Capitalization of Experiences «Water, Land and People»

Lessons learned from the Process

Berne, 2007

Capitalisation of Experiences "Water Land & People"
Key lessons learned from the process[1]

1. A lengthy road to defining objectives, process and users….
The initiative was planned at head office level and underwent a rather lengthy period of revision of the objectives and outcomes, the learning process and methods, and type and users of the outputs. The inclusion of the three countries in the planning happened at a later stage since they were not identified at the beginning (with the exception of India). As this implied further negotiations and redefinitions, the start of the initiative got delayed, thereby loosing some momentum. However, an important achievement was a change from the initial focus (which relied heavily on desk studies and workshops) to an actor-centred learning process in each of the three countries.

2. Learning groups provide a privileged space for learning
In each country a "core learning group" composed of about 15 experienced professionals from different sectors met face-to-face three to four times. They shared, analysed and drew lessons learned, based on their own experiences and inputs (field visits, interviews, case studies) generated between the learning events. This modality was very much appreciated by the group as an appropriate approach for sharing and learning. However, it is important that there is clarity right form the beginning on the functioning of the group and the responsibilities of each member.

3. Facilitation of learning processes towards ownership
Those who made the experiences – the experience holders – should own the learning process. This can only be achieved if they are involved right from the planning stage. (definition of topics, methods and products). While effective and dynamic facilitation is essential to maintain momentum and to ensure productive outcomes, the facilitator should accompany and lead the group towards ownership of the process and its outcome. The case of Bolivia, where the learning group lost momentum and ownership at the beginning because it was left without a facilitator, demonstrated this crucial role of the facilitator.

4. Define intermediate results and make immediate use of them
The learning process is most effective and motivating if intermediate results are produced and immediately used as inputs for decision-making and in other learning initiatives (as opposed to working in isolation to achieve a final product). It would have been useful if the learning groups had better defined such products and uses right at the planning stage.

Examples:

Bolivia: Contribution of the learning group to consensus building for the regulations of the Irrigation Law. The facilitator of the learning became vice-minister for irrigation and could use the findings of the learning group the same time maintaining contact with the group.

India: The learning group was consulted by, and contributed to, the elaboration of the new national watershed guidelines. Tank management was identified as an topic of high common interest, resulting in a series of exchange visits between farmer groups and NGOs.

Mali: Participants of the learning group became active members of the "Water for Food" Community of Practice (an initiative of SDC) contributing with their findings.

Contribution to 4th World Water Forum Mexico (March 2006): The CE process generated valuable inputs and presentations at the Forum: Swiss pavilion; Topic Session convened by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC); Topic Session convened by the Global Water Partnership (GWP).

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[1] These lessons reflect the view of people from Intercooperation head office in charge of coordination and facilitation of the initiative.

Water Land People

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Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC

inter
cooperation
Natural Resource Management
Rural Economy
Local Governance and Civil Society

5. Story telling is an innovative learning tool

The learning groups successfully applied the method of story telling to identify the topics for learning, and to gain new and authentic insights on them. Story telling allowed participants to break out of the usual more formal setting, thereby seeing complex issues from previously unperceived angles, challenging - and ultimately changing - fixed mind sets. However, the method needs to be properly introduced, including training, which happened a bit late during this initiative. But everybody learned a lot and the experience contributed to the story guide published by SDC.

Examples of story telling applications:

Bolivia: Stakeholders with different views on the irrigation law and its regulations indicated that by listening to each other's stories they gained new insights that helped them to better understand each other's view points. They believe that the intensive discussions in the learning group contributed to the current revision of the (too) privileged access to water for irrigation farmers that was established under the irrigation law. Furthermore, the Tiquipaya example will be used as an input for further definition of the role of municipalities in water management, especially in dynamic contexts such as Tiquipaya, where rapid urban development leads to changing priorities for water use (from irrigation to domestic use).

Mali: Farmers of Sikasso indicated that they liked the method of story telling and applied it for the sensitive issue of community wealth ranking – something they had never done previously.

