

# Documentation for change

## Editorial

The many different articles regularly published in *LEISA Magazine* show that development projects on agriculture or natural resource management can help to improve the productivity of farms and/or regenerate natural resources. The same can be said of the various efforts by farmers worldwide, many of which are also reported regularly in this magazine. The adoption of new techniques, as well as the processes of trial and error, lead to new skills and knowledge, resulting in better yields or improved management of the available resources. Those who have the chance to travel to rural areas, anywhere in the world, often find farmers who are improving their productivity and income in an ecologically sound way. But while the results of these initiatives can be evident to someone visiting a particular area, they are not generally known further afield.

The main reason behind this is that successful experiences, whether from external organisations or farmers' own innovations, are rarely documented. Nor is much effort made to communicate the results to others. Thus, somebody interested in finding out about a certain project will have to go to the area where this project was implemented. Only there can she or he see, *in situ*, what the results and the impact has been. It is easy to see why, then, academics and decision makers often believe that projects or programmes achieve very little, or that only a few farmers have something interesting to show or to say. This apparent "lack of evidence" is an argument which is often used against low-external-input agriculture.

It is therefore necessary to find a way of analysing activities, results and impacts so that these can be made available and shared with others. One way of doing this is through an effective documentation process, involving all those who have been part of a case, and building on their experience.

## Especially relevant for LEISA

More than just describing a case, the aim of a documentation process is to build new knowledge. There is still a lot to learn about the techniques, methods, interactions and science involved in ecological agriculture. LEISA, as a concept, is constantly evolving and changing as a response to changes in the natural, social and political environments. Documenting new developments is therefore very important for the further development of LEISA. The articles in this issue show that the purpose of documentation is not only descriptive: the process needs to examine closely what results and impacts are achieved in a given case, and why. Going through this process is an opportunity to learn and to discover interesting and useful links, opinions and learning points. These can then lead to adaptations of the activities and feed into planning, whether planning large projects or cropping patterns on small scale farms.

## Difficulties involved

There are several reasons why interesting experiences, successful or not, are often not documented. Perhaps the most common problem is lack of time. Field workers are busy implementing their projects or programmes, often running many different activities at the same time, all of which need to be finished before a certain date. There is thus little time to sit

down and look back at what has actually been done and achieved. And there is even less time to put this all on paper, nicely phrased and in an easy to understand language. In the same way, farmers are busy with their everyday activities, with very little time to even keep records of their daily tasks, of inputs used or of yields obtained.

To others, the main bottleneck is the lack of expertise or abilities to document. Many field workers, both in government organisations and in NGOs, complain that they do not feel prepared to analyse a certain practice in detail or to write this down, also claiming that their main responsibilities are in the field and not behind a computer. Not surprisingly, they show a certain "fear" when asked to document an experience, as if expected to do something that can only be done by experts or by an external consultant. A third set of difficulties commonly mentioned is the lack of institutional support for setting aside time and resources for documentation.

Those familiar with governmental and non-governmental organisations may see some contradiction here, for a lot of time and resources are often dedicated to putting documents together: teams spend a considerable amount of time writing proposals and completing evaluation forms. There are many reports which have to be completed and submitted, describing all that has been done and all that needs to be done in the near future. These, however, are not really the result of a documentation process, as they do not fulfil the two basic objectives of such a process: to help those involved in a given experience learn from it, and thus be able to improve the experience itself, and to let others know what is being done and achieved in a given field.

Most of the reports or documents prepared by organisations working in the field fail on two grounds: they are only descriptive, and they are not shared. By only concentrating on describing activities and results, we miss the opportunity to look in detail at the reasons behind each of these activities and results, and to learn from them. By giving more importance to the description than to the analysis, the result is a document full of information, but from which it is difficult to extract lessons. Therefore, it does not contribute to the generation of new knowledge. At the same time, by not sharing the results of our work (sometimes not even among colleagues or members of the same organisation), we limit the possibilities of others to learn from our successes and failures.

