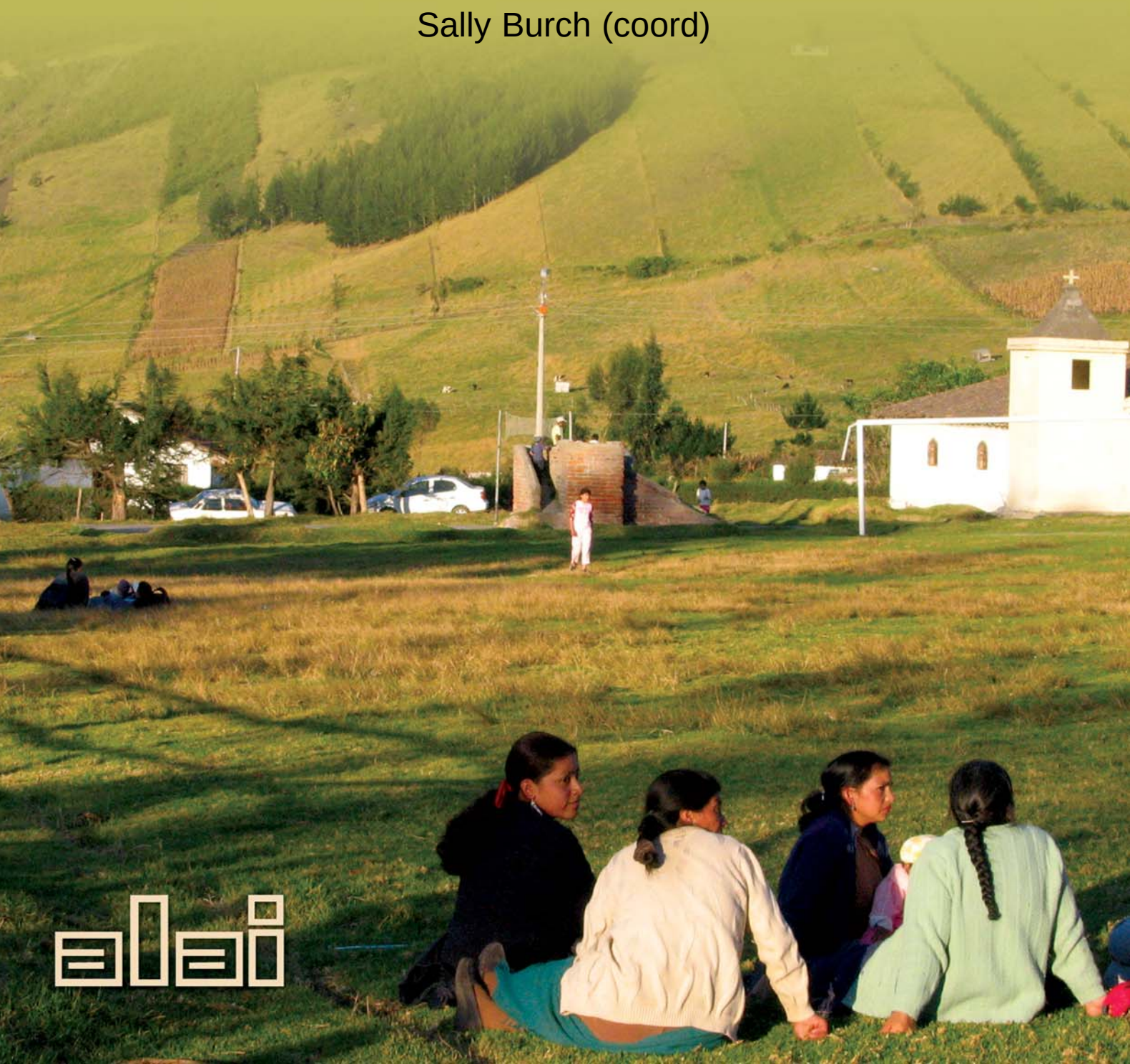
Knowledge sharing for rural development:

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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Which knowledge for rural development?

