



Chorlaví Group
Building a Social Learning Network
1998 – 2005

Executive Summary

Santiago, January 2005

Introduction

The objective of the Chorlaví Group (CG) is to promote and facilitate decentralized social learning aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of initiatives that can lead to changes in rural Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). This objective is linked to a well-defined thematic agenda of sustainable rural development.

Participation in the CG is free and open to all non-governmental organizations (NGOs), rural organizations (ROs), foundations, universities, research and training centers, and other organizations and/or individuals who share the Group's mission and objectives.

The CG is governed by a Council of eight experts and representatives of sponsoring organizations. It is funded by the Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO, Netherlands) and the International Development Research Center (IDRC, Canada). The *Asociación Latinoamericana de Organizaciones de Promoción* (ALOP) sponsors the CG and the *Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo Rural* (Rimisp) is responsible for its Executive Secretariat.

At the beginning of 2005, the Council requested that Rimisp undertake a systematization of the CG. This process was meant to be a critical analysis of CG performance since its establishment and aimed to discover useful lessons, which could be shared with other learning networks, as well as insights that might improve future performance. This analysis included the first product and service quality assessment as well as an evaluation of CG outcomes and impacts.

The systematization process, which took place between May and September 2005, consisted of: a) a detailed document review including annual monitoring and assessment reports prepared by the CG; b) in-depth interviews with qualified informants related to the CG; c) specific analyses of different CG tools via surveys and interviews; and d) six in-depth country case studies, which were a particularly revealing component of the process.

This document synthesizes¹ the main findings with emphasis on two aspects: CG organization and development, and CG outcomes and impacts. The document also includes relevant conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned.

Origin and Development of the Chorlaví Group

The evolution of the CG has been a dynamic process of innovation and “adaptive management.” The table below summarizes stages in the CG's history and illustrates that the most significant changes occurred in the following areas: (1) conceptual framework; (2) operational framework; (3) thematic agenda; (4) stakeholders and users; (5) governance; and (6) tools.

¹ Complete documents (the main report and background annexes, including the reports of each case study) can be found at: www.grupochorlavi.org

Table 1. Key Stages and Milestones in the Chorlaví Group’s Development

| Year | Stage | Key Milestones |
|-----------|--|---|
| 1997/1998 | Group background | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research Program on Monitoring and Assessment Methodologies for Natural Resource Management Projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, with IDRC funding; the first experience with a small projects grant. • Seminar held in Ibarra, Ecuador (at the Chorlaví Hacienda) organized by ALOP and ICCO, to discuss experiences in sharing mechanisms between NGOs and ROs. |
| 1999/2000 | Group start-up | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ALOP and ICCO select Rimisp via a public bidding process to implement a pilot plan for CG development. • Pilot project implementation. |
| 2001/2004 | The Group’s first three years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Merging of the Minga Fund (supported by IDRC) and the Chorlaví Fund (supported by ICCO and ALOP) forming the Mink’a de Chorlaví Fund (FMC). • Joint launching of the InterCambios Bulletin with FIDAMERICA. • Launching of the CG and FMC web sites. • At the end of 2004, the CG Council and the FMC Committee met extensively to reflect on the experiences to date and to draw lessons for the design of a new phase. |
| 2005/2007 | The Group’s second three years (current stage) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Merger of the CG Council and the FMC Committee into a single governing body (CG Council). • Definition of a central learning theme for the second three-year period. • Definition of social learning projects as the Group’s main strategy. • Detailed definition of the Group’s target population. |

Conceptual Framework: Moving towards Social Learning

The initial concept of experience sharing transformed into organizational learning and eventually into social learning. Organizational learning means that organizations have the power to learn through the individuals that comprise them, where training is key to creating processes of change in the attitudes of personnel within the organizations.

On the other hand, social learning focuses on identifying the extent to which individuals learn, not only from their direct experience, but also from observing the experiences of others. This represents a qualitative leap that better reflects the experience of the CG platform in terms of the process of generating and adding value to knowledge. Thus, the CG social learning process is characterized as: a) originating from and being based on critical reflection on innovative transformative experiences happening within rural communities; b) linking individual experience with broader spaces where lessons drawn from individual experiences can become part of the institution; c) being useful to and seeking to influence agents of change; d) using methods that enable the development of potential, abilities, and creativity; e) mobilizing stakeholders that operate in partnerships and support ongoing initiatives; f) possessing a regional (continental) scope; and g) being multisectoral and able to find common ground across specialized reflections and thematic organizations.

