

A report of monitoring and coaching partners on community conversation implementation and uptake

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Introduction

As part of the CGIAR Research Program on Livestock (Livestock CRP) work in Ethiopia, the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) and the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) research teams, in collaboration with research and development partners, used a community-based learning approach known as ‘community conversation’ to engage community members and local partners in dialogues and joint actions about gender and livestock development issues.

A series of community conversation modules has been developed and tested in five Livestock CRP intervention sites in the country. These are being scaled up to other livestock program sites by the interventions of partners. Working with and through research and development partners has been a core design principle and objective of the community conversation approach. Implementation and uptake of the approach by partners requires capacity development support in the form of targeted training, supportive monitoring and coaching.

A cumulative, action learning approach has been taken in the implementation of community conversation interventions. A series of community conversation modules on livestock development issues have been developed and synergically implemented from 2018 to 2021 allowing continuous monitoring and capturing of lessons from previous conversations through reflections and individual interviews. Working with different partners and communities, the goal of these interventions has been developing capacity for supporting implementation and uptake of the approach.

A learning and action-research agenda allows a conscious practice of reflective and rich documentation resulting in series of reports, blog stories, synthesis of lessons learned, extension guidelines, practice briefs and training tools (see Annex 3).

Piloted in the animal health flagship of the Livestock CRP, the community conversation approach is now being taken up by other programs as an inclusive, participatory engagement approach with communities and local partners. Projects such as the Health of Ethiopian Animals for Rural Development (HEARD), the Small Ruminant value chain Transformation in Ethiopia (SmaRT), the Synergies of Animal Welfare and Agroforestry (SAWA) Borana and the One Health for Humans, Environment, animals and Livelihoods (HEAL) seek to employ the community conversation approach as a partnership development and community mobilization approach.

This report presents the results of monitoring, coaching and problem-solving support field visits to research and development partners on the implementation and uptake of SmaRT pack integrated intervention packages, among which community conversations are an integral component. It highlights observations, challenges and feedback provided to partners in integrating the community conversation approach into research and extension. The field monitoring, coaching and feedback visits were made in three sites (Menz Mama, Doyogena and Bonga) from December 2020 to April 2021.

Purpose of monitoring, coaching and feedback visits

This activity has been implemented as part of the Livestock CRP country priority program on the SmaRT pack and animal health flagship in Ethiopia, which use community conversations as a facilitation mechanism for integrated implementation of technical and institutional intervention packages.

The field monitoring, coaching, and problem-solving support for partners has the following objectives:

- To monitor and assess the extent to which research and development partners work in coordination towards integrated implementation of SmaRT pack intervention packages.
- To observe and provide feedback on how partners implement community conversations and uptake of the approach in research and extension.
- To identify gaps in partnership and coordinated delivery capacity of partners and provide problem-solving support towards better implementation and uptake of community conversations as a research and intervention method.

Monitoring and coaching implementation methods

The monitoring, coaching and feedback to partners on implementation and uptake of community conversation as a mechanism for strengthening partnership and integrated implementation of SmaRT pack intervention packages has been implemented through the following methods.

- **Joint implementation with community conversation interventions.** The monitoring and coaching activity has been coordinated and aligned with implementation of a series of community conversations on animal feeds and nutrition, animal health and collective actions in livestock marketing. The conversations have been facilitated in monthly intervals, which allows the program team to provide regular monitoring and feedback to partners and to address emerging implementation challenges.
- **Monitoring and feedback discussions with research and development partners on priority integrated intervention plans.** Monitoring and feedback discussions were held with research and development partners regarding progress and challenges in partner coordination, implementation of integrated interventions, review and reporting on the SmaRT pack interventions, and implementation and uptake of community conversations.
- **Community conversation implementation monitoring and observation checklist.** A process-oriented checklist has been developed and used to monitor and observe implementation of community conversations by partners (see Annex 1). This has helped identify implementation competency gaps and provide feedback and problem-solving support to partners.
- **Development of a monitoring, coaching and documentation tool.** A reflective, process-oriented tool has been developed to guide monitoring, coaching and documentation of community conversation implementation and uptake by partners (Lemma, Tigabie and Mekonnen 2021; Annex 3).
- **Planning, reflection and feedback sessions with partners.** A series of team alignment, reflection and feedback sessions have been held with partners during and after community conversations to facilitate collaborative learning, identify follow-up and monitoring strategies, and pathways to integrating the approach into research and extension.

