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'Say it with pictures': an account of a self assessment process in a dairy sector support project in Tanzania

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• **Introduction**

The Southern Highlands Dairy Development Project (SHDDP) has been working in Tanzania since 1979 to strengthen the private dairy sector, with the specific goal of 'contributing to the family income of dairy farmers and the nutritional status amongst their communities'. Initially the project focus was on distributing in-calf heifers to small-scale farmers in order to increase the dairy herd in two regions of Tanzania. However, in the latest phase of the project (1996-99), SHDDP has taken a new approach, moving away from supporting dairy production towards a more holistic dairy sector support approach. New activity lines - dairy farmer groups and dairy business - have been established and the extension line has been reoriented towards a demand-driven approach based on the needs of dairying households. SHDDP's focus now is on working with dairying households in a participatory manner throughout its activities.

This commitment to a participatory approach even includes project evaluation. Although the conventional form of evaluation will be retained (i.e. a short-term evaluation conducted by an outsider), a new formula has also been tried, which has met with considerable success. This consists of a series of self-assessment days. It was decided that if the project was really to be participatory and demand driven, it was vital to hear what farmers were saying about it *directly* themselves, and in their own words.

These self-assessment (SA) days would be a chance for project clients[1] to assess the new project approach as well as evaluate the implementation of project activities. It was also intended that the SA should be a learning exercise for all those involved, and subsequently take its place amongst the standard management tools of the project. To this end, a number of different methods and tools were designed by the authors and tested during the self-assessment process. A separate SA was also carried out for staff.

Selection of clients

In order to have an unstructured but representative sample of clients, a random selection of the areas in which SHDDP works was made, then a randomly stratified sample of households[2] was taken from those areas. One male and one female member from each selected household were invited to attend the SA days. In the past, extension was largely directed towards the husband in a household, and the vast majority of the cows were registered in the name of the husband. However, in the present phase, SHDDP has realised that women are heavily involved in a household dairy enterprise, being responsible for much of the work of caring for the cow and also for household nutrition. Thus, there has been a recent emphasis on seeing the whole household as a unit of production, and it was

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[1]SHDDP refers to all those taking part in project activities (farmers and dairy business people) as 'clients'.

[2] SHDDP uses the 'cooking pot' definition of household, i.e. all those who are regularly present and living/working within the same enterprise.

for this reason that both husband and wife[3] from a household were selected. In addition, gender issues are also a priority concern; therefore it was important that both men and women were equally represented. In total there were eight client SA days, two all male, two all female and four mixed.

There were two central priorities in developing a methodology suitable for clients' SA:

- to give clients scope to express their own opinions and thoughts freely without leading questions coming from the facilitators. Facilitators can unwittingly influence the type of answers received, and what is not said is often as informative as what is said; and,
- to create a non-threatening atmosphere in which farmers could talk freely about their dairy farming/business lives.

These two criteria ruled out the use of more conventional approaches such as written lists of questions with space to fill in answers, since some farmers, particularly women, are not fully literate, or do not have an adequate command of Swahili. Therefore, as a basis for discussion it was decided to use a series of pictures representing most of the activities in which clients of the SHDDP project would be involved. The GRAAP techniques used in Francophone West Africa were a source of inspiration in developing these SA methods.

Pictures

The participants of each self-assessment day were divided into small groups, and each group received an envelope containing about 50 small pictures. The pictures represented as many things connected with dairy farming as we could think of. They were simply drawn and represented one point/thing/activity only; e.g. a cow, money, grass, milking, an injection, a group seminar, selling milk etc. (see Figure 1). The groups were then asked to arrange these pictures on the floor into a larger picture which explained the day-to-day/month-to-month activities involved with dairy cow keeping, dairy farmer group activities or dairy

business activities, depending on which 'activity line'[4] was present that day. They were invited to reject any pictures they did not find useful and to draw extra pictures if they were needed. Each group presented its picture to the others, and this formed the basis for discussion and questions.

The pictures proved to be a powerful stimulus to provoke discussion, and many clients seized the opportunity to ask questions of their fellow farmers and to exchange ideas on a variety of subjects. At the same time, they provided a natural way for the facilitator to ask more specific questions, such as:

"You explained with this picture that you prepare compost from manure - how exactly do you do this?" "Who taught you how to do it?" "When?" "Do you find it useful?" "Why?"etc..

