carry out some strategic planning in terms of what would support better development of PA in the UK
3. To share and identify good practice in PA

Participants

Our definition of 'Movers and Shakers' is those who have been driving the development of PA in the UK, through training and support to others. The original invitation list is in Annex A; unfortunately a number of the invitees were unable to attend. Those present were:

Peter Bryant, Independent Consultant
Keith Budden, Groundwork West Midlands
Barbara Castle, Independent Consultant
Megan Evans, Participation Cymru
Duncan Fuller, PEANUT
Charlotte Flower, Oxfam UK Poverty Programme
Kate Gant, Independent Consultant
Scott Jones, Centre for Research and Development Training, Wolverhampton University
Nick Lunch, Insight
Sammy Musyoki, Institute of Development Studies
Jo Rowlands, Oxfam UK Poverty Programme
John Rowley. Independent Consultant
Kirsty Sherlock, Macaulay Institute
Peter Taylor, Institute of Development Studies
Frances Thyer, Communities First Support Network
Jan Walsh, Groundwork Wales

Overview

The event ran from Wednesday lunchtime to mid afternoon on Thursday. Sammy and Charlotte developed a programme for the first afternoon, which took us through introductions, personal journeys and the UK PA journey timeline. Issues that were raised were then prioritised to take forward. The rest of the sessions were taken on by the participants, and there was a really strong sense of a shared responsibility for the programme. As a group we discussed the principles underpinning PA, and then split into smaller groups to explore issues around power, practice, mainstreaming and the future role of a national networking group.

Introductions

We spent a short time exploring how we did and did not know each other; it was surprising that many in the group had not met before or come across each other. For many in the group the only connection between them was Oxfam and this raised a number of observations about how we network, and indeed how the few networks that do exist do not overlap with one another.

We went on to explore and share our personal life journeys (using drawings) and this raised a number of common observations/questions/issues:

- Is PA something that you do or a fundamental principle underpinning your work, or both?

- Not working with a confined definition like 'P.A.' – working more with belief
- Power – unsettling power relationships; is this why Oxfam is interested in PA?
- Informal networking with other practitioners to assist learning and reflection
- Standards/quality; peer review – assuring quality
- Situations in the UK – actual decision making a long way from where community development is happening
- Evolution in approaches to participation and where we are now in this journey?
- Influence of overseas experience; connections to a place abroad, life changing experiences and particular people influencing us
- Should we be looking for consensus or not?
- Difference between relationships between civil society and government here in the UK and in other countries
- Education/teaching background
- We have all experienced different journeys, and often with significant changes in direction
- Cross fertilisation/multi-media/multi-faceted approach to the way we work
- A common need – to be inspired/mentored

PA journey in the UK

We used a historical timeline tool to help us reflect on the PA journey in the UK over the last 10 or more years. Our task was not to create the ultimate or the most accurate history of PA in the UK, but to reflect on how it had been introduced and developed over this time. Along the line we placed key events, and as we discussed the journey issues, the learning and achievements were captured on different coloured cards.

As many of the early PA pioneers were not with us at the Retreat, the early years of PA were possibly represented a little vaguely. It was agreed that it would be useful at some stage to carry out a more detailed historical analysis, just to capture its richness as many using PA now in the UK are unaware of the journey. Since the Retreat, an MSC student from Reading, Naysan Adlparvar, has taken up the task of completing the timeline as part of his MSc dissertation. He is interviewing many of the Retreat invitees who were not able to join us in April, and will produce a short report (in addition to his thesis) in October.

A transcript of the timeline is attached in Annex B. Historically, PA in the UK has emerged through interactions between those working in an international development context and a UK context, over a period of roughly 15 years. Certain key people came back to the UK having worked with RRA, PRA and PLA overseas, and promoted an approach drawing on these methodologies. This strongly influenced the development of PA in the UK.

The exercise led us to highlight some key reflections:

- In 2004, what do we mean by "PA"? We seem to have different understandings about it.
    - Do labels and definitions matter to us and to those we work with?
    - What distinguishes PA from what has gone before (assuming there is "nothing new under the sun")?
    - Is it a set of principles and beliefs?
    - Are we actually practicing PA or are we still on the journey towards it?
- PA may be viewed as an integration of research, education and collective action; with an aim of learning and transformation.
    - Avoidance of an extractive approach is critical.
    - Are there stories existing of collective action that has led to transformation and social change?

