



Young deaf woman as community photographer of farmer innovation in Tigray, Ethiopia

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The usual way of documenting farmer knowledge and innovation is researcher-led: everything is documented that the researcher feels is important for his or her purpose. This may mean that key information is missed, or experiences are captured in a language and style that don't attract other farmers. This is why PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia joined in the efforts of the international PROLINNOVA network to develop and promote an approach to farmer-led documentation (FLD), in which farmers are involved from the beginning in deciding on why, what, when and how to document their innovations and experimentation. Information documented in this way can easily be shared from farmer to farmer, from village to village, from district to district, and from region to region. Moreover, FLD can strengthen the links between farming communities, on the one hand, and extensionists, government officials and policymakers, on the other.

PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia decided to pilot FLD in Tigray Region in the north of the country. The team formed to facilitate the FLD pilot was made up of a senior researcher (female) and a junior researcher (male) from Mekelle University and a female journalist from the regional radio station in Tigray: the three authors of this paper. PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia was already working with female and male farmers in Participatory Innovation Development (PID) activities building on local innovation in subsurface drainage, water-lifting devices, home-made drip irrigation, rearing queen bees and managing agricultural biodiversity. This had inspired especially the women to take more active roles in development. They were interested in having their innovations and PID experiences documented, especially because women's innovations are seldom identified and publicised. The team's idea was that FLD would give rural women the opportunity to document their innovations and practices so that they could share these in their and other communities.

In November 2008, the team visited Tahtay Maychew and Geter Adwa Districts, with the idea to encourage outstanding woman innovators to document their own innovations. At a village meeting involving eight male and two female farmer innovators involved in PID, the team explained the reasons for focusing on women-led documentation of women's accomplishments and experiences in innovation related to agriculture and natural resource

management. The PID group of farmers greatly supported this focus, because they felt that women's innovations normally receive less recognition by people both inside and outside the community.

The team asked the farmers in the PID group to whom the training in photography and audio-recording should be given: to the women innovators themselves, to a daughter or son of each woman innovator, or if they had other suggestions. The PID group preferred to have a "community documentalist" and suggested a young deaf woman named Million, 21 years of age, who had left school after completing 7th grade and could therefore read and write. Million was a single mother of a small child and also taking care of her younger sisters and brothers, since the death of her mother, Tsige, an energetic innovator who had been identified during the Indigenous Soil and Water Conservation project that had preceded ProInnova–Ethiopia. The PID farmers wanted to give Million an opportunity to learn new skills. They and Million were quick to understand the potential of pictures to share the various kinds of local innovation more widely and to give other farmers a better chance to learn from local innovators.

The FLD facilitation team returned with a video cameraman from Mekelle University, who trained Million for two days in digital photography. Immediately after she had learnt how to operate the camera, she first took a picture of her little son. When she saw this picture in the camera, she expressed immense happiness. For her, the pictures have a special meaning, as she cannot express herself in spoken words.

Million took still more photos in her home and in the village. When we looked at the photographs together, she was proud of what she had achieved and become even more interested in visual recording. She felt that photography made it possible for her to show her capacities. She was confident that she could continue to take pictures on her own without any help. She wrote to us (in Tigrinya): "I feel happy that I acquired this skill, which may help me not only in getting me remembered, as not being neglected as a deaf person, but also to generate income for the future."

She then took many pictures of the PID farmers in the field. After they saw the pictures that Million had taken, some of the farmers' reactions were: "This is good. You researchers are in the regional capital in Mekelle. You are too far from us. But she can take photographs of our practices. We can also call her to take pictures during our daily activities when we feel it is important. Things can be documented at an early stage." "She can cope with new things, and giving such training to her is also important. Personally, she may benefit from that and, for the community, she will be an asset." Thus, the farmers felt that, as a member of the community, Million could document local innovations and practices in the way and at the time that the farmers wanted to have them documented. They were happy that skills to take pictures had come closer to them and could help in showing their progress over time.

Some follow-up training was integrated into the Women Learning Women (WLW) project supported by a small grant from the Gender, Agriculture and Rural Development in the Information Society (GenARDIS) project of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). This project provided training in modern information and communication technology (ICT) and included the provision of a digital camera. This camera was given to the community photographer Million for use primarily in documenting local innovation and PID activities. During the ceremony to hand over the camera to Million, the PID group was advised to work out guidelines on how Million's skills and the camera should be used.

Million has developed great confidence in using the community's digital camera. She has also been able to generate some income through photography of marriage ceremonies and other social events in the community. She feels recognised in the community and empowered through the photography skills she has acquired, because, in her words, "not hearing is not a reason for not working".



Community photographer Million in 2011, three years after her training, shows her most recent photo to Fetien from Mekelle University (Photo: Beyene Tedla)

See also:

Association for Progressive Communications (APC). 2010. GenARDIS 2002–2010 Small grants that made big changes for women in agriculture – GenARDIS grant for Mekelle University, Ethiopia: Women innovators document their own innovation and experimentation in Tigray Region of northern Ethiopia (www.apc.org/es/system/files/Genardis_EN.pdf).

Fetien Abay & Gebrecherkos Gebregiorgis. 2009. Process documentation of experiences in facilitating farmer-led documentation in Tigray, Ethiopia. Addis Ababa: PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia (www.prolinnova.net/sites/default/files/documents/resources/publications/2009/73237_process_documentation_fld_ethiopia_290709.pdf).

Fetien Abay, Gebrecherkos Gebregiorgis & Lemlem Hailemicahel. 2011. Learning farmer-led documentation in Ethiopia. In: Veldhuizen L van, Waters-Bayer A, Wettasinha C & Hiemstra W (eds), *Farmer-led documentation: learning from Prolinnova experiences* (Silang: IIRR / Leusden: PROLINNOVA International Secretariat), pp15–26 (www.prolinnova.net/sites/default/files/documents/resources/publications/2012/FLD_booklet_2012/chapter_4.pdf).

For more information about FLD in Ethiopia and elsewhere, see <http://www.prolinnova.net/fld>