
LEARNING FROM A LEARNING INITIATIVE

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In Colombia, the Inter-Institutional Research Group on Regional Competitiveness Models has been running a series of experience capitalization processes for several years, modifying the approach to meet the needs of its members and partner organisations. Working for many years, and focusing on those steps generally recognised as the most difficult ones, has helped them draw key lessons.

Cover “We can expect greater results if we can make sure that our learnings are used in new experiences”

The Inter-Institutional Research Group on Regional Competitiveness Models (RCM), created by the Regional Center for Productivity and Innovation of Cauca (CREPIC) and the University of Cauca (Unicauca), was formed in 2001 in the Cauca department, in Colombia. RCM was launched to support the development of productive projects, implement associative processes and articulate joint activities among the academic, governmental and business sectors.

RCM has been running different experience capitalization processes for more than 10 years with the aim of extracting lessons from its different projects, but it has also been interested in learning how to do this better and get better results. Over time, RCM has allocated more resources to the implementation of this approach, and worked to enhance its potential by following creative processes focused on the local context.

First steps

Since 2001, RCM has led 60 projects that have contributed, either conceptually or methodologically, to the development of joint activities and collaboration efforts between a large group of regional actors, and to support them sharing information as part of a broad knowledge

management (KM) initiative. As a result, different KM processes have become an integral part of RCM’s approach. Aware of the broad experience of the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) in this field, in 2008 RCM asked this organisation to run a series of workshops and share their ideas. A few RCM researchers joined these workshops, together with representatives of other organisations.

One of these researchers took the responsibility of adding the experience capitalization approach to the RCM projects. This “champion” saw the implementation of seven processes between 2008 and 2010, following the methodology developed and shared by CIAT. This was based on the utilisation of a log document (where information from an experience is recorded and can be referred to at a later date), with key questions designed to motivate those directly involved in a particular experience to analyse their cases. During this period we continued using this log, even if, gradually, the process underwent some adjustments. The facilitator, for example, began writing the final report when the researchers were too busy.

In 2013 RCM started a new project which came to be known as InnovAcción Cauca, involving 16 organisation in a strategic alliance, with the main purpose of developing a training process to boost

innovation processes throughout the department. An interesting characteristic was that this project decided to run an experience capitalization process from the very beginning. The person in charge of this new initiative worked for two years, and was replaced in 2015 by a new experience capitalization facilitator.

The working styles of the two facilitators were very different. The first facilitator, for instance, was especially interested in considering the opinions of all project partners, beneficiaries and the research team through evaluation exercises and the completion of the log. These actors, however, were not trained in the experience capitalization process, so their role was simply to provide information to the facilitator. The second facilitator preferred to train the RCM research team, and helped them lead their own processes and write their final reports.

The best of both worlds

In InnovAcción Cauca, the new facilitator found a team where the experience capitalization steps had been followed regularly and all documents and records were kept (researchers had been recording their activities using the logs). However, the team did not see the purpose of these steps, nor could they recognise a milestone, or identify key lessons, or see the difference between experience capitalization and an evaluation process. It was therefore necessary to develop a training programme, share concepts, and agree on a common objective.

Another challenge was that the participation of the project academic committee (AC) which included a representative of each project partner, was not as active as it should have been. This was a significant problem because the InnovAcción Cauca partners