Our initial aim was not to be directive; however, we found that sometimes we had to ask more specific questions in order to fulfil our brief, since we found that certain issues of importance to SHDDP never came up when left to the clients. We tried to keep these questions as open as possible, so that the participants had to explain their own experiences and opinions, rather than just answering 'yes' or 'no'. We also found that when all the participants were clustered around a collection of pictures on the floor, the discussion was generally much freer and more lively. When we sat on chairs in a big circle, the flow of discussion tended to become more stilted and formal. None of the participants had any problems in interpreting the pictures - one old man exclaimed *"'When I saw the pictures, I saw my life exactly as it is!"*. Most participants also had no worries about drawing extra pictures (e.g. someone sweeping out the cow stall, milk quality measuring equipment, even a bull mounting a cow!) and those that said they couldn't possibly draw were easily persuaded to have a try.

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[3] For the purposes of evaluation, etc. SHDDP treats each wife in a polygamous marriage as a separate household.

[4] SHDDP divides itself into four 'activity lines': extension , farmer group, dairy business, monitoring.

Figure 1. Example of pictures used in self-assessment exercise
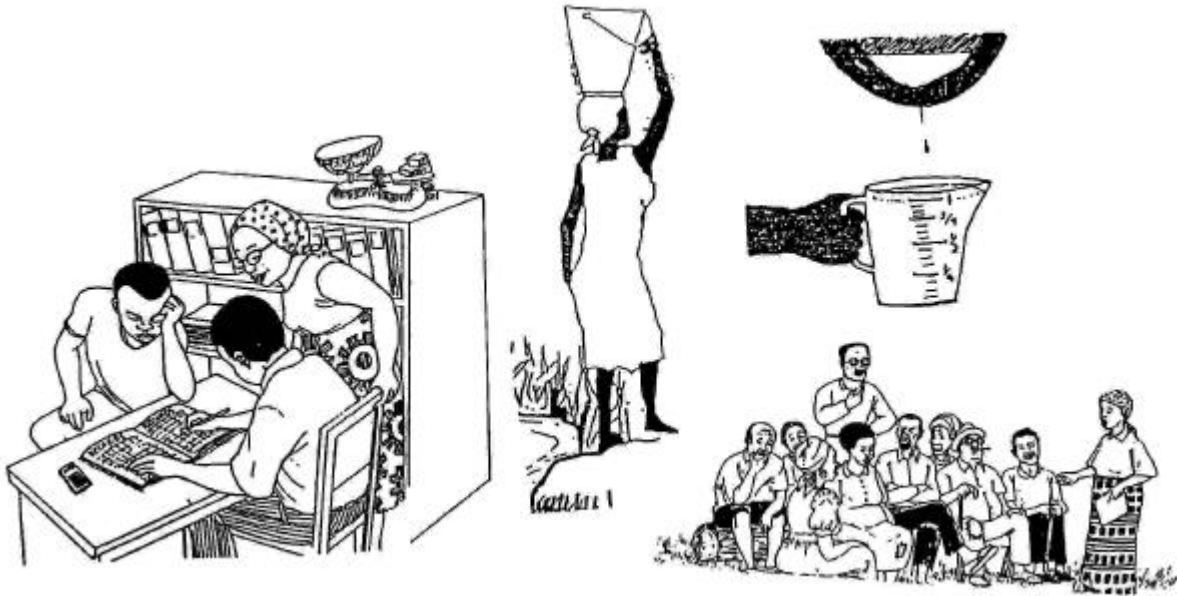
We wanted to keep the format as open as possible in order to provoke spontaneous comments on SHDDP, but to some extent, the presence or absence of pictures inevitably imposes the facilitator's preconceptions on the participants. For example, would farmers have mentioned record keeping so often if we had not included a picture of someone writing numbers in a notebook? We always emphasised that the pictures had no intrinsic meaning - they were to mean what the participants wanted them to represent. In many cases people would adapt a picture to their own needs: for example, one group used a picture depicting a group meeting to show their contented family sitting together in the evening after another profitable day of drinking and selling milk.

At the end of the day, depending on time, the number of topics already covered, etc., the session was usually rounded off by a general discussion on changes perceived in the service of the organisation in the last year and a half.

To facilitate this, the participants formed new groups and were asked to list the services (as dairy farmers, dairy farmer groups or dairy business clients) they had received (or not...) from SHDDP. Each person was provided with 10-15 beans (depending on the length of the

list) with which they were to score the various services, according to whether they had received the service and the value placed on it. Each group presented its list and explained the scoring. This provided another opportunity for questions to be asked. Although this method involved some writing, it was kept to a minimum, and each group appointed a secretary to write and read out the headings when it came to scoring. In this way, levels of literacy did not constrain full participation in the exercise.

• **Problems**

Inevitably, we faced some problems during these self-assessment days.

