

Building documentation and communication capacities

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Together with many other NGOs, the Agriculture Man Ecology (AME) Foundation has been working on ways to improve the sustainability and productivity of the agricultural and natural resources of rural communities in the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh since the late 1980s. Recognising that effective information sharing mechanisms are critical for learning from each other, AME, in collaboration with ILEIA, developed *LEISA India*, a regional edition of the LEISA Magazine. However, the main problem in publishing an interesting magazine is the access to good quality information on the experiences taking place in the field. With the aim of further strengthening information exchange on sustainable agriculture between organisations, a concept note was prepared and circulated. This served as a basis for a consultative workshop where the concerns and issues which hinder effective information sharing of field based experiences were discussed.



Participants discussing the documentation process.

During the workshop, participants agreed that in order to increase information exchange, good quality documentation of experiences would be needed. The group expressed that the process of documenting and sharing experiences and learnings is of crucial importance to the organisation itself, but also ensures that others learn from the experiences, and makes the intervention agency's role as a change agent visible. The outline of a collaborative plan of action towards better and wider information sharing for sustainable agriculture began to take shape, focusing on two main issues:

- How can more information on sustainable agriculture be generated, documented and widely disseminated?
- What capacities are needed within the organisations to be able to do this?

It was realised that capacities cannot be increased with a single training event, but that a long term programme is required. Such a

programme should be rooted in the needs and priorities of the organisations, it should enable processes to intensify and prioritise documentation and communication within the organisations, and it should improve staff's abilities and skills in doing so.

One of the outcomes of the workshop was the development of the LEISA India consortium, which included AME's field offices as well as partners like MYRADA or GEAG, two Indian NGOs, the Tamil Nadu LEISA Network and a few interested individuals. Though informal and loosely structured, the consortium partners started to support each other, and a joint two-year programme on documentation and communication was planned for the period 2004-2005, conceptualised and developed by *LEISA India* in collaboration with ILEIA.

The Documentation and Communication Programme

The participating organisations had to commit themselves to prioritise documentation processes, to identify persons within their organisations to take part, and finally to institutionalise the entire programme within their organisations. The activities included workshops on sourcing, documenting and communication; as well as planning and review meetings, field work and assignments. The partner organisations set aside staff time to allow for participation in the workshops as well as for further documentation and writing between the workshops. The *LEISA India* team and ILEIA provided the necessary support.

The programme was based on three approaches: participatory learning, learning by doing, and periodic planning and review of the learnings and outcomes. The participatory learning environment enabled learning from the diverse experiences of the participants in working with agricultural information at field level. Group learning processes were combined with individual assignments based on the organisational priorities of each participant. Hands-on learning benefited from the support of well-known and experienced resource persons who provided the necessary clarity and added value. Thus, these workshops built on the existing experiences, skills, and critical capacities available within the group at each stage of the programme process. It was also important to put each participants' learnings into practice within their respective organisation. Insisting on having the same individuals from each organisation attending all workshops and carrying out the assignments in between, has helped in building core capacities within the organisations.

The integrated joint planning and review processes ensured the necessary focus and rigour. Involvement of the heads of the organisations in the review meetings, along with the participants, helped to review the progress made in a realistic way, and also ensure necessary support and commitment for the programme.

Three workshops on Sourcing, Documentation and Communication were designed. Each organisation agreed to make an assessment of their own documentation activities before the first workshop, helping define specific objectives and a programme for each partner organisation. The organisations were also requested to prioritise two experiences which they wanted to document and publish. These workshops were

intensive, involving reviews of all participants' efforts by the group as well as by resource persons. They were timed so as not to clash with the seasonal field programmes of the participants. There was a minimum three-month interval between each workshop to allow participants to complete their assignments. The venue for the workshops was located away from the city, ensuring a week of uninterrupted attention to the learning and reflection processes.

What to document?

The first workshop, in November 2003, started with the identification of field experiences. Each participant presented the experience selected by his/her organisation, explaining why this particular case had been chosen. The experiences selected would be the basis for the assignments they would undertake after the workshop.

