

“Ground up”: facilitating networking and sharing in sub-Saharan Africa

Parkie Mbozi

Participatory Ecological Land-Use Management (PELUM) Association is a regional network of 138 civil society organisations with over 15 development partners working in nine countries in eastern and southern Africa. They are Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Uganda, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The members are involved in a wide range of activities in sustainable agriculture, food security, and natural resource management. The activities include training, information dissemination (including gender, HIV/AIDS), drought relief, seed multiplication and delivery, financial support, advocacy and lobbying.



PELUM members have joined hands in forming strategic alliances to fight poverty and remedy other social injustices in the region, and to enhance capacity building. The PELUM mission statement reads in part: “We aim to build the capacity of members to respond appropriately to changes and challenges towards the empowerment of communities.”

Launching “Ground Up”

PELUM Association launched its regional magazine, *Ground Up*, in March 2000, five years after the Association was formed. *Ground Up* was a response to the information needs of its members. They wanted a magazine, which would enhance their capacity to deliver extension



SOME MEMBER ORGANISATIONS USE GROUND UP IN COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS.

messages through the sharing of experiences and information across the region. The magazine was to be a vehicle for networking in participatory ecological land-use management (pelum) across eastern and southern Africa and with like-minded partners and organisations beyond the region.

The magazine was also meant to fill a gap in development literature which focuses specifically on agriculture and environment at a Sub-Saharan regional level, and which is rooted in the region and looks at development from a southern perspective.

The specific objectives of the magazine are to:

- popularise the participatory ecological land-use management (pelum) approach among communities in eastern and southern Africa;
- influence policy-makers to think pelum and to lobby and advocate for sustainable communities;
- provide a forum for critical analysis and evaluation of pelum approaches;
- share pelum approaches in the region and beyond and to promote networking;
- encourage research in the area of pelum; and,
- to provide a voice for the South, giving a southern perspective to development.

After a series of consultations, a feasibility study and a week long planning workshop, and armed with a dummy edition, we finally published the maiden issue in April 2000.

Ensuring sustainability

The planning workshop produced a five-year business plan, which projected that the magazine would attain financial sustainability by the third or fourth year of publication. While many development publications are given out free, we decided to take a different route: combining information service delivery with business. We wanted to look ahead to the time when donor support would fall

away, particularly after the period of our current strategic plan (2000-2004).

In the firm belief that there was a niche for a regional development magazine, we planned for a commercial publication from the outset. We printed the magazine in colour, signed up designers, originators and printers, and went in search of subscribers, advertising agents, distributors and editorial contributors throughout the region.

The magazine sells at US\$1.50 on the newsstands and at US\$5 to subscribers, against a production and distribution cost of around US\$2.7. This means that the difference of US\$1.2 on the newsstand price is a subsidy to popularise the magazine.

The editing and printing of the magazine is done in Harare, Zimbabwe, the base of the regional office of PELUM Association. The magazine is then sent to country-level commercial distributors and bookshops and to country PELUM offices to be distributed through the PELUM network at a commission of 10% for members and 20% for country PELUM offices.

While we commission experienced journalists to write on given themes, we also encourage PELUM members to contribute their experiences, in line with our aim to “sing our own song” in the magazine. Ideally, the content should be dominated by contributions from the members. This is in line with PELUM principles and values and intends to give the members greater control of the magazine.

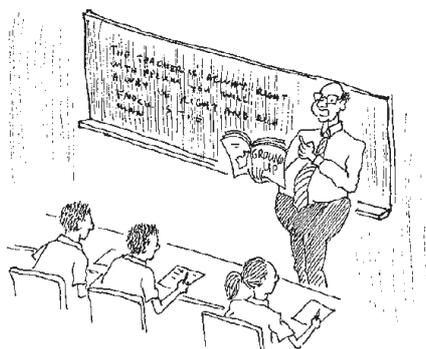
Realising that not many members had journalism training, we have been running training courses in basic writing skills every year since 1999.

Content of the magazine

In deciding the themes for *Ground Up* editions we have been mindful of the core business of the members and partners, and problems specific to the eastern and southern African region. To make the

magazines more relevant we ask the members to suggest themes, which reflect the information demands of the farming communities they work with. The previous issues of the magazine have, therefore, focused on:

- farmer innovations
- participatory methodologies and concepts
- seed security
- issues and experiences in advocacy and lobbying
- farmer-to-farmer extension
- organic farming and marketing
- micro-irrigation and water harvesting
- measuring impact of development programmes.



GROUND UP HAS BEEN USED AS LECTURE MATERIAL IN UNIVERSITIES.

