Shared learning and participatory evaluation: The sistematización approach to assess development interventions

Esteban Tapella
Universidad Nacional de San Juan, Argentina

Pablo Rodríguez-Bilella
Universidad Nacional de San Juan & National Research Council of Science and Technology (CONICET), Argentina

Abstract
The sistematización approach is a multi-stakeholder strategy to assess development interventions with emphasis on the lessons learned. Apart from briefly highlighting sistematización roots in Latin America, as well as its similarities with other evaluation streams, the article concentrates mainly on the concept and method of sistematización itself, its scope and limitations. Recognizing that there are several approaches to systematize development interventions, the article introduces a basic ‘method’. In the final section, it is argued that introducing this endogenous approach from Latin America may serve as an additional brick in building the evaluation field in this and other regions of the world.

Keywords
Latin America, learning, multi-stakeholders, participatory approach, sistematización

Introduction
In the Latin American development field, there is a wide range of insufficiently known or not properly valued development interventions or as sistematización prefers, development experiences. These are not just facts, specific events or data, but vital processes that combine a set
of objective and subjective dimensions of the socio-historical reality (Jara, 2006: 7–8): contextual conditions, particular situations, actors’ actions, perceptions and interpretations, results and effects, and the interrelation of all these factors. Conventional evaluation approaches apply linear cause-effect logic models focused on measuring performance and success in their attempt at demonstrating accountability to external authorities. These evaluations often come up short because development interventions are multifaceted and complex systems, with different actors, interests and values, developed in turbulent scenarios where many factors shape the outcomes apart from the project. Furthermore, learning is as important if not more important than accountability for the protagonists and subjects of development interventions. In the field of evaluation, there have recently been several developments that stress that traditional evaluation practice cannot capture and map complex systems dynamics and interdependencies (Funnell and Rogers, 2011; Patton, 2010; Williams and Hummelbrunner, 2010). Sistematización has been doing this for the past 40 years.

The sistematización approach is a multi-stakeholder evaluation tool developed in Latin America that emphasizes in-depth comprehension of processes and shared learning among the participants of development experiences as they unfold. The approach is based on the notion that experiences can be used to generate on-going understanding(s), and that lessons learned in real-time can improve both ongoing implementation and also contribute to a wider body of knowledge. Learning from action does not happen by accident; it needs to be planned for in project design, in staff job requirements, in the cycle of meetings and reflections, in the general project culture, and so forth (Guijt et al., 2007). Most development experiences are not designed to be action-learning processes; therefore, the challenge is how to promote, design and conduct learning processes for experiences that were not designed with that purpose in mind.

With strong roots and history in Latin America, the practical origins of the sistematización approach has not led to its formalization into a full prescriptive theory. This is a problem common to the Third World. The building of the field of evaluation in the region has partly to do with forming a more comprehensive knowledge of its development. A key conclusion of Carden and Alkin (2012) in analysing the second edition of ‘Evaluation Roots’ (Alkin, 2012) is that the book does not have a single chapter on development evaluation theory in low and middle income countries. Therefore, in this article we will explore the sistematización approach, beginning with making explicit its three main roots:

a) the field of popular or adult education, a sort of participatory education born in the 1960s with Paulo Freire’s liberation pedagogy (Freire, 1970), that closely linked education with politics; here sistematización was seen as a way of reviewing the education practice in order to improve its contents and methodologies;

b) the field of Latin American social work during the 1970s, where sistematización was developed as a way to use the professional practice of social workers as a source of knowledge about society, with the goal of turning social transformation actions into scientific praxis;

c) the wide adoption of sistematización by NGOs in the 1980s, seeking a better understanding of their development practice, carrying out a bottom-up revision of the theories of change on which development interventions were based (Jara, 2012).

The sistematización approach grew out of a critique of social science and its inability to provide ‘right’ answers to persistent social problems, and the so-called ‘objectivity’ of social
science researchers was critiqued as a failure to engage with those actually affected by the development interventions. In this sense, sistematización tried to end or limit the privileging of the perspectives of academic elites or external evaluators over those of ordinary programme participants. Initially, sistematización was understood to be in line with the stream in the evaluation field that had stressed a movement from positivist, hypothetical, deductive and more quantitative approaches to constructivist, interpretative and qualitative perspectives.1 More recently, Martinic (2010) has suggested that the concept and practice of sistematización did not have a singular meaning because it is context-specific: an evaluation approach that respects and reflects the richness of the different contexts where it is used.

