



FIDAMERICA



**Institutionalizing Learning
in Rural Poverty Alleviation Initiatives**

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Enero, 2006

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Executive Summary

This document describes an approach for improving the learning capacity of rural development initiatives focused on poverty reduction. It is based on work undertaken with a selected number of projects supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in Latin America and the Caribbean and builds on work with systematization methodology undertaken with PREVAL. From 2002 – 2005 16 IFAD projects in 11 countries were accompanied with varying degrees of intensity and success in undertaking systematic learning efforts around themes or questions of core concern. The basic approach consists of five phases:

1. Laying the basis
2. Identifying themes and questions
3. Systematization of experiences, analysis and documentation
4. Communication and socialization; and
5. Institutionalization of lessons learnt.

Each of these five phases are discussed in terms of the main objectives, expected outputs, problematic aspects to consider and participation. The document concludes with observations about the conditions needed for effective learning in rural development initiatives, and a short discussion of issues that have proven particularly important to consider in the process.

1 Introduction

Poverty reduction is a complex task that requires tackling issues of power imbalances, limited economic opportunities and long term capacity-building to ensure good governance, reduce inequity, improve well being and incomes and deal with sustainability threats. Most projects funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) deal with contextually specific poverty phenomena and processes. This requires project participants¹ to adapt theoretical ideas about poverty reduction to suit their situation and to innovate continually. Not surprisingly, solutions for the complex environmental, poverty and democracy challenges they face very often emerge from the trial-and-error of project experiences.

Tapping into the analytical potential of IFAD project staff is critical – they form a key source of institutional innovation. A growing trend has been to ask such professionals to produce ‘lessons learned’ and to document ‘best practices’, and therefore, to make their projects into active learning initiatives.

IFAD has stressed its ongoing commitment to improved knowledge management and learning that is centered on projects. It seeks to gather insights about a selection of key themes² from practical project experiences and use them to shape new policies, projects, procedures and practices - as well as to improve the performance and impact of the project that generated the insights in the first place. This concern is not about knowledge for knowledge sake but about seeking insights to improve their actions, either immediately, in next phases of funding or more generally within the area of poverty reduction. The assumption is that, in so doing, IFAD’s funding will not only have local impact but can also add value to the thinking on poverty reduction.

By implication, IFAD projects should be judged, at least in part, by how well they identify lessons from projects, synthesize these lessons at a regional level and use them to make a relevant contribution to improved knowledge, policy and, above all, practice in the field of poverty reduction and sustainable rural development.

However, more critical than learning as a performance criterion is the emphasis in this paper on the need to organize IFAD projects in ways to make this learning³ process explicit and effective. Experiences with implementing a

¹ The term “project participants” includes not only the staff in the project management and implementing units, but also co-implementing organizations, rural grassroots organizations, NGOs, perhaps municipal governments and other local level agencies, and governmental organizations such as Ministries of Agriculture. In this paper, it is a term that refers to the set of organization and groups directly engaged in the implementation of the project.

² Priority themes in the 2002-2006 Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Strategy were: rural financial services, decentralization and capacity-building, market development of services for the rural poor, indigenous people, and access to dynamic regional and international markets.

³ In this paper, learning focuses around the process of generating knowledge from project experience and using it to improve future action. It could be called ‘action learning’ or ‘experiential learning’.

program or project must be used to generate understanding and lessons learned that improves ongoing implementation and makes a contribution to a wider body of knowledge. Learning from action does not happen by accident – it needs to be planned for in project design, in staff job requirements, in the cycle of meetings and reflections, in the general project culture, and so forth. Like many development projects, most IFAD projects are not designed to be action learning processes. The challenge, therefore, is how to promote, design and conduct learning processes within organizations and project activities that have not been designed with this purpose in mind.

Between 2002 and 2005, as part of the work of the FIDAMERICA Regional Network⁴ the authors of this paper undertook work with staff from 16 IFAD projects in 11 Latin American and Caribbean countries (see Table 1) facilitating systematic learning efforts around themes or questions of core concern to project participants. This work built strongly on earlier work by FIDAMERICA and on ongoing collaborative work with PREVAL, in particular on developing methods and building capacity for systematization of rural development experiences.

Using a common framework known as '*Aprendizaje y Gestión de Conocimiento*' (AGC – Learning and Knowledge Management), we accompanied projects with varying degrees of intensity and varying learning outcomes. In some cases, the AGC concept was added to existing learning processes, in others it has remained more of a one-off effort, and with one project we were unable to move past the initial steps.

AGC, as we initially defined it in 2002, consisted of a six stage process:

1. Development experiences;
2. Identifying critical themes and formulating questions;
3. Systematizing development experiences;
4. Analyzing to identify lessons that can be generalized for wider use;
5. Documentation of the learning process and its results;
6. Institutionalizing lessons learned (socializing, capacity-building, norms, incentives).

In April 2004, we revised our original AGC concept to a five stage process (see Figure 1), to incorporate the realities we experienced in the projects with which we had interacted. Thus this paper represents a tested and revised understanding of 'learning' in the context of IFAD projects.

⁴ FIDAMERICA is a regional learning network funded by IFAD and coordinated by Rimisp-Latin American Center for Rural Development (www.rimisp.org).

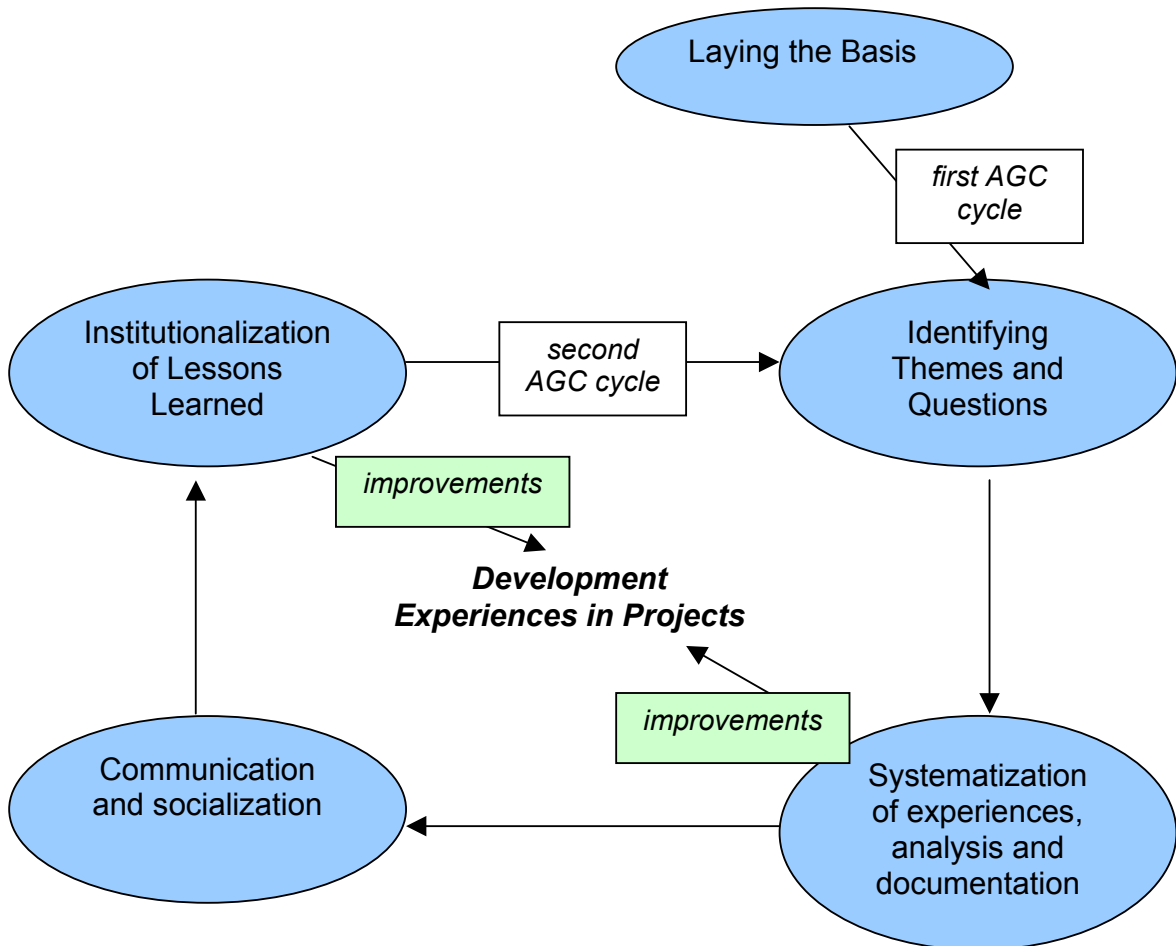
Table 1. IFAD projects involved in the AGC initiative

<i>Project and Country</i>	<i>Involved with AGC since</i>
CORREDOR CUSCO-PUNO, Peru	2002
DOM HELDER, Brazil	2003
FAT, Nicaragua	2002
HULE, Mexico	2003
PADEMER, Colombia	2002
PRODAP II, El Salvador	2002
PRODECOP, Venezuela	2002
PRODERCO, Honduras	2002
PRODERQUI, Guatemala	2004
PRODEVER, Guatemala	2004
PRONADEL, Honduras	2002
PROPESUR, Dominican Republic	2003
PROSALAFSA, Venezuela	2004
PROSOC, Honduras	2002
TRIPLE C, Panama	2002
URUGUAY RURAL, Uruguay	2004

Our purpose in this paper is to provide a methodological summary of the AGC concept and practice, as implemented in a particular type of rural development context, namely that of IFAD projects. These poverty-reduction efforts have certain features that affect their capacity to learn based on the AGC concept (see section 4 below). IFAD projects are:

- government-based and therefore embedded in existing government and political systems, cultures and procedures;
- focused on rural households and regions of extreme poverty, often with strong incentives from the project's beneficiaries and its institutional environment, to project staff to deliver fast and concrete solutions and not 'waste' time on processes that do not clearly lead in this direction;
- involve a significant amount of money – around \$10 to \$25 million dollar loans;
- longer term than the usual 3 year time horizon of projects, stretching to 6 or 7 years;
- multi-component (typically including financial services, technical advisory services, support to rural organizations, training and capacity-building, and small-scale infrastructure);
- complex in terms of the range of issues they are seeking to address; and
- not action learning focused by nature.

Figure 1. The Five Phases of the AGC Process



We hope this paper will inspire others who are already active with systematic learning and knowledge management initiatives or those keen to try this to improve the critical and reflective capacity of their rural development initiatives. Thus we anticipate the ideas in this paper to be of particular use to project directors/coordinators (NGOs and governmental), facilitators/consultants, leaders of rural organizations, and to the Regional Networks analogous to FIDAMERICA that IFAD is supporting in West Africa (FIDAFRIQUE), Asia (ENRAP), and North Africa and the Near East (KariaNet)

The paper begins by describing the importance of ‘learning’ as a conscious process in rural development initiatives, before describing in detail how we implemented the AGC concept in different contexts. We discuss the organizational conditions that appear critical for effective learning and highlight a number of key issues that require special attention. The paper is illustrated with examples from the different IFAD projects with whom we were privileged to work, to which we are grateful for the collective ideas discussed here.

