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# SHARING AGRO-ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AND STRENGTHENING SOCIAL NETWORKS: THE AGRICULTURES NETWORK

## DOCUMENTING FIELD-BASED INNOVATION EXPERIENCES FOR RECOGNITION OF FAMILY FARMING

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**Abstract** — For 25 years, the work of ILEIA and its AgriCultures Network partners has been shaped by the idea that millions of small-scale farmers and their supporters in society experiment and innovate during their daily work. In the local ecological setting farmers increase their technical and economic autonomy, raise productivity and incomes. The main objective of the Agricultures Network is to make these innovations visible as examples of an alternative model of development. The network allows sharing knowledge on common views vis-à-vis agro-ecological farming that exist across relevant (GO, NGO, research, education and private) organisations, in which everybody can play a constructive role. This paper gives a few examples of the results achieved in terms of information exchange and knowledge building.

During field visits we always observe how farmers and practitioners actively contribute to the “body of knowledge” on sustainable agriculture but rarely have the capacity to document or systematise, limiting the possibilities for dissemination and scaling up. This led us to develop a documentation capacity building programme, with which, by focusing, detailed descriptions and analysis, practitioners “unearth” a greater number of experiences, contribute to their analysis and wider dissemination, and in this way contribute to the field-based generation of knowledge on agro-ecology. Running this programme also helped us identify the challenges which all documentation processes face. We look forward to documenting not only field-based experiences, but also processes in the governance arena that sets conditions for small-scale farming to play its societal roles.

**Key words** : small-scale family farming, documentation, systematisation, innovation, information exchange, institutional development

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**Résumé** — *Le partage de connaissance agro-écologique et le renforcement des réseaux sociaux: le Réseau Agricultures.* Depuis 25 ans, les travaux d'ILEIA et ses partenaires du Réseau Agricultures a été basé sur l'idée que des millions de petits agriculteurs et leurs partisans innove méthodes dans leur travail quotidien. Dans le cadre de l'écologie locale, les paysans développent leur autonomie technique et économique, en augmentant la productivité et les revenus. L'objectif principal du Réseau Agricultures est de rendre ces innovations visibles comme des exemples d'un modèle alternatif de développement. Le réseau permet le partage des connaissances sur les points de vue communs vis-à-vis de l'agriculture agro-écologiques qui existent à travers pertinentes (GO, les ONG, la recherche, l'éducation et privés), dans lequel tout le monde peut jouer un rôle constructif. Cet article donne quelques exemples des résultats obtenus en termes d'échange d'informations et le renforcement des connaissances. Au cours de visites sur le terrain on observe toujours la façon dont les agriculteurs et les praticiens de contribuer activement à la connaissance sur l'agriculture durable. Ces processus sont souvent non documentés ou capitalisés, ce qui limite les possibilités de diffusion et de mise en échelle. Ceci nous a amené à développer un programme de renforcement des capacités de documentation, avec qui, en se concentrant, des descriptions détaillées et des analyses, des praticiens dé-couvrent un plus grand nombre d'expériences, de contribuer à leur analyse et une diffusion plus large, et de cette manière contribuer à la production de connaissance sur l'agro-écologie. L'exécution de ce programme nous a également permis d'identifier les défis des processus de documentation. Nous voudrions documenter non seulement les expériences sur le terrain, mais également des procédés dans le domaine de la gouvernance qui définit les conditions pour l'agriculture à petite échelle à jouer son rôle.

**Mots clés** : agriculture familiale à petite échelle, la documentation, de systématisation, l'innovation, l'échange d'informations, le développement institutionnel

## INTRODUCTION

During the past few years different analyses of the world's agriculture sector have been made, and most of them point to crises and difficulties (IAASTD, 2009, Eenhorn and Becx, 2009). The number of hungry people has risen to above a billion, showing serious problems of food production and distribution. Environmental degradation is having a serious impact, while weather conditions are becoming increasingly unpredictable. In addition, the rising costs of manufacturing agro-chemicals, or of all activities related to processing, packaging or transporting food, means higher prices for the consumers. These difficulties have been clearly presented by the IAASTD report, which concluded that the strategy followed for promoting agricultural growth in developing countries "has failed", and that "business as usual is not an option" (IAASTD, 2009).

