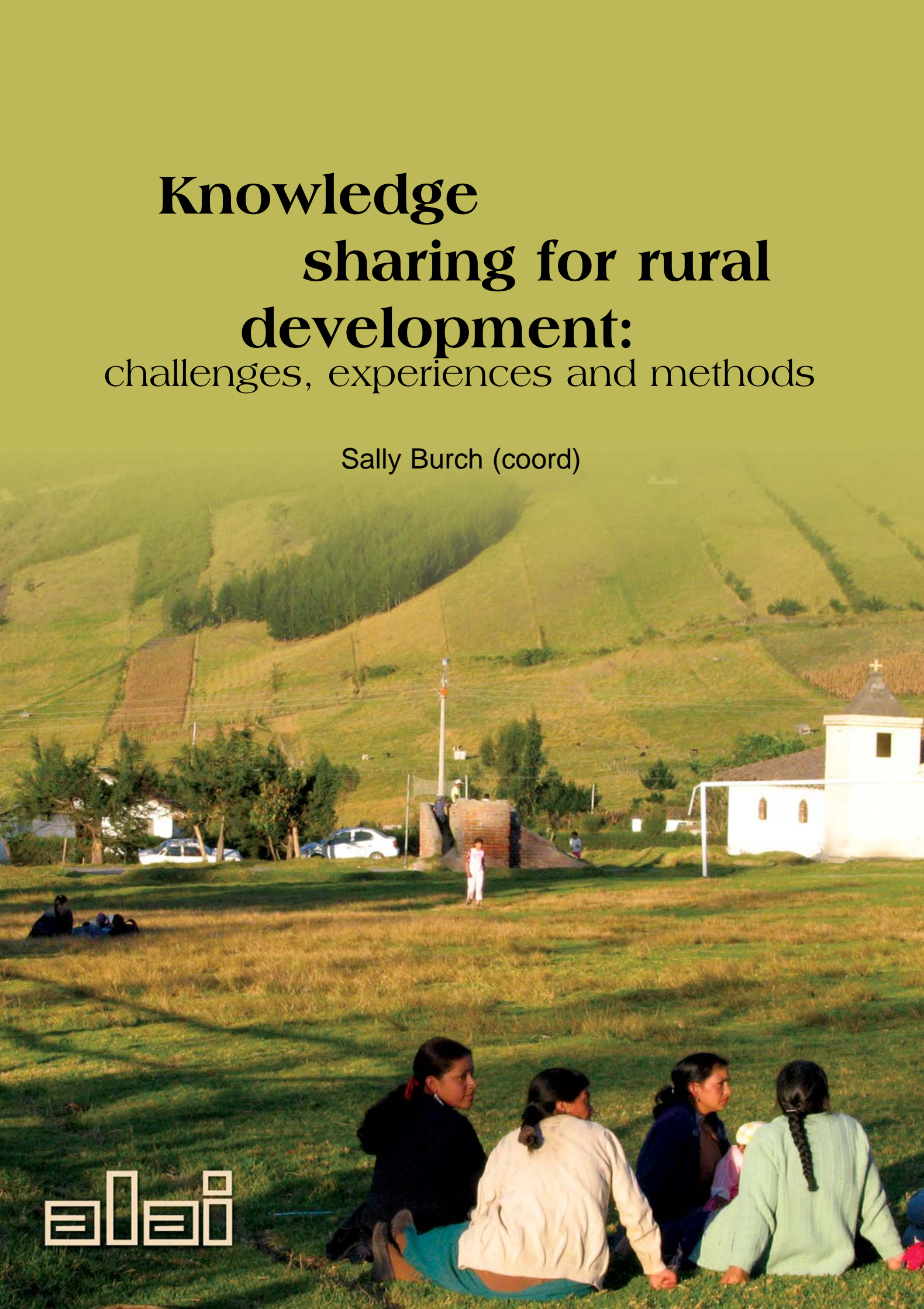


Knowledge sharing for rural development: challenges, experiences and methods

Sally Burch (coord)



Knowledge sharing for rural development:

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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Meeting of Young
Cooperative Members:
presentation of group-
work results.
La Catalina, Costa Rica
SULA BATSÚ

La Catalina: A knowledge sharing experience for capacity building processes

Kemly Camacho
Bellanet-Sulá Batsú

These reflections are based upon the analysis of a three-year long process in Costa Rica of applying "knowledge sharing for collective creation" processes, in training processes with the social economy sector.

