

Tools Mobilising Knowledge for Rural Development – Experience of a regional initiative

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Every so often one comes across innovations in human development that are not readily available to those who could benefit from them: resulting in ‘reinventions of the wheel’. Often knowledge exists only in the heads of the development practitioners who acquired it: it can also be couched obscurely in scientific research journals. As a result innovation, scaling up, and replication and application of good ideas for development suffer.

Among the reasons for this are the relative isolation of people in the field, including farmers and development workers and the lack of interaction amongst practitioners, researchers, and policy makers. This is especially the case for marginalised and remote communities, which remain unconnected with mainstream society. The access of these communities to the knowledge available outside and their ability to share experiences are limited. Development processes bypass them and their voices are unheard in terms of building their own agenda. Lack of knowledge about these communities is a barrier to designing appropriate interventions.

Innovations in information and communication technologies during the last decade have begun to reduce isolation and bring communities together. Knowledge networks are mobilising knowledge to support development outcomes. This paper describes the experiences of a regional initiative for improving knowledge-sharing amongst a wide range of recipients to support marginalised rural communities.

ENRAP

Knowledge Networking for Rural Development in the Asia-Pacific Region, or ENRAP, is a joint initiative of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada. ENRAP was designed to deliver global knowledge resources to the rural poor. It has supported knowledge-networking among IFAD’s projects and partners throughout the Asia-Pacific since the late 1990s.

ENRAP promotes tools to document, share, and access information; trains implementation teams; and establishes appropriate mechanisms to support networking.

Assam, India



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Writeshops, systematisation, and social network analysis have become popular along with radio, mailing lists, communities of practice, websites, and other virtual tools to help reduce poverty. Face-to-face events such as workshops, training, and review meetings also play a role.

Approach

ENRAP's overall approach is to network with relevant actors in the IFAD space – projects, government and non-government agencies, research and training institutions, IFAD grantees, and others – to create opportunities to share; to introduce tools and methods; and to build networking capacities.

“ENRAP's overall approach is to network with relevant actors in the IFAD space”

During the last decade, IFAD projects and partners connected nationally, and regionally throughout Asia-Pacific. Some of the national networks are supported by a website (e.g., India, China, Vietnam, Mongolia) or webpage (e.g., Philippines, Bangladesh), and all are supported by the regional network site www.enrap.org. They also connect around common themes of interest such as monitoring and evaluation of poverty reduction projects; use of participatory GIS to help communities manage their natural resources; application of a value-chain approach to mountain agriculture; and gender mainstreaming and development.

Widespread sharing on subjects critical to poverty reduction has taken place. Monitoring and evaluation personnel throughout the Asia-Pacific report an improved ability to troubleshoot with peer support and to work with headquarters' staff to resolve difficulties. Similarly, networking about gender issues has improved gender practice through improving understanding of project needs and of problem solving.

Meghalaya, India



Tools and methods

Apart from creating virtual and face-to-face spaces, ENRAP met the demands of network members to experiment with different ways of capturing and disseminating knowledge. Methods used include use of video to document lessons from poverty reduction efforts; writeshops to package experiences for different audiences; systematisation methodology to extract field knowledge; familiarisation tours to project sites in other countries; and knowledge-sharing tools to improve learning from meetings.

Digital video documentation – Asia has many languages and oral traditions, thus audio-visual tools are appropriate. They have become popular because of the lowering of equipment costs and the fact that they are now easy to use. Staff from IFAD projects in India, Laos, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Philippines received training in shooting, editing, and producing films about poverty reduction mechanisms. Importantly, participants appreciated the power of the medium and even learned how to use raw clips to monitor projects and capture baseline data. Several projects continue to film and use the information, some together with local

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agencies. In particular, the Northern Mindanao project in the Philippines provided the regional line department with its experiences on film: the department used its communication lab to edit the film and disseminated it through mass media. A step-by-step training schedule was developed along with a community of practice (www.ranaghose.com/training/).

Writeshops – One of the most frequent requests by Asian projects is for training in writing skills. Written outputs were built in to projects on completion or soon

Knowledge for policy effectiveness: an example from the Philippines

As per the Indigenous People's Rights' Act 1998, ancestral domains must have an ancestral domain sustainable development and protection plan as a requirement for issuing a certificate of ancestral domain claim. The guidelines of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) at the time only gave a broad description of what the plan is all about, but did not specify the process by which it is formulated. In 2006, a team from an IFAD project working in the Northern Mindanao region systematically documented the process of plan formulation in the municipality of Lanuza, Surigao Sur. This documentation became the basis for the NCIP to review and revise its guidelines, thereby ensuring that indigenous peoples are recognised in local village development plans. Interviews with government staff, JM Canas; and J Unson, Agusan Sur Provincial LGU; and project staff (Prosperidad, Agusan Sur, 17 Nov 2009) revealed that, "In a way, this not only helped in the formulation of new steps or guidelines, but also contributed to capacitating the NCIP itself as an agency. The revised, enhanced guidelines later issued by NCIP stipulated the need for a separate, clearer vision for the IP community... The new guidelines...helped mainstream the indigenous community in the development plans of local government units".

