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It works! Speaking for ourselves: a development dialogue tool

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Responding to our own flawed practice

The catalyst for the development of this power tool came from comments made by an elderly woman during a government evaluation of the first phase of SOS Sahel International's Borana Collaborative Forest Management Project (BCFMP 1999-2001). The evaluation team had asked a group of rural women from the Bobella community what advantages they had gained from the project.[1] The group had interacted positively with the forest management and livelihoods activities. They had appreciated the project's approach and were pleased to be closely involved. However, an older woman then commented that there had been a lot of talking about the community's needs, but that the actions taken in response were often predetermined. She held the evaluators' attention by elaborating their frustration at being frequently consulted (by both government and NGOs) but not listened to. She complained that organisations often visited their village, asked them many questions, and then simply disappeared. Why the information was needed and what was done with it they did not know. What they did know, however, was that very little changed on the ground.

Reflecting on these comments, a number of critical issues

concerning the way in which SOS Sahel and other organisations work with communities emerged, such as:
- the balance between specialised sector approaches (in our case collaborative forest management) and broad community needs;
- the need to invest the time required to interact with communities in genuine participatory planning; and
- the need to ensure that their priorities are addressed and their understanding and ownership established before moving forward to action.

As our reflection deepened, a further key point was identified. This was that community members are marginalised throughout the whole development process. Their only opportunities to express their needs and priorities are when development actors appear in their village asking questions. But these visits are based on chance. The issues raised will depend on who is spoken with and on their particular ideas and perceptions. In turn, this is determined by who happens to be in the village at the time of the unannounced visit. There is no dialogue, and no pre-arrangement of meetings and discussions. More significantly, there is no preparation, planning or prioritisation by the community of the issues they should present to development actors when these chances arise.

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[1] Bobella is a village in Arero Woreda, Borana Zone, Oromiya Ethiopia

The idea of unpacking the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF)

Our conclusion was that communities need to be able to represent themselves far more effectively in development discussions and to overcome this marginalisation. They need to be able to present their priorities in a coherent language that development agencies can understand, and in a form that is more than a wish list.[2] Our idea in meeting this challenge was to work with the community to unpack the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (DFID, 1998; 1999).

The SLF is an innovative, analytical tool. It emerged in the late 1990s and has been used by development professionals to improve their understanding of people's lives. It involves analysing five categories of capital assets within a context of vulnerability (the result of trends, shocks and culture) influenced by transforming structures and processes (such as government laws and policies).

The SLF is highly representative of what could be termed the latest 'development-speak'. It is a language shared by those formulating development policy and designing development practice – and is exclusive to development agencies. What would happen if those agencies went to a village and found a community using the SLF, and talking their development language? Would it make a difference? Would they hear better and take the community more seriously? Would they respond more effectively to that community's needs and priorities?

Our idea was to present the SLF the community, in its three main components – capital assets, vulnerability context and transforming structures – and see what they did with it. To see if they could understand the SLF and adapt it into a tool to use to present their development issues.

A development tool that works

After a considerable amount of time working with the Bobella community, the *Speaking for Ourselves: Development Dialogue Tool* was developed. The community group quickly understood and cleverly adapted and developed the SLF.[3] They selected the five capital assets as the core of their tool, visualising each asset and then assessing them in terms of what assets they have and do not have through scoring. Asset cards were created in order to produce a physical tool.

[2] By 'wish list', we refer to the current uncoordinated list of wishes, hopes, aspirations and desires that a community will come up with if a passing development agency asks broad, open questions about development needs and priorities.
[3] The group was made up of self selected men, women and youths in order to have a cross section of the community, and to see if ay particular sub group would make specific or different use of the SLF.

"The Bobella group and the government spokesperson were using the same development language. This enabled comparisons of government and community development perspectives and priorities"

The community started using the tool to identify priority development gaps as asset gaps. Once an issue was selected, they used the tool again in order to plan development action, identifying which assets they have in hand and which need to be brought in. The tool developed was proving very useful. However, the key question of whether the use of the tool in development dialogue would reduce community marginalisation in the development process remained.

It was time for the real work to begin: to see if the tool actually works as a development dialogue tool. The community built up their experience of using the tool over time, increasing their skills, confidence and competence with each opportunity. Members of the group and sub groups took turns to present the tool. A brief description of these presentations, their results and the reactions to them is given below.

