

A Strategic Approach to LandCare Projects

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Since 1998 the National Department of Agriculture (DoA) newly known as the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) made funding available to LandCare Grants for the implementation of projects at community level. The vision was to improve the livelihoods of people in an ecologically sustainable manner. LandCare themes were identified and grouped into two key areas, namely Focused Investment (Water, Veld Soil and Junior) and Small Community Grants. In 1999, the ARC-RFI (Range and Forage Institute) became involved, with the implementation of conservation tillage based cropping systems (Trytsman 2008).

What was initially a gypsum project became a LandCare project and ARC-RFI was approached by the ARC-ISCW (Institute for Soil Climate and Water) to assist in the implementation. After this initial project more money was allocated by the then DoA for similar projects, especially on the Easter Seaboard side of South Africa. The aim of the researchers involved was implementing projects that place people at the “starting point, the center and the end of each development intervention. “But as Hendrik Smith admits in his PhD thesis (Smith 2006) *“The first dilemma facing researchers trained in natural sciences is the death of knowledge and skills they need to design manage and facilitate such a process.*

In general, I can categorically state that natural scientists in South Africa are not trained in these aspects. When exposed to such situations, they feel totally left in the dark as to what is required for successfully completing a project.

Furthermore, most of these researchers have very few mentors to guide and assist them through the process. The result is usually poorly executed projects not achieving most of the intended outcomes of good research and development projects”.

Methodology of doing a LandCare Project

The theory behind the approach to bring about significant change at community level involves three broad areas as illustrated in Figure 1: that of planning the change, managing the change and how to improve. Whiles planning and preparation are done mostly early during the live cycle of project implementation, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) occur concurrently.

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Project Lifecycle

How to Start

The building up of confidence, knowledge, communication skills, trust and the willingness to take on responsibility from all stakeholders is a crucial process during this stage.

Preparation

This part of the process can be described as the diagnostic and situation analysis phase. Secondary data should be sourced, getting information, reports and maps from the target area and the local conditions if available, beforehand. This can be useful for background information for the research team. Building rapport, trust and getting beneficiaries to participate from the start should be high on the agenda of the project leader. Tools that can play a vital role to get the target groups to participate, such as rich pictures, semi structured interviews; seasonal calendars etc. can be used.

These tools are helpful for the researchers in that it provide the research team a glimpse in time into the lives of the beneficiaries. Encouraging participation during this early stage of project inception is vital to get buy-in from beneficiaries, strengthen local capacity to influence decisions and to create an environment for change.

For the diagnostic phase, the intended outcomes should be the following:

- To describe and understand the current farming and / or production systems
- To identify and analyse the key farmer problems, needs, fears and aspirations (within agro-socio-economic situation)
- To identify possible and existing interactions and structures (linkages)
- To develop some preliminary solutions/ interventions (ideas) on how to solve these problems
- To plan the first phase (s) work
- Stakeholder analysis report is compiled

Stakeholder Analysis

During these early encounters with beneficiaries it is also wise to spend time in clarifying the FOCUS (system of interest) of research. During a stakeholder workshop beneficiaries cluster stakeholders, according to their roles, influence and importance towards the focus. This workshop involves a range of relevant stakeholders which were identified by primary stakeholders or key informants. A proper stakeholder analysis is impossible without a broader contextual analysis. Stakeholders do not operate in a vacuum. Their relationships, problem perception and resources are influenced by social, cultural, political and institutional context in which they operate; with their assistance the stakeholder analysis is completed. After this stage it would be wise to give report back to Stakeholders to verify the data collected.

Planning

A Logical Framework Approach (LFA) is an instrument for objective-orientated planning of projects. Project beneficiaries and the ARC as the implementation agency handling the project were involved in the planning activity. The LFA method was used during a participatory workshop. The main objective of the LFA is to give a logical approach to a complex problem situation.

1. Problem analysis: The tool often used during a participatory workshop is the use of the so called drawing up of a problem tree. The problem analysis is done by having SH listing down the problems (causes or the roots and the effects or the branches). This procedure makes it possible to clearly visualize the causes and the effects of the focal problems and clearly find relationships between different problems.

2. Objective analysis: The objective analysis is a positive reverse image of the analysis. The objectives should answer the following questions;

- Goal: Long term vision of the project owners.
- The project purpose: The very reason why the project is needed.
- Results/Outputs: State the service or product the beneficiaries will receive. What the project is responsible to deliver.

3. Work plan of the project: this is the means to achieve the objectives and the means to eliminate the causes of the focal problem. The activities included the work that is done by those involved in the project. Example of activities are training, on-farm trials etc.

4. Resources and inputs in order to implement the activities: Resources provided for implementing the activity within the framework of the project consists of:

- Technical expertise (local /or foreign, Equipment, Premises, Funds, Time

5. Indicators: Indicators need to be objectively verifiable. In other words, anybody needs to be able to measure the results. Important to state the sources of verification in the project document.

