

Stimulating Farmers Learning through Interaction Visits

An Experience from Watari, Kano, Nigeria

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Summary

Exposure and interactive cross visits are some of the powerful learning tools of extension. And so links and cross visits between farmers in the Hadejia Valley Irrigation Project (HVIP) area and their counterparts in similar areas were used as a way of promoting learning and sharing of experience. The desired impact is to enhance irrigation knowledge and skills, promote greater participation in irrigation system operation and maintenance, increase adoption of viable technologies and strengthen Water User Associations (WUAs) management. In this regard irrigation farmers from HVIP visited and interacted with their colleagues in Watari Irrigation Project (WIP). Major learning points were - project overview/water sources, system operation & maintenance, farms and WUA's activities. More knowledge and information was also exchanged during an unmediated bilateral consultation between the two sides. In a feed back, farmers express delight with the experience and acknowledged benefiting from their colleagues' system maintenance, agronomic and marketing practices. A key lesson learned from the exercise was that these types of visit's success depend on quality of planning and availability of the needed material resources. We conclude that farmers interact and communicate free (if not better) with fellow farmers.

The Watari experience

The concept of farmer-to-farmer extension was found to be effective in different parts of the world and likewise several experiences from the field provided indi-

cations of the effectiveness of adopting its principles. Bunch (1982) describes one the principles as "motivating farmers to learn new ideas in order to extend them to other farmers". Based on this principle, an NGO in Nepal trained and exposed farmer leaders through cross visits as a strategy of inducing farmers to adopt new forestry technologies.

Since 1999, the National Agricultural Extension and Research liaison Services (NAERLS) of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Center de Cooperation International on Recherche Agronomique Pour de Development (CIRAD), the Hadejia – Jama'are River Basin Development Authority (HJRBDA), Kano, with the support of the French Embassy in Nigeria conceived a collaborative program aimed at strengthening the capacities of both professional staff and farmers, and promote greater involvement of beneficiaries in the irrigation system's management (see also *Beraterinnen News* 2/03). As part of that on-going effort, establishing links between farmers in the Hadejia Valley Irrigation Project (HVIP) area and their counterparts in similar areas was identified as a way of promoting farmer-interactive learning and sharing of experience. Such learning is expected to lead to enhancement of irrigation knowledge and skills, promote greater participation in irrigation system operation and maintenance, increase adoption of viable technologies and strengthen the self organizing capacities of Water User Associations (WUAs) in the HVIP area. In line with this objective a farmers interaction visit was designed and conducted during the dry season (month of April) of 2002, during which WUA representatives from HVIP visited and interacted with Watari Irrigation Project (WIP) farmers and WUA leaders.

The visit's methodology

NAERLS specialists facilitated formal communication and request for official consent between the two

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farmers' associations and the agencies working directly with them, i.e. Kano State Agric and Rural Development Authority (KNARDA) for WUAs in WIP and HJRBD head office on behalf of the WUAs in HVIP. A pre-visit to the WIP to make contacts and identify learning points was also planned. HVIP extension staff working with individual WUAs as facilitators, guided by NAERLS specialists, mobilized and reached agreement with WUAs - nominated representatives, on the objectives, date, logistical arrangements and a checklist of special topics of observation / discussion during the visit. The farmers were reminded on 3 key learning aspects, namely:

1. See and discuss water management techniques with WIP farmers and staff.
2. Observe, test or discuss irrigation operation and maintenance practices with the WIP farmers and staff, and also
3. Observe or discuss WUAs affairs with the WIP farmers and staff.

A total of 34 participants, consisting of 3 HVIP senior management staff, 4 extension staff, 24 representatives nominated by 8 WUAs and 2 specialists from NAERLS set off for the trip, in a bus also provided by NAERLS. A senior management staff of the WIP joined by the project's head of extension staff and some WUA leaders received the visiting team. No formal program was prepared, but in line with usual protocol a little time was allowed for briefing by the project's manager, introduction of names and light refreshment before the visit to the field began. In the field, the host WUAs facilitated by WIP staff led the visitors on a field walk and observation to 4 major learning points in the project area.

Learning points

Project overview – farmers saw the medium earth dam and its reservoir, located on the Watari River which serves as the project's main water source. The reservoir is operating at 50% capacity presently because only about 30% of the proposed project area is developed.

Table 1: Profile of Watari irrigation project

Information	Descriptors
Project construction began	1996
Project's proposed area	1400 hectares
Area developed	690 hectares (in 2002)
Number technical staff	6
Number of extension staff	17
Number of farmers	5,000
Services provide by project staff	Water distribution, maintenance, forestry and WUA organization
Major crop (in dry & wet seasons)	Tomato, onion, pepper, rice, wheat, maize

Irrigation system operation and maintenance – the level of WUAs participation in system maintenance is quite commendable. HVIP farmers were impressed by the weed-free nature of pathways and irrigation structures seen. Surprisingly, no breaches of irrigation structures were seen in WIP, a problem which is common to the HVIP.

