



Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Fakulteten för naturresurser och
lantbruksvetenskap

Whispers in the forest

– A field study about communication within Vi-agroforestry

Viskningar i skogen

– En fältstudie om kommunikation inom Vi-skogen

John Lund

Kandidatarbete • 15 hp • Uppsala 2012

Agronomprogrammet - landsbygdsutveckling

Institutionen för stad och land

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Omfattning: 15 hp

Nivå och fördjupning: Grundnivå, G2F

Kurstitel: Självständigt arbete i landsbygdsutveckling

Kurskod: EX0523

Program/utbildning: Agronomprogrammet - landsbygdsutveckling

Utgivningsort: Uppsala

Utgivningsår: 2012

Elektronisk publicering: <http://stud.epsilon.slu.se>

Nyckelord: Rwanda, Vi-agroforestry, NGO, communication, flow of information, social structuring

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Summary

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the social and structural dynamics of an organization working with questions regarding development. The organization in question is Vi-agroforestry, a Swedish based NGO that works around the lake Victoria basin and the focus will be on their office in Rwanda. I have used a qualitative approach and conducted participatory observation as well as semi-structured interviews to gather data.

I have emanated from the individuals in the organization by using a theory of microsociological organisationperspective to understand how the employees create and is created by the existing social structures. (Blomberg, 2003)

Even though the office in Rwanda only is a relatively small part of Vi-agroforestry's operations it is still highly individual and independent from the rest of the organization. It has an own set of unwritten rules and a locally adapted way of acting. As of now a lot of changes are taking place in the structure and conditions for how the organization can operate, allowing an observer to notice details in how the different levels interact and what the conditions for mutual understanding can be. The office stands in front of big changes that can either divide or unify the staff.

Abstract

Syftet med denna studie är att undersöka och förstå den sociala och strukturella dynamiken i en organisation som arbetar med utvecklingsfrågor. Organisationen i fokus är Vi-skogen, en svenskt NGO som arbetar runt Victoriasjön och studien kommer att behandla deras kontor i Rwanda. Jag har använt en kvalitativ metod och genomfört deltagande observation samt semistrukturerade intervjuer för att samla in empirisk data.

Jag har utgått från individer i organisationen med hjälp av en teori om mikrosociologiskt organisationsperspektiv för att förstå hur de anställda skapar och skapas av rådande sociala strukturer. (Blomberg, 2003)

Även om kontoret i Rwanda endast en relativt liten del av Vi-skogens verksamhet är den fortfarande mycket individuell och oberoende av resten av organisationen. Kontoret har en egen uppsättning av oskrivna regler och ett lokalt anpassat sätt att agera. Under studien pågick en hel del förändringar i strukturen av och villkoren för hur organisationen ska fungera. Detta gav mig som observatör möjlighet att märka detaljer i hur de olika nivåerna samverkar och vilka förutsättningar för ömsesidig förståelse kan finnas. Kontoret står framför stora förändringar som antingen kan dela eller förena personalen och i högsta grad påverkar arbetet som utförs.

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Introduction

This chapter gives a background to the study being done as well as a brief explanation of the organization VI-agroforestry and the conditions under which the organization works. There will also be a description of Rwanda, the country in which the study has been conducted. Moreover the study's purpose will be explained and discussed and lastly the different problems with conducting a study such as this will be brought up.

Background

Vi-agroforestry

Vi-agroforestry is a Swedish-based NGO which operates in four countries around the Lake Victoria basin: Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya. The organization works with development of the rural agricultural sector using mainly agroforestry methods to promote sustainable farming. They work through other enterprises as well, (such as creating farmers unions, micro economy planning etc) and work through five major components with which they aim to reduce deforestation, erosion and improve the lives and livelihoods of people involved in the project in Rwanda. These five components are:

- Land use, environment and climate change
- Farm enterprise development
- Farmer groups and demand driven advisory services
- Capacity building and training
- Policy and advocacy work (SCC - VI, 2010, s. 7)

VI is currently involved in a programme called “Lake Victoria Regional Environmental and Sustainable Agricultural Productivity Programme” (RESAPP). The programme is a joint initiative of the Vi Agroforestry Programme (Vi-AFP) and the Swedish Cooperative Centre (SCC).

The aim of the two organizations is to enhance and improve their actions and co-operation in the Lake Victoria basin in order to contribute to

sustainable development and poverty reduction in the region. (SCC - VI, 2010)

Communication is the most fundamental part of all interaction, whether between individuals, organizations or countries. However, communication can be conducted in a lot of different manners and be perceived in an even greater number of ways. For a Non Governmental Organization (NGO) which works with improving livelihoods and conditions for small time farmers, it is important to communicate well with both recipients and donors. For this to be possible it is of outmost importance that the communication within the organization functions satisfactory. The different parts of the organizations need to have an understanding not only for each other but also for their own role and how they affect the work being done. Therefore the structure of the organization plays a significant role as do the individuals working with the organizations and the current state of the nations in which the organization operates. Naturally, also the attitudes of the donors and recipients play an important part as it is they who ultimately set the playfield for the policies the organization applies to its work. This study has a focus on how the individuals within an organization affect and at the same time are affected by the structure of the organization since the rules for human interaction and structure to a large extent depend on the conditions for communication and understanding (such as hierarchies and language).

As Vi-Agroforestry is an organization based in Sweden and dependent on funds from anonymous givers and governmental funds and they need to have goals that appeal to the potential givers while at the same time being relevant to the needs in the areas where the work is performed. As of now however, there is a lot going on in VI as their by far biggest donor, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), demands a change in the structure of VI's organization for continued support. For example, 75% of the funds given by SIDA are now to be distributed to local partners working with similar questions as VI-agroforestry. This means VI-agroforestry both needs to find and establish partnerships and start to make big changes in their budget and structure as they will only get to dispose of

25% of their ordinary budget. (SIDA, 2007) Moreover they are soon finished with RESAPP and will begin a new programme period. This makes for a very interesting starting point for a study of communication within the organization. The country itself in which the study has been conducted gives its own set of conditions for how these matters are to be handled. Overall, it is imperative to have an understanding for the country to be able to discern important aspects of patterns in communication.

