

6 | Stimulating farmers to do their own photo documentation in South Africa

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The PROLINNOVA platform in South Africa (SA) realised that farmers take active part in development activities but are seldom involved in documenting them. The low level of literacy among farmers was often cited as a reason for their non-participation in documentation. Some PROLINNOVA-SA partners therefore wanted to explore how farmers might document their farming-related activities. They nominated Thabani Nicholas Madondo, an active and innovative farmer from Potshini in KwaZulu-Natal Province (KZN), to attend a workshop on farmer-led documentation (FLD) in Uganda (see Chapter 2). Upon returning, Madondo worked with the partners to facilitate initiatives aimed at engaging farmers in documenting their own experiences for wider sharing and learning. In three pilots, farmers were encouraged to use photography for this purpose. The experiences and lessons learnt are described here.

The three FLD pilots

In Potshini, a sub-ward of Okhahlamba Municipality in KZN, Madondo initiated the first FLD pilot, which went from May to October 2007. At a local group meeting, he shared with his peers what he had learnt at the FLD workshop in Uganda. Other farmers were enthused by his feedback and were interested in documenting their experiments with water conservation technologies¹. Since many group members were not literate, they preferred photography to record their stories.

PROLINNOVA-SA partners in North-West Province (NWP) undertook a second pilot from August 2008 to April 2009. FLD was used to initiate activities to promote farmer-led innovation in the region, in collaboration with the Agricultural Research Council (ARC). A group of farmer-trainees used photography to document joint experimentation in homestead food gardens².

From March to November 2010, FLD activities in KZN were expanded from Potshini to seven other communities in Okhahlamba Municipality, where the Farmer Support Group (FSG) was piloting a Local Innovation Support Fund (LISF), a small-grant scheme for farmers to cover costs for their own experimentation, innovation and learning. FSG encouraged the farmers to use photography to document and share farming and life experiences, and to document their experiments supported through the LISF.

¹ The group formed part of a watershed management project facilitated by the Farmer Support Group and extension staff of the KZN Department of Agriculture. Several farmer groups had been set up as platforms for sharing and learning (Letty & Shezi 2008). Madondo led one such group.

² This pilot was held within a food security project of the ARC and involved staff from FSG, ARC and the North-West Department of Agriculture.



Farmer learning to use camera and focus on an object during FLD training (photo: Brigid Letty)

What farmers wanted to document and why

The first pilot started with an awareness-raising workshop in Potshini, which brought together 40 interested farmers, 80% of whom were women. Farmers discussed FLD at some length and agreed on several objectives, including: to document valuable knowledge and practices for future generations, to share experiences with other farmers and service providers such as the Department of Agriculture (DoA), and to create a record of current experiences that could inform farmers' decision-making and future planning.

The pilot in NWP also started with a workshop, which was attended by 12 female farmers and six male farmers, local extension and research staff, and the ARC. FLD was introduced as part of participatory innovation development. Pilot activities were discussed in detail, and farmers received some training in handling a camera. The farmers expressed interest in taking pictures of the different stages of crop growth, the different tasks involved at each stage and the challenges they encountered. They also mentioned livestock and related problems as a possible focus of their photography.

For the third pilot, FSG introduced the initial FLD experiences to seven communities at the Okhahlamba Sivusempilo Farmers Forum meeting³. Members of the Forum

³ The Sivusempilo Farmers Forum consists of representatives of eight communities under the Amangwane and Amazizi Traditional Authorities in Okhahlamba Municipality, who meet monthly.

farmer who had been involved in the pilot in Potshini, brought along their photo albums. Their enthusiasm while sharing their experiences captured the imagination of the other farmers. Mrs Mduba, for instance, showed a series of photos which told the story of how she fenced her garden: poor fencing of her garden, the damage caused by livestock to her crops, support received from the local municipality for fencing, and then a better-producing garden because of better fencing. This was a good example of how farmers had used photographs to get their messages heard by local authorities.

Managing the equipment

PROLINNOVA-SA had bought 12 analogue cameras for the Potshini pilot. The 40 farmers decided to divide themselves into 12 groups of 3-6 persons, and each group would have access to one camera. One farmer would take three photographs and then pass the camera on to the next person in the group. The groups agreed to give the exposed films to Madondo for processing and printing in the nearby town. Several problems were encountered in using analogue cameras: overexposure of film, limited options for editing after taking the photos, and high costs of processing and printing.

