

4 | Learning farmer-led documentation in Ethiopia

Fetien Abay, Gebrecherkos Gebregiorgis & Lemlem Hailemichael

The usual way of documenting farmer knowledge and innovation experiences for sharing these more widely is researcher-led. Everything is documented that the researcher feels is important for his or her purpose. As a result, key information may be missed, experiences are captured in a language and style inaccessible for farmers, and the documents are taken to the offices of researchers, leaving the communities with empty hands. To counter this, PROLINNOVA-Ethiopia joined in efforts of the global PROLINNOVA network to develop and promote a farmer-led documentation (FLD) approach in the country.

As a first step, PROLINNOVA-Ethiopia decided to pilot the new approach in Tigray Region in northern Ethiopia. This allowed working with communities and (women) farmer innovators with which PROLINNOVA-Ethiopia organisations in Tigray had good working relationships. The pilot itself started in November 2008, with follow-up support continuing up to December 2010. Though this pilot was not without challenges, the responses from the innovators and their communities were so encouraging that the FLD facilitation team felt motivated to help introduce the approach elsewhere. An opportunity for this presented itself when farmer innovators and their support organisation in the Ambo area of Oromia Region – having learned about the FLD work in Tigray through the PROLINNOVA-Ethiopia network – expressed an interest in FLD. In late 2009, the FLD facilitation team from Tigray supported the farmers in Ambo in learning about FLD and its use. Here, we describe the attempts to apply and modify the FLD approach in Ethiopia, analyse the results across both locations, and formulate lessons and conclusions on how this approach could be taken forward in Ethiopia.

The FLD pilot in Tigray Region

The FLD facilitation team and its preparation

The team formed to facilitate the FLD pilot comprised a senior researcher and a junior researcher from Mekelle University and a female journalist from the regional radio station in Tigray: the three authors of this paper. The senior researcher, having learned the basics on FLD through the international network, briefed PROLINNOVA-Ethiopia members in Tigray and explored possible interest with women and men innovators attending a regional exhibition on rural development and natural resource management organised by the Tigray Region Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development (BoARD). The men appeared to more readily understand the concept of FLD than the women. The senior researcher also briefed and "trained" the other members of the facilitation team about FLD and the importance of documentation from the farmers' perspective.

The central idea and objective of the FLD pilot

In Tigray, both female and male innovators have been identified and are involved in Participatory Innovation Development (PID) that builds on local innovation in various topics. This has inspired especially the women to take more active roles in development. They were interested in having their practices and PID experiences

documented. Women's experiences are commonly in the domestic sphere and their innovations are not well known and publicised. Our 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. We thought that the women innovators already involved in PID in Tahtay Maychew and Geter Adwa Districts of Central Tigray would be most likely to be interested in this, as we had a particularly good rapport with them.

Planning FLD

To operationalise the idea and to plan the FLD process, we visited the farmers and development agents in these two districts who were involved in the PID activities (these people are referred to here as the "PID group"). We first met with the development agent and local administrator of the area and discussed the importance of FLD. Then we proposed a meeting with the farmers in the PID group. The development agent joined the FLD facilitation team in a meeting attended by eight male and two female innovators. After they had been introduced to the central ideas of FLD, these farmers greatly supported the initiative. The group members agreed with the suggested focus on women, because they felt that rural women have less mobility than rural men and women's innovations normally receive less recognition by people both inside and outside the community. They appreciated the potential contribution of FLD to allow sharing of farmers' and especially women's experiences with the wider society.

After discussing various innovations by group members, the PID group identified two women experimenters to be involved in the FLD pilot: Hawaria Berhe and Medhin GebreEgziabher. Both women are involved in PID processes supported by the Tigray subplatform of PROLINNOVA-Ethiopia, which is coordinated by the Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD), a national non-governmental organisation (NGO). Hawaria, who was one of the two women farmers at the meeting, expressed her interest in documenting her innovation. The PID group suggested that also Medhin, who was not at the meeting, be involved in the activity, as it felt that the community needed to learn more from her excellent activities in managing fruit trees and grass species.

The FLD facilitation team visited Medhin after the meeting, during the same trip. She initially said she was too busy. She often has visitors from government agencies and NGOs as well as from Ethiopian Television (ETV) and radio stations. She finds these visits to be time-consuming and was unhappy with their inflexible timing. When we explained the objective of FLD and the kind of training we could provide, she appreciated that she could learn a new skill and that the activity could be flexibly planned. Since she had been exposed to mass media when she received a national prize as outstanding female innovator in Tigray Region, she asked if it would be possible to make a video-recording and transmit the film through ETV.

