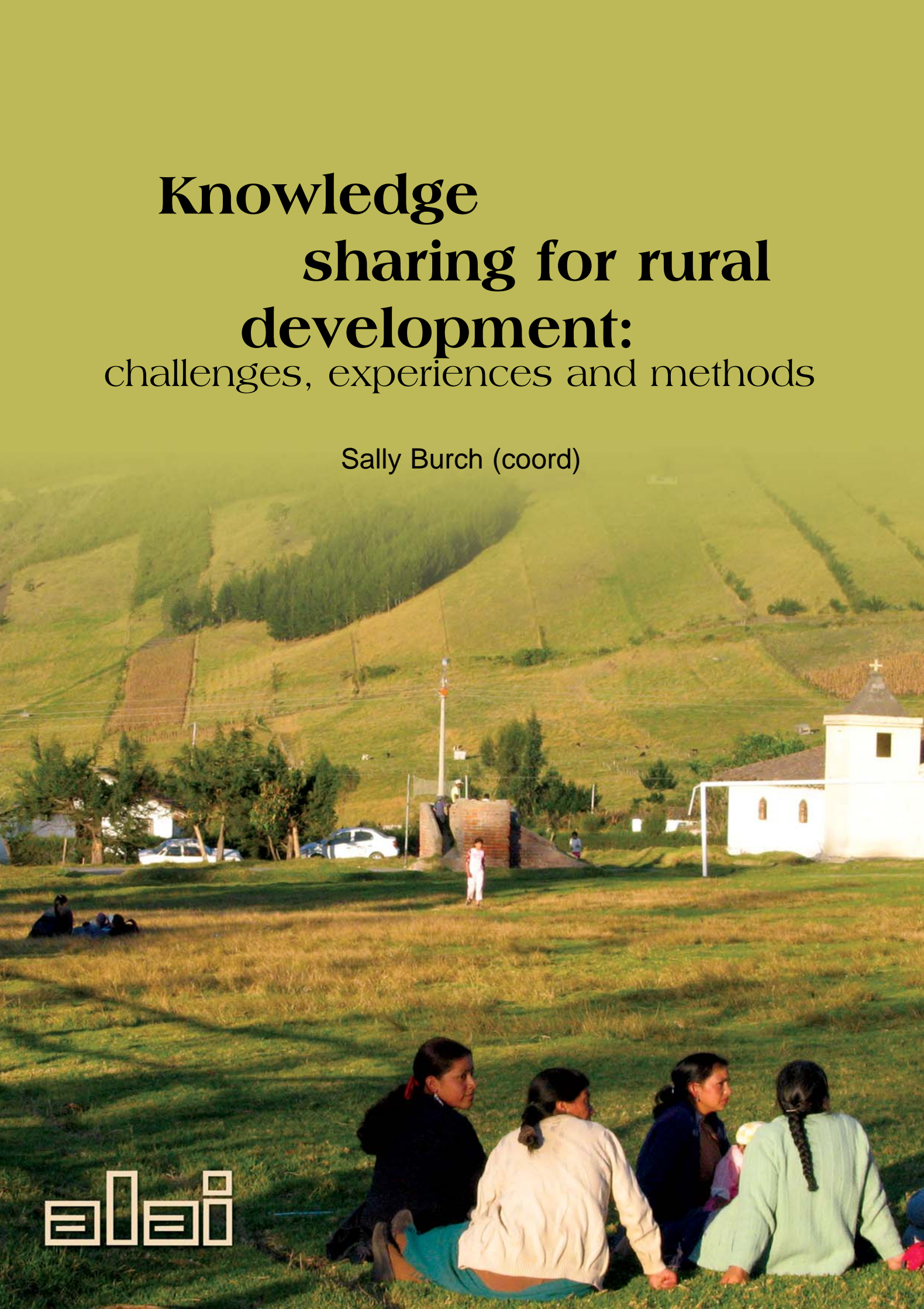


Knowledge sharing for rural development: challenges, experiences and methods

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.



