

Initiative for Mainstreaming Innovation (IMI)
“Innovative forms of training and capacity-building in
IFAD-supported projects and programmes”
Policy and Technical Advisory Division

Colombia

FIELD STUDY



Enabling poor rural people
to overcome poverty

International Fund for Agricultural Development

Initiative for Mainstreaming Innovation (IMI)

**“Innovative forms of training and capacity building
in IFAD-supported projects and programmes”**

Field Study

Colombia: A practical approach to building peer-to-peer knowledge

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This paper was prepared by Mara Girardi, Consultant, and reviewed by Andrés Silva, Director of the Rural Opportunities Programme and Roberto Haudry, Country Programme Manager for Colombia.

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COLOMBIA

A practical approach to building peer-to-peer knowledge

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Introduction

This paper reports on the major findings of a study on innovations in training and capacity building developed within the Rural Opportunities Programme of Colombia's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The Rural Opportunities Programme

The programme's objective is to contribute to combatting rural poverty by increasing employment, incomes and assets of the poorest families, and improving competitiveness and market integration of rural microenterprises. This is to be achieved by: expanding opportunities for rural people and their microenterprises to gain access to financial resources, technical services, knowledge and information to help develop their initiatives; and promoting their participation in setting public policy. The Rural Opportunities Programme is a continuation of the Rural Microenterprise Development Programme (PADEMER) cofinanced by IFAD between 2000 and 2006.

Notes on methodology

This study is divided into two parts. The first describes the innovative training and capacity-building activities supported by IFAD under the Rural Opportunities Programme. The second provides an evaluation of the results in terms of increases in incomes and empowerment of women and men microentrepreneurs and their associations. In addition, two sections are included on the empowerment of young people and women.

The desk review was comprised of project reports, documentation on training activities, publications and the websites of the Ministry of Agriculture and other institutions concerned, such as the PROCASUR Regional Corporation,¹ the Regional Rural Development Training Programme and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA),² and information published in scholarly journals. Fieldwork included interviews with the director of the Rural Opportunities Programme and coordinators for monitoring and knowledge management. In addition, ten rural microenterprise associations were visited in the departments of Risaralda, Valle del Cauca and Cauca. Given the lack of exhaustive quantitative information, several case studies were examined for evidence of changes that the programme had generated.

¹ PROCASUR is a regional organization based in Chile that designs, organizes and carries out one of the main activities covered here: learning routes.

² IICA administers the programme resources.

I. Training and capacity-building activities under the Rural Opportunities Programme

Among the programme's capacity-building activities, three innovative approaches have been identified:

1. Learning and exchange visits, internships and participation in trade fairs and similar events
2. Learning routes
3. Business schools

Multiple forms of knowledge and local talent

All three approaches share a recognition of the knowledge developed by producers and microentrepreneurs, their ability to share such knowledge with their peers efficiently and effectively, and the importance of practical approaches to knowledge processes. The programme values such knowledge and skills as tools to overcome poverty. As such, it promotes spaces where they can be recovered, developed and disseminated, to improve the efficiency and profitability of initiatives and generate conditions for exerting influence on public policy.

These spaces generate a wealth of information highlighting the key role played by local producers and microentrepreneurs, who possess much practical knowledge (although not "legitimized" by academic credentials) and have developed successful innovations. The programme, with support from partners such as PROCASUR, identifies these individuals and offers activities to accredit them and include them in a virtual platform created three years ago, which today serves as a highly useful instrument for identifying talent to implement projects.

I.1 Learning and exchange visits

I.1.i. Proposals, organization, duration and implementation

Learning visits are an established practice among the Colombian rural organizations supported by PADEMÉR and the Rural Opportunities Programme.

Proposals for visits come from the organizations themselves, motivated by the desire to learn about the successes and failures of similar experiences. In many cases they coincide with a search for solutions to critical issues related to organization, production, processing and commercialization of their products.

Preparation for such activities is straightforward and does not require any methodological support. All that is needed is the initial contact, an agreement between the associations and organization of logistics.

