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# Family portraits in Mali, Kenya and Tanzania

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## Introduction

The family portrait methodology provides a visual and written portrait of how a family sees itself within a broader environment (see Figure 1). This article compares how this methodology was used with pastoralists in Mali between 2000 and 2002, and in Kenya and Tanzania in 2004.<sup>1</sup> It describes how the methodology was adapted and refined for different objectives in different contexts, and concludes with some suggestions for facilitating and using the approach.

## Family portraits to catalyse change in Bankass, Mali

SOS Sahel worked with four pastoralist families in Bankass district in Mali to prepare family portraits. Since the colonial era, the more powerful settled farming communities have made decisions about natural resource management, to the exclusion of pastoralists and women. The advent of decentralisation in Mali, and the election of local governments who would take responsibility for natural resource management, was a prime opportunity to try to transform power relations between resource users and ensure more equitable use of natural resources. The family portrait was a key tool in this approach; it took analysis to the household level and added

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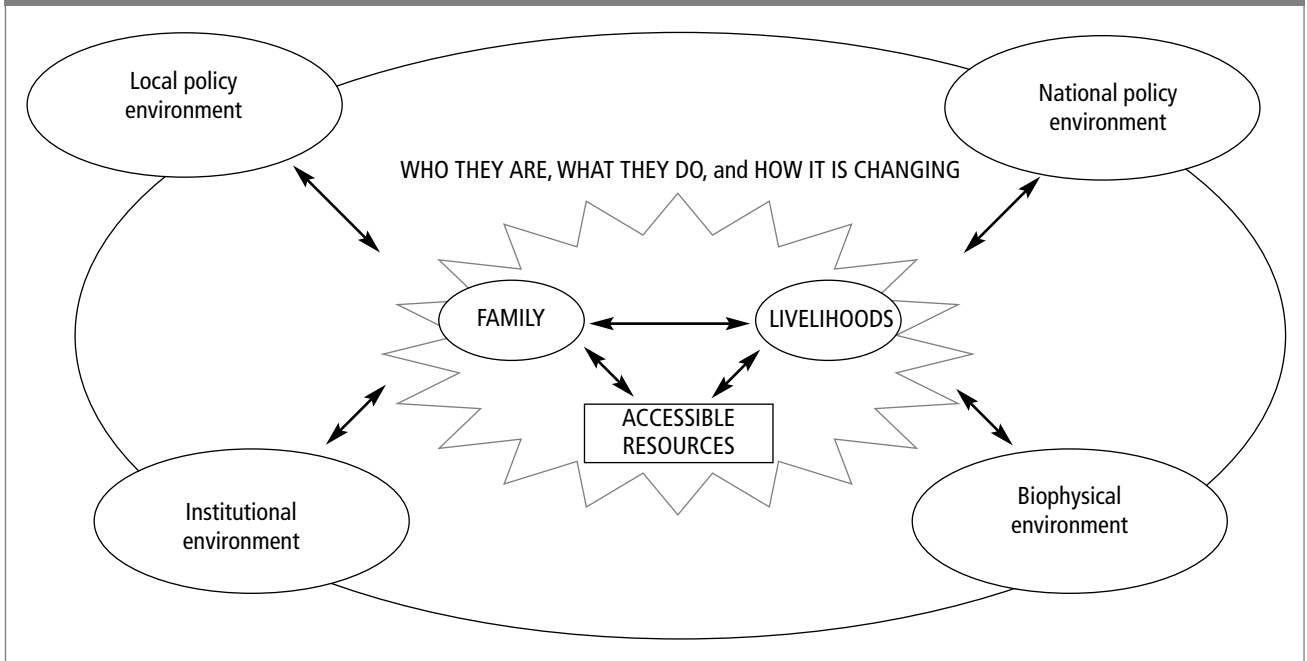
depth and complexity to debates that were often oversimplified or stereotyped. It was also used to catalyse a process of reflection and decision-making within the community, and to lobby for policy change at a local level.

Each community analysed the problems that the family identified to assess whether they were common to the majority of the community, and whether they were getting worse or better (Table 1). They also identified priority actions and the support needed to implement these actions (Box 1).

