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# A village picture book

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### • Introduction

At the beginning of our field work in Burkina Faso, we wondered how to approach villagers, given the importance of first impressions in setting the base for future work relations. We are studying indigenous practices of soil and water conservation from a technical and socio-cultural perspective. Our interest is in understanding the way farmers view their environment, in particular their indigenous soil and water conservation activities. Our research depends on establishing a relationship of trust between 'us', the outsiders, and the villagers. It also requires the time and patience of local people in participating in the project. We came up with the idea of providing villagers with an opportunity to make their own village picture book.

We hoped a village picture book would:

- serve as an icebreaker for the relationship between researchers and villagers;
- provide villagers with an opportunity to present village life which would act as a focus for discussion; and,
- provide a gift to the village in exchange for their co-operation in the project.

In this article we describe the methodology that we used to make the picture book in four study villages. We present the benefits and drawbacks of this technique and provide a summary of undertaking a similar activity with Dutch farmers. We conclude with some reflections on this tool's utility.

### • Methodology

We scheduled a series of four meetings in each of the four study villages.

#### The first meeting - Explanations

We met with the chief and other villagers to describe the aims of our project: to learn how people live and use their land and share these experiences with Dutch farmers. We explained that we would like to undertake many activities but would start by creating a book about the life and history of the village. The book should be composed of pictures that can be understood by everyone, regardless of their age, literacy or ethnicity. We explained that we would provide them with a camera and they should take photographs of 'whatever they wanted to show us about their village'. We spoke in general terms to provide the greatest freedom of interpretation in what they should photograph.

We offered to make two copies of the book. We kept one copy for us to show to Dutch farmers. The other was for the village, to show to visitors or as a record for their children of how they lived. We asked the chief to appoint two men and two women photographers who should be old enough to know the village and its history well, but young enough to have good eyesight and be able to walk around.

#### The second meeting - Visiting

We held a second meeting for the chosen photographers to show us around their village (the female researcher accompanied the women photographers and the male researcher went with the male photographers). This meeting

gave us an opportunity to ask questions about the village in the context of the photo-taking session. The time spent walking and talking also allowed each of us to get to know two members of the village.

### **The third meeting - Photography**

This was the photo-taking session. We provided each pair of photographers with an automatic 35 mm. camera and film. After being shown how the cameras worked, the photographers

were asked to take pictures of their life and history. We accompanied the photographers, noting their comments and any information they provided. When they asked what they should photograph, we insisted that they should choose. We did ask them, however, to take pictures of natural situations and not to arrange subjects. We were careful with our wording so as not to suggest whether they should take pictures of people or objects.

**Figure 1. Presenting the picture book to the village**



## The fourth meeting - Feedback

We returned with the developed photographs to the village. Each group of photographers was asked separately to order and tell a story through the pictures they had taken. They then pasted the photographs onto paper sheets. We asked them to find a symbol to represent women and one to represent men and to draw it on the pages. This enabled us to distinguish between the photographs taken by women versus those taken by men. The pages were put in plastic sheet-pockets and enclosed in a ring-binder. We asked if events or objects were missing and discussed what they would photograph in the future. Finally, the photographers presented the books to the rest of the villagers (whom we had asked to gather under a tree) and explained the story contained in the village picture book.

We made a second copy of the picture book for ourselves to bring back to Holland. Our copy is identical to the villagers' book except that we included a written account of the story that the villagers had told us.

### • Benefits

The picture book method was useful to us on various fronts. Our research on indigenous soil and water conservation practices requires an understanding of how villagers perceive their environment. This means learning about many aspects of life that we may not associate with soil and water conservation. The simplest way to explain this was to tell villagers that we were interested in learning about the way they live. This is too general to discuss in a public meeting and may arouse much suspicion. We found the picture-book a useful aid for showing people our interest in their lives. The photographs provided us with a purpose for being in the village and a focus for discussing different subjects (often starting with the question 'why did you choose to take a picture of this?').

We gained many insights on how local people view their village through the photographs that they had taken. The photographs also identified areas for further investigation, including gender differences in village perceptions. Although a small gift, the picture book provided the village

with a tangible record of our research. The photographs sparked interest among the villagers and they actively participated in the final discussion.

They also asked us to repeat the method at other times of the year so they could record seasonally important activities in their lives. More importantly, the picture book allowed us to break through an 'us and you' situation because the picture book was a joint project that inspired confidence in the researchers and villagers alike.

### • Issues arising

We found this method worked particularly well in establishing a collaborative relationship between researchers and villagers. However, this approach may not work more generally as many people are sensitive about having their photographs taken, even by other villagers. The first meeting should determine the feasibility of using a photograph-based approach to village appraisal.