The Operational Framework: From the Learning Cycle to the Learning Project

The learning cycle was an organizational learning strategy implemented to address three themes: (Collective Action and Improvement in the Living Conditions of Rural Households - CA, Rural Territorial Development - RTD and Decentralized Environmental Governance - DEG).

Currently, the basic CG working unit is the learning project, which is understood to be as a set of activities linked to systematization, critical reflection, dialogue, communication and documentation, amongst others. By means of a systematic, analytical, and comprehensive process, the learning project aims to answer questions about a specific and relevant theme (or axis theme).

Regarding the learning cycle, the social learning project includes: a) greater specification of learning objectives that introduce detailed, state-of-the-art information on the theme in order to distinguish between cutting-edge questions and widely recognized lessons and/or knowledge; b) the integration of all tools available to the CG; and c) better coordination between different kinds of participation, stressing the integration of catalysts for change.

The Thematic Agenda

Initially, the process included six well-defined themes. Later, the thematic agenda was expanded based on independent annual definitions (e.g. CA, RTD, DEG). Currently, a three-year macro-theme is defined that coordinates the learning projects implemented each year. Therefore, for the 2005-2007 period, the CG will focus its activities on institutional and production transformation processes of poor and traditionally marginalized rural areas that, despite facing adverse conditions, have been able to empower themselves based on creative strategic visions.

Stakeholders and Users

The target population was organized into thematic work teams. It rapidly became apparent that this approach was repetitive of the work done by other networks. The focus was then redirected towards reaching so-called “invisible” NGOs and ROs not generally included in international efforts. Later, emphasis was placed on organizations that could be considered “nodes” within formal or informal networks. Gradually, several issues emerged related to what was deemed to be a very vague and broad definition of CG users.

Based on such experiences, the decision was made to facilitate social learning processes that involved catalysts for change. “Catalysts for change” are understood as being individuals, groups, or organizations that are developing new ways of thinking and transforming rural societies through their actions and/or ideas, thereby helping to push current boundaries of knowledge, practice and policy. However, the CG is still committed to disseminating learning project outcomes to a broader set of institutions

and ROs engaged in Latin American rural issues. Hence, the Group works with “targeted users” and “non targeted users”.

Governance

A constant concern is the establishment of a governance system – Council or Committee – for the CG that provides effective strategic and planning guidance while at the same time avoiding burdensome and costly bureaucratic procedures. Likewise, the Executive Secretariat is constantly seeking to improve the quality, efficiency, and accountability of its processes, ensuring the broadest possible participation while minimizing administrative and operational costs. The basic criterion to follow is that the network or platform is chiefly engaged with specific initiatives and the “apparatus” is very agile. The following figures demonstrate the success of these efforts: of the US\$800,000 program costs between 2001 and 2004, 9.4% were for administration and management expenditures, 3.1% for monitoring and assessment, and 87.5% for funding CG activities.

Tools²

The evolution of the CG did not lead to increasingly complex tools, but rather a better coordination of the tools in use in order to strengthen the learning experience and expand and diversify the stakeholder and user network. The main tools used by the CG are described below.

The Mink’a de Chorlaví Fund (FMC)

The concept of a “competitive fund” has driven the knowledge building process at CG. The management and implementation of this activity has been subject to a dynamic process of change.

Initially, calls for bids were made through electronic means. Over 90 proposals involving more than 120 organizations from 12 to 15 LAC countries were received in each round of competition. Mechanisms to ensure process transparency have been continually improved.

