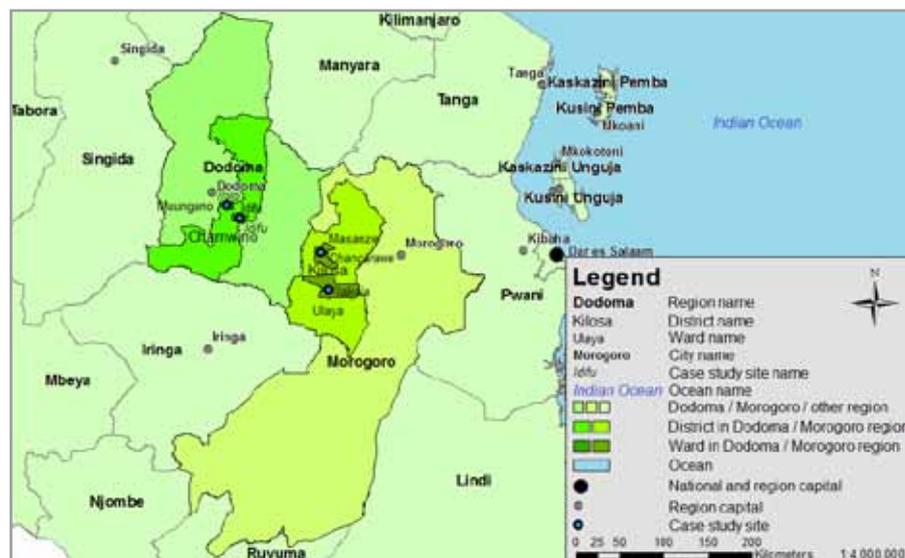


Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: a tool for making farmer groups function better

Since the 1990s, community based organisations (CBOs) such as farmer groups have been at the forefront of development strategies, positioned as key partners for enhancing livelihoods and reducing poverty. The success of any project, however, depends on how effectively the farmer groups function and evaluate their progress. Pramila Thapa, Pamela Ngwenya & Brigitte Kaufmann report on a project in Tanzania.



Map of Tanzania showing study sites.

Credit Alexander Zägel

Many groups fail due to poor leadership, a lack of transparency and mistrust among members. Furthermore, social hierarchies often hinder the way a group functions by excluding the views of those members with less power and influence.

At the German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL), we believe that facilitating the development of useful and appropriate tools for enhancing farmer group planning, monitoring and evaluation of activities is a powerful way to cultivate these skills among group members. This is especially the case in locations where farmers may have little or no formal education.

In early 2015, an innovative project was implemented to enhance food and livelihood security with smallholder farmer groups in two regions of rural Tanzania. One region—Dodoma—is semi-arid and the other—Morogoro—is semi-humid. Since rain-fed agriculture is the major occupation of between 75% and 85% of the people living in these regions, increased climate variability poses a threat in terms of food and

livelihood security.

DITSL is collaborating with three farmer groups in Tanzania: Wendo (in Idifu), Upendo (in Changarawe) and Tuamiho (in Ilakala). We helped the farmers to identify, explore and implement their own innovative plans to enhance their livelihoods. Through supporting a participatory process of scenario-building and planning, each farmer group implemented their own innovative project—a soap making enterprise (Wendo), a bicycle rental enterprise (Upendo) and an upgraded irrigation system (Tuamiho). The farmers designed these innovations themselves with the intention of diversifying or enhancing their income sources so they could re-invest in their agricultural activities.

PM&E: an appropriate tool for defining appropriate action

After implementing their innovative projects, there was a need to monitor and evaluate (M&E) to assess the outcomes and to identify areas for improvement. It is often bemoaned that M&E is “top-down”, donor-driven and overlooks the views and needs of the

people managing the projects - in this case, the farmers. The knowledge gained from M&E is often shared too late or not shared at all with project participants. This is where Participatory M&E (PM&E) comes in. With the working experience of DITSL’s team, gained in several other sub-Saharan African countries, we have developed a participatory approach to M&E as a tool for defining appropriate action.

In PM&E, group members learn about collecting and analysing data to track the progress of a project/activity, to identify problems and to support the implementation of appropriate actions. The aim is that such information and reflection can help the group to find ways to improve their project. Essential to this process is that the farmers undertaking the innovative activities are the ones who decide on what should be monitored/evaluated, which data should be collected and how this should be done. PM&E activities and tools are therefore inherently fitting, or appropriate, for the users and can be more useful in their own context than externally-designed M&E strategies.

The guiding intention of introducing PM&E to the innovation groups in Tanzania was to help the groups to self-manage their projects and enable them to implement learning from their M&E activities, right away.

