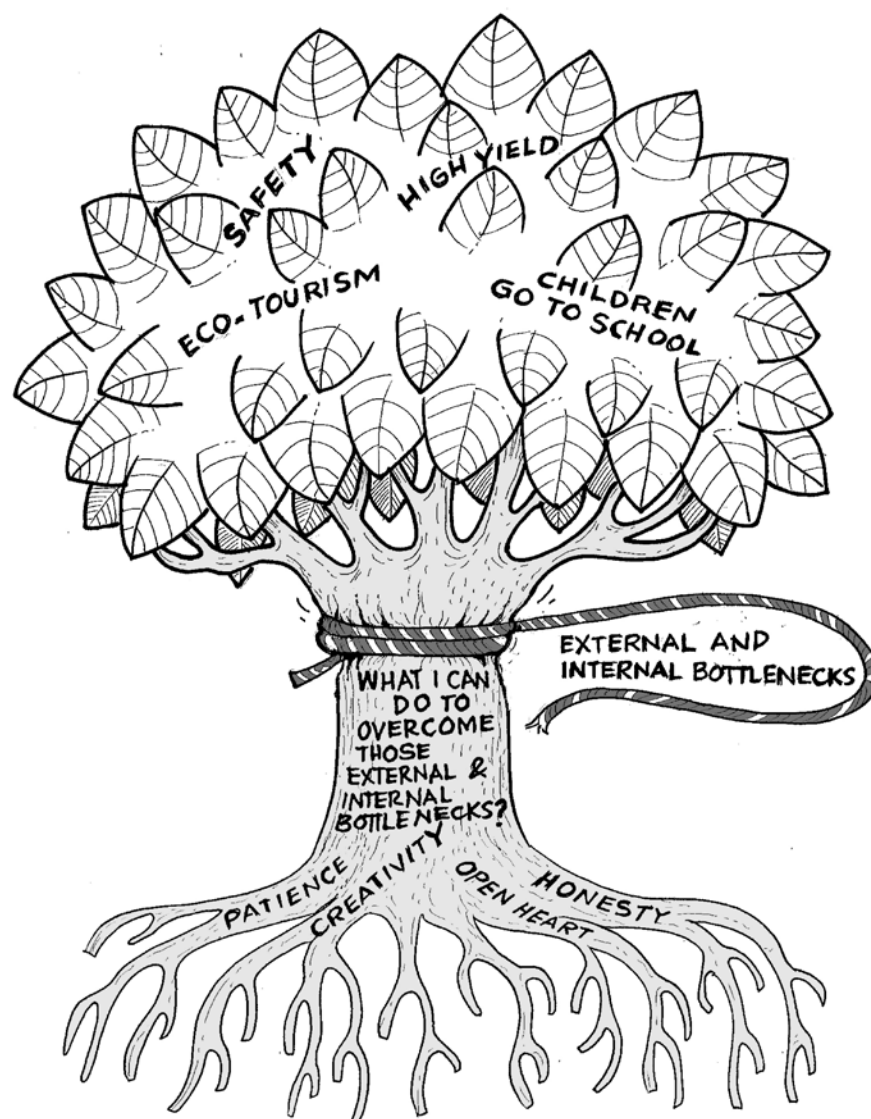


Using the Tree of Life Tool for Visioning and Reflecting on Project Progress



Empowering leaders

In Southeast Asia, as in many parts of the world, people from all walks of life work hard to improve their quality of life. Their search for a way out of poverty and towards material well-being is often plagued by formidable obstacles: degraded environmental conditions, social isolation, unsupportive policies and the closed loop of poverty. Those who especially feel trapped in low-yield, low-opportunity livelihood find it difficult

not to have a fatalistic view of life. While struggling to secure food for their families, they do not always value their own potential or the opportunities that surround them.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is working to provide rural people with skills and organisational resources to help rural people lift themselves out of poverty, IFAD has teamed up with the Centre for Creative Leadership (CCL), which has pioneered and field-tested a comprehensive model for leadership development at various levels. This is directed towards utilizing the full human potential of the rural poor by fostering leadership development and personal empowerment.

The project's overall objective was to establish locally based pools of trainers/facilitators and to initiate a reliable and affordable leadership programme for IFAD-supported projects in Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, and Vietnam. A total of 16 trainers attended the 8-day Training-of-Trainers (ToT) course and went on to replicate the training with farmers in selected communities in their countries. Farmers from all walks of life received the training: leaders and members of cooperatives, farmers from minority groups and typical smallholder farmers.

One of the tools that proved very useful in promoting awareness, empowerment and leadership was the *Tree of Life* tool. This was adapted from two similar tools, an earlier version of the *Tree of Life* (developed by Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo and David Denborough) and *The Tree of Sustainability* (Arthur Delvecchio). These valuable tools were used to facilitate visualisation and empowerment exercises across many different groups of participants, especially individuals from vulnerable communities (such as HIV orphans or smallholder and woman-headed households).

