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Tom Pietrasik/ActionAid

RESOURCE PACK ON  
**SYSTEMATIZATION**  
OF EXPERIENCES



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And very special thanks to Mariluz Morgan, a Peru-based systematization specialist, who worked very closely with Samantha to develop the excellent English-language content on the methodology you will find in this guide. This guide represents an important addition to the very limited existing range of English-language resource materials available on systematization.

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## How to read and use this resource pack:

**Interventions**: if you click on a word circled like this in red you will be directed to a page of the glossary on which you will find the definition. The full glossary can be found on page 37 of the resource pack.

: if you click on an arrow like this it will automatically link you to an appendix, or a resource, or another section of the resource pack that is referred to.

**The resource pack has been designed for you to read in two ways:**

- As an electronic file, i.e. you read on your computer screen. The built in links to the glossary and different sections of the pack are designed for electronic reading.
- As a print version – the resource pack has been designed so you can print out the whole pack, including the appendices, or print section by section depending on what you are interested in.



# Resource Pack on Systematization of Experiences

## Systemati... WHAT?

Probably many of you have never heard the word systematization before but in Latin America, and increasingly in other parts of the world, it is widely known, discussed and applied.

The idea was born in the 70s, and is very closely related to **popular education**, **participatory action research** and similar trends that developed in those tumultuous years of change (of uprisings, of revolutions, of the overthrow of military dictatorships etc.) in Latin America. It is likely that the challenge of adjusting to these socio-political changes and the desire to support better or more effective development and social change motivated people involved in **practice** to start searching for ways to organise and communicate what they had discovered in and through their practice.

And they developed what they called **systematization of experiences**, a methodology that helps people involved in different kinds of practice to organize and communicate what they have learned. We are talking about the so called (and famous) **lessons learned**, about which everybody talks nowadays, but are not so easy to produce.

Over the past 40 years systematization has evolved and obtained recognition as a methodology for social reflection, and is being 'discovered' outside of Latin America. There is very little material written in English and this resource pack expects to contribute to fill that space. Through it we hope not only to disseminate ideas about systematization of experiences, but also to encourage people to start doing it.

In the resource pack, you will find links to resources that will help you understand systematization better or to see how other people have done their own systematizations

## Why should you read this resource pack?

You probably are now wondering if you should go on reading this resource pack. Will it be useful for you? Will the time you spend reading benefit you in some way? How can you navigate your way through the pack?

Well, the answer to these questions depends on your own interests and needs. Perhaps you are simply curious and want to know what these strange words systematization of experiences mean. In this case, go on for a while, read the first two chapters, in which we present the background and the main ideas about what systematization of experiences is, and that will probably be enough to satisfy your curiosity.

Or maybe your daily work is in development or **activism** or, in general terms, with **interventions** that seek to change social situations. In this case, you have probably found many problems that systematization of experiences intends to tackle. For example, you know you are **learning** a lot, each day new things happen and you manage to solve them... or not... but you just don't have the time to think it over and organize those learnings, even less to write them down. Or maybe you are struggling with a challenge in your work and can't find new orientations that would help you do better. Or maybe you have learnt so much from your work, but have no idea how to capture and communicate all the complexity and richness of your practice.

If you feel that way, then this resource pack could be just what you have been looking for. After reading about what systematization of experiences is (chapters one and two), you can move on to the third chapter, where you will find ideas about how to systematize.

In the resource pack, you will find links to resources that will help you understand systematization better or to see how other people have done their own systematizations. You will also find an existing bibliography of systematization materials, in Spanish, Portuguese and English, which we expect will grow in the future. This includes a systematization of advocacy experiences in Brazil, Guatemala and the United States undertaken by ActionAid International and published as *Advocacy for Change* in 2009\*.

We hope that this resource material will not only stimulate you to reflect on what you do, but also inspire you to systematize some of the valuable experiences you have probably accumulated. If that is the case and you would like some assistance, please get in touch with Samantha Hargreaves, the International Shared Learning Coordinator ([samantha.hargreaves@actionaid.org](mailto:samantha.hargreaves@actionaid.org)), or Laurie Adams, the Head of Impact Assessment and Shared Learning ([laurie.adams@actionaid.org](mailto:laurie.adams@actionaid.org)).

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Jenny Matthews/ActionAid

# 1. Background to Systematization

## 1.1 The origins

The earliest references to systematization in Latin America appear during the 60s. According to Oscar Jara (2006, p. 14), there are six streams that have shaped and continue to influence the methodology: social work, adult education, popular education, theology of liberation, theory of dependency, and participatory action research.

### We can track down three main origins of systematization:

a) **Social Work:** Since the late 60s, but especially in the first half of the 70s, systematization developed in Latin American Social Work as a way to use field experiences as a source of **knowledge** about society. The goal was to turn social transformation actions into **scientific praxis** (Palma, 1972).

The crisis during the second half of the 70s in Latin America (military coups and dictatorships across the continent) interrupted the development of systematization, but it reappeared in the mid-80s, when democracy started to return to many countries on the continent. Since the 90s interest has shifted to the improvement of professional performance based on lessons obtained in practice. Until the early 90s important advances in defining concepts and methods were made, much of this led by the Latin American Association of Social Work Schools – Latin American Social Work Centre (ALAETS-CELATS).

b) **Popular Education:** Born in the 60s with Paulo Freire's **liberation pedagogy**, Popular Education links education with politics. In Popular Education, systematization helps us to formulate questions and offers an alternative to the methods for developing knowledge that have been dominant in educational research and **evaluation**. Systematization helps to deepen ideas about what

Popular Education is, and strengthen its methodologies, techniques and procedures (Jara, 2006).

**c) Development facilitation:** Slightly different from Popular Education, this stream relates mainly to NGO projects and programmes that aim to help people and communities obtain the development they need. Development facilitation does not only relate to education and capacity building, but may include technical assistance, the provision of resources and services (such as loans, infrastructure – irrigation, latrines, drinking water, etc.), support for organising people etc. Systematization has supported a better understanding of this practice and of the theories on which it is based.

The disciplines upon which systematization are founded all have something in common: they are all ‘practical disciplines’, focused to action. Their main intention is to achieve changes in situations and in people. And this is probably why development facilitators and activists have an interest in systematization, understanding it as a method that promises to show how to learn from action, from practice...

*The interest in systematization appears among professionals who work directly with popular groups implementing projects and actions that intend to improve their life conditions and/or their socio-political location. This interest is born from the need to recover and communicate experiences (achieved in interventions related with social work, popular education, development facilitation) that had been taking place for several years. These professionals suspected that their valuable and ‘full of **learning**’ experiences were not being exchanged and accumulated and consequently, were not being taken advantage of. Traditional evaluations did not explain the richness of the **processes** and many times ended in unfair or partial assessments. In the last years, the so called ‘paradigmatic crisis’ questioned many theoretical and ideological assumptions on which actions had based<sup>1</sup>. The need to revise what development means and to find new orientations for its facilitation became urgent. Systematization is one of the proposals that appear, together with different forms of **research** and evaluation, that emphasize the participation of all actors involved, both project teams and poor people (Francke & Morgan, 1995, p. 7).*

### **Systematization intends to tackle two main issues:**

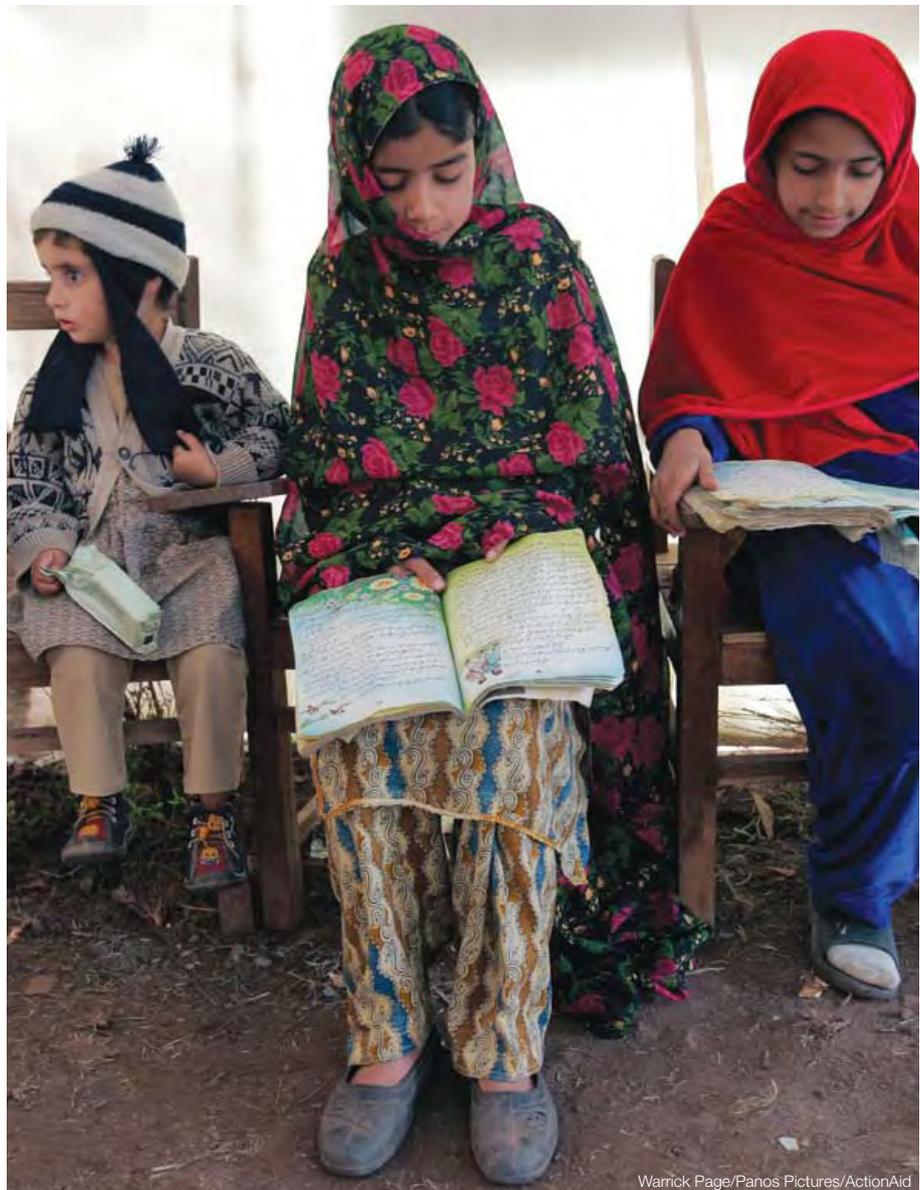
- 1. Theoretical construction:** the three disciplines (social work, popular education and development facilitation) expected that systematization could help them to define their field, to differentiate themselves from other disciplines, and to build frames of reference.
- 2. Methodological construction:** they also expected systematization would help them to discover better ways to perform their work.

With reference to both the theoretical and methodological construction of disciplines, systematization is conceived as a new form of knowledge production which, instead of going from theory to reality (as it was in the ‘classic’ way), focuses instead on reflections about practice.

<sup>1</sup>During the late 80s and early 90s, many theoretical ideas were questioned (science as the source of truth, scientific methods as the only way to obtain knowledge, etc.). All those questions and doubts, together with the collapse of the Soviet Union, is what some people call a “paradigmatic crisis”.

In Jara's words: "A new relationship between theory and practice appeared: instead of applying to practice what had previously been formulated in theory, theoretical approaches are built having as a starting point the systematization of ... practices" (Jara, 2006, p. 13).

Since the first ideas appeared in the 60s, systematization approaches have evolved considerably (to read about systematization's evolution up to the early 90s, follow this link [↗](#)). Unfortunately, nobody has written an update about what has happened more recently, though judging from the abundant production of conceptual, methodological and also systematization products, it would seem that systematization continues to develop and grow in its range of applications<sup>2</sup>.



<sup>2</sup> The Virtual Library on Systematization of Experiences is a good example, though mainly with Spanish (and some Portuguese) texts. See <http://www.alforja.or.cr/sistem/biblio.shtml>



Brian Sokol/ActionAid

## 2. What is Systematization of Experiences and What are Its Purposes?

### 2.1. What is an experience?

As you can see, we are talking about systematization of **experiences**. So let us first agree on what we mean by an **experience**. The word has two main meanings of relevance to us here: a) what happens to us directly, as when we say “a child’s first experience of snow”; and b) what we learn during our life, so we talk about how experienced older people are or about a carpenter with experience in roof repairs”<sup>3</sup>.

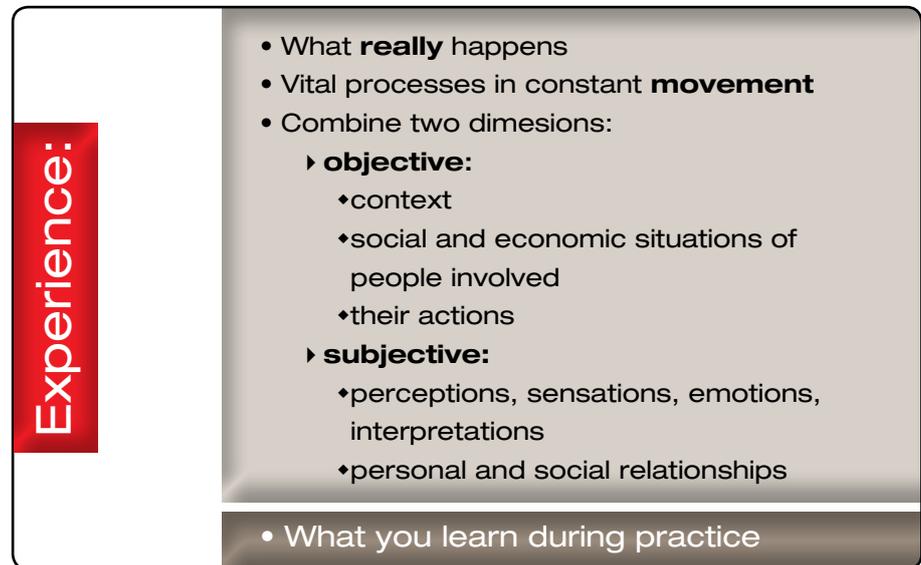
In systematization we use both meanings and so, we understand an experience as (a) what really happens (that is, not what we expected or wanted to happen) during practice and (b) also what we learn during it.

Experiences are complex and vital processes in constant movement. They combine objective and subjective dimensions: by objective we mean the conditions that prevail in the context, the social and economic situation of the people involved, and their actions; and by subjective we mean the perceptions, sensations, emotions and interpretations of each actor, as well as the personal relationships between them (Jara, 2006).

We also learn a lot through our experiences; they are always ‘pregnant’ with knowledge. But it is a very special kind of knowledge (If you want to know more about the epistemological basis of systematization, click here [→](#)).

<sup>3</sup> Examples taken from Freedictionary online

## CHART No. 1



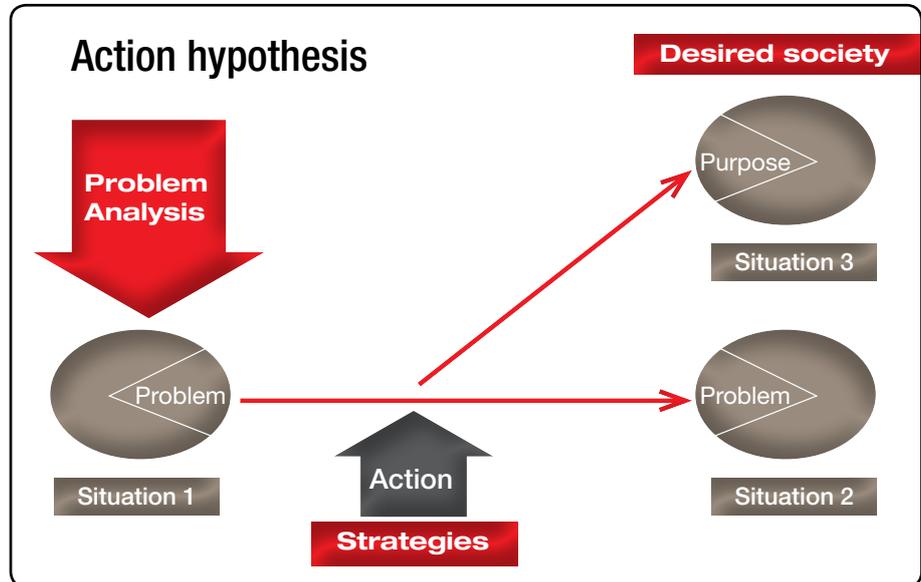
In the field of systematization we are not talking about all kinds of actions (that is, about everything we do in our daily life); we are talking about intentional action: that is action with explicit purposes.

All intentional actions are based on knowledge: a set of ideas, beliefs, ways of thinking that inform our understanding of the situation and its context, and which lead us to the kind of intervention we think is required to produce the change we expect. The knowledge we hold also informs the type of change we think is required. But this knowledge is not always explicit. Especially when the urgencies of action demand our immediate response, we just react, not always being conscious of the knowledge that informs our actions. One of the best ways to discover the knowledge that underlies our actions is to analyse the actions.

Underlying every intentional action we can find an 'action hypothesis' that can be expressed as follows: *to tackle this problem, we will do something that we think will achieve these purposes that will help in achieving the state of change we desire.*

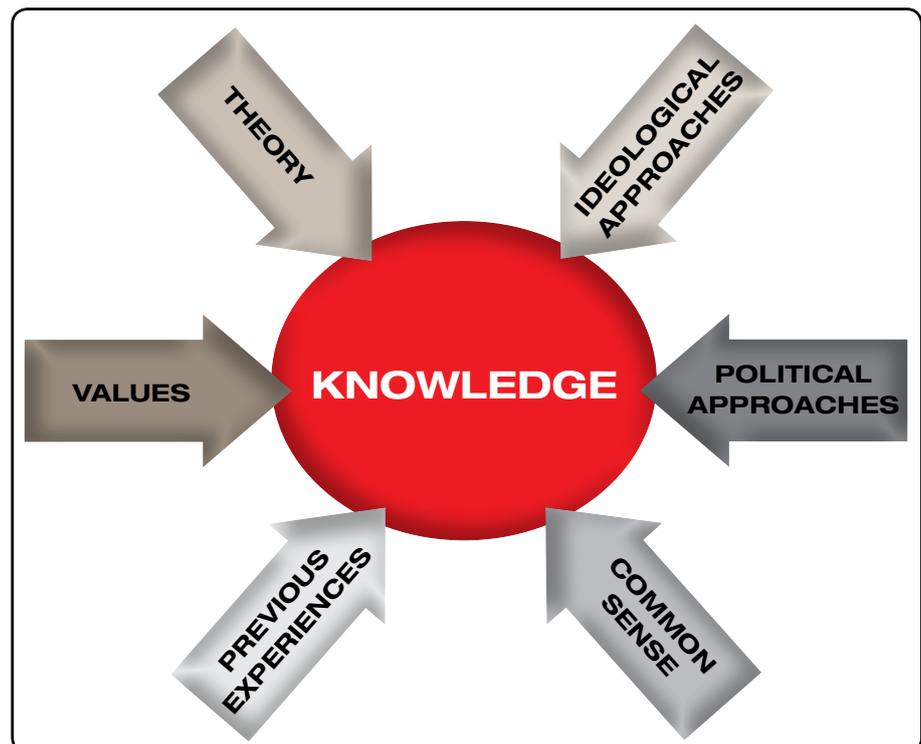
First of all, we analyse the situation and identify the problem or problems we want to modify (situation 1 in the diagram below). We assume that if we don't do anything, the situation will go on, and the problems will persist (situation 2 in the diagram below). To bring about change we define actions that will move that situation in the direction we want, producing a third situation (in the diagram below) in which the problem doesn't exist any more; it has changed into something new: change has happened and our purposes have been achieved.

### CHART No. 2



Knowledge lies behind action: during the problem analysis, in the definition of the strategies we will use, in the decision about the purposes we want to achieve, we use what we know. Action is informed not only by theory, but also by our values, our ideological and political approaches, our previous experiences and our common sense. This is all a part of what we call knowledge.

