

Training local innovators in Farmer-Led Documentation in Ambo, Ethiopia

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From 20–22 November 2009, training in Farmer-Led Documentation (FLD) was given to farmer innovators at the Ambo site in Oromia Region, one of the three sites in Ethiopia where PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia is piloting Local Innovation Support Funds (LISFs). This pilot is being coordinated by the local non-governmental organisation (NGO) called Ethiopian Rural Self-Help Association (ERSHA), with support from the PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia coordinator based in Addis Ababa with the NGO AgriService Ethiopia (ASE). The participants in the training were 20 innovators belonging to five Farmer Associations in the Ambo area, and five development agents (DAs) who are directly involved in piloting the LISF in the area. The LISF Fund Management Committee (which is made up of farmers only – one innovator farmer from each of the five Farmer Associations) selected the farmers who would take part in the training. Most of the selected farmers were literate, having received formal education up to Grade 9. All participants were male. The facilitators of the training were Fetien Abay, a female lecturer at Mekelle University in northern Ethiopia, and Lemlem Hailemichal, a female radio journalist, likewise from Tigray Region. Both had gained experience in FLD working with women farmer innovators in Tigray in 2008–09.



Figure 1: FLD workshop participants with the two facilitators (centre)

How the training was done

”Brainwriting”. To start off the training, the participants were guided through a “brainwriting” exercise, a method that encourages interaction and generates numerous ideas from all members of a group. Each participant, sitting in a circle, was given an A4-size sheet of paper and asked to write at the top of the sheet a problem he is trying to solve. The participants were given five minutes to write down any question that needed to be addressed in connection with that problem. After a bit more than five minutes, when everyone had finished writing, each participant passed the worksheet to the next person on the right. Then, each was asked to generate answers to the question received. The sheets were further passed around to the right from participant to participant, until they reached the people who asked the original questions. When this round was over, participants were asked whether they had received any new ideas for solving their problem, what fascinated them and what was not acceptable or clear to them.

Through this exercise, a large variety of problems and solutions were raised. The “brainwriting” stimulated some of the members who may have been hesitant to speak up because they feared they might not express things well in Amharic, the official language in Ethiopia. Through this exercise, they formulated their thoughts in the local language Oromifa. They wrote it down themselves, and then it was translated into Amharic by the DAs from the Department of Agriculture (as the facilitators did not understand Oromifa).

The exercise went extremely well, and most of the solutions given by other farmers were unique; there were no major repetitions. In this way, the farmers were given the opportunity to demonstrate their creativity in generating ideas.

Most of the farmers’ questions were clustered into different types of technical innovations in farming and natural resource management. But one question posed by a farmer was: *“How can agricultural experts be made to recognise farmers’ innovation?”* Some of the answers given were: *“be patient”*, *“organise and present ourselves in local or regional farmers’ day exhibitions”* and *“advocate for introducing farmer innovation in extension work”*. This last response was an eye-opener, even for the facilitators, about the need to lobby the government extension service to incorporate farmer innovations and to stimulate farmer-led innovation processes as an approach to agricultural extension.

Case presentations. The facilitators presented the case of FLD by women innovators in Tigray. They spoke about the problems that the farmers and the FLD support team faced when starting up FLD. Both the facilitators and the farmer innovators had been accustomed to researcher-led documentation. The facilitators had to convince the farmers that they were free to use their own creativity in documenting what was important to them, starting with choosing which aspect of their innovative work they would like to document, deciding what would be the best way to document it, and deciding why and for whom they would like to document their innovation. This case of FLD had been documented with photographs and text (in both English and Tigrigna, the language in Tigray) in a booklet entitled *Women documenting their innovations: outcomes of a farmer-led documentation process* (the English version can be found under <http://www.prolinnova.net/flid/73237%20FLD%20booklet%20Ethiopia%20290709.pdf>).

Then, two films were shown to the participants in the Ambo workshop: a video made by Mekelle University on facilitating the FLD work in Tigray and a video made by the Sustainable Land Use Forum (SLUF) on farmer innovation in sustainable land management in Wollo (a part of Amhara Region immediately south of Tigray). The workshop participants were particularly impressed by the photography skills gained by the deaf woman selected by her fellow villagers in Tigray as community photographer. They also commented on the innovative work of women farmers, as there are not so many female-headed households in the Ambo area as there are in Tigray. Seeing the FLD film stimulated the participants’ interest in visiting Tigray. They also wanted to receive copies of the booklet, preferably in the Oromifa language or, if this was not possible, in Amharic. Both the workshop facilitators and the PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia coordinator promised to arrange a version in Amharic and possibly also one in Oromifa.

