

## Learning through E-networks and Related M&E Issues

Irene Guijt<sup>1</sup> and Jim Woodhill<sup>2</sup>, with Julio A. Berdegué<sup>3</sup> and Irene Visser<sup>4</sup>

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 About This Paper

Technology changes have made it possible to invest in electronic networks (E-networks) as a form of communication that aims to link individuals and organisations across physical and time boundaries. E-networks are virtual communities connected and moderated through the Internet. They exist for various reasons, such as informal sharing, facilitating communication among colleagues, providing access to otherwise unobtainable documentation, and even as facilitator of action learning processes among its members.

From a development perspective, much is expected of these technologies. UNDP's Human Development Report for 2001 states that people hope that "new technologies will lead to healthier lives, greater social freedoms, increased knowledge and more productive livelihoods." For them, "the ultimate significance of the network age is that it can empower people by enabling them to use and contribute to the world's collective knowledge". In the run up to the Johannesburg Environmental Summit, the preparatory document lists the "rapid development of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and their increasingly global use" as a key trend since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. They go on to say that "ICTs have great potential to further the sustainable development agenda, especially if effective steps are taken to bridge the digital divide". This risk is echoed by UNDP that challenges us "to ensure that the entire human race is so [via ICT] empowered - not just a lucky few."

Two networks in Latin America that make heavy use of the 'E' medium, Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA, are part of this trend. They link dozens of rural development initiatives in an effort not only to provide access to information but also to facilitate learning processes based on the field experiences of the network participants. In doing so, these networks expect that the participants will be more efficient and effective in their rural development efforts. This links them firmly to a second

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<sup>1</sup> Consultant, Learning by Design, the Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> Head of Social and Economic Department, International Agricultural Centre, Wageningen, the Netherlands.

<sup>3</sup> Chairperson, RIMISP, Santiago, Chile, plus Coordinator of Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA.

<sup>4</sup> Consultant, RIMISP, Santiago, Chile.

trend, that of the development of learning theory and practice and its link to ICT. Through its interactivity, multiple possibilities of links, and multiple-perspective approach, ICT holds the potential to move beyond linear learning of the kind that leads to propositional knowledge (cf de Jong and Biemans 1998, Stahl 2001, Silvio 1999, Kim 2000, Bawden and Packham 1993). However, this is new territory and none more so than when applied to the specific area of action learning, a key interest of the networks we are considering, and its monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

This paper aims to assess different types of learning that can be mediated by various E-network functions, in order to suggest ways forward for the M&E of Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA. The main question that we address in this paper is ‘How can regional E-mediated networks that aim to provide a learning platform know whether they are making a contribute to the learning of the network members?’.

After describing the specific cases of Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA, we will discuss learning theory and its relevance to E-networks. From this we suggest four levels of learning that can be achieved through eight functions that E-networks offer. We focus in particular on what is needed for action learning to be possible, as this is where a frontier lies for E-mediated networks. The paper concludes with ideas for undertaking monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of E-networks that aim to serve rural populations and their organisations. Critical M&E that focuses on the learning impact of networks is needed to assess if this new trend of investment in rural development-focused Internet exchanges are worthwhile.

## **1.2 Defining E-Networks, Practitioners, Action Learning and E-network Functions**

This paper is aimed at *practitioners* and considers how (action) learning via the Internet can enhance their potential as creators of knowledge, an activity that has often been in the hands of rural development researchers. Practitioners, for our purpose, are those people involved in the practice of implementing rural development programmes or projects. They may be the professional staff of government, NGO or private sector rural development organisations or the community members of informal rural development initiatives. In our two networks, they are people with an interest in using the Internet to improve the quality of their rural development work. Our focus here is how practitioners can become more reflective to learn from their experience in order to both improve their own practice and contribute to the general knowledge base on rural development. Researchers can contribute significantly to E-based learning and support practitioners in their reflective practice, but the focus of the networks in this paper is on activating practitioners to generate learning.

*An E-network* is a group of people who interact through the medium of the Internet linked by a common interest. In so doing, they may become a community of ideas. The Internet medium offers the following:

- cheap and quick ways to communicate in the written form with each other (audio and visual versions of such communication is not yet in widespread use at this stage);
- facilitated (or moderated) and rapidly exchanged written dialogue about issues or topics relevant to members;
- access to Internet sites run by network moderators or by fellow subscribers that provide (organised) information of relevance to its members;
- access to large amounts of other information, sometimes pre-selected around a topic of common interest.

But it must also deal with some challenges: potentially large numbers of participants in exchanges, the relative anonymity of exchanges and the opt-out opportunity that physical distance allows, and bridging different contexts without being able to convey these optimally.

It is critical to distinguish between a pure *E-network* and *E-networking*. Members of a pure E-network have no recourse to physical modes of contact. For these networks, establishing common

understanding of operating contexts, key issues, allegiance to the network, and common purpose are more difficult. E-networking occurs when the E-mediated exchanges form just one part of the interactions of a network of practitioners who also have other forums. These other forums that support E-networking may include workshops and conferences, joint projects or regular work meetings. This distinction is important as the non-E forums provide a critical opportunity for significant human dimensions to emerge, such as mutual trust and understanding and having a shared vision. This is more difficult – though not impossible – to construct in the relative anonymity of a pure E-network.

The aspect of *learning* we discuss in this paper differs from how learning is most often discussed in relation to the Internet, i.e. as an option for distance education. Our focus is on a relatively underexposed version of “E-learning”, in which the role of the Internet is to facilitate action learning by networks of practitioners in order to improve their practice and make a contribution to knowledge domains relevant to their fields of work. “*Action learning*” is the process of learning from the experience of implementing a programme, project or initiative in order to generate knowledge (lessons learned) and then using these lessons to improve ongoing implementation and to make a contribution to a wider body of knowledge. As it emerges from a collective of individuals, we will at times refer to it as “collaborative learning”.

Pursuing the idea of using E-networks for facilitating learning by practitioners leads us to consider its potential *E-network functions*, of which we have identified eight main ones:

1. *E-networking infrastructure and skills* – assisting network members to have the necessary equipment (hard and software) and skills to engage in the e-network. This can be undertaken via webpage development, skills workshops, advice on software, etc.
2. *Basic communication* – being able to carry out necessary exchanges quickly and easily between geographically dispersed actors who need to co-operate. This is mainly via email lists or by posting large documents or data for access to all partners but also includes access to contact details.
3. *Building relationships* – enabling people to build with ease a network of contacts with whom they need or wish to interact, on which they can draw to carry out their work better.
4. *Mediating access to web-based information* – the potential for easy and quick access to up-to-date focused information that practitioners require and that is therefore focused and filtered by network moderators and/or members. This type of web-based information can range from literature lists, key readings, organisational profiles, where to find books or tools, market prices, etc.
5. *Providing a network member-related information bank* – offering the opportunity for network members to provide information about their experiences by posting basic information, Powerpoint presentations about innovations, project documents, etc. This function is critical for those experiences that would otherwise not have a podium through which to offer their insights and innovations.
6. *Interactive information exchange and dialogue* – practitioners being able to support each other by sharing their knowledge, experience and ideas, usually around specific themes. This function has a question-answer character and includes peer support groups, activist groups, e-conferences and loose discussion lists on any topic a subscriber wishes to consider.
7. *Formalised education and training* – practitioners being able to enhance their knowledge and skills through structured, sometimes accredited learning systems. This falls under the topic of ‘distance learning’. This function will not be considered in this paper.
8. *Facilitating action learning* – structured learning efforts with a group of practitioners with the explicit aim to generate knowledge and extract lessons learned and thus to improve particular practices or overcome specific problems and knowledge gaps.

In practice, these functions interlink to create different types and levels of learning. The functions are achieved through a range of possible activities, such as e-conferences, open discussion lists, electronic newsletters, data banks, bulletins of ‘must-read’ references, etc. Note that the same activity can contribute to different functions, such as an E-conference, which can relate to functions 2 and 5 and

may be an essential element in function 7 – depending on how it is structured. Examples of the range of possible activities in the context of our Latin American E-network examples are discussed in the next section.

## 2 Two Regional Networks : Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA

Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA, the two networks around which we are structuring this paper, are both based in Latin America and the Caribbean and focus on rural development issues relevant for practitioners (see Table 1). They are both moderated through RIMISP, a Chile-based NGO active throughout Latin American and the Caribbean. Both are struggling to define how they can assess whether they are contributing to their stated learning aims, or how to monitor and evaluate their contribution to learning. This section discusses critical issues of concern that are emerging from these two cases in relation to the learning focus of this paper. Both networks are described and discussed in detail in Appendix 1.

*Table 1. Basic features of Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA*

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Grupo Chorlaví</i>	<i>FIDAMERICA</i>
Age	Started in 1999	Started in 1995
Medium used	Totally virtual – no face-to-face encounters other than at the first meeting in 1998, when the idea of a network was conceived	Interspersed face-to-face events with electronic conferences and email exchanges
Size	300-400 subscribers	39 national projects and 10 regional programs supported by IFAD
Funding agency	ICCO (Dutch NGO) and sharing funding of the linked Mink'a de Chorlaví competitive fund with IDRC (Canadian NGO agency). ALOP, an association of development NGOs, co-sponsors Grupo Chorlaví.	IFAD, UN organisation, focusing on rural poverty alleviation
Membership	Open access	Open access to documents and e-conferences but exists to serve IFAD projects and programs and more recently, the local community-based organisations with whom they work
Emerged from	Result of a meeting with NGO's and community-based organisations on sustainable agricultural and rural development	Instigated to support a limited number of existing projects related to one funding agency
Activities	Competitive fund, e-newsletter InterCambios, open discussion list, e-conferences, web site, Special Cooperation Agreements	In Phase III, bi-annual events on sharing innovations, hands-on facilitating of project learning processes, technical assistance in the use of the Internet, e-conferences, e-newsletter InterCambios, maintain/develop Internet-based facilities and systems in the projects, sub-network of community-based organizations

### 2.1 Emerging Issues and Conditions

Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA are both regional networks that rely on electronic communications to provide a structure for a learning environment, in which multiple learning processes of practitioners are moderated. The configurations of participants change according to the topic under discussion, so they are networks in flux. They also have key differences. For example, unlike FIDAMERICA, Grupo Chorlaví does not have the advantage of face-to-face contact in regular forums. Their audiences are also different - Grupo Chorlaví has a more open-ended public while FIDAMERICA's focus is on IFAD projects (and partners) in the region.

Nevertheless, the initial experience of these networks lead us to identify emerging issues that affect both of their capacity to achieve the stated goals.

## Key Issues related to Learning Contribution

The most fundamental issue that emerges from a first look at the networks (see Annex 1) concerns uncertainty about the extent to which the learning that might be occurring is contributing substantially to the practice of rural development. Current M&E for the networks is not yet effectively monitoring learning impacts. One moderator says: “I see ourselves as facilitators, struggling on our way, using our intuition to stimulate discussions, to find incentives so that participants will share their experiences, and to redesign our websites based on common sense and assumptions.” This is fine from an operational point of view but is unlikely to suffice for the funding agencies and may restrict the capacity of the network moderators to innovate and improve.

While there is little doubt that both networks are making a valuable contribution to basic communication and access to information (see the eight functions in section 1.2), the evidence of substantive learning is not clear. By substantive learning we mean that knowledge about how to overcome key constraints to, or opportunities for, rural development has been generated or communicated/accessed and that this knowledge has been used to make significant changes to the practice of rural development.

We use the term “substantive learning” because a range of learning is undoubtedly occurring as a result of the E-networks. However, the aim of these networks is to improve the performance of participants as development agents. “Substantive learning” is that which is sufficient to cause such effects. As participants are mainly practitioners, this will entail the transformation tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, hence the focus on systematisation and not on a formal research process.

The limited M&E to date of these networks in terms of learning make it difficult for us to assess fulfilment of this objective. The mix of E-mediated interactions and face-to-face encounters that features in the case of FIDAMERICA make it necessary to consider the link between specific activities that contribute certain functions to achieve certain levels of learning (see section 3). All we need for the purposes of this paper is sufficient understanding of the diversity of interactions and the varying degrees of participation in these, in order to be clearer on how to assess the learning that takes place through these networks, with whatever combination of electronic and non-electronic activities they may opt for. In this sense, the networks can be viewed as any other type of project and hence our return to basic M&E principles in section 7 of this paper.

This overarching concern brings us to several related M&E issues:

1. The learning goals for the networks are couched in very general terms. So it is difficult to know exactly what outcomes are expected via which mechanisms and therefore what needs tracking. This calls for more precise learning goals at the level of activities and the networks as a whole, supported by good mechanisms to select topics, issues and goals.
2. Fostering and facilitating critical reflection and learning within a single organisation or project team – so at proximity – is already a considerable challenge that is only now gaining the kind of attention it merits (Groot 2002, King 2000). Facilitating such processes between geographically dispersed network members is even less understood, and requires further development and experimentation with appropriate methodologies. Typical characteristics of communication through Internet are: distance, decontextualised in time and space, the relative anonymity posed by distance and time differences, and only one mode of learning, i.e. via writing and reading. Facilitators need to work with these characteristics as part of their learning challenge.
3. It is proving difficult to achieve a critical mass of regular engagement by key stakeholders for the learning objectives of the networks to be fully realised. Grupo Chorlaví moderators have tried various strategies to stimulate participation. They use considerable energy to motivate experts to contribute to the debate. Top experts are too busy and, importantly, have their own networks in which they choose to invest. It remains unclear who is using which information to make which changes in their rural development practice. Note

however, that low levels of feedback from users cannot be interpreted as a lack of success – many participants in various activities may well use information but just not report on it.