Rwanda

Rwanda as a nation is heavily dependent on the agricultural sector which generates a big part of the country's GDP (39%) and almost 90% of the employment. The main problem is lack of arable land, as about 70% of Rwandese land consists of steep hillsides and the average farm size is 0.76 ha/household. The reliance on agriculture, land scarcity and widespread poverty have led to overexploitation of land and erosion, which in turn has led to a decreasing output. (UN, 2011) (Worldbank, 2011)

At the same time the country has a very brutal history with repeated genocides and discriminating governance during the past two hundred years, a history that needs to be briefly explained to the uninformed reader. The country has for a long time been populated mainly by two ethnic groups, the Hutus and the Tutsis where the Hutus represent about 90 percent and the Tutsis about 10%. When colonized by the Belgians there was a discrimination of the Hutus in favor of the Tutsis which eventually lead to a shift in power and persecution of the Tutsis which continued between 1959 and 1994 when it culminated in genocide. This lasted for four months when between 500,000 and 1,000,000 Tutsis were murdered/killed. The now governing party, the Rwandan patriotic front (RPF), consists mostly of exile Tutsis who came back during the genocide and managed to claim power over the country. The RPF has been holding the power since then with Paul Kagame as prime minister and it claims to be working for an equal and prospering Rwanda.

As of now, Rwanda is one of the countries that receive most aid in the world, partly because of the events that unfolded in -94 and partly because of how the situation has been handled. Rwanda has received much praise for putting a lot of effort into fighting corruption and inequalities (gender, ethnic), improving the environment and putting a lot of focus on the countryside.

Assumptions and aim

Vi-Agroforestry themselves have acknowledged that they have some problems regarding the compiling of data and that they could improve the way information is packaged and transferred.

“The staff has forms to fill in and have instructions on how to report, etc. However we have had some problems in compiling the data submitted by extensionists and zone coordinators to central office which some time is contradictory or with errors. It could be interesting to know little more, maybe is not only lack of commitment from some staff /.../ Monitoring and Evaluation staff working in the central office compile at project level and analyze the information. They have a hard work to check and do the necessary corrections.” – Project manager

The assumption on which this study is based is that the process of communication within VI-Agroforestry may experience problems due to different levels of education, different uses of language and in some ways different views of the goals of the organization. There might also exist differences regarding cultural and national backgrounds leading to different experiences. All of this, together with the difference in work tasks that exist in the office and in the field, may and probably will create and/or add to an already existing power structure or hierarchy that can further augment communication problems.

The aim of this study is to understand and be able to explain the flows of communication and how the social structures within VI-agroforestry’s office in Rwanda are created. To do this I will use a general question during my analysis of the empirical data:

- How does the structure of VI-agroforestry affect the flows of communication through the organization?

To specify and define these questions I will use the following sub-questions:

- In what ways, and under what conditions, do the different field operation units meet and how does this affect the work being done by VI-Agroforestry?
- Is there a full coherency between the head office's outlines and the work on grassroot level?
- What tools are used for communication?

Theory and methods

In this chapter the theories with which the analysis is conducted will be discussed. The microsociological organization perspective as well as some theories of social process in the development sector will be explained and put in context. Finally the relation between the two theories and their appliance to this study will be explained. The approach to the fieldwork is being discussed and why the methods that are used have been chosen. I will also explain the concepts that are imperative to the study's course of action and how these affect the gathering of data.

Microsociological organization perspective

To get a good understanding of how the organization works it is imperative to know of and understand the driving force behind it, the general ideals as well as the individual ones and also the practical work performed. This field study has a focus on the mechanics of interaction at an individual level where the general ideals and framework for the organization will serve as a supplement to support the results produced.

The main theoretical tool to be used for this is called the microsociological organization perspective (MSOP). This perspective, as the name implies, tries to understand and explain the organization and its mechanics based on

the individuals who work within and around it, seeing the employees as both creators and products of the goals and aspirations of the organization in question.

The MSOP is to be used as a tool to help handle, analyze and understand the empirical data collected. The aim is to concretize already existing thoughts and ideas as well as synthesize qualities in order to crystallize and combine these into a dynamic basis for an organization as well as for a project model. (Blomberg, 2003) In this specific case I have to map the different positions and persons that interact and in what ways the interaction is conducted. After that I need to assess how this works in relation to headlines of the organization regarding communication and handling of information. By doing this a good understanding of the different actors and structures within the office should submerge and create a good ground for discussion and analysis. In addition, Vi-agroforestry has a reputation of being a democratic and open organization with a large amount of open discussions and attentiveness. If this is true, it implies that communication within Vi-Agroforestry is complex as a bigger diversity in voices and opinions are heard. The way this is handled could both be a source of problems internally as well as a good example for other organizations. (Forslund, 2009) (Tonnquist, 2010) (Blomberg, 2003)

Combining and applying on an NGO

The target organization of the study and the fieldwork is an NGO, an organization that differs from others in the sense that they work with development as a goal and counts their success rate not in financial gain but rather in abstract values such as improvement of livelihoods. However, this does not mean that the financial aspect is not important, on the contrary it affects the structure of the organization in a very interesting and important way. The theory that has been chosen is meant to facilitate the understanding of the special social climate that the rift between different positions and backgrounds combined with the need to adapt the organization to existing demands from donors and external factors may create. To understand these dynamics may be the most important part of the study as well as something that needs a good coordination between the theory and

methods being used to fully understand.? The theory needs to correspond well with what kind of question and information is procured to be able to apply and fit in well with the context of the field study.

