

Process documentation of experiences in facilitating farmer-led documentation in Tigray, Ethiopia

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Introduction

The traditional way of documenting local knowledge and innovation is researcher-led: everything is documented that the researcher feels is important for his/her purpose. But to address the interest of the farming people, it is necessary to look for other approaches, of which “Farmer-Led Documentation (FLD)” is one. It is farmer-driven, in that farmers are involved from the beginning in deciding on the purpose, i.e. why, what, when and how to document. FLD can also make many contributions to development. It strengthens the relationship between the communities and development agents, experts and policymakers. In addition, the information documented in such a way can be shared from farmer to farmer, from village to village, from district to district, from region to region, and vertically from village to development agents and to high-level government officials. When farmers document their own farming experiences, they are enabled to preserve local knowledge and are empowered at the same time. FLD helps them in developing their own locally adapted versions of sustainable agriculture and restores their pride in their own innovative potentials.

Through the PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia initiative in Tigray Region, both women and men innovators have been identified and are involved in Participatory Innovation Development (PID) that builds on local innovation in subsurface drainage, water-lifting devices, home-made drip irrigation, rearing queen bees and managing agricultural biodiversity. This has inspired especially women innovators to take more active roles in development, and they are interested in having their practices and PID experiences documented by researchers. However, we initiated FLD as an alternative, in view of its potential to allow farmers/local communities to take the leading role in the documentation process.

The FLD facilitation team was composed of a senior researcher and a junior researcher from Mekelle University (the authors of this process documentation) and a female journalist (Lemlem Hailemichael) from the regional radio station in Tigray. We decided to focus on encouraging women to document their own innovations. The reason for this focus was that women’s practices are commonly in the domestic sphere and their innovations are not well known and well publicised. This initiative was meant to give them the opportunity to document their innovations and practices on their own and to share these with other people in their own and other communities.

Preparatory activities

- **Proposal development**

Fetien Abay developed the proposal with support from Gebrecherkos Gebregiorgis from Mekelle University.

- **Briefing meeting**

Before starting to facilitate the FLD process, the senior researcher briefed members of the PID group in Tigray Region supported by PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia who were attending a regional exhibition of rural development and natural resource management organised by the Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development (BoARD) in Shire, Western Tigray, in February 2008. She briefed both women and men innovators who were displaying information about their innovations. The men more readily understood the concept of FLD than did the women. In Mekelle, she briefed the other FLD facilitation team members on the concept of FLD and the need for documentation from the farmers’ perspective.

- **Planning FLD**

In November 2008, the team visited Tahtay Maychew and Geter Adwa District, where an outstanding woman innovator is managing natural resources in an exemplary way. The visit was facilitated by the senior researcher, who used to coordinate the second phase of the Indigenous Soil and Water Conservation (ISWC II) project in Ethiopia. This project, which went from 1997 to 2002 with Mekelle University as lead organisation, piloted identification and promotion of farmer innovators in land husbandry in Tigray. It is in its pioneering activities that the PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia initiative is rooted.

The objective of this first meeting was to inform the local people and development agents who are involved in the PID (referred to from now on as “PID participants” or “PID group”) about FLD, to identify local women who would be interested in documenting their innovations and PID experiences, and to arrange appropriate timing for the FLD activities. The team not only briefed the PID group about FLD but also gave further information about the PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia initiative intended to support local people’s innovativeness and empower them.

On the first day, the FLD facilitation team discussed with the development agent and local administrator of the area about the importance of FLD and the need for meeting with the farmers in the PID group.

On the second day, the development agent joined the team to hold a meeting with these farmers. Ten innovator farmers (eight men and two women) attended this second meeting. First of all, the farmers and the team members introduced themselves to each other. Then, the team explained the objective of the proposed documentation and the reasons for focusing on women-led documentation. The PID participants greatly supported this focus, because they felt that rural women have less mobility than rural men and that women’s innovations normally receive less recognition by people both inside and outside the community. The farmers (both men and women) appreciated the potential contribution of FLD to allow sharing of their experiences with the wider society.

Before starting to facilitate the actual documentation, we facilitated a warm-up discussion by inviting the farmers (both male and female) to share their experiences. We did this because of the PID farmers’ expressed interest to explain their innovations when they introduced

themselves. Therefore, each farmer in the PID group explained about his/her innovations and practices. They explained how they have been changing through their innovations and how other members of the community have benefited from their innovation. After this, they identified the two women experimenters to be involved in the FLD, Hawaria and Medhin. These two women, who are involved in PID processes supported by the “Typical Northern Highlands” (Tigray) sub-platform of PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia, were identified through peer selection by both male and female innovators in their area. As a member of the PID group, Hawaria expressed her interest in documenting her innovation. The PID group recommended Medhin, as the community also needed to learn more from her renowned activities in managing fruit trees and grass species. Medhin was not in the meeting but afterwards affirmed her interest in documenting her innovations. The third women innovator that became involved in FLD was a woman who is highly renowned for her innovative management of natural resources and was selected by the FLD facilitation team. Details about these three women innovators are presented below.