    - What has been achieved in terms of changing power structures and power relations?
    - What other forms of change are important and recognisable?
- Ultimately, however, meanings are personal and how we perceive PA depends on our own belief systems.
    - Can we share and develop common ground around our different belief systems through networking?
- What influences where PA is going in the UK?
    - Evidence-based evaluation?
    - Openness about what works and what doesn't?
    - Questioning effectiveness of certain forms of training?
    - Relationship with those who commission PA and the way Terms of Reference are prepared, understood and implemented?
    - Nature of support to the development of PA in the long term?
    - How can PA fit with the managerial and organisational culture in the UK?
- Incremental change is needed - a gradual, constant, collective chipping away is required throughout the system within which community development and regeneration are located. Our developing network of PA practitioners and trainers needs to articulate a common system of beliefs and principles.

We had pulled the above issues together by early evening on the first day, and after supper spent time as a group reviewing them and deciding which we wanted to take forward and address in more depth the following day. This required further exploration to achieve clarity on some of the points and issues, and breaking down some of the issues further. We prioritised five issues for further discussion and then thought about how we would address them. We realised that there was a sequence to this discussion and that we needed as a group to have agreed the basic principles of PA before we then went on to discuss the other issues; so this was placed first on the agenda as a whole group activity. The issue of 'who we are' is also one for whole group discussion, and we agreed that as we would probably be touching on this issue in other discussions as well, that we would pull those out in a final plenary session. So the five issues we addressed and the process that we used to do this were:

<table>
<tr><td>1 Principles:</td><td>We worked on this in one large group, using a snowballing technique.</td></tr>
<tr><td>2 Power</td><td rowspan="3">We worked on these issues 2, 3 and 4 in 3 small groups. Each group was asked to:
- articulate the problem and why it is important
- describe what difference addressing this issue would make
- discuss what we can do to address it
- discuss 'who are we'? (in the context of the issue)</td></tr>
<tr><td>3 Practice</td></tr>
<tr><td>4 Mainstreaming</td></tr>
<tr><td>5 Who are we?</td><td>In plenary after the feedback on groups 2, 3 and 4, we discussed the reflections that were raised in answer to the 'who are we?' questions discussed in each group</td></tr>
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1. Principles

As a group we used a snowballing exercise[1] to draw our five key principles. The issues that were raised are transcribed in full in Annex C but are distilled into 5 key principles:

- PA should be an empowering approach that is underpinned by principles of community development and embodies collective action to transform people's lives according to their own criteria.
- PA should be based on a continuous learning process that respects self-knowledge, establishes a climate of trust and openness, and fosters creativity and new skills
- PA should be proactively inclusive, paying attention to both differences and similarities.
- PA should always enable critical reflection to challenge established beliefs and power relations both within and around communities, and should always seek to achieve equitable partnership between all stakeholders.
- PA should never be an extractive process, and is robust and ethical.

2. Power

Our subgroup recognised early on that one of the basic principles of PA is to challenge the status quo (i.e. current power relationships and power balances both within and outside the community), so in order to achieve that we need to work with private, non-government and state sectors. Therefore PA requires us to ask questions about existing power relationships between and within groups. In turn, this means ensuring that stakeholder analysis should always contain elements of power analysis.

We also recognised that facilitation is, in itself, a form of power and PA practitioners need to be mindful of their role in a process. Concern was raised about misrepresenting the 'voices of the people', which means we need to ensure greater transparency and ensure validation is carried out with those involved. In addition, practitioners often act as gatekeepers, and we questioned why it was so rare to actually allow the voices of the group to speak directly to the decision-makers.

We felt that by recognising the explicit political and power aspects of PA, we could help to challenge established beliefs and stimulate collective action. There was a discussion around the role of the PA practitioner in piercing 'false consciousness' and enabling individuals to question their conditions and seek more equitable solutions. This is challenging, as it requires careful management to ensure solutions are for the collective good, not responding to short term self interest, whilst avoiding raising expectations that can't be met given the time and resource constraints of most projects. This led to the acknowledgement that it is important that this type of work is not embarked upon unless there is time and support to carry forward the process; and that commissioning bodies needed to be educated to allow this time and support to be built into projects.