### CHART No. 3

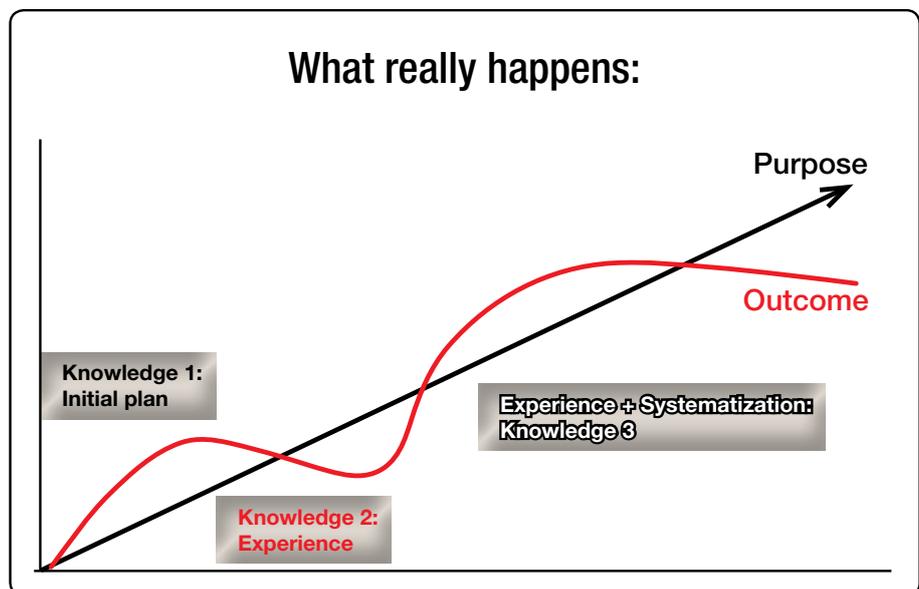


What really happens, though, is never exactly what we had planned, and the real outcomes are usually different from our initial purposes. Our plan is based on what we knew before we started acting (knowledge 1 in Chart No. 4 below). Changes between plans and real action happen because we discover new things (in the problem, the context and the people involved) and also because reality is always changing. So, changes are due to new knowledge we obtain during practice, that is, what we learn by living (knowledge 2).

The problem is that constant demands of action do not let us realize how the changes in our practice are the result of our learning. Because we are constantly facing problems that require fast and immediate action, we generally are not aware of these processes. That is why it is difficult for us to tell others what we learned.

These demands in our environment make it difficult for us to produce an ordered, supported and 'communicable' knowledge. It is here that systematization steps in: through **critical reflection** about practice, it turns the lessons learned in the experience into a third kind of knowledge (see Chart N° 4). It helps us to make the new knowledge explicit (evident) and to organize it so we can then communicate and disseminate it.

#### CHART No. 4



## 2.2 What is systematization?

Summarizing the previous ideas, we can say that we understand systematization as a new way to produce knowledge that focuses on practice.

How does this new way of producing knowledge work? First, we decide to do something, based on what we know about the problem/s we want to tackle and change (the purpose/s we set for ourselves), and we define the actions and strategies to achieve those purposes. Then we act, that is, we have a practice. The reflection about that practice produces new knowledge that leads to better practices (and achievements). And this process goes on again and again...

Systematization, then, is a process that intends to produce knowledge about action or practice through the analytical reflection and interpretation about what happened. The understanding of the process allows us to not only improve practice, but also to communicate and disseminate the lessons and knowledge produced.

Here are two very similar definitions of systematization of experiences:

## Systematization definitions

### Systematization Permanent Workshop (TPS)<sup>4</sup>

*Systematization is the reconstruction of and analytical reflection about an experience. Through systematization, events are interpreted in order to understand them. This supports the production and dissemination of consistent knowledge that is rooted in reality. The systematization allows for the experience to be discussed and compared with other similar experiences, and with existing theories and, thus, contributes to an accumulation of knowledge produced from and for practice.*

### Alforja (Oscar Jara)<sup>5</sup>

*Systematization is the critical interpretation of one or several intervention experiences. Through the process of ordering and reconstructing the experiences, systematization assists us to discover or explain the logic of the intervention process, the different factors that influenced it, and how and why the elements of the intervention related to each other in a particular way.*

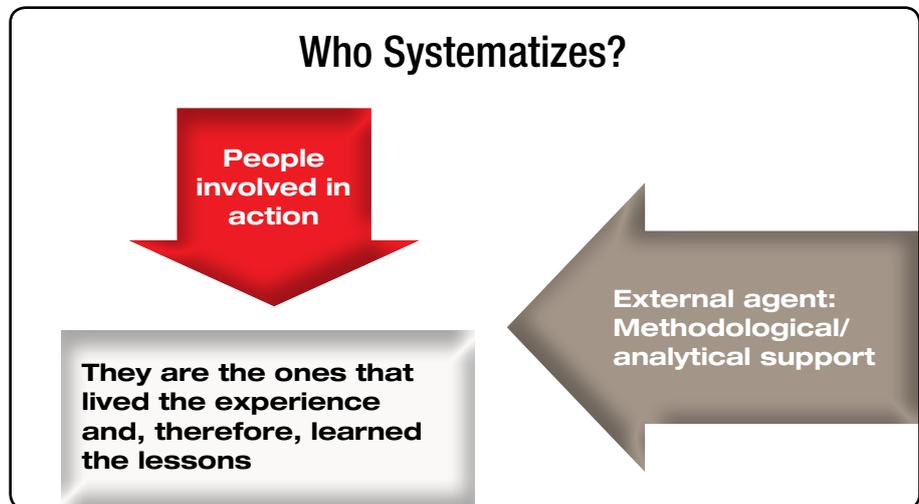
If systematization intends to organize what people who have been in a practice have learned living it, those who systematize must be the same who lived the experience. The knowledge is inside them, even if they are not aware of it.

External agents can support the process; they can provide guidance and methodological orientation. They can even help during the reflection process by asking questions and helping with the critical analysis. But they cannot replace the reflection of people directly involved in the experience.

<sup>4</sup> Systematization Permanent Workshop (TPS) is a group of Peruvian professionals (sociologists, social workers and educators) that come together to reflect about systematization of experiences. It was born in 1988 and is closely related to the Latin American Adults Education Council (CEAAL). The definition presented is taken from: Barnechea, M. M. & Morgan M. L.: "El conocimiento desde la práctica y una propuesta de método de sistematización de experiencias", Lima, 2007

<sup>5</sup> ALFORJA is a Costa Rican NGO that specializes in popular education. It works in Central America and Mexico. Oscar Jara is part of ALFORJA and a very important creator of systematization reflection and practice. The definition presented is taken from: Jara, O: "Theoretical and practical orientations for systematization of experiences", 2006.

## CHART No. 5



### 2.3 The purposes of systematization

As we already stated, systematization's main purpose is to improve practice. But, as an activity that combines knowledge and practice, it also contributes, at the same time, to practice and to theory.

#### To practice:

- ▶ It helps actors involved in a shared action build a common vision about what they are doing (successes and mistakes, possibilities and limitations). In this way, it contributes to group cohesion and coherence, and strengthens people's skills.
- ▶ Constant reflection on what is happening helps to avoid errors such as losing sight of our actions' purposes, meanings and orientations, and even, of those of the organization to which we belong. Reflection can also prevent the mechanical repetition of procedures that were once successful, but may no longer be relevant.
- ▶ Through dissemination of the knowledge produced, systematization contributes to a collective learning process that will improve the practices of others (helping them avoid our mistakes and the endless 'recreating of the wheel').

#### ***Examples of how systematization contributes to practice:***

- *A group of peasants discovered together what they did well and the mistakes they made when they directly sold their crop to the market. Systematizing their first experience, they learned how to do it better in the future and could also tell other peasants about their lessons. Follow this link [➔](#) to read more.*
- *A women's organisation systematised their history and the way their leaders developed, and in this process discovered what to include in a training plan for new leaders. Follow this link [➔](#) to read more.*

### To theory:

- ▶ Systematization can encourage discussions and the updating of concepts and approaches that support action. It helps to increase the ability of these concepts and frameworks to explain social situations.
- ▶ By discussing and accumulating lessons learned in particular experiences, systematization contributes to the creation of knowledge that can be applied to general situations. For example, it can contribute to the design of intervention methodologies that will be more effective in tackling a social problem, or it can give ideas about public policies that will give better solutions to situations that affect poor people.

#### **Examples of how systematization contributes to theory:**

- *A network of institutions focused to strengthening citizen participation produced systematizations that helped them discuss and refine their concepts of representative democracy, participative democracy, citizenship, relationship between civil society and state, local power etc. Follow this link  to read more.*
- *An NGO systematized their experience of supporting the formalization of micro-enterprises and, through this process, discovered some of the legal and tax barriers to the sustainability of these very small enterprises. This led the NGO to propose modifications to the national tax legislation.*

Even though systematization can produce ideas that refer to more general problems or situations, it is important to keep in mind that it refers to **one** experience; it produces knowledge about a **particular** situation that cannot be directly generalized. It does not produce theory directly.

## **2.4 Relationship between systematization and other forms of knowledge production**

Systematization is very closely related to other knowledge production activities, such as research and evaluation. There are confluences and differences between these activities, which should however be understood.

Differences can be found in their study **objects**, that is, what they focus on; and in their purposes. Research focuses on understanding an aspect of reality about which we don't know enough; evaluation focuses on the results of actions; systematization is similar, but focuses on how and why things happened, putting special attention to the processes lived by actors.

**Purposes** are also different: research expects to discover something about that aspect of reality, either to use it immediately or just to increase knowledge about it; evaluation expects to 'rate' (assess) the action's success or failure; while systematization intends to understand the processes in order to produce lessons that will improve future practices. So, systematization does not 'rate' action's success or failure; it is interested in lessons learned from both success and failure.

## CHART No. 6

<i>Differences between knowledge production activities</i>			
	Research	Evaluation	Systematization
Study object	An aspect of reality	The results of actions	An experience: <b>how and why</b> things happened
Purposes	To discover something about that aspect of reality	To 'rate' an action's success (achievement of its purposes, efficiency, impact etc.)	To understand the process; learn from practice to improve it

### The most important confluences between these activities are:

- Systematization can produce research questions that will lead to the production of more useful knowledge to support practice and social transformation. This knowledge, generated through research, can then guide new practices and, in turn, future systematizations, giving birth to processes of knowledge accumulation that better suit our reality and needs.
- Systematization and evaluation support each other: even though systematization does not focus on purpose achievements, it needs to know if action was successful or not, in order to understand how things happened and why. And the lessons systematization produces can help to explain better how purposes were – or were not – achieved and hence support evaluation efforts.

## 2.5 Relationship between systematization, **ALPS** and other knowledge generation systems in ActionAid International

In an ActionAid International (AAI) training on systematization in May 2008 one of the questions posed was 'how does systematization relate to our existing processes and systems like the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPs)<sup>6</sup>? Isn't it the same?' This section of the guide arises from this important question.

The place to start is one step before and in the short section to follow we will talk about how systematization supports organisational values and principles. We then go on to discuss the difference between systematization and other organisational processes and systems. We also talk about how to relate existing organisational systems and methods to each other in supportive ways. This is a significant organisational challenge.

<sup>6</sup> ALPS is a framework guiding AAI's organisational processes for planning, monitoring, strategy formulation, learning, reviews and audits. It sets out our key accountability requirements, and articulates the values and behaviours that should guide these organisational processes.

We have a range of knowledge activities that are oriented to understanding context and building policy or strategy, but we are generally weak on building knowledge about our practice and theorising about change from the position of our practice

## Organisational values and principles

Systematization, as an approach, satisfies many of our stated organisational values and ALPs principles.

Transparency and accountability, through the co-exploration of practice and the co-construction of knowledge with rights-holders, partners and allies. Systematization is focused to interventions, experiences and practices, trying to understand the reasons for their success or failure, with a view to identifying lessons and constructing knowledge to inform future practice. This process helps us to fulfil our accountability commitments.

AAI has a strong aspiration to be a learning or knowledge-centred organisation, and learning is set out as a key ALPs principle. We have a range of knowledge activities that are oriented to understanding context and building policy or strategy, but we are generally weak on building knowledge about our practice and theorising about change from the position of our practice. This is because practice (how we work for change) is often tacit, unseen and not usually fully known by the practitioners themselves. Systematization offers us a powerful methodology to translate 'difficult to capture' experiences/lessons into knowledge that we and others can use. This learning will help transform our practice towards greater creativity and innovation, and hence deepen the impact of our work.

The AAI Shared Learning Guide (2007) identifies systematization as an important learning process that we should activate, develop skills for and support if we want to grow a learning organisation and build knowledge that supports transformative practice and theory.

## Relating systematization and research

We undertake research and generate knowledge using different approaches and methods – more traditional research, quantitative studies, qualitative research, and participatory research studies. We mainly undertake research to inform policy positions for advocacy and campaign work. We may also undertake research to understand an issue for programming purposes. How then does systematization relate to research?

Systematization can generate questions to be explored through research and vice versa. Our research is generally oriented to building understanding on an issue or a question often with the aim of building theory and developing policy positions that can be articulated through advocacy and campaigning actions. Systematization of particular experiences can inform policy positions and help inform theory from the position of practice.

Section 2.4 above quite adequately explains the difference between research and systematization. Follow this link  to Section 2.4.

## Relating systematization and review/evaluation

Another form of knowledge production can be found in ALPs and these are our evaluation and review processes. ALPs mentions **Participatory Review and Reflection Processes (PRRPs)**, External Reviews, Peer Reviews and Governance Reviews. We might also undertake other types of reviews/evaluations such as mid-term/cycle reviews of a project, programme and/or intervention that ALPs does not specifically 'require'.

We use the **Global Monitoring Framework (GMF)** as the lens or frame through which we design and facilitate these various types of project, programme or organisational reviews/evaluations.

Reviews and evaluations are not the same as systematization (as explained in Section 2.4 above →). Reviews/evaluations typically aim to assess whether we have delivered expected outcomes and 'rate' the success of an action in terms of its efficiency, impact, sustainability and so on.

How then does systematization relate to evaluation/review? Systematization is not a tool for assessing impact but may definitely be a supportive methodology for evaluation. An evaluation/review may point to an important outcome (planned or not) from an experience, but its purpose is not to explore how and why this outcome came about. A systematization process could be activated as an extension of an evaluation/review to assist the practitioners/activists to explore an experience, the how of a positive impact or failure, or a practice question that has arisen through the evaluation/review.

***A suggestion for relating systematization and PRRPs:***

We may also be able to use systematization as a methodology within a PRRP. Day one or more of a PRRP could focus to 'general review', which throws out specific questions to be explored through systematization, research or more in-depth evaluation. Day 2 of a PRRP could then be structured as a focused exploration of a specific question related to an experience/practice - a PRRP systematization? This 'type' of PRRP could assist us deepen understanding of a particular experience.



Tom Pietrasik/ActionAid



ActionAid

## 3. How to Systematize: General Orientations

As we stated in the previous pages, we understand systematization as one of several possible ways of producing knowledge. It is distinguished by its focus to a particular experience, and its main purpose is to discover how to do things better, starting from the lessons learned in practice. Those lessons are produced through critical reflection about the experience.

Sitting down and reflecting on an experience is not difficult, but this does not always lead to new knowledge. We need a guide, an orientation that will help us move from our intuitions and sometimes chaotic ideas to an ordered knowledge we can communicate to others. That orientation is a method, and in the next pages we will present one that has been evolved in Latin America by Systematization Permanent Workshop<sup>7</sup>. You will also find some aids (such as questions, charts etc.), as well as tips and examples that we hope will assist you.

Before we start talking about how to systematize, it is important to establish some basic ideas: what is a method and how do we use it, and what conditions need to be in place if we are to successfully systematise an experience?

### 3.1 Our idea of method

- First, we understand the method as a tool that helps us to do something better or easier. There is no tool that is good for everything: if we want to cut a tree, we will pick an axe; but if we want to cut flowers, we will pick a scissor. There are different tools, and methods, for different purposes, and each one must be chosen depending on what we want to achieve. So, we must start thinking about the purposes and only then choose the best method.

<sup>7</sup> There are various systematization methods and this is the one the writers of the guide have found most valuable.

- Second, this systematization method does not prescribe exactly what to do. Instead, it presents general orientations and guidelines that should be taken up and applied in a flexible way, according to the type of experience and the particular conditions of the people that will systematize it. No method that intends to produce knowledge can be applied as a recipe; flexibility and creativity are very important.

### 3.2 Conditions for systematization

A successful systematization needs some basic supportive conditions in three areas: in the group that will systematize the experience; in the experience itself; and in the organization that hosts the process.

**Conditions in the team or group that assumes the responsibility of leading the systematization process.** The role of this group (which should be of a manageable size – see below) is a leadership one. It should ensure that basic conditions are in place, plan and conduct the systematization, and motivate the involvement of all participants. It will also monitor the systematization and will probably have to prepare the systematization products.

Who should be part of this group? It depends on the experience and its actors but, most importantly, on who is promoting and taking responsibility for the systematization itself: an NGO? an organization? a movement? They are the ones that ‘own’ the systematization and they will decide who to invite to the group that will lead it. We suggest, as a rule of thumb, that this group not exceed six people.

The group will need basic resources such as: documentation about the experience, budget, and appropriate venues for different aspects of the process. Time is also a very important resource. The members of the leading group and other actors who will participate in the systematization will need to have time set aside and built into their plans. We will go back to this point below.

The most important conditions are subjective or attitudinal. The people in this group have to be curious, interested to reflect on the experience, and discover new things that will help to improve what they do. It is also necessary that they develop critical and self-critical attitudes (abilities that are generally learned through practice), as well as the capacity to interrogate beyond what seems evident. If these attitudes are not present, the systematization process probably will not move from what the group already knows, and will miss the opportunity to create new knowledge.

#### ***A few more thoughts about ‘attitudes and behaviors’***

Special **attitudes** are **required** to carry out successful systematization processes: the desire to do things better; the intention to innovate new and better strategies and methods; the courage to explore new ways; and to risk being wrong. If these attitudes are not present, procedures will be mechanically repeated and no new knowledge will be produced.

Systematization, therefore, *“requires autonomous people, capable of posing problems and applying their knowledge without clinging to traditional, institutional or previously regulated knowledge ... an emancipated person ... a person capable of building critical knowledge, prepared to take distance from supposedly certain and finished concepts and proposals”* (Ghiso, 2006, p. 42).

Systematization will be easier if the intervention was well designed, that is, if it was based on a thorough problem analysis; if purposes were clear and agreed upon by the actors involved; if strategies and methods were selected to advance the agreed purposes...

Even though systematization should be a group commitment, one person must assume the leadership of the process. There are some special characteristics this person should have, or be able to develop; it is important to keep this in mind when the leader is chosen:

- ▶ he or she should have a special interest and motivation to do this systematization;
- ▶ he or she should have the ability to motivate the rest of the group and to promote subjective or attitudinal conditions that will support the systematization;
- ▶ he or she should have strong communication (oral and written) skills; and
- ▶ he or she should have developed analytical and conceptual abilities.

These capacities are especially important because any systematization process can produce tensions, as it questions the action hypothesis, the theoretical, political or ideological approaches, and even hierarchies within the institution or organization. It also uncovers mistakes and proposes changes that can produce resistance. Good leadership can help to use these tensions in a productive way instead of letting them turn into destructive conflicts.

As we said before, a critical resource in systematization is time. A big question always is: how much time will systematization take? There is not an easy or clear answer, as it depends on many elements. As you will see in the examples included in this pack, there is a case in which a group systematized their experience in a one day workshop (to read this example follow this link [↪](#)) and another in which the process took a full year (follow this link to read the example [↪](#)).

What needs to be considered in estimating the time to be reserved for systematization?

- ▶ The 'size' of the experience that will be systematized: its length, its complexity, the number of people involved, and the characteristics of the geographic area;
- ▶ The amount and quality of available documentation on the experience: if there is very much, it will take more time to process it; if there is too little, it will take more time to interview participants in order to recover their memories; if it is completely dispersed and disordered, it will take a long time to put the documentation together; and so on...
- ▶ And the critical aspect: how much time can the group, realistically, dedicate to the systematization?

That is why it is so important, as you will see later, to carefully plan the systematization process, bearing in mind the opportunities and constraints, to develop a realistic plan that will not frustrate participants.