A "field study" was planned in order to illustrate the difficulty of identifying interesting experiences and finding enough information in the field. The MYRADA watershed project in Kolar was selected for this. The workshop purposely avoided any detailed discussions of conventional methodologies prior to the field visit, in order to allow participants to explore what, in their experience, would prove to be appropriate and effective ways of sourcing information that would lead to a complete and integrated description of the selected LEISA experience.

The exercise allowed participants to interact with various groups involved in the project, and to try out different methods of finding information. They also used cameras to get hands-on experience with photo documentation. The participants were accompanied by a photographer, quietly making observations during the whole process. Reviewing the results after the field visit, the participants hilariously related their "excellent" and embarrassing skills in photo documentation.

The workshop was structured so that each participant was able to contribute his or her knowledge and experience on field observation, the approaches and methods that could be adopted in information and data collection, and experiencing the "soft skills" required while interacting with farmers in the field. Group discussions on the skills and knowledge needed for meaningful sourcing of information, the need for reflection, and on the general mistakes and assumptions made, helped the participants to prepare better for their own information-sourcing assignments. Meanwhile, participants also discussed the results of the field study, reflecting on the process, and worked as a group to present a report during the workshop. This was a particularly important and successful exercise as it required workshop participants to combine their individual approaches, perspectives and experiences, and make explicit the ideas and insights gained.

At the end of the workshop, participants presented the experiences chosen as part of the assignments for information sourcing in their respective organisations. The planning cycles for the activities were presented along with commitments.

Documenting LEISA experiences

In February 2004 the participants returned for the second workshop with the texts they had worked on since the first workshop, including texts such as "The Participation of Women in Agriculture Extension System", "Changes in Cropping Practices following Watershed Interventions", or "A study on a collective approach of Women farmers in organic vegetable production and marketing". Each experience was individually

read, analysed for its completeness and strength and checked to see whether the data was reliable. Each text was also assessed to see how far they succeeded in describing processes and impacts in a complete and reliable way.



Photo: K.V.S. Prasad

One of the authors learning how to use the digital camera.

The texts were presented by each partner and reviewed by all the participants. The approach was effective because of the multidisciplinary nature of the group, its experience and specific skills. Much of the in-depth work of critical comment took place in small groups. Care was taken to ensure that each of these groups had as representative a composition as possible – skills, gender, experience and knowledge.

The process helped the participants identify gaps, irregularities, unclarities and strengths, and to meaningfully weave it all into a complete message. Most importantly, they became aware that documentation has to be an ongoing process within the organisations, and systematic and regular if it is going to be meaningful. Serious intent is not enough and will not help recover information which has been 'lost' in memory lapses at various levels. Based on the inputs received, the participants were asked to go back to the field, address the gaps and improve the text.

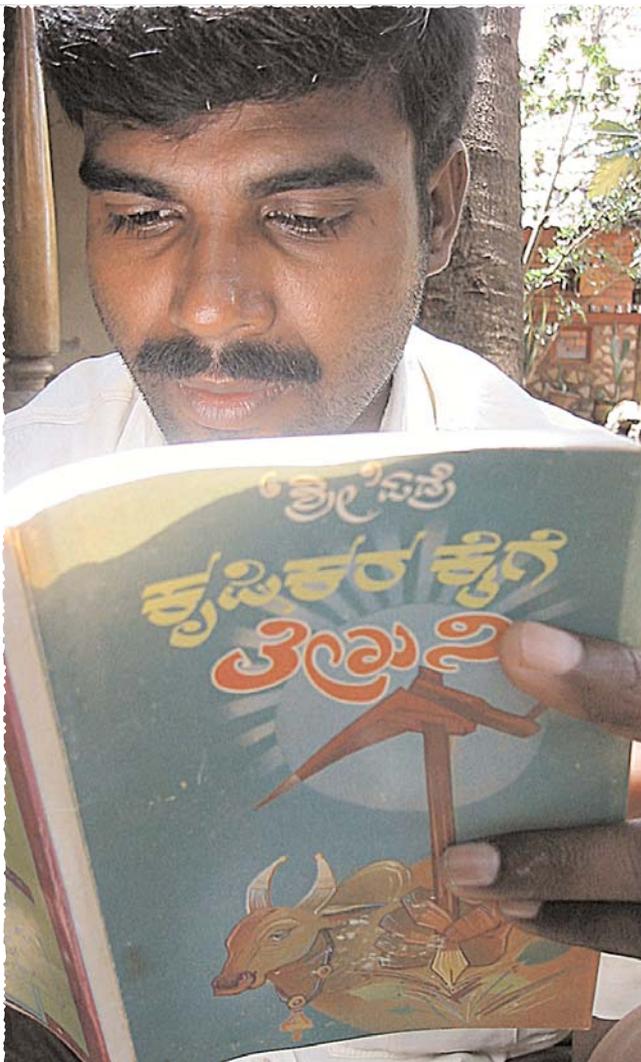
Another important dimension addressed in the workshop referred to the principles of good writing. The focus was on writing in a simple and straightforward way, for which a renowned development journalist shared his experience and tips with the participants. Thus, the second workshop helped participants to reflect, look critically at content and learn a little bit about how to communicate simply and effectively.

