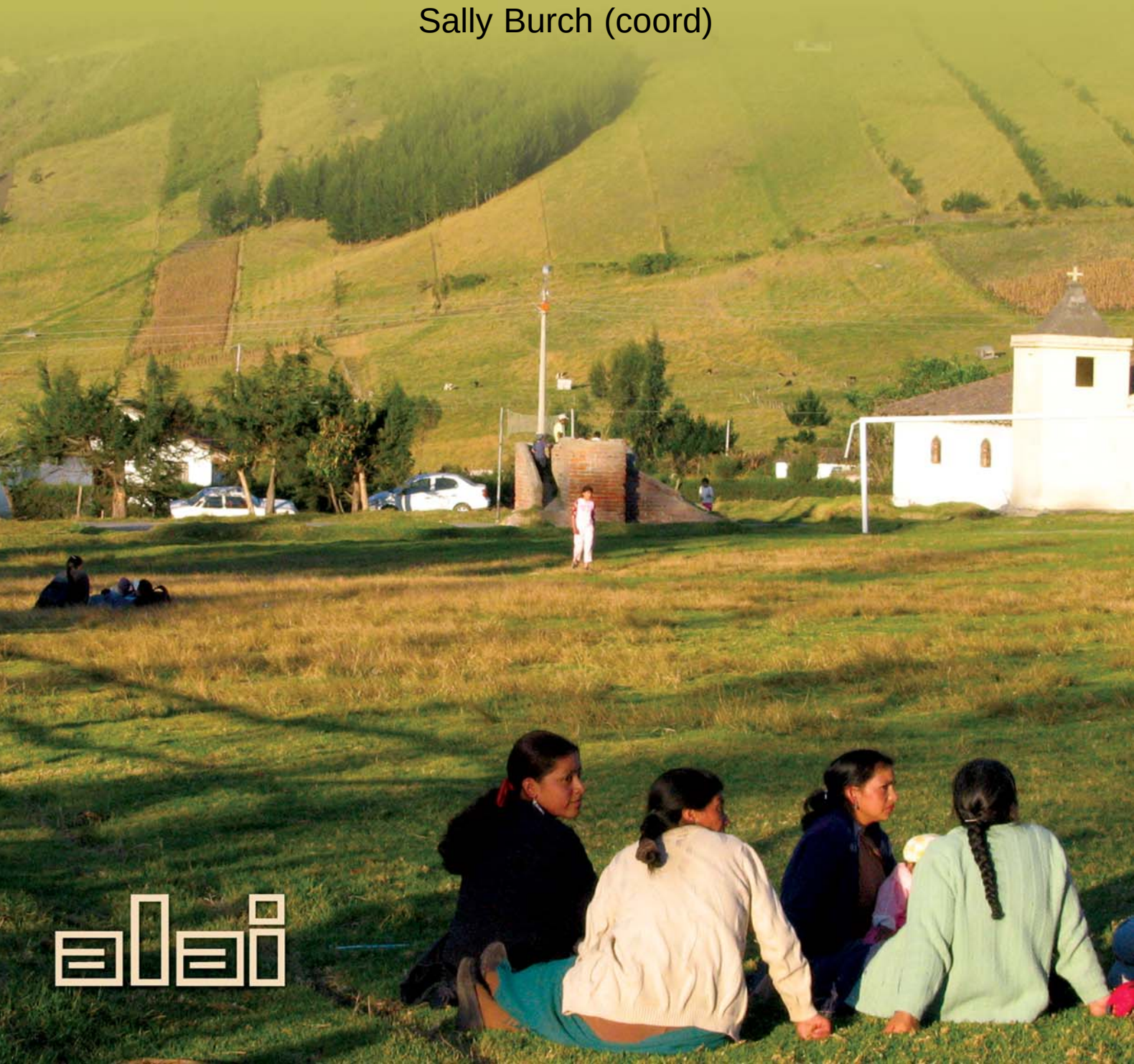
Knowledge sharing for rural development:

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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Bolivian communities share knowledge with the support of graphic presentations.
AGRECOL

ICTs for building knowledge, as an administrative tool

Luis Carlos Aguilar
Sergio Quispe

The AGRECOL Andes Foundation, with its headquarters in Cochabamba, Bolivia, is a regional information and documentation centre on agro-ecology and sustainable natural resource management. Its work focuses on knowledge management in these areas and is carried out through capacity building with various actors; information dissemination by diverse means; documentation and systematization of experiences; support for local initiatives; work with networks; and studying the potential impact of these efforts..

http://www.agrecolandes.org/

Information and communication technologies -ICTs- help in the construction of new, sharable forms of collective knowledge from the experiences of rural producers.

Before implementing the use of digital media, AGRECOL had accumulated (over a span of more than five years) a wealth of experience in the promotion and organization of exchanges between peasant farmers, during which agriculturists would visit one another's community. As a result, the farmers gained access to information about different ecological agricultural practices with which they could then experiment in their local setting. In order to better document these valuable lessons, some participants used digital cameras and audio recorders. At that point, the need emerged for a more systematic means of documentation, which would facilitate the dissemination of findings.

Based on institutional experience, digital photo cameras were introduced as the primary means for documenting the farmers' experiences.

Once the appropriate technology was identified, a participatory approach had to be found for the documentation process that would involve the whole community and, concurrently, respond to its own needs and decisions. The challenge consisted of developing a methodology that would transform farmers' perspective on the generation of local content: they and their families would take photos instead of being photographed; they would be outlets rather than recipients of messages; they would go from simply being sources to being producers in the process of knowledge management. In summary, the methodology had to ensure that the agriculturists assumed the role of authors, based upon their own experience and knowledge.