At the same time, we see a growing recognition of the important role that agriculture can play in development. The World Development Report (World Bank, 2008) makes a convincing argument for agriculture as a driver of development. The same can be said of publications made by the IMF, the G8 and NEPAD meetings, or the CSD COP-17. Recognising the relationship between agriculture and climate change, the Copenhagen conference led to the establishment of a Global Research Alliance on Agriculture Greenhouse Gases. Finally, this growing recognition is also seen in the donor community. After several years where agriculture was not part of the international co-operation agenda, many development organisations are now willing to support projects and programmes which focus on agriculture.

So there is a growing recognition of the role which agriculture can play in rural development, together with a growing recognition for the need of having a different approach to development. The organisations and networks which promote this change are also increasingly visible. But what still does not get the visibility it deserves is the set of practices

which show such a different approach, and which show how agriculture, and in particular small scale agriculture, is already contributing to rural development – even though these are found in every country, under every context or circumstance.

## 1. ILEIA AND THE AGRICULTURES NETWORK

ILEIA, the Centre for Learning on Sustainable Agriculture, defines itself as a knowledge and information “powerhouse” on small-scale agriculture. Its mission is to help make local innovations visible, to connect relevant stakeholders with information in order to generate dialogue, and thus facilitate the worldwide adoption of sustainable agriculture practices.

For 25 years, ILEIA has been publishing a quarterly magazine that changed its name from *ILEIA Newsletter* to *LEISA Magazine* to now *Farming Matters*. With this magazine we aim to exchange opinions and ideas, providing practical examples of how sustainable, small-scale farming contributes to providing food security, social justice, a healthy environment and rural (and also urban) development. Throughout these years, ILEIA’s main achievement has been to identify initiatives and interesting developments taking place at the local level, and to publish information about them for a wider audience. But more than just presenting information or improving the availability of relevant information, ILEIA seeks to be a link that connects local experiences to global issues (and vice versa), providing a platform for sharing the lessons resulting from the work which is taking place in different countries, regions and continents.

Fifteen years ago, ILEIA decided to work more actively with partner organisations in different regions of the world. This led to similar magazines being published in different languages, reaching new countries and readers. In the course of these years, what started as a single bulletin has gradually turned into a set of eight magazines, with together more than 45,000 subscribers, in 150 countries, and with 40,000 unique webhits per month. The total direct readership is estimated in about a quarter million. Since 2009, ILEIA and the organisations behind these magazines constitute the AgriCultures Network.

## 2. RESULTS

Regular surveys and a 2009 impact study (ILEIA, 2010a) complemented by ad-hoc feedback show that readers use the magazines in different ways (Table 1).

*Table 1. Recorded use of information from AgriCultures Magazines by readers (From: ASPTA, 2009).*

Field of attention	Indicators
Public visibility of the agro-ecological alternative	Replication of information published in the magazines in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Material transmitted on TV</li> <li>○ Material used in campaigns</li> <li>○ Published articles</li> <li>○ Divulagation in electronic media (sites, blogs, lists, etc...)</li> <li>○ Production of radio programs</li> <li>○ Production of audio-visuals</li> </ul>
Influence on public policies	Use of articles as background for advocacy actions
Pedagogical support for teaching and training practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Use of magazines and/or articles in training/capacity-building spaces</li> <li>○ Reprinting of articles, whole or in part, in teaching materials</li> </ul>
Inspiration for scientific research and social experimentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Farmers and/or communities test the technical, methodological and/or socio-organizational proposals described in the articles</li> <li>○ New lines of research are inspired by ideals divulged in articles</li> </ul>

