

Photographs from the field

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‘Photos say more than a thousand words.’ Although there is plenty of truth in this popular saying, photos can do more than communicate or being published. In this paper, we describe how photos from the field have been used for multiple purposes with farmers, project partners and colleagues.

Farmers and their innovations

Stimulate pride

Most farmers love it when you take photos of their innovations, and they are even more excited when receiving a copy later on. I used this approach in Bangladesh to gather community feedback on multipurpose seed drying tables. Using a second-hand 20 dollar colour printer that I carried with me, digital photographs were printed on A4 sheets. Once laminated, they were displayed in a village photo exhibition.

Creative thinking

Later on, the Agricultural Advisory Society (AAS), an NGO working under the Poverty Elimination Through Rice Research Assistance or PETRRA project, used some of these photos to stimulate innovations in other parts of the country. But before showing the photos of the drying tables, women were given laminated A4-size colour photographs, depicting daily life aspects of drying, and were encouraged to describe the advantages and disadvantages of each of these. These sessions were held to stimulate



Zabed (left) and Hatem Ali (right) proudly present a photograph whereby, together with their respective wives, they pose in front of their seed drying table. They proudly show it to others in their own and neighbouring communities.

the creative thinking process. Only then the photos of the drying tables were shown. Of the 570 participating women, 60-70% made their own multipurpose seed drying table (Latifun Nessa and Van Mele, 2005).

Women-to-women

Apart from the high adoption rate in project villages, 5-10% of women in neighbouring villages made a drying table. Not bad, but it could have been better. Selina Akhter, one of the women said: “I can motivate anybody to make a table, and if I would have a photo of my drying

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table, I would show it and discuss with others whenever I go out.” This hasn’t been explored so far, but surely opens up new routes for women-to-women extension.

Ownership in participatory research

In another PETRRA sub-project, Gary Jahn from IRRI and his colleagues took regular photos of farmers at their “Insecticide” and “No insecticide” plots of their field. They were glued into the farmers’ field note books to visualise differences in crop performance and to stimulate ownership of the trials.

With partners in the field

Mirror, mirror on the wall

In August 2002, during a two-day workshop on participatory research in the Seed Health Improvement sub-Project (SHIP), I experimented with showing people photographs of their own performance during group activities and farmer interviews. Each team had to evaluate the positive and negative aspects in terms of facilitation and participation. After 10 minutes groups swapped photographs until all had commented on all photographs. The session ended with a discussion after each had presented what they had learnt. Interpretations varied, but photos surely proved a useful self-evaluation and learning tool.

Getting focused

While documenting various PETRRA sub-projects, I asked staff to show me photos of their activities. This helped to narrow the communication gap in some cases, but more often it allowed me to better target my questions.

Tact and subtlety

However, taking good shots requires skills and practice. Photographers need to be aware of cultural and social sensitivities. Also when photographing farmers during training events, subtlety is required. At one occasion I attended a farmer-to-farmer extension session. My visit to the project as a distinguished outsider coincided with the project team preparing themselves for a seminar.

Four cameras circulated, or it may have been five. But of course this was an exception: in most projects there is often no camera at all. As with participatory video, a photo camera could be handed over to one of the farmers to document their activities.

Back in the office

Apart from the polite ‘How was your trip?’ colleagues hardly probe with more detailed questions. Showing them a few selected photos often triggers a good discussion on an unexpected topic. Colleagues see things that you hadn’t noticed, or see the same thing through a different pair of glasses (even if they don’t wear one).

Suggestions for project managers

We recommend project managers to attribute part of their budget for monitoring and evaluation to strengthen a project’s capacity in documenting, reflecting and learning. Providing field teams with a basic digital camera (3 megapixels) should be accompanied by a short training course on how to take good photographs, how to file them, and how to use them as a learning tool. Photographs nicely complement narratives (see article ‘Learning through Writing’) and make reports attractive to read.

References

Latifun Nessa, H. and Van Mele, P. 2005. Breaking down barriers: women-led group extension. In: Van Mele, P., Salahuddin, A. and Magor, N. (eds.) *Innovations in Rural Extension: Case Studies from Bangladesh*. CABI Publishing, Wallingford, pp. 29-39.