

Experiences on Community Action Research Programme (CARP)

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Abstract

This write-up provides the experiences that the author has gone through as part of his PhD study being conducted under the Community Action Research Programme (CARP) at Bunda College of the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR). It gives an overview of the following aspects: number of farmers directly involved in CARP, number of farmers reached through outreach events, comments by farmers on changes realised as a direct result of the author's work, personal experiences – best times, lessons learnt and challenges and what the author plans to do after graduation in relation to what he has been doing in the study. His main message is that the CARP programme provides opportunity for experiential learning by both university and community actors.

Key words: Experiential learning, fish farming, Malawi, University outreach

Résumé

Cette description fournit les expériences que l'auteur a vécues en rapport avec son travail de thèse dans le cadre du Programme de Recherche-Action Communautaire (CARP) au Collège de Bunda de l'Université d'Agriculture et des Ressources Naturelles de Lilongwe (LUANAR). Elle donne un aperçu des aspects suivants: le nombre d'agriculteurs impliqués directement dans le CARP, le nombre d'agriculteurs contactés par le biais des activités de sensibilisation, les commentaires des agriculteurs sur les changements réalisés en tant que résultat direct du travail de l'auteur, les expériences personnelles – les meilleurs temps, les leçons apprises et les défis et ce que l'auteur entend faire après l'obtention de son diplôme par rapport à ce qu'il a fait dans l'étude. Son message principal est que le programme CARP offre l'opportunité d'apprentissage expérientiel par les acteurs universitaires et les acteurs communautaires.

Mots clés: Apprentissage expérientiel, pisciculture, Malawi, sensibilisation de l'Université

Background

Universities are recognized as important players in revitalizing agricultural productivity and creating innovations. However, most African universities especially in Sub Saharan Africa are being challenged on their relevance to solving the pervasive problems of poverty, food and nutrition insecurity, and diseases in the region. This is so because they are currently ill-equipped and cannot respond effectively to the demand for the much needed knowledge-based graduates, who can address real-world problems. At the same time, there is a general concern that University research and training programmes are not linked to the development needs of the communities while academic programmes are generally considered outdated (Sawyer, 2004).

In response to these needs, with support from the Regional University Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM), Bunda College embarked on two related programmes: Outreach programme and Community Action Research Programme (CARP) by engaging the whole value chain starting from training programmes, research, community engagement and curriculum development to respond to the needs of the community and industry. While Community Action Research Programme (CARP) is coordinated by the Regional Fish Node, Bunda College with support from RUFORUM is implementing a Project “*Enhancing Fish Production and Marketing for Food Security and Income of Small-scale Producers in Malawi*”. The programme is aimed at building capacity in action research, value chain analysis, organizational development and marketing in relation to aquaculture through graduate training and research, while engaging key actors to identify gaps, constraints, opportunities and innovations in the fish value chain for experiential learning and curriculum reform.

Approach

The CARP project is being implemented in Dowa and Mchinji districts. The project is anchored on implementation of community action research in order to ensure a build-up of a learning community. The project is being implemented through five fish farmer organisations (FOs) that were established within four agricultural Extension Planning Areas (EPAs) in the two districts. Four of the farmer organisations are in Mchinji district while one is in Dowa. Mchinji and Dowa were selected as CARP project sites because of existence of on-going fish farming activities that were being undertaken in the two districts. The fish farming activities were being implemented in these areas by the Malawi Government through the Presidential Initiative for Aquaculture Development (Malawi Government, 2006).

Number of farmers directly involved in the CARP. Table 1 presents the distribution of fish farmer organisations under the CARP project. The table also reveals the trend in participation in the farmer organisations between men and women.

Table 1. Profile of Fish Farmer Organisations (FO) under CARP.

Name of FO	District	EPA	Traditional authority	Name of village	Women	Men	Number of farmers in FO
Chikondi	Mchinji	Mkanda	Mkanda	Chimombo	3	15	18
Gwirampini	Mchinji	Mikundi	Nyoka	Langa	3	3	6
Nthawinchuma	Mchinji	Msitu	Mavwere	Guwende	1	15	16
Manthalu	Mchinji	Msitu	Mavwere	Manthalu	4	10	14
Khumbireni	Dowa	Nachisaka	Chiwere	Jemusi	1	13	14
Total					12	56	68

Out of 68 fish farmers who are members of the five farmer organisations, only 12 (17.6 percent) are women while the rest (82.4 percent) are men. In addition, among the women participants, only one female member is head of a household. This implies that of the 68 fish farming households, 98.5 percent are male headed. It is also noted that men took a leading role and were ready to take charge in providing their perceptions on issues of fish farming. While this dominance may be attributed to the fact that normally in the rural societies of Malawi women tend not to take part in leading roles in many development activities in the midst of men, fish farming is also generally regarded as a man's activity and hence the observed men's dominance in the project sites.