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	○ Articles are cited in academic works
Influence on methodological approaches for producing agroecological knowledge	Testimonies
Stimulate interaction between practitioners of agroecology	Contacts made between readers and authors (request for new information, timetabling of visits, etc.)
Stimulate the systemization/ documentation of experiences – valorizing empirical experience in the construction of knowledge	Testimonies
Construction of identities among practitioners, self-esteem and breaking with social isolation	Testimonies

Published articles are regularly used as training material, are distributed in workshops and seminars, and are also used in universities or agricultural education institutes. These are copied, reprinted, and in many cases also translated into other languages. They are also used for awareness purposes. Quoting one of the letters received, for example, *“this article served as inspiration for a journalist in Kenya to produce a news item for a German television network... the resulting piece was watched by approximately 23 million viewers.”* Showing that the magazines are also used by policy makers, a Tanzanian MP was proud to say that he regularly uses the information provided during parliamentary discussions in Dodoma.

The information presented in the different magazines regularly inspires readers to try out ideas, and helps them develop their own ideas and then put them into practice. Box 1 shows how a particular technology, the ‘system of rice intensification’ (SRI) has spread from country to country. The magazines are free to publish such scientifically contested, yet practical innovations; now, over a million farmers use the technology, that is under development in other crops as well.

*Box 1. The role of AgriCultures Network Magazines in the spreading of the System of Rice Intensification.*

SRI, the System of Rice Intensification. First mentioned in an article written by Norman Uphoff and published in 2000, the information presented in various issues has encouraged readers to try it out – and also to contact authors and then to write an article and share their own experience. One of these readers is Rajendra Uprety, and agricultural extension officer in Nepal. In March 2009, he wrote how *“at the bottom of the December 2000 article I found the e-mail address of the author, so I decided to write to him. He sent me a lot of information...”*. This information helped him set his own SRI fields, with positive results. Two pieces written by Mr Uprety himself, showing these results, were also published in the magazine in June 2005 and in December 2006.

Later, we heard how these two articles motivated others to try out SRI in different areas – a very encouraging snowball effect. *“I read the article written by Rajendra Uprety and contacted him to get more knowledge about SRI and how it works... Many farmers now want to adopt this new method of rice cultivation. This is all due to the inspiration we got from the LEISA magazine.”* (Umersh Achaya, e-mail sent 11 January 2010) The magazine has also been instrumental in introducing the idea of SRI into Cambodia where it is widely applied (L. Fisher, Cornell University, pers. comm.).

The magazines inspire readers to try out ideas and exchange information, which allows them to become authors. And as authors, they experience benefits from writing for our magazines and being widely read. As a Cuban researcher said, *“LEISA has always meant recognition to new ideas. Many times it is difficult to bring new ideas into a journal. At the same time, LEISA has been an important “extension” element. As a researcher, I have to invest more than one year’s time to write a paper for a scientific journal that is read by no more than 150 or 200 persons. But if I do the same with LEISA, then I get a much much bigger audience. I think that LEISA gives a good space for those interested in transforming reality.”* (Humberto Rios, interviewed April 2009)

### 3. DOCUMENTING AND SYSTEMATIZING FIELD-BASED EXPERIENCES

When visiting farmers' communities all over the world, it is easy to see the large number of development experiences in place. Working together with different organizations in society, millions of small-scale farmers experiment and innovate in their daily work, all of which can be analysed in order to identify limitations, favourable conditions and impact achieved. One of ILEIA's main tenets is that every one of these experiences is a possible source of learning.

Experience shows that often this does not happen, for many different reasons, and ILEIA and its partners started a programme in 2007 for increasing the documentation of small-scale and sustainable agriculture practices and experiences. Understanding "documentation" as a process which seeks to organise information from a given practice or experience, in order to analyse it and draw lessons from it, this programme has been implemented since then, with three main objectives:

- Capacity building of regional partners to document field experiences;
- An increased documentation and spreading of these experiences; and
- The validation of documentation methods.

