

From systematization to learning

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Abstract: Recognizing that a large part of the information resulting from a given field project is lost, and that most of the lessons drawn from its implementation are not shared, many organizations are dedicating time and energy to ‘systematizing’ their work and sharing the results, and with it hoping to increase results and impact. A word first coined in Latin America, systematization refers to a process which seeks to organize information coming from a field experience in order draw lessons from it. This process aims at a critical reconstruction and interpretation of a particular case. As FAO put it in a recent (2013) document, this is an iterative process through which an experience is identified, valued and documented: *“Thanks to this approach, the practice can change and improve and may thereafter be adopted by others.”*

Earlier guidebooks presented the theoretical need for such a process, describing its evolution and advantages. Others emphasized the need to collect as much information as possible, and to organize it in a logical way. Aiming at the successful implementation of a systematization process by practitioners in the field, ETC Andes produced and distributed a short manual in 2007, highlighting the need to define a given case and describe it, but also the need to analyze it in detail. Working together with many different organizations, the processes started on the basis of this manual led to positive results. Yet, although most individuals and organizations involved in these systematization processes made it clear that their interest in them responded to the fact that *“we are a learning organization”*, more attention was given to publishing a product, as a document to share, than to internal learning processes, or to the need of sharing the lessons learnt and helping others to follow them. Between 2011 and 2013, IFAD's interest in supporting knowledge management processes in East Africa gave the opportunity to facilitate a series of systematization processes in Ethiopia and Zambia, and in doing so, to focus on some necessary adaptations of the process. This paper presents the methodological changes tried so as to ensure that a systematization effort does lead to a continuous learning process, and some of the issues that need further attention.

Keywords: systematization, capitalization, documentation, learning

Systematization

A visitor to the rural areas, all over the world, will find that farmers face many difficulties. In many cases they face food insecurity, in all cases they need to adapt to climate change. The same visitor, however, will also find that many of these same farmers, working with private or public organizations, with large or small programmes or projects, are improving the productivity of their fields, or are getting a better price for their products. The adoption of new techniques, or the implementation of new ideas, is leading to better yields or to an improved management of the available resources, and with it to skills and knowledge which are then put into practice in a larger scale. While these results can be clear to someone visiting a particular area, they are not generally known outside it. This is one of the reasons why decision makers often believe that development projects, or farmers' own initiatives, achieve very little and are not worth supporting.

Despite the enormous amount of information easily available on the Internet, it is thus easily accepted that somebody interested in finding out about a certain project will have to go to the area where this project was or is being implemented, and only there, *in situ*, see what the results and impact has been. Many times, these positive results are not even known by colleagues, those who join a team at a later stage, or by those who are working in a different location, as these interesting experiences, and the lessons they bring, are not written down and shared. The most common reason behind this is lack of time and resources, although this is certainly not the only explanation. Field practitioners, extension agents, researchers or farmers also mention a lack of skills, or not "*knowing how to go about it*".

A word first coined in Latin America, systematization refers to a process which seeks to organize information resulting from a given field project in order to analyze it in detail and draw lessons from it. Back in 1996, Daniel Selener and his colleagues at the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) referred to it as a method "*that facilitates the description, reflection, analysis and documentation, in a continuous and participative manner, of the processes and results of a development project*" (Selener *et al.*, 1996). Many years later, FAO documents talk of an iterative process through which an experience is identified, valued and documented in various media. Although referring to it as *capitalization*, this a process that not just shows what is being done, but also allows drawing key lessons and identifying good practices. "*Thanks to this approach, the practice can change and improve and may thereafter be adopted by others*" (FAO, 2012). The main objective is to collaboratively generate new, 'field based' knowledge.

Many field teams now express their interest in "*facilitating a greater understanding of what happened and did not happen so as to improve future activities*", even if not all of them use the same words and definitions for such a process. These differences have been summarized by, for example, Le Borgne (2009), comparing the terms most frequently used in English, French or Spanish: "*the key value of process documentation is its ongoing nature, its creative use of media and its focus on continually informing implementation. The added value of capitalization is to synthesize findings from experiences to inform change in future interventions. In turn, systematization proves its worth in its social nature and the fact that it helps address issues of power relations and empowerment during an intervention*".