**Conditions in the experience that will be systematized.** Systematization will be easier if the intervention was well designed, that is, if it was based on a thorough problem analysis; if purposes were clear and agreed upon by the actors involved; if strategies and methods were selected to advance the agreed purposes; and if there were enough resources (human, material, financial) etc.

The whole organization (especially its leaders) should make a strong commitment to the systematization process, creating conditions for the group to develop it, and investing the required resources

But, take note: it will be easier if these conditions exist; but that does not mean that a poorly designed intervention cannot be systematized. In fact, even if it will be more challenging, the lessons produced can be very helpful to improve future designs.

When we say a well designed intervention this does not mean that it was 'perfect' and you didn't make changes as you went along. By no means! As we have stated before, implementation rarely follows the path of our plans.

What we mean here is only that, if the action hypothesis (follow this link  back to Chart No. 2) was explicit from the beginning, systematization will be easier. It may make it easier for the group to compare the initial knowledge – on which the intervention was based – to the knowledge obtained during implementation, which may explain the changes in the intervention strategy.

Documentation (written, audiovisual, photographs, etc.) about the experience is also a big help, as you will probably discover when you do your own systematization.

**Conditions in the organization that hosts the systematization team.** The whole organization (especially its leaders) should make a strong commitment to the systematization process, creating conditions for the group to develop it, and investing the required resources. For this, it is important that the organization clearly identifies the value that the systematization will bring, either because it will give space for an important reflection about the work of the organization, which will help it to improve it; or because it will allow the organization to communicate and disseminate a message.

It is important to note that the organization, the experience, and the people involved in a systematization process require some level of 'maturity' to undertake a successful systematization. When the organization is too young, and/or too many of the people involved are youthful or have only been in the organization for a short period of time, they will lack other experiences to compare this experience against, or they may be too oriented to the future and future actions, having little interest to learn from past experiences.

### 3.3 The broad steps in a systematization process

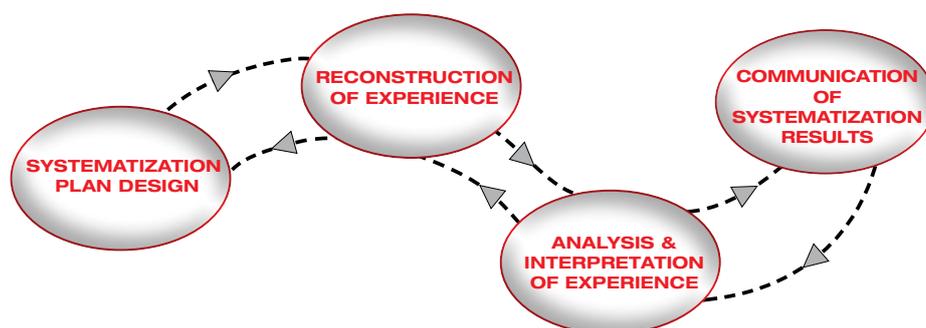
**We will present the systematization method in four broad steps:**

- ▶ Systematization plan design
- ▶ Reconstruction of the experience
- ▶ Analysis and interpretation of the experience
- ▶ Communication of the systematization results

But these steps should not be understood as phases or stages that go one after the other. Very often it will be necessary to go back and forth; to discuss, agree and think it over; to build and modify concepts; to write, delete and write again.

We will explain each step, giving examples and some tools that can help you. But we can't emphasise enough that, if you are systematizing an experience, **you own it**, and only your creativity can guarantee that the process leads to the creation of new knowledge.

## CHART No. 7



**Note:** The 4 broad steps are linked and the process is iterative, meaning the previous steps will be 'revisited' as you go on. When you finish reconstructing the experience, you should go back and make sure you do not need to make changes in the plan design. When you are analysing and interpreting the experience, it will probably be necessary to review and complete the reconstruction and, perhaps, make new changes to the plan design. Finally, when you are communicating the systematization results, it could be necessary to deepen some parts of the analysis and interpretation, or to 'refresh' the reconstruction of the experience. You may also need to return to the plan design to remind yourself of the systematization purposes you defined.

### 3.3.1 Systematization plan design

The **purpose**, in this first step, is to reach agreements about: *what experience* to systematize, the expected *purposes*, the *main question* that will organize the process, and the way the systematization will be carried out.

All the actors involved in the experience must participate in the making of these agreements. This includes representatives of the different organizations and institutions involved, including the community, grassroots groups or movements, as well as NGOs and even funding agencies, if this makes sense.

Since there will always be many different **options**, what is finally agreed between the parties should be **negotiated**. So it will be necessary to pay special attention to **power relations** in the group, making sure that the voices of poor and excluded people are heard and respected, as much as those of professional teams, boards of directors and funding agencies.

**You can use the following steps to develop your systematization plan design:**

- a) **Organizing the main information about what happened during the experience.** The idea is to sketch only the most important elements and to write them down in a very brief text (not more than 2-3 pages).

**The following questions can help to organize the information:**

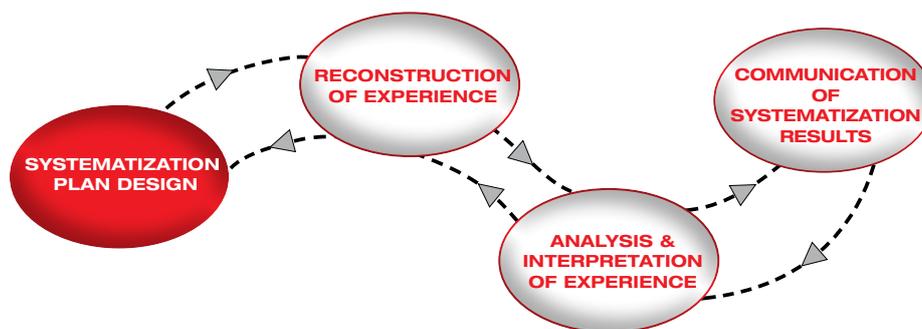
- ▶ Where and when did these things (actions or steps in the intervention) happen?
- ▶ What were the expected purposes or goals?
- ▶ What actions or steps were followed to reach your purposes or goals?
- ▶ Who participated? (including direct and indirect actors)
- ▶ What were the outcomes (positive and negative, expected and unexpected)?

b) **Basic agreements.** Once you have a general outline of what happened, you should answer some questions that will make it easier to reach agreements on the systematization process.

Don't try to answer these questions in the same order presented here, though; neither should you consider any answer definitive until you go through all the questions. The answer to each one of the questions depends on the answers to the others, so it will be necessary to go back and forth until the group in charge of designing the systematization is satisfied with the results.

**What part of the experience will be systematized (first question)?** There are different possibilities: you may want to consider everything that happened, or to choose an aspect (a period of time, a geographical zone, the actions of one of the actors, women, for instance, one of the strategies, etc.).

### **CHART No. 8**



#### **Examples: What part of the experience to systematise?**

- A peasant's organization that achieved their goal of selling their bean crop directly to the national market decided to systematize their leaders' role in the process. Follow this link [➔](#) to read more.
- After five years of life, a women's organization decided to systematize the organization's history, starting from the moment it was born until its first National Congress. Follow this link [➔](#) to read more.
- A network of 15 Latin American institutions decided to systematize their citizen participation training carried out before and after general elections in four countries. Follow this link [➔](#) to read more.

#### **What do you want to systematize this experience for (second question)?**

What do you want to systematize this experience for? What do you expect to learn by doing it? What product do you expect to develop (a written report, a video, a play)? Who would find this product useful? Your audience is really important as this will shape how you design and communicate the systematization. The audience analysis tool may assist you identify and analyse your audience – follow this link [➔](#) to read more about the tool.

### **Examples: What do you want to systematise this experience for?**

- *The peasant's organization wants to learn from their first effort of selling directly to the national market and expand the experience to other crops.*
- *The women's organization wants to recover the accumulated experience of historical leaders to guide the training of a new generation of young leaders.*
- *The network wants to enrich their conceptual position about democracy and citizen rights.*

### **What is the main question that will guide this systematization (third question)?**

This question expresses what you want to know about the experience, which motivates the systematization.

### **Examples: The main question for systematization**

- *Peasant's organization: what was the role of the leaders in getting the crop sold on the national market? In simple terms: Which actions of the leaders were useful and helped to bring about the change and which were not useful?*
- *Women's organization: What situations affected the emergence of leaders during the first years of the organization? How did the relationship between leaders and the base of members develop?*
- *Network: What was the impact of the training on the participation of citizens in matters of daily governance and during elections?*

**How will the systematization be carried out (fourth question)?** This includes: the method that will be used, the activities and who will carry them out, costs etc.

As we said before, these questions are closely related and influence each other. Now you will have to **choose** between different options and **negotiate** agreements, bearing in mind the question of power.

The central criteria in these choices and negotiations are the *knowledge interests*: what you want to know or understand about what happened. In thinking about this, it is important to bear in mind that very rich and valuable lessons can also be learned from failures, and not just 'successes'.

It is not easy to decide to systematize an unsuccessful experience, though. Not many people like to show their own failures and mistakes, especially in a world in which 'success' is a valued asset. Leaders may fear losing donor money if the organisation is honest in its reflections, and staff may fear dismissal or risks to promotion. It requires a great deal of maturity, both in the organization and in the team, to be able to confront failures and mistakes.

It can help to remember that the purposes of systematization are different from those of an evaluation. Follow this link  to Section 2.3. Systematization does not focus on the results (outcomes, impact, etc.) of an intervention, but in the lessons learned during it.

If you are to systematise an 'unsuccessful experience' then it will be essential that the people involved have much confidence (in themselves and in each other).

If you don't trust your partners, comrades or leaders, don't even try to systematize a failed experience, because you will all end up lying to each other and/or to yourselves, and no valuable knowledge will be generated.

Maturity, confidence and trust, as well as the capacity to criticize (ourselves and others) and to manage conflicts in a positive and productive way can be learned through practice, though. What is required is the will to try it, and the humility to accept mistakes.

### ***Hints and tips: Systematization plan design***

- You don't have to systematize **everything** that happened during an experience. In fact, especially in your first attempts, it is much better to go for a smaller experience than for a very big and complex one. Remember: the first time you cooked something, you probably didn't try to imitate a famous chef.
- The 'bigger' the experience chosen (several years, many people involved, very complex), the more superficial your analysis is likely to be. On the other hand, if you choose a small experience (what happened with one of the actors during only some months, for example), you will not achieve a general overview of the whole process. None of these choices is correct or incorrect; it depends on the **purpose** of the systematization. What is important is your awareness of the consequences of your decisions. It is just as when you take a photo: if you broaden the scope you will miss the details; if you focus on a detail you will miss the landscape. You need to decide the scale and scope for your purposes.
- Deciding on your main question is a very important moment in the systematization plan design. Consider the following tips:
  - ▶ Focus on what you **don't know** about what happened during the experience; it seems obvious, but many people keep sticking to what they already know.
  - ▶ The question has to **look back** to something that has already happened, trying to understand why it happened that way. A systematization question does not refer to the future or to elements that were not part of the experience chosen; those kinds of questions lead to planning or to research.
  - ▶ The question should not focus on the results, meaning the outcomes or the things that changed because of what we have been doing; that would lead to an evaluation. The question focuses on **what we learned** about **how** to bring about these results or changes, or how to avoid the problems that came about doing it.
- One systematization process will not answer all the questions or solve all the problems. You will have to **choose**, as we said before, the more important question you need to answer now, or the lessons that should be communicated to others right away.
- **Humility, humility and more humility.** Don't try to make a gigantic contribution to science or social change through systematization. It should help you to understand the experience you have been involved in, to learn from it, and to make things better next time. And really: isn't that more than enough?
- **Be realistic.** When you think about how to carry out the systematization, your questions may have to be modified depending on the time, financial resources or human capacity that is available.

As you can see, at this stage it may become evident that the real interest is not to systematize an experience but to undertake an evaluation or a research project. It is important you discover your need as soon as possible before you invest time and resources in an effort that will not lead to the desired product. Go back to Section 2.4  to remember the different purposes of systematization, research and evaluation.

Before concluding this step in the process, you need to ensure that there is internal consistency between the experience chosen, the expected purposes, and the question that will guide the systematization. This means it is necessary to check if:

- ▶ The systematization of **this experience** will help you reach your identified **purposes**; and
- ▶ The answer to the **systematization question** will be found by analyzing what happened in **this experience**.

The **Consistency Chart** we present here may help you to check the basic agreements you have reached. As an example, we include the decisions the peasant's organization made:

### **CHART No. 9**

<b>What experience</b>	<b>What for (purpose)</b>	<b>Main question</b>
Leaders' role in the process of selling beans directly to the market.	To repeat the process with other crops.	Which actions of the leaders were useful and helped to bring about the change and which were not useful?

c) **Writing the systematization plan.** The agreements you have reached should be written down so they can guide the process. A possible outline for the **Systematization Plan** could be:

**1. Justification** (the input for this section is the answer to the first question →)

1.1 Identification (that is, what part or aspect) and brief description (location, purposes, actions/activities, participants, outcomes) of the experience that has been chosen.

1.2 Importance of systematizing this experience.

**2. Purpose of the systematization** (the input for this section is the answer to the second question →)

**3. Main question** (the input for this section is the answer to the third question →)

**4. Plan** (the input for this section is the answer to the fourth question →)

4.1 Method, activities and persons that will take responsibility for each one

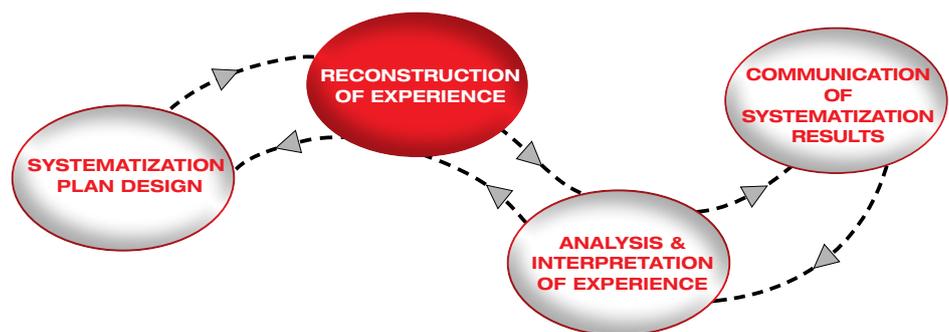
4.2 Information sources

4.3 Budget

4.4 Timeline and schedule

### 3.3.2 Reconstruction of the experience

#### CHART No. 10



The **purpose** now is to recount what happened, that is, to tell the story. The experience has to be drawn out from participants' subjectivity so it can then be analyzed and interpreted.

**The experience reconstruction uses two main sources:**

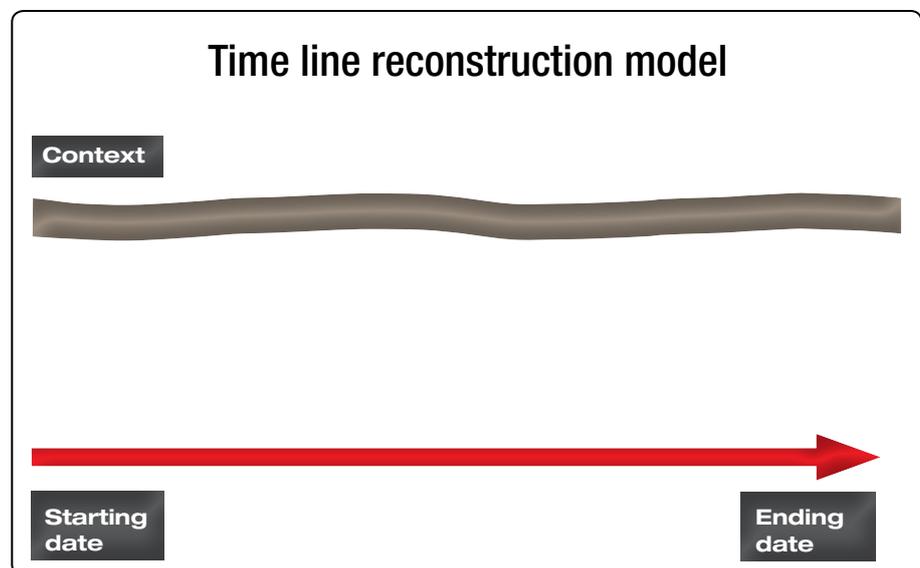
- ▶ Documentation about what happened (different kinds of reports, materials produced, graphics etc.)
- ▶ Participants' memories

Organizing information about what happened in a clear but schematic way will be adequate. Here we present two possible ways of doing it, but encourage you to be creative and find your own suitable method.

**CHART No. 11**

Experience reconstruction chart model								
Date	What happened	Who did it	What for	How	Outcomes		Context situations	Questions/ Observations
					Positive	Negative		

**CHART No. 12**



The next example shows a very simple and practical way to reconstruct an experience.

### **Example: Experience reconstruction**

*To reconstruct the experience of the bean producers, they used a time line. On the left side of a big sheet of paper, over the time period 92-93, they placed the drawing of a very sad, thin and pale peasant with a few coins in his hand. On the other end, over the time period 93-94, they placed another drawing: this time a better fed and clothed peasant, with a big smile on his face and more money in his hand. Between the two figures they drew a road showing what they did to get from the one situation to the other.*

*With the help of written reports and their personal memories, the peasants reviewed each month. They wrote in colored cards what they considered important: green for training; yellow for strategies and actions followed; and pink for difficulties.*

*Little by little, the road started to fill up. During the first months there were more green cards (training) than yellow ones (strategies and actions followed), but in the months that followed the color balance changed and, at the end of the process, there were only yellow cards. Follow this link  to read more.*



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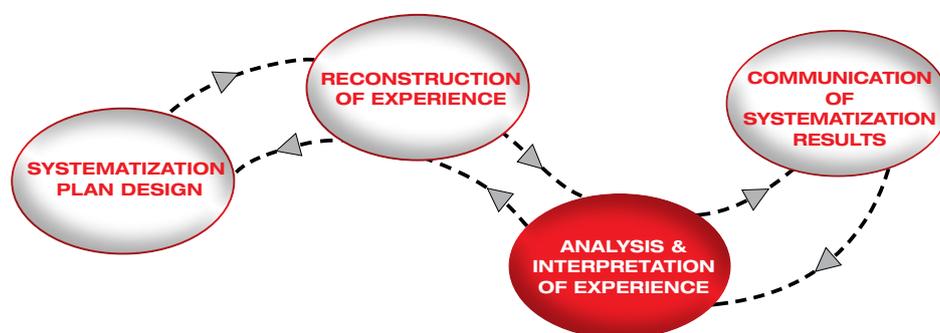
### ***Hints and tips: Reconstruction of the experience***

- In this phase you tell the story of the **experience chosen**. Be aware that it is easy to broaden the focus to other aspects and consequently work on more than what is necessary. Keeping the Consistency Chart (follow this link  to Chart No. 9) in mind – or even better, on the wall – as you reconstruct the experience will help to control this risk.
- The idea is to report the **real process**, that is, what really happened, not what you planned or hoped would happen.
- You need to include the point of view of **all actors involved** in the experience that is being systematized. Different techniques can be used for that: individual or group interviews, discussion workshops, focus groups, etc. The tool chosen depends on the characteristics of each actor. For example, role-playing may be much better with a group with low or no levels of literacy, or to retrieve subjective feelings. Don't forget to consider how best to navigate **power** so that the voices of poor and excluded people are not excluded.
- Include **both objective** facts (places, dates, number of participants, themes included in workshops, etc.) **and subjective** perceptions (opinions, feelings, intuitions etc.) of the actors involved. Reconstruction tools (like the ones we presented above or others you may develop) should create the opportunity to capture different kinds of content.
- Give special attention to **how** things happened. If we want to understand the experience and learn from it then we need to give special focus to this, which is usually not highlighted enough in research processes and evaluations.
- Reconstruction must always consider the **context** in which the experience took place, but including only facts or situations that **affected it directly**. Depending on each case, you could register political or economic changes in the region, country or locality; climatic factors or disasters; changes within the organization, etc.
- Choose and **adapt** the reconstruction tools using the following criteria as a guide:
  - ▶ Time is a very important factor when you reconstruct an experience: you can build a chronological story using a timeline, or draw a river, or tell a story using time frames, or episodes, or phases as frames;
  - ▶ Describe what happened, identifying who did it, the purposes they wanted to achieve, and the results obtained; and
  - ▶ Leave space to take note of questions and reflections that will spring out while you are reconstructing the experience.
- It would help if one or two persons prepare a first version of the reconstruction using the available documentation. This version can then be enriched with the other participants' memories, using the different techniques mentioned above (workshops, interviews, etc.). It is also very useful to present the reconstruction to an 'external agent', that can help to complete gaps and point out especially interesting events.