Sally Burch
ALAI, Quito, January 2007

For millennia, the countryside has been fertile terrain for the evolution of human knowledge. For example, generations of farmers have discovered or improved more than 10,000 species of edible plants; they have developed extensive knowledge concerning the properties and uses of plants; though practice they have learned soil management and how to adapt to climatic differences, across diverse geographic locations; they have developed techniques for fertilization, pest control, animal husbandry, medicinal preparations, crafts utilizing agricultural products, and much more.

Also, each society has generated their own means of transmitting knowledge from generation to generation, and while some knowledge has always been held in reserve by certain crafts or occupations, the great majority of knowledge has been shared freely. This experimentation and exchange are precisely what have enabled improvements in species and techniques, adapting crops to local conditions. In addition, it has contributed to the conservation of biological diversity, ensuring that the ecosystem remains robust. In this way, although people have not been altogether immune from disasters and plagues, they have been equipped with mechanisms to overcome them.

The impact of the Green Revolution

In the last century, starting from the so-called "Green Revolution," transformations in the countryside have profoundly altered this way of life. Since the 60s, with the introduction of so-called "improved seeds," global food production increased exponentially. These seeds provided greater harvests, avoiding - in theory - the looming global food shortage stemming from population growth. This increase in production accelerated during the 90s; between only 1990 and 1997, production of food per capita grew by nearly 25% (Duch, 2006). By that time, almost 75% of the rice-growing areas in Asia and 70% of corn in the world was cultivated used these improved varieties, and an estimated 40% of farmers worldwide were utilizing industrial seeds, particularly in Asia and Latin America.

According to Peter Rosset, Joseph Collins and Frances Moore Lappé (2000): "Much of the reason why these "modern varieties" produced more than traditional varieties was that they were more responsive to controlled irrigation and to petrochemical fertilizers, allowing for much more efficient conversion of industrial inputs into food."

Given this, it seems astonishing that, far from resolving global hunger, the situation has worsened within the same period, deteriorating more rapidly since the 90s. This past October (2006), Director-General of the Food and Agricultural Organization for the United Nations - FAO - Jacques Diouf, deplored that one decade after the World Food Summit in Rome (1996), during which a commitment was made to halve the number of people suffering from hunger by 2015, in developing countries today, there are 820 million more people who go hungry than in 1996, most of whom are women. Furthermore, this figure is rising by 4 million each year.

Paradoxically, people suffering from hunger live primarily in the countryside. The vicious circle facing small farmers is well-known: indebtedness, deteriorating quality of life, hunger, loss of land, migration, etc.

Gustavo Duch (2006) states that "In impoverished countries farm families survive, in most cases, within an ecosystem highly suitable for agriculture, for raising animals, for fishing or for the enjoyment of forest products. However, more than 70% live in poverty and suffer from malnutrition because these resources are controlled by a few elite."

As early as 1986, the World Bank, one of the main proponents of the Green Revolution, recognized in a study on global hunger, that a rapid increase in food production would not necessarily guarantee greater food security; in other words, that hunger would not diminish. It identified lack of purchasing power as the central issue for undernourished people (Rossett et al, 2000).

Various analyses demonstrate that those who have reaped the greatest benefit from rising food production are transnational agribusinesses. Currently, global trade in seeds already surpasses 30 billion dollars, four times that of 1970. (Desfilhes and Dufour, 2005, p 87). In the mid 80s, thousands of seed companies existed, and not one held more than 1% of the market share. By 2003, 10 companies controlled 30% of the global market. At that time, 65 agrochemical companies existed. Today, a dozen agrochemical companies control 90% of the global market (Ribeiro, 2003).