2 Why Learning Matters in IFAD's Rural Development Initiatives

“Improving the performance and sustainability of IFAD's projects demands a sustained effort of organizational learning. In today's world it is no longer possible for an institution to remain effective if its main resources and capabilities are not continually reinforced. Knowledge is the main strategic resource of institutions involved in the complex task of reducing rural poverty. Learning organizations are those that organize systematic processes aimed at improving the quality and pertinence of their knowledge base to enhance their understanding of the context in which they operate, all with the purpose of applying this strategic resource to the task of making difficult strategic decisions.” (IFAD 2002)

IFAD has invested over US\$ 1.1 billion in rural development in Latin America and the Caribbean between 1978 and 2002. To ensure that the rural poor benefit optimally from this investment, it is continuously seeking new ways to combat rural poverty. Innovation is essential for overcoming problems with existing poverty reduction strategies and to deal with new problems that emerge. Prevention of the mechanical applications of limited or inadequate strategies is also important, as is not wasting time multiple reinventions of the wheel. Thus, despite being geographically separate, and subject to specific economic, cultural, political and environmental contexts, the sharing of IFAD project experiences is potentially a rich source of finding and spreading innovation in relation to their common goal of poverty reduction.

Learning must occur at the fundamental level of individual projects. It is here that “the interaction with rural poverty, its causes, dynamics, and consequences takes place, and where strategies and interventions are designed and managed to reduce poverty” (IFAD 2002).

2.1 Experiential Knowledge

One main source of knowledge at this level, on which the AGC concept is based, is ‘experiential knowledge’. Such knowledge constitutes the insights emerging from the daily practice of those involved in poverty reduction initiatives. Often, learning processes are not explicit in project processes; such knowledge remains ‘tacit’ (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Although tacit knowledge is made visible through individual capacities and competencies, people often have difficulty articulating this type of knowledge. For them, tacit knowledge is often not recognized as possibly being of value to others or not common knowledge to others as well. As tacit experiential knowledge also consists of an individual's mental models of reality, articulating experiential knowledge will also require clarifying the underlying perceptions of how and why ‘things work’.

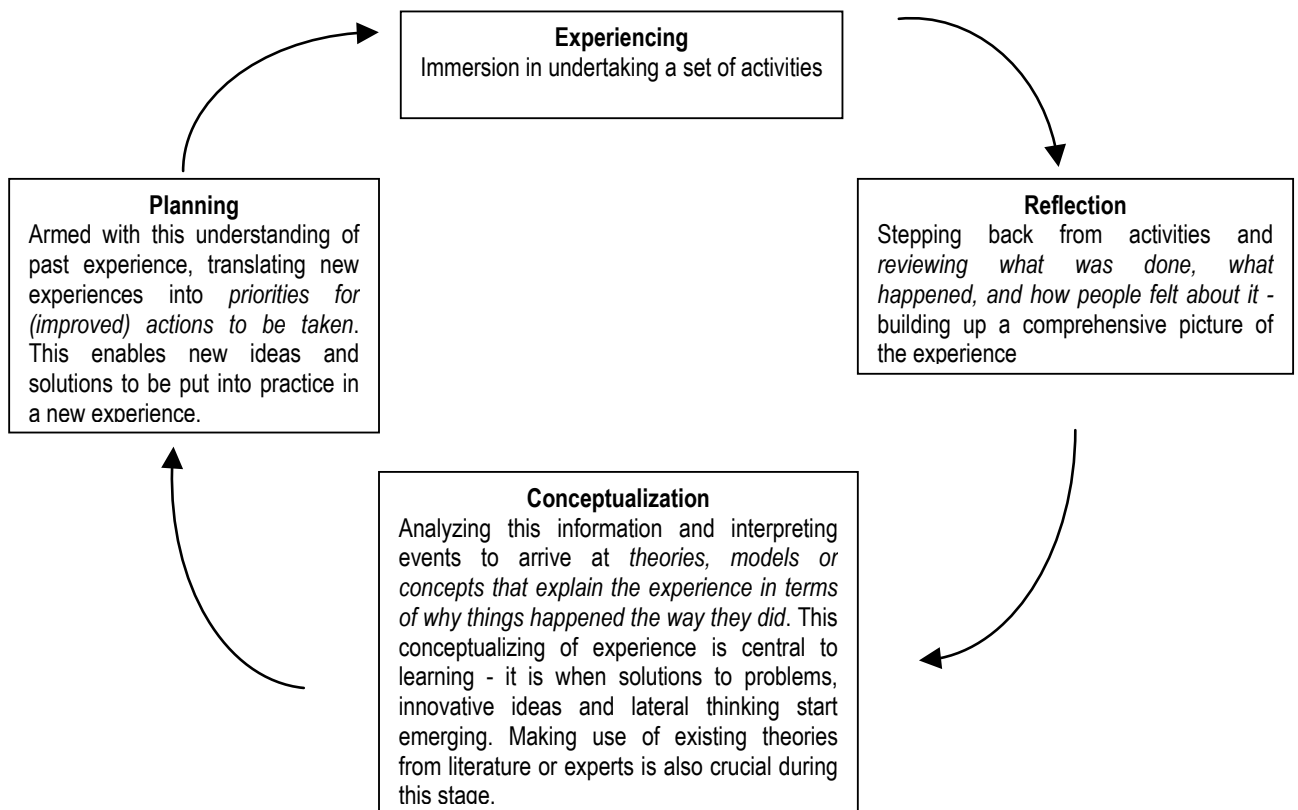
David Kolb (1984) has explained how experiential learning works that enables tacit knowledge to become explicit and understandable for others. This is based

on an understanding that knowledge as continually being ‘constructed’⁵ through complex social processes as individuals interact with each other and their environment. So knowledge is placed firmly within the knowers and their contexts. In our case, the knowers are IFAD project participants who use their experiences as the basis for generating new insights.

An ‘experiential learning’ view of knowledge sees those involved in a project as needing to create knowledge appropriate to their own situation by integrating and internalizing existing, formal knowledge with an understanding of their own specific context and reflection on their own experiences.

According to Kolb’s theory, learning from experiences involves a four-stage cyclical process (Figure 2). An individual or group must engage in each stage of the cycle in order to learn effectively from their experience(s). The cycle starts with an individual’s or group’s experiences of events. But these experiences alone do not lead to learning.

Figure 2. Experiential Learning as a Four Stage Cycle



⁵ Knowledge is not seen as truths about an external reality but rather as the negotiated understanding that individuals and communities use to make sense of their worlds and to take effective action.

Of course, learning occurs in every single project. But usually, learning is crisis-driven, by unconscious trial-and-error efforts, and not shared among all project participants who are essential for ensuring impact. Usually only stages 1 and 2 of Kolb's learning cycle occur, leading to ongoing errors. Thinking about a project with Kolb's four stages in mind can greatly help to improve existing learning processes. It can help avoid costly errors and speed up the development of effective innovations that lead to greater relevance, efficiency, and ultimately impact.

The experiential learning cycle can lead to what we call 'institutionalizing learning' if the following occurs:

1. Practice-based findings, recommendations and lessons learned are extracted from the (comparative) analysis of local development experiences;
2. These are then used to improve the quality of people's work in the project (and perhaps elsewhere in the IFAD system);
3. Identifies which capacities need revising, strengthening or creating, as lessons often indicate existing gaps in this area.
4. Leads to changes in project concepts, methods, procedures, norms, rules and incentive systems (and perhaps elsewhere in the IFAD system).

However, certainly in the context of most IFAD projects – with large geographic scales, many diverse groups and interests, and a range of activities – such experience-based learning needs to be designed, facilitated, implemented and followed up. To be effective, learning must be viewed as a structured process that requires dedicated planning and management within an organization.

2.2 Clarifying Experiential Learning for IFAD Projects

To ensure clarity about the focus of AGC, three aspects of experiential learning merit some attention:

1. how M&E links to AGC-type learning;
2. the kind of learning we are *not* talking about; and
3. nested learning.

How M&E links to AGC-type learning

Two frequent questions of project staff when first exposed to the idea of the AGC learning cycle is 'Is AGC different from M&E?' and 'If they are different, how do they link?'. The answers are: yes, they are different and yet they are closely related. While AGC and M&E processes use information on results, their purpose, focus and rhythm differs.

Monitoring and evaluation focus on the results related to the intended goals of the project. Evaluations happen sporadically (typically only twice in the lifetime of an IFAD project) and focus on five important standard questions: relevance,

efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. Monitoring systems focus on tracking progress towards *intended* goals. Neither of these processes encompasses questions and dilemmas that emerge during the implementation of activities.

Furthermore, almost no M&E system is guided by questions set by project participants and which are renewed after a learning cycle. M&E systems are designed to have a long shelf life and to provide standardized information over a long period of time. Indicators are usually not updated or changed, unless project goals or results are modified.

AGC aims at retrieving knowledge about the processes of implementing strategies. The learning cycle of AGC focuses on questions that emerge from practice, assumptions that underpin the strategy and about which some doubts might emerge, new areas of activity that have popped up in the course of the project and about which ideas are not fully formed. The regular renewing of questions allows AGC to offer project participants the timely opportunity to examine critical topics. Table 2 gives some ideas about the types of questions that an AGC process provides an opportunity to examine.

During the systematization phase, solid use should and will be made of any monitoring information and evaluation reports that might exist. Information on results will be used in both M&E and AGC. But for AGC, this use will focus on the themes and questions identified as particularly relevant at that moment in time for ensuring project impact. Furthermore, a systematization process will require additional collection of information, such as about the operational difficulties and dilemmas that project participants encountered.

Hence a separate but complementary investment of resources, time and focused information collection must be made for a learning cycle along the lines of AGC to complement the information flow produced by M&E systems and processes.

The kind of 'learning' not central to AGC

Clearly we are not talking about the transfer of an existing idea, which is more in line with teaching of know-how. Such capacity-building efforts are often important components of IFAD projects but do not constitute new learning based on project experiences. For example, training courses for community groups on how to manage micro-credit activities can be updated by reflections on what has worked well and what has failed in the past – and in that sense experiential learning is a source of insights to improve capacity-building efforts, an option we recognize in the institutionalization phase of AGC (see section 3.5).

Second, we are not dealing with *anticipatory learning* that uses scenarios of possible futures to anticipate problems and opportunities and plan strategies to deal with them pro-actively. The AGC concept offers an approach for *retrospective learning*, which focuses on making sense of past actions and detailing lessons that can shape the next improved iteration of poverty reduction

strategies. Thus information from monitoring systems and (mid-term) evaluations become important sources of information for the analysis.

A third type of learning we are not talking about, but is complementary to project-based learning, is that of sharing of lessons learned among projects. Such sharing requires an interpretation of what is meaningful for projects in other contexts. It is an example of 'nested learning', see next section.

Nested learning

For project-focused learning to have a value outside the project context, follow-up activities are needed after experience-based insights have been identified and documented. In addition, the experiences of project participants need to be enriched by other experiences and information external to their specific project. One clear example of how this mutually enriching flow of information occurs is that of the bi-annual 'Meetings of Innovation and Learning to Eliminate Rural Poverty' organized by FIDAMERICA and other IFAD-supported projects and programs, and attended by representatives of most IFAD projects in Latin America and the Caribbean. Only by investing in project-based learning is there something of potential interest to others to share at such events - and thus contribute to inter-project learning.

The AGC work is part of a larger set of activities by FIDAMERICA to stimulate and facilitate knowledge processes at a regional level (Latin America and the Caribbean) with the participation of a number of IFAD-supported rural development projects. As a learning network FIDAMERICA supports learning and knowledge management processes focused on five priority themes⁶. The results and products of within-project AGC work are inputs of the region-wide, inter-project learning processes. For example, many projects share similar development components. 'Financial services for the rural poor' is a good example. After completing about 14 systematizations in several projects and a panel that discussed the topic in a meeting in Lima, FIDAMERICA held an electronic conference with more than 1000 participants. After that, a consultant was contracted to analyze the 14 cases, the e-conference conclusions and the state of the art on financial services for rural poor. The results are used to inform the individual projects as well as IFAD as an organization (to improve project design) and other private and public organizations involved in rural development in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Hence the five phase AGC model is nested in a more general model of a learning system that aims to reach more universally valid and relevant conclusions and lessons learned, but always based on particular intervention processes linked to the real world of rural poor.