The Tree of Life

The Tree of Life is an empowerment tool designed to explore inner power. It uses the different parts of the tree as metaphor to represent the different aspects of our lives. The roots are our personal values. The trunk relates to the actions that we can take to overcome external and internal bottlenecks (which are squeezing the trunk like a rope). And the leaves are the vision that we have of a better life for us and our family. The use of metaphors and carefully formulated questions help farmers to describe their personal values: What is it

Best to visualise change

Visualisation has a very strong impact on behaviour change. While explanation is a rational thinking process, visualisation engages the person as a whole—senses, feelings, thoughts. For example, during the initial exercises when farmers talked about leadership, they talked about someone else. This person had the power to influence, to do something and the means to achieve set goals. By going through the step-by-step process of describing the different sections of the tree as core values, visions and bottlenecks, their view of leadership changed. They could see many more elements of a leader in their “roots” than they did before. Initially, they felt that they had to get much more help from someone else, an external person. By visualising they could bring out elements of leadership that was a part of them all along.

that they hold dear? What do they firmly believe in? It provides them with a chance to talk about and reflect on their strengths. In a guided process, they continue to talk about their vision for the future: What do they want to achieve in the future? Now linking the two parts together, they look at the trunk: What is “suffocating” the trunk? Farmers explore and investigate the internal and external bottlenecks that block them from using their strengths or taking the risk to try new things. What is it that fosters a culture of blaming others? The value of these tools is that they enable getting into great detail about the specific obstacles in introducing something new or identifying old habits that may need to be changed (trying a new crop or other livelihood activity). The impact can be significant because an analysis using the tool can help identify options that people might decide to try out.



The materials for the training are basic: flipcharts, separate pieces of paper (for writing down the different values and goals), and something to mark with (crayons, water paint, markers, etc.—the more colourful, the better). Based on the experience with the ToT and the subsequent work done with farmers groups, the training takes about half a day (4 hours). In other situations however, it can take longer. It is very important to explore the values in vivid detail and to make the connection to how they can be helpful in overcoming external and internal bottlenecks.

Characteristics of the Tree of Life tool

Uses culturally appropriate metaphors

Metaphors in many cultures and communities evoke powerful meanings and associations for local people. These meanings and associations embrace important values, knowledge and skills, which support farmers in finding answers to the problems and challenges they face. In the trainings in Cambodia, the farmers found it easy to engage with the tool. Trees are plentiful in most communities, and many secure their livelihood from forestry. It is easy for them to imagine what a healthy tree looks like, how to take care of the roots and what benefits the fruits bring.

Links daily life and support structure to farmers dreams

The tree is used to describe what is happening at the level of the individual, but it also connects to the outside world. The participants are encouraged to think back not only about themselves but also their families and communities, as well as their external influences and support networks. They have the opportunity to reflect on, honour and acknowledge the precious relationships that they have with other farmers, the community and their family in terms of their livelihood. The Tree of Life encourages farmers to individually seek out support,

not waiting for others to give support. This automatically gives farmers a space to create their own structure for support, learning, and caring for each other.

Links inner strengths to overcoming challenges

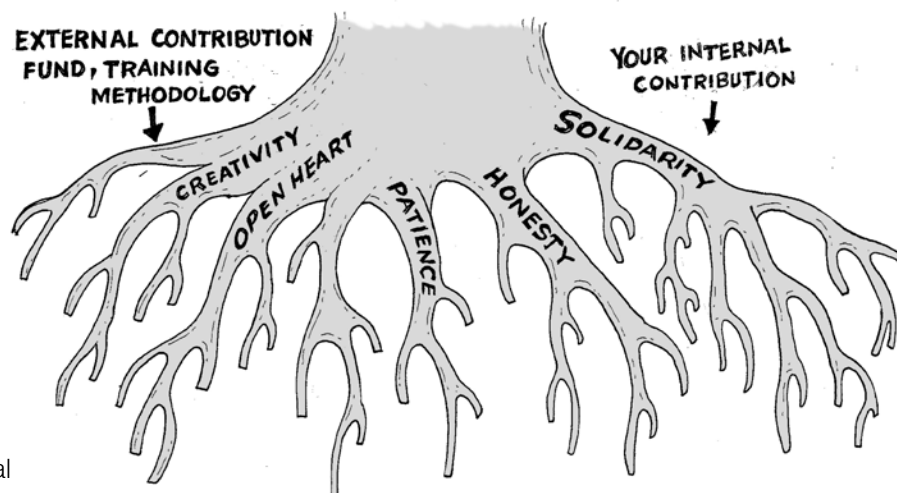
By visualising the tree, the participants are making an expanded image of themselves and their inner thoughts, feelings, potential, blockages, etc. People tend to trust and rely more on outside power than on their inner potential. They often find it hard to connect and acknowledge their achievements and the values they bring. They tend to focus on the problems. Visualising the tree helps them to see how their inner strengths and values can overcome the bottlenecks they describe. And they learn to appreciate themselves and their potential.