For the rest of 2002 we will focus on mainstreaming gender in agricultural programmes, the World Summit on Sustainable Development, in particular the Farmers' Convergence which PELUM is organising, and biotechnology and food security. These themes are intended to fill information gaps and enhance the capacity of the members in those specific areas.

Achievements

Two years of publishing *Ground Up* has been a mix of opportunities and challenges. We have just over 100 subscribers at present and a little under 30% of the copies produced are sold through newsstands across the region.

We have some structural achievements in producing a regional magazine and in facilitating networking across the region and beyond. Firstly, the Association has gained invaluable experience in producing such a magazine, which can be shared with others in the region and beyond. This experience also adds to the learning and growing process of the Association.

Secondly, the magazine has managed to bring together experts with different backgrounds and has facilitated networking. To an appreciable extent, through the magazine, we have also managed to provide an avenue for linking

experts with the communities on the ground and between policy makers and those affected or afflicted by those policies.

Through the magazine we have also created a pool of journalists and media who are friendly and sympathetic to the cause of PELUM and are now working closely with us on a number of issues in sustainable agriculture. The journalists are paid US\$60 for an article and US\$10 for a photograph or cartoon used.

Testimonies of Impact

From the beginning, comments like the following have been received regularly: *"I realise the importance of the publication your organisation is producing. The magazine is very relevant and essential to my field of agricultural extension and rural development in my country. I am a civil servant in the Ministry of Agriculture in Ethiopia ..."* We realised that this type of feedback was not enough; we wanted some deeper insights. We decided to have a comprehensive external review of the magazine, which was carried out in Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe in March and April this year.

From the preliminary results of the review we have deduced that the magazine has been instrumental in selling the PELUM values, principles and methodologies in sustainable agriculture. The Tanzania *Ground Up* review report reads, *"Ground Up successfully documents the achievements and constraints of various experiences, e.g. in micro-irrigation, thereby allowing farmers and development workers to share across the region."* James Mwami, an extension worker in Uganda, says, *"I find Ground Up useful because it tackles grassroots mobilisation and participation. The magazine is proving to be very useful to our organisation."*

There is also a reported trickle-down and multiplier effect from *Ground Up*. Mark Maseko, the Zambian reviewer, reports that, *"Some member organisations use it (Ground Up) in community workshops while others use the information from the magazine to develop course materials for their community education projects. Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Catholic Diocese of Lusaka reported this kind of utilisation of information from Ground Up."* *Ground Up* has also been used for compiling teaching material in universities. The School of Agriculture at the University of Zambia, for instance, has asked for back copies to distribute among its students. The magazine's use of research findings seems to be one of its major attractions among academic and research institutions.

Some members describe *Ground Up* as the flag-bearer for the Association and in campaigning, advocacy and lobbying.

Through *Ground Up*, PELUM Association has raised awareness about the issues that need to be brought to the attention of politicians and policy-makers.

The magazine has also enhanced networking and the sharing of information and experiences throughout the region. A number of respondents state that they read the magazine specifically to learn about the experiences of other members or about organisations involved in similar work or facing a similar problem. Through *Ground Up* we have been able to link organizations and individuals wishing to learn from each other. For instance, a number of farmers wrote to us or directly to the International Development Enterprise inquiring about an innovative treadle pump, which we featured in Volume 1, Number 1.

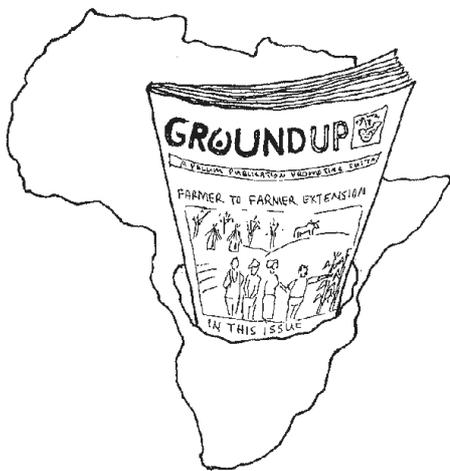
The magazine has facilitated networking by providing sources of information and contact details of authors, individuals and organisations involved in particular areas of interest. One farmer reader based in Hurungwe, Zimbabwe, wrote, *"I was interested in the article about micro-irrigation technology for small-scale farmers (Ground Up, Vol. 1, No. 1). Please send more information about how I can get a quotation or terms of payment and the address of the agent of treadle pumps. I have been looking for this type of pump to boost my farming business."* The theme of organic farming in Vol.1, No. 6 was eagerly taken up among organic farmers, marketers and consumers in the region and beyond.



---- INCREASE THE MAGAZINE MARKET BASE AND MAKE IT MORE RELEVANT ON THE GROUND.

