

Institutionalizing learning in rural poverty alleviation initiatives

Irene Guijt, Julio Berdegue, German Escobar, and Eduardo Ramírez

Poverty reduction is a complex task that requires tackling power imbalances, limited economic opportunities and long term capacity-building to ensure good governance, reduce inequity, improve well being and incomes and deal with sustainability threats. Most projects funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) deal with contextually specific poverty phenomena and processes (see Box 1). This requires project participantsⁱ to adapt theoretical ideas about poverty reduction to suit their situation and to innovate continually. Despite being geographically disparate, and subject to specific economic, cultural, political and environmental contexts, the sharing of IFAD project experiences is potentially a rich source of finding and spreading innovation in relation to participants' common goal of poverty reduction. Not surprisingly, solutions for the complex challenges they face often emerge from the trial-and-error of practical experience.

Box 1. Key features of IFAD projects

- Government-based, hence embedded in government and political systems, cultures and procedures
- Focused on rural households and regions of extreme poverty, often with strong incentives from beneficiaries and institutional environment for project staff to deliver fast and concrete solutions and not 'waste' time on supportive processes
- \$10 to \$25 million dollar loans
- Longer term projects - stretching to 6 or 7 years
- Multi-component (typically financial services, technical advisory services, support to rural organizations, training/capacity-building, small-scale infrastructure)
- Complex in terms of range of issues being addressed
- Not action-learning focused by nature or design.

Tapping into the analytical potential of IFAD project staff is critical – they form a key source of institutional innovation. A growing trend has been to ask such professionals to produce 'lessons learned' and to document 'best practices', and therefore, to make their projects into active learning initiatives. IFAD invests in knowledge management and project-centred learning not for knowledge's sake but to seek insights to improve their actions, either immediately, in next phases of funding or broadly within poverty reduction. This provides IFAD's funding with the opportunity to realize both impact at both a local and a global level.

Learning must occur at the fundamental level of individual projects. It is here that "the interaction with rural poverty, its causes, dynamics, and consequences takes place, and where strategies and interventions are designed and managed to reduce poverty" (IFAD 2002). By implication, IFAD projects should be based on an explicit experiential learning process, planning for it in project design, in staff job requirements, in the cycle of meetings and reflections, and in organisational culture.

However, like many development interventions, IFAD projects are not designed to be action learning processes. The challenge, therefore, is how to promote, design and conduct learning processes within organizations and project activities that have not been designed with this purpose in mind.

This article is based on 16 rural agriculture projects in Latin America (Peru, Brazil, Nicaragua, Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, Venezuela, Honduras, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Panama and Uruguay), supported by the FIDAMERICA Regional Networkⁱⁱ. The projects were all aimed at facilitating systematic learning efforts using a common framework known as ‘Aprendizaje y Gestión de Conocimiento’ (AGC – Learning and Knowledge Management).

This article begins by describing how we conceived ‘learning’ as a conscious process in rural development initiatives. We then describe the five stages of the AGC concept. We discuss the organizational conditions that appear critical for effective learning and highlight seven key issues that require special attention. The paper is illustrated with examples from different IFAD projects.

Experiential knowledge as the basis

The AGC concept is based on ‘experiential knowledge’ which constitutes insights emerging from the daily practice of those involved in poverty reduction initiatives. Often, learning processes are not explicit in project processes; much knowledge remains ‘tacit’ (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Although tacit knowledge is made visible through individual capacities and competencies, people often have difficulty articulating this type of knowledge. Tacit experiential knowledge consists of an individual’s mental models of reality; therefore articulating experiential knowledge will require clarifying the underlying perceptions of how and why ‘things work’.

