

Indigenous women and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

Africa

Gender, Biodiversity and Local Knowledge Systems to Strengthen Agricultural and Rural Development (LinKS): United Republic of Tanzania, Mozambique and Swaziland

Project title	Gender, Biodiversity and Local Knowledge Systems to Strengthen Agricultural and Rural Development (LinKS)
Thematic area/programme	Gender, agrobiodiversity and local knowledge
Project duration	Seven years (1988-2005)
Location	United Republic of Tanzania, Mozambique and Swaziland
Beneficiaries	Researchers and development workers from governmental and non-governmental institutions
Executing agency/agencies	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
Implementing agency/agencies	FAO together with numerous partner institutions in each project country, such as national research institutions, universities, ministries of agriculture and livestock, extension service, seed units, non-governmental organizations etc.
Source of funds	Government of Norway

Overview

The project focused not on indigenous peoples or indigenous women, but on local or indigenous knowledge and gender roles and responsibilities in relation to biodiversity management and food security. In the United Republic of Tanzania, the project supported one research study that explored local knowledge of the Maasai on breeding and selection of cattle, sheep and goats and its relation to the goals of food security and herd survival.

Maasai pastoralists possess a specific knowledge system that they have used for generations to maintain their livestock and their production system. This study set out to investigate local knowledge, preferences and

criteria regarding breeding and selection, and the differentiation of local knowledge depending on roles, responsibilities, age and gender. Furthermore, possible changes in local knowledge under the influence of migration were investigated. The preliminary results of this study will be highlighted here.

What was planned (objectives and main activities)

The main objective of the study was to understand the dynamics of local knowledge on breeding and selection of livestock in the Maasai community and to determine whether changes in the local knowledge system occurred when the Maasai migrated to different agro-ecological zones. The specific objectives were to explore preferences and criteria for the breeding and selection of cattle, sheep and goats of the Maasai in two different regions, one in Simanjiro (in the northern part of the United Republic of Tanzania and presumed to be the area in which the Maasai had originated) and the other in Mbarali (in the southern part of the United Republic of Tanzania, a preferred migration area for the Maasai for the last 30-50 years). The local knowledge systems of the Maasai from these two regions were specifically verified in relation to:

- Gender and age
- Roles and responsibilities
- Decision-making
- Goals and food security and herd survival

What the strategy was

The research team was a multidisciplinary group of scientists and extension staff who identified the main stakeholders and tried to involve them as far as possible in the study. During the field visits, the team applied a participatory action research approach, using tools and gender analysis tools specific to this approach. Data were collected, analysed and presented in a gender-disaggregated way wherever possible. The team organized several field visits; each visit was followed by data analysis, report writing and meetings providing feedback to the rural communities. After the feedback meetings, the next field visit was planned.

The study was conducted in three phases. Phase one focused on the Maasai in Simanjiro; phase two focused on the Maasai who had migrated to Mbarali; and phase three entailed the organization of visits between the Maasai of the two regions so as to give them the opportunity to exchange experiences, and to enable each group to understand how the other had responded to conditions in different agro-ecological zones. The exchange visits offered an excellent opportunity for all of the participants to learn from each other.

Who was involved

The participants comprised a multidisciplinary team of seven researchers, consisting of social scientists, animal scientists, breeders and veterinarians from the Ministry of Water and Livestock Development, the University of Dar es Salaam and Sokoine University of Agriculture, district extension staff and pastoral/agropastoral communities.

Sustainability

Some members of the research team understood that the Maasai were true livestock specialists and that they practised animal breeding for specific purposes. Furthermore, they understood very well that Maasai women had in-depth knowledge and understanding of livestock, that they knew the animals they milked very well and that they played important roles in monitoring the animals, giving advice to their husbands about breeding and treating sick animals. The research study led to much-increased awareness of the importance for the Maasai of local knowledge in livestock breeding.

Awareness-raising material will soon be available for extension staff, researchers and policymakers.

Replication/spin-off effects

All of the members of the research team went through an intensive on-the-job learning process. Their understanding of the Maasai and their local knowledge systems was increased and new insights were derived from their experiences. Hopefully, the research team members will apply this knowledge and experience to their future work and to the dissemination of the research results.

What was learned

- It is important to work with a multidisciplinary team to achieve a better and an in-depth understanding of the complex local knowledge systems of the Maasai. A detailed gender analysis at the beginning of the study was crucial.
- Intensive training in data collection and a clear understanding by the research team of the concepts of “gender, local knowledge and biodiversity” were necessary before entry to the field.
- During data collection, it was important to collect information separately from men and women groups of the Maasai. This gender disaggregation was important with respect to understanding different gender roles and responsibilities.
- Gender roles and responsibilities are flexible and adapt themselves to changing situations (drought, diseases etc.) and outside influences (policies, markets etc.). Therefore, it is necessary to

conduct a careful, in-depth examination in the rural communities of the ways in which men and women respond to these outside challenges.

- Triangulation of information is extremely important. The research study was divided into three parts. After each field visit, the data were analysed, a report was prepared and the results were presented, in a feedback workshop, to the agro-pastoral community and the stakeholders. The preparation of the next field visit reflected the comments and discussions.
- It is difficult to collect information on local knowledge: people often do not value this knowledge themselves and therefore do not share it.
- Maasai women play an important role in selecting animals for breeding. Owing to their daily contact with cows while milking them, Maasai women are able to monitor the animals closely.
- In respect of the breeding of animals, women have their own prioritizing criteria. This information is regularly shared with their husbands and the other men of the boma.
- Women monitor animals and their health situation closely. Women take care of sick animals and prepare medicine for their treatment and also treat less serious diseases. Women are responsible for newborn calves, their mothers etc.
- Women are responsible for milk management; the income from selling milk products is controlled by women.
- Women and children may possess their own animals, which are managed together with the herd of the boma. Women have control over their own animals.
- Outside influences: when men, from time to time, leave the boma in search of additional income earning opportunities, women assume greater and greater responsibility for the herd and its management.

Factors contributing to success

- The research team participated in various workshops conducted to sensitize them regarding gender, participation, local knowledge etc.
- Each of the different steps of the study was followed by a workshop focused on analysis, report writing, feedback to the pastoral community, and planning of the next step. The feedback workshops provided an important opportunity for the research team to present the data collected to the rural community. The Maasai made comments, provided further inputs, identified gaps, and discussed with the research team how the study was to be continued.



UN Photo/Wolff

Obstacles or problems identified during the project

- It is difficult to destroy prejudices of researchers, for example, with respect to how the Maasai behave, and what they know and what they do. Destroying the myths is a definite challenge!
- The confrontation of local knowledge and scientific knowledge.
- Local knowledge (and especially women's knowledge) was thought to have little value. Local animal breeds and the local knowledge associated with them were not valued very highly either by researchers or by the agropastoralists themselves. This lack of esteem for local traditions was a challenging factor in the study and throughout the project.

Document/bibliography

Study reports are not yet available but will be posted soon on the website of the LinKS project.

For more information, contact:

LinKS website: www.fao.org/sd/links

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