Exploring the three key elements of the process

1. The roots

This is a metaphor or prompt that invites farmers to think deeply about their core values. For instance, the facilitator may mention core values such as being “honest, helpful, committed, hardworking”, and will highlight these for the participants. These are the powers that the individual can tap into to achieve their goals,

their **internal contribution**. Also, there are **external contributions** that feed the “roots” with life-giving water and nutrients. An example is a self-help group where they can save/borrow money for their business. They can attend training on improved farming practices; they may have local NGOs that could provide seeds or technical support in their farming. The facilitator carefully listens for these key words and highlights them by writing them down on cards. Seeing these concepts physically connected in the tree visual builds an understanding of their connection in real life. The following are some of the questions often used:

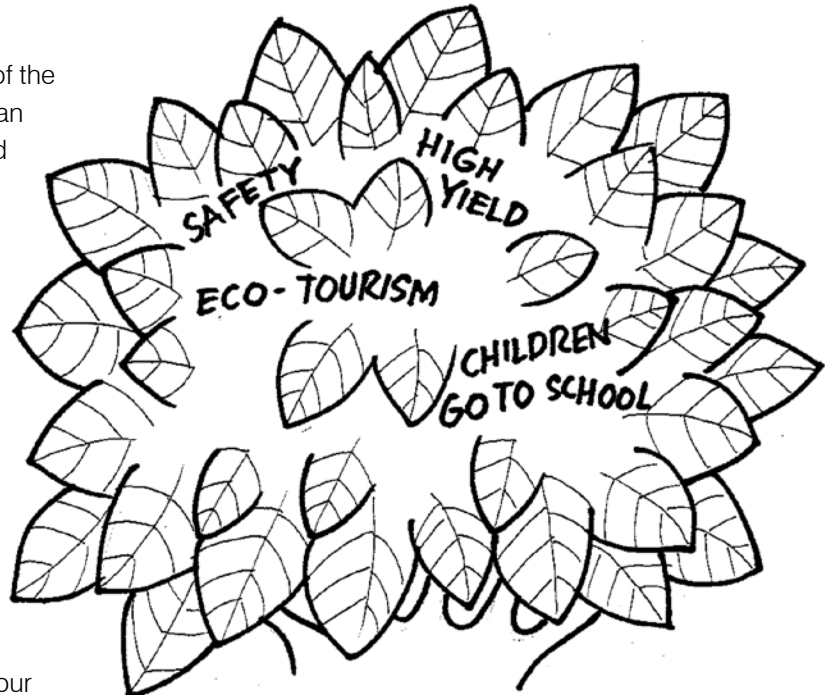


- What are the good things that people say about you?
- What are the values that you live by? What do you think is good for everyone to try to do? (being honest, helpful, generous, hardworking; taking challenges; saving, respecting others)
- How do you feel when someone says these things about you? (proud, honoured, happy, energetic, motivated)

2. The leaves

The main idea behind using a visual of the leaves of a tree is to provide farmers an easy way to talk about their vision and hopes for the future for themselves, their family and their community. Some questions that can be used to explore their vision include

- What do you want for yourself (dreams), something you would like to have as a farmer, a father and a friend? What would make you happiest if you could have it tomorrow?
- What about your family? What do you want for your children? What do you want for your wife/husband?
- Your community? What do you want to see changed in your community, your farmers group and the people around you?



To build a sense of empowerment, the facilitator can ask more questions about the specific values and strengths: How long have these hopes and dreams been alive in your mind? How did you hold onto these hopes and dreams? What has sustained them?