Although much reflection and work has been done in order to formalize it as a method (Chavez-Tafur, 2006; Francke and Morgan, 1995; Jara, 1994), and more recently to clarify its history and roots (Jara, 2010), the dialogue and interaction of sistematización with other evaluation approaches has been quite limited. At the same time, and probably due to its practical origins, the sistematización approach has not always made explicit its links with social science theory, with the exception of the relation several authors have made with dialectical materialism (Capó S. et al., 2010; Ghiso, 1998). Not surprisingly, a fruitful link to explore this may be the one that relates sistematización with systems thinking, which is increasingly influencing approaches to evaluation (Boyd et al., 2007; Hummelbrunner, 2011). At the heart of systems thinking – closely linked with complexity theory and its concepts2 – lies the notion that making sense of the world implies approaching it as a whole with its interrelationships, instead of dismembering it into its component parts and analysing them in isolation. Sistematización shares with systems thinking an effort to overcome linear cause-effect logic models in order to capture and map complex dynamics and interdependencies.

Sistematización, although absent in the compilation made by Williams and Hummelbrunner (2010) about different methods of systemic inquiry, complies with the four characteristics that these authors used for their selection of systemic methods. The first one is that it is a practical approach, perhaps to a fault, as mentioned above, because there has been a lack of theorization over sistematización in spite of an impressive number of sistematizaciones3 that have been done over the years and which could readily serve as a foundation on which to build theory. Second, sistematización has been widely tested by diverse organizations (mainly but not only in Latin America): most of them have been local, regional, national, or international NGOs, but there are also several cases of sistematizaciones carried out by local and regional governments. In the third place, sistematización covers a wide spectrum of issues in the systemic tradition, namely actors’ interrelationships and their perspectives on the development intervention and its boundaries. Finally, sistematización’s multidisciplinary character is not limited to evaluation, being also closely linked with other fields like action-research, social change, organizational change and social work.

This article will now focus on the concept and principles of sistematización and then on the sistematización method. The article concludes by highlighting the relevance and usefulness of this approach in building the evaluation field in the Latin America region.

**Sistematización: A useful multi-stakeholder assessment tool**

‘Sistematización! What’s that?’ This is a common response on hearing this strange sounding term for a Latin American method oriented to critical reflection and shared learning. The English translation ‘systematization’ loosely means the act of organizing something according
to a system or a rationale but this does not do justice to the approach. Actually, sistematización involves not only somehow linking the activities with the outputs or outcomes of a project, but mainly accounting for why this relationship exists, unravelling the underlying connections, in order to understand the development of the experience, and how change has happened or not. Through sistematización, people critically reflect on and make sense of development experiences, turning the lessons we derive from that reflection into new and explicit knowledge, which in turn can inform a new round of practice, and be communicated to others who may also benefit from it (Barnechea Garcia and Morgan, 2007; Jara, 2006).

When thinking about ‘knowledge’, it is necessary to also think about ‘reflection’ and ‘learning’, as both represent core concepts in sistematización. For this approach, learning is a social and collective process; it should be focused on practice; it involves questioning what we know and building new critical knowledge for change; and it flourishes best in supportive learning environments (ActionAid, 2006).

Importantly, the process of learning and generating new knowledge from the experience is not a personal act by an individual. So, sistematización encourages participation through collective reflection on the experience of a development experience, and in the process strengthens the abilities, skills and capacities of the main actors and other stakeholders to look at the experience’s evolution, identifying lessons and insights for future interventions.

**Sistematización: An operational concept**

In general terms, sistematización is the participatory process of on-going description, analysis and documentation of the different aspects of a specific development intervention or experience: its actors, actors’ interaction, results, outcomes, impacts and problems (Selener, 1996). Sistematización is carried out with the active participation of the agents closely involved with the intervention, in order to draw lessons to improve the efficiency and effectiveness. (Fondo Mink’a de Chorlaví, 2002).

Sistematización involves a critical reconstruction and interpretation of a development experience, aimed at explaining the logic of the intervention, the external and internal factors that influenced it, and why it had the results it did (Jara, 2006). The sistematización method attempts to identify lessons from the experience by describing, organizing and analysing a development activity’s theory of change and the project approach, the institutional, social and historical context, the relationship between local and external actors, and describing the organizational process, including obstacles and facilitators as well as results and impacts of the experience (Morgan-T and Quiroz, 1988).

