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taking regional history and development policy into account in the interpretation of project processes and success

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CHAPTER 4

The context for RIPAT: taking regional history and development policy into account in the interpretation of project processes and success

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In this chapter, the local historical, demographic, and political contexts of RIPAT 1 are described. It is stressed that there is an ever-present need for farmers to be responsive and adaptive to the changing political and climatic conditions that they face. The role of crops and livestock in the long history of exchange between ethnic groups is described. The authors find that the integration of different approaches to agricultural development, the provision and careful composition of the basket of options based on local context, and the ability to adapt to and engage with local conditions and realities, leaving the farmer with a genuine element of choice, have all been instrumental in the achievements of RIPAT.

4.1 Introduction

The context and adoption study (see Chapter 3, Section 3.6) in the RIPAT 1 area began in the summer of 2011.¹ In the course of our fieldwork we both saw and heard about the genuine accomplishments of the RIPAT 1 intervention. Interpreting this success correctly is crucial, not least because the RIPAT intervention is supposed to serve as a model for support to rural communities that can be applied elsewhere in Tanzania and in the broader region of Sub-Saharan Africa. Clearly, RIPAT 1 cannot become the sole template for future work in other regions. Nevertheless, there are important lessons to be learned from the first RIPAT project, as its success seems to be tied to both an efficient project implementation design and an ability to engage with local realities and variations. In this chapter, therefore, we attempt to understand these two particular circumstances.

After a brief introduction to the RIPAT 1 project area, i.e. northern Tanzania in the vicinity of Mount Meru, we consider its changing demographic, political, agricultural, and economic features, with the specific intention of reminding ourselves that RIPAT plays into ongoing and complex social changes rather than marking any simple and radical shift from one static situation 'before' to another one 'after' the project. The point is that any given RIPAT project will always be influenced by the specific historical, economic, and demographic situation of the area in question. Consequently, the main lessons to be drawn from RIPAT 1 are not about the particular crops and techniques, but rather about adaptation to local conditions.

In the second part of this chapter we outline an interpretation of RIPAT in terms of the changing discourses and practices of development policy, both generally and in the specific Tanzanian context. Overall, we make a distinction between a *top-down* approach that focuses on the implementation of a set of centrally predefined best practices imposed from outside, and a *bottom-up* approach that favours flexible adaptation to local conditions and preferences. These two approaches are involved in all levels of policy, from general development and national policies right down to – as in the case of RIPAT – the introduction of certain recommended agricultural products and procedures. We suggest that one of the secrets of RIPAT's success may lie in a pragmatic handling and flexible integration of the two approaches. New technologies and new crops and animals were presented to farmers as part of the RIPAT packages, but there were also elements of choice and opportunities for farmers to satisfy their own self-interest.

4.2 The study area in brief

The eight villages involved in RIPAT 1 are all situated to the east of the city of Arusha, in what was then called the Arusha District on the southern plains of Mount Meru.

There are three major climatic zones in the district: the upland, midland, and lowland zones. The villages involved in RIPAT 1 are all situated on the border between the middle and lower belts. The area where the RIPAT 1 villages are situated can generally be described as a semi-arid region with irregular rainfall, and as consisting of bush and open grasslands; however, farming conditions vary immensely from village to village and even from farm to farm because of differences in soil structure, access to water, and annual rainfall. Agriculture is the main economic activity in the villages, with maize, beans, vegetables, pigeon peas, and sugar cane as the main crops. The majority of farmers are subsistence farmers with an average of 2 acres of farming land for cultivation per household. None of the villages have electricity installed, and only a few villages have access to piped water. Water for the cultivation of crops is mainly obtained from rainfall or by means of irrigation systems, with water being taken from rivers and canals coming from the upland area. However, because of the erratic rainfall, irrigation water is not available throughout the year, and access to water is thus a constant struggle. All the villages in RIPAT 1 are situated south of the main tarred road between Arusha and Moshi, but access to the villages themselves is by dirt roads that are maintained only to a certain extent. For several decades now the area has seen substantial population growth. The annual growth rate in Arumeru District during the last 50 years is estimated to have been around 3 per cent. It is estimated to have had a population of 460,000 in 2000, with an average population density of 159 people per square kilometre, making it one of the most densely populated areas in Tanzania (Arusha Regional Commissioner's Office, 2000). The population density varies, however, from that of the closely populated fertile highlands on the slopes of Mount Meru to that of the lowlands, which still have only a scattered population.