Having learnt from the first pilot, PROLINNOVA-SA decided to invest in digital cameras for the NWP pilot. The participating farmers, who were from four communities, decided that each community would receive one digital camera. The farmer-trainees in each community would share the camera, while one person would be responsible for taking care of it and for organising the printing of 10-15 photos per farmer at three-month intervals.

FSG distributed eight digital cameras among ten groups of farmers in the seven communities in the Okhahlamba pilot. The farmers discussed and agreed on arrangements for sharing the cameras. The safekeeping of the camera would be a shared responsibility of all participating members in each community. One person would keep a camera for two weeks and then hand it to the next person. FSG acquired a second-hand laptop computer from the PROLINNOVA International Secretariat, so that the farmers could download and view their digital photos. A female farmer-leader of the Farmers Forum kept and handled the laptop, which she brought to each forum meeting for downloading photos and other uses.

Training farmers in photography

In early June 2007, before the winter cropping season started, FSG trained farmers in Potshini in basic photography. In the following months, the farmers took photos and, during group meetings, they shared the photos and their experiences with this form of documentation. After the first batch of photos was printed, the farmers met for a feedback session. They commented on each other's photos: some were out of focus; others did not have a clear subject etc. This exercise helped those who had not yet taken any photos to see that there was no penalty for bad pictures and to gain courage to venture out and try.

Similarly, in the NWP pilot, PROLINNOVA-SA partners gave farmers practical training in camera handling and taking pictures. The group viewed the photos together and gave feedback to each other on how to improve them. This second pilot turned out to be more challenging, because there were no local research or extension staff able to support the farmers in the documentation process. Four months after the training, FSG staff visited the farmers in all four communities. Some farmers had been quite active in taking pictures, whilst others had not been sure what they should photograph. The FSG staff reviewed the farmers' pictures and suggested how they could be improved, and also helped the farmers identify aspects of their farming to focus on through photo documentation. Three months later, in March 2009, FSG staff returned for a second follow-up visit. By this time, most of the farmers had taken their own photos.

Drawing from the experience in the previous pilots, FSG staff designed a more intensive process of training and support for farmers in the Okhahlamba pilot. During an initial two-day training, the farmers learnt about the features of the camera (lens, viewing screen, power button etc), how to operate a digital camera, positions and ideal conditions for taking photos, how to review photos on the camera, and how to change the battery and memory cards. They also learnt how to download their photos and store and review them on the laptop computer. Farmers then practised taking photos of each other, thus learning the basics of using a camera. They then took the cameras home overnight to make more photos of their farms. The following day, they reviewed and discussed these photos. After the training, the farmers began taking photos regularly, using the cameras that FSG had given them. A month later, a two-day review workshop was held. All photos made by the farmers were projected on the wall. The farmers and facilitators discussed ways of overcoming difficulties encountered, such as focusing, camera angles etc. The basics of camera use and photography were repeated. Madondo from Potshini then introduced the storyboard technique and, after a lengthy discussion, the farmers each thought up a story that they could document. FSG recruited a university student to provide follow-up support to the farmers for six weeks. He helped the farmers develop their storyboards and take the relevant photos to support their stories.

Farmers share their photo stories

During the Potshini pilot, severe drought prevailed. This meant that the farmers could not take as many pictures of their gardens as they had hoped to. Yet, they were able to present their photos and discuss their experiences at the Sivusimpilo Farmers Forum in October 2007, five months after the training. Other groups in Okhahlamba Municipality and staff from the DoA joined the meeting. Two female and three male farmers presented posters they had made using their own photos; this prompted lively discussion. Nearly all the photos were related to their gardens, showing, for example, different watering techniques, uses of grey water and crop-protection measures. Some photos were also about day-to-day work in the food garden, produce from the garden and the sale of products.