PM&E: the process at glance

Six months after the projects were started, we organised workshops to establish PM&E with the three groups in Tanzania. The following five-step-process, with guiding questions, was initiated:

- Orientation and planning: what is PM&E? what is it for? who will do it?
- Deciding on the PM&E focus: what do we want to evaluate? what do we

want to improve? what information is needed?

- PM&E development and action plan: how can we collect the appropriate information in an appropriate way?
- Collection of the information and analysis: what are the results and what do they tell us?
- Presentation of PM&E results with all group members: what shall we do now to improve our project or solve the problems we have identified? What new information is needed?

Over a three-month period, at least seven workshops took place with each farmer group, to guide them through the above steps. In the first session the groups were asked to form monitoring teams, so that the task could be

efficiently delegated; the only criterion set by DITSL was that the PM&E team should not include group officials, as they have other tasks.

It was stressed that literacy was not a requirement to be a team member, as PM&E tools do not have to involve written words. Each PM&E team went on to decide on issues to evaluate, select indicators for monitoring, define the frequency of their data collection and design a tool for looking at and recording the information they needed.

The information was then collected, discussed and analysed in order to decide the appropriate actions needed to improve the outcome of the projects. Although the PM&E process took time and energy, when reflecting upon the challenges being faced in their innovation projects, each farmer group showed keen interest in trying it.

Benefits of PM&E

Farmers reported that through implementing a PM&E process, they acquired knowledge of how to effectively record and share information. Sharing of information within the group improved financial transparency and trust in all three cases. In the soap making enterprise, after monitoring the income and expenditure, the farmers found that their business was not facing a loss, as they had previously suspected.

In the bicycle rental enterprise, the group learnt that the behaviour of their shop attendant was discouraging customers and they then took appropriate action to change this situation. In the irrigation group, the farmers were suffering a drought and through their regular monitoring activities, were then able to assess irrigation needs more effectively and enhance their tomato production.

By increasing and sharing information within the groups, PM&E fostered accountability and trust-building, especially between leaders and other group members. Moreover, the system ensured that those who were sometimes more marginalised were included, such as the elderly and illiterate. Such members were encouraged to record data by developing and drawing symbols, as shown in the photograph (below).

One illiterate elderly female monitor from the soap making enterprise remarked, "Since I became the monitor, I am happy to have learnt how to "write"! I didn't know before; you told me even I can "write" by drawing, so, I have drawn here...see, I've got 1500 [Tanzanian Shillings, by selling one bar of soap]. I have drawn a long line to represent a thousand and I have drawn the small dots for 100s [Tanzanian Shillings]"

In the picture shown, the farmers drew symbols to depict the activities and expenses incurred through their soap making enterprise: for example, nylon worth 14000 Tanzanian Shilling (TSh) (US\$6) and group stamps worth 45000TSh. To draw and understand these pictures, one does not need to be literate. This approach to PM&E can therefore enhance social inclusion within the group.



The soap making group busy at work.

Credit Pramila Thapa

In all participating groups, farmers reported that implementation of PM&E supported self-governance, especially in terms of managing and recording financial transactions. Such records helped to reveal the current situation of the innovation processes and enabled them to take corrective actions to avoid or minimise potential losses.

Raising the interest of group members in PM&E required extra time and effort from the farmers and was not always easy. Some initially asked why the researchers could not just do the M&E themselves! However, co-designing and conducting the M&E activities in this participatory way is essential to generating data relevant to them and their own activities, which soon became clear to the farmers. This is evidenced in the way that some farmers in Ilakala have now taken the PM&E learning home and applied it to their household livelihood activities.

The inclusion of illiterate, elderly and female farmers in the PM&E teams brought in important and often marginalised views and in some cases, brought a new sense of unity to the group. Participation, social inclusion and a collective decision-making process promoted transparency, accountability and trust among group members in all our three cases.

Thus, the PM&E process not only improved the management of innovative projects but also fostered more positive group dynamics and better functioning. These overarching benefits confirm that PM&E is an appropriate and effective tool for CBOs, such as those involved in the innovation project in Tanzania. The process can assist in identifying appropriate actions to bring about positive change. More broadly, we suggest that PM&E works well as a competency building process for CBOs, to support them in taking ownership of their own development.

Pramila Thapa, Pamela Ngwenya & Brigitte Kaufmann work with the German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL GmbH), Witzenhausen.

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For more information contact Dr.

Pamela Ngwenya, German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL GmbH), at the Faculty of Organic Agriculture, University of Kassel, Steinstraße 19, 37213 Witzenhausen, Germany. Tel: +49 (0) 5542 607 18; Email: p.ngwenya@ditsl.org; Web: www.ditsl.org



One of the groups meeting for a discussion

Credit Maria Restrepo



Photograph showing symbols used to monitor and evaluate the cost of soap making

Credit Pramila Thapa