India: Story telling produced very interesting insights on gender aspects related to water management (see stories No. 4 & 5 on the storytelling video). At least one partner organization introduced story telling as a method for it's management retreats.

Some limits of story telling that were encountered are as follows:
- Difficulties in communicating the essence of stories to others (who did not participate in story telling sessions), even if these stories are captured by means of video, audio or transcription. The latter is very cumbersome. Interpreted and/or summarized stories risk the loss of authenticity.
- Story telling requires an environment of trust, permitting the "truth" to be told. Cases in which stories were used to discredit certain persons raised the question of whether story telling is an appropriate method for dealing with sensitive political issues (example: disagreements on the irrigation law in Bolivia). Stories can be easily manipulated to personal ends.
- Facilitating story telling can be a demanding task, especially when trying to generate short stories focussing on "turning points". Often people are blocked from extracting the essence of what they know, so their stories are simply chronological descriptions with little substance for learning.
- Story telling alone may not be enough for the capitalization of experiences, especially if quantitative information is needed. It should therefore be complemented with other tools (case studies, data analysis, etc.)

6. Create a variety of innovative products for use at different levels

Each country learning group was left the freedom to define their own product, giving emphasis to two main criteria:
i) Usefulness at different levels but above all for local users (farmers associations, municipalities, NGO's, projects, etc.). and
ii) Emphasis on audio-visual products rather than large text. This approach created real local ownership for the different products.

On the other hand, this approach bears the risk that too much effort is invested in the design and elaboration of the products, rather than on content. It is also important to

define at the beginning the responsibilities and required expertise for the elaboration of the products. With requirements to produce multi-media products, this was heavily underestimated in the current initiative. Furthermore, the huge number and great variety of the country products made it rather difficult to consolidate them into a single global product suitable for wider distribution.

Examples of innovative products:

Mali: Flyer on a topographical model (maquette) for the development of lowlands. These models have been successfully used as a visual tool for the participatory planning of lowland development. The Mali learning group identified a felt need to describe the construction and use of such models, for their wider uptake. Furthermore, the learning group decided to elaborate a number of attractive Powerpoint presentations as an effective tool to communicate the lessons learned.

Bolivia: Stories and the video "Pathways of water in Tiquipaya". Following the flow of the water within the watershed, the different stakeholders (farmers upstream and downstream, urban users of drinking water, local authorities, NGO's, projects etc.) describe their situation and concerns in relation to their access and use of water.

India: A video was produced of development practitioners sharing their experiences through story telling.

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7. Face-to-face events are essential to foster exchange between countries
Although planned within the initiative, interaction between the three country learning groups only fully took place when representatives of the three groups met face to face at the 4th World Water Forum in Mexico. The exchange of early results and views on the learning methods gave new impulses to the CE process in the three countries (use of story telling, defining interesting products). A second exchange took place when two participants from the Indian learning group visited Bolivia. In such situations, the challenges posed by the different contexts, language and cultural barriers should not be underestimated.

8. Commitment and availability need to be identified for all learning group members
While the participation in the learning group is on a voluntary and informal base (no formal agreement was established), there is need to define at the beginning of the learning process the commitment and availability of all members (at personal and institutional level). Expectations and interests need to be clearly established. The continuity of the members in the learning group is essential to ensure an effective learning process and its outcomes.

9. Learning processes take time but be careful not to loose momentum
While a learning process has advantages over a single learning event, the duration of the process was generally considered too long (one and a half years in Bolivia, one year in India and Mali). This was another reason for some participants dropping out during the process. As a general recommendation, such processes should be restricted to a maximum period of one year.

10. Incentives for learning – it does not work without them!
Sharing and mutual learning motivated the group members to participate in the learning process. However, this was not always enough to ensure continued participation, some group members dropped out during the process due to the lack of other (also financial) incentives. Continued participation needs some remuneration especially in the case where members are not paid by an employer (i.e. farmers, private sector actors, local authorities). For many participants it is an important incentive that their names appear on the products. This should be encouraged.