Kolb (1984) considers that experiential learning can enable tacit knowledge to become explicit and understandable for others. An ‘experiential learning’ view of knowledge sees those involved in a project as creating knowledge appropriate to their own situation by integrating and internalizing existing, formal knowledge with an understanding of their own specific context and reflection on their own experiences. Kolb’s theory involves a four-stage cyclical process consisting of:

1. *Experiencing* - immersion in undertaking a set of activities;
2. *Reflecting* - reviewing what happened, and how people felt about it;
3. *Conceptualizing* - analyzing this information and interpreting events to arrive at theories, models or concepts that explain the experience in terms of why things happened the way they did; and
4. *Planning* - translating new experiences into priorities for (improved) actions to be taken.

Much learning does not follow such cycles, with often only stages 1 and 2 occurring, which perpetuates errors. Learning is often crisis-driven, emerges from unconscious trial-and-error efforts, and is not shared for all those who influence final project

impact. Using Kolb's four stages to think about project learning cycles can help avoid costly errors and accelerate innovations that can lead to greater relevance, efficiency, and ultimately impact. In IFAD projects – with large geographic scales, many diverse groups and interests, and a range of activities – such experience-based learning needs to be designed, facilitated, implemented and followed up. To be effective, learning must be viewed as a structured process that requires dedicated planning, management and institutionalization within an organization (see stage 5 below).

Focused learning

The focus on context-specific learning makes a wide range of questions and themes possible during an AGC cycle. Learning can be facilitated at different levels, differentiated for instance through the intervention logic:

- *Activities- or method-focused learning*, occurs mostly through context-specific lessons;
- *Results-focused learning*, occurs less frequently. This requires reflecting on theories of change that underpin the activities, with general lessons ensuing;
- *Goal-oriented learning*, occurs least frequently. This is based on various linked activities and their results, with lessons having widest relevance.

For each of these levels, lessons can focus on underlying assumptions or on more operational aspects.

Any development intervention is based on a theory of action, that is, a set of assumptions describing the collective vision of what will happen as a result of certain activities. The theories of action we use partly come from society's established and formalized knowledge base, partly from the accumulated experience of those involved in designing the project or program, and partly from 'political correctness'. Not all theories of action in use are well tested before being used to design the project. This may lead to unreliable assumptions or hypotheses informing the core strategy. Some assumptions are explicit, but many only become evident for people when deviations from the expected reveal the hidden assumption. Hence explicitly questioning assumptions will help a project learn about fundamental anomalies or weaknesses in its strategy (see Box 2).

However, identifying a problematic assumption does not always mean it can be corrected, as other constraints may hinder change. For example, IFAD projects are negotiated between national governments and multilateral organizations, sometimes requiring parliamentary approval. The bureaucracy reduces flexibility for adjustment once contracts have been signed. Project participants, in particular the management staff, can only make decisions within the bounds set by others in the national hierarchy.

Table 1. Diversity of learning focus

<i>IFAD Project</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Learning questions</i>	<i>Lessons and project improvements</i>
PROSOC, Honduras	The community capitalization process	Has the Communal Management Committee (CMC) improved and made fund transfers to the Segua community faster and more efficient?	The CMC did improve efficiency in fund disbursement but it is subject to capacity-building through training and technical support. The involvement of other organizations, such as on rural credit, may stimulate extra social participation and financial rationalization.
FAT- Nicaragua	The negotiation processes and the agreement between farmers and technical service providers	Who defines the needs for non-financial services in rural communities that operate in a competitive market system - and how is this defined?	To improve the definition of technical service needs: (1) avoid price-related incentives for specific services, except when aiming to scale up specific support; and (2) information and confidence are needed to define non-financial service agreements and therefore must get project support.
PRODAP II - El Salvador	The processes of organizational strengthening in the execution of infrastructure projects	Which conditions are needed for community-level infrastructure investments to contribute to organizational strengthening?	The project must ensure that community organizations operate with a minimum level of internal democratic process and that they have some basic experience, norms and rules before asking of them high levels of human, financial and material investment.
CUSCO-PUNO, Peru	Relationship between project targeting and impact	Is there a trade-off between targeting the project on the poorest of the poor and meeting the project's objectives in terms of improving rural financial and technical assistance markets as a means to reduce poverty?	Revision of targeting criteria and modification of strategies and procedures in several of the project's components

