

# Building social capital

Improving participation in NR management



**Farmers in Uganda's highlands face many problems with soil erosion and soil fertility ranking high among them. There is no shortage of technical solutions to these problems but the links between farmers and researchers are not good and local communities struggle with local government structures, byelaws and policies that do not always favour the introduction of new and beneficial ideas.**

Recent decentralisation efforts in Uganda have shown promising improvements by enabling more people to participate in policy decision-making. But this is not impacting on natural resources management and on the capacities and decision-making processes of local communities that manage them. In too many cases, local communities play only a limited role. If decentralisation is to be fully effective it must be based on sustainable local institutions capable of engaging local communities directly in the articulation of their needs, and the analysis, design and implementation of natural resources policies and innovations.

## Social capital to improve participation

Researchers investigating ways to address this problem have found that the presence of social capital is a necessary pre-condition for resource-poor farmers to participate in policy formulation and implementation. Social capital also improves people's willingness to be involved in research and development activities, and improves the adoption of natural resource management innovations that require collective action and collaboration. Thus initiatives and processes that strengthen social

capital can improve the adoption of sustainable natural resource management practices and policies.

Social capital, in its simplest sense, means the more people trust each other, the better off will be the society. It describes the features of social organisations such as social networks and interactions that facilitate coordination and cooperation among people so they can act collectively for mutual benefit. A good example is the traditional rice terraces in SE Asia where high social capital is needed to organise and manage labour-intensive construction and maintenance of the terraces and to synchronise cropping patterns for effective water and pest management. Without strong social capital the system would not survive.

## Research setting

Four pilot communities in the highlands of Kabale in southwestern Uganda were chosen to investigate the influence of social capital on natural resources management and to look for ways of strengthening it. Agriculture in the area is rainfed with annual rainfall in excess of 1,000 mm. Farmers cultivate bench terraces on the steep sloping hillsides to grow basic food crops such as sorghum, beans and maize. They practise soil conservation measures introduced in the 1970s by the agricultural service and enforced by local administrators. However, years of political turmoil, breakdown in administrative services, population pressure and poverty, have meant that many of these terraces have seriously deteriorated. Soil fertility has declined and erosion is a serious problem.

The first step was to assess the effectiveness of local natural resources management policy processes. To achieve this researchers worked directly with poor men



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and women smallholder farmers using community-based participatory action research methods to analyse existing farmer groups and current organisational capacity. Household case studies of livelihoods were examined and linked with complementary data from other surveys and participatory rural appraisal exercises. As a result, an understanding of the social capital in the pilot communities and how it works in the pursuit of livelihoods was developed. The complexities of social capital are well demonstrated in the box below.

In Habugarama village (about 59 households), there are at least 12 local groups and organisations ranging from labour parties, credit and savings groups, pig rearing, farming groups, swamp association, to 'Determined women', a drumming and singing group. Mrs Betty is a member of all these groups. In one she is the vice-chairperson and in others she is secretary, treasurer and committee member. Similarly, Mr. Fred Bitarabyo is the chairman of the Mugandu/Buramba society. He is also a member of the Uganda seed potatoes producer association, chairman of Rukore primary school PTA, chairman of Barisa-Bahinge livestock keepers and soil conservation, member of Kihira group, Nyamabale farmer field school.

The next step was to strengthen the social capital by building the capacity to develop, implement and enforce local policies and in particular the byelaws that support natural resources management. This meant facilitating regular interactions and discussions between the local communities, local government and other target institutions by integrating participatory approaches into policy decision-making and implementation. Two principal mechanisms were used to achieve this, policy stakeholder workshops and policy task forces.

### Policy stakeholder workshops

Bi-annual policy stakeholder workshops were organised to bring together all the stakeholders (80-100 participants) from farmers' representatives to members of parliament. Typically presentations were made by farmers, government services and research organisations. These were followed by plenary sessions in which key issues were identified and debated. From this the priority issues for policy and research intervention were identified.