Bellanet is a secretariat of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada. Its Latin American regional office is located in Costa Rica, hosted by the cooperative Sulá Batsú, a self-managed cooperative of professionals working in the areas of knowledge sharing, new technologies, the social economy, free culture and social research in Latin America, with special emphasis on Central America.

<http://blog.sulabatsu.com/>

Introduction

For the knowledge exchange process in La Catalina, the methodology was developed by Sulá Batsú (www.sulabatsu.com) with the support of Bellanet's (IDRC) Regional Office in Latin America (www.bellanet.org). This presentation is drawn from the perspectives of Sula-Batsu's members regarding this project.

Within the context of La Catalina Training Centre whose goal is to build capacity within the social economy sector, the challenge was to test in practice "knowledge sharing for collective creation."

La Catalina is a Training Centre for the Social Economy (www.lacatalina.org) located in Costa Rica with plans of becoming a capacity development centre serving Latin America and the Caribbean in the mid-term. With a beautiful location in Birrí, in the Province of Heredia, La Catalina acquired its facilities through the cooperation of forty three organizations that are all part of the social economy sector with the shared goal of developing training programs appropriate to the needs and conditions for social economy enterprise development. This centre seeks to give entrepreneurs the opportunity to receive training specifically tailored to the questions and concerns pertaining to the social-solidarity economy.

Enterprises within the social-solidarity economy¹ are understood here as productive initiatives focussed on people rather than capital. They are businesses that integrate social development, particularly at the local level, into their management structure balanced with environmental responsibility and economic results. They also aim to generate wealth and to re-distribute it in a fair and equitable way, sustainably, using economically-efficient production, but without being profit-oriented.

These initiatives spring from the needs of social groups who see entrepreneurship as an important route toward their own development. As a result, the organizational and political management of such initiatives are grounded in democratic principles rather than in the amount of capital each person contributes.

In 2002, 120 businesses came together to define what they would like to see from a Training Centre for the social-solidarity economy. They envisioned a centre that would build technical, management and political capacity amongst people within this sector to improve their competitiveness and to provide them with the necessary skills to address

1 This includes organizations involved in cooperative economic activities, meaning citizen-organized enterprises premised upon democratic values and management models. Such organizations share the following foundations: they work in the collective interest of their membership beyond simply generating profit, using an autonomous management model and democratic decision-making, prioritizing people and provision of work over capital.

These organizations take a more social and humane approach to economic activities, in contrast to the traditional private enterprise. This alternative vision does not infer a lack of profits. Instead, it means that profit generation is based upon principles grounded in the recognition that societies are made up of people.

challenges arising from globalization and international markets.

They also outlined the specific skills that entrepreneurs in this field require. In general at this time, leaders in technical areas of the social-solidarity economy, including business managers and many political leaders, have been trained in traditional business schools. As a result, the need for appropriate, high quality technical training oriented toward solidarity entrepreneurship was clearly identified.

The need for a unique approach to learning was also indicated. They emphasized practical learning that respects and draws upon the knowledge generated to date by the sector and which is best expressed in the lived experiences of those involved. They also indicated that such training should be dynamic and entertaining.

Taking into account the demands of the sector, Sulá Batsú with the support of Bellanet made a proposal to the Board of Directors and the Academic Council of La Catalina to implement an inaugural plan for the centre. The implementation process would be based upon "knowledge sharing for collective creation", as previously used by both Sulá Batsú and Bellanet in various parts of the world.