Visits last an average of two to four days.

The concept is broad and flexible, can be adapted to the needs of associations, and may include:

- i. Visits to one or more similar experiences where the host presents, explains and demonstrates the innovations introduced and the results obtained, involving participants in a peer-to-peer knowledge dialogue;
- ii. Visits to markets and participation in fairs, which represent a laboratory for learning by doing, where the real-life experience is the trigger for the dynamics of learning.

I.1.ii. Participation and costs

Visits are conceived so that grass-roots organizations can participate with all their members. At least 25 to 30 people participate in a visit, whereas fewer people are involved in visits to markets or fairs. If quotas are limited, a collective decision is made on the basis of the competencies and skills that are most appropriate to the activity planned. The costs averages between US\$95 and US\$130 per person for three to four days, and are usually cofinanced by organizations and the members concerned.

I.2 Learning Routes

I.2.i. Proposals, organization, duration and implementation

Learning routes are organized and implemented under the responsibility of PROCASUR. They constitute a highly structured form of training with complex preparations and are defined as a “continual learning process, organized thematically around successful experiences, case studies and practices in rural and local development, in which the users and partners themselves become the trainers”.

Associations have access to a supply of pre-existing learning routes organized by PROCASUR, and may select the one that best meets their needs.

The routes usually last one week and devote one day to each experience, with local talents presenting the topics agreed upon and providing guidance for visitors in the field. Each day concludes with a wrap-up workshop, and during the week participants develop an innovation plan to implement in their own organizations or microenterprises. This very intense process is guided by facilitators who also advise on

the formulation of innovation plans, which serve as the link between the learning route process and its impact on the participants' context.

I.2.ii. Participation and costs

The potential public is quite broad since a single route can be replicated, improved and updated. Participants are generally limited to 20 to 25 people from various organizations and countries. The main criterion for participation is the relevance of each member's profile to the route themes. Average local costs range from US\$800 to US\$1,500 per person (not including transportation from the place of residence to the starting point, plus overall organization expenses).

I.3 Piloting the business school

I.3.i. Proposals, organization, participation and development

The business school is a new initiative that was designed and validated through a pilot project by Rural Opportunities Programme with technical support from IICA in 2010. It was developed to address the concern about building responsive tools for highly diverse needs for training, advisory assistance and support for rural microenterprises. The initiative consists of organizing a thematic process of reciprocal training and advisory assistance among microenterprises, so that they become both teaching and learning enterprises. The theme selected for the pilot in 2010 was the critical issue of commercialization and marketing.

The first step is to identify learning enterprises, business schools and teachers. Then a theoretical and practical course is offered on the selected theme, bringing together all actors concerned and concluding with the development of an improvement plan that includes one-year strategies for the long- and short-term goals. The next step is a visit of all business schools. Then a competition takes place among the final versions of improvement plans as they are being implemented simultaneously with support from the instructor, who visits the learning enterprise at least three times. After several months, the plans implemented are evaluated and prizes are awarded to the "best" experiences, not on the basis of excellence but rather the capacity to introduce tangible change.

The business school concept differs from visits and routes in that it prioritizes monitoring to ensure that full advantage is taken of the results of training activities and that innovations and improvements are implemented and structured in the form of continuing support until the process concludes with an evaluation.

Pilot participants included 31 schools, with 24 men and 11 women; and 7 business school with 10 instructors, including 5 men and 5 women, each assigned to one or more learning enterprises.

I.3.ii. Duration and costs

The entire process is expected to last six months, although the 2010 pilot lasted only three months, from August to October.

The business school is expected to serve as a low-cost instrument, considering that total expenditure for the pilot amounted to 120,000,000 pesos (US\$66,700), of which 30,000,000 pesos (US\$16,700, or 25 per cent) represented prizes awarded to winning enterprises. The average amount per school was therefore US\$1,735.

I.3.iii Plans for 2011

Plans for 2011 call for replicating the business school, improving the concept on the basis of the pilot results and increasing to 70 the number of schools involved as learners. Plans also call for publishing the methodological proposal with documentation on this first experience.