PA methods are used in situations where projects have a narrow remit either in geographical or sectoral terms. There was some discussion about whether these were really PA projects,

[1] In this process we started off working on our own, then in pairs, and spent 10 minutes identifying 5 key issues in answer to the question 'PA should always…?'; after ten minutes each pair joined another and shared those issues and agreed a new 5 key principles. These were then shared with the wider group. The timings were determined by the facilitator who observed the intensity of the discussion, pushed for a close and finally abandoned the control role, handing the responsibility back to the 'slowest' group.

as we observed that truly participatory projects do not have a set agenda but allow the participants to scope the very question to be answered. We also talked about whether projects that merely describe (needs analysis) are really PA as we agreed that PA required some kind of commitment or aspiration for action to challenge the status quo and improve the lives of those with whom we were working. The fact is that these projects do exist, and we often find ourselves working on then; the challenge is how do we make them more effective and inclusive.

Recognising the political nature of PA will help us recognise and work with others to counter the power structures that keep groups marginalized and therefore allow us to target where, and how to challenge these. PA practitioners can overcome these obstacles by helping individuals discover the power they already have within themselves through collective organisation and often, much can be achieved by just highlighting the opportunities already available to the communities. We need to consider how PA is related to broader ideas about participatory democracy and traditional models of democracy. Thus, PA is about restructuring social institutions, rather than just helping improve the provision of services.

In terms of how this affected the 'who are we?' question, we seemed to agree that PA was not a neutral or technical process focussed on tools, but was intrinsically linked to a belief in collective transformation. PA practitioners self identify as activists in that we share a common political agenda and aspiration for positive change. This is challenging in terms of maintaining links with decision-makers and getting funding (making a living) and often we might not present as activists. But despite a non-threatening and consensual façade, we share a commitment to transformative change. Understanding this means that as practitioners we have to be very self-aware and undertake reflexive work to ensure that we are mindful of the effect that our actions are having. In particular, we have to make difficult decisions about how far to raise expectations, and when we should not practice PA as the conditions do not allow transformative change. Realistic review of what we can deliver is part of our self-evaluation. Also, we discussed that people may choose not to participate if they feel that the outcomes will not be acted upon. Our role is to enable people to choose, but we can't force them to act and should not be held responsible if they choose not to act.

We had a fairly long discussion about the importance of having facilitators who are grounded in the community; and the importance of supporting local community activists. There was some discussion about whether local actors were able to escape local politics: sometimes a 'sympathetic stranger' can maintain a more balanced view of local events, and access all sections of a community more easily. We agreed that there needed to be a deep engagement with the local context, and this might be best achieved through a team of external and internal workers. In a related manner, we discussed the importance of not 'reinventing the wheel' but starting any project or process with a collective and good understanding of the history of the community and how the issues have arisen. In summary, it was stressed that we should be long term allies for the community – not necessarily resident there but maintaining a relationship that lasts beyond the project. It was suggested that PA practitioners need to make and support both horizontal networks (between groups) and vertical networks (between different power bases) and could have a key role to play in both influencing and informing these networks.

We also discussed the importance of influencing and informing other networks, so that they are aware of the issues and the energy that our particular PA projects have created. Again, this helps stop reinventing the wheel, as different projects and processes can piggy-back off one another in an integrated fashion, instead of working in isolation and ignorance of each other. We also decided that having tangible action on the ground (learning by doing) was the best method for creating the less tangible transformative changes in cultures and attitudes. By bringing together a group to undertake a particular task, we are able to demonstrate and

transfer skills and tools to local people, empowering them to undertake their own PA work in the future.