Zonal Forest Management Assemblies

The first opportunity came in May 2004 at the annual Zonal Forest Management Assemblies, which are part of the activities of the wider BCFMP.[4][5] The assemblies are community-arranged meetings involving traditional authorities, forest management groups and government line offices. The assemblies focus on the new forest management systems that are being established. However other development issues can be discussed. The Bobella group was given the chance to present their development dialogue tool. The reaction to the group's presentation was very positive. The description and explanation made by the group of their capital assets came across clearly. The importance of natural capital and social capital was stressed, and this fitted well with the issue of forest management through traditional institutions and systems, which was being debated at the assemblies. The assembly participants appreciated the logic and relevance of the analysis.

Later in the meeting, a government spokesperson presented the government's new pastoral development

[4] A zone is a governmental administration unit: Region – Zone – Woreda.
[5] Two assemblies were held, one in Guji Zone and one in Borana Zone.

**Asset cards drawn
and chosen by the
Bobella group**

Natural Capital

HUMAN CAPITAL

CAPSULE

SOCIAL CAPITAL

OROROO   LICHOO   RUFAA

GADAA

PHYSICAL CAPITAL
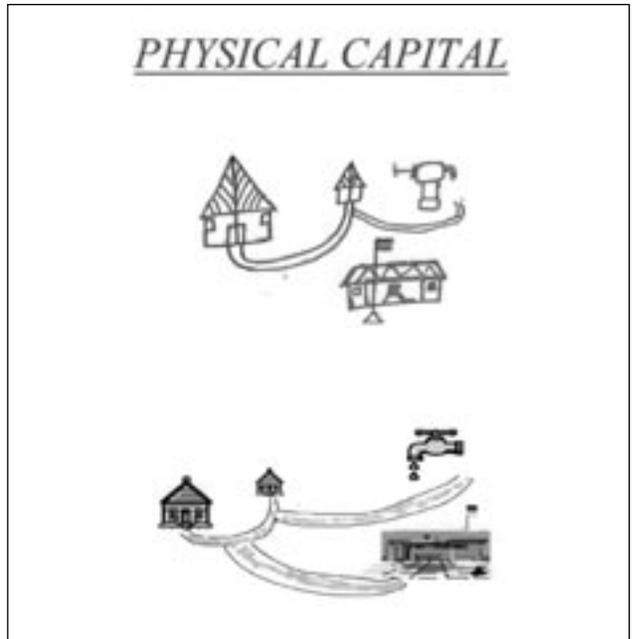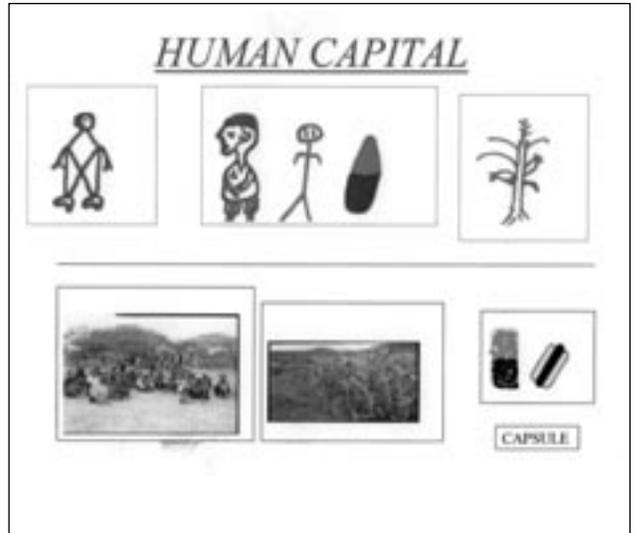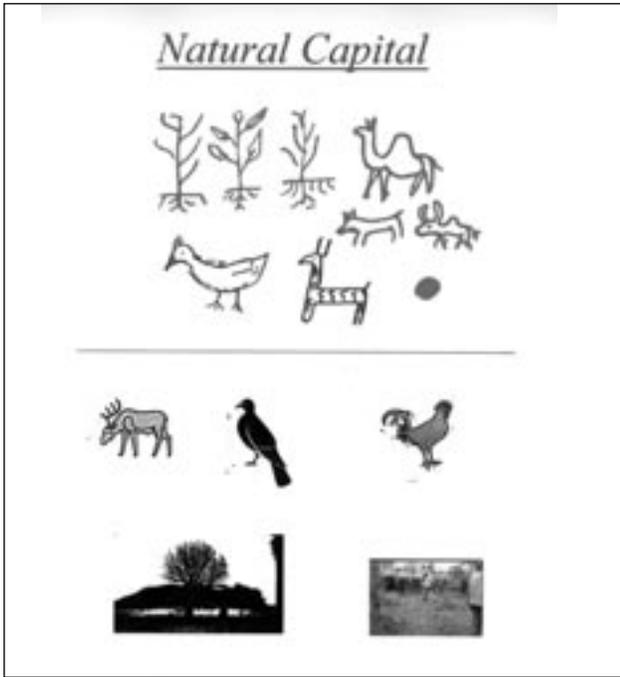
programme. He also talked about capital assets and liveli-hoods. He stressed the government's intention to invest in human capital – in schools and clinics for pastoralists.