Qualitative vs. Quantitative methods

In this study I have chosen to use primarily qualitative methods when collecting empirical data due to the character of the aim and research questions. Qualitative methods focus on a lesser number of informants but have a more in-depth relation to them. In opposite quantitative methods reach out to a larger number of informants but do not get as much information out of every informant. This study is conducted through interviews and participatory observation, where the qualitative approach to the mediums chosen gives the best output.

Participatory observations and interviews

I have conducted the study mostly by doing participatory observations, meaning that I have followed the employees along during their workday, taking part of both their work and their social relations, trying to understand the different work tasks and how these work tasks are organized and coordinated. By this, I also hoped to get a relation to the different actors/informants that would allow me to get to know the social contexts in which they conduct their work.

To compliment the participatory observation some semi-structured interviews have been conducted, which means that there have been some questions prepared regarding the various topics that are relevant to the study. These questions leave room for further questions or even cause the omission of some of the questions depending on how the interview progresses. This works well when doing a limited number of interviews with a well selected target group, as in this case some of the key actors in the office. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the informants and later transcribed.

The abductive approach

This study is characterized by an abductive approach. According to Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2009) this implies the use of general rules and theories to understand, describe and explain one single case. It starts with the theoretical framework being used and works with the analysis of empirical data in a way that aims to help gain a general understanding of the case and describe possible patterns. When it comes to academic approaches Alvesson & Sköldbberg mean that there are three different types. Apart from the abductive, there are also the deductive and the inductive approaches. The deductive approach is sometimes more informally called a top-down approach where you, in a simplified illustration, conduct the study in the following order:

Theory – hypothesis – observation – confirmation

Inductive approach on the other hand works from the bottom up. The abductive approach however originates in the collection of empiric evidence, then forming a hypothesis. It works similar to how a medical diagnosis is conducted, you have a set of symptoms and find a fitting and plausible diagnosis to this. (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009)

Field study

At the office, we were given a mentor amongst the employees, whom we could turn to when we had questions or wanted to make arrangements regarding field trips or wanted to get in contact with employees outside of the office. This person was the senior officer of the Field Operation Unit, who was responsible for the practicalities of the field work, field officers and zone coordinators. He was also the deputy project manager, which made him an important hub when it came to the flow of communication.

As the study has been conducted in Rwanda, not everyone spoke English and most people found it easier to express themselves in their native language. Often there was a mix between Kinyarwanda, English and French used when trying to communicate. When doing interviews on field level I therefore made use of an interpreter. In the office, however, the employees had a high level of English and an interpreter was not needed. When

working with an interpreter it is important that he/she is well aware of what kind of study is being done, what the questions represent and why the informant is being interviewed. (Kvale, 1997)

Important things to keep in mind

The study is conducted within a culture different from the one I am familiar with; the same applies for the language being spoken and the natural conditions under which the organization works. This could affect the gathering of information as well as the interpretation of the information gathered. The most prominent problems will be discussed below.

Firstly, I conducted this study together with a fellow student, researching the same problem from different theoretical perspectives. At an early stage we were confronted with the problem of gathering collective empirical data which satisfied both our interests without confusing or overwhelming the interviewees. This we had to overcome by communicating thoroughly between ourselves before and after each interview and discussing the questions, giving them a proper order and in some cases restricting our questions to the relevant issues rather than elaborating everything we found interesting.

Secondly, Rwanda is a country with a dark history of genocide and oppression, something that today is relatively taboo to talk about and can easily create a bad and tense atmosphere. At the same time it is something that deeply affects the people living and operating in the country. However, it is generally affecting, not in an apparent way but rather in ways that you may sometimes pick up without being able to pinpoint unless you are familiar with the people you interact and have contact with. My stay in Rwanda was not long enough for me to fully be able to notice these reactions properly and put them in adequate perspectives. Therefore I will only be able to discuss this theoretically and relate to it as one of many possibilities to the way relations are managed.

Thirdly, there were some complications regarding language. As mentioned, English is a language widely spoken in parts of Rwanda. However, not by all and not always sufficient to conduct interviews. Therefore I was

sometimes constrained to use a translator during my interviews, primarily when talking to the field officers. A limited knowledge of the language spoken complicates the conversation, can create misunderstandings and give false information. Using an interpreter can have the same effect as the information has to travel through a third party that may miss/misunderstand/ignore certain parts of the information gathered. It can also create a distance to the interviewee. To counter this I have tried to confirm the information gathered a second time at a later moment in the research and critically put it in context.

Empiric results

In this chapter the results of the field study will be accounted for. The chapter is divided into four main sections; the head office in Rwanda, the zone coordinators & field officers, Vi – agroforestry's communication with SIDA as well as other donors and lastly the partnership situation.

The following is a brief description of my arrival to Rwanda and VI-agroforestry:

As I arrive to Rwanda I am met at the airport by one of VI-Agroforestry drivers. He drives me to the office building where there is also a homestay in which I will have my living quarters. At the driveway I am met by the logistics officer. She welcomes me and shows me around, introduces me to the other employees and gives me a brief explanation of each employee's function. After that, she shows me my room, which is adjacent to the rest of the office. She then takes me on a tour of Kigali, along with the cashier who needs to change some money in a forex office. They show me the downtown area and the market area of the city. In the meantime she tells me about the city, the country and VI-agroforestry. When we arrive back at the office the working day is ending and most of the employees get in one of the organization's big Land Rovers and are driven to their respective homes. When the car drives away I can see the employees talking merrily and laughing with each other. My first impressions are that I feel welcome and that everyone seems willing to cooperate, at the same time the structure seems relatively open and unstructured.