4.3 History: people, power, and produce in the RIPAT 1 area

Whereas the Mount Meru midland and lowland zones are semi-arid, the Mount Meru upland, with its rich soil and plentiful rainfall, is one of the most fertile areas in Tanzania. Due to its fertility, the area has a long history of migration flows and competition for its attractive but limited land. The people around Mount Meru have therefore been part of wider systems of exchange for centuries, and they have been selecting crops and developing technologies for just as long. It was into this historical setting that the first RIPAT project was introduced in 2006. In order to understand the current social context as well as the scope and variety of RIPAT 1's successes, it is useful to take a look back at the history of the region, since past experiences always tend to influence current options and choices.

History of agricultural exchange

In the latter half of the 19th century, the area which was to become Arumeru District was inhabited by long-established highland farmers, the WaMeru, as well as by pastoral WaMaasai and a mobile group of farmer-pastoralists, the Arush WaMaasai. The RIPAT 1 area

is still primarily inhabited by the three ethnic groups – WaMeru, WaArusha, and WaMaasai – but, in contrast to the situation today, the groups used to live within fairly separate social spheres in distinct agricultural zones. On the lower plains, pastoral activities dominated. On the upper plains, the WaArusha specialized in irrigating their crops, and provided the pastoral WaMaasai with key resources in times of drought or disease. Higher up still, on the well-watered and fertile slopes of Mount Meru, the WaMeru carried out intensive cultivation of bananas and grain (Spear, 1997: 21–31 and 35–8). In the 19th century, European demands for ivory and sugar brought the people of both Mount Meru and the plains into far closer interaction with the wider world. As the trade in ivory and sugar developed, the WaArusha supplied the trading caravans that travelled up from the coast. A wide range of products were noted by travellers in the region: maize, cassava, sorghum, beans, sugarcane, sweet potatoes, bananas, millet, tobacco, and yams, all generally cultivated in irrigated plots. This list of produce (Spear and Nurse, 1992) deserves our attention. Over half of the crops (maize, cassava, sweet potatoes, beans, and tobacco) came originally from the Americas, and were thus relatively recent arrivals in East Africa. Sugarcane and bananas point to older connections with South Asia, while millet, sorghum, and yams are part of well-established African crop mixes. This variety of crops is significant, marking the existence of a dynamic exchange economy and indicating willingness to experiment with new crops and their associated agricultural technologies. So, in the context of history, the current basket of options of crops and strategies in the RIPAT projects, as well as people's willingness to take up a range of the options available, should be seen as a continuation of a long agricultural development process involving experimentation and adoption of new crops and technologies that can be traced back for centuries.

History of social interaction

The WaArusha evidently did well from their 19th-century niche. They expanded both down into the plains and up onto the mountain, and soon came into direct conflict with the WaMeru population. Over the next few decades, isolated raids turned into an invasion of sorts. Soon both the WaArusha and WaMeru were living side by side on the slopes of Mount Meru, where both groups further developed intensive agriculture. However, despite the increased interaction between the two ethnic groups, they remained culturally distinct. As Spear notes (1997: 57): 'Arusha and Meru thus continued to pursue similar [agricultural] objectives in fundamentally different ways as each continued to order its own world according to its own cultural values and perceptions.'

