

Nexus Networking Grant deliverables

Activities Report: Network of Organic Resource use in rural Africa (NORA)

Euan Phimister, University of Aberdeen, UK (PI)

Aims

The aims of the networking activity were to bring together a range of Ethiopian partners (regional and local policy makers, scientists, entrepreneurs, industry and civil society) to co-design research on organic resource use in rural areas of Ethiopia. The intended Networking activities (all in Ethiopia) were focus group discussions, households and civil society organisations; Stakeholder meetings with NGOs and policy makers; and final project workshop.

Original Academic Partners and changes over Project Period

The named academic partners included soil, environmental, agricultural scientists, economists, sociologists and a social psychologist, and was international in nature with partners from the UK (*Phimister* (PI), *J Smith*, *P Smith*, *Hallett*, University of Aberdeen; *Fischer*, James Hutton Institute), International Research Institutions (*Balana*, International Water Management Institute) and Ethiopia (*Fedaku*, Southern Agricultural Research Institute; *Tefera*, Hawassa University).

Within the project, Homans took early retirement from Aberdeen early in the period and withdrew from the project.

In December, Fedaku moved from his role as SARI Research Director to a regional government role as Kembata-Tambaro Zone Chief Administrator within Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR). He remained active within the project particularly in terms of facilitating engagement with local and regional policy makers. In addition, his replacement as SARI Research Director, Getahun Yakob, stepped in to help organize the December workshop and to facilitate the continued participation of SARI within the proposal submitted.

Summary of Activities undertaken

Preparations for Focus Group and Stakeholder Discussions (May-September)

The initial months of the project were devoted to the preparation by academic partners of aims, objectives and guidelines for the focus group discussions and stakeholder discussions. Minuted monthly project meetings took place in May, June, and July. These were run from Aberdeen by the PI with other partners either present in person or on Skype. Unfortunately, this format worked for everyone except the partners based in Hawassa because the internet connection there was not sufficiently reliable. As a result, communication with the Ethiopian partners in this period was undertaken via email and bilateral telephone calls with the PI. While the process of developing the FGD guidelines did reflect views from the whole team, it was decided

that the PI should make an extra visit to Hawassa in late August/early September to ensure that the ideas and local understandings of the Ethiopian academic partners were incorporated as fully as possible into the development of the network activities.

Main Focus Group and Stakeholder Discussions (September – October)

The Ethiopian partners identified Halaba woreda (district) as the area in which to focus. It is a special district with a population of around 300,000 which reports directly to regional government (SNNPR) allowing all levels of policy makers (local and regional) policy makers to be more easily contacted. Discussions with the local Head of the Bureau of Agriculture led to arrangements for two focus groups being organised in two kebeles (localities), Aymele and Aymata. Aymele was selected to represent better access for water, sanitation, waste management and energy, whereas Amata was to represent poor access. A focus group discussion was held by Ethiopian partners (Fekadu and Tefera, with Phimister present) in Aymele kebele with a group of 4 women, 4 farmers and 4 elders (no other kebele office holders or development agents were present) in early September. The team also talked individually to the Head of the Kebele, local kebele officials, plus a farmer who also provided a short tour of their holding and homestead.

Unfortunately, the arrangements for the second focus group discussion were postponed by the kebele. However, the team reviewed information coming from the initial stakeholder meetings and the FGD in Aymele, which suggested that 1) Aymele in fact better represented a kebele with poor access for water, sanitation, waste management and energy 2) water governance appeared to be an important emerging issue. Hence it was decided to explore whether a second FGD could be organised in a kebele where water governance and in particular water transport had been an issue. The Ethiopian partners did explore this but ultimately it was not possible to organise within the time period.

Within the Halaba locality of stakeholder discussions (one to one and small group discussions) were undertaken with both higher level officials and officers with direct responsibility for implementation of policy and monitoring, across agriculture, water, energy and health. For example, the Head of the Water, Mineral and Energy Office for Halaba district provided an overview of the issues within the woreda, while discussions with process officers in various departments provided insights into the practical implementation of policy, e.g. the Alternative Energy Process Officer discussed challenges associated with implementing biogas, solar PV, and energy stoves in the district, similarly a process officer at the District Health Office provided insights into the water borne diseases in the district.

One initial issue which emerged from a number of the discussions e.g. with the local Health officer, which had not been present within the initial network proposal was the potential relationship between peri-urban waste management and organic resource use. Although ultimately this avenue was not pursued within the project proposal or stakeholder workshop, the team did undertake a number of supplementary activities to explore this after the initial stakeholder discussions (briefly discussed below).