The Bobella group and the government spokesperson were using the same development language. This enabled comparisons of government and community development perspectives and priorities. The Bobella community had iden-tified gaps in their human capital. However their priorities lay between strengthening their social capital (traditional author-

ities and systems) their most valued asset, and developing their physical capital (improving road access and establishing a grinding mill) in their village. The government spokesper-son had stated the need to build human capital. The poten-tial for dialogue with both sides speaking the same language and having similar understanding had arisen.

From this first experience of presenting the development dialogue tool the reaction from the assembly participants was one of clear interest in the dialogue tool. Many stated a

desire to know more and learn how to use the tool themselves. The reaction from the government officials attending the assembly was rather more subdued. But when asked later, they stated that they were both surprised and impressed to hear a community group presenting such a comprehensive livelihood analysis.

Zonal and Woreda development committees

A number of Zonal and Woreda development committee meetings were arranged. The purpose of these meetings was to bring Zonal and Woreda administrators and development committees down to the village level, to hear the community present their development dialogue tool. They felt that holding the meetings in the village mirrored the previous visits of development actors to the community. It was also felt that villagers would be more at ease presenting their tool in their own environment, and reflected the reality that the community have few opportunities to travel outside the village.

The reaction to the development dialogue tool presentations was very positive. The Borana Zone Administrator stated that this was the sort of development practice that the government wanted to promote. He congratulated the community, and urged SOS Sahel to scale up the method to other areas. He also donated 65 corrugated iron roofing sheets towards the construction of a grinding mill (the community's priority project) and recommended that the Woreda Administration support the project through their pastoral development funds.

The Woreda-level Administrator and development committee were also impressed by the presentations. They stated that the community's priorities would be funded from the government's new pastoral development funds, since they fitted with that programme well. However, this has not yet happened.

Some of the comments made by the government participants were as follows:

'I feel very happy to see the community group present its development issues in such an attractive way.'

'I have learnt a lot from the community members today that I didn't know before (referring to the capital assets).'

'I hope to share this experience with colleagues. It would be good to spread the tool to other communities."

'By using their tool I encourage the community to struggle hard to pull themselves out of poverty.'

Asset card drawn and chosen by the Bobella group
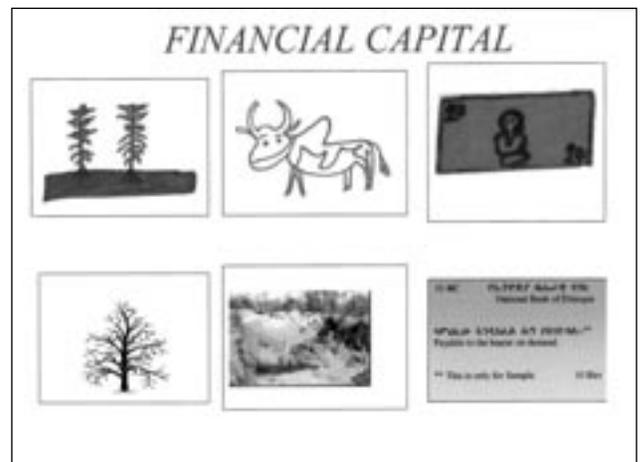
'I am happy that you all talked the same language and expressed your issues as one voice. This shows you are really concerned and ready to participate in development activities.'