Box 2: Questioning strategic assumptions

In MARENASS (Cusco Peru), a core strategic assumption was that targeting the 'poorest of the poor' was compatible with working on developing rural financial and technical services markets. When project staff questioned this assumption, they concluded that their theory of action needed adjusting. Evidence had shown that they needed to redesign their strategies and develop indicators to monitor trade-offs occurring between targeting a certain economic group and having a certain economic impact.

Most project staff is involved in implementing fixed tasks, for example, setting up micro-credit facilities, constructing roads, providing technical assistance or training to local organizations, and so forth. While there is considerable standard knowledge about most operational aspects of a programme, each context has its own challenges. Staff must be able to discuss the challenges, their questions and dilemmas that emerge in order to seek solutions together. Learning that enables staff to reflect on their practical experiences and make sense of this together (stages 2 and 3 of Kolb's learning cycle) can form a solid basis for improving the daily implementation of core activities (see Box 3).

Box 3. Questioning operational challenges

In PRODAP, El Salvador, the social infrastructure component was designed in such a way as to improve community infrastructure conditions but in particular to strengthen local organizational capacities. The assumption was that by organizing and implementing a school or road construction initiative, local organizations would be strengthened. During an AGC cycle, the assumption itself was not questioned but the operational aspects were refined. The project team realized that local organizations need basic support in terms of internal democracy and in terms of shared norms and rules - and that it cannot just automatically result from being involved in construction work. The team also agreed the need for a gradual process of accumulating experiences - and organizational strengthening - before expecting local organizations to undertake large construction efforts.

Understanding the five phases of the AGC process

This section discusses the five phases of the AGC process in terms of participation, outputs, quality criteria and variations:

- Phase 1 – Laying the basis
- Phase 2 – Identifying themes and questions
- Phase 3 – Systematizing experiences, lessons and documentation
- Phase 4 - Communication and socialization
- Phase 5 – Institutionalizing.

Central in all phases is the facilitator who guides the AGC process. This facilitator may be an external consultant, national or international, or project staff involved in prior AGC processes. If the facilitator is internal, then careful consideration is needed to ensure he or she is able to garner commitment to the process, especially among senior management. Moreover, ample time is needed to undertake this process. So-called 'champions', people with leverage and respect, are also crucial, in addition to the facilitator, whose presence and role might be sporadic. Until the idea of learning becomes embedded in practice, someone needs to actively build it into staff practices, allocate budgets, and encourage a focus on the questioning mode of working that

AGC encourages. Recognizing and stimulating these champions can greatly help the work of the facilitator.

Phase 1: Laying the basis

This phase should lead to four results: formal agreement by senior management to proceed with AGC; interest by a large group of project staff and other participants; clarity about the AGC concept; and agreement on the timing and sequence of next AGC steps.

Two preparatory tasks are critical: obtaining senior management support for the full AGC cycle and understanding different interests. This means explaining what AGC consists of in terms of the timeframe, focus, possible benefits and stakeholder involvement so that senior managers can compare costs and benefits. The second task involves identifying different understandings of what an AGC learning approach means in practice, as this will influence people's willingness to explore failures or problems as well as successes. Is AGC a public relations exercise or aimed at dealing with dilemmas? Being clear on what AGC is will avoid confusion during later phases.

A useful part of phase 1 is a participatory diagnosis of the existing learning processes in the project (see Box 4).

Box 4. Discussing learning processes

1. Is there a culture of dialogue and critical debate within the project? Do the director and other senior staff stimulate and reward innovation and entrepreneurship?
2. How do changes occur in the project strategy and operations and what does this tell you about how learning takes place?
3. What are the core reflection moments of the project? What does this consist of? Who is present?
4. To what extent do project participants perceive 'learning' to be part of their jobs and core project business, and valued as part of the project culture?
5. What are the strengths of the project in terms of learning from problems and successes and doubts?
6. What are the weaknesses of the project in terms of learning from problems and successes and doubts?