Details of women innovators involved in the pilot FLD activities

1) Hawaria Berhe¹. In most male-headed households, women are usually invisible, though they contribute equally or more than the men to the development of specific innovations by the household. In contrast, W/ro (Mrs) Hawaria, a PID participant who lives in the village of Maybrazio in Tahtay Maychew District, is a strong woman who is innovating, together with her husband, in drip irrigation and natural resource management. She is also known for her innovations in dealing with crop and animal diseases.

2) Medhin GebreEgziabher is a widow living in the village of Maysie in Tahtay Maychew District. She has gained regional recognition for her success in land management and fruit production. She grows more than five different species of fruit trees and specialises in multiplying grasses for animal feed. The Tigray Regional BoARD is one of her major customers for the grass species she sells. Because of the different crop species grown in her farm and the different flowering trees, honeybees visit her garden. When she observed this, she felt encouraged to try beekeeping and is experimenting with modern and locally made beehives.

3) Mawcha Gebremedhin lives in the village of Bethans in Geter Adwa District. She had been identified as an innovative woman farmer during the ISWC II project, initially because she started ploughing as a woman, thus challenging the cultural norms in Ethiopia that only men may plough with animal traction². She now gives training in ploughing to other women household heads and to girls who have left school. Because of her recognised skills, she has been ploughing on a share-cropping basis for six elderly men in her village. She has also been innovative in reclaiming land and regenerating natural resources.

These women do not have formal education but they are aware what it means to document something and how it could be done. The FLD facilitation team asked these women if they were interested in documenting their innovations and practices and, if so, how. The women said they preferred documentation in the form of simple booklets, local radio recordings and photography.

¹ The women wanted their names to be mentioned in the report.

² See: Mamusha L, Fetien A & Waters-Bayer A. 2000. Women challenge cultural norms. *ILEIA Newsletter* 16 (2): 40; Fetien A, Mamusha L, O'Flynn P & Waters-Bayer A. 2001. A challenge and an opportunity: innovation by women farmers in Tigray. In: Reij C & Waters-Bayer A (eds), *Farmer innovation in Africa: a source of inspiration for agricultural development* (London: Earthscan), pp155–167; “Ethiopia: a woman innovator speaks”, *IK Notes* 70, World Bank, Washington DC, July 2004.

They are interested in future that also media people be involved to help especially with disseminating the audio-recordings and also to train them in photography.

The FLD facilitation team asked the farmers in the PID group to whom the training in photography and audio-recording should be given: to the women innovators themselves, to a daughter, son of each woman, or if they had other suggestions. The PID group preferred to have a community recorder and selected a young deaf woman named Million, 21 years of age, who had left school after completing 7th grade. They wanted to build her capacity through the new skills in photography and radio and video recording. She is a female household head who is taking care of her younger sisters and brothers, since the death of her mother, Tsige, an energetic innovator who had been identified during the ISWC II project. Both women innovators accepted the suggestion of the PID group but, in addition to the community photographer, Hawaria wanted to receive the photography training herself, whereas Medhin and Mawcha later requested that their sons be trained.

Starting up FLD

The FLD documentation process was not based on questions and answers by the FLD facilitation team, that is, it was not done like an interview. The three women decided what should be documented and spoke what they wanted, and the female journalist recorded this. The female journalist was a member of the FLD facilitation team during every field visit. She audio-recorded what the rural women said about their innovations, while the other team members took written notes. After the audio-recording, the rural women listened to what had been recorded to assure whether it was based on their interest or not. The team explained to the women: if they agreed with it, it would be retained as a document; if not, it would be deleted. The women expressed satisfaction when we asked them whether the recorded experiences were in their interest, because they felt that they had a hand in and control over what was recorded. Then, the other farmers in the PID group listened to the recorded innovations and practices to confirm the women's stories. Actually, we did not encounter anyone who requested that something be deleted. That may be because, from the beginning, they were talking about what they were interested in.

We had planned to start some documentation with Hawaria during the first visit but, because her younger brother had been hit by a car, she apologised for the inconvenience when we arrived at her place and asked the team to postpone the meeting. However, she gave a brief introduction of her innovations on our way to the hospital. We made plans for a later visit to work with her.