What we conclude from the experience of the two networks to date is that there is a very big jump from E-networks being a valuable and useful tool for regular communication, information accessing and sharing to E-networks becoming a platform for substantive collaborative learning that can significantly contribute to improved rural development practice.

### **Six Conditions for Effective Learning Platforms**

Drawing on this experience and the authors' other experiences in facilitating collaborative learning activities, we propose six conditions that are necessary for networks that rely to a large extent on the electronic medium and wish to become an effective learning platform for its members. These conditions must be tested and developed further but we offer them here as an initial attempt at assessing whether networks have the basic capacity needed to do the job.

1. **Individuals are motivated to participate actively.** Motivating people to invest time in learning is difficult, even by conventional means. Training programs need to offer substantial scholarships because otherwise projects do not send staff members. Research organizations do not fund trips to conferences, libraries in many NGOs and even most provincial universities are weak and under threat of closure. Field staff are rarely expected to read or document their experiences, nor are they provided with many opportunities to access current literature in whatever form. Open discussion and criticism of organisational accomplishments and performances is often discouraged, with M&E results usually showing that efforts are 'good enough, given the circumstances, but some changes are needed'. By and large, learning is still not appreciated as an essential element of decent development efforts so incentives will be needed and therefore need to be understood.

Participants are motivated to engage by different factors. These include: availability of time, extent to which participation is seen to be part of normal work, extent to which participation helps individuals do their work, attractiveness/ease of materials posted on the web, incentives and sanctions related to their participation or non-participation, how comfortable people feel using the electronic medium for written dialogue and the extent to which people feel they are free to challenge and question what their organisation or project is currently doing. Almost all of these motivational factors relate to facilitating learning in any context and some relate specifically to the electronic medium. Understanding the motivational factors and working out how they can be managed via incentives to ensure a critical level of participation represents a significant undertaking.

2. **A clear and systematic learning process is being facilitated.** Learning about a topic does not just happen because people can interact and communicate. Thoughtful planning and good facilitation is needed for lessons to emerge. For example, in the case of action learning, the process needs to be based in particular on experiential learning theory and to use mechanisms that help people move through the phases of observation, reflection, analysis, conceptualisation and decision-making in a structured way. Moderators need to be aware of how to facilitate learning processes if it is have any chance of success. Due to the importance of this condition, the next section of this paper specifically addresses learning theory and process, before identifying four levels of learning that require systematic processes.
3. **E-network participants are able to effectively and efficiently access the Internet.** It is important to ensure that simply accessing email and the Internet is not in itself a barrier. Factors here include people having regular and easy physical access to a networked computer, Internet connections being adequately reliable and fast, and people having adequate computer and Internet skills. The distribution of exchanges at the recipient end also needs to be understood. Too little is known currently about internal communications in organisations linked to Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA, and whether mail gets lost, people know how to use the Internet, if messages are shared, etc.

4. **Rural development initiatives are designed or modified to be learning-oriented.** If someone is busy implementing a deadline-driven project or programme, with little in-built space for reflection and learning, he or she cannot be expected to engage actively in a learning network. On the other hand, if learning objectives have been built into a project or programme, then the learning network becomes a helpful vehicle for carrying out these objectives. In the next section of the paper, we outline steps for designing such initiatives.
5. **Learning processes are institutionally supported.** All of the above conditions are heavily influenced by the institutional context. The project design, M&E and funding/loan processes that are required by bi- and multi-lateral donors have a dramatic impact on incentives for learning, as do the policies and procedures of national government agencies and NGOs. For example, having a specific action learning objective with allocated funds in a project design document and project staff and consultants having job descriptions that require attention to action learning could represent a significant improvement. For agencies to commit to learning processes, be open to criticism and change, the staff requires specific policies, procedures, systems, incentives and resources that make this possible.
6. **Clarity about the opportunities and constraints for certain types of learning (particularly meta-learning) through E-networks.** The combination of learning processes and the virtual world is still in evolution and not well understood. What takes place across the electronic medium is the dissemination, comparative analysis, documentation and storage of experiences, with the starting point remaining one's experiences. This relates not only to the extent to which facilitation can support learning of individual members but also whether lessons with general value can emerge from the collection of disparate experiences, i.e. meta-level learning. Despite the rhetoric about the benefits of the information superhighway, the electronic medium has the potential to work against the recent innovations in experiential learning theory and practice. The notion of the information superhighway goes to the heart of the issue. Information does not equal knowledge and easy access to information does not automatically mean professional competence, wise decision-making or effective learning. The electronic communication medium needs to be set within a context of human cognition and interactive processes of decision-making and action. This paper makes a small contribution to this condition about knowing the limits of web learning.

### 3 Types of Network Learning and Theory

If we wish to examine how to improve and evaluate learning via electronic networks, it is necessary to first examine the concept of learning itself. For the purposes of this paper we wish to distinguish four types of learning that can occur within an E-mediated network. These are: (1) learning from existing information in order to take action; (2) learning from experience to improve immediate practice; (3) learning from experience to improve the collective knowledge base, and; (4) learning how to learn via E-networks. These types of learning do not happen in isolation of each other, with the second type dependent on the first type happening, and so on. Before discussing these types of learning in more detail in section 4, we will first look briefly at the concept of learning itself.

#### 3.1 Emergence of the Learning Paradigm

The idea of learning has, over the last 20 years or so, emerged as a central concept in many different fields of human endeavour. We now talk of organisational learning, the learning organisation, learning communities, social learning, principles of adult learning, facilitating a learning process and so on. Why has the idea of learning come to be seen as so important? This can be explained from four perspectives - a practical, a philosophical, a political and a psychological.

From a practical perspective, humankind has found life at the turn of the century increasingly complex and ever more rapidly changing. This marks a profound difference from earlier human times where social life was organised around traditional practices that generally changed rather slowly. In the modern world, the advent of science and technology has unleashed a new dynamic of social change.

Individuals, organisations and societies are finding that must continually adjust themselves to a constantly changing external environment. To do this, they must learn and thus the notion of “adaptive management” or “learning by doing” is proposed (cf Röling 2002, Gunderson et al 1995, Borrini-Feyerabend et al 2000).

Philosophy has witnessed what is known as a constructivist turn. Simply put, this means a shift away from seeing knowledge generation as being the sole province of ‘objective’ scientists to recognising the validity and importance of knowledge that is socially constructed through human interaction (cf Berger and Luckman 1991, Guba 1990, Reason and Rowan 1981). For example, scientists cannot provide society with objective answers about ethical questions over genetic engineering. The knowledge to make wise decisions on such matters must be learned through social and political engagement between many different groups. This can be seen as involving a learning process.

The level of stakeholder or public participation in processes of governance from local to global levels grew dramatically in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (cf Edwards and Gaventa 2002). In part this happened for pragmatic reasons as governments began to realise that stakeholder input was needed to achieve the necessary support to make decisions and take action. It has also been driven by an ideological consensus around the merits of democratic participation and empowerment and the perceived rights that people have to be involved in influencing changes that will impact on their future (cf Goldblatt 1996, Goodin 1992). Processes of political participation at whatever scale involve at least some aspects of learning, to learn about issues but also about the best way to make decisions.

The fourth perspective relates to the growing understanding about human cognitive processes. We now understand better – though still only partially – how the human mind assimilates information and makes sense of this information. Education has shifted from a model of pouring knowledge into an empty vessel to one of engaging students or adult learners in more active processes of problem solving and conceptualisation (cf Bawden and Packham 1993, Ison 1990, Van der Veen 2001).

### **3.2 A Constructivist Approach to Knowledge and Experiential Learning**

In writing this document, we are making a critical assumption – that practitioners (people involved in the practice of rural development as opposed to researchers) can make a valuable contribution to their own and others knowledge about rural development and that this can be used to improve future action. This might seem a rather obvious assumption but represents a revolution in terms of learning theory, and is therefore relevant for E-networks that aim to stimulate learning.

The twentieth century was an era of the expert and the scientist in which the creation of valid and useful knowledge was seen largely as the domain of formalised science. This model viewed scientific experts as generators of knowledge that could be extended or taught to others to use and apply. In this model students, practitioners or even farmers are not expected to question and critically analyse problems and solutions but rather to absorb knowledge established by others that they then should apply. To realise how pervading this model has been, look at most school and university curricula in which the emphasis is largely on placing knowledge into supposedly empty brains. The extent to which students are supported to find out how to solve their own problems and to reflect on and make sense of their own experience has been very limited (Bawden and Packham 1993, Ison 1990). The consequence, it can be argued, are organisations and practitioners populated with professionals with professional learning disabilities. People and organisations are not very good at learning to learn. This model has also driven several decades of rural extension work in which externally derived knowledge was taken to the potential users.

In an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world, where experts do not have all the answers, not knowing how to learn is a major problem and a significant impediment to development. The Internet may well provide opportunities to support better learning, but first it is necessary to know something about learning itself.

The problem described above has its roots in western philosophy, in particular, in the ideas about what constitutes valid knowledge that emerged with the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution. This is not the place for a detailed philosophical analysis but only to highlight what is critical for understanding the concept of learning.

Two main paradigms or schools of thought about the philosophy of knowledge can be identified: objectivism and constructivism. Objectivism sees knowledge as truthful facts about objects or phenomena that can be uncovered by the application of scientific method. This knowledge is seen as being independent and separate from the individual knower and any specific context and hence is believed to have an objective quality. From an objectivist standpoint there is a knowable external reality independent from knowing human subjects. Science gives us access to the 'truth' about this external reality. This school of thought fits an E-network that takes knowledge from the world of science and researchers and places it at the disposal of practitioners.

Constructivism defines knowledge differently - as being 'constructed' through complex social processes as individuals interact with each other and their environment. 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. From this perspective, knowledge is placed firmly within the knowers and their contexts, that is, with practitioners who use their experiences as the basis for generating new insights. A constructivist perspective sees practitioners (and communities of practitioners) as needing to create knowledge appropriate to their own situation through integrating and internalising established knowledge with an understanding of their own specific context and reflection on their own experiences. This school of thought fits with an E-network that seeks to create meaning through debate among those who are immersed in practice.

### **Experiential Learning**

A constructivist perspective on knowledge requires clarity about how people can learn from their own experience. One of the most important contributions to ideas about learning has been the theory of experiential learning of educationalist David Kolb.

According to Kolb's theory, learning from experiences involves a four-stage cyclical process. 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. First, it is necessary to reflect on this experience. This means exploring what happened, noting observations, paying attention to your feelings and those of others. It means building up a comprehensive picture of the experience.

The second stage of the cycle involves analysing this information to arrive at some theories, models or concepts that explain the experience in terms of why things happened the way they did. This theorising or conceptualising about experience is very important to learning. It is where solutions to problems, innovative ideas and lateral thinking start emerging. Drawing on existing theories, for example from standard books or experts, is also crucial during this stage.

Armed with this understanding of past experience, the third stage involves deciding what is most important for and generating ideas about how to improve future actions. It requires deciding how to put what has been learned into practice.

Finally, in the fourth stage, putting these new ideas or solutions into practice by taking action will result in a new experience. And so the cycle continues.

Being explicit about moving through each stage of the learning cycle has proven to be very helpful in problem solving and project management. What is both interesting and important for group work is that different people tend to have different styles of learning and, therefore, place more emphasis on, or feel more comfortable with, some stages of the learning cycle than others. For example, some people like exploring new ideas and situations without ever moving on to taking action. Other people tend to jump to conclusions without fully exploring or analysing the situation. Then there are those

people who are happy as long as they are busy and do not think too much about whether what they are doing will produce results. By being aware of these styles, in individuals or in groups, problem solving and decision-making can be improved dramatically. But for the E-network environment it is unclear how these styles affect the learning process and how it is moderated, a question that needs further investigation.

Groot and Maarleveld (2000) summarise this view of learning well. “This active learning finally leads to a deeper understanding about how complex issues work and why. It improves peoples’ capacity to make sense of and adapt (to) the ever-changing world. Compared to learning through adoption of externally provided solutions, this active learning is supposed to have many advantages in terms of sustainability, creativity and innovativeness. These qualities are essential when dealing with challenges faced in natural resources management, food security and agricultural development”.

### **Loops of Learning**

In addition to Kolb’s cycle, critical for E-network learning is the distinction between single and double loop learning. This derives from Argyris’ (1990) and Argyris and Schön’s (1996) work on levels of learning that mainly focused on organisational learning but has proven useful in other contexts. Most reflection is what they call ‘single loop’ learning, which is learning how to do what you are currently doing a bit better without changing the organisational strategy, structure, culture or systems. It focuses on improving efficiency and effectiveness in achieving pre-determined goals and maintaining performance within existing norms and rules (Argyris and Schön 1996).

Double loop<sup>5</sup> (or second-order) learning not only affects *how* something is done better but also in the underlying insights and principles. This type of learning is needed when it seems that tweaking rules will not be adequate for goal achievement, and when the theories or assumptions that guide action need to be revised.

Both single and double loop learning are needed. As Groot and Maarleveld (2000) say, it is simply a matter of knowing what type of change is required: in rules and procedures (single loop learning) or a more radical transition or innovation (double loop learning). They also go on to stress that these learning loops have implications for the facilitation process: “the choice of a particular learning loop especially influences *what participants learn* [original emphasis]”.

