

Experience Capitalisation

Elements for a strategy in dispersed projects

Compiled by Elisabeth Katz, LBL, based on work together with staff of the IC-LEAF¹ project in Bangladesh

Experience is not what happens to a person. It is what a person does with what happens to him/her. (Aldous Huxley)

Experience capitalisation – what is it? A look at what people call experience capitalisation reveals different concepts and perceptions responding to different needs. Since there are more and more projects and programmes who work with many different local partners, often in dispersed locations, learning from the experiences across these different partners becomes increasingly important. The IC-LEAF project in Bangladesh is one such project, and it takes the challenge of capitalising on the diverse experiences made very serious.² Their first efforts and insights may be useful for many other projects and programmes, and thus we share them with this article.

Introduction

When early this year a request for support in experience capitalisation efforts came in from a project in Bangladesh, we – the International Team of LBL – thought this is what we have been doing for 20 years now, and thus this assignment will be simple; we just have to adapt our mechanisms and methods to the needs of a project. To get ideas on how this adaptation could look, we googled

¹ IC-LEAF (Livelihoods, Empowerment and Agroforestry Project), implemented by Intercooperation and funded by SDC, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

² In fact, LEAF's predecessor projects already engaged in formal experience capitalisation and the design of LEAF was guided by the insights gained. The resulting capitalisation documents are available with LEAF.

“ex-perience capitalisation” and similar expressions. However, this internet search brought myriads of sites and documents on knowledge management but not much helpful on experience capitalisation, except the insight that there is no universal perception about it, although in the development circles there is much talk, not only about knowledge management, but also about experience capitalisation. So the work in Bangladesh started with discussions on what different people mean when they talk experience capitalisation, and with getting to a common understanding for the LEAF project. Based on this, a strategy and processes to do experience capitalisation in this project were elaborated, the cornerstones of which are presented in the following. How it turns out in practice remains to be seen. We hope to be able to tell you more in the next issue of the Rural Development News.

Different forms of experience capitalisation

Most efforts undertaken that are explicitly termed experience capitalisation are ex-post efforts to learn from experiences made over a longer period of time – sometimes in one project/programme or, more frequently, across several projects/programmes with similar tasks. Typical examples from the SDC environment are:

- Livestock development experiences in India: an extensive exercise to capture the experiences made during 20 years of Swiss-funded livestock development projects in India. The efforts were led by external consultants. Later a new project was initiated with the objective of feeding relevant insights into the livestock sector and influence frame conditions towards priorities of rural livelihoods.
- Experience capitalisation of Clean Air Projects of SDC: Workshop with representatives of all project partners. Output – a list of working principles to guide the design of future Clean Air projects.

- Thematic cross-sectional studies: Studies which analyse the experiences of different projects/programmes regarding a particular issue, and draw conclusions e.g. on success factors or on advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to an issue. Such analyses can be done through external consultants visiting the experiences to be analysed, as desk studies through documents and email interaction, through workshops with representatives of the case study projects or directly by representatives of the case study projects. Examples are LBL's study on innovative mechanisms for financing rural services or Helvetas' lessons learnt from using rapid market appraisals. This type of experience capitalisation should provide ideas to others on how to deal with similar issues in their own environment.
- Communities of Practice (CoPs): People involved with similar activities in different places and organisations discuss and analyse their practical experiences, and draw out insights and learnings. Although recently there is much talk about on-line CoPs, they may as well be based on periodical face-to-face interaction.

A kind of experience capitalisation efforts which arise more spontaneous from implementation experiences and are usually not labelled as such, can be found in project publications, as case studies in published papers and workshops, and in newsletters and journals.

The experience capitalisation understanding of IC-LEAF adds another type to those mentioned above – experience capitalisation as a more immediate and continuous process of learning from experiences, done by the involved actors – staff and target people – themselves.³

³ Note that continuous learning from experiences is also an important tenet of Outcome Mapping. Read more in the article on page 49.

Defining characteristics of experience capitalisation (as understood by LEAF)

The discussions in LEAF resulted in the following defining characteristics of experience capitalisation for them:

- The term implies that the outcome of experience capitalisation is capital, i.e. something which is to be invested again.
- Occasions to reinvest the capital are:
 - continuous improvement of own project activities,
 - basing annual planning on insights gained in the previous year(s),
 - feeding experiences gained into the design of subsequent project phases and new projects,
 - other actors' activities and projects (through sharing the capital with a wider audience).

