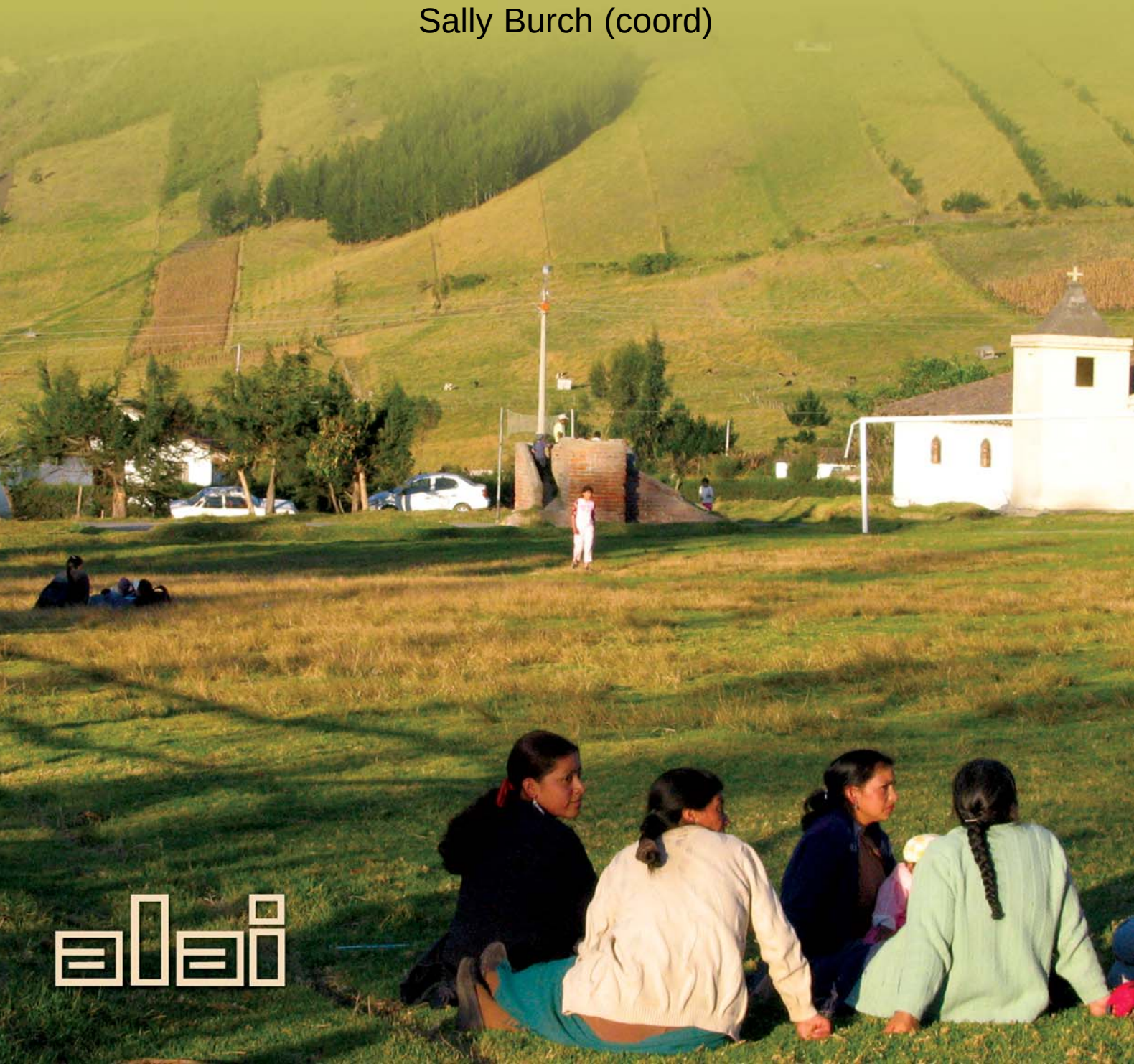
Knowledge sharing for rural development:

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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Media and Materials for Knowledge Sharing

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Sulá Batsú- Bellanet LAC

Knowledge sharing is a complementary response, from a critical standpoint, to the knowledge management trend. Organizations have invested significantly in researching and developing methodologies and tools in order to document, catalogue and capture knowledge for its optimal use in productive activities.