Phase 2: Identifying themes and questions

The expected outputs of phase 2 are agreement on: themes and related questions to be explored; which project experiences will be used for the learning process; and the exact planning for phase 3.

Selecting priority interests is essential due to time and financial constraints. However, the process of identifying, formulating and prioritizing themes and questions is itself part of the learning process. It takes participants through an open-ended exchange of topics where dilemmas exist, challenges occur and improvements are needed. Such exchange takes place in workshops with each stakeholder group, after which overall agreement is sought on the themes. It is vital that a range of project stakeholders are involved as the themes selected and questions drafted will form the backbone of the entire learning cycle. The AGC experiences to date show that sharing these lists and becoming aware of possibly different priorities is often a significant first eye-opener for senior management from the AGC cycle.

During this phase, experiences are shared as the basis of the learning experience. These can comprise success stories but also more problematic experiences, which can help identify how to overcome operational obstacles or rethink strategies (see Box 5).

Box 6. Learning from success, mistakes, or others?

The Corredor Cusco-Puno project (Peru) decided to select four critical themes, one for each of the three local offices and one to be addressed by the senior management unit. In each of the four processes, participants in the AGC cycle selected one successful example, one unsuccessful or less successful, and one example that was known to be successful but in which the project had not played any role at all, but had been developed or supported by some one else. The latter served as an independent point of comparison. Overall, the stories allowed the participants to enrich their discussion of the critical themes and questions by comparing between cases.

Phase 3: Systematizing experiences, lessons and documentation

The third phase of the AGC concept is the most visible, as this is when the systematization workshops take place that lead to the documentation of lessons and recommendations. The expected outputs of this phase are: a set of documented experiences describing the initial situation; the intervention process and the subsequent situation, including critical reflections on what could have been done better; a set of lessons learned to be communicated more widely; and agreement on the audience to whom to communicate the outputs, plus a process for ensuring meaningful sharing and debate (see phase 4).

Table 2. Guiding the systematization workshop

<p>Initial situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the development problem or opportunity before the intervention of the project <p>Context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The causes or determinant of the problem or opportunity Factors that limited local action to solve the problem or take advantage of the opportunity 	<p>Development process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What was done (activities)? When? (organization in time)? Who did it (actors)? How was it done (methods)? With what was it done (resources and costs)? <p>Context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Factors that favoured the process Factors that constrained the process 	<p>Current situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does the current situation compare with the initial situation? What are the tangible and intangible benefits? Who has captured or benefited from these benefits? <p>Context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Factors that amplified the magnitude of the benefits or the number of beneficiaries Factors that constrained the magnitude of the benefits or the number of beneficiaries
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We will highlight six core issues that emerged from the AGC processes in different IFAD projects (see Berdegué *et al.* (2004) for a more detailed methodology).

Start simple in order to institutionalize learning

If the first attempt at explicit learning is perceived to be a success by senior managers, then subsequent cycles can involve more diverse stakeholders, handle more complex themes, examine more challenging questions, and make use of more elaborate information gathering exercises. The results from the first attempt should drive the project towards increasing investment in learning and lead to better quality outputs - but above all to valuing sustained learning efforts.

Ensure core elements are present but be open to variation

Understanding variations – such as thematic variation, variation in participation, and variation in workshop length and sequence – will help in making appropriate preparations and making conscious choices.

Ensure analytical thinking

Analytical thinking calls for more than a simple description of what happened, exploring beyond contextual specifics.

Strive for critical reflection

Reflection is the process of exploring and reassessing assumptions, so some curiosity is needed to enable people to shift between inquiring (seeking information) and interpreting (giving meaning to the information) before developing useful insights. While most people are capable of critical thinking about their experiences, sharing these thoughts publicly and committing them to paper is more difficult and calls for a ‘safe’ environment.

