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Visualising group-discussions with impromptu cartoons

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• Background

The Banque de Development de l'Afrique Centrale is assisting the government of Tchad in a project for the production of milk-products and poultry in the surroundings of the capital N'Djamena. The whole project is running into major financial and conceptual problems. Small farmers and small-time enterprisers were organised by the project into groups and financed with a credit scheme. However, results were far below expectations. As a consultant I was asked to find means of improving the programs in the poultry-sector. This obviously also implied improving the relationship between farmers engaged in poultry and the project (SONAPA).

• The problem

One major problem was that the farmers' perception of the situation was unknown (as 'farmers' one would have to imagine people living in suburbs, with small enterprises - not actual farmers). The aim was therefore to identify the problems as perceived by them, and to rank them.

However, the challenge was language! The language-capacities of the people involved in the discussions (farmers, field-personnel the project, myself) was as follows:

'Southerners':
 Mothertongues: various local languages
 Lingua Franca amongst themselves: Sarrha
 Working knowledge of French
 Working knowledge of Arabic

'Northerners':
 Mothertongue: local Arabic dialect
 French very insecure

No Sarrha

Myself: Mothertongue: a Swiss-German dialect
 Working knowledge of French
 No Sarrha, No Arabic

There was therefore the acute danger that the Southerners would resort to talking French with me, that the translations into Arabic would not happen in the heat of the discussion, and that therefore the Arabic speakers would be marginalised in the discussion - a potentially dangerous development in the context of the Tchad.

• 'Cartooning'

The groups already knew what the sessions would be all about, because of an introductory tour to all contacts two days prior to the discussion.

Structure of the discussion:

- Drawing of cartoons: As soon as a particular problem started to become recognised as such by most of the participants, I set out to make a rough-handed sketch of it (paper and felt-pens of various colours). Each sketch took no more than 30 seconds to make, and was a pictorial as possible.
- Once finished, this 'cartoon' was shown around and the problem-definition was established. At this stage Arabic speakers would get the cartoons explained to them by Sarrha speakers (in Arabic). Often the cartoon had to be changed or amended. Before going on, it was made sure that each participant related the same problem-

definition, agreed upon by everybody present, to that particular cartoon.

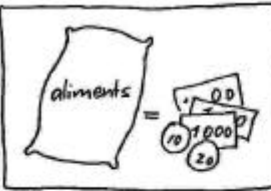
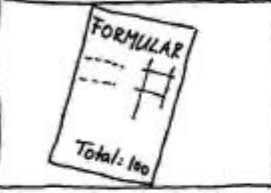
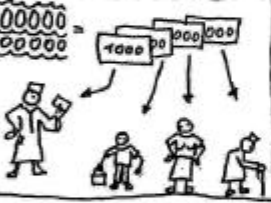

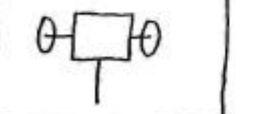

- Further problems were listed in the same way until exhaustion, *i.e.* until further problem-suggestions were being laughed at by all other farmers, indicating that they were personal problems not directly relevant to everybody. The final problem-list consisted of up to seven pieces of paper, each with a cartoon, spread out on the mat everybody was sitting on, and weighted down by twigs, stones, fingers, and elbows due to the blustering dust storm around us.
- Ranking: the cartoons were ranked on the mat into a sequence. Usually the least important were quickly established. Where ambiguities, insecurities, or even quarrels

broke out, strict pairwise ranking was carried out to establish the particular place of a cartoon in the sequence. Often this pairwise ranking resulted in a new problem being recognised, drawn and defined. The new cartoon would then be added, usually resulting in the resolution of the conflict.

- The three top problems were individually discussed for solutions. Whatever notes I wanted to make, I made them directly on the paper of the cartoon being discussed, in view of everybody, in French, and explaining what I was writing.

Each discussion took about 2 hours. The cartoons were taken along and processed into discussion-protocols (Figure 1).

Figure : Protocoll of a visualized group-discussion with cartoons.

Identification Cartoon	Definition of the problem	Counter-measures discussed.
	<p>The feed is too expensive, even though quality is quite all right presently</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The price should follow grain prices on the open market. - Only buy concentrates and proteins to add to the grains (but this would mean we would have to crush our own grains).
	<p>We don't understand how we are paid by SONAPA for the products we are delivering. Either we are cheated, or mistakes are being made.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A system must be found which we understand and which is acceptable to SONAPA. - No delays in payments!
	<p>When we go selling eggs in the market, we can't keep much of the money, because everybody knows we have cash and come present their problems to us.</p>	<p>We prefer selling to SONAPA, with monthly payment. That way we have a sum in hand with which to do something!!</p>
	<p>We are afraid that the new chicken-breeders association is going to block our access to SONAPA. We're afraid we will no longer be able to deal with SONAPA on an individual basis.</p>	<p>SONAPA should not believe any organisation which claims to be representing all chicken-breeders. SONAPA must remain accessible to individuals</p>
	<p>We have no pousse-pousse for transporting bags of feed.</p>	
	<p>We have no cemented floor in our chicken-houses.</p>	

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Original text : French ; Ranked, with most important at top.

• **Evaluation**

- Everybody seemed to enjoy the exercise. Interaction was vivid, not only between myself and farmers, but also among themselves. Often I was left completely out of the discussion, and the cartoons would be shuffled and reshuffled. Cartoons would change hands, fingers would point at cartoons while making a point, somebody would angrily throw away a cartoon and then hold another with both hands, etc. During such phases I consciously concentrated on the body language, which helped me to gain an intuitive feeling (not an understanding) of where the pressing points were. After things settled down and were explained to me, I usually already knew the gist of the discussion and only had to make sure I wrote the right interpretations as notes on each cartoon.
- The act of drawing the cartoon had a strong fun-component for everybody. This was instrumental for acquiring a personal rapport with the farmers. Sometimes things were suggested which I did not know, and therefore could not draw, as in the case of a 'pousse-pousse'. I handed over paper and pen to the farmer suggesting it, and he drew it to the hilarious comment of everybody. Seeing the drawing I immediately knew he was referring to a two-wheeled cart which you push (French: pousse).
- The project field-personnel were in the beginning rather lost in their white veterinary coats, notepads and ballpoints. Most of them finally managed to get themselves involved in the discussions and enjoy them. They were often very important for nailing down a clear-cut definition of a problem. However, this was a completely new experience for them.
- Possible draw-back: the knack of visualising and drawing a problem as a picture on-the-spot is not given to everybody. However, the capacity for drawing is not a problem. It should be clear that the quality of the drawing has

nothing to do with its value as a communication-facilitator. The point simply is to make sure that everybody relates a particular problem to a particular cartoon. In the extreme case this cartoon can just be a black dot - but that is no fun! Cartoons are fun, even if they only resemble childrens' drawings!

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