Development agency meeting

This took place in December 2004 in Addis Ababa in order that the Bobella group could present their tool to donors, federal government officials and NGOs. Unfortunately, donor attendance was poor. The NGOs present included the Pastoral Forum for Ethiopia, FARM Africa, CARE International, Oxfam Canada, GTZ, and the Gudina Tumsa Foundation. Government representation included the Federal Office for Pastoral Affairs.

The reaction to the tool presentation was again one of supportive surprise. Several organisations were interested to know how adaptable the tool was and whether they could introduce the tool to their own target communities. The Federal Office for Pastoral Affairs expressed interest in the tool for community-level planning. Meeting discussions centred on the development implications of using the tool.

However, the Bobella group was rather disappointed by this meeting – an issue discussed in more detail below. Briefly, the fact that the meeting was held in the capital, and involved international organisations and potential donors, led the group to expect a more immediate and concrete response (i.e. funds for their proposed development actions). This did not happen. There was a clear gap in agendas between the development agency audience and the community presenters. The development agency audience were observing a community group making a livelihoods presentation as a development tool, the community were presenting their livelihood position and expecting some action.

Comment/ impact	Motivation	Self-help	Empowerment	Skills	New ways of working
'We promised to work very hard to see our projects established very soon.'	●				
'We believe in the importance of the project and have already started collecting money from within the community.'	●	●			
The tool has actually changed our attitude towards development.'		●	●	●	●
'The tool has helped identify our capital assets which we weren't able to identify before.'				●	●
'We have learnt that there is a big opportunity outside of village life, with a big audience of people working on development issues, that can be met.'d			●		●
'We learnt that other communities cannot identify the five capital assets like we do.'			●	●	
'The tool is good, we can use it to solve our problems' (men's sub-group).	●				
'If you tell us to work we will wake up and work very hard using this tool' (women's group; refers to presentation work).	●	●			
'This tool has helped us to express our ideas properly.'		●	●	●	

Sahel Alliance meeting

Finally, the group was invited to present its tool to the Sahel Alliance meeting in Negelle in April 2005. The Sahel Alliance is made up of the former SOS Sahel country programmes, now national autonomous organisations, linked together within the Alliance. There were representatives at the meeting from Mali, Sudan, Ethiopia, UK, South Africa and Kenya.

The reaction to the presentation was one of inspiration and frustration: inspiration at the skills of the group, at their empowerment and enablement, and at the quality of the development relationships and their potential.[6] There was also frustration for and with the group that they had invested so much time and energy into developing and using the tool, but had had so little immediate response, in terms of secured resources. After the presentation the participants contributed ?750 in support of the group's priority planned activities.

What do we think? The Bobella Group

Community members' comments and reactions were recorded while the tool was being developed and used. Group members were asked simple questions about how the work affected them, and this is what they said.

At the beginning of the work

People were enthusiastic and curious about the idea of carrying out the action research. The strong relationship that already existed between the SOS Sahel team and the community contributed to this willingness. '*We can identify our assets, we have very little*' (comment made at the research concept introductory meeting).

After developing the tool

As skills were built and their understanding of the aims of the research increased, the group developed its SLF tool but were not sure how, when, or where to use it. '*People come and show us how to plough or how to dig. SOS Sahel is showing us how to use our heads, how to plan and how to present our ideas. This is most important to us*' (comment made at the BCFMP mid-term evaluation meeting).

What they say now

'*This is our tool. We have used it to analyse our livelihoods and to explain our livelihoods to you*' (comment made at the introduction of presentation at the Sahel Alliance meeting).

The following comments were recorded from the community group during the process of the action research. Their suggested impact is analysed in the table opposite.

[6] Relationships between different levels of the community, and between the community and project.

"Will the use of this tool be embraced as proof of community capacity, or rejected as a threatening and confrontational strategy to challenge and undermine professionals and government officials by, and in front of, communities?"

What do we think? The research team

Our learning from this experience has been very interesting. In our opinion there is no doubt that the tool has worked.

