

Women and animal traction in Mbeya Region of Tanzania: a gender and development approach

by

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Abstract

Agricultural technologies are not value-neutral. They have associated with them certain assumptions and choices which can greatly alter the existing social structures into which they are being introduced. The promotion of a technology thus requires an understanding not only of the technology but also of cultural issues. This paper outlines the attempts of a development project in Tanzania—the Mbeya Oxenization Project—to promote the use of animal traction in a “gender sensitive” way. Challenged with the reality that animal traction is considered a male activity, and that gender issues are often perceived as a threat, the project designed strategies to ensure that female farmers are effective participants in, and beneficiaries from, project activities. By fitting the Mbeya Oxenization Project’s experience into a “gender and development” approach, a useful framework evolves which could be used by other animal traction projects in their efforts to integrate gender concerns.

Background

The successful introduction of a technology into a culture involves an understanding of both the culture and the technology—how they fit, or do not fit, together. All too often a technology is considered value neutral, meaning that only its physical attributes are considered. But experience has shown that all technologies have associated with them certain assumptions and choices which have implications when the technologies are introduced to the public. Technologies reflect relationships between people and machines. And culture is not static; cultures, or patterns of interaction between people, develop as a result of various environmental, economic, social and political influences, and are in a continual state of flux. Without careful prior investigation, the introduction of a technology into a culture can have unexpected and often unintended results (Sylwander, 1990).

This is not a new idea. People have recognised this fact for some time, but have not understood its impact on the change process; indeed, it has often been ignored or overlooked in development projects.

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This paper discusses the experience of the Mbeya Oxenization Project—an animal traction project based in Mbeya, Tanzania—and its attempt to involve both male and female farmers as effective participants in animal traction technology. By placing the project’s experience within a developmental framework—a gender and development approach—some lessons are identified which may assist others in their attempts to integrate “gender issues” into an animal traction project.

Project context

The Mbeya Oxenization Project (MOP), located in the southern highlands of Tanzania, was initiated in 1987 as a joint venture between the Government of Tanzania and the Canadian International Development Agency. Its primary objective was to promote agricultural development by encouraging smallholder farmers to use animal traction technologies to increase production, and alleviate drudgery, in a way that “contributes to growth with equity among smallholder farmers” (MEDA, 1986). Although the project planners intended that both men and women would be effective participants and beneficiaries, no strategies to implement this intention were identified in the planning documents. Early in the project, MOP staff found themselves using a passive approach, which resulted in them working only with men; they were frustrated by being given little direction on how to involve the main farmers of the area, the women.

A year after MOP began, an effort was made to solve this problem by creating a Gender Issues Section within the project. The mandate of this section was to develop a programme which did not just assume that women would benefit from the use of animal draft technologies, but which listened to, and worked with, women, as farmers and agents of change. With little support and no blueprint to follow, this section was given the task of developing and implementing guidelines to ensure that women’s needs, opportunities or constraints would be considered at all levels, and in all activities, of the project.

Misconceptions about women and animal traction

It did not take long for the gender issue staff to realise that in order to develop a methodology for integrating the so-called women's concerns, two major issues had to be recognised and dealt with. The most visible of these was the fact that in most peoples' minds, and throughout the literature, animal traction is regarded as a male-oriented/dominated activity. For example, posters and brochures promoting the use of animal traction rarely mention women as farmers who could use this technology. Also part of this perception are the ideas that women are too weak and afraid to handle oxen, that women will destroy the equipment because they are not capable of understanding it, that women have no interest in learning to use draft animal technologies, that there is no need for women to use oxen, etc. Decision-makers from regional government to village levels were not aware, or were not willing to acknowledge, that women have any meaningful role to play in an animal traction project.

The second major issue is that many people working in development do not understand what gender issues really mean. For many, gender issues translate into the threat of radical change, where culture and traditions are disregarded as women take control over men. Fear of this anticipated change immediately raises barriers to communication.

Such misconceptions are likely to be present in any project which is promoting change—whether it be animal traction or any other activity—and if they are to be overcome they must be discussed by men and women together. It needs to be understood that being culturally sensitive is not necessarily the same as being gender-sensitive.

Both these issues had to be considered in formulating MOP's methodology.

Strategies for integrating women in animal traction

As relationships with rural women developed through frequent interaction it became obvious that it was only men who had misconceptions about women and animal traction. Women were indeed interested in using oxen, but they felt powerless to try. In Mbeya Region, only men own oxen and they exercise complete control over them, giving women little access to their use or benefits. It therefore seemed crucial that MOP facilitate a process whereby women could at least have access to this resource, even if not control over it.