In Michael Scriven’s now classical distinction (1981) between goal-oriented and goal-free approaches, sistematización has moved more comfortably in the first field, firmly rooted in the performance terrain of evaluation – did we do what we said we would do? However, sistematización’s practitioners have a clear understanding that, in most of the cases, interventions do not happen as planned in their proposal, as the path to achieving project outcomes and impacts is not a straight road but a bumpy and turning one. As Long and Van der Ploeg (1989: 228) put it, ‘an intervention is never a “project” with sharp boundaries in time and space as defined by the institutional apparatus of the state or implementing agency’. The sistematización of the development experiences is useful because it allows practitioners and other actors to learn from the curves and the bumps on the intervention road (Schouten, 2007).
As mentioned before, multi-stakeholder involvement is crucial in any sistematización process, since critical reflection and the identification of lessons cannot be achieved in isolation. It needs to be accomplished with partners and communities, as they will bring new dimensions and interpretations to what we are learning; they will bring their stories of how they lived the experience that will be, in sum, the story of the project or development intervention. This story can best be told by all the actors involved. Through the interpretation and the telling of the project’s story, sistematización puts the power of the story’s reconstruction on the ones that were directly involved. As in the Eastern paradigm of evaluation explored by Russon (2008: 72), in sistematización, the inquirer and the object of inquiry exist in a state of nondifferentiation, the seeming boundaries between the inquirer and the object of inquiry become porous and fluid, and this is one of the key contributions and explains the richness of sistematización.

Martinic (2010) highlights two epistemological issues for sistematización. The first one is dissatisfaction with categories that dichotomize the knowing subject from the object to be known. Thus, sistematización attempts to simultaneously cover theory and practice, knowledge and action. The second disagreement is with language that describes or interprets the action from outside the action represented, because sistematización attempts to construct a descriptive language ‘from within’, that is, from the experience, which constitutes the benchmark that gives the language meaning. This inside-outside epistemology is always present, notwithstanding that some practitioners stress the role of external agents to a lesser extent.

Sistematización, as a method that proposes shared and participatory group dynamics, creates a space where people can share, confront and discuss opinions based on mutual trust. They critically engage in diverse interpretations of the development experience and generate mutual and collective learning. A multi-stakeholder approach requires that, for instance, the institutional staff may learn with and from other people (usually poor and excluded people). In this sense, sistematización creates space for all actors to be heard and fully represented in the construction of the story.4

In sum, sistematización is a method that helps project staff and stakeholders to carefully track and reflect on meaningful moments and events in the project’s life. Multi-stakeholders reconstruct the experience and produce new knowledge.

Basic guiding principles of sistematización

Based on the brief conceptual framework presented above, the following set of basic principles can be used to guide a sistematización process:

- **It is a process of analytical thinking and critical reflection over a development intervention.** It focuses on what was done, why it was done in this specific way, what were the general results achieved, why these results were useful or not, and what is the likelihood of the experience being sustainable and replicable.
- **The purpose is to learn from the successes and failures of interventions.** The conclusions drawn from the experience should contribute to the generation of new knowledge that could be useful for other interventions.
- **Emphasis is given to the process.** Sistematización is a structured and focused way of capturing the process of change that a project aims to bring about, the activities and
interactions between stakeholders, the issues and contextual factors. Results and impacts are important, and their analysis is part of the sistemización, but they are not the central focus of the analysis. Rather, it is more important to explain why and how certain results were obtained. Sistematización tracks the process of an intervention: what happened, how it happened and why it happened.

- **As a systematic and analytical process, sistemización** involves organizing information in such a way that different stakeholders have an opportunity to reflect and learn about the process. The whole experience has to be organized by identifying different elements connected with it, including the context, the project objectives and results, and its activities. Sistematización is also a systematic way to reflect, analyse and discover patterns that help or hinder change.

- **The more pluralistic and participatory the process, the better the result.** The sistematisación exercise should involve as many stakeholders as possible, not only to get different points of view but also to widen the angle of analysis and bring in different political, economic, cultural, social and other dimensions. Knowing that different people have been involved in the experience, and that each one of them could have different viewpoints and interests, it should be expected that there will be different opinions regarding what was done and achieved. As Chavez-Tafur et al. (2007) states, the purpose is not to achieve a consensus. Rather, if that diversity of opinions is taken into account and is fully represented, it will be easier to identify lessons learned and generate broader and deeper knowledge.

- **Sistematización distinguishes lessons learned from conclusions and recommendations.** Using the definitions of Irene Guijt and colleagues (Guijt et al., 2007), a ‘conclusion’ is a synthesis of confirmed facts that relate to a certain situation (e.g. project ‘X’ did not fulfil its objectives). A ‘recommendation’ is a specific idea about how to deal with concrete problems or take advantage of concrete opportunities in a given situation (e.g. in order to improve the quality of water supply, technological innovations should be adopted). Finally, a ‘lesson learned’ is a generalized statement of what is likely to work and/or what has to happen to achieve (or prevent) certain results based on concrete evidence. Sistematización focuses on lessons learned.

