

# The mountains are disappearing

*"These visits are an envy to the other communities. We are therefore very glad that you have come to open our eyes to see what we, on our own, can do for ourselves. We hope this will continue".*

These were the feelings expressed by a farmer from Tangbini near Langbenshi during one of the PTD workshops.

## Ben Bonzali

The following is a brief description of the research process in Bumboazio and Tangbini, two communities in Langbenshi and how the experiences gained are being incorporated into the main-stream agriculture extension programme. The Agricultural Station in Langbenshi has had two experiences with PTD. The earlier phase was between 1989 and 1994 and preceded the current collaborative research phase.

### The PTD process

In the first phase farmers' participation was limited to problem identification at the field level. Their involvement in subsequent process planning, monitoring, assessment and feed back was taken over by the researcher. The ILEIA research programme made a bold attempt to involve farmers at every stage of the research process.

In the problem analysis farmers identified poor soils as the main cause of yield decline. Farmers identified the direct and indirect causes of yield decline as the consequence of their own activities and bad farming practices. They concluded that the options and the means to address these problems lay close at hand.

To make appropriate and relevant choices they prioritised these problems by matrix scoring and ranking. This was a most interesting and important learning exercise for both the field staff and farmers. Initially, the ranking was treated as an ordinary game but from the discussions that ensued when results were analysed it became clear that it was a useful tool for farmers' participation in decisions making.

The most difficult phase of the process was designing trials. Farmers discussed how they would carry out their experiments, what location they would use, what variables (assessment indicators) should be looked for, and how much time would be needed before they could come to any conclusion about adopting or rejecting a technology. The resulting trial, designed to address the problem of poor soil fertility, was fine-tuned by farmers in the light of their own practices and experiences. It became clear that farmers

do experiment, although in a manner slightly different from conventional methods.

### The experiences gained

Very early in the research process, we realised that NGO field staff needed to change their general orientation and perception about farmers. They would have to abandon their idea that farmers lacked knowledge, were primitive and resistant to change. Our previous interactions with farmers had invariably put them on the receiving end. A dependency syndrome had been created and many organisations pursuing participatory processes are now trying to reverse this.

At the beginning of the research process, it was essential that external partners familiarise and acquaint themselves with the people and their situation. This was an important step in winning the trust and confidence of the community and ensuring the cooperation on which the success of the research programme would eventually depend. The process involved a series of farmer workshops on topical issues concerning agricultural productivity and sustenance. Periodic assessments of the process, particularly the experiments and the farmer exchange visits, formed a significant part of the research. Group work was the basic strategy adopted to enhance the gathering of adequate, diverse, and rich information for analysis. The groups were usually segregated according to age and sex differences for the purpose of identifying the perceptions of each target group. A major research output was building up the capacity and confidence of farmers to enable them to take their own initiatives in solving problems rather than waiting for solutions from elsewhere.

The research process tried to develop technologies based on farmers' knowledge, capacities, and available local resources. Experimenting with composting was an idea put forward with enthusiasm by farmers. Before the PTD trials, only a few farmers used organic manure to improve soil fertility. When one approached their communities a common sight would be huge mountains of household refuse. Often the biggest ones would be close to the chiefs' compound. Once farmers' had remembered the value of using organic fertiliser to improve soil fertility and productivity, these mountains gradually began to be converted into nutrient-rich soil additives and they started to disappear. At an assessment meeting a farmer in Bumboazio stated: *"Our forefathers practiced it, and handed it down to us. However, you people came in with your chemical fertiliser to discourage us from*

*continuing the practice. You were even giving the chemical fertiliser to us for free. Now its price is beyond our reach you have come back and you are saying use compost".*

In contrast to this another farmer declared: *"They are telling us that our practices of old have better potential than the present use of fertiliser, because if you wish to succeed in life you have to work hard and endure suffering. That is our lot, and they are only helping us out".*

### Conclusion

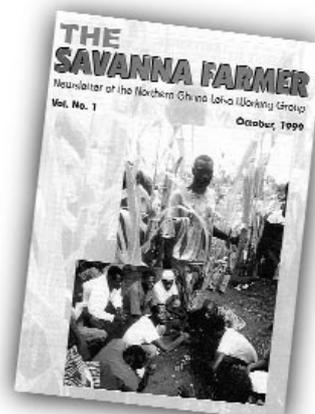
Through the PTD process we have realised that farmers do have a vast stock of knowledge, and have very good reasons for whatever they do. Most technological packages in the recent past could not be sustained probably because the potential of the farmers themselves was not recognised. This is the challenge we are confronting now the research programme is coming to an end. The Agricultural Station is trying to meet this challenge by adopting participatory approaches in all its extension programmes. Farmers' participation has been taken on board with the drawing up of community action plans and joint implementation and monitoring. On this basis a new three-year work programme was developed for the Stations' extension activities.

Many of our working communities are adopting LEISA technologies and are asking for a process similar to that followed in Bumboazio and Tangbini to be initiated in their communities.

It is clear that there is a potential for LEISA practices in the area, and it is our hope to continue and sustain the gains of the collaborative research programme so that more mountains will disappear.

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