The vision of a better life

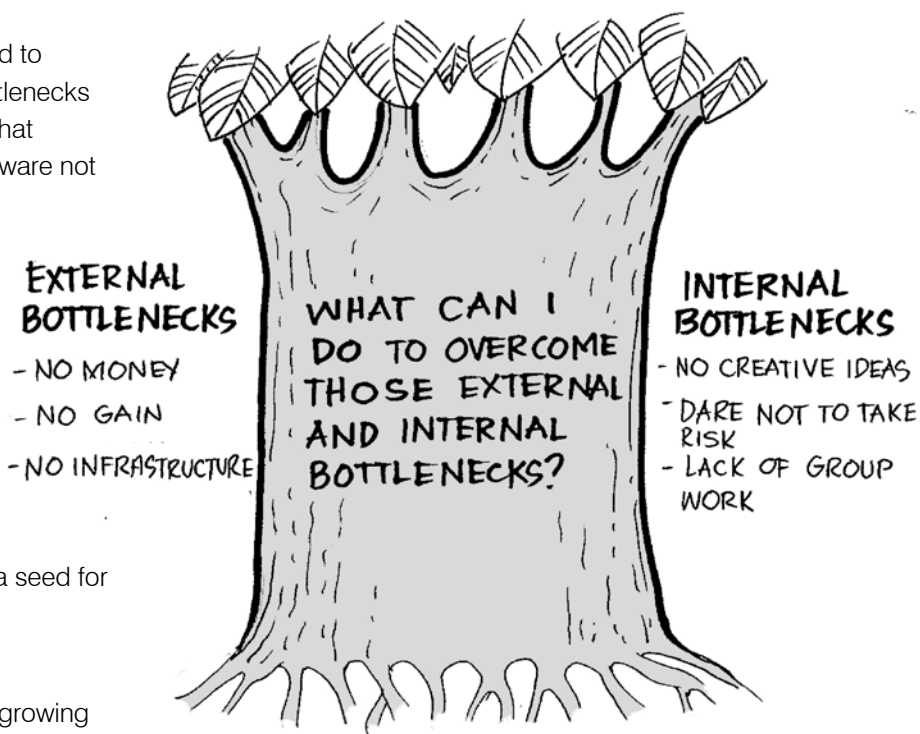
During the Tree of Life exercise in Cambodia, farmers shared several hopes and dreams they hold dear in their lives:

- Use new, better techniques in farming
- Cooperate better with farmer groups
- Save money to send children to school
- Develop ecotourism in the community
- Have regular income from their products
- Each family having its own home garden
- People in the community working well with each other

3. The trunk

The questions below are used to explore the blockages or bottlenecks faced by farmers, to ensure that participants become better aware not only of the external but also of their own barriers to achieving their dreams. The facilitator can draw additional illustrations around the various tree parts. For example, storm, rain, or other symbols can be added to represent the bottlenecks, a shining sun for goals, and a seed for values. Illustrative questions can be:

- Why are your leaves not growing fast and shining bright green in the sun?
- What would you like to do but don't feel strong enough to do?



This part is the most critical part of the facilitation because typically, mostly *external* barriers will be shared (e.g. no money, no technical support, no solidarity from farmers' teams, domestic violence, no infrastructure, etc.). The *internal* blockages are not mentioned often (e.g., I am afraid to take risks, I give up easily, I don't want to learn new things, I am not sure how to communicate with partners or traders, I am afraid of being blamed, I'd like to blame others, etc).

The facilitator can use specially drafted questions to address barriers.

- How strong are your values? What else do you need to make your values stronger?
- Give an example of a barrier that you overcame? What did you do to overcome it?
- Who did you get support from?
- How can your core values contribute to overcoming these blocks?
- What are you going to do differently?

The Tree of Life is an activity in which people draw a tree on a big piece of paper. They draw the roots, the ground, the branches, the leaves and the fruits. They are asked to imagine they were a tree and to imagine what it would be like to think of parts of life as parts of a tree. For example, the roots are one's core values that one can hold on to. The branches are one's hopes, dreams and wishes. The trunk may symbolise one's bottlenecks.

These questions help farmers see the linkage between bottlenecks and their core values as well as how those core values can help them to overcome the bottlenecks. Visualisation can help improve the understanding of how they can address external bottlenecks. Gradually, they can understand that dealing with their internal barriers and powers are the key to their development (in the tree analogy... for the leaves to grow well and flourish).

Lessons learned

- The exercise should start and focus on the roots—the core values—encouraging participants to learn from each other and to actively share what they are good at.
- The tree metaphor should be explained in great detail. It is easy for people to grasp this image; however, it may be challenging for them to think creatively about the different elements and come up with exhaustive lists for the values, barriers and goals.
- Internal bottlenecks are the critical point. It is very important for the facilitator to ask more detailed questions to tease out the internal blocks and to make them very visible to the participants. Internal barriers are often more powerful than external ones.
- Follow-up is important. The exercise can be repeated as an evaluation tool months after the initial session to check progress and potential changes in the different “parts of the tree”. It also helps reiterate the importance of the empowerment impact and to draw attention to the actions that the farmer can take to improve their situation.

Conclusion

The Tree of Life as a multifaceted M&E tool, can be applied at many different stages of project planning, implementation and evaluation. It can easily be adapted to the different needs at each stage and works well in a situation where a team of practitioners with different capacity levels needs to develop a joint goal. Regardless of educational level or professional capacity and position, each participant can join and share inputs easily. The tree has many branches and roots and there is enough space for many ideas. It can be used as a planning tool, when project goals need to be developed and the threats and opportunities assessed. It can be further applied as a periodic review tool to check progress.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CCL	Centre for Creative Leadership
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
ToT	training of trainers
NGO	nongovernment organisation

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