Documenting and recording

Documenting and recording the outcomes of activities and projects makes extensive use of different media instruments, in workshops and exchange activities. This was also the first approach that our team took to integrating media.

The objective of documentation is to capture the experiences, ideas and collective creations developed during the activity in order to copy, archive or refer back to them. In knowledge sharing processes, documentation is essential to creating an explicit archive of what was collectively created, for which photos, videos, presentations, transcripts and documents used during the activity are very important.

These materials and media together tell the story of what took place. They compile the information shared or created during the workshop and, using visual, audiovisual or digital means, they ensure that people can remember what took place and communicate this to others who were absent.

A wide variety of resources, with different qualities, can be used to document and record processes and activities. Organizations have the most experience using media in this way. Some have also been quite innovative and have created interactive presentations about what was shared.

One case presentation:

Workshop about the Cooperative Management Model

For the workshop on the Cooperative Management Model our team created and published a website which included:

- A photo gallery where we posted pictures taken during the event
- A section for video interviews which we carried out with several participants
- A video with soundtrack which included the main images and ideas shared during the workshop
- A section for audio interviews that we carried out
- A section from which all the documents and presentations from the workshop could be downloaded.

With the help of note-takers, transcripts and summaries of several sessions were made available immediately. The workshop contents and archive were documented and published "live," including comments and observations from participants.

http://www.lacatalina.org/modelogestion

Use of media and methodological support

The potential for digital media or multimedia to be integrated into knowledge sharing methodology and to help create sharing conditions has not been well-explored.

One example of such an application would be if part of the workshop interaction takes place in a web forum and the forum is made part of the methodology. Instead of being a side process, the forum could become a subgroup for participants who are geographically distant. The web forum could also be used as a storage facility that is progressively filled with ideas, links, examples and resources used during the workshop.

We've also used video. Using video in place of a live expert presentation has given us very positive results when it has been integrated into our methodology and used for a specific purpose. For example it can pose questions for debate or provided a starting point for discussion amongst the group leading towards a common creation. Video can also be useful to help explain a complicated topic for participants to use when they return to their organizations. Videos, however, require a greater effort to produce than most other materials and are also expensive. As a result, their use must be clearly justified and it must be well integrated into the methodology. The quality of editing and images, its availability in

multiple languages (with subtitles or translation), and the documents or digital files that accompany the video, are all factors that may hinder or enhance its usefulness to present a subject and generate discussion.

One of the main joint projects between Sulá Batsú and Bellanet LAC is "low tech" media production to support knowledge sharing dynamics and spaces. We've put a lot of effort into facilitating interactions based on simple materials that are very familiar to participants such as large posters, scrap paper, cardboard, scissors, colored paper and coloring materials. Each methodological design includes an outline of the required materials which will help to advance the process rather than being mere decorations. For example, different colored ribbons can be used to help identify groups, cardboard cards can be put together to create a mural of everyone's ideas, a giant map can help participants to collectively identify where they're from.

Creating and transforming media

Another aspect of media that we've wanted to build into knowledge sharing experiences, as far as possible, is to integrate training for participants so that they can transform both the content they create as well as the media they use during the interaction. The idea is that participants manipulate and transform media by determining its role in the knowledge sharing process, the way it will be applied and what kind of results will be produced. In this way, media becomes an essential part of the sharing process and enhances collective creation.

An experience:

The Cube: a methodology for assessing the Internet's social impact

Participants of this workshop were from Central American social organizations, who learned how to apply an impact assessment methodology which they helped create during participatory research. To help participants visualize the methodology as a multi-dimensional process, the facilitators created a cube that had been printed on cardboard and which was then assembled. Each side represented a different aspect of the methodology. This required creating graphics for each element assessed and a different technique to accompany each side of the cube during the course of the workshop. The result was an interactive workshop with consistent content in distinct modules, that participants could easily recreate in their own organizations. The cube served several purposes, including thematic integration and visualizing the multi-dimensionality of the topic, as well as providing a guide for participants and working material for facilitators.

Two proposals for future development:

Meta-recycling and *Estudio Livre*

We recently wrote a pilot project proposal to apply meta-recycling in the Central American context. Meta-recycling is a Brazilian approach to the social re-appropriation of computers, in which used computers are rebuilt using art and FLOSS (free software). (http://www.metareciclagem.org)

Estudio Livre is a group which collectively produces digital music, animation, images and video in the communities. It takes a creative approach to capacity building with the idea of sharing as its base giving an example of how sharing and media can go together.