Reversal of roles, community decision-making and development partnership

Even during the action research process the reversal of roles was apparent. The research process invested a lot of time in developing understanding of the SLF on both sides (the community group and the SOS Sahel research team). The research team initially used a more traditional approach of gathering information supplied by the community. Working in familiar ways helped build gradual but comprehensive understanding of the SLF as a concept and as the basis of the new tool.

Developing the ideas and skills needed to shape and then use the tool required a different dynamic. The key to success in moving from understanding the concept to a more animated and practical use of the tool was understanding and ownership, with the community rather than the research team driving the agenda and designing the tool as they see fit. In this regard the skill-building process within the research process became a microcosm of what the overall tool aims to achieve. The power relations of the formal development dialogue process are reversed, with communities making decisions and acting as genuine partners in development.

Some shortfalls

To some extent the community still expects instant success. Recent discussions have focused on the fact that now they have the tool and have presented it to development audiences, but where are the resources?

An understanding of how to use the tool strategically and opportunistically needs to be developed. The challenge is how community members can take the initiative fully upon themselves: how they can invite development actors to visit them, to discuss with them, and to plan around their ideas? In reality the community has few opportunities to meet donors and development agents, given the costs and difficulties of travel, their isolated location, and lack of communications systems.

What next? Building on the experience

Spreading the word

It could be said that if an intervention is really good it will spread itself. Following the reactions to the community presentations, recommendations have been made to spread the method to other places. The main challenge is the time needed to develop the necessary skills. The action research gave the space to develop both the tool and the community's skills over a 12-month period. Certainly within SOS Sahel's current Borana programme, spending that amount of time with one community group is not feasible in terms of time, or replicable in terms of cost. Further fieldwork will show how the tool could be transferred and communication between and amongst communities established. One innovative proposal is to use the Bobella community group as trainers, and to establish a system of community-to-community training.

Who's listening?

In order to really scale up we need to know who is listening. Investing time and resources to scale up the method would feel much safer if government and other development actors were genuinely committed to listening to communities and treating them as development partners. Unfortunately this is not always the reality.

As mentioned before, at one point the Bobella community group became disillusioned with the presentations. When they travelled to Addis Ababa for a donor/NGO meeting, they themselves and the rest of the community expected the group to return having secured the resources to go ahead with their first project. When they did not, people in the community questioned the value of the tool, leading the group themselves to question it.

The problem is one of raised expectations. The research team took care to explain the purpose of the research and to stress that there were no guarantees of success. That part of testing the tool was to see what happened when the community made their presentations. But after all the time the community had invested, and the fact that we had set them up with a donors' meeting, it is natural that they expected more.

What the project had not done was to prepare the group for the realities of securing funds: The frustrations, the need to canvass many potential sources, the slowness of response, and the lack of preparedness among donors when meeting a community with its own action plan.

Knowledge is power

Communities obviously understand their livelihoods far better than we do. They are the best informed about their own situations, problems and potentials. And yet dialogue is still a challenge. Why don't development agencies listen and talk more carefully with the people they aim to serve? We would suggest that the key factor is the quality of the development relationship, and the level of trust and respect between development agencies and communities. In almost all presentations the development audience's reactions were of surprise, even shock that communities could analyse and articulate their livelihoods in a development language. This prejudice ensures communities are marginalised from development processes.

Interestingly the role of communities in using the SLF as a tool is little explored in the literature. The SLF is presented as a framework through which 'we' (development professional and governments) can better understand 'them' (communities), but not as a means through which communities can better articulate their needs. The SLF is the intel-lectual property of academics and development professionals and uses a language that reinforces the gap between these professionals and communities – unless, of course, the community also learns that language.

The assumption that professionals know more than their target communities reflects unstated positions of power. One of the main blockages to progress in using participatory development approaches over the past 20 years has been the denial by development professionals of the wealth of knowledge that exists within communities, and of the specific and potential skills they have. The rhetoric of communities being equal partners in development is rarely realised.

In developing this dialogue tool – an animated assessment of capital assets using visual cards for community self assessment – the research has tried to merge a community's knowledge about their own livelihood situation with one of the latest theoretical development concepts, the SLF.

It is highly likely that this knowledge is not common currency amongst the lower levels of local government. Will the use of this tool be embraced as proof of community capacity, or rejected as a threatening and confrontational strategy to challenge and undermine professionals and government officials by, and in front of, communities?

Sensitive introduction of an empowered community demands great care.

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