Many different definitions can be found, focusing on some of the key steps involved⁶⁶. Put together, they all refer to the process described in IFAD's Rural Poverty Portal: one that aims at learning from the experiences of ongoing and completed operations in order to increase the impact of rural development strategies, programmes and projects.

⁶⁶ The Swiss Development Cooperation's "Knowledge Management Toolkit" (2009), for example, considers "experience documentation" and "experience capitalization". The former refers to making information available to third parties, while the latter aims to change one's practices as a result of a reflection process.

A step-by-step process

Earlier references to systematization placed a strong emphasis on the conceptual definitions, on the emergence of the approach, and on its relationship with popular education, social work and PRA approaches (Jara, 2009). Simultaneously, the guides that were meant to help practitioners operationalize these ideas concentrated on collecting as much information as possible, recommending carrying out detailed interviews and surveys with as many participants as possible, and then to present and share this information as timelines, 'turning points', diagrams, or individual histories. While the approach became increasingly known, its apparent complexity led to field teams requesting the help of an outside expert as the only alternative for analyzing their work and presenting the results to the outside world. At the same time, it soon became evident that a large part of the information collected contributed to the description of the project, but did not help explaining the results achieved, and therefore did not help getting better lessons. On the contrary, collecting it and trying to use it seemed to take too much time.

In 2006 ETC Andes published and distributed a short manual, building on the work of many other organizations and also building on many practical exercises. Its objective was to encourage field teams to start a systematization process without relying on external consultants, and to ensure that, by focusing on the analysis of a field experience, these teams would be able to draw lessons which would help them improve their practice. The recommended process was summarized in five steps:

- a) An initial preparation of the process to follow, referring to the identification of the participants, of the time needed and of the resources that are available for it, or which would be required. This includes making a plan, setting deadlines, and collecting the information which was already available (work plans, annual reports, evaluation documents, etc.). Most important, this is the moment when the 'case' is selected. Among the different projects run by an organization, or among the different components of one specific project, participants need to start by selecting the one which can lead to lessons that are not generally known, and which are therefore more useful.
- b) A detailed identification of each case, starting by selecting the 'boundaries' which divide this case from all the other activities and results which, even if they are part of the same project or programme, are not to be considered this time. When did this specific case start, and how long had it been going on? Where was it implemented, where were the results seen? Who was involved? This is also the stage where the case is put into context: What were the main problems in this area? What was done before to try to solve them? What are the main economical, social or geographical aspects which describe this area?
- c) A description, presenting the activities implemented, and all the results achieved, during the selected period of time (considering the information frequently collected in a project report). As part of this description, participants are asked to make a list of difficulties faced (as problems or negative factors which affected the implementation of the activities, or which prevented the team from achieving better or more results), and also a list of unexpected results: all those which were not planned nor expected at the beginning of the project or intervention, but which did happen, and which later proved to be important.
- d) The identification of criteria and indicators so as to analyze the results seen in the field, and thus complement a description. The assessment of all activities and of the results achieved means comparing them with previous cases, and giving an opinion or value judgment on the basis of the initial objectives and the strategies that were followed. Identifying appropriate criteria for this assessment is seen as the first step, followed by the use of indicators for each criteria so as to identify the factors that explain the results: the rea-

sons behind the outputs and outcomes, and also the factors that prevented the team from achieving more or better results.

- e) A sharing and dissemination plan, starting with the elaboration of a 'product'. While this product can be a short video film or a radio programme, participants in these processes frequently opt for a collection of short articles, and a small booklet. Preparing this booklet not only means paying attention to the content, but also to a logical structure for presenting this content, and to the style. Writing for fellow extensionists, or for colleagues, means writing a short article in a simple non-academic language, with photos or diagrams, and with quotes reflecting the opinions of those in the field.

Distributed with the LEISA magazine throughout Latin America, this manual was taken up and tried by different organizations. Translated into other languages, it was also tried, for example, by Vetaid in Mozambique, IED in Senegal, or the SEE Foundation in Inner Mongolia. A quick review of these different systematization processes can show many results, one of which refers to the skills developed by those participating in them and, at the same time, to these teams' realization that starting such a process is not something that can only be done by an outside experts. Presenting a systematization process as simple and easy to follow, and involving team members in its implementation, helped demythologise it.

