



Moving Toward Inclusive and Equitable Learning:
How Participatory Data Methods Can Facilitate

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This is the second instalment in Palladium's Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Analytics (MELA) Portfolio series on integrating diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) principles into MELA work in international development. This series is a follow-up to [Promoting Equitable Outcomes in International Development](#).

Introduction

Data has the power to advance learning and subsequently enhance decision-making and drive project results, but its impact depends on who sets the learning agenda, how it is experienced and shared, and what program results are prioritised.

More often than not, researchers and monitoring and evaluation professionals sit with donors and program implementers to review and analyse data without giving a seat at the table to the participants and communities who provided that information, and who may feel the impact of the findings. Making sense of data without the perspective of the end recipient results in biased learning. A more inclusive approach to developing questions of interest, data gathering, analysis, and review is required to truly unleash the power of data to maximise people-level impacts.

Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) is one promising approach to encourage more inclusive and equitable learning and to sustain positive impact.

What is PLA?

PLA is a *family* of approaches, behaviours, and relationships that enable and empower community members to share, analyse, and enhance their knowledge of the political, economic, and social situation, and then to plan, act, monitor, evaluate, and reflect. PLA by its nature seeks to match context and thus, a standardised methodology or process is not possible (or desirable).

Although the application of PLA does not guarantee learning will occur inclusively and equitably, its key tenets support the empowerment and mobilisation of local communities and its members. In turn, this can foster more balanced power relations between communities and outsiders and create room for multi-faceted data to underscore learning. Key tenets behind PLA methodologies include:

- Full and active participation of community members / program participants in all aspects from design to data collection to dissemination
- Group analysis and learning to emphasise two-way dialogue and to think more critically about any power imbalances in the data
- Careful consideration and strategies to give voice to those who have been most marginalised

PLA in action at Palladium

A few Palladium projects have demonstrated how they apply PLA principles, especially those strategies to deepen interactions with communities and encourage local participation in gathering and reviewing data. These approaches have led to better, more sustainable, community-driven initiatives and results.

Palladium's Feed the Future Malawi Agricultural Diversification Activity (AgDiv) trains communities using the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) [approach](#). The approach layered with other Activity interventions at critical times during the planting and harvesting seasons, ensures that women can have equal say in deciding how to utilise household assets.

This community-led empowerment methodology uses inclusive and participatory processes to enhance individual life and livelihood planning; challenge established attitudes and behaviours to give marginalised women a voice in decision making, and develop collective strategies to better target and focus resources for empowerment and wealth creation. The methodology consists of trainings that explore gender justice, participation, and leadership; visual diagramming tools to encourage dialogue in multi-stakeholder conversations; peer learning mechanisms and structure for continued and actionable learning; and mechanisms to integrate GALS sustainably in organisations or interventions.



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AgDiv's integration of GALS complements the disbursement of capital injection loans to empower women by involving them in collective dialogue and learning that enhances their confidence and emboldens them to take leadership roles in household decision making. One village savings and loans (VSL) member considered for capital injection who participated in the GALS training said that she has felt “inspired and challenged,” and she has been able to gain skills to communicate better with her husband and work together, which has assured her that “my future, my well-being, and that of my family is secured.”

Participatory strategies to strengthen joint accountability systems

From 2015 to 2017, Health Policy Plus (HP+), funded by the US Agency for International Development, piloted an approach to spur locally-driven action by strengthening joint [accountability systems](#) among health system actors for family planning. The data gathered to guide the work drew on PLA elements, especially the collaboration with existing networks of female leaders in Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda to prioritise one issue hindering their country's ability to reach its family planning goals.

Further, country teams in tandem with these women leaders, conducted participatory assessments to map accountability linkages and then established mechanisms to strategise on a path forward building off of and learning from the data collected with relevant stakeholders.

For example, in Uganda, the women leaders who guided the assessment subsequently trained district officials on family planning data collection and use. In Malawi, to address the challenges behind youth-friendly health services (YFHS) implementation, the team invited Parliamentarians to the field to engage directly with facility staff and clients so that politicians could more effectively advocate for YFHS funding.

Both these cases illustrate how, by putting data into the hands of local female leaders, these women could leverage this knowledge to direct their own path forward to improve their country's family planning outcomes.

Why is inclusive and equitable learning a goal?

Since learning by its nature depends on who requests the information; the type, quality, and representativeness of the data; who is in the room at critical discussion points; and how information is exchanged; the risk of bias is quite high.

Using PLA and other participatory and community-centric approaches in MELA can increase our responsiveness to the communities in which we work and aligns with Palladium's [own values](#). To aim for positive impact, we need to be bold in our approaches to enhance inclusive and equitable learning to support more equitable program results.

If we facilitate increased and inclusive processes to interpret data and learn from it with communities, then they will have the tools and resources to mold and push their own change agendas, and we can better foster more lasting impact.



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