We ourselves proposed a third women innovator, Mawcha Gebremedhin, to be involved in the FLD pilot, as she was well known for her innovative management of natural resources and the senior researcher knew her since several years. We therefore visited also Mawcha during the same trip. After initially being confused about the purpose of FLD, she became enthusiastic and suggested documenting her creativity in new ways of storing maize cobs to prevent theft, an innovation important for her food security, as well as how she maintains the tree species she had planted earlier on her own initiative. Had the researchers led the documentation process, we might have focused only on the benefits she gained from the tree species and on her spirit of innovation.

Details on all three women innovators are given in Box 1.

Box 1: Women innovators involved in the FLD pilot in Tigray

1. Hawaria Berhe¹. In most male-headed households, women are usually invisible, though they contribute equally or more than the men to the development of specific innovations by the household. In contrast, Hawaria, a PID participant who lives in the village of Maybrazio in Tahtay Maychew District, is a strong woman who is innovating, together with her husband, in drip irrigation and natural resource management. She is also known for her innovations in dealing with crop and animal diseases.

2. Medhin GebreEgziabher is a widow living in the village of Maysie in Tahtay Maychew District. She has gained regional recognition for her success in land management and fruit production. She grows numerous different species of fruit trees and specialises in multiplying grasses for animal feed. The Tigray BoARD is one of her major customers for the grass species she sells. Because of the different crop species grown in her farm and the different flowering trees, honeybees visit her garden. When she observed this, she felt encouraged to try beekeeping and is experimenting with modern and locally made beehives.

3. Mawcha Gebremedhin lives in the village of Bethans in Geter Adwa District. She had been identified as an innovative woman farmer during the Indigenous Soil and Water Conservation project, initially because she started ploughing as a woman, thus challenging the cultural norms in Ethiopia that only men may plough with animal traction². She now gives training in ploughing to other women household heads and to girls who have left school. Because of her recognised skills, she has been ploughing on a share-cropping basis for six elderly men in her village. She has also been innovative in reclaiming land and regenerating natural resources.

¹ The women wanted their names to be mentioned in this publication.

² See: Mamusha L, Fetien A & Waters-Bayer A. 2000. Women challenge cultural norms. *ILEIA Newsletter* 16 (2): 40; Fetien A, Mamusha L, O'Flynn P & Waters-Bayer A. 2001. A challenge and an opportunity: innovation by women farmers in Tigray. In: Reij C & Waters-Bayer A (eds), *Farmer innovation in Africa: a source of inspiration for agricultural development* (London: Earthscan), pp155-167; "Ethiopia: a woman innovator speaks", *IK Notes* 70, World Bank, Washington DC, July 2004.

These three women farmers do not have any formal education, but they know what it means to document something and how it could be done. The women said they preferred documentation in the form of simple booklets, audio-recordings and photography. Audio-recordings would enable dissemination through (local) radio. Hawaria wanted to receive photography training personally, whereas Medhin and Mawcha requested that their sons be trained in photography.

Implementing FLD

The actual documentation process took place during our second visit to the women innovators in January 2009. A photography and video specialist (Mulugeta Kiros) from Mekelle University joined the team during this visit to assist in the video-recording requested by Medhin. Also other farmers in the PID group were interested in this possibility, when the FLD facilitation team informed them of the request Medhin had made.

During our visit to Hawaria, she showed and explained a number of innovations, including some new to us that Hawaria was very proud of, such as a big box made of mud to keep silkworms in order to produce silk threads and an innovation for rodent control in fruit trees developed jointly with her husband. The photographer then trained her how to use a digital camera and how to take detailed and clear pictures of innovations. She practised taking photographs of objects she selected in the garden and in the kitchen area inside her house. She had to retake most of the photographs, but some of them turned out well.

During our visit to Medhin, she expressed regret that no documentation had been done of her home area before she rehabilitated it. This made it difficult for her to show the difference between how it looks now and how it looked then. In her case, the FLD facilitation team made radio and video recordings, while Medhin gave explanations to the team. Her main focus was on the challenges and difficulties that she, as a widow, faced during her innovation in reclaiming the land and enriching it with fruit trees and with grasses used for animal feed, rather than on how and why she planted various species and their productivity and how she was supported by the agricultural experts (which we might have chosen to record). She stressed the importance of documenting, publicising and supporting women's role in bringing about change.