An even more visible result has been the broad dissemination of the products, and with it the beginning of an information-exchange process. Members of the different teams of CARE's *Programa Redes Sostenibles para la Seguridad Alimentaria* (REDESA) produced a series of documents which, put together, gave a complete picture of a large-scale project implemented for many years throughout Peru. The collection of articles written by the participants in the process supported by MISEREOR in India and Bangladesh led to the publication of "*Strengthening people-led development: A joint effort of local communities, NGOs and donors to redefine participation*"; the systematization process of CONCERN's Rights-Based Livelihoods Programme in Tanzania resulted in a "*Guide for Staff and Partners*". These documents have helped organizations 'show what we do', provide evidence of the benefits of their work, and have even served as PR material.

Box 1. Participants

Process started by IFAD's ESA Division, 2011-2013

Country	Projects	Finished article
Ethiopia	Pastoral Community Development Project (PCDP)	A drop of water matters
		Co-operating in SACCOs
		Abolishing 'mingi' in Southern Ethiopia
		Building knowledge together
	Pastoralist Welfare Organisation (PWO)	<i>Prosopis</i> : Minimising harm and maximising benefits
	Agricultural Marketing Improvement Project (AMIP)	Working together for innovation
		Market information matters
	Participatory Small-scale Irrigation Development Programme (PaSIDP)	Changing mindsets for fighting poverty
		More than canals in Upper Quashni
		Training farmers in Goche
		The Arata Chufa water users' association
A strong water users' association in Denkusha		
	The Lenda Irrigation Water Users' Association	
Zambia	Smallholder Agribusiness Promotion Programme (SAPP)	The winning triangle: Smallholder farmers, private investors and government
	Rural Finance Programme (RFP)	Sweet solution to obesity
		Dairy production for sustainability
	Smallholder Productivity Promotion Programme (S3P)	Sweet but sour
		The magical trick of inclusiveness and flexibility
	National Agricultural Information Service (NAIS)	<i>Dambos</i> : a land of knowledge for farmers
		Cassava processing and packaging
Healthy cattle, better livelihoods		
	Climate smart agriculture for smallholder farmers	

Improving the process

In 2011, IFAD's East and Southern Africa Division invited ILEIA⁶⁷ to support the teams of IFAD-supported projects in the region, helping them develop their skills to systematize and share lessons as part of their broader efforts in knowledge management. Trying a 'learning by doing' approach, ILEIA invited these teams to start a systematization process, focusing on the activities implemented by the different projects and on the results achieved. The processes that started in Ethiopia and Zambia followed the steps tried in the past (see box), though modifications were made so as to ensure broader results. IFAD's interest, in particular, was to develop a collective process aimed at shared learning.

As in every case, the starting point was fulfilling the basic requirements. The work of many individuals and organizations supporting systematization processes in different parts of the world has shown that there are basic conditions which determine whether a process can be completed (all of which have been presented as the 'basic conditions' for a systematization process for more than 15 years; see Selener *et al.*, 1996). This meant, first, securing time and resources. Next was the commitment of all participants, and the support of the organization behind the experience so that participants could effectively participate, or so that the necessary information would be made available. Third, we tried to encourage a critical viewpoint, the need to "*show things as they really were, and not as we wanted them to be*" and to "*constantly ask why, why, why*". Adapting the

⁶⁷ Based in the Netherlands, ILEIA is the Centre for Learning on Sustainable Agriculture. As editor in chief of its quarterly publication in 2013, Jorge Chavez-Tafur led the systematization process in East Africa on the basis of the approach mentioned above.

approach followed in the past helped secure these different needs and ensure better results. In short, this meant:

