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Bridging the divide in community development:

The importance of process in linking community demands and responsive external support

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Bridging the divide in community development: The importance of process in linking community demands and responsive external support

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Her team, Victoria Atieno Apondi, Langat Kipkorir, Levi Alfred Orero, and Nabeela Jivraj, also Coady graduates, have been instrumental in making this project a success.

The World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) – (www.worldagroforestry.org) is a centre of scientific excellence that harnesses the benefits of trees for people and the environment. Leveraging the world's largest repository of agroforestry science and information, we develop knowledge practices, from farmers' fields to the global sphere, to ensure food security and environmental sustainability.

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Introduction

Since smallholder farmers in the Global South are among the people most vulnerable to the impact of current and future climate change, numerous external actors focus on building their capacity in climate change adaptation and mitigation practices. Previous experience however shows that the success, efficiency and sustainability of these projects depends on appropriate models and tools being implemented in order to take relevant climate-smart practices to scale.

After the successful completion of a four-year asset-based community-development (ABCD) climate change adaptation and mitigation pilot (2010-2014), and more than three years into the four-year (2015-2019) proof of concept phase, I propose to formulate sixteen key messages about the importance of process. These lessons focus on how external actors can meaningfully support community-driven scaling of land-based development activities that are both context-specific and responsive to local identities, interests and preferences (IIP). These IIP can be understood as the quintessence of people's complex life aspirations that are composed of and influenced by their socio-cultural background (identities), their rational calculations (interests) and their personal taste (preferences). Scaling, here, is furthermore understood as more quickly, equitably and sustainably reaching more people over a wider geographical area.

The sixteen lessons, which are sub-divided in seven categories, encompass:

1. **Get suitable people on board:** Select suitable staff; select suitable project participants; engage early on;

2. **Choose an approach that inspires communities to drive their own development:** Take an ABCD approach; enhance accountability through record keeping; encourage financial sustainability;

3. **Encourage community members to stand out and inspire others with their passion and hard work:** 'the strong ones'; choose diverse leadership;

4. **Help community members to understand the business behind the practice:** Prioritize value chain literacy; provide small-scale business tools;

5. **Integrate conservation and enterprise diversification into an income-generating perspective:** Link training outcomes with livelihood enhancement; train for best practice; train for diversified livelihoods;

6. **Foster demand-driven outreach support and backstopping:** Provide consultation opportunities; ensure adequate follow-up support;

7. **Monitor success and assessing impact in a participatory manner:** Have a participant-driven M&E strategy.

In the following section, I outline the contents of each of these sixteen lessons, as well as what matters and why it does. In the concluding section, I briefly contextualise the lessons and propose various applications.

Scaling community development projects for sustainability: 16 key messages

Get suitable people on board

1. **Select suitable staff**: Ensuring that the project is implemented on the ground by staff members who are conversant with local languages and cultures is crucial for social acceptability of the project.

    What matters: Having a strategy to recruit and maintain suitable staff. We select project staff from ethnic, religious, social communities that are strongly represented in the project area. While we observe suitability of staff members in terms of language and culture, we observe local power dynamics and ensure that staff members are not only from more powerful groups within the community. We also select staff members with complementary skills (i.e. in community development and social sciences on the one hand, and in agriculture and other biophysical sciences on the other hand). We are also mindful to have a gender and age balanced team.

    Triple A field attendant facilitating a 'commodity leaky bucket' and 'commodity ledger' refresher session, March 2017

2. **Select suitable participants**: Rigorous selection of project participants who are interested in and suitable for a given project contributes to the overall success and overall sustainability of the project.

