

Learning and Building Knowledge for Development

(Article submitted for publication in CCIC's *Au Courant* newsletter, November/December of 2003.)

By Philippa Wiens

“How can we capture what we have learned from our experiences? What are we learning? What has worked, and what has not? How can we use our knowledge to influence policies that support sustainable development?” These are questions being asked by ANAFAE, an association of over 30 NGO's working to promote ecological agricultural practices among small farmers (women and men) in Honduras. The work of these NGO's has been important in a country of 6.5 million people which has been plagued by ecological disasters (Hurricane Mitch in 1998 being the latest of these hits) that have been magnified by the country's extreme ecological vulnerability, resulting in part from high rates of deforestation and heavy soil erosion.

Farmers and ANAFAE members have built up a significant body of experience about sustainable agricultural practices. ANAFAE members are starting to ask themselves how they might learn from this experience, to share this learning more broadly, and to influence government policy to support these practices.

Last September, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) launched “Building Learning Systems for Honduran Development”. This project is working with Southern partners such as ANAFAE to strengthen their capacity to learn, to generate and to share knowledge, and to apply this knowledge to influence appropriate interventions for sustainable rural development in Honduras. The working assumption of the project is that development practice drawing on learning from past experiences and input of all relevant stakeholders will be more effective in meeting the needs of vulnerable populations. Operating principles of the project include promoting the use of participatory and multi-stakeholder research and learning processes, and facilitating broad-based dialogue and collaborative learning among civil society actors, government and the donor community.

The Framework

How have we been working to strengthen partners' capacity for learning and generating knowledge to influence development practice in Honduras? The project has focused on three broad areas of activity. Each area of activity responds to existing needs, and addresses a series of challenges for building capacity among partners for learning.

These three interrelated components are:

- *Learning*
- *Knowledge sharing*
- *Knowledge application*

Learning refers to activities that support partners to become learning organizations. To date, this has involved supporting partners in the development of tools, mechanisms and processes for reflection and learning within their institutions, organizations and networks, so that partners are capturing and generating knowledge from past and current experiences (including lessons learned from these experiences), and sharing this knowledge and learning with each other. Over the long-term, the full integration of these learning processes will imply a significant re-orientation in how partner organizations function, as learning is drawn into the heart of their work and can better serve as the basis upon which decisions and planning are undertaken.

This work has been challenging in a context where there is little pro-active sharing of information and knowledge, where organizations are often operating in crisis response mode, time and money resources are scarce, and research capacity is often weak. A solid foundation for integrating processes favouring on-going learning and knowledge generation is missing. There is a first-level need to support the development of *capacity* to learn and to generate knowledge.

Knowledge sharing refers to activities which promote mechanisms for *sharing* relevant development knowledge, both within and between institutions, organizations, and networks. It is this facet of the framework that speaks most directly to the project's intention of promoting broad-based dialogue and collaborative learning among actors in Honduras.

Experience to date suggests that constant staff turnover, corruption, unequal power relations, and a closed political climate all contribute significantly to inhibiting the development of an environment of openness to information sharing and knowledge.

In this context, the challenge is to support the development of effective and regular knowledge-sharing practices (particularly face-to-face activities such as workshops, seminars and round-table discussions). Ideally, these practices promote the development of *collective knowledge* based on the aggregate learning of a diversity of actors. These same practices can also serve as an effective tool for promoting collaboration between civil society actors, government representatives and the donor community.

Knowledge application refers to the *application of learning and knowledge* by partners to inform action within their immediate area of practice, and to use this knowledge to engage policy-makers and to influence the broader agenda and national-level strategies for sustainable development in Honduras.

This facet of the project addresses the difficult issue of promoting interventions which draw upon and validate knowledge from those most directly affected by development interventions. It speaks directly to the issue of power: *whose* knowledge “filters through” to inform policy and action; *who* translates this knowledge “on behalf of others”; and how inclusive are the policy-making and implementation processes themselves. It speaks to the *process* of capturing collective knowledge based on the development experiences of a diversity of actors (including the women and men of local communities) to inform

the national-level strategies which are intended to respond to the needs of low-income rural communities in Honduras.