Number of farmers reached through outreach events. The implementation of the project has shown some significant positive externalities which include an increased number of fish ponds constructed in the project sites, increased fish pond area and a number of other non- CARP fish farmers have shown great desire to become members of the CARP fish farmer organisations. Table 2 presents the number of fish farmers who have been reached through outreach events as part of CARP project activities and are currently willing to become members of the CARP farmer organisations. These farmers have either constructed new ponds or increased the sizes of their fish ponds with a view to have an estimated 1000m² of pond area which is the major criterion for a farmer to become a member of the CARP fish farmer organisation. Increased access to fish

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farming inputs and fish markets and good prices of fish that the CARP fish farmers realized have acted as a major incentive for the other farmers in the project sites to emulate fish farming activities from the CARP fish farmers.

Apart from the 37 members as shown in Table 2, who are willing to become members of the fish farmer organisations, farmers in Chisamba village in Lilongwe district were greatly motivated to start fish farming after they had participated in the launch of the CARP-fish project in Dowa district. This is a group of 70 women who have already constructed 7 ponds within their village. They decided to become fish farmers after they had noted the significant benefits that their fellow farmers obtained through fish farming activities during the CARP-fish project launch.

Table 2. Number of farmers willing to become members of CARP Fish FOs.

District	EPA	Traditional authority	Name of village	Number of farmers willing to be members of FO
Mchinji	Mkanda	Mkanda	Chimombo	3
Mchinji	Mikundi	Nyoka	Langa	3
Mchinji	Msitu	Mavwere	Guwende	12
Mchinji	Msitu	Mavwere	Manthalu	16
Dowa	Nachisaka	Chiwere	Jemusi	3
Total				37

Feedback by farmers on changes realised as a direct result of the project work. Most of the farmers claim that the project has assisted them in improving their fish farming activities. The following are the changes that farmers have realized as a result of the project activities:

- The farmers have gained knowledge and skills in community organization. They are more cohesive as a group than they were before implementation of the project activities through community action research.
- They have more access to markets where they get higher prices for their fish produce.
- They are able to formulate and enforce institutional arrangements without any external influence, for example, from extension workers. The rules are made in order for their

Experiences of the graduate researcher – best times, best learning and challenges

organisations to be effective and sustainable. The organisational rules include appropriation as well as provisional rules. These are operational rules to enable efficiency in the functionality of the farmer organisations. This is also the change that farmers cite as a result of community action research.

- Fish production among members of the farmer organisations has significantly increased because farmers share their knowledge and skills which facilitates effectiveness in their fish farming operations.
- Farmers also reveal that many people in their areas are undertaking fish farming activities by emulating what other farmers who are members of CARP are benefiting from the fish farming activities.
- Most fish farmers have increased the number of their fish ponds or have increased the size of ponds in order to reach the target of ‘1000m² which is one of the criteria for farmers to become members of the fish farmer organisation.

Best times

- One of my best times in my study was the time when the Department of Extension of Bunda College assessed my research proposal and accepted it as appropriate and suitable for a PhD study programme. This is always a critical stage in any academic study and it really pleased me.
- There is also a good working relationship between the farmers and the author (student researcher). We have established an effective rapport between ourselves in order to ensure communication and general mutual understanding on issues related to improvement of their individual livelihoods at household level through the fish farming activities that they are engaged in which is also crucial for me to undertake the community action research work in my study programme.
- Another good thing out of the study is that farmers are eager to learn new things that they hope will improve their livelihoods. However, for them to learn the new innovations and interventions, the extension agent, as the author is commonly called in the project sites, should build the trust and confidence of the farmers in our selves.

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Lessons Learnt

- Farmers are full of knowledge, wisdom and intelligence. Through community action research, community members and researchers can significantly undertake rural development activities including farming activities. This is achieved if the researchers listen to the farmers themselves and avoid dictating what they think is right on the farmers. They should learn to hand-over the 'stick' to farmers.
- There are various incentives that motivate farmers to establish farmer organisations. This implies that if the farmers feel that they do not benefit from their collective action, they also lose interest to participate in the organisations and hence effectiveness and sustainability of such institutions are always questionable.

Challenges

A number of challenges were encountered during the study. Key among them was the poor telephone network between Bunda College and the project sites which made it very difficult to communicate with the fish farmers. Also, other organisations who earlier had worked in the project sites used to provide incentives such as money and food to communities. This was a drawback since the CARP project did not provide them with any material incentives. The other challenge relates to inadequate literature on farmer organisation development in fish farming in the context of Malawi. This made it difficult to get background information on the fish farmer organisation development issues.

What I plan to do after I graduate in relation to what I have been doing. Since I am a lecturer at one of the public universities in Malawi, I will assist in realigning teaching, research and outreach activities towards community responsive practice which will be amenable to rural development and improving livelihoods of rural communities. I will also assist the university in reviewing the teaching syllabus in order to incorporate community action research as an approach of conducting research and outreach activities in order to improve community livelihoods. With the experience gained, I will be able to train students on the best bet practices to be followed for establishing farmer organisations that are both effective and sustainable in undertaking collective action. Importantly, I will continue doing community action research so as to effectively understand the challenges facing community groups especially in rural areas in order to effectively improve their

well being through better targeting of interventions to improve their felt needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the CARP project has provided an ideal opportunity for joint experiential learning by communities, graduate students and university researchers from Bunda College at the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR). This approach needs to be scaled up in Malawi and possibly other countries in the region.

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