Action Points:

- Lobby commissioning bodies for enough time and resources to allow us to explore these wider agendas that so often are the real cause for success or failure
- Educate commissioning bodies about the effects of poor PA and resist doing poor PA where possible
- Take a strategic approach that sees every project as a piece of the jigsaw which contributes to the bigger picture of transformative change
- Use our position of power responsibly to lobby for change, whilst allowing the unmediated voices of the groups with whom we work to speak directly to decision-makers where possible
- Pass on tools, experience, passion to others to allow them to practice PA
- Recognise our identity as activists, however carefully we might disguise this
- Ensure PA training has an explicit focus on power relations

3. Practice

The group focussed almost entirely on training. They identified that there are no agreed standards; either on content or approach. There is no recognised overseer of quality and no national co-ordinating body. There are patchy systems of accreditation via university departments and the Open College Network; these may not improve the quality of the training, just make the trainer jump through many hoops. Many organisations provide a certificate of attendance as many trainees want some formal recognition even if only for their own satisfaction, and often trainees need some kind of recognised course in order to continue to claim benefits. However, a certificate of attendance would be given to even the worst trainee, undermining the value of the accreditation.

There was no agreement on how to address these challenges, but a number of issues were recognised:

- How could we improve quality without becoming restrictive? There are real fears of being exclusive and creating a restrictive select group. There are real fears of quality control becoming a restrictive policing role that would homogenise training courses and destroy creativity, responsiveness and flexibility. In particular, how can you have standards whilst ensuring that training is flexible enough to be adapted to special circumstances. However, at the same time there is a real desire for quality control and professional development and better performance - we do want to do well and to learn.
- There is some delicacy between trainers who may feel that they are in competition and therefore feel unwilling to share what they perceive to be sensitive information. However, there may be lots to gain from sharing information and ideas and forming groups/ teams to do particular bits of work.
- We fear we may not have the skills for peer reviewing – some people do this really well allowing you to learn and to feel good. So we need to focus on how best this can be achieved and supported.
- There is no obvious source of funding for quality control – which raises the question of who should pay for PA professional development? For example, it is difficult to get clients to pay for more than the basics of a training course. They often find it difficult to agree to have more than one trainer, so feedback days and evaluation days or other inputs that would improve the work are hard to negotiate.

As a consequence, there is a lot of poor training and poor practice being done; PA may be getting a bad name and as poor processes often lead to inappropriate initiatives, further disempowering and disenfranchising the very communities PA seeks to help.

So what needs to be done? Overall the potential solutions examine the road to a [self-] regulated profession. We can see that there are steps towards self-regulation, helping to develop shared understanding of principles and shared codes of conduct; and eventually to some more formal external body for approval and control.

However, there are ethical as well as practical concerns about regulation, particularly regarding the question of who are we to regulate anything? This relates to the power relations within the PA professional community, as well as between PA practitioners and the commissioning/funding bodies.

A logical inference from the discussion was that Oxfam has a key role in keeping information flowing between the emerging groups in the UK. The development of ideas on quality, and perhaps one day on regulation, needs to be well co-ordinated so that groups do not pursue different incompatible initiatives.

Action points:

The action points were divided into those that might be more easily achieved and the more difficult and longer term:

Easier and quicker

- Form Action Learning Sets to work on quality.
- Reach agreements to shadow each other; to create mentoring relationships.
- Peer review mechanisms.
- Collect existing experiences (good and bad)

Less easy, slower

- Publish or share quality stories.
- Regular meetings to work on these issues.
- Share experiences of successes and failures
- Share good practice.
- Reach agreements on what should be included in training:
  - Core elements and desirable elements
  - Contents
  - Style and approach
  - *(One participant expressed concern with this: How do you legislate for good training being adapted to the special circumstances?)*

More difficult

- Curriculum development and benchmarking (including a record of how flexible the training was).
- A register of PA trainers
- A register of approved PA trainers.
- Systems of registration and regular re-submissions.

4. Mainstreaming

What is the issue?

Our observation is that there is a cycle of trend/'flavour of the month' that has developed in particular in regeneration, whereby different tools and approaches are popular for short

periods of time. These different tools and approaches are seen all too often as 'the participation', and there is a general lack of understanding about what good participation is and the role PA, as well as other participatory tools and approaches play to achieve that. It is unclear to many – professionals and communities alike – what their roles within these processes should be and they might well differ from their current roles. So much of the focus of capacity building is at the community level, or the 'front-line' as it is often called. However, to ensure that participation is mainstreamed and transformation institutionalised, it is important to work across the board - policy makers, commissioners, deliverers, politicians, citizen based organisations, researchers/evaluators, educators and so on. We need to link up these levels and identify gaps in knowledge and understanding, and address them.