For the majority of farmers, however, this has meant losses, because the cost of inputs has risen more rapidly than the gains from production. For example, a study based in Central Luzon, Philippines, demonstrated that while the rice harvest increased by 13% during the 80s, it required an increase of 21% in fertilizer use (Rossett et al, 2000). This implies a growing economic and technological dependency on the part of the peasantry, who have to purchase agricultural inputs each season within an imposed technological framework, in which their ancestral knowledge no longer counts.

The global organization Vía Campesina considers that the root problem is export-ori-

ented agricultural production, whose priority is trade in food rather than satisfying local nutritional needs. Associated with this are practices of "dumping" whereby subsidized agricultural products are sold in countries of the South below the cost of production, to the detriment of local agricultural economies.

Alternatives to the agro-industrial model

A lot of evidence exists demonstrating that the industrial model of agriculture - based upon monocultures and homogenous seeds, utilizing chemical fertilizers and pesticides - is unsustainable, as much in terms of costs, as because it exhausts the soil. An increasing number of farmers in the world are abandoning the use of industrial inputs, if only because they cannot afford to pay for them.

However, serious factors persist that prevent the adoption of alternative forms of development, beginning with state policies that, since the 80s, have been aligned with neoliberal economic prescriptions. Thus, in many countries of the world, agriculture programs, access to credit and legal frameworks continue to favour, mainly or exclusively, the agro-industrial model. Also, the scientific research that receives support and financial investment, as well as academic and official recognition, is mainly that which serves agro-industry.

It seems beyond belief that for two decades, in the European Union, farmer organizations have had to struggle against regulations that prohibit them from collecting and sowing their own seeds, or that fine them for doing so. Both in Europe and in the U.S.A., legal restrictions persist against the age-old practice of farmers exchanging seeds, rules which are starting to be introduced also into Latin America, for example, as a condition for signing Free Trade Agreements.

Recently, faced with ever more clear evidence that the agro-industrial model is unsustainable, efforts are mounting to defend and work for change. In fact, experience increasingly demonstrates that agroecology offers a viable and sustainable alternative to this model, and can be equally productive in the medium term, ensuring better livelihoods for farmers. However, change will be difficult to attain without public policies which favor genuine development for peasant farmers and protection for the natural environment. In several countries, rural struggles point towards such policies: for example, those in favour of agrarian reform or food sovereignty.

One of the most serious impacts of the agro-industrial model has been the progressive loss of ancestral rural knowledge. In the early 80s, it was estimated that more than half of the world´s genetic diversity amongst cultivated plants had been lost- along with the related knowledge - a process that continues year after year, signifying a loss for all of humanity.

Meanwhile, as part of the resistance to this model, an effort has re-emerged to retrieve traditional knowledge and species. A first step in this initiative is to revalue these

resources, given that, frequently, rural communities discredit their own reserve of knowledge, assuming that outside knowledge is superior. One aspect of the Green Revolution has been the propaganda that has accompanied it - with the aid of mass media - concerning the "progress" that agroindustry signifies in relation to past approaches.

Another necessary step is to re-evaluate the applicability of traditional knowledge and methods to present conditions, and to renew mechanisms of exchange and agricultural improvement. Even so, today, the recuperation of past practices is not always enough to sustain rural life in the face of new challenges and demands. For example: how to recover soil which has been depleted through monoculture and application of fertilizers? What techniques are adequate to replant mangroves and marine life in coastal areas devastated by shrimp farms? Which methods will protect crops from new infestations, without contaminating food and the environment? And fundamentally, how to achieve a level of food production which ensures a dignified livelihood for rural families as well as feeding growing urban communities?

In many cases, in order to respond to these challenges, new technical and scientific knowledge will have to be sought, which can be adapted to specific cultural and geographic circumstances. Although this often implies relying upon external advice, it also raises the necessity of improving levels of internal expertise. In this context, the development or renewal of practices and mechanisms for knowledge creation and exchange takes on new meaning and relevance, not only for the daily task at hand and the livelihoods of the rural communities, but also for the future of humanity.

Towards a transformative knowledge

Within this search for better approaches, it is useful to reflect on what we understand as knowledge: how is it acquired? what knowledge do we prioritize socially?