- a) making a clear distinction between a systematization workshop and a systematization process. In most cases, a workshop has been the moment (and setting) when the process gets started, when information is collected and sorted out, or where the general ideas regarding the method and approach to follow are shared and discussed. Yet a systematization process takes longer, and needs to involve people who do not necessarily attend a workshop. ILEIA tried to make this difference clear by proposing a ‘sandwich process’: meeting participants during a first and a second workshop, but also working with them before and after these meetings, and also encouraging them to work closely with others (e.g. as interviewees, or providing feedback). This meant that the different steps of these process needed to be defined and planned; participants needed to commit themselves to participating in all of them;
- b) planning for different ‘products’ as the expected results of the process, and making sure that these were clear to all those involved. Many organizations are interested in developing the skills and capacities of their staff, but then are disappointed when there is no concrete, tangible product to show and share as a result of their systematization process, wishing they had also opted for a booklet or a document from the beginning. Others specifically aim at an article or at a written document from the very beginning, but then fail to pay attention to the details involved in its preparation, such as the selection of the right format for the intended audience (an academic journal, a popular magazine, a brochure, a poster), or then fail to present the results in a clear way. In this case, the clear identification of the products needed to go hand in hand with the selection of all participants;
- c) focusing on the identification of the experience to be documented and shared at the start of the process. While experience has shown that there are practically no restrictions as to what can be taken as a case to describe and analyze (and an ‘experience’ does not only refer to a technical process nor to ‘good practices’), we tried to motivate participants and to ensure a wider interest in the process and its results by building on the idea of a project’s USP or ‘unique selling point’. This is a marketing concept used to differentiate one object from similar ones, or in this case, to differentiate one project or one part of a project from others being implemented in the same area or under similar conditions;
- d) looking beyond written documents, both as a source of information and as final products, and also as tools to use during the process. While the ‘products’ of a systematization process are mostly articles or booklets, these can also include radio programs or short films. Participants in previous training processes showed that short videos, made at the spot and with simple tools (in many cases with only a mobile phone) are better sources of information than detailed surveys or old project documents. We copied these ideas and developed them further by using other communication tools, such as role plays. These proved to be very useful when analyzing a case by different participants in a workshop, helping express ideas in a fast and straightforward way;
- e) aiming at different types of information and different opinions as a way to get a clearer picture. Even though we emphasized its participatory focus and presented a systematization process as a multi-stakeholder approach, we encouraged disagreements or a lack of consensus among all participants as a positive sign: one that leads to a stronger analysis during the process, and which can also give readers a more accurate view of what happened in the field (where disagreements and different perspectives are the norm and not the exception);

- f) focusing on individual stories, even if, again, these were developed as part of a collective process. Our objective was to give priority to the opinions, ideas, feelings or views of the ‘experience holders’ or of those running the process, and to encourage them to express themselves as part of their own learning process. Following Bolton (2010), we wanted a systematization process to mean both ‘learning to write’ and also ‘writing to learn’. Before thinking of an outside audience, participants were to focus on learning from their own experience by writing about it and about themselves as part of it;
- g) comparing similar experiences focusing on the same theme by running parallel processes. This was one of the characteristics of the process followed in Ethiopia, where participants looked at the ways in which the Participatory Small Scale Irrigation Development Project supported the organization of different Water Users Associations. Describing and analyzing each case separately but simultaneously helped participants keep each other sharp (highlighting issues which one team might have forgotten, or identifying better indicators). Our objective was also that, by putting the end results next to each other, the reader can now compare them, and then draw his or her own conclusions.

We also tried, but were less successful in selecting the best moment to start the process, and to plan its different steps in detail. Because of the many commitments of all teams, this was a serious problem, both in Ethiopia and in Zambia, and the ‘sandwich process’ took much longer than expected. We also wanted to select the participants, encouraging different categories to join (team leaders, M&E officers, field staff, and communications officers). A general lack of time meant that not all those interested in joining could do so.

A complete and continuous process

The steps taken in Zambia and in Ethiopia helped all those involved not just to complete the systematization process, but also to make sure that the expected products were reached – both as skills and capacities to document, or as products to share and disseminate. “*Learning for rural change: Fourteen stories from Ethiopia*” has been distributed, and a similar booklet with the Zambia stories is being produced. At the same time, participants value the skills developed, mentioning their acquired capacities to make sense of the available information, or to understand their own work. Yet the evaluation made by all participants, and a discussion with all those involved in the processes in Ethiopia and Zambia, revealed the possibility of even larger benefits by:

