Forests, Trees and People NEWSLETTER

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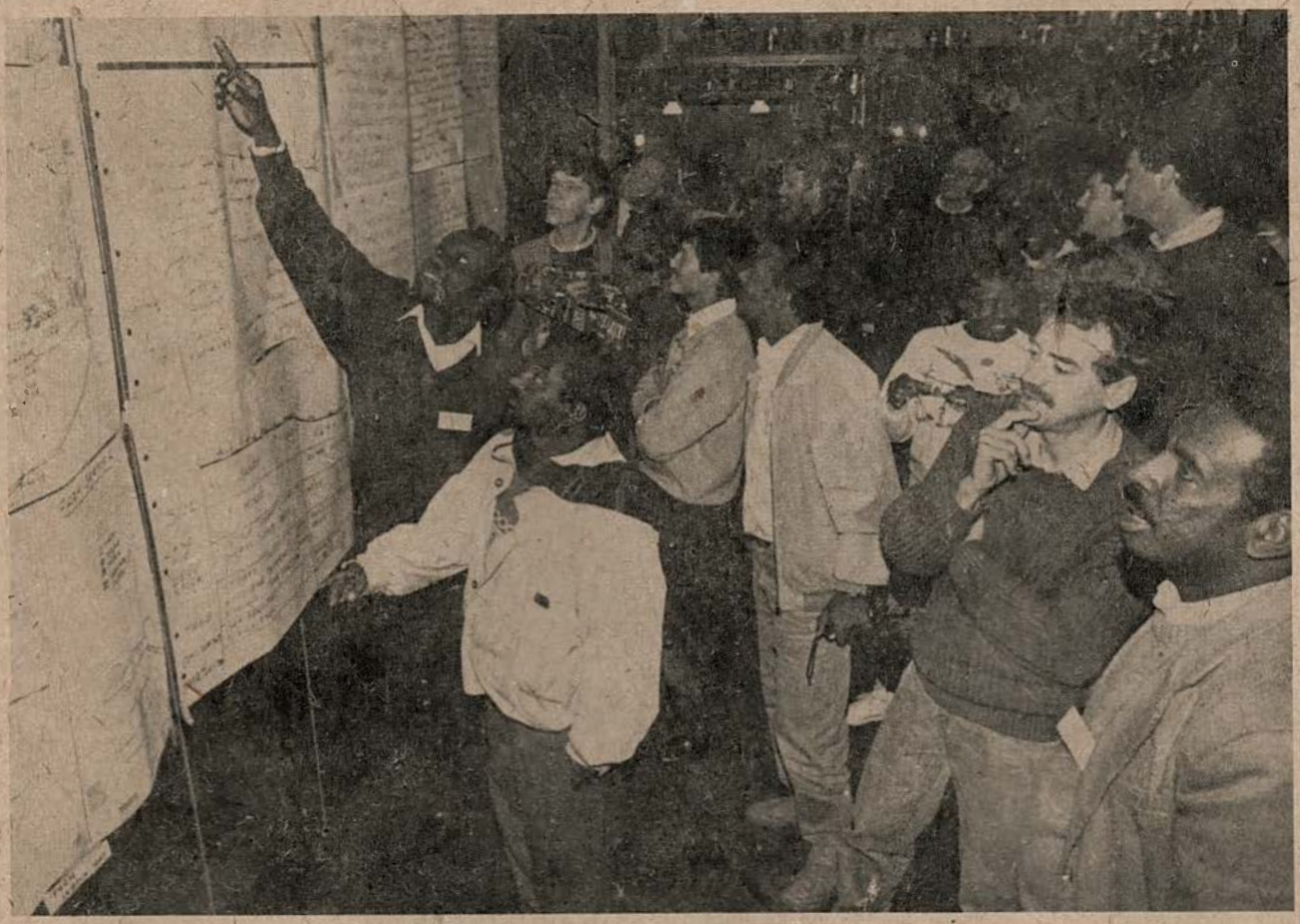

Forests, Trees and People Newsletter

is a quarterly publication distributed to field projects, institutions, organizations or individuals interested in and/or working with community forestry activities. It forms part of the FTP Programme's networking activities which are jointly run by the International Rural Development Centre (IRDC), Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SUAS), Sweden; the Community Forestry Unit, FAO, Italy; SILVA, France, and regional programme facilitators in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

The network is designed to share information about improved methods of planning and strengthening community forestry activities and about on-going or planned initiatives of potential interest to its members.