Once the reconstruction of the experience is complete, the team should go back to the systematization plan and verify if the purposes, main question and even the experience chosen are still valid for them. If they consider it necessary, they can and should make adjustments - discussing, negotiating and arriving to new agreements with all actors involved in the systematization process.

### 3.3.3 Analysis and interpretation of the experience

**CHART No. 13**



Other questions that exceed the scope of this systematization (for example, if they deal with issues that are not part of the main question) should also be ruled out

The **purpose**, in this step, is to reflect on the experience and identify the lessons and new knowledge it holds.

This is a key moment in the systematization process: creativity, curiosity and criticism are particularly important now.

All knowledge production processes start from questions. Even little children know that, and that is why they go through a phase in which they can drive their parents crazy by asking *why*, and *why*, and *why*... forever. But they don't do it to bother adults; they do it because they are learning (gaining new knowledge) as fast as they can.

This systematization method is also based upon questions. That is why we asked you to agree on a **main question** when designing the systematization plan, and we said that question indicated **what you wanted to know** about the experience.

In this moment, again, we will use questions as the main tool for the analysis of the experience we are systematizing. Without losing sight of the main question and the systematization's purpose (again, the Consistency Chart can be very helpful – follow this link [➡](#) to Chart No. 9), all people involved should get together and, in a brainstorm session, ask all the questions they have about the experience.

Next, the questions should be reviewed, ruling out those which would be better addressed through other kinds of knowledge activities, such as research. Other questions that exceed the scope of this systematization (for example, if they deal with issues that are not part of the main question) should also be ruled out. In this brainstorm session you can expect to generate many questions that will not be addressed through the systematization process. Don't discard these questions; save them for other efforts.

**Remember:** it is not possible to answer all questions and concerns through one systematization process; focus on the main question and the limits it establishes. This will help you remain focused and avoid the risk of a 'never-ending systematization'.

It is possible that asking questions will lead you to the need to **specify concepts** that you use but may not have common agreement on, or may be weakly defined. This will require that you **relate with theory**. For example, if you are asking about *people's participation*, you will have to agree on what is – or is not – participation, either reading or inviting experts to explain it to you.

### **Example: Questions guiding analysis and interpretation**

*The women's organization that was interested in leadership formation asked the following questions:*

- ▶ *What were the most common motivations among the leaders in the beginning? Did they change? Why?*
- ▶ *How did the organization's purpose change across the different stages?*
- ▶ *What were the main contradictions or challenges leaders faced across the phases of the organization's development: at a personal level, between them and their families, between them and the members, among them as leaders, between the organization and the institutions that supported them? How did they deal with those contradictions? Which of these contradictions still remain?*
- ▶ *How did the conceptions of the leaders about leadership and about their role evolve and why?*
- ▶ *Which aspects in their training or formation as leaders seem essential?*

Systematization questions are answered through discussion and reflection processes involving all relevant actors in the experience. These processes help participants to reflect on the experience and its context, uncover theoretical assumptions and approaches, bring in new information, and access the memories of the participants.

### **Hints and tips: Analysis and interpretation of experience**

- The processes of questioning, referring to theory and concepts, and answering are not consecutive moments. Instead, the **group will go back and forth**, as questions lead to the need to develop concepts more precisely and answers raise new questions.
- Be sure to **include different actors' points of view**. Be especially careful to ensure that discussions about theory don't interfere with less educated people's participation in the reflection.
- A **critical attitude** is essential, so you can explore beyond what seems evident and not be satisfied with the first and most obvious answers. For example, the 'easy' way to answer a question about the lack of people's participation in meetings would be to blame them because they are conformist or lazy. But we must go on, asking ourselves about the discussion themes of those meetings (were they interesting for the people?), about the way we announced the meetings (were people informed in time?), about the hours in which they were held (did this make it easy for women to be there?), for example. Once again, the 'external agent' can be very helpful, not only by helping to make (and discard) questions, but also to answering them. Keep on pushing with the questions until you are sure you have discovered something you did not know before.
- While you are answering the questions, always **relate the experience to its context**: it would be impossible to understand how and why things happened without considering external events.

A systematization will have been successfully concluded when you have reached a satisfactory answer to the systematization main question. But the conclusions of all systematizations should always be expressed as **lessons** and end up in new action proposals or recommendations for other persons who want to engage in similar practices. It can also produce inputs for policies or general strategy design.

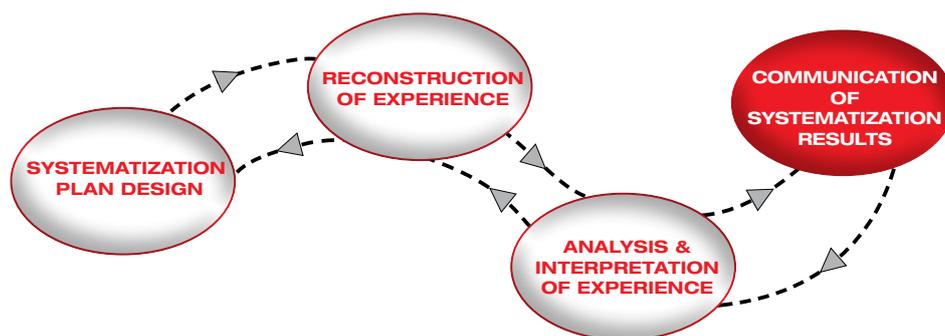
New questions may also have been raised, which can lead to other practice-based knowledge production processes (researches, evaluations or other systematizations) or to dialogues with academic sectors.

### **Examples: Systematization conclusions**

- *The women's organization reached practical conclusions that were expressed in a new leaders' training plan which takes into account the main lessons learnt from the initial experience. Also, theoretical conclusions were reached about: the relationship between leaders and members, the most important elements for training leaders etc.*
- *The network produced statements about democracy construction, citizen rights and participation in Latin America that allowed them to reformulate the citizen training programs, adapting them to the circumstances and challenges in each country.*

### 3.3.4 Communication of the systematization results

#### CHART No. 14



The process of new knowledge production has ended, so the **purpose** now is to communicate and disseminate the experience and its lessons. The challenge is that other people, who did not live this experience, should be helped to understand it and especially, to take advantage of the lessons you learnt.

The initial product of this phase should always be a written report. Starting from this you can then produce other communication products for different audiences. You should consider these products during the planning stage of the systematization; your products should support your systematization purposes and be budgeted for at the outset. Follow this link [➔](#) to Section 2.3.

#### ***Examples: Systematization products***

- *The women's organization produced a video, educational brochures and a 'photo romance' about "the emergence of a leader".*
- *The network produced discussion papers and scripts for radio programs that promoted public debate about democracy and citizen participation.*

As important as its publication is systematization's dissemination, so ideas for this aspect should also be planned and budgeted for. Forms of dissemination include forums, workshops and other kinds of meetings in which systematization results can be discussed as widely as possible.

### ***Hints and tips: Communicating your systematization***

- You should communicate the **new knowledge** and **lessons** obtained through the systematization of the experience, not only the story of what happened. The story will mainly be used to explain the lessons learnt.
- Your challenge is to ensure that your targeted audience **understands** your message (Appendix 7). Choose different kinds of communication products (written reports, videos, cartoons, plays, etc.) depending on your target group, and adapt your language to each one of them.
- The systematization product should get the audience to think, make them question themselves, or see an issue in a different way. Use **content** (stories, examples and a language) that is familiar to your audience, and use examples and testimonies that can powerfully illustrate your lessons and conclusions.
- The key idea is: **we want people to read (or listen to us)**. So, the systematization product must be short, simple and, above all, appealing and attractive. Think about what you would have liked to know before engaging in the action you have systematized, and try to communicate that, because that is probably what will be most useful to others.
- The first step is to decide the content of the systematization report or communication product with the **participation** of all the members of the leading team. The first version of the product should ideally be assigned to one member of the team with the most appropriate skills for this purpose. This first version should be reviewed and discussed with the rest of the group and with other people you feel will enrich the product. If it is possible, a presentation to the targeted audience could help make sure that the content and language is appropriate.
- **Beware:** do not commission a person (even if he or she is an excellent writer) that has not been part of the systematization process, because he or she has not participated in the knowledge production process. Your product will probably not adequately reflect the complexity of understanding and learning that the group has obtained through the systematization. In addition, the group will not feel reflected in it and will likely not **own** it. Only when you are producing a communication product that requires specialized skills (a video or a cartoon), should you call in an expert, but never lose control of the content.

## Link Here to Find Several Examples of Systematization Processes that can Inspire your Own:

- Bean producers harvest a systematization experience -  follow link to case study
  - A women's organization wants to train new leaders -  follow link to case study
  - A network of organizations wants to deepen their theoretical conceptions about democracy and citizen participation -  follow link to case study
  - Women's empowerment: an action on gender quotas in a trade union -  follow link to case study
- 

## Other Systematization Resources

Link here to go to a systematization web site: <http://www.alforja.or.cr/sistem/biblio.shtml>. Even though it is in Spanish, you will find some documents in Portuguese and, hopefully, soon we will be able to feed it with English texts.

### Link to the following to find texts about systematization in English:

- Oscar Jara: "Theoretical and practical orientations for systematization of experiences", 2006 
- Esteban Tapella: "Systematization: Basic Concepts and Methodological Considerations" Chapter 1 of ActionAid International Resource: **Advocacy for Change: Lessons from Guatemala, Brazil and USA**, 2009 
- Alboan-Hegoas: "Looking at systematization. What systematization is?", 2004 

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CEAAL, Santiago, Chile, 1992

# APPENDICES



Resource Pack On  
Systematization Of Experiences

# Glossary of terms

<b>Activism</b>	Vigorous, conscious actions that may be guided by a doctrine or belief system that have the purpose of achieving social or political change.
<b>ALPS</b>	ALPS is a framework guiding AAI's organisational processes for planning, monitoring, strategy formulation, learning, reviews and audits. It sets out AAI's key accountability requirements, and articulates the values and behaviours that should guide these organisational processes.
<b>Critical reflection or analysis</b>	<p>A human ability to think about or appraise something - a situation or an experience, for example – with a view to reaching deeper understanding, and a conclusion about meaning.</p> <p>With reference to systematization: a process of reconstruction and critical review of a lived experience, searching to understand what happened, and why it happened in that way. Its purpose is to understand and explain the experience and to produce lessons that will improve future practices.</p>
<b>Dialectic</b>	<p>A “method of reasoning which aims to understand things concretely in all their movement, change and interconnection, with their opposite and contradictory sides in unity”<sup>1</sup>.</p> <p><b>In systematization, we employ three main aspects of dialectic thinking:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ we conceive that it is not possible to understand reality if we do not consider all the interconnected elements that are part of it;</li> <li>▶ we conceive of reality as a historical process that is produced by human action and, consequently, human beings can change its course; and</li> <li>▶ we conceive that reality is in permanent movement, and that change is produced by contradictions (tensions) between the elements that form it.</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/d/1.htm#dialectics>

<b>Epistemology</b>	A branch of philosophy that focuses on knowledge: how it is obtained, its nature, its foundations and its limits. Epistemology asks “how do we know what we know?” <sup>2</sup>
<b>Evaluation</b>	Assessment of the changes produced by a project, using criteria such as efficiency, effectiveness, impact and others. It allows us to verify the changes produced by the project and to produce information that will improve decision-making.
<b>Experience</b>	Everything that really happens during the implementation of a project, change intervention, action etc. Experiences are complex and vital processes, in constant movement, that include both objective dimensions (the context, the social and economic situation of people involved, their actions, etc.) and subjective dimensions (perceptions, sensations, emotions and interpretations of each actor, as well as the personal relationships between them).
<b>Global Monitoring Framework</b>	The Global Monitoring Framework (GMF) assists AAI track progress against its international strategy, Rights to End Poverty (RTEP). It “provides a set of focused guidelines for gathering, consolidating and analysing data, information and stories about the nature, extent and results of our work” (GMF, 2007)
<b>Hermeneutics</b>	Knowledge and art of interpreting something (especially text) with the purpose of determining its meaning.
<b>Intervention</b>	Intentional action that has the purpose of changing reality.
<b>Knowledge</b>	Includes our idea-sets, the things we know and believe, including the attitudes and values we hold, which influence and shape how we behave and work. Knowledge also includes knowing what we don't know or what we may need to know. We don't define knowledge as neutral and objective. We see that knowledge is created in the material and social contexts in which we live and work. Knowledge may either serve to reinforce existing unequal relations of power, or, if approached critically can help to challenge these relations. Thus, certain kinds of knowledge have great potential to bring about deep kinds of social change. This is why we are challenged to constantly question the sources and effects of our ideas, values, attitudes and beliefs. Critical knowledge is, in part, derived from critical reflections on our practice and in turn influences our ongoing practice. We prefer the term critical and/or creative knowledge <sup>3</sup> .

<sup>2</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/epistemology?o=>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.actionaid.org/assets/pdf/SharedLearningGuide\\_FINAL20July2007.pdf](http://www.actionaid.org/assets/pdf/SharedLearningGuide_FINAL20July2007.pdf)

<b>Learning</b>	The process (the how) through which ideas, information, beliefs, values and attitudes are created. The ways in which we learn shape the information we need and the knowledge that we form. It is, therefore, important that we look critically at the ways in which we learn. Critical learning leads to the meaningful selection of information, the creation of new ideas and to critical knowledge. Many of the ways in which we learn confirms existing knowledge that maintains unequal relations of power that include some people and exclude others. This guide (the ActionAid Shared Learning Guide), therefore, emphasises the need to deepen and create learning processes, and the skills and capacity needed to facilitate them, which will enable us to critically engage existing ideas, and construct new knowledge for change. We prefer the terms critical and/or creative learning <sup>4</sup> .
<b>Learning dialogue (dialogical learning)</b>	Learning process that happens when different persons encounter each other and dialogue or 'argue' on an egalitarian basis. The outcome of the dialogue is based on the validity of proposals presented, and not on the relative power of the different actors.
<b>Lessons learned</b>	Knowledge obtained through a process that involves reflection about an experience.
<b>Liberation Pedagogy</b>	Educative movement whose main representative is Paulo Freire. It focuses on the cultivation of an approach to education through which people gain awareness/consciousness about their social condition through critical analysis and reflection about the world that surrounds them.
<b>Participatory Action Research</b>	A form (or method) of investigation through which people involved in action assume the role of producing knowledge about the problems that affect them, and the best ways to tackle these problems.
<b>Pedagogy</b>	The science of teaching/education.
<b>Popular Education</b>	Educative approach proposed mainly by Paulo Freire and developed in Latin America since the 50s. Its purpose is to help poor and excluded people know themselves, develop their capacities, and recover their dignity.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.actionaid.org/assets/pdf/SharedLearningGuide\\_FINAL20July2007.pdf](http://www.actionaid.org/assets/pdf/SharedLearningGuide_FINAL20July2007.pdf)

<b>Practice</b>	“Practice is active... and is directed at changing something. Practice differs from activity in general, because practice is connected with theory... Practice is only enacted through theory and theory is formulated based on practice. So long as theory and practice are separated then they fall into a distorted one-sidedness; theory and practice can only fully develop in connection with one another” <sup>5</sup> .
<b>Praxis</b>	Action based on reflection; the concept breaks the separation between theory and practice (see definition above under ‘practice’).
<b>Process/es</b>	Set of facts or situations ordered according to previously defined criteria. In systematization, situations are ordered chronologically, to present the pathway/trajectory of an experience.
<b>Participatory Review and Reflection Process (PRRP)</b>	A reflection process that takes place on an annual basis at every level of the organisation, involving stakeholder groups. PRRPs aim to support learning on achievements and failures so that AAI can improve the responsiveness and quality of ongoing work. The key objective is to increase ActionAid’s accountability and transparency to stakeholder groups <sup>6</sup> .
<b>Research</b>	Process that produces new or better knowledge about different aspects of reality. This knowledge can – and frequently is – used to define and orientate interventions.
<b>Scientific praxis</b>	Action based on scientific knowledge.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/p/r.htm#practice>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.actionaid.org/assets/pdf/ALPSENGGLISH2006FINAL\\_14FEB06.pdf](http://www.actionaid.org/assets/pdf/ALPSENGGLISH2006FINAL_14FEB06.pdf)

Resource Pack on  
Systematization of Experiences

# Evolution of systematization of experiences

A complete revision of the recent evolution of systematization approaches is a pending task, but we will present here what is currently available.

An important effort to survey the development of systematisation was undertaken by the Chilean sociologist, Diego Palma, in 1992. According to him, there are not different 'types' of systematization of experiences because they all have the same foundations and general purposes (to relate theory and practice). His conclusion, following a review of systematization proposals, is that they all have a common epistemological background: they deal with qualitative dimensions of reality and are based in a **dialectical epistemology**.

**But he also founds distinctions, mainly in:**

- a) What systematization intends to achieve (its purposes): Palma distinguishes three options, but states that some systematization approaches combine more than one of them:
- ▶ To exchange knowledge or learning amongst different groups;
  - ▶ To reflect on and understand practice; and
  - ▶ To obtain knowledge – or theory – from practice.
- b) What to systematize (its study object):
- ▶ The people's practice;
  - ▶ The professionals' practice; and
  - ▶ The intentional relationship between both (the methods).

These three kinds of practices, according to Palma, are different, so each one of them can legitimately be a systematization object. Systematization can also focus on a combination of all, but this is much more complicated and needs very skilful handling.

**Some years later, Francke & Morgan (1995) identify two main ways to understand systematization:**

- a) One that aims to classify and make typologies in order to compare experiences. The person or group that systematizes is an external agent that recovers and orders several cases, according to predefined criteria. They place many of the systematization efforts in different countries of Latin America during the 80s in this category.
- b) Another one that understands systematization as a way to produce knowledge about intervention experiences, so the task has to be assumed by those directly involved in it. The goal is not to compare or classify experiences, but to obtain and accumulate knowledge from practice. Some approaches state the possibility of building theory from practice.

In the chart that follows, Francke & Morgan summarize the four main approaches that sit within the second group (point b above). Each one of them was developed and advanced by different organizations, and this explains the specificity of each approach:

- ▶ CELATS is the Latin American Social Work Centre that is linked to an association (ALAETS) of several Social Work Faculties – or Departments – in different Universities of Latin America. CELATS is located in Lima, Peru, but its activities (mainly training, but also research and intervention projects) are directed to social workers of all Latin American countries.
- ▶ Systematization Permanent Workshop (TPS) is a group of Peruvian professionals (sociologists, social workers and educators) that come together to reflect about systematization of experiences. It was born in 1988, and is closely related to the Latin American Adult Education Council (CEAAL).
- ▶ School for Development is a Peruvian NGO that specializes in the training of NGO staff in topics related to development facilitation, including systematization of experiences.
- ▶ ALFORJA is a Costa Rican NGO that specializes in popular education. It works in Central America and Mexico.