Until now, we've been shy about exploring this idea. During several workshops we have created content while the workshop is taking place: producing, editing, mixing and publishing live web and video materials. However, we have still mediated participants' approach to media, since methodological and thematic issues have taken priority over the communication tools being used.

A few important considerations

As a result of our experiences with integrating media production and knowledge sharing methodology in a way that is consistent with the particular objectives and target group, we've disovered that there are a series of relationships affecting the interweaving of multimedia with knowledge sharing process.

An example:

Marketing products and services

In a workshop with women from diverse cooperatives throughout Costa Rica we simulated a town market and created a space for participants to get to know the products and services that the others were offering. Each woman received a blank piece of paper, cards and coloring materials with which to draw their product or service with assistance from the facilitating team. Each person then called out their product in a creative way, moving around the room offering a small card with their contact information. The objective was the symbolic exchange of products and services. As a result of this activity, some women established business contacts and met like-minded or supportive organizations.

* **Individual participants representing a group:** workshop participants usually represent a larger group that may be located in another part of the country, of the region or the world. In knowledge sharing methodologies, as well as in the use of media, we try to balance the individual participant's inputs with the inputs from the network or group that he or she represents. Media can help to illustrate this relationship in which participants are representing others. Internet tools for collective creation such as blogs, wikis, forums and chats are useful in this regard.
* **Adapting audiovisual and symbolic language to the local context:** we try to ensure that symbols, images and language used in our materials are relevant to the groups involved considering their culture and context. References perceived to be foreign or irrelevant may hinder the sharing process, which also happens frequently when people encounter new or unknown technologies. Sometimes the simplest media is the most useful in helping participants to develop their own language in order to share and defend their ideas.
* **Relationship between media and the objectives:** it is necessary to strike a balance between the space we give to the media we have prepared for a process and how the process is evolving toward the desired objectives. Often some of the materials we prepare for a workshop are left unused because dynamics within the workshop change, making them irrelevant or inappropriate. Media must always have a purpose that is directly related to the goals. Materials cannot be merely decorative; they need to be well-considered and suitable.

An experience:

Life and destiny

As part of an intergenerational knowledge sharing workshop we wanted to explore the different life and work expectations of people from various age groups. We created a long poster with a time line to illustrate a lifetime from which the group collectively created a story about a character from birth until death. Each group chose five numbers randomly which became "key" ages in the life of the character.

We placed "destiny cards" in a tumbler. These described important and unexpected changes in the life of the character, such as a career opportunity, a pregnancy or a natural disaster. The group had to integrate these elements into their story. At the end, this graphic representation of the character's life was analyzed to consider the contrasts between life expectations of rural, urban, older, younger, female and male populations. Each tool used during this activity had a specific purpose and was closely related to the achievement of the objective.

A technique:

Newspaper of the Future

In several workshops we've wanted to generate a vision of the local or national future based upon the group's perspectives in general. In order to do this, we've asked participants to use newspaper and magazine clippings, paint, markers, crayons and large gray cardboard panels. Each group assembles a newspaper dated for sometime in the future representing what will be taking place in various aspects of local or national life. The group designs the sections and the contents according to their own creativity and wording. This approach has resulted in very imaginative and provocative results which can be shared with everyone else without requiring further explanation.

* **Participant as producer:** In order to appropriate the process, participants must see themselves and their ideas reflected in the media used. Materials that are too elaborate and which don't allow for changes or intervention by participants may be perceived as foreign or difficult to relate to. We try to use media that are simple, interchangeable, easy to reproduce and multi-purpose. As a result, participants can decide what form they will take and which ideas they will represent.
* **"Live" media production:** We have had various experiences and different results in on-the-spot media production. While it's easier to prepare a video or set of photographs in advance, live production is a much more valuable experience. However, technical difficulties, lack of resources and the pace of live production may affect the quality of the final outcome.

After working nearly two years in the production of media and materials for knowledge sharing, our team recognizes both the great potential for integrating media with knowledge sharing processes, as well as the difficulties that this implies in order to ensure meaningful and coherent media production. Fundamentally, we are striving to produce economically feasible media and materials that are in line with knowledge sharing objectives, maintaining as the central priority the ideas, hopes and motivations of the individuals and groups involved given their specific context.

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