Significant challenges include the lack of policy-engagement capacity among civil society organizations; the need for “packaging” knowledge in ways appropriate to policy-makers; and an overall political context often hostile to active civil society engagement.

A focus on learning

In the twelve months since this project began, activities have focused on the first facet of the framework: strengthening partners’ capacities to learn and to generate knowledge. It has been the necessary starting point of our work. A critical aspect of this work has been the search for appropriate entry points which *build upon existing activity and interest* for learning.

To date, two key entry points have been:

- ***The introduction of a learning approach to Monitoring and Evaluation (M & E):***

The introduction of M & E as a participatory tool for learning has been well received in a context where M & E has often been dominated by a negatively-regarded, non-participatory, and highly judgemental approach. The Project’s activities have focused on encouraging different attitudes towards M & E (its need, purpose, and use) and on the introduction of participatory methodologies for learning.

- ***“Systematization”: Building on local practices for capturing lessons learned from past development projects.***

“Systematization”, a popular concept and practice in Honduras, denotes a process of analyzing project experiences and capturing lessons learned in order to apply these lessons to future development initiatives. The concept and practice offers much potential as a tool for learning. To date, however, the practice has fallen short of reaching its potential.

The project has focused on working with partners to enhance systematization practices through the use of a more rigorous research approach and the use of participatory methodologies inclusive of all groups of actors involved in the experience being analyzed. The project has also involved partners in developing more effective mechanisms for disseminating the information and lessons learned from this analysis, to encourage the sharing of this knowledge beyond the parameters of the immediate project and institution.

Both M & E and systematization have involved a process of introducing partners to tools and mechanisms which build upon, and, ultimately transform, existing practices, in order to “deepen” the learning potential of these practices.

A key aspect of the project's learning activities has been the introduction of *participatory methodologies* as a central component of partner learning practices and processes. Past IDRC experiences with participatory methodologies suggest that the use of participatory methodologies can serve as an important vehicle for addressing the issue of *whose* knowledge (i.e. whose experiences and from whose perspective) is being captured, built-upon, and conveyed to policy makers. Participatory methods have also demonstrated the potential to be an effective tool for bridging the knowledge gap between actors at the field-level and development NGOs who are trying to represent these voices. They also raise key political issues as to how people living in poverty participate in complex policy decision making that directly affect their livelihoods and future. Several partners have expressed a profound awareness of and concern for the difficulty of bridging this gap.

What kind of learning?

In these early stages of the work of the IDRC project, our starting point has been to build on current understandings of learning. Presently, it is an instrumental approach to learning that resonates most strongly with partners, as reflected in current understandings, practices and institutional constraints to learning.

A significant challenge for the project is to encourage practices whereby learning activity moves from being an add-on activity to being an integral aspect of institutional functioning and development practice. It is the challenge of moving learning beyond the limited activity of capturing and disseminating lessons learned from a specific project experience, to the establishment of regular and on-going processes of learning and knowledge sharing among colleagues and other actors, which inform all facets of their work. It is the challenge of moving learning into the "heart" of development practice.

Where do we go from here?

As we continue to try to bring learning into the heart of development practice, we are faced with the on-going challenges presented by an environment which does not place a high value on learning activities, where partners are squeezed for time and resources, where research capacity is weak, where there is little sharing of information and knowledge, and where inclusive decision-making processes, at all levels, is not the norm.

In the early phases of this work we are engaging with partners about learning, and strengthening their capacity to implement learning methodologies. To what extent this will translate into shared learning, collective development of knowledge, and application of this knowledge for development (on the ground and in policy) remains to be seen. Ultimately, it is our hope that the "Building Learning Systems for Honduran Development" project will contribute to inclusive, broad-based dialogue and that collaborative learning will become regular and normal aspects of development practice in Honduras.

The IDRC "Building Learning Systems for Honduran Development" Project is working in partnership with CIDA's Pro-Mesas pilot program to implement new ways of 'doing'

development in Honduras, as per CIDA's new aid effectiveness policies. The IDRC Project will be funded over five years by CIDA.

Philippa Wiens is a member of the IDRC Honduras Program team. She is based in Ottawa.