

Learn, implement and evaluate An iterative training process

Development in Uganda mainly means: reconstruction. A long period of chaos, dictatorship and civil war ended in the late 1980s. Since then, all sorts of new initiatives have started, especially within the emerging sector of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In 1993, SNV (the Netherlands Development Organisation) and NOVIB (Netherlands Organisation for International Development Cooperation) convened a two day brainstorming workshop on environment and sustainable land use with their partner organisations in Uganda. One of the outcomes was a felt need for training on sustainable agriculture and participatory extension methods.

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The steady decline of crop yields is one of the major problems faced by Ugandan farmers. This makes it increasingly difficult to produce enough food to feed the family and have surplus for sale to meet the rising costs of school fees, medical expenses, etcetera. This decreasing production is mainly caused by the continued use of shifting cultivation techniques on permanently cultivated land. It causes decreased soil fertility, increased pest and disease problems and an ever increasing "hunger for land".

Due to economic liberalisation and the impact of a structural adjustment programme, external inputs, like synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, are beyond the average farmer's reach. Moreover, agricultural extension services are not able to address farmers' problems adequately. The technical know-how of extension workers is not appropriate to solve the problems farmers face today.

Furthermore, the extension approach does not include the farmers' perspectives on problems and possible solutions.

A cyclic process

ETC Netherlands assisted SNV/NOVIB Uganda in developing and implementing a training programme on Low-External-Input and Sustainable Agriculture (LEISA) and Participatory Technology Development (PTD). Ten Ugandan organisations (9 NGOs and 1 GO, partners of SNV/NOVIB) involved in agricultural development participated. The programme's overall objective was to support these organisations and strengthen their capacity in implementing sustainable land use programmes.

The following training objectives were identified:

- review current status of agriculture in Uganda;
- introduce methods and concepts of LEISA and PTD;
- prepare agricultural work plans for each organisation; and
- stimulate networking among the organisations.

The training programme was set-up as an iterative process of *learning* from theory and practicals in the workshops, *implementation* of work assignments with farmers in participants' own working situation and guided *evaluation* of implementation experiences with fellow participants. Thus, the learning process during the field periods and the training workshops were equally important. Presenting the training programme in blocks allowed us to adapt tentative programmes of field periods and workshops according to specific needs identified in the process. Furthermore, this approach increased the impact of the training as it allowed participants and organisations to gradually come to grips with the topics, creating time to reflect and link what is learned to their working situation.

Training methods used in the workshops were quite diverse. They included introductions and lectures, topic-wise plenary discussions, group activities, fieldwork and practicals, plenary evaluation of group and field work, slides, videos and role play. The basic structure followed for each topic was a) analysis of current situation, b) introduction of relevant LEISA & PTD concepts and techniques, c) practising these through group work on case studies derived from participants' experiences and practicals and finally d) evaluating and summarizing learning points.

LEISA, PTD and project planning were integrated within a single training programme. This gave the opportunity to link the technical aspects of LEISA, the extension/experimentation approach of PTD and the managerial aspects of project planning. Each participating organisation was represented by two extension workers and one policy maker, thus representing both field and policy level. In the first two workshops, extension workers were trained in LEISA and PTD. In the third workshop, extension workers and policy makers discussed and agreed upon analysis of agricultural problems in their working area and together they made an action plan for 1995. The knowledge and insight gained by the extension workers in the first workshops enabled them to discuss matters with their policy makers on equal footing. Thus, involving both organisational levels in one training programme ensured commitment and support at all levels of the organisation.

Between workshops

Alternating workshops with structured learning in participants' own working situation was crucial in making the training programme a success. Work assignments were formulated for the main topics introduced and first practised in the field during the workshops. For each following field

Learning and unlearning

During field visits between the workshops, it appeared that all organisations had enthusiastically embarked on the assignments as far as LEISA was concerned. They had introduced crop rotation, multiple cropping, animal husbandry integration and soil and water management. Only one organisation had embarked on a participatory problem analysis. The other participants were hesitant as they find it a rather difficult subject. When reviewing the first workshop assignments during the second workshop, it appeared that in-depth analysis is often lacking. This showed that constraints in introducing LEISA are more often related to the methodology of developing LEISA than to the techniques used. Visits to farmers participating in the assignments confirmed that the mode of interaction with farmers is mostly based on conventional extension methods. Conventional agricultural techniques are simply replaced by LEISA techniques. Farmers are given recipes without the reasoning behind the change, which makes it difficult for the farmer to adopt and adapt the techniques to their own situation.