6. Risk analysis and risk management: Includes critical reflection on internal and external factors as well as a plan to overcome influence that can negatively influence the project also called the "killing factors".

7. Assumptions: factors outside the project scope but important to fulfil the goals of the project.

How to Manage and Improve

The implementation phase consist of an iterative and cyclic approach of action and research (i.e. learning) with four major phases act, observe (and monitoring), reflect (and evaluate), plan (and modify) (Kolb 1984). Figure 2 illustrates the use of repeated action research cycles that facilitate an iterative process which maximized learning and integration of new innovations into existing farming systems (Winter 1997)

Monitoring

The systematic, regular collection and occasional analysis of information to identify and possibly measure change over a period of times.

Evaluation

Is the analysis of the effectiveness and direction of an activity or research project and involves making judgement about progress and impact (Abbot and Guijt 1998).

a. *Awareness and Communication*

Farmers' Days were primarily an awareness-raising activity where the audience, which consists of local farmers, provincial and national departmental staff, local leaders and organisations, and other relevant stakeholders, were informed about the vision, objectives, activities and technologies of the project.

b. *Training of Trainers*

Training is an important aspect of capacity building, but like technology development, it is more a process than a once-off activity. It is not something undertaken to start a process of technical or organisational change, but rather a continual effort to upgrade human resources by sharing ideas and concepts and disseminating techniques, methodologies and skills.

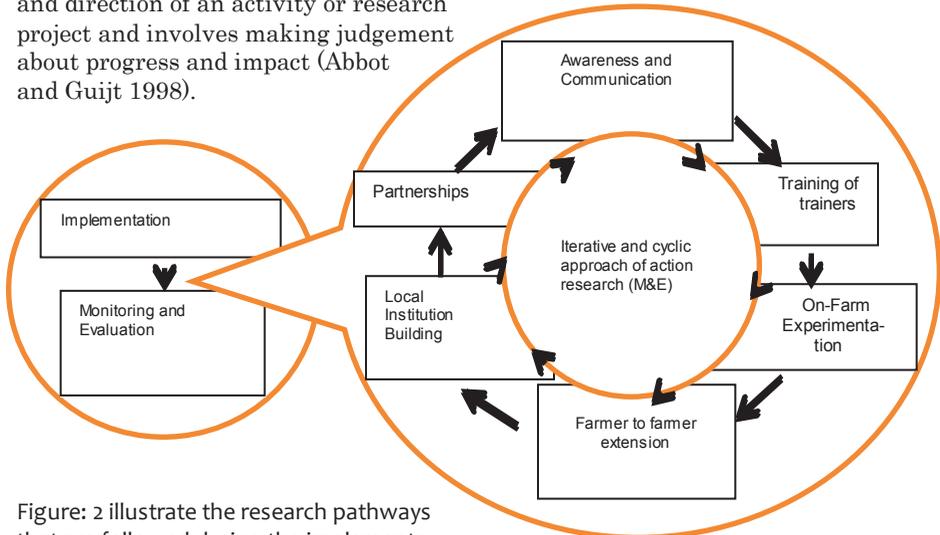


Figure: 2 illustrate the research pathways that are followed during the implementation, monitoring and evaluation phases of the projects (Smith et al 2001).

c. On-Farm Experimentation

The on-farm, farmer manages trials in the LandCare projects created a platform for testing of new technology. These trials were annually evaluated by a panel of farmers and researchers and evaluated according to pre-determine guidelines. Inputs for the trials were sponsored by the project. Researchers also provide training, guidelines and technical support to farmers.

The exploratory researcher manage trial were collectively manage by extension personnel and researchers. These trials played a vital role during farmer days and awareness creating.

d. Farmer to Farmer Training

Farmer-to-farmer extension has developed as a means of improving the dissemination of technical improvements at the local level. Farmers working with researchers and extension officers are encouraged to share their technical developments with other farmers building a process of information exchange.

e. Local Institution Building

Two distinct methods were employed in the LandCare projects to foster the development of social structures or local institutions, i) a monthly action forum and ii) the formation of small learning groups. This monthly farmer forum was seen as the 'heart' of the project – it is here that the project was managed in a participatory and adaptive manner.

f. Partnerships

The multidisciplinary nature of the projects mend that the institute responsible for management and implementation had to form partnerships with different tertiary institutions, farmers and other ARC institutes for delivering the required output and outcomes.

Conclusion

Scientists as members of a research team, involved in rural development often need a paradigm shift, from technical focus to a human development focus. New ways of thinking new attitudes are not always easy, but are crucial to the success of the project. An action research approach assisted project teams to facilitate participation by a range of stakeholder in order to ensure sustainable management of the natural resource. A key function of action research was the stimulation of feedback, reflection and social learning amongst stakeholders (Smith et al 2009). Although the soft system approach is dynamic and ever changing, the principles remain the same. Creating a platform that will facilitate and promote social learning and by doing just that, empower beneficiaries through participation to help themselves.

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