Knowledge necessarily implies a process of assimilation and transformation by the human mind. A data base can contain information - that is, organized data - but for this data to become knowledge, it must be appropriated and confronted by reality. For scientist Albert Einstein, *the only source of knowledge is experience*.

The popular education theorist, Paulo Freire, considers that to know is to construct categories of thought with which one can appraise the world, making its interpretation and transformation possible. In addition, he recognizes that generating knowledge is a social process: *There is no knowledge in existence that has not been born out of preexisting knowledge and that which exists today came from that which existed before* (Carlos Stolen Núñez, 2005). For this reason, to share knowledge is a condition for its creation.

In a given society, the choice of which knowledge is developed is not a neutral process. Currently, what is considered "universal knowledge" is increasingly that which is developed to serve powerful economic interests. So much so that in the last quarter century, publicly-financed research has been drastically reduced, giving way to that financed by large corporations.

The World Bank - an institution which also boasts of being a knowledge bank - expressed this vision of "universal knowledge" in a document which argues how knowledge management can favor development: *"Developing countries need not reinvent the wheel (...) Rather than re-create existing knowledge, poorer countries have the option of acquiring and adapting much knowledge already available in the richer countries. With communication costs plummeting, transferring knowledge is cheaper than ever."* Among the national strategies to reduce inequalities, the Bank mentions three means of facilitating this acquisition: *"an open trading regime, foreign investment, and technology licensing"*; in addition, it proposes *corporatizing research institutes* (Pascal Renaud, 2005, p. 404-406).

We could hardly expect alternative approaches to development to arise from this model of thought. Rather the creation of other forms of knowledge will be required, which is an enormous challenge, as is argued by investigator Rigoberto Lanz, adviser for the Scientific Mission of the Ministry of Science and Technology of Venezuela: *The question is not only putting what we have already developed in science and technology 'at the service´ of the people. (...) It is not just a matter of people ´having access to´ a particular science or technique, that is simply available in some kind of department store of neutral options. The fundamental question is how to produce a distinct logic for integrating knowledge and society, another cognitive model, with new concepts and categories that lead toward a new rationality (...) This implies... an emerging process of* ***critical appropriation*** *of all available knowledge within society, which will reverberate within the institutional models responsible for governing this field. The grassroots impact of this policy cannot be measured in terms of ´extension' but rather by the predominant role played by the people in driving their own affairs (including the technical solutions to their problems)* (Lanz, 2006).

Private property or public good?

In this dichotomy concerning visions, the privatization of knowledge (via the ever greater expansion of intellectual property rights) and its nature as a public good comes into play. From their original purpose of stimulating creativity, while assuring reasonable remuneration to authors and inventors, copyright and patents are expanding today into more and more areas - including forms of life, such as genetically-modified seeds and genomes. One of the areas in which the impact of such policies is felt most intensely is in the countryside. Without giving them recognition, transnational companies are patenting the ancestral knowledge of indigenous peoples, and then trying to earn royalties from these same rural populations for using the seeds that they have patented. In the face of this problem, Latin American countries have been slow to react to ensure adequate protection of the traditional knowledge of their peoples.

In fact, the production and exchange of knowledge and information has a peculiarity that distinguishes it from material goods. Through the process of sharing, knowledge is not lost, rather it is multiplied and enriched. In other words, intellectual common goods

can be used concurrently by a countless number of people, without interfering with or destroying the shared resource. For this reason, the economy of symbolic goods does not correspond to the same parameters as that of material goods. With the growth of digitization and the Internet, the cost of reproducing and distributing symbolic goods (texts, data, audio-visuals, computer software, music, etc.) is close to zero; but as these products are very easy to copy for free, this is seen as a threat by those who are trying to profit from them. This leads to demands for establishing and extending intellectual property rights and further restricting copyright. In the majority of cases, the main beneficiaries of such rights are no longer the individual authors and inventors, but rather large corporations.