Observations, findings and feedback

Local partnership landscape assessment

In Menz Mama, while research and development partners are willing to collaborate and deliver jointly in an integrated way, they seem to be less empowered and demonstrate poor coordination, alignment, partnering capacity and vision for the future. Follow-up and monitoring discussions with development partners indicated weak coordination between research and development partners. For example, there were instances of complaints by development partners about coordination challenges of activities with the research partners. On their part, during feedback meetings, research partners expressed concerns about the limited ownership and engagement capacity of local development partners. This indicates that the partnership and coordinated implementation capacity of partners in Menz Mama needs to be strengthened through communities of practice or strategic multi-stakeholder platforms.

In Doyogena, research and development partners demonstrated a good level of coordination and partnering capacity towards integrated implementation of SmaRT pack intervention packages and implementation of community conversations. The Livestock CRP research team noted that partners in Doyogena referred to other partners in working together and acknowledged each partner's contributions and synergies. This is a good sign of local partnership and opportunity to work with, and through, partners in integrating the community conversation approach into the research and extension system.

In Bonga, there seems to be poor partnership and coordination of integrated implementation of interventions. Among other reasons, physical distance between research and district development partners due to poor road infrastructure might have contributed to the limited partnership, interaction and regular follow-up, and monitoring of interventions. During community conversations involving research and development partners, the research team noted that there exists little familiarity among local research and development partners; indicating poor coordination, information flow, joint analysis and actions. Despite these challenges, community conversations have played a key role in bringing community members and partners together and facilitating interaction, collaborative learning and action in support of integrated implementation and monitoring of SmaRT pack intervention packages. It may be better to work with zonal-level partners to alleviate the physical distance and poor road access limitations.

Our observations show that developing partnering and participatory engagement capacity of partners through targeted training, coaching, problem-solving support, and a series of learning and sharing interventions is required in Bonga.

Developing partnering capacity through multi-stakeholder platforms

The monitoring discussions the Livestock CRP team made with partners both at the research centres and district development partners on the follow-up of community conversation interventions, implementation integration, and partnership at the delivery level has informed the need to follow-up the community conversations with communities of practice or strategic multi-stakeholder platforms to address issues beyond the communities.

In the process, the team made partners aware of the need to work in coordination and created motivation and vision for the future about the benefits of the community conversation and multi-stakeholder platform interventions in the sense of developing partnering and coordinated implementation capacity.

The community conversations intervention together with monitoring and coaching support for partners has helped plan and motivate partners for multi-stakeholder platform events. The engagement of partners in the community conversation process and the team alignment and after-event reflection and learning meetings have shown the need to strengthen partnership at the local level. More importantly, the community conversations intervention has identified key issues which require the actions of strategic partners at different levels. So, the multi-stakeholder platform events are a logical extension of the community conversations intervention to strengthen the delivery or response capacity of service providers and to follow-up on the action points from the community conversations. This complementary application of community conversations and strategic multi-stakeholder platforms has proved to be a promising strategy to develop local capacity and sustain development outcomes.

Anecdotal stories of community conversation applications and benefits by partners

During the monitoring and coaching visits, partners were asked to reflect on their community conversation experience and describe how they view the approach, how they think it differs from their current practices, and how they think it can be integrated into research and extension, or how they are currently applying the approach in their personal or work life.

Minda Hailemichael is an animal health expert in Menz Mama District. He participated in community conversation facilitation training and also facilitated community conversations on animal health in the district. He said that, while there were no community conversations held with community members due to COVID-19-related restrictions, the experience helped him better interact with farmers when giving treatment and vaccination services. Previously, he usually focused on his treatment actions and did not ask and learn from farmers in an interactive way. He said he has now started to ask farmers questions to learn about the history of their animals and animal management practices.