## Advantages of proper documentation

The articles in this issue show that documentation is not necessarily a difficult process, nor is it something that can only be done by external experts. On the contrary, it is a practice which can easily become a regular activity. There is a lot to be learned from our own decisions and activities, and from the consequences these have. A detailed analysis of our experiences, from which clear lessons are drawn, can contribute to a better definition of what needs to be done in order to proceed and reach certain objectives. As part of a wider monitoring and evaluation process, documentation can help make better decisions or help (re)define a course of action. In the same way, as shown by Den Belder et al. (page 6), documentation can play an important role in supporting the learning processes fostered by approaches such as Farmer Field Schools or Participatory

Technology Development. In their words, documentation “is a powerful tool to integrate and expand knowledge”.

A documentation process is essential for sharing results with others. This is important when we are interested in promoting a given technique or procedure, when the aim is to scale up certain project experiences, or when we try to create a wider impact. A specific document, as one of the final products of a documentation process, can be disseminated, copied or exchanged with others, and thus reach an audience with no geographical barriers. While we usually refer to a book, leaflet, brochure or to different types of written and printed documents, the same is true for other options: a set of images, a video, or a slide show. The benefits are even greater if we look at the whole process, and not just at the final document. As a learning process, documentation can also contribute to sharing



Photo: AGRECOL, Bolivia

**Women exchanging experiences: preparing compost in Muruq'u Marka, north of Potosí, Bolivia.**

information and exchanging knowledge by showing what needs to be done in a particular situation, and – just as important – to avoid making similar mistakes again. Instead of reinventing the wheel time and again, every new effort should build on what others have done – something which can only happen if we know what has been done and why it was successful or not.

In similar ways, a documentation process can have a fundamental role in ensuring that existing knowledge is not lost. The efforts of PROTA (page 33) contribute in this sense by compiling the existing knowledge on more than 7000 plant species of tropical Africa. Collecting, compiling and recording information is particularly important when dealing with indigenous or traditional knowledge, especially if this is otherwise not registered. The LIFE method, as reported by Köhler-Rollefson and Rathore (page 13), facilitates the documentation of animal genetic resources, giving due credit to the rightful owners of indigenous knowledge.

At the farm level, farmers can reflect on their activities by registering inputs like time spent or the amount of seeds used,

together with the final price for the produce, and analysing all this further. Documentation can in this way support the development of a farm towards a specific goal. This is particularly important for farmers striving to increase the sustainability of their farm with available resources. The case presented by North and Hewes (page 44) compares the developments on the farm over time, together with a thorough analysis of the reasons behind the results. In this way, the plans for the farm can be adjusted to better support the development of the farm in the chosen direction.

### **Different possibilities**

A documentation process will rarely follow a fixed recipe. It should be adapted so as to be relevant to each specific situation and organisation. It may also serve different purposes. Each particular documentation process must take into account the different perspectives of everyone involved or affected, not only of those who are responsible for the writing (or who are in charge of a project). As such, the issue of who is actually documenting an experience, and for whom, should be carefully thought about throughout every process.

By definition, documentation is a participatory undertaking. Many different people are involved in one experience; each person may have a different point of view or opinion; everyone has something different to contribute. The way in which these different perspectives become part of the process will depend on the methodology followed.

The documentation approach chosen will depend on the time and the resources available, as well as on the number of persons or institutions to be involved. It will also depend on what final product is expected, and on who is likely to benefit. In some cases, it may also consider the use of information technology. This can have many benefits: the use of the internet, for example, can help reach a wider audience at a very low cost. Using CDs can store lots of information in a small space, which can then be easily exchanged. Digital photography can be the basis of a documentation process in situations where reading and writing is not part of the local culture, but where visual images have for centuries facilitated communications, reflection and debate (AGRECOL, page 28). It must be clear, though, that the use of expensive equipment is never a necessity, but rather a tool that can facilitate the process.

In all cases, whether documentation involves writing or not, the whole process is made easier when using a predetermined structure. As shown by Madariaga and Easdale (page 16), following a specified structure can make the process more thorough, without overlooking important aspects. This approach is also important as the documentation process can be rather lengthy, and may involve many people.

Whatever the methodology or approach, the importance of a documentation process lies in the opportunities for learning that it provides. These come out of the final product which is shared, just as much as of the process itself. As such, the benefits of documentation are many, both at an individual and at an organisational level.