

The mirror technique

How to communicate with farmers in an optimal manner, getting their attention and keeping them interested? Floice Adoyo explains how drama was found to be the ideal vehicle for Kenyan farmers to convey sensitive messages to each other.

Floice Adoyo

It is generally recognised that the most important aspect of successful rural development programmes is how to work with people in a way that helps them deal with their own problems. In order to find out what factors play a role in the use of trees, some kind of survey must be done first. The Kenya Woodfuel Development Programme (KWDP) started with an informal socio-cultural survey based on community discussions. These discussions revealed that trees are planted by men for timber, poles, frames for building, charcoal for sale, but never for fuelwood for home use. Collecting fuelwood is a woman's responsibility who, according to cultural traditions, is not allowed to plant trees or even to cut down planted trees.

Woodfuel: a sensitive issue

Women are expected to collect fuelwood from the natural woody biomass. This resource decreases dramatically as population density increases and more bush is cleared to increase agricultural land. In Kenya's cultural context, only men can own land. Trees play a role in land demarcation and ownership within the district. In the event of a dispute on land ownership, the dispute will be decided in favour of the person who planted any trees on that piece of land. Women are therefore not allowed to plant trees and a sudden increase of the role of women in tree planting cannot be expected. In some areas, it is even a taboo for a woman to plant a tree. Infraction means she will become barren. It is also believed that certain tree species are allergic to women. If a woman were merely to touch them or carry them, the seedlings would wither and die.

The dilemma is clear. Problems faced in fuelwood procurement could not be discussed with the men as they believed it was below their status to discuss the issue. Yet, culturally, women were not allowed to take part in activities such as tree planting that would help them solve the problem they were facing in procuring fuelwood. One of the objectives of KWDP was to develop suitable agroforestry extension approaches and methodologies to deal with the issue of a sustainable source of fuelwood.



Sensitive information is passed on through songs, dances and plays using poems and proverbs. At the 1990 Agricultural Show in Kakamega, one of the KWAP teams performed their theatre and won a prize.

Facing the mirror

To find a way out of this impossible situation, the information gathered during the survey had to be presented to the community in an effective and acceptable manner to motivate them to undertake some positive action. It was therefore important to find out how villagers usually pass on information and how they use it. Discussions were held with community members, both individually and in groups. To get the information, the interviewer had to create an atmosphere of confidence between herself and the villagers and to show them that their practices and knowledge were valuable and could benefit others. It thus became apparent that sensitive information is never passed on in a straightforward manner but through songs, dances and plays using poems and proverbs. The listeners are left to decode the message for themselves and do something to change the situation they find themselves in. In this way, no offense or conflict is caused. A mirror is placed before the person and looking at himself makes him do something about his situation.

This was found to be a common way of passing information, traditionally taking place on special occasions, like during circumcision time, when the initiates can sing

about almost any topic, or during weddings, when the girls from the bride's party perform songs and dances about any possible bad behaviour the bridegroom might have. Other occasions are funerals, the beginning of the planting season, harvesting time, or encounters with leaders. The indirect way of communicating avoids hurting people's feelings or losing one's face.

Traditional approach

This approach is common knowledge. The message to be passed on is developed by people who are respected in the community and whose advice is usually sought and accepted by the other villagers. At the same time, they must have the talent to present the messages in drama form, like women group leaders, choir masters, traditional dance leaders, village headmen, leaders of drama groups or school teachers.

The performing groups can have a formal structure or be assembled when the need arises. First, the problem is identified and possible solutions are discussed. If it is decided that the only way to address the problem is to place a mirror before the people (due to its sensitive nature), then the message to be passed is developed. This message is then put into drama, dance, songs and poems and performed by drama or dance groups. These groups can be made up of either adult men and women, youths having left school or school children and their teachers. Whichever group one chooses to pass the message, it must be a respected group within the community so that the others can take their messages seriously and not dismiss them as comedians only entertaining others. The cast has to rehearse to bring the message out clearly.

Developing popular theatre

Based on the community's way of passing on sensitive information, we developed an awareness programme to test whether the same approach could be used to pass on extension messages. The programme highlighted identified practices that hinder development. During the test phase, one drama was developed and shown in different parts of the District that had similar practices, beliefs, values and taboos concerning tree growing (see box). Natural fuelwood was getting scarce and no thought had been given to the idea that certain species of trees could be planted for fuelwood. The programme was presented in the form of popular theatre (drama, song and dance) which reached all members of the community. This "mirror technique" was eventually recorded on film and video to be used mostly as a training tool in further development and use of the technique.

