

MEETING THE COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES OF PHILIPPINES LANDCARE

G Boy^{1,*}, E Garcia², A Laotoco³, E Ruiz⁴ and N Vock⁵

¹World Agroforestry Centre, Lantapan Research Site, Lantapan, Philippines

²SEAMEO Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture, Los Banos,
Laguna, Philippines

³World Agroforestry Centre, Claveria Research Site, Claveria, Philippines

⁴SEAMEO Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture, Ned, Lake
Sebu, Philippines

⁵Department of Primary Industries & Fisheries, Nambour, Australia

ABSTRACT

The Philippines, like many Asian countries, is faced with major soil erosion in its rural uplands. Few past programs have resulted in sustained 'on-ground' impact. Landcare is a new and different approach. Commenced in 1996 at one site as a partnership between farmers, local government and technical facilitators, it has since developed to involve over 600 farmer groups with up to 65% adoption of on-farm conservation technologies. It has also had positive social and economic impacts. A key factor in its success has been effective communication, including use of Landcare Facilitators, effective verbal and visual communication methods, 'hands-on' farmer training, and involvement of the broader community.

A need to capture the essence of the Landcare experience in book form to service new Landcare sites resulted in an innovative process to collect and publish the Landcare stories from over 40 people including pioneers, farmers, facilitators, government, community representatives and researchers.

INDEX TERMS

Soil erosion; Landcare; sustainable land management; effective communication; story telling

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It is estimated that approximately 65% of Asia's 1.6 billion rural population earn their livelihoods from farms located on steep slopes of greater than 8%. As a result, the region is renowned for the worst soil erosion rates in the world. This not only significantly reduces farm productivity, affecting farm livelihoods and regional economies, but also impacts on stream sedimentation, affecting water quality and storage, marine resources and biodiversity.

Nowhere is this problem more relevant in the Asian region than in the uplands of the southern Philippines, where a combination of a rurally-dominant population, high population growth, extreme poverty, insecure land tenure, intensive cropping practices, and high rainfall have led to significant soil erosion, posing a grave threat to sustainable farming and poverty alleviation. While there have been many attempts over the years to address the problem, there are few if any examples of sustained 'on-ground' impact.

* Corresponding author email: karenboy@mozcom.com

Landcare is a relatively new initiative which is taking a different approach to this problem. It commenced in 1996 in the northern Mindanao municipality of Claveria, when local farmers, local government and technical facilitators from the World Agroforestry Centre formed a special partnership to enhance farmer development and ownership of conservation farming technologies. The term 'Landcare' was coined to provide the initiative with a new identity, primarily to emphasise the difference between this partnership approach with a 'grass-roots' farmer focus, and the more traditional 'top-down' technology transfer processes predominantly operating at the time (Figure 1).

In 1999, the Landcare program was expanded to two other pilot sites in Mindanao and subsequently to pilot sites in the Visayas through a partnership between the World Agroforestry Centre, the SEAMEO Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA) and two international research and development organisations – the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) from Australia, and the Agencia Espanola de Cooperacion Internacional (AECI) from Spain. The Australian partnership brought to the program the wealth of more than 15 years of Landcare experience from Australia through the direct involvement of a 'grass-roots' Australian Landcare group, Barung Landcare.

