Creatively Improving Agricultural Practices and Productivity

Pro Resilience Action (PROACT) project, Nigeria
Oxfam case studies

Since April 2016, The European Union and the Oxfam Pro-Resilience Action Project in Kebbi and Adamawa States, Nigeria, have supported poor smallholder rural farmers to improve their agricultural productivity. The project has a specific focus on increasing crop yields per hectare for better land usage, as well as ensuring farmers possess the skills they need to maintain good agricultural practices, such as inputs utilization and climate mitigation strategies, as well as an information-sharing system on weather and market prices. The project uses a Farmer Field School model that continues to serve as a viable platform for rural farmers to access hands-on skills and basic modern farming knowledge and techniques. The case studies presented here demonstrate a significant increase in farmers' productivity, income and resilience. This approach should be emulated by governments and private sector players to achieve impact at scale in Nigeria's agricultural sector, which is the country's top non-oil revenue stream.

CASE STUDY 1: THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL RULERS IN PROACT'S SUCCESS IN ADAMAWA STATE

The traditional ruler of Gella during an interview with a project official. Photo credit: Japhet Osidoma.

INTRODUCTION

Communities look to their traditional rulers for guidance and as role models. Rulers' support is therefore critical for programme success.

Historically, governance in different parts of Nigeria was synonymous with traditional institutions and their rulers. Local administration generally centred on the traditional ruler, who was considered the repository of religious, legislative, executive and judicial functions. The geographical sphere of authority of a traditional ruler is usually limited. In contemporary Nigeria, traditional rulers cooperate with the Local Government Authority (LGA) to help deliver effective governance and contribute to the security and peaceful co-existence of their communities. They act as gatekeepers and liaisons between the community and external stakeholders. They wield influence over their subjects and when they endorse or reject a project or course of action, everyone in the community supports them. The success of any project is therefore largely dependent on its acceptance by traditional leaders, as representatives of the target community.

As part of documenting Pro Resilience Action's (PROACT's) good practices, we conducted interviews with traditional rulers to understand their perspective on Oxfam's community engagement, and whether and how this engagement contributed to PROACT's success. A traditional ruler from one of the two communities sampled per LGA was asked questions to show their relative knowledge about PROACT's aims and its interventions at the community level.

STRONG SUPPORT FROM RULERS

The traditional ruler of Gella, Mubi LGA HRH Adro Haruna Ahmed, confirmed that Oxfam visited and informed him about the project: 'When Oxfam first came here, they came to the palace and talked to us about their intentions before they started their interventions. Oxfam then brought us so many things. They taught us modern farming. They also taught us how to save money.' He noted that PROACT taught the community the correct plant spacing and fertiliser application, and how to use herbicide and insecticide to control weeds and pests on the farms. 'They [Oxfam] helped my people with fertiliser at a subsidised rate, and the most interesting part of it is that we pay only 50% for purchase. Then after harvest, we complete the remaining 50% payment.'

As in Gella, the traditional ruler of Malabu in Fufere LGA said: 'I was informed about their [Oxfam's] project and the day they visited, I called other Village Heads to come and hear what these people brought to us. After that, they began the interventions.... Oxfam trained people in agricultural practice. Women and men were brought together as a group, where they started contributing a small amount of money every week, and from the money gathered, they can have loans for other productive farming activities.'

The grain bank renovated by the Village Head of Murke, HRH Yakubu Umar.
Photo credit: Japhet Osidoma.

He said that the community partners came to thank him, thinking he was the 'initiator of the programme'. To support PROACT, the ruler '... asked them to follow the rules and regulations of the programme... let them not be defaulters in any kind of assistance rendered to them. If there are certain items to be paid back, let them do it on time'.

In Pwalamoye community, Guyuk LGA, the traditional ruler, HRH Yoila Hanabi, recalled that the Oxfam team had met the LGA Chairman before they visited him at his palace to introduce the project. According to him, Oxfam was 'the first organization that came to us without asking us to register with money'. He actively mediated conflicts, clarifying Oxfam's position on participant targeting. When asked if the community partners complained about any aspects of PROACT's services, the traditional ruler noted that there were complaints about the selection of people who received cash for work and cash transfers. He reported: 'The complaint was: why will some people be given money without doing any work, but some had to work before money was given to them? I told them the reason was because of their strength: "During enrolment, your responses were the criteria they used".'