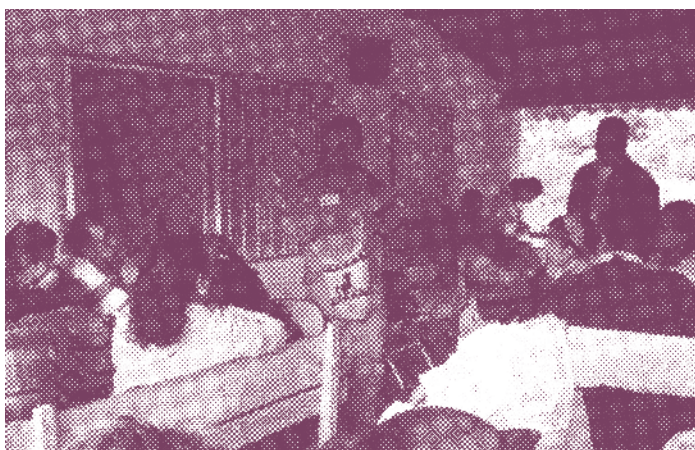
are also its main beneficiaries, so the AC's point of view was needed. In 2017, InnovAcción Cauca joined a workshop in Costa Rica organised by the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) in the context of the CTA-led project on experience capitalization ("Capitalization of Experiences for Greater Impact in Rural Development"). One of the issues discussed here was the best way to engage stakeholders – something that helped us plan better ways to work. For example, one idea that InnovAcción Cauca followed was to run separate workshops, some with the research team and others with the AC, in both cases guided by the facilitator and by another communications professional. Both were in charge of capturing and transferring opinions between the two groups in a way that would help avoid any possible conflict.

Having separate groups gave even better results than expected: although just 9 of the 15 AC members participated in these workshops, they expressed opinions that had never been said out loud before. The inputs provided by the AC helped the research team to carry out a deeper analysis of their experience, focusing in those aspects they had not considered before.

Facing new challenges

During the 2017 workshop in Costa Rica we also heard about other challenges frequently faced when running a capitalization process, such as those related to the dissemination of the knowledge products created. Many workshop participants said they do not feel responsible for these dissemination processes, stating that they lack the expertise and skills needed. They also said they have some

Below Working together in different sessions, the inputs provided by the AC helped complete a deeper analysis of the experience





Above Comics were seen as a the best way to reach an audience that has limited time

problems engaging their communications teams and getting them to understand the logic of the approach. We saw that InnovAcción Cauca had an advantage here as its experience capitalization process had been led by a communications specialist.

Due to RCM's familiarity with the experience capitalization approach, InnovAcción Cauca decided to share the lessons drawn from the process with its 16 partner organisations. We wanted to let other researchers benefit from the lessons learned and widen the reach of the project results. KM processes are a key element of the RCM programme, so the challenges and hurdles we faced were seen as an opportunity to generate knowledge.

Up until the moment InnovAcción Cauca decided to share these lessons with other organisations in 2017, it had been preparing written stories, videos and reports – but it seemed that people were losing interest in these media after 4 years of the project. InnovAcción Cauca decided to try to reach an audience that has limited time, such as those who work in science, technology and innovation activities, in a quick and amusing way: by using comics. The project created the interactive comic *Súper.Nodo*, responding to the idea that people must reflect in order to learn (see <http://www.unicauca.edu.co/innovacioncauca/super-nodo>). *Súper.Nodo* has 10 chapters based on the most important project learnings, which were extracted

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from all the situation that were described and analysed. At the end of each chapter, the story offers two options to solve a problem and asks readers to select the one they prefer. Each option redirects the audience to a different ending, but only one of them provides key lessons.