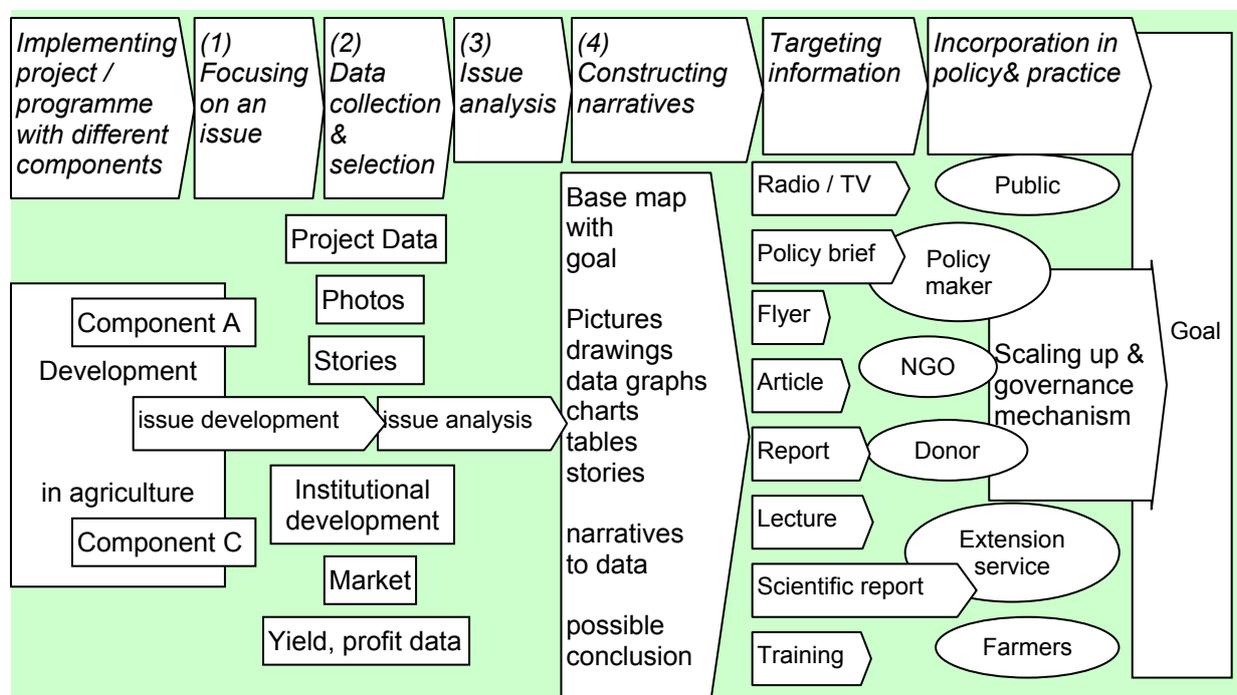


Figure 1. General flow of a documentation/systematization process in four steps (1-4) that are part of a larger information exchange process (steps not numbered) (ILEIA, 2010b). In reality, the process is rarely linear – for example, the foreseen audience determines choices made earlier in the process, such as the focus and the kind of data collected.

Until now, the programme resulted mainly in increased awareness of the importance of documenting and building knowledge on the basis of practical experiences (ILEIA, 2010b). This has led to more articles being written and published (in AgriCultures magazines and elsewhere), but has also led to stronger linkages among practitioners, and to a greater exchange of information.

#### 3.1. Main activities

Our work started with the publication and distribution of a short manual ("Learning from experience"), meant to help those interested describe and analyse their work. More than a method, this manual put together the recommendations given by several guides and methodologies, recognising the importance of

- Organising the information available with the help of a set of tables;

- Analysing it in detail to understand what happened;
- Drawing conclusions which help generate new knowledge; and
- Presenting and sharing these results in a chosen format.

