

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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Casilla 17-12-877, Av. 12 de octubre N18-24, Of 503, Quito, Ecuador
Telf: (593 2) 250 5074 Fax: (593 2) 250 5073
E-mail: info@alainet.org Web: www.alainet.org

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Girl engaged in adequate
community use
of the mangroves.
Congal, Esmeraldas
CARLOS VINUEZA MONTUFAR /
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Knowledge exchange for the conservation of life-giving natural resources

*María Augusta Robalino, Juan Emilio Zambrano,
Máximo Cangá, Maricruz Valencia*
C-CONDEM

The National Coordination for the Defence of the Mangrove Ecosystem (C-CONDEM) works in Ecuador for the defence, conservation and retrieval of the mangrove ecosystem. They thus aim to guarantee the vitality of the mangroves and other related ecosystems, and of the populations whose livelihoods depend on them, in the face of threats and negative impacts of activities that degrade the environment. The organization congregates more than twenty community groups and associations of shell-fish gatherers and artisan fisherpeople, federations and environmental and social NGOs.

<http://www.ccondem.org.ec/>

Project promoters began collecting, recovering and cataloguing information in 2004. In August of 2005, we made our first Power Point presentation about mangrove swamps during a training and exchange meeting with the communities. This process of work and project promotion is being carried out both in the North and South of the province of Esmeraldas, Ecuador. In the North, efforts center around revitalizing clam production, whereas in the South the initiative concentrates on community tourism.

While the exchange of knowledge and information takes place amongst communities in both sectors, the experience shared by community members and promoters in each case is unique. The goal is to gather together widely dispersed information, whether written, or in the form of testimonies, project reports, photos, videos, etc. As project promoters, we analyze and organize the information. Almost all of this information concerns community experiences, since local promoters within the organizations, associations or community groups have been writing about the situations and problems that they face. In addition, we carry out interviews with people.

As a result, the information being exchanged is drawn both from the process of systematizing information, and from what the communities directly tell us about. Overall, we aim to present proposals about how to improve the standard of living in these communities.

Community tourism

One of our proposals is a community tourism plan that was developed in cooperation with a community located in the south of Esmeraldas. Putting this plan into action involves two key steps:

1. Site visits

First, Visits were made to communities in which tourism is desired, in order to identify their tourist potential. In particular, visits were made to Bilsa, Muisne Island, and Mompiche, as well as to other communities that have joined the community tourism plan and have committed to develop it.

2. Workshops

The workshops are intended for the community members, including the local authorities, groups or associations, schools and the general population. They draw on technical know-how, taking into consideration additional inputs and advice needed for the project's implementation, as well as what resources are available locally. In this way technical and ancestral knowledge are brought together, with the objective of cooperating with members of the local community.

Renewal of fish, shellfish and crustacean populations for community benefit

The main source of income for residents of the mangrove swamps comes from harvesting shellfish and crustaceans, especially clams and crabs, as well as from small-scale fishing. These activities have been affected by ecosystem destruction. Our proposal for northern Esmeraldas has been to improve the standard of living through the clam population recovery in areas where it has been depleted. The plan is assisted by community-set fishing limits, determining appropriate harvest size utilizing three processes:

1. Motivation workshops

Motivational workshops are given to the communities involved in harvesting clams regarding this resource's potential and taking into consideration necessary inputs and advice toward implementing the repopulation of the species *Anadara Similis* and *Anadara Tuberculosa*.

2. Site visits

Site visits are then made in order to select project locations, to which they later return to construct harvest pens made out of mangrove and mesh, in which clams will reproduce. This project brings together technical and ancestral knowledge.

3. Adoption of Conservation Practices

Adoption of conservation practices is achieved through ongoing control, monitoring, and methods of harvesting clams according to the community-determined limits.

Our work

Using these methods of information gathering, site-visits and workshops, we are able to develop products for the publicity and promotion of community tourism as well as for clam conservation, while simultaneously learning about the reality within these communities, the rich diversity of resources that the mangrove ecosystem has to offer, and the challenges concerning clam conservation in the face of threat from shrimp farming. The publicity campaigns are mainly targeted at universities and communities using the radio, as well as through meetings with various organizations.

When making presentations to the communities, we use Power Point, primarily utilizing images. We have realized that, in communities where reading is not customary, wordy presentations do not give good results, and in addition that images can express much more than many words. Furthermore, by using images the many illiterate people who live in the communities are not excluded. It is worth mentioning that before making each presentation, we also take a survey to find out what people prefer-whether they like photos or drawings, which colors they enjoy, etc. Using this information, we adjust the content and design of the slides. Our next step is to make a preliminary presentation to groups or associations with which we work in each community. They provide feedback and make some changes, adding details and removing others, doing whatever they think is best, because they are the ones who really know the reality of their communities and how the presenta-

tion might be received. We take their ideas to assemble the final presentation that will be made to the community at large. In this way, the local community associations validate our presentations and learn from us, as we also learn from them.

The above explains why a different presentation is made to each community, according to their tastes and shared perceptions. The presentations incorporate local terminology; for example, we use the word *parir* (to give birth) instead of the more technical term *desovar* (to lay eggs) because it is commonly expressed this way in the community. We would say: "... the animals will *give birth* in the sea..." with "*lay eggs*" in parenthesis. The same approach is used in the slides about mangrove species, with common names first and corresponding scientific names in parenthesis. Along these lines, if we ask a woman in the community to tell us which mangroves exist in the area using scientific terms, she is unable. But if we ask her for the common names, she knows them all, as well as how to distinguish each of them. Therefore, it is not that she lacks this knowledge, but rather that she is familiar with other names. This demonstrates that while there are different ways to name the same things, the knowledge is present.

The ICTs strengthen our processes

Throughout this process, we have determined that with good management of communication technologies they can be very useful. It used to be that we would arrive in the communities and provide workshops with paper handouts, and halfway through the workshop people would fall asleep. But now, with Power Point, the workshop holds their attention. As well, with these Power Point presentations we have managed to attract groups of students to visit the communities, making the problems surrounding the mangrove ecosystem more widely known even at the level of their respective communities such that the people identify more with their location, recognizing it as their own and, thus, increasing their degree of organization. It is ideal if the community members feel like they are a part of this entire effort.

Toward this end, we have provided training to people in these communities in use of computers, as well as digital video and photographic cameras. In this way, they can independently gather and describe their own experiences using Power Point. Right now, however, the limited access these communities have to electricity, as well as computers is problematic. But, it is our responsibility to share what we have learned as project promoters, since we do not stay in the communities for a long period of time. If we give back what we have learned, they will be able to continue sharing their experiences. In fact, we have already trained 120 people and we hope that they can visit other communities, in the way that we do, to train even more. Given that writing is not a part of their culture, and that we want to avoid the loss of elders' knowledge, achieving this information is necessary in order to preserve it.

Maria Augusta Robalino, Juan Emilio Zambrano, Maximum Cangá and Maricruz Valencia are promoters of the Mangrove ICTs project, Conservation with Community Production, of C-CONDEM.