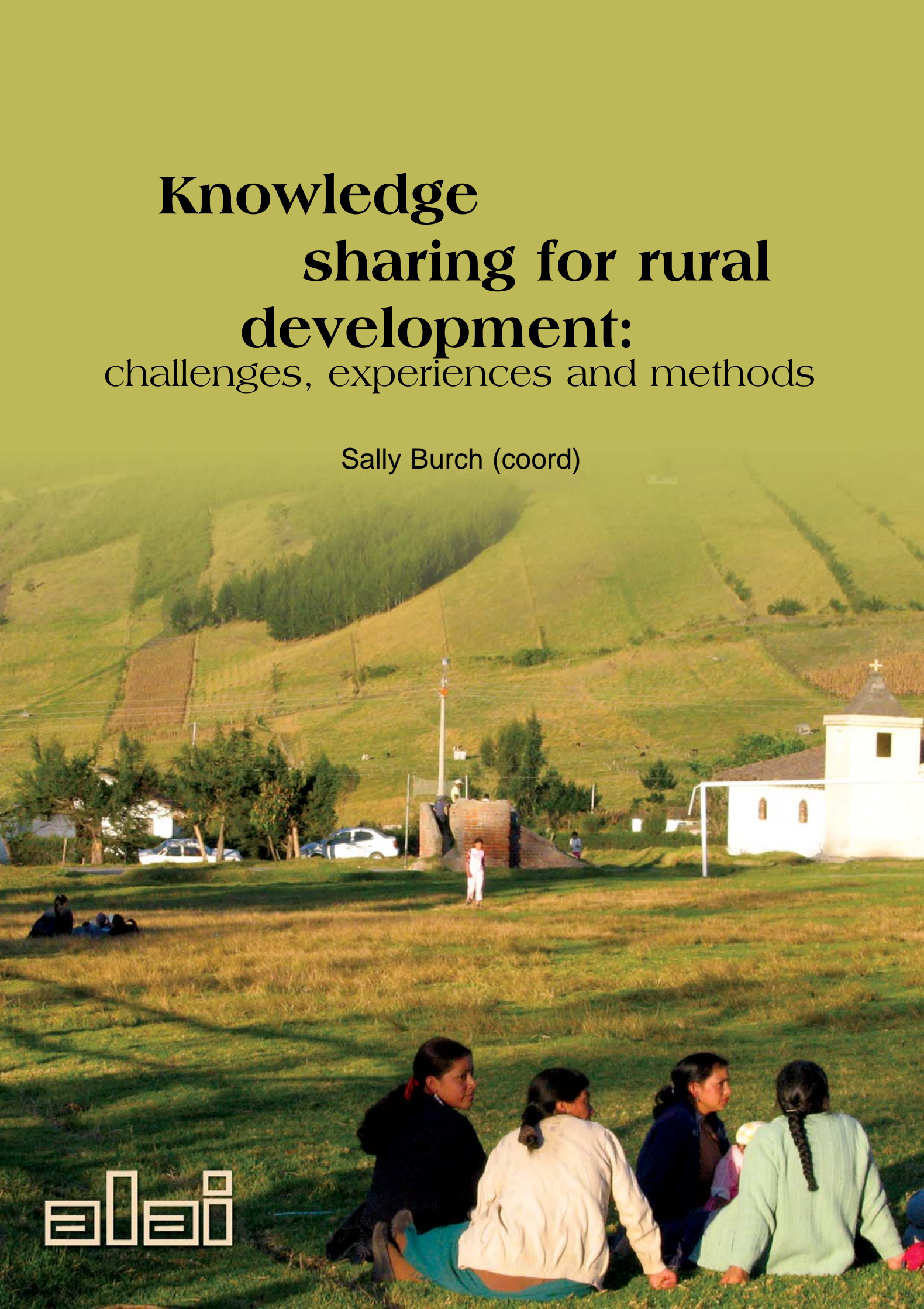


# Knowledge sharing for rural development: challenges, experiences and methods

Sally Burch (coord)



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challenges, experiences and methods

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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.*