The homestay was situated in the same building complex as the office, making it easy to feel a part of the organization and helping me understand it, as I met the staff and got to see the flow of work every day, enabling me and the staff to exchange questions and make plans regarding field trips and the like. The part of VI-agroforestry that was active in Rwanda was comparatively small, and the office was where most decisions were made and therefore it was also where I spent most of my time.

Rwanda head office

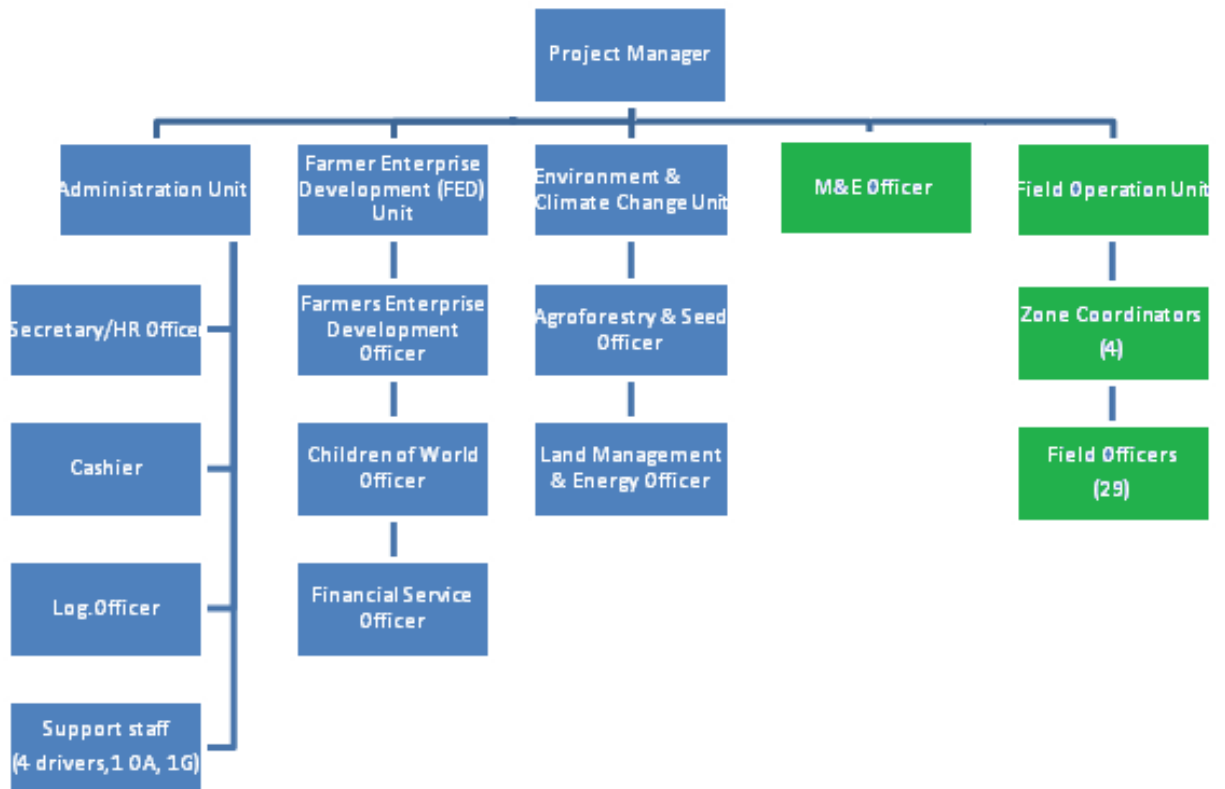
The study took place during a time when a lot of things happened in the Rwanda office. There were mainly two factors that I could disclose which made a significant imprint on the communication system. Firstly there was a change in the system of how the economical means were to be distributed due to new directives from SIDA – demands on installing a partnership system with other, locally active organizations. This structural change was still at the planning stage when the study was carried out, but the wind of change had started to blow and there was some instability in the structure of the organization. Secondly the project manager retired after over 30 years of service in the organization, creating an empty space as he had played a big part in the “construction” of the organization as well as of the Rwanda office as he had been positioned there since the office was opened.

Structure of the office

The office itself is considerably smaller than the other offices of VI-Agroforestry in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda but still follows the same model as the other offices which means that some of the employees can have two or more different positions/work tasks:

“/.../ what we are implementing here is the same as are implemented in Uganda, Tanzania and the whole project. We do have the same vision and activities. But it depends on the number of staff, like in Rwanda we are a small office, but in other countries, it depends... But here we are 45, actually we... haha, when you look at the number of staff, of employees here, we are very few compares to other projects.”

The model of the organization of VI-agroforestry :



(SCC - VI, 2010, s. 24)

In this chart, every square represents one employee, except for the squares that have numbers in them, where the number represents the approximate number of employees at that post. The green squares represent the positions that work at field level to an extended degree, compared to the rest of the office. For this study, the rightmost column is the most essential as it goes all the way from an important position in the office to the field level. Also, the monitoring and evaluation office (E&M officer on the chart) was a great help during the participatory observations.

The Project manager is the head of the office and most decisions have to be run through him before executed. Generally for VI's offices and also in this case, the head of the Field Operation Unit doubled as the deputy project manager because the position of head of the field operations came with a good perspective of the whole country's base of operations as the zone coordinators all submitted their reports to this position. Together with the field operation units, the head of administration unit carried a lot of

responsibility. Rwanda as a country has a very strong sense of hierarchy which was noticeable in VI-agroforestry's Rwanda branch as well, most decisions made were run through with the superior in that area.