There was a great deal of learning within the families and the project team about the challenges families face in achieving sustainable livelihoods. Project team members became more confident and felt they had more legitimacy in policy discussions.

<sup>1</sup> The process in Kenya and Tanzania is still in its early stages.

Figure 1: Conceptual diagram of the family portrait



At a district-level workshop, local counsellors and government officials analysed portraits to identify the key problems faced by families. They saw for themselves the complexity and diversity of survival strategies, the importance of mobility and the interdependence in the use of resources in different agro-ecological zones. They also identified and discussed problems that could arise from certain groups being excluded from decision-making. Participants could draw their own conclusions rather than being presented with research findings. This brought analysis of real lives into district-level discussions, which are often ill informed. The result was a consensus on the necessity for inclusive fora for decision-making on natural resource management.

A consultative body was set up, including the office of the district council, three representatives from each commune, including one woman, and representatives from the technical services, NGOs and other associations. Since 2002 the body has met four times, and the decisions made have contributed to the commune and district councils' development plans. For example, the rehabilitation of the livestock corridors around Bankass and around Baye is now in both district and commune development programmes. The family portrait contributed to the start of the reversal of the power dynamic, giving pastoralists and women a voice in decision-making fora.

### Family portraits to understand change in Maasailand

The family portrait methodology was used in Tanzania and Kenya during 2004 as part of an International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) project 'Better policy and management options for pastoral lands: assessing trade offs between poverty alleviation and wildlife conservation'. Maasailand has seen much more extensive and rapid change in the way land and resources are owned and controlled than Mali. In Kenya, changes include a shift in land tenure policy from communal to individual landholdings, high population growth and immigration, expanding agriculture, mining and settlement, and increased awareness of the issues and conflicts around wildlife conservation through both national parks and community initiatives.

Much of the research carried out in the ILRI programme was quantitative, establishing broad trends of change but not picking up on the detail. To complement the survey work ILRI community facilitators did nine family portraits in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania (Amboseli and Maasai Mara in Kenya, and Longido and Simanjiro in Tanzania). These presented Maasai households' own experiences and analyses of the complexity of changes to their livelihoods, revealing who benefits and how, and who is not able to grasp opportunities and why not. For example, broad trends towards increasingly diversified livelihoods have been

**Table 1: Analysis of problems with transhumant pastoralists in the Samori Forest**

Problem	Classification	Details
Difficult to access the Sourou River to water animals.	Experienced by all families and is getting worse.	Each year there are more rice fields alongside the river. The passages left for the animals are so narrow that you need more herdsmen to avoid damaging crops.
Settlement of farmers in previously uncultivated forest, reducing grazing areas.	As above.	The traditional authorities, which allocate land, do not recognise the rights of pastoralists to the land, nor defend their interests.

observed but Kirisia's own story (Box 2) explains his experience of diversification.

The visual tools and photos helped to illustrate the issues the families faced more clearly. One family found the analysis of herd dynamics extremely useful and said they would continue to use it annually to inform their decisions about herd management. Others found that discussions around land use and access illustrated the contradictions in the system, which they needed to discuss with neighbours. Follow-up with the families is planned for 2006.

The portraits were also a way for the ILRI community facilitators, who are supposed to be the link between communities, researchers and policy makers, to do local and national level analysis. This work is on-going.

### Adapting and refining the family portraits methodology

Critical reflection on SOS Sahel's work in Mali informed how the methodology was used in Kenya and Tanzania, as discussed below.

#### • Developing the field guide together

In Kenya we were careful to follow the Mali example of developing the field guide during the training workshop. This gave facilitators time to think about the key livelihood issues in each area, and how they could facilitate a discussion and analysis around those issues with the family.

#### • Criteria for selection

In Mali, community members selected families to do family portraits. This was to ensure ownership of the process within the community and so that each family was committed to doing the portrait. However two communities selected their

### Box 1: Community action: pastoralist organisational development in Samori Forest

Participants identified a lack of consultation over land use among pastoralists, migrant farming villages and the local natural resource management association as a key problem. They decided that the fact that they were not well organised themselves contributed to this lack of consultation. Their action plan was to set up an association of transhumant pastoralists to act as the point of contact for sharing information, and to represent their interests in local decision-making on natural resource management.