There are two major points to observe from this. First, we should note that development and change in the Arumeru District has been a continuous process of exchange and adoption, not only of crops, goods, and livestock, but also of people and traditions. This is also evident in the RIPAT villages today, where WaArusha, WaMeru, and WaMaasai live side by side, with no clear-cut distinction between the ethnic categories in terms of livelihood and social relations.² However – and this is the second point – despite their long history of interacting and adapting to changes, ethnic identity remains important, and there are noticeable differences in orientation and preferences in terms of livelihood strategies and traditions which still make ethnic variation one of the keys to understanding some of the complexity of the society of the area (see Box 4.1 and Chapter 7).

Box 4.1 The importance of livestock

Livestock production is one of the major agricultural activities in Tanzania. In the RIPAT 1 area, as in most of Tanzania, livestock plays a major role. Most households live as agro-pastoralists, which means that they combine crop cultivation with animal husbandry, keeping cattle, goats, sheep, and chickens on their farms – although the amount of livestock kept varies, depending on spells of drought and outbreaks of disease. The ownership of farm animals is of great importance for several reasons. First, livestock is an important source of market products such as meat, skins, milk, and eggs. Second, farm animals are an economic asset in terms of providing households with draught power for transport and cultivation, and with valuable manure that improves agricultural production; cow manure can also be used as a building material and as fuel for cooking. Third, owning livestock is regarded as an alternative method of saving, with reasonable protection from inflation. As capital, livestock are also seen as a means of insurance against natural hazards and other economic hardships. These factors are important for the successful introduction of improved breeds of chickens and goats from the range of options provided by the RIPAT project (see Chapter 2). Whereas the introduction of a new or improved crop entails a certain risk of harvest failure, the receipt of a goat or chicken is a direct and immediate financial gain.

In addition to these economic factors, livestock has a much wider social and cultural significance. This is the case for both the WaMeru and WaArusha populations, but most especially for the WaMaasai, for whom cattle and the pastoralist way of life are of significant practical and symbolic value. The ownership of livestock is a symbol of wealth and a source of pride, and for pastoral WaMaasai, cattle still define their systems of social hierarchy and prestige. Livestock also hold great importance in rituals and ceremonies. Cattle are exchanged between a groom and his bride's family, and can also be used as payment for fines. Advice to farmers to cut down on the number of goats of traditional strains that they own and instead keep a smaller number of animals of superior breeds indoors (as recommended in RIPAT) might seem a rational option from an agricultural and market-oriented perspective; for the WaMaasai, however, this option might not be appealing, as the size of the herd plays just as important a role as the quality of the animals.

4.4 Adapting to change

In 1885 Tanganyika was declared a German protectorate, and things changed. Perhaps the most far-reaching action of the new German administration as far as this area was concerned was the decision to make available a large area on the lower mountain slopes for settlers and commercial farming. At the same time, an upper boundary for settlement on the mountain was laid down, effectively locking both the WaArusha and the WaMeru into an enclosed zone on the mountain (Larsson, 2001: 32). This 'iron ring' policy was taken over by the British, the colonial power after the First World War. The inability to expand their territory forced both the WaMeru and the WaArusha on the mountain to intensify and restrict their cultivation beyond anything they had attempted before. Pastures traditionally used for grazing were turned into fields for annual crops – first in rotation with pasture, and later for permanent cultivation. The territorial boundary blocked access to the lower slopes and plains in many places, which limited the possibility of owning cattle, since the pastures had become inaccessible (Larsson, 2001: 169; Spear, 1997: 135–9). Only a small number of cattle were kept up on the mountain, where they were kept indoors and hand-fed on banana leaves and grass – incidentally, exactly the kind of goat husbandry recommended by RIPAT today. As the population continued to grow, annual crops such as beans and maize were replaced with perennial crops, mainly coffee and bananas, giving the area the name 'the coffee-banana-belt'. Bananas had always been important on the mountain, both as a socially significant crop used in

ceremonies and for gift-giving and as a staple food. An inhabitant of one of the RIPAT villages referred to bananas as 'the mouth-opener' for the WaMeru people, as it was the first kind of solid food that they tasted as babies. With the need for more intensive land cultivation, bananas became the main staple food for the farmers, and they were grown on every spare piece of land that could be found.