The stakeholder contacted at the regional level in Hawassa attempted to mirror those at the local level and follow up on some issues raised, e.g. the problems kebeles faced with local water pump breakdown and repair. Hence, for example, a meeting was held the Regional Head of Drinking water institutions administration and equipment repair (Regional Water, Energy and Mineral Bureau). Similarly, a meeting with 5 members of the Regional Bureau of Alternative Energy provided a range of insights into policy implementing biogas, solar PV, and

energy stoves at the regional level and also brought out some differences in perceptions of the challenges faced between levels of government.

In an attempt to follow up the potential issue of the relationship between peri-urban waste management and organic resource use, attempts were also made to set up meetings within the Hawassa municipality within officials in the Waste Management Bureau. These ultimately proved unsuccessful. A meeting was held with a local entrepreneur who had set up the first waste management scheme within Hawassa city, how it had developed and its failings, how the current and how the potential for recycling of wastes.

The team was less successful in engaging relevant NGOs than it had hoped. The hoped for engagement with international NGOs was adversely affected by the fact that the team member with these networks (Homans) took early retirement from the University during the summer and withdrew from the project. Some engagement with local Ethiopian NGOs was achieved with a meeting held with Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD) director and 5 ISD staff (<http://www.isd.org.et/>) with Phimister in Addis Ababa during September. However, despite efforts, there was no NGO engagement in the workshop event. We discuss this further below.

Stakeholder Workshop and Partner Meetings, December, Hawassa University

After advice and extensive discussions with the Ethiopian partners, the workshop for stakeholders was compressed into a single day (5 December). It lasted from 9.30-5pm. There were 22 participants, including those from local (Halaba) and regional government from the regional and local bureaus dealing with water, energy, agriculture and natural resources. These included a number such as the Halaba Agriculture Bureau Chief, Regional Head of Drinking water institutions administration and equipment repair, with whom prior meetings had been held. In addition to UK network members, there were international scientific experts from the Southern Agricultural Research Institute (SARI), Hawassa University, the International Water Management Institute (Addis Ababa) and the Centre for International Forestry Research (Addis Ababa).

The morning was devoted to presentations, Fedaku (SARI) welcomed the participants and set out expectations for the day, after which Phimister gave a brief overview of the background to the Nexus Network and the Organic Resource use project. Tefera (Hawassa University) presented the issues emerging from the local project team's discussions with local policy stakeholders, farmers and householders in Halaba district, around the current use of organic resources and how the problems people faced impacted on organic resource use. Dr Kassa (Centre for International Forestry Research) provided an overview on understanding the energy, food and water nexus for organic resources at an Ethiopian national levels, the challenges in linking national plans to rural landscapes and households, and the need to provide a range of options for different local people in different situations. There was then a wide ranging plenary session, facilitated by Dr Tesfaye Abebe, Vice President for Research & Technology Transfer, Hawassa University.

In the afternoon break-groups considered participants views on what new knowledge and research would be useful, what the priorities should be and how to engage with stakeholders. The workshop ended with a general plenary session facilitated by Dr Wolde Mekuria Bori (IWMI - Ethiopia).

Both before and after the workshop, meetings took place between the academic partners present to firstly finalize meeting preparations, and then to discuss the meetings outcomes and how to ensure that proposal reflected the various stakeholders.

Additional Partner meeting, January 19/20, University of Aberdeen/ James Hutton Institute

In order to circumvent the physical communication issues between Hawassa and UK which had become evident during the early stages of the project, an supplementary academic partner meeting was organised in January in Aberdeen where both Balana, Tefera attended. This was intended (and achieved) the smooth completion of the proposal and detailed planning of the activities and coordination between the partners if the proposal submitted is successful.

Stakeholder engagement and the Final Project Proposal

The focus group and local stakeholder discussions provided key information on the nature of Nexus issues faced and did transform and fundamentally shape the proposal submitted. In particular, it became evident from these discussions that organic resource use issues and their relationship to water, energy, and food use in this locality was much more complex and dynamic than had originally been conceived by the academic partners. In particular, how the shortage of organic resources results from the difficulties faced by farmers in responding to changing (and increasingly erratic) seasonality and water availability. The research design and instruments proposed in the research proposal very much reflect these stakeholder discussions in trying to capture the complexity and dynamic nature of organic resource use in the locality.

