

8 | Lessons, challenges and way forward

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As mentioned in the introduction, the cases presented in this booklet are derived from farmer-led documentation (FLD) pilots, of relatively short duration and with facilitators who were themselves getting to grips with the approach. Despite these limitations, they have provided first-hand experience in putting FLD into practice and helped draw out lessons to further develop the approach.

Building community confidence

Drawing from discussions with farmers and others involved, the cases emphasise FLD's empowering effect on communities. The ability to master a new skill that was the exclusive domain of "professionals" and to take documentation into their own hands has not only brought excitement to communities, but also an increased sense of self-confidence. And this in turn has given them a stronger position to interact with support agencies including government departments. The case from South Africa describes how a woman farmer uses her photos to support her claim for fencing to the local authorities and receives compensation. In Ethiopia and Niger, the communities have made closer links with media and got their innovative messages into local newspapers and radio programmes. There is also mention of how farmers have engaged with policymakers using their own documentation to support their innovative work in agriculture and natural resource management.

Role reversal

FLD attempts to give farmers a central role in documentation of local knowledge and experiences, whilst development practitioners move to a more supportive role. The cases presented in the previous chapters indicate such a reversal of roles, albeit gradually. Low levels of literacy among men and women have in no means constrained this role reversal and indeed – as in the case of Niger – even stimulated adult literacy. Yet, the cases also indicate the struggle to truly reverse the roles in the FLD process and include examples of farmer participation only at the level of consultation. This could be because of the design of the pilots and their limited time frames, the newness of the approach or the difficulties faced by FLD practitioners (particularly those with a research background) to give up their leading role in the documentation process.

Horizontal sharing

A major benefit of FLD as reported by all cases is the horizontal sharing that supported farmer-to-farmer information exchange. The pictures taken, the stories told and the videos made on local innovation and experiences were shared widely at the local level, not only as part of the FLD pilots, but also, and more importantly, as part of regular activities of development programmes in the area or independently by farmers themselves. Few cases, however, analyse and compare the strengths of such horizontal sharing of local experiences based on FLD outputs to those developed entirely by media and other professionals. Drawing on

information from the cases, it is possible to make such a comparison based on some key criteria (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparing farmer-led with professional-led documentation of local experiences

	Farmer-led documentation	Professional-led documentation
Content	Limited bias, no external interpretation or filters Convincing through use of local language, expressions, concepts, realities Easily understood by local people	Inherently biased; prone to interpretation by outsiders Convincing through systematic presentation of information and data Not so easily understood by local people
Technical quality	Lower	Higher
Use of outputs	Mostly at local level	Usually at higher levels – national and international
Costs	Lower	Higher
Choice and management of equipment	Needs careful consideration and planning to ensure smooth implementation	Organised by professionals as part of their work
Community capacity-building effect	High	Low
Sustainability	Farmers could continue documentation	Documentation a one-off activity

Farmers often mention their interest in FLD for the mere possibility to show their innovative work to visitors. And they regret for not starting documentation any earlier as it would have allowed them to show visitors not just what they have now but how they got thus far, improving through the years and seasons.

Building capacity for FLD

It is clear from the cases that the breadth of capacity building for FLD needed at both farmer and staff/facilitator level had been underestimated. Having chosen for modern tools, the pilots put strong emphasis on handling of equipment. In most cases, farmers were given basic, hands-on training in the use of equipment

(e.g. photo cameras) at the outset. As the pilots progressed, it was clear that farmers needed continued follow-up and mentoring to improve their basic skills and to acquire more advanced skills such as developing story boards, manipulating digital photos using a computer, maintaining equipment etc. Beyond these technical skills, they also needed to focus on aspects such as effective dissemination methods, analysis of the advantages of FLD methods and tools, and strategies for making FLD more sustainable. This was a challenge for the development staff involved, who though familiar with facilitating participatory processes, had to go deeper into these aspects themselves before finding ways and methods to include them in training, often semi-literate, farmers.

Recognising this need for further capacity strengthening, partners involved in some of the cases began to give more attention to it. In South Africa, for instance, further review and training spaces were brought in during the course of the pilots, trying out a staggered approach to capacity-building. Initial FLD training was followed by a period of action (field practice), and thereafter by reflection, peer review of outputs, and further training leading into the next action phase, thus creating an action-reflection learning cycle. This allowed for peer learning as well as inputs from the facilitating staff. In other cases, a local support "system" was created to facilitate further learning by farmers who continued FLD after the initial training. This was mostly in the form of regular interaction with local development staff or – as in case of South Africa – with a student hired temporarily for this purpose.



Farmers in Ethiopia continue to use their photography skills to document community events (photo: Beyene Tedla)

Use of modern audio-visual equipment

All the cases mentioned here used modern technologies, often digital, audio-visual equipment as the main FLD tool. Two cases (Niger, Burkina Faso) attempted to combine this with documentation methods known and used locally such as storytelling. The use of modern equipment, however, posed several challenges. Most prominent was the use of video, which required those involved not only to have access to a computer for editing, but also to be sufficiently computer-savvy to use the editing software. This holds true despite the fact that computer equipment and software have become much more user-friendly in recent years. Access to electricity was a must for recharging camera/computer batteries. Facilitators got around this by taking the rough video material back to the cities for processing, hiring video editors when needed. In order to preserve local ownership of the FLD process and products, farmers or community representatives were directly involved in the editing, had a critical say in what was cut and what was not, and watched and commented on the draft edits. It was evident, however, that using technically-complex tools such as video cameras would be less favoured by farmers in the long run. In fact, the cases show that farmers who continued documentation on their own after the pilots preferred conventional or digital photo cameras.