    What matters: Having a strategy to select suitable project partners/groups. Based on the underlying approach of asset-based community-driven development philosophies to support individuals and groups to 'use what they have to get to where they want to go', we use a group selection tool to screen eligible community groups for minimum material well-being (assets), and particularly for social capital. Social capital is typically expressed in social networks of reciprocity, cooperation and trust, which we analyse based on how long groups have been working together, what their objectives are, how they designate their leadership and what the groups have achieved together (agency). We also screen for the

objectives that groups formulated during registration with government services to ensure that we, as an external actor, are a 'match' for these groups as well. Altogether, the idea is to increase the likelihood that an external actor and a local actor - in our context, community project groups - are suitable in terms of offer (in knowledge, training, exposure) and demand (identities, interests and preferences).

3. **Engage early on**: Early engagement of local authorities and the wider community in the target area builds official support, general awareness and a network of linkages.

   What matters: Having a strategy to engage with other stakeholders, notably government offices. We engage with the local authorities in the targeted area from the beginning. Apart from official/legal procedures that have to be followed in order to secure permission to work in an area, we visit the representatives of the local administrative offices in the target area and introduce ourselves and the project. We then ask them to organise community meetings, and to mobilise all formal and informal community groups in their area to attend. After introducing the project, we administer a brief questionnaire to interested groups, the results of which are analysed through our group selection tool, and the project groups are selected accordingly. Local authorities are informed and included in the process but are not invited to select or propose project groups, which allows us to address issues of selection bias and elite capture that often hamper project success. At the same time, other community members and groups are informed about the project during these community meetings and know about the outreach model through which they can benefit from the project indirectly. During these initial meetings, we also forge relationships with relevant government offices (i.e. with agricultural extension officers) whose expertise we draw upon in technical trainings.

Triple A team meets former project group whose members successfully took up agroforestry, March 2017

Foster community-driven development: Choose an approach that inspires communities to drive their own development

4. **Take an asset-based community-driven development (ABCD) approach**: An in-depth asset assessment through the application of various ABCD methods makes it possible to identify the target community's identities, interests and preferences and hence to define an action plan that is context-specific, locally-relevant and socially-appropriate.

What matters: Basing the entire project on an ABCD approach. ABCD is an approach to community development that places agency and control in the hands and minds of the communities themselves, positioning external actors as supporters and facilitators. Fundamentally, the ABCD approach uses various tools to help communities to identify and mobilise their various assets (human, social, natural, physical, financial) and to use them to pursue activities that enhance who they are (identity), which livelihood activities they want to pursue (interests) and what they like (preferences) to develop their individual households and the community as a whole. Our active engagement with the project groups starts with ABCD, including: appreciative inquiry; a transect walk for physical and natural asset assessment; a 'hand, head and heart' exercise for human asset assessment; organisation and association mapping for social assets; and community leaky bucket for analysis of the local economy and business opportunities. ABCD however is more than just a set of tools, it is the foundation underpinning all other activities, supporting communities to understand, identify their own development pathways, and drive their own development initiatives.

Local government extension officer discussing the dairy value-chain during dairy ToT training of lead-farmers, July 2016

5. **Enhance accountability through record keeping**: Clean record keeping is directly related to accountability and hence to the performance of groups, individual members and leaders.

   What matters: Having a strategy to foster accountability. Record keeping is part of our wider group dynamics and leadership training, which strengthens group cohesion and mutual accountability. Specifically, groups are trained in writing meeting notes, drawing up formal group constitutions with group objectives and activities, community action plans etc., all of which provide a physical record against which progress can be tracked and based on which individual members can be held accountable. During that training, we also do 'animation': an abstraction exercise through which groups characterise their individual members and designate different roles to them with the help of animal characters. We typically use catalogues of animals that are known to community members and discuss common character ascriptions to these animals, and the advantages and disadvantages of each animal. We then discuss which animals should play which roles, for instance who should be the leaders or the conflict managers, based on the characteristics identified in these animals. In a next step, the group members' characteristics are jointly assessed to help in the designation of different roles. This abstraction exercise helps to see which community members are suitable for certain positions, functions and tasks within their

community groups and beyond, which later helps in the selection of Village Savings and Loaning Association (VSLA) officials and lead-farmers (LF) as well.