## SYSTEMATIZATION OF EXPERIENCES APPROACHES

	CELATS – Latin American Social Work Center (1985)	TPS – Systematization Permanent Workshop (1988)	EpD – School for Development (1991)	ALFORJA – Oscar Jara (1994)
<b>Addressed to</b>	Social workers	Development facilitators and popular educators	Development workers/facilitators	Popular educators and development workers/facilitators
<b>Systematization concept</b>	A method that integrates theory and practice in order to produce knowledge from intervention experiences. It is conceived as a form of research in which the knowledge object is an intervention in which the researcher has participated.	A process that creates knowledge starting from interventions in reality. This process is constant and allows for the accumulation of knowledge over time.	The reconstruction of and analytical reflection about a development intervention that seeks to identify its achievements and failures. Contrasting and accumulating systematizations will lead to methodological guidance for similar interventions.	The critical interpretation of one or several interventions through the process of ordering and reconstructing them. Through systematization, the participants will discover or make explicit the logic of the process, the factors that have been part of it, and how and why they have interacted in this way.
<b>Purposes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ To improve social workers' practice.</li> <li>▶ To contribute to similar interventions.</li> <li>▶ To contribute to scientific knowledge built upon particular and daily life situations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ To improve interventions.</li> <li>▶ To enrich, contrast and/or modify existing theoretical knowledge, turning it into a useful instrument for social change.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ To reach a common vision about the development process among its participants.</li> <li>▶ To disseminate and contrast learning in order to build and deepen development facilitation theory and methodology.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ To reach a deeper understanding of intervention experiences in order to improve practice.</li> <li>▶ To share lessons to others engaged in similar interventions.</li> <li>▶ To contribute to theoretical reflection and theory production with the knowledge produced from concrete social practices.</li> </ul>

**Source:** Francke, Marfil and Morgan, María de la Luz: “La sistematización: apuesta por la generación de conocimientos a partir de las experiencias de promoción”, Escuela para el Desarrollo, Lima, Perú, 1995.

**Note:** The years shown at the top indicate the point at which the proposal was published.

Resource Pack on  
Systematization of Experiences

# Epistemological basis of systematization

## Specificity of knowledge produced in practice: practical knowledge

Knowledge produced during practice is different from that produced through other efforts, such as **research**.

During practice the main interest is to achieve the purposes or goals of an action or intervention. Actors involved in practice may and do sometimes search for knowledge in the available theories and choose the fragments that will help them to understand situations and intervene more appropriately. Their main interest in this search is not to find theoretical explanations for what is happening, but to achieve changes. So, the validity of knowledge is tested by the success or not of the action: ***theory is at the service of practice***.

Social change practitioners and facilitators constantly reflect about their practice, drawing upon theories they are familiar with, their previous experiences, as well as their capacity to notice changes in reality and in actors. North American philosopher Donald Schön (1983) refers to these abilities as an art which allows practitioners to tackle and solve unknown and changing situations. *Reflections about day-to-day action produce knowledge that will later be used in new practices*. This can be called ***practical knowledge***.

## From experience to practical knowledge

Experience (meaning what we learn during day-to-day practice, and may not be conscious of) is dispersed, and lacks precision and formalization. Its discussion, validation and communication is difficult. Systematization intends to turn these diffuse/scattered and unclear lessons into forms of knowledge which are precise, and can be verified and formalized in order to be communicated to others.

Rigor (or accuracy) has a particular meaning in systematization. The knowledge produced is validated by its success in guiding future practice, not because of its internal consistency or relation to theory. This generates a cycle of practice – reflection – practice. In order to adequately guide new actions, knowledge produced in the first practice must be accurate, the interpretation of changes that happened through the action should be correct, and the logic of that experience correctly discovered.

In methodological terms, rigor comes from: 1) making explicit the foundations (theoretical, political, ideological, values etc.) of the practice and 2) the capability of the people who are systematizing to critically review the practice, understand what happened during it, and explain how the new knowledge was produced.

Experiences are always complex processes that involve different actors, each with their own interests, logic and rationalities. 'Knowledges' involved are also different and expressed in different 'languages' that are sometimes incomprehensible to each other. Authors who work on **learning dialogue** and **hermeneutic** approaches are exploring ways to tackle these challenges of communication.

Another possibility is to give one of the actors (the professional team) the responsibility of recovering, interpreting and translating to their own 'language' the perceptions and points of view of the other participants in the practice. And then, once the systematization is complete, translating the knowledge produced into the 'languages' of other actors, so they can use it for their own benefit.

Practices to be systematized are not just rational interventions supported by theory, but also include political, ideological and affective dimensions. Consequently, both practice and systematization articulate deeply rational-objective and affective-subjective dimensions. If these various dimensions are not holistically addressed through systematization then the attempt to understand the intervention would be incomplete.

## A brief look at the epistemological basis of systematization

The idea of systematization explored above is supported in two epistemological bases that question the central foundations of classic knowledge theory:

- ▶ First, those who produce knowledge about and from practice are, at the same time, their actors. It is, thus, based in **the unity between the subject and object of knowledge**: the persons that systematize intend to produce knowledge about their own practice, about themselves and their actions (that modify their surroundings and themselves). They are part of their own study object.
- ▶ Second, systematization is based in **the unity between who knows and who acts**. The purpose is not only to know more about something or to understand it better, but mainly to *do – and be – better*. Knowledge is put at the service of action.

These epistemological bases also break distances and contradictions between rational-objective and affective-subjective dimensions. If the same person knows and acts, and if object and subject of study are the same, reflection processes and its products include both objective and subjective components.

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Resource Pack on  
Systematization of Experiences

# Bean producers harvest a systematization experience<sup>1</sup>

At the end of 1993, a group of peasants in southern Costa Rica achieved something significant that they had been working towards for a while: they sold their most important crop – beans – directly onto the national market. Not only did they get better prices, but they forced intermediary merchants to offer better prices to producers.

The peasants decided to review this experience of bypassing the intermediaries and selling directly onto the national market, so they could clearly identify their achievements and mistakes before expanding the approach to other crops.

An NGO, called CEP Alforja, supported the peasant group design a process to reconstruct the experience, critically analyse it, and identify the most important lessons. It was all done by its main actors, the peasants, in a one-day workshop.

The first step was the **historical reconstruction** of the process. This was not a general reconstruction of all the events that took place. A particular focus, a **systematization axis**, was identified: “*what was the role of the leaders of the producers’ association in getting the crop sold onto the national market?*” In simple terms, what the peasants wanted to know was: “*Which actions of the leaders were useful and helped to bring about the change and which were not useful?*”

The technique used for reconstruction was a graphic tool: a time line. On the left side of a big sheet of paper, over the time period 92-93, they placed the drawing of a very sad, thin and pale peasant with a few coins in his hand. On the other side, over the time period 93-94, they placed another drawing: this time a better fed and clothed peasant, with a big smile on his face and more money in his hand. Between the two figures they drew a road showing what they did to get from the one situation to the other.

During the reconstruction they drew on available **documentation**, such as documents of workshops, about the experience. The peasants were familiar with these documents and used to working with them.

The key elements of the experience were then **ordered and classified using the following organizing ‘themes’**: *training, strategies and actions followed, and difficulties*. With the help of reports and personal memories, the peasants reviewed each month. They wrote in colored cards what they considered important: green for training; yellow for strategies and actions; pink for difficulties.

<sup>1</sup> Taken from: Jara, Oscar: “Para sistematizar experiencias”, Alforja, Costa Rica, 1994.

Little by little, the road started to fill up with elements classified by month and category. At first there were more green cards (training) than yellow ones (strategies and actions), but in the following months the color balance changed and, at the end of the process, there were only yellow cards.

The producers were surprised and satisfied by the process of reconstructing and ordering the experience. A new need arose: to communicate to other peasants the final systematization product and the **lessons they had learned during the systematization process**.

The next stage of the systematization was **the critical interpretation** of the experience. The simple method used here was to classify the cards again but this time in an **analytical chart** with three titles:

Mistakes	Recommendations for other experiences	New ideas

It was important to link the mistakes to suggestions for how to correct them – this helped them move away from defensiveness, which does not support learning. Focusing on recommendations allowed the group to explore what they had discovered and propose new action possibilities.

The chart was completed on a big sheet of paper, so everybody could see the ideas that were being included. On a separate paper, named **learning**, they wrote other ideas that did not exactly fit on the chart.

The last stage of the exercise was **to synthesize the lessons** (individual and collective) produced during the experience. The lessons were mixed up with very rich anecdotes, and it was appropriate that they be tape recorded to capture this depth and richness.

The critical reconstruction of their own experience allowed the producers to **interpret** their achievements and difficulties, with a view to bringing about improvement and change in future actions not just for themselves, but also for other producers.

Resource Pack on  
Systematization of Experiences

# A women's organization wants to train new leaders<sup>1</sup>

What experience	What for (purpose)	Axis
The organization's history, starting from March 8, 1985 (when it was born) until December 20, 1990 (first National Congress).	To recover the accumulated experience of historical leaders so as to guide the training of a new generation of young leaders.	Situations that affected the emergence of leaders during the first years of the organization, and how the relationship between leaders and the base of members developed.

## Who systematizes:

Members of a popular women's organization in a phase of organizational renewal.

## SYSTEMATIZATION PLAN:

### Organization:

- ▶ The systematization process will be coordinated by a team of five persons: two national leaders and three regional leaders. Eight historical leaders and ten women from the membership base that have been in the organization during its first five years will also participate in the systematization process.
- ▶ The systematization will take eight months: one for preparation, three for reconstructing and ordering the process, two for critical interpretation, and the last two for the elaboration of conclusions and a training plan.
- ▶ Methods to be used are: individual interviews, and collective discussion and reflection sessions.
- ▶ Three representatives of NGOs that acted as consultants to the organization will participate as supporters, posing their points of view in the collective sessions. One will advise and support on methodology, and the other two will help process the contents. A research institute will also be requested to help analyze the context.
- ▶ The organization's meeting minutes, the bulletin published during the five years, newspaper cut-outs, and information from the institutions that acted as consultants to the organization will inform the systematization process.

<sup>1</sup> Taken from: Jara, Oscar: "Para sistematizar experiencias", Alforja, Costa Rica, 1994.

## Historic reconstruction:

The process will be recovered by identifying the main stages and meaningful moments in the organization's emergence. Individual interviews with leaders will allow them to explore why and how they joined the organization. In terms of context analysis, only information about what happened in the country at the most significant moments in the organization's history will be considered.

## Questions for critical interpretation:

- ▶ What were the most common motivations among the leaders in the beginning? Did they change? Why?
- ▶ How did the organization's purpose change across the different stages?
- ▶ What were the main contradictions or challenges leaders faced across the phases of the organization's development: at a personal level, between them and their families, between them and the members, among them as leaders, between the organization and the institutions that supported them? How did they deal with those contradictions? Which of these contradictions still remain?
- ▶ How did the conceptions of the leaders about leadership and about their role evolve and why?
- ▶ Which aspects in their training or formation as leaders seem essential?

## Conclusions:

- ▶ Practical conclusions, expressed in a new leaders' training plan, which takes into consideration the major lessons from the initial experience.
- ▶ Theoretical conclusions about: relationship between leaders and members, the most important elements for the training of leaders etc.

## Communication products:

- ▶ A 20-minute video about the origin of the organization, including a selection of testimonies and interviews.
- ▶ A series of educative brochures based on the most relevant aspects of the systematization, to be used in the new training plan.
- ▶ A "photo romance" script about "the emergence of a leader", recreating meaningful situations that appear in the systematization.
- ▶ A synthesis document to be presented to the next organization's assembly, which will be disseminated and used as discussion material throughout the organization and with the supporting institutions.

Resource Pack on  
Systematization of Experiences

# A network of institutions wants to deepen their theoretical thinking<sup>1</sup>

What experience	What for (purpose)	Axis
Training for citizen participation carried out before and after general elections in: Costa Rica (June 1993 to June 1994), Peru (August 1989 to October 1990), Venezuela (September 1992 to December 1993) and Mexico (February 1994 to March 1995).	To enrich the network's conceptual position about democracy and citizen rights.	The impact of the training on the participation of citizens in matters of daily governance and during elections.

## Who systematizes:

A network of fifteen institutions that carries out training programs on citizen participation in four different countries (Costa Rica, Peru, Venezuela and Mexico).

## SYSTEMATIZATION PLAN:

### Organization:

- ▶ The process will be coordinated by a commission that includes one person from each country and one person from the network's executive committee. All training teams of the fifteen institutions will participate, as well as a research team specialized in each country's situation. Other people's involvement is also expected: participants in the training programs, social and political leaders, various managers of the institutions and of the network.
- ▶ The process will take place during one year. It will start with a one-week planning workshop. During the first six months, every country will reconstruct and order its own experiences, linked to an analysis of the internal political situation. An intermediate international workshop will take place at the six-month mark, at which point the countries will share what they have done and on that basis the group will agree on the questions that will guide analysis/interpretation. During the second six-month period, national advances will be shared through mail exchanges. The country teams will write their final documents and present them in a second international workshop in which general conclusions will be drawn.
- ▶ The representatives of the four countries will be responsible for organizing, defining and coordinating the processes in their own country. The representative of the network's executive committee will be responsible for coordinating the exchanges during the year, and planning the international workshops.

<sup>1</sup> Taken from: Jara, Oscar: "Para sistematizar experiencias", Alforja, Costa Rica, 1994.

- ▶ Document references will be: national and network plans; projects presented to financing agencies; event reports; internal evaluations; educational materials produced; press cut-outs; political analysis documents etc., newspaper cut-outs, and information from the institutions that acted as consultants to the organization will inform the systematization process.

### **Historic reconstruction:**

The four national contexts will be reconstructed in detail, as will the training activities undertaken in each. These reconstructions will assist in building understanding of the role and contribution of the citizen training experiences in each country.

### **Questions for critical interpretation:**

- ▶ Which purposes, actions, training themes and content, and results are common to the four experiences? Which are different? Why?
- ▶ How did the specific nature of each country's electoral system impact citizen participation? And how did this dimension influence the design of the training programs?
- ▶ What were the main tensions confronted by the training programs in each country? Which tensions were similar? Which tensions changed during the process? How were these tensions dealt with?
- ▶ What kind of demands to each country's democratic system appeared that might be related to the training program? Which citizen rights emerged as the most relevant during the campaigns around the elections? What contributions to the concept of citizen participation can be identified as having been made by the training program? What challenges were posed to concepts such as "representative democracy", "participative democracy", "citizenship", "local power" etc.?

### **Conclusions:**

- ▶ Statements about democracy construction, citizen rights and participation in Latin America.
- ▶ Reformulation of the citizen training programs adapting them to the contemporary circumstances and challenges in each country.
- ▶ Learning and exchange mechanisms so that country training programs continue to be strengthened on the basis of shared reflections and learning.

### **Communication products:**

- ▶ Discussion papers to be published in magazines and journals in different countries.
- ▶ Papers for an international seminar in which the national experiences and the Latin American projections for the project will be discussed.
- ▶ A reflection document about the systematization contents that will be discussed by all members of the network and disseminated to other networks.
- ▶ Scripts for radio programs that disseminate the citizen training experiences and promote public debate about democracy and citizen participation.

Resource Pack on  
Systematization of Experiences

# Audience analysis tool<sup>1</sup>

## Know your audience

When you think about your systematization product, it is very important that you think very carefully about whom you want to target, i.e. who is your audience and what is the message you want to reach them? If you don't give some careful thinking to the people who will read what you have written (or view your video, or read your comic etc.) then you may miss the mark in communicating what it is you want them to know or understand from your experience.

## Why is it important to know and analyse your audience?

Different products and different types of writing are appropriate for different audiences. If you want to reach masses of people and mobilise them for action you might write a simple pamphlet. If you are trying to reach policy-makers then you might write a short position or policy paper, with a more academic and formal orientation. A video, with strong visuals and dialogue, or a comic, might be the most appropriate vehicle to reach people that are illiterate or semi-literate.

You are planning a systematization product, targeting a particular audience, because you want them to know, do, or think something differently afterwards. If you are to reach your objectives then you need to identify your audience, analyse them carefully, and then decide the best type of product to achieve the desired impact. The audience analysis will also help you to work out how to orient your product – what sort of content to put in or leave out, what sort of style and language to use, etc.

## How to do an audience analysis

1. **Step 1:** Make a list of the different categories of people you would like to reach with your product
2. **Step 2:** Go through the categories of people you have identified, and prioritise your main (or primary) audience. You need to be really strict with yourself here. Then you can identify a secondary (less important) and tertiary (least important) audience, but only if this is needed. If you only have one – a primary – audience then your job is that much easier.
3. **Step 3:** Create a picture in your mind of your primary, secondary, tertiary audiences – who are they, what do they think/know/believe, what might appeal to them, what ideas might they resist, what do you need them to think/know/believe after reading/viewing your product, etc?
4. **Step 4:** Complete the audience analysis matrix below. Work your way carefully through the questions. It will help you really understand your audience better. Armed with this knowledge you will be able to identify an appropriate systematization product and develop content that is appropriate to reach and influence your audience.

<sup>1</sup> This section draws on two resources: Dunlap, L: "Undoing the Silence: Six Tools for Social Change Writing", New Village Press, 2007; and Hurt, K: "Writing Effectively and Powerfully", Civicus

## Audience Analysis Matrix

Audience	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
What does my audience know about my topic? What do they not know?			
What do I know about my topic that they do not know? What research do I need to do if any?			
What are my audience's attitudes, values and beliefs about my topic?			
What does my audience expect and need from my product? What do I want them to do/ think/believe?			

Resource Pack on  
Systematization of Experiences

# Women's empowerment: Gender quotas in a trade union<sup>1</sup>

What experience	What for (purpose)	Main question
Adoption of women's participation quotas in the election of leadership of the trade union association - CUT, Paraiba, Brazil, 1998-1999.	To discover the elements that were part of the experience of adopting quotas, focusing on how this impacted women's relationship to power in the trade union organizations.	What situations helped or hindered the ability of women to exercise power in their trade unions?

## Who systematizes:

Members of the Central Unica dos Trabalhadores – CUT (Unified Labor Union Association).

## SYSTEMATIZATION PLAN:

### Organization:

- ▶ This systematization was financed by the Fund for Gender Equity of the Canadian Embassy in Brazil, involving five of the partners (2 NGOs, 2 trade unions and 1 academic institution) through which the Fund implements projects.
- ▶ The process started with a workshop, organised by Systematisation Permanent Workshop (TPS), orienting members of the team to systematisation. The group was then divided in two, and each was assigned a systematisation advisor. TPS is located in Peru, and all of the advice was done by distance, using mainly web-based technologies, such as e-mail and online spaces. The different teams came from different places in Brazil, so they did not have the opportunity to meet frequently, but also communicated by e-mail and through the internet.
- ▶ The systematization we present here was conducted by two members of CUT, and involved other members – men and women – belonging to different unions that comprise the association. These included members of 20 small rural producers unions; and 28 urban trade unions (bank workers, teachers, health workers, etc.). Social movements, NGOs and a women's organization also participated.
- ▶ The systematization took approximately eight months and included the following steps: definition of the main systematization question; reconstruction of the experience, focusing on the ways in which women relate to and with power; analysis and interpretation of the experience; identifying concepts that guided the intervention and answering the main question; and writing the final report.

<sup>1</sup> Taken from: "As mulheres e o exercício do poder (CUT/PB)". In: "Sistematizando caminhos. Transposição de obstáculos no mundo do trabalho". FIG Brasil-Canada, Brasil, 2003.

## Historic reconstruction

The process was reconstructed mainly using CUT's documentation and members' memories. They ordered these inputs in a reconstruction chart, as shown in the resource pack.

### Questions for critical interpretation:

- ▶ Why is it necessary to establish quotas to guarantee women's participation and representation?
- ▶ Having implemented gender quotas, what factors supported women's participation in spaces of power they would traditionally have been excluded from?
- ▶ What are the most important actions that must be implemented to reduce gender inequities as part of an affirmative action strategy?
- ▶ What impact does women's participation in trade unions have on their daily lives, both in the work place and at home (for example, how do they deal with meetings, their house chores, taking care of children, etc.)?
- ▶ Has the introduction of women's quotas, and increased proportions of women in leadership, produced any change in the way the trade union functions?
- ▶ What difficulties do women confront when they assume leadership positions in trade unions?

### Lessons (knowledge) produced through the systematization:

- ▶ Trade union organizations have been built – socially and culturally – as male spaces and have been occupied mainly by men. Increasing women's participation in the unions requires recognition of their exclusion, and the adoption of affirmative action strategies to correct gender inequities. .
- ▶ While the number of women trade union members is increasing there has not been a corresponding increase in women's leadership. Male union leaders do not recognise that this disjuncture relates to the ways in which they exercise political power within the unions.
- ▶ By building in women's leadership quotas, women have obtained greater political representation in the unions. The result is that they are increasingly coming to be recognised as a part of the working class that has been excluded from positions of power. They are increasingly being seen as important social and political actors.
- ▶ The promotion of debates about equal opportunities and gender relations raised new views in the political structures of the unions. This has forced men and women leaders to consider the power relations between men and women, and how certain behaviours and ways of doing things exclude women. This has helped women leaders to exercise power legitimately.
- ▶ Women's experiences in the exercise of power will open possibilities to accumulate reflections and lessons about these new social practices. Challenging attitudes and behaviours that reproduce unequal gender relations between men and women will lead to a more supportive environment in which women can exercise power differently.
- ▶ The experience has contributed to the construction of a new culture in the trade unions, based on a more equal division of power between men and women. It reinforced the idea that formal equity is not enough for real equity, and that it is necessary to promote specific measures to ensure the greater integration of women in trade union structures.