Until these levels are linked up, it is unlikely that 'participation' and any meaningful engagement of the most excluded and marginalized people would be beyond the 'front-line', and as we all know this is not where decisions are really made. There is no easy quick-fix solution to this; it is a very long-term task. It is further hindered by the fact that most of us are engaged in these processes on a short-term basis, or within imposed short-term constraints (funding, local politics, planning frameworks, etc). However, by working with this bigger picture in mind, and collectively gathering good practice experience, identifying bad, attempting to influence beyond the 'front-line' in every piece of work we do (invite decision-makers to join the training, develop a reference group to be kept informed of what is happening, communicate and keep people informed) we will be able to lobby, inform, educate and challenge across these different layers. We know that for good community development to happen, and for transformational change to occur, there needs to develop a sustainable and long-term perspective of all actors. Through this process of wider learning and support, goal posts might remain in one place a little longer, and judgements made about good practice (and what should be scaled up) made on sound criteria. In the long run this would mean that government would get better value for money – and achieve its targets.

Action points:

- Use the networks and organisations that we are part of and ensure that we are taking the same messages
- Carry out stakeholder analysis to identify where information, lobbying and/or training need to be focussed
- Understanding and delivering (PA process) over the long term, using commissioning within an output driven funding environment (not just at appraisal stage)
- Clarity about small changes that can lead to something bigger
- Focus on regions, where smaller networks and communities of practice can develop more easily and are in more direct contact with key decision makers
- Identify good practice and how it makes an impact, and so illustrating and developing understanding around the negative impact of bad practice
- Identifying 'selling points' to different levels but also ensure that they are linked up

5. Who are we?

We agreed that as a group, our aim is to learn to improve practice and to influence change. We should form a 'national collective' that can keep an overview, feed regional learning into national, and make national and international connections. The basic mechanism that we would adopt is peer review. We agreed that we must be creative in how we capture and disseminate lessons learned – using more than the printed word (e.g. video).

There was a specific discussion about Oxfam's role. It was seen to have a role in creating and supporting the perspectives of national alliances, as well as enabling local and regional alliances to link into national agendas. There is potential to link into Oxfam's other resources

– such as campaigning and policy – to support the advocacy work that we would like to develop. Oxfam does have committed resources to achieve some of this in the form of:

- Social Inclusion Directory (SID) an internet based database focussing on gender and participatory practice, knowledge and resources in the UK
- Publications (possibly in the form of videos and DVDs)
- Collaborative research
- Convening events

What about those not at the meeting?

It was agreed that in addition to providing feedback to those invited to the event and unable to attend, each of us would use our personal links to involve new people. We could post the workshop report on the UK Community Participation Network (UKCPN) as well.

Action Plan

We went through the many ideas that came out of the 5 sessions and attempted to turn them into concrete actions, with timeframes and responsibilities clearly identified.

1. Guidelines for commissioners: a small group – Communities First Support Network (CFSN), Barbara, Scott, Charlotte, Duncan and Groundwork (with Charlotte leading) to work mainly by teleconference and email to develop draft guidelines in the next 6 months.

2. Action Learning Sets: we felt that we could tackle these in a number of different ways, but all, at present, are quite informal:
   a. People connect up informally with others over a common concern or issue and work out a way of working together – either by meeting, by teleconference, or via email; working through the problems and supporting each other through a series of 'meetings'
   b. We ensure that at the next Retreat there is time to work in action learning sets, focussing on identified concerns. This could be done either with the resources within the group, or possibly by inviting an external facilitator
   c. The key is that we need to ensure that learning is shared in some way, each set being responsible to ensure that learning is captured and is accessible to others
   d. See also points 6, 9,10.

3. West Midlands regional stakeholder analysis and mapping. Kate, Keith and Scott are going to work on this and plan a regional event at some stage pulling together regional practitioners and experience (this could be hosted by Groundwork or through REGEN West Midlands).