As I perceived it, the state implemented social security nets in Rwanda do not provide for people living in the poorer levels of the socioeconomic ladder, which entails that a lot of pride is invested in work in general and in the different positions herein. To have a job represents the ability to provide for yourself and your family, thus making it a question not only of status but also a more basic question of what means you have for a balanced livelihood. Thus I get the impression that the hierarchical ladder plays a far greater role in Rwanda than it does for example in Sweden as it represents more. In addition, the country has long history of top-down management. This issue was something that most of the employees were aware of but as it was the general culture and standard it set the rules for the practice. However, it should be said that these country-specific standards may not always be in line with the ground rules that VI-agroforestry's office in Sweden originally had in mind.

The technical program adviser who works at VI-agroforestry's program office as student coordinator, amongst other things, claims that there are a lot of differences in the culture of the different participating countries but as far as she knows, these do not build up to any major problems in the overall structure of the organization:

"//... yes, this thing with culture... I guess there are some differences, but there aren't any problems really, you have to adapt. In Sweden keeping time is very important but you get used to it pretty quickly. And the locally employed have adapted a lot to us as well when they have noticed that we are that concerned about it. Other than that there is a lot of other differences, like how it is very hierarchical, you should be well dressed and look proper./.../ Now, I think that we have, as an organization, been here for a long time and become quite rooted, getting into the culture and adapted to the local demands."

This may be true in the relation “Program office > Rwanda office”, but it is not as clear in the relation “Rwanda office > Program office” as it is the program office that set the rules and the Rwanda office that has to comply with the rules. This is not something that is impossible and as the informants’ statements imply, it is something that does not show in the official communication or reports between the Rwanda office and the program office. This difference in experience is not something that is easy to get clear during interviews either. Instead it is something that could be observed during the actual fieldwork, if you take heed to the different layers of knowledge that is observable. These layers are the discursive, the practical and the unconscious and together they create a picture/understanding of the driving forces between the actors. However, to be able to discern what the different layers consist of an understanding of the actors is needed as the driving force behind every action is subjective. (Forslund, 2009) In this case, the experience of problems when put in context with differences in cultures could be observed, for example, in the manners in which the evaluation of the activities was conducted.

There are some evaluations that are to be conducted each month, often through meetings with farmers and field officers, assessing the potentials and possible problems as well as following up on the work that already has been done. We accompanied the evaluation and monitoring officer on one of these evaluations. During the morning we went to two different farmer collectives, following up how the honey production was progressing and checking in on what the farmers thought about the project. Around lunchtime however, it started to rain hard and we took a break and found shelter in a small restaurant. In the restaurant we passed the time by eating some goat meat and talking. It was me and my colleague, the evaluation and monitoring officer, the zone coordinator for the zone we were in and the field officer for the specific area we were in. However, the rain did not stop. At five o’clock the monitoring and evaluation officer, after some discussion in Kinyarwanda with the other staff turned to us and said something in the line of: “Now it’s already very late and the

farmers we were supposed to meet probably aren't there anymore. Besides it is still raining and we would get wet. So we decided that we can pack up and go home." The meeting with the farmers did not happen, at least not at that time. Instead he talked on the phone for a while with a representative for the collective we were supposed to meet and decided to meet up with them at a later point, if he got the time. This course of action regarding field meetings and work related excursions were not uncommon, it was rather common for field days to be pretty relaxed since there were a lot of factors that could influence the conditions for the field visit. Also the different actors that were involved together create conditions for how the field visits were supposed to look. Each individual, according to the microsociological organization perspective acts by three different layers of knowledge. Firstly, there is the discursive layer of knowledge, which refers to the knowledge used discussing and planning actions to take. The second layer is the practical knowledge, which refers to what people actually do and how they do it. Lastly, there is the unconscious layer of knowledge which refers to the actions we take automatically and without apparent thought. In an organization like this it is important that the employees have a feeling of sharing the goals and thoughts of the organization in general. To actually do this is almost impossible as everyone has their own set of ideas and ideals, but the feeling of sharing the goals and thoughts of the organization creates an environment where solutions dominates over problems and a warm social climate is prevailing. (Blomberg, 2003)

Monday Meetings

Every week a Monday meeting is held. During these meetings, everybody working in the office attends, 15 people all in all, me and my colleague included. The meeting starts at nine o'clock and lasts for about an hour. With us on the meeting is Finn, the person who is going to step in after Jorge as project manager after Jorge's retirement. Jorge opens the meeting by talking about last week, what his agenda looked like and what the coming week's agenda will look like for him. He talks in a very peculiar

way, mixing English, Swedish, French and Spanish making it relatively hard to understand what he is saying. But it is a big focus on their newly begun cooperation with four local organizations. When he is done, the person next to him describes his last week and his coming week in the same manner. This procedure is repeated until everyone has had a word, everyone has talked for approximately five minutes. Internet is discussed, they have had some problems with the connection and because of this there has been a delay in the monthly reports to the program office. Other than that the main focus is on the different aspects of the cooperation and preparations of the restructuring that is about to take place. All this seems to proceed smoothly and on routine, no interruptions and everyone seems to be very secure about each other's work tasks. (Lund, 2012)

Monday meetings were always held at nine o'clock. The main function of these meetings was to coordinate the staff and make the communication easier. Since the number of people working in the office was relatively small, it was possible for all of the head office staff to participate. As I perceived it, the Monday meetings was a very important although not a very big part of the structuring of the work being done. It also helped me as an observer to understand the different roles/positions in the office and the connections between these. Through the meeting the employees got information about their colleagues' plans and by that a chance to better coordinate their plans. Also the Monday meetings signalled the start of a new week and required some reflections regarding the previous week, making it easier to see how and when the different decisions were taken. In a small branch of an organization such as VI-agroforestry people have a relatively big individual freedom to organize their own work. The microsociological organization perspective used considers the individuals acting in organizations as ruled by will and with subjective, personal perspectives and interests. In addition to this, the individuals themselves are regarded as relatively unstable and formable. (Blomberg, 2003) This could mean, simply put, that:

“...//each individual strives to maintain a (seeming) stable self perception, a stable identity, and stable relation to others.”