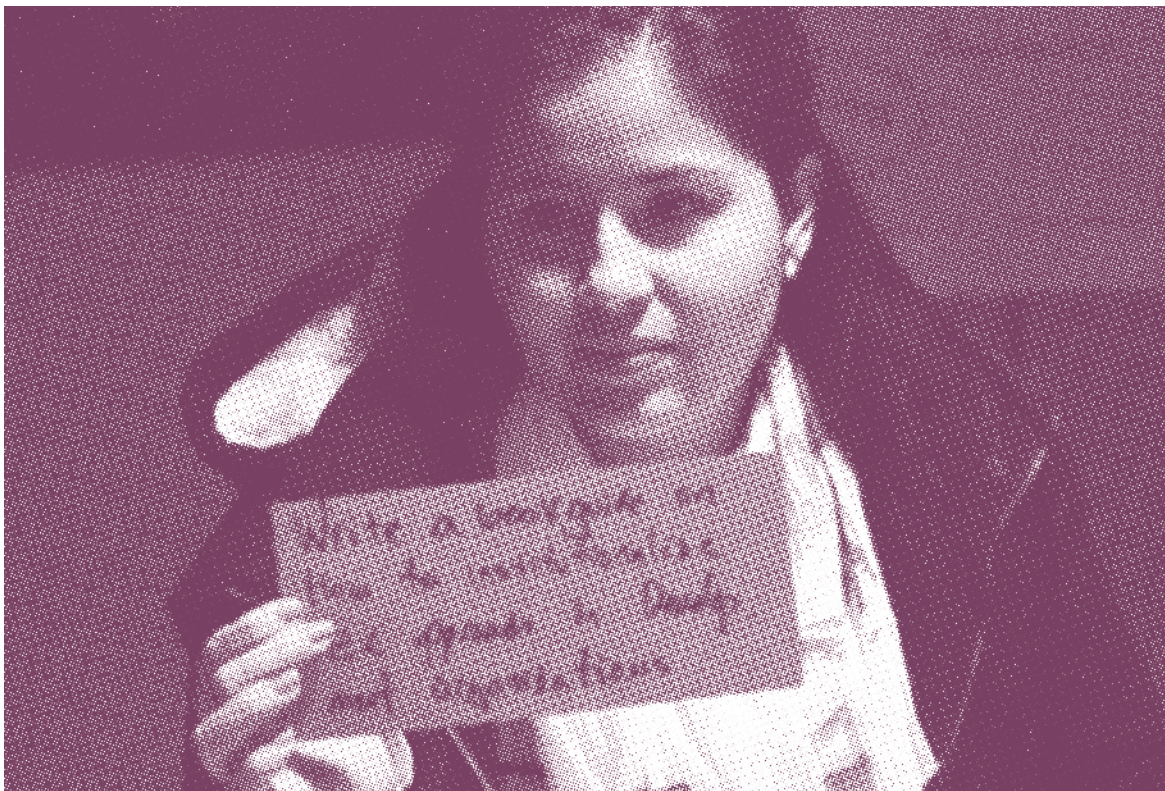
The project has been evaluating the results of this comic during the first months of 2019. We plan to prepare a guidebook and share the key steps we followed and the main lessons we are drawing.

A few lessons

The sustained application of the experience capitalization approach has been key to the maturation of the RCM team and of the approach itself. Time and practice have allowed all team members to identify, by themselves, the advantages of an experience capitalization process. They have also had the opportunity to experience different ways to apply this approach and to get the best results according to their needs. Proving that experience capitalization can solve the needs of an organisation is very important for institutionalising the process and making it sustainable, as people can see its value and add it to their day-to-day activities.

Just as important has been the support provided by the leaders of RCM and of InnovAcción Cauca, with resources allocated for the different capitalization processes and for their communication and evaluation strategies. These leaders have been willing to try new ways to complete an experience capitalization processes and in this way have better results. And although the group in which the experience capitalization process has been institutionalised is small, the process has the potential to reach more people because it is being shared with a network of institutions in Cauca. In addition, during the years that the RCM team has been applying the approach, it has adapted the process to the needs of the region so that the experience capitalization methodology can be more easily adopted by its partners. For example, now we know the kind of information that those in the network demand and which of our partners can supply it. We have also provided creative methods for developing the experience capitalization process in the context where we work, and some of our partners have already recognised this approach as a mechanism for learning, and not just for communicating results.

In addition, we should highlight that RCM made the decision to go beyond the mere adoption of



Left Next step: write a guidebook and share the main lessons drawn



Above Engaging stakeholders helped the team make better plans

experience capitalization, and helped develop a stronger process by evaluating the results and incorporating little explored actions, such as the dissemination of lessons and recommendations. The project has not just focused on reporting what it has achieved to its beneficiaries, but on showing what it has learned and on using these lessons.

In summary, the project has learned that in order to institutionalise experience capitalization, it is not enough to study the steps involved: it is also necessary to explore complementary fields that have the potential to enrich the approach. With the purpose of guaranteeing that the developed knowledge is, in fact, used by all beneficiaries, such fields include communications and impact measurement. If we can make sure our learnings are used in new experiences, we can expect greater results.



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