Communicating the experiences

The third workshop, held in September 2004, focused on the selection of communication tools and media for specific messages and target audiences. The workshop therefore involved resource persons from the print media, radio and video programmes, as well as those involved in archiving and repackaging information.

After reviewing the assignments, the workshop focused on the potential of various tools for effectively communicating a message and how the choice of message and tool can be made for a particular target group. The participants experienced making recordings for radio and video under the guidance of specialists. These specialists gave valuable insights and much needed clarity on the use of these tools, as well as on their limitations. They also highlighted that these tools are expensive to buy and maintain. Attempts were made to explore which methods were suitable for communicating partners' experiences. Participants tried making posters and wall newspapers based on their experiences. The workshop concluded with a planning session for the next period.

Looking back at the whole year, participants mentioned how they managed to turn their first studies into a communication product, and that they had already started documenting their second experience. Similarly, they mentioned the conscious efforts made to show the work of their organisations: an article on *Namma Dhwani*, a community managed radio service, was published in both the global and the Indian editions of LEISA Magazine; MYRADA's article entitled "Planting Trees on Bunds" appeared in a publication brought out by German Agro Action; a video and a poster on "Women's rights on agricultural land" was developed by one of the participants and circulated among various NGOs and other organisations.



Other publications can also give ideas for the final layout of the document.

At the end of the first year of the programme the participants felt that there had been a definite shift in thinking and that they were now "writing with a purpose" instead of reporting for the sake of accountability only. There was better clarity on the various aspects and dimensions required to prepare a complete text. The programme also proved that, given the time, resources and the attention required, it was possible to carry out a documentation process successfully. However, the participants felt that it was often their individual interest which drove them to complete the assignments in time. They were once again hard pressed for time once they were back in their respective organisations, attending to various other duties. There was obviously still a need to institutionalise this programme.

Institutionalising documentation

The second year of the programme, therefore, focused on institutionalising documentation in the respective organisations, so that documentation activities would continue even after the completion of the programme.

Activities were planned within the respective organisations so that the documentation skills could be spread to other staff members. In some cases, this was done by forming the staff into teams and making them responsible for the documentation of ongoing activities. Another way of institutionalising was by upgrading the skills of team members through trainings. For example, MYRADA conducted a Communications Workshop to upgrade the skills of its own middle and senior level managers in communication and documentation. Similarly, the LEISA Network, along with the AME Tiruchi Unit, took the lead and organised a documentation workshop for NGO partners. More than 20 NGO staff were trained on various aspects of documentation and communication. This workshop acted as a path breaking collaboration between All India Radio Tiruchi and AME Foundation in broadcasting a series of primetime programmes based on field experiences. In the same way, the AME Madanapalli team has intensified its contributions as well as coverage of its activities and events in the local newspapers and media.

As a result of these institutionalisation processes, the importance of documentation seeped through and was translated into sustainable actions in the organisations. The organisations involved planned and implemented internal capacity building programmes with the help of the trained participants, thus sustaining the momentum. The participants and the organisations themselves saw improvements in the quality of content as well as presentation, leading to greater recognition and visibility of their efforts. Most importantly, the benefits of the programme could be experienced by the participating organisations.

The momentum created in the participating organisations still needs to be nurtured and supported for a longer period so that regular documentation becomes a habit which is fully integrated with the implementation of project activities. Only in this way will the experiences of field activities lead to knowledge which is accessible for others and which can therefore help in developing sustainable agriculture further.

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