For moderators of E-networks, opting for single loop learning means guiding discussions by asking network members to reflect on “how” questions, such as “how do we solve the problem of defaulting credit group members” or “how can we avoid making the common mistake of unrealistic expectations regarding participatory processes”. If the topic under consideration requires more far-reaching reflections, then E-network moderators will need to turn to questions that lie at the double loop level and ask “why” questions, such as “Why are we expecting so much of participatory processes?” or an analysis of the assumption that small micro-credit groups are the best route for rural finance.

Before being able to outline the steps we consider critical when designing networks to be action learning-oriented, we also wish to discuss current thinking on “lessons learned”. The focus on this topic, which we consider is the output of learning processes, can miss the mark if it does not focus on which lessons for whom and how to use lessons to make a change. The process of learning lessons can benefit much from the learning cycle and loops of learning we have discussed above.

### **3.3 Growing Interest in “Lessons Learned”**

The idea of learning lessons has become popular. Lessons learned are now suggested as being a key output from monitoring and evaluation, project and programme review documents often claim to be presenting lessons learned and development organisations argue the importance of learning lessons

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<sup>5</sup> Argyris and Schön (1996) also identified triple loop learning that entails learning about single and double loop learning. It deals with the procedures that guide the learning process itself, who is responsible for learning, how learning occurs, etc. This would be relevant to E-networks if the subscribers are keen to understand their own learning processes.

from the implementation experiences of programmes they fund. Like Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA, an increasing number of groups aim - and claim - to synthesise lessons learned from their members' experiences and using these to improve practice.

However, the rhetoric and the reality about lessons learned are rather far apart. Few lessons on offer are useful for guiding future action. They are often inadequate in one or more of these ways:

1. The lesson learned does not contain a generalised principle that can be applied in other situations. Instead, it is simply a description of an observation or a recommendation that lacks justification.
2. The lesson has not been related to the assumptions (hypotheses and existing knowledge) on which the programme or project has been based and so lacks a meaningful context to explain from where it has emerged.
3. The lesson is an untested or inadequately justified assumption or hypothesis about what might happen if something is done differently. In other words, it would be foolish to rely on the lesson without it first being tested. Few lessons are crosschecked from various sources.
4. The lesson is either too general or too specific to be useful to others.
5. Few lessons are clear about the audience for whom the lesson might have relevance and thus are neither articulated in appropriate terms nor targeted at intended audiences, so hampering their use to improve action.

Current approaches to learning lessons are constrained by three factors. First, few practitioners or organisations have a clear understanding about a lesson learned and what characteristics it needs to have in order to be useful. Second, the process of learning lessons is rarely embedded in an overall learning and knowledge generating strategy. Third, there is insufficient investment in the various resources and facilitation required for practitioners to engage effectively in a learning process that leads to usable lessons.

These constraints can be overcome, we believe, if rural development initiatives are designed from the foundations up to be action learning-oriented. In section 1.2 we defined "action learning"<sup>6</sup> as being the process of learning from the experience of implementing a programme, project or initiative in order to generate knowledge (lessons learned) and then using these lessons to improve ongoing implementation and to make a contribution to a wider body of knowledge. So "lessons learned" can be defined as knowledge derived from experience that is sufficiently well founded and generalisable that it has the potential to improve future actions. Thus, action learning is the ongoing cycle or process of learning while the lessons learned are the knowledge outputs that arise as just one part of the action learning cycle.

Finally, in the case of regional networks, lessons learned – and indeed learning in general – need to be considered at two levels: the project level and the meta-level, i.e. across projects. Let's clarify this with an example. Suppose you are working with ten projects interested in managing micro-irrigation schemes. A relevant learning question for these projects could be: "How can one ensure that the water user's association (WUA) is effective?". Previous experiences might have indicated that the more active the participation, the more effective the WUA. Thus a more specific question could be: "How can you ensure the active participation of those involved in the WUA, and therefore what motivates their involvement?" How will you deal with the ten different contexts? In 'A', the project might say "Well, we served beer at the meeting and had a good time and the enjoyment factor and social exchange is an important pull factor". This could be the lesson learned for that project. Project 'B' already has the equivalent of a social-beer occasion in their water management process, and so this motivation will not make the WUA more effective. Thus you need to move from a context-specific lesson such as 'beer at WUA meetings helps to increase the quality of participation', to a meta-lesson that transcends the specific implementation or operational aspect of "beer at meetings". Such a lesson could be 'seek to understand local motivating factors for participants to attend the WUA'. Thus the

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<sup>6</sup> The terms action learning and action research are often used interchangeably but we view them as a continuum of learning activities. Action learning involves activities whose primary focus is implementation yet require improvement and thus provide a focus for learning. Action research involves activities with a primary focus on knowledge generation but undertaken through engaging in implementation.

lesson moves to a higher level of abstraction. FIDAMERICA has explicitly designed these two levels into its current phase of work.

## 4 Types of Learning and the Functions and Activities of E-networks

Within the context of the above discussion about learning we can now turn to the types of learning that occur within an E-network and how the functions and activities of E-networks can support such learning.

### 4.1 Types of Learning

For the purposes of this paper, we wish to distinguish four types of learning that can occur within an E-network. These are:

1. Learning from existing information in order take action;
2. Learning from experience to improve immediate practice;
3. Learning from experience to improve the collective knowledge base;
4. Learning how to learn via E-networks.

Learning of types 2, 3, and 4 we will refer to as action learning because reflection on the experiences with action taken is used to generate lessons. Type 3 learning could also be referred to as action research.

**1. Learning from existing information and knowledge in order take action:** This type of learning simply implies accessing and using existing information in order to take action. For example, it might mean gathering existing information on the best way to grow organic coffee and using this information to set up and manage a small-scale enterprise. The learning aspects means that the learner(s) needs to be able to understand the information, internalise it and work out the practical implications for taking action. It is important that the learner(s) can identify their information needs and access the necessary information.

**2. Learning from experience to improve immediate practice:** This type of learning involves practitioners learning from their experience of taking action in order to improve what they are doing. The coffee growers reflect on the successes and failures of their experience so far in order to improve the management of their coffee enterprise. This involves the learner(s) in being able to reflect on their experience and draw out conclusions (lessons learned) that can be applied in the future to improve action. This learning will also draw on type one learning as an issue may emerge from practice that creates the need for the grower to seek out additional information to resolve problems or questions that emerge from experience. This type of learning is largely what was described above as single loop learning.

**3. Learning from experience to improve the collective knowledge base:** This type of learning takes type two learning a step further by looking, for example, at how the experience of the coffee grower and / or the experiences of many coffee growers can contribute to the collective knowledge base about how to best grow coffee. This type of learning becomes complementary to more formalised research processes and is often useful in testing out research conclusions or the validity of existing theories and assumptions. For the type of learning to be worthwhile two things are necessary. First, the knowledge generated must be generalised or abstracted in a way that makes it relevant and meaningful for other contexts. Second, the learning needs to be related to the existing knowledge base, there is little point in putting a lot of effort in re-learning something that is already established and well-accepted knowledge. This type of learning is largely what was described in section 3 as 'double loop learning'.

**4. Learning how to learn via E-networks:** This is a meta-level learning that focuses not on the subject matter but on the actual process of learning itself. Learning lessons through experience and in

particular using E-networks for to do so is a relatively new and innovative concept. There remains a need to learn about how to best use E-networks to improve learning. This type of learning is very closely linked to the monitoring and evaluation of the E-network but also includes how participants perceive their own capacity to learn. Some call this level of learning ‘triple loop learning’ (Argyris and Schön 1996)

#### **4.2 Linking Types of Learning to E-Network Functions and Activities**

Eight different E-network functions were introduced in section 1.2: E-networking infrastructure and skills; building relationships; basic communication; mediating access to web based; providing a network member ‘information bank’; interactive information exchange; formalised education and training; and facilitating action learning.

These different functions and their associated activities, such as providing web site or conducting E-conferences, will contribute to the different types of learning in different ways. For example, an E-conference that is focused on helping participants to gain an understanding of existing knowledge would be quite different to an E-conference that is aimed at generating new knowledge to overcome a particular common problem.

The ‘basic communication’ function would be important for all types of learning. Building relationships may be more important for learning of types 2, 3 and 4 because in these situation people need to share their successes and failures which requires some trust. The way a web site is set up and the nature of the information bank for network members will vary depending on what type of learning is being emphasised.

An important point is that for learning levels 2, 3 and 4 to occur there will be an important facilitation role for the network. Careful thought is needed about how to best facilitate this via the network, using the principles of learning explained in section 3.

As one moves from learning level 1 to level 4, there is likely to be a change in the audience and number of people interested and the needs they will have for the network. For example, it is likely that more people will be interested in gaining access to information which is directly applicable to their own work, compared to the number of people keen to to learn how to learn and thus improve their network . Researchers are more likely to have an interest in type 3 learning, while a busy enterprise manager may feel she/he only has time to make use of the network for personal needs related to learning types 1 and 2.

Focusing on these different types of learning can help to more define more specific objectives of the network in relation to the different learning needs and topics of the network members, and hence what sorts of specific activities are required to optimise the different functions of the network to meet the members needs. Looking at these different type of learning also provides part of the framework for network M&E that will be discussed in section 7.

These relationships between levels of learning, network functions and network activities are illustrated in Table 2. The table is indicatives only, illustrating the merits of looking at E-networks from the perspective of levels of learning and functions to clarify the network objectives and the network evaluation process . Discussion about, and refinement, of such tables could help network designers / managers and users to clarify the needs for and services of the network.

Table 2. Linking types of learning with E-network functions

<i>E-network functions</i>	<i>Types of Learning</i>			
	<i>L1 – Learning from existing information</i>	<i>L2 – learning from experience to improve practice</i>	<i>L3 – learning from experience to generate new insights and knowledge</i>	<i>L4 – learning to improve learning</i>
<i>E-Networking Infrastructure and Skills</i>	Assisting network members to have the necessary equipment and skills to engage in the E-Network activities			
<i>Basic Communication</i>	Use of network to inform members about activities, seek information on needs and organise activities	As for L1	As for L1	As for L1
<i>Building Relationships</i>	Members need to know who exists that may be able to provide them with information	For these levels of learning building trust so that people feel comfortable to share successes and failures and offer constructive feedback becomes very important. This may be enhanced by face-to-face activities.		
<i>Mediating access to information</i>	This is a critical activity area for this level of learning, with members needing to be supported in quickly and easily accessing information they need	As for L1	As for L1, but here additional information of a research and theoretical orientation will be important	Need to have access to the collective experiences of network members about the value and use of the network for this level of learning
<i>Network information bank</i>	Information that members have found useful is made easily available	Experiences of members are documented and made available for other to use in their own learning	Collation and analysis of experiences of members in order to support L3 learning	Collecting and analysis of network monitoring and evaluation information
<i>Interactive information exchange</i>	Focuses on helping members to access relevant information by engaging with other members but not necessary around a specific topic, for example a network question and answer role	As for L1 but then focuses on helping members to reflect on their own experiences and improve their practice	Focuses on generating new insights and so involves analysis of the collective experience and the relationship with existing knowledge and theory	Focuses on members reflecting on the value of the network itself to meet their needs and how it could be improved, for example, with each interactive session finishing with such an activity.
<i>Formalised education and training</i>	A more structured way of meeting members information needs	Problem based education focused on members real life situations	This function of the network could draw on the information generated by this level of learning	Training in network use and the skills for learning from experience may be important for overall network functioning
<i>Facilitating action learning</i>	Not relevant	Focuses on helping members to reflect on their own experience to solve problems and in doing so drawing on others experience.=	Focuses on identifying areas where unresolved problems exist that require new insights and knowledge to make improvements	This essentially involves facilitating a learning orientated M&E system for the network itself

## 5 Designing Rural Development Initiatives to be Action Learning-Oriented

If an E-network, project, programme or organisation wants to learn from their experience (experience of network members), then such learning needs to be planned for and facilitated. The following steps provide some ideas to think about in order to design an E-network, project, programme or organisation to be action learning oriented (i.e. consciously learning from their experience). There is a particular challenge here for an E-network in that the network is to a large extent dependent on drawing on the learning that is occurring within its members project's or organisations. The capacity of the E-network to overcome the lack of a learning orientation within members projects or organisations may be limited. However, encouraging members to consider the following steps could help them to improve how they learn from their experience with network activities.

The aspects of learning theory described above lead us to propose a set of six idealised steps needed when designing an action learning-oriented rural development initiative. These steps and the elements of each step serve two purposes. First, they enable us to examine more closely how E-networks can contribute to action learning (see section 6). Second, they provide a basis for examining how to monitor and evaluate and action learning-oriented E-networks (section 7).

The steps are:

- Step One – Setting an Action Learning Agenda;
- Step Two – Articulating the Theory of Action;
- Step Three – Identifying Specific Action Learning Questions and Investigation Methods;
- Step Four – Facilitating (or Moderating) Critical Reflection;
- Step Five – Documenting and Communicating Conclusions and Lessons;
- Step Six – Using the Lessons to Improve Action.