What distinguishes sistematización from other forms of inquiry – mainly social science research – is its inherently political character, since in sistematización (as well as in programme evaluation – Green, 2000) science and politics are deeply intertwined in their relationship with decision making about priorities and social orientations. When people do the sistematización of their experiences of development interventions, they build their capacity to promote transformative praxis. The sistematización approach aims to generate new knowledge that will strengthen social organizations in their struggles for greater justice (Vela Mantilla, 2010). In this sense it should not be understood as a neutral assessment methodology, but a tool for critical interpretation of reality and the transformation of ‘status quo’ situations that affect large sectors of society.

**How to systematize an experience: The method**

This section introduces the basic method of sistematización based on the authors’ personal experience (Rodriguez-Bilella and Tapella, 2008; Tapella, 2009, 2010) as well as in the work
The approach involves different inter-linked and iterative steps. To illustrate the method, this article uses the process of lobbying and advocacy in the experience to have the *Ley de Desarrollo Integral de La Juventud* (Comprehensive Youth Development Law) drafted and approved in Guatemala, a process supported by ActionAid Guatemala (Hargreaves and Morgan, 2009: Chapter 4). The ActionAid stakeholders used sistematización to analyse the experience developed between 2003 and 2007 and which involved a social movement, collective direct action, campaigns, local organization and advocacy.

As shown in Figure 1, the starting point of the sistematización method is identifying the object of study and its main aim is to set the boundaries of the experience to be systematized.

In this case, the focal point of the sistematización was the advocacy work carried out by many different organized actors, and directed to securing approval of the *Ley de Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud* in Guatemala. It is interesting to note that the sistematización was used in the course of an ongoing experience, and not when the process had come to completion and the law was passed by the Guatemalan Congress. Therefore, it revealed how the young people involved in the process took important steps in terms of social
alliance-building and organization that influenced early on the Iniciativa de Ley (draft law) for the future law, which represented major progress in the national context.

The second step involves the identification of key social actors involved in the initiative. Sistematización seeks the opinion and points of view of a large number of the actors and there are usually constraints to interview all of them. Thus, the selection of the most important ones or those who may have different points of view constitute a key step of the process.

In the Guatemala case, the process included the participation of members of Sociedad Civil para el Desarrollo de la Juventud (SODEJU – Civil Society for Youth Development), Fundación para la Juventud (FUNDAJU – Foundation for Youth), many representatives of several youth organizations, members of Guatemala’s Congress, and members of the sistematización team – who also played an active part in the endeavour itself. The team coordinated the workplan and ensured that the different activities took place.

In the third step, the initial situation or starting point, as well as the context, are described. At least two aspects should be identified here: (a) the problem to be addressed by the development initiative, and (b) an opportunity. That is, the sistematizers identify the change(s) to be achieved: for example, more employment, less poverty, women integration in decision-making processes, adoption of a new technology to make agriculture more sustainable, and so forth. There are also external factors that surround the development of the project, which can be economic, political, social, geographical, environmental or others (Chavez-Tafur et al., 2007). These factors may limit the scope for action or for the endeavour to be developed, or they may serve to leverage opportunities. For the purpose of the sistematización, it is necessary to focus on the factors that have limited the local agency to address the problem and those that contributed to the success.

In the Guatemalan case, this step was approached with the explicit intention of describing and analysing the situation that gave the context for the endeavour to influence formulation and approval of the Ley de Desarrollo Integral de La Juventud, and to permit comparisons with other similar initiatives. So, demographic and socio-political information on youth in Guatemala was compiled, as well as certain events of the national contexts that influenced the endeavour: the creation of a new ‘institutionality’ as a result of the 1985 Constitution; the political negotiations that put an end to the domestic armed conflict; the ratification of the convention on Rights of the Child; critical laws and public policies (implemented and not implemented) that were oriented to youth; and violence and stigmatization of youth during the past presidency. The immediate background was also introduced, paying attention to actions that youth organizations participated in relating to the advocacy process in favour of the Ley de Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud.

The second and third steps of the Guatemala sistematización are illustrated in Figure 2 below.

The fourth step of the sistematización process is identifying and describing the main objectives of the experience. To understand and learn from a development experience, it is necessary to analyse its main purpose in order to get a clear idea of what drove the initiative. It is necessary to reconstruct and analyse the experience and flush out a general picture of the dynamics of its process and implementation, and the changes that occurred. This step is closely linked with what has been called the building of the programme theory for evaluation; that is, making explicit the underlying assumptions about how particular programmes or projects should work and then using this theory to guide the evaluation (Funnell and Rogers, 2011).