One of the consequences of this push toward privatization of knowledge is that it jeopardizes the principle of international law, recognizing cultural and scientific creation as the common property of humanity and as a source for new creations.

"Collective intelligence" initiatives stand out among the citizen-based responses to this phenomenon, one of the main expressions of which is the free software movement. This movement defends four freedoms: the freedom to use computer software; the freedom to study and adapt programs; the freedom to distribute copies, as well as to upgrade and share programs so that everyone benefits. These liberties are similar to those claimed by the movement for the free exchange and improvement of seeds. As reaffirmed by Jean-Marc Defilhes and François Dufour (2005, p.86) members of the Farmers's Confederation of France, the traditional practice of farmers has signified: the liberty to freely sow and reap the fruits of a plant; the freedom to study plants and to adapt them to one's own needs; the freedom to share seeds and to participate in their geographic distribution, as well as to improve seeds and to share these improvements for the benefit of the community.

The potential and limits of information technologies

As part of the answers to the issue of knowledge for rural development, formulated within the field of international development, in the last decade, great expectations have arisen from the potential of new information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Dominant discourse focuses on the need to overcome the "digital divide," pointing out that the lack of access to these technologies will only deepen gaps in development, whereas greater access would allow rural communities to connect with information and knowledge that will supposedly help them to overcome underdevelopment. These arguments have led to considering programs which give marginalized populations access to technology as a solution for underdevelopment.

Undoubtedly, access to telecommunications should be guaranteed as a universal service[1]. However, there is no evidence to demonstrate that these technologies can, in and of themselves, provide solutions to the problems of rural development indicated above. In

1 In Latin America, often the prime motivation of the rural population to access telecommunications - whether mobile, fixed or Internet - is to keep in touch with their migrant family members, inside or outside the country.

practice, many projects based on a technological approach have failed, when they start from the view that technology is a tool with which to channel knowledge from the outside, without regard for the existing knowledge system within the community concerned, their values or their culture.

Nonetheless, there is mounting evidence, that through a process of community appropriation, these technologies can indeed be a strategic component of more integrated solutions. Various initiatives that have started from a process of the communities themselves identifying their needs and priorities, have taken on a search for methods and methodologies, in which ICTs are identified as one of many possible options which may be harnessed for development and exchange of knowledge. There are no universal prescriptions to achieve this, but some common criteria can be identified. The sharing of experiences, including the successes and errors encountered, can help optimize integration of these tools.

It was with this understanding that, in March of 2006 in Ecuador, the *Workshop on knowledge-sharing for rural community development* was organized, which was part of a series of South-South exchanges that have taken place in various countries of Asia and Africa - this being the first for Latin America -. (The workshop was coordinated by Hivos, ALAI, IIAV and IDRC. The following chapter is an overview of the results).

This publication gathers together experiences shared during this event as well as other related experiences which show-case different facets and methods for knowledge sharing in the context of rural communities. In addition, it explores several methodological instruments and materials for exchange, employed in one Central American initiative in social economy. It also draws from five local experiences, accounting for different approaches in the use of ICTs as tools for systematizing, sharing and building knowledge. These are: in Bolivia, self-managed audio-visual documentation in various locations; in Peru, an online agricultural information system in the Valley of Huaraz; in Ecuador, a website and telecenters for relatives of migrants, in Cuenca, and photographic documentation for raising awareness in communities of shell-fish collectors in the mangroves of Esmeraldas; then in Uganda, exchange of agricultural knowledge with the help of radio, cell phones, the internet and other technical supports. Also, we present a contribution of aspects concerning resistance based upon Mayan indigenous knowledge, in Guatemala; and finally, the proposal for rural education and training developed by the Landless Workers' Movement, in Brazil.

These very dissimilar experiences have in common an understanding of the importance of starting from needs and priorities as identified by the concerned communities, respecting local culture and means of communication. They also make it clear that technology, as powerful as it may be, is a tool, whose contribution to development will depend upon how the actors and the communities adapt it to their own goals.

