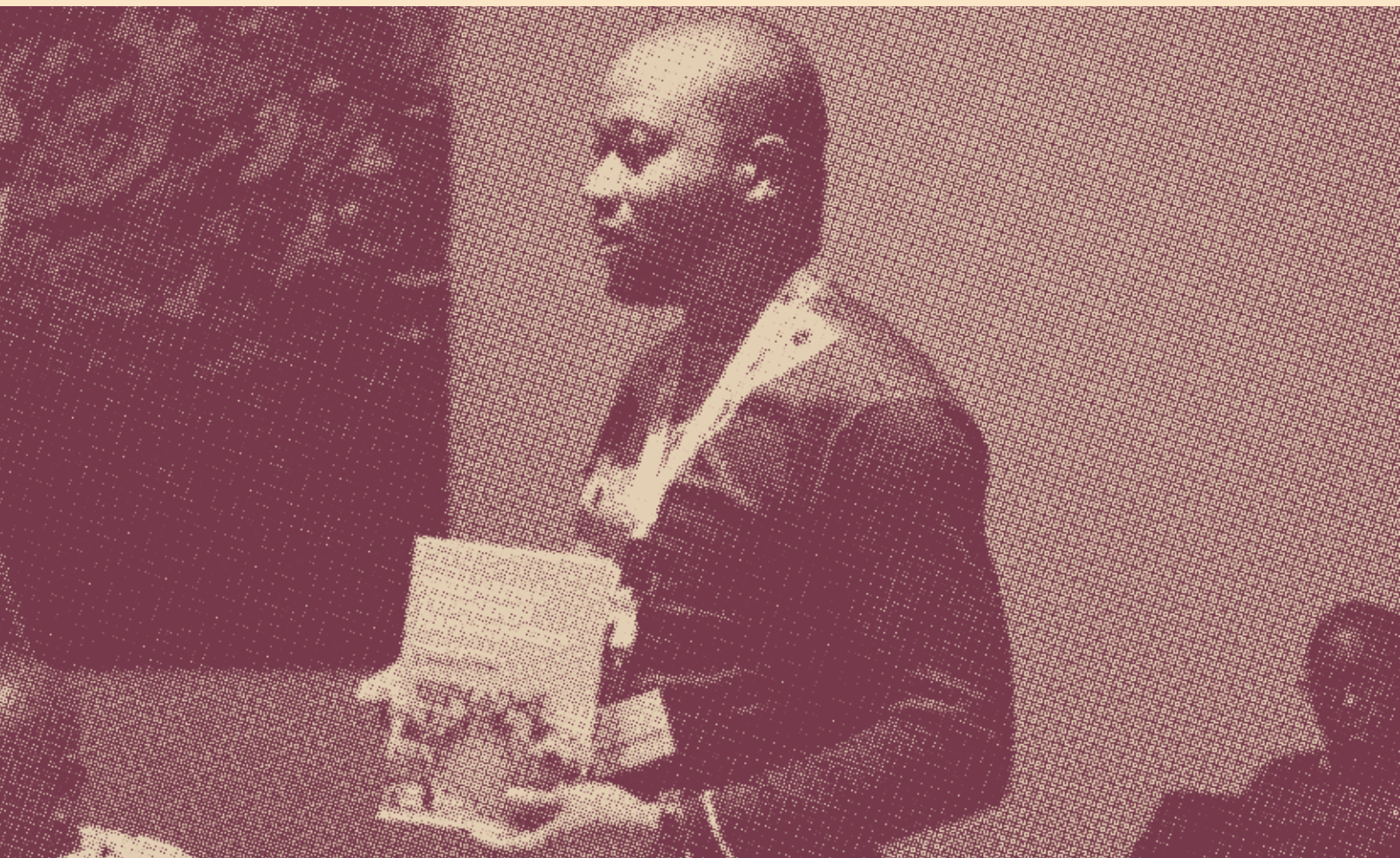


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# FACILITATING THE ADOPTION OF EXPERIENCE CAPITALIZATION TO INSPIRE CHANGE

*Emmanuel Sahr Gbakie*



The Rural Finance and Community Improvement Programme Phase II (RFCIP II) in Sierra Leone has started several experience capitalization activities, from organising and facilitating training workshops for key project staff, to producing knowledge products and sharing them with other development programmes. This article highlights some of the key steps taken for the adoption of the approach, as well as the lessons learnt and the way forward.

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*Cover Showing the knowledge products which were completed helped convince others*

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*Below Facilitator and participants in one of the first workshops in Accra*

According to the literature, experience capitalization is a systematic, iterative and participatory process through which an experience is analysed and documented. This helps generate knowledge which can be shared and used to support decision making processes in development projects. With this in mind, the adoption of this approach has been, and continues to be, the main goal of many projects and organisations.