The political advocacy in favour of the Ley de Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud was understood as a continuation of several processes developed in Guatemala, and described above as
Figure 2. Actors, context, and background of the sistematización in Guatemala (Hargreaves and Morgan, 2009).
‘immediate background’. The political advocacy efforts rested on important organizational achievements, which had been encouraged and supported mainly by SODEJU-FUNDAJU and the Coordinadora Juventud por Guatemala (Youth Coordination for Guatemala), as well as nearly 50 organizations who worked in coordination and had played a leading role in the organizational process. The intentionality of the endeavour was stated as follows:

The advocacy process in favour of the Ley de Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud is a response to the difficult situation of young people in Guatemala and the urgent need to counter the problems that are preventing healthy youth development. There can be no doubt that Guatemalan youth are in urgent need of legal measures to (a) assure the means to social and political participation, (b) permit participation in generating proposals for solving young people’s educational, vocational training and capacity-building, health and labour problems, (c) make it easier for them to fulfil their responsibilities towards the family, community and the environment, and (d) secure their fundamental human rights. The advocacy process in favour of the Ley de Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud is basically a political project in that it focuses on bodies of the State where decision-making and administrative power to approve and implement policies is centralised. The process is directed at securing the willingness among members of congress and people in government in general to take decisions that benefit Guatemala’s youth. (Hargreaves and Morgan, 2009: 50–1)

The intentionality of the project or initiative is constructed through the identification and analysis of its objectives over the short, medium and long term. Background information on the organization and a general framework of the initiative is compiled when considered useful. For example, what the organization is about, why it is working there, what is the project’s team composition, what is the relationship of the organization with other actors in the geographical area such as grassroots organizations, government and other local authorities who are involved:

The process that gave rise to the law has entailed conducting activities of persuasion, organisation, negotiation, lobbying and mobilisation. Persuasion targeted various sectors of society: youth, women, adolescents, community leaders and government authorities. The organisational activities have been useful for ensuring stronger, more unified youth participation. Negotiations were held specifically with authorities and representatives of government bodies. The lobbying focused on government and congressional authorities. The social mobilisation took the form of marches, demonstrations, forums, press conferences and meetings.

The fifth step in the sistematización is dedicated to the analysis of the final or current situation. Although sistematización is far from being a results or impact evaluation, it is important to identify, describe and analyse these aspects if the programme was previously assessed with this aim. This also serves to later identify which processes lead to what results or impacts. The results of the initiative are usually presented comparing the initial situation with the current or final situation, or the situation ‘with’ and ‘without’ the intervention. This is a qualitative exercise, mostly exploring the impressions and opinions of the participants. Here, positive and negative results should not only be considered regarding project objectives, but also in relation to the process, highlighting both the achievements and the causes and conditions that contributed to them.

Here are examples of this step from the Guatemalan sistematización experience:

Even though the law has not yet been passed, the organisational and alliance-building processes that this endeavour generated are unprecedented in Guatemala. Coordination relations among the main
actors have been horizontal, especially in decision-making. In this way consensus was reached as regards what specific work was to be done and the advocacy process in general. In evaluative terms, the levels of coordination can be considered sufficiently effective, particularly because participation by all the youth organisations is nearly permanent and also because they participated actively in most activities demanded by the advocacy process in favour of the law. All the organisations have cooperated, some as channels for information and youth mobilisation and others cooperating by providing technical, logistic and economic support for both strategic actions and more occasional or localised activities. In terms of public representation, the youth organisations’ main leaders have taken a leading role with the media, at public events and at moments of negotiation, lobbying and calls to action. Culturally and politically, the youth organisations are highly representative of their various constituencies, which legitimates the advocacy process. There is no doubt that the organised action of Guatemala’s youth movement on specific areas of legislation and public policy-making reinforces civic participation.

At certain points, not all the youth organisations have assumed and fulfilled their commitments. This was due mainly to work constraints in their organisations. Other organisations were unable to respond immediately to urgent demands. Appropriate communication, consultation and motivation mechanisms must therefore be set up in order for participation to be more timely. Some youth organisations which disagreed with the relationship established with the then government in the context of the advocacy were not interested in playing an open, leading role. Accordingly, two of them (HIJOS and ACJ) decided to withdraw from the coordination.