Curso de Formación a Largo Plazo en Educación para el Desarrollo  
Long Term Training Course on Development Education



Resource Pack on  
Systematization of Experiences

# Theoretical and practical orientations for systematization of experiences

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# 1. What is systematizing experiences?

The word *systematization*, used in several disciplines, mainly refers to **classifying, order or catalogue data and information**, “placing them into a system”. This is the most common and disseminate notion of this term.

Nevertheless, in the field of popular education and social processes’ work we will use this term in a more ample sense, referred not only to data and information collected and ordered, but also to **obtaining critical learning from our experiences**. This is why we do not say only “systematization” but “systematization of experiences”.

- ▶ Experiences are **dynamic historical and social processes**: they are in constant change and movement.
- ▶ Experiences are **complex processes**: on them interfere a series of objective and subjective factors interrelated:
  - a) **Conditions** of context or historical moments on which they develop.
  - b) Particular **situations** that make them possible.
  - c) Intentional **actions** that we do with determined goals (or intentional actions only as answers to particular situations)
  - d) **Reactions** generated from certain actions.
  - e) Expected or unexpected **results** emerging.
  - f) **Perceptions, interpretations, intuitions and emotions** of men and women intervening on it.
  - f) **Relations** established among people subject to these experiences.
- ▶ Experiences are **vital and unique processes**: they express an enormous richness of elements accumulated, and so they are unique and unrepeatable.

All the things said above can justify why it is so exciting, as well as demanding the task of **seeking to understand them, extract their teachings and communicate them**. We try to critically appropriate ourselves of the lived experiences, giving an account of them, and sharing with others what was learnt.

Therefore we can affirm:

**Systematization is the critical interpretation of one or several experiences which, from their ordering and reconstruction, discover or explain the logic of the process lived through them: the factors intervening, how they relate among them, and why they did it that way.**

This effort can assume several forms, variants or modalities, but in any systematization of our experiences we should:

- a) Order and rebuild the process lived.
- b) Make a critical interpretation of that process.
- c) Take out learning and share it.

## 2. Characteristics of systematization of experiences

- ▶ To produce knowledge from the experience, but aiming at surpassing it.
- ▶ Recovers what succeeded, rebuilding it historically, to interpret it and obtain learning.
- ▶ Values the knowledge of the persons subjected to these experiences.
- ▶ Identifies the main changes happening during the process and the reasons for that.
- ▶ Production of knowledge and meaningful learning from the singularity of experiences, taking possession of their meaning.
- ▶ Builds a critical look over the lived, allowing the orientation of experiences in the future with a transforming perspective.
- ▶ It is complemented with evaluation, which is usually focused on measuring and valuing the results, bringing a critical interpretation of the process that made possible the results.
- ▶ It is complemented with research, which is opened to knowledge of diverse realities and aspects, bringing together knowledge to particular experiences.
- ▶ It is not reduced to describing happenings or processes, writing a memory, classifying types of experiences, ordering the facts. All of this is only a basis to make a critical interpretation.
- ▶ The main actors of the systematization should be the actors of the experiences, even though to make it they can require support or consultancy of other persons.

## 3. For what purpose do we systematize experiences?

We can systematize our experiences with different objectives and utility.

### **Example:**

3.1 To understand more deeply our experiences and be able to change them.

*(Allow us to discover good hits, errors, ways to overcome obstacles and difficulties or repeated mistakes, in such a way that we take them into account for the future)*

3.2 To interchange and share our apprenticeships with other similar experiences.

*(Allow us to go further on anecdotic interchange, making it much more qualitative)*

3.3 To contribute on the theoretical reflection with knowledge emerged directly from experiences.

*(Allow us to bring a first level of theorization that will help to link the practice with the theory)*

3.4 To focus on policies and plans from solid learning coming from real experiences.

*(Allow us to formulate bigger range proposals based on what happens in the field)*

## 4. Conditions to enable the systematization of experiences

For this process are required personal conditions on those doing the systematization, as well as institutional conditions on the organization promoting it.

### **Personal Conditions:**

- ▶ Interest on learning from the experience, valuing it as a learning source.
- ▶ Sensibility to let it talk for itself, seeking not to influence on the observation and analysis with prejudices or justifications.
- ▶ Ability to make analysis and synthesis that guarantee rigor in the management of information and abstraction capacity.

## Institutional Conditions:

- ▶ Search for coherence in team work, placing it as an opportunity for a critical reflection, for inter learning and the construction of a shared thought.
- ▶ Definition of an integral system of institutional functioning, articulation, planning, evaluation, research, the follow up and the systematization as components of a same strategy.
- ▶ Impel in the organization accumulative processes, which give an account of the way walked, and seek on advancing into new stages.
- ▶ Give it a real priority assigning time and resources that will guarantee the adequate realization.

## 5. How to systematize: a methodological proposal in five steps

### A. Starting Point:

- a1. Having participated in the experience
- a2. Having registers of the experiences

### B. Initial questions:

- b1. Why do we want to do this systematization? (Define the goal)
- b2. Which experiences do we want to systematize? (Delimitation of the object being systematized)
- b3. Which central aspects of the experience are more relevant to us? (Fix a systematization axis)
- b.4 Which information sources are we going to use?
- b.5 Which procedures are we going to follow?

### C. Revisiting of the lived process:

- c1. Rebuild the history
- c2. Order and classify information

### D. Core reflection: Why happened what happened?

- d1. Analyze and synthesize
- d2. Make a critical interpretation of the process

### E. Outcomes:

- e1. Formulate conclusions
- e2. Communicate apprenticeships

## A. Starting point: live the experience

- ▶ It is about starting out from our own practice experience: what we do, think and feel.
- ▶ It is essential having participated in some way in the experience going to be systematized.
- ▶ The men and women which were the actors of the experience should be the main **protagonists** of the systematization. (Nevertheless, in many cases it will be necessary to count with external support: to coordinate the methodology, to organize experiences, to deepen on reflection subjects, to produce communication products... but in none of these cases should the support substitute the persons that lived the experience during the systematization process).
- ▶ It is essential to make and keep registers of what happens during the experience: notebooks, files, information, records of reunions, documents produced. Also photos, tape recordings, videos, drawings, newspaper cut outs...

## B. Initial Questions

### B1. For what purpose do we want this systematization?

- ▶ This is about **defining the goals** of this systematization: have very clearly in mind the use that will have this systematization in particular.
- ▶ It can be taken as reference the different kinds of goal mentioned in point 3: "Why is it important to systematize experiences?"
- ▶ To define the goal is important to have in mind the mission and institutional strategy, as well as the interests and personal possibilities.

### B2. Which experiences do we want to systematize?

- ▶ This is about **delimiting the object** we want to systematize: choose the specific experience or experiences systematizing, indicating the place where they took place, as well as the time needed to do this systematization.
- ▶ It is not about covering the whole experience since its origins until the present moment, but the most relevant part for this situation.
- ▶ The criteria for the delimitation will depend on the goal defined, the consistence of the experience, the persons participating in the process, the context on which it happened, and its present relevance.

### B3. Which aspects of the experience are more relevant to us?

- ▶ It is about **fixing a systematization axis**: a guiding line crossing the experience, referring the main aspects we are presently interested in systematizing (normally is not possible to systematize all the aspects present in an experience).
- ▶ Allow us to focus on some elements and avoid dispersion during the analysis and critical reflection.

## **B4. Which sources of information are we going to use?**

- ▶ It is about identifying and positioning of the information we need to recover the experience's process and order its main elements.
- ▶ Identifying which information would be necessary to obtain through interviews, documental search, archive revision, etc.
- ▶ In this moment is important to focus on those registers referred to the object defined and those referred to the systematization axis, not to lose time compiling useless information.

## **B5. Which procedures are we going to follow?**

- ▶ It is about making an operational systematization plan: defining the tasks to do, who will be responsible to accomplish them, who will be the participants, when and how. Which instruments and techniques will be used. And also with which resources can we account on, and what will be the activities' chronogram.

## **C. Revisiting the experienced process**

### **C1. Rebuild the history**

- ▶ It is about making an ordered reconstruction of the things happened during the experience, like it happened, normally on a chronological way according to the period delimited.
- ▶ It allows having a global vision of the main happenings occurred during that period.
- ▶ In this moment can be identified the meaningful moments, the main options, the changes marking the rhythm of the process, and placing the stages followed during the experience's process.
- ▶ Can be used graphic techniques (for example: time line) or narrative ones (tales, stories...).

### **C2. Order and classify the information**

- ▶ It is about organizing all the information available about the distinct components of the experience, having as guide the systematization axis (the most relevant aspects).
- ▶ It is important to determine clearly the variables and categories to order and classify.
- ▶ In this moment it is about being as more descriptive as possible, searching not to emit conclusions or interpretations in advance, but starting to underline the subjects to go deeper on, or critical questions worked on the interpretative phase.
- ▶ Can be used matrices or frames which can help placing the distinct components separately, which will favor the analysis of particular points later on.

**Note:** many times the historical reconstruction and the ordering of the information can be done at the same time.

## **D. Core reflections: Why happened what happened?**

### **D1. Proceeding with analysis and synthesis**

- ▶ It is about initiating the interpretative stage about everything reported and previously rebuild from the experience.
- ▶ Analyze the behavior of each component separately and immediately establishing relations among them. At this point several critical and questioning points emerge.
- ▶ Look at the particularities and the whole; the personal and the collective.

### **D2. Critical interpretation**

- ▶ It is about restarting the questioning, asking ourselves the causes of the things happened.
- ▶ Allows identifying the tensions and contradictions, the interrelations between the objective and subjective distinct elements.
- ▶ Seeks for understanding the key or essential factors; understand, explain or discover the experiences' logic: why happened what happened and didn't happen otherwise?
- ▶ This is the moment to confront those discovers with other experiences and establish relations.
- ▶ This is the moment to confront these reflections emerged from the experience with the established or theoretical formulations.

## **E. Outcomes**

### **E1. Formulating conclusions and recommendations**

- ▶ It is about arriving to the main affirmations arising as a result of the systematization process.
- ▶ Can be either theoretical or practical formulations.
- ▶ They are starting points for new apprenticeships; therefore they can be opened interrogations, once they are not "definitive" conclusions.
- ▶ Should answer to the goals we established for this systematization.
- ▶ Look at what this experience is teaching for its own future and the future of other experiences.

### **E2. Elaborating communication products**

- ▶ It is about making the apprenticeships communicable.
- ▶ It allows sharing the lessons learnt, at the same time as dialoging and confronting with other experiences and apprenticeships.

- ▶ We shouldn't limit to a single product (the "final document"); we should draw a communication strategy that will allow sharing the results with all the persons involved and with other interested sectors, thinking it according to whom it is directed to and that it becomes a part of a more ample educative process.
- ▶ With all the material compiled and interpreted, resort to diverse and creative forms: video, theater plays, debate forums, brochure collection, photo-series, radio shows, etc.

## 6. Some useful formats

### FORMAT FOR DAILY REGISTRATION

This format was created to be filled individually on a daily basis, giving an account of the work made.

Name:

Date:

Project /area / program / section:

What I did today	Time used	What for did I do it	Who participated	Results	Observations and impressions

### WEEKLY REGISTER FORMAT

This format was created to be filled by the whole team every week, from each person's individual registers. This task could be done in a short reunion on which the results could be socialized and shared the different perceptions.

Name of the project / area / program / section:

Week: from            to            month            years

Activities developed	Date	Goals	Responsible	Participants	Results

## FORMAT FOR ACTIVITIES REGISTRATION

This format was created to be filled once an activity is completed. It can be done individually or as a part of a group work.

**Name(s):**

**Project/Area/ Program/Section:**

**Date:**

### **1. What was done (title, type of activity):**

1.1 Where it took place:

1.2 Who and how many persons participated:

1.3 Duration:

1.4 Description of the activity (one page maximum):

### **2. If the activity was programmed in advance:**

2.1 Goals planed for it:

2.2 Results reached

a) With relation to the results foreseen:

b) Results not previously predicted:

### **3. If the activity was not previously programmed:**

3.1 How and why was made the decision of doing /participating in this activity?

3.2 Results reached:

### **4. Impressions and observations about the activity**

**5. Reference documents about this activity (methodological drawings, tape recordings, transcriptions, convocations, material used, etc.)**

## TECHNIQUE: APPRENTICESHIPS RECOVERY FILE

Goals:

1. Recover important lessons from meaningful moments to build and adjust a learning information banc, which can be used in the systematization and shared with other persons interested in the experiences we realized.

2. Exercise in the ordered redaction of reports about things done, important situations and daily apprenticeships.

### File Format

Title of the file (should give an idea of what is central on the experience):

Name of the person making it:

Organism /institution :

Date and place of the file's elaboration:

**a) Context of the situation** (1 or 2 sentences about the context on which the meaningful moment happened: where, when, who participated, with what aim; that is a reference placing in a more ample context what is going to be reported).

**b) Report of what has happened** (1 to 2 pages maximum *describing* what happened, told in such a way possible to understand the development of the situation, its process, the roles played by different actors).

**c) Apprenticeships** (1/2 page on the learning a moment left to us, and how it could serve for the future).

**d) Recommendations** (1/2 page expressing our recommendations towards the ones who would like to make a similar experience in the future).

**Key Words:** (descriptor(s) which allow us to identify the main subjects referred by the experience)  
– Will immediately allow having a grouping, classify it by common subjects.



# GUIDE TO ELABORATE A PROPOSAL OF SYSTEMATIZATION <sup>2</sup>

This guide aims at being a help for those who want to build a plan, project or proposal of systematization. It is mainly thought so that it can be presented to the institution or organization to which it is concerned, as a base to discuss it. It also can be useful to justify a financial request.

## 1. General aspects

**Title of the proposal:**

**Made by:**

**Date:**

## 2. About the experience we want to systematize

- ▶ Which experience we want to systematize (object definition):
- ▶ Why is important to systematize it:
- ▶ Short summary of the experience (two paragraphs indicating where and when it was done, who participated, its goals, and some other general information).

## 3. About the systematization plan

- ▶ For what purpose do we want this systematization (goals):
- ▶ Which central aspects of the experience are more relevant to us (axis)
- ▶ Which elements should be taken into consideration for the history recovery (a paragraph with some key ideas):
- ▶ Which elements should be taken into account to order and classify information (a paragraph with some key ideas):
- ▶ Which are the important subjects to approach in the critique interpretation (a paragraph with some key ideas):
- ▶ Which information sources are we going to use and which we would need to produce (registers):
- ▶ How is this systematization going to happen (indicate the stages, techniques and procedures going to be used and who will participate)
- ▶ Products that should come out from this systematization:

## 4. Time limits and chronogram

Date	Activity	Participants	Observations

<sup>2</sup> Based on an original proposal by Mariluz Morgan



## **Advocacy for change:**

Lessons from Guatemala,  
Brazil, and USA

## Chapter 1

# SYSTEMATIZATION: BASIC CONCEPTS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

by Esteban Tapella



# Advocacy for change:

## Lessons from Guatemala, Brazil, and USA

### Abstract

This pack presents the results of the Systematization of Advocacy and Campaign Experience in ActionAid Americas (2007 – 2008) carried out by IASL and ActionAid Americas. The aim of the systematization project was to provide an opportunity for countries in the Americas to critically examine, together with other actors, their advocacy experiences. Through a methodology called systematization which has its origins in Latin America different actors involved in advocacy or campaigns critically recalled what the experience was about, analyzed the rationale for the choices made, how and why different factors intervened to shape or change the intervention over time, and what processes of change emerged from the experience.

Learning from our advocacy work and disseminating the various advocacy and campaign experiences that took place in the last two years in the work of ActionAid Americas were two of the central objectives of the Systematization of Advocacy and Campaign Experience in ActionAid Americas. Learning, as stated in the ActionAid Shared Learning: A Working Guide (2007), is a social process because it happens through relationships between people and the ongoing dialogues that they have with others. ActionAid Americas through its close interaction, discussion and exchange with partners, communities, poor and excluded people and other stakeholders in the work for rights has learned in various areas but particularly in a specific area, which is advocacy, as advocacy is core work in the region. The way we work with other actors through organised and coordinated actions for change in policy, public attitudes and socio-political practices has generated lessons and learning that need to be shared and disseminated.

The pack 'Advocacy for Change' includes a CD and two DVDs. The CD includes an introduction and three chapters. Rosario Leon provides an introduction to the systematization project and highlights some of the key moments of the experience. In Chapter 1 Esteban Tapella (Consultant on Systematization) presents the theoretical framework adopted for this systematization, the basic concepts and methodological considerations. Chapter 2 is about the experience of Advocacy on Comprehensive Youth Development Law in Guatemala, systematized by ActionAid Guatemala in coordination with the local partners SODEJU-FUNDAJU. This experience is also synthesized in a video in one of the DVDs of the pack. Chapter 3 includes the experience of work of ActionAid USA with a coalition of NGOs around the Farm Bill in the United States of America. Finally, the experience on the National Education Campaign, systematised by ActionAid Brazil in coordination with Ação Educativa, a local partner, is presented as a video in the other DVD of the pack.



## Presentation

“Sistematizacion! What’s that?” This was my response, a few years back, on hearing this strange sounding term for a Latin American methodology for critical reflection and learning. At the time, we were finalising AAI’s approach to shared learning, and were identifying existing and new learning methods and processes we could implement to support our concept of learning.

ActionAid’s concept of learning is based on four core elements: learning is a social and collective process; learning should be focused on practice; learning involves questioning what we know and building new critical knowledge for change; and learning flourishes best in supportive learning environments.

Systematisation as a methodology has all these core elements. Translated into English, systematisation, which has its origins in Latin America in the 60s, loosely means ‘the act of organizing something according to a system or a rationale’.

Through systematisation practitioners and activists critically reflect on and make sense of an experience, turning the lessons we derive from that reflection into new knowledge, that is explicit, which can inform the new round of practice, and be communicated to others who may also benefit (Morgan, 2009). Importantly it is a new form of knowledge production that turns the traditional relationship between practice and theory on its head: instead of applying theory to practice, we build theoretical or conceptual understanding about an issue from the systematisation of experience or practice (Jara, 2006).

As IASL, we believe that systematisation is a powerful methodology that can support AAI and its allies critically reflect on our practice for change and construct new forms of knowing. This knowledge will assist us to deepen and transform our work, and support new ways of working and struggling towards a change in this world of ours.

Our Latino colleagues, and especially Rosario Leon (at the time the IASL Advisor for LAC), have in the past two years greatly supported AAI’s orientation to and uptake of the systematisation methodology. We now have a small collection of existing written materials in English; we have some core documents translated into English; we have trained over 35 colleagues in the Africa Region in the basics of systematisation; and we have a simple English guide to systematisation (available at the end of June 2009).

Most importantly, we have piloted the methodology through the systematisation of three advocacy and campaigns experiences in the LAC region, which are now presented here and which we hope you, the reader, will benefit from reading.

**Samantha Hargreaves**  
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Impact Assessment and Shared Learning

Resource Pack On  
Systematization Of Experiences

Advocacy for Change:  
Lessons from  
Guatemala, Brazil, and USA



## Chapter 1

# SYSTEMATIZATION: BASIC CONCEPTS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

by Esteban Tapella<sup>1</sup>.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the development field there are a wide range of experiences that are insufficiently known and/or not properly valued and documented. Although technical staff and teams from NGOs, public or private institutions and cooperation agencies usually reflect and discuss implementation, positive results and mistakes of their intervention, and also discuss how their actions and advocacy work could be improved in the future, this reflection and knowledge are rarely documented and systematically communicated.