### 5.1 Step One – Setting An Action Learning Agenda

The first step is to work out the general issues, topics or problems around which learning will take place. For example in a project it may be recognised that there is a particular problem that has to be resolved during implementation and that this should be one of the foci for learning. In an e-network, members may have a particular common issue or problem that they want to collectively discuss and learn about. The rural development initiatives that are members of Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA are large and complex, often integrating many different disciplines or areas of knowledge. Consequently there is a potentially endless list of relevant topics about which to learn. However, to be effective, focus on a limited number of key topics that can be handled within the available resources and time frame of the learning initiative. To set priorities:

1. Identify the important knowledge gaps and constraints in the rural development knowledge base to which the initiative participants could potentially contribute.
2. Identify any knowledge gaps or uncertainties that need resolution in order to improve rural development activities.
3. Look for overlaps between 1 and 2.
4. Develop a set of criteria for prioritising action learning topics (for example, relevance to implementation, availability of or access to expertise, cost and difficulty of achieving worthwhile results).
5. Prioritise the list.

Both FIDAMERICA and Grupo Chorlaví undertake efforts to articulate a focused learning agenda. For example, for each round of Minka de Chorlaví's Fund, a set of rural development experts are canvassed for their priority areas of concern. Network members were also asked to help specify the terms of reference of the fund, and 41 suggestions were received from 36 individuals. Moderators of both networks seek input from members to determine the focus of e-conferences. FIDAMERICA now

operates slightly differently as it has a predetermined list of topics for the next three years that are based on IFAD's institutional objectives and its knowledge management themes for its LAC region.

In this step, of particular importance and a challenge for both networks, is the question of who responds to calls for topics and how agreement is reached.

## **5.2 Step Two – Articulate the Theory of Action**

People's actions are guided and justified, implicitly or explicitly, by a theory of action, which describes what they think will happen if an action is taken. For example, as a student you may study hard. So your theory of action is that by studying hard you will do well in your exams and end up with qualifications that enable you to have an interesting, secure and well-paid job. This theory contains a set of assumptions. First, that by studying hard you will do well in your exams. This would be a faulty assumption if you are just not bright enough to do well, you misjudge which topics to give most attention to, or you become sick at the time of the exam. A second assumption is that good qualifications will land you a good job. But perhaps unemployment is high and few good jobs exist.

Articulating your theory of action means making explicit your assumptions about the cause and effect relationships that justify the action you will take. A theory of action may draw on existing established knowledge and theories as well as the 'theories' developed by an individual or group as a result of reflecting on their past experience. The theory of action is what should be included in the fourth column of the logical framework matrix, although for many project this has not been very clearly worked out.

The design of any rural development initiative relies on an (implicit and/or explicit) theory of action (some call it 'conceptual model' and thus its rationale contains many assumptions. Our theories of action stem partly from society's established and formalised knowledge base and partly from the accumulated experiences of those involved in designing the initiative. An initiative may involve a participatory design process with key stakeholders. The theory of action is that such involvement will lead to a better designed project that will better meet people's needs. Underlying this is an assumption that people have the skills and capacities to participate effectively. This could turn out to be a false assumption and the theory of action would then be prove to be incorrect. Our theories of action (and assumptions) are, therefore, more or less well tested and hence more or less reliable.

Untested and unreliable theories of action can lead to the theoretical failure of an initiative (see Box 4). Usually far more attention is devoted to the mechanics and logistics of implementation than to the theoretical basis of an initiative. An action learning approach to design and management means being explicit about and testing the theoretical foundations around which initiatives have been planned.

Different individuals or groups may have very different theories of action in terms of how they approach the same situation. This is potentially a source of both conflict and innovation. Engaging different people in dialogue about the reasons why they do things the way they do becomes a valuable source of learning. Often people have not made clear to themselves and other all the reasons for acting the way they do which is why helping them to articulate their theory of action is important.

### **Box 4. Project logic and project success (Margoluis and Salafsky 1998)**

***A successful project***

Good theoretical model + Good implementation = Leads to Project Success

***Theoretical failure of a project***

Incorrect logical model + Good implementation = Leads to Project Failure

***Failure in implementation***

Good logical model + Failure in implementation = Leads to Project Failure

***Absolute failure***

Incorrect/illogical model + Failure in implementation = Lead to Project Failure

To articulate a theory of action:

1. Identify the main intervention strategies or activities.
2. Identify the main theories and assumptions on which these strategies or activities are based.
3. Describe how the theories and assumptions are drawing on established knowledge and experience and assess how reliable this established knowledge and experience is - in general and for the specific context of the intervention.
4. Identify the main weakness or risks in the theory of action that may provide important areas for learning.

There is no intention to suggest they all network members would have or would try to develop a common theory of action. Rather the point is that in their discussions around different learning topics or themes they need to be able to reflect on and discuss with others their theory of action. This of course becomes easier if in the design stage of a project or some other initiative the theory of action has been made explicit.

Neither Grupo Chorlaví nor FIDAMERICA show much evidence of incorporating this step in their learning process. Both may, at times, request a conceptual or methodological paper to feed into or kick off an e-conference. In InterCambios, the newsletter that is shared by both Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA, the core topic of each issue is supported by documents that represent perspectives that the newsletter editors and moderators consider are important and make an effort to provide different and even conflicting perspectives. These could represent, if indeed state-of-the-art understanding on the topic, the latest theory of action. However, the theories offered in the newsletters are not clearly articulated in terms of theories or action, nor made the subject of further inquiry. For example, in the recent issue of Intercambios on privatised extension systems, a theory of action could have said something like: “If we privatise extension systems, then we expect more efficient services that are more responsive to farmers needs, etc”. Those assumptions that are considered questionable or unclear would then become the focus of an action learning process.

### **5.3 Step Three – Identifying Specific Action Learning Questions and Investigation Methods**

Once you have decided on the broad topics for action learning and identified the theory of action, the next step is to develop more specific questions around which to focus the learning and information gathering process. For example, in relation to the example mentioned earlier, you might be interested to know what capacity building is necessary for stakeholders to engage effectively in a participatory process.

How specific the action learning questions are and how much attention needs to be given to the investigation methods will vary a lot between different activities. In some situations the methods may involve little more than discussion among network members. In other situations researchers may be involved in working collaboratively with network members and helping for more sophisticated data gathering methods.

The point is that if one is serious about an action learning process, it requires more than setting a theme and stumbling over lessons or asking people to submit lessons. It will require consideration of what information is needed in order to answer the action learning questions. This is where the process takes on a research perspective, the basis of the knowledge generation objective.

Looking at our two networks, we see some evidence of the use of specific questions. For example, in e-conferences, Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA offer weekly or fortnightly-specific discussion questions that relate to the key theme of the conference. It is not clear in the case of Grupo Chorlaví if they operate via a clear choice of methods to answer these questions, other than calling on people’s diverse experiences. Good data is important in supporting learning. People’s immediate impressions or perspectives may not always align with what the data indicates. FIDAMERICA Phase 2 has produced a how-to guide for the project level systematisation process, thus offering a clear set of investigation methods for the projects. At the meta-level of learning across projects, the “Encuentro” itself was

guided by a method to extract and harmonise experiences through project level preparations and focused roundtable discussions. FIDAMERICA Phase III more strongly emphasises this step, as it will make use of a team of consultants who will jointly outline a set of questions and a methodology for accompanying projects in their process of institutionalising knowledge management and learning.

#### **5.4 Step Four – Facilitating (or Moderating) Critical Reflection**

Facilitating – or in the case of E-networks, moderating – critical reflection means involving the key stakeholders in an initiative in reviewing and analysing process and progress in order to identify lessons learned. Processes of critical reflection accompany data gathering in order to draw out conclusions, lessons and recommendations.

Take the example of collaborative resource management. After several years of collaborative management experience in a particular project, management may decide that it is an appropriate time to hold a learning lessons workshop. Such an event may bring together project staff, community representatives, collaborating researchers and possibly an international expert on the topic. Using a structured process, the group reviews their experience of the project, make sense of any data collected and reach agreement about the key lessons and implications for both the project and the wider knowledge base about collaborative management.

Such events need to be carefully structured and facilitated to ensure that the outputs are worthwhile in the sense that the lessons can be usefully generalised to other situations and hence make a contribution to the knowledge base on collaborative resource management.

E-networks do not necessarily have the advantage of face-to-face debating events. We identified this earlier on as a key difference between Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA. FIDAMERICA started to link the e-exchanges with events in Phase 2 through the “Encuentro” and the related systematisation process. This is being stepped up in Phase 3, where consultants are to work through critical reflection processes with projects. What exactly constitutes effective moderation of critical reflection in the case of an E-network requires more consideration.

#### **5.5 Step Five – Documenting and Communicating Lessons**

Lessons learned need to be documented clearly and communicated appropriately. The work involved in this task should not be underestimated. Indeed it is this aspect of learning lessons that often collapses. Practitioners often do not have the time to write up their lessons learned or may not have the writing skills to convey their ideas appropriately to others. It is important to think of specific strategies of how these constraints can be overcome. For example, giving staff specific days off for writing or involving somebody to with writing skills to help field workers clearly document their lessons.

Lessons learned are often documented as a single stand-alone statement. While this may be appropriate in some circumstances, the context of the lesson learned and its relationship to existing knowledge is often important to explain for others the real value of the lesson.

Communicating lessons learned in an appropriate style for the intended audience is also a key point to keep in mind. Grupo Chorlaví is conscious of the difficulty of catering to the wide audience that it has, with their country and project-specific information needs and styles of communication. In some cases it can insist on this, such as via the Mink’a de Chorlaví Fund, a clear communication strategy for key policy makers was included as a selection criterion. The two networks have two prime audiences for the learning and lessons they aim to generate. One is the wider group of public and policy makers, often country-specific but sometimes regional and, in the case of IFAD, organisational. This audience needs simple, clear and graphic forms of communication. The second group is project staff themselves and their use of documented material for improving action. The extent to which either network is dealing with ensuring that material reaches these audiences is, by and large, not clear other than relying on the passive uptake of documentation that is available via the network websites.

## **5.6 Step Six – Using the Lessons to Improve Action**

The final step in the process and the ultimate test for action learning is the actual use of the lessons learned to improve action. The learning cycle continues when lessons are learned about an earlier round of lessons learned that have been put into practice. While this step may appear obvious, consciously planning and managing for it to happen is often neglected.

For example, an annual planning workshop for a rural development project could explicitly examine the key lessons learned over the previous year and decide what changes will be made in the coming year's programme as a result. Many IFAD projects do not have such annual events that consciously build on last year's successes and problems. As it is widespread among projects, it is highly likely that many Grupo Chorlaví members similarly neglect this step. Thus at the level of individual network members, this step may not to be well addressed.

Another way of motivating the use of lessons would be to ask individuals to identify a number of lessons learned that they will use to try and improve their own work practices over a coming work planning period. At a more strategic level, an organisation such as IFAD could be maintaining and synthesising lessons learned that could then be used as a foundation in the design of new projects. This officially happens in all new project documents, which include a section about which projects and lessons the proposed project is built on. But rarely is there thorough debate on lessons learned during project design.

This step appears to be the most distant for the networks to influence, as by definition it has to occur among the practitioners or among the policy makers, the network's prime audiences. It is thus highly dependent on the individual motivation and organisational context. To know if this is happening through Grupo Chorlaví or FIDAMERICA we will need to seek out examples from the network members. This is a critical M&E task (see section 7).

## **5.7 A Word of Caution**

Much learning, of course, happens in rural development initiatives without the structure of these six steps. Insights are gained informally on a daily basis, through observations, trial-and-error and random chats. Many areas that need improvement do not need explicit learning questions or facilitated reflection. Innovations emerge from practice.

However, in this paper, our focus is on the E-mediated networks, who pull together disparate actors from diverse contexts to make sense of issues of collective concern. Stumbling on consensus about such issues would not be an efficient nor necessarily effective learning process. Also, it is inefficient and ineffective if people "learn lessons" that are already well documented and established in recognised knowledge bases. Effort needs to focus on taking stock, debate and peer reviewing prior to offering new lessons to arenas of practice. It is for these reasons that we offer these six steps as a guide for the conscious construction of a learning process that leads to lessons that build on existing knowledge and experience.

## **6 Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA – and the Conditions for Learning from Action**

Thus far in the paper, we have discussed e-mediated networks in terms of eight possible *functions* and described four *levels of learning* that these networks can facilitate (including the six steps needed for learning levels 2 and 3). We also suggested six *conditions* that are needed for a network to support learning. These three perspectives can be used to guide the M&E of such networks.

In this section, we focus on the six conditions and how well they are being met in Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA. This enables us to suggest how likely the networks are, under the current construction, to meet learning aims. In so doing, this section is an example of the use of one perspective for guiding action of the networks moderators, which is a key core purpose of M&E. How

this option fits in with other aspects of network M&E is discussed in detail in the final section of the paper.

### **6.1 Condition 1: Individuals are motivated to participate actively.**

Irrespective of the level of learning that the networks aim at with their activities, participation is fundamental, be it participation in terms of being willing to absorb new information or participation in terms of being willing to analyse experiences. Both networks are aware of the importance of this condition and how little is invested, by rural development efforts in general, in encouraging learning. Therefore, where possible, they are taking steps where possible to provide incentives. However, the network moderators might need to consider in more detail which levels of learning are best pursued through which incentives and therefore, which (combinations of) activities.

