




Pamphlet 4

## Learning at RedEAmérica

Rodrigo Villar



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Foundations and Companies for Grassroots  
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## Learning at RedEAmérica

Grass-roots development, as analyzed throughout these pamphlets, has the fundamental goals of generating capabilities for collective action by poor citizens and promoting an enabling environment and public interest institutions that facilitate participation by grass-roots organizations in deliberation and in the search for solutions to their own problems. The foundations and companies who are members of the Network account for very broad accumulated experience in diverse strategies at different levels of action, aimed at promoting capacities for collective action and supporting the development of public interest institutions that facilitate grass-roots development.

Each Network member can contribute certain basic strategies and elements for grass-roots development, but none of them has all of the answers. The Network's great potential is its critical mass of experience and knowledge that enables it to influence the field of development in a way that none of its members by themselves could hope to do so.

The documentation, interchange and collective learning among the members of the Network thus becomes immensely powerful in extending knowledge and development of the methodologies, not just among the Network's members, but among all foundations and companies interested in grass-roots development in Latin America. This sharing of knowledge also translates into opportunities to influence national and international development agencies that can support this type of development.

Given the Network's practical orientation and its intention to be influential in the world of development, the learning that is generated should be converted into intervention models, procedures, standards for action and other forms of knowledge aimed at action.

The challenge with a learning plan of this kind is to prioritize and specify the questions and the collective learning process in order to advance as a Network in acquiring the knowledge needed for improving its members' grass-roots development programs, to offer alternatives to all foundations and companies interested in these types of activities and to have an influence on the guidelines of development agencies.

Achieving a worthwhile learning system in this field requires a systematic and focused effort, along with making connections between persons knowledgeable about grass-roots development and those needing information on the subject. This, in turn, implies converting the knowledge accumulated by each Network member into a collective body of knowledge in this field. A Network such as RedEAmérica, which seeks to influence others, cannot limit itself to circulating knowledge among its members, but must instead collectively define and work on the challenges posed by the field of grass-roots development and jointly produce such knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

The following are some preliminary guidelines for organizing collective learning among the members of the Network. We begin by defining some units for analysis of the learning system and then go on to propose preliminary topics to guide this learning within each of these units of analysis.

<sup>1</sup> For more on these ideas, see Creech, Heather. *Strategic Intentions: Principles for Sustainable Development Knowledge Networks*. International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). 2001, pp. 3-4.



## Units of analysis in the RedEAmérica Learning System

A learning system oriented towards action must take into account and provide feedback for the different levels where the actors linked to the system intervene. Three units for analysis can be established. These units are:

**Grass-roots organizations and their projects.** This refers to grass-roots organizations supported by the Network's members in formulating, implementing and evaluating their projects. These organizations, along with the projects that they design and execute, constitute the Network's reason for being and that of grass-roots development itself. These groups intervene in their communities,

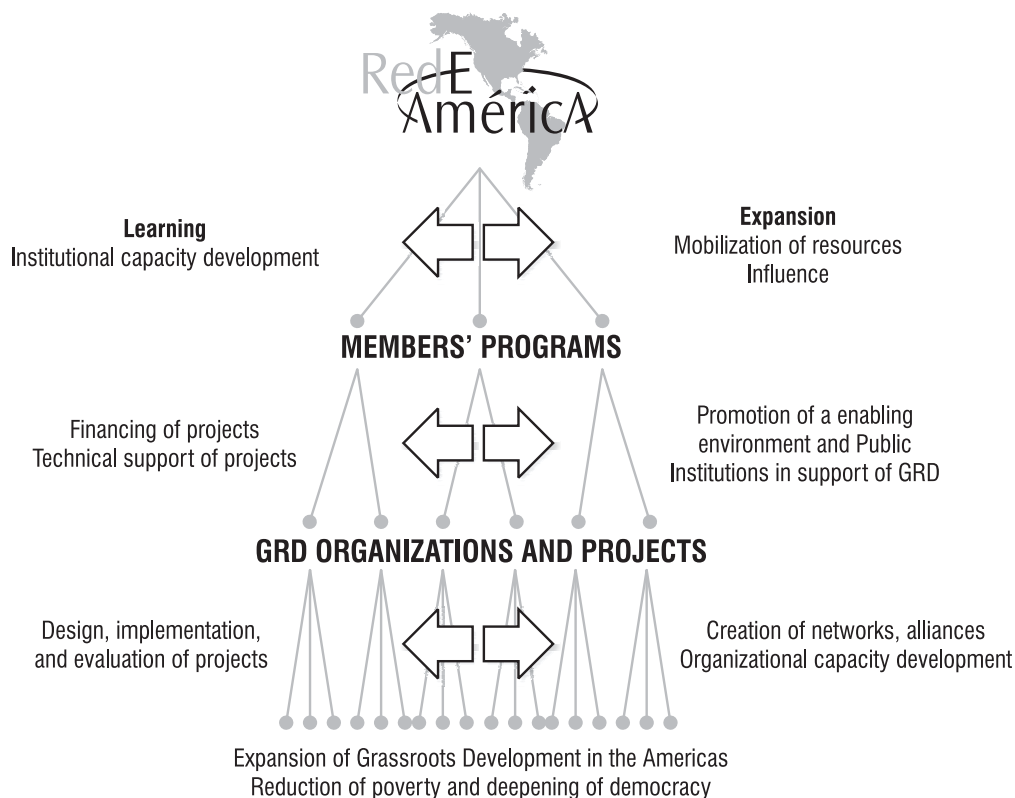
localities, regions or countries, and seek to strengthen their participation in order to improve their quality of life, increase their access to resources and participate in public discussion of matters that affect their lives.

