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'Washirika': Raising awareness without mass media

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Paul Vare, Living Earth Foundation

Introduction

Living Earth Foundation (LEF) is an international NGO that works with people to resolve environmental issues that concern them. LEF's focus is on education and participation so the inherent contradiction of using one-way (usually top-down) mass media in a human development context has been a growing concern among programme staff.

This paper outlines the development of a people-centred approach to raising awareness, i.e. without a reliance on one-way communication media. This includes a detailed account of the process that was followed by Living Earth Foundation in applying the approach on a project in Tanzania.

Learning to behave

A comparative study into sources of learning and behavioural influences among adults in Uganda and UK (Vare 1996) highlights the importance of dialogue in the learning process; the influence of mass media is surprisingly hard to pin down even in the UK. Passive learners cannot interrogate the mass media and so the effect of these media is usually limited to raising awareness. The closer the source of learning is to the learner, the more significant it would appear to be; known and trusted people are therefore a critically important ingredient in determining our own knowledge and attitudes through life.

Field neighbours in Ghana: people-based 'mass' communication around protected areas

The principle that people will learn from those they know and trust informed the development of an education programme for the EC-funded *Protected Areas Development Programme* (PADP) in the Western Region of Ghana (Vare 1998).

This programme includes a cadre of volunteers whose task it is to interact with their neighbours along the forest boundary. Each volunteer visits a limited number of homes stopping at the point where s/he is no longer very familiar with the place and or people, i.e. when s/he is no longer recognised as a neighbour.

These *field neighbours* are selected in pairs (one female, one male) by their community. The only 'qualifications' for volunteers is that they are widely recognised as having integrity and have a genuine willingness to take part in the programme.

Field neighbours walk from household to household arranging a time to meet or hold discussions on the spot. They collect data on forest use, development priorities and opinions on the emerging programmes being negotiated with PADP. 'Data' is collected in narrative form and is heard and written down at pre-determined intervals by a community liaison officer from the Wildlife Department. This ensures that the volunteer role can be offered to individuals based upon their personal qualities rather than their level of literacy.

By engaging people in conversation, questions are raised and current issues discussed. Volunteers receive training so that they can supply information but only in answer to people's questions. People listen and learn when their concerns and questions are being addressed – simply giving pre-prepared speeches might be termed teaching but it does not guarantee learning. This approach also reduces the temptation to proselytise, in an unconnected manner, about the less tangible (traditionally Northern) values attributed to wildlife although these issues are raised through discussion.

The field walker programme has made a significant contribution in the development of Community Resource Management Areas, an entirely new legal entity in Ghana. This has involved transferring resource use rights and responsibilities from the Wildlife Department to local community structures, a process that is fraught with potential misunderstandings and tension on both sides. The frank and informal nature of the field walkers' meetings with their community liaison officers helped to overcome suspicions, clarify and refine concepts and build mutual trust.

Tanzania: Project background

The *Rufiji Environmental Management Project* (REMP) is run by the District Government with technical assistance from IUCN – The World Conservation Union. Problems of unsustainable levels of resource use are recognised locally

in Rufiji District but local people feel powerless to change this pattern. The issue is not simply a lack of awareness of wildlife values but the empowerment of local resource users so that they can play a genuine part in taking decisions that affect them.

The situation is being addressed by the REMP awareness programme which has been designed by Living Earth Foundation who provided a four-person team (from UK and Living Earth Uganda) during two inputs in September and November 2000 (Budden *et. al.* 2000).

The evolution of 'Washirika'

REMP has worked to devolve environmental decision-making authority by helping four pilot villages to form village environment committees; Living Earth has since tried to engage all local resource users in this decision-making process. This has been achieved through a programme of learning through dialogue.

Like the field neighbour programme in Ghana, volunteers are sought to develop and promote dialogue with their neighbours through listening and questioning. Unlike the Ghanaian programme, the volunteer listeners are not selected primarily on a geographical basis. Establishing the programme here involves a more intensive programme of participatory research. This avoids the danger of imposing an externally designed programme. Trust is identified as the vital ingredient behind successful dialogue – it is critical therefore for any external facilitators to take care to implement a transparent process of selection and training. In the pilot programme established by the Living Earth team, villagers use the Swahili word *washirika* to describe the people they trust and with whom they co-operate.

The washirika programme is the learning link from the community to the District Government via the village environment committee and REMP. It is designed to bring all local people into the decision-making system, to elicit their ideas and their support in developing resource management patterns that will benefit both wildlife and local livelihoods. This is also a way of encouraging people's critique of higher level decisions which are traditionally accepted as 'givens' in Tanzania's hierarchical political system.

The role of the volunteer listeners

Volunteer listeners spend a few hours a week talking with and listening to ten close neighbours and friends on natural resource/environmental issues. They internalise and remember the key issues, concerns, questions and ideas for solutions. A weekly meeting takes place with all the volunteers in the hamlet to discuss their dialogue of the previous week. The key issues are then summarised and recorded. No allowances are paid for this work; REMP provides lunch for those attending training sessions.

The role of the volunteers' representatives

The volunteers select from their midst two representatives (one male, one female) to link with the village environment committee. The representatives have the tasks of co-ordinating the weekly meetings, recording the summary information, ensuring that all members of the hamlet have access to a volunteer and requesting groups to replace volunteers who are no longer active. Again, no allowances are paid for this.

When they attend the village environment committee meetings, the representatives inform the committee of major issues and possible solutions at the grass roots level. They should also provide information on the impact of the village environment action plan. Their monthly report is forwarded to the Village Government for onward transmission to the District Government and REMP.