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ALAI

Sharing knowledge for rural community development: *Echoes from the Latin American South-South Workshop*

The workshop "Sharing Knowledge for Rural Community Development with the help of ICTs," took place from March 16th to 21st, 2006. It was convened by Hivos, IICD, IDRC, and ALAI as the 7th in a series of "South-South Exchanges," which have taken place in various countries on different continents, on the initiative of the first three organizations mentioned above.

The main aim of the "Sharing Knowledge for Rural Community Development" workshop was collaboration concerning knowledge and Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) for rural community development, in the context of globalization. It took place across three different locations in Ecuador: Quito, Tumbaco y Muisne. The 27 participating organizations, representing 10 different countries, are all involved in one way or another with rural development processes and, though using various methods and technologies, they are all exploring the use of ICTs for sharing knowledge in the communities.

As the central theme, emphasis was placed on the role played by knowledge sharing in rural development processes (for example, in agriculture, community tourism, shellfish harvesting, and marketing). Within this general framework, the workshop explored in greater depth the topics of "local knowledge and content" in the context of globalization, as well as "ICTs as a tool," and "sustainability of community information centres."

Local knowledge and content

In the course of the workshop, a distinction was made between two types of knowledge: one being "local, traditional or ancestral," which is the closest to a grassroots experience, and the other being "technical, expert, or academic," related to processes of organization and exchange on more institutional levels. It was pointed out that as part of this process discussion is needed about the power dynamics that intervene, imposing one kind of knowledge over another, or negating or discrediting certain types of knowledge compared to others, questioning their legitimacy, etc.

The need to work towards understanding the limitations existing in the relationship between these two types of knowledge was recognized, noting the possible transformations in their content and the implications of these changes, seeking in this way to support "two way learning" processes rather than superimposition or imposition.

ICTs as a tool

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), when thought of as tools that can facilitate the knowledge-sharing process, gave rise to agreement amongst the group that "ICTs are means, and not an end." In this respect, it is important to note the distinction made between ICTs and "New" Information and Communication Technologies (NICTs). Both can be referred to as tools for communication and distributing information, but a wider range of related technologies can be found in the first, such as radio, television, theatre, etc., while NICTs focus primarily on digital technologies, such as the internet.

The shared experiences verified that ICTs, in their various forms, can facilitate knowledge sharing processes. These processes are optimized when there is clarity, with regard to what knowledge to exchange based upon the objectives, who is involved in the exchange process and which technology is the most appropriate to use. In this respect, one participant commented:

> *ICTs are a facilitator, a channel, and a mechanism of [information] flow. However, fundamentally what really produces the change are not the ICTs, but the information that is shared […]. When the flow is unblocked there are transformations in the organizational process. This must be taken into account, because while it is said that technology produces such changes, they are actually generated by the flow of information and the sharing of knowledge.*

In this way, one type of technology is not prioritized over another for its age or novelty, but instead for its effectiveness to facilitate the sharing of knowledge with respect to the set goals. The participants then recognized the necessity to learn about these different means and methods for applying ICTs according to specific needs and objectives. In this way, ICTs can be adapted to each local situation, identifying the mechanisms that allow for a "friendly" encounter between these technologies and the communities.

Moreover, the potential of ICTs for organizing and preserving traditional or local knowledge was debated, as well as their aptness for facilitating dialogue between local knowledge and expert knowledge that is already systematized. It was noted that this process implies work to restructure concepts and perspectives, within the organizations themselves that are working for community development. In this respect, one participant expressed:

> *It is necessary to arrange processes according to which technologies will be used, as much in order to bring together expert and local knowledge systems, as to advance systematization of local practices. This requires NGOs to move towards models, built through dialogue and collaboration, of participatory social analysis- which allows for such engagement, dialogue, and consensus among different systems and knowledge […].*
>
> *At this time, ICTs can play a very important role in furthering processes of systematizing local knowledge; because if we leave the rich, local processes simply within oral traditions, this understanding little by little-as we have experienced before- will begin to be lost […]. Afterwards, greater integration and balance can be sought, integrating systems of expert knowledge in a more balanced way with this organized local knowledge.*

Sustainability of Community Information Centres

Although sometimes known as info-centres or telecentres, the group preferred to call them "Community Information Centers," referring to the intentionality to create a space where varied and useful information for the development of the local community is stored and accessed. The center is for information and is, above all, of the community.