During the same trip, we went to Maysie village to visit Medhin. When we entered her garden, we met Medhin working there with her son. The FLD facilitation team introduced itself and the purpose of the visit. Medhin often has visitors from government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in various parts of the region and the country, and she finds it time-consuming explaining her experiences. In addition to such visits, various journalists from ETV (Ethiopian Television) and radio stations have visited her with repeated queries and inflexible timing for recording. Medhin initially told us she was too busy and wanted to work in her field. When we explained the objective of FLD and the kind of training we intended to provide, she appreciated the FLD approach as being different from the previous documentation efforts, because it can be flexibly planned and gave the chance not only to focus on what she wanted to be documented and to share with other communities but also to gain a new skill. She said she would be more interested if we could give the training during a holiday, that is, a day in

the week when, according to the Ethiopian Orthodox calendar, the farmers are not allowed to work in their fields. Since she had been exposed to mass media when she received a national prize as outstanding female innovator, she requested video recording and the possibility of transmitting the film through ETV. The PID facilitation team promised to invite a video-person to join on the next visit in order to assist her when she documented her innovations.

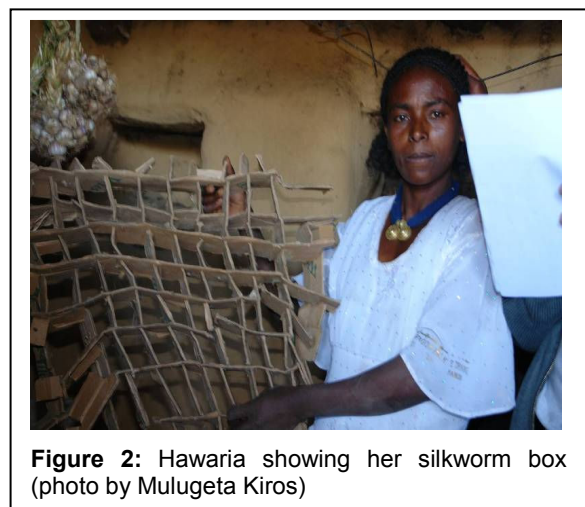
We also visited Bethans village, where Mawcha resides. She is very familiar with the senior researcher. We saw her already from afar, harvesting her crops, working together with her son. He had completed 10th grade before leaving school, and used to live with his father in Wellega in south-western Ethiopia. He grew up there during the resettlement programme of the previous government regime. She invited us into her house, which has a corrugated iron roof, an observable change in standard of living from ordinary Tigray farmers, made possible because of the success of her innovations.



We introduced each other and explained the purpose of the visit and the meaning of FLD and the different methods and roles involved. However, she was still expecting us to do all the documentation and invited us to document her innovations and experiences that she wanted to share with others. When we explained that she was the one to choose what to document, she started in a different direction. Most important to her was security: she was interested in documenting her creativity in new ways of storing maize cobs to prevent theft and her initiative on maintaining the tree species she had planted earlier. Had we led the documentation process, we might have focused on the benefit and spirit of innovation she gained from the preserved tree species. By the time we left Mawcha's place, we had another perspective on her situation, and had made an appointment with her for our next visit to train her son in photography.

The second visit for FLD to all villages (Maybrazio, Maysie and Bethans) was made for four days (3–6 January 2009). During this visit, the team went to Hawaria's home a second time. When we reached there, Hawaria came out with her husband and welcomed us. We explained again our aims and the purpose of FLD to her, and then we asked her to talk about what she wanted to have documented in written form as well as in photographs and in radio recordings.

As researchers, we were impressed by what we saw in the surroundings of the house. The family has a garden full of vegetables and fruit. The wife



told us in confidence that she has many other innovations that should be documented, saying: *“I have something to show you in the home later that I am proud of.”* She was more interested in presenting a big box made of mud to keep silkworms in order to produce silk threads. She asked us to take her picture with it (see Figure 2). Hawaria explained her own and joint innovation on local medicines.

“I have an innovation of which I am proud, and I planned to show it to you and to get it documented. This [rodent control] was invented jointly with my husband to protect my fruits.” It is a mixture of chopped plant locally called *Botiom-Botiom* and animal urine (Figure 3a-d).

We then trained her how to take pictures. She took photographs of things she selected in the garden and in the kitchen area inside her house. We made copies of a collection of her pictures. She had to retake most of the photographs, but some of them turned out well, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Hawaria showing her anti-rodent medicine and local medicines kept in a traditional cupboard (latter photo by Hawaria)

We then made a second visit to Medhin in Maysie village, as she had been busy during our first visit on a working day of the week. This time, she immediately took us to the area she had rehabilitated and said: *“You know this place was not like this before. But we were not aware of documentation and did not take any picture of it before. This makes it difficult to describe the difference from what it was then.”* She seemed to have been inspired by our first visit. This showed us how FLD stimulates farmers to want to document their innovations and experiences.