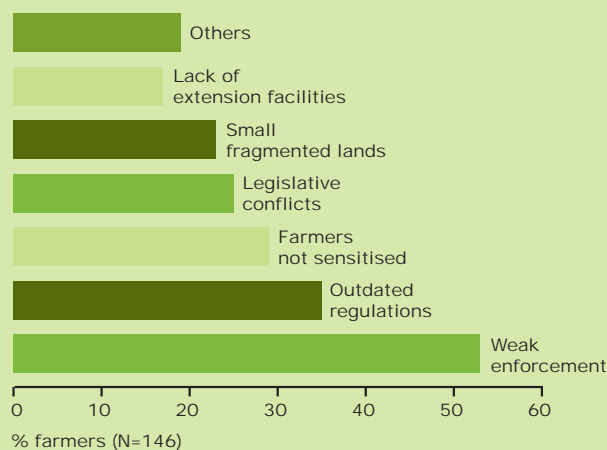
The weakest group at such events was undoubtedly the farmers. So to prepare them to be effective partners a number of meetings were held in the villages and a range of participatory techniques such as mapping, diagramming, role plays, group discussions and visioning techniques were used to develop their community action plans for natural resources management and research and development interventions.

### Improving local byelaws

One of the early workshops recommended that a study be undertaken to improve understanding of local natural resources byelaws and to suggest mechanisms for improving their formulation and implementation. Under decentralisation, many local governments are reviewing such byelaws and formulating new ones. But in too many cases, they do not have an adequate understanding of the issues involved and they have no systematic way of discussing them with farmers who are directly affected by them.

Farmers too have little understanding and appreciation of the byelaws. A farmer survey showed that less than half were aware of important byelaws such as *only agro-forestry trees shall be planted at the boundary or terraces of neighbouring plots and persons who own woodlots on hills and want to clear fell should first seek advice from Forest Department, local councils and chiefs*. Some byelaws were found to be more strongly enforced and effective. Common features of these were that local communities had participated in their formulation and implementation and they concerned technologies and practices that increased productivity.

Farmers' assessment of the reasons for weak and effective byelaws



## Policy Task Forces

Policy Task Forces (PTFs) were suggested at a policy stakeholder workshop as a means of improving community capacity to implement existing byelaws and develop new ones. These were set up to build and strengthen the links between the local community, local government and research organisations. Policy Task Forces were established for different stakeholder groups: local, district and sub-county. The sub-county level is critical as this is where the administrative powers lie to make byelaws, develop plans and budgets, and allocate resources. Village PTFs provide the main link between farmers and local officials and have the task of reviewing existing byelaws, initiating new ones and monitoring their implementation. They comprise farmers, 50 percent of whom must be women, local councillors and government officials. In this way, officials are embedded in the local social relations and can be under pressure to perform for the community and be responsive to it.

It is at the village level that most support was provided. Village PTFs were exposed to successful experiences of collective action and effective byelaws to build their confidence and capacity to engage in policy dialogue with other stakeholders. They were also mentored to better articulate their presentations and in some cases they proved to be better presenters than the research and development workers.

Village PTFs have proved to be very effective for building support for reviewing and formulating byelaws and for mobilising political, social, human and technical resources. For instance, through their village PTF, farmers in a small village of 59 households have formulated a byelaw on digging trenches to reduce run-off on hillsides. They have established 220 trenches and are now actively engaged in adaptive research to stabilise the bunds with different options of dual-purpose barriers using legumes and shrubs. This byelaw has now been discussed at the sub-county level for its general application in the sub-county.



## The outcome

Experience so far suggests that village PTFs are beginning to build their social capital. There is growing evidence of mutually beneficial collective action for managing natural resources, and community engagement and participation in research and development. Village PTFs are also beginning to take a lead in the development process and some are helping to build 'bridging' social capital by linking with other village PTFs and to research and development organisations. Despite considerable progress at the local and district levels, effective links with national institutions and higher level, distant policy makers is still problematic. However the potential for scaling-up is good. It is estimated that about 5 million poor rural people living in this part of Uganda and another 30 million people living under similar conditions in neighbouring Rwanda, eastern Congo and Burundi could benefit from strengthening their social capital.

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