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In this issue

Cover photo: Foreign students taking part in the course 'Participatory tools for enhancing local initiatives' facilitate a lively public discussion between different interest groups in the Dutch village of Voorst on environmental issues. Photo: Gerard Veldhuis.

Participatory tools for enhancing local initiatives

by Marc P. Lammerink and Gerard Prinsen

In this article the authors describe the approach and different phases of the six week course "Enhancing Local Initiatives - Participatory Tools for Social Forestry". In practicing what they preach the course facilitators use participatory methods to enhance the participants' capacity to analyse their own working situation and develop their own personal action plans. Participants move and grow through the different phases, where both confusion and excitement are seen as indicators of the healthy process that is taking place. They develop, both on the basis of the contradictions in their own working practice as well as their own knowledge and analytical ability, a new working approach that recognizes and builds upon local knowledge.
The specific course described in this article was held in November and December 1992 in The Netherlands where eleven foresters and extensionists from eight developing countries participated.

The need

During the past two decades there has been an increasing demand for a forestry approach that can contribute to the process of sustainable development. This implies a development that is equitable and that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the needs of future generations. It also implies that forestry extension services have an important role to play in contributing to a participatory, decentralised and self-sustaining process of rural development.

Enhancing local initiatives of men and women farmers is not only an imperative from a socio-political perspective but also responds to a very pragmatic need. It is a two-fold operational strategy based on two important assumptions. First there is the fact that farmers know through experience and continuous experiments their own environment. Therefore they are a major source of locally tested and relevant knowledge.

Secondly, due to the magnitude of environmental problems we face today, a successful strategy necessitates that people themselves, not only policy makers and government officers, are recognized as the ones responsible for the management of their and their children's natural resources.

To be able to enhance the existing local initiatives in an effective way, professionals in forestry extension need new skills. They need to identify correctly these initiatives and support local groups in interchanging their knowledge and

experiments. They need to assist in developing sustained approaches. Participatory methods are very well suited to making clear what the local opinions on problems and solutions are. At the same time these methods provide an outstanding means of developing, in close collaboration with farmers, pragmatic plans of action that can be implemented immediately.

Training approach

Basic to the training methodology is that participants recognize the value of existing knowledge among the rural population. After this recognition participants are assisted to develop their own participatory approaches to enable them, as extensionists, to make this local knowledge the basis of development initiatives.

In fact the course staff is guided by the same principles during the learning process with the participants as those they advocate be followed in the field. Participants were shown that there is no standardized content that goes with each phase (see below) of the participatory approach. The exact content is structured around the knowledge and experience of the participants. The responsibility of the course staff (and later the course participants in their own work) is to outline, facilitate and maintain the logical order of the phases and connections between them. In the course methodology staff assist participants to describe and thereafter diagnose their own experiences. As a picture emerges of what is actually being done and what participants believe should be done, additional knowledge and skills are introduced in order to close the gap. It is only on the basis of this diagnosis that the introduction of new concepts and tools can be expected to be fruitful. Practicing these new tools and concepts is necessary to obtain the needed self-confidence to translate these newly acquired concepts into an effective personal action plan.

Training cycle

The five phases of the training cycle and how these were implemented are described in the following sections.

Describing achievements and difficulties

In the first phase of the course, the participants described their present approach to forestry extension. The achievements and difficulties were listed, as well as the possibilities and limitations. According to the participants most of the achievements were related to varying, but limited, degrees of awareness among the population on the importance of trees as a means to generate additional income. It was considered an achievement that over the past years social forestry professionals had succeeded in involving increasing numbers of government and non-government organizations in activities related to tree planting activities.

In terms of scope, the difficulties which participants faced were classified into two categories. First there were legal (ownership and tenureship), economic (low incentives) and institutional (policy, limited staff) restraints. In general they did not feel it was realistic to expect that they, as extensionists, would be able to influence these forces directly. Secondly, participants attributed many of their difficulties to the 'ignorance and cultural beliefs of people' or to their 'lack of technical know-how'. Participants were in agreement that farmers seemed reluctant to implement the activities being suggested by the forestry extension staff and a lot of efforts had to be made to convince farmers to plant trees. The less economic and legal incentives an extensionist could mobilize, the less receptive farmers were. These were the difficulties that they felt they, as extensionists, should be working with.