The resources required should also be noted: at least one camera, facilities for developing photographs, sufficient budget to purchase film and pay for developing and the paper and ring binders for presentation. Furthermore, the quality of the information learned from the photographs depends on working with a 'good' photographer.

A potential disadvantage to this method is the time required. It took several meetings to develop a relationship with the villagers, and so this method may not be suitable for short projects. In principal, the time required may be reduced by using a Polaroid camera. In this way the project can be introduced, the pictures taken, ordered and pasted, and the final book presented all within one day. We have not tried this but it seems that some of the benefits of the picture book approach, particularly the discussion it provoked, may be lost.

Two researchers conducting sessions with the men and women simultaneously made this approach quite quick and reduced the chances that the two groups influenced each other. However, gender differences in local perceptions may be attributed to differences in the way the researchers presented the project to

the groups or in the translations provided by the two interpreters working with the researchers. A way around this is to conduct the explanatory phases of the project jointly. It is important that the researchers specify in detail, and ahead of time, how they will explain the stages of the project to the photographers. This can prevent implying, through terminology, that pictures are 'expected' of one particular aspect of village life.

- **A Dutch parallel**

To enhance our exchange of information, we offered to bring a picture book of Dutch farming to Burkina Faso. Our methodology was similar to that described except the emphasis was on providing information and materials rather than on interpretation and confidence building. We made contact with Dutch farming organizations and asked two farmers to take pictures of their lives and farming practices to show to African farmers. To give a sense of the variety of farming practices in The Netherlands, we gave a 35 mm. camera to both an organic farmer and a dairy farmer.

As with the African farmers, we tried not to influence what they photographed but asked the farmers to explain the significance of the photographs they took. We developed the photographs and placed them in a book in the order in which the photographs were taken. We added notes on the explanations and information provided by the farmers. In exchange for their time, we gave the farmers a full set of the photographs they took.

From the outset, we expected very different experiences through working with Dutch and Burkina Faso farmers. However, we were struck by the similarities in undertaking the exercise in both countries. First, both groups of farmers were constrained by the amount of time they could spend with us at busy agricultural times of the year. Second, an understanding of how to use cameras underpins this photographic approach to appraisal. We had to provide good instructions on how to use a camera to farmers from both countries. Finally, all the farmers provided both technical pictures and explanations of their work (e.g. how we plant, what crops we rotate, the problems with tractor ploughing) in combination with a more spiritual appraisal of their everyday life (including

religion, life philosophies, family relationships etc.).

- **Reflections from a year later**

We conducted these activities a year ago and having returned to our Burkina Faso study villages, we can reflect on the utility and efficacy of the picture-book approach. We feel the picture book is an excellent tool for confidence building but feel it must be used with caution for exploring village perceptions of their environment.

We found the picture book a most useful way to establish trust and develop a dialogue between researchers and villagers. When we returned to our study villages after four months of absence, we were very well received and noted that the picture books were very much on their minds. Again, they asked us to conduct the activity at this different time of the year so they could photograph different types of activities and landscapes.

We added the outputs of the many joint research activities that we conducted with the villagers (e.g. PRA maps and genealogies) to the picture book. This provided us with a way to present our research results and obtain feedback. It also made our work accessible and reduced village suspicion about the research. Thus, the picture book became a mechanism to establish and maintain trusting relationships.

The Dutch picture books were a great success in the African villages. They provided a way to explain and describe a completely new and different way of farming to the villagers, most of whom have never been to the capital, Ouagadougou. The picture book created an exchange of information between the villagers and us, the researchers, transforming the research process from a monologue into a dialogue.

Our other main objective for the picture books was to gain insights on how villagers see their environment through their choice of photographs. It is difficult to determine how much we influence the choice of photographs through our questions, explanations of the project and the translations (working through an interpreter). More importantly, because only a few people are involved in the photography, we

obtain a limited number of personal, rather than 'village', views of life. Finally, the photographs are influenced by 'chance' in terms of what is encountered on the day during the season of study.

While we do not advise this as a stand-alone method for interpreting village environmental perceptions, we do recommend it as a useful way to get acquainted with an agricultural system. For example, the photographs highlighted important activities in the villages that were not immediately apparent to us, such as honey collection and gold seeking.

The picture book also sensitised us to the different 'dialogues' used by men and women. Men tended to have explanations of a technical or scientific nature while women's explanations relied heavily on the magical or spiritual. Furthermore, we noticed gender differences in outlook. Men tended to take wide-angle pictures from a distance, including much of the landscape and many objects. By contrast, women took close-ups of people doing activities and included children in their photographs.

We feel that the picture book was a useful method not only in terms of providing a gift and focal point for villagers but in increasing our understanding of local farming practices.

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#### NOTES

A poster has been prepared presenting the four steps of making the picture book. Black and white, A4-size copies can be obtained from the authors free of charge. Colour copies in other sizes are also available upon request.