

Farmer-led Documentation

by Dorine Rüter and Anne Piepenstock



Sustainable agriculture and natural resource management depends to a great extent on the effective interaction of the knowledge and experience of local farmers and of development agents. Documenting and sharing local experiences, practices and initiatives play an important role in this interaction.

Documentation, however, is frequently done in an extractive way, with outsiders controlling the process, and the information that has been documented being stored beyond the reach of the community. Recently, there has been a move towards farmer-led documentation (FLD), whereby local people tell

their own stories in their own language. The resulting products can be used by community members for internal learning within the community, for exchange with other communities and for sharing with development workers, researchers and policy-makers.

An FLD Process in Brief

In Bolivia, where the AGRECOL Andes Foundation introduced farmer-led documentation to rural communities, the documentation process starts at the community level. Using participatory rural appraisal-type exercises, community members decide what they want to document (a practice, an innovation, a project) and which elements (objects, people, activities) need to be captured to convey their message. This information will be used later to capture and process material. In the next step, the community jointly identifies the type of documentation to be applied and, if necessary, which members should be trained to use the relevant equipment, such as cameras or audio recorders. With the storyboard prepared and facilitators trained, the agreed material is then captured and processed into a usable format. The community members involved present the edited material to the whole community for discussion and validation. Finally, the resulting documentation is used for a variety of purposes, such as sharing experiences between local communities, influencing policy at local or regional level, or even the education of college students to help them value and learn from traditional knowledge.

Supporting Farmer-to-Farmer Learning and Exchange

FLD is a learning and capacity-building process. Documentation, especially when done with others, helps farmers to analyse what they know, to capture that information, and to recount it to other people. The documentation is presented in a language (be it visual, spoken or written) that he or she understands. This makes the documentation material very suitable for processes such as farmer-to-farmer training and extension.

The following case illustrates how community members used the results of their FLD efforts for learning from and sharing ideas with a neighbouring community.

In Ghana, participatory video (PV) was used as a tool to empower innovative farmers to share their innovations with others. Two farmers' groups at Wapuli and Chegbani, Saboba-Chereponi district, were trained in PV and subsequently shot their own separate films about their innovations using siella, a salty soil enjoyed by animals (Bruce et al, 2006). Each community watched both films: their own and that of their neighbouring community. This enabled them to analyse and compare the actual innovation that was documented, as well as the quality of the films.

“Community members of all ages, the aged, the able-bodied, youth and children gathered for the event. The air was rife with comments as the various farmers known in their community introduced themselves on the screen.”

(Bruce et al, 2006)

The film of the Chegbani farmers' group featured men and women, and captured cattle licking the siella mineral lick. After watching this film, the Wapuli community realised they too have female members in their farmers' group, but they had not included them in the film. Also, they stated, “We should have shown our bullocks licking...”. In turn, the Chegbani farmers noticed the Wapuli mineral lick was made differently and was much more solid. This provided them with new ideas for improving their own lick blocks.



FLD Can Promote Local Innovation

FLD, with people themselves defining what they wish to document, can also promote local innovation. Local innovation can be defined as the process through which people in a given locality discover or develop new and better ways of doing things, using the locally available resources and on their own initiative (Waters-Bayer et al, 2006). Throughout the world, farmers experiment informally to develop and test new ideas for the better use of natural resources. As shown in the example from Ghana mentioned above, FLD enables such farmers to document and share their innovations. Furthermore, FLD may also be used to describe the process through which these innovations came to be. Using such documentation, farmers can demonstrate their capacity and willingness to innovate, which in turn can transform how research and extension agents view local people. This new perspective may provoke a reorientation of research and development efforts to enhance farmers' capacities to adjust to change – to develop their own locally appropriate systems and institutions of resource management – so as to gain food security, sustain their livelihoods and safeguard the environment.

Opportunities and Challenges of ICT

Modern information and communication technologies (ICT) offer interesting new opportunities for FLD. Participatory video, as used in Ghana, is one promising example. Farmers' ability to record their own messages using text, pictures, audio or video can increase the effectiveness of existing media such as radio, and open up new means of grassroots communication.

Although experiences are promising, many challenges still need to be addressed. A significant challenge, for example, is finding a balance between the opportunities that ICTs offer, while bearing in mind the feasibility and sustainability of the proposed solutions. Technologies such as photography (Bolivia) or video (Ghana) may be well suited to the visual culture and illiteracy levels often present in farmer communities, but the equipment needed is usually delicate and expensive. Communities interested in FLD have started looking for ways to cover costs of purchase and maintenance of electronic equipment. Some use their photo or video camera on a commercial basis, for instance to record weddings or other social events. Others have found a local NGO prepared to provide a digital camera, as well as the space and a computer to function as a community documentation centre. Joint initiatives between local organisations, local public authorities and support from an NGO or project can improve the sustainability of these community centres.

Another challenge is developing the required skills to handle the ICT equipment. Integrating technical training in ongoing capacity development interventions can strengthen the potential of ICT-based documentation. For example, as currently being tried out in Bolivia, learning how to document could be included in the curricula of conventional youth education. This approach has an added advantage – it works in two ways. By utilizing the computer skills they developed at school, young community members can have a more active contribution to the documentation process, while experienced farmers have the opportunity to share their accumulated knowledge with them.



Conclusion

FLD has great potential to empower and build the capacity of local communities. When exploring the opportunities new ICTs provide to realise this potential, it is also essential to realistically address the challenges that go hand-in-hand with applying these technologies.

Development agents interested in supporting a farmer-led approach to documentation can learn from and strengthen traditional methods of knowledge sharing and documentation already used by local communities. Any positive influence from external development agents on the effective application of FLD by local communities can only come from stimulating and enabling farmers to take the lead, as well as showing a willingness to listen to, and learn from what they have to say. In any case, the main principle of FLD should prevail: letting the farmers set the agenda for their own development.

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