Irrigation practice – HVIP farmers saw some farms in the already developed areas. In one of the fields cropped with tomato, a considerable time was spent on questions & answer. The farm's owner, though had neither access to credit nor easily affordable inorganic fertilizer, has produced a wonderful crop by strictly applying the extension agent's recommendations. With a little fertilization and spraying, he established an attractive and healthy looking 2 hectares field of tomato. Having followed the correct spacing and almost optimum fertilization he claimed to be picking an average of 100 baskets every week, a figure not rivaled by any of the visiting farmers.

WUA activities – the strong points of the WIP farmers are that they follow research recommendations and carry out cooperative system maintenance activities well, in spite of their weak WUA organization and management status. Moreover they have more years of irrigation experience. The opposite is the case for HVIP farmers. On the other hand the HVIP farmers are presently obtaining and repaying institutional credit regularly due to their strong and organized WUAs.

WUA-initiated marketing strategy – the WIP farmers realized that costs of transporting their products to markets in Kano and Abuja are increasing and decided to negotiate with buyers to come to the farms to buy. The negotiation has worked and they show the visitors a site where a proposed market is under construction. The effort is taking both the WIP farmers and commodity buyers to implement. HVIP farmers were impressed with this achievement. They realized that they need such a marketing arrangement more than the WIP farmers due to the longer distance between HVIP and either or Abuja markets.

Consultation session – a bilateral consultation session was held at the end of the field walk, to discuss key learning aspects seen or heard in a more detailed and mutual setting. For this venue the WIP farmers' common resting place, a simple open area surrounded by shady trees was used. The exercise involved the two farmer associations mainly, no third party or facilitation. The farmers split into small groups to ease and allow broader participation. Observations and issues not seen or discussed well during the field walk were revisited and questions raised and answered. In his remarks the leader of HVIP farmers representatives expressed happiness with every thing he saw or heard. He commended the WIP farmers' spirit of self-help and especially their keen interest in adoption of improved farming practices. The leader also extended an invitation to WIP farmer to visit HVIP in future. In his response the WIP leader congratulated the visitors for attaining such a good level of organization.

Feed back from the farmers

Visit's impact on knowledge – when asked to state some of the important things they learned during the event, the HVIP farmers' representatives responded as follows:

1. It is delightful to see weed-free distributary and field canals at WIP. This reminds us to improve our own system's present condition too.
2. The cropping intensity (near 100%) at WIP is impressive. That of HVIP is as low as 10 – 13 % in the dry season, in most sectors.
3. Adoption of good farm management practices, improved agronomic practices in particular, pro-

ved beneficial as shown by the high cropping intensity and tomato output seen in WIP.

4. The farm-gate marketing strategy organized by WIP farmers is a good idea that may work well. HVIP farmers need to adopt a similar strategy to solve problem of the long distance that separates them from large Kano markets.

Follow-up action – the representatives and the extension staff subsequently agreed on what should be the direct and indirect measures of the visit's impact on HVIP farmers.

Two major actions are required:

1. **The expected role of farmers' representatives** is to extend the knowledge gained during the tour to their colleagues in the respective WUAs immediately.
2. **Subsequent impact** is expected to be seen in form of visible improvement in activities such as system operation/maintenance, agronomic practices, cropping intensity and WUAs management.

Problems encountered during this exercise are as follows:

1. At the WIP head-works noise of flowing water made it difficult for many of the participants to hear the briefing given by the guide. A megaphone would have solved the problem, equipment which is usually suitable for large audience.
2. Only a video recording of the visit was made. But most of the farmers do not have videos. In this case still pictures would have been more useful during dissemination.
3. Length of field exceeded 2 kilometers. If this was known before the visit, a motor vehicle would have been used to facilitate movement.
4. Time was a critical factor. As a result the one day planned for pre-tour identification of learning points and interview with WIP staff and farmers was found to be impracticable.

The important lessons learned from this tour are:

1. Farmers interaction visits are effective learning tools in extension, technology dissemination, organizational strengthening, etc. but their success

depend on, among other things, appropriate timing, good technical planning and availability of modest financial resources.

2. Information exchange between farmers may require mediation by facilitators, especially where the original objectives are being derailed.
3. Although the main goal is learning, follow-ups are needed to further motivate farmers to take action.

Concluding remark

Farmers' interaction visits are strong learning tools in extension. As a learning tool the visit was used to achieve the objective exposing farmers to improved knowledge, skills and experience with hope of increasing their efficiency, productivity, self-organizing capacity and strengthening their partnership with HVIP authority in irrigation management. The exercise demonstrates the fact that farmers communicate and interact free (if not better) with fellow farmers. The level of questioning, discussion and exchange of information between them was extensive. Their delight was evident when they flatly rejected a reminder that the time allotted for the consultation session is over, and instead requested extra time.

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