In order to share information about the approaches presently being used by the various course participants, groups were formed and given the task of developing a community forestry project in a typical but fictitious district, 'Olvana'. In working together participants not only shared useful experiences but the also discovered the bottlenecks that were collectively recognized. The result was a project proposal that could be considered to represent the commonly shared 'state-of-the-art' at the beginning of the course.

Diagnosis and reflection: confusion

In the next phase of the training cycle, participants were requested to make, individually, a sketch map of a farm that is familiar to them. Most participants drew their family's or their own farm. Then, leaving their professional context behind, participants listed the tree and shrub management practices that were used on these well known farms.

To their great surprise they were able to list several dozens of different tree and shrub management activities. Some examples were: selective planting and felling according to marketability and fruit or fodder production; the introduction of new species through contact with farmers from other regions; the construction of fences around seedlings; the planting of specific trees to keep birds away from crops; and pruning and coppicing to increase production. Two participants made mention of very successful reproduction techniques practiced by local farmers that were completely unknown to the others.

Participants entered into a state of confusion. How was

it possible that they, as extensionists, encountered so many farmers 'ignorant', 'reluctant to plant trees', and 'lacking technical know-how', while at the same time they knew of so many examples from their personal experience that indicated just the opposite?

After this inventory, participants studied several case-studies that not only confirmed the existence of these and other farmer tree management practices but also outlined some ways to involve farmers in extension and applied research through participatory approaches. Gradually an insight was gained that many extension policies, although they are based on research findings and therefore scientifically sound, actually ignore or work against the interests and the actual management practices of the farmers.

Conceptualization of a participatory approach

In the third phase of the training cycle, participants analysed several case studies that outlined in detail different participatory approaches. Through comparison participants acquired the insight that various participatory approaches may use different wording for the phases in their approach, or may distinguish between three to as many as eight phases. But participants discovered that there was a kind of logical order to be followed. They then developed their own synthesis of the various studied approaches and applied this to the 'Olvana' district. Here participants noted differences in the approach they previously developed for 'Olvana' and the newly designed participatory approach. For example instead of starting with an awareness campaign to teach the people about the importance of trees, the new project design started with an information gathering exercise to find out what people were already doing in terms of tree management. Instead of budgeting for the establishment of nurseries the budget made funds available for a workshop where local farmers could discuss their present activities, share ideas on what needed to be done and identify resources with which to do it. The project proposals had become fundamentally different as had their role as extension officers.

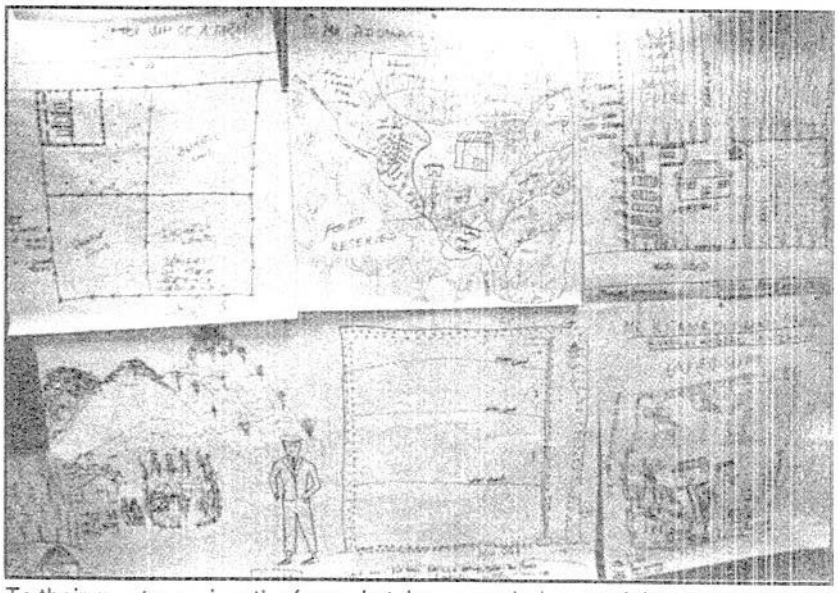
As participants realised that a participatory approach takes specific local conditions as the starting point, they also concluded that it is not possible to apply a rigid model in which predetermined issues that are to be dealt with are set by the extensionists. Their role is characterized more by offering and maintaining the logical order of the process of research and action. Generally a first step is to develop a clear picture, in dialogue with the villagers, the problems they face and their potentials. But how this dialogue is established differs in each situation. One consequence of this approach is that it demands a high level of openness and creativity on the part of the extensionist. An extensionist that has become a facilitator rather than teacher must have different skills, as the course participants clearly realized.