In the second three-year period, the FMC underwent three major modifications: a) merger of the CG and FMC Council into a single Council that has both planning and strategic powers; b) selection by the Council of an external consultant independent from the Executive Secretariat contracted to audit and certify the competition rating process; and c) the introduction of mechanisms focused on correcting imbalances, such as those related to geographic areas. After identification of the tendency of some sub-regions (especially Central America) to be under-represented in the group of awardees,

² User quality assessment of e-conferences, the InterCambios bulletin, and the website is based on the comparison with similar instruments from other development institutions and networks.

promotion workshops targeting those sub-regions were conducted beginning in 2003. As a result, the participation of Central American organizations almost doubled (from 10% to 18%).

E-Conferences

Since its inception, the CG has conducted 12 e-conferences. On average, each conference generated more than 150 messages amongst participants and was followed by more than 1,500 people. Based on an assessment of the conferences over the past four years, a large portion of participants read all or most of the material shared during the session. Ninety-six percent consider the content to be 'very useful' or 'useful'; a little more than 76 percent of those who responded to the surveys referred to the quality of the e-conferences as 'good' or 'excellent'.

The InterCambios Bulletin and the Chorlaví Group Website

The surveys show that a large portion of readers (67%) find that the bulletin helps them to improve their work performance and 82% say that the topics addressed in the bulletin are relevant to their institutions. More than 54% find the bulletin to be of excellent quality.

The CG website also shows an increasing number of users. There have been more than 800,000 hits per year, with a considerable increase in 2003, which had over 900,000 hits. Seventy-five percent of users consider the site's content to be relevant to their institutions and 50% say that the content helps them to improve work performance. This explains why the number of documents downloaded from the site increased 15-fold between 2001 and 2005, finally reaching 32,000 successful downloads each year. Almost all the people interviewed report the content quality to be 'good' or 'excellent'.

Distance Courses

At the end of the learning cycle on Collective Action and Improvements in the Living Conditions of Rural Households in 2002, the FAO and FODEPAL signed a cooperative agreement to publish CG materials on this theme and develop a distance training course for practitioners of LAC rural development. This course was held on two occasions with more than 40 students from approximately 12 countries in the region. The excellent outcomes of the course led to a new agreement between FAO-FODEPAL for 2006. Notably, a large portion of students appreciate the opportunity to address the theoretical concepts of collective action with real life examples provided by the CG.

Outcomes and Impacts

The systematization process included case studies³ that addressed the following question: *Are the strategies and processes developed by the CG and the FMC suitable*

³ Case studies were carried out in six countries with 14 projects and involved about 90 people from institutions and ROs who were interviewed or with whom assessment workshops about the FMC and CG were conducted.

for social learning? The main conclusions focus on the following aspects: a) the FMC as a social learning process; b) The impacts: so what is all this good for? c) the CG: approaches to the added value of an interactive network.

The Mink'a de Chorlaví Fund as a Social Learning Process

Our analysis distinguished three relevant components to the social learning process promoted by the FMC: a) mechanisms and tools; b) participation; c) the dynamic organizational learning cycle.

Mechanisms and Tools

Opinion as to the acceptance level and quality of the main mechanisms and tools used by the Fund is unanimous in its praise, especially regarding the relevance and transparency of the competition, including information management, the initial meeting, and the definition of shared themes.

Regarding the conclusion of the learning cycle, suggestions were made in terms of deepening the value added through more coordinated and sustained efforts aimed at adequately “closing” the process and simultaneously improving product quality. This could be achieved by holding a final “face-to-face” meeting to share and assess experiences, providing further feedback, modifying the e-conference so that it is not the main closing activity, and diversifying final products.

Furthermore, the discussion provided additional critical elements regarding the quality of institutional reports, their dissemination and use among competition awardees, and the policies of winning institutions in terms of the dissemination of results, both publicly and internally, especially among the ROs involved.

Participation

Trends as to participation in systematization projects are mixed and can be grouped as follows: a) extreme situations occurring in a minority of cases (i.e. two projects from the 2001/2002 competitions) where the project idea and its development were essentially personal in nature, despite institutional support; b) intermediate situations (approximately six projects, mostly from the 2001 competition) where the lead institutions acknowledged that RO, private and public organization participation was circumstantial and restricted to information gathering methods; in some cases, this hindered ownership of the results and in others while it limited visible outcomes at the local level, there was some influence on public policy; and c) situations involving greater participation (approximately six projects, mainly from the 2002/2003 competitions) in which the participation of ROs and local governments was actively sought during the systematization process, leading to impacts on RO involvement and learning.