Conditions for participation have improved in that a favourable opinion has been issued on the Law and the new government has signed a commitment undertaking to promote a whole youth agenda. The youth organisations have agreed to continue with the endeavour. On the basis of redefining certain coordination mechanisms, the CJG is restructuring and there is more interest among the organisations in engaging in the steering bodies so as to expand the CJG and make it more of a force at the local level. One thing is abundantly clear: the work of advocacy should continue beyond the brief stagnation in 2007–2008.

Finally, the sixth step refers to the analysis of the achievements and lessons learned. As it was mentioned before, one of the main purposes of sistematización is to produce knowledge based on the experience, so in this step we need to identify the new knowledge that came out of the experience. This knowledge is important for the actors and stakeholders involved, such as the target group, local authorities, government representatives and people from other institutions. This knowledge is also important for other institutions who might eventually implement a similar project in another context or region. Identifying lessons is basically the attempt to scale up the analysis from the immediate context of the project.

In the case of Guatemalan sistematización, the following statements related with new knowledge were identified:

As a result of engaging in this endeavour and the related reflective thinking, the various participants involved in the systematization process consider it important to share the following recommendations with others who may decide to embark on similar endeavours, whether for reasons of political advocacy or social organisation.

- In order for processes of advocacy by youth to be conducted successfully one should seek constantly to expand participation by youth organisations and personalities and to build alliances in order to gain greater strength and grassroots support.
• At times, the lack of funding makes it difficult to engage youth organisations in advocacy, pressure and mobilisation, and it is therefore necessary to build alliances and seek greater support for the Ley de Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud to be approved by the incoming members of congress.

• The work of advocacy requires organisation, training and capacity-building for an extensive team of young people, accompanied by technical staff, so that they are better equipped to pursue the advocacy activities and better prepared to deploy activities and strategies, without unnecessary improvisation, all in response to the contingencies of the negotiating process. That team should be broadly representative of youth and comprise a diversity of youth organisations. That helps prevent centralising decision-making and concentrating activities in a small group of people.

• In order to promote the approval of a law in Congress, it is better – once the bill has been drafted – for it to be submitted as a ‘measure’ by a group of members of congress, and much better if they represent various politicians from different political parties. This prevents the legislative process from becoming individualised and stalling due to the political interests or personal problems of one or more individual sponsors, as happened with this endeavour. The bill submitted would have been more effective if it had been sponsored by more members of congress and ideally from more than one political party.

• In the process of drafting a bill, it is better to seek outside advice on preparing certain technical and legal aspects to meet legislative requirements, such as the statement of reasons and the legal opinions. For a variety of reasons, including inefficiency and/or negligence, the advisors to members of congress, caucuses and congressional committees are remiss in fulfilling these requirements in a timely manner.

• Given that the political pace of Congress is extremely slow, advocacy plans should be structured to be executed in the medium term by carrying out a variety of lobbying and mobilisation activities periodically in order to keep demands current and bring pressure to bear to further the aims of the political effort to sway Congress. On the other hand, advocacy strategies always entail planning other options and alternative plans, which includes physical presence and organising emergency visits, with the idea of not allowing the political pressure to slack off.

• In order to be objective and realistic, one should not trust fully the offers ‘normally’ made by members of congress and other government authorities, because mostly they do not keep their promises. In that regard, various options should be available to enable the process to continue and to respond immediately to such situations.

• Communication, publicity and information strategies should be permanent in order to keep young people, social organisations and the general public informed and as a means of pressuring members of congress and other political agents towards approving the proposed law. That means maintaining close relations with reporters, journalists, editors and media owners.

Furthermore, conclusions, lessons and recommendation are analysed with the organization that implemented and supported the initiative and its stakeholders, and the findings of the sistematización should also be communicated to people external to it. This will bring new
Figure 3. Basic aspects to consider when communicating lessons learned.
insights to others as well as opening space for them to comment on the lessons learned, which will enrich the sistematización’s outcomes.

In order to take advantage of the lessons drawn from the experience, the new knowledge has to be properly communicated and socialized by keeping in mind the points described in Figure 3.

The six sistematización steps described and illustrated above include different aspects that should be documented and analysed during the sistematización process by using tools for data gathering. Some of these tools are: (a) interviews with the people directly involved and other stakeholders, (b) participatory observation, (c) analysis of secondary information, (d) focus group, meetings and workshops, (e) discourse-based valuation, (f) participatory mapping, (g) construction of future scenarios, among others.

As mentioned, the final stage of the sistematización process is not just the action of drawing knowledge from the experience and communicating the lessons learned. This new knowledge needs to be institutionalized and integrated in the life of the organization. This step has many times – as with evaluation in general – been given less attention than the other steps. As we consider this a serious mistake, we discuss it in detail below.