One of the major problems faced by this type of project is sustainability, both in economic terms as well as in social and cultural terms, particularly when communities do not feel that the information centre is their own. Speaking about sustainability goes beyond simply financial considerations. The issue of sustainability is economic, as much as it is social and cultural. One of the keys to sustainability is through a true appropriation of the project and, thus, of the centre itself, on the part of the community. Another way discussed in the workshops, which relates to the diversity of ICTs, just like the diversity of needs and concerns of the community, has to do with the diversification of the services that a community information centre can offer. The more the community gets involved from the beginning in the planning, design of the centre and implementation of activities,

the greater the probability that the centre will become a gathering place for the various concerns of the community, and that it will truly be adopted by the community. This opinion was shared by one participant, who indicated that:

> *The information centres can also put to use more than just good technologies, they can be spaces for exchange: they can be in touch with a community radio station to advertise a video presentation or to promote the paintings that school children are creating on rural themes…The centre can harness, give feedback and broadcast the various forms of information that exist in these information centres.*

Several participants emphasized that it is also important to coordinate with different types of groups, such as other grassroots organizations, NGOs, public and private businesses, international supporters, etc. Special emphasis was given to the necessity of having ties with government bodies and local authorities, who "should be present throughout the process, responding to the communities." In this way, it was pointed out that forming strategic alliances opens up the possibility of accessing a variety of mechanisms, techniques, methodologies and ICTs themselves, that are necessary to reach the objectives.

Some lessons learned

From the many lessons that can be drawn from the workshop exchanges, we summarize here some of the most important, both in content and methodology.

Content:

* In the context of globalisation, retrieving, valuing and sharing local knowledge takes on a new meaning and relevance, as an answer to a model of agro-industrial development that has been incapable of improving the living conditions in the countryside.
* In order to be able to act in the face of the transformations that are taking place in the rural areas, it was seen to be important to have a grasp of this global context, and how it is affecting local communities.
* It was pointed out that sharing knowledge is not necessarily a spontaneous practice, but that it requires motivation, policies, mechanisms, techniques, means, etc. A key factor of motivation - and of success - is to start from the needs identified by the communities concerned.
* Information and communications technologies (ICTs) - both conventional and new - were identified as tools that can contribute solutions, within a strategy of knowledge sharing for local development. But they are not a solution in themselves, nor are applicable to all cases. Which tools are most appropriate can be identified according to the context and methodology, considering their particular advantages and limitations, and adapting them to local conditions.

Methodology:

* It was understood that in dynamics such as this workshop, it is necessary to define beforehand whether the group wants to focus mainly on the interchange of experiences, or on the collective construction. In this case, the group opted for the latter, which was judged by the majority to have been the most adequate, given the characteristics of the participants present.
* The character of a workshop of this type (with a very diverse group, of organizations that were not known to each other beforehand, without a pre-established common future project), implies methodological challenges, that demand great flexibility in adapting the rhythm and thematic approach to the spirit of the group. It is a plus to involve the participation of the group in these definitions.
* It was understood that follow-up is important, but does not necessarily have to occur among the same group. The important thing is how what has been learned feeds back into the practices of each organization, in their own context, and into the interchanges in the networks where they participate; also in the bilateral relations and interchanges that arise between participants of the workshop.

The complete review of the workshop (in Spanish) can be downloaded at:
http://www.alainet.org/active/12146
And a shorter English version here: http://www.alainet.org/active/13368