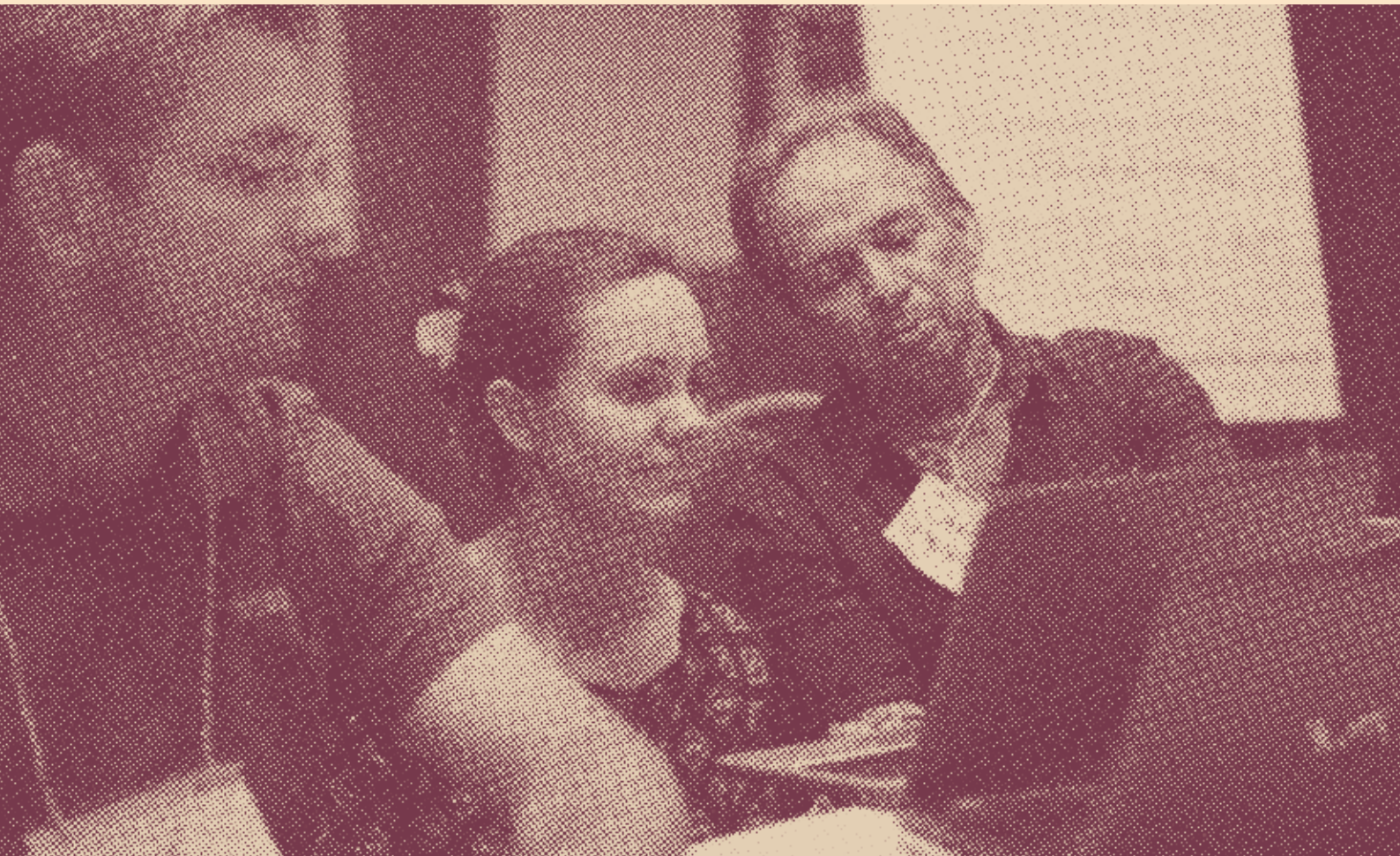

WRITING FOR THOSE WHO'LL READ

Dirce Ostroski



An experience capitalization process is a short, practical, effective and simple process, and its final product is a document which is complete. It is possible to focus on activities within the farm of a single, small-scale producer, as well as to capitalize a broad programme involving, let's say, 500 communities. This is one of the things that makes the methodology very attractive. Moreover, a capitalization process includes the analysis of both negative and positive aspects in a particular experience, and draws lessons from them. This brings us a step beyond the systematisation processes we are familiar with in the Brazilian Semiárido.