The decision to systematize an experience, whether a project, programme, an advocacy action, etc, lies in the idea that *experiences* must be used to generate understanding and that lessons learned can improve ongoing implementation and contribute to wider knowledge. As Gujit *et al* (2006) put it, learning from action does not happen by accident; it needs to be planned for in project design, in staff job requirements, in the cycle of meetings and reflections, in the general project culture, and so forth. Most development projects are not designed to be action-learning processes. The challenge, therefore, is how to promote, design and conduct learning processes for experiences that were not designed with that purpose in mind.

The process of systematization<sup>2</sup> encourages participation by implementing collective reflection on how a shared experience developed. It strengthens the abilities, skills and capacities of the main actors and other stakeholders to look at the evolution of the experience and identify lessons and insights for future interventions.

<sup>1</sup> For additional material on systematization, contact Esteban Tapella (etapella@gmail.com). He is a social worker specialized in development studies, from the Social Science Department at the National University of San Juan, Argentina.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'systematization' is often used in Latin America as *sistematización*. It refers to a process which seeks to organize information resulting from a given field project, in order to analyze it in detail and draw lessons from it. The main objective of this process is to generate new knowledge. In English, the most frequently used words referring to this process are the terms 'documentation' and 'documentation process'. However, in this document we used the term 'systematization', since 'documentation' could be interpreted as simply the action of recording information.

This chapter aims at conceptualising systematization and presents a description of its methodology. This was the basic framework that oriented the processes of systematization that ActionAid Guatemala, Brazil and the USA undertook in 2008 and that are part of the whole package. The chapter is made up of an introduction followed by section 2 that presents a conceptual framework for systematization and discusses the link between systematization and ActionAid *Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS)*. This section also provides some guiding principles to systematize experiences and it highlights out the usefulness of systematization. Section 3 presents the six basic steps to consider in when systematizing an experience. Concluding remarks are presented in the final section.

## 2. BASIC CONCEPTS

### 2.1. What do we mean by systematization?

In general terms, systematization is the participatory and thoughtful process of reflecting about different aspects of a specific project or general intervention: its actors, actors' interaction, outcomes, results, impact, problems, process<sup>3</sup>. Systematization is a methodology that facilitates the on-going description, analysis and documentation of the processes and results of a development project in a participatory way (Selener, 1996). According to the Fondo Mink'a de Chorlavi (2002), systematization is the process of reconstitution and critical analysis of a development experience, carried out with the direct, active participation of the agents who developed the initiative to draw the lessons that may make it possible to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of that and other development processes.

According to Oscar Jara (1998), systematization involves a critical reconstruction and interpretation of an experience. It is aimed at explaining the logic of the project, the external and internal factors that influenced the experience, and why



© Esteban Tapella. Training on systematization. In Guatemala, 2008.

3 In this paper the terms 'experience', 'project' or 'intervention' refer to what is being systematized and documented.

it had the results it did. For Morgan and Quiróz (1988) systematization attempts to identify lessons from the experience by describing, organising and analysing the development of an activity in respect of different aspects (such as the theory and methodology of the project, the institutional, social and historical context, the relationship between local and external social actors) and describing the organization process; including obstacles and facilitators as well as results and impact of the intervention.

In general terms, systematization intends to answer the following questions:

- What was the nature of the experience? What was the experience about? Who were the actors? How do they relate to each other?
- What was done, how, why, for what purpose and for whom?
- How did cultural, economic, geographic, institutional and political factors influence the experience?
- Which expected and unexpected processes and results occurred during the experience?
- What were the results and impacts of the experience or project and why did they happen?
- What were the problems the project had to face and how they were addressed?
- Which were the factors that facilitated or hindered the achievement of objectives?
- What lessons did the different actors involved in the experience come out with?
- Which lessons can be communicated or taken into account for future experiences?

It is important to recognize that in many cases different interventions do not happen as planned in the project proposal. The path to achieving project outcomes and impacts is not a straight road but a bumpy and turning one; or, as Long and van der Ploeg (1989) puts it, “[...] intervention never is a ‘project’ with sharp boundaries in time and space as defined by institutional apparatus of the state or implementing agency”. Thus, the systematization of our interventions is useful because it allows us to learn from the curves and the bumps on the project road (Schouten, 2007).

## **2.2. Systematization and ALPS**

One of the main purposes of ALPS is the need to ensure that all ActionAid processes create the space for innovation, learning and critical reflection. Through its Strategy called Rights to End Poverty, ActionAid collaborates with partners, communities and other stakeholders to fight against poverty and exclusion. Those efforts, interactions and struggles make up the rich set of experiences, interventions, actions, initiatives, projects, etc, that take place in all the countries where ActionAid works through work in Development Areas (DA) and Development Initiatives (DI).

But, capturing the lessons from the practice, critically reflecting and generating knowledge and actual learning, needs more than good intentions and goodwill; it needs the allocation of space and time to actually reflect on what happened, how it happened and with whom. Space and opportunity are needed for critical reflection during reviews or key moments, for instance, when the experience moves to new phase or ends or evolves into a different project.

There is a need to take a look at what we are doing, how we are doing it and why, in order to be better equipped for the next steps of a project, programme, advocacy or campaign work. NGOs, networks, coalitions, communities, CBOs, etc, team up with ActionAid and combine efforts and resources towards a common objective; therefore a critical reflection and the identification of lessons can not be done in isolation by ActionAid. It needs to be done with partners and communities as they will bring new dimensions and interpretations to what we are learning; they will bring their stories of how they lived the experience which will be, in sum, the story of the project or experience. The story of a project or experience can not be told by one actor alone, but only by all actors involved. Through the interpretation and the telling of the project's story, we are putting the power of the story's reconstruction on the ones that were involved and that is one of the key contributions and the richness of systematization.

Systematization is a methodology that proposes shared and participatory group dynamics. This implies creating a space where people can share, confront, and discuss opinions based on mutual trust so we are talking here of analysis and reflection of a participatory nature. There is no single way learning but instead there is critical engagement in the interpretation of the experience and mutual and collective learning. ALPS require that staff learn with and from poor and excluded people, our partners and others and systematization encourages us to open the room for all actors be heard and fully represented in the construction of the story.

The graph shows some points of convergence between ALPS and systematization.

**ALPS:**  
Critical engagement and mutual learning.

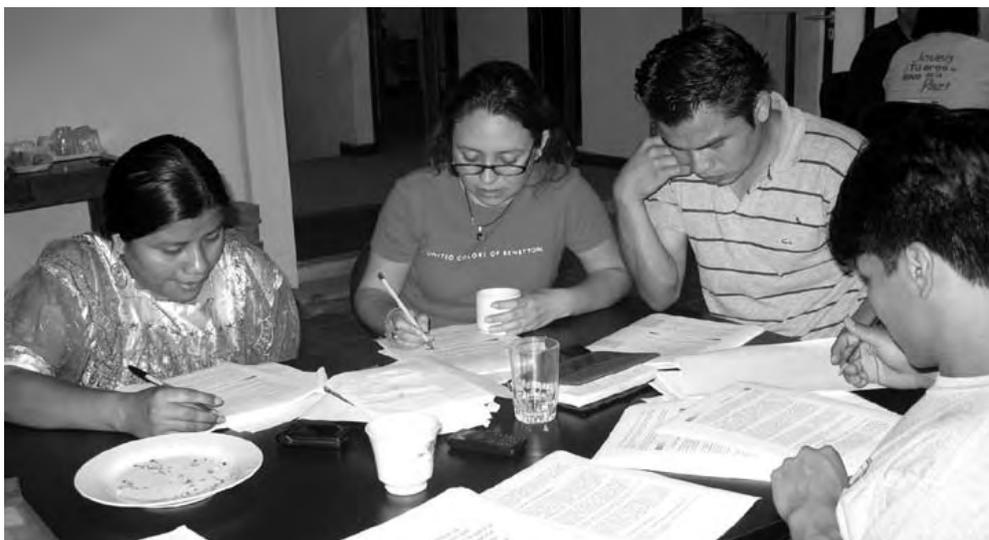
- ALPS** sees critical reflection and learning processes based on successes and failures. **Systematization** is the critical reflection process on the experience. Process is key (How are things done?).
- ALPS** is based on idea of learning as way of improving decision making processes and sharing good practices. **Systematization** helps to incorporate learning into our own practices in order to be able to continue with our work of social transformation.
- ALPS** encourages the use of creative media to communicate. **Systematization** points out the importance of documenting, communicating and sharing experiences.
- ALPS** attempts at developing new ways of looking at and doing the work. Through the **Systematization** there is generation of lessons from the experience.

Systematization is a methodology that helps project staff and stakeholders to carefully track meaningful moments and events in the project's life or experience. It enables reflection and analysis of key moments and events. Systematization is a tool to practise the ALPS principle of critical engagement and mutual learning by stimulating and encouraging the reconstruction of the experience and production of new knowledge built on practice and reality.

### 2.3. Basic guiding principles of systematization

Based on the conceptual framework presented above and other contributions<sup>4</sup>, the following set of basic principles can be used to guide a systematization process:

- It is a process of **analytical thinking and critical reflection** on experience. It focuses on what was done, why it was done, why it was done in this specific way, what were the results and impacts, why these results were useful or not, how sustainable the results are and the likelihood of the experience being replicated.
- The purpose is to **learn from the successes and failures** of the project. The conclusions drawn from the experience should contribute to generating new knowledge that could be useful for other interventions.
- Emphasis is given to the **process**. Systematization is a structured and focused way of capturing the process of change that a project aims to bring about, the activities and interactions between stakeholders, the issues and contextual factors. Results and impacts are important, and their analysis is part of the systematization, but they are not the central focus of the analysis. Rather, it is more important to explain 'why' we obtained the results. Systematization tracks the process of an intervention: what happened, how it happened and why it happened.
- As a systematic and analytical process, systematization involves organizing information in such a way that different stakeholders have an opportunity to **reflect and learn** about the process. The whole experience has to be organized by identifying different elements



© Esteban Tapella.  
Reviewing Systematization Final Report in Guatemala, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Berdegué et al (2000), Cadena (1987) y CIDE-FLACSO (1988).

connected with the experience. Not only does the project have to be explored but, for instance, the context, project objectives and results, activities, etc. Systematization is a systematic way to reflect, analyze and discover patterns that help or hinder change.

- The more **pluralist and participatory** the process, the better the result. It should involve as many stakeholders as possible, not only to get different points of view but also to widen the angle of analysis and bring in various dimensions (political, economic, cultural social, etc). Knowing that different people have been involved in the experience and that each one of them will have different viewpoints and interests, it should be expected that there will be different opinions regarding what was done and achieved. As Chavez-Tafur *et al* (2007) state, rather than aiming to achieve a consensus, it will be easier to identify lessons learnt, and generate knowledge if that diversity of opinions is taken into account and it is fully represented.

- Systematization **distinguishes between conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned**. A 'conclusion' is a synthesis of confirmed facts that relate to a certain situation (e.g. project 'A' did not fulfil its objectives). A 'recommendation' is a specific idea about how to deal with concrete problems or take advantage of concrete opportunities in a given situation (e.g. to improve the quality of water supply, technological innovations should be adopted). Finally, a 'lesson learned' is a generalized statement of what is likely to work and/or what has to happen to achieve (or prevent) a certain result (e.g. collective guarantee systems based on group credit have been shown to be an effective instrument to improve repayment rates with poor rural communities in Central America). Systematization focuses on lessons learned.

## 2.4. Why do we systematize?

Systematization serves:

- **To improve the quality and impact of our interventions.** The lessons learned allow stakeholders, in particular those closely involved in a project or experience, to step back far enough to reflect on trends, patterns, opportunities and warning signs. This learning contributes to improving future interventions.
- **To generate new knowledge and test the assumptions behind the experience.** It contributes to deepening our understanding of crucial factors that influence the project's life by reflecting on the experience and testing our beliefs about the nature of the problem and the assumptions about our interventions. We cannot expect different results if we keep doing the same thing.
- **To strengthen all stakeholders' capacity,** ActionAid included. The more participatory the process is, the more likely it is that the systematization can contribute to encouraging stakeholders to adopt systematization as a methodology for learning, reflect on their own practice and improve it.
- **To share and disseminate lessons learned.** Sharing recommendations and lessons with a broader audience and not only with those directly involved brings new insights and new ways to see and do things. Disseminating systematization outputs to a wider audience than the project context facilitates new knowledge and new approaches.

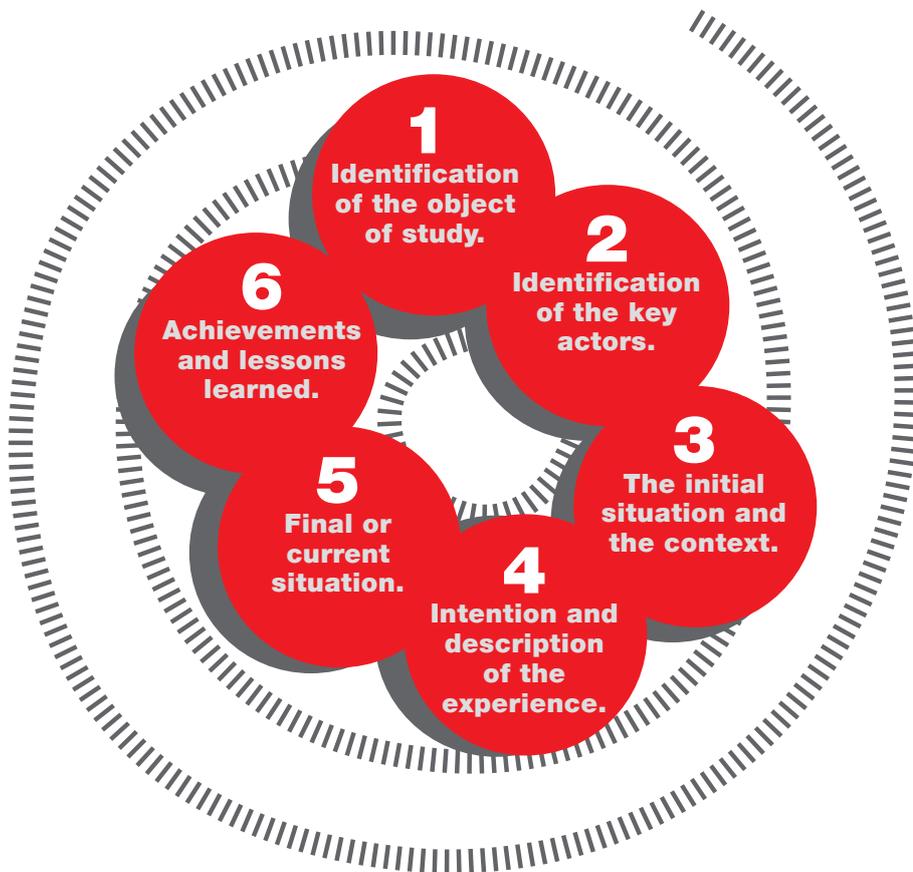
### 3. HOW TO SYSTEMATIZE AN EXPERIENCE?

There are various methodological approaches to systematize experiences. We present here a basic 'method' that has been applied in different projects and it is based on the personal experience and the work of several authors like Chain (1987), Morgan and Quiróz (1988) and Berdegué *et al.* (2000).

The starting point is the selection of a project or experience carried out by a team or group. This step is called *identifying the object of study* and its main aim is to set the boundaries of the experience to be systematized.

The second step involves the *identification of key social actors* involved in the experience. In the third step the *initial situation* of the experience and the *context* are described. Step four has to do with the identification of the main objectives and the description of the experience (*intention and description of the experience*). Step five relates to analysis of the *final or current situation*. Finally, step six refers to analysis of the *achievements* and *learned lessons*.

#### Basics steps of systematization process



These six steps include different aspects that should be documented and analyzed during the systematization process by using tools for gathering of data (for instance, interviews with the people directly involved and other stakeholders); participatory observation; analysis of secondary information; focus group meetings and workshops, and other. Further explanation of each step is provided in the next paragraphs.

### **3.1. Identification of the object of study**

Since systematization is a process for producing knowledge, it is necessary to define the 'object' of knowledge, that is to say, to determine what is going to be systematized.

This step helps us to set the boundaries of the experience. It is usually not possible to systematize the whole experience, so there is a need to define the problem or aspects of the experience that we want to analyze highlighting out the most significant aspects for our systematization. The idea is to select an experience; it could be a campaign, a moment of a campaign, a fundraising initiative, a project (on sensitization, awareness raising, training, etc) and define the main items or aspects or parts of that experience that we will be looking at.

### **3.2. Identification of the key actors**

People's participation in experiences and projects is not the same; some have a more direct participation than others; some participate more at the beginning than in the end, etc. Systematization seeks the opinion and points of view of a large number of the actors as all have different visions, opinions, perceptions and interpretations of the experience. As there will not be time to interview all of them, we should try at least to involve the most important actors or those who we know have different points of view and can enrich the reflection.

Once actors have been identified we need to decide who will be most useful or relevant to involve in the process. Some of them may be mainly be a source of information for specific aspects, while others should participate in the whole process. It is also necessary to identify a coordinator, someone who will be responsible for coordinating a plan of work and ensuring that the different activities take place, meetings are called, and objectives are achieved.

Some questions for this step are:

- Who managed the project and who took the core decisions in respect of the experience?
- Who provided human, material, financial and technical resources?
- Who are the actors involved in the experience? How did they relate to the experience? In which moments?

### 3.3. The initial situation and the context

All experiences and projects have a starting point (initial situation), in which two aspects should be identified: (a) the *problem* to be addressed by the project and (b) an *opportunity*, that is the change that we want to achieve (more work, less poverty, women integration in decision making process, etc). In this step we need to describe the problem and the opportunity or change before the intervention.

There are also external factors that influence the project's life and are not controlled by the actors. Those are called the *context* and they are made up of the issues that surround the development of the project. According to Chavez Tafur *et al.* (2007), these factors can be economic, political, social, geographical, environmental or others (e.g. local election processes taking place in a particular moment, migration trends, drought or heavy rainfall conditions, etc.). For the purpose of the systematization, we should try to focus on the factors that limited local agency to address the problem and those that contributed to the success.

The following questions can guide this step:

- What were the historical, social, political and economic contexts in which the experience took place?
- How did the context influence the project and the participants? What particularities did the context have that need to be taken into account in the reflection? What was the situation at the beginning of the experience?
- What was the institutional context (institution, objectives, scope and organizational structure, human, technical and material resources)?
- What was the relationship between the stakeholders and the organization funding the project/experience? How was power exercised among the various stakeholders?
- What were the participants' expectations at the beginning of the experience?

### 3.4. Intention and description of the experience

In every systematization process it is necessary to analyze the main objective or intention of the project or experience to have a clear idea of what drove the project. It is also necessary to analyse the project, methodology and intervention's approach. Then we need to reconstruct and analyse the experience to get a general picture of the project, the dynamics of its process and implementation and the changes that occurred.

#### a. The intention.

The identification and analysis of the objectives of the project over the short, medium and long term is needed. The following questions can guide this step:

- What were the changes that the project expected to obtain?
- What were the beliefs about the nature of the problem and the assumptions that guided the project intervention?
- What were the problems prioritized by project participants and why?

Background information on the organization and a general framework of the project or experience will be useful (what the organisation is about, why it is working there, what is the project's team composition, what is the relationship of the organisation with other actors in the geographical area such as grassroots organisations and CBOs, government, other local authorities, etc.)

### **b. Nature and characteristics of the project**

This level includes all those aspects that will help us to describe and analyze how the project was organized and formulated. Some key questions to consider are:

- What was the orientation, approach or strategy followed by the project?
- How did the idea of the project come out?
- What methodologies were used to design and formulate the project?
- How did people participate in the identification of the main problems and the formulation of the project?
- What types of activities and strategies were designed to assure the sustainability of the project?

### **c. Project implementation**

The systematization of an experience is mainly based on the description of the project's cycle and life. The main aim here is to look at and reflect on the experience. This allows for a description and analysis of the project in order to learn from its dynamics and results.

In this stage we identify the activities and achievements during the selected period of time including unexpected results, difficulties faced, and unmet objectives. As suggested by Chavez Tafur et al. (2007), we can use the following chart in order to identify what information we need to collect and what is still missing.



© Esteban Tapella. In small groups, reflecting on the experience to identify the most important activities and its results. In Guatemala, 2008.