The inaugural plan took one year to carry out and included twelve workshops. Capacity building goals for the participants were laid out in four subject areas as decided upon by the Academic Council. These included: 1) social economy business management, 2) developing the concept of the social economy, 3) intergenerational exchanges, and 4) several technical topics selected for their relevance to the sector at this point in time such as international regulations concerning financial information, risk management in savings and credit cooperatives, and cooperative insurance. For several of these themes two or three workshops were developed.

Various stakeholders from the Central American and Costa Rican social economy sector supported and coordinated the realization of this plan. Special mention should be made of the Institute for Promotion of Cooperatives, the National Cooperative Council, La Catalina's Academic and Administrative Councils, and the Training Centre's partner organizations.

For the duration of a year and a half, "knowledge sharing for collective creation" was put to test as an appropriate approach to capacity building for the social economy sector given its particular demands. This article reflects upon this process with a focus on the outcomes of the process resulting from the implementation of the inaugural plan. The results from each of the particular subject areas elaborated upon during the collective creation process are also interesting but will be set aside for a later opportunity to be addressed.

Knowledge sharing for collective creation

Currently, knowledge has become one of the most important factors in productive processes. Knowledge is inherently human and has always been used by people to pro-

duce, reproduce and to improve their material and non-material conditions. However, it has now become the raw material for production.

Information and communication technologies play a central role in these new wealth generation processes because they constitute the space where diverse types of knowledge meet in order to develop productive processes.

In this context a strong trend has emerged to find ways of "capturing" knowledge. Proposals for knowledge management have arisen looking for means to create virtual spaces and automated systems (such as data bases) that will "organize" people's knowledge whether they are part of a business, social group or other productive process.

In contrast with this approach, an alternative proposal has been developed to challenge this concept of "knowledge management" which states that:

- * When knowledge is made explicit it becomes information. Information can be managed, that is, captured and organized in storage devices and disseminated in various digital and traditional formats.
- * Information is an input for individual and collective learning processes that people and social groups use in order to develop new knowledge.
- * Knowledge gained through lived experiences of individuals and social groups is called tacit knowledge. This cannot be stored nor captured, rather it can only be shared or exchanged through people's interactions. This can take place digitally or face-to-face, but the key element is the interaction. Additionally, this knowledge is intangible, in contrast to knowledge that can be made explicit and become information.
- * Until now, tacit knowledge has not been valued very greatly. It hasn't been favoured in productive processes nor in formal education. However, rural, aboriginal and other marginalized communities have principally relied upon tacit knowledge for their own development, survival and resistance.
- * Since tacit knowledge finds its expression in the experiences of people and social groups, it can't be captured and it can't belong to anyone except for the person or group who has lived it. As a result, it hasn't received the attention of those whose only goal is capital production. However, as previously mentioned, tacit knowledge has begun to draw the attention of large productive processes which have tried to develop mechanisms to make tacit knowledge as explicit as possible in order gain ownership of it.
- * However, given the particular nature of tacit knowledge, it is impossible to make it explicit and much less to possess it.

Only information can be managed. Knowledge cannot be transferred, captured or managed. It must be shared, through the interaction of people whether by digital means or face-to-face..

Design of the Process

In this section, lessons learned by Bellanet-Sulá Batsú during the development of the inaugural plan for La Catalina are brought forward.

Exchange-based knowledge sharing processes necessitate a particular methodological approach that begins with the following building blocks:

1. A clearly defined topic about which people want to collectively work together and develop new knowledge.
2. The information and knowledge that each participant brings with them.
3. The passion that participants have for the topic.
4. Existing power relationships between participants.
5. Group characteristics such as age, roles, responsibilities, identities, etc.
6. The time available for the exchange.

Once these group characteristics have been identified the methodology is designed, aiming to collectively create new knowledge concerning a particular topic, based upon the experiences of the participants. It is assumed that new knowledge is not equivalent to the sum of individual knowledge amongst the group, but rather that the interaction will add greater value to what they bring with them through synergies and exchanges that take place amongst the diverse participants. For this reason it is very important to have a clear understanding of the primary reasons and motivations for the exchange.