6. **Encourage financial sustainability**: Sound mobilisation and use of one's own financial means through VSLAs is the foundation for sustainable engagement in targeted activities. Membership of VSLAs fosters discipline in financial and planning matters and provides a platform for regular meetings and exchange among community members.

   What matters: Having a strategy to foster financial independence and sustainability and to counter dependency. One of the main constraints of many development projects, and of people engaging in activities in a sustainable manner, is a perceived lack of investment capital. This contributes to projects having to deal with dependency syndrome, which often leads to project participants 'waiting' for an external agent to provide this capital and/or pay them for activities and to the discontinuation of project activities after external support is withdrawn. Mobilising resources is hence fundamental for project engagement and sustainability. Our approach to mobilising these resources is that sensible resource use depends both on financial literacy, and on a decision of individual households to use their available resources more efficiently. This is why we encourage project groups to set up VSLAs, following the CARE model, which encourages regular meetings under strict but very transparent regulations, which satisfy both our objectives. VSLAs typically meet once a week, which allows us to use the opportunity of each group meeting every single week at the same time as a regular entry point to share information and/or propose new activities.

Foster growth: Encourage community members to stand out and inspire others with their passion and hard work

7. **"Run with the strong ones**': Selecting LFs, who are trained on behalf of their groups, because of their interest in and dedication to the selected activities, fosters appreciation of hard work and of those who 'stand out' in the community.

Triple A dairy lead-farmers during practical training session with Triple A project staff, government extension officer and farmer trainers, July 2016

   What matters: Having a strategy to concentrate most effort on those who are receptive and willing to try improved practices and who show a sense of civic duty to encourage others. After training all project groups in the 'basic capacity and agency development' modules, the project groups revisit their community action plans (CAPs) that were initially developed after the

ABCD training. In light of further insights related to group members' identities, interests and preferences, and with strengthened financial opportunities through the VSLAs, CAPs are revisited and redefined. At this stage, we declare our intention to support activities in three activity types, which are typically defined at the sub-sector level. Individual project groups select these activities completely freely - but since groups are encouraged to 'use what they have', two things are likely. First, groups typically select activities that are related to their group objectives. Second, they are encouraged to use the external partners as 'social assets' and it is hence likely that they choose activities that are in line with the professional identity of their respective external partner. Since we established mutual suitability in terms of offer and demand during the group selection phase, it is often possible to anticipate which activities are likely to be selected by the communities, which greatly helps in project planning.

Rather than training the entire group in the selected activities, we ask project groups to self-select LFs who are trained on their behalf. Using LFs allows us to cut project costs and encourages recognition of hard work and inspiration. It also allows us to get through the technical trainings in relatively short time periods. Training LFs furthermore allows us to re-group people from different project groups in line with the activity for which they were selected, leading to further exchange of ideas and practical skills from across the project area.

8. **Choose diverse leadership:** Selecting various LFs per activity and promoting various activities per group provides opportunities for exchange.

Triple A horticulture lead-farmer and her family enjoying their first harvest after the horticulture ToT training of lead-farmers, October 2016

What matters: Having a strategy to embed individual trainings in a wider context that enhances cross-learning and mutual encouragement and accountability. Selecting various LFs per activity, and various activities per group, promotes positive competition among LFs of the same activity, as well as between LFs of different activities that were supported by the external actor. We typically observe a few basic characteristics, beyond the self-drive and sense of civic duty addressed above, including balance in terms of gender, age and other factors of social differentiation. Observing these characteristics allows us to train people from different demographics and social positions, which, in turn, makes it easier for different groups in the community to access these LFs and their specific knowledge and skills. Altogether, using different LFs for different activities drawn from different social strata provides opportunities for exchange and insights into varied experiences that the community members can draw upon.

Help community members to understand the business behind the practice

9. **Prioritize value-chain literacy**: Participatory or producer-led value-chain analysis improves understanding of the markets and one's opportunities to increase profits by reducing costs and improving income.