Methodology

The methodology, followed by the process, has four fundamental stages:

1. Preparation

Once agreement has been reached with the organizations to document their experiences, the selection of local facilitators is important. Next, the experiences to be documented are identified and prioritized by the farmers.

2. Training and documentation

The local facilitators are then trained in the use of digital cameras, computers and learn the documentation process, which involves recording and cataloguing sustainable agriculture practices. This process involves collective explanations, cooperative writing of a script that defines the situations, activities and places to be documented; as well as the media that will be used (such as photographs, interviews and drawings). At this point, the document is edited and organized along with sound and images into a multimedia *Power Point* presentation.

3. Validation

Validation is the multimedia presentation to the community of the information produced. At this time members of the community contribute, correct or complement the documentary, which will later be broadcast throughout the community and beyond as part of the process of sharing experiences.

4. Exchange of experiences

This is the time in which experiences documented by farmers of different regions are shared. The theoretical part involves showing the *Power Point* presentations, where the protagonists explain their experiences showing images and short films. Following this, practical demonstrations further explain the experiences they want to share.

Toward a process of self-managed documentation

Through these basic activities of documentation and dissemination, local content and new knowledge have been produced. After the first cycle of documentation and exchange, in which 15 organizations from different regions in Bolivia participated, several communities proposed to continue documenting their experiences. They appreciated the ease with which they could share knowledge with their children (a key motivation), disseminate their experiences within their municipalities and catch the attention of local authorities, promote their products, and train other farmers, amongst other reasons.

This raised the need to establish the basic conditions for self-management. The first condition: assure that the organizations have access to a digital camera and a computer. The strategy: come to agreement that the project will equip the organization with a computer, while each organization assumes responsibility to acquire a digital camera with its own funds. Under these conditions, the project was able to outfit six organizations in different regions of Bolivia. In addition, these organizations created a documentation center, in which training courses in use of the ICTs are also offered.

The documentation that these organizations now have is both an administrative tool and a means of sharing their knowledge. In addition, it provides a means of communication, which gives their communities, organizations, and institutions access to this information and knowledge, enabling them to advance towards sustainable rural development based upon eco-agricultural principles.

The farming experience in the community of Camillaya

The creation of transferable knowledge from the experience of producers has multiple possibilities for use and application. Although it is certain that an implicit knowledge exists within the individual and/or family productive processes in farming communities, with ICTs the farmers have entered into a process of ***articulating*** this knowledge, which allows the collective sharing and construction of new forms of knowledge.

But this collaborative construction of knowledge has also begun another process. It enhances inter-community relationships and acts as an instrument of negotiation with the local authorities, external institutions and financers.

An experience that deserves to be mentioned is that developed by the organization AIPI (Integral Association of Inquisivi Producers), which includes among its member groups: "Kollamarca" (a group of women who work with medicinal plants) and the Organization of Beekeepers. Both groups are from the Camillaya community of the second municipal section of Quime, Inquisivi province, in the department of La Paz.

Their initial experience of building group knowledge out of individual experiences has generated an intergenerational symbiosis and enlivened the process of documentation.

Knowledge as an instrument of management

The addition of ICTs to AIPI´s productive strategy, which is already nature-friendly, has led them to various benefits. In the case of the beekeepers, the new information and communication technologies have allowed them to generate material useful in the project management, seeking financial support, and marketing their products. *"... It is easier to convince people when one has photos or films to show. People only believe it when they see it... "* (Elsa Shock, naturalist of the Kollamarca organization).

Beginning with the insight of Ms. Elsa Shock, and coupled with the ICTs, AIPI has sought support for a business proposal to fortify its beekeeping activity. Their results have surpassed their expectations and obtained funds that have been administered by the beekeeper organization. *"... When we presented our project to the qualification committee, we stated clearly what we want to do, and they were easily convinced. In addition, within the ranking of the projects presented, we came in first place. They have even said that future funding proposals should follow our example..."* (Juan Vera, president of AIPI).

However, this experience shows not just how ICTs are being implemented into rural life, but also that communities will adapt models and find new applications for their own benefit. The use of new technologies in the communities is a tangible reality, from which a series of lessons may be extracted; ICTs are demonstrating this more and more.

Nevertheless, the experience also shows that these technologies do not always reach everyone, in the sense that not everyone has the same skills. For example, older people may have life-experience in productive activities, but have not been able to acquire the skills necessary to utilize ICTs.

In the case of the Camillaya community, a *symbiotic intergenerational relationship* has developed whereby youth who have the skills to use ICTs collaborate with the adults who describe their experience from which presentations are developed. The young men who go to school and have skills in the use of new technologies (computers, for example) do not contribute to rural production. Through their interactions with the adults they are also gaining experience in productive activities.

This gender-generational interaction around use of ICTs, extends to the barriers regarding women's specific role in the community, and has led to a change in attitude in this regard. Young female students are incorporated in these processes as they attend school and learn computer skills, with which they assist older women to give their presentations.

A rational process of interaction must have some effect or result. Judging by the experience of AIPI, in which the adults describe their experience in order to give a presentation, the young people learn about the work of the adult producers. In turn, the adults learn from the training that the young people are receiving based upon the quality of education that is provided in the schools of the area. The important aspect of this interaction is that it demonstrates a preliminary outcome in what adults and youth are learning from each other.

Now, as a result of the dynamics generated by the ICTs arising from the symbiotic intergenerational relationship, is the construction of collective learning through a collaborative process for the long term.

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