Regarding the process with La Catalina, which is our example here, the first decision made by the implementing team - in this case Bellanet/Sulá Batsú - was to divide the training process into three groupings: 1) conceptual development used to arrive at a focus, concept or position beginning with the experiences of the participants. 2) reflection, and 3) technical issues. For all three types of processes the same approach to knowledge sharing for collective creation was utilized, but toward distinct objectives as outlined in the following table.

Methodology for Knowledge Sharing for Collective Creation as utilized in the Inaugural Plan for La Catalina			
Type of process	Creation	Reflection	Technical
Objective of the process	To create a concept, methodology or approach based upon the experiences of all participants. This objective strongly relates to the idea that all participants have valuable experiences for the construction, deconstruction or reconstruction of concepts.	To reflect about a problem or situation affecting participants in the activity. This objective is closely tied with the fact that people have very few available spaces or opportunities to reflect collectively about shared concerns.	To increase participants' technical knowledge by establishing interactions between participants facing a particular day-to-day reality and people with previous experience in this area. This objective reflects the principle that regardless of how much technical "expertise" a person might have, her or his knowledge can always be challenged when faced with various realities.
Objective of the exchange	To interact with people having diverse experiences pertaining to the topic at hand in order to create new ideas and concepts.	To create a dedicated space for listening and bringing forward diverse perspectives and concerns arising from the participants' experiences. These activities don't have to arrive at a concrete proposal, rather it is hoped that participants will come away with perspectives different from their own all developed from a shared experience.	
Learning objective	Participants will have a new perspective and a different understanding of the topic under discussion.	At the end of the session, participants will have new perspectives that challenge their own understanding of a specific topic.	Participants will question their own expert technical knowledge on a specific topic.
Examples of topics explored using this methodology	The management model What is the Social Economy?	Inter-generational interactions	International Regulations of Financial Information Cooperative insurance Financial Risk Management

Another key factor is that the knowledge generated through sharing processes results in both tacit and explicit knowledge of which only the latter can be documented. However, participants also take away valuable tacit knowledge which can't be captured or measured. This tacit knowledge is exhibited for example in attitude changes, new relationships, well-founded opinions and an overall strengthening of the social movement. As a result, there are also many intangible outcomes.

The thematic support team

The process facilitation team doesn't always share an in-depth understanding of the topics about which the knowledge sharing process will take place. This makes having a thematic support team necessary which includes people with broad expertise on the particular topic. In this regard, it isn't necessary to rely upon people with academic expertise, instead practical experience should be given high priority.

This team helps to assess the starting point of knowledge that the sector currently has about the given topic, as well as key milestones to be attained and central issues to be addressed. They also review the learning objectives as outlined by the process facilitators. This advisory group is particularly vital with regard to technical subjects.

Each process of knowledge sharing for collective creation is unique. Even if one process shares the same objectives as another, the group of people that collaborates and interacts during the process will never be the same.

Discovering the passions and knowledge that each group brings

This is one of the most important challenges for knowledge sharing because it is frequently unknown until the interaction between participants begins. As a result, the working agenda should generally begin with an activity that allows the process facilitators to get an understanding of this element.

This also means that the initial agenda can't be completely structured and it's likely and sometimes necessary that the agenda be modified once this element is understood in order to tailor the process to the group. This issue may present challenges for people who are accustomed to having strict agendas arranged in advance of the activity. However, lessons learned during the process with La Catalina indicate that open and flexible agendas are fundamental to maximizing the design of the interaction considering the knowledge and interests that the group brings with it. This implies a serious transformation in the traditional structure of collective processes.

Also evident is that in order to achieve success, the central facilitator and her or his support team must be equipped with: a) flexibility, to transform the process in a short time, requiring a deep understanding of the methodologies, techniques and their use; b) the capacity to improvise as needed in order to achieve the proposed knowledge-based objectives, and c) well-developed skills in "reading" a group and its dynamics.