   What matters: Ensuring that partners develop a sense of ownership and control over the practices they take up by understanding their position in the value-chain and adopting a 'business' perspective. The promotion of activities needs to take markets into account, or rather: the identification and potentially the strategies to generate demand need to be foregrounded, before supporting the project participants' engagement in specific activities. Rather than only performing 'external' value-chain analyses, we believe that participatory market actor identification and mapping help the project participants to develop further agency. In turn, this increases their sense of control over their practices and their businesses. Through these exercises, community members can create linkages with different market actors. These can help to reduce input costs by aggregating demand and addressing actors that are placed higher in the chain directly and to increase income by aggregating agricultural produce. Linkages can also help to access higher paying clients/markets.

   Village Savings & Loaning Association meeting, November 2016

10. **Provide small-scale business tools**: Business skills and simple business tracking tools give people an overview of the resources and time it takes to engage in an activity, which helps to manage expectations, and fosters a sense of ownership and control.

    What matters: Propose and co-create tools, and provide support in the application of these tools, to enhance planning capacity and control over engagement in various livelihood practices. The small-scale business tools are among the most important elements of the project, because they help project participants have their numbers 'at hand'. The household leaky bucket and various commodity ledgers, which ideally would form a farm ledger, help project participants to plan their activities, anticipate when and how much financial input they need and allow them to sell other produce and/or take loans from the VSLA accordingly etc. The anticipation of costs and time lines related to income help to manage expectations and support project farmers to only engage in certain practices once they have done the maths and ensured that they are able to engage in the practice from the beginning to the end.

Integrate conservation and enterprise diversification into an income-generating perspective

11. **Link training outcomes with livelihood enhancement**: Embedding technical trainings related to climate-smart technologies with an income-generating perspective relates uptake of proposed activities and technologies to tangible outcomes.

    What matters: Proposing livelihood-relevant framing for technical trainings and deliberately linking activity with livelihood enhancement ('development'). After groups select specific activities/sub-sectors, we embed the technical training modules into an overall business logic. In our context, the core idea is to support uptake of 'professional' farming, and 'farming as a business', rather than supporting general 'subsistence' farming. The income-generating and/or business logic provides incentives to engage in the practices and helps to overcome one of the typical challenges faced by external actors: the lack of motivation to engage in 'project activities'. When proposed activities are framed as 'being for the benefit of the project' rather than for one's own benefit, community members might ask for 'sitting allowance', while embedding trainings in livelihood-relevant framings strengthens interest and 'ownership'.

12. **Train for best practice**: Climate-smart best practices for soil, land and environmental conservation can be embedded in the technical trainings identified in the action plan and are hence framed as crucial for successful engagement in selected income-generating activities.

    What matters: Having a strong focus on best practice: those that are both 'good' and 'climate-smart'. Actors interested in promoting 'good agricultural practices' or other 'good practices' often struggle with 'convincing' project participants why these practices should be taken up. This is particularly true for less 'popular' conservation technologies, including soil health management practices, the rationale for which is less easy to grasp. By including these practices in the overall 'technical skill-set for successful farming', the importance of the adoption of these practices is de-emphasised, while engagement in these practices is defined as a pre-condition for further income-generation. Hence, we promote engagement in CSA practices for the sake of one's pocket rather than for the sake of the environment.

Triple A horticulture lead-farmer showing her newly established kale field, October 2016

13. **Train for diversified livelihoods:** Training in various activities supports integrated farming systems, and promotes diversified income sources, which directly relate to adaptive capacity.

What matters: Supporting livelihood diversification and integrated farming systems. The project's offer to support project groups in several activities is directly related to our interest in supporting farm and income diversification. Both are in line with strategies to improve adaptive capacity of households, since households that engage in various activities and draw an income from various activities are less likely to be adversely affected by climate change.

Newly established chicken house of a poultry lead-farmer, March 2017

Reinforce project outcomes: Foster demand-driven outreach support and backstopping

14. **Provide consultation opportunities:** A simple field office with fixed consultation-hours during which community members can get advice serves an important backstopping function.