The Dynamic Learning Cycle

It is recognized that the CG – through the FMC – supports a learning cycle in which the systematization project is one of the main initiatives. The following aspects of the CG learning cycle merit particular attention: a) moments that permit closer and more interactive contact, i.e. face-to-face meetings; b) the combination of acquiring methodological tools and conceptually updating issues related to rural development; c) interaction with development agents, also open to researchers, intellectuals and decision-makers; d) the possibility of going beyond a micro-project vision and becoming involved at a regional level. Therefore, the added value appears to be in a more comprehensive learning cycle that includes methodological, conceptual, inter-stakeholder, and territorial approaches with strong organizational impacts.

Impact: So what is all this good for?

Impacts that reach beyond specific and short-term outcomes are often difficult to identify in network analyses. The CG has found some evidence of change and learning processes that have been influenced by participation in this network and, specifically, from the implementation of FMC projects. The evidence is summarized as follows:

- a) A small group of projects mainly related to personal issues, with little influence on institutions or ROs. These cases tend to be found in the first competitions, which is a good indicator of the Fund's development.
- b) A second group of projects are those in which conceptual and/or methodological impacts tend to be within the implementing organization, which can be seen, in part, as an improved management approach. The assumption is that certain types of projects supported by the CG initially deal with institutional strengthening, which in turn can result in better outcomes and impacts at the local level. This is a widely shared argument among networks and NGOs and it is based on truth. However, the relationship between institutional strengthening and local development is not direct.
- c) A third group is formed by projects that have broad impact, endure over time and, in some cases, have increased their scope. The range of impacts is wide and includes the design and implementation of specific field projects, local capacity building, as well as impact on regulations, policy-making, and public investment.

Given the depth of the impacts observed, it is realistic to consider the systematization project to be but one of several factors influencing the assessment. However, it is important to stress that the people involved in these experiences identify the FMC as a key catalyst for the development of such impacts, which clearly indicates an added value of the CG.

Selected Learning Outcomes and their Current Uses

- One university research and extension center is deepening its approach to linking DTR and social learning, specifically “translating” it into two new institutional projects: 1) supporting the drafting of a municipal plan, and 2) delivering two annual undergraduate and graduate courses at a public university.
- One international cooperation agency has included systematization tasks as part of an institutional department for knowledge and learning management, with assigned responsibilities and considerable budgets.
- The same agency has strengthened its DTR institutional profile and practice in the intervention areas of three countries involving dozens of implementing agencies – both NGOs and ROs – and has improved capacity building through training courses delivered at a public university.
- The concepts of community forestry and DEG developed in one systematization project have been included in a public regulatory agency’s work plans, in discussion regarding a new forest bill, and in a work plan funded by international donors in a Central American country.
- Several municipal governments have gained knowledge as to the application of analytical methods (e.g. perspective-linked vision, identification of strengths and weaknesses), which are elements that they consider useful for the preparation of municipal environmental management plans.
- Several NGOs have deepened their knowledge of natural resource management, land conservation, agro-forestry, livestock management, desertification, natural reserve management, and payment for environmental services. This knowledge is being used in the design and implementation of plans and projects in several countries.
- Several NGOs have gradually focused their projects on specific target groups such as women and youth, with positive outcomes in terms of improving their voice and decision-making power at household and local levels (e.g. local council meetings, community assemblies, local government) with some discernable changes in established power relationships.
- ROs from several countries have improved their participation and have developed their own spaces for debate and analysis not exclusively linked to a project or institution; they also show their willingness to continue capacity-building and participate or promote new systematization processes.
- NGOs, ROs, and local governments from two areas where mining companies are present have identified and begun using specific local conflict management tools.

Note: Examples are drawn from case study interviews of Mink’a de Chorlaví Fund awardees.

A further examination of the impact analysis identified signals as to the scope of application for the thematic conclusions and recommendations of the systematization. By confirming that neither the overall final synthesis nor the institutional reports provided clear information about such application, in order to verify (in-)consistencies with thematic recommendations we decided to identify the main changes observed from the systematization’s final year until present as perceived by stakeholders.