**The members of the Network and their grass-roots development programs.** This includes strategies for financing and accompanying projects, as well as strategies to promote an environment favorable to public interest institutions that support grass-roots development.

**RedEAmérica and its programs.** This includes the programs of the Network and the activities of the national nodes (*nodos*). The Network intervenes as a whole to promote learning and the construction of institutional

### GRAPH I

UNITS OF ANALYSIS REDEAMÉRICA LEARNING SYSTEM



capabilities among its members, increase the number of members in the Americas, mobilize new resources for grass-roots development and influence development agencies and public policies so that they will make grass-roots development a central component of development agencies.

### **a. Learning about grass-roots organizations and their projects**

At the level of grass-roots organizations, the fundamental question has to do with the characteristics of the collective capabilities required by these organizations so they can participate more actively in reducing poverty and strengthening democracy.

#### **■ About the reasons for grass-roots development**

If the challenge for grass-roots development is to promote the voice and empowerment of poor citizens, and if the way of achieving this is through generating capacities for collective action, the fundamental question for grass-roots development proponents is, what type of collective capabilities are hoped for?

Grass-roots organizations' collective capabilities involve a wide range of organizational abilities and skills employed to reach objectives proposed by the groups, networks and alliances. These include capacities relating to planning, follow-up, evaluation and systematization of projects; management and administration of resources; coming to agreements and negotiating between the members of the organizations and between the members and other social actors, and the capacity to anticipate and adapt to change and have an influence in the public sphere.

For RedEAmérica, it is fundamentally important to understand better which are the principal collective capabilities and how are these linked together at the different levels of intervention on the part of grass-roots organizations (micro, meso and macro). For example, it is important to specify the type of collective action capabilities required for good performance by grass-roots

organizations; which collective capacities are required by networks of organizations in order to function and work in inter-sectorial alliances; and finally the capabilities needed so that grass-roots organizations can effectively participate in the public sphere and interact with public institutions.

This kind of learning will make it possible to contribute elements needed to determine, from the perspective of grass-roots development, which elements characterize a capable grass-roots organization, which define a strengthened network of grass-roots organizations and inter-sectorial alliances with participation by grass-roots organizations, and which are the principal characteristics required for participation by grass-roots organizations in discussion and lobbying about public policies. Answering these questions will help whoever supports grass-roots development to know more clearly what they want to promote.

The question about the collective capabilities of grass-roots organizations is linked to the question of their sustainability. This question requires identifying the essential characteristics that make it possible to predict that an organization can be sustained over time, as well as the principal obstacles in the processes of organizational strengthening and alternatives for overcoming them at the different levels of action (micro, meso, and macro).

Identifying collective capabilities, obstacles, strategies and factors that are present in processes for promoting sustainable grass-roots organizations will become an important tool for the members of RedEAmérica in their social interventions and for future members in the design and implementation of grass-roots development programs.

The Network has made important progress in the field of collective capabilities and the sustainability of grass-roots organizations. On one hand, specification of collective capacities has become a prerequisite in designing an evaluation system, while at the same time the study under way on the sustainability of grass-roots organizations has the subject of capabilities as its central focus.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For more on this point, see the results from the Workshop on Evaluation in Córdoba, August 2-4, 2004 and the terms of reference or description of work on strategies for developing the sustainability of grass-roots organization, drawn up by the Programa de Construcción de Capacidades Institucionales (Program for Construction of Institutional Capacities, PCCI), coordinated by the Fundación Corona.