Grupo Chorlaví emerged from an expressed need of the intended network members, which would seem to imply that motivation would exist for active participation. However, more participation is possible, for which some additional measures have been taken: the Mink'a de Chorlaví Fund with enticing US\$18,000 rewards for innovative applied research and the option of special cooperation agreements (which relate to learning levels 2 and 3), plus direct appeals by moderators for contributions from experts and simpler language in communications (which relate to learning level 1). Active participation fluctuates greatly per activity but also within each activity, such as from one e-conference to the next. The learning level of activities varies, and therefore the network will fluctuate between serving as an information clearing house or information supermarket and a debating platform. Important in this is that no matter how much the network (and its moderators) set up incentives, if there is no organisational space for staff to participate in Grupo Chorlaví, then success will be limited. Thus the question of motivation needs to be viewed not only from the network perspective but also from that of the members' organisations (see condition 5).

FIDAMERICA is a slightly different case. It has a longer history, which included various face-to-face forums, deals with a group that already has a common identity – IFAD and so has been able to create an identity and a clear purpose. It has always used a combination of personal encounters with e-exchanges. This has allowed the building of personal relationships between the moderator, IFAD and project staff, thus limiting the negative effects of anonymity. The convergence around IFAD in LAC has made it possible to create a demand for engagement by requesting top management to encourage participation. It has stimulated participation through an informal sense of rivalry that was stimulated in the run-up to the 'Encuentro' but also through the practical methodological support in systematisation workshops and follow-up action. In Phase III, it will be interesting to see what incentives projects have – and will need – in order to institutionalise learning and knowledge management. The presence of an external facilitator/consultant should help in this respect as it provides a constant pressure, reminder and support for the projects involved.

### **6.2 Condition 2. A clear and systematic learning process is being followed.**

The networks deal with the four different levels of learning, with each learning level operating according to a certain logic. For learning levels 2 and 3, we refer to the six steps in section 4 as a structure for such a clear and systematic learning process. For learning levels 1 and 4, an equally explicit learning structure is still needed. Learning level 4 is only actively pursued via one activity of FIDAMERICA, which is the focused project support by external consultants on learning how to manage knowledge and learn. This support is nested within the logic described in Figure 2. We will now discuss both networks in the focus on learning levels 2 and 3, via the six steps of the learning cycle.

Step 1. The general impression is that considerable effort is being made to set a *common learning agenda* by consulting with network members for certain activities, such as the Mink'a Fund or some of the E-conferences. This has had limited success in the sense of active participation but also as the networks' general learning goals remain unclear and therefore what different activities can contribute to that. The activities listed in the FIDAMERIA project proposal, for example, do not specify clearly

their contribution to the overall learning goals. If a network is to be of and for the members, then there is a case for investing more in setting a common agenda for learning against which performance of the network can be assessed.

Step 2. Relatively little seems to be undertaken with respect to *articulating the theory of action (of the issue being discussed)* related to the learning agenda, other than sometimes commissioning overview papers for e-conferences and in part through the systematisation efforts within the context of FIDAMERICA. While learning will happen without an articulated theory of action, as learning happens in many everyday interactions, it is not made explicit and therefore intangible for M&E.

Step 3. Efforts to *specify questions and investigation methods* are present but could be strengthened. It appears that only in the case of e-conferences is there further specification of the questions to be investigated, i.e. debated in the email exchanges. Methodologically, the only common investigation method that has been articulated within the context of FIDAMERICA has been the guide on systematisation that was produced for IFAD projects in LAC. For Grupo Chorlaví, the Mink'a de Chorlaví Fund requires each proposal to define clearly how it is to investigate its question. In the latest round of the Fund, people who had written the winning proposals met during a workshop to converge around more common questions. This was an interesting activity to tighten the questions and methods in ways that would facilitate joint learning (level 3) across the winning proposals.

Step 4. *Facilitating critical reflection* happens by moderating discussions in different ways, with varying levels of intensity per service. Most intense is the e-conference moderation, which appears to be the sole e-based forum where debate in the sense of critical reflection seems to be occurring. For FIDAMERICA, the “Encuentro” has served as the prime vehicle for critical reflection. In Phase III of FIDAMERICA, the consultant-facilitated project-based learning activities will also contribute significantly to this.

Step 5. *Documenting and dissemination information* is a key activity for the network. While the quality of the lessons varies, the network moderators are investing considerable effort to produce written outputs that synthesise, conclude and recommend. These are widely disseminated but largely by posting it on the web or including it on the InterCambios newsletter. Both networks now recognize the need to completed such “open-ended” dissemination, with more targeted communication activities aimed at specific decision makers who have a direct interest in the topic under consideration, and the power to use the new information and knowledge to influence the design or implementation of policies, programs or projects. In the case of FIDAMERICA, such targeted communication is directed at those who are in charge of designing training and technical backstopping programs for IFAD project managers and staff, as well as those in the IFAD Headquarters who are responsible for the design of strategies, position papers, and guidelines. Each project cycle in the Fondo Mink'a de Chorlaví, includes a stage of “strategic communication” in which a focused list of decision makers will be engaged in some appropriate way (e.g., a workshop, a ‘policy brief’ publication, or even through personal interviews).

Step Six. There is no evidence on the extent to which *lessons are being used to improve action*. Early efforts by Grupo Chorlaví to undertake follow-up case studies to ascertain this were rejected by the Board as the likely results seemed limited compared to the overall cost and effort that would have been involved. Now that Grupo Chorlaví is no longer in an experimental phase, more investment in assessing learning may be justified. For this, we offer ideas in section 7 so that the network can gain insight into the extent to which it is helping to improve rural development practice. Critical for this is establishing what level of change is feasible for a network to affect as many non-controllable factors stand between a staff member’s participation in an e-conference and their alleviating poverty on the ground.

Overall, two observations can be made. First, to achieve learning levels 2 and 3, there appears to be room for improvement within the networks in terms of structuring their approach to action learning, as outlined in section 4. Second, the networks need to focus their M&E on assessing learning – and not just use of the activities, see section 7.

### **6.3 Condition 3. E-network participants are able to effectively and efficiently access the Internet.**

Both networks are currently operating under the assumption that access to the Internet by their members is rapidly becoming the norm rather than the exception, even at the level of small provincial towns. Moreover, the facilitators of the networks argue that efforts to expand connectivity are currently so vast –involving from large multinational corporations that run telephone systems in LAC, to foundations and NGOs working specifically on closing the ‘connectivity gap’- that it would make little sense for the networks themselves to become engaged in this line of work.

Through the influence of FIDAMERICA, IFAD in Latin America now includes a clause in each loan agreement establishing that its projects must have access to the Internet in their main and branch offices. FIDAMERICA can provide advice to its members on how to access the Internet and how best to organize the use of this resource within the project. While in Phase I this network invested heavily in training, it now has devolved this responsibility to the members after concluding that it is today possible to find qualified trainers and technical support in each country.

In both cases, however, the facilitators have kept the technical demands of their systems to a minimum, in order to facilitate the participation of those members who may have access only to low quality and low speed Internet connections. For example, e-conferences are run through e-mail and not through web pages; web sites are designed so that pages can be downloaded in less than 90 seconds even by users linked through low speed modems; large documents in the web site are posted in compressed file formats, etc.

Yet, discrepancies will exist due to national telecommunications infrastructure differences; Gomez (2000) mentions Haiti and Cuba both with poor infrastructure. Internet in Haiti is an economic privilege while in Cuba it is a political privilege. Individuals working in remote rural areas may have no access to a telephone line, or charges may be higher as they must dial long distance to access their servers. As Grupo Chorlavi and FIDAMERICA are aiming at all of Latin America, some access biases will mean that certain countries or areas within countries may be difficult to include. This is not a problem, simply a condition that needs to be kept in mind when undertaking M&E as the operating conditions will affect what can be expected in a diverse region. Today some network members are accessing from little towns that two to three years ago could not dream of having access. Thus the severity of the problem is decreasing quickly.

### **6.4 Condition 4. Rural development initiatives are designed or modified to be learning-oriented.**

The network moderators do not know about the detail of how the network members are viewing their rural development initiatives in terms of learning orientation. This relates to any of the four levels of learning. Understanding this and therefore assessing what the contribution of the E-network could be to this would require considerable investment. It would amount to a member-wide needs assessment in terms of learning processes and needs.

FIDAMERICA benefits from the direct insights that IFAD has about its projects and the close contact over many years of the network moderator with the projects. Studies of IFAD projects (cf Ravnborg 2001, Ocampo 2001) clearly show that few projects are focused on adding to IFAD’s knowledge base or build action learning into its mode of operation. Recently, efforts have intensified to encourage projects to adopt a participatory and learning-oriented style of monitoring and evaluation (IFAD 2002). The ideas forthcoming from these efforts strongly align with the idea of action learning as outlined in section 4. However, implementation is yet to start. Thus much is needed for this condition to be met. FIDAMERICA’s Phase III anticipated this condition and thus includes a component for hands-on work with projects to analyse, construct, test and adjust their learning efforts.

### **6.5 Condition 5. Collaborative learning processes are institutionally supported.**

In the case of Grupo Chorlaví, there is no single institution that can support collaborative learning within the members' organisations. On the other hand, the members of Grupo Chorlaví are in an institutional context which at least in theory should be more flexible, rewarding of innovation, etc., so perhaps they need less institutional support from the outside as compared with the government agencies that implement the IFAD projects. Thus it is unclear if this condition is being met and therefore what the Grupo Chorlaví network can add to the institutional context of its members. This would require at minimum a survey among the network members.

In FIDAMERICA, the binding institution is IFAD and it started actively seeking institutional support for learning initiatives in the latter stages of Phase II. This feature is now woven tightly into Phase III by directing the learning agenda towards the established institutional knowledge management areas of interest. In this way, it is hoped a demand for the outputs of FIDAMERICA will slot more easily into ongoing discussions by feeding clear information needs. Also, it will help projects to justify the efforts they make in terms of contributing to the learning agenda. Financial support for the "learning consultants" that will work with selected projects is also a clear signal of institutional support for the importance of action learning.

### **6.6 Condition 6. Clarity about the opportunities and constraints for learning (particularly meta-learning) through E-networks.**

Both Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA would benefit from more insights into the potential of action learning via the web, to which this paper is but one small contribution. This challenge is not specific to them. For example, Easdown of the Rural Extension Centre (QLD, Australia) and working largely through the electronic medium in linking farmers in rural Australia has read widely on both the Internet and facilitation but found little of use. He uses his facilitation skills to create group cohesion with different kinds of small networks of farmers and organisations but still finds it difficult to deal with phenomena particular to the E-medium, such as the bystander effect. This has led them to innovate with, for example, email games in an effort to stimulate debate and facilitate discussion.

It would be worthwhile to invest more in bringing together Internet specialists with skilled action learning facilitators to explore the limits and potential of e-based action learning. Several features would merit special attention, such as:

- the influence of operating largely through the medium of writing rather than talking which has generally been the basis of action learning. This is affected by language (if more than one language is spoken in the region where an E-network operates), skills with the written medium, the relative anonymity of the written form, and psychological aspects, such as the difference between writing that is often viewed as work and talking being more closely aligned to social interaction;
- how to deal with the diversity of experiences across the region that the networks serve via networks that can never be a substitute for skilled facilitators but which is not a feasible option for all projects, communities, departments, etc. Issues of scale and limited resources are leading to the use of the e-network to facilitate learning in highly heterogeneous contexts and experiences. If this type of development does not occur, learning and improving will continue to be something done by the privileged few, and thus reducing development impact.
- how to deal with the voluntary nature of contributions, including the difference between who engages and who should engage for success.

## **7 Framework for M&E of Learning through E-networks**

### **7.1 Current Internet M&E Practice**

The use of the electronic Internet medium for basic purposes such as contact and email exchange remains a challenge (IDRC 2000). Yet more uncharted methodological territory lies ahead of us in

dealing with the purpose of action learning. Such new practices mean that M&E is also still embryonic.

The diversity of approaches, methods and findings of ICT's assessments is commensurate with the variety of ICT applications in rural development (Stoll et al 2001). To date, the M&E of the E-medium's contribution to development focuses on one or more of the following themes:

- access to ICT (connectivity and equitability of access);
- capacities to use ICT (computer literacy and capacity building efforts);
- evaluation of quality and use of the media (web pages, electronic lists);
- evaluation of the impact of ICT;
- evaluation of the usefulness and adequacy for users' needs.

Many E-networks are monitored largely in terms of access and use, part of which is undertaken automatically through web statistics. Most M&E of E-mediated exchanges focus on website use and can tell you about annual, monthly, weekly and even hourly hits, which documents are used and which organisations or countries are accessing. E-conferences are often evaluated through standard practice, as in the case of Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA, with short questionnaires asking, for example, about usefulness and degree of participation.

While this provides very important and useful information on the Internet as an information supermarket model (functions 1 to 4, see section 1.2), it falls far short of what is required to assess the learning impacts of a network. Consequently it is important to be clear about the extent to which the network is really aiming to facilitate learning or whether it is essentially operating as an information supermarket.

## **7.2 Suggestions for M&E Practice**

Note that the ideas below do not represent a final framework. The task of this paper was to suggest M&E options, which we have done via practical considerations and conceptual options. These now need to be detailed into a comprehensive M&E system.

### **Practical Considerations**

*1. Realistic levels of investment.* M&E is a challenge - even in a project where staff members see each other frequently, have ample opportunity to work together and exchange experiences, and there is a relatively common understanding of the working context. The M&E of an E-medium must therefore be kept realistic as there are several compounding factors that magnify the challenge: dispersed actors with no collective allegiance to the network (in the early stages at least), infrequent contact, no understanding of each other's context unless described, the time-consuming nature of written dialogue, and so forth.