The workshop played a vital role in shaping and sharpening what the priorities within the project proposal should be and how organic resource availability, seasonality, farmer decisions and governance arrangements interact and influence each other. The main questions which the project proposal aims to address emerged as the key issues for the stakeholders in the workshop, i.e. how to increase the amount of biomass produced and organic matter incorporated into the soil to improve soil fertility, water conservation and production for food, fibre and fuel; how to improve water availability, its use and governance; how to improve our understanding of the impact of economic constraints, and cultural and social norms on the adoption of relevant new technologies by individuals and communities; and how to help individuals and communities adapt to the changing environment that results from climate change and population growth.

Outputs

The project has produced (or is in the process of producing a number of outputs)

Direct

- 1) Internal Draft Note of Focus Group & Stakeholder Discussions.
- 2) Blog Stakeholder Workshop, <http://www.thenexusnetwork.org/projects/networking-grants/organic-resource-use-in-rural-africa-network/>
- 3) Proceedings of Stakeholders Workshop, Hawassa, December for participants
- 4) Project Proposal
- 5) Paper – currently drafting stage

Indirect

The Nexus network activities have built a number of strong relationships between partners which have led to the following collaborations either directly related to the Nexus issue or in cognate areas.

Discussions by Phimister & Tefera have led Tefera being drawn into a British Academy funded Network led by Phimister (originally covering academics from Uganda and Ghana only) on using existing large scale surveys of households to broaden the evidence base on how access to credit, water, and energy impacts on farm household productivity, income, and food security. Hawassa University will receive 6 Stata software licences for staff and research will be undertaken using the Ethiopia Socioeconomic Survey. Phimister will also give short Stata training course to PhDs and ECRs in use of large datasets planned for late April 2016, Hawassa University, and also in 2017/18.

A recent cognate bid for funding has also been made to the recent International Growth Centre Call for Proposals <http://www.theigc.org/> which involves the majority of network academic partners (SARI, Hawassa, Aberdeen, James Hutton Institute), and attempts to extend the co-production efforts undertaken in the current project. A further bid to NERC-DfiD is currently in preparation.

Discussion

A number of challenges emerged during the project which the project team tried to respond to in an adaptive and flexible way.

Communications

The main initial challenge faced arose because of the difficulty in physical communication between UK and Hawassa, which meant that having the intended discussions via Skype involving the whole project team proved impossible to achieve reliably. This made reaching shared understanding across the various partners initially more difficult than expected, as the need for bilateral telephone calls with Ethiopia meant that the full exchange of views between all partners was not possible at this stage. The approach taken to address this was to increase the number of bilateral visits between the partners than originally intended, i.e. September visit by Phimister to Ethiopia; January visit by Balana and Tefera to Aberdeen.

These with the range of meetings, discussions and contact which took place between academic partners and with other stakeholders ultimately did build a strong and cohesive team with the final proposal submitted very much jointly owned by all partners. In retrospect, programming

these meetings and visits at the outset and earlier in the project would have helped facilitate the networking activities. In addition, communication e.g. via Skype between Aberdeen and IWMI in Addis Ababa proved more reliable than attempts to link with Hawassa. Had the initial partners within the network also explicitly included the involvement of staff members from IWMI-Ethiopia (who are often in Hawassa for other projects), this would also have aided the communication flow between the academic partners.

This experience has been built into the project management and plans associated with the submitted Nexus project proposal, e.g. Phimister will visit Hawassa in late April as part of a British Academy project, which will facilitate preparations for the Nexus grant if the team is successful at the next stage, regular visits are also programmed within the proposal submitted, and staff from IWMI-Ethiopia are explicitly involved.

Building inter-disciplinary understanding and engagement with co-production process.

One of the strengths (and of course weaknesses) of the Nexus concept is that it is easy for it to be interpreted only from a physical resource perspective. As a result, the scientists found it easy to engage with initially in terms of identifying the key problem as being one of alleviating a physical resource constraint. However, they needed time to be convinced by the social scientists of the important role of social science in understanding the nature of the problems and the role of co-production. While broad, the Nexus concept from time to time was seen as restrictive with occasionally team members being aware that they were self-censoring in terms of what was relevant or not due to the feeling that to be relevant an issue had to touch on water, energy *and* food.