Women hand weeding, Njelenje, Mbeya District

MOP approached this goal in two ways. At the household level, an awareness campaign was started among contact farmers. Discussions were initiated with both men and women, to raise awareness of who benefits, and who could benefit, from the use of draft animal technologies. These discussions covered such questions as which members of the household were responsible for what cropping and other activities. It was emphasised, for example, that ox carts could be used to carry water for domestic use (women's responsibility) as well as for brick making (men's work); or that an ox-drawn ridger could be used for ridging a woman's bean field as well as a man's maize field (Wekwe and Marshall, 1991). Training seminars and exchanges were organised, where husband and wife had to attend together. Gradually a new perspective was seen to be developing within households. Men became more aware of the potential benefits of animal traction for the whole family—for agricultural activities and for domestic use. Women gained skills and confidence, not to mention relief from some of their responsibilities. It seems that positive change can be brought about, albeit slowly, by promoting this kind of awareness.

A second approach was to help women actually to have access to and control over draft animal technology. The strategy used was to organise women into groups. By providing women's groups with loans to purchase oxen and equipment, and to manage an income-generating project based on animal traction, the perceived barriers to women using oxen were again shattered. In the "group" context women felt that they were strong enough to counter family, community and cultural constraints. As individuals they may never have had the courage to plow a field with oxen, but when they had the support of other women of like mind they were enthusiastic students of draft animal use. Many are seeking creative ways in which animal traction could enable the group to meet its objectives (such as hiring out their oxen and equipment). In some

groups, individual members saw this as an opportunity to reduce their personal workload. Working with groups allowed MOP the opportunity to train many women at one time, stressing animal traction and project management skills, as well as encouraging women to be more self-confident and aware of their role in development.

These "village based" activities are not enough. Although there is much talk these days of "women in development", "gender issues", etc, it is not always clear what these terms mean, particularly in the context of an animal traction project. There is a considerable and expanding theoretical base concerning "gender", but there is little practical knowledge with which to guide a project.

An example will illustrate how MOP handled this situation. A concern of the Gender Issues Section was that if MOP staff themselves do not understand (or even agree!) why they are trying to involve women, what message will they send to the people in the villages, or will the message they are sending be consistent? To address this issue, a "gender sensitisation" process was initiated within the project. Using some basic organisational tools, all project staff went through a process of recognising their fears or ideas surrounding women's issues; discussed what gender issues are for development workers; and the implications for an animal traction project. It became clear that it would be necessary to deal with comments such as "I am afraid about what will happen if women are equal", as well as to raise awareness on issues of gender, before a gender-sensitive animal traction programme could be designed. This does not happen spontaneously! Gender issues must be understood as a development issue, rather than an equality issue, in order to objectively, and constructively, plan and analyse activities. It should be mentioned that the participation of MOP staff has been active and honest, and recommendations emphasised the need to continue this awareness process.

Farmers' group at weeding demonstraion, Njelenje, Mbeya District



Photo: Sam Vander Ende

Gender and development approach: MOP's experience

The following discussion outlines some of MOP's attempts to ensure gender "equity" within the project. However, it must be stressed that the programme has developed through trial and error. As there is no single way to address gender concerns that will be appropriate for all situations, MOP's methodology should be considered as one of many possible alternatives.

If MOP's experiences are fitted into a theoretical framework, a pattern, or guideline for activities, emerges which may be helpful when analysing other animal traction projects. An appropriate perspective to ensure that women are equal participants in the development process seems to be the "gender and development" approach, as defined by Young (1988) and Rathgeber (1989), among others. This approach is not concerned with women *per se*, but with the socially defined and defended *gender* relations between men and women (Young, 1988). In other words, what women do, or do not do, is related to what men do, or do not do.

One way that gender relations are evidenced in a society is through the sexual division of labour, which is based on a set of ideas about what men's and women's capacities are, and what is appropriate for them to do. The sexual division of labour in any society includes both a set of ideas and a set of material practices, all of which are specific to a particular culture and time. Although the sexual division of labour can be seen as a structure of division between men and women, it should also be seen as forming the basis of social connection, as men and women become interdependent in their combined efforts to meet household survival needs.