Negash Desta is head of the Livestock and Fish Development Office in Doyogena District. He said that vaccination or treatment services did not focus on advising farmers or communicating disease prevention information. 'I am amazed by the engaging power of the community conversation approach. I now intend to engage in an interactive way with farmers when they come for vaccination or treatment services,' he said. 'We can spend some time to learn from farmers and communicate key disease prevention messages before we provide treatment or vaccination services,' he added. He also appreciated the follow-up strategies and the after-event reflections of the community conversation process. He intends to encourage animal health experts to seek feedback from farmers during vaccination campaigns or treatment services.

Tessema Erchafo is a socio-economics researcher at the Areka Agricultural Research Centre. He facilitated community conversations on collective actions for livestock marketing in Doyogena District. Reflecting on his community conversation experience, he said 'the approach is transformative and allows addressing of problems based on the experiences and views of communities.' He added that as a researcher, he has usually focused on understanding community problems in an extractive way. Community members are only information providers, with little feedback and learning for them. 'But now I see that community conversations can address both research and learning objectives.'

Eshetu Alayu is head of the Livestock Development Office in Menz Mama District. He said that his participation in Key Afer community conversations was a rewarding experience. After learning about the transformational power of the approach, he organized a district-wide sharing of information using resource persons from among Key Afer community members. He reflected that the farmer-to-farmer sharing of experience was a powerful influencing and information dissemination method. He also facilitated community conversations on collective actions for livestock

marketing in the Zeram community. He has committed to follow-up on community actions by including this in the regular monitoring checklist or agenda for the district and to bring together participating partners in a peer-learning and action group through a community of practice.

Birhane Wachamo is head of the Women and Children's Affairs Office in Doyogena District. Asked about her experience of community conversations, she said the approach helps bring about community awareness and action. 'It facilitates our work, and we now have community change agents [participating community members] whom we can use to share information and influence other community members.' Looking ahead, she sees opportunities to use the community conversation approach through development agents, farmer development groups and adult education programs.

Liulseged Alemayehu is animal feeds and nutrition researcher at the Debre Berhan Agricultural Research Center. He facilitated community conversations on animal feeds in the Zeram community of Menz Mama District. Reflecting on his community conversations experience, he said the approach allows one to learn from and with farmers in an interactive way. 'I am amazed at how much I learned from the farmers about their practices and priority feed management problems. I see that the approach offers an effective way to identify research problems and develop and test technologies with farmers.' He added that it gives him a different perspective in identifying research problems and doing research with farmers. 'I wonder how much I have missed opportunities to make feed research more applicable to farmers,' he reflected.

Jane Wamatu is feed and nutrition scientist at ICARDA. Sharing her experience with community conversations, she said that 'during a workshop organized for sheep fattening youth groups, I got a sneak peek into the potential of community conversations. The workshop was intended for communicating improved practices in feeds, nutrition and ration formulation. But it ended up being in-depth discussions around the feeding challenges of the youth group members. It was totally exhilarating. The in-depth information on feeding practices and feed resource utilization that was revealed has never been captured in surveys. Revelations on misconceptions and service delivery challenges all came to the fore. I have the conviction that community conversations are a very useful way for exploring diverse perspectives and gaining deep insights into development challenges.'

Muluken Zeleke is animal feeds and nutrition researcher at the Bonga Agricultural Research Center. He facilitated community conversations on animal feeds in the Shena community of Adiyo District, Bonga Zone. He appreciated how knowledgeable the community members were and how much he learned from them. 'I found the approach very engaging and generative. I am amazed with the level of analysis and learning that happened in a short time,' he said. 'I was wondering about what I could have done better in feeds research while the conversations were happening,' he added. Asked about how he could use the community conversation approach, Muluken reflected, 'I can use the approach as a participatory research and training method. I am also considering doing action research along the community actions from the feeds community conversation.'