### Box 2: Kirisia

The family of Kirisia is pastoralist, depending mostly on livestock keeping for its living. Low rainfall and lack of access to water mean that cultivation is not possible. Many decisions about access to pastoral resources are made in consultation with the neighbourhood. Kirisia considers the pastoral way of life to be an integral part of the Maasai community, where the size of your herd symbolises your status. Kirisia's family also leases out a plot of land near Namelok, and receives periodic remittances from Kirisia's brothers, Kirayian and Leshan, who work in Nairobi. The motivation to diversify came from a sense that pastoralism is increasingly vulnerable to devastating droughts and changes in climate and land access. They also realise that as the family grows and more children go to school they will need more cash to cover school fees. By diversifying, the family feels it can better survive the dry seasons and droughts and is in a reasonably strong position to respond to changes in access to natural resources in the future.

village chief, showing how delegating decisions to community level will not always enhance the participation of the poorer members.

In Kenya and Tanzania we maintained community selection but developed more stringent criteria, including poverty indicators. In Tanzania two communities did a participatory wealth ranking exercise<sup>2</sup> initially and then selected families from wealth bands. This ensured that they understood the views and analyses of those not benefiting from change, and those normally excluded from decision-making.

#### • Inclusion from the start

In Kenya we insisted that three female facilitators were trained from the start. This ensured that they were a central part of the team, and were working from the same level of information as their male colleagues. In Mali, although women were included in the facilitating teams, they did not take part in the initial training. Team members commented on how having a female facilitator in the team, and thus direct and appropriate contact with women, meant discus-

<sup>2</sup> For more information about wealth ranking see [http://www.iiied.org/NR/agbioliv/pla\\_notes/pla\\_backissues/15.html](http://www.iiied.org/NR/agbioliv/pla_notes/pla_backissues/15.html)

**Family member with favourite crossbred Zebu/Boran cow. Innkilto, Kenya**



THEME SECTION

Photo: K. Cochrane

sions were more accurate and detailed. In two families, the female facilitators found that women had much more detailed information about the range and importance of livelihood activities than the head of the family (the Mzee), who saw livestock as the main source of livelihood. This detailed knowledge gave the women a voice and respect that they do not normally have. In addition this approach meant that many young family members heard their family history for the first time, as well as contributing their views, which were often very different to the older members.

• **Maasai facilitators for Maasai portraits**

All the facilitators who worked on the portraits were Maasai and conversations took place in the Maa language. This made it much easier to empathise with the families, negotiate cultural issues, build trust and have proper conversations.

In Mali we did not have enough Peul facilitators so conversations sometimes took place in Bambara, which not all family members (especially the elderly and women) spoke.

• **Staying with the family and getting involved**

In both East and West Africa the project team stayed with the family for four to five days. This was essential as many conversations took place late at night or over shared activities such as cooking. Accompanying the family in its daily tasks, the men to water the cattle, or the women to collect water or fuelwood, reduced the disruption of the project team on the family. Finding an appropriate space and time to talk to different family members was critical, especially for engaging with the women.

• **Establishing a contract of trust with the family**

The importance of trust was a key lesson from the Mali work.



'Handing over the stick' using visual tools. Kenya

When trust was developed, both parties benefited, and where it was not the portrait quickly became an exercise in question and answer. The key to trust is establishing ownership of the process by the family from the beginning. In Kenya and Tanzania the family was asked whether they wanted the facilitators to help them write down their family story. It was explained that both the process (discussion, analysis and sharing) and the product were important. In Maasailand, where there is an extensive culture of story telling, families were very interested in having their story recorded for them. In one community there was an explicit contract of trust developed between the community and ILRI staff. The community had not allowed the last set of researchers to work with them, but because the team was Maasai and offering something that was of interest, they agreed.