Through the process, all the academic partners showed a great willingness and openness to engage. Although physical lines of communications were difficult at times between Aberdeen and Hawassa, the regular meetings which were held across the academic partners throughout the project were arguably crucial in reaching a shared understanding of the nature of the Nexus issues faced. These continual discussions drawing on the results of the stakeholder engagement as they became available clearly led to significant changes in the view of the nature of the Nexus issues across the academic team. In part this was facilitated by the personalities involved. While all partners brought their own disciplinary perspectives to the table, all showed a willingness to listen and take account of the range of perspectives. One example of this would be the discussions which took place after the stakeholder workshop in Hawassa. Interestingly but perhaps unsurprisingly there was a tendency for each academic partner to emphasise the issues raised by stakeholders which linked to their disciplinary perspective. However, this was consciously and openly discussed in the meetings after the workshop, allowing for a genuinely collaborative proposal to be developed, where the perspectives from all disciplines are embedded.

One conclusion based on this experience is that in these type of projects regular discussions need to be programmed for all partners to discuss emerging evidence, as these facilitate the process of understanding across the disciplines, building trust and good personal relationships between partners. This allows individuals space and time to take positions, defend them but also to step back from them. The need for personalities who are confident in what their disciplines can (and cannot) bring but who are pragmatic, open to argument and willing to listen to all views is also clear but much less easy to ensure from the outset.

Stakeholder Engagement

For the non-academic stakeholders, the value of a Nexus approach to the issues raised was easily understood (usually framed in terms of physical resource constraints). In particular, policy makers appeared to value the opportunity to discuss across the issues rather than simply taking a sectoral focus on either water, agriculture or energy only which is apparently the normal focus for policy discussions.

Drawing on the extensive local networks and connections which our academic partners in Hawassa have with regional and local government, engaging with local people and policy makers was successful. However, a number of challenges were encountered in engaging non-academic stakeholders beyond this particularly in terms of the final workshop.

The focus of the network activity in terms of generating a specific proposal where the available potential budget (£150K) was seen as limited posed a number of issues in terms of non-academic engagement.¹ First, there was a real concern across the team (and particularly the Ethiopian partners) that, given the cultural context, non-academic stakeholders would interpret workshop participation as a promise of future support (if the proposal was successful) which could not be delivered given the budget. Attempts to get wider participation from outside Ethiopia in the final workshop were also made difficult by the size of the potential budget on offer and location of the workshop in Hawassa (around 5 hours from Addis Ababa). While we managed some interviews with local NGOs, none accepted invitations to the workshop in Hawassa. Although the precise reasons are unclear, in at least one case the discussions with NGOs were quite challenging in terms of answering what might be in the project for them within such a restricted potential budget.

The relative short length of the network project, (ultimate) budget and budget rules for use of funds within the network grant did restrict some potential activity. As discussed above, issues around peri-urban organic resource use were brought by some stakeholders early in the project. These were initially tentatively pursued but were not ultimately followed up either in the workshop or the proposal. Discussions across all of the academic team during September acknowledged that the issue raised were important and interesting. However, the need to produce a clear proposal in January, the wish to provide a focus for the December workshop particularly given the budget, meant that this potential avenue was seen as too risky and speculative to follow up at that stage. The ability to exert such an extra effort, which would have fallen particularly on local partners, was also hampered by the fact that local academic partner staff time in Ethiopia could not be charged to the budget, which was problematic given their institutional constraints.

Conclusions

Despite the difficulties encountered, the academic project team concluded that the process of stakeholder engagement which achieved with local people, and local & regional policy makers did transform and fundamentally shape the ultimate proposal submitted and in that sense the network activity did achieve its primary objective.

¹ The budget size also ultimately prevented one of the original team members, Balana (IMWI-Ghana) playing a formal role within the proposal submitted. Although he played an active role within the network activities and discussions, from IWMI perspective participation in small grants needs to be justified for strategic reasons. This proved possible to achieve for staff from IWMI-Ethiopia but not staff based at IWMI-Ghana office.

Notwithstanding the challenges arising from the “small” size of ultimate grant on offer the fact that the Nexus Network is ESRC led rather than one of the other research councils helped facilitate transdisciplinary collaboration.

If networking grants of this type were conducted over a longer time frame this might allow academic teams to be more open to risk taking in terms of associated issues which emerge during the stakeholder engagement process.

International collaborations of this type particularly involving developing countries pose particular challenges. At the very least, greater flexibility in what network budgets might be used for local partners in these contexts should be explored.