Stakeholders, participation and communication in sistematización

Until now, this article has introduced the concept and methodology of sistematización as a particular multi-stakeholder evaluation approach that basically aims to organize available information about a particular intervention, analyse it in detail in order to understand what has happened, draw conclusions that will help to generate new knowledge, and present and share the results in a chosen format. The intentionality of this dissemination has to do with making available the main results of the sistematización for the key stakeholders involved in the project or programme in order to improve future interventions.

As mentioned, the core principle of any multi-stakeholder assessment is ‘participation’. While sistematización may share most of ‘the myths about systems approaches’ (Rogers, 2011),5 most likely, it does not share the ones that say that they focus on processes and not on outcomes and impacts, and that they always involve a participative approach, because clearly these two are key characteristics of the sistematización approach. At the time of identifying the stakeholders that should take part in the sistematización, all sectors should be contacted, not only programme staff and donors but also local government, other NGOs, academia, community and other sectors or groups that might be interested in the issue. It is quite important to adequately manage people’s expectation from the very beginning, adopting principles of inclusion, transparency, partnership and empowerment.

Once ‘participation’ lost the radical connotations it once had (mainly in popular movements), it gained a new respectability and legitimacy, becoming a new orthodoxy in social development (Stirrat, 1996). The popularity of ‘participation’ has ethical and instrumental origins, expressed in the ideological shift away from supposedly undemocratic and top-down planning (usually linked with the heavy bureaucratic structures of state intervention established from the Second World War onwards), and the belief that the lack of participation by intended beneficiaries has often been responsible for project failure (Eversole, 2003; Foell et al., 2000). The advocates of this shift towards participation have stressed its potential for generating information at the grass-roots level by involving members of the community in projects intended for their benefit, transforming them into active subjects rather than passive objects of their own development. The usual way of accessing this knowledge in
**sistematización** has been through participative meetings or workshops led by external agents with a variety of methods: small group discussions, self-diagnostics, use of diagrams, and so on. The information gathered by these participation techniques has usually been considered more reliable and relevant to the interest of the participants than that generated by more traditional research methods (Chambers, 1983, 1991).

But if we want to move **sistematización** beyond the technocratic and the instrumental use of participation, it is necessary to show how contemporary development strategies are usually not free of contradictions, as it is believed by the neo-populist fostering of participation and empowerment made by external agencies (Long, 2001: 185–8; Olivier de Sardan, 2005; Tandon, 1996). The tendency to view an approach that fosters local involvement as the only alternative to local economic decline means that empowerment is defined in a way that is complicit with dominant neoliberal narratives of globalization and technological change in terms of the inevitability of these processes and the need to foster dynamic, market-orientated responses that mobilize and re-deploy existing capacities (MacKinnon, 2002: 311).

For stimulating participation, the use of participatory tools or games has been widely adopted in **sistematizaciones**. However, they have not always contributed to deeper involvement by different stakeholders. The mental and institutional willpower to open participatory spaces is the key challenge to keep in mind, as there is not a path set of ‘successful’ participatory tools ready to be applied in every case. The experience and creative understanding of any particular situation may help a lot, as tools rarely can be applied in a ‘pure’ way, as they appear in the book or manual. According to the situation, it is necessary to adapt tools by modifying them partially or totally.

On the other hand, a multi-stakeholder perspective should avoid becoming ‘stakeholderism’, that is, the notion that stakeholders should be there, everywhere, just because. It is as dangerous to have no stakeholders is it is to have too many stakeholders involved just because you are in the time of ‘please, give me a stakeholder’. In these cases, it is very difficult to manage how to respond to so many perspectives or opinions, and consequently risk wasting participation or a real stakeholder involvement. One lesson learned by the practice of **sistematización** is to identify and select only those stakeholders – social or institutional actors – whose perspectives or opinions must be taken into account in some way or another.

Another difficulty is having several stakeholders with quite different positions or antagonist interpretations involved in the **sistematización**. There is the risk of creating a sort of ‘boxing ring’ where people can fight for what they believe is the truth. In these cases, the facilitator of the **sistematización** should act as a moderator of the stakeholders participation, someone ‘neutral’ who provides space for participation but focuses on clear questions or points.

**Sistematización**, as a particular kind of multi-stakeholder assessment, contributes to understanding crucial factors that influence the nature of the problem and the project’s life, promotes the strengthening of all stakeholders’ capacity, and helps to share recommendations and lessons learned with a wider audience working on development. **Sistematización** was never far away from the notion of utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2012), although not always having the clear emphasis on use that **sistematización** has acquired nowadays.