Differentiate between conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned

Experiences show that project participants find ‘conclusions’ and ‘recommendations’ easier to handle than ‘lessons’. In part, this is because they are more immediately useful for project implementation and strategy. Identifying ‘lessons learned’ requires being able to discard site-specific features and focusing the analysis on underlying logics and ideas. This puts considerable demands on the analytical capacity of participants. Such lessons are the vehicle for scaling up the immediate context of the project, but often tend to be cliché statements. Hence, facilitators should seek to ensure that lessons are comprehensible for others by describing the context in which the lesson was learned, the theme, the assumption(s) on which the intervention is based, what triggered the lesson and the lesson itself.

Commit the analysis to paper

Participating in a systematization process will itself lead to considerable learning among participants. However, often insights need to be shared or formalized and therefore written or audiovisual communication is essential.

Phase 4: Communication and socialization

A key insight from the first AGC experiences was that the impacts could probably be improved significantly by formulating and integrating communication strategies into the learning process. A new addition to the AGC cycle, the most important expected outputs is greater and more intensive access to process outputs and lessons learned.

‘Communication’ refers not to transferring information, but refers to a process of internalizing the analysis by those who are responsible for the types of experiences addressed in the systematization phase. ‘Socialization’ is the process of debate, enabling lessons to embed themselves - or, after further reflection, to be consciously rejected.

Although ideally the ‘communication and socialization’ phase should be an ongoing process, in practice this is often not feasible, given the hesitation to invest in learning, the size of IFAD projects and the potentially large numbers of stakeholders. Hence, a focused phase, in which earlier outputs are communicated and debated is included in the process. This phase focuses mainly on first, project level discussions with non-participants (project participants not involved in the systematization phase), to allow for understanding about the processes that were questioned, which in turn could lead to actor-specific recommendations. Second, it focuses on those external to the project: from other parts of IFAD, other IFAD projects or other rural development practitioners, to share insights and seek external comments.

Phase 5: Institutionalizing

The final stage will prove AGC’s true value. This stage requires embedding recommendations and lessons learned into the everyday life of the project. The expected outputs of Phase 5 are: clarity about the changes needed in the project in terms of norms, incentives and human resource development; and support from decision makers and implementers about the way forward with these changes.

This generally involves three aspects (see Table 3 for examples):

1. Adapting or establishing new norms, rules and procedures so that favourable processes are encouraged and hindering processes are discouraged;
2. Establishing or modifying the incentives system for different interest groups in the project; and
3. Incorporating improvements into human resource development policies, i.e. internalizing new insights into the skills base of project participants via capacity building programmes, on-the-job training or short workshops.

These three types of changes can be institutionalized in two ways: first, *emerging* through the process and as a result almost imperceptibly finding its way into the daily practice of project and partner organization staff. Second, through *specific intervention*, filtering insights and transforming them into action points, identifying who is responsible and the source of funding for the planned changes, as well as the deadline by which progress with implementation is expected. Success at this stage will depend greatly on the willingness of the project management team to formalize changes and those who are supposed to implement changes.

Not all lessons can or need to be institutionalized – as long as this is an explicit and deliberated decision. For example, one project director decided not to change a strategy of empowering the rural organizations to make decisions about the project resources, even when the systematization showed that the strategy had significant flaws. His reasoning was that within the past year, the project had made a major change in several of its strategies, and that yet another change would cause confusion and exasperation. His argument was valid – the timing was not right to introduce the recommended change.