Another challenge of modern ICT-based tools was related to costs. In all pilots, equipment such as photo cameras was given free of charge to the communities. The question on further financing of the activity – for printing photos, for repairs and maintenance and eventually replacing the cameras when needed – was raised only later on in the process, if at all. But faced with the question, communities were quick to think of possible solutions. These included hiring out the cameras to others in the community and providing paid services for taking pictures at ceremonies and other important events. The short duration of the pilots were not sufficient to test whether these options could indeed fully finance the costs involved, but attempts were being made to address the issue. If communities experience tangible benefits of FLD as mentioned here, then it would be safe to assume that they will continue the activity and find ways to cover recurring costs.

Having provided communities with equipment, all pilots needed to clarify issues of ownership and management. When this issue was left unaddressed, as mentioned in the case from South Africa, farmers trying out FLD, once on their own, did not dare to take the camera out of the case as they did not know who would be held responsible if it got damaged. But when the issue was discussed openly, farmers were able to work out practical ways to manage the use of equipment, on their own or together with a supporting organisation. An important issue for clarification in many cases was whether the equipment could be used for purposes other than FLD, as this would open up options for income generation. Existing community structures such as farmer groups or community-based organisations can play a useful role in local management of FLD and the equipment, as described in several of the cases.

Sustaining the FLD process

The communities and support teams involved in the pilots have looked at different options to sustain the process of FLD that was initiated through the pilots. In nearly all cases, the farmers involved have shown an interest in continuing the process on their own by finding ways to manage the equipment and to cover the costs, without the support of other actors. And this is already happening, as mentioned in the cases from South Africa and Ethiopia.

Another option is that farmers are linked to other actors who could continue supporting them in FLD. In this regard, the cases of Niger and Ethiopia show the importance of building partnerships, particularly between conventional agricultural research and development agencies on the one hand and non-traditional partners such as media (television, radio, newspaper) and providers of education on the other. Such organisations who deal with documentation as part of their regular work could support FLD beyond project budgets: a radio station could broadcast stories collected and told by farmers and their groups, a local newspaper could publish farmer-made photo displays, an adult education agency may continue to support community libraries or information centres that could be focal points for continued farmer documentation.

FLD can also continue beyond the pilots when the involved organisations make it part and parcel of their regular programmes and integrate it, where appropriate, into their regular activities.

Moving FLD forward

These pilots have shown that FLD has the potential to harness the creativity of farmers and to give them a central role in documenting their own experiences. Future pilots could build on these and enable more learning and refining of the FLD approach. Larger budgets that allow more serious capacity building and closer field support in the initial phase of FLD could be useful. Longer timeframes for the pilots would enable an action-reflection process to be designed and built in right from the start.

To be effective, an FLD initiative should start with a careful analysis of the aspirations of the farmers in terms of what they wish to document, for what purpose(s), for whom and how. Such an analysis will also elicit any existing forms of documentation within the communities that could be strengthened. In addition, it will help to identify which FLD tools are most appropriate, given the available resources and prevailing conditions (i.e. access to electricity, proximity to town centre etc). A discussion on how to sustain the process of FLD after the pilot is over is crucial, as it will influence the choice farmers make regarding the mode and tools of documentation.

These initial decisions will enable facilitators to tailor capacity building that is more appropriate and comprehensive. In broadening the scope of FLD, farmers who are involved in FLD pilots could continue to be facilitators of the process in their own localities. Those who show a keen interest in playing such a role could be given some extra support already in the pilot stage.

Another question to be addressed by future FLD initiatives is whether the equipment should be given free at all. The pilots described here assumed that communities would "adopt" the FLD approach and continue to pay for the associated costs, including that of equipment, once the free service was over. Facilitators who take up FLD in the future could be more creative and find ways in which the communities could – from the start – contribute even a small part of the costs. They could investigate whether similar cost-sharing activities exist in communities and draw on these experiences. A great advantage of starting off on a cost-sharing basis is that it helps communities to consciously decide whether they want to be involved in FLD at all. And this in turn, would make them engage proactively, make sensible choices regarding the mode/tools for documentation and "own" the process more readily.

These pilots are encouraging in showing how FLD and its products have supported farmer-to-farmer sharing and learning, but have been too short in duration to analyse its wider impacts. But as FLD continues, future initiatives should look more closely at aspects of impact. Are farmers who have been inspired by what they have seen and learned applying aspects of these to improve their own farming practices? Is FLD more convincing in getting messages to other farmers than conventional documentation? Are more farmers being attracted to document their own experiences after having been exposed to how others are doing it? Responses to these questions will allow for a more thorough assessment of the benefits of FLD and for developing it further. It will also confirm whether FLD is feeding into informal farmer-to-farmer learning, which is a main driver of innovation in agriculture and natural resource management.

The way forward for those who wish to engage in FLD, both PROLINNOVA network partners as well as other development organisations, is to move beyond pilots to a position where FLD is integrated into the array of participatory approaches and methods used by them in their regular interactions with farming communities.