During the 1930s and later, members of the younger generations who could not find sufficient farmland anywhere near their home communities moved into towns or were forced down to the semi-arid plains, where they settled and started to cultivate land (Spear, 1997: 146). Many of our informants in the eight RIPAT 1 villages told stories of how they themselves or their parents had moved down from the mountain to settle, and everyone still had families and home villages on Mount Meru. Many of the farmers who migrated tried to grow bananas around their new homes on the plains, but because of infertile land, the lack of water, or both, very few succeeded. Having the possibility of growing bananas again is therefore very much appreciated and has undoubtedly contributed to local people's readiness to adopt an improved method of growing bananas as introduced by RIPAT.

4.5 RIPAT in a development context

Looking back at the historical context of the farmers targeted in RIPAT 1 helps us to understand some of the challenges faced as well as the successes achieved by RIPAT.

Agriculture has always been a national priority for poverty alleviation in Tanzania. With 74 per cent of its population involved in agriculture (UNDP, 2010), agricultural development in Tanzania continues to be a central concern for both the Tanzanian government and the donor community. The main question to be addressed has been how best to help farmers to curb poverty. Since Tanzania's independence in 1961, several strategies have been employed to tackle this issue, with a variety of approaches and

Box 4.2 Development in Tanzania

As in most other developing countries from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, there was an emphasis in Tanzania on imposing development from the top downwards through ready-prepared solutions for the farmers to implement. The most well-known example of such an approach in Tanzania was perhaps the *ujamaa* nationwide village reorganization policy, based on ideas of African socialism. In the early 1960s, President Julius Nyerere adopted a strategy of resettling otherwise scattered farmers in new collectivized villages, where the people were supposed to practise collective farming. The intention was to improve the farming system by bringing together the rural population in these villages where social services, extension services, and farm implements could easily be provided (Assmo, 1999: 66–7). Approximately 5 million people were relocated overall. Social services were improved with the development of these centralized villages, but food production did not keep up with population growth and, instead of economic development, Tanzania was faced with additional debt and greater poverty (Larsson, 2001: 33–4). As in other countries where centralized development policies were followed, this crisis eventually led to the adoption of an agricultural liberalization policy in the late 1980s, with the aim of reducing state involvement in favour of market orientation and private sector development (Cooksey, 2003: 70; Larsson, 2001: 34; Ellis and Biggs, 2001: 438–9). With liberalization also came a stronger focus on – or at least a stronger rhetoric concerning – giving people a say in the development decisions that might affect them, and ensuring that development interventions were appropriate to the needs and preferences of the population that they were intended to benefit (Ellis and Biggs, 2001: 443). In this sense, liberalization became rhetorically tied to a bottom-up approach that argued for the participation and empowerment of local people in the determination of their own lives.

policies replacing and overlapping each other over time. In line with international trends in development policy, one may speak in broad terms of a general shift from a top-down policy approach – i.e. centrally defined and usually large-scale programmes that are implemented across whole nations – towards a bottom-up approach that (it is claimed) favours local participation and involvement in the design and implementation of development projects (see Box 4.2).

In its pure form, the top-down approach advocates the replacement of the existing agricultural, social, and cultural organization by another model. Accordingly, local participation is regarded as the participation of local people in an externally designed project, and imperfect adoption of the project elements is understood as a sign of imperfect local participation in an otherwise perfect project. This approach takes as its point of departure the assumption that local practices are problematic or deficient and that change must be transferred in a top-down manner from scientists and developers who know what is best for local farmers (Ellis and Biggs, 2001: 440). What is advocated is a shift in local agricultural practices and, by implication, also in mindsets, culture, and social organization.