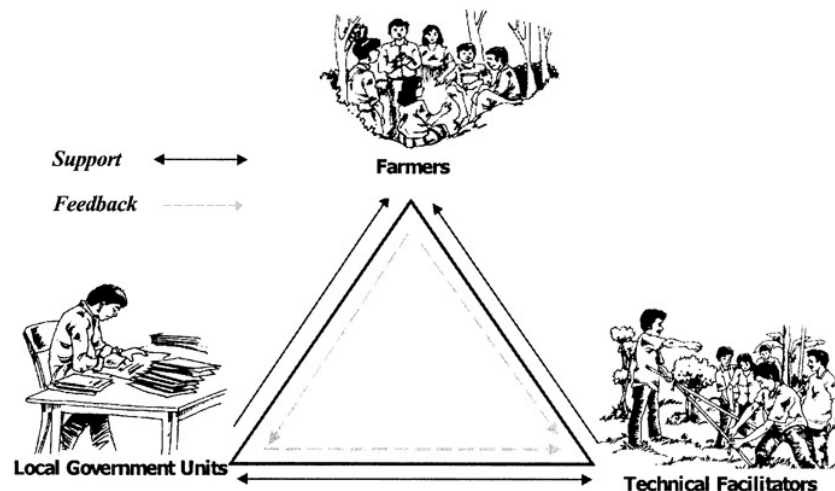


Figure 2. Landcare is an equal partnership among farmers, technical facilitators and local government at the local level, with a focus on farmers being supported and facilitated to learn about problems and solutions, take ownership, and then take steps to address them in their own way. While land management issues are the initial entry point or focus of the program, farmers and their households are encouraged to use the Landcare process to simultaneously tackle livelihood, social and other issues relevant to their local communities.

Since its formation, the Landcare program has delivered some outstanding results, as identified during a recent comprehensive evaluation study of the three Mindanao pilot sites. These include:

- the rapid formation of more than 600 Landcare groups;
- 25 to 35% of farming households involved as members of Landcare groups;
- adoption of conservation technologies including natural vegetative strips and agroforestry by 35% to 65% of farmers;
- protection of 15 to 25% of the total farm area with conservation measures (note that this represents a much larger proportion of the cultivated and steeper vulnerable land);

- establishment of more than 300 individual and communal tree nurseries with an output of more than 500,000 fruit and timber tree seedlings;
- active involvement in the program of more than 50 local institutions including local government units (LGUs), national government agencies, NGOs and private agribusiness;
- a significant increase in the knowledge and skills of farmers through the training provided and a significant increase in social capital related to membership of Landcare groups;
- a significant spill over effect with many non-Landcare groups and non-Landcare members benefiting from direct group to group and farmer to farmer contact.

The study confirmed that although conservation technologies were understandably the primary focus for farmer involvement in Landcare, many farmers became involved because of the perceived opportunity to access potential livelihood improvements such as fruit and timber trees, high value vegetable crops and collective marketing and purchasing schemes, implemented through the Landcare process. Although the impact of this on farm incomes is still being fully evaluated, extrapolations using previous modelling work indicate that it has been significant. A pleasing and inspiring outcome has been a re-shaping of the attitudes and aspirations not only of farmers at the project sites but also of some of the key local government and other institutions, which have previously employed predominantly 'dole-out' and 'top-down' extension approaches. For local institutions, the adoption of a Landcare ethos, where activities and projects are identified and planned by farmers rather than imposed on them, is a positive indicator of the possible potential for Landcare in improving governance.

THE LANDCARE COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE

The environment in which the Landcare program has been operating is both difficult and challenging. At the farmer level, there is a lack of knowledge, capital and physical farm resources, which hinder the ability of farmers to make the necessary changes to more sustainable farming practices. At the institutional level, there are differing political agendas at the local level, deeply entrenched views on existing programs, the inevitable concerns about cost, relevance and adaptability of new programs and their ability to deliver desired outcomes, and often a lack of real engagement with the local farming population. This has been exacerbated by a general decline in agricultural extension services. These factors have limited the ability of local institutions to seriously pursue long-term sustainable farming programs. To complicate the position further, both levels face the same hurdles as any new community development initiative - apathy from disappointment with past programs that have failed to deliver meaningful outcomes, and the usual reticence to try something new and different.

In this difficult and challenging environment, the Landcare program has recognised from its earliest days the importance of clear and effective communication. However, as with all good action learning processes, the communication processes have evolved in complexity and sophistication over the duration of the program, and are still evolving. The four core communication principles established include:

1. **Use of special personal facilitators, called Landcare Facilitators.** These trained facilitators provide a specialist 'facilitation' role in helping farmers and institutional personnel to lead and manage their own agendas of learning and change. An important component of the role is to help identify farmer and institutional leaders, and train them where required, to take on the facilitation role within their own communities or institutions. The role can be difficult, often involving a fine balancing of process management and provision of technical content, without leading, managing or manipulating the process.