Quito, May 2007

**Knowledge sharing for rural development:**  
*challenges, experiences and methods*

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Mayan ceremony in the inauguration of the 3rd Continental Rural Women's Assembly (CLOC), Guatemala, 2005.  
MINGA INFORMATIVA

## Resistance and contributions from the Maya cosmovision

### *National Indigenous and Farmer Coordination –CONIC–*

#### **Native seeds: heritage of the Maya people**

"The diversity of native seeds is the heritage of the Maya and indigenous people at the service of all humanity. On November 11th, 2006, the sacred Maya calendar displays: WAQXAQIB Q'ANIL. This energy is the Nawal of our native seeds. The Maya indigenous peoples have stood firm defending the diversity of these seeds, which have fed us for

**T**he National Indigenous and Farmer Coordination (CONIC) of Guatemala has tens of thousands of members, 95 percent of them indigenous. Its efforts mainly focus on defending the rights of the peasant (including land rights), working from the perspective of the Maya identity and cosmovision, as well as universal indigenous rights. It strives to recover and sustain into the future: collective community power; history; duality and harmony between men and women; and the unique customs, traditions, thought and spirituality of the communities. It is a member of the Guatemalan organizations Union of Labour and Popular Action (UASP) and Wakib' Kej, as well as the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (CLOC) and of the international farmer's movement Via Campesina.

more than five thousand years. It saddens us to remember the loss of respect for our seeds, due to the imposition of trade policies and the use of technology packages from the Green Revolution. While the "revolution" supposedly seeks to improve production, it actually sterilized and contaminated our seeds, as well as nature and Mother Earth. The imposition of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was *'el tiro de gracia'*-the mercy shot designed to eliminate them. (*Excerpt from an official release from CONIC, November 9th, 2006*).

"In many communities, maize, beans, and other basic grains are no longer treated in the way our grandparents traditionally did it: with affection, gratitude, celebration, incense and candles, but above all with tenderness. Now, they are treated like any other object necessary for life. Our Maya cosmovision takes the perspective that not one single grain should be thrown away, stepped on, wasted, or burned. It also says that seeds shouldn't be touched before receiving the secret of abundance. Nor should it be touched when night has fallen, for it scares the seed into withdrawing its abundance. Another lesson is that it is necessary to wait for the full moon in order to sow, and to present the seed before the *Ajaw Q'anil* in order to avoid diseases during the growth process. The same attitude is applied to saving the grains that will serve as seeds, and in so doing avoiding the weevil. These are only some of the teachings.

"The Western perspective taught in schools has contributed to the fact that children remain ignorant about many elements of Maya culture and spirituality; and of course in this case everything pertaining to seeds. They must memorize and repeat teachings from other cultures, while devaluing all aspects of Maya community and culture. This type of education has a negative impact on household and community education.

"We recommended to the communities who are part of CONIC that they should reactivate and strengthen the physical and cosmological conservation of the various classes of native seeds; indicated by the four colours that represent the four pillars of Maya cosmovision: birth, death, wisdom and life. To respect and learn the knowledge and recommendations of the elders in the family and community.

"- To improve seed classification according to the recommendations and guidelines of our grandparents. To not accept genetically modified seeds that, besides damaging our health by causing cancer, will eventually return to destroy our Maya cosmovision-which is based upon our native seeds-and make us lose the essence of the ancient seed of our grandparents.

"- To stop using chemicals in agriculture as they kill many vital elements within the soil, which might only be recovered after a period of ten years. It is urgent to offset and avoid further contamination in order to protect the health of animals and human beings. To stop burning Mother Earth's body with chemicals because we are shortening our lives as well as those of future generations.

"- To strengthen and increase the use of organic fertilizers and insecticides in various crops in order to ensure healthy and high quality harvests. Quality not quantity. To increase the production of improved fertilizers, fungicides utilizing plant compost, and



others." (*Excerpts of a message from CONIC to member communities, June 9th, 2005, or 8 Q`anil q`ij in the Maya calendar*).