I.4 Effectiveness of methodologies

A high percentage of associations participating in the programme have taken part in exchanges – 84 per cent in 2007 and 89 per cent in 2009, for a total of 960 exchanges during 2007-2009. This indicates that tens of thousands of producers and microenterprises have participated in the visits.

Moreover, a financial analysis shows that in all the areas contemplated – productive, commercial, financial, administrative and organizational investment – expenditure on intangibles such as training and visits was equal to or greater than expenditure on tangible items such as investments in machinery and inputs, publicity and office equipment.

There is widespread satisfaction with the positive effects of the visits, exchanges and participation in fairs and expos, as well as recognition that methodology is one of the major success factors. Exchange themes and organization can be very complex, but the common language and experiences among those teaching and those learning facilitate understanding. Horizontal relationships prevent communication barriers and generate an atmosphere of trust. Observing the workings and positive results of an innovative technology or work method convinces participants of their effectiveness, so that they take ownership of new knowledge and want to apply it in their own context.

I.5 Results

Acquisition of working methods

The associations can see that both parties achieve shared positive results. Preparing for the encounter calls for a reflection on their own experiences, and during the exchange they elaborate on their own weaknesses and failures, and visualize innovations to promote their growth, as well as valuing strengths and achievements that may not be perceived in daily life.

These results are leveraged in the routes, since different actors acquire methodological tools with varying degrees of complexity: route participants reflect on practices and develop innovation plans; hosts systematize their experiences and incorporate the collective reflection process into their associations; and local talents develop teaching, communication, facilitation and interpretation skills.

Bank of experiences, platform for rural talents, generation of income

Both learning routes and business schools document and systematize their successful experiences, and local talents are trained and specialized in technical issues as well as teaching, adding to and strengthening the bank of successful experiences and talents. Also, new opportunities for generating income are created since host organizations receive 800,000 pesos (US\$450) for the day of the visit, three of the seven business schools receive US\$500 for participating, and teachers receive US\$300 for every learning enterprise under their responsibility.

II. Impact of exchanges: Increased incomes and empowerment processes

Among the most significant indicators of success, the exchange activities led to an increase in the incomes and empowerment of those involved.

The financial analysis of for the period 2007-2009 indicates that of five results achieved by the associations, four show a positive correlation with the undertaking of some kind of exchange: production increase, technology exchange, product diversification and quality enhancement.

Increasing incomes and making progress on empowerment processes are generally contingent upon a number of internal factors and external conditions which vary according to time and context. Training is one of these factors. It is not easy to isolate, but for many associations exchanges have clearly been the determining factor for adopting innovations at critical moments. Such innovations result in deep-seated and

lasting shift in their vision and plans and, in turn, a process of empowerment along different dimensions, including economic, and thus to increased incomes. In other words, the exchanges have capitalized microenterprises and their initiatives, although statistically their impact – which extends beyond production - has not yet been quantified in monetary terms.

II.1 Innovations and increases in incomes

Three types of associations can be identified which, based on one or more exchanges, have promoted a new partnership project: successful experiences of approximately ten years' duration in connection with PADEMÉR and Rural Opportunities; those with a relationship of less than five years; and emerging associations with a more recent relationship to the programme. Considering the adverse external factors that they have had to face, all three groups have demonstrated increased incomes and improved living conditions of their members.

First group

Panela (sugar cane) producers' organizations are emblematic within the first group, since many were undergoing a crisis at the beginning of the 2000s and adopted improvements and innovations after learning about other successful experiences. These included sowing new varieties of sugarcane and introducing better growing practices to reduce waiting time between harvests and raise productivity; and adopting improved kilns and cleaner processes at sugar mills to increase efficiency and reduce processing times. Making use of by-products such as bagasse for fuel, ash, cachaza molasses as fertilizer and cane plant residue as animal feed has brought in additional income. In terms of commercialization, the value chain was reorganized, from the planning of producer quotas to warehouse management, products were diversified, new formats were adopted (250 grams) and higher volume sales were negotiated. All these improvements have increased the returns on panela production. These innovations have led to higher and more stable incomes for both sugarcane producers and sugar mills, which are generally family- and/or community-run.