Therefore the participants were given an opportunity to acquaint themselves in a number of sessions with several participatory tools. Thus each developed his/her own personal toolkit, with the needed tools to match the participatory approach they outlined earlier.

Different tools for participatory intervention and data gathering were explored and practiced. For example: procedures for village self-selection, the creation with villagers of case histories, the village meeting, gridding, dialogue-interview techniques, transects, ranking and various forms of diagramming.

Practising: a South-North dialogue

Once participants had tools with which to make their participatory approach operational they were ready to enter the fourth phase in the training cycle: practicing and experimenting to identify the value and the limitations of the acquired techniques in a field situation. This was done



To their great surprise, the farm sketches revealed several dozens of different tree and shrub management activities that are practiced by farmers.
Photo: Gerard Prinsen

in the small Dutch village of Voorst (12000 inhabitants) with villagers who were interested in collaborating in a four day participatory research project.

The participants defined as the objective of this fieldwork that it should provide the extension staff and the villagers with an insight into the different forces that have determined the past and present situation and that will determine the future of the village. On the basis of this analysis, to be made with participatory techniques, different challenges and proposals for the future of the community would be elaborated with key informants. The results of this whole process was then to be presented to interested members of the community at a public meeting/seminar.

During the three days of field work the participants split into small groups to work with various community members (individual farmers, farmer's families, key persons from various agricultural organizations and the municipality, the local agricultural school) to create a clear picture of the rural village. Halfway through the process the information that had been gathered was checked with young farmers at an informal evening meeting. On this occasion participatory mapping was also practised.

After three days the results from the discussions, the sketch maps and transects were written on wall papers and presented at a final meeting to which all the villagers were invited. Those 35 people who attended, most of whom were farmers, had some factual comments on the information concerning the past and present situation. When the information was presented on the future challenges of the community the farmers started a very lively discussion among themselves.

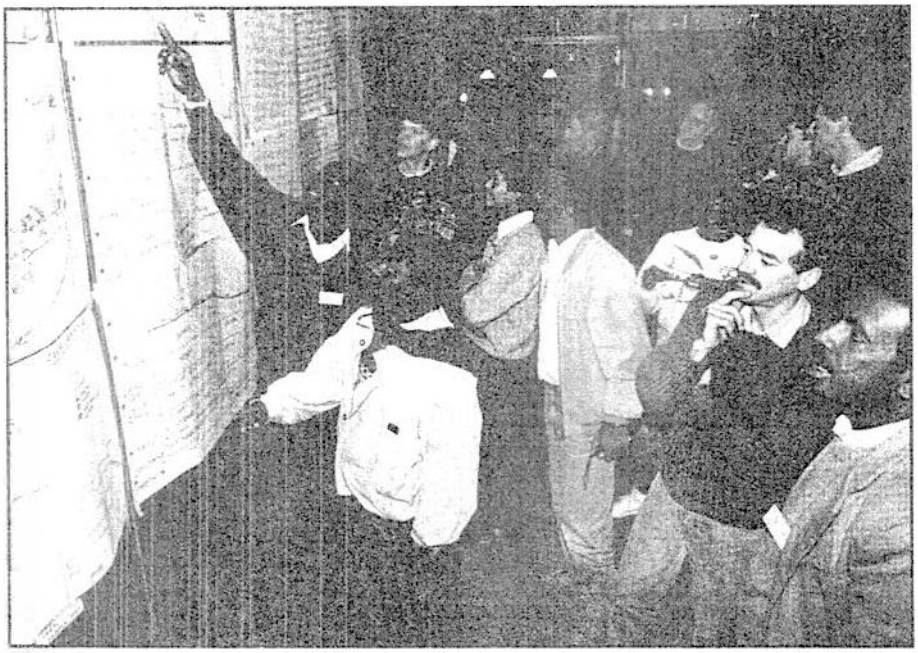
The three major challenges identified included: the quota for milk, the quota for cowdung (see box on the next page for explanation) and the increasing acidity of soils and water. The conclusions - that farmers in order to maintain a reasonable income needed to increase the size of their farms and intensify the production but also needed to take environmental protection measures - were contradictory.