⁶ These are: market access, financial services for the rural poor, development of markets for technical services that are inclusive of the rural poor, indigenous peoples, good governance and decentralization.

Project-specific experience is not the only knowledge source that feeds learning among project participants. Much relevant knowledge on key rural development topics is produced elsewhere. Accessing this information must be explicitly incorporated in the design of a project level learning system. All good quality and applicable information on the topic in question must be considered to strengthen the basis for deciding which improvements to the intervention process are worthwhile and which are not. This external information should be taken into account when deciding what is going to be institutionalized. Sections 3.3 and 3.5 deal with this issue in more detail

2.3 The Focus of Learning – and Expected Results

In our work with the IFAD projects, a wide range of learning questions and themes were identified (see Table 2). Some focused on assessing the impact of specific methodologies on gender relations, while others were broader questions to understand success factors and obstacles in certain cases: ‘What seemed to make the difference?’. Some themes were internal-focused and operational, aiming to understand how project procedures could be improved, and others questioned deep underlying principles in the project strategy.

Table 2. Diversity of learning focus

IFAD Project	Themes	Learning questions	Lessons and project improvements
PROSOC, Honduras	<p>1. Family-to-family technology transfer</p> <p>2. The community capitalization process</p>	<p>1. What are the effects on intra-family relations of implementing the FAPRIN methodology?</p> <p>2. Has the Communal Management Committee (CMC) improved and made fund transfers to the Segua community faster and more efficient?</p>	<p>1. The FAPRIN approach has introduced technical change and has improved human and family relationships. A delivery gender focus will improve the FAPRIN effect on intra-family relations.</p> <p>2. The CMC did improve efficiency in fund disbursement but it is subject to capacity-building through training and technical support. The involvement of other organizations, such as on rural credit, may stimulate extra social participation and financial rationalization.</p>
PROSALAFA, Venezuela	Supporting and strengthening community organizations	What are factors affected the outcomes of the Buena Siembra Cooperative in the State of Lara?	Community organizations can be constructed on social solidarity and common needs. However, other services, such as rural credit

			and a marketing strategy supported by the project, are key factors to strengthening social-based organizations.
FAT- Nicaragua	The negotiation processes and the agreement between farmers and technical service providers	Who defines the needs for non-financial services in rural communities that operate in a competitive market system - and how is this defined?	To improve the definition of technical service needs, two elements need to be considered: (1) avoid price-related incentives for specific services, except when aiming to scale up a certain kind of support; and (2) information and confidence are two necessary elements to define non-financial service agreements - and therefore must get project support.
PRODAP II - El Salvador	The processes of organizational strengthening in the execution of infrastructure projects	Which conditions are needed for community-level infrastructure investments to contribute to organizational strengthening?	The project must ensure that community organizations operate with a minimum level of internal democratic process and that they have some basic experience, norms and rules before asking of them high levels of human, financial and material investment.
CUSCO- PUNO, Peru	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Impacts of the transfer of funds to Andean communities 2. Effectiveness of empowerment strategies 3. Relationship between project targeting and impact 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the organizational effects of the transfer of funds to Andean communities for technical assistance and training? 2. How effectively are the local organizations managing their contracts with their Technical Advisors? 3. Is there a trade off between targeting the project on the poorest of the poor and meeting the project's objectives in terms of improving rural financial and technical assistance markets as a means to reduce poverty? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Changes in the strategy used to transfer funds for Andean communities 2. Recognition of the need to strengthen the capacities of the local organizations and development and implementation of specific processes to do so 3. Revision of targeting criteria and modification of strategies and procedures in several of the project's components
URUGUAY RURAL	The functioning of decentralizing certain aspects of the project	What elements ensure that decentralized decision-making components/aspects function adequately?	For decentralization to be effective, the project must not only transfer functions but also human and financial resources

Learning can occur and be facilitated at different levels. One way to imagine this is in terms of the intervention logic, which identifies the activities needed to achieve specific results and how these results will help achieve the overall project goal:

- *Activities- or method-focused learning* will be more frequent and the derived lessons may be more context-specific. For example, “How can we simplify the ‘Business Plans’ that the local organizations need to develop in order to access to the services of the project?”
- *Results-focused learning* is likely to be less frequent as this relates to ‘higher-order’ theories about how activities are supposed to lead to change. The derived lessons may be more generally relevant. For example, “What can the project do to stimulate and increase the rate of savings in the local Savings-and-Loans clubs?”
- *Goal-oriented learning* will be even less frequent, as it will be the result of a series of linked activities and their results, and lessons may be relevant at even higher levels (beyond the specific context). For example, “What critical changes need to be made in the core project strategy in order to enhance and speed its impact without sacrificing the mandate to focus on the ‘poorest of the poor’?”

For each of these types of levels, lessons can focus on underlying assumptions or on more operational aspects.

A. Questions that enable testing of underlying project assumptions

Any development intervention is based on a theory of action. This is a set of assumptions that describes what project staff think will happen if they undertake an activity or set of activities. For example, agricultural development projects often train farmers as tractor drivers and mechanics. Staff assume – their theory of action – that this will support agricultural intensification. The theory may be confirmed, but it may also happen, as it often does, that many of the new mechanics use their new skill as the ticket to migrate to the city. If this happens and project staff question their theory of action, then they may be able to develop a new strategy and sets of activities that is more likely to lead to the intended development goal.

A theory of action may be more or less tacit or explicit and may draw on formalized or on ‘everyday’ knowledge or both. Consequently the intervention is based on many assumptions about cause and effect relationships that will to varying degrees be made explicit (see Box 1). For example, project staff who involve local people in micro-credit groups make many assumptions about how people will behave if they are given joint responsibility for this collective financial opportunity on which they depend. If assumptions are correct, then results are more likely to fulfill expectations.

Box 1. Examples of IFAD Projects Questioning Strategic Assumptions

- In Cusco Peru, one fundamental assumption underlying the project strategy was that targeting the 'poorest of the poor' was completely compatible with working on developing rural financial and technical services markets. The project questioned this key assumption and concluded that they needed to reformulate their theory of action, for example, by redesigning their strategies and developing indicators to closely monitor trade-offs that might be occurring between targeting a certain economic group and having a certain economic impact.
- In FAT - Nicaragua, a core assumption is that technical service markets for the rural poor only require resource transfers in response to a need that is formulated as a group project. The need would be satisfied when the group selects the best service provider's offer for the price that it can afford. The project questioned this assumption and identified a set of objectives that guides rural communities and service providers in the demand/supply of technical service support and establishes quality standard agreements between communities and providers, without defining specific prices for certain services or market procedures for such valuation.

There are some often astoundingly simplistic views by organizations on how social change happens through participatory development processes. Blair (2000) points out a simple causality that lies at the basis of much that is called 'participatory development': more participation is expected to lead to more representation of underprivileged citizens, and to more empowerment of these groups to affect laws, plans, and budgets, which in turn will lead to benefits to all, and therefore to poverty reduction. Blair's conclusion is that "as we proceed analytically through the ... formula, the results registered to date become successively less substantial" (ibid, p.25). He hastens to say that this does not mean it is not worthwhile but that they remain untested. Similar theories of action underlie many efforts on promotion of market access by small farmers, the benefits of decentralization, the roles and impacts of community-based organizations, the goods to be derived from social capital, the power of micro-credit, the benefits of gender analysis and approaches, and almost all of the theoretical and ideological pillars of contemporary rural development.

Whenever a project or program is designed the people involved, either implicitly or explicitly, resort to their individual and collective theories of action and build many assumptions into the rationale of the intervention. The theories of action we use partly come from society's established and formalized knowledge base, partly from the accumulated experience of those involved in designing the project or program, and partly from political correctness. Not all theories of action in use are well tested before being used to design the project. This may lead to unreliable assumptions or hypotheses informing the core strategy. Some assumptions are explicit, but many only become evident for people when deviations from the expected reveal the hidden assumption. Hence explicitly questioning assumptions will help a project learn about fundamental anomalies or weaknesses in its strategy.

A note of caution is due here about the transforming potential of 'questioning strategic assumptions'. Identifying a problematic assumption does not always mean it can be corrected. Other constraints will affect the possibility of strategic adjustments. For example, IFAD projects are developed and negotiated between national governments and multi-lateral organizations, sometimes requiring parliamentary approval as a project affects foreign debt levels. This reduces their

flexibility for adjustment once contracts have been signed. Furthermore, projects are implemented by management units that depend on or are housed within larger organizations, such as the Ministry of Agriculture or a national institute of rural development. Sometimes the project assumption that has proven problematic also underpins the strategy of the larger umbrella organization, which might not be keen to revise its assumptions. Therefore, this reduces the option for the project to deviate and operate with refined but differing assumptions. Both factors relate to the limited autonomy of IFAD projects. Project participants, in particular the management staff, can only make decisions within the bounds set by others in the national hierarchy.

B. Questions that focus on operational dilemmas and challenges

Most project staff are involved in implementing fixed tasks, for example, setting up micro-credit facilities, constructing roads, providing technical assistance or training to local organizations, and so forth. While there is considerable standard knowledge about most of these operational aspects of a program - and staff are usually contracted with the appropriate skills - there will always be new contexts that cause challenges and dilemmas for implementation.

In such cases, staff must be able to talk about the new challenges they face, the questions they have, the dilemmas that emerge, in order to seek solutions together. If the project culture is an open one, then staff will seek each other's advice in an ongoing dialogue. However, some dilemmas may go beyond the in-house capacity. Then external expertise needs to be sought. Also, sometimes staff do not have enough time or opportunities to seek advice when they need it. Then management needs to create more moments for exchange of opinions and experiences. And not always are new insights shared with all those who would benefit from them. For example, one extension agent may have had success with a farmer-to-farmer integrated pest management activity as an alternative to an extension agent-to-farmer process. But unless this gets recognized as being useful for others and shared with them, it will remain an isolated case of good practice.

Learning that enables staff to reflect on their practical experiences and make sense of this together (stages 2 and 3 of Kolb's learning cycle) can form a solid basis for improving the daily implementation of core activities. Three examples illustrate how questioning operational challenges differs from questioning assumptions (see Box 2).

Box 2. Examples of IFAD Projects Questioning Operational Challenges

- The technical services component in IFAD's Corredor Puno-Cusco project worked as follows: selection of community-based organizations on the basis of simple 'business plans' that defined which type of technical advice they need and for what purposes. If the idea was approved, the project would transfer the money for the organization to hire any technical advisor they chose, define his/her terms of reference, evaluate his/her services, terminate the contract whenever they wanted, negotiate the fees/products/results, and so on. The organization operated autonomously, with no intervention or even support from project staff. The project's only role was to select the organizations eligible for funding, with the devolved process being the full responsibility of the selected organizations. In one AGC cycle, the project team wanted to review how this process worked in practice and what the project could do to improve the outcomes. They concluded that many organizations needed to develop their capacities to manage these services and operate with 100% autonomy in these 'rural markets for technical services'. This then helped the project to provide additional support that would increase the project's impact.
- In PRODAP, El Salvador, the social infrastructure component was designed in such a way as to improve community infrastructure conditions but in particular to strengthen local organizational capacities. The assumption was that by organizing and implementing a school or road construction initiative, local organizations would be strengthened. During an AGC cycle, the assumption itself was not questioned but the operational aspects were refined. The project team realized that local organizations need basic support in terms of internal democracy and in terms of shared norms and rules - and that it cannot just automatically result from being involved in construction work. The team also agreed the need for a gradual process of accumulating experiences- and organizational strengthening - before expecting local organizations to undertake large construction efforts.
- In PRONADEL, Honduras, resource transfer to small farmer communities was implemented through community-based organizations (local management structures, or LMS) that was taken for granted as the mechanism that will create and sustain a revolving fund from which every community member could benefit. The analysis of the fund transfer process to the community showed that, contrary to expectations, the LMS were not the proper community-based structures to handle funds and that community institution-building was a missing element in the fund transfer strategy..