In this case, the FLD facilitation team made the radio- and video-recording, while Medhin gave explanations to the team. Her main focus was on the challenges and difficulties that she, as a widow, faced during her innovation in reclaiming the land and enriching it with edible fruits and grasses used for animal feed. In contrast, researchers might have been more interested in documenting how she planted and how she was supported by the agricultural experts, and might have been more inclined to assess the productivity of vegetables and other plants and the types of inputs she was using. But, when she had the chance to decide on the topic of documentation, she talked about the experiences she faced in the absence of her husband.

The next topic she wanted to raise and document was the need to be concerned on gender equality. She stressed the importance of publicising and supporting women’s role in bringing about change. As she put it: *“Whether someone is a male or a female does not matter and, if they work hard, they can make a difference regardless of their sex.”*

We asked Medhin whether she keeps records of her initiatives and creativity in her innovations. She replied that she had no means of recording or documenting in some other form except by memorising in her head, as her priority was on demonstration and the action of showing success. After we had showed her son how to take pictures and he started to do so on his own, she became very excited, as she realised that he would be able to keep records for her.

Moreover, she thought it would inspire her son after he had damaged his right hand when helping her to cut down some trees.

During our second visit to Mawcha in Bethans village, we met her in her home with her 20-year-old son Tesfay. Since her son had come to visit her, she felt more secure. She had tried to convince him to stay and work with her on the farm, as she feels safe when he is with her. However, he did not want to stay in the village and had rather asked her to cover all his living costs and tuition fee in a private college offering middle-level training. The FLD facilitation team had also tried to convince him, but to no avail. She was happy when we visited her again, because she felt that there are people beside her.



Training local people in photography

Local youths selected by the community or by individual women innovators who had been selected by the community were trained how to take photographs with a digital camera and the best way to take clear and detailed photographs of innovations that the women and others in the community wanted to capture. During this visit, a video-camera man (Mulugeta Kiros) from the Mekelle University documentation centre joined the team in order to assist in the video-recording that had been requested by Medhin. Also other farmers were interested in this when the FLD facilitation team informed them of the request she had made.

The main aims of the video and photography were to:

- Train one member of each women innovator's family to take pictures
- Train the community photographer in Tahtay Maychew District, and
- Document local innovations, the problems they address and the solutions they offer.

During our second visit to Mawcha's home, our aim was to give her son some training in photography. The video-camera man taught Tesfay about basic operation of the camera and how to take pictures. Then, Tesfay took pictures of his mother and, upon her request, of the new maize store (Figures 5 & 6). She explicitly asked him to take a photo when she was showing the maize stored in the middle of the grass and also when she praised God for the solution she had found. We as researchers had expected that she



would document different experiences and innovations. Had we led the documentation process, we might have focused on the benefit and spirit of innovation.

Her son was indeed inspired by the training that the team gave him in camera documentation and video-recording, and decided to stay living with his mother. He reflected about the training in the following way: *“For me, getting such training is very important. It is a good skill. It can help me to record agricultural and non-agricultural practices and innovations in the village. Even, it can help me as a source of income by taking pictures in the rural community during marriage ceremonies and other social events.”*

During the meeting in November 2008, the PID participants had also selected the young woman Million as community photographer. The video-camera man trained her for two days in digital photography. The young woman was quick to understand the potential of pictures to disseminate the various kinds of innovation more widely and to give other farmers the chance to learn from local innovators.

After Million had been trained in how to operate the digital camera and how to take pictures, she first took a picture of her son. When she saw her son in this picture, she expressed great happiness. She took many pictures of the PID participants in the field and also of the FLD facilitation team. When we looked at the photographs together, she was proud of what she had achieved and become more confident and interested in recording. Her assessment was that the pictures made it possible for her to show her capacity, since she cannot express herself in spoken words.