During this second visit to Mawcha, the video-filmer taught her son about basic operation of the digital camera and how to take pictures. This he started to do immediately. He took pictures of the new maize store, among other things. Mawcha explicitly asked him to take a photo when she was showing the maize stored in the middle of the grass and also when she praised god for the solution she had found. For her son Tesfay, the training contributed to his decision to stay living with his mother. "With this, I can record agricultural and non-agricultural practices and innovations in the village. It can even help me as a source of income by taking pictures in the rural community during marriage ceremonies and other social events."

Community documentalist

Parallel to the work with the three women innovators, members of the PID group spoke of the need for a community photographer, as most of the innovators (especially women) are illiterate and not all of them could handle photography on their own. A "community documentalist" could record also other innovations of the PID group. In our discussion with the PID group about whom to train in local documentation, the group suggested a young deaf woman – Million, 21 years of age, who had left school after completing 7th grade, single mother and energetic innovator in her own right. This would be an opportunity for her to learn new skills. During our second trip to the FLD pilot site, Million was trained for two days in digital photography. Afterwards, she took many pictures of PID group members in the field and also of the FLD facilitation team. For her, the pictures have a special meaning, as she cannot express herself in spoken words. She showed great confidence in using the camera. Group members were satisfied with the pictures taken and were happy that skills to take pictures had come closer to them and could help in showing their progress over time.



Million being trained by Mulugeta Kiros in photography (photo: Fetien Abay)

Generally, in all cases, the women decided what should be documented and they spoke on topics and in ways they wanted. The female journalist audio-recorded the women's narrations, while the other team members took written notes in order to describe the process of how they supported FLD. After the audio-recording,

the women listened to what had been recorded to verify it. The FLD facilitation team had agreed with the women that, if they liked the recording, it would be retained; if not, it would be deleted. In practice, no-one ever requested that something be deleted, perhaps because they were talking about what they were really interested in and they had control over what was recorded or perhaps because they were not used to correcting outsiders. Then, the other farmers in the PID group listened to the recorded innovations and practices and confirmed the women's stories.

And what happened then?

The pilot FLD process – including the training in photography – was only a first step, which succeeded in raising the motivation in the community. The FLD facilitation team used the photos in making posters and a booklet entitled *Women documenting their innovations: outcomes of a farmer-led documentation process* with text in English and Tigrigna. We sent all the photos to the PROLINNOVA-Ethiopia Secretariat in AgriService Ethiopia (ASE) in Addis Ababa for possible future use to show what innovative farmers, particularly women, are doing. We also gave some prints in photo frames to the women innovators involved in the FLD pilot.

The PID group and the women innovators found it important to document their innovations using a digital camera and wanted to obtain a camera for themselves (they had been using a camera provided only temporarily by the university). They also said they needed further training on how to take pictures and to work with digital photos. There is a clear need for some continuation of support to be able to introduce the concept of FLD more clearly and to provide further training in FLD facilitation to development agents and NGO staff who work closely with farmer innovators. It will be important to provide farmer groups and locally recognised women innovators access to digital cameras and some training and guidance in downloading digital images, arranging to have them printed and inserting them into reports or posters or other means to share the photos.

Some follow-up training for the women innovators 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 camera.

Million, the community photographer, plus the three other women involved in the FLD pilot and three male members of the PID group were invited on an exchange visit to Abrhatsbha village in Eastern Tigray, the site of the WLW project. There, the women from Central Tigray displayed their innovations using the pictures taken during the FLD process and also demonstrated aspects of their innovations in practice. For example, Medhin showed how she prepares local food out of ziziphus fruits from her trees, and Mawcha explained the history of her success in regenerating trees and her ploughing skills.

One year after the first pilot, a meeting was held in Maybrazio village, where Hawaria lives, for the purpose of exchange learning on FLD. It was attended by the women innovators, the PID group, development agents, specialists and the Head of the District Office of Agriculture, leaders in the District Administration, staff from the Office of Women's Affairs and from ISD, and the FLD facilitation team. Also present were radio and ETV journalists and a group of farmer innovators and two development agents from the WLW project in Abrhatsbha. Together, they reviewed the initial experiences with FLD and the resulting documentation. The booklet on FLD was given to all farmers and partners. This event provided an opportunity to introduce the concept of FLD to a wider audience, firstly by disseminating the booklet and secondly through the TV coverage.

