

Knowledge sharing for rural development: challenges, experiences and methods

Sally Burch (coord)



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Since the "Green Revolution", world food production has grown at a dizzy pace. Yet hunger continues to spread throughout the globe, chiefly in the countryside, as small farmers are increasingly forced into ruin. The agro-industrial model is thus showing signs of fatigue.

More and more peasant farmers are seeing ecological agriculture, combining ancestral and new methods, as a sustainable solution. This brings about new challenges, such as how to recover knowledge that was becoming lost, adapt it to current conditions and complement it with new knowledge. The creation of mechanisms to generate and share knowledge - both among farmers and with investigators and specialist centres -, is now a condition of survival of rural communities.

This book explores these issues, combining reflections with concrete experiences that, among other things, are experimenting how new information and communications technologies can foster effective knowledge sharing.



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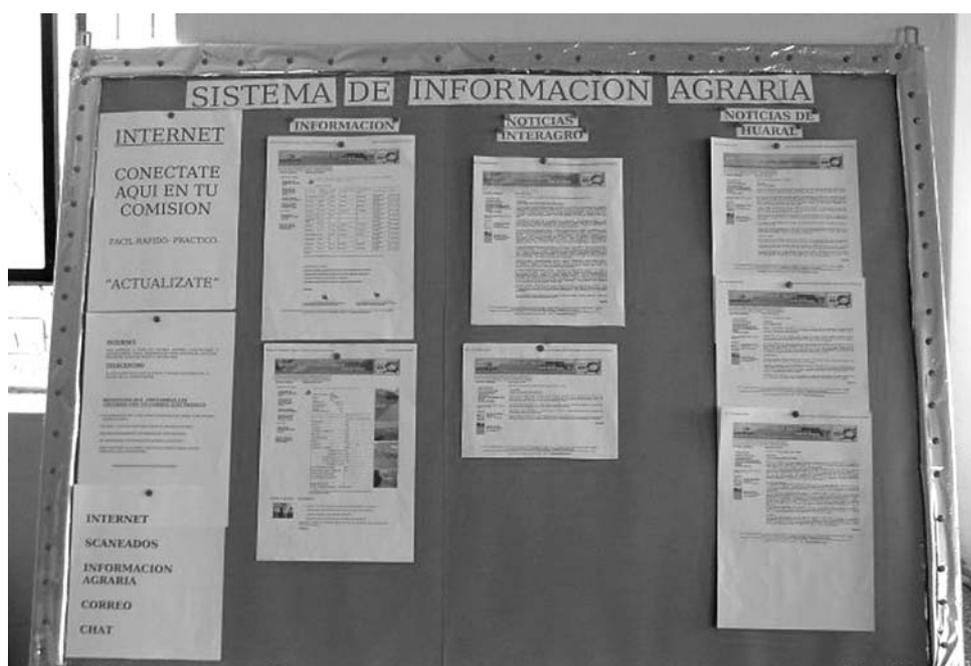
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Contents

¿Which knowledge for rural development?	5
<i>Sally Burch</i>	
Sharing knowledge for rural community development: Echoes from the Latin American South-South Workshop	13
La Catalina: A knowledge sharing experience for capacity building processes	18
<i>Kemly Camacho</i>	
Media and Materials for Knowledge Sharing	32
<i>Lena Zúñiga</i>	
ICTs for building knowledge, as an administrative tool	38
<i>Luis Carlos Aguilar</i>	
The Agrarian Information System in the Huaral Valley	43
<i>Fanny Jiménez</i>	
Satellite-linked Telecenters unite migrants with their familias	46
<i>Mónica Loyola Crespo</i>	
Exchange of local agricultural content in rural Uganda	50
<i>Ednah Karamagi Akiiki</i>	
Knowledge exchange for the conservation of life-giving natural resources	54
<i>María Augusta Robalino, Juan Emilio Zambrano, Máximo Cangá, Maricruz Valencia</i>	
Resistance and contributions from the Maya cosmovisión	58
<i>National Indigenous and Farmer Coordination -CONIC-</i>	
Challenges for Schooling in the Brazilian Countryside: the Experience of the MST	62
<i>ALAI</i>	
Some resources on knowledge sharing	69