She assured the FLD facilitation team that, if she had a camera, she could take pictures on her own without any help. She wrote and showed in her gestures: *“I feel happy that I acquired this skill, which may help me not only in getting me remembered, as not being neglected as a deaf person, but also to generate income for the future.”*

When we asked the PID participants to provide us their feedback on the pictures she took, they responded: *“She has an ability to cope with new things, and giving such training to her is also important. Personally, she may benefit from that and, for the community, she will be an asset.”* They felt that their innovations and practices can be documented by their community member in the way and at the time that they want to have them documented. Everyone in the PID group responded in a similar way. The training of the community photographer impressed the farmers after they saw the pictures she had taken: *“This is good. You researchers are in the regional capital in Mekelle. You are too far from us. But she can take photographs of our practices. Again we can call her to take pictures during our daily activities when we feel it is important. Things can be documented at an early stage.”* One female farmer added: *“If members of the local community get trained, they can benefit themselves as well as their communities.”*



Their attitudes toward the FLD process have been fantastic, and they feel that photography is an important form of documentation because, according to them, it can show progress and change over time. On the final trip, the photographer asked Million to demonstrate her previous training. She showed her skill of using the camera as shown in Figure 7.

Lessons learnt

The concept of FLD was new to both the FLD facilitation team and the farmers. Trying to facilitate FLD was a learning process for us. It was encouraging to see how farmers became motivated when they could take the lead in deciding to document their problems and their solutions. They appreciated their roles in making decisions about what to document and also appreciated gaining skills in something they had not been able to do before. It was an important lesson we took from the FLD process in our discussion with Mawcha. As mentioned above, trees surround her house. In researcher-led documentation, the focus would have been on these plants. How did she manage on her own to regenerate such a large area with trees? Why this type of tree? And so on. But she chose another focus.



Figure 7: Million demonstrating how she took and can trace back pictures (photo by Mulugeta Kiros)

The farmers appreciated the brief introduction in using the digital camera. The trainees had an opportunity to capture in practice their own problems and achievements, using the knowledge they had acquired during the training. During the second visit, we found the farmers more inspired by the FLD process than during the first visit. Since then, they had been reflecting on the importance of FLD. Everyone was interested to talk about his/her innovations and experiences and to have them documented or to document them themselves. They told us that there are about fifteen farmer innovators in the village who have organised themselves into a PID group. They said: *“We are exerting efforts day and night in developing new things. Some of us developed animal medicines; some of us developed new treatments against storage pests. Many of us have developed different innovations. But our innovations have not been disseminated and commercialised outside the local market. We need to get recognised outside our locality.”* They had improved their lives and gained local benefits from their innovations, but they obviously wanted wider recognition.

The farmers reflected on their idea about making the training available for women. *“In most cases, training and mass media focus on the men. Hence, giving this kind of chance to groups of women is a good opportunity. We are working together. We, ‘husband and wife,’ are working for the development of the family as well as our localities. Then, it can be considered as an opportunity for the women to have their voices heard outside their home.”* This is an indication that the male farmers have begun to consider women as equal participants in the public sphere.

The training given to the women’s daughters and sons in using a digital camera can help address the illiteracy problem of the women. The literate female photographer (Tsige’s daughter

Million) had greater confidence in taking pictures than did the illiterate women farmers. She was more active and interactive than they were. The illiterate ones were shy and less confident, because they could not read what is written in the camera. The experience led to greater mutual confidence between the literate female photographer and the illiterate women farmers.

We learnt that women household heads have many responsibilities and little time to spend on documentation activities. However, it is possible to address their challenge, at least in part, through flexible time planning, raising the awareness of community members and training their grown-up children so that they can support the women in recording when they need it.

From the viewpoint of the PROLINNOVA–Tigray sub-platform, the FLD activities also give a good opportunity to introduce media people to another way of documentation. The farmers were keen to hear the radio broadcast and a couple of the men gave their mobile phone numbers to the journalist so that she could inform the community about the time of broadcasting. Links have been made with the Tigray regional radio to arrange broadcasting of the women’s stories during the regular rural development radio broadcasts.

Follow-up

The PID group and the women innovators who documented their innovations asked for external support for a camera and further training. Follow-up training was integrated into the Women Learning Women (WLW) project supported by a small grant from Gender, Agriculture and Rural Development in the Information Society (GenARDIS). For continued learning through practice, it is important to provide the farmer groups and the locally recognised women innovators with digital cameras and further training in downloading digital images, arranging to have them printed and inserting them into reports or posters or other means to share the photos.

An FLD programme that targets the PID members as a group would be useful to support their own documentation and peer-learning process. For example, a few literate (male) farmers are already keeping their own diaries for the purpose of documenting their innovation and experimentation. These farmers could be focal points in facilitating FLD and could be trainers of other farmers less experienced in documenting their innovations. This activity should be upscaled and practised more widely within the PROLINNOVA programme, so that other stakeholders and partners can join in the process.

Despite the motivation that has been raised in the community, we feel that the pilot FLD activities and training in photography were not sufficient. There is a need for continuous support to introduce this concept more clearly and more widely by providing training in FLD facilitation to development agents and NGO staff who work closely with farmer innovators.

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