

## **Step by step: Conducting Beneficiary Assessment with Communities**

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### **Introduction**

The Seeds and Access to Markets Project (SAMP) contributes to increase food and nutrition security of smallholder farmers by improving availability of, and access to adequate quantities of quality seeds and planting material of suitable and diversified crop varieties. The project, now in its second phase (2013 to 2015), is implemented through a mandate in Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and Swaziland by GRM International. In preparation for a third phase of the project, SDC Pretoria Cooperation office commissioned an impact assessment of the Zimbabwe component, and a beneficiary assessment for Lesotho and Swaziland. The impact assessment was suitable for Zimbabwe, as the project has been implemented there for a longer timeframe. For Lesotho and Swaziland, on the other hand, a beneficiary assessment was appropriate as the project is newer and a need to better understand the beneficiaries and their needs.

The Beneficiary Assessment (BA) process was conducted in Swaziland and Lesotho from February to May 2015. Beneficiary Assessment involves active engagement of beneficiaries in understanding their context, their needs and priorities in project planning and implementation (SDC 2013; Salmen 2002). This provides an understanding of the project from the perspective of the beneficiaries rather than from an outsider perspective (be it implementing team or consultants). Some of the important findings from this process were that beneficiaries felt that the SAMP project implemented in Lesotho had benefited the seed producers rather than the seed consumers, while for Swaziland the farmers felt that there are additional seed and crops that they would like to access such as certain bean varieties, potatoes and sunflower. These findings were considered in the planning for the next project phase. This paper is a presentation of my role and experiences whilst facilitating a beneficiary assessment for the SAMP project with communities in Swaziland and Lesotho.

### **1. Working with an external Consultant**

In order to facilitate the beneficiary assessment process, SDC Pretoria cooperation office utilised the service of Helvetas Swiss Inter-cooperation that has a standing backstopping mandate with SDC for evaluations. Riff Fullan was the consultant assigned to SDC Pretoria for facilitation the Beneficiary Assessment process. Introductions were made via email to the consultant and I was assigned to be the SDC contact for the process. Together with Juliane Ineichen, the head of the Food Security domain, we developed terms of reference for the Beneficiary Assessment for Swaziland and Lesotho. The consultant shared with me Beneficiary Assessment tools so as to get an understanding of the process, while I also shared with the consultant project reports for him to understand the country context and SAMP project objectives. These documents enabled us to adapt terms of reference and Beneficiary Assessment methodology to the project context, and start thinking of the planning process.

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## **2. Planning and Budgeting for the Process**

After refining the terms of reference and the BA methodology, I engaged GRM, the partner implementing the SAMP project, to discuss the Beneficiary Assessment process. The SAMP Project Advisory Committee (PAC) meeting held in Lesotho on the week of 9<sup>th</sup> February 2015 provided a good opportunity to meet the implementing team for Swaziland and Lesotho and Alex Carr, the project team leader. During the PAC meeting I shared the Beneficiary Assessment process, rationale for doing it in Swaziland and Lesotho, and the expected roles of GRM, consultant, national facilitators, citizen observers, and SDC:

- The role of GRM, the implementing partner, was to identify potential national level facilitators to conduct the Beneficiary Assessment in Lesotho and Swaziland, identify citizen observers with the help of the facilitators, and provide logistical support to the process as required such as transportation, accommodation, conference facilities and stationary. Independence of GRM from the process was essential to prevent bias or influencing the community perceptions.
- The backstopping consultant would provide overall leadership, training and technical guidance on the Beneficiary Assessment process.
- The national facilitators to be recruited nationally and be responsible for recruiting citizen observers, training them and overseeing their data collection, and reporting.
- The citizen observers were recruited at the project site amongst project beneficiaries and responsible for all the data collection.
- My role representing SDC was facilitating the contracting of the various parties in the BA process, supporting the backstopping consultant and ensuring that any constraints were addressed.

I developed a working budget with assistance from GRM teams (Lesotho and Swaziland) since they were familiar with local contexts. We budgeted for facilitators' training, training of citizen observers, field work, and validation workshops for each country. GRM also advised on the rates to pay national facilitators, assistant facilitators, and citizen observers.

After this, I developed a budget for the entire process including required trainings, field work, validation workshops, consultancies fees and logistical costs. I shared this budget with SDC finance that assisted me to finalise it in the context of the entire budget available for the exercise. Riff Fullan the consultant shared the draft program schedule for the beneficiary assessment that we adjusted after incorporating feedback from GRM and national facilitators.

## **3. Engaging project implementer and the national facilitators**

The beneficiary assessment process required hiring national facilitators for overseeing the data collection process and report writing. I modified the standard terms of reference for facilitators in line with our needs and shared with GRM to shortlist potential candidates for the role. GRM sent me four resumes for national level facilitators for our consideration. I had specified that a gender balance was necessary between the national facilitator and the assistant facilitator. I reviewed the CVs in line with the terms of reference and conducted telephone interviews with candidates to understand them better and check their availability. Both male and

female facilitators were recruited for Lesotho and Swaziland. I shared with the facilitators their terms of reference, the beneficiary assessment methodology and SAMP documents for them to further understand the project.