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Huaral Valley, Peru.
CEPES

The Agrarian Information System in the Huaral Valley

Fanny Jiménez

For more than three years now, the Huaral Valley, located 80 km north of Lima, has witnessed the progress of an initiative by the Irrigation Water Users' Council - an institution that unites the valley's farmers and which aims to take advantage of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in order to organize and share pertinent information with farmers in the area.

Small-scale farmers often face a competitive disadvantage within the agricultural market. One main reason for this is a lack of access to timely and specialized information that could help them make appropriate decisions to improve their market participation. In response, the Chancay-Huaral Valley's Irrigation Water Users' Council, with support from the Peruvian Center of Social Studies (CPSS), has implemented an online Agrarian Information System (AIS) that enables farmers to quickly and easily obtain useful information in order to deter-

The Peruvian Centre for Social Studies -CEPES- is an institution specialized in rural development, dedicated to improving the living conditions of rural men and women in Peru.
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mine: what to plant; at what prices to sell their products; financial institutions from which they might gain support; the number of hectares being cultivated in the area; what type of crops have been planted, when they were planted and when they will be harvested; as well as other important information which might make them more competitive. The project directly benefits six thousand farmers in the Chancay-Huaral Valley.

In order to identify what information would be useful to the farmers, a needs analysis was undertaken. The Agrarian Information System was then created, with ongoing improvements since its launch in September of 2004. Later, training in use of the Internet was provided for farmers and their children, who lacked any previous contact with such new technologies. One very positive aspect of this is that they were trained using free software.

Sustainability of the telecenters

At this time, fourteen of the seventeen Irrigator Committees that make up the valley's Irrigation Water Users' Council are connected by a wireless network, having altogether sixty-two computers with online access. They also utilize a telephone network that allows them to communicate at very low cost. This infrastructure, previously unheard of in any rural part of the country, favors capacity development and agricultural information production at the local level. The various offices of the Ministry of Agriculture in Huaral have also become interconnected utilizing this network, including the Agricultural Agency, ATDR, INIEA- Donoso and SENASA.

The Irrigation Water Users' Council and the farmers within the Irrigator Committees have actively participated in all stages of the project. From the beginning they have understood the importance of maintaining and advancing the Agrarian Information System and have made concrete commitments towards these goals. As a result, they have managed to solve problems as they arose during the execution of the project and have offered support drawing upon their own resources.

One way these telecenters can be sustained is through the income received for particular services, which helps cover the cost of electricity and rent. While free for farmers, those outside the organization pay a fee to use the centers, which helps address some of the expenses. As well, the Council has income related to the irrigation water management, which also covers additional costs that the project incurs.

There is an ongoing effort to ensure that the farmers recognize the importance of this system and implement it as a useful tool in their work. This is achieved when a farmer enters into the information system and recognizes the data as real, identifying with the information and assuming it as their own.

The System uses and develops free software programs of high quality, which are improved through collaboration with national and foreign technicians. Since implementation costs are minimal, it is possible to make use of these programs to replicate this expe-

rience in other valleys without starting from zero.

Beyond new technology

Although new technologies, such as the Internet, inspire interest in people, they also have their disadvantages-one of them being that they are not readily accessible to many people. Taking this limitation into account and in spite of the enormous advantages that this new technology offers, the possibility of integrating traditional and new technologies has been considered. The Irrigation Water Users' Council is very enthusiastic about installing a radio transmitter, and producing programs that will widely broadcast the information that is currently part of the Agrarian Information System. This will ensure that the information reaches more people, along with news bulletins and other forms of information and communication.

Fanny Jiménez is the content manager of the Information Technologies area of the project of the Agrarian Information System through Internet for farmers in the Huaral Valley.