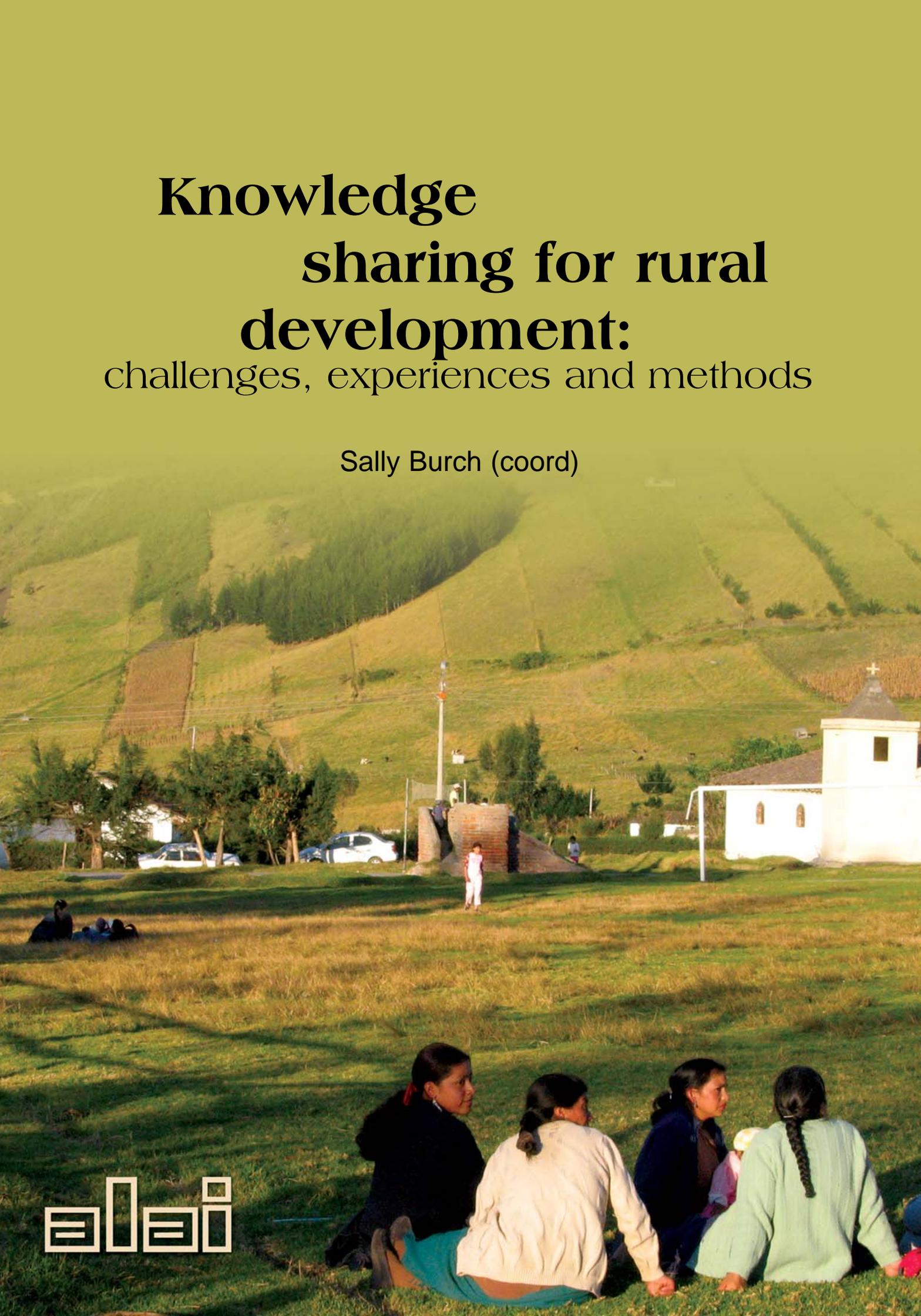# Knowledge sharing for rural development:

challenges, experiences and methods

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Knowledge
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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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Pucara Telecentre,
Azuay, Ecuador
SOCIAL PASTORAL
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Satellite-linked Telecenters unite migrants with their families

Mónica Loyola Crespo

From a technical perspective, these telecenters are rooms equipped with personal computers, which are linked together through a dedicated connection in order to provide free Internet access. They are set up in various public and private locations, such as: libraries, government offices, municipal and town halls, community and cultural centers, union offices, and foundations, amongst others.

The Telecenters project oriented to migratory issues is an initiative of the Department of Human Migration of the Social Pastoral Service of Cuenca, province of Azuay - Ecuador, as part of the Intercommunication Project between Latin America and Europe, implemented in Ecuador by Caritas of Spain. The Social Pastoral Service is also part of the Migration, Communication and Development Plan.

http://www.migrantesenlinea.org

These centers are also known in Latin America as infocenters, public communication booths, access centers, digital libraries and more. They are not based upon universal models; instead they have grown out of experiences based with local culture and community needs.