Quito, May 2007

Knowledge sharing for rural development:
challenges, experiences and methods

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Children on an MST
settlement participate in
a tree planting
Brazil
VERONICA LEON

Challenges for Schooling in the Brazilian Countryside: the Experience of the MST

ALAI

Based upon a variety of sources, Brazil is one of the countries with the greatest social inequality on the planet. Large estates, known as "latifundios," form the basic fabric of this arrangement. In 1984, confronting this reality and calling for agrarian reform, the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) emerged. However, not only was the movement demanding access to land, it also called for recognition of other rights, such as rural education and culture. As an outcome of this, the MST has become a socio-cultural movement for civic education.

The Landless Workers' Movement (MST) is a people's movement, made up of rural workers and others who are fighting for agrarian reform and against injustice and social inequality in the Brazilian countryside. Currently, the MST has a presence in 24 states around the country, with around 470,000 families organized as part of its settlements and camps. Its proposal and experiences in the field of rural education and training are considered to be a model in Latin America.

By making an issue such as land concentration a national concern after years of systematic avoidance in Brazil, the MST has become an important actor for democratization in the country. Of course, it plays an unsettling role since the organization is acting on behalf of an excluded sector to make its voices heard, challenging society as it demands full citizenship for its members. As one leader within the movement notes, it is in this sense that "in order to democratize the land, we have chosen to occupy it and from this point to construct a more democratic and just society. However, we have also realized that we have to occupy the fields of knowledge and wisdom, that is to say, of education, which is the meaning behind the slogan: "land occupied is a school established."

Along with this has come the construction of schools, development of courses and work in farmer training. Twenty five thousand members of the MST have become literate and there are more than two thousand schools within the settlements, where more than one hundred and sixty thousand children and adolescents are studying under the direction of more than four thousand teachers. As an outcome of their social struggle, these schools have official state recognition as public schools. In the camps, itinerant schools have been established, which are in operation within seven states, accommodating three thousand students and three hundred and fifty educators. As well, the movement takes into particular account the political education of leaders and militant activists.

As part of this process, the MST emphasizes the importance of autonomy with regard to future planning. That is, decisions pertaining to education, writes a leader within this sector, must respond to "our reality and guide us into the future, beginning with quality education and scientific rigor. What do we need then? If we have land, if we have knowledge, if we have thousands of years of experience, it's our responsibility to have good, adequately-compensated educators, where the community is an active participant and the State fulfills its duty to guarantee our right to be educated. In fact, from the point of view of the Landless Movement, to be a member without education is unthinkable. One must complete the full training process, right up to the university level such that one understands one's role within the community and how to make productive and creative contributions as part of one's generation."

In this effort to fully train community members to be ready to participate and to forge a common destiny, it has been important to establish a bond "between social and educational production, between socio-cultural and educational dynamics, between social and pedagogical thought, and between raising awareness for rights and advancing the struggle for education, knowledge and culture," says Miguel Arroyo¹, who goes on to describe a rural socio-cultural dynamic - a pedagogical movement - in which the development of the MST is constructed as an educational subject and as an educator: "Where its existence, its struggles, its organization, its expressions, its languages and images are educational, interrogating us, shaking up our values, concepts, imagination, cultures and structures.

1 Arroyo, Miguel (2000). *Prefacio, Pedagogía do Movimento Sem Terra*, Roseli Salette Caldart, Editora Vozes, Petrópolis, p.10.

Constructing new values and knowledge, a new political culture. Training new collective subjects."

Arroyo elaborates on the dominant political and pedagogical approaches to rural education, which he says only recognize "an ignorant people who are slow to become civilized and modernized by policies from outside." However, in contrast, through the movement of the MST which grew out of "its own rural social dynamics, that it is posing new problems and lessons for pedagogical theory in favour of rural social and educational policies. It resituates the central issues that education and culture have always considered."

A new challenge: secondary education

The establishment of schools initially arose out of necessity from amongst the first families who occupied unproductive land in order to cultivate it, and whose children needed access to primary school. They understood that schools would help their communities to take root. Soon after, questions began to emerge with regard to their ideas and methodology; one of first questions that the movement formulated was: "How do we create the school that we want?".