Innovators' presentations. After this introduction to FLD, the farmer innovators from the Ambo area were asked to try and document their own innovations in a visualised way. They were provided with flipchart paper and coloured markers and had 30 minutes to prepare their documentation of their innovations and/or experiments: how they started to innovate, where they are now and what still needs to be improved. The farmers then spent roughly 45 minutes displaying their posters with drawings and writing and looking at each other's posters. When they displayed their posters, they were asked by the other participants and by the facilitators about the work they had done before and after their innovations, and the contribution that the innovation had made to them and to the community.



Figure 2: Farmer innovator Sahilu Yadeta presenting his innovation process with the help of his own drawings

How the farmer innovators reacted to the training

The workshop participants were encouraged by the cases from Tigray and Wollo and by the creativity of the local farmers in presenting their innovations and experiments. This was evident in the motivated participation of all, the frequent questions and the good suggestions made. Referring to the activities in Tigray, one farmer from the Ambo area said: *"We need to motivate our women farmers to raise their confidence and to be able to express themselves."* Thus far, the five associations of farmer innovators piloting the LISF in the Ambo area include only men. They said they would be able to include women in their groups. Both the male farmer innovators and the DAs agreed to promote innovation by women in their area. The farmers were keen to carry out FLD making their own photographs and video films, as well as written records. They said that they had gained new ideas for documenting the process of their experimentation and innovation. They discussed in great detail some of the issues related to participatory video, such as how this could be done in an inexpensive way, because they perceived video as a particularly effective tool for documentation.

The comments of the workshop participants were recorded by the radio journalist. Some of the questions and suggestions they raised were:

- Could the FLD booklet on the Tigray experience (currently in Tigrigna and English) be printed and distributed in their language (Oromifa) or at least in Amharic?
- There is a need to start FLD in their own innovation and experimentation sites.
- They want to be trained in FLD, particularly in photography and in video and written recording.
- The facilitators had presented their PowerPoint slides in English but it would have been good to present them in Amharic.
- Most of the farmers expressed interest in making their innovations publicly known not only in their community but also to people in higher-level decision-making positions.
- Most were willing to share their innovations with others, but a few said they would not like to share their innovations until these been recorded as their own innovations.
- The innovators in local veterinary medicine said they wanted to be recognised in the community and by the government as innovators and to make known how useful their treatments are for animals; however, they did not want to explain what specific plant species and combinations they use, as giving treatments is a source of income for them.
- Finally, the farmers and the DAs emphasised the need for further experience-sharing and exposure visits between regions by farmer innovators.

After the training, the PROLINNOVA-Ethiopia secretariat at ASE bought five small conventional (non-digital) cameras for the five *Kebele* (Sub-District) Administrations where the five DAs who took part in the workshop are working. The Farmer Innovators Group (FIG), made up of a total of 32 farmer innovators in the five Farmer Associations in the five *Kebeles*, contributed 5% to the total costs. The cameras are kept in the DA offices, but belong to the FIG. It was agreed that each of the 32 FIG members would contribute one Ethiopian Birr per month (about USD 0.85 per year) to cover costs for camera repair and partial costs for the films and for development and printing. The remaining operating costs will be covered, for the time being, from the budget of ERSHA's farmer capacity-building programme. The farmers already started to use the cameras to take photos of their innovations and experiments, but felt that they needed some training, so the LISF coordinator in ERSHA is organising this for the farmer-photographers. This training will include guidance in careful use of the cameras.

With encouragement from the Fund Management Committee, four female farmers have applied for LISF grants, and all four applications were approved. The innovations on which they are working are selecting potato varieties tolerant to late blight, testing herbal treatments for eye ailments in cattle, controlling termites on onion crops and making compost to fertilise gardens. The PROLINNOVA-Ethiopia sub-network in the Ambo area hopes that many more female farmers will be encouraged by the activities of these women innovators, who will serve as role models.

The funding for the FLD training came from the budget line for documentation in the PROLINNOVA-Ethiopia budget from the Netherlands Directorate General for International Cooperation (DGIS), not from the Rockefeller Foundation funds for piloting LISFs. A group of farmer innovators – one selected by each Farmer Association – is now organising a trip to Axum in Tigray Region to visit the farmer innovators there. Along the way (travelling by road), they will also visit farmers in Wollo who are organised into Farmer Field Schools (FFSs). During a visit to Ambo by farmers piloting a LISF in Amaro in southern Ethiopia, the latter told of their visit to the FFSs in Wollo, so the Ambo farmers are now very keen to go there. The FFSs had been supported by Save the Children-UK and are continuing their activities after the end of that project. At present, the FFSs are blending and packaging different types of herbs for combating crop pests and, as reported by the Northern Wollo *Woreda* (District) Office of Agriculture and Rural Development, the farmers are able to generate reasonable income from these botanicals. Visiting these farmers could give the farmer innovators from the Ambo area some ideas as to how they could continue financing their own experimentation and innovation activities.