(Blomberg, 2003, s. 158)

By watching and analyzing how the meetings progressed, it is possible not only to understand how the different employees choose to organize their work but also how to organize themselves and their surroundings in order to achieve something that can be called stability. For example, it was clear that the project manager filled the position as leader and guide through the different tasks that were to be completed; a lot of attention was directed towards him and it was he who had the last word both at the end of the individual description of the week's work but also at the end of the meeting. During the meetings, it was always possible for the employees to pause and ask questions and get clarification on the different subjects that were discussed. However, it was only a few of the employees who did this, and in a lot of cases the questions seemed to question the accordance to the frames within which the decisions were to be performed rather than to get a better understanding of the practicalities discussed. This is partly because of how knowledge and interest in the work mix and is spread between the employees, but could also be a way to establish and maintain a hierarchical order. It was mostly the same three to four persons that interrupted with these questions and discussions, claiming a position of knowing and being a main part of structuring the work. This is not something that is unique for this organization, or for organizations in general, it is something that can be noticed in most social interactions, but nevertheless it is important for the understanding of the dynamics within Vi-Agroforestry.

How these social structures can be constructed was especially noticeable in the earlier mentioned shift in management. The project manager who had been in charge of the office since the beginning of Vi-agroforestry's involvement in Rwanda retired and a new project manager was appointed by the program office in Sweden. Between the retiring project manager and the start of his successor there was a gap of about two months. During this gap, the head of the administration unit filled the role of temporary project manager, beyond her usual work tasks. During her time as a project

manager, the Monday meetings shifted greatly in character and a somewhat new structure of the weekly procedure started to evolve. For one thing, the time for the meeting was adapted to the hour when most of the people in the office were available instead of always being held at nine o'clock. The official time for the meeting remained 9 o'clock, but there was more of a discussion between the appointed project manager and the different employees and other things were often given a higher priority.

During the actual meetings there was a big difference in how the discussions played out. With the temporary project manager/head of administration, the other employees seemed more open minded, more discussions were raised, about both big and small issues. For example, there was a long discussion during the first Monday meeting under her rule about the route the driver took each morning to collect the employees. Some complained about others not being in time, others about the practicality of the current route and came with suggestions of new routes and new orders in which the employees should be picked up. With these discussions the employees not only brought forth small issues that had been nagging them for a while; they also took the temperature on the new social climate as the head of administration was "only" a temporary boss and still more of a colleague, someone who, herself, knew about the smaller problems that the permanent project manager did not take heed to or just hadn't had time to deal with. The Monday meetings during this period also took a lot longer and often had to be stopped before all issues had found a solution. But the discussions were there and out in the open, whilst before people went directly to the project manager with a problem instead of bringing it up during the meetings. An employee described the situation before the retirement like this:

"But if you have a problem and come and speak it out, then the project manager, /../ has been very good to us, like a parent, so like every problem, you tell him and they solve the problem." –

Human resources officer

An office situation where a boss is respected and where the employees feel safe bringing up problems and conflicts is very valuable. At the same time it takes a lot to fill this position and, as the case was here, it

could be complications when the position is left open. As long as a new structure is found and conflicts find new ways of solving themselves it can be a good experience for the employees as they get a chance to reevaluate and get new perspectives on coworkers and situations that can create rifts in the social structure. (Blomberg, 2003)

Zone coordinators & Field officers

“Aah actually, before I, like, mention out the, like, key offices, My office; field operations it’s like, it’s like the zenith of the whole project, It’s where almost all the staff look up to for communication yeah, because everything that is done within the project is, has to be, be known by this office, so at the end of the day, if anyone wants any kind of information, in most cases they expect this office to be, to be knowing, to at least have a notion about each and everything that is going on in the organization/.../” – Head of field operations

Apart from the main office in Rwanda, on the field level, there are two positions that hold a lot of importance to the organization. It is the zone coordinators and the field officers that carry out the orders that have been given and decisions that have been taken on office level. Furthermore, it is the field staff that make things happen, who implement the goals and thereby legitimate the existence of the organization..

“For us we have to supervise their [the farmers] daily activities, so that we may enable them to get developed, you know for them to get well, so we need to supervise those activities so that they may be successful. If we can do that, we make our report to the zone coordination and the zone coordination sends the report to the head office.” –Field Officer #1

There were four zone coordinators and 22 field officers at the time of the study. Each zone coordinator was responsible for the field officers in each specific zone. Their work consisted mainly of overseeing the work of the field officer, passing on directives from the office and collecting reports from field officers, reporting the progress of the field work on to the next

level, the head of field operations. For example, each month there was a quantitative report that each field officer filled in about costs, number of trees planted and meetings with local farming collectives' etcetera, that the zone coordinator compiled and sent fourth. The head of field operations later compiled the zone coordinators reports and sent them forth to Nairobi, where all the offices' reports were compiled and sent to the program office.

The general idea, at least at the Rwanda office, is that all communication between the field officers and the office should first go through the zone coordinators and then the head of field operations. This can be a good thing regarding structure, because by going through these two positions the information that arrives does so through the proper "channels" and can be sorted in a distinct manner. But this way of handling things can also be a problem. For example, the head of field operations thought that it was a bad thing that the field officers never talked with him directly but always went through the zone coordinators. It could take a lot of time for information to get passed on if the zone coordinators had a lot on their table. It also meant that information which the field officers thought was important could get lost when the zone coordinators made another estimation of the same information.