For all partners, it seems difficult to really apply participatory technology development approaches in practice. This could be caused by various reasons, ranging from the friction between sustainable long-term interests mostly beyond the projects' life span and vital short-term project successes (both donor and community driven), to a firmly rooted comfort in top-down approaches, which are clear, fixed and predictable. Further, technical staff are seen as the persons who should know and give, preferably a swift, solution to the problem. Where participants were not hindered by a formal technical background and therefore do not pose themselves as agricultural experts, a participatory process was more easily adopted. However, throughout the training programme a change could clearly be observed with most organisations. When requested during the evaluation what participants expected to do with the course experience, the standard answer after the first workshop was: "To train colleagues and farmers." After the third workshop this had changed into: "To implement together with farmers."



During one of the workshops, a contest was organised for designing a T-shirt. The winning design was printed and all participants received a shirt.

period, participants were requested to select a number of work assignments for implementation with farmers in their own working area. As there were plenty of work assignments to choose from, participants could select according to their specific requirements and interests. In the following workshop, participants presented and questioned each other on their experiences in the implementation of work assignments. We were impressed by the serious commitment with which all participating organisations undertook their work assignments and involved farmers in it.

During the field periods, participating organisations were visited by the trainers. This gave room to discuss problems in implementing work assignments and it helped the trainers to better understand the working situation of the participants. Participants appreciated these visits not only for the technical support given, but just as much for the moral support provided.

By using participants' cases during workshops and because of the structured learning process during field periods, participants' day-to-day working situation was at the heart of the training programme. This ensured applicability of all that was learned. At the same time, this approach bridged the gap between learning and putting into practice. It answers the question that is always on every trainee's mind: "This all sounds very nice, but will it be applicable to my situation and will I be able to put it into practice considering all the constraints at home?"

Conclusions

The iterative process of learning, implementation and evaluation increased

participants' understanding of the topics step by step. This was clearly illustrated by the improved quality of work assignments done during the second field period when compared to the first period. Participants not only gained practical LEISA skills but also started developing participatory skills and attitudes and analytical capacity in the fields of LEISA and PTD. However, realising full development of these skills and capacities will require a longer-term follow-up with a considerable component of organisation-specific support. Developing participatory attitudes is more than learning participatory skills. It requires a real change in attitude, involving just as much "unlearning" of old habits as learning and developing new skills and approaches. Similarly, developing analytical skills requires a long-term process of acquiring a deeper understanding of ecological, technical agricultural and extension processes and possible changes and solutions. Therefore, such a follow-up programme will require a long-term commitment from participating organisations as well as course organisers and donor organisations involved. The advantages of an iterative training approach by and large outweigh the extra labour and expenditures when compared to a one-off training event.

Integrating LEISA, PTD and project planning and combined participation of extension workers and policy makers resulted in a shared understanding of problems affecting regional agricultural development and realistic work plans for the development of LEISA and PTD accepted at the relevant organisational levels.

Participants and organisers agreed that the first three objectives of the training programme were successfully realised. However, the networking objective was not realised to every one's liking. The organisers perceived networking as an informal way to exchange experiences between organisations on their own initiative, whereas the participants rather consider it to be the formal establishment of a service organisation with members. Currently, several organisations in Uganda cooperate in setting up such a national service organisation for sustainable agriculture.

Taking into account the quality and commitment with which work assignments were undertaken and the serious and realistic action plans made, we are confident to conclude that these ten SNV/NOVIB partner organisations in Uganda will be implementing sustainable landuse activities using LEISA and PTD approaches in 1995.

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Pre-workshop 1 assignment

April

Workshop 1: LEISA and PTD (two weeks, LEISA analysis and principles, soil and water management and PTD for extension workers)

May

Field period A

Work assignments on soil and water management and PTD for extension workers. Follow-up visits by trainers

June

July

Workshop 2: LEISA and PTD (two weeks for extension workers on Evaluation of work assignments, crop management, animal husbandry and PTD)

August

Field period B

Work assignments on crop management, animal husbandry and PTD for extension workers and, together with policy makers, on analysis of the regional agricultural system and PTD. Follow-up visits by facilitators.

September

November

December

Workshop 3: Project planning (one week, evaluation of work assignments for extension workers and, together with policy makers, the analysis of the regional agricultural system; making agricultural work plans for 1995)