Nine months after the initial training in NWP, PROLINNOVA-SA facilitated a reflection workshop with the farmers. Eight female and five male farmers from three of the four communities attended, as did staff from the ARC, North-West University and the provincial DoA. The farmers had prepared posters from a selection of their own photos. The posters were mounted on the walls of the meeting hall and the participants had ample time to engage with each farmer about the experiences with FLD. Interestingly, the discussions focused more on what had been documented than on the process of documentation itself. Farmers had taken photos of a wide range of topics, which included both technical aspects, such as soil preparation, adding compost to the soil, healthy and diseased crops, and right and wrong planting methods; and social aspects, such as children being taught to plant, young people helping out older people in the gardens, a visit to a local school, receiving an award from the Department of Arts and Culture, and an end-of-year party of the farmer group.



Mary Malebadi of Miga using a poster with her own photos to share experiences (photo: Brigid Letty)

The Okhahlamba farmers documented both farming and social activities, and both individual and group activities. The storyboards gave the farmers direction in taking the relevant photos, which together became a photo documentation that could be shared with others. Each of the ten groups came up with their own documentation, covering various topics and experiments in soil erosion control, testing high-value crops, household food gardens, water harvesting, conservation farming, marketing, alternative feed supplements etc. Some of the farmers documented how the savings and credit groups worked or how information was being shared at the Farmers Forum meetings.

In the first two pilots, farmers received small albums to store their photos. For the farmers, the albums have become prized possessions in which they take great pride. Each Okhahlamba farmer group now showcases its work in a central album, which is kept by one of the members. The farmers use these albums to spread news about development to other farmers, and to show their work to visitors and at farmer meetings.

Farmers reflect on the pilots

During reflection on their initial experiences with photography, the farmers in Potshini listed several pros and cons of using photos as a means of FLD. On the positive side, they felt that taking photos had helped them keep a better record of their activities and made it easier to explain problems (i.e. crop or livestock disease) to extension workers from the DoA. The farmers felt they could have benefited from more training in handling a camera. They also felt that sharing one camera among several persons meant that no single person was responsible for it. There was still plenty of room to improve the process, yet the farmers had enjoyed it and were convinced that at least a few of them would continue to document their work and experiences through photography. Moreover, the pilot allowed the Potshini farmers to share their experiences in FLD with other farmers in the region.

Farmers at the reflection workshop in NWP said that the photo documentation had brought them some benefits. One woman said that she had not realised that the photos would prove to be so useful for presenting her experiences to others. Another woman said that she now had visual evidence of her work and also a record to look back on. Another farmer added that the photos are useful to generate interest in gardening among younger people and also show people that gardening is not an activity that makes you sick. Most of the farmers agreed that the photos had helped them learn from each other about experiences in gardening. The farmers had also learnt from each other about the use of cameras. One of the women – in fact, the only person in the group who had ventured out to do her own photo printing in town – described how she had taken the memory card to a camera shop, how she had selected the photos for printing and what she had paid to have it done.

Reflecting on the challenges in the NWP pilot, PROLINNOVA-SA partners realised that, despite the lack of regular follow-up, the farmers had produced reasonably good results. By discussing among themselves, the farmers managed to improve their photography and camera-handling skills, and had organised the safekeeping of cameras and printing of photos. The use of digital cameras, even though more expensive than analogue cameras, had been positive, because the former allowed farmers to view images, correct mistakes quickly and print only what they wanted. Although outsiders initiated the FLD, the farmers involved understood its usefulness.

The review workshop during the Okhahlamba pilot showed that, here too, farmers had learnt from each other through photography. The documentation process had increased their self-confidence and they could use the photo documentation to support what they wanted to say to others, including local authorities. Many experiments supported through the LISF had been systematically recorded by farmers and the photos were used for monitoring and evaluation. The farmers were also using photography to record their livestock with their personal brand marks as a way of addressing the issue of stock theft. Farmers said they had been convinced that photo documentation is a very good way of recording how their lives changed and tracking the progress they had made.



Farmers in Okhahlamba supported by facilitator to review their photos using a computer (photo: Phumuzile Phakathi)

The farmers in Okhahlamba mentioned the challenge of sharing one camera within a group of several farmers. They said that the distances between group members made it difficult to make the camera available to each individual at the time he or she needed it. Also, those who were trained were not able to pass on the skills to the others, as FSG had hoped. This meant that the trained farmers tended to use the cameras more than the other farmers did. Even those who were trained forgot some things they had learnt and needed some refresher training from time to time. Another issue the farmers raised was the discipline they needed to build up in order to have the camera ready for use. They recalled instances where they could not take some important photos because they had forgotten to charge the camera batteries.