4. Wales - all participants from Wales are involved in the CFSN in some way, and so are in a good position to review experience in Wales.

5. National collective - should this be formal or not? It was felt that it is too early to address this and we should revisit this during the second PA Retreat.

6. Pull together a lessons learned' policy briefing to inform Active Citizens Unit (ACU), Community Development Foundation (CDF), Joseph Roundtree Foundation (JRF) and Urban Forum (UF) as well as others. Nick encouraged us to think of video or other ways of producing this briefing. Again, it was felt that this could wait until the next session for further exploration.

7. Need to gather examples of good practice and demonstrate that this is an essential way to support the development of good practice. Delegates to pull together examples of good practice for Charlotte to compile into a case study of good practice (to be sent to Charlotte within the next three months).

8. Communications - need a media strategy to work out how best to communicate our message. Again this needs to be addressed when we have some clearer information to communicate (e.g. see 6)

9. Peer mentoring and ongoing support to the recently trained; this could be local, cross region/country, in person or by email/telephone. Agreed that this is linked to the Action Learning Sets, we could use these to support mentoring work.

10. Training - we need to analyse the power relations inherent within training, recognising both our power over those we train and our responsibility to ensure that the training ensures future PA practitioners embrace and practice principled PA work. It would be a good subject for an Action Learning Set. This could also form part of the guidelines.

11. Co-facilitation – it was suggested that we try this through learning sets or through personal contacts through the Retreat. Also that we bring it into the guidelines.

12. Retreat for practitioners to reflect and learn - hold another Retreat, planned for 6 months time (26-27 October) to develop the Action Learning Sets.

13. Duncan is going to explore 'Blogging' as a useful mechanism for e-networking and sharing learning. Meanwhile, Oxfam will circulate the groups contact details for those who attended the event to keep in touch with each other.

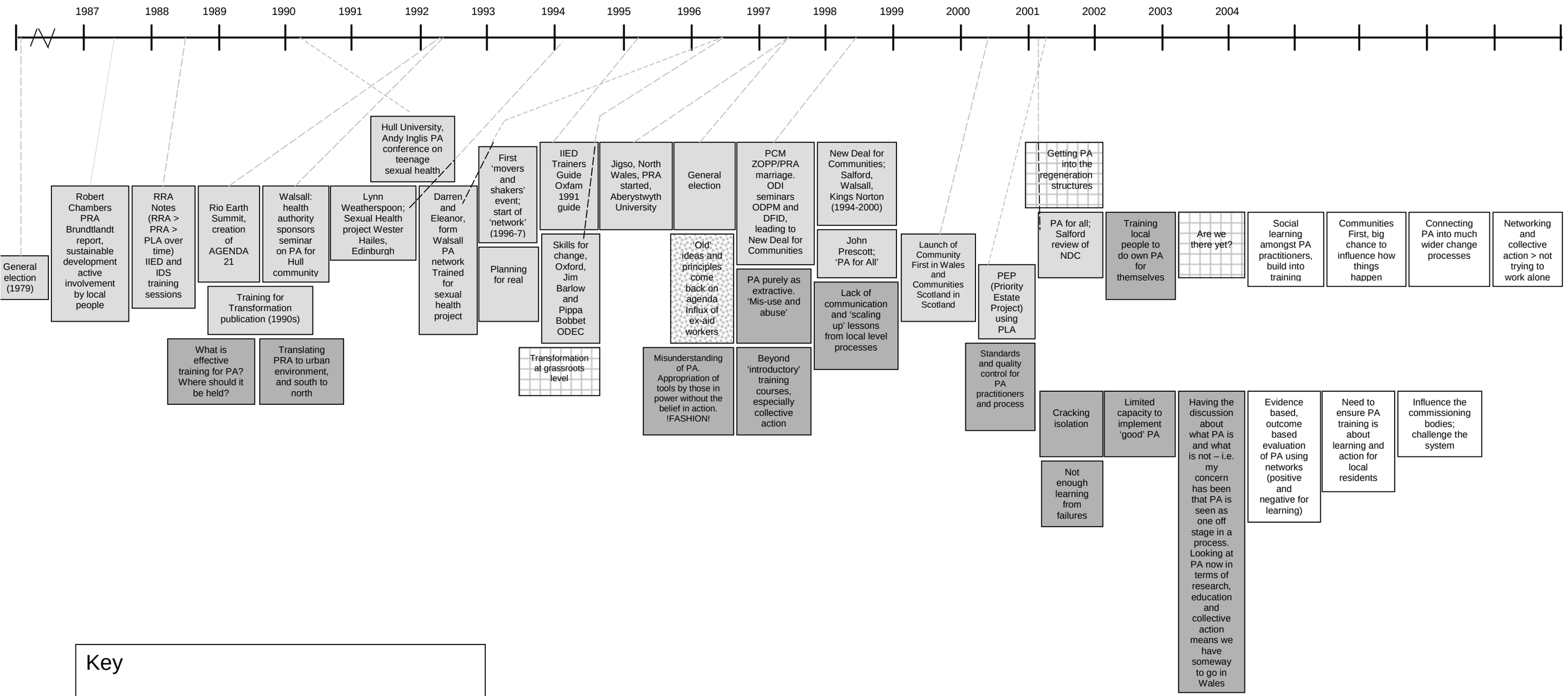
14. Charlotte to arrange production of a report of the Retreat, with the support of an editorial group of Kate, Kirsty, Sammy, John and Peter.

