Cross-Visits: Opportunities for Knowledge Sharing with Local Organizations

The TOPS Agriculture and Natural Resource Management Case Study Series

August 2016

In June and August 2016, USAID Food for Peace (FFP)-funded programs in Zimbabwe and Malawi organized and attended cross-visits with local organizations. The cross-visits were knowledge sharing opportunities focused on learning agricultural best practices. Each cross-visit was to a local organization with a strong agricultural technical focus and a deep knowledge of the local environment.

Cross-visits, where one group visits another with a learning objective, can be a beneficial activity for program staff to gain knowledge on topics relevant to their work. In particular, cross-visits to local organizations allow staff to hear different perspectives and form relationships with organizations that may have a focused skillset and a profound understanding of the community and landscape, its particular strengths, and the challenges it faces.

There were several objectives for these cross-visits:

1. **Continue the learning process from the TOPS Resilience Design in Smallholder Farming Systems trainings**—both cross-visits followed TOPS trainings focusing on soil and water health. These activities continued the lessons from the trainings and allowed for more field officers to actively participate in the learning process.
2. **Increase technical knowledge**—allow staff to learn about a different approach to agricultural development in order to strengthen their capacity.

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3. **Develop relationships with local organizations and gain awareness of other agriculture activities that are being promoted in USAID target areas**—there are a lot of organizations operating in Zimbabwe and Malawi. Program success involves a high level of coordination, collaboration, and sharing between organizations operating in the same geographic areas.
4. **Share lessons and knowledge between programs**—bring staff from the two USAID/Malawi FFP programs together to interact and share lessons between the programs.

The World Vision Enhancing Nutrition, Stepping Up Resilience and Enterprise (ENSURE) program organized and attended a cross-visit with The Muonde Trust in Zimbabwe. The Project Concern International (PCI) Njira and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) United in Building and Advancing Life Expectations (UBALE) programs attended a cross-visit facilitated by The TOPS Program to Panthunzi in Malawi.

The Muonde Trust Cross-Visit

In June 2016, the USAID ENSURE program took a field visit to [The Muonde Trust](#) following the TOPS Resilience Design training in April, where TOPS invited Muonde to present their work. The cross-visit allowed ENSURE staff to learn more about beneficial indigenous water harvesting practices and for ENSURE staff who attended the TOPS training to share the knowledge with their field officers. Additionally, they used the visit to inform their workplan on conservation works in catchment areas.

Although Muonde was formally recognized in 2014, the community and farmers have been testing and implementing water harvesting practices in Zvishavane since the 1980s. It is a network of people who are skilled local-action researchers and community extension agents. Their model of learning focuses on bottom-up knowledge generation and testing to identify best practices in agriculture. They are focused on improving farmer knowledge and understanding in order to increase water conservation and improve agriculture production[1].

The ENSURE program brought 35 staff members and key government stakeholders to Zvishavane to learn about the water harvesting techniques practiced by Muonde. Program staff discussed and documented the field observations from the cross-visit. Their key takeaways included:

1. Adopt, adapt, and advance the use of dead level contours with infiltration pits[2]
2. Support community initiatives through "on-farm trials"
3. Promote use of grey water and boomerang berms
4. Strengthen the use of stone walling at water points
5. Increase extension workers level of information sharing at agriculture hubs and demo plots
6. Plant fruit/leguminous trees within the dead level contours

ENSURE followed up their cross-visit by conducting a training on Resilience Design in Smallholder Farming Systems for their agriculture and disaster risk reduction staff in mid-July. This was part of a plan to cascade the information from the TOPS training, The Muonde Trust cross-visit, and existing knowledge within the ENSURE organizations to field officers and program beneficiaries.

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[1] More information about The Muonde Trust's work can be found at http://www.muonde.org/the-work/

[2] Infiltration pits are a type of basin dug in the ground to help collect rainwater or runoff water

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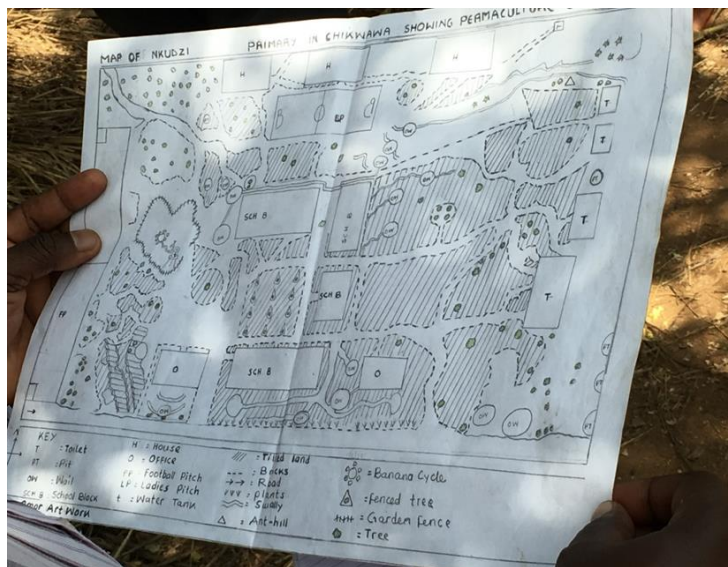www.fsnnetwork.org
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Panthunzi Cross-Visit