In March 2017, I was introduced to the experience capitalization approach at a CTA-organised workshop for the English-speaking countries in West Africa. This followed up on a 2-day workshop that had been organised in Sierra Leone, a month beforehand. During the workshops, me and another colleague learnt about the different steps involved and saw how this could help us document our experiences, and share the lessons learnt.



The Rural Finance and Community Improvement Programme Phase II is working to set up Community Banks (CBs) and Financial Service Associations (FSAs) in many rural communities in Sierra Leone. Its aim is to ensure access to finance, helping the rural poor embark on profitable activities, such as agribusinesses. The project is financed by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Government of Sierra Leone, and since the project began in 2009, we have been able to establish 76 rural finance institutions across the country.

Over the years, documenting the experiences of rural projects and programmes has been, and continues to be, a major challenge. Most of the time, the various units and components of a project produce reports and complete documents that respond to the project log frame and the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system. But most of these reports fail to capture the experience in detail. Hence, exposing our project to the experience capitalization methodology encouraged project staff to go beyond the “normal” processes for producing reports, and to discover why we did a particular activity in a certain way, and the reasons behind the results achieved.

This article shows how far we have gone as an organisation to ensure we institutionalise the experience capitalization approach across various





*Left “If we are to change the face of agriculture and rural development programmes in Africa by making them more efficient and evidence-based, there is a need to look in detail at all activities and results, and to share lessons and recommendations”*

project activities. We decided to implement these processes as a means of ensuring we no longer miss out on documenting and learning from our own experiences, even at the pilot stage.

### **Supporting the institutionalization of experience capitalization**

During the CTA workshop in Ghana, we were charged with developing articles using the experience capitalization methodology, i.e., selecting a specific case study, setting the boundaries of this experience (such as a time frame), gathering information, describing and analysing the case – and in this way looking in detail at the way we were implementing our project. We decided to write about the establishment of CBs in Sierra Leone.

Presenting a case study was a prerequisite for attending the second follow-up workshop organised a couple of months later. The need to develop a written document helped us build a very good case to solicit financial and moral support from our programme coordinator and from the programme as a whole. Institutionalising experience capitalization within the organisation includes, but is not limited to, the steps outlined below.

#### *(a) Advocacy within the organisation*

Advocating for the institutionalization of the approach within RFCIP II was not difficult as the programme coordinator had also been a part of the workshop for technical staff held a few months before. During this workshop, key staff were introduced to the experience capitalization concept, and how it could be pivotal in project implementation. This made the institutionalization process much easier than I had expected. It was also helpful that during the first workshop in Ghana I sent constant e-mail updates of the training to key staff – including the programme coordinator – showing and explaining what we were doing. The e-mail updates informed staff of the next steps of the process, such as the preparation of the case study article.

Upon my return after the first workshop with CTA, I organised a meeting with the programme coordinator and mentioned the importance of holding an experience capitalization session for all those working with and related to the programme. The session would focus on the steps needed to develop the article showing the establishment of the CBs – which would subsequently be published by CTA. This gave way for the approval of budgets to organise four different workshops for more than 35 staff members at both the National Programme Coordination Unit (NPCU) and the Apex Bank – an entity established under the project with support from the Bank of Sierra

*Right Explaining the process that the team followed to the managers of the Financial Services Association*

Leone, and given powers to monitor and supervise all 76 rural finance institutions – on experience capitalization. The results of this effort included:

- Increased staff knowledge on the need and importance of an experience capitalization process;
- Published knowledge products on various topics related to rural finance, community development, climate change mitigation, production and rehabilitation of tree crop/oil palm, and road and inland valley swamp rehabilitation;
- The decision to start at least one experience capitalization process annually for all major departments;
- A dedicated budget line within the annual work plan and budget for undertaking knowledge management / experience capitalization activities;
- A synchronised approach with the M&E department for embarking on experience capitalization activities;
- Many different face-to-face meetings, all of which helped to develop the staff's capacities for documenting project experiences;
- The sharing of experience capitalization information and knowledge products among staff, via e-mails and social media platforms, convincing others of the need to take up the approach.