The intent is not for small projects such as those funded by the FMC to be responsible for such processes. Nonetheless, in some cases we did find a certain consistency between the recommendations of the systematization and the practices being developed. Questions that remain unanswered are the extent to which the considerable support provided by the CG promotes such validated practices and the extent to which the FMC is contributing to progressive learning linked to more innovative experiences that are pushing the boundaries of knowledge and options. The latter impact is apparently still in early stages of development.

**Application of Thematic Conclusions and Recommendations:
The Case of the Rural Territorial Development Competition**

- *For production transformation:* suggested practices being implemented are related to land conservation: the cultivation of grains, grasses, and traditional crops on preserved/restored land; the increase in products linked to traditional or niche markets – agro-ecological markets, for instance – and the development of non-agricultural income raising initiatives.
- *For institutional development:* recommendations with the highest levels of application include: the establishment and consolidation of integrated farmers' organizations (with an income raising purpose); the strengthening of local organizations and different interest groups, particularly for women and youth; the search for greater RO autonomy from institutions; accountability practices; improved relations with municipal governments; and municipal plan development.

The Chorlaví Group: Approaches to the Added Value of an Interactive Network

According to its initial purpose, the CG was a network/platform to add and link efforts and resources in LAC. The idea was to identify if there was an added or “hallmark” value in multiple inter-institutional scopes of action, for instance, service delivery, the social learning process, proposal design, and institutional strengthening. Considerable appreciation for the CG as an interactive network “of quality” was revealed. Compared to other networks and shared spaces, the added value of the CG can be characterized as:

Flexibility. Unlike rigid networks organized based on vertical models, the CG is recognized as an “open” network. There are no apparent differences between members and non-members hindering participation. It is a platform that facilitates access to other networks and institutions. In this sense, the CG prioritizes flow of contacts, information and knowledge, and “networking,” rather than the institutional structure and its maintenance.

Executive management. Although comments have been made about some mechanisms and tools used by the Fund, overall management is considered to be transparent and efficient, especially in relation to the competition. Coordination is completed via a minimal structure that is sufficient for the network to operate freely, channeling generally appreciated services, especially the website (considered to be versatile and dynamic) and bulletins.

Focus on knowledge and learning. Particularly noteworthy are the spaces for debate (mainly face-to-face), theoretical quality, updating, dissemination, and validation of relevant rural development concepts and themes – all features linked with Rimisp researchers – as well as different means of communication, including e-conferences, which are largely appreciated by “extended” users.

Main Conclusions and Recommendations

Group Dynamics

1. The CG has demonstrated a great capacity for adaptation and innovation in terms of concepts, approaches, organization, methods, and tools, based on feedback from practical application, assessment, and reflection focused on proactive and quick adjustments. The CG is considered to have been a great learning program for donors, the Management Council, and Rimisp.
2. The CG working method is recommended as a permanent practice. However, after the previous development stages, greater “stability” would be preferable in terms of allowing sufficient application time for new strategies and mechanisms, as well as facilitating comparative assessments of the innovation outcomes as to their impact on elements needing improvement.

Learning Practices

1. As a social learning platform, the CG demonstrates several positive attributes: a) selection of innovative themes in the current rural development setting; b) systematization of field experiences; c) participation of different stakeholders; d) a certain level of influence on institutions and ROs that directly or indirectly participate in process analysis; and e) contribution to broader knowledge in defined themes. Learning is strengthened by the decision to receive good quality information through the e-bulletin or to participate in e-conferences.
2. Additional efforts are needed to determine key aspects of the learning process and learning outputs. Questions still exist about the ability to influence all development stakeholders by means of networks based on ICT applications. More specific analyses are required as to how to have such influence without compromising the CG’s feature as an interactive network with multiple and diverse users.

The FMC

1. Undoubtedly, the FMC is the most powerful of the CG’s tools. This is reflected in the considerable effort and resources allocated to the Fund, its well-known reputation among people linked to the CG, active participation in the FMC competition, and the impact of outcomes on other CG activities.
2. The systematization of experiences is the main source of CG learning material. This tool is highly valued and several institutional and community/RO impacts can be associated with being a competition awardee and having systematized field experiences. There are strengths and weaknesses in the systematization

process and its outcomes, but, overall, it is a tool that develops knowledge and facilitates learning on several levels within the CG's diverse audiences.