Applied to an animal traction project, this approach would emphasis the need to examine the division of labour between men and women for productive, as well as domestic, activities, and to try to predict how a change in one activity will affect others. MOP experience indicates that the introduction of animal traction into a household can affect the labour allocations of the whole household, and for many cropping activities (Vander Ende, 1990; 1991). For example, data collected over the entire cropping season from some 20 farming households who own oxen and 20 who do not show that overall labour requirements increase for those households which own oxen, compared to non-owners. This is not surprising, as ox owners cultivate nearly twice as much land (for the three main crops) as non-owners. However, the extent to which the labour inputs of



Figure 1: Household labour allocation for animal traction owners. Data collected in three villages of Mbozi District. Based on average areas of 2.4 ha coffee, 2.5 ha maize and 1.0 ha beans (two crops). Household composition of 6.25 persons actively involved in cropping activities. Source: Adapted from Vander Ende (1990; 1991)

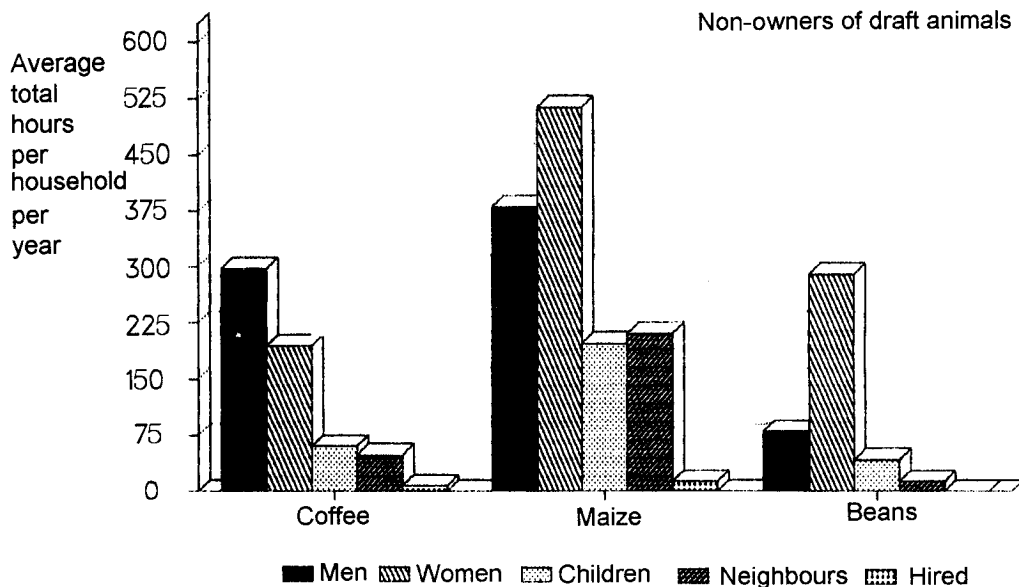


Figure 2: Household labour allocation for non-owners of animal traction. Data collected in three villages of Mbozi District. Based on average areas of 0.6 ha coffee, 1.6 ha maize and 0.7 ha beans (two crops). Household composition of 3.5 persons actively involved in cropping activities. Source: Adapted from Vander Ende (1990; 1991)

different members of the household increase varies considerably: for the three main crops, males in oxen-owning households invest 26% more time in cropping activities, females 54% more and children 338% more than their counterparts in households which do not own oxen (see Figures 1 and 2).

Although it is true that households with oxen are larger (more wives and more children) than those without, it is not clear whether they are larger simply because of the higher labour requirement. The cause and/or effect response to draft animal technology adoption/ownership and labour patterns

and labour allocation continues to be part of an MOP longitudinal study.

As well as determining the responsibilities of men and women, the sexual division of labour also attributes a set of values to all tasks, and to the doers of the tasks (Young, 1988). For example, hauling water for domestic consumption is hardly considered work, and so it has basically no status (Mascarenhas and Mbilinyi, 1983). However, hauling water for making bricks can help to generate income, and therefore prestige attaches to this activity. As animal-drawn carts have high status, and as it is the men who are the decision-makers, carts will usually be used to haul bricks rather than water, which is considered "women's work".

Similar considerations apply to the use of animal traction on cash crops (high returns, high status) compared to food crops (low cash returns, low status). MOP data (Vander Ende, 1990; 1991) indicate that oxen-owning households spend 46% less time per unit area (total time of all household members) on coffee production than households which have no oxen. This supports the assumption that the use of animal traction enables farmers to reduce the labour required for agricultural activities. On the other hand, labour inputs for bean production are 16% higher in oxen-owning households than in households with no oxen. As coffee is considered a "male" crop, and growing beans a "female" responsibility, these data support MOP's concern that draft animal technologies are usually directed at certain crops, most often those which are under the control of men. This situation is not unique to Tanzania, or even to Africa, but reflects a very common occurrence in which low status jobs are most often those which women and children do, and technologies, as well as research into technologies, are most often directed towards high status activities.