From these, the purposes of experience capitalisation can be derived: learning to improve project activities, and sharing learnings with a wider range of concerned actors to improve their activities.

- Experience capitalisation looks at processes and factors which lead to changes and outcomes
 - in order to understand what works well and what does not work well (good and bad practices),
 - identify facts and issues which contribute to successes and failures (success factors),
 - extract positive and negative lessons and insights.

It looks at **HOW** (and **WHY**) something is being achieved, as opposite to poverty and other outcome monitoring which look at **WHAT** is being achieved. This differentiates experience capitalisation from outcome and success stories where it is often not understandable for readers how they were achieved.

The differentiation between experience capitalisation which looks at processes and causes, and looking at achieved outcomes/impact turned out to be important for LEAF, since the project recently also introduced poverty monitoring. Defining the difference helped in clearing up a certain confusion.

- Experience capitalisation is part of, and needs to be integrated into, the project's learning, controlling and monitoring system.

An analysis of what LEAF is doing related to experience capitalisation showed that aspects of it are taking place in many different processes of the monitoring and controlling system. Integration and utilisation of the resulting insights, however, is done rather intuitively than systematically.

A generic experience capitalisation process

The table below shows the main elements of experience capitalisation processes. These elements are generic for all experience capitalisation processes; but they can be put into practice in many different ways.

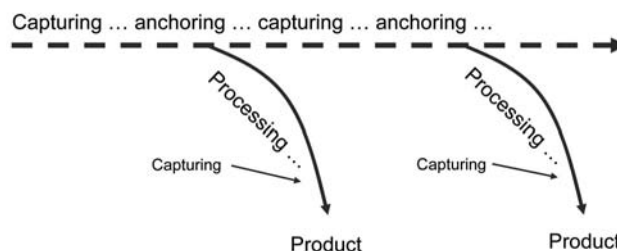
Generating experiences	Experiences are generated everywhere and always during project work – at the level of the target people and organisations as well as with staff at all levels.
Capturing experiences	Ensuring that worthwhile experiences are collected and become common assets of the project and do not remain the knowledge of a few people who were directly involved. Capturing experiences will usually mean to write them up in some form. Alternatively video or audio tapes where someone tells about the experiences could be used.
Anchoring experiences	Captured experiences need to be anchored so that they are not lost (as boats that are not anchored, drift away). This means that the recorded experiences are organised (sorted and stored) in an easily manageable way – on paper in files or in a database. The organising system should include a retrieval system which is easily accessible for all concerned people and a mechanism which culls stuff not worthwhile keeping from the system.
Processing experiences	Processing experiences means making capital out of them. This includes everything from analysing and synthesising available experiences over drawing insights and conclusions to outlining and writing capitalisation documents or other capitalisation products.

Experience shows that even very good documents are not adequately utilised if they are just sent around or placed on websites. Utilisation of the resulting experience capitalisation products thus needs to be promoted and facilitated.

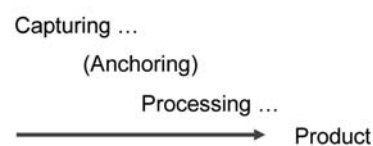
A continuous process combined with concerted efforts

Experiences can be captured and anchored continuously in an on-going system and as concerted efforts when experiences on a particular issues are sought. Capturing pieces of experiences whenever they arise is maybe more resource-consuming, but likely also more accurate.

Processing the experiences then needs concerted efforts at certain points in time. For processing it may be necessary to complement the experience pieces captured and anchored in a regular process with targeted search for pieces to get a complete picture.



Continuous capturing and anchoring combined with concerted processing efforts.



Concerted effort over short time.

LEAF is currently implementing several concerted experience capitalisation efforts; on a longer term it plans to establish a continuous experience capitalisation system, integrated into its other controlling and monitoring activities.

Choice of issues and outputs

The thematic scope of experience capitalisation efforts needs to be precisely defined. Often it is advisable to narrow it down, i.e. to determine particular issues which are of high interest at a given point in time, and focus experience capitalisation efforts on these. At the same time keep eyes and ears open for emerging issues to capitalise.

An experience capitalisation output needs to be adapted to its purpose and the envisaged audience. A product to share experiences with a new approach with a wider audience has different requirements than one to guide direct project partners in improving certain implementation processes. It is difficult to satisfy all purposes with one and the same product.

An experience capitalisation output may be formal documents of varying scope and size, but can as well be sections in periodical and annual reports or articles in newsletters etc.