This is an example from the Project ‘Organizing a seed bank in the rural community of Tudcum, San Juan, Argentina’.

COMPONENTS	Activities	Main achievements	Difficulties faced	Unexpected results
<b>(a) People’s involvement and participation.</b>	Getting agreement on the project idea.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People that participated in workshops agreed on the idea and got involved in project.</li> <li>• The first proposal was strengthened by farmers’ ideas and suggestions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not all social actors participated in early stages of the process.</li> <li>• Local seed sellers did not support the project.</li> <li>• Local authorities showed a weak commitment to the idea.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People from other communities asked the NGO to replicate the same project in their region.</li> <li>• The National Institute of Agriculture (INA) offered technical and financial support.</li> </ul>
<b>(b) Training and organization.</b>	Organizing a local committee.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A coordinating committee was organised.</li> <li>• More people got involved in the process by effective use of communication tools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approval to use local government building were not confirmed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• INA offered an alternative place to implement the bank of seed.</li> </ul>
<b>(c) Key actions.</b>	Gathering and collecting seeds of...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More than 87 species of seed were collected.</li> <li>• Increased number of farmers are interested in participating by providing and accessing local seeds.</li> <li>• Alternative funding was identified.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial support for infrastructure to keep seed’s safety was not enough.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The farmer union offered to partially support the infrastructure.</li> <li>• INA offered technical assistance.</li> </ul>

The *components* are the main areas around which the work was organized. It has to do with the definitions of the boundaries of the experience to be systematized (step 1). By dividing the project into components it is possible to see how the activities were organized according to subject, time or location.

In the column *activities* a list of what was done has to be identified, selecting the most important activities (each component may have more than one activity). It is also important to indicate the role played by the stakeholders during each step of the project. Whenever possible include amounts (number of events, number of participants involved) and location. It is essential to show what actually happened, and not what was planned to happen.

The main *achievements* are the results in relation to objectives of the project. It is important to gather people’s different points of view, even if it is difficult to reach agreements among the participants.

In the *difficulties* column we identify all the problems or negative factors which affected the implementation of the project as a whole or some of its activities, or those aspects which prevented us from achieving more or better results. When describing difficulties we should also include any internal problems faced by the organization in charge of the project. Avoid presenting only positive outcomes; we must try to be as fair and open to constructive criticism as possible.

The *unexpected results* are those results (positive or negative) which were not aimed at the beginning but which later on proved to be relevant in the life of the experience.

Some questions that may help during this stage are:

- What was done (activities)? With what resources and at what cost?
- When was it done (organization in time)?
- Who did it (the actors)? How did the different actors participate in the process?
- What monitoring and evaluation was implemented, and to what extent did it help to improve the project and its results during implementation and in the long run?
- How was it done? What were the main methods and tools? Why were those methods and tools chosen and how well did they work? What were the expected and unexpected results? Which external factors influenced the project's outcomes and impact?
- What were the project's strengths and weaknesses? What were the team's strengths and weaknesses?
- What changes – if any - were introduced during the project's life in relation to objectives, methodologies, tools and resources? Why?

### **3.5. Final or current situation**

The main aim of this step is to describe the results and impact of the experience. This can be done during the implementation or immediately after the end of the experience.

The results of the experience are presented comparing the initial situation with the current or final situation, or the situation 'with' and 'without' intervention. Positive and negative results should not only be considered in regard to project objectives but also in relation to the process. It is important to highlight both the achievements and the causes and conditions that contributed to them.

Some of the key questions to ask here are:

- What can we say about the current situation compared with the initial situation?
- What improved? What did not and why?
- What are the tangible and intangible results? For whom?
- How do people see or think of the results? What they will do now that the project is over?

### **3.6. Achievements and lessons learned**

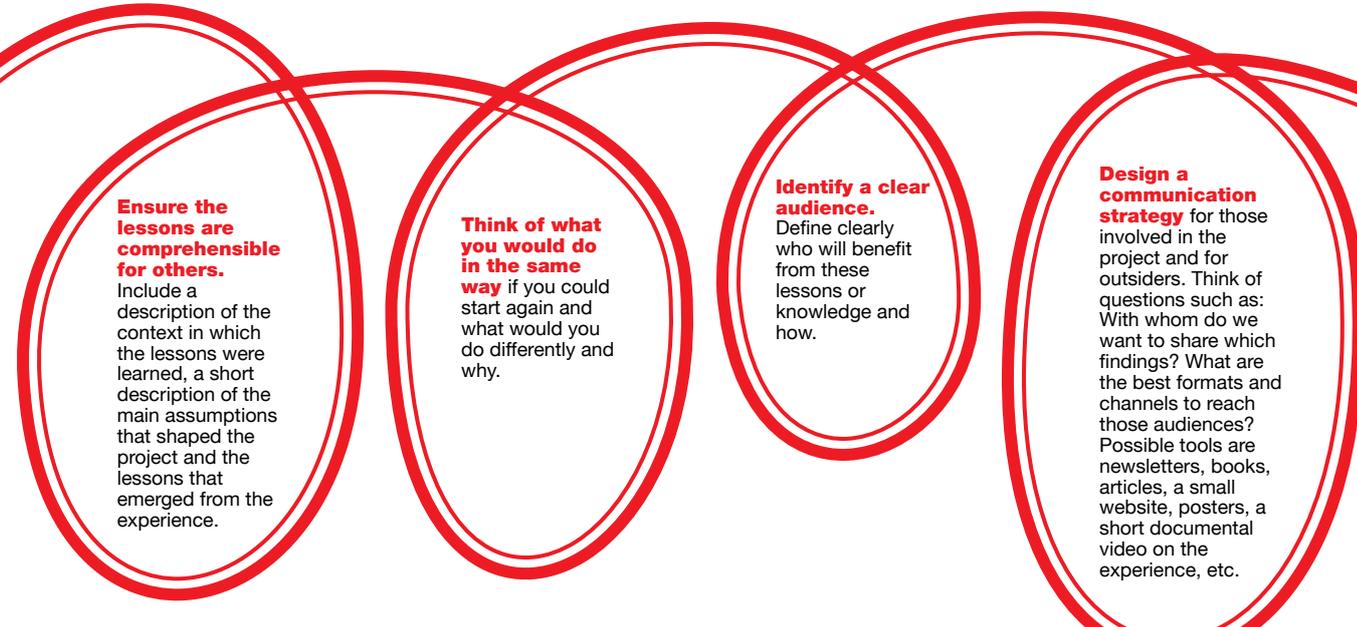
As mentioned, one of the main purposes of systematization is to produce knowledge based on actual experience. In this step we need to identify the new knowledge that came out of the experience. This knowledge is important for the team and the actors and stakeholders involved such as the target group, local

authorities, government representatives, people from other institutions, etc. This knowledge is also important for other institutions who might eventually implement a similar project in another context or region.

Identifying lessons is basically the attempt to scale up the analysis from the immediate context of the project. Not only should the lessons be shared and communicated but also institutionalized.

Conclusions, lessons and recommendation should be analyzed with the organization that implemented and supported the project and the stakeholders. The findings of the systematization findings should also be communicated to those people external to the project. This will bring new insights to others as well as opening space for them to comment on the lessons learned which will enrich the systematization's outcomes.

To communicate and socialize the lessons consider the followings points.



**Ensure the lessons are comprehensible for others.**

Include a description of the context in which the lessons were learned, a short description of the main assumptions that shaped the project and the lessons that emerged from the experience.

**Think of what you would do in the same way** if you could start again and what would you do differently and why.

**Identify a clear audience.**

Define clearly who will benefit from these lessons or knowledge and how.

**Design a communication strategy**

for those involved in the project and for outsiders. Think of questions such as: With whom do we want to share which findings? What are the best formats and channels to reach those audiences? Possible tools are newsletters, books, articles, a small website, posters, a short documental video on the experience, etc.

As mentioned, the final stage of the systematization process is not just the action of drawing knowledge from the experience and communicating the lessons learned. This new knowledge needs to be institutionalized and integrated. It is important to disseminate and popularize the main results of the systematization and ask team members to analyze and suggest specific recommendations to improve future interventions.

In order to institutionalize lessons learned, or transform them into action points, it is important to analyze the lessons, eliminate whatever has already been taken into account or is no longer relevant, discuss the implications of the remaining recommendations, and write up a plan identifying the changes to introduce in this or other experiences.

#### **4. FINAL REMARKS**

This document has presented basic concepts and steps for systematization. The method described refers to the systematization process of project or development experiences, which basically aims to organise available information, analyse it in detail to understand what has happened, draw conclusions which will help generate new knowledge, and present the results in the chosen format.

Systematization can be used to document single, short activities, projects, or longer and more complex programmes or advocacy actions. It can be carried out by community-based groups or organisations, NGOs, networks or large institutions. It is a general framework for orientation rather than a manual or rigid guide. It can be adapted to various contexts and particular institutional interests.

Systematization of experience helps to improve future interventions. As Schouten (2007) states, it may enable projects to raise issues of general interest and stimulate reflection and debate in wider society. Systematization may be one of the main tools for making development experiences more relevant, effective, replicable and sustainable. ■

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**“Powerful learning arises from ongoing sharing and critical reflection together with peers, colleagues and fellow activists on how we are working for change”**

**Shared Learning: A Working Guide  
(ActionAid, 2007)**

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**THE COMPANY ACADEMY**

TRUSTWORTHY TRANSLATIONS

*Original in Spanish*

Resource Pack on  
Systematization of Experiences

# Looking at Systematization<sup>1</sup>

## What is systematization?

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from: Alboan-Hegoas: "La sistematización, una nueva mirada a nuestras prácticas" ("Systematization, a new view of our practices"), Bilbao, Spain, May 2004. Source: <http://www.alboan.org/archivos/1viendo.pdf>

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# 1.1 Definition of systematization

It is always complicated to define a concept since it is difficult to express in only a few words all its fundamental meanings. Therefore, we find ourselves with different definitions of systematization, all of which give us clues to what it is.

## To systematize is . . .

- *To register, in an orderly manner, an experience that we wish to share with others, combining the actual work with its theoretical basis, and emphasizing the identification of the knowledge obtained during the experience.*

(Inter-American Institute of Human Rights)

- *A permanent and cumulative process of knowledge creation that springs from intervention experiences in social reality. This kind of knowledge is produced starting from popular education and development promotion interventions that involve social actors and seek to produce change.*

(Permanent Workshop on Systematization)

- *Systematization is the critical interpretation of one or several intervention experiences. Through the process of ordering and reconstructing the experiences, systematization assists us to discover or explain the logic of the intervention process, the different factors that influenced it, and how and why the elements of the intervention related to each other in a particular way.*

(Oscar Jara)

- *An alternative to evaluation traditionally applied to social and educational projects. It also appears as an answer to the inadequacies of social research methodologies used to analyze problems arising in social change projects.*

[Sergio Martinic)

- *An intentional and participatory process of creating theoretical and practical knowledge springing from and about emancipation and transformation practices, with the purpose of contributing to the growing development of the strengths and abilities of social actors. Becoming collective subjects, those actors may become real protagonists in the identification and resolution of their own needs and expectations – on a day to day as well as historic basis – overcoming relationships and mechanisms of subordination opposed to this transformation.*

(Felix Cadena)

- *From our perspective, systematization is the critical interpretation of an experience which, by means of its organization and reconstruction, discovers or makes visible the logic of the lived process, the factors intervening in that process, how they are related to each other and why they have done it in such way, thus building new knowledge.*

(Systematization of Human Development Experiences Project)

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that there is not a single agreed definition of systematization. This may add confusion when trying to understand the concept, but it also opens the door for our own contribution. This “non-definition” has enabled the emergence of different “schools” or social approaches which, in our opinion, have common concerns and purposes: to learn from our own practice.

## 1.2 Characteristics of systematization

While there is some variation in systematization’s main features, we have been able to identify some common characteristics to every systematization exercise. Before listing them, it is worthwhile pointing out that every systematization is preceded by a practice. Without a practice or an experience, it is impossible to systematize.

Once practice has happened, systematization is a **participatory process** that enables the elements or features of the practice to be **organized**; recovers the **historical memory** and supports its **interpretation**; **generates new knowledge** and enables it to be **shared** with other persons.

### a. Process

Systematization requires having a pre-established “itinerary” that shows how to carry out a process. The systematization process is as important as its result. It is necessary to bear in mind that systematization is:

- *A process that is under construction, with its own itinerary (or route)*
- *The process is as important as its results*
- *The process is open to development and to the contributions of the group that is systematizing*
- *It helps us to discover the logic of the process and activities that are being systematized (elements, relationships, etc.).*

### b. Participatory

Systematization is a method that requires a participatory dynamic, meaning that it needs a space in which people can share, confront, and discuss opinions based on participants’ mutual trust. Its participatory nature is strengthened if:

- *Those who have participated in the experience are those who systematize it*
- *A space for work is created based on people’s trust*
- *A space to share, confront and discuss individuals’ opinions is built*
- *A dialogue is created in which discourse, theories, and cultural constructs are negotiated.*

## c. Organizing

Systematization requires a logical ordering of facts and knowledge acquired during the experience. It is a way of organizing events that allows for the **critical interpretation** of the experience. For that, it is necessary:

- *To record, in an orderly way, the facts of the experience*
- *To organize and reconstruct the lived process*
- *To arrange the disorganized knowledge and perceptions that emerged during the experience.*

## d. Historical memory

The exercise of systematizing allows us to recover the history of the experience and preserve its memories.

- *It forces the team to make an effort to recover the historical memory of the experience and to use this as a standardized methodology*
- *It recovers the historical memory*
- *It critically reviews practices*
- *It allows us to understand concrete practices as historical and dynamic processes*

## e. Analysis and interpretation

This is one of the basic components of any systematization. Once the historical memory of events has been recovered and organized, it is necessary to interpret it in order to extract the learning. Critical interpretation supposes the following elements:

- *Every individual is a subject of knowledge and has perceptions and knowledge from his/her experience*
- *It is necessary to objectify what has been lived: to turn one's own experience into an object of study and theoretical interpretation, as well as into an object of transformation*
- *It is necessary to reflect about practice*
- *A practice must be critically interpreted by placing it in a specific context*
- *Development processes are analyzed in context*
- *It is necessary to pay attention to the experience and to the interpretations of those who participated in the process or situation*
- *A balance between theoretical and practical aspects must be kept*
- *Interpretation is a technical and professional task that includes quantitative and qualitative aspects and aims to advance transformation and tangible democracy.*

## f. Learning and new knowledge

The main benefit of systematizing experiences is learning and new knowledge. Knowledge comes from one's own practical experience; therefore, its usefulness is even greater. One of the goals in achieving this learning is its incorporation into our own practices in order to be able to continue with our work of social transformation. This learning should enable us to:

- *Conceptualize our experiences, that is, to produce knowledge out of reality*
- *Show what “we didn't yet know we knew”*
- *Produce useful knowledge*
- *Produce new learning that enables abstraction from each particular case, finding fertile ground for generalization*
- *Learn from practice and from other organizations*
- *Improve our practice.*

## g. Share and disseminate

As in most knowledge-creating processes, it is of great benefit to be able to share it with those who work in the area of the systematized experience, because:

- *The information has been organized in order to transmit an experience to other people, so they can take advantage of it in the future*
- *Its purpose is to share and compare learning*
- *It can also strengthen the identity and the sense of belonging in the organization itself*
- *It enables experiences to be shared with other organizations or groups.*

# 1.3 A historic look at systematization

## Emergence of systematization

Some persons point to the beginnings of systematization in the 1950s in the Latin American Social Sciences and Social Work academics. At that moment and for that group, to systematize was to recover, organize, specify and clarify Social Work knowledge in order to give it a scientific character.

In any case, systematization, such as it has been described in the foregoing pages, emerges in Latin America in the 1970s in organizations working in the area of popular education.

These organizations recognized they had developed interesting educational interventions but found that, as time went by, little remained of the experience and the knowledge built. Their interest was to collect and learn from the experiences with the people involved in them. They called it 'systematization' because the idea was to recover and critically analyze experiences with the persons involved. In this way they would build new knowledge.

The methodology and understanding of systematization underwent great development in Latin America over many years and developed convergences with Participatory Action Research methodology, and relationships with University Social Work schools, as well as the Latin American Council for Adult Education (*CEAAL, Consejo de Educación de Adultos de América Latina*).

During the 1970s, systematization developed and defined better its concept and methodology, mostly linked to Popular Education.

Since then, systematization has developed with more or less intensity and along different paths and been taken up in various ways. What follows is a summary of this journey.

## Development of systematization

In the 1980s, conditioned by the new socio-political context in different Latin American countries, systematization's development was constrained, both at the social work and academic levels.

However, in the 1990s, together with the appearance of new techniques in development cooperation projects (such as participatory rural appraisal), methodologies and tools related to popular education began to develop. Systematization comes out of the field of popular education and begins to expand into the rural and community development fields.

Systematization began to link with other methodologies, such as community research, participatory planning, participatory evaluation, etc. Since the 90s, these links have contributed to important adaptations and new experiences in systematization in the Latin American context. In the next pages we will review some of these approaches, whose purposes range from prioritizing the production of new knowledge to describing and building typologies of practices.

Thus, different 'types' of systematization can be identified, depending on its purposes, the people addressed, utility, etc.

## Systematization “rediscovered”

Towards the end of the 90s, people in the ‘North’ started talking about systematization. The term is sometimes used to mean only the recovery of memory or the compilation of data. People that are related to Popular Education bring an understanding of systematization as a methodology for learning from experiences.

The methodology appeared at a time when practices related to international development cooperation, development education and social transformation were being challenged. At the same moment, organizations in the corporate, as well as social and NGO sectors, were discussing the need to improve the quality of their work.

It is in this search for methodology and tools that could improve social and developmental interventions that systematization gained its appeal. This is how interest in the systematization of experiences was respectively discovered or recovered in the North and the South.

Nowadays, discussion has become more focused on the relationship between systematization and other processes and tools, such as report writing, research and evaluation.

Hence, we find ourselves with a methodology that is ‘open’ and in permanent development. We encourage interested organizations and individuals to share their experiences and to contribute towards this methodology development that still has many questions that are open to debate:

1. **In-depth epistemological and theoretical exploration:** Can systematization of one or several experiences generate “academic” knowledge? I.e. is it possible to elaborate a theory from one or several specific cases?
2. **Methodological proposal:** The debate about whether participatory methodologies and qualitative techniques can describe reality with enough rigor. Also about the emphasis systematization places to the process being as important as the result.
3. **Participation and empowerment:** Discussion about how to collect contributions from all the persons involved in the experience to be systematized, and how to measure its importance in a specific context.
4. Debate about the risk of **reducing** the methodological proposal to **a tool** for disseminating the results of funded projects, gathering all participants’ voices but not producing learning or empowering the people involved.

## 1.4 Why to systematize

As was pointed out at the beginning of this guide, we systematize because we wish to **learn from our practice** and furthermore, because we seek to:

- *Acknowledge what has been done*
- *Recover the historical memory of what has been done*
- *Analyze and acknowledge achievements and failures, as well as the critical situations (lessons) found or learnt*
- *Analyze concrete processes in their contexts*
- *Learn from practice*
- *Generate new knowledge from practice*
- *Improve our practice*
- *Make progress in our work for social transformation*

## 1.5 Purpose of systematization

- *Improve our practice*
- *Produce learning*
- *Create new knowledge*
- *Communicate and share knowledge with other people and organizations.*

As already mentioned, we find different approaches and practices of systematization depending on the elements prioritized:

- Dissemination
- Learning
- Interpretation
- Analysis
- Historical ordering/memory
- Participation
- Process

## 1.6 Who to involve in systematization?

There is great debate concerning not only who should participate, but the degree to which each group related to the experience should participate.

There is a general agreement that all persons directly involved in the experience must participate in the systematization, whether they are:

- *Beneficiaries, or*
- *Promoters/facilitators*

These persons play different roles in the experience, but all of them must have something to say in its analysis and critical interpretation.

Depending on the systematization's purpose and on the group's situation, participation of people that are external to the institution or the experience can be an enriching or limiting element. There is no clear consensus about this, though many of the experiences we know included external people who guided the process, helped focus the theme and posed questions.

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