### ■ On how to achieve grass-roots development

In this area, the subject of greatest interest to the Network is the role of projects as instrumental in strengthening collective capabilities and social learning in communities. If the projects are just brief moments in the timeframe for developing empowerment processes and increasing the capacities of communities, what are the principal characteristics of projects that generate these capacities? At the same time, if projects are opportunities for civic and social learning on the part of communities, what are the best ways to facilitate and incentive this learning during the course of the projects?

These topics relating to characteristics of the projects as tools for strengthening grass-roots organizations and for developing their collective capacities are a central part of the work of creating a guide to setting up programs for the financing and follow-up of grass-roots development projects.<sup>3</sup>

### ■ On evaluating grass-roots development

An important challenge in the learning plan as it has been proposed is to find evidence that the organizational capability of the poor contributes toward decreasing poverty and strengthening democracy. This includes discovering good practices in the mechanisms through which the poor and excluded are able to improve their living conditions with the support of these organizations and networks. This means addressing questions such as the following: How does participation by the poor in organizations or networks translate into greater economic and social welfare? What collective capacities better contribute towards generating economic, social and civic opportunities for poor citizens? And how is public policy affected when grass-roots organizations are active in public debate?

Collective thinking about these questions has been the key to building the system for evaluation and follow-up, and will also serve as the basis for defining hoped-for

benefits in the four-year investment plan RedEAmérica<sup>4</sup> is currently constructing.

### b. Learning about the grass-roots development programs and intervention strategies of members of the Network

The following are the areas of greatest interest in the grass-roots development programs promoted by members of the Network:

#### ■ Support programs for grass-roots development

The preceding pamphlets present the first ideas about the meaning of grass-roots development for Network members and its potential for decreasing poverty, strengthening democracy, overcoming social exclusion and promoting sustainable development. This framework serves as a point of reference in guiding the Network's programs and those of its members, while also constituting a living document that with feedback is modified as the Network's collective learning process goes forward.

In tandem with progress on this development framework, the Network is also formulating shared principles and criteria in order to guide the way in which its members support grass-roots projects and in order to subsequently create standards that will serve as a guide for constructing new development programs.<sup>5</sup>

#### ■ How the support programs for grass-roots development work

In the programs of the foundations and companies who are members of the Network, it is important to systematize the different strategies and methodologies used for supporting the development of collective capabilities and strengthening grass-roots organizations. In its first phase, this learning will focus on strategies for strengthening the organizations, networks and alliances, particularly financing and follow-up for grass-roots development projects.

<sup>3</sup> For additional information on this subject, see the terms of reference or the description of the work for drawing up the guide for financing and accompaniment drawn up by the PCCI and coordinated by Fundación Corona, and also the results from the RedEAmérica workshop on Financing and Accompaniment carried out in Córdoba, Argentina on May 11-13, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> See conclusions from the RedEAmérica Workshop on Follow-up and Evaluation carried out in Córdoba, Argentina, August 2-4, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> See conclusions from the RedEAmérica Workshop on Financing and Accompaniment carried out in Córdoba, Argentina. May 11-13, 2004



The *Fundación Juan Minetti* of Argentina and the *Fundación Corona* of Colombia are coordinating this first systematic effort in collective knowledge in the field of financing and working with grass-roots organizations. The set of elements of the project cycle, along with basic follow-up strategies, are the central topics in this first phase of learning. The interchange of experiences, internships, collective workshops and systematization of good practices in financing and follow-up, are the chosen methods for consolidating and enlarging the knowledge base accumulated by Network members in this field.<sup>6</sup>

Based on this collective learning, the Program for Construction of Institutional Capacities (PCCI), coordinated by the *Fundación Corona*, is producing the needed materials to provide a menu of options for future foundations and companies who wish to improve or initiate grass-roots development programs and work with organizations in the development of their institutional capabilities and the implementation of these programs.<sup>7</sup>

The first materials provided by this program as support tools for building institutional capacities are three guides: one for setting up funds for financing and working with grass-roots organizations; another for evaluation and follow-up on grass-roots projects, and a third for drawing up a budget for grass-roots development projects; there is also a set of case histories to illustrate these topics. With this set of guides and their accompanying training strategies, the goal is to create capability on the part of the Network to offer models, procedures and standards that have been tested in practice to companies and foundations wanting to set up or improve grass-roots development programs.

In a subsequent phase, the Network will provide guidance for learning about other strategies for promoting grass-roots development that are complementary to financing and support for projects, such as those directed at education and support for public interest institutions and the creation of a favorable environment for grass-roots development.

The project for “Public spaces for local civic engagement

<sup>6</sup> See the Program for internships and exchanges coordinated by the *Fundación Minetti*.

<sup>7</sup> See *Fundación Corona*, Programa de Construcción de Capacidades Institucionales (Program for Construction of Institutional Capacities) at RedEAmérica.