Annex A: List of invitees

Original invitation list, including those who were unable to attend the event:

Barbara Castle	Independent Consultant
Charlotte Flower	Oxfam UK Poverty Programme
Chris Johnes	Communities First Support Network, Wales
Daren Garratt	Drug Action Team, Walsall Primary Care Trust
Duncan Fuller	PEANUT
Eleanor Chell	Walsall PA Network
Eve Bevan	Food and Nutrition Project, Shepherds Bush Healthy Living Centre
Frances Thyer	Communities First Support Network, Wales
Hannah Parker	Joseph Rowntree
Jan Walsh	Groundwork Wales
Jo Rowlands	Oxfam UK Poverty Programme
John Rowley	Independent Consultant
Jonathan Dudding	ICA UK
Kate Gant	Independent Consultant
Keith Budden	Groundwork West Midlands
Kirsty Sherlock	Macaulay Institute
Linda Tock	Hull and East Yorkshire Participatory Appraisal Network
Martin Westerby	Bedford Primary Care Trust
Megan Evans	Participation Cymru
Nick Lunch	Insight
Peter Taylor	Institute of Development Studies
Peter Bryant	Independent Consultant
Roger Newton	York PA Network
Sam Murray	PA Practitioner
Sammy Musyoki	Institute of Development Studies
Sarah Madden	Independent Consultant
Scott Jones	Centre for Research and Development Training, Wolverhampton University
Susan Guy	Scottish Participatory Initiatives
Vicky Johnson	Development Focus
Victoria Williams	Food Matters
Vikki Hilton	Edinburgh University
Viv Simon	PEP North

Annex B: PA Timeline



Key

- Significant Events
- Challenges
- Opportunities
- Lessons Learned
- Achievements

Annex C: Snowballing exercise

This is the full transcript of the output of the snowballing exercise.

Principles:

Should be fun using creative tools adapted for the context.

An empowering approach and should be underpinned by principles of community development and capacity building, e.g. respect
Should be based in community development principles.

PA should be about long-term relationships not just a one-off.
Should try to establish a climate of trust and openness.
PA should create a residue of skills with all key stakeholders in the change process.
Should be based in continuous learning process that respects self-knowledge.

PA should be proactively inclusive, paying attention to both differences and similarities.
PA should seek to be inclusive of diverse voices.
Should embrace multiple perspectives.

Enable critical reflection to challenge established beliefs and power relations.
PA should promote creativity, risk-taking and challenge the status quo and result in change. PA should not be about “experts” and passive recipients.
Should challenge power relations within and around communities.

Should include/embody collective action to transform people’s lives according to their own criteria.

PA should always seek to achieve equal partnership between all stakeholders.

PA should never be extractive.

Later additions:
Robust, cross-checked, validated.
Depends on a combination of principles, process and tools.
Depends on a belief that you can learn from others.