Farmers plan follow-up actions

The farmers in Potshini decided to raise funds to buy a camera for each person who wished to continue with photography. This was a challenge because analogue cameras were going out of the market and digital cameras were more expensive. With the assistance of FSG, a local agro-dealer donated a digital camera to the Potshini farmers. Madondo was responsible for the camera because his house is a central point in the community, and anyone attending local farmers' gatherings and field trips could easily collect the camera.

Since the reflection workshop marked the end of the NWP pilot, the farmers from each community sat together in small groups and discussed next steps. All groups reported back their intention to continue to use photography as a means of documenting their activities. They also had ideas of how they could use the cameras for generating income by hiring them out to different people who wished to make pictures. They also planned several ways of minimising costs related to printing photos. Staff members of the different development organisations at the meeting expressed willingness to support the farmers in whatever way possible. Another positive outcome of the pilot was the presentation of a paper on FLD at a conference of the South African Society of Agricultural Extension by a researcher from ARC who had been involved in the pilot (Vorster et al 2009).

Participants from four of the seven communities in the Okhahlamba pilot planned to take photos of local functions (i.e. weddings and traditional ceremonies) to generate income, which they would then use for buying more cameras to allow more farmers to have access to them, so that more documentation could be done. They also agreed that each community would have a common album for keeping a record of all the important events and incidents within the community.

Farmers continue to document and share

The farmers in KZN have continued to use photography to document their own activities as well as important local events. In Potshini, farmers share their practices and ideas with other farmers in the Sivusimpilo Farmers Forum through verbal presentations and posters. The posters include farmers' photos of their various livelihood activities. The use of photos has improved the quality of presentations made during farmer-to-farmer sharing, as they help farmers express themselves more clearly. This is illustrated through the experiences of Mrs Moloi and Mr Zondo (see Box 1).

Box 1: Examples of continued farmer documentation after FLD piloting in KZN

Some farmers presented their photo stories at a farmers' market day in New Reserve. Mrs Nkabini from Newstand in Okhahlamba Municipality displayed her photos showing her producing tomatoes and the income she gained from selling them locally. Mrs Moloi from Obonjaneni in Okhahlamba used photos to share a story on joint experimentation and marketing of cherry pepper. Mrs Moloi said that, "Telling a story using photos allows one to be precise on the sequence of events and gives evidence".

Mr Zondo, a farmer from Okhombe who is passionate about livestock, took still photos of his cattle. He had the photos developed and keeps them as a visual record of his stock. He said that this "database" would come in handy if any of his cattle are stolen, as he could then show the photos to the police or to fellow villagers helping to search for the cattle. If he wants to sell stock, he could take photos of the cattle to be sold and show them to the buyers, without having to drive the cattle to the selling point.

In the winter of 2011, farmers documented heavy snowfall, which had not been seen in the past ten years, and the effect of the snow on livestock health. This could be a climate-change phenomenon and the photos could serve as a record of this for the farmers.

Farmers reap tangible benefits from FLD

The farmers in the Okhahlamba pilot show their photos to visitors and friends, and to their spouses who are away from home for most of the year, to convince them to support their gardening activities. As a result, some husbands have provided financial support for fencing, farming inputs etc and have supported family members to participate in other development activities such as savings and credit.

The chicken market has become more successful around the festive season for farmers involved in poultry. These farmers used their photos as proof for the DoA that women in Potshini have knowledge about poultry farming and are actually doing it. The DoA now supports the poultry women's group with poultry infrastructure.

Photography has also proven to be a useful communication tool for non-farming activities. For example, it has helped raise awareness about the advantages of savings and credit. Savings groups normally do not allow non-members to be present while they are discussing their savings, as they prefer to keep their transactions a secret for fear of robberies. To allow sharing information on the practice, farmers involved in FLD photographed savings and credit activities in practice and showed the photos to other farmers. Partly as a result of this, the number of savings groups has increased in FSG's areas of operation, and even beyond.