<sup>8</sup> See *Scope of Work for Developing Research on the Concertation Capacity of Poor Communities in Local Public Spaces in Latin America*. Inter-American Foundation.

in Latin America,” proposed by the IAF’s vice-president for programs, will be an important learning step in this important field and will also provide elements for progress by Network members. This research is being coordinated by *Fundación para la Superación de la Pobreza* in Chile.<sup>8</sup>

The accumulated knowledge about strategies for promoting public institutions that respond to demands from the grass-roots is quite limited. Neither has there been great progress in knowledge of the type of programs that can contribute towards promoting, providing incentives and reinforcing grass-roots participation in public discussion and in the design and control of programs that could benefit them. This is an important area of learning for the Network, and it is critical to make progress in this field in order to have better intervention elements and be able to substantially influence the expansion of grass-roots development.

#### ■ Evaluation of support programs for grass-roots development

The challenge of evaluation at this level of analysis is to know if the diverse intervention strategies used by the members to strengthen the poor communities’ capacities for collective action (financing, accompaniment, advice, training etc.) are effectively contributing towards strengthening these capabilities and creating sustainable grass-roots organizations. That is, whether the way in which companies and foundations are financing and following up grass-roots development projects is effectively contributing towards strengthening the capabilities required by grass-roots organizations so that they can develop projects themselves for proposed social change.

For the Network, it is fundamental to specify the role or roles that foundations and companies can play in grass-roots development that will be most relevant and have the greatest impact, keeping in mind that they represent just one of many actors involved in this type of development. It is not enough for a network like RedEAmérica to verify and share what its members already have.



### c. Learning about RedEAmérica and its programs

In addition to what each member of the Network does in relation to supporting grass-roots development, RedEAmérica has its own vision, programs and strategies. RedEAmérica has an intervention model, which is more than the sum of the intervention models of its members. Learning about this model and evaluating its effectiveness constitutes another challenge for the learning system.

#### ■ About RedEAmérica's programs

The Network was constituted so that its members would learn together about the most efficient ways of promoting and supporting grass-roots development programs among companies and business foundations; develop shared strategies and methodologies; establish a hemispheric training program; guide private social investment towards grass-roots development; mobilize new resources towards grass-roots development programs, and influence governments and international agencies so that they will make grass-roots development a central part of development in general.<sup>9</sup>

These objectives and the ways of reaching them have been refined during the work of the Network. As RedEAmérica's programs and activities move forward, they will require new information and updates as to what the Network wants to achieve and how to go about it.

#### ■ About how RedEAmérica's programs work

The Network has defined a structure and programs in order to promote its proposed objectives. In structural terms, it has created an assembly, some national nodes, a governing council, a committee of company presidents (CEOs) and an executive secretariat. In terms of intervention programs, it has set up the learning program coordinated by the Fundación Minetti, the Program for Construction of Institutional Capacities coordinated by the Fundación Corona, and the Program for Institutional Communications coordinated by the current executive

secretary, the Fundación Polar. RedEAmérica has recently added a lobbying strategy along with another for growth and expansion and is studying the best way of putting them into operation.<sup>10</sup> It is hoped that the Network, through its structure and programs, will be able to carry out its mission.

The creation of the Americas Development Fund (Fondo de Desarrollo de las Américas) is a challenge recently taken on by the Network. Its establishment involves a number of requirements in terms of collective learning, for which the Network will be responsible. These include the following: drawing up a four-year investment plan or a portfolio of projects for the Network; implementation of a shared system for evaluation and follow-up on grass-roots development approved by members of the Network; standardization of basic categories used in grass-roots development projects; establishment of a certification system for grass-roots development projects on the part of foundations and companies; and identification of standards of conduct to be maintained by foundations and companies during processes of financing and working with grass-roots organizations. The learning program and the Program for Building Institutional Capacities are working on a number of these subjects.

#### ■ On evaluation of RedEAmérica's programs

The mechanisms for evaluating and obtaining collective feedback on the progress of the programs have until now consisted of the Network's assemblies and the meetings of its governing council. The programs for learning and building capabilities have established their own goals for evaluation. However, in the future the Network will need to more clearly specify a way to evaluate its strategies and programs, along with the information needed in order to do so.

The three levels of learning have mutual feedback and one of RedEAmérica's greatest challenges is to establish a good flow of information and procedures in order to permit productive interaction in learning at different levels.

<sup>9</sup> See Presentación Institucional. Objetivos Estratégicos de RedEAmérica (Institutional Presentation. Strategic Goals of RedEAmérica).

<sup>10</sup> See Results of the RedEAmérica Workshop on Strategic Planning. Caracas, May 27-28, 2004.

