

Thinking together

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In March 2006, twenty-six key actors in the Tanzanian organic movement met at Sokoine University of Agriculture in Morogoro. Their purpose was to further develop organic agriculture and the workshop was convened as part of an action research study in collaboration with the newly formed Tanzanian Organic Agriculture Movement (TOAM). The experience of this workshop sheds light on ways to stimulate shared action through the creation of shared meaning. The goal of this article is to explore how to free creative potential using participatory methodologies, and to provide ideas for designing interactive meetings that enable people to analyse their situations, envision more desirable futures and strategise in order to make the transition.

Organic sector in Tanzania

Certified organic agriculture emerged in Tanzania in the early 1990s. Although many organic practices are based on traditional knowledge, organic agriculture as a holistic farm management system is a recent concept that is not widely understood. Although in its infancy, the certified organic sector is growing rapidly and is being propelled by smallholder farmers and commercial interests in capturing the expanding organic market. In 2003 the first local certification body, the Tanzanian Organic Certification Association (TanCert) was established in order to certify organic products for both the domestic and international market. At present, estimates of the certified land area range from 37 000 to over 64 000 hectares, comprising approximately 27 000 farms.

Certified organic agriculture in Tanzania is predominantly export-oriented. The focus is on traditional commodity crops such as coffee, tea, cocoa, cashew nuts and cotton and non-traditional crops such as vanilla, sesame, herbs and spices which are often processed. Fruit and vegetables are also becoming increasingly important. There are now at least 23 certified organic projects in Tanzania, including 16 firms for export and 7 projects for the local market. Most projects follow an out-grower model in which smallholders are contracted by exporting companies who pay for certification, sometimes in collaboration with donor programmes. There are also a few individuals farming organically on a large-scale and two cooperatives engaged in organic coffee production.

The need for coordinated action

The main stakeholder groups in certified organic projects are farmer organisations, companies, facilitating agencies and certifying bodies. Consumers, government extensionists, policy-makers and research institutions also play important roles in developing the organic sector.

The Tanzanian Organic Agriculture Movement network, established as a platform for exchange and promotion of organic agriculture, has identified the lack of coordination amongst the different types of actors working in the emerging organic sector, as a major weakness. Improving communication and collaboration between those active in organic projects is important for developing an organic agriculture that balances economic concerns with those of the environment and the livelihoods of smallholder farmers.

Tanzanian Organic Stakeholders' Forum

The idea to hold a forum arose from this need to address the lack of coordination amongst stakeholders, and in order to bring unity and direction to the national organic movement. Three main objectives of the workshop were: to share and synthesise



Photo: Author

Amaranth and many other vegetables are increasingly grown organically in Tanzania.

knowledge on organic food and farming; to create a shared vision for the future of the sector; and to formulate individual and joint action plans for achieving this vision.

The design of the workshop, inspired by the Soft Systems Methodology, included the following stages:

Preparation

Participants were selected on the basis of belonging to diverse stakeholder groups, representing different organisations, long-term involvement in organic agriculture, and in order to bring an age and gender balance. Detailed planning of the workshop involved articulating the purpose, process and desired outcomes of each individual session. In order to make the workshop interactive the majority of sessions were focused group discussions, in an informal arrangement based on the World Café method.

Defining the relevant system

In order to clarify the context, specialists gave short presentations on the history and background of organic agriculture in Tanzania, current research activities, curricula development and international issues. These presentations and plenary discussions helped participants to develop a common understanding of the issues.

Analysing constraints and opportunities

A successful vision uses "creative tension", the tension between vision and reality, to lift organisations and communities out of the mundane. The aim is to "hold" visions while remaining committed to seeing current reality clearly. For this reason, it is important to have a sound understanding of system weaknesses and constraints *before* creating positive mental images of the future.

Challenges to strengthening organic agriculture were identified through the use of guided conversations around the question: "What challenge, if resolved, would radically improve the state of organic agriculture in your area?" These challenges were then grouped thematically according to TOAM's pillars of action which include market development, standards and certification, research and education, policy and legislation, institutional development, and production and processing.

Visioning

Visioning involves establishing an overarching goal that is harmonious with our core values and sense of purpose. At its simplest level, a shared vision is the answer to the question: What do we want to create? In the Tanzanian Organic Stakeholders' Forum the purpose of visioning was to build consensus on the future direction of activities and to focus the strategic agenda for action planning.