During the workshop, the digital camera provided by the WLW project was handed over to the community photographer Million. A second camera was handed over to Mawcha's son in recognition also of his photography skills. It was made clear that the community camera should be used primarily for the purpose of documenting local innovation, and the PID group was advised to work out guidelines on how Million's skills and the camera should be used. Similarly, Mawcha and the development agent in her village discussed how the camera given to her son would be used to document the innovations also of other farmers in the village. Also during the workshop, a laptop was given to the PID group.

After inspiring presentations by innovative farmers, researchers and government officials, copies of the booklet on FLD by women innovators were distributed to all participating farmers and development agents. This recognition was meant to encourage farmers - both men and women – to continue their own innovation and experimentation and to document their experiences.



Participants who received the booklet on FLD discussing its contents (photo: Fetien Abay)

The presence of BoARD leadership during this event in Maybrazio village proved to be very important. The Head of the District Office of Agriculture promised that copies of the booklet would be sent to schools and to other sector offices. He committed his office to continue giving training in the use of ICT to support FLD. After the small group of farmer innovators from Abrhatsbha returned home, they organised a one-day feedback meeting with their fellow villagers and shared many of the inspiring farmer innovations they had seen during the workshop in Central Tigray. They also shared the concept of FLD and the FLD experiences they had encountered in Maybrazio village. Ethiopian journalists documented the whole process and their film was shown on TV.

Introducing FLD in Oromia Region

From 20-22 November 2009, two members of the Tigray FLD facilitation team gave a 3-day training in FLD in Ambo, west of Addis Ababa in Oromia Region, to 20 farmer innovators and five development agents working in these farmers' villages. With support from the NGO Ethiopian Rural Self-Help Association (ERSHA) and ASE – the NGO that coordinates PROLINNOVA-Ethiopia – these farmers are managing so-called Local Innovation Support Funds (LISFs), locally managed funding mechanisms to enhance local innovation. Most of the selected farmers were literate, having received formal education up to Grade 9. All participants were male. The main components in the FLD training in Ambo are described in Table 1.

Table 1: Main components of FLD training in Ambo

Session	Topic	Details
1	Brain writing	On an A4 sheet of paper, each participant wrote a problem he was trying to solve and a question he had; the sheets were circulated in the groups and the other participants added suggestions; then each participant read the solutions given to him. This showed the creativity of everyone in solving problems.
2	FLD case presentations	The Tigray FLD experience was presented by means of the booklet with pictures <i>Women documenting their innovations: outcomes of a farmer-led documentation process</i> and a video made by Mekelle University on the FLD pilot in Tigray. There followed a second case-study video made by the Sustainable Land Use Forum (SLUF) on farmer innovation in sustainable land management.
3	Farmer innovation presentations	The farmer innovators were provided with flipcharts and markers and given 30 minutes to prepare documentation on their innovations and/or experiments, followed by 45 minutes displaying their posters and writing on each other's posters. Then, in the plenary, the

Session	Topic	Details
		participants discussed the results and impact of this exercise.
4	Strategising FLD	Again in the plenary, the participants discussed possibilities for FLD in Ambo and practical implications such as cost-effective ways to do participatory video – a type of documentation that seemed to be attractive to the farmers.
5	Closing	The participants gave feedback in the plenary on the training process.

As response to the presentation of the Tigray cases of FLD, the farmers in Ambo realised the need to include more women in their PID groups and to promote innovation by women in their area. With encouragement from the local Fund Management Committees, after the FLD training, four female farmers applied for LISF grants and all four applications were approved.



Million, the community documentalist, in action (photo: Fetien Abay)

As an overall outcome of the FLD training, the farmers in Ambo showed keen interest in making their own photographs and video films, as well as written records. They said they had gained new ideas for documenting the process of their experimentation and innovation. Some of their conclusions and suggestions were:

- The FLD booklet on the Tigray experience should be printed and distributed also in their language (Oromo);
- FLD should be started up at their own innovation and experimentation sites;
- Intensive training in FLD is needed, particularly in photography, video and written recording;
- The workshop facilitators presented their PowerPoint slides in English but it would have been good to present them in Oromo or at least Amharic (the official working language in Ethiopia);
- Most farmers are interested in making their innovations publicly known, not only in their community but also to people in higher-level decision-making positions;
- A few farmers said they would not like to share their innovations until these had been recorded as their own;
- The innovators in veterinary medicine wanted to be recognised in the community and by the government in terms of acceptance of the usefulness of their treatments for animals; however, they did not want to explain what specific plant species and combinations they use, as giving treatment is a source of income for them;
- Finally, the farmers and the development agents emphasised the need for farmer innovators to be involved in experience-sharing and exposure visits between regions.