Ensuring a "horizontal" interaction

Processes of knowledge sharing for collective creation share the basic requirement of "horizontality" between participants. This means that in laying out the process conditions must be established, including the venue or space, such that participants feel they have

equitable circumstances within which to bring forward their personal perspectives and experiences concerning the topic under discussion.

When knowledge sharing methodologies were in the early stages of development, particularly through the work of Bellanet-Ottawa with the international virtual community KM4DEV, with which Sulá Batsú has been working on these issues, one of the main concerns raised by the Bellanet-Sulá Batsú team was whether it is actually possible to have "horizontality" under the very unequal conditions existing in places such as Latin America.

In the inaugural plan for La Catalina, the workshops for collective creation brought together managers with their workers, directors from administration councils together with representatives from their membership, people with a long history as part of the social economy sector with younger generations having expectations that new work spaces will open up for them, technical staff with policy-makers, as well as producers, both men and women. It was crucial to establish conditions that would permit this tremendous diversity of interests, expectations and perspectives to interact under conditions allowing for "horizontality."

In this regard, we learned that collective creation has limits depending upon the particular group. Once such a limit is reached where conditions enabling "horizontality" have broken down, people can no longer participate equally in the constructive process.

In order to achieve the greatest horizontality, it is necessary to ensure that a) every participant has something to contribute to the chosen topic, b) every participant is passionate about some aspect of the topic, c) every participant understands and approves of the conditions for knowledge sharing.

Two aspects need to be highlighted regarding conditions for sharing. First of all, with regard to experts it's commonly believed that learning takes place when one or more experts make presentations to a group on specific subjects. In contrast, the methodology under examination values and prioritizes expertise gained through everyday experiences, which is often deemphasized in traditional educational processes.

The second issue needing to be addressed deals with the time allotted for people to speak. Generally in collective processes, a few people monopolize the dialogue either because they are in positions of power that gives them a greater perception of legitimacy to speak for longer or because they consider themselves to be an expert on the topic under discussion. However, usually these people don't participate in processes of collective creation or they establish a clear distance between themselves and the rest of the participants. The knowledge sharing rules as part of this process outline that for every 3 hours of exchange the maximum amount of time an individual may speak should not exceed 20 minutes. While some flexibility exists, this is considered a golden rule. This rule is also a condition for horizontality that proved difficult to implement in the process with La Catalina, but which was progressively established making it possible for everyone to interact.

Conditions for Sharing

- * The more knowledge is shared, the more it grows.
- * Knowledge can't be transferred, only shared.
- * Everyone in the group has valuable knowledge and experiences with regard to the topics for which the gathering has been organized.
- * Diversity of experiences and opinions must be respected in order to enable sharing.
- * Since every participant has knowledge concerning the topic under discussion, the contribution of each person is equally valuable.
- * Within the group, with regard to the specific topics, either no one is an expert or we are all experts.
- * It's recognized that the contributions of others transform and augment both individual and collective knowledge.
- * It's recognized that time is scarce such that it's important to respect the time allotted for each to speak making clear that additional time taken by one person to speak limits others' participation and hinders the interaction process.

The lay out of the physical space should also support the process of "horizontality". For example, as far as it's possible, a central table from which speakers present, should be avoided. People who are going to speak or present can do so from their seat along with the rest of the participants. Facilitators should also be seated amongst the participants.

Valuing tacit knowledge

This approach to knowledge sharing for collective creation values tacit knowledge in a new way because it has been generally downplayed in both productive and formal education processes.

In this way, the knowledge upon which many local communities have developed, particularly those most excluded from economic processes, is given fundamental value. Elements such as oral tradition, critical to the development of our identity, are given higher rank as part of this methodology. Also, knowledge that can be documented is given the same level of importance as that which people bring with them through their own experience. Inevitably, this approach brings attention to the issue of property over knowledge, however this will be set aside for discussion at a future point in time.

Techniques for Sharing

One of the most common misinterpretations of this methodology is that it is based in the application of particular techniques. As previously stated, the central idea is to design a knowledge sharing process within which various techniques are brought together and used in order to achieve the anticipated development of concepts and skills through the course of the process.