What matters: Providing opportunities for exchange and support in a demand-driven model; being clear on the exit strategy. Independently from training sessions in the field, which project staff typically conduct in specific localities close to project participants' homes (typically in local places of worship), we have a field office that opens twice per week. The office is open on market days and located in close proximity to the central market of the region, allowing project participants and others to get targeted information and support from project staff. This, again, increases ownership and agency, because project participants do not have to wait for project staff come to their farms and/or their areas for trainings. Instead they can access project staff whenever they want additional support. We also provide access to various books, leaflets and other information material at the field office.

15. **Ensure adequate follow-up support:** The facilitation of regular exchange visits among LFs, the creation of linkages through market visits, and support for the creation of specific producer groups, enhance sustainability and constitute a viable exit strategy for external supporters.

What matters: After 'hands-on' engagement is over, fostering exchange and social capital development for enhanced sustainability. In the last step of our project, LFs train other project group members, as well as members of the wider community in the technical and business skills they received. To support their practice further, we organise regular get-togethers of LFs with their LF cohort (hence all dairy LFs meet, all poultry LFs meet etc.), which allows them to exchange successes and challenges, and find inspiration and solutions together. These get-togethers also help us to remind LFs of their social responsibility towards other members of the community by whom and in whose name they were trained in the first place. Further market linkages through market visits are used to support and encourage the formation of 'interest' or 'producer groups' among LFs; but we do not do that directly, since such groups need to be organic and 'authentic' to work.

Count and win double: Monitor success and assess impact in a participatory manner

16. **Have a participant-driven M&E strategy**: Participatory monitoring and evaluation tools can be used to track successes of the project, both in terms of livelihood outcomes for the project partners, as well as in terms of return on investment, while also benefitting project farmers directly by increasing their awareness of the numbers behind their practices.

What matters: Proposing simple and participatory metrics to track 'success' at various scales. We invested considerable time in the definition of relevant metrics to track project success. At the moment, we track changes (through regular rounds of data collection) in household economics through 'household leaky bucket' data collection, which considers both on- and off-farm income and expenditure. We also collect additional agricultural data, including crop harvest and land sizes under cultivation; outreach data in terms of who trained whom on what etc. We are attempting to satisfy various interests and objectives with these metrics, including: (a) showing the donor that we produce value for their money ('return on investment'); (b) tracking whether/how households engage in the proposed practices and whether/how uptake of certain practices influences adaptive capacity and/or general household well-being; (c) involving project participants in participatory data collection in a creative way that reduces the often extractive nature of M&E data collection activities, and that, most importantly, serves the households themselves.

Graduation of Triple A poultry lead farmers after a five-day course, July 2016

Furthermore, we conduct qualitative research alongside these more M&E type research activities to understand more about the dynamics of LF outreach activities, the workings of VSLAs etc.

Conclusion

This paper emphasises the importance of process in externally-supported community-development, and in our context specifically, in an ICRAF-supported climate change adaptation and mitigation project. It contributes to a growing body of work on the 'missing link' between the identification and appraisal of existing systems on the one hand, and knowledge, innovation and skills related to desirable practices for context-specific sustainable livelihood engagements on the other hand. The proposed process-based model, and the specific tools we use, create and accompany meaningful communication between external actors' 'offers' in terms of expertise, knowledge and skills and communities' 'demands' in terms of identities, interests and preferences. In doing so, the process constitutes a 'sustainable delivery mechanism' with the help of which community development overall, and specifically the sustainable uptake of relevant adaptation options, can be supported.

Further material

Scientific articles

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Trees on Farms: transforming lives through sustainable agriculture, https://www.youtube.com /watch?v=GMSGvOMEr-M&t=438s/

Women in agroforestry for improved livelihoods, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= Ana5b9O6hiM/

Youth empowerment through agroforestry, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wl1G86G8dc0 &t=38s/

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