The process of establishing the programme

REMP is a Tanzania Government/IUCN programme so the Living Earth team worked alongside local government staff during this process. Staff members were selected for their facilitation skills rather than their technical background in natural resource management or education.

Task 1: Semi-structured interviews

A number of interviews are held with residents in order to gain an understanding of the hamlet, its current sources of information/learning and the important social groups. Interviews include a discussion on what people understand by environment and natural resources, where they gather information and who they discuss issues with and where.

Task 2: Trust mapping

This is a novel adaptation of village mapping, developed by the Living Earth team, to find out how people in the community relate to each other in terms of trusted 'neighbours' and to identify social groupings in their terms. The activity includes the following steps:

Step 1: Request that the community meet to map their hamlet.

Step 2: Discuss and decide on which social groupings should meet separately (recommend that at least men and women meet separately).

Step 3: Explain the purpose of the exercise to the sub-group.

Step 4: Ask one person to start by drawing on the ground the most important landmarks in the hamlet and to mark their house, where they work, where they get information, where they meet and discuss.

Step 5: Use probing questions while they are drawing and try to establish dialogue. Ask: Why? With whom? What do you learn there? etc.

Step 6: Allow others to correct or add to the map.

Step 7: Pass the stick to the next group member to add their house, place of work, people they visit, etc. Continue until all have participated.

Step 8: When the map is finished, request someone copy the map and keep the copy with a trusted person in the hamlet.

Step 9: Facilitators should analyse the outcomes and list the main sources of information, the various social groups and the places where people meet to discuss (formally and especially informally).

Step 10: Arrange to meet again soon in peer groups – see below.

Task 3: Peer group meetings

These meetings bring together people who consider themselves to be in the same social or peer group. (NB in the pilot activity, residents chose old men, young men and women although young women were added after the first trial run).

The groups discuss and agree on the number of listeners required to enable all group members to be able to meet with a volunteer listener (the facilitator suggested no more than ten people per listener). They also agree criteria for the selection of listeners.

Typical outcomes in terms of criteria have included:

- Trustworthiness
 - One who attends meetings
 - One who is not lazy
 - One who can follow-up
 - Has experience or expertise in the activity of the interest group s/he is representing
 - Can communicate well with others
 - Can accommodate others and has no temper
 - One who likes sharing information with others
- Specific geographical or occupational criteria are also important.

The actual volunteers are not selected at this meeting although a date is set for an introductory training session for all of the volunteers.

Task 4: Peer groups select washirika in the absence of external facilitators

Task 5: Volunteer training

The roles and responsibilities of volunteers are explained at this meeting which lasts for a full day. Specific activities include:

- Discussion on what is understood by the environment and natural resources
- Questioning and listening exercises
- Role play on work of volunteers
- Transect walk through village and hinterland, asking volunteers to point out natural resource issues and how they have changed over time

Task 6: Review of first week's dialogue – selection of representatives

After one week of work, the volunteers come together to discuss any problems or issues arising from the method. This is an early opportunity to refine the process for this particular community. The two representatives who will provide the link with the village environment committee are also chosen at this time.

Monitoring the programme

The facilitator from the District Government keeps track of timetables and joins volunteers on occasions to see how they are getting on. At these meetings volunteers are expected to report any difficulties they experience, information which can be used to further refine this and subsequent programmes.

Next steps

Having initiated the activity, the next task is to extend the programme hamlet by hamlet, beginning with the REMP pilot villages. The initiation of a *washirika* programme should be used as a means to reinvigorate or mobilise village environment committees and ensure that they have a truly representative membership. The programme should then extend to neighbouring resource users in adjacent villages.

One critical issue which may face similar programmes in other contexts is that local governments (the implementing authority in this case) are often implicated in the promotion, legally or otherwise, of unsustainable resource use. As a result there is often mistrust between local people and their civil servants. In the case of REMP this issue might be relieved, if not resolved, by engaging an NGO as a third party or 'honest broker' to facilitate the programme on behalf of the District Government and rural communities.

Lessons learned

The process for the selection of trusted volunteers is critical; the key to success lies in the way that the programme has been refined and modified by local people rather than being introduced as a pre-determined system.

In general the washirika programme needs:

- ample time for implementation and prior mobilisation of the community before the trust mapping exercise
- careful follow-up to ensure that (a) volunteers have live issues for discussion and (b) relevant extension staff respond to appropriate calls for technical assistance
- the village environment committees require training in how to handle the information generated by the washirika programme so that they can respond promptly themselves and make the most of this activity, otherwise there is a danger that some committee members will see this as undermining their own decision-making powers

More specifically on trust mapping, the facilitators noted that:

- like any practical exercise, it relaxes the participants and allows them to reflect on current practice and discuss issues freely
- such discussions provide information which will be of importance during the implementation of the washirika programme – one should never stop listening
- it reveals gender lines which might otherwise be ignored, e.g. the mapping exercises showed that women's learning sources and trusted people are quite different from those of men (women cited churches, hospital, market, garden and friends who are highly trusted whereas men focused on meeting places like bars, hotels and their friends who are mostly linked to shared economic activities)
- the mapping indicates common learning sources which the facilitator can pick out as key areas or persons for subsequent awareness raising

Concluding comment

As a component of an awareness-raising campaign this is a markedly different approach to that adopted by many environmental conservation programmes which often stop at the village level and tend to be dominated by one-way modes of communication *from* 'the authority' to 'the community'. The washirika programme represents the point at which environmental education and stakeholder dialogue converge. This is a novel approach that will require sensitivity and shared experience to develop further.

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