Based upon this premise, the Social Pastoral Service of Cuenca, with the support of the "Intercommunication Project between Latin America and Europe", decided to launch the Satellite-linked Telecenter Pilot Project. They began in the Province of Azuay, in areas with the highest migration rates and little or insufficient telecommunication services. Their objective was for *"Latin American migrants in Europe and their families in Latin America to establish a lasting means of communication via the Internet, providing them with greater knowledge of the realities of migration to Europe and possibilities for development in Latin America"*.

Possibilities offered by the Telecenters

Telecenters offer many possibilities for the communities in which they are currently in place, including training of people of all ages in the use of this technology. Telecenters have been used to train the residents of Santa Isabel, Girón and Pucará in practical and technical skills. They have also been used to provide hands-on training to youth, who learn while operating the telecenters. These youth, who, in some cases, have been wasting their time largely on unproductive or meaningless activities, find in the Telecenters a creative, new and attractive space making two new things possible: on one hand, to learn about technology and, on the other hand, to learn about strategic uses of such technologies toward improving the standard of living in their communities. How? Through integrating ICTs into people's daily routines, as part of the local dynamics of the community.

Community Impact

January 13, 2004 marked the beginning for the implementation of the satellite telecenters. The installation process began with site selection and preparation, which was carried out with the cooperation by all participating cantons. Furniture was provided and arranged in each telecenter according to the number of computers and relative size. Each Telecenter was equipped with three computers, a Web-Cam, a printer and a broadband satellite connection. Moreover, each parish contributed additional equipment, according to what it could afford. Administrative personnel were selected by the parish priests within each canton, who took into particular consideration: gender equality (two of the three operators are women); technical and academic skills; and awareness of trends in local migration. The personnel chosen received technical and administrative training.

The telecenters in Santa Isabel, Girón and Pucará have become strategic locations of support for the communities. The available technology has enabled warm and timely communication between local residents and their relatives abroad. In addition, it has facilitated access to information pertaining to the needs and requests of users. At present, the

telecenters are visited by students from elementary to high school, who arrive to do their homework and internet searches. In smaller numbers, farmers and craftspeople occasionally arrive for meetings, to receive training, and to conduct searches on topics of interest for improving their production. Family members of migrants use chat, e-mail and video-conference to communicate with their loved ones. The youth of the community take advantage of the centers to meet, talk, play, and chat with other young people online. Teachers benefit from having Internet access in order to prepare for their classes and to update their teaching methods.

As a further example, the local Government of Pucará uses their telecenter to communicate with other Government authorities, as it is the only place in the canton where this service is offered. They are signing agreements with the telecenter in order to train their employees in the use of these new technologies. As well, within the telecenter, people can now obtain low-cost access to telephone communication over the Internet, taking care of an urgent necessity within the area: "... the shortage of telephone service".

According to the operators and administrators of the satellite telecenter pilot projects, there have been various benefits. But they all agree that telecenters have helped to further: *"...communication with friends and relatives who are abroad, as well as providing access to news, information other archives, and opening up the possibility of creating personal web pages, etc..."*

As a result, they also see several changes occurring in the communities:

In Santa Isabel: *"...The most noticeable change has occurred amongst the youth, such that it has become easier for them to do homework, projects, assignments, research, etc. It is a significant change since, although there is a library in the canton, the young people do not take much interest in it. However, the telecenter, has greater appeal for them. It has also attracted the attention of children; and as a result, they have learned how to use the computer. As well, little by little, families of migrants are beginning to use the telecenter with the purpose of communicating with their relatives... "*

In Girón: *"... A remarkable change has been noted in the youth, mainly because on the Internet they can find more up-to-date answers for their questions, which are not available at the libraries. It facilitates their research, and they can also use it to communicate with their friends and relatives. Institutional relationships have also improved... "*

In Pucará: *"... the most significant change achieved is that it is motivating the use of technology in a town as poor as Pucará, where residents previously knew very little about computers and much less still about the Internet. Particularly notable changes have been realized amongst the youth... "*

In conclusion…

We believe that the telecenters of Santa Isabel, Girón and Pucará have enabled more equitable access to new technologies, especially the Internet. They have facilitated greater

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social inclusion for sectors with few resources and, for our target users, migrants and their families, fulfilling the mission for which the telecenters were created.

It must be emphasized that the benefit is not found within the ICTs as such, but in their potential to create powerful institutional networks, as well as to build social and economic capacity. In addition, in our case, they improve communication and exchange of information as well as affection. As a result, we must continue working hard to encourage families to consider the telecenters as their own, so that the families, as well as institutions, NGOs and local governments, see this as a cross-cutting service for their own transactions and as a center for development in their communities.

In our view, a high degree of community acceptance of the telecenters largely depends upon the benefits that result from the support of educational, cultural, economic, technological and political changes, which translate into a wide social impact.

The target group for this project was primarily migrants and their families regardless of age and gender. However, to ensure the sustainability of the telecenters it was necessary to involve other social actors that would promote synergy toward achieving our objectives, such as for example: the educational sector, local government, NGOs that work in each region, community organizations (whether for profit or not), youth, parish councils, community leaders, and producer cooperatives, savings and credit unions, etc. We are advancing bit by bit, slowly but surely.

***Mónica Loyola** was operational coordinator for the implementation of telecenters oriented to the migratory issue, on behalf of the Social Pastoral Service of Cuenca.*