3 Understanding the Five Phases of the AGC Process

Turning now to the learning process itself, this section describes in detail the current understanding of AGC as it has emerged from our work with the projects. This section will discuss each of the five phases – as we now view them (see Figure 1), and discusses important questions such as:

- Who is/should be present in these phases?
- What outputs are needed from each phase?
- What quality criteria can be used to ensure that good quality work is taking place?
- What types of variations in implementing this phase can be considered?

Throughout this section, we refer to ‘the facilitator’, who is plays a critical role in guiding the AGC process. In our initial work, we acted as AGC facilitators and – in collaboration with PREVAL - many project staff received initial training to act as facilitators. Many have proceeded beyond this initial stage of capacity development. With this paper, we hope to encourage others to take up this role. This may be a national external consultant, as undertaken now by Corredor Cusco-Puno Project (Peru) in its subsequent applications of the AGC process. The former M&E coordinator of the same project is now helping other projects with their own AGC efforts, as is the former director of PRODAPEN, Costa Rica, who is currently facilitating AGC processes with a number of projects in Central America and the Caribbean.

It may also be someone within the project, such as in the case of PRODERCO in Honduras, where previously trained staff members facilitated an AGC process and, going even one step further, organized a program to train technical staff and leaders of rural grassroots organizations as facilitators of systematization processes (one critical part of the AGC cycle). In Prosalafa II, Venezuela, the main AGC ‘champion’ is the director who was a staff member during the first phase of the project when he received training in the AGC process. If the facilitator is internal, then careful consideration is needed to ensure he or she is respected enough by all project participants, especially senior management, to be able to ensure their commitment to the process. Furthermore, they must be given enough time to undertake this process.

However, one facilitator alone will probably not be enough to keep the process moving, as that person’s presence is sporadic and their role often specific to a certain phase in the AGC cycle. Crucial for the process is the presence of ‘champions’, two or three people with some leverage and respect in the project. As most IFAD projects are not designed as learning projects, someone has to invest time at creating and then keeping open the space and opportunities for learning to occur. Until it becomes embedded in project practice, someone or several people need to work at several fronts to build it into staff practices, allocate budgets, and keep people focused on the questioning mode of working

that AGC calls for. Recognizing and stimulating these champions early on in the AGC process can greatly help the work of the facilitator.

3.1 Phase 1 – Laying the Basis

Considerable preparation is needed to lay the basis for effective AGC activities. This involves making contact with the project and obtaining the support of senior management for subsequent stages. Essential for this phase is explaining what AGC consists of in terms of the timeframe, focus, possible benefits and stakeholder involvement. During the initial conversations, the most frequent question we had from senior managers were: How much time of my staff will it take? How much does it cost and who will pay for it? These questions surely reflect the perception that, despite interest in the potential benefits, the proposition to engage in a learning process is not really at the core of a project's role and mandate. Yet, the idea makes enough sense that it cannot be rejected out of hand. Senior managers will decide based on their perception of the cost-benefit balance. Facilitators need to be ready to answer such questions with convincing and context-specific arguments. This phase is delicate in the sense of needing to create commitment and enthusiasm.

'Laying the basis' also requires the facilitator to start understanding the different interests involved in participating in an AGC process. There are likely to be different interests and different understandings of what such a learning approach means in practice. Some may view AGC more as a focused 'marketing' exercise that requires sharing some positive experiences. For example, some projects value the systematizations (Phase 3) for helping them make their success stories visible. Others active in the same project may grab the opportunity to deepen their understanding of a stubborn dilemma, a problem or a question they have about their work. Clearly such different understandings of learning will have implications for the willingness of project participants to explore failures or problems as well as errors. It is critical to get clear and obtain consensus on this, otherwise during the analysis (Phase 3) the facilitator may well be puzzled by different degrees of frankness of participants.

A useful part of Phase 1 is a relatively quick participatory diagnosis of the existing learning processes in the project. One option is to simply ask these questions:

1. Is there a culture of dialogue and critical debate within the project, does the director and other senior staff stimulate and reward innovation and entrepreneurship?
2. How do changes occur in the project strategy and operations and what does this tell you about how learning takes place?
3. What are the core reflection moments of the project, who is present and what kinds of reflection, based on what type of information is undertaken and with which methods?
4. To what extent do project participants perceive 'learning' to be part of their jobs and core project business, and valued as part of the project culture?

5. What are the strengths of the project in terms of learning from problems and successes and doubts?
6. What are the weaknesses of the project in terms of learning from problems and successes and doubts?

The facilitator can seek to answer the questions, either in a short group discussion with key project staff and other participants, or via a series of one-on-one discussions. For many projects and staff, it will be the first time they think actively about something called 'a learning process'. Therefore, these initial discussions are useful to help them think through what it might mean for them, as well as giving the facilitator insights about the existing learning moments and processes.

In this first stage, facilitators must aim to actively capture the interest of senior management in making project learning more systematic and explicit. Senior management must be seen to support subsequent stages of the work. For the participatory diagnosis of internal learning, the facilitator may find it useful to speak with unit or thematic coordinators, the person responsible for monitoring and evaluation and coordinators of co-implementing organizations. Finding a 'champion' - someone internal to the project who will support the AGC idea and help make it happen can make a significant contribution to a smooth AGC process. Remember, however, that champions will be paralyzed within the project systems if they lack support from senior managers.

In a project where systematization is being well embedded, AGC may not be recognized as being any different than yet another systematization workshop. During a previous phase of FIDAMERICA, the work was exclusively focused on systematization, which quickly became one-off documentation exercises and did not lead to institutionalizing of improvements. Therefore, it is critical to clarify that AGC is more than a one-off systematization by discussing all five phases and stressing that systematization is only one (important) step in a more elaborate way of viewing and implementing systematic project learning. Ensure that people are aware of the role and importance of the other steps and of the need to seek non-project insights during subsequent phases. Systematization can end up being a simple, insular documentation exercise, whereas learning requires all five phases that draw pm project-derived as well as external information.

In summary, therefore, expected outputs from Phase 1 are: formal agreement by senior management to proceed with AGC, interest by a large group of project staff and other participants, clarity about the AGC concept, and agreement on the timing and sequence of next AGC steps.

3.2 Phase 2 – Identifying Themes and Questions

Not all themes can be the focus of learning at the same time. The AGC process, which includes systematization workshops, requires some effort and implies costs and allocation of staff time; therefore a single AGC cycle should focus on priority themes at that moment in time and questions related to each theme. But

identifying key learning themes is not only about efficiency and use of scarce resources and time. Identifying, formulating and prioritizing themes and questions, is in itself part of the learning process, without which the learning lacks purpose and direction. It takes project participants through an open-ended exchange of topics where dilemmas exist, challenges occur and improvements are needed.

In this phase, the multi-actor approach that characterizes the learning process, becomes prominent. If the theme and questions are formulated only by one person or one interest group, then the wider relevance and interest may well be lost. The topic of learning should reflect not just one manager's interest or concern but a curiosity or question that is present among a wider group of project stakeholders. So it is vital that a range of project stakeholders are involved as the themes selected and questions drafted will form the backbone of the entire learning cycle. A good selection of stakeholders to participate in this phase is:

1. the project senior management;
2. the project technical team;
3. co-implementers (e.g. private firms and NGOs that are contracted to assist farmers and implement the project strategy with beneficiaries), and
4. representatives of the rural organizations the project is working with directly.

In Phase 1, one tries to negotiate wide participation of stakeholders as an essential part of Phase 2. In some cases, phase 2 may be undertaken at the same time as Phase 1. This will depend on the access that the facilitator has to key people and whether or not senior management is immediately supportive of the learning process. In some newer projects, the Directors had been staff members of an older project in which he/she had become acquainted with AGC. In their new capacity and project, they immediately requested that his /her new project be involved in the AGC process, as in the cases of PRODAP Phase 2 in El Salvador, PROSALAFSA phase 2 in Venezuela, PRODERQUI in Guatemala, and PROSOC and PRODERCO in Honduras. Thus the project immediately started with Phase 2. Usually, however, Phase 2 takes place well after Phase 1 as it requires time to organize sufficient and diverse participation of a wide range of people.

A frequent and important challenge with this multi-stakeholder approach is that different participants will usually have different questions and priorities. These can often be reconciled, in particular if the differences relate mostly to the scale or level at which the theme is examined or of motivation for asking the question. For example, the same problem can be addressed through a method or activity question or through a results or even a goals question. But often they are quite different and may require two sets of themes and questions to be addressed separately but in parallel. For senior managers, it may well come as a surprise that technical staff and grassroots organizations have different priority themes/questions than his or hers. If a good dialogue can be facilitated about the reason behind such differences, this can extend everyone's understanding of

where project challenges are perceived to lie and, thus, contribute to the learning exercise.

To ensure everyone has a fair say in theme selection, small separate workshops should be held with each group (notably senior management, local staff, co-implementers, and rural organizations). The output of each workshop is a prioritized list of themes each group considered critical for systematic learning. If there are differences between these lists, a critical next step will be to reach agreement about which themes are more critical than others. The AGC experiences to date show that sharing these lists and becoming aware of possibly different priorities is often a significant first eye-opener for senior management from the AGC cycle.

In this phase, three decisions must be made as preparation for Phase 3 but do not necessarily require the presence of a facilitator. They can be the responsibility of someone who knows the project well and can ensure solid collective discussion around these questions.

1. *What themes are most critical on which to focus learning efforts of a wide group of project stakeholders?* Usually each stakeholder group ends up with a prioritized list of eight to 12 learning themes. Several issues can be then derived from each theme that merit critical analysis.
2. *What kinds of questions need to be answered for each theme? What are the problems, challenges, dilemmas, curiosities?* This additional step helps define key areas of interest of project participants and can lead to defining the precise question or issue on which the critical analysis will concentrate in the systematization phase. Sometimes, this degree of specificity is not defined in Phase 2 but instead takes place early on in Phase 3 with those who are participating directly in the systematization.

For those keen to share success stories, the interesting experiences will be those where good results are known and can be shown. For those keen to overcome operational obstacles or rethink strategies, the interesting experiences will be those where problems have occurred. Some of our work indicates that learning from a complete success story can be less striking and profound than where it involves examining a less successful innovation or example (see Box 3).

Box 3. Learning from success, mistakes, or others?

In the Corredor Cusco-Puno project in Peru, it was decided to select four critical themes, one for each of the three local offices and one to be addressed by the senior management unit. In each of the four processes, participants in the AGC cycle selected one successful example, one unsuccessful or less successful, and one example that was known to be successful but in which the project had not played any role at all, but had been developed or supported by some one else, which they included to have an independent point of comparison. This is an important innovation and contribution to the AGC model. It allowed the participants to enrich their discussion of the critical themes and questions by comparing between cases.