3. The FMC could carry out the following specific actions to increase RO participation, particularly that of Central American institutions: a) direct reference to ROs and institutions in the competition invitation, which may include bonus points for proposals from these groups; b) involving catalysts for change so that help for proposal submission to the Fund can be provided from within their network of contacts; c) alliance-building between ROs and applied research centers to create consortiums to participate in the Fund; and d) simplifying the terms of the invitations and rules to make them more universal.
4. It is preferable that stakeholders themselves systematize experiences given that they are the most familiar with the processes under discussion. To this end, we suggest that institutions applying to the Fund: a) ensure community participation from early stages in proposal design, and attach related written evidence; b) provide written community commitment to the systematization of the experience and, preferably, to the rest of the learning cycle; and c) commitment from the institution applying to the Fund, to provide feedback to the communities with whom the systematization process is being undertaken.
5. The users of the communication tools have a good impression of activities that add value to the knowledge developed by the systematization process, however, the teams that carry out the tasks do not share this perception. We recommend: a) establishment of a contractual participation commitment with competition awardees for all learning cycle activities; b) monitoring awardee participation in e-conferences; c) assessment of the quality of participation in e-conferences as one of the criteria for participation in other activities, such as learning routes or the final project meeting; and d) monitoring quality of the final synthesis and inclusion of the best systematization final reports in this document.
6. The final outputs of the systematization and the publication linked to each learning cycle must undergo quality control. This requires: a) clear and timely guidelines for drafting the final report, including assistance from each learning project's facilitator; b) external revision of final reports and deliverables for publication; c) retention of a significant portion of final payment for release once quality requirements for the final deliverables have been met; and d) additional efforts to adequately reflect the conclusions and lessons learned throughout the entire process, which will serve to minimize generalizations in the final synthesis.

Diverse Audiences

1. Users positively assess the quality of CG communications tools and FMC activity outputs. Given the CG's diverse audiences – i.e. target population – a variety of products are needed, regardless of common themes.

2. The roles and participation of new audiences (for example, catalysts for change) must be monitored so as to ensure that CG tools are consistent with the characteristics of this new target group.
3. An additional recommendation is to pursue alliances with other networks and/or organizations that work on similar themes in order to share valuable experiences, both in terms of knowledge and learning promotion.

Assessment System

1. The assessment of the CG began with an analytical approach focused primarily on annual work plans. During this second three-year period, there was a gradual transition towards scope mapping combined with an assessment of learning goals. This effort will be supplemented with in-depth case studies to continue identifying and deepening analysis of the network's field impacts. This stage should include graduate students.

Lessons Learned

A flexible work scheme and a dynamic and effective learning model are considerable benefits for projects that operate in networks with virtual users and audiences that are initially difficult to identify. For such conditions to work, an effective interplay is needed among donors, government agencies, and the implementing institution. This interplay demands profound and ongoing analysis of outcomes based on broad consultation and dynamic assessment mechanisms.

The fulfillment of learning goals in an open and virtual scheme appears to correspond with multiple factors: a) the ability in the short term to generate knowledge for related audiences and practitioners; b) the ability to involve multiple stakeholders that add value to and generalize the knowledge generated; c) the use of critical and participatory analytical methods, which involve direct stakeholders in field activities intended to develop knowledge; (d) broad dissemination of interim and final outcomes; e) a highly flexible governance and management system adaptable and responsive to different audiences; and f) a permanent analysis and assessment process that permits efficient and timely adjustments.

A mechanism to systematize real experiences related to cutting-edge rural development issues would be a powerful tool for developing knowledge amongst applied research institutions, ROs, NGOs, and other organizations and would serve as basis for social learning and, at the same time, contribute to the knowledge of themes and innovations that play an important role in Latin American rural development strategies. For such a mechanism to be effective, it needs to have clearly established, transparent, and well-managed guidelines, as well as sufficiently attractive and interesting proposals that ensure a high-quality competition.