Ideally, the elements introduced should be adopted evenly, at the same pace, everywhere – as if everybody had the same problems and were in need of the same solutions to escape from poverty. An incomplete adoption of the package would be seen as a semi-failure; one could try to understand why people resisted or failed to do as they were told or taught, and then try to identify obstacles to change (in people's mindsets, tradition, culture, poverty, ignorance, and so on) in order to overcome those obstacles. An example of this approach is the national government extension system in Tanzania, which is based on trained extension officers and specialists visiting preselected contact farmers. It is expected that the contact farmers will take on the recommendations from the extension officers, and then spread the messages to other farmers in the communities.

The bottom-up approach, by contrast, views farmers as knowledgeable and able to decide on their own best future course of action. It takes as a point of departure the fact that farmers must have very good reasons to do what they do, however 'imperfect' or 'irrational' this might seem to an outside observer unfamiliar with the local context. Local participation is thus taken as the participation of project staff in local lives, working with people to find solutions to their problems, and adoption is then a measure of how well the project or staff have understood the local problems and how appropriate their proposed solutions have been in the local context. The approach assumes that what farmers do is right *for them* given the local constraints, but also that what they do may in many cases still be changed and improved, and that farmers are interested in doing this if it is to their advantage. Change may come from the outside, but must build upon local knowledge, needs, and constraints in a bottom-up manner, and in a strong collaboration between local farmers and scientists or developers (Chambers, 1983; Ellis and Biggs, 2001: 443). It recognizes that farmers are individually different and have different needs: some engage only in agriculture, others also in marketing or business; they adopt different agricultural strategies, and they change their strategies over time; and so on. This approach builds on what people already do, and then tries to widen the range of options available to them as well as to help them overcome local constraints. It is therefore accepted that things cannot be adopted evenly, and even a partial adoption of the products from a basket of options will be seen as a success, and taken as a sign that the developers have introduced some of the right products or techniques, given the local context, and have done more good than harm.

It is worth noting, however, that the bottom-up approach is in itself a policy defined from the top down, in that it specifies the role and contribution of local participants within projects and programmes, and individual projects continue to be required to adhere to general political priorities and targets. Therefore, the continuing challenge for social and economic development initiatives is to answer the question of how to combine the intentions and resources of donor and development agencies with local interests, preferences, and conditions as they are seen from the participant/recipient point of view. As we shall see, this aspect of the difference of approach is particularly pertinent in the discussion of the role of RIPAT within the villages and groups involved in the project.

4.6 The RIPAT answer to the challenge

In the light of our account in Section 4.3 of the historical development of the area, with its emphasis on constant changes to the local agriculture and economy, the bottom-up approach to agricultural development appears more realistic and practical. Actual changes have always occurred on the basis of farmers' assessments of the choices available and of the practicality and the advantages and disadvantages of these choices. That is certainly not the same as saying, however, that farmers have always been able to overcome all problems and limitations, and that there is no need for external input into farmers' practices, or no need for the general improvement of structural conditions (such as access to markets, land, and training) – and some of these problems can be addressed only by centrally implemented, political actions. As we see it, RECODA's work is an expression of this understanding.

In fact, we have detected elements of both the top-down and the bottom-up approaches in the RIPAT project. The farmers were not involved in defining their main problems or the solutions to their problems prior to the project implementation, as a fully participatory extension approach would imply. There was therefore very little local participation in the process of project design in RIPAT 1, as it was RECODA and the Rockwool Foundation that decided to focus on agriculture in general and on the specific farming techniques selected. In this respect it can be argued that RIPAT was a top-down approach. However, the RECODA staff introduced a range of crops and technologies to the farmers based on thorough knowledge of farming, local conditions, and marketing opportunities, and they gave the farmers the option to choose what suited their individual needs best. RECODA and the Rockwool Foundation established the framework for the development approach, but within that framework they allowed the farmers themselves to define their own best ways forward, thereby recognizing that farmers are different from one another in many respects and have different needs.