I developed contract documents for GRM and national facilitators, ensuring a gender balance for all the countries.

#### **4. Preparation meetings with facilitators**

Together with Riff, we held several skype meetings with national facilitators to enable them to understand the Beneficiary Assessment process, their expected roles, and the context prevalent in both countries. We initially scheduled meetings monthly but towards the start of Beneficiary Assessment, meetings were held weekly. Outputs from skype meetings included the revised inception report, proposed methodologies and detailed schedule of activities for each country. Each country also had developed a list of citizen observers that would be responsible for data collection. By the time we met physically, as a team, we had covered much groundwork in preparing for the beneficiary assessment process. Though skype provided a platform for constant interaction, we sometimes faced connectivity challenges.

I attended the facilitator's training and preparation meeting with Riff Fullan. This was held in Swaziland. Present in the meeting were the facilitators from Swaziland and Lesotho, together with their assistants. The purpose of this session was to develop and refine the Beneficiary Assessment process, agree on the implementation schedule, and develop tools to be used during data collection. Riff was the main facilitator, while I was the co-facilitator. After three days, we had finalised the implementation schedule and data collection tools for each country. The facilitators were confident and ready to facilitate the Beneficiary Assessment process and train citizen observers the following week. My presence in the field enabled me to get more clarification on the various roles of all players, especially of GRM in providing logistical support to the entire process. Apparently there was misunderstanding of responsibilities between GRM management office and field teams that had not been informed clearly about their roles and budget available for the Beneficiary Assessment process.

#### **5. Training the Citizen Observers and field testing**

Training citizen observers and field testing was done by national facilitators and their assistants. While Riff supervised the Lesotho process, and I supervised the Swaziland process simultaneously, we kept close communication by telephone. Citizen observers were trained on the theory of the Beneficiary Assessment process, and usage of field tools. One day of field testing was also done to ensure that the developed tools would accurately capture views and perspectives of interviewed households.

Some challenges were experienced during training of citizen observers and field testing. On the logistics side, GRM field teams appeared not to be ready for the process in spite of our constant prior engagements with their management office in Pretoria, South Africa. Not all stationery requirements had been purchased on time and the GRM field team was not aware of the budget details. In terms of citizen observers, as this was the first time for most of them to be involved in such a process, it was not easy for some to conduct interviews. Some citizen observers were quite old and thus struggled with the process while the younger generation could cope with

the demands of the process. My feeling was that the time for field testing was short and did not give citizen observers adequate time for practice. Also, it was easier to conduct household/individual interviews, compared with facilitation of focus group discussions. Focus group discussions generally require more experienced researchers to manage the conversation flow and group dynamics. Household interviews, on the other hand, are much easier, requiring completion of standardised questionnaires.

## **6. Data collection, analysis, validation and report writing**

A weeklong break between training citizen observers and actual data collection enabled citizen observers to rest before the continuous period of data collection. This also gave time to GRM to arrange and fine-tune all logistical preparations. Actual data collection in the field was done by citizen observers, with supervision from national facilitators. The national facilitators were responsible for data entry, analysis and report writing. Though Riff Fullan and I were not involved in the actual data collection, we gave significant comments and input to the reports for Swaziland and Lesotho.

The final process before finalisation of country reports consisted of validation workshops in Swaziland and Lesotho. These workshops were facilitated by Riff Fullan and brought in project stakeholders that included GRM staff, citizen observers, SDC staff, government employees from the department of agriculture and local community based organisations. In each country workshop, the national facilitators presented results of the beneficiary assessments. Comments and feedback from stakeholders were incorporated in the final reports.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Beneficiary Assessment is a useful process that gives communities we are serving the power to assess impact of projects from their perspective. This process involves coordinating various stakeholders such as communities (citizen observers), national facilitators, and the implementing partner. My experience highlighted the importance of careful planning at the onset of this process, and the need for constant review to ensure that responsibilities are clear and are executed according to the agreed plan. Logistical arrangements need to be in place well in advance of the field work processes. Though we had advanced to the implementing partner the required finances, they did not coordinate properly with their field teams in terms of plans for the process and finances. This resulted in schedule delays and frustrations by field teams and national facilitators.

The uniqueness of the Beneficiary Assessment process is that it relies on peer-to-peer assessment, rather than external experts and consultants. In a Beneficiary assessment, though one contracts consultants (lead consultant and national facilitators), it is necessary to still recruit citizen observers and train them to conduct the process. This additional dimension needs planning and monitoring closely to ensure effectiveness. The age of citizen observers recruited is important to ensure that new skills can be learnt and utilised. Pairing the older generation with the younger for interviews could be useful to ensure that there is a right balance. More time for field testing is essential to ensure that all citizen observer participants are accorded an opportunity to practice the data collection methodologies and reflect on them. It may also be necessary to consider more simple participatory tools for data collection such as Participatory Rural Appraisal tools, rather than focus group

discussions. Some of these tools include community maps, trend analysis, and the 10- seed technique. These tools tend to be simpler to use and rely on community participation.

In future it may be worthwhile to consider how citizen observers could be involved in data analysis. The Beneficiary Assessment process only provided for their participation in data collection and validation which also involved the community at large and stakeholders.

## **References**

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