

# Filling the pages of our institutional diaries

ILEIA offers capacity building support on documentation and systematisation to a number of organisations around the world. From 2011 to 2013, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) invited ILEIA to guide a documentation trajectory in Eastern and Southern Africa, to enable reflection on experiences working with smallholders.

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**F**ield staff, project co-ordinators and monitoring and evaluation officers working in three countries, (Ethiopia, Zambia and Swaziland) engaged in a process of reflection and knowledge sharing. In two consecutive workshops, these participants critically analysed their own work, thereby generating lessons learned for themselves and others. Often these lessons remain implicit, as highlighted by Alfred Mkonda from Zambia. *“We do a lot of work, but as long as we do not write our insights down there are a lot of blank pages in our institutional diaries.”*

## An extended methodology

Documentation and systematisation are skills best learnt by putting them into practice straight away. Participants in the workshops select, describe and analyse an initiative that they have been involved in. These insights from their practical experiences complement textbook learning and very relevant and inspiring to fellow fieldworkers.

After the analysis, the challenge is to present the experience in a simple, readable, yet systematic way. We all know how to write a long, formal report, but how attractive are these types of texts and how effective are they in really disseminating important insights? We discussed content, audience, the structure and style of a good article, and worked towards finalising the stories in the form of an article (see box).

This process is an empowering experience for field staff and programme officers, as it validates the impor-

tance of their experiences. *“I can definitely integrate this method in my work,”* said an Ethiopian extension agent. *“Not only can I document and communicate the achievements and challenges that I face in my work, I also learn from the process itself!”*



Coached by ILEIA's editors, about 50 field staff and programme officers from Ethiopia, Zambia and Swaziland wrote articles about their lessons learnt in rural development, which were compiled in a series of booklets. All the booklets and several videos are or will be available on [www.agriculturesnetwork.org](http://www.agriculturesnetwork.org).

## Dambos: a land of knowledge for farmers

Inadequate water supply and a lack of irrigation facilities are one reason why many Zambian family farmers suffer from food insecurity. But for the farmers in the district of Chibombo the story is different. They are growing more food than ever, and inspired others to start to recognise the importance of farmers' indigenous knowledge.

Chibombo has a long stretch of wetland, locally known as *dambo*. In the past, the *dambo* area was not used for farming, as communities feared the muddy soil, capable of "burying somebody alive". When the region experienced terrible droughts in the late 1980s, desperation initiated a change in attitude towards farming in the *dambo* fields. The story begins with one innovative farming family.

On one fateful day, after a poor harvest from the last rainy season, Mr John Phiri, his wife Maggie and their five children decided to try planting different crops in the *dambo* field as a last resort. While they took a break to rest, they shared a watermelon that Maggie had brought with her. To their surprise, the watermelon seeds that were scattered by the children in the field grew by accident. They produced very good quality, big, juicy fruits. So did the tomatoes and vegetables that the family planted. Because of good soil fertility and an abundance of moisture in the soil, they had enough to eat and surplus to sell.

### Seeing is believing

Seeing the food produced by the Phiri family encouraged neighbouring farmers to also start planting in the *dambo*, which is wet throughout the year. Some families were hesitant at first, due to long-held beliefs about wetland farming. Farmers were encouraged to learn from each other about what crops they can (and can't) grow and about diseases and pest control methods. Family farmers, such as the Phiri family, are experts about their own lands. The value of their knowledge is increasingly being recognised by other actors. As government extension officers made their routine farmer field visits, they started to catch up with what the farmers in Chibombo district were doing in the wetlands. Agricultural researchers started looking into the use of the *dambo* fields for cultivation, taking the time to learn from the Phiri family about the methodologies they used. Extension officers used the Phiri *dambo* crop field for demonstrations for other farmers in the region.



Regrettably, Chibombo farmers now face new problems. Now that more vegetables and watermelons are produced in the *dambo* fields, the market for watermelons and cabbages in the district has become flooded. As a result, the prices have gone down and the farmers feel they are being exploited by middle men. It remains important to assist the farmers to develop market linkages and technologies for value adding technologies, building on their own needs and knowledge.

### Farmer knowledge

The experience in Chibombo has shown that one should not underestimate family farmers' knowledge. It is a valuable resource that can be adopted and incorporated into national and regional development programmes. Family farmers are not just recipients of knowledge, but they experiment and find out what works best in their farming systems. As such they are also important knowledge builders. This is a lesson that needs to be recognised more widely. The Zambian Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock and other co-operating partners are encouraged to take up this principle and scale it up to other areas to help increase farmer productivity and food security.

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