Criteria for selecting appropriate techniques rely upon three elements: the objectives for creation, the conditions of the group and the potential for interaction that exists at a given point in time.

Since this article focuses on methodology, details are not included concerning each technique used in each of the various processes. These may be consulted in the website of Sulá Batsú (www.sulabatsu.com) and in future publications.

However, to give an example, the following table summarizes some of the techniques used during the process with La Catalina.

Techniques	Methodological Objective
<i>After Action Review</i>	Review, evaluate or give feedback on an activity that has already taken place.
<i>Peer assistance</i>	Design an activity. Consult with one another concerning a decision and a proposal.
<i>Storytelling</i>	Recount an experience by telling a story.
<i>Open spaces with 5 variations</i>	Multi-purpose activity useful for revealing knowledge and passions brought together by the group. Create and discuss topics arising from group interests.
<i>Create a newspaper</i>	Visioning.
<i>Puzzles</i>	Summarize what was learned.
<i>Life lines</i>	Create proposals from diverse perspectives and visions.
<i>Knowledge and passions</i>	Establish what knowledge and passion the group is bringing to the process with regard to a specific topic.
<i>Graphic representations</i>	Document and organize the process of collective creation.
<i>Sketches</i>	Document and organize the process of collective creation. Also used to loosen up or relax following a sharing process.
<i>Group interrogation</i>	Develop questions concerning key themes, learning to carry out a healthy interrogation of oneself and others.
<i>Creation based upon work of another group</i>	Develop complementary visions and proposals.
<i>Nuclear fusion</i>	Moving from the individual to the collective in the process of creating a proposal.

The cyclical process and saturation points

Another characteristic of knowledge sharing processes is that they have saturation points. These points arise at two key moments. First of all, when the group is tired. Although the activities and techniques utilized in this approach are dynamic and entertaining, intellectual fatigue usually sets in during the collective construction stage. The process facilitator needs to be aware when this is taking place and to immediately interrupt the process such that knowledge building is not negatively affected.

Saturation also takes place when group contributions start becoming repetitive. This indicates that the knowledge which the group has brought to the exchange process has been largely integrated into the process. It is said that knowledge sharing processes work cyclically, like a spiral. Once all of the inputs have been included as part of the collective creation process, a saturation point is reached and the group starts repeating itself. At this stage, the process facilitator needs to begin integrating new perspectives into the creation process.

There are several ways to include new perspectives, one way is to mix up the participants in each working group, another way is to involve new participants. Storytelling is an additional approach to reconsidering an experience or to furthering a process of interrogation. Thematic facilitators may also enter in to break up the cyclic nature of knowledge sharing. Thematic facilitators are people with a breadth of experience in the subject under discussion. They might also be people who have spent time reflecting on the theme such that they can introduce new elements into the group process.

The knowledge sharing team

One of the main problems with these processes is that they can be very expensive to organize because they require a significant number of facilitators. For example, during implementation of the inaugural plan we involved approximately 50 young professionals, responsible for various roles over the course of the different activities.

On average, a good facilitator can work with a maximum of 15-20 people at a time utilizing this type of process. Sometimes in La Catalina we were facilitating 120 participants at a time, requiring up to six methodological facilitators to carry out the processes of interaction and collective creation. Likewise, each group facilitator needs a support person who is responsible for documenting each proposal and making notes concerning the group process.

In summary, for each activity, the facilitation team requires:

- * A *main facilitator* with the responsibility of weaving together the knowledge building process. Amongst other things, this means making sure that each activity connects to the next and that the process of collective creation and conceptual growth of the group is moving along. This person is also responsible for "reading" the group

as a whole and for redefining the agenda and the dynamics according to his or her interpretation of how things are going, including reorganizing groups and methodological facilitators depending upon the course of the process. The main facilitator also designs the overall process and provides ongoing summaries throughout the training. Finally, this person is responsible for the facilitating team throughout the activity.