Second group

Among associations with a relationship of less than five years with the programme, the municipality of Belén de Umbría in Risaralda, primarily a coffee-growing area, has managed to respond positively to the crisis in coffee prices. It has done so mainly by diversifying production and creating associations of small-scale producers in new areas or those traditionally subsidiary to coffee – lulo fruit, blackberry, fish, banana, panela – to build a new farming culture in which small-scale producer initiatives are part of several stages in the value chain. The five associations have conducted visits both

separately and together, and have made closely coordinated progress on innovating in their activities. Each new innovation, each new investment, has been the source of a process of shared reflection.

The association of banana producers, ASPLABEL, adopted innovations as a result of the visits, boosting productivity by 50 per cent. In addition, it installed a peeling plant in June 2010 and negotiated pulp sales at a better and more constant price. Second-grade bananas are now being used to produce meal for animal feed and peel for fertilizer, generating 80 jobs.

Blackberry cultivation was a new activity and production levels were very low. Following a visit to producers in Santa Rosa (Risaralda), the members of ASMOBEL modified their growing and commercialization practices, bringing vast improvements in yield. In this way, the objective of supporting a family with half a hectare has been achieved, since the income generated is close to the minimum wage of 535,600 pesos, just under US\$300.

Generally, the five associations have been carrying out shared projects to add value to their products, selling fruit in pulp form, bananas and fish prepared for frying, etc. They are also managing a shared project to open a locally supplied supermarket, removing the middlemen in order to offer lower prices to all customers and additional benefits to their members.

Third group

Small associations that have recently undergone a crisis, such as ASOCHITAM, AFAYUM and ASOARTUC,³ have become stable and are now able to be more competitive thanks to the results of visits, exchanges, and participation in fairs and learning routes. They have learned to improve the quality and processing of their products, and to diversify product packaging and presentation. At the same time, they are now stronger and more self-sustaining as organizations and have increased the incomes for their members. Finally, these associations have generated income by training other producers or artisans, microentrepreneurs and secondary school students, and are receiving new requests to provide these services.

³ ASOCHITAM is the Association of Women Agricultural Producers for Vereda Chisquío, El Tambo, Municipality of El Tambo, Cauca; AFAYUM is the Women's Agricultural Association of Yumbillo, Vereda Yumbillo, Municipality of Yumbo, Valle del Cauca. ASOARTUC is the Craftworkers Association of Tunía, Municipality of Piendamó, Cauca.

II.2 Economic empowerment and improvements in living conditions

In addition to higher incomes, economic empowerment is demonstrated in other improvements such as those outlined below:

- ✓ Associations have implemented several strategies to protect the incomes of small producers from market fluctuations, including diversifying production and entering into agreements with large enterprises at fixed, which is possible when an association has strengthened its marketing positioning.
- ✓ Virtually all the associations manage a revolving fund, which is a major asset for the association but also strengthens family finances and members' productive activities.
- ✓ Promoting diversification in production has also played an important role in guaranteeing family self-sufficiency.
- ✓ Improvements in production, processing and commercialization have shortened the workday and improved living conditions in many cases. The introduction of improved kilns, for example, has both shortened the workday and reduced the use of practices which are harmful to the health of workers and communities, such as high temperatures and lack of ventilation at sugar mills, and toxic emissions from burning tires as fuel.
- ✓ The associations manage social projects for producers, such as housing programmes.
- ✓ Educational levels have improved in all associations for both women and men members, as well as for their daughters and sons, generating an increase in demand for formal education. Many local talents, having received encouragement to professionalize and continue their education, have completed courses at the National Learning Service (SENA) or enrolled at university.
- ✓ The financial analysis 2007, 2008 and 2009 highlights the steady increase in hiring of local talents by the programme and by microenterprises, indicating that the strategy to promote a market for local technical services has yielded good results. The resulting income varies widely. In a particularly successful case, one woman has increased her income from 400,000 pesos per month three years ago to 1,750,000 pesos at present, just under US\$1,000.

