

Learning through writing

Paul Van Mele

The use of reporting tools, such as the logframe analysis, has become an industry in itself with its own following of consultants, publications and pressure to comply with the 'rules'. The efforts that go into such a system are often not in proportion to the learnings that they generate for project staff, managers and donors alike.

Pressure to regularly submit project reports creates stress among partners and organisations. The critical reflection on achievements, difficulties and opportunities is often limited to that of the person writing the report. Its importance for organisational learning should therefore be carefully re-assessed. In addition, the number of people reading reports is limited. Even colleagues rarely read one another's writings. A general feeling is that official reports are boring, full of donor language, never saying what actually happened or what really mattered. So how could we avoid all these shortcomings?

Reflecting, interacting and documenting

Funded by the U.K. Department for International Development, the Poverty Elimination Through Rice Research Assistance (PETRRA) project managed 45 sub-projects between 1999 and 2004, based in Bangladesh. After a year of intensive interactions, a group of twenty sub-projects focusing on uptake and extension methods became the subject of the book "Innovations in Rural Extension: Case Studies from Bangladesh" (Van Mele *et al.*, 2005). This article presents some of the strategies followed and lessons learnt while documenting each sub-project's experience.

The process began in October 2003, when the twenty sub-projects were given guidelines intended to assist in reflecting and documenting their experiences. The two-page guidelines covered the following eight sections:

- Summary
- Actors and Network: who did you work with, what was their background
- Evolution of the Method: origins of ideas, changes made during project
- Extension Method: the steps involved so that others can apply your method
- Keys for Success: to help others recognize to what extent they have the same ingredients in-house, or what they should look out for in building partnerships
- Potential Pitfalls: to help others avoid some of the hurdles you encountered
- Scaling-up: strategies you used for mainstreaming method
- Conclusion

Under each heading were a few paragraphs explaining how to obtain the desired content. Apart from suggestions to present certain information as tables or diagrams, no indication was given as to the style to be used.

Each of the twenty sub-projects prepared a first draft by early November 2003. During a one-day workshop, the extent of the challenge became clear. Showing and enabling people how to reflect on their experiences would not be achieved overnight, neither would it be possible to turn them all into professional writers. And how would it be possible to work with 20 projects at the same time?

This first short experience resulted in 3 main insights:

- 1) the documentation guidelines needed to give more detail and suggestions for style and format if some uniformity in case studies was to be obtained;
- 2) people needed a project case study to help them better understand the guidelines;
- 3) if the project was serious about the desired output, it would be necessary to work intensively with all partners, over a period of time.

To address these points, one case study example about a community-based seed production project was developed, while at the same time testing and improving the guidelines for authors. The guidelines were expanded to nine pages and included style-related tips such as:

- Write the way you talk
- Use nouns and verbs
- Don't show off your vocabulary
- Quality is in the detail

As project documentation facilitator, I returned to Bangladesh and worked intensively with all project partners from January to September 2004 to help them put their experiences into words and pictures. Above all, as one of the overall project aims was to mainstream the learning from each sub-project, the exercise needed to stimulate reflection.

Formal reports gave us insights into mainly quantitative impacts, but were limited in explaining what really happened. To help us understand the reality of people's work better, and put their experiences in a historical, sociocultural and institutional context, we decided to use a broad range of tools related to innovation systems analysis, such as actor linkage maps and enterprise webs. These tools were used in mini-workshops to further stimulate institutional learning, as well as using photographs (see page 30) and narratives. The idea behind the narratives was relatively simple: let people tell a story while reflecting on key points.

Narratives

Writing helps to internalise our experiences and, as such, a narrative can act as a self-learning tool. Inspired by examples I had seen working with an anthropologist in Bolivia, I used one narrative produced there to motivate the field staff in Bangladesh. Surely this was much more pleasant reading, so rich with details, that it was possible to actually visualise what had happened during his field trips. But could anybody write in this way?

We received some narratives following the example provided. But although people had really enjoyed this new way of expressing their experiences, none of them continued to use this reporting format when not asked to. After all, it was a format that was not part of their formal reporting requirements. In future, project managers could actively encourage their staff to regularly write a narrative and use these as part of their participatory monitoring and evaluation. They could also be asked to include 2-3 of their best narratives in their final report. An example of a narrative from the project is presented in the box.