Today a greater challenge has arisen: to make secondary education more available. Out of two thousand schools, only fifty have managed to incorporate secondary education and/or intermediate levels, such that at the moment they are addressing the needs of about three thousand students across the country. However, most young people within the settlements, who would like to further their education, are obligated to go to the city to study, following a curriculum that does not correspond to rural reality, nor to a project of social change.

In this process, community involvement in education is considered fundamental. "The settlements and camps must actively participate from the early stages of outlining the educational project, throughout the phases of improvement, to that of concrete activities. It is important to maintain a deep, ongoing dialogue between the community and its educational institutions. Schools must assist in local development, articulating its challenges and seeking concrete alternatives at the same time. On the other hand, the community needs to feel a sense of belonging over the schools, suggesting topics of community interest and being open to potential feedback. The community has the right and the duty to participate in the ongoing development of education, beginning with its pedagogical elements, and including its economic, cultural and political aspects," reads a document from the Educational Sector of the MST (Educação Fundamental, November 2004).

Agroecology-oriented education

Development and exchange of knowledge in the interest of rural community development are challenges that do not solely concern adults within the community. On the contrary, the sooner one becomes involved, the greater are the possibilities of incorporating this into daily life. In addition, youth participation is fundamental to ensure the future of

these communities and to build up internal capacity for their development.

When explaining what is meant by rural education, Matheus Fernando Mohr, an educator in one of the schools in Santa Catalina, says that: "The central issue is translated into initiatives to strengthen rural areas, such that the educational project corresponds to the necessity not only of occupying, but of remaining on the acquired land. One example of this relationship is demonstrated by agroecology, which is premised upon cooperation and collective work, and which in practice is primarily channelled and related to the work of youth within the MST. Once more, this project extends beyond rural areas, to involve urban areas and to consider their particularities."

From a methodological point of view, Mohr explains: "The importance of understanding the world of work, allied with a consideration and understanding of one's lived reality, is emphasized as part of the early education of young people, such that basic education is considered from a polytechnical perspective. This is developed with the understanding that, beyond technical skills, we need to consider various technologies and their scientific foundations which characterize the relations between techniques of production and productive processes."

To explain this further, Mohr uses as a metaphor the stages by which the Landless Movement operates, "occupy, camp, settle." He elaborates, "In order to draw lessons from reality, we must introduce various historical and scientific aspects which allow one to understand agroecological theories; or, in other words, we must "occupy" the scientific foundations of agroecology. Next, following from theoretical and practical experiences which relate to the social, historical, cultural and geographic reality, we can receive, construct, experiment and share adapted techniques, based upon what has taken place; or in other words, we "set up camp" considering the various ways to implement agroecology. Finally, based upon an analysis of the results obtained, from organization and ongoing evaluation of these results, and with the goal of reviewing these practices as necessary, we arrive at the "settlement" of agroecological practices, grounded and arranged within the social struggle and resistance of the MST."

What is the contribution of communication and information within this process? The educator recognizes that they are important components, since "...they represent an important tool in the construction of knowledge, as part of the search for means to broaden one's worldview, and to share, as much internally within the camps and settlements as externally, that which we are currently building and advancing".

However, Mohr recognizes that access to these technologies is socially conditioned and, as a result, is a right to be gained. "We have obtained certain victories in this sense: establishment of information centers, some with Internet access; a newspaper for the educational community, correspondence between regions or states and with some Spanish-speaking countries. In addition, almost every school has video facilities with which to contemplate diverse areas of knowledge." Yet, other initiatives which depend upon the political will of governments, require further political struggle, so as to obtain equipment, technologies and resources.