II.3 Personal and collective empowerment

II.3.i. Self-esteem, self-confidence, self-image and demand for autonomy

Personal accounts have been unanimous in affirming that learning visits, routes and business schools have strengthened members' perceptions of themselves. Each and every one of them has overcome insecurities and shyness. Through recognition by others, they have also come to recognize their own capabilities – as individuals and as a group.

Self-esteem grows even stronger when producers become hosts rather than visitors, when they make the shift from receiving to providing training. Sometimes they are surprised to discover their own qualities, as a member of ASOCHITAM expressed: "I had no idea I could talk like that. When I was teaching them about the dye, I realized... I always thought I had no patience, and that day I realized I do".

Moving from receiving visit to receiving routes is a major challenge, because routes require associations to have a level of planning, development and systematization that is not needed for a visit.

Appropriating the learning route methodology entails a strengthening process whereby the association gradually acquires more autonomy. ASOPANELA, for instance, following an intensive experience with learning routes and after having made innovative contributions to its methodology, offers a highly structured "Weaving Knowledge" programme that can be included as part of a learning route and can last one day or up to one week, depending on the interests and expectations of the visitors and the topics they wish to explore.

II.3.ii Democratization of knowledge and horizontal relationships

The concepts and methodologies underlying learning tours, exchanges and routes challenge the traditional models of training and trainer. Within the associations, demand is being generated for different approaches. In the words of a member of Belén who is also a municipal technician: "The way we work is very participatory, taking concepts and knowledge from many people and making use of collective knowledge. It's not about the person who knows making the decisions, but about adopting knowledge from other people."

This way of thinking about technicians calls for a different way of thinking about farmers as well. Farmers are recognized as investigating, experimenting, demonstrating, arguing and questioning their experiments on the basis of results, because knowledge is

built collectively and those who are in a position to train are “not expected to teach, but to learn and then to teach”.

II.4 Social and political influence

In just several years the associations participating in the programme have been strengthened and became robust, recognized and respected actors.

Most importantly, a profound cultural transformation has taken place in which a producer is no longer merely a processing unit but is present in all the stages of the value chain, and on a collective basis with other small-scale producers. This improves productivity, quality, organization and commercialization. It also prepares them to face the challenges of globalization without giving up any of the rich material and symbolic culture inherent in the rural world.

The innovations and strengths acquired position associations in the social arena, as indicated by their growth. This is generally one of the most effective ways for small-scale farmers to achieve viability as an enterprise.

Relationships with various public and private organizations – ministries, international cooperation agencies, universities, foundations, national producer associations, and so on – confirm the social and political recognition that the associations have achieved.

The primary space where such influence takes place is the municipality, as in the case of Belén de Umbría, where the five associations make a very strong collective actor and have gained full backing from the mayor’s office. Beyond the municipality, they play a leadership role within the department, and serve as a reference point and model for departmental authorities.

Finally, the partnership with mayors and councilmen is important, but it is considered more valuable to have a direct presence on the municipal council in the form of elected members. Accordingly, ASPROLESO has two members who are councilpersons and the president of the Belén Blackberry Association (who is also secretary general of a federation that brings together 40 organizations within the department) is a candidate for the position of councilperson representing associations within the municipality.

II.5 Strengthened institutions

The positive influence of exchange activities on the success of microenterprises can be leveraged if they are accompanied by other positive factors, such as a partnership model based on full participation and horizontal leadership, and in which information is shared by and available to all, and decisions are made collectively.

III. Empowerment: Young People and Women

From the formulation stage, the programme identifies young people and women as priority groups together with poor rural people. Prioritization was based on a diagnostic assessment of the condition and position of both groups within society.