On the one hand, the project has a top-down approach with the aim of 'bridging the technology gap' (which is the slogan of RECODA), changing the mindset of farmers (shifting from subsistence to commercial farming, maximizing productivity and income), and introducing packages of good practices (such as conservation agriculture or zero grazing). These elements of RIPAT were determined at the organizational level, and it was expected that they would be implemented to some degree by the farmers. From such a top-down point of view alone, however, RIPAT does not seem to have had a very significant effect. Even though farmers were eager to learn and the top-down teaching and transfer of knowledge were greatly appreciated, few of the old ways of practising

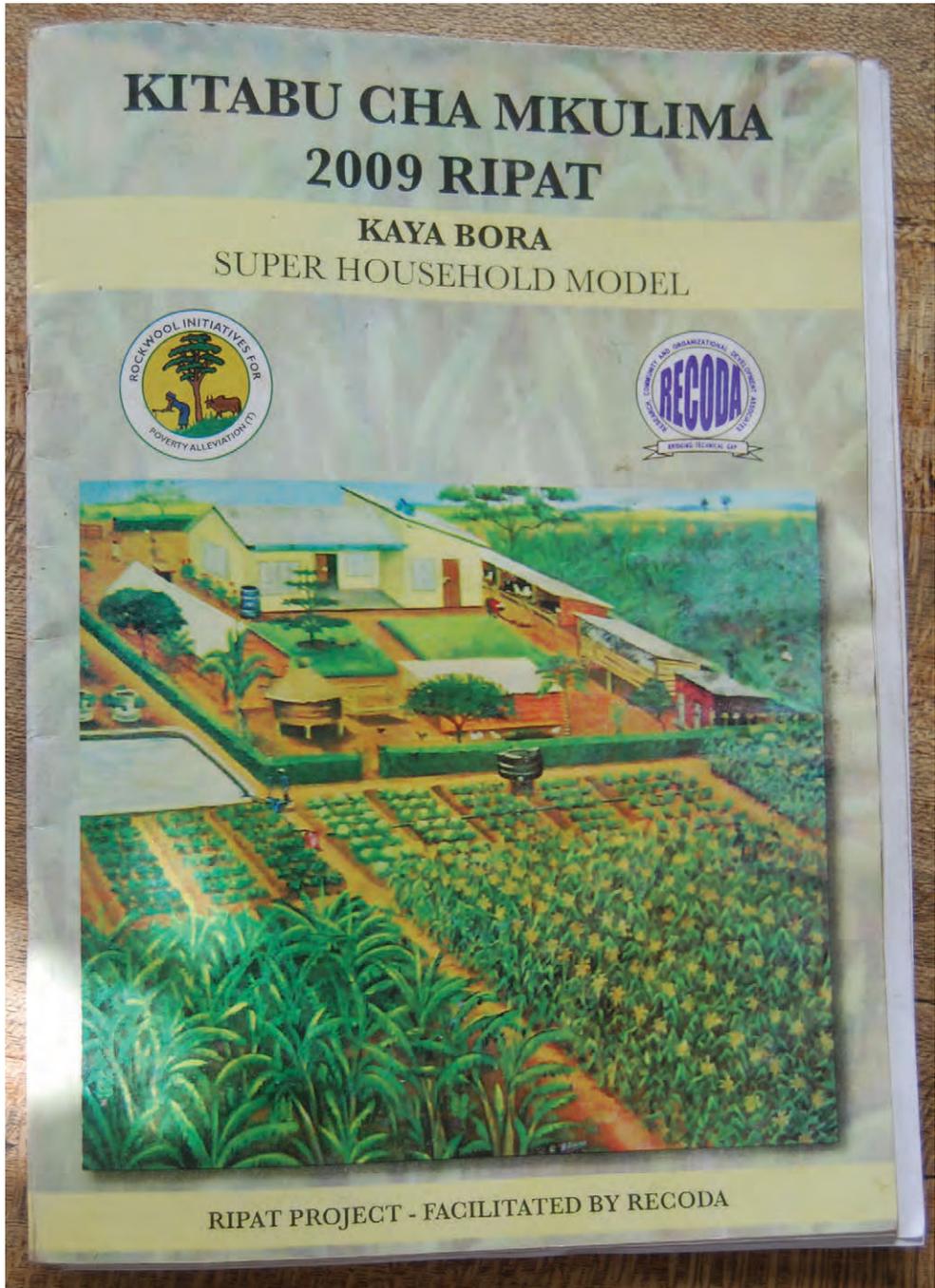
farming have been eliminated, and there has not been a radical change of ‘mindset’ from subsistence agriculture to cash cropping. First, the traditional strategies already integrated a good deal of cash cropping and marketing. Second, subsistence agriculture remains important, as risking too much on cash crops is a difficult and insecure strategy.