#### • Which language to write in?

We had long discussions within the team, and between the team and the families, about the language for the written family portrait. In Kenya and Tanzania all families spoke and used Maa, but more people were literate in Kiswahili. We decided in the end to write the portraits in Maa so that they would be a family story in the family language which, when read aloud, would be understood by everyone, not just those who understood Kiswahili.

#### • Photos

In Kenya and Tanzania, we took a Polaroid camera so that people could have copies of the photos straight away. We

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also asked the family which photos they wanted in their portrait. This increased their sense of ownership and provided a focus for discussion.

#### • Visual tools or not?

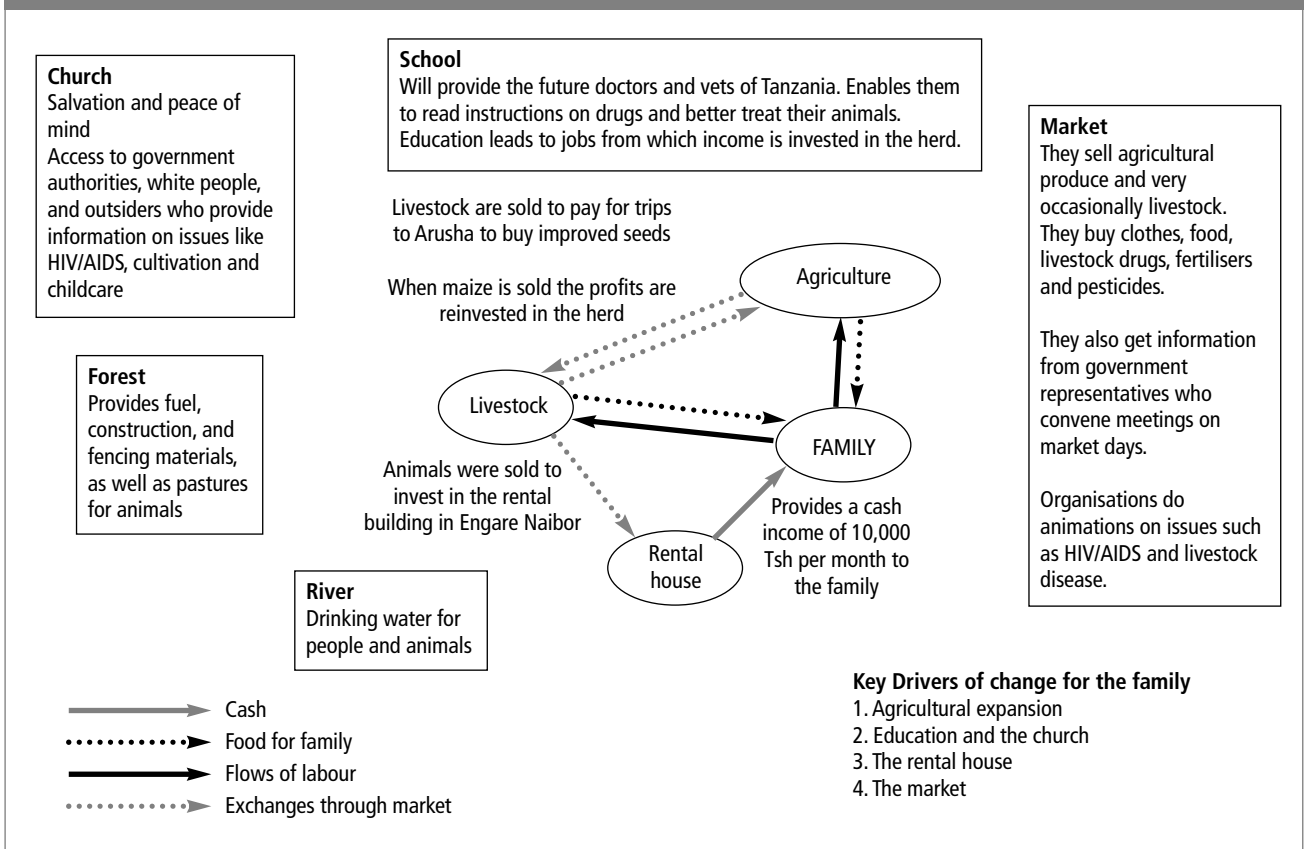
In Mali we used relatively few visual tools (mostly with women) and relied more on conversation and discussion. During the training workshop in Kenya, it was hard to persuade the team that visual tools would add a new dimension to discussion and debate. The argument was that Maasai is an oral culture, and they may think they were being patronised if they were made to 'draw' or 'play games'. In reality, experience in Kenya and Tanzania showed how 'visualising the conversation' helped to include more voices in the portraits, reduced the focus on the head of the family, and added to the level of analysis in discussions. We used resource mapping, ranking livelihood activities, Venn diagrams of institutions and services and livelihood diagrams during the family feedback.