3. *Where are there interesting experiences in the project from which to learn through a systematic look?* While the exact locations of empirical experiences that can be systematized are not usually discussed at this stage with the facilitator and is purely a decision of project participants, it is essential that this must be considered before Phase 3 if the systematization exercise is to be successful. This last decision is critical if the next phase can be planned in time (see Phase 3). It is also a decision that might lead to differing opinions, based on why people feel AGC is useful.

In summary, therefore, expected outputs of Phase 2 are: agreement on which themes and related questions will be examined, agreement on which project experiences will be used for the learning process, and agreement on the date for Phase 3.

3.3 Phase 3 – Systematizing Experiences, Lessons and Documentation

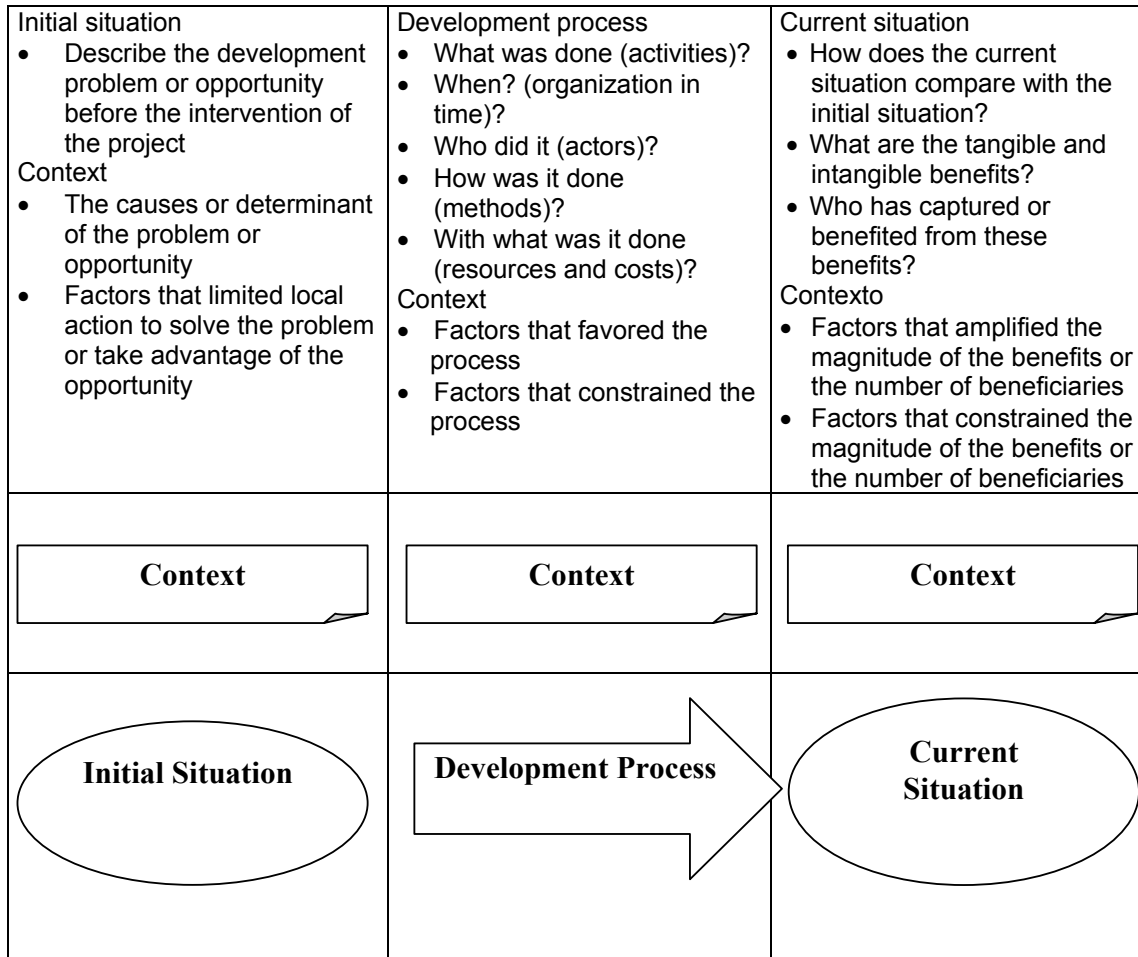
The third stage of the AGC concept is the most visible, as this is when the systematization workshops take place that lead to the documentation of lessons and recommendations. It is this phase that is most directly appealing to projects that are undertaking a systematic learning cycle for the first time, as it is clear that outputs will be concrete. Often however, as explained above, this becomes a one-step substitute for the entire learning cycle. This short-cut view of learning should be avoided. In particular, if the 'institutionalization phase' is not carried out, this increases the likelihood that project implementation continues as usual. One cannot not assume that if a lesson emerges and is made explicit during the systematization phase, that it will automatically lead to changes in project design or implementation

Much can be written about the detailed facilitation of this phase. Much of this information is already documented in the methodology guide '*Sistematización de Experiencias Locales de Desarrollo Agrícola y Rural*' by Berdegué, Ocampo and Escobar. In this section, only a few highlights will be discussed as they emerged from the AGC processes in different IFAD projects. Below is a schematic overview of systematization that is described in detail in the guide (see Figure 3).

Being clear about the methodological limitations of this step is important to ensure realistic expectations about the process and outputs. For example, a trade-off needs to be made between tightly defined themes that are conducive to deeper analysis and broad themes that are conducive to greater participation. Other drawbacks include: lack of generalization power due to the case study nature of a systematization exercise; the lack of a control group or benchmark against which to compare a specific example that is analyzed; lack of indicators related to the theme in question that would enable a more comparative analysis; and the ubiquitous difficulty of guaranteeing the presence of sufficient creativity to deal with contextual variables and processes and of analytical skills needed to ensure deep analysis. Despite such limitations, experiences to date with over 250

systematizations (most of which were undertaken on the initiative of project participants themselves) indicate that the process and outputs are sufficiently beneficial to generate ongoing enthusiasm.

Figure 3. An overview of questions that guide the systematization workshop



Lessons Learned

If you could start again, what would you do in the same or similar way and why?
If you could start again, what would you do in a different way and why?

¿Qué haría de forma diferente si volviera a hacer algo similar?

Start simple

Starting simply is better than trying to create a perfect first process and making it overly complex. If the learning cycle may be institutionalized as part of the project approach, then it is worth considering starting with a simplified version with low costs and limited staff input. If the first try at explicit learning is perceived to be a success by senior managers, then subsequent cycles can involve more and more diverse stakeholders, treat more complex themes, examine more challenging questions, and make use of more elaborate information gathering exercises. This, in turn, should generate higher quality reflections and learning.

Institutionalizing learning is a multi-year process so do not expect to get it perfect in the first round. The first 'systematization method' that took place in the late 90's by FIDAMERICA and PREVAL (with the collaboration of the MARENASS project of Peru), was significantly more complex than the one that was finally adopted and utilized: it was more powerful and led to deeper insights but also took more time of very busy staff and rural people, was more costly, and, in the end, was less attractive, despite offering more learning benefits. The simpler version, in which concrete insights emerge from a week of debate and reflection, has proven a success as projects have adopted and adapted it. FIDAMERICA and PREVAL have conducted about 60 systematization workshops as part of their training workshops, while staff have independently undertaken more than 200 systematizations of their own based on what they learned at the initial training workshops. The results from the first attempt should drive the project towards increasing investment in learning and lead to better quality outputs - but above all to valuing sustained learning efforts.

Ensure core elements are present - but be open to variation

Having the right people present and ensuring that appropriate and enough information is at hand are critical for a successful outcome of this phase. It is obvious that a closed discussion with only project coordinators around the table will not be as rich as when co-implementers and beneficiaries are present. More interview-based and monitoring data will allow for more triangulation and reflection.

However, while people and information are the undisputable backbone of this phase, there is no single answer as to who should be present and exactly what information must be at hand. Understanding the variations that may be possible will help in making appropriate preparations and making conscious choices.

Variations will occur as a result of the type of themes selected and how tightly or broadly they are formulated. A tightly formulated theme, such as 'the process of creation and operation of a specific rural micro-credit facility', will allow for more

focused information seeking and more focused invitation of participants. However, the relevance of a tight theme may be more limited. A broad theme, such as 'the process of providing technical assistance to production initiatives supported by the project', will require more extensive efforts at information gathering and will also require more diverse project participants, as the theme is more likely to be relevant for them and will need their perspectives for a meaningful analysis. There is, however, a trade-off between tightly and broadly defined themes. The broader the focus, the less intensive the analysis will be but the more project participants will be able to contribute, while a tight focus will make a deeper analysis and insights possible but with a reduced number of project participants. An ideal theme is concrete but general enough to allow reflection by a large group of project participants that work in different geographic regions of the project.

Another source of variation can occur in terms of stakeholder participation, which is in part, a result of the nature of the project. For example, a project with a small coordination unit that has decentralized much of its operations is more likely to automatically tap into non-unit stakeholders, than a project with a large coordination unit where operations are controlled internally. Decisions about who to invite to the systematization workshops and who to involve as interviewees will also be affected by the theme. Representatives from all active participants must be present during the workshop, with the active engagement of as many as possible of the 'indirect actors' (those affecting the context) either in the workshop or in the subsequent fieldwork process. Clearly, ensuring the participation of direct stakeholder groups will be more straightforward. However, having insights from the indirect actors will qualitatively enhance the insights. In one case, a community leader was a member of the systematization team. His contribution was extremely important in drafting the questionnaire that was used to gather additional information, and also in interviewing community members, which was an indigenous community and thus presented language and cultural difficulties for others in the systematization team.

Obviously as many different perspectives as possible on the chosen themes should be present. Also consider that the more people are present who might need to carry out improvements that emerge from the reflections, the smoother will be the institutionalization process (Phase 5). Consider the following factors when identifying and prioritizing which direct and indirect actors to invite to participate in Phase 3 and in which role (as workshop participants or as interviewees):

- the thematic focus of the systematization exercise;
- the type of actors involved in the intervention process (management, technical designer, co-implementers, rural organization associated with the process, farmers and producers directly involved in the process, local authorities, private actors, competitive institutions, complementary institutions, etc.); and
- the extent of direct influence over the process being systematized.

Clearly, practicalities such as available time, the size of the workshop group and available resources (transportation, facilities, proximity of direct actors) will ultimately affect who and how many will be active in the analysis and who will be interviewed (see Berdegue et al 2004 for more details on this).

A third variation occurs in the actual sequence and length of workshops. A solid systematization process has, so far, taken place in the form of a workshop or a set of workshops. A single comprehensive workshop using the FIDAMERICA-PREVAL method usually lasts 7 days. Two outputs of each workshop are a 15 to 20 page document and a power point presentation. Attempts by us to reduce the number of days for this first exposure have not worked well.

What FIDAMERICA has done is that Phase 3 in the first round of AGC in a given project takes the form of a 'learning-by-doing' workshop. About 20-30 individuals involved in a project apply the FIDAMERICA-PREVAL systematization method in seven days, with the support of two or three facilitators. An optimal size of each group appears to be about six participants and one facilitator, as this allows for active involvement in both critical analysis and documentation.

The first day is dedicated to introducing the key concepts. Days 2 to 6 focus on a hands-on exercise, in which participants split into groups, go to the field, systematize a specific development experience with the direct and active involvement of all direct actors, write the first draft of a systematization report, and prepare a power point presentation. The final session of this workshop is a half-day seminar in which the final, complete products are presented by the participants to their co-workers, project senior management and, in many cases, top authorities from the Ministry of Agriculture or other important decision-makers. The final results include (per critical theme/set of questions) a 20-30 page document, a power point presentation, and a comprehensive set of lessons learned and recommendations for improving the work of the project.