This manual has been used by different organisations during the past three years, as a result of the direct involvement of ILEIA and of some of its partners in their documentation processes (ILEIA, 2010b). Among these “cases” we have had the documentation process of the work carried out by IADO in Isangati (Tanzania), the projects carried out by VETAID in Mozambique, the efforts of the SEE Foundation in Inner Mongolia (China), the different DURAS projects in south-east Asia and in West Africa, the “rights-based” projects of CONCERN in Tanzania, and the “farmer-led approach” projects supported by MISEREOR in India and Bangladesh. We were also happy to see that this manual has been used by other organisations, without our involvement, resulting in documentation processes taking place, for example, in Pakistan (carried out by Intercooperation), in Peru (by El Taller), in Tanzania (by Katani Ltd.), and more recently in Cameroon (by CENDEP).

These “cases” have led to some articles being published in the *LEISA Magazine* and in other media, with information also being presented in funding proposals and in PR material. But the overall results have been broader. One of the most interesting outcomes has been the opportunity which these documentation processes have given for learning about specific activities. Learning about their own work, and being able to share these lessons with other like minded institutions has been mentioned as one of the most important results by those taking part in these exercises. Quoting one of the participants in a workshop carried out in Vietnam, “*we didn’t know how much we needed to do this until after having done it*”. According to others, “*it is during this process that I have learnt most about my project*” (participant, Pakistan, June 2008); “*This is simple and straightforward, and therefore very adequate... You learn even without noticing that you are learning*” (participant, Tanzania, June 2008).

In addition, we have been able to identify some of the major difficulties which practitioners face when starting a documentation process, and also see the main aspects and considerations involved: what exactly are organisations interested in documenting? Why do they do it? Who is involved? Looking in detail at many different processes, we have identified a set of lessons, all of which are meant to help us, and others, plan and carry out better documentation processes.

### **3.2. Why do organisations document their work?**

The objective most commonly mentioned is an organisation’s desire to “*show what we do*”, and then share their work with others: “*we want more people to know what we do, and what our role is in social progress*” (SEE Foundation, October 2007). This is the reason why some organisations have been keen to publish their work in the *LEISA* magazines. In some cases this has been especially aimed at donors: showing what an organisation does is a logical step when trying to secure financial support for future work.

But outsiders are not the only ones to learn: organisations engage in a documentation process in order to learn themselves, and thus improve their own work. Quoting a participant in one of the DURAS workshops, their aim was “*to facilitate a greater understanding of what happened and what did not happen in order to draw lessons and conclusions which will feed into improving future project activities*” (June 2008). An IADO staff member put it equally clear: “*We are a learning organisation*”.

At the same time, by purposefully involving different stakeholders, and by aiming at a detailed exchange of ideas and opinions among them, one of the main objectives of a documentation process is to “*develop a collective reflection process*”. The establishment of networks has been the objective of the seminars organised by ABA in Brazil, helping those

working around similar issues get to know each other. These networks are therefore seen as settings which “*help break the feeling of isolation*” which many practitioners feel. This is linked to the broader idea of empowerment (especially when talking about farmers) as an expected result of participation in such a network.

### **3.3. What to document?**

The manual published in 2007 spoke of documenting “experiences”, as a term used to cover “the many different development initiatives taking place all over the world”. These initiatives were seen as single, short activities, as projects, or also as longer or more complex programmes. Even if unwillingly, these were rapidly identified as technical processes or interventions. Our work with DURAS, however, showed the possibility (and the difficulties) of documenting a social innovation process, such as the establishment of partnerships between organisations. Those involved in this exercise saw that “*the way of structuring the information available and of analyzing it can be the same, regardless of the type of project*”. It was similarly mentioned that “*the problem is not in the activities or processes being documented, but in those who are involved in the process*” – in this case researchers interested in showing the results of their research, instead of showing what was achieved in terms of linkages or partnerships. One researcher adapted the proposed method and developed a way to map actors and roles around a research topic (Ngapkang, 2008).