In Murke community of Song LGA, the traditional ruler, HRH Sarkin Yakubu Umar (Tanbarin Song), acknowledged that the Oxfam team engaged with him before project activities began in his community.

Sarikin Yabuku, posing proudly in his farm and demo plot.
Photo credit: Japhet Osidoma.

In addition to having good knowledge of the interventions, he joined a male-only village savings and loan association (VSLA) in order to encourage other members of the community who may have had doubts about the safety of their funds in the VSLA. As the farmer field school was held in his palace, he learned and adopted good agricultural practices. He applied these on his maize farm, including renovating the grain bank near his palace and restoring the only dug-out well, which supplies water to the community, particularly during the dry season.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

The PROACT interventions demonstrated that the cooperation of the traditional rulers as key influencers and leaders of their communities increased the adoption rate of good agricultural practices introduced through the Farmer Field School. Similarly, the VSLA, albeit a new approach in the project communities, gained popularity and acceptance through the engagement of traditional rulers as champions. None of these interventions experienced the resistance that can characterize the introduction of new products or technology that radically changes what people have been used to for centuries. The rulers' support also meant that Oxfam did not need to invest time and other resources on sensitization, promotion and campaigns before the rollout of programme activities. Such requirements have the capacity to disrupt the workplan, project timeline and deliverables.

Traditional rulers, if effectively engaged in project implementation, can serve as role models for the community, mediate between the project team and community partners, and clarify project objectives where there is misunderstanding. The common assumption that project staff are always safe in the community may not be the case if traditional leaders have not fully accepted the project. Traditional rulers are therefore needed to offer field staff protection, to the extent of their influence. Crucially, their active engagement promotes the sustainability of interventions beyond the life of the project.

Farmer Field School session at the palace of HRH Yakubu Umar, Village Head of Murke. Photo credit: Japhet Osidoma.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Communities look to their traditional rulers for guidance and as role models. Rulers' support is therefore critical for programme success.
- People are the agents of their own development, and involving them in the entire project cycle increases the prospects of local ownership and project sustainability.
- Successful community engagement requires a hierarchical approach, from the highest to the lowest tier of government, followed by the community leadership. This must be successfully conducted prior to programme activities.

Traditional rulers' influence on their subjects can be leveraged by programme implementers for community acceptance, project and institutional visibility, and advocacy with donors and government for resource mobilization.

CASE STUDY 2: INCREASING YIELD THROUGH GOOD AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES

Wakili Bala on his rice farm in Kola. Photo credit: Ashiru.

Rice farmer Wakili Bala lives in Kola Community in Birnin Kebbi Local Government Area, Kebbi State of Nigeria. He has two wives and seven children. Before he joined the Oxfam PROACT Farm Field Training School (FFTS) and Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA), he obtained an average yield of 10 bags of rice every planting season, but this was hardly enough to feed his family. Wakili practised traditional methods of rice planting: he did not clear the land before planting, he planted seeds directly into the soil, he had little access to fertilisers and pesticides, and he applied fertiliser by spreading it onto the soil. This resulted in poor yields.

To help address the family's hunger, several of his children left the community for the big cities to engage in odd jobs so that they could send money home. He used this money to feed rest of his family. To supplement his farming income, he took camels into the forest to scavenge for food, but this still didn't provide enough to feed the family. Their meals were irregular, sometimes only one a day, and they often went to bed hungry.

Wakili says his life has changed three-fold since he joined the FFTS and VSLA. He is now enjoying progress in his farming business. His yield has improved, with an average harvest of 34–40 bags of rice from the same farmland which used to give only 10. He has learned new techniques, including land preparation, growing rice nurseries, transplanting rice, plant spacing, weed management and better fertiliser use. Being a member of the

VSLA has given him access to fertilisers, which he obtains as loans and pays back after harvest.

The PROACT project has reunited his family. Able to feed and provide for them all year round, Wakili has asked the children to return home. Now they all work on the family farm as a united team. His ability to provide for the family has improved his relationship with his wives. They now take decisions together on how to spend the money he gets from the VSLA share-out.

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