Although there may be many explanations of these changes in labour allocation, the data referred to above indicate that the impact of draft animal technologies may be far reaching. It is therefore necessary to understand what kind of changes MOP is promoting, and to monitor the consequences. The gender and development approach provides a framework for reminding us of the many aspects which must be considered. The implications for an animal traction project are clear: if we want to give women a real chance to have access to and to benefit from such technology, we will have to challenge the typical path that most technological development follows.

Equally (perhaps more) important is the fact that gender relations reflect power relations. The



Photo: Sam Vander Ende

Women participating in a weeding demonstration, Njelenje, Mbeya District

relationship between males and females is not a relationship between equals. This is clear from the differential level of access and control which men and women have over resources such as land, capital, equipment, education and training (Overholt et al, 1985). Applying this concept to an animal traction project means recognising that men's use of animal traction, to the exclusion of women, can be based simply on the fact that men have the capital to purchase, and therefore control, the oxen and equipment. They are in the position of power. It may also be that men determine access to training or education opportunities. MOP marketing staff, observing that very few women attended meetings and demonstrations, discovered that although the village leaders (men) and contact farmers (men) were informed that MOP expected both men and women to attend, the message never reached the women. The men decided that there was no need for the women to participate, so they were not informed. Only by understanding who has access to, and who controls, the various resources involved in an animal traction project can we formulate strategies to reach our target groups. Crucial to this kind of investigation is the awareness that a household decision may not be a unanimous one. Folbre (1986) makes the point that intra-household conflict can arise in family decision-making over distribution of income or work responsibilities. We must therefore be aware of whose priorities we are hearing.

It is important to acknowledge, when doing such analyses, that culture plays a major role in determining who does what, and with what technology. However, development projects often find that certain activities cannot be done because of cultural restrictions or constraints. Although the local culture provides a pattern for interaction, the pattern is not set in stone. It may be a convenient excuse to blame culture, when in fact the real problem is our inability to understand the



Photo: Sam Vander Ende

Women's group weeding, Iyula, Mbozi District

social/cultural environment (Prindiville, 1991). Only by recognising the positive and dynamic nature of culture, and identifying opportunities and openings, can we develop strategies for change within the parameters of the culture. For example, MOP was often told that for male extension workers to talk to women, with no men around, was inappropriate within the local cultural context. However, MOP identified an opening: by organising women into groups, it was quite acceptable for male staff to talk with women, even when no men were around. The culture was respected and in a small way change is being promoted.

Conclusion

The experience of MOP has clearly shown that assumptions that all household members benefit equally from the use of draft animal technologies are not valid. We have also seen that by using a gender and development framework we can be systematic in our analysis, and better able to design activities to meet our objectives. By analysing the local situation—for example, who is responsible for what work (domestic as well as productive activities), with what technologies, what skills are needed for this work, and what are related activities—and bringing this to the attention of the household, we are better prepared to understand how all these aspects could be influenced by the introduction of a new technology into the household. It is also important to scrutinise existing power relations, such as who has control over which resources. Are we content to work within these structures, or do we want to try to change them?

By promoting animal traction for women's crops and activities, we may indeed be challenging traditional attitudes and values on many fronts. First, domestic activities (eg, carrying water and firewood, milling maize) have to be considered as real work, not just "the things that women do". Second, we

need to convince decision-makers, farmers, researchers, producers, leaders and politicians, all usually men, that there is reason to direct "high status technologies" to "low-status work and workers". We need to go beyond merely teaching women to plow with oxen, to actually addressing the structures which keep women in their secondary position. Animal traction is an ideal vehicle to promote such change.

A review of most animal draft technology projects shows a consistent association between men and animal traction. In this paper we have challenged some traditionally held perceptions as to why this is so. It is suggested that it may be a reflection of the shortcomings of development projects and the way they are planned, rather than direction dictated by culture. The challenge for all of us is to stop accepting the "same old reasons" and to explore other issues, and listen to alternative priorities. By adapting a gender and development framework, planners and implementers can begin the journey towards truly "gender-sensitive" development.

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