#### • Family feedback: using livelihood diagrams

In both East and West Africa, the team spent a separate day discussing the entire portrait with all family members to engage them in a wider discussion and to verify the information was correct. In Mali, to make the process more interactive and to ensure non-literate family members could follow, the team prepared visual representations of the interrelations between the different systems of production (e.g. farming, fishing, herding), the family and their links to other people, institutions and places.

Although these feedback sessions were useful, we felt that the methodology could be developed further to deepen the family's analysis of their situation. So in Kenya and Tanzania we introduced livelihood diagrams (see Photo 3 and Figure 2), which helped families analyse how livelihood activities were connected and how they were changing. In large families the diagrams were done with men and women separately. These exercises highlighted issues that families had not thought about previously.

**Figure 2: Livelihood diagram**



**Livelihood diagram**  
Ngare Nabour,  
Longido, Tanzania

Photo: K. Cochrane



**Box 3: Extract from facilitator's process notes from the Mara, Kenya**

'It was much fun meeting the family for the second time. Since we were able to call the family members by name, and we spent some good time sharing news outside the portrait. The second visit was also important in ensuring that the portrait was more accurate as the family had a chance to check all the details and added more information to what they earlier said. The families were amazed at the amount of information they were able to provide and how it was captured in writing. By enumerating their past and present they felt they better understood themselves and the young family members said they learnt new things by listening to their parents speak to us.'

Note: For a full explanation of the diagram see Figure 2. Objects with paper underneath them signified agents of change within the community. For this family they were: the church, the school, the market and agriculture.

**• Process notes**

All facilitators kept process notes. In these notes, facilitators recorded feedback from the families, tracked progress and explained what worked well and what hadn't.

**Conclusion: facilitating and using family portraits**

'Doing' a portrait with a family is not a simple painting exercise, it throws up many issues. However the family portrait, if introduced with tact and diplomacy, and if the family takes real ownership, can be a powerful tool to facilitate critical thinking and illustrate essential community issues.

There will always be different views (generational, gendered) within the family and deciding whose view is included can be difficult. However, the discussions over these differences are central to the analysis undertaken.

Painful or sensitive issues vary from country to country. In Mali the number of heads of cattle in a herd is confidential information. Thus, discussions about the size of herds and their sustainability had to be negotiated very carefully. The Maasai on the other hand were happy to discuss freely the number of cattle, although they rarely counted them, however talking about deceased family relatives only took place in private one-to-one discussions.

Facilitating a critical analysis with the family, while allowing them to 'tell their story', takes time and skill. Rushing into an analysis of issues that concern the facilitator, and asking too many questions, can reduce ownership by the family. However it is not just a listening exercise, and facilitators need to find ways to question, add depth to, and help the family

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to think through its story. Practical advice for this includes listening at the beginning and using simple visual tools, and then moving on to use further visual tools that support analysis, as well as in-depth targeted discussions on certain issues.

Using family portraits to contribute to transforming power relations is a long-term process, and is dependent on continuing support for weaker voices to be heard and for their views to be taken into account. In Mali, the consultative forum is still young and dependent on external support. The strength of the family portrait is that it starts with critical analysis at a family and community level. The results can be used in a variety of ways, from helping communities decide on self-help initiatives, to informing policy discussions. What is powerful is that the actions proposed, and positions that people take, are deeply rooted in the realities that communities face.

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