2. **Emphasis on verbal and visual communication processes, particularly at the farmer level.** This is necessary as most farmers in the target areas have generally low levels of education and consequently poor literacy skills. Hence, the Landcare facilitators will initially engage with farmers in a village group (or technical staff within an institution) through a slide show or picture presentation, where spoken words and pictures are used to introduce the issues and concepts. Follow-up for interested farmers or technicians is generally in the form of a cross-visit to one of the Landcare sites, where participants can view first hand the activities of Landcare groups. This ‘seeing is believing’ experience has proven to be a dynamic process in changing attitudes and aspirations and consequently practices on farms or in institutions. At the farm level, where radio is the dominant mass media communication, particularly in remote areas, a Landcare radio program broadcast in local dialects has proven to be very effective at one site in reinforcing Landcare messages and maintaining interest and involvement. In the case of institutions such as LGUs, where staff have good literacy and good English skills, brochures and booklets on Landcare and conservation technologies, printed in English, are used to provide staff with materials to promote the concepts within their institutions.
3. **Specialised training, containing active ‘hands-on’ involvement, for farmers and technicians.** Training may range from use of the farmer-developed ‘cow’s back’ method for locating contours, through sophisticated nursery propagation techniques, to facilitation skills practice. The well-known principle of “tell me and I will forget, show me and I will remember, involve me and I will understand” underpins all training events, in that no training is conducted that does not allow active ‘hands-on’ involvement by participants. In addition, in all training events involving farmers, farmers are used as trainers to emphasise the additional and important benefits obtained from direct farmer-to-farmer interaction and communication.
4. **Involvement of the broader community.** Besides involving farmers and institutions, the Landcare program also encourages involvement of other individuals and groups within the relevant communities. These include schools, out of school youth groups, the church, private companies involved in agribusiness, and urban professional groups. In many cases, particularly with school and church programs, the Landcare ethos is thus reinforced throughout the farm family. This has been shown to have a positive impact on the development of positive attitudes to conservation practices and subsequent practice change. The program also addresses the involvement of farm women, by assisting in the provision of facilities to enable women to be actively involved in training and other events. As a result, many leadership and executive positions within Landcare groups are held by women.

A NEW COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE FOR LANDCARE

As the Landcare program has grown, and indications of its success have emerged, interest has increased within various LGUs, NGOs and other agencies located in similar upland rural areas of the Philippines. In some cases, this has been out of curiosity, but in many cases, it has reflected a desire to either implement a Landcare program in its entirety, or incorporate some of its features within existing community development programs. As a result, the demand for information has increased dramatically, placing considerable pressure on the small band of Landcare facilitators and support staff at the pilot sites. Over the last couple of years, the demand has exceeded the available resources, presenting the Landcare program with a new communication challenge – how best to provide interested people with the essential introductory information on Landcare in a dynamic yet easy to digest format, using an appropriate mass media process. This would then allow the Landcare facilitators and their

support staff to filter potential new Landcare developers and direct their limited resources to servicing those which were either most committed or most strategically important to the future development of the program.

A book was chosen by the project team as the most appropriate vehicle for capturing and delivering this 'essence of Landcare' to potential new Landcare developers. Funding was then sought and secured from ACIAR under the ACIAR Philippines-Australia Landcare Project to develop the book as an outcome of the project. Specialist communications staff from ACIAR Publications provided advice to the Landcare project team, and through this contracted the services of an Australian private industry communications consultant, Jenni Metcalfe of E-connect Communications, to work with the project team in developing the book.