Table 2. Analyzing lessons to ensure three levels of institutionalization

<i>Recommendations and lessons</i>	<i>Implications for the norms governing the project</i>	<i>Implications for the incentives system</i>	<i>Implications for human resource development</i>
Lesson 1. Rural organizations often lack the capacity to manage technical advisory services on their own. The development of this capacity needs to be supported by the project.	a) A simple method needs to be designed to assess if a rural organization does or does not requires this type of capacity-building. b) Resources from the project budget need to be allocated for the organization to contract consultants that can help it develop this capacity.	The method for selecting organizations that receive project support discriminates organizations that lack the capacity to self-manage external consultants. The evaluation criteria have to be changed so that promising organizations lacking this capacity can opt for capacity-development support.	Need to reinforce with co-implementing agencies the importance of identifying the capacity of rural organizations to self-manage technical consultancy services paid for in part with the project funds.
Lesson 2. Community capital formation through direct transference for productive projects requires a solid organization and a legal structure for funds administration	a) The local community structure through which community capital programmes are envisioned needs to be redefined with the participation of direct actors. b) The community organization component must be adapted to match the community structure.	a) Accumulation and savings mechanisms for the community must be developed to increase common capital. b) Social accountability must be made explicit to all group members to ensure fund repayment. c) Incentives for producers to become new members are required.	Training of co-implementers and small producers is needed. Main topics for workshops are: information on productive alternatives, simple project evaluation techniques, basic administrative capacities and social leadership.

Organizational conditions for effective learning in IFAD projects

The success of an AGC process depends on its ability to encourage participants to question core strategic or operational assumptions. The learning process is affected by five key conditions.

Conditions in the project context

Any project operates within a socio-political culture that affects the extent to which government agencies and staff engage in frank and open critical reflection. While such factors are hard to influence, knowing which ones are problematic may help determine whether or not to invest in an AGC process.

Project design

While all IFAD projects include poverty reduction aims, the inclusion of 'learning' as a core activity or strategy is rare. IFAD projects are usually conceived of and implemented as blueprint projects with beneficiaries receiving fixed outputs and not

as learning endeavours. The lack of a learning orientation means that no resources are reserved in budgets nor is there any staff with formal responsibility for 'learning'. This will produce scepticism about the merits of investing precious time and money in an activity that is not formally valued.

Dealing with small implementation units

Among small implementation units, with 10-20 staff members responsible for managing millions of dollars worth of activities, convincing staff to participate in any activity not considered 'core business' will require additional efforts. This may mean shifting parts of the AGC cycle to other actors, even sub-contractors.

Project culture

Perhaps most significant of all conditions is the internal project culture, which is very strongly influenced by the characteristics and disposition of senior management. Projects with open-minded directors and managers, who not only support but also behave transparently and in an inclusive and innovative manner, are much more likely to welcome the idea of AGC than those in which authoritarian managers call the shots. This of course is closely related to the wider institutional and political context.

Such ideal conditions occur – but not often. Their absence does not mean that AGC is impossible. It simply means that different types of managers will require different approaches.

Stage in project life

Each project has a lifetime, with different stages affecting the enthusiasm to undertake AGC-type learning, each with its own facilitation challenges. For instance, a young project is under much pressure to perform, assemble teams, design basic information and management systems, establish local and regional alliances, and so forth, all of which leaves little time for anything else. Yet it is a stage in which learning from other projects can be most valuable – and this can be the entry point for AGC.

Middle-aged projects risk reaching a certain static state, limiting the learning opportunities. AGC can help identify and address the communication barriers that become entrenched in such set-ups.

Projects nearing the end of their life have shown great interest in AGC, often recognizing the need to take stock, document and show what has happened. While it creates an opportunity to share project experiences with others, there is no time for feedback and phase 5 – institutionalization of learning – becomes virtually meaningless, although it may be of great importance for other projects and for IFAD as an organization.

Critical issues to consider during the process

In the AGC work with IFAD projects, seven weak areas emerged that need extra attention for optimal learning to occur and changes to be institutionalized.

Link the phases

The success of each phase depends in part on its linkage to the others. For instance, conscious efforts must be made during institutionalization (phase 5) to use the documentation results (from phase 3), and to involve more than a handful of senior staff (phase 4).