Action plans, targets and deadlines

Editing a book or writing a chapter is impossible without closely interacting with all actors involved, from project manager to field staff, farmer and dealer. We interviewed lots of



Using a colour chart to discuss rice.

Box 1. A narrative

Teeth of Gold

Helen Latifun Nessa

At the onset of the session, I asked the women if they use any equipment to test seed dryness prior to storing their rice seed. All of them denied firmly, so I asked once more:

“Are you sure that you don’t have any equipment with you to test seed dryness?”

“Yes, we are. We do not use any equipment,” they replied.

“Then how do you do the testing?”

“We use our hand, feet, ear and teeth.”

“Don’t you consider these as your equipment?”

“Oh my goodness!”

They all grasped the message and laughed loudly. When Ms. Rokhsana, the facilitator of the session, asked them to explain their traditional method, they replied:

“A crackling sound comes when we shake seeds close to our ears.”

“A croaking sound comes when we bite rice with our teeth.”

“The seed feels slippery when we stir it with our feet.”

“The seed feels lighter when we test the weight of dried rice.”

Despite the range of diagnostic tools, all confirmed that using teeth is the best way. When I suggested they should take utmost care to keep their teeth well and strong, they all laughed again.

Then the practical session began. Women were invited to rate three batches of seed with 11, 13 and 15% moisture content, respectively. They were all excited. One by one they came to the front and slowly started crunching the seed. All had a serious and attentive look on their face while Ms. Rokhsana noted down their opinion.

Participants were still in for a surprise when Ms. Rokhsana brought out a scientific moisture meter to test the validity of their opinion. Once more doubt appeared on the participants’ faces. “Do you have any objection?” she asked. Although a little confused, curiosity took over and they soon came forward accepting it as a challenge. Rokhsana explained that the moisture content of rice seed should be less than 12% and if it were higher, seed would require more drying.

Rokhsana took the moisture meter and started testing. The results confirmed the women’s opinion. The whole event made them very happy: they realised their teeth are worth gold.

people. As agricultural extension is a highly complex matter, workshops often drew on network diagrams, matrices and a range of other visual exercises.

To keep track of the progress of all 20 sub-projects, clear action plans and deadlines were agreed upon. Although the ultimate reward would be for each partner to have a chapter in the final publication, we initially worked towards another target. All had to present their case studies at a national workshop, held at the premises of the Department of Agricultural Extension in Dhaka in April 2004. The output was captured in a proceedings.

Reflecting on our experiences

This documentation process not only resulted in lessons learnt about how new extension methods had been developed by a wide range of organisations, but also helped to build learning capacities and make the methods more widely known and accepted.

However, the extent to which these capacities become an important part of an organisation’s culture depends not only on the organisation’s philosophy, but equally on its workload. For NGOs that rely heavily on donor funds, it is especially important to assess their “project saturation point”. Project overload can have a negative effect, as staff perform up to a certain level, after which the quality of their work starts to decline. Time for reflection, as a necessary element in the learning process, is often lost at the expense of doing more activities and writing more and more boring reports in search of funds.

As the project is committed to optimise ownership of the lessons learnt, facilitation of the documentation process was seen to be as important as the end products themselves. Some of our struggles during the whole documentation process are highlighted below:

- Of all the sub-projects working on uptake and extension methods, many had poor writing skills and lots of interaction was needed to help them explain their experiences.
- People who come in from outside to evaluate the projects do not see the amount of informal discussions that have gone in the whole process of institutional change and method development.
- Each subproject has their own strength, as such reducing the potential to develop general guidelines for case study preparation. This could be difficult for people who have an inflexible mindset when using guidelines, even if creativity and flexibility with structures and style is stimulated.
- As most people are only familiar with formal (and boring) report formats (often in bullet-point style); training is needed on writing narrative stories.
- Starting the documentation process in the last year of a project puts a lot of pressure on staff to comply with monitoring and evaluation and other official requirements.
- High ranking people may insist in taking the lead in writing the case study, rather than consulting field staff within their own organisation.
- Documenting project experiences is like the next step in testing the solidity of a partnership. Existing power relationships become clear; without good facilitation government staff do not consult with their NGO collaborators, even if they may hold the most valuable experiences.

More lessons could be presented, but I don’t want to get boring. ■

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