III.1 Young people

Although not targeted exclusively to young people, the Rural Opportunities Programme has focused on applying innovative strategies that promote and encourage their participation, especially in businesses traditionally managed by their parents. In all the associations there is much concern about the issues of youth. There is an acute awareness of the need to ensure the continuity of a sustainable, innovative and innovating farming culture in the face of the challenges of globalization. The programme has demonstrated the success of family strategies for including young people in business, since these strategies are based on recognizing their social and family assets.

In particular, the programme has implemented training, reflection and exchanges among young people and for policy dialogue: a programme of financial and entrepreneurial education; workshops on influencing youth policy; and facilitation of two learning routes.

The Financial and Entrepreneurial Education Programme for Rural Youth took place over a three-year period from 2008 to 2010, promoting savings and credit for young people under two strategies: (1) virtual financial education using the SENA virtual platform; and (2) incentives for formal savings (with 50 per cent matching grants). The initiative had very broad participation (6,140 young savers, equally distributed among men and women; and 5,949 trained in financial education) and was successful, especially in promoting savings.⁴ At the same time, it generated lessons learned. One of the most important of these is the need to develop a closer and more personal relationship with young people, when programme participants are being identified as well as during implementation, to ensure that they take on a leadership role.

⁴ Implementation of this initiative involved 107 educational establishments with a total of 9,247 students in ninth, tenth and eleventh grades; Banco Agrario de Colombia where the young people opened savings accounts and received monetary incentives; and SENA, which made available its virtual platform to implement the educational strategy. As a result, 6,140 young people have put aside savings and 5,949 have been trained in financial education, for total savings mobilized of 1,258.10 million pesos.

III.2 Women

Until 2010, the only gender-based strategy adopted by Rural Opportunities Programme was an affirmative action measure whereby proposals submitted to competitive processes by women received a higher rating.

Despite the lack of gender strategies, women – both from women's organizations and mixed associations – are leading important processes of empowerment relating to exchanges and other activities.

III.2.a Gender relations and exchanges

In the various kinds of programme exchanges, men's participation was estimated to be at a higher rate, 70 per cent, compared to 30 per cent for women, despite efforts to promote equal participation. This is attributable to several factors: opposition within couples to having women leave the home and community; social pressures on women to perform caretaking roles and an internalization of such roles; and the conviction within associations that men have greater competencies and can make better use of training. According to several accounts, women or children may participate "when men are unable to".

In contrast to women's lower participation rates in exchanges, they are very high in learning activities. There is evidence of progress made by women's organizations as a result of learning visits, routes and participation in trade fairs and other events. There is also the financial analysis for 2007, 2008 and 2009, which shows that of five results achieved by exchanges of experiences,⁵ a positive correlation was found with women's presence and action in four of them: increased production, technology exchange, product diversification and quality enhancement.⁶

III.2.b Gender-disaggregated data

More than 60 per cent of programme users were men in 2007, 2008 and 2009. The exception was microcredit, where women accounted for 55.9 per cent of the funds awarded in 2010.

Data disaggregated by gender on association membership, members of boards of directors and local talents show more men in leading roles than women, confirming that women participate in the labour market and perform tasks and responsibilities but are not as well represented in formal bodies (as members) or in decision-making bodies (on

⁵ References here to exchanges of experience include learning visits and routes. The five positive results are the four mentioned, plus an increase in the customer base.

⁶ The fifth result was an increase in the customer base.

boards of directors). At the same time, within mixed associations there is a solid group of very capable women interacting in public who are exerting strong leadership in key roles, whose degree of autonomy is not representative of the female population as a whole.

As for women's associations directly involved in the study, it is telling that two of the three belong to the handicrafts sector. This coincides with overall programme data, whereby women account for the majority only among handicraft workers. More generally, they are present in activities considered proper to women, whether agricultural or non-agricultural. It is also clear that despite women's achievements on the organizational and productive fronts, on product quality, administration, and the design and implementation of commercialization strategies, and despite improvements in their incomes, they still have major obstacles to overcome if they are to advance economically.

III.2.c Gender relations and life cycle

The case of ASOARTUC is interesting to note in this regard. The membership is relatively older, with several members over 50. This suggests that women have more opportunities to join an economic or social initiative autonomously when they are separated from their spouse and/or no longer have small children, i.e. when their reproductive life is over and their caretaking role has diminished.