We have observed that out of the 20-30 people involved in each training workshop, a significant number will continue to do this type of work on their own, in the context of their normal work routine. The web page of FIDAMERICA has dozens of examples of systematizations undertaken by former participants of the training workshops. Several of these individuals have evolved to become facilitators of similar processes in other projects.

If the process is internally facilitated, then the workshop could be divided into two parts: the first ending with the drafting of the questionnaire (see Berdegue et al 2002), and the second part consisting of the field work and analysis (see Box 4). However, there should not be much time between the two parts. What is clear from our experiences is that the systematization document, including final editing, must be edited during the workshop. Afterwards other demands take over and organizing the time to make the final touches becomes very difficult.

Box 4. Varying rhythms for a systematization process

In the case of the Corredor Puno-Cusco project in Peru, senior management requested that the different activities that are usually packed into one training workshop, be separated into two parts, with a few month gap in between. During the first workshop (lasting 2.5 days), participants reviewed the concepts underpinning 'systematization', and proceeded to identify, prioritize and select their priority issues and critical questions to guide the learning process. 'Homework' was defined by the participants to obtain, organize and analyze background information, talk with different rural communities to see if they were interested in participating in the upcoming exercise, prepare the logistics for the field work, etc. During the second session (6 days), participants undertook fieldwork, talking with communities and organizations, processing this information, writing the (draft) reports, and preparing the (draft) power point presentations.

The Puno-Cusco project experimented with yet another variation. Here, the systematization was going to be carried out directly by the most senior project managers, including the Director General. However, it was impossible for them to dedicate a full week to undertaking a systematization exercise. Instead, they decided to contract a consultant who, over a period of four months, visited the project several times to facilitate brief but intensive and well-prepared sessions, each lasting between a half to a full day. In between visits, each team member prepared for the next step by fulfilling agreed tasks.

Ensure analytical thinking - as well as critical reflection

Two analytical challenges often present themselves as challenges for the facilitators: how to analyze beyond specifics, which makes identifying lessons learned an abstraction for many, and second how to ensure sufficient trust and safe space that people can make honest appraisals of what lies at the root of success and failure.

A common limitation of the final documentation is the absence of deep analysis about the intervention process. Participants struggle with thinking beyond the specific conditions of the case being analyzed and with drawing general lessons. The capacity for analytical thinking is frequently not a feature of the profile of staff engaged in these projects. They are usually selected for their expertise in facing and solving concrete and situation-specific challenges, not for their ability to conceptualize general ideas from an analysis of concrete experiences. For most people, analytical thinking is much more challenging than asking them to describe what happened. Therefore, documentation is often focused on project efforts and the immediate and localized lessons, as opposed to drawing conclusions and recommendations that can be of more general use. From the point of view of the direct participants and the project, this is not a problem: the learning has already taken place and the results can be put to immediate use. But it becomes a significant limitation when it comes to contributing to the wider body of knowledge about rural development. Thus it is a key constraint to consider when one thinks about 'scaling-up' lessons learned to influence other projects or public policies (see Section 5).

Critical reflection is a second challenge. This results from the broader institutional context in which project activities take place. How open are organizations that are hosting IFAD projects to open criticism, to recognizing mistakes, to challenging deeply and long-felt assumptions? Critical discussion is important as the learning that is to be shared should be as honest as possible to ensure relevance and usefulness. Facilitating critical reflection is an art, as it requires creating an environment of trust and frank discussion in contexts that might not normally entertain such debates.

The term 'critical reflection' is often used by people without full understanding of its meaning. Learning comes from realizing that there is a difference between what one expected to happen and what actually happened – and then identifying which assumptions might need revising and what that revision needs to be. Reflection relies strongly on the ability and the opportunity to challenge the assumptions that informed actions. Hence reflection can be considered the way in which people explore and reassess their assumptions.⁷

To reflect, a person needs a certain level of curiosity that enables her or him to shift between inquiring (seeking information) and interpreting (giving meaning to the information) before developing useful insights. Williams (pers.comm.) suggests that three things help: the challenge needs to be tough but not too tough; curiosity needs to be aimed at a real purpose that requires resolution and the issue needs to be slightly nebulous, thus inviting reflection. Berdegué (pers.comm.) adds a fourth condition: the consequences to the individual or group doing the critical thinking must be acceptable. This means, that there must be no fear of retribution from others, whether the immediate boss, the authorities in the Ministry to which the project belongs, or an international NGO that provides the funding to its local counterpart, or from peers. This crucial factor must not be underestimated in any project that is embedded in a broader set of institutions and relationships.

Most people are able to have critical thoughts about what they experience. However the difficulty lies, from a facilitation perspective as encountered in AGC processes, in making these critical thoughts public. There is much at stake to criticize one's peers or superiors but there is as much at stake when being asked to reflect critically on one's own practice, as it means questioning one's identities, capacities and aspirations.⁸

Clarify the difference between conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned

The systematization process distinguishes between conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned as follows (Berdegué et al 2004).

- A 'conclusion' is a synthesis of confirmed facts that relate to a certain situation. For example, 'the policy X did not fulfill its objectives'.

⁷ This paragraph and the next are from Guijt (forthcoming).

⁸ This paragraph is based on Klouda (2004, pg 7).

- A 'recommendation' is a specific idea about how to deal with concrete problems or take advantage of concrete opportunities in a given situation. For example: 'to improve the level of repayment in project X, the following changes are needed in the credit facilities....'.
- A 'lesson learned' is a generalized statement of what is likely to work and/or what has to happen to obtain (or prevent) a certain result. For example: 'Collective guarantee systems based on group credit have been shown to be an effective instrument to improve repayment rates with poor rural communities in Central America'.

Experiences show that project participants find 'conclusions' and 'recommendations' easier to handle than 'lessons'. In part, this is because they are more direct useful for them - they do, after all, relate directly to project implementation and strategy. Jointly agreed themes and questions, rather than underlying issues and assumptions, guide the investigation of several very local experiences -. Identifying 'lessons learned' requires being able to discard site-specific features and focusing the analysis on underlying logics and ideas. This makes a considerable demand on the analytical capacity of participants. If this is low, identifying lessons will be a struggle.

Identifying lessons is the only attempt to scale up the analysis from the immediate context of the project. Lessons should be relevant knowledge that can be shared among all IFAD stakeholders, since they represent generalizations on rural development components that are common to most IFAD projects, leaving out project-specific aspects. Lessons often tend to become cliché statements, such as strong community organizations are needed to put in place an efficient micro-credit system. Facilitators need to pay particular attention to the formulation of useful lessons learned (see Box 5).

Box 5. Bringing quality and clarity to conclusions, recommendations and 'lessons'

Several considerations can help increase the quality of the lessons that are documented:

- Ensure the lessons are comprehensible for others - include a description of the context in which the lesson was learned, the topic under investigation, a short description of the commonly held belief that was the starting point of the intervention, what triggered the lesson and the lesson itself in the form of 'If X, then... '.
- Be clear about the sources of lessons - Which project experiences and which stakeholder groups' perspectives are included?
- Identify a clear audience - For who are the conclusions intended and to whom will it be communicated?

Dealing with documentation

If the audience for the recommendations and lessons learned are simply the direct actors of the systematized experience, then there is no need to document every detail – the learning will have already taken place in part during the

systematization process itself. However, FIDAMERICA's focus has been on adding value by sharing systematization outputs with a broader audience through e-conferences, e-bulletins and face-to-face meetings. Given this need to communicate results beyond the immediate analysts to others in the project and those outside the project context, then written or audiovisual communication is essential.

Getting the analysis on paper is the last hurdle in Phase 3. Writing skills are often few and far between among project staff, let alone other participants. Furthermore, while discussions may be frank, hesitation can occur when asked to put this down in writing. If capacities do not exist in the project, then contract additional help for this part of Phase 3. It has also helped to ask groups to think not in terms of writing a formal report but simply about sharing a story of their experiences.

In summary, therefore, expected outputs of Phase 3 are: a set of documented experiences describing the initial situation, the intervention process and the subsequent situation and containing critical reflections on what could have been done better; a set of lessons learned to be communicated more widely; and agreement on the audience to whom to communicate the outputs plus a process for ensuring meaningful sharing and debate (see Phase 4).

3.4 Phase 4 - Communication and Socialization

One of the key observations after the first experiences with the AGC learning cycle were that the impacts of a cycle could be significantly improved if communication strategies are formulated and integrated into the learning process. This phase, being relatively new to the team's experience with AGC, is less clearly defined than the other four phases. This section will describe initial ideas on what such a phase should aim to undertake and key considerations.

Due to the size of IFAD projects and the intensive nature of Phase 3 that makes wide participation unfeasible, it will always be essential to share the outputs from Phase 3 with a much wider group of people who are critical for the success of the project. If the analysis and discussions remains restricted to those present at the systematization workshop, then it may prove very difficult to generate an interest in any proposed operational or strategic improvements.

Two steps or levels of communication and debate are needed. The first takes place at the project level and encompasses discussing the systematizing document, conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned with those who were not present at the systematization workshop. These outputs should be put on the agenda of any of the existing reflection spaces that all projects have. This will ensure wide sharing and therefore contribute to scaling up the understanding about the processes that were questioned in the systematization efforts. This is the direct institutional and social learning in project implementation. An output of this phase would be actor-specific recommendations to be institutionalized at the project level.

The second level of communication and debate is with those external to the project, inside other parts of IFAD, with other IFAD projects or with other rural development practitioners. This has two benefits - bringing what might be new insights to others as well as asking them to comment on the insights and thus add value and deepen the insights that emerged through the systematization exercise.

In both cases, this phase calls for an explicit process to share *and debate* the findings from the systematizations. This means that 'communication' does not refer to simply transferring information but rather to a process of internalizing the analysis by those who are responsible for the kinds of experiences for which the systematizations have tried to identify lessons and improvements. 'Socialization' is the process of debating widely that enables lessons to embed themselves - or, after further reflection, to be consciously rejected.

If recommendations and lessons learned are simply communicated as tasks to undertake, then the reasoning behind it gets lost. The output from the systematizations needs to be understood per level, per domain in the project so that people are motivated internally to instigate what they believe to be improvements.

Therefore, two considerations are vital - the participants and the methodology. As the purpose of this phase is to share, careful thought is needed about who should be targeted for this phase. The learning cycle can be viewed as a chain of people - who asked (Phase 2), who analyzed (Phase 3), who heard and debated (Phase 4), and who changed (Phase 5). By analyzing the change chain in this manner, and assessing who was not present during Phase 3 yet needs to change (Phase 5), the focus of the communication in Phase 4 will become clearer.

Obviously methodology needs to be meaningful for the target groups. In most IFAD projects, reading documents is the way in which staff and other project participants are assumed to learn. Yet, documents are hard to get hold of, not reproduced, not circulated, nor deliberately discussed during meetings or reflection opportunities. Other forms of disseminating and sharing will need to be created and implemented. This can include putting the outputs from Phase 3 on the agenda of standard meetings with different groups or organizing separate meetings or short workshops with focus groups. In either case, the Phase 3 outputs must be shared, their validity must be discussed, and participants must themselves identify what this might mean for their future actions vis-à-vis the project. For a development project that wishes to operate as a 'learning organization', appropriate communication and socialization fora, such as periodic workshops, and tools, such as a newsletter, are essential. Furthermore, project management must allocate resources, mainly in terms of time and money to enable project participants to exercise this responsibility as part of their regular terms of reference and not as an optional, secondary activity.