Challenges

Although it is evident that the magazine ranks highly among its readers, we still face a number of challenges. We are yet to expand the reach and penetration of the magazine in the region. Postal charges are prohibitive, and customs regulations differ from country to country. In some countries educational materials attract duty and value-added tax which cost as much as the price of a copy. These



THE MAGAZINE HAS FILLED A GAPING HOLE IN AFRICAN MEDIA

problems have restricted the number of copies sent out.

Being a relatively young publication, copy sales, subscriptions and advertising are still limited. We are also recognizing that development information and products do not sell as much, particularly in this part of the world where purchasing power is limited among households and development information is known to be free.

The less than expected number of contributions from members has also been a source of concern. We aimed to have at least 75% of the content from members of the Association. The best we have done is 50% with the rest of the articles coming from academics,

researchers, journalists and partner organisations. We believe this reduces the extent to which experiences are shared among members of PELUM, though not necessarily between PELUM and similar organisations.

Our biggest challenge remains to be in assessing the impact of the magazine in the area of advocacy and lobbying and, more fundamentally, its impact on the livelihoods of farmers and farming communities.

The future

The Tanzanian reviewer of *Ground Up* writes, "Despite some structural weaknesses, the magazine has filled a gaping hole in African media, and serves as a vital means of realizing the vision of PELUM and raising the Association's prestige and visibility. If *Ground Up* remains sensitive to the needs of its target group, and flexible enough to adapt its editorial policies, there will always be a need for such a publication. In terms of meeting market needs, *Ground Up* has good prospects."

This is an encouraging observation. We intend to use the review to strengthen the magazine, particularly in marketing, distribution, advertising and member participation. We want the country desks to become more involved in the magazine and assume its ownership. Two country offices are already producing their own

newsletters, largely inspired by, and learning a lot from, *Ground Up*. We would like to see such developments scaled up and replicated in the other countries.

One of our strategic priorities is enhancing the capacity of members, extension workers and farmers in the region to document their experiences for the magazine. This would facilitate not only the sharing of information and experiences but also increase the magazine's market base and make the magazine more relevant on the ground.

One major lesson we have learnt in the last two years is that it is not easy to attain financial viability of a development-oriented magazine. However, *Ground Up* being the only agriculture and environment magazine produced and circulated in the region currently is the magazine's greatest strength. We intend to capitalise on this strength to keep the PELUM flag flying. ■

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Market rates flow out of the cradle of a telephone

Given the glamour of information technology, we are led into believing that costly hi-tech tools are essential for harnessing the power of IT. But VIIT (Vidya Pratishtan's Institute of Information Technology), a young engineering college in the small town of Baramati, India, has been working out a way of offering agricultural information via the much-overlooked phone.

Telephone - effective medium

VIIT recently has been putting together its interactive voice response (IVR) system, meant to benefit the rural population. This IVR system is meant for use in Indian conditions - where connectivity is often not available, computers are few, telephone lines could be noisy, and there is a lack of literacy among the rural population.

Phones have spread out to large areas of India particularly over the past decade-and-half. VIIT points out that telephone links today cover 70% of India's geographical area, and could, thus, play a vital role in ensuring that IT has a wider penetration across the many small villages that dot India.

The telephone is, in fact, the most penetrating medium of communication in rural India. "It can be used in conjunction with computers to provide updated information to the people who are not acquainted with the use of computers and IT," argues the VIIT. That's the solution they've tried to put forward.

Market rates by phone

"So far a voice engine in the regional language was not available," says the VIIT. Now, the system is being set up around the area of Baramati. It offers

market rates of various commodities via the phone. The service is called 'aaj ka bazaar bhaav' (today's market rates), and is being used by the Baramati Marketing Society. Rates can be dynamically updated, and the user can choose the preferred language. This means that the information can be accessed via a normal phone line.

What are the advantages? Users can have instant access to the changing market rates at an affordable price, and in their own language. There is 'time management' on both sides. Resource-management is also stepped up. Besides, there is a report generation facility.

It works quite simply. For starts, the user dials into the telephone number of the Marketing System. The system - without human intervention - picks up the call and plays the welcome message; it then waits for the user's response. This done, the user has to dial the code for the category of information needed. The system then plays the rates of the required category. Then, the user has the option of dialling 'o' to stop the conversation, or dial another code to listen in to more details. Following this, the system disconnects and gets ready for the next call.

IVR systems could be the way to revolutionise the access to digital information (across a context like India). It ensures availability of information, by investing limited resources. Once the framework is ready, it is easy to implement this system according to the need of the user in no time," argues Prof. Amol C. Goje, the Director of VIIT.

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