*2. Follow basic good M&E practices.* Notwithstanding these E-features, we see no reason why the starting point for developing M&E for an E-network could not involve following standard good practice guidelines. Such guidelines refer to distinct rural development initiatives rather than regional networks but contain some elements that Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA could possibly already benefit from. Box 5 lists a core set of standard good M&E practices (IFAD 2002), with short comments on their relevance to the two E-networks.

#### **Box 5. Standard Good M&E Practices**

- *Establish clear learning goals and objectives against which to monitor and evaluate.* We have stressed the importance of articulating the networks' learning goals with the users. This requires clarity about the role of the networks, for example, as an information access platform (learning level 1) or as an action learning facilitator (learning levels 2 and 3). In section 3, we describe four levels of learning that we feel are appropriate for the E-networks in question.
- *Check that proposed activities will lead to objectives being achieved.* Overly ambitious initiatives will benefit no one. This requires assessing the level of learning that is feasible for E-networks to

achieve, and then from that derive the combination of functions and necessary activities (see section 4, Tables 2 and 3). Grupo Chorlaví has already shifted to a less ambitious mode – from ensuring learning to supporting learning.

- *Establish performance questions and indicators for each objective.* By including performance questions in the M&E system, one has the freedom to include qualitative evaluation elements but particularly to combine different monitoring data and observations about the network process to assess progress
- *Address the five key evaluation questions of impact, relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability.* These questions are key to any development initiative. See 7.2 below for some methodological options which go further than standard web statistics and short questionnaires for E-conferences. For example, if assessing the impact in terms of ‘changed practice of network members’, then this will require (sampled) case studies to know how practice has changed as a result of engagement with learning mediated through the network.
- *Linking M&E into management practices and ensuring it provides necessary information to support management.* To date, in Grupo Chorlaví, the Board would plan a key role in this process, while the Executive Committee is FIDAMERICA’s rudder. The Board has played an active role in shaping the M&E practices though not always keeping in mind the original learning intentions of the network.
- *Ensure sufficient time and resources for M&E in the design.* A level of investment in M&E should be appropriate given the overall resources available. A general rule of thumb puts this in the order of between 2 and 10% of the overall budget (IFAD 2002). Currently, M&E activities are taking up well below this level of funding in both networks. Therefore this level of investment for the two networks should be expanded.
- *Make appropriate use of qualitative and quantitative methods.* This goes – or should go – without saying. And yet web statistics dominate the M&E of E-networks. Investment in qualitative studies to assess impact will be inevitable if Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA wish to understand what levels of learning are being achieved. The current mix of qualitative and quantitative methods focus on assessing, for example, quality of the newsletter, user-friendliness, pertinence, efficiency.
- *Engage key actors in processes of critical reflection about the initiative.* This requires obtaining the active participation of network members, an aspect we have stressed but that remains a challenge. So far, the network moderators have pursued a mainly passive process of seeking opinions by sending out general evaluations and requests for feedback. For the network, this M&E principle implies that a more proactive approach may be needed to seek opinions through direct and targeted contact with members. The network moderators could also consider devolving M&E responsibility to a working group of network members.
- *Invest in the necessary conditions and capacities for M&E systems to be implemented effectively.* Depending on the model for M&E that is pursued (see item 6), a close look will be needed of the required conditions and capacities that might need supporting. M&E is sufficiently challenging in any project, and in an e-network the challenges are greater still. Thus it should not be the responsibility of relatively inexperienced individuals without additional support.

### **Conceptual Options for the M&E Framework of Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA**

The construction of the two E-networks with their diverse activities, functions and levels of learning provides different possible starting points for and perspectives to take when developing an M&E framework. Together, these elements also form a certain logic that can form the basis of M&E. Once you have established the level of learning that you are aiming to realise via the network, you can be clear about which network functions you need to be providing. These functions will require certain combinations and sequences of activities. In this way, the levels of learning can be seen as the ‘impact’ level, the functions as interim ‘results’, while the activities are just that – activities, which can be assessed in terms of their quality.

*1. Decide on the level of impact that is achievable and relevant to know.* By definition, these E-networks support learning by improving certain conditions and providing specific services but they cannot control other critical factors that are essential to determine impact in terms of improved practice. As one progresses from activity level to impact level, M&E becomes increasingly time-consuming and difficult to attribute to project efforts, whether via an E-network or in an on-the-ground project. At the lowest level of activities, M&E would focus around the use of services, which is

currently undertaken for example via the web statistics. Moving up, one could look at the degree of participation of users in the various activities or functions.

In pursuing M&E, a realistic assessment needs to be made about the ability to attribute change to the e-network in question. Both networks consist of individuals or organisations pertaining to other social and other (sometimes virtual) networks. At the highest goal level, attributing changes to the efforts of a network - and an individual's use of it - faces the same problems of attribution that any project faces.

As with any learning initiative, dilution of impact can occur at many levels that lie outside the control of the network, so simply counting participation via web statistics can never be an indication of change. For example, if networks are to improve organisational performance, they need to ensure active participation, which should lead to new (at least new for the participant) and relevant (for the participant) knowledge, have a favourable context and supportive conditions for the application of the new knowledge, organise and manage well the process of implementing change, which should then lead to the intended results. What level is reasonable to evaluate in the networks?

Our perspective is that it is feasible to assess which changes have been initiated in practice by network participants, and with impact studies focusing around selected case studies to ascertain what changes have led to higher order impacts.

2. *Focus evaluation activities around clearly formulated overarching objectives of the networks.* As stated in several places, both networks need more clarity about their learning objectives in terms of learning about what and who is supposed to be learning. This makes it more assessable than the current objectives. The question remains of how these learning objectives should be defined and by whom. We suggest that if networks exist for the benefit of their members, that some degree of a participatory process would not be amiss. This then brings us to methodology. Doing this via general email consultation could lead to low responses. A more proactive stance would be needed, perhaps via targeted phoning of a random sample of network members. Face-to-face strategic planning events via representation from sectors, countries and topics would be another option, albeit costly.

3. *Use the five standard evaluation themes.* FIDAMERICA and Grupo Chorlavi can refer to the standard five themes for infrequent evaluation events: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact. Box 6 offers some questions that could be considered for each of these five themes.

Box 6. *The five evaluation themes for the two networks*

	<i>Possible Questions</i>	<i>Possible Methods</i>
<i>Relevance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What types of needs exist among which type of practitioners that the networks cater to?</li> <li>• How well have the different types of learning been accommodated in the network structure?</li> <li>• To what extent has the network been set up in consultation with members and is being co-managed with them?</li> <li>• How appropriate are the network objectives to the needs of network members and their rural development challenges?</li> <li>• Is the network meeting the information needs for practitioners of rural development projects?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comprehensive, focused survey</li> <li>• External review of network structure</li> </ul>
<i>Effectiveness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the network doing in terms of functions and activities?</li> <li>• How well is the network fulfilling each of these?</li> <li>• Level of use/trends/types of users of different sorts of functions and activities (as there could potentially be a high turn over).</li> <li>• Are participants/network members using the activities for an information portal (learning level 1) or as a dialogue/debate forum (levels 2, 3, 4)?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of current structure in terms of 8 functions</li> <li>• Survey about activities (already being done in part)</li> <li>• Categorization of types of participants per activity and their sustained participation</li> <li>• General survey about four levels of learning among participants, asking for examples of change</li> </ul>
<i>Efficiency</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the cost of the network and of participants investing in the network as compared to investment in</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial assessment of current costs per function/activity</li> </ul>

	the rural development projects?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sample survey among participants of their investment in terms of time/other</li> </ul>
<i>Impact.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What examples of on-the-ground changes in the rural development projects of participants can be discerned and how has their participation in the network contributed to that?</li> <li>• For level 3 learning, what type of new insights are being generated and what is the quality of this (depth of discussion, novelty, etc)?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case studies and individual interviews (small sample)</li> <li>• Review of outputs (learning level 3) by experts</li> </ul>
<i>Sustainability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How independently are network participants using the Internet for learning activities?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sample survey with examples of uses</li> </ul>

3. *Assess contribution of activities to learning, and not just the quality of each activity.* Currently, M&E does not include overall assessments of how activities contribute to learning. We suggest that the question is asked of to what extent do activities contribute to different functions and to different levels of learning. If of all the activities, 5% on building internet infrastructure, 80% are contributing to mediating access to other information, nothing is undertaken in terms of formalized education and training, and 5 % on facilitating action learning, then this gives the basis for comparing against the set objectives and if necessary, adjusting where emphasis is placed.

4. *For assessing action learning (types 2 to 4), use the six conditions and six steps of the action learning cycle (see section 5).*

M&E questions related to the six conditions for effective Internet-mediate action learning would focus mainly around:

- What are we and our network members undertaking to ensure these conditions are in place?
- Are our efforts enough?
- Are there any other obstacles emerging that require our attention?

The information from this would help the network moderators assess the likelihood of success of the network efforts and provides them with management-oriented information to adjust activities.

M&E questions related to the six steps of the learning cycle could include:

- How are these steps being pursued and moderated in our network?
- What results is this producing among the members in terms of changed practice? (learning level 2)
- Do our lessons represent a step forward in thinking to date (for example, via peer review process to assess the quality of lessons generated)? (learning level 3)
- Have members improved their own capacity to sustain learning processes (learning level 4)
- Is this result satisfactory for the network members and in relation to our learning objectives?

## Final Comments

M&E for these E-networks is not, as yet, possible via a neat and tidy framework. We are not talking about a single coherent project or organisation with a single logic in its structure of components for which you can undertake component-specific M&E and then aggregate contribution towards overarching goals. Instead, these networks comprise a more organic set of activities, some of which have separate management and funding structures, with diverse participants with varying levles of engagement and whose motivation remains largely unknown . Result-based management is difficult as there does not appear to be a ‘meso’ level in these networks, which instead jump from activities to general goals. Our construct of functions may partly fill that gap but with difficulty, as the activities are linked to several functions simultaneously.

Thus this paper offers various aspects to deal with the organic nature of the networks:

- Different levels of learning, about which we need to know to what extent, even roughly, is the network contributing to each level and is this desired by members;

- Steps of (action) learning, about which we need to know to what extent people are learning from experience and which gaps in the steps might hinder impact;
- Functions, about which we need to know if the network is contributing equally or if it is skewed in its emphasis (via the set of activities) and if this is desirable, and if some functions are performing better, and why;
- Conditions, about which we need to know that if something is working well or not so well in the network, to what extent this is related to one of the conditions (not) being met and what might be improved;
- Activities, about which we need to know if they are of good quality, being used, are contributing to different functions and learning levels.

It is now up to the network moderators and their management structure to decide which M&E path to take.

To conclude this paper we would like to offer a reflection about the merit of the e-medium. Over-emphasising electronic interaction to facilitate action learning processes as opposed to other supporting conditions and interactions is likely to require downplaying direct impact. Learning requires interactive human processes. It is difficult enough face-to-face but across anonymous distances, the challenges are amplified. This is not to undervalue their contribution. E-network appear to help facilitate important aspects of learning. But perhaps we should emphasise how they can support learning rather than viewing learning as being directly and solely attributable to the network. What is clear in any case is that much remains to be understood about the link between action learning and the capacity of E-networks to act as an effective facilitator. To this end, we hope that both Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA can document their experiences and contribute to this understanding.

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- Michael Murtaugh, Jam! Web designer for complex issues, Amsterdam, Netherlands
- Warwick Easdown, Extension officer for rural internet communications, Rural Extension Centre, Gatton, Australia

## Appendix 1. Grupo Chorlaví and FIDAMERICA

### 1. Grupo Chorlaví

Grupo Chorlaví ([www.GrupoChorlavi.org](http://www.GrupoChorlavi.org)) is a network of Latin American NGOs and social and organisations of rural people (RO). Membership is open, requiring only filling in an online information sheet. All activities of the Grupo Chorlaví are open to any interested organisation or individual.

It started in mid 1999, initially as an 18-month pilot project to experiment in the construction of a system of interaction among organisations of rural civil societies in Latin America. The original project had five official objectives:

1. Establish systems of communication;
2. Facilitate a process of systemizing, exchange, and analysis of information and knowledge;
3. Establish a system for making decisions;
4. Monitor and evaluate the network;
5. Evaluate results and opportunities in order to decide the convenience of a second phase.

When Phase 2 was negotiated some of the original assumptions were examined, as Phase 1 had explicitly had an experimental nature. The original emphasis on working through permanent thematic groups (e.g., agricultural technology and farming systems, marketing, local development, etc.) was discarded early on, as it had been found that these duplicated the work of existing networks. The emphasis on linking NGOs active only at the local levels was also reconsidered, as a workshop with this type of organizations in Honduras concluded that they did not prioritise Internet access above other needs, had little interest in international discussions, and that it would be more efficient to reach them indirectly through the national networks to which these “less visible” organizations already belong.