A lot of discussion focused around the question of whether consumers were willing to pay a higher price for agricultural products that have been produced in an environmentally friendly manner. Though the villagers themselves were not in agreement on the answer to this question both they and the course participants agreed that this was the major issue for farming in the village.

In evaluating this exercise both participants and villagers agreed that the contribution of foreigners had been challenging and constructive. It had been a facilitating force to initiate a public discussion, for the first time, on an important issue between the different groups in the village. This actually came as a surprise, both to the participants and the villagers. The participants had not expected that they would be able to facilitate this discussion and the villagers had not expected outsiders to the village to be able to activate a discussion on an environmental issue that was increasingly dividing the agricultural community.

Developing a personal action plan

Returning to the course centre, participants entered the fifth and final phase of the training cycle with even greater enthusiasm. Their doubts as to the effectiveness of a participatory approach as well as their own ability to work with it were gone. Now they had to face the challenge of how to fit this new approach and tools into their own working situation.



Outsiders to the local community facilitate a lively public discussion between the different interest groups in the village on environmental issues.

Photo: Gerard Veldhuis

Participants started by using the same research methodology that they applied in the village of Voorst. The main difference was that each of the participants now worked on his or her own individual case. Central elements of developing this personal action plan included the delineation of a vision based on the past and present circumstances. Then the contradictions and challenges, rooted in the past and present, for future developments were defined. The analysis of these forces resulted in tangible proposals. One participant, for example, had now understood why his groups of farmers carrying out trials advanced only when fairly large incentives were distributed. Not only were they requested to test seedlings that were unfamiliar to them, but also they never expressed any previous interest in keeping nurseries with only one species. During the course he had realised that farmers (including his own parents) already did practise tree management and that the project proposals never took these into consideration. In his personal action plan he decided to try and review the programme and start with participatory research to analyse the actual tree management activities of farmers. On the basis of this analysis the opportunities for possible improvements could emerge.

Before devising the final personal action plan (PAP) participants were confronted with exercises and cases that distinguished different aspects of policy and organizational change and changing an operational practice. The last step was to structure and write down in detail these PAP with the help of standardized working sheets.

Conclusions

At the closing of the course, participants reflected on what they had accomplished. In addition to exchanging valuable personal experiences throughout the course they appreciated the importance of knowing that they were not alone in a search for more participatory approaches. Also most participants stressed the fact that they not only acquired knowledge on participatory approaches but even more importantly had gained increased confidence in their capabilities to 'learn by doing'. Others, even more daringly, added that the course made them realise that it is not so much a lack of institutional resources that hampers extension work. A far more important problem is the poor involvement of farmers in extension work. One group of participants stated this very clearly: "From being seen as ignorant, farmers are now recognized as knowledgeable partners." ❐

Both authors work with the consultancy group FMD (Forestry Manpower Development) which has during the past five years contributed to training and education programmes in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The course 'Enhancing Local Initiatives' was developed and executed by FMD in cooperation with the Management for Development Foundation (MDF) in the Netherlands. With a working approach based on participatory methodologies, FMD staff operate in the fields of Social Forestry, Integrated Rural Development and Natural Resource Management. The staff of FMD consists of foresters and social scientists who have combined their knowledge and experiences in an effort to develop training programmes in which local knowledge and skills are the building blocks for development initiatives.
FMD offers several courses and tailor made programmes. For more information contact: **FMD, PO Box 10363, 7301 GJ Apeldoorn, The Netherlands**. Tel: 31-55-222933, Fax: 31-55-225773.

The quota system for milk and dung are part of European Community (EC) policy

Farmers receive a subsidized price for the milk they produce. This price is more or less fixed and at a level far above world market prices. This guarantees farmers a certain income level but it also limits farmers' possibilities for increasing their income as they are only allowed to produce and sell a fixed amount of milk at this price. The latter is to avoid EC governments having to pay more subsidies than they have bugeted for and to avoid having to stock the surplus milk that EC consumers cannot drink and that governments cannot sell on the world market.

The Netherlands is a very small country with very intensive livestock production. The increasing acidity of surface waters is partly caused by free dispersion of dung. Therefore the government has assigned farmers gradually decreasing quotas for cow and pig dung that can be freely dispersed over the land. This is forcing farmers to change their cattle feeding patterns in order to decrease the acidity in the dung, keep a precise record of the amount of dung produced, store the surplus in expensive tanks and pay for the destruction of their surplus by specialized industries.