The main objective of this approach is to create a favourable attitude in the general public towards an extension programme and thus avoid creating distrust through not concentrating on individual farmers and causing strife within the community. In this case, the approach sought to raise awareness about fuelwood shortages being a community problem, affecting both women and men and needing the participation of both to be solved. It also aimed at increasing women's participation in growing trees by promoting multipurpose fuelwood species which are fast growing. To obtain this goal, the message in the display should be very clear to the audience. It should also be realistic and credible to the rest of the community so that they can easily identify with it. The setting of the play should be within their own environment and cultural set-up, using minimal means so that the community can see it as something which is within their reach. The presentation should be humorous enough to allow people to look at themselves and laugh at themselves. At the same time, the

audience should see the seriousness of the situation, discuss the issues involved and find appropriate solutions. Furthermore, to be effective, the mirror should be developed together with representatives from the community. The actors should come from this same community and should be people who command respect so that others take their message seriously.

Before the drama can be taken for display to a wider audience, the extensionist should preview it first with a smaller group of people from the community who can give comments on the presentation of the issues, the credibility of the whole display, the clarity and the interpretation of the messages, and the ability of the drama to motivate people to positive action.

Using the technique

Once the drama is ready, after it has been previewed and changes have been made, it can be presented in rallies, field days, chiefs' meetings, women's group meetings, parents' days in schools, in churches or anywhere where there is a gathering. Because the programme is developed together with the villagers, the capacity is built within the community to develop their own role plays, drama, songs and dances dealing with day-to-day problems. A number of groups have now developed this

The story in the drama revolves around the family of Okunyanyi and his wife Eshifindi. Eshifindi has serious problems because of lack of fuelwood. On the other hand, Okunyanyi has planted many trees around his homestead. These are to be used for timber poles and to be kept as "a live bank" to be sold in times of need. Eshifindi cannot discuss her fuelwood problems with her husband Okunyanyi, because men do not concern themselves with such "minor" issues as collecting fuelwood. Also, for a woman to admit that she is unable to get fuelwood for family cooking is tantamount to admitting that she is unable to take care of her family and this can be grounds for divorce. Eshifindi therefore suffers in silence. She has exhausted all the natural sources of fuelwood from around the farm, the hedges, the pathways and crop residues such as maize cobs and stover. Her neighbours will not lend her any more fuelwood because they are in the same position. On the other hand, Okunyanyi wants his food well cooked and hot water for his bath. He says where Eshifindi gets fuelwood is not his problem. In despair Eshifindi is driven to destroy Okunyanyi's only good chair to use the sticks as fuelwood. When Okunyanyi discovers this, a fight starts and the whole village comes together to discuss the fuelwood issue. Although the men are blind to the fact, the women say they have serious problems in finding fuelwood. The villagers discuss the issue and possible ways of solving the problem.

capacity to mirror almost any sensitive topic, such as family planning, nutrition and planting trees.

What happens after the play?

At the end of every show, there is a short discussion and all kinds of questions are answered. Having created the awareness there has to be some follow-up action. The demand created can be so big that follow-up without outside support should be ensured. This is done by training villagers who can support the groups to execute actions which result from the sessions. These persons could be village headmen, chiefs, women's group leaders, local tree seed vendors or frontline extension staff. We give the villagers time and encourage them to seriously think and discuss about the problem of fuelwood procurement and possible solutions. After a week or two we give assistance to those villagers who feel that they need to do something about the situation. The programme often results in a lot of enthusiasm and pride on the part of farmers, when they realise that their ideas, knowledge and capabilities are appreciated by others.

Limitations

There are a number of constraints that villagers might face when dealing with this approach. The actors have to do some rehearsing before they can stage the play, to be sure that the message gets across. If at the last minute the key actor is not available, then the group is not able to stage the play as scheduled. Selection of meeting places can also create a problem, either because of transportation or because the site is not culturally acceptable to all members of the society. However, having participated in the identification of the problem, in finding the solutions to it, and implementing the solutions themselves, farmers are more able to persist in the activity and overcome any problems as compared to a situation where an outsider thinks and plans for them and then expects them to implement the activities.

References

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Note: The drama is recorded on VHS Video cassettes or on 16 mm film. This, as well as the books mentioned in the references, can be ordered from ETC Kenya, PO Box 76378, Nairobi, Kenya.

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