Due to the need for creative, localized solutions for communicating and socializing the outputs of Phase 3, this phase will require some input of time and resources. It will also require careful feedback to ensure that significant insights

from those not present during Phase 3 and who will not be present during Phase 5, help to inform the subsequent analysis during institutionalization events. In one project, those participating in the systematization workshop did not have a strategic perspective on the project. Hence lessons learned focused on micro-level issues. In such a case, the communication and socialization will need to target senior managers or others with a more strategic perspective of the project, so that they can raise the relevance of the lessons to a level that may have a greater impact on project effectiveness.

In summary, therefore, expected outputs of Phase 4 are: a much larger group of people who are not only aware of Phase 3 outputs but have also discussed their validity and what they might mean for them and their role/tasks in the project, and possibly adaptations to the lessons learned from the systematizations.

3.5 Phase 5 - Institutionalizing

The final stage is critical for institutionalizing learning, when the value of AGC can finally hit home. As mentioned above, changes may well be implemented as soon as the door closes after the systematization workshop (phase 3). Senior managers may well recognize the merit in a recommendation or a lesson learned, and then immediately instigate improvements. This has occurred more frequently than we anticipated when we designed a Phase 5 as part of AGC. However, if the workshop ends up being a documentation exercise or the results of the systematization are not very popular with senior managers at first glance, then phases 4 and 5 are important to give an extra impetus that the systematization outputs are considered carefully. So socializing results and having all team members analyze and suggest specific recommendations to be institutionalized should be a common practice at the project level within an AGC process.

This stage requires the embedding of the recommendations and lessons learned from Phase 3, as approved and perhaps adapted through Phase 4, into the everyday life of the project. Three aspects need explicit attention:

- Adapting or establishing new norms, rules and procedures;
- Establishing or modifying the incentive system; and
- Incorporating improvements into human resource development policies.

Changing the norms that govern project staff behavior and their culture means modifying the rules by which the project operates so that favorable processes are encouraged and hindering processes are discouraged. For an example, see Table 3.

Shifting the incentives basis requires clarity about what 'incentives' mean and their role in the project. Incentives are stimuli that encourage a certain way of working. The types of incentives will be specific to the way of working that is being encouraged and will be specific for the different interest groups in a project - project unit staff, co-implementers, and beneficiaries. For example, if as a result

of a systematization process, a project is keen to encourage field advisors to focus on results more than on activities, then the staff evaluation system can be changed to heighten the importance of effect or impact criteria and reduce the weight given to simple completion of activities. Sometimes very simple incentives can be effective. In projects that are moving from a control-oriented to a learning-oriented M&E system, something as simple as providing training to staff and other stakeholders shows they are trusted and being encouraging to contribute to M&E. By investing in staff, the transition of project style becomes real. For another example, see Table 3.

The third type of institutionalization aspect is the internalizing of new insights into the skills base of project participants. This usually involves some shift in capacity building programs, adapting on-the-job training, or short workshops. By ensuring that those that can benefit from the lessons learned are all up-to-speed on the improvements, the responsibility to implement the improvement becomes shared. For an example, see Table 3.

Any of these three types of changes can be institutionalized in two ways. If an idea that has emerged from the above stages is valued and understood, it may almost imperceptibly find its way into the daily practice of project and partner organization staff. But sometimes institutionalization is also a specific event of filtering insights and transforming them into action points. In the second case, such an event will take place after the systematization workshop.

In one project, two months after the systematization workshop, the director met with the management team to review each recommendation and lesson learned in order to identify what needed to be institutionalized. Two months proved to be long enough for the meaning of some of the lessons to have become fuzzy, requiring substantial reinterpretation. Therefore, think carefully about the timing of Phases 3, 4 and 5.

If a separate event is conducted, plan to include the following tasks:

1. Analyze lessons of the systematizations undertaken;
2. Eliminate whatever has already been taken up by the Project and those that are no longer relevant.
3. Discuss the implications of the remaining recommendations and lessons learned (see Table 3).
4. After the implications have been determined, write up a plan identifying who is responsible and the source of funding for the planned changes, as well as the deadline by which progress with implementation is expected.

Table 3. A structure for analyzing lessons to ensure three levels of institutionalization, with examples

<i>Recommendations and lessons from the systematization that still need consideration</i>	<i>Implications for the norms governing the project</i>	<i>Implications for the incentives system</i>	<i>Implications for human resource development</i>
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<p>Lesson 1. Rural organizations often lack the capacity to manage technical advisory services on their own. The development of this capacity needs to be supported by the project.</p>	<p>a) A simple method needs to be designed to assess if a rural organization does or does not require this type of capacity-building.</p> <p>b) Resources from the project budget need to be allocated for the organization to contract consultants that can help it develop this capacity.</p>	<p>The method for selecting organizations that receive project support is discriminating against organizations that lack the capacity to self-manage external consultants. The evaluation criteria have to be changed so that promising organizations lacking this capacity can opt for capacity-development support.</p>	<p>Need to reinforce with co-implementing agencies the importance of identifying the capacity of rural organizations to self-manage technical consultancy services paid for in part with the project funds.</p>
<p>Lesson 2. Community capital formation through direct transference through productive projects requires a solid organization and a legal structure for funds administration</p>	<p>a) The local community structure through which community capitalization is envisioned needs to be redefined with the participation of direct actors.</p> <p>b) The community organization component must be adapted to the needs of the capitalization structure.</p>	<p>a) Accumulation and savings mechanisms for the community must be developed. This is one way to increase common capital.</p> <p>b) Social accountability must be made explicit to all group members to ensure fund repayment.</p> <p>c) Incentives for producers to become new members are required.</p>	<p>Training of co-implementers and small producers is needed. Main topics for workshops are: analytical information on productive alternatives, simple project evaluation techniques, basic administrative capacities and social leadership.</p>
<p>Lesson 3. For the effective development of a market in technical assistance services, FAT must invest in strengthening the supply and demand sides. This means that the project should not only focus on producers and their organizations but also on technical professionals that are part of the service supply, to ensure that this continues to be increasingly effective.</p>	<p>a) Project proposal forms need to include technical management activities.</p> <p>b) Allow for technical professionals to help identify and formulate proposals.</p>	<p>a) Incentives for the suppliers to facilitate access to resources for upgrading skills and other incentives that they might identify.</p> <p>b) Define criteria to 'recognise the best technical professional'.</p> <p>c) Define criteria to identify farmer groups that have worked well to be awarded prizes.</p>	<p>a) Strengthen the technical professionals' and farmers' understanding of the FAT project (what is a service market, pricing, how to assess benefits, negotiation between supply and demand, etc)</p> <p>b) Prepare technical professionals and producers to shift from external</p>

			technical assistance to locally managed technical services.
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Success at this stage will depend greatly on the willingness of two parties: the project management team, including the director, to devote time to this and formalize changes in the project, and those who are supposed to implement changes. This can be project unit staff, beneficiaries or co-implementers. Therefore it is critical to ensure the presence of key partners who are to support and undertake the changes at an institutionalization event. Only then can it be considered 'collective learning'.

Remember that not all lessons can or need to be institutionalized. What is important is that this becomes an explicit decision, rather than the usual default option of 'business as usual'. For example, one project director decided not to change a strategy of empowering the rural organizations to make decisions about the project resources, even when the systematization showed that the strategy had significant flaws. His reasoning was that within the past year, the project had made a major change in several of its strategies, and that yet another change would cause confusion and exasperation. His argument was valid – the timing was not right to introduce the recommended change. But it was an explicit decision, resulting from a debate stimulated by the results of the systematization and offering insights into a problematic aspect of the work that might be addressed at a later stage.

Keeping this in mind, the expected outputs of Phase 5 are: clarity about the changes needed in the project in terms of norms, incentives and human resource development that result from the systematizations, and support from decision makers and implementers about the way forward with these changes.

4 Organizational Conditions for Effective Learning in IFAD Projects

Implementing the approach to organizational learning described above does not guarantee that learning occurs. It can, if implemented in the wrong context, simply become a mechanical exercise that is insufficiently well analyzed or carried by a wider group of people to generate any meaningful improvement in project activities or strategies.

Creating the opportunity for a systematic and critical look at core aspects of an IFAD project asks that certain conditions are in place or are established beforehand or concurrently with the learning process. Without these conditions, project and partner organization staff may undertake AGC but it will likely be limited to an information collation and documentation or marketing exercise that does not help them question core strategic assumptions of the project. This will significantly reduce the likelihood of significant improvements emerging from fresh insights on project experiences. Note that these are not absolute “yes or no” conditions. In each case, it is a matter of the degree to which these conditions are met that will determine how it affects the learning process and its results.

Conditions in the project context

Any project is embedded in a socio-political culture, which affects the extent to which government agencies and staff engage in frank and open critical reflection. Clearly, there is little one can do about these factors but knowing which ones are problematic for AGC may help determine whether or not to initiate the process at all or not.

Some contexts are repressive towards the critical spirit of project staff and dissuade dissent and the frank exchange of ideas. For example, a high ranking official of the Ministry of Agriculture of one country in Latin America invited to the final presentations of the systematization training workshop, jumped from his seat on hearing someone say “learning also from our mistakes”. He loudly and clearly stated, “We do not make mistakes in this ministry and anyone who does make mistakes does not belong here”. This gives a clear and harsh message to those involved in development projects in that country that learning from errors - and discussing this in public - is not likely to be lead to promotion.

Another frequent situation relates to the administrative and legal regulations that are so rigid in some countries, that projects are essentially paralyzed in terms of innovation. This substantially raises the cost of institutionalizing the lessons learned and recommendations from the learning process, as projects cannot make meaningful changes without a long and complex process of bureaucratic maneuvering.

Both are examples of disincentives for institutionalizing learning. Within the context of the AGC work, we decided not to work in some projects where we felt the context was insufficiently open to even allow the minimum debate and therefore could not provide even the minimum chance of success.

A second aspect is the context of promotion and relocation that determines the stability of the core team. The longer a core set of managers, unit staff and co-complementers have to work together, the better they know the project and each other. In some IFAD projects, we have started afresh several times, with new directors or 'learning champions' and have still not moved past Phase 2 or 3.

A third contextual factor comes from the responsible government department and their desire for quick results. The more pressure that a ministry - or foreign donor - puts on a project for rapid achievement of intended objectives, the less inclined the project will be to stop, reflect, and shift direction and modify plans. A strong 'do, don't think' culture in the ministry to whom the project is accountable will certainly give an additional challenge to convincing project directors to try out an AGC learning cycle.

Project design

Many development projects, including those of IFAD, have poverty reduction aims. But it is rare indeed to find any project that includes 'learning' as part of its core activity or of its strategy. Many IFAD projects are conceived of and implemented as blueprint projects and not as learning endeavors. Fortunately, those of more recent design tend to be more flexible and more open to implementing changes in operations, and even in strategies, during implementation, but there is a need to advance much further in this direction.

Furthermore, many projects are conceived as projects with beneficiaries receiving fixed outputs. Such projects are less likely to deviate from the existing list of development options than other projects that see local development as a process of co-creating the direction, strategy and approach.

Not being designed with learning in mind, leads to a number of challenges for implementing AGC. First, no resources for any of the five phases will be reserved in the budget, nor will there be any project staff who have 'learning' as their formal responsibility or in their terms of reference. The most common situation is that M&E staff get allocated the AGC set of activities but even they do not have extra time to invest in what remains 'an additional' or 'extra-curricular' activity. While fun and useful, it is not the core business of a project. A second challenge is that there will generally be a marked skepticism about the merits of investing precious time and money in an activity that is not considered important. Only when the merits of AGC emerge after Phase 5, have many projects recognized the value of 'learning' as part of its way of operating.