“/.../because there are some people who are still so stuck to this bureaucracy thing, you find people always want to follow the protocol [...] There are things that the FO, you know I said the FO are the implementing people, yeah so there are some ideas that they have, that they feel the management should know, and look into, for any convenient or favorable changes but at the end of the day, at times, like, the ZOCO might not find it that necessary yet it is actually necessary, yeah so, instead of passing it on, he just leaves it to lie there, that's quite a challenge yeah, then at the end of the day, like when you get close to the field officers, they come up with ideas, they tell you “We came up with these ideas, I don't know if you heard about them?” This they are telling you when it is already too late.” –

Head of field operations

The zone coordinators and the field officers on the other hand thought that it was important and a good thing to always follow the hierarchical order:

“I think when someone is going straight to the officer there, they can go there but it is not good, because the responsibilities on the contract says that is like... is like the... bridge, between all field activities, all field officers and the head office officers. So, everything passes through the zone coordinator and you check it, check whether it is true or what? And when you get confused, you go to the field and then you correct your... you make it clear and then you submit it to the officer in the office.” – Zone coordinator.

Without a working system regarding communication with the field level, the organization runs the risk that the information to be dealt with is faulty or that the actions that are being taken may miss important components. Just as with the office, a working system is more than just a model for how the communication is going to be conducted, it is also how the practicalities can be made to work, the relation between the field personnel and the head of field operation unit as well as the evaluation officer and other positions in the office that have connection with the field work. The most important aspect here is to make every extension/part of the organization feel included and part of the discussions and the work being done. This can be hard in cases like this. Where there is a small office which is relatively concentrated and a big outspread field department, there is a risk that a collected and somewhat elitist office department and a more individualistic and somewhat excluded field branch is created. (Blomberg, 2003) One of the field officers expressed himself this way about the interaction between himself and the office:

“Yeah, we only have direct contact when we are in the meeting and then whatever they want to bring to us via the ZOCO, that’s only when we can get information. And if they want also to

supervise and you know have to see what is going on, sometimes they can come on the field and at that time you can see them and interact with them.” – Field officer #2

The field officers have a good perception of how Vi-agroforestry works in their region and what goals should be prioritized by them. But in a bigger perspective, regarding the bigger changes in structure and goals they are somewhat left out. This isn't only a problem though, as they are seen as autonomous personnel that are good at acting on their own and able to take decisions that correspond well with both the local farmers and the office without being too tied up with the bureaucratic guidelines from higher up but instead, if advised by the zone coordinator, rather steer the already started farmers' collectives in a different way that is more in sync with the current goals. This is the current way of doing things as I perceived it, and I believe that it is a flexible and functional way of going about things. The downside may be that the field officers get a little detached from the main office in questions like this partnership situation. For example this is how one of the other field officers described their most important contacts:

“The people that I interact with are my fellow FO's, we always interact. And the second people are the local leaders. We have something called a management meeting whereby the local leaders call on different people from different organizations, or from different sectors, to come together or plan together, and have a meeting together. Because some of the things we do falls in a government programs and strategies, we need to hear from the government where they are putting their first priorities, and if these priorities falls in the objectives of our project, we buy them as a, as a priority to, we put it in our program, we prioritize this provided that these things are fitting into our program.” – Field officer #1

It is interesting to see how none of the positions within the office was mentioned here. However, as it was in the organization at the time of the study, the relation between the head office and the field level were quite close as I experienced it. There were regular meetings and

trainings in which both employees at the office as well as zone coordinators and field officers participated and got along with a feeling of familiarity. However it could be problematic to assess the equality during these exchanges as there is a distinct difference in status between the field and the office. The risk with this is that the communication is relatively one-sided as the “dominant” party decides the topics and the positions which should be held by the other participants in the discussion. (Blomberg, 2003).

Partnership situation

”Through stakeholder involvement, the Government wants to stimulate and strengthen the development of self-supporting relationships of mutual interest between Swedish stakeholders and stakeholders in low and middle income countries in the framework of Sweden's policy for global development” – SIDA

The guidelines state that 75% of Vi-Agroforestry’s support from SIDA, their by far biggest donor is to be distributed to different, locally based organizations. The process of finding and establishing contact with good partners takes time and means a lot of work, since the partners must have a sufficiently developed organization, yet still be in need of the partnership to further improve their work. As I conducted my study four partners had been located and the work of evaluating them and assess their roles were one of the most important priorities. However the guidelines for how the partnerships were supposed to look like and function in order for SIDA to be satisfied seemed complicated and the process dragged out on time.

“For example we were supposed to begin in January, but this is April, almost May and we haven’t started. And at times we have nothing to tell the partners, when they ask us what’s going on, how far it has gone, and we have no idea, so that shows you that there is a lack of communication between us and the donors, and back here the partners look at us here, working for VI, as the donor. Because we are like the middlemen between the partners and the funders, yeah so there is a bit of delayed

communication, you know, between us and the donors, because at least we should be able to keep the partners in the loop, so that they can know the progress.” – Head of field operations