On the other hand, however, the project also has a bottom-up approach that provides baskets of options trialled on demonstration plots, lets farmers select what is best for them (regardless of what the agency would prefer to see them do), and works very closely with farmers through farmer groups to overcome the constraints on their endeavours (see Chapter 2). In this way, by emphasizing choice and flexibility, RIPAT manages to create the conditions for a variety of farmer innovations. The success observed therefore reflects a continuous process of adjusting what the project has to offer in order to come closer to what the targeted farmers need and want. This process of choice and flexibility is not only a matter of having the right project design. It also requires a constant attention to farmers’ shifting predicaments and situations which can be achieved only through close, hands-on work with the farmers – something of which RECODA is very well aware.

Another important factor in this regard is the close collaboration between RECODA as the implementing institution and the Rockwool Foundation as the project donor. Both RECODA and the Rockwool Foundation are, in top-down/bottom-up rhetorical terms, the power holders in the project, although their roles are different. These different roles could potentially be a source of conflict and misunderstanding, because of different and possibly competing interests. However, through constant communication and consultation from the start of the first RIPAT project, the two parties have achieved a mutual respect and understanding which has allowed flexibility and change according to farmers’ needs. This has enabled the project to strike a balance between participatory and directive approaches, and still satisfy the requirements of the donor. New technology (which may not actually be so very new to the farmers) and new crops and animals were presented to farmers as part of the RIPAT packages, but there was always an element of choice. Local farmers received a range of possibilities and, working in groups, explored those possibilities to find those that fitted best with their own immediate assessment of needs and markets.

In the RIPAT project, the top-down approach to agricultural development has been transformed into a process that is very open. There are many options for farmers to choose from, and most of these options are improved variants of known practices, crops, and livestock. Furthermore, RECODA’s implementation has more often than not managed to maintain a dialogue with farmers and to continuously incorporate the experiences of RIPAT farmers into the project design. There has been a real, and often successful, attempt to give farmers not just new ‘things’, but also new choices.

RECODA has worked with farmers on an equal footing, considering them as experts, and has invested time and resources in working with them in their fields. RECODA originally promoted a particular vision of modern farming and modern life, summed up in a picture of the ideal family home, a modern building surrounded by a goat shed, a poultry house, well-organized home fields, and outfields with crops in marshalled lines (see image, ‘The model super-household’). But the reality was different. Farmers chose in terms of what they could manage with available labour and land, and also in terms of their perceptions of their own best interests. Some of the RIPAT technologies found a niche, but had different impacts on different farmers.



The model 'super-household'

The provision of a carefully composed basket of options was therefore the development strategy that proved most helpful, as it acknowledged that the local farmers were active agents who would select what fitted in best with their perceived needs and local constraints. New knowledge and experience were acquired, even if the entire package was not adopted, and other projects will be able to build on this in the future.

Notes

1. When RIPAT began in 2006, the area in which it was implemented was called Arumeru District. Arumeru District has subsequently been divided into Meru District and Arusha District. Some of the RIPAT 1 villages are located in Arusha District and some are in Meru District.
2. According to the impact study, 82 per cent of the heads of households in Marurani (one of the RIPAT 1 villages) refer to themselves as WaArusha, 8 per cent WaMaasai and only 3 per cent WaMeru. The village of Kwa Uguru is primarily WaMeru, with 81 per cent of the heads of household WaMeru, 13 per cent WaArusha and less than 1 per cent WaMaasai.

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