Intermediate level basic education in areas of agrarian reform

Landless Workers Movement, Brazil

- * We take into consideration that this is a concern for all of Brazilian society. Less than half of Brazilian young people, between the ages of 15 and 17, reach secondary school; amongst these, only about half graduate. In rural areas, the education of young people is more critical: slightly more than one fifth of young people between the ages of 15 to 17 attend secondary school. Regional differences also exist within Brazil.
- * Considering education as human development has made us reflect on the subjective role of people in the pedagogical process and on the recognition of education as a human right for all people at every stage of life. To focus on the development of subjects is to work on a human project, linked with a societal project, defining learning processes necessary for such training and considering socio-cultural bonds of the subjects and their differentiation with each phase of life.
- * Our educational proposal relates to the construction of a people's project for Brazilian agriculture, linked to a new project for a Nation founded on sovereignty and justice. This work implies a creative reevaluation of rural life and recovery of self-esteem - often times stolen from those that live and work in the countryside - and a search to overcome the contradiction between country and city, an outcome of capitalist society. This challenge leads us to participate in the development of rural education.
- * Schools, particularly those in rural areas, can be "more than schools" when they provide a socio-cultural reference point for the community, either by being involved in solving local problems, which enables students to advance their scientific knowledge, to adopt technologies and to relate learning with practical situations in everyday life, as well as for the opportunities for social exchange that schools offer, such as in recovering family history, or as a result of opportunities to learn from books, films, debates and diverse cultural experiences. These activities can also be thought of as a way to engage young people who, for one reason or another, have to study away from their home communities.
- * Considering the necessary changes to the school system, the MST has established the following primary pedagogical principles:
 - 1° - Reality as the foundation for study and creation of knowledge, and as a training ground for critical analysis, worldview formation, intellectual freedom and thoughtful examination of the various dimensions of human life.
 - 2° - Education for work and through work.
 - 3° - Participation in democratic management processes which challenge students to

learn about self-organization and construction of an educational collectivity.

4° - Collective work and ongoing training of educators.

- * Our discussion concerning basic education at the intermediate level must begin with the concrete subjects who are principally demanding this opportunity, in other words, *youth within areas of Agrarian Reform* who are part of the *rural youth*; to consider a school for youth and of youth, viewed as individuals and as collective subjects who comprise a broader social identity: that of the Landless Movement, that of farmers and of the working-class. Also, to particularly consider education for these youth who are concluding their basic education and who must have alternatives for ongoing studies without needing to leave rural areas.
- * We consider that intermediate level basic education is, in fact, "basic" element of training for youth. One of its prime goals is to develop and to formulate in youth a *worldview*, articulated in *values and identities* which are adopted in this phase of life. In order to develop a critical and creative perspective of the world, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of scientific theory and practice, which allow one to understand the social, economic, political and cultural development of society, nature and various dimensions of human life. School helps to establish this foundation when it is able to link the processes of adoption and production of knowledge - the basic aspects of academic education - to issues in "real life"; in other words, to the world of work, culture, political participation, interpersonal relationships and, in the particular case of our youth, to the specific social struggle which they are inheriting or of which they are already a part.
- * It also implies the construction of methodologies and pedagogies which permit a real articulation of the relationships between general and specific knowledge, between science, technology and techniques, taking into consideration concrete reality as an object for the creation of knowledge and social engagement to be shaped by youth. In our case then, it is necessary to ensure that there is an organic relationship between the academic curriculum and key aspects of project development within the settlements, which in the present debates of the MST, give high-priority to cooperation and agroecology, with a clear need to specifically discuss the role of youth in their implementation.
- * Organizational and pedagogical design of schools which enables the implementation of this concept of "secondary education," must fundamentally include a combination of *processes of participative management* (which include the self-organization of students, as well as the relationship of the school with the system of organization, the development project of the settlement and cooperation from the youth within the Landless Movement); *involvement in productive processes* with links to production, as well as to cultural and organizational activities of the settlement, and to the struggles of the social movement; *practices of living together* which cultivate

values and humanitarian interpersonal relationships; and an *organization of studies* which favors academic integration, respect, value for diverse knowledge systems and an understanding of the relationship between knowledge, work, culture and social struggles.

Excerpts of the Final Document from the First National Seminar on Intermediate Level Basic Education in the Area of Agrarian Reform, Luziânia/GO, September 18-22, 2006. (Translation by ALAI.)