III.2.d Subordinate participation

Women's participation in economic and social life, and hence within associations, is generally seen by men and by women themselves as marginal or complementary, as a way of helping a spouse or supporting the family when there is no male provider present. At the same time, the presence of women with very visible performance and leadership supports the view that women have no difficulty playing the same roles as men in traditionally male areas, and hides the obstacles that continue to limit their full, recognized and autonomous participation.

In this context, steps must be taken to identify, raise the profile of and assign value to the contributions made by women to the economy, material and symbolic culture, and social reproduction, as well as identify, make visible and address structural and cultural problems so that progress on women's empowerment becomes more decisive and broader in scope.

III.2.e New avenues of action under the Rural Opportunities Programme

Important initiatives have been programmed under the programme for 2011 to promote gender equality:

- 1) A competition to raise the visibility of women's role in developing rural microenterprises
- 2) A policy dialogue workshop around gender equality; and
- 3) Gender workshops to strengthen organizations cofinanced by the programme.

These three initiatives should serve as the starting point for a sustained process to build training strategies and methodologies for rural women based on their objective and subjective realities, involving them in the process and using all available instruments without any preconceived model. It must be kept in mind that, if it is to be sustainable, economic empowerment must be part of a comprehensive empowerment strategy encompassing all dimensions of women's lives: personal, family-related, social, economic and political. In addition, the development of gender awareness must be at the core of all processes.⁷

Under this approach it is important to recover, as valuable knowledge, the experiences of rural women microentrepreneurs who are producers and artisans. It would be interesting and useful to know more about the strategies that women developed to create, maintain and consolidate their own spaces, within women's and mixed initiatives, to overcome gender obstacles both in and outside of the home, both within associations and beyond. These obstacles are external – resistance, pressure, opposition and violence of various kinds – but also internal in the form of internalized conceptions and ways of feeling based on the construction of femininity.

Bringing together these aspects of experience would contribute to building new and valuable collective knowledge for rural women, and precisely the right methodological tools are available to facilitate this, tested under Rural Opportunities. First of all, exchanges in forums featuring horizontal relationships, but also workshops on life experience, personal growth and family togetherness, which all the organizations report having tested and – both women and men – have evaluated as very positive, evidencing

⁷ This is one of the lessons learned from systematizing three successful experiences in the economic empowerment of rural women living in poverty and extreme poverty in Nicaragua: Xochilt Acatl, ADIM and FUMDEC, facilitated by D'Angelo, Almachiara and Patrick Welch. They elaborate on this lesson in the paper *Diseño de currículas de capacitación para productoras, micro y pequeñas empresarias rurales* [Designing curricula to train rural producers, micro and small entrepreneurs] developed at the initiative of the World Bank in 2007 in Managua, Nicaragua.

the need to work on subjective and emotional dimensions and relationships from any space.

In this respect, it would also be of interest to examine the possibility of constructing a learning route to learn about economic empowerment experiences that operate under a comprehensive perspective, encompassing all aspects of the lives of women: personal, family-related, social, economic and political.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The three innovative training methodologies developed under the Rural Opportunities Programme – learning visits, learning routes and business schools – share a number of conceptual and methodological features:

- ✓ Valuing farmers' knowledge as a legacy that is not internalized or visible, and that needs to be recovered and systematized for capitalization and replication;
- ✓ Collectively building knowledge based on peer-to-peer sharing, exchanges and horizontal communication;
- ✓ Belief in the effectiveness of peer-to-peer learning based on a practical approach;
- ✓ Feedback on policy proposals based on best practices and successful experiences.

Learning visits

Learning visits are simple, loosely structured tools that are easy to carry out and low in cost, lend themselves to broad participation and are very effective in terms of learning and replication.

All the associations identify one or more visits as the determining factor in introducing strategic changes that have enabled them to overcome crisis situations and transform themselves into successes. This has occurred as a result of introducing innovations into production, processing and commercialization systems and generally implies a shift away from a vision as producer towards a vision as microentrepreneur.