Grupo Chorlaví currently aims to stimulate and facilitate the systematisation<sup>7</sup>, dissemination, exchange, comparative analysis and electronic documentation of strategies, methods and tools generated through the daily work of NGOs and ROs, that have been shown to be innovative or successful in the promotion of sustainable agricultural and rural development. Two kinds of documents are produced that provide the content of the exchanges:

1. those aimed at the managers, members and staff of NGOs and RO, whose contents can contribute to their “know how” to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their sustainable rural and agricultural development initiatives;
2. those aimed at national and international policy decision-makers, that express the perspectives of rural civil society organisations on critical issues for sustainable rural and agricultural development

Grupo Chorlaví has six interacting components: a competitive small grants fund, electronic conferences, an electronic newsletter, special cooperation agreements, the website and the mailing list. Each of these contribute to achieving the aims of the Group.

*Fondo Mink'a de Chorlavi*<sup>8</sup>. This competitive grant fund seeks to stimulate and facilitate organisational learning to improve public and private initiatives aimed at reducing poverty and exclusion, improving natural resource management, and promoting sustainable rural development. Each round of the competition focuses on one theme, the current one being ‘collective action and improvements in the living conditions of rural populations’. The theme is defined by a committee of ten members, after extensive consultation with a large number of

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Systematisation’ is a specific term that has been translated directly from Spanish. It refers to a participatory critical reflection process with those active in a development initiative, to organise their understanding of what has happened and why and from this identify key lessons.

<sup>8</sup> The fund is a joint initiative of the Grupo Chorlaví and of the International Development Research Centre in Canada. See: [www.FondoMinkaChorlavi.org](http://www.FondoMinkaChorlavi.org).

individuals and organizations throughout the region. The final reports of the projects supported by the fund are discussed in electronic conferences, and the general conclusions and lessons learned, are then communicated pro-actively to key decision makers.

*Electronic conferences.* Two e-conferences are organised each year, on topics of priority interest to NGO and RO, defined by the Board of Grupo Chorlaví. Usually each e-conference is based on several case studies prepared by NGOs, RO and others, that can be complemented by relevant conceptual or methodological documents. Each e-conference ends with a synthesis document. About 700 individuals and organisations subscribed to the last e-conferences. Normally between 10 and 25% of subscribers send messages and/or prepare case studies. Based on evaluation surveys, the moderators of the network estimate that up to 60% read most of the messages and case studies and that up to 75% share one or more documents with other persons not participating in the e-conference.

*InterCambios electronic newsletter*<sup>9</sup>. Each issue contains purposely selected documents that introduce reader to an issue considered of importance for NGOs and RO. For example, the last issues included four papers on privatised extension systems, add another example. The documents come from a wide variety of sources, public and private, national and international. The newsletter also contains sections on “Who is who”, “Tools”, “What’s going on” and “What’s coming up”. The e-mail version is disseminated to 4,089 addresses (growing at 20% per month), and the web version is visited by an average of 235 persons in the week after each mailing. Decisions on the themes emerge from consultations, discussions with the Board and the moderator’s own insights.

*Special Cooperation Agreements.* These formal agreements are established with networks or groups of NGOs and/or ROs working on specific issues of interest to the Group. Through these agreements, Grupo Chorlaví can provide technical support and small amounts of funding to strengthen activities that are part of learning, such as systematisations, dissemination, etc.

*Grupo Chorlaví web site.* The site provides access to documents, editorial articles, information on NGOs and RO, and an interface in Spanish to the ELDIS documentation service run by the Institute for Development Studies in the United Kingdom. The site records about 42,000 hits per month (excluding those of RIMISP staff).

*Chorlaví electronic list.* This is a non-moderated e-mail list with 400 subscribers that can be used by the participants to disseminate any sort of information related to the objectives of the Grupo.

This combination of activities enables Grupo Chorlaví, by its own account, to support two levels of learning processes .

First are those processes that are independently organised by other networks and organisations working on issues of importance to the Grupo Chorlaví. The forms of support that Grupo Chorlaví provides will vary depending on which process it is trying to stimulate and strengthen and the Special Cooperation Agreements are used to accommodate these differing needs. By and large, however, supportive activities include:

- dissemination of relevant documents;
- public exposure for innovative experiences;
- systematisation and documentation of advanced or innovative experiences;
- communication among stakeholders;
- information to access resources (from theory to tools) that support learning processes.

The second set of learning processes emerges from the Board of Grupo Chorlaví. To do this, they have articulated that facilitating effective learning processes is possible with these five mechanisms<sup>10</sup>:

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<sup>9</sup> This newsletter is co-sponsored with FIDAMERICA and distributed to both networks.

<sup>10</sup> As we saw in Section 5, these mechanisms relate closely to some of the steps needed in designing an action learning-oriented network initiative.

1. Identification and prioritization of key issues that: (i) are relevant to the work of NGOs and ROs, and (ii) where the effectiveness of the work of NGOs and RO is hampered by gaps in theoretical, methodological or operational knowledge. Critical for this procedure is that priorities must be able to capture the interest and imagination of significant and large groups of NGOs and RO. This is currently undertaken through e-mail consultations with members, in relation to key events (such as the Monterrey summit or the current crisis of the coffee world market that affects hundreds of thousands of small growers in Latin America and the Caribbean) and via discussions with the Board and the Mink'a de Chorlaví Fund committee. The moderators' own insights and contact with people working in the region are also important. Priority topics cannot always be pursued, as in the case of the impact of trade agreements on small-scale agriculture, about which the moderators found insufficient high-quality information.
2. Find out which initiatives could potentially offer insights to the knowledge gaps defined above. The contests of the competitive fund and the calls for case studies for the e-conferences are the primary mechanism.
3. Support the critical analysis and documentation (systematisation) of those development initiatives that may yield answers to the knowledge gaps. The grants of the Fondo Mink'a de Chorlaví are the main vehicles for this.
4. Facilitate the comparative analysis of a significant number of case studies, supplemented by inputs from other sources, to draw conclusions, guidelines and "lessons learned" that can be of more or less general validity to address the knowledge gaps (perhaps with additional adaptations at the local level). This occurs via E-conferences.
5. Communicate the insights generated by the above to relevant decision-makers at two different levels: the NGOs and the ROs who are the direct participants in Grupo Chorlaví, and strategic decision-makers who are making policy at national and international levels (public and private).

A range of lessons from the pilot project is guiding the work in the second phase of Grupo Chorlaví. This includes the observation that very active moderation is needed to structure discussions and write conclusions and summaries. Furthermore, incentives are needed to stimulate participation and have been put in place, such as the competitive fund, strong moderation, incentive to win prizes for case study writing. Two other incentives to encourage participation are, first, a better choice of relevant topics for which there is wide interest e.g. small farmers of access to organic markets or the current coffee crisis, and the very dynamic update of information of the websites that keeps people curious.

Other lessons from Phase 1 that we perceive to be critical for enhancing the learning impact of the network include:

- The learning objectives of each activity (e.g., an electronic conference, a round of competition in the Mink'a de Chorlaví Fund, an issue of the e-newsletter) must be more sharply defined than is currently the case. Yet, given the heterogeneity in the network participants, this also inevitably results in only some members being interested in each activity.
- Evaluation of effects and impacts cannot rely only on email surveys, as the response rate is usually between 3% and 10% (though this is three to five times higher than the 'rule of thumb' standard used by companies engaged in marketing campaigns, it is well below the 15% limit of acceptability and 25% of good return rates on focused surveys).
- Given the heterogeneity of the participants, it is likely to be difficult to reach a workable consensus on those critical capacities that the network should try to improve by facilitating structured learning processes, but this has not yet been given serious thought and merits more attention, particularly as it would help focus the network's overall learning objectives.
- There is always a tension between focusing on more practical, down-to-earth issues as opposed to those that are more of a conceptual or methodological nature. The balance between "practice" and "concepts" is not easy to define in general nor in each activity.

Evaluating the actual impact of the network is difficult as its expected outputs and effects are intangible: learning processes that enhance capacities that improve effectiveness and efficiency. It is

highly difficult to establish causality between the network's activities and these effects and impacts, as network participants will receive signals and inputs from many other sources. What might be more feasible is explaining probable causes, or finding out in what way the information and dialogues of Chorlavi serve in practice.

### **M&E Activities and Issues**

In such a young venture, tracking of progress and adjustment is critical. M&E was a key activity and so a detailed proposal was produced. The Board discussed it in May 2000, one year after the network started. The original proposal was to focus on six themes: membership (who and if part of the less visible organisations were being targeted), cross-cutting interests, quality of information, impact on the quality of the work of the members, cost-efficiency of Internet, quality of services of RIMISP. For each theme, indicators and methods were proposed. The Board decided this was too ambitious.

Instead, the Board decided on a simpler M&E system, based on a monthly assessment of achievements and discussed in the virtual board meetings and with learning notes. These learning notes (one page) were produced by the moderators per network event and focused on lessons learned. Four were produced. Web statistics (see Box 1) have continued to be part of M&E, though this has seen several changes due to shifts in websites, redesign and new statistics software.

#### *Box 1. Current web statistics available on Chorlavi*

- Basic statistics (accumulated since the launch of the web site, per month, per week, pay day):
- Number of hits
- Number of successful hits
- Average number of successful hits per day
- Average number of successful hits per page in the website
- Average number of successful hits per page in the website per day
- Number of distinct files requested
- Number of domains attended
- Total transfer of information (in kilobytes)
- Total transfer of information per day
- Country and generic (e.g. "com", "net") domains from which the website was accessed
- Organisation domains (e.g., aol.com, hotmail.com) from which the website was accessed
- Type (e.g., doc, pdf, gif, html) and size (in kilobytes) of files downloaded by visitors
- Report on the visited pages within the website.
- Reports of what documents are only visited and not necessarily downloaded.

These statistics are updated and published daily in the website of Grupo Chorlavi

Prior to the Board decision, ad hoc impressions had been gathered by collecting messages on views of Grupo Chorlavi or cornering visitors to RIMISP, where one of the moderators was based, to ask their views on the information exchanged. Discussion lists were analysed as well as a content analysis of messages, identifying threads and issues of discussion. Indicators used were: who participates, how often, where do they come from, monthly subscriber count. Response rates to questionnaires were low. For example, in March 2000, one of the moderators sent a questionnaire to 222 addresses on three themes: the usefulness of the Chorlavi Fund, the electronic list and the web site; only 6% replied.

These impressions and the learning notes were the basis of the formal evaluation that was presented to the funding agency (ICCO) in June 2001. It followed the guidelines set by ICCO: a chronological calendar of milestones (with the network and the Board); assess achievement of objectives, evaluate direct and indirect beneficiaries, evaluate benefits of participating in the project, and finally, reflections as a point of departure for the new project Chorlavi II.

Thus M&E of the pilot phase of Grupo Chorlavi was valuable but not systematic. Some useful lessons emerged from practice and feedback such as the importance of summarising discussions to share this with peers or policymakers and the need for less academic language. Little was done to assess who was learning what and information stopped at who was accessing what information. These limitations

seem to result from decision making delays, shifting objectives, which are inevitable at the onset of a new initiative, and the Board's initial decision not to invest excessively in impact-level evaluation for this pilot phase. More importantly though, Phase 1 was explicitly an experimental project, with the funding agency formally agreeing that the objectives, activities, etc would be up for permanent revision by the Board – which they were.

Notwithstanding this context, Phase 1 lacked clear overarching learning objectives, partly due to the amalgamation of various components under the Grupo Chorlaví umbrella, each with its own objective.

In Phase 2 of Grupo Chorlaví, these components have been conceptualised as a more integrated learning process that requires activities for each of the four phases of: systematisation (the Fund), exchange (web site and electronic newsletter), analysis (E-conferences) and documentation of lessons (web site). The cycle in its ideal form is envisaged as follows. The Competitive Fund will trigger the systematisation of a set of 10 or so innovative development initiatives focusing on a theme or topic. The products of this systematisation (articles documenting the development initiatives and their context, their results and impacts, the main factors leading to those results, and the conclusions, recommendations, and lessons learned that can be extracted) are then disseminated to all network members. Those documents emerging from the individual case studies (complemented if possible by documents from other sources) are the basis of a process of comparative analysis and synthesis, which will normally involve an e-conference to allow for the direct participation of all interested network members. The final synthesis document is disseminated broadly to a large number of individuals throughout the region (through the web site and the InterCambios newsletter). Finally, a process of pro-active communication of the results is organized, targeting specific and well-defined “strategic” decision-makers who have the capacity to use those results to influence public policies at the national and international levels, development programs, government institutions, NGO networks, etc.

The integration of elements into a single cycle will remain limited for two reasons. First, certain components do have specificities in their funding and management, and second, because until now they have not followed each other sequentially. The network moderators did not wait for each previous stage to be completed before launching a new element. For example, there have been several E-conferences without the first round of the Mink'a Fund having been completed. However, this “timing problem” will be corrected after the results of the first round of competition of the Mink'a Fund come in at the end of 2002.

If these elements are now connected via a structured sequence, then one will need to assess the aggregate learning impact of Grupo Chorlaví, despite participation that varies from one activity to the next.

A consultant has been hired to help RIMISP carry out M&E in the current phase of Grupo Chorlaví; this arrangement is temporary until a ‘permanent’ M&E system is designed, as a product of the discussion of this document. The network coordinator checks the web statistics weekly. Focused evaluations have been conducted of each e-conference and after 12 issues of the InterCambios newsletter. A progress report (against the annual work plan) is prepared for the Board four times a year by the network coordinator; the Board holds virtual meetings four times a year, and its resolutions and background documents are published in the web site. Taking advantage of travel opportunities, the coordinator meets no less than three to five times a year with different Board members, and meetings between the Board members also take place. The network moderators or Board members receive much anecdotal feedback, much of it confirming rather obvious findings such as .... Some information has been new, such as which sections of the newsletter is liked most and which documents from the website are downloaded most frequently. In the end, however, despite these activities, Grupo Chorlaví still lacks a formal and systematic M&E system. This discussion paper is supposed to offer ideas to start constructing such a system.