Reflections of partners on the monitoring and coaching support

At the close of the monitoring and coaching discussion, partners were asked to reflect on their coaching experience – how helpful it was, what they would do differently, or how they would apply it in their work.

The monitoring and coaching or problem-solving discussions the team had with partners were useful and gave them the drive for action. Partners reflected that the monitoring and coaching support motivated them for action. They said that they have gained new lessons and insights into what they could do better and more.

'It is not enough to bring partners together for a review and planning meeting. Regular field monitoring and problem-solving support keeps partners on action and maintain momentum,' said a research partner. Both research and development partners appreciated the on-the-job learning and reflection support. 'It is more applicable and helpful than conventional training activities, which often lack local relevance and appropriate follow-up strategies,' reflected another partner. Partners appreciated the monitoring and coaching support and requested for more regular interaction, monitoring, coaching and feedback support in the future.

Opportunities and challenges in integrating community conversations into research and extension

The observations from partners' reflections and responses suggested critical awareness and capacity gaps and lack of incentives in the implementation of participatory learning approaches in extension.

Most of the district development partners were not able to see what they could do things differently in terms of integrating the community conversation approach in their extension work. Often what came to their mind was the resource constraints to the implementation of community conversations. But when they were asked to describe what they could do and how they could integrate community conversations into extension given the available resources, they were unable to suggest innovative applications and outcomes. This shows that the primary cause of inability to apply participatory learning processes in extension is an absence of the right attitudes, behaviours and organizational culture for learning, reflection and action.

Challenges to integrating community conversations or participatory learning and action processes in extension come from individual, organizational and community characteristics.

Personal characteristics. At the individual level, staff of research and development partners need to have a good level of learning and information sharing culture and necessary soft skills to apply participatory learning processes. A good level of facilitation and documentation skills is also required for successful implementation of community conversations.

Organizational characteristics. Most often research and development organizations work along the top-down, conventional approaches. Organizations rarely have the culture and incentives that are conducive to learning, sharing and outcome orientation. Partner reports lack reflective thinking, learning and practice.

Community characteristics. The community conversation approach contrasts with conventional development approaches because it engages community members in active dialogues leading to community awareness and actions. However, community members are used to listening to outsiders and have limited exposure to dialogues among themselves and with service providers.

It is important to recognize the inefficiencies of conventional development approaches and seek for more participatory, inclusive and collaborative engagement approaches. These include community conversations, which require more positive learning attitudes and behaviours and role reversals. Working with and through partners in an interactive way, providing regular monitoring, coaching and feedback support can help create institutional capacity for integration of participatory learning processes in extension.

Annexes

Annex I. Community conversation implementation monitoring and observation checklist

The following checklist was used to observe and monitor on-site community conversations facilitation by partners and give feedback and problem-solving support based on the observations made.

- Location, venue and sitting arrangements
- Group composition and dynamics
- Time management
- Motivation and setting context for engagement
- Interactivity and degree of discussion richness
- Facilitation quality
- Use of illustrations, stories, examples
- Paraphrasing and summarizing
- Organization and flow of discussion
- Group management and controlling the discussion
- After-event reflection and insight-making meetings

Annex 2. People met during monitoring and coaching visits

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Eshetu Alayu	Menz Mama District, head of Livestock Development Office	0912727423
Minda Hailemichael	Menz Mama District, animal health expert	0920787476

Annex 3. Outputs of community conversation implementation in Ethiopia

Modules

- Lemma, M., Mulema, A., Kinati, W. and Wieland, B. 2018. *Transforming gender relations and reducing risk of zoonotic diseases among small ruminant farmers in the highlands of Ethiopia: A guide for community conversation facilitators*. Nairobi, Kenya: ILRI. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/99264>
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Training materials

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Extension guidelines

Lemma, M., Mulema, A., Kinati, W., Mekonnen, M. and Wieland, B. 2020. *A guide to integrate community conversation in extension for gender-responsive animal health management*. Nairobi, Kenya: ILRI. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/110398>
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