Learning routes

Learning routes are based on identifying and systematizing successful experiences with rural initiatives and with policy and strategy development, in Latin America and

globally. On this basis, it builds intensive training programmes around thematic thrusts in which both users and partners act as trainers.

It is a complex instrument that can be designed flexibly in response to different needs, from artisanal business innovations to public policy design. It involves setting up a bank of successful experiences and local talents, to be mobilized within a national-regional-global space for knowledge exchange and strategic reflection on the world of farming and rural development.

Business schools

A business school is established by taking up and orienting tools validated by learning visits and routes towards the objective of offering microenterprises and associations sustained support during a medium-term process of innovation and improvement.

It is structured around a set of business schools and learning enterprises, combining collective work with bilateral work between teacher and learner, with support from the programme's technical team.

Learning visits, routes and business schools

Learning routes and business schools, unlike learning visits, conclude with a commitment by participants in the form of an innovation/improvement plan to be implemented at the respective microenterprise or association.

A business school's programme includes implementing improvement plans with advisory assistance and support.

All three methodologies, which are efficient, effective and low-cost in terms of their respective spheres of action and objectives, are fully aligned with the strategies of the Rural Opportunities Programme, which developed them and enriched them by linking them together.

Improvements in income and empowerment

There is evidence that learning visits and routes are a determining factor in adopting innovations and thus improving incomes and living conditions and advancing the empowerment of rural people and their associations.

The recent first edition of the business school has shown that it has the same transformation potential, in addition to being an essential instrument for the programme objectives, addressing the need for a tool to train and support microenterprises in medium-term processes.

Empowerment processes take place both individually and collectively within the economic, personal, social and political dimensions.

Partnership is an essential success factor in these processes – for its role in disseminating knowledge and innovation among members, for its fundamental role in commercialization, and for its role in exerting social and political influence.

Young people

Recently conducted initiatives demonstrate the significant potential of young rural people as the drivers of local economies and the need to provide for future generations.

Among the programme's strengths are the progress made in identifying successful experiences and young local talents, as well as testing instruments to promote savings and start-up enterprises.

Women

The Rural Opportunities Programme works with many women's associations and other successful experiences.

Among mixed associations there are a good number of women in important positions who exert strong leadership and play a decisive role in the success of microenterprises and associations.

These experiences must be recovered without overlooking the gender-based obstacles women face – which, for instance, result in their minority share in capacity-building activities.

The Rural Opportunities Programme has addressed these issues by implementing affirmative action in its competitive processes, and has programmed key activities for 2011 to generate inputs for the design of comprehensive strategies geared toward rural women and gender equality. In this sense, the planned activities are appropriate: identifying and systematizing successful experiences with women's initiatives, organizing policy dialogue seminars and conducting workshops on gender equality jointly with the associations.

Recommendations

Building knowledge

Continue to promote, improve and integrate the three instruments developed by the programme in response to different needs;

Generate mechanisms for documenting detailed information on capacity-building activities;

Conduct a study to accurately quantify the increase in incomes among members as a result of exchanges; and

Continue to strengthen the bank of successful experiences systematized and the platform of local talents, encouraging them to participate in projects within and outside of the programme.

Strategies for rural youth

Revisit and deepen the development of training instruments geared toward young people, enhancing their social and family assets, as part of the methodologies and strategies developed under the programme; and

Strengthen the young rural talents programme and rural youth policy-setting action.

Women

Prioritize action towards the design of a comprehensive gender strategy to narrow existing gaps, keeping in mind that:

- ✓ If economic empowerment is to be sustainable, it must be part of a comprehensive strategy of empowerment encompassing all aspects of women's lives: personal, family-related, social, economic and political; and that
- ✓ Developing gender awareness must be at the core of all processes conducted.

Promote exchanges with organizations and experiences, both in Colombia and abroad, with economic empowerment that use a holistic perspective, incorporating all aspects of women's lives.

