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Participatory research to support sustainable land management on the Mahafaly Plateau in south-western Madagascar

Socio-cultural checklist for development and conservation actors in South-Western Madagascar



This checklist was written in the frame of the Sustainable Land Management in Madagascar (SuLaMa) project by following authors

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When working in cross-cultural contexts, development and conservation stakeholders have to be aware that science-based knowledge might contradict local belief systems and values in the research region. Thus, all informational and educational material should be designed with regard of their addressees and the contexts in which they will be used and consumed. The communication should follow the philosophy of respect, human dignity and cooperation. This checklist supports the development of products that are understandable, usable, useful and culturally and religiously sensible in the context of the project region. The checklist aims to avoid conflicts, misunderstandings and violation of socio-cultural conventions and human dignity by

- Assuring applicability in local conditions
- Taking local socio culture and world views into account
- Respecting personal rights and privacy
- Avoiding discrimination, racism, and injustice (e.g. gender aspects)
- Paying regard to sustainability of knowledge and resources
- Assuring a mutual learning process

The checklist can be applied for digital or printed products that are published, distributed, or made accessible, for example

- informational materials like fact sheets or brochures,
- educational materials or publications, instructions for scientific research,
- scientific publications,
- reports,
- tools like maps, digital models or methodological approaches,
- Recommendations like action strategies, guidelines and manuals.

It might serve several types of addressees of informational or educational material, such as

- NGOs in and outside Madagascar
- State or public agencies in and outside Madagascar
- Malagasy and foreign researchers and research institutions
- Universities, schools, teachers and other educational institutions in Madagascar
- Local or regional authorities (traditional and state) in the project region
- Local or regional institutions, organizations, groups, cooperatives, communities etc.
- Individuals from the project region
- Tourists in the project region
- Investors and donors
- Donors and supporters of conservation or development projects
- Global scientific community and the general public

to reach several goals of conservation and development stakeholders, for example

- Educational purposes (in context of family, community, school, training, university, tourism)
- Providing action strategies for stakeholders
- Guaranteeing a continuation of scientific research
- Empowering people for informed decision making
- Making SuLaMa's scientific and general knowledge and expertise accessible

Nevertheless, the checklist might not be equally relevant for all projects, contexts and potential addressees of SuLaMa products. Still, it remains the responsibility of each researcher or person in charge with conservation or development initiatives to assess the socio-cultural adequateness of his/her activity.

General checklist

- ✓ Conservation and development actors do not have unlimited power of definition and interpretation monopoly: Does the product/ recommendation show respect towards cultural orientations and worldviews provided they do not conflict with human dignity?
- ✓ Does your product/activity respect personal rights? (You might have to ask authorization of people or organization to publish this information.)
- ✓ Is the information given generally understandable and not misleading?
- ✓ Are you aware that your recommendations/ knowledge may touch problematic issues and conflict lines among addressees and in particular the local communities?
- ✓ Are you aware that local people might value and classify your study object/activity according world views concerning
 - ancestors
 - supernatural beings
 - spiritual meaning of plants, animals and places
 - importance of rituals and social obligations
 - respect of age
 - ethnic belonging
 - taboos
- ✓ Did you check whether your recommendations and action strategies may affect men and women in an equal way?
- ✓ Did you check whether your recommendations or action strategies adversely affect people's and in particular women's access to and control of resources?
- ✓ Do your recommendations and action strategies include strategies to promote the active involvement and participation of rural communities?
- ✓ Do your recommendations/ action strategies empower and strengthen local communities?
- ✓ Are your knowledge and recommendations replicable? (document not only the result but also methodological and process knowledge)
- ✓ *Is expert-based knowledge documented and stored so that it is persistent, searchable, and accessible?*
- ✓ Are all possible consequences that your recommendations/ action strategies may have on the systems critically taken into account?

Written Material (print and digital)

- ✓ Did you translate the product/user manuals etc. into local language (French, Malagasy, Tanalana)?
- ✓ If translated: Do you assure to use the expressions and terms that are used in the project region?
- ✓ Did you use common and simple words to describe scientific/expert knowledge?
- ✓ Did you let cross-check the content of your product/user manual etc. by someone familiar with local people's understanding?
- ✓ Did you consider the high illiteracy rate? (Visualizations and supporting products/material might be necessary)
- ✓ Did you reduce the resources needed to consume the products/material? (e.g. technical equipment)
- ✓ For the production of the material: Did you make responsible use of resources? (no exorbitant use of resources, use recycled paper avoid color prints and high gloss)

Terminology

- ✓ Did you reflect that language is never neutral? Choose your terms carefully. (The term "hut" for example implies inferior connotations than the term "house")

- ✓ Did you avoid “othering”? (Try not to reproduce oppositions)
- ✓ When describing people, did you use their self-designations and denominations the concerned people use for themselves?
- ✓ Did you critically reflect the terms “development” and “conservation”? Are the terms used in a non-hierarchic way that do not imply the “western model” as benchmark?
- ✓ Did you avoid racist or colonial terms like “tribe”?
- ✓ Are all statements made about people and activities non-judgmental, and respectful?

Photos

Personal rights

- ✓ Did people agree with taking pictures, were they informed about the purpose, did they agree with publishing the pictures, did they see and agree with the pictures?
- ✓ Did they have the option to deny their authorization?
- ✓ Did they see the pictures on a display (on case of digital cameras)
- ✓ In the case of children: Did their parents authorize the photos?
- ✓ Do the photos respect privacy and culture (taboos, fady, ...)?
- ✓ Are you aware that photos that show sacred objects, places or private spaces can violate personal rights?

Human dignity

- ✓ When picturing people: Did you check that the photo perspective is not from above?
- ✓ Are your photos taken with sensibility for suffering, poverty and illness?
- ✓ Do the photos show the human body in a dignified way? (nudity, injuries and diseases)
- ✓ Do the photos avoid colonial picture arrangements? (e.g. hierarchic difference between black and white people)

Documentary view

- ✓ Did you make a clear connection between text and picture?
- ✓ Did you put photos in their veridical context and did you explain them (captions, footnotes)?
- ✓ Did you note correctly the names, place, date, context and the name of the photographer? (not only name “scientific experts” but also give the names of the “local partners”)
- ✓ Are the pictures of documentary character and showing reality in its diversity? (Do not romanticize, euphemize or sensationalize!)
- ✓ Did you avoid to picture clichés and stereotypes?
- ✓ Do the pictures show people as agents and show equal partnership between “white experts” and “black partners”?
- ✓ Can you use pictures of on-site partners? Can you make your pictures accessible to on-site partners?

Picture editing

- ✓ Did you avoid to use filter and editing effects in an adulterant way?
- ✓ Did you avoid to cut away the surrounding and context of the motive?
- ✓ Did you take into account the choice of colors and the impression they may evoke?

Symbols and other illustrations

- ✓ Did you adapt symbols and illustrations to the context of the addressees?
- ✓ Did you use pictures from peoples’ surroundings and daily life?
- ✓ When illustrating people: Do the illustrations correspond to the physical attributes of the person illustrated?