Occasions for capturing experiences

In programme activities there may be different occasions on which experiences can be captured:

Any time during work. Development workers come across worthwhile experiences and pieces of experience very often, while interacting with target partners, but also while interacting with other staff, in workshops etc. The challenge is to recognise what is worthwhile to capture. To ensure that such capturing actually happen, a programme may require staff to submit for example at least two experience pieces per month.

During formal meetings. In the regular exchange and coordination meetings which most programmes have, special time slots may be allocated to capturing experience pieces.

On specially organised occasions. One-off or periodic experience capitalisation events may be used to collect experience pieces on selected topic and jointly reflect on them.

Tools and mechanisms for capturing experiences

Many methods to collect information for studies, diagnostics etc can be used also for experience capitalisation (e.g. PLA tools). In the following box some tools and mechanisms which are more specific to experience capitalisation are presented. For experience capitalisation efforts usually a clever combination of different tools is necessary.

Observations: Write-ups of remarkable observations on processes and how to do things made during project activities.

Reflections: Insights based on formal or informal, individual or joint reflection on experiences.

Story telling: Stories and statements by people which illustrate an experience. With stories very personal views on experiences are captured.

After action review: Right after an action the people involved review the experiences made with a view on insights and lessons.

Joint learning review: Looking back at experiences with a particular approach or process after some time or at certain moments for and analyse for insights and lessons.

Micro-workshop: A short workshop where a small group of people discusses experiences around a certain issue.

Cross-interview: Two people interview each other regarding a certain issue. Each one prepares his/her own set of questions.

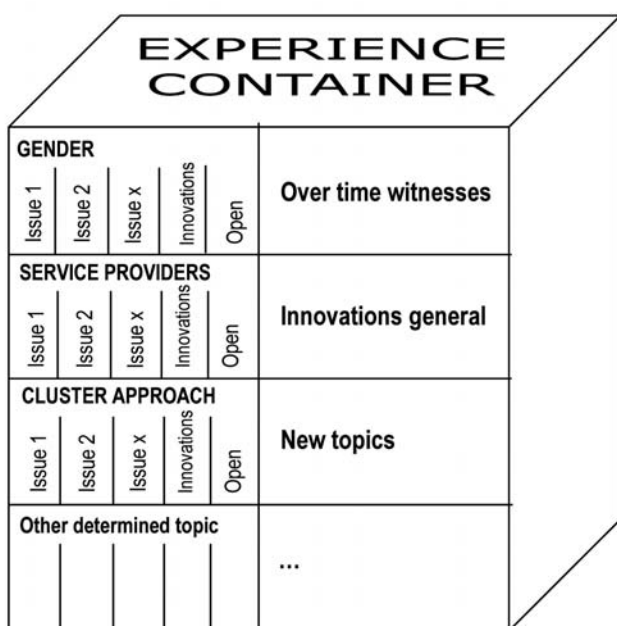
Community of Practice: People involved in similar tasks in different places meet regularly – virtually or face-to-face – to discuss experiences and derive insights and learnings.

Blog: A virtual or physical space (on a website or in the form of a folder or notebook) to which everybody (of a group) has access and can post text, reacting to what other people have written before.

Witnesses over time: Regular interaction with selected actors from the target group to capture their views on processes and changes in them over time.

An anchoring system

Captured experiences need to be stored somehow. The graph below shows an experience container as a possible storage system. Such a container may consist of physical files or be a place on the computer system. The experience container has different compartments providing space for experience pieces on different topics and issues. LEAF envisages also space for innovations on particular topics and in general, as well as space for new, upcoming issues and topics.



In projects with dispersed staff and partner organisations, the question arises where to keep the experience container and who should manage which part of the contents. The adequate answer will have to be determined in each case separately.

Actors of experience capitalisation

All actors involved – staff of development organisations as well as people of the target system – can be suppliers of experiences, since they all generate experiences.

Capturing and anchoring experiences will usually be a task of development organisation staff, although target people may be involved for issues which help them directly to improve their own activities.

For analysing and processing experiences on specific topics LEAF forms task forces. These are composed of staff of different levels (project support unit, regional offices and partner NGO staff), and care is taken that subject matter specialists as well as non-specialists are included in the TF to ensure the consideration of different points of view.

In view of the heavy workload of project staff the question may arise whether to engage external consultants for the experience capitalisation efforts. LEAF has made bad experiences with this, but they are considering another try in which the ownership of the effort and the control over contents and insights remain with the project; the external consultant remains a servant of the project and does not become the leader of the thinking process. Such a consultant may have the role of a coach and facilitator and/or a ghost writer.