Some IFAD projects have an innovative design not only in terms of what they are trying to achieve but also in terms of how they operate vis-à-vis the existing bureaucratic structures. In such cases, much time is spent on sorting out the many new bureaucratic issues that need resolving and figuring out the boundaries of decision-making for the project. Besides being a drain on time, this can compromise the flexibility of the project to undertake innovations such as AGC.

Dealing with small implementation units

Some project implementation units consist of 10 to 20 individuals responsible for implementing a set of activities worth several dozen million US dollars. This requires them to channel much work through sub-contractors. If a project is predominantly sub-contracted and the project unit is small, then the experiential base is far from the project unit. This makes the communication process more demanding as more groups need to take the AGC idea on board, in order for them to be willing to contribute to reflections and institutionalize changes.

Furthermore, if the project unit is small which is usually the case, then staff time will be even scarcer and they need more convincing before engaging in an activity that is not considered 'core business'. This opens the way for shifting parts of the AGC cycle to other actors. For example, in many cases, staff from co-implementing organizations were involved in the systematization process. In one project, the systematization of all activities completed by co-implementers was institutionalized as a result of the implementation of Phase 3.

Another factor that affects an AGC cycle is that co-implementers or sub-contractors often operate under quite narrow terms of reference aimed at producing well-defined and specific outputs in as brief as possible period of time. These sub-contractors are then free to move on to other things, perhaps outside the realm of the project. Understandably there are few incentives for the sub-contractors, who embody much of the project's field experience and knowledge, to engage in AGC type activities. No one is paying them to do this and it is almost never part of their terms of reference. This can be remedied in the project design but can also be considered at the time of contracting and agreeing on terms of reference.

Project culture and skills

Perhaps most significant of all conditions is the internal project culture, which is very strongly influenced by the characteristics and disposition of senior management. Projects with open-minded directors and managers, who not only support but also behave transparently and in an inclusive and innovative manner, are much more likely to welcome the idea of AGC than those in which

authoritarian managers call the shots. This of course is closely related to the issue of the wider institutional and political context surrounding the project.

The nature of the senior managers is critical for the entire culture. A curious manager will stimulate others to be curious and seek information outside the experiential bubble of the project. A manager who seeks critical feedback is more likely to see staff do the same. An innovative manager willing to take risks with new methods, activities or strategies is more likely to encourage risk-taking by others. A sharing-oriented manager is more likely to organize informative meetings and encourage staff to ask and give opinions, and to organize informal meetings on their own initiative.

Such ideal conditions occur but not often. Their absence does not mean that AGC is impossible. It simply means that different types of managers will require different approaches in Phase 1, when more skepticism has to be overcome and perhaps a less ambitious first trial of the learning cycle should be conceived. The less democratically minded managers will also require continual convincing until after Phase 5, which, if successful, may reduce the level of skepticism.

A more practical condition that AGC can help to address is a common one - the absence of skills in reflective practice. For many staff, the defining of priority themes and the formulation of relevant questions is a new skill that they must acquire. This is also usually the case for the critical reflection process and the subsequent formulation of lessons learned. Exploring the extent to which this has already happened, as part of Phase 1, can help prepare the facilitator for Phases 2 and 3.

Stage in project life

Each project has a lifetime with stages that affect the enthusiasm to undertake AGC-type learning. During the initial first couple of years, the project has relatively little incentive as they feel they have not undertaken enough to learn from. In addition, a young project is under much pressure from many sources to get the ball rolling, assemble teams, increase the number of households being reached, raise annual expenditure levels, design basic information and management systems, establish local and regional alliances, and develop the necessary relationships with co-implementers and beneficiaries.... all of which leaves little time for anything else. In this stage, the cost-benefit analysis tends to not come out in favor of initiating AGC. Yet, it is a stage in which a new project may be extremely interested in learning from other similar projects, and this can be an entry point into the issue of learning systems. In such cases, accessing and incorporating knowledge from other non-project sources is critical to good quality learning. Key sources of information are other IFAD projects and nearby rural development initiatives.

Some middle-aged projects reach a certain static state, influenced in part by the way they were designed, into rigidly compartmentalized teams of activity. In such

situations, divisions are rigidly maintained between components, zones, and units. The communication barriers that become entrenched in such set-ups need to be recognized and addressed if learning is to take place across the project. Without this, the risk is high that AGC occurs in pockets and little islands, with the subsequent loss of the benefits of collective learning. In such situations, Phase 5 of institutionalization will also prove challenging.

On the other hand, projects that are nearing the end of their lifetime have shown great interest in AGC. Those with up to two years left, realize the need to take stock, document, share and show what has happened. This situation is also not ideal for AGC. While it creates an opportunity to share project experiences with others, there is no time for feedback and Phase 5 becomes virtually meaningless as far as the project is concerned, although it may be of great importance for other projects and for IFAD as an organization.

In all cases, the challenges for facilitators are different. Early on in a project lifetime, AGC may need to be conceived as a very modest endeavor. With projects due to retire, the emphasis may need to be on Phases 3 and 4 while Phase 4 and 5 have to be designed considering stakeholders outside the project. Therefore, the AGC learning cycle in its full five phases, appears to lend itself best for projects who have stabilized enough to feel comfortable reflecting on initial experiences and yet have several years to go.

5 Critical Issues to Consider during the Process

In the AGC work with IFAD projects, five weak areas have emerged that need extra attention for learning. These are suggested here in the form of 'do's and don'ts' that will give additional quality to the process of undertaking an explicit learning and knowledge management process within the project.

Do not forget to link the phases well. In the work, the link between the documentation during systematization (Phase 3) and institutionalization (Phase 5) is not always clear. Sometimes the documented outputs are ignored and decisions about changes are made by the project director and a couple of senior managers. Make conscious use in Phase 5 of the documentation results. Also keep an eye on who is present during institutionalization discussions, as this can quickly become the domain of a handful of higher placed people.

Seek information from outside the project experience. Learning that is based entirely on internal project experiences is a very good start. However, it may well be that other projects elsewhere have also grappled with similar issues and may have advanced further in terms of finding solutions or alternatives. Actively seek to include ideas from outside the project experience during the systematization process. The type of reflection and changes stimulated by AGC could dramatically improve if external information could enter the project-level discussions.

Crowds can be wiser than individuals – so think wisely about participation in each of the five phases. Often projects place imaginary boundaries around groups of people who should and should not be involved in an AGC process. In many cases, *collective* analysis was weak. It often fell on the shoulders of a few keen individuals. More minds can greatly enrich the discussion. However, involving all stakeholders will never be a feasible option. Consider carefully how collective the analysis process should be. In particular, consider how marginal groups, those not usually involved in learning exercises or strategic thinking about the project, can make a meaningful contribution. This is not about simply inviting them but about informing them, accompanying them, giving them space and time to speak up and analyze.

Be aware that learning often stays within the comfort zone of the project – and that this may not always be desirable. AGC as currently implemented does not, in general, lead to discussing the 'undiscussables' that could lead to significant strategic shifts in the intervention. Sometimes, project strategies and operations are improved in small steps but the larger changes that could make efforts really worthwhile for the rural poor requires project participants to dare to discuss sensitive topics. If undiscussables are holding back project effectiveness and should be put on the table, carefully explore how this might occur without jeopardizing the entire AGC effort or relationships or the jobs of project participants who engage in the process. Examples of undiscussable topics that might be worthwhile exploring include corruption, illegitimate political influence on

project decision-making process, unjustified removal of key staff and directors due to their personal political preferences, gender and race discrimination and severe and costly failures which if exposed would lead to heads rolling – perhaps of those exposed, but most likely of those doing the exposing. In some countries with harshly polarized relations between government and opposition, the political climate will not tolerate frank admission of problems or failures.

There is nothing embedded in AGC that will ensure its sustainability so it risks being an interesting one-off exercise. Don't forget institutionalizing an AGC type process itself! This does not mean that the exact scheme of five phases must be adopted but rather the core elements. In one project they have now created a regular process of systematization, discussions of results, and so on. Some phases may become more prominent in project culture, which is clear from the rapid and widespread update of systematization within IFAD projects. Many projects include spontaneous practitioners amongst the staff and other stakeholders, subsequent to a training workshop.

Institutionalizing the AGC process itself means trying to establish or strengthen the preconditions mentioned in the previous section:

- providing political support to project participants so that they have sufficient autonomy from the political and institutional context, or housing the project within reformist institutions that are willing to support this kind of learning initiative;
- selecting project directors and senior managers who truly understand and share the importance of critical reflection and frank debate, and who can promote innovation;
- designing projects so that they are learning projects that encourage frank debate, from their objectives, to their management culture and strategies, to the regular methods and tools, to the allocation of human and financial resources to support learning activities;
- developing the skills of project participants to engage in the different learning activities; and
- adapting the learning strategies and methods to the different stages of a project's life cycle, starting with project design and ending with ex post evaluation.

In the end, institutionalizing learning in development projects being implemented by government entities will require a sustained effort that is not substantially different from the ones put in motion to institutionalize other major changes in a project's culture, such as gender perspectives or participatory approaches to development.

While AGC is an easy concept, the ramifications and political skills needed should not be underestimated by any facilitator. The idea of a learning cycle with five phases can be grasped by anyone. However, in its implementation, in some projects it means opening a Pandora's box. As the basis for AGC success is dedicated critical reflection, which may well challenge accepted thinking and relations, it requires a good understanding and negotiating of the political system

of the project. It also requires articulating the theory-of-action - project intentions - and then relating it to the theory in practice. This may reveal conflicts between the good intentions of objectives and local realities and aspirations. For example, a project may be focused on poverty reduction yet the specific activities it promotes lack the potential to create new or better jobs, increase income, or reduce risk and vulnerability. Another project is trying to promote market access for poor peasants, yet the systematization reveals that traders, wholesalers and retailers are not interested at all in the staple crops produced in the project area and which the project is supporting with credit and technical assistance. So what progress can be made on objectives, and therefore what is the basis for a learning cycle?

Application of the AGC cycle always highlights such design failures, as project designs are inevitably based on a partial reading of local realities and can never account for unanticipated future changes. This is only a problem in contexts where self-criticism is not valued and performance hinges on strict adherence to original project goals. As this is true in many cases, an AGC facilitator needs to tread consciously and carefully. However, when managers recognize it as the useful management tool that it is and project implementers see the effects of improvements induced by their reflections, AGC becomes an obvious and valuable process to guide IFAD projects towards greater impact.

Up-scaling of lessons learnt requires more than lessons that can be scaled up. A frequent justification for and expectation of introducing learning processes is to use the lessons learned to influence public policy or the design/implementation of projects similar to the one in which the learning took place. The notion that sending AGC reports to policy makers or even holding a workshop with them to discuss results will be sufficient has proven to be unfounded.

Scaling up lessons requires building up of an 'interface' between project level learning and the higher-scale processes that one is trying to influence. Such an interface includes three elements at least. First it requires a synthesis, that is, an analytical process to adapt the original lessons learned to the degree of abstraction that is appropriate for the decision making processes being influenced. It requires a concrete opportunity, that is, an active demand for the message one wants to convey, and not just a general interest. Third, it requires a communication strategy for engaging in an active dialogue with those decision makers that actually wish to hear what it is that projects have to offer in terms of lessons. In the past three years, FIDAMERICA has started testing elements of this approach to up-scaling, which will be a major component of its plans for the immediate future.

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