- a) increasing the number of those involved – not just the number of participants in a workshop (or throughout the process), but rather having different participants, focusing on the different categories (and sub categories) of people involved in a project or in the selected experience: extension agents, project officials, local authorities, farmers - and then male and female farmers, literate and illiterate, young and old, etc. At the same time, such diversity can also be temporal and not only spatial: is it possible to invite an ex-colleague? Someone who participated in the project in earlier phases but who is not involved in it anymore? He or she can bring important information, and can share interesting opinions as to why things are, or were, in a particular way. A broader participation can ensure more information, but also bring different types of information, and different opinions;
- b) ensuring their participation. While a systematization process is frequently presented as a participatory process per definition, ensuring such participation is not an easy and straightforward process. Inviting farmers to a workshop so as to hear their opinion, for example, needs to start by ensuring that these farmers truly represent the farmers in the area, or the beneficiaries of the project or program. Just as important is to make sure that their voices are effectively heard throughout the process, which may mean inviting a facilitator who can achieve this by guiding the process in an effective and efficient way. At the same

time, involving different categories of participants will lead to power issues which need to be avoided or minimized: the most common case is that of extension agents who do not express their opinions during a meeting because the director of their organization is also present, or of female participants who are easily overshadowed by their male colleagues;

- c) paying more attention to the theory behind the activities and the results which are described and analyzed as part of the experience. The systematization of an irrigation project, for example, needs to include the theory that explains the different steps taken in the field, and thus help explain the technical results. Bearing in mind that not all readers will be irrigation experts, those who can benefit most from the process and from the final document will be those working on similar projects, and thus facing similar technical problems; or
- d) giving space for the unexpected. Few projects focus only on the activities that were planned from the very beginning, and few achieve only the results that were intended. In most cases, the most interesting lessons come from those additional activities and from the unexpected results. A focus on these ‘known and unknown unknowns’ can also help participants identify themes or cases for further analysis.

BOX 2. Illustration of a case

One of the activities of the Participatory Small-scale Irrigation Development Programme (PaSIDP, Ethiopia), later published as “The Arata Chufa Water Users Association” in “*Learning for rural change: Fourteen stories from Ethiopia*”.

Boundaries

Area / Location	Stakeholders	Starting date and duration	Objectives	Strategy / Approach	Context
Arata Chufa kebele, Zuway Zuria district, Oromia region, Ethiopia	Farmers (beneficiaries), farmers' association	Project started in 1996-97, continued until 2011	A more efficient and effective management of water	Establishment of rules and regulations, training leaders and farmers (members)	Recurrent drought, shortage of water during the dry season, no storage possibilities

Description (excerpts)

Component	Activities	Main results (output)	Outcome / Impact	Difficulties faced	Unexpected results
Capacity building	Training of members and of leaders; Sharing of experiences	Groups of farmers trained 2 times per year; Leaders trained 3 times per year; Visits to neighboring associations; Visits to other regions	New skills A more efficient management system;	Budget shortages; A lower participation of some members;	Even though the association was meant to include only a few, many others have shown interest in joining
Organization of consultative meetings	Sharing of experiences	At least two general meetings per year; Meetings of all leaders organized every two weeks	Sustainable use of irrigation water Increased productivity	Overlapping meetings, not everyone can attend; Some members do not pay their fees on time	
Support to general management	Decision making on the amount of the fee and on the moment to pay; Fee collection	Fees collected, money available for the maintenance of the canals			

Analysis (excerpts)

Criterion:	Economic impact	
Indicators	Positive factors	Negative factors
Income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased savings as a result of a new savings culture • Higher production levels • Higher prices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not enough land • Inflation • “Some farmers are lazy”
Living standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More production, higher prices, higher incomes • Food self sufficiency • People more aware of the options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension agent did not speak the language • Traditional • Pessimism
Social capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership in WUA, membership in cooperative • Mobilisation work • Experience from other communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women do not own land • Youth migrate, are therefore not so involved

Criterion:	Participation	
Indicators	Positive factors	Negative factors
Gender / youth inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women received priority from project • Youth are not tired, are motivated, have more energy • Youth embrace new technologies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women do not own land • Association members are not gender-sensitive
Contribution, motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farmers see that they can easily increase production • Outside experience, good trainings • Higher awareness levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperative is inefficient • Bad past experiences • Farmers own land elsewhere
Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good governance • Better understanding of the benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too expensive • “Nobody told me” • “I get benefits without joining”

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