Box 2: Livestock keepers tell their stories using participatory video

Monique Salomon, University of KwaZulu-Natal

"It was my first time to hold a video camera. I only used a still camera before. I thought it was easy but it turned out to be difficult, and I really wish to do better". Siphiwe Dubazane, Okhombe

"I didn't know anything about a video camera or a tripod. I was only given a camera before to take photos. Others should also experience this". Vimba Zondo, Potshini

These were some of the views expressed by participants attending training in participatory video in the Okhombe valley in KZN, facilitated by Michelle Leibbrand and Simphiwe Mthiyane of the Valley Trust and organised by PROLINNOVA-SA and a SANPAD⁴-funded action-research project on cattle keeping. The training aimed to equip farmers to document their stories on livestock keeping using video, with support from development workers. Over three days, participants learnt how to handle a digital video camera, how to record and replay, how to zoom, pan and tilt using a tripod, how to interview one another and how to manage sound. Participants also discussed the importance of obtaining permission to film, involving others in filming, and community viewing to give input into the final product.

This was also an opportunity for participants to share their experiences in keeping livestock. Livestock, they felt, are good because they are a source of income, are used in traditional ceremonies and offer security. The farmers were concerned about livestock diseases, stock theft and lack of good grazing. They then developed storyboards of what they wanted to film in this connection once they returned home.

A month later, the participants reunited, bringing their video footage, and learnt how to edit it into short video stories. They produced four such stories, which were compiled into a DVD: "Stock theft in Okhombe"; "Reviving indigenous (Nguni) cattle"; "Taking care of cattle"; and "How to take care of grazing". A first viewing to some colleagues at the University of KwaZulu-Natal elicited much enthusiasm. A lecturer in grassland science asked whether she could show the videos to her students. A NGO director complimented the participants, as the DVD showed that farmers take their own initiatives and can produce good stories.

The Okhombe farmers showed their video on stock theft at a meeting of livestock keepers in the neighbouring village. This helped speed up the formation of a community patrol (amavimbela) in the region. The DVD was also used at a communal rangeland and policy workshop in which rangeland scientists debated with policymakers in the National Department of Agriculture to refocus the draft Range and Forage Policy to suit the realities of livestock keepers in areas under communal land tenure.

The Okhombe farmers are now using a pocket digital video camera, which was purchased for the action-research project on cattle keeping. The team has filmed local groups working on land rehabilitation, a school outing to rock art paintings in the mountains, and the official ceremony where the Provincial Minister of Education opened new classrooms at the local secondary school.

⁴ SANPAD: South Africa Netherlands research Programme on Alternatives in Development

Some lessons and tips

Some general observations and lessons have emerged from the pilots that may be useful for others interested in FLD using photography:

- Illiteracy of farmers is not a reason to exclude them from the documentation process.
- FLD brings many benefits: farmers can tell their own story, choose what they want to document, share their experiences, document their lives and activities, and bring their problems to the attention of traditional authorities and municipalities; moreover, FLD can boost their confidence.
- FLD processes are more successful when they are embedded in existing development work, and should add to rather than disrupt (farming) activities.
- FLD is best learnt through farmer-led training: involving farmers with documentation experience as trainers is a very effective and sustainable way of motivating other farmers to document.
- Developing a storyboard can help farmers focus if they know what they want to document.
- More farmers can benefit from capacity building in FLD if a mechanism is put in place to transfer skills from trained farmers to other group members.
- Follow-up support to farmers, especially in the initial period of learning the new skills, can help overcome fears and increase confidence. Nevertheless, also without support, farmers are motivated and resourceful, and can use the cameras for their own purposes.
- Using cameras in remote areas poses logistical challenges (e.g. distances to travel for printing photos, need for energy to charge batteries), but these barriers can be overcome by encouraging people to find their own ways of dealing with these challenges.
- Once learnt, farmers have a skill that they can use for the rest of their lives and can generate income from it.
- It is important for farmers to discuss and consider how – after the pilot ends – they will finance continued use of photography as a means of documentation (e.g. expenditure for printing, repairs and replacement of equipment).

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