As of now the five organizations, (four partners and Vi-agroforestry) each created a group with a focus on what the respective organization knew best. They called it spear-heading the organizations, making specialist groups that together with the other groups could claim to have better conditions to deal with the different problems regarding development. Vi-agroforestry’s special area was, not surprisingly, agroforestry. To me it seemed like a somewhat complicated structure, since Vi-agroforestry was the organization that had contact with the donors and was responsible for the funding to be evenly distributed and that made them the ones with most power. The organization had hired a consultant from KPMG to make evaluations on the four different partners and this made for an interesting study. The consultant had an evaluation form, with a long list of details to be checked, whether the partner organization had fulfilled the different conditions and to what degree this was done. However, the consultant did not talk Kinyarwanda and most of the spokespersons in the partner organizations did not talk good English. After the first meeting with a partner organization, the consultant had left all the papers to the head of field operations and the head of administration, instructing them on how to do the evaluations along with some details about the questions. This was not something that the employees appreciated since they already had a full schedule, but as this evaluation was something that had to be done they had to carry out the evaluations themselves. The consultant later collected the compilation and went on to ask the Vi-agroforestry staff along with one representative from each organization how they thought the different goals that weren’t met already could be met and how long it would take. After some discussions between the attendants the consultant was more or less done with his work, except for the report that was to be sent in to the project office. During this, most employees were rather skeptical as to how the evaluation was conducted and as to the fact that the consultant did not seem to do much work himself. This created something of a rift in the views on the decision making management in the organization as a whole as there was no real room for complaints and

change. And in my point of view, there seemed to be a very vague perception of what the employees knew about the changes that were taking place. If compared, the different levels of the office seemed to have pretty different opinions on what the impact would be. Most of the field officers we talked to described their role in the new partnership situation like this:

“For us, I think, for me i don´t know very much about the consortium but i think it is another branch, another program that is going to be having its own budget, that will be working directly with the farmers cooperatives, and for us it doesn´t affect us because we think it´s good again to promote the people, the farmers. But concerning how it works, how the tools that they will be working with, maybe the ZOCO is the one knowing this, much.” - Field officer #2

Some office personnel that worked directly with the changes on the other hand seemed more skeptical to the idea of a unchanged approach to the field officers work, and the structure in the organization overall:

./.../with our field officers things are going to change because, like I told you they want to push everything to the partners and that is going to mean losing most, MOST all, almost all of our field officers. That one is going to be a very big challenge, yeah because, like last year we lost two, not because we didn´t want them, but it was necessary we had to reduce the number of staff, [...]so yeah, it is going to be a big challenge. Not only has the field staffed, because we are not even sure about the senior staff, basically the whole arrangement. So we expect a lot of changes.” – Head of field operations

To have this big a difference in opinions and knowledge about a situation as important as this is a good mark on how the knowledge in the different layers of the organization differs and how the communication is prioritized. The whole partnership situation that has been discussed in this section is a good indicator of how the general flow of communication and information is structured, also in other parts of the organization.

End of the line

This chapter is the finishing chapter of the study. Here the conclusions of my work is to be brought up and reported, as well as connected to the aim of the study. I will discuss how the empiric results gives way for the conclusions and how I perceive Vi-agroforestry in Rwanda communication wise.

Vi-agroforestry is an organization with a relatively good structure for communication and social interaction. Since it works with aid and development, the employees also seem to feel that they are doing a progressive work that they can take pride in, something that is extremely important for organizations like this as it makes donors, employees and receivers of the organizations services more open and sympathetic to the work being done. However, to be able to reach the aim of this study, (which is to understand and be able to explain the flows of communication and how the social structures within VI-agroforestry's office in Rwanda is created) it is not enough to notice the pride the employees put in their work, it is imperative to discern what this pride stems from and what part it plays in the lives of the employees. A somewhat tricky aspect of the social structures in the office, as well as Rwanda in general is the effects of the genocide that took place 1994. This was not something that anyone spoke openly about, at least not in situations and contexts where it could be used for this study. It is however important to keep in mind that it still exist a rift between the two major ethnicities and that this indeed is something that is affecting the social structure of the whole country. Due to the fact that people do not like to talk about it in combination with the relatively short duration of the study made it tricky to come to any conclusions on how this affected the situation at the office, but, as mentioned, is a factor that is important to keep in mind.

As mentioned earlier in this study there is something that is important to emphasize, namely that the major component of the organization's work is the work on field level. But this work is not altogether easy. There is, in the practical implementation of the organization's aims and goals a relatively big rift between how they want to act and how they have to act in order to continue to exist as an organization. The partnership situation is a strong

example of this. Even if the changes that are required by the donors mean something good for the development in the region they are still not all good for the employees in Vi-agroforestry as the changes bring economic hardships along with uncertainty and turbulence.

Also the relatively big gap between the office and the field level could compose a treat to the flow of understanding and togetherness within the organization. However the employees do work with a big dose of flexibility and “open mindedness” which require a broad and general understanding of each other’s positions and work tasks. For that to work it is not necessary for the employees to share goals and perspectives regarding their work. More importantly, the employees need to feel as if they do. For this, there is guidelines from the head office of the organization that proclaims what should be done and how this is going to happen. These guidelines is not made to micro manage but rather gives some room for the employees to interpret and adapt themselves to how they should go about things. And by doing this, the employees can create their own vision of the organization and fit in their coworkers and their actions with this vision, thereby getting the feeling of shared goals and perspectives regarding their work. If this feeling of “togetherness” exists, which I perceived it to do in Vi-agroforestry, then it creates a good playing field for exchange of views and experiences in a creative and open manner, as people tend to work closer with individuals they feel they understand and coincide with. (Blomberg, 2003)

Vi-agroforestry’s office in Rwanda was not completely synced and there were clearly some problems regarding the communication, especially in connection with the partnership situation. But this is not unique for Vi-agroforestry. In fact, there are few situations and relations in society where the communication flows smoothly and effortlessly. The important thing is that there is a will to understand and be understood, and that will exists in all the employees which I was contact with. The problem may instead be the practical implementations of the guidelines and goals as real life may prove the ideas to be a bit off. On the other hand the practical implementation might as well bring the remaining staff together and strengthen the idea of

shared ideas and ideals, creating a strong and unified front with which to deal with the quest for a brighter future. It all lies with how the employees perceive the new situation, and how they manage to find a balance between the reducing field personnel, new management and cooperation with the local partners. If they do, the office will likely have a bright future ahead.

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