**Final remarks**

This article has introduced **sistematización** as a general monitoring and evaluation tool that aims to improve future interventions, enabling projects and development initiatives to raise issues of general interest and stimulate reflection and debate in broader society, seeking to
make development experiences more relevant, effective, replicable and sustainable. The sistematización approach has been used to document single and short-term projects, as well as longer and more complex programmes or development interventions, being carried out by community-based groups or organizations, NGOs, networks or larger institutions.

Understanding that one of the best ways to contribute to social change is to develop better feedback loops, sistematización has been for a long time one useful way for stakeholder voices to be heard in the development process. It has found a place mainly within the world of NGOs, which tend to be ‘doers’ rather than ‘thinkers’, and which have decided it is worth investing in sistematización over other monitoring and evaluation approaches that are often seen as too sophisticated for their fairly modest aims.

The participatory and political nature of the sistematización approach has meant that its practice is characterized by endogenous elements, closer to the practice of internal evaluation than to the external one. The Millennium Development Goals in the early 2000s favoured the transformation from controlled or required evaluations by donors and agencies to an emphasis on national and local actors. It has been the standard practice in sistematización to always recognize and defend the recognition of the ability of the subjects of an intervention – the poor, the beneficiaries to take part in the analysis – of their reality and the concrete development practices in which they participate.

Beyond this characterization of sistematización, the purpose of this article is in line with strengthening the field of evaluation in the Latin America region, something that involves building indigenous evaluation cultures and capabilities in order to contribute to improved decision making as a critical factor to effective use of evaluation in the global south (Carden, 2007). Following Katherine Hay (2011: 3–4), we understand that:

**Evaluation practice** is the ‘doing’ of evaluation. **Evaluation capacity** is the ability to do evaluation, and **evaluation use** is the application of evaluation to some change process. **Evaluation field building** refers to the range and diversity of efforts to strengthen practice, capacity, and use.

Beyond recognizing the contributions of the adopted and adapted approaches and methodologies in the low and middle income countries, Carden and Alkin (2012) also identify endogenous methodologies, as those specific to certain regions, with little or no contact between them, and with strong theoretical and practical roots with its original context. In this scheme, sistematización is presented as an endogenous approach from Latin America, sharing some characteristics with the other endogenous methodologies: they are specific to certain regions, they have no contact or interaction with the other regional approaches, they have strong theoretical and practical roots with its context of origin, and they were primarily developed by groups of individuals rather than single writers.

As we begin our reflection about strengthening the field of evaluation in Latin America, which we hope will include a more nuanced understanding of the different streams of sistematización in the region, this article is a first building brick in this enterprise, in order to have a more clear presence in the global evaluation community.

**Acknowledgement**

We would like to thank Karen Russon and Ricardo Wilson-Grau for their help in editing this article, a task that went beyond polishing the language, and actually provided in-depth technical feedback. Of course, we take ultimate responsibility for any inaccuracy and weakness in the article.
Notes

1. Similar approaches to the original sistematización are ‘Documenting Experiences’ (Chavez-Tafur et al., 2007) and ‘Capitalization of Experiences’ (Villeval and Delville, 2004).
2. Some of these concepts are emergence, co-evolution, self-organization, tipping points, and phase change (Patton, 2010; Ramalingam and Jones, 2008).
4. In a second article we will explore the actual links between sistematización and other methodologies adopted in developing countries as the Most Significant Change approach (Davies and Dart, 2005), Outcome Harvesting (Wilson-Grau and Britt, 2012), Experience Capitalization (Villeval and Delville, 2004), etc.
5. For sure, sistematización is surrounded by myths shared with systems approaches: they are about including everything, they are more expensive than traditional studies, they are about complexity and this means making things very complicated, that they are always qualitative or always quantitative, and that they are only for learning and not for accountability.

References

Cadena F (1987) La Sistematización como creación de saber de liberación. La Paz, Bolivia: APE-CEEAL.


Esteban Tapella is a lecturer and researcher at the Programa de Estudios del Trabajo, el Ambiente y la Sociedad (www.petas.com.ar) at the Universidad Nacional de San Juan, Argentina. During the last 10 years he has been involved in the field of monitoring, evaluation and sistematización. He is a member of ReLAC (the Latin American Network of Evaluation).

Pablo Rodriguez-Bilella is a consulting sociologist. He is a board member of ReLAC (the Latin-American Network of Evaluation), IOCE (the International Organization for the Cooperation in Evaluation), and IDEAS (International Development Evaluation Association). He is a lecturer of Social Anthropology at the Universidad Nacional de San Juan, and researcher at the National Research Council of Science and Tecnology (CONICET), both in Argentina.