I was invited to join the workshops that CTA organised in Mozambique in 2017. My initial intention was to focus on the work of some lace makers in Paraiba, the state where I live, but this is part of a project which was only starting then. On my own initiative, I decided to look instead at the knowledge management activities which were part of the implementation of the IFAD-funded project called SEMEAR, which was then ending. I was very interested in looking at what we had done and achieved, even though this meant focusing on a six-year long programme.

Not surprisingly, I found it difficult to select which of the different interventions to consider – especially because I was aware that leaving things out was unavoidable. I had to make many decisions on my own as, when the workshop started, the SEMEAR teams had already been dissolved. As I was the project coordinator, I still had the task of delivering the final audit reports. But there was no one to talk to. In addition, the programme had spread across eight states, and the only way I found to gather additional information was to phone a few beneficiaries, and ask them for their opinions.

The merit of the tables

We were recommended to fill in a set of tables, as templates, and I did this with the information I had

with me in Maputo. Like my colleagues, at first I was a bit reluctant. Why? Because it is necessary to make choices, prioritise some ideas above others, and discard the rest. Usually, we do not want to choose, and we want to put everything in every document we write. This happened to me too. And the other difficulty I saw was that I had to pick ideas that are strongly interconnected with each other, and to separate them between the different columns and rows in these tables. These two factors took me from my “comfort zone”: we are not used to dealing with information in this practical, direct way.

However, when it came to writing, I realised how useful these previous steps were: the tables are very useful as a guide. When I started to write a first draft document I had already gone through the difficult steps of separating, prioritising, and organising information, and it was much easier to go on. Now I see that it is easier to get out of the “comfort zone” and complete a document when you understand the purpose of those tables. They help us see what we know and what we don't know. They help us see what is linked and what is not, and then it is also easier to add new elements – such as the information one comes across after a workshop.

For those who do not have the habit of structuring a text, writing an article can be very difficult. I think of people like me, working in the field: our documents

Cover Testing some of the choices made when writing



Above “We were recommended to fill in a set of tables...”

are often jots that have to be linked to become a running text. With this methodology, the tables help us to divide this difficulty into pieces. This is the merit of the tables. Then we look at each one of those small pieces and see what fits best into the text.

In fact, the importance of the tables only became clear to me after the second workshop we had in Maputo, when I was already completing the article. What had cost me most time was to decide what was necessary and what was essential. Particularly, I think that writing little is essential. We are nowadays bombed by an enormous amount of information. To me, it is clear that the larger the text, the lesser its chances of being read.

Determinants

Once I had a first draft, there was almost no time or opportunity for comments. The SEMEAR team was not there anymore, and my IFAD colleagues would

have needed more than 30 days to make comments – something which was not possible. The other participants were also under a great pressure of time.

So I made some decisions. When writing, I think it is very important to think for whom, and for which purpose, I am writing. I value simple texts because there are more people in the world who prefer simple texts, and who find it difficult to understand complex documents. If they are the ones who will be reading what we write, then we need to strive for simple texts. But I was also asked to prepare a document that would go to IFAD and to other organisations, and which therefore required a more formal tone. Although I personally prefer to be direct and practical; I sought a balance between the two styles.

I used quotes and photos to highlight the most important ideas. Some of the quotes in the final article came from those phone conversations. Yet, most of them I had collected throughout the process, as material for the reports (before I had ever

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thought of completing a capitalization process). I believe that the examples and the statements I added in the final article are a dense summary of what I heard throughout evaluations and conversations. At the same time, the photos were already available, as they were made during the years of implementation of the activities of the programme. It is important to note, however, that if we had known we were going to be doing this, we would have also collected other types of information for the analysis, and we would have done it in a participatory way, in parallel with the day-to-day implementation of all activities.

Now that my document is ready, I see that the biggest difficulty I had was when talking about the negative results. Analysing the problems that have occurred is more difficult than analysing what went right. As far as I know, we do tend to focus only on those cases that have been successful. However, when you avoid

touching sensitive issues – institutional ones in particular – you may miss the opportunity to draw key lessons, and to help others so that do not make the same mistakes. You feel more comfortable to document the challenges when you dare to look at what did not turn out as planned – and then you draw the most interesting lessons.



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