Source: Assessment: Philippines National Network, Antonio Quizon, 2009, ENRAP

after. Some projects divided the exercise into two, training first and writing later, allowing time in between to collect field data. These writeshops helped project teams reflect on experiences, validate with peers, and use expert help to write them down. From 2003 to 2010 several projects and country teams organised writeshops to document project experiences, learning from and adapting the process to their needs and contexts. A guide to writeshops and a review of cases from around the world are available at www.mamud.com/writeshops.htm

Systematisation – Staff find little time to assess their efforts. Monitoring takes place on a regular basis but generally does not capture the more complex changes. Systematisation provides an opportunity to review poverty reduction achievements collectively over a short period of seven to ten days through field research. The information generated helps modify implementation and inform project management as well as government partners. Several projects in China, India, and the Philippines, have tried the methodology and a guide and manual were produced. (www.enrap.org/resources/development-themes/Systematization/books-and-guides).

Knowledge sharing: methods and tools – What started as orientation-cum-training on tools to improve knowledge sharing for IFAD country focal points led to training at project and country level and then to the design of a guide. The tools of world café, peer assist, open space, and chat shows are now commonly used by IFAD projects. They have proven effective in engaging people and improving learning and sharing. Primarily aimed at spreading understanding of the tools among IFAD projects and partners, the guide has received widespread attention from development personnel (www.enrap.org/resources/development-themes/knowledge-management/introducing-knowledge-sharing-methods-and-tools-a-facilitators-guide?searchterm=Knowledge+sharing+tools).

Results

Network members identified several benefits provided by knowledge-networking for poverty reduction; and how use of the tools had helped. Earlier, when the network was still in its preliminary stages, IFAD projects and partners found it useful simply to discover others in the IFAD family. For example, Cameron Odsey, Project Director of the CHARM project in the Philippines, met project directors of the other two IFAD projects in the country and their government counterparts for the first time in 2003 at an ENRAP meeting in Bangkok. He saw this as a major point in the history of the Philippines, network, which now connects all on-going IFAD projects, the government departments who host them, and the National Economic Development Agency.

As the network expanded, members shared problems and resolved common challenges. Mailing lists and workshop events became ways to exchange information, to prepare for events, and to work collaboratively with the IFAD family in Asia-Pacific. The larger network produced smaller and bilateral connections to communicate about issues of specific interest to rural development.

“As the network expanded, members shared problems and resolved common challenges”

Some key outcomes of ENRAP's contributions to knowledge for rural development are given below.

Policy influence – The ability of project and country teams to communicate their experiences in working

with the rural poor improved their dialogue with policy makers. Teams and community members were able to share substantively, instead of simply reporting, in ways that engaged policy makers. The project director of an IFAD project in North East India felt:

“...sharing information has helped to change [the] policy of the State Government of Meghalaya for pro-poor implementation of the national rural employment guarantee scheme (NREGS) and other government

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schemes...” (NREGS is a countrywide programme aimed at providing a minimum of 100 days of work a year to each poor family).

This is thought to have played a role in convincing government and donor partners to scale up the North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project (NERCORMP).

Learning and project performance – Knowledge sharing and networking are linked to specific benefits to project performance and to improved individual and project ability. While studying the Philippines’ national network Tony Quizon (Quizon 2009) reported that knowledge-networking led to: “(i) improving staff skills, (ii) improving project capacities and performance, (iii) creating a culture of learning and sharing, and (iv) bringing publicity and recognition to specific initiatives or target communities”.

Project directors and staff commented that their participation in regional events helped to validate their own experiences, broaden their awareness of issues faced in other countries, and learn about new development approaches.

About 70% of participants felt the network helped them to share experiences about application of the value chain (VC) approach to mountain agriculture and helped them meet people and organisations working on VC and access valuable information, as shown by the preliminary results of an online survey held in September 2010.

Knowledge management – Exposure to tools and methods for sharing knowledge helped operationalise IFAD’s increasing emphasis on knowledge management (KM) in its Asian operations. Thus, this initiative to promote networking amongst a dispersed group of people working with marginalised rural communities became a key lever in IFAD’s KM efforts. Understanding these tools helps projects implement knowledge management in support of rural development. With resources and systems in place, knowledge generated about rural development through project initiatives is being captured and shared regularly, both internally and externally; e.g., IFAD’s Asia-Pacific newsletter has generated a lot of interest.

Conclusion

Capacity development in the use of tools and methods to help knowledge sharing was a key factor in ENRAP’s approach. New tools and new ways of combining them with traditional ones have provided opportunities to share information with local communities and to give them a voice in the creation of new knowledge

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Photos from IFAD supported project areas.