*(b) Facilitating experience capitalization process*

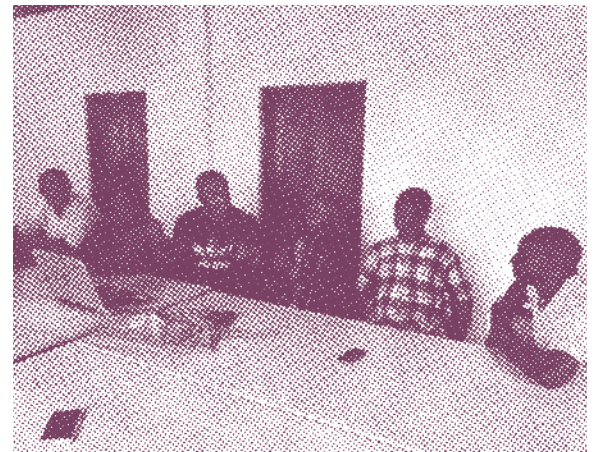
One key factor we have considered throughout our institutionalization efforts is the selection of key participants/stakeholders to help implement new processes. Thus, we targeted the directors of the Apex Bank, as heads of various project units and departments. Various workshops were organised and facilitated together with the head of the M&E/KM unit. Also, at the first workshop where all staff were present, we invited co-facilitators from Plan

International and the United Nations Development Programme (who were part of the workshop in Ghana), to support the process and to add credence to it. Although only one person from Plan International was able to join and support the facilitation team, this was a very good move.

Different articles were developed after various presentations on experience capitalization, all of them using the template developed by CTA to gather information. Converting the template into articles was somehow a challenge for some participants, so in some cases we hired an editor from a local newspaper to help us. In collaboration with the M&E team, we were able to jointly develop criteria and indicators for measuring the impact seen.

*(c) Stronger links with M&E*

The role of the M&E unit is crucial when it comes to developing indicators and criteria to measure and analyse the successes and failures identified with an experience capitalization process. Therefore, the M&E and KM units were merged to ensure that the data included in all knowledge products has gone through the M&E system.



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A meeting was organised with the M&E/KM unit after the first CTA workshop to ensure that project data was provided to all staff when documenting the different project experiences. It was also important to remember that the M&E unit also conducts thematic studies to provide evidence of project outcomes: the results of such studies can serve as the starting point of a new capitalization process. We have also tried to mirror the analysis – which involves identifying and selecting criteria and indicators to critically analyse the results obtained – within the project’s logical framework, using these indicators to determine whether a specific activity has been successful or not.

Most importantly, we realised the experience capitalization process differs from the standard M&E and KM methods because of the way the information gathered is tabulated. Before adopting this approach, the documentation of project activities and experiences was done by using different report formats for different audiences. Now we have a standardised format to gather information, and the templates allow us to properly record our activities. Using these templates, we can go back and try to find answers to the questions we weren’t previously asking, focusing on all those steps that were good and on those that were not so good in relation to each project result.

### **Challenges and lessons learned**

The main challenge in our organisation has been the absence of field visits to our various operational areas to validate and gather more information on the experiences being documented. This was due to limited funding for scaling up the process. Additional funding would have been necessary to increase the number of days over which the workshops were held – to increase participants’ understanding of the process – and embark on field visits where applicable.

But in spite of these difficulties we have seen positive results, and many of the lessons learnt are now used to inform future projects, such as the newly approved Agricultural Value Chain Development Project, which will start later this year and work to establish strong linkages between the private sector and smallholder farmers. Additionally, a former colleague who worked with me during the various workshops I held, has expressed interest in replicating the path we have followed in his new office at the Sierra Leone Red Cross Society. Our organisation looks forward to providing all the necessary support they may require.

Experience capitalization is a timely idea, not only for my organisation but for many other development organisations in Africa where there is need to document the lessons learnt in rural development initiatives. If we are to change the face of agriculture and rural development programmes in Africa by making them more efficient and evidence-based, there is need to look in detail at all activities and results, and to share lessons and recommendations.



*Right Key staff were shown how experience capitalization could be pivotal in project implementation. This made the institutionalization process much easier*



The need to embark on strategic partnerships that will popularise the methodology in this part of the globe cannot be overemphasised. Towards this end, tangible evidence in the form of knowledge products has been generated and shared by this project. Sharing these knowledge products is especially important, in the same way as supporting change agents within development organisations. A wealth of information from rural development initiatives (particularly agriculture) is available, all of which can help improve other initiatives. Experience capitalization can help scale-up success.

### ***Next steps for NPCU***

The financing agreement for the new Agricultural Value Chain Development Project was recently signed by the Government of Sierra Leone and IFAD, and implementation of the same will begin soon. As a result, we look forward to building on what we have already started within the Rural Finance Programme by documenting experiences at every stage of the new project. The human resources department will help us by ensuring that the job descriptions of all key

department staff include experience capitalization functions. The staff's commitment to such activities will be reviewed as part of their annual performance evaluations. Additionally, since the concept of experience capitalization is new to most organisations in Sierra Leone, we look forward to sharing information with those interested. This will be done with the products we have developed and, where applicable, with new experience capitalization training workshops.



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