The process involved first setting the scene by asking participants to sit comfortably, preferably with eyes closed and legs uncrossed. A short story was then read to them. This skeletal story-line can be adapted and embellished to add colour and breathe life into the exercise. Important points to remember include speaking slowly, including adequate pauses for participants to adequately visualise, and posing broad and open-ended questions that do not constrain imaginative thinking.

“It is the year 2015. An exciting organic initiative that you have been involved with for many years has been more successful than you ever anticipated. It has gained widespread support from the local community. Generous partners have contributed a wealth of expertise and support. The initiative has become a model for the development of organic agriculture in Tanzania, and there has also been mounting interest from farmers, the government, researchers, journalists and the general public. What has taken place? How has the system changed in your area?”

After allowing participants to visualise this situation individually and in as much detail as possible, they were invited to create symbols such as words or images that represented different aspects of their visions and jot these down on paper.

Visualisation was followed by sharing in groups, with participants listening carefully to one another’s visions and incorporating aspects that resonated with all into a shared vision that was mapped out on a flipchart.

Once participants were satisfied that key elements of their visions had been represented, group members were asked to circulate around other flipcharts leaving one “host” who remained at the table to explain the group vision to “visitor” participants. Afterwards they returned to their home tables and gave feedback that could enrich the group vision. This was summarised as a vision statement phrased as: “To have an organic sector that ...” and written in big block letters on A3 paper. Table hosts then presented the group visions to the plenary whilst underlining key words.

On this basis, central elements of all the group visions were incorporated into an overall shared vision that was further discussed and refined. In this process, the facilitator is supposed to build a shared vision that reflects personal visions and is rooted in individuals’ values, concerns and aspirations, thereby connecting people to an important undertaking.

Articulating strategies

Following the visioning session, the groups developed strategies and formulated action plans around the challenges and themes previously identified. The cornerstones of the shared vision –health, environment and income– provided the ultimate goals of all the action plans. Participants considered the forces supporting and hindering their efforts to realise the shared vision when choosing various courses of action. During the coffee break participants paired up to discuss whether the action plans being formulated were New, Appealing and Possible – a useful little tool nicknamed NAP analysis. For example, the group which decided to strategise on market development resolved to increase trade and income from organic products by establishing local market centres by 2008.

The workshop concluded with a press conference which consisted of presentations by a panel of six speakers from different stakeholder groups followed by a question-and-answer session.

Evaluation

Simple methods can be used to evaluate a workshop such as this one. Feedback from participants indicated that the workshop

was extremely useful for stimulating networking, although it is still early to evaluate whether the workshop will lead to effective partnerships and joint action in the long-term.

Outcomes

Tangible outputs of the process were a shared Organic Vision 2015 (see box), individual plans of action, joint strategies and media coverage in the form of radio and television bulletins and articles. Participants also left with their own individual visions, either written down or in their heads, which they can refer to in the future as a source of inspiration and direction.

Tanzanian Organic Vision 2015

“To have a vibrant organic sector supported by a wide range of stakeholders that is the driving force behind agriculture in the country, takes advantage of local and export markets and contributes to enhanced livelihoods through quality and safe food, environmental conservation, economic growth and sustainable development.”

As a result of broad-based participation, the shared vision represents a wide range of stakeholders. These include: educators who advocate for improved curricula, research facilities and learning institutions; farmers who seek better prices, more efficient production systems and easier access to certification, and; traders who want to make sure that domestic markets develop and export market services are available.

The next step could involve incorporating the tangible outcomes into strategic plans, organising regular stakeholder forums and reinforcing partnerships around common concerns. For example, the workshop catalysed the meeting of representatives from producer groups, organic support groups and certifiers, paving the way for future collaboration on establishing Internal Control Systems for smallholder group certification.

On the basis of participants’ evaluation, however, the most significant outcome that emerged from the workshop is intangible: enhanced networking and communication amongst stakeholders.

Conclusion

Creating a shared vision is one way of building the capacity of communities to adapt, survive and thrive, into an unknowable future. As shown in this example, visioning can bring coherence to the activities of diverse stakeholders and create the incentive and basis for participatory planning. By holding workshops which integrate knowledge from many different sources and which offer opportunities for joint learning among relevant social actors, the foundations for successful innovation, or collective social competence, are laid.

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