### **The origins of the Maya cosmovision**

Maya knowledge and cosmovision originated more than five suns ago; each sun representing 5,200 years of the long Maya story. Since that time, the law of Mother Nature was conceived, beginning with the principle of reciprocity and contributing to the balance of large, medium and small systems. This vision led to the understanding and explanation of the passage of time, in order to walk in step with it. The sun was conceived as our majestic grandfather, the moon as our glorious grandmother and the Earth as our mother. Our ancestors are considered as children of time and Mother Earth.

In addition, the Maya cosmovision conceived of the various elements of the system as time's workers, involved in a complex organization made up of several levels that interact and coexist. They cycle through various dimensions and generate life, including human beings, who understood the conscience, will, authority and knowledge of Mother Nature's elements.

The conscience, will and wisdom of Mother Nature are widely perceived when human beings primarily consume natural substances. The spirit of Mother Nature passes on her knowledge to us so that we can understand the organization and spirit of all the elements in the reproductive cycle, without altering her own nature. The sacred maize, cocoa, beans, achiote, pumpkin and tubers, as well as edible and medicinal plants, all nourish perception, resulting in various outcomes, from mathematics and the use of zero to astronomy and instruments that measure time and space.

Oilcloth and the sphere are both more than 3000 years old, and have served in understanding the movement and sequence of the stars and planets. These observations also led to the creation of several calendars that reveal the origin and destiny of life. Despite attempts at its extermination, this knowledge has survived thanks to life, Mother Nature and time.

### **Expression of resistance and survival**

This knowledge persisted while the territory of the Mayab'-today known as Mesoamerica-was still intact. With the colonial system's imposition of agricultural products for export, knowledge, labour and land were usurped; marking the beginning of the latifundio-minifundio land tenure structure-characterized by a few large estates and numerous small farms. As a result, this knowledge fell away and now survives in limited spaces, as a refugee in its own ancestral territory. Since colonization, some aspects of this knowledge are stagnant while others have been reinvented for survival. In addition, attempts are made to disrupt the bartering system as new products are imposed for the market.

Recently, consumerist countries have imposed the production of non-traditional agricultural products. Despite being small farm owners, this demand brings with it the cost of depleting and further deteriorating the scarce arable land. It also takes advantage of the workers by compromising their honour and responsibility, inherited from our ancestors as a valued part of our culture.

From the moment of invasion, the Maya writing system was attacked; the pre-Columbian documents were almost entirely destroyed. Up to this day, eight documents have been retrieved that validate the knowledge that survives through oral tradition and in our own languages, and which continues being passed on from generation to generation.

The educational system retains a mono-ethnic and mono-cultural approach, despite reforms that have tried to be put in place. This system transforms the knowledge that students have, which has survived through oral tradition but is now threatened by such practices of alienation and domination.

Very little space or resources have been gained from this colonized state and whatever has been achieved only serves the most superficial aspects of Maya culture. Rather than addressing deeper cultural values, these opportunities are more likely to coopt indigenous representatives. This colonized state cannot give rise to a new plural being, given its ethno-centric and anthropo-centric origin, but it should take responsibility for and repair the damages done to Mayan culture.

### **The dialogue with modern techno-scientific knowledge**

Human knowledge is the heritage of all of humanity because it arises from the socio-historical development of peoples. A change must begin with the historical recognition of the contributions made by ancestral knowledge, from which to enter into dialogue with technological knowledge bringing it back to equilibrium and out of conflict with Mother Nature. It is an urgent challenge to lay the foundation for a new approach to development, which must occur from the reestablishment and reconstruction of Mother Nature, a necessary condition for how to approach various types of knowledge.

Indigenous peoples have contributed to today's world and to global knowledge; as is clear from observing the products that have originated from indigenous peoples. What more can be contributed now in this hostile environment? If everything is at risk of being patented, privatized, and exported ...

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*This text was drawn from documents of CONIC and interviews with **Leopoldo Méndez Martínez and Rosa Tomas Atz**, of the Mayan Association Uk'úx Be (Heart of the Way), member of the Coordination and Convergence Waquib Kej, of Guatemala.*