Seek information from elsewhere to avoid project myopia

While learning from internal experiences is a great start, alternatives and innovations may well lie elsewhere. The type of reflection and changes stimulated by AGC are likely to improve if external information is included in project-level discussions.

Crowds can be wiser than individuals

Consider carefully who should participate in each phase. Collective analysis is often weak and falls on the shoulders of a few individuals. Involving all stakeholders will neither be feasible nor necessarily desirable but consider how those not usually involved in strategic thinking can contribute. Besides invitations, they need information, accompaniment, and space and time to speak and participate in analyses.

Learning often stays within the comfort zone of the project

Taboo subjects that could lead to significant strategic shifts in the intervention, are often avoided, and as a result learning is limited. It is the role of the facilitators to carefully explore how to address such topics without jeopardizing the entire AGC effort, participant relationships or the jobs of those involved.

Institutionalize learning by embedding core elements

Sustained learning cycles, after a first immersion, will require establishing or strengthening preconditions. This may involve building learning into project objectives, culture, strategies, methodology, human resources and financial resource allocation. It will require support for participants to develop autonomy from the political and institutional context and calls for senior management that is not afraid of critical reflection and innovation.

Do not underestimate the ramifications and political skills needed of the learning process

The AGC can be a Pandora's box and should not be underestimated by any facilitator. The success of the process is based on solid critical reflection, highlighting not just successes but also design and operational failures. This is a problem where self-criticism is not valued and performance focuses on strict adherence to original project goals. As this is often (partially) the case, an AGC facilitator needs to negotiate the political system consciously and carefully.

Scaling up of lessons requires more than lessons that can be scaled up

Lessons are often expected to influence public policy or subsequent project design. This requires consciously building an 'interface' between project level learning and the higher-scale processes that one is trying to influence. This requires an analytical process to translate original lessons to decision makers; an active demand for the message one wants to convey or an active strategy to create demand for messages;

and a communication strategy for engaging in an active dialogue with decision makers.

This article describes an approach for consciously embedding learning in development projects. It has emerged from a strong conviction that learning processes must be as resource- and time-efficient as possible, especially in conditions where 'learning' is not considered the core business. Based on experience from more than a dozen cases, we identify a minimum set of conditions, elements and inputs for such a process to succeed. We have sought to describe what has been effective in each phase, what poses possible risks, and what needs to be considered for further improvement.

Recently, IFAD's Board approved a learning and knowledge management strategy, based on the experiences in Latin America and the Caribbean (IFAD 2007). Furthermore, IFAD has started similar learning and knowledge management networks in other regions: FIDAFRIQUE (West Africa), ENRAP (Asia/Pacific)ⁱⁱⁱ, and KariaNet (Near East and North Africa). It is likely that these will draw on the AGC experiences of FIDAMERICA described here.

Implementing the approach to organizational learning as described above does not guarantee that learning occurs. It can, if implemented in the wrong context, simply become a mechanical exercise that is insufficiently well analyzed or carried by a wider group of people to generate any meaningful improvement in project activities or strategies. In this sense, institutionalizing learning in development interventions is no different from institutionalizing other innovations in project thinking and practice, such as gender perspectives or participatory approaches to development – they all require sustained and explicit efforts to come to an appreciation of what the innovation has to offer in terms of development impact.

Note

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 18th Symposium of the International Farming Systems Association (IFSA) with FAO and IFAD, Rome, Italy, 31 October – 4 November 2005. Full conference paper can be found at http://www.ifsaglo2005.org/programm/papers/t3_case_studies.pdf

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Abstract

This article describes a 5-phase approach for improving the learning capacity of rural development initiatives focused on poverty reduction that was applied in projects supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The approach is called 'Aprendizaje y Gestion de Conocimiento' (AGC – Learning and Knowledge Management). Like many development interventions, IFAD projects are not designed to be action learning processes. Yet they recognise the need for project-centred learning to improve their actions, either immediately, in next phases of funding or broadly within poverty reduction. The challenge is how to promote, design and conduct learning processes within organizations and project activities that have not been designed with this purpose in mind.