- * *Process facilitators* are responsible for the collective creation process with each working group. They must have a thorough understanding of the techniques being used as well as the overall objective. They must be able to summarize their group's work in order to integrate it with that of others and will meet as often as necessary with the team of facilitators in order to do so. The composition of working groups will be in constant flux depending upon the techniques used.
- * *Thematic facilitators* are people with particular experience in the areas under discussion. They must be willing to participate in the collective creation process and to avoid thinking of themselves as an "expert", or lecturing in order to "transfer" their knowledge to others. They must also be willing to take part when saturation points are reached in order to advance the process as needed.
- * *People responsible for documentation* are vital, given that in this approach the process is just as important as the results. In general, it's very difficult to find good note-takers who can concurrently document the process using video, photography, or other such tools. As a result, it's necessary to have at least one person per working group with the role of recording as best as possible the process after which they will help to organize the documentation concerning what took place as well as the results.
- * The *logistics coordinator* is another essential role. She or he makes sure that work spaces are conducive for "horizontal" enabling the sharing process. The logistics coordinator is also responsible for making materials available in a timely way to each process coordinator for each technique that is used. This person also collects the materials produced by the documenting team.
- * Someone is also designated to *design and produce the required materials*. Due to the degree of improvisation and re-scheduling sometimes necessary as part of these processes, materials often have to be produced along the way and often very quickly. Materials may be printed or digital, occasionally including multimedia development or web-page production. In the case of the inaugural plan a media production unit was set-up on site. At other times, large flipcharts have been sufficient.

Final thoughts

As previously mentioned, evaluating the outcomes of a "knowledge sharing for collective creation" process is extremely difficult because many results are intangible and difficult to measure. Amongst these are included attitude changes, new relationships, transformative processes and organizational strengthening. While participants take away many such results, only explicit knowledge can be documented. This doesn't include the important aspects such as enthusiasm, pleasure, new visions and perspectives that each participant also takes away with her or him.

In conclusion, it is evident that knowledge sharing contributes to:

Thematic development: Specific topics were built upon throughout the duration of the plan. Collective knowledge evolved with regard to the particular subjects selected during this period of time.

Establishing a space for reflection: The social economy sector in Costa Rica and Central America needs time and space to reflect together. Generally, organizations and businesses don't prioritize for this. However, this process indicated the need and benefits of making available such a resource.

Designing a meeting space: Capacity building processes carried out in La Catalina brought the sector together, strengthening the concept of the social economy, as well as cooperation, productive links and the social economy movement as an option for development.

Knowledge for affecting change: The process demonstrated that knowledge can affect change, particularly through the sharing of experiences. Sharing has a special impact because it helps people identify with one another. The discovery that everyone has something to contribute is transformative. They also discover that through learning, integrating, adopting and adapting the experiences of others that they develop new innovations for their businesses.

Following from this process, similar examples from other situations were found, which are also very valuable. However, it's important to clarify that this methodology goes beyond simple sharing processes between people or straight forward collective creation. Rather, the methodology examined here has theoretical and methodological implications for better understanding of the knowledge building process.

An additional lesson learned during this time is to avoid mixing incompatible methodologies. For example, trying to implement a "knowledge sharing for collective creation" approach with groups who prefer more traditional approaches such as long presentations by guest speakers is ineffective.

Presenting this methodology as a valid approach for capacity building has also been complicated, since training processes are usually thought of as something more traditional.

Pertaining to the approach proposed by Bellanet-Ottawa and the virtual community KM4DEV, two key contributions arise from this case study:

Firstly, collective creation is added to the original knowledge sharing proposal. It's necessary to go beyond sharing and to use the space for collective creation such that sharing results in specific concrete outcomes.

Secondly, the development of mid- and long-range processes rather than simply facilitating a single workshop permits development of long-term initiatives in cooperation with a sector or group such that processes of transformation are more deeply entrenched.

***Kemly Camacho** is a researcher and member of the Bellanet - Sula-Batsú Cooperative alliance.*