The project team, consisting of Philippines and Australian team members and the contracted consultant, met in Darwin in mid-2003 to commence the book project, where both the type of information required and various concepts for presenting it were closely explored. As a result of this analysis, the consultant suggested a story telling concept be used, where a diverse range of people from Philippines Landcare would provide their own reflections on what Landcare means to them. It was decided that this concept best reflected the Landcare ethos with its focus on people and partnerships, and the need to capture this without interpretation of so-called Landcare 'experts'. The meeting then drew up a list of more than 50 potential story tellers, across the breadth of the Landcare experience, and developed a process for capturing the stories using a personal 'one-on-one' interviewing approach.

In a subsequent meeting of the project team and the consultant, Jenni Metcalfe, in the Philippines in late 2003, the list of story tellers and the story capture process was refined, and Jenni provided specialised training to the team in interviewing techniques and photography. The proposed interviewing technique was an informal one, with only one or two set questions to 'break the ice' and get the interviewee talking, and from then on using an open-ended interviewing style to allow the interviewee to provide their own perspective without constraint from the interviewer. As part of the training, Jenni worked alongside the interviewers (Landcare facilitators) for the first couple of interviews (in cases where the story tellers were comfortable with this arrangement), as well as gathering photographs. From late 2003 to early 2004, the Landcare facilitators then conducted all of the remaining interviews and photography. The process used from this point was as follows:

1. Landcare facilitators contact story tellers, briefly outline the project, and make an appointment for an interview.
2. Interview conducted with the full conversation being recorded on a battery-operated hand-held tape recorder. Appropriate photographs taken of interviewee and their farm or Landcare activities.
3. Tape recording converted into a transcript using a dictaphone.
4. Transcript checked by interviewer to clarify any inaudible sections, and correct any words, spelling or terms used.
5. Transcript sent to consultant, Jenni Metcalfe, who converted the transcript into a story (book chapter). Note that in this process, the essence of the story was maintained intact – the actual words and phrases used by the interviewee were all retained and no interpretations of the transcript were made.
6. Each story was returned to the interviewee to verify that the story capture was accurate, and the interviewee was agreeable to their story being published.
7. Verified stories were checked by the ACIAR Project Leader to ensure there were no unethical or litigious statements contained within.

8. Design, layout and chapter groupings of book decided, and photographs, maps, figures and other graphics selected. To facilitate use of the book, a decision was made to use as many photographs and graphics as possible, and to assemble the stories under easily-understood groupings such as Landcare pioneers, farmers, facilitators, government, community representatives and researchers. This way, readers would have the option of selecting stories from their own particular discipline group.
9. Preface writer selected and invited to write preface. Note that the preface writer selected was a Landcare farmer, in keeping with the ethos of Landcare as a 'grass-roots', farmer-driven movement).
10. Book edited by a professional editor to ensure consistency of terms and other quality assurance measures. Note again that the actual content of the stories was not changed, with words and phrases maintained intact).
11. Book published (November 2004).

The book was subsequently launched at a special function in the heartland of Landcare in Mindanao in February 2005, where all but one of the more than 40 story-tellers was in attendance. The function further epitomised the ethos of Landcare, with the 80 guests consisting of more than 50 Landcare farmers and their spouses.

It is still too early to comment on the impact of the book as evaluation is still in progress. However, early indications are positive, judging by the demand, comments made and requests from various sources for permission to use material from the book for other purposes. Importantly, it is proving its worth for the purpose it was created, in providing new Landcare developers with an array of personal perspectives on Landcare, rich in detail and sentiment.

CONCLUSION

The experience of Landcare as a new community development initiative has reinforced the value of clear and effective communication in achieving success. It demonstrates that communication strategies need to be flexible, and crafted carefully in conjunction with clients to ensure they are relevant and timely.

If this is done, the project has shown that areas of difficult to adopt science in difficult economic and cultural settings can be facilitated to have impact and lead to worthwhile long-term change. This is reinforced in the words of the writer of the preface of the landcare book, Landcare farmer, Basilio Decano:

“With Landcare, ideas are heard, perspectives are respected and decisions are made. The farmers get to be the leaders, in the driver’s seat, and are not just mere beneficiaries of programs. We are partners.....and that is something we cherish”.

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