After the training, the PROLINNOVA-Ethiopia secretariat in ASE bought five small conventional (non-digital) cameras, one for each of the five farmer innovator groups (FIGs) involved in the LISF pilot in Ambo. The cameras are kept in the office of each development agent, but belong to the FIG. Farmers contributed 5% of the total costs and also agreed to contribute one Ethiopian Birr per month (about USD 0.85 per year) to cover costs for camera repair and partial costs for the films and their development and printing. The remaining operating costs are being covered, for the time being, out of the budget for ERSHA's farmer capacity-building programme. The farmers started to use the cameras to take photos of their innovations and experiments. Upon the farmers' request, ERSHA organised some further training for the farmer-photographers in order to give them more confidence in using the cameras.

What we have learned about FLD

The concept of FLD was new to the facilitation team, the farmers and the various support agents involved. Trying to facilitate FLD in Ethiopia was a learning process for us all. We learned a great deal. Some of the main insights we gained were the following:

- Farmers are highly motivated when they can take the lead in documenting their problems and their solutions. They appreciate their roles in making decisions about what to document.
- Farmers often choose different foci in their documentation than the FLD facilitation team would have done.
- The local people involved in FLD appreciate gaining skills in something they could not do before, such as using a digital camera, and want to use these skills to capture their problems and achievements.
- The FLD work draws attention to farmers' own innovations among all people involved, including the communities. FLD contributes to giving the innovations wider recognition.
- The focus on women innovators in Tigray helped to create awareness also among the male farmers on the role of women as equal participants in the public sphere. Women – also those who were illiterate – could easily handle the camera. Though female household heads have many responsibilities and little time to spend on other things, they managed to do FLD through flexible time planning and training involving their grown-up children.
- All of the women involved had children who could read and write. The researchers therefore think that FLD and sharing of information on new technologies could also be done through printed material – the written word – through the farmers' children. This idea was reinforced when we heard the daughter of one of the members of the PID group read out a poem (see Box 2) she had written about her parents' achievements in agricultural innovation.
- The FLD activities helped establish linkages with media professionals. Radio broadcasting was much appreciated by farmers. Links have been made with the Tigray regional radio to arrange sharing of the women's stories during the regular rural development broadcasts.
- It is useful to focus FLD initiatives on existing groups such as the LISF groups in Ambo or the PID group in Tigray, to support their own documentation and peer-learning process.



Tsirha Malede explains the tomato drying innovation of her mother using a poster with photos taken by her father (photo: Fanos Mekonnen)

- In the case of the Tigray PID group, a few literate (male) farmers are already keeping diaries for documenting their innovation and experimentation and some are, on their own initiative, taking photos of their experimentation and innovation. Indeed, one farmer also took photos of his wife's innovation in food processing, had them printed on his own costs and displayed them on the wall of their house for visitors to see. Such farmers could be focal points in facilitating FLD and could be trainers of other farmers less experienced in documenting their innovations.

Box 2: Poem written by 15-year-old Tsirha Malede about her parents' achievements

Just a stranger

Befriended with us he lived
With no difference flesh and blood,
Ever destitute, always in poverty
Has been our flag, our identity.

Befriended with us, took nationality,
Made himself Tigrean identity,
Eternal aid seekers and mendicants,
Evil of evils, ever dependents.

Lived along with us like big brother,
We respected Mr Poverty with no bother,
What a past, what a history
Downpouring with agony and misery,
We realised long after
Poverty was just a stranger.

Died of thirst, standing on water bed,
Fertility under feet, but drought reigned,
However this land, our blessed land
Has been a gold mine at hand.

Poverty, the illness cancerous,
It's remedied being industrious,
Working on it with efficiency,
Our land is gold currency.

I witnessed the innovation miracles
When my dad filled the granaries,
I witnessed my mum's miracles
Equalising herself with others,
He and she buried poverty,
Danced upon it with felicity.

Long life to my parents their innovation,
May its progress be smooth,
Led by committed scholars
Whose research like prayers,
Smoothing the rough they showed
The rocks also being ploughed,
Realising of dreams we are seeing
With milk and honey Tigray flooding.

(translated from Tigrigna into English by Berhane Achame, Mekelle University)