Group size and the desire to leave the format open often meant that the group went the way it wanted to. Many of the participants (particularly in the dairy business and farmer group days) seized the opportunity to exchange ideas with their fellow farmers/business colleagues; these lively discussions were not always directly relevant to the task of assessing SHDDP. However, it was obviously a felt need, and since they had all made the effort to attend, we gave them space for their discussions. We noted down the

points they were particularly keen to talk about, as possible useful feedback for SHDDP. On several occasions there were nearly 30 people in a group, which was too large when we were all together in one big group (and this was inevitable, although we did try to do as much as possible in small groups). When the group consisted of some confident vociferous people and some quieter shyer ones, the latter were drowned out; when the group consisted entirely of confident vociferous people, then it was impossible to hear everyone's views in the time allotted. A maximum group size of 24 people would have been more manageable.

The most serious problem encountered was where groups consisted of both women and men. In the first set of assessment days there was strict division, with men on one day, women on the next. This worked well and on both days, the clients contributed their ideas and opinions freely. In the last set, however, because of transport problems, husbands and wives attended together. This meant that the women were mostly silent, since they were constrained by the presence of their husbands. When asked to comment on a point, they would unanimously agree with the men. In a discussion about co-operation within the household between husband and wife, everyone swore that nowadays there was a great deal of co-operation and things were a lot better. However, during the lunchbreak, one woman came up to us, and although no one was remotely within hearing distance, she whispered *"It's all lies. Maybe for one or two of the women that is how it is, but for most of us, it's nothing like that"*. This inevitably cast doubt on almost everything that the women said. Since we only had one room, we couldn't take the women away and, although we did try to chat informally with them in the tea and lunchbreaks, they were not giving anything away while their husbands were nearby. But although unsatisfactory for assessment purposes, this situation offered interesting insights about gender relations.

We also noticed that whereas on one women's day, most women were prepared to admit that there was very little co-operation between them and their husbands, on another, once one or two women started to explain how their husbands shared everything with them these days, the other women followed suit, although

it seemed likely that this was not the case. The others got round it eventually by talking about the bad situation of 'other women, of course not the ones here today' but it does highlight the difficulty of gaining reliable information, particularly on sensitive issues or those perceived as somehow shameful, from a large non-homogenous group. However in the end, because we did the self-assessment with several different groups, we heard enough about such questions from enough people to realise what the problems were and why some groups would prefer not to admit to them.

This methodology brought out a great range of findings, including the following:

- in general, the clients were happy with the services provided by SHDDP, and were very aware of the recent changes taking place in the organisation;
- clients had an impressive level of knowledge about how to care for their cows;
- some dairy farmer groups were well established and functioning, but most still needed much support and assistance;
- clients appreciated the work SHDDP had done through the business line; however, more needs to be done to stimulate the milk market in order to dispose of a milk surplus in some areas; and,
- gender issues were a major topic of discussion and came out as a key constraint to the smooth running of a household dairy enterprise, i.e. men go to seminars and enjoy the financial benefits of having a cow, whereas women are further burdened by extra tasks without seeing any benefits, and often in the end have little incentive to care for the cow properly.

Some clear points for follow-up were highlighted by this study, especially the question of gender. SHDDP now has a comprehensive and extremely effective gender policy in place, which has begun to alleviate many of the problems cited by the women. Much work clearly needs to be done to strengthen dairy farmer groups, and there is also plenty of scope for looking further at the milk market and developing strategies to build up small milk selling businesses, as well as local input outlets.

• **Conclusion**

We adapted the methodology continuously as we went along until we felt satisfied with the way it worked and its results. As well as bringing out a range of findings, this methodology was a medium which the farmers themselves could control and use to express their concerns in their own terms. Some of the SHDDP staff had been sceptical about the methodology, particularly the pictures, but afterwards one was heard to say that he had never before seen farmers talk so much and produce so much information!

Recommendations

• In cultures where it is difficult for women to speak in public in front of their husbands, and where having husbands and wives in the same session is unavoidable, a possible technique would be to divide the group into two smaller groups of men and women and talk to them separately from the beginning. This might give the women the confidence to speak out, despite being in the same room as their husbands. If gender related problems are brought up, the groups could be brought together and a discussion facilitated (if the women agree). However, this would require considerable gender-facilitating skills, and would also be beyond the scope of the self-assessment.

• The pictures should be specific to each group - e.g. the dairy business group should have had a different set of business oriented pictures so that they could better explain their activities.

• Groups need to be smaller so that whole group discussions are coherent and not too threatening.

• Although we were using these self-assessment days to evaluate the project, the clients found them a valuable opportunity to exchange ideas with other clients whom they would rarely meet. This came out very strongly in the grateful and enthusiastic votes of thanks from the clients at the end of each session. Therefore, rather than trying to keep participants strictly to the predetermined agenda, there is no harm in giving them a certain amount of latitude, partly because interesting points do come out, and partly because it makes it a really good day out for everyone!

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