The AGC process described here is based on work undertaken with 16 projects supported by IFAD in Latin America and the Caribbean. From 2002 to 2005, the projects were accompanied with varying degrees of intensity and success in

undertaking systematic learning efforts around themes or questions of core concern. The article concludes with observations about the conditions needed for effective learning in rural development initiatives, and critical issues that require particular attention.

About the Authors

Irene Guijt is an independent advisor, trainer and researcher focusing on learning processes and systems in rural development and natural resource management, particularly where this involves collective action. Her work with international multi- and bilateral aid agencies and NGOs has focused largely on how to ensure more critical reflective thinking can take place that can strengthen pro-poor development. She has just submitted her PhD titled: 'Seeking surprise: rethinking monitoring for collective learning in rural resource management'. Other key publications include *The Myth of Community: Gender Issues in Participatory Development* (co-editor) and *Negotiating Learning: Collaborative Monitoring in Forest Resource Management* (editor).

Irene Guijt, Learning by Design, Bredeweg 31, 6668AR Randwijk, The Netherlands. Email: iguijt@learningbydesign.org

Julio Berdegúe is Mexican and holds a PhD in Social Science from Wageningen University, The Netherlands. From 1994 to 2007, he was President of Rimisp-Latin American Center for Rural Development (www.rimisp.org), where he now works as Principal Researcher. He is Vice-Chair of the Board of Trustees of CIMMYT (International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center). Other recent assignments include participation in teams preparing the World Bank's World Development Report 2008 "Agriculture for Development" and the Independent External Evaluation of FAO. Recent work focuses on territorial rural development and on market restructuring and inclusion and exclusion of small farmers and rural entrepreneurs, with an emphasis on the supermarket sector.

Julio A. Berdegúe, RIMISP, Casilla 228, Correo 22, Santiago, Chile. Email: jberdegue@rimisp.org

German Escobar is the Executive Director of Rimisp, where he has worked since 1998. He holds a Ph.D. in Agricultural Economics. He has worked for Oregon State University, CATIE in Central America, the International Research Centre in Latin America and the Interamerican Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture in the South Cone and Central American regions. He has been consultant for diverse international organizations and government institutions and has been involved in several research and applied projects on rural development and rural poverty alleviation.

German Escobar, RIMISP, Casilla 228, Correo 22, Santiago, Chile. Email: gescobar@rimisp.org

Eduardo Ramírez is a Chilean agronomist. His interests focus on rural societies and their economic transformations through social processes, institutional arrangements, technical change and strategies that link poor areas with dynamic markets. Also, the design and evaluation of public policies to enhance the potential of such transformations for generating economic growth in societies ever increasing freedom and justice. He has been a Principal Researcher at Rimisp since 1992. From 1995 to 2003, he was head of the Department for Policy Coordination at the Ministry of Planning and Cooperation of the Chilean government. From 2001 to 2003 he taught

agricultural evaluation at the Catholic University of Chile. He is currently working on his PhD.

Eduardo Ramirez, RIMISP, Casilla 228, Correo 22, Santiago, Chile. Email: eramirez@rimisp.org

ⁱ Project participants comprise staff in the project management and implementing units, but also co-implementing organizations, rural grassroots organizations, NGOs, municipal governments and other local level agencies, and governmental organizations such as Ministries of Agriculture. In this paper, it is a term that refers to the set of organization and groups directly engaged in the implementation of the project.

ⁱⁱ FIDAMERICA is a regional learning network funded by IFAD and coordinated by Rimisp-Latin American Center for Rural Development (www.rimisp.org).

ⁱⁱⁱ ENRAP is applying the AGC methodology. It recently led an e-discussion on the systematization contribution to the IFAD projects in South Asia, which was well received by most participants.