But whether we were looking at technical or at social innovations, our interest was placed in “stories from the field”. This led some participants to refer to “best practices”, and to aim at developing recommendations on the basis of these practices. This approach was not taken by all, considering that “best” or “good” are terms which are specific for a given context, and that the main objective of a documentation process is not to produce an inventory of what works best for a given context, but rather to extract the main lessons. And one of the lessons we drew was that most of these experiences are in fact processes which have unexpected results – so we are not really aiming to look at a practice as a result of such a process (as a final product), but rather at the process itself (Guijt, 2008).

Finally, all cases showed the importance of drawing specific boundaries, and not being over-ambitious. Documenting a broad project in detail can be too difficult, with the risk of becoming an unmanageable process. This was solved in one case by “*having various documentation processes going on simultaneously*”. In other cases, the logical recommendation was to look at a narrower set of activities, or at a shorter period of time. An alternative method is to focus on a particularly, narrowly defined issue (water, soil, land use rights) and document relevant aspects of such issues (institutional embedding, roles of different actors) (Schoubroeck et al., 2009).

### **3.4. Who is to be involved?**

As expected, all organisations mentioned their interest in getting as many stakeholders as possible. If documentation is to be a participatory process, then all expect the active participation of a broad set of actors. Factors such as time and resources, however, showed that this is not so easy, and what seemed an obvious pre-requisite many times did not occur. And at the same time as trying to get as many people involved as possible, one team also thought of their representativeness, aiming at working with those that were involved in the field experience which was being documented. Do they have the time? Are they interested? This all confirmed the need to think about the important role which the “owners of an experience” have in its documentation.

Having different people involved also led participants to consider the importance of co-ordinating this participation and dealing with disagreements (especially when thinking of “learning networks” and team-building processes). And this has been linked to discussions on the role of an external facilitator. If she is not one of the “owners” of the experience, then

what is she to do? When must she get engaged in the process, and what responsibilities must she assume? These are issues which need to be dealt with before a process starts.

Finally, having different people involved has also shown the need to consider issues of power. Do all participants feel free to express their opinions? Do all opinions carry the same weight? A frequent observation made has been the differences seen in the overall discussion and exchange of ideas when certain actors are present (e.g. an organisation's director) as compared to when they are not.

### **3.5. And how to go about it?**

The different documentation exercises in which we have been involved did not follow one method, but rather a set of basic methodological principles. We confirmed the importance of setting boundaries or focusing, describing a case, analysing it in detail, and sharing the main lessons learnt (steps in 1-4 in Figure 1). Working in different settings helped us see the importance of not following a blueprint approach, but rather follow these principles in a flexible way. This flexible approach, however, confronted regular difficulties, namely the lack of time or of specific resources, all of which called for clear and detailed plan.

More interestingly, the different "cases" have all shown the importance of giving additional attention to the analysis of the experience, starting with the correct identification of indicators, and their use in measuring results and in collecting opinions. Equally important is the need to pay attention to what is generally seen as the final phase of a documentation process: the dissemination of the results. This is where all the "cases" have been weaker, and where we want to put more attention during the coming months.

## **4. FURTHER CHALLENGES**

Running this programme helped us identify additional challenges and aspects that need further elaboration. For example, field visits regularly reveal that the tackiest problems small-scale farmers face are not always technical or economic, but are also institutional: land tenure issues, access to water or pollution, rights to harvest trees, and the like. How are these issues taken into account? How can these challenges be turned into opportunities for further learning? Following the approach mentioned above, different network partners are now starting a process which will help us identify the major constraints (or "hot issues") found in the field and identify the major stakeholders which are (or which need to be) involved in order to enhance the development of sustainable agriculture (for a first methodological attempt, see Schoubroeck *et al.*, 2009). Thus, besides "field-based innovations", network partners also aim to come to grips with the way "institutional innovations" take place and help exchange knowledge and information among key stakeholders – whether they are in a research, civil, private sector, political or bureaucratic function. With it we intend to broaden our learning, but also pave the way for a widened social learning process and upscaling of relevant practices and approaches.

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