## **2. FIDAMERICA**

FIDAMERICA is a network of Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) projects and regional programs co-financed by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Its general objective is

to promote and facilitate communication and learning processes to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of poverty-reduction initiatives supported by IFAD in LAC. Launched in November 1995, it has since been managed and facilitated by RIMISP. FIDAMERICA has moved through three phases, each defined by separate funding grants from IFAD to RIMISP: 1995-1998, 1998-2002 and 2002-2005. A closer look at the three phases of FIDAMERICA shows an interesting growth in understanding of how to use E-networks to achieve learning aims.

### **Phase I (Nov 1995 – Oct 1998)**

The original mission of FIDAMERICA was “to improve the opportunities of poor rural communities in Latin America to have access to information and knowledge, and to facilitate the development and strengthening of capabilities at the local level to make a better use of such resources.” It saw the first step as requiring the connecting of projects working with the communities. Historically it was among the pioneers, as the WWW and the first web browser had appeared less than one year before, and the Internet was just starting to become popularized. So early activities (1996-97) emphasized training of project staff (including project directors, heads of project components (e.g. financial services, technical assistance, M&E, etc) and, in some cases, selected field-level technical staff, in the use of Internet. It equally included technical backstopping to projects to acquire the services and equipments required to use the Internet, including support to develop project web pages.

The main exchanges of experiences between projects took place through bi-annual e-conferences. Each conference was dedicated to a specific topic selected by the RIMISP team after consultations with project directors and IFAD staff in Rome. In these e-conferences, the projects would prepare brief case studies that would be discussed and compared. Each e-conference produced a synthesis, conclusions and recommendations document. Participation in the e-conferences was open not only to IFAD projects but to any other person or organisation interested in the topic. Efforts were made to use case studies coming from sources other than IFAD projects.

The initial three years clearly emphasised linking projects to the Internet and stimulating them to use it to improve communications, exchange and access to relevant information. Thus it followed essentially an information supermarket model – plus building and stocking the supermarket. The actual content of the exchange, and the effects on the project’s decision-making processes, received less attention. An external evaluation of Phase I highlighted a range of achievements (see Box 2).

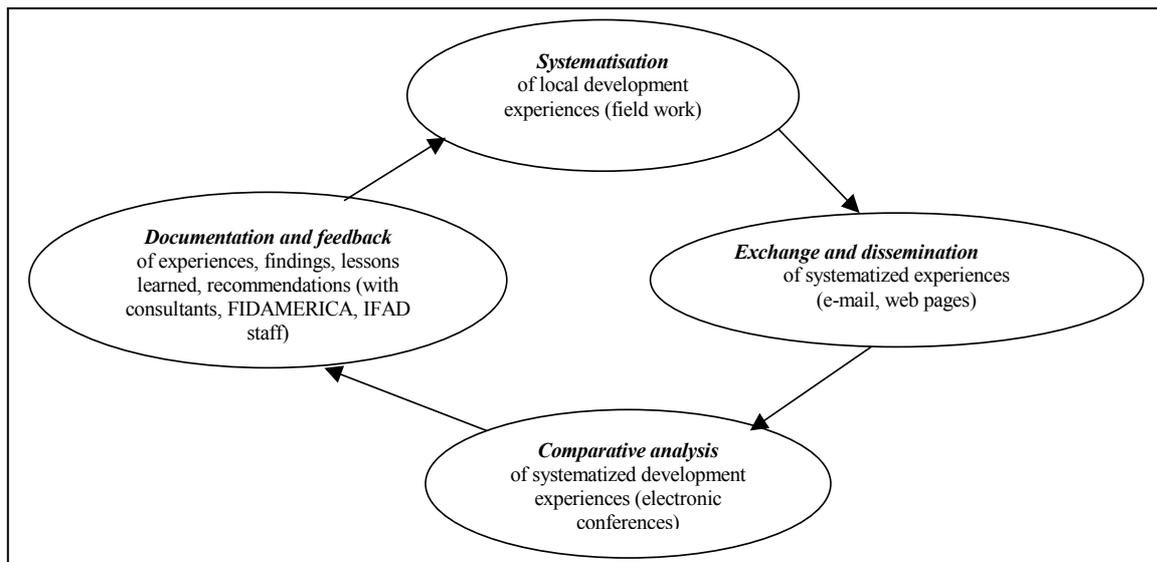
*Box 2. Results from FIDAMERICA Phase 1, as of Sept 1998 (relates to IFAD-supported projects and programmes in LAC, unless otherwise indicated)*

- trained about 150 IFAD project staff members in Internet-based tools and services to support development initiatives
- linked to the Internet 23 IFAD-supported projects and seven regional programmes in 18 countries
- set up web sites for these projects/programmes, now visited by thousands of individuals from all over the world, so contributing to dissemination and visibility of IFAD in the region
- organised three major electronic conferences and four electronic debates in which hundreds of individuals and organisations discussed issues of great importance to the projects (e.g. role of farmers’ organisations in managing rural/agricultural projects, new financial systems for the rural poor, privatisation of technical assistance/extension services)
- stimulated the preparation and made available in the Internet, about 150 documents written both by staff members of IFAD and non-IFAD projects and organisations, and more importantly, by rural people, such as women leaders of rural organisations
- developed a Virtual Farmers’ Market, which allows IFAD and non-IFAD projects to look for new opportunities to market the goods produced by the rural communities which they serve
- developed a Virtual Rural Development Library for IFAD and non-IFAD projects to store and have access to many formal and informal publications they produce
- established electronic non-moderated lists, such as FIDAVANCE, which currently has 170 users and has greatly expanded daily communication among projects/programmes in LAC
- improved efficiency and reduced cost of project/programme communication systems by helping to institutionalise the daily use of electronic mail
- supported three other regional programmes in establishing electronic lists for communication and information purposes, and/or to implement their own moderated electronic conferences

## Phase II (Nov 1998 – April 2002)

During its second phase, FIDAMERICA shifted its emphasis from connectivity to content. Efforts focused more on working directly with IFAD project staff to stimulate and support efforts in systematizing local development initiatives. The project-specific systematisation was intended to produce critical building blocks for a learning process across the network. But they needed a focus. So consultation between RIMISP and project directors led to four priority topics for Phase II: financial services for the poor, privatisation and decentralization of extension services, economic organisations and market access, and management of the environmental impacts of development activities.

Figure 1. Phase II overview of how learning was expected to take place



Intense discussions also led to an explicit model of how the ‘learning community’ encapsulated within FIDAMERICA would work (see Figure 1). The learning community was not viewed as a permanent creation but rather as one that would be organised per topic. The project director decided whether to join a certain topic or not. A meeting with all project directors was held in 1999, in which each learning community defined a detailed two-year work plan. Formal contracts were signed with RIMISP that specified the rights and obligations of each participant, objectives, how activities would be funded, how they would be evaluated, and so on.

And then little happened. The directors went home and very few projects delivered on their commitments. It became apparent that ‘learning’ and ‘knowledge management’ were not considered part of a project’s objectives or mission, that they were not part of the terms of reference of any staff member, and that the budget did not explicitly allocate resources for such activities or objectives. Project staff always prioritised standard project activities.

RIMISP identified a two-pronged strategy of entice-and-demand to cope with this bottleneck. First, it was necessary to convince project directors of the important benefits for them of such work, and that they would extend beyond the intangible fruits of learning. In other words, products of this process could help the project achieve its objectives and could also be attractive to decision makers in the government departments. Second, RIMISP asked IFAD in Rome to clarify to their national counterparts that ‘learning’ and ‘knowledge management’ were important development objectives.

RIMISP worked with PREVAL (another of IFAD’s regional programmes) to design a simple, rapid method for systematizing local development experiences. Several practical workshops were held with project staff and each resulted in four or five case studies, each with a document and an illustrated power point presentation, being produced in eight days. About 50 project staff was trained in the use

of the systematisation methodology, and creating perhaps one or two convinced ‘learning champions’ per project.

When this was in place, FIDAMERICA announced what it expected would be a significant incentive: the “Encuentro de la Innovación y el Conocimiento para Eliminar la Pobreza Rural” (Meeting of Innovation and Knowledge to Eliminate Rural Poverty), the biggest-ever meeting of IFAD projects in which each one would have the opportunity to show their best accomplishments (see Box 3). The organisers and participants considered the meeting an unqualified success. In less than three months of preparation, about 60 quite well documented case studies covering 17 development topics were produced. A spirit of competition took force in which each project wanted to produce the best case studies. As the FIDAMERICA moderator summarises: “The discussions during the meetings were excellent, transparent and honest, and many participants left the event more convinced of the value of investing in learning from their own local development work.”

*Box 3. The Innovation and Knowledge Meeting*

The “Encuentro” drew together 39 IFAD projects and programmes from 18 LAC countries, and 30 rural organisations, with 150 participants, of which 40% project staff and 26% members of rural organisations. The “Encuentro” discussed innovations per theme via prepared case studies. The 17 themes included: “participatory approaches in technical assistance”, “access to markets by poor farmers”, “generating income by conserving the environment” and so on. Some conclusions related to institutionalising action learning and that helped shape FIDAMERICA III include:

1. The themes of learning and knowledge management are not incorporated in the design and daily work of projects. We lack methodologies for institutional learning at project level and across projects.
2. As direct as possible access by users to funds, knowledge, decision making spaces would be a key indicator of success.
3. This type of event needs a certain regularity but we hope to see better quality cases and presentations, more challenging debate about different options, non-IFAD participants.
4. Process the best cases from the “Encuentro” for debate in other rural development forums.
5. Continue systematising our experiences.
6. Support projects for thematic linkages.
7. Regional programmes (such as FIDAMERICA) should focus on distance learning programmes for the approximately 4000 professionals linked to IFAD in LAC.

Thus Phase II saw a transition from information supermarket to stocking the supermarket with better produce and shifting it towards a learning community that more actively sought and produced learning.

**Phase III (May 2002 – April 2005)**

Phase III aims to institutionalise the practice of learning within each project and within the IFAD system in LAC as a whole, i.e. learning from each other. The notion of “project” has broadened to include not only project staff, but also co-implementing organisations, rural grassroots organisations, and perhaps municipal governments and other local level agencies. This broadening means it will not be able to depend solely on the use of Internet-based technologies. With the projects, it will need to use other face-to-face means through which to stimulate dialogue and exchange. Half the IFAD projects in LAC have been invited to work with FIDAMERICA to produce their own three-year learning program, starting with a diagnosis of how learning takes place currently, learning objectives, and required actions. LAC-wide “encuentros” will take place every two years (the next one in 2003), and in the interim, e-conferences and the InterCambio newsletter will maintain continuity of contact and debate.

To ensure a learning-focused interaction between individual projects the IFAD system in LAC, RIMISP views the learning process as per Figure 2. Learning is: (1) institutionalised as findings, recommendations and lessons learned extracted from the comparative analysis of local development experiences, (2) are used to improve the quality of people’s work in the project (or elsewhere in the IFAD system) and (3) cause changes in project (IFAD system) concepts, methods, procedures, norms and rules. This route to learning is based on a series of project- level and IFAD-level assumptions.

Phase III will still maintain its E-network activities in terms of website development, electronic newsletters, mail lists and e-conferences. But these are to be supplemented by consultant-guided learning-about-learning processes, two region-wide 'Encuentros', and additional technical assistance. To reach the rural organisations, more traditional media will be used to share Internet-based information and face-to-face events to generate insights. Thus FIDAMERICA III quite clearly goes beyond a pure E-network.

### **Monitoring and Evaluating FIDAMERICA**

The moderator currently undertakes M&E, although at the end of each phase an external evaluation is contracted by IFAD, to be conducted under the guidance of a 'Core Learning Partnership' team comprised of IFAD staff and external experts. Aside from these end-of-project external evaluations, there is no formal system for M&E other than an annual work plan, which the moderator uses to check progress against planned activities. An Executive Committee supervises the annual work plan. The annual work plan is activity driven thus higher-level goals are not assessed. Adjustments are made as necessary and with approval from IFAD Rome.

Together with Grupo Chorlaví, the bulletin InterCambios is evaluated. A recent review asked seven questions on: usefulness, extent read, relevancy of themes, quality of contents, ease of reading, most useful section, and open comments.

Web statistics are also gathered. So FIDAMERICA knows, for example, that they have had 135,742 visits (a distinct Internet user) in the past 12 months and that these visits have registered 1,331,059 hits within FIDAMERICA's web site. Although they do not know how many documents have been downloaded, they do know that 15.5 million kilobytes worth of html, doc (word) and pdf (acrobat) files were downloaded over the past 12 months, which they estimate to be about 31,000 documents. This information tells us nothing about the learning impact, although it does give an idea about the demand for the materials available in the web site.

Although FIDAMERICA Phase III is described in a logical framework matrix with accompanying M&E indicators, its M&E system needs clarity and detailing. Compared to prior phases, it has the most far-reaching learning goals in terms of institutionalisation at project and regional levels, which forces greater clarity about how impact is to be assessed.

Figure 2. FIDAMERICA Phase III - an interactive learning process between projects and IFAD LAC