On August 10th, the TOPS Agriculture and Natural Resource Management team facilitated a cross-visit for the two USAID FFP Development Food Assistance Programs in Malawi. The CRS UBALE program and the PCI NJIRA program visited Panthunzi project sites in Chikwawa, Malawi. Panthunzi is a local agriculture organization focused on strengthening capacity around landscape design in order to maximize production in Malawi.

Each FFP program sent 21 staff members from their agriculture and environment projects on the cross-visit. Staff visited two primary schools that are redesigning their compounds with Panthunzi in order to maximize the benefit they receive from their available space. Matthews Mpofu, Director of the local organization Perm-a-Outreach and partner with Panthunzi, hosted the programs at the schools in order to explain the technical aspects of the compound design.

Since each school existed prior to Panthunzi, the compound already contained physical structures including school buildings, teacher houses, a borehole, football pitch, toilets, etc. Similar to development programs coming into already-existing systems and structures, they need to learn to plan and adapt depending on the current situation. Panthunzi's role was to work with the school in order to design the landscape around these structures and to maximize benefits from the land. The process began with engaging the local school community to identify what they wanted from their land and then empowering the community to create a map of their land designed in a way that allowed them to access these benefits.

The mapping process led the community to identify what resources were available—based on the physical structures, the natural environment, slope, existing vegetation, people's interaction with the land, etc.—and then how to design the techniques in order to benefit from the resources.

Design of primary school in Chikwawa, Malawi

Photo credit: Eric Carlberg, The TOPS Program

After visiting the school sites and learning more about the landscape design, DFAP staff discussed lessons learned from the day, design aspects that can be integrated into their programs, and other technical lessons learned from each of their programs. Lessons discussed included training approaches and sustainability strategies as well as application to conservation agriculture demonstration sites, watershed management, kitchen gardens, and borehole rehabilitation in the USAID programs.

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Following the Panthunzi cross-visit, the UBALE consortium partners spent two days visiting project activities in the CARE target areas (NJIRA spent two days visiting project sites prior to the cross-visit)[3]. Staff continued the knowledge sharing within their consortium and discussed how lessons from the cross-visit could be integrated into different existing activities including conservation agriculture demonstration plots, livestock watering point rehabilitation, and watershed management.

Key Lessons on Cross-Visits

Staff learning and capacity development can occur in many forms. Cross-visits are a good practice to increase program staff knowledge, learn about and from different perspectives, and increase collaboration among development partners. Local organizations, regardless of size and funding source, provide key opportunities for learning and collaboration for USAID programs. Cross-visits do not need to be expensive or a time burden – there is much to be learnt from other areas within the same country. Some suggestions on how to create a beneficial agricultural cross-visit include:

- Ensure knowledge sharing is two-way. Both visiting and host organizations should be sharing information and experiences with each other.
- Be participatory in the planning and execution. Make sure all of the stakeholders are involved in choosing organizations, locations, and key learning objectives.
- Identify locations with similar environments and climate characteristics. It is important for staff to be able to relate to the environment.
- Seek out new and different perspectives. Learning from people with new or different viewpoints enables (or allows) staff to approach problems in different ways.
- Build in time for debrief. Taking time to reflect on the cross-visit's lessons learned provides a good stepping stone for programs to bring the conversations and learning back to their projects.
- Establish subsequent follow-up learning opportunities. Agriculture practices require getting the details right. A short cross-visit may expose staff to new agriculture techniques, but further learning is likely required to make sure the details of the practices are understood.

The TOPS Program

The Technical and Operational Performance Support (TOPS) Program is the USAID/Food for Peace-funded learning and knowledge management initiative, bringing the highest quality information, knowledge, and promising practices in food assistance programming to implementers and donors around the world to ensure more communities and households benefit from the U.S. Government's investments to fight global hunger.

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[3] CARE International is a sub-grantee on the USAID UBALE Program