A Short Guide to Participatory Systematization

Prepared for Universitas Forum

Mapping community knowledge of water sources in Sri Lanka
Photo: Andrei Rami Rodan
A Short Guide to Participatory Systematization

Summarized and translated from:

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Systematization, in the field of social sciences, refers to the generalization, replication and extension of past practices. The purpose of this guide is to better define the concept of systematization and what this practice implies, as well as to provide a methodology for participatory systematization.

1. What is systematization?

Systematization can be described as the initial step in the research process. It involves arranging and evaluating practices, and is rooted in practical experiences. These experiences can be defined as dynamic social processes based on a complex combination of factors such as context and conditions; the actions and interactions of diverse actors; perceptions, intentions and interpretations of reality, as well as results.

Systematization is an organized reflection on an experience as a permanent process, through the accumulation of information and knowledge. It can be seen as the link between practice and theory, or a conceptual interpretation of practice, whose outcomes must serve as the foundation for deeper analysis. It creates a logical connection between the practical process, its context, and the theoretical premises on which the experience is based.

What differentiates systematization from other forms of interpretation is its participatory character. Through systematizing experiences, the researcher and the actors directly involved aim to understand a social process from within, drawing on the dynamics of the experience in order to comprehend the reasoning behind the process itself and the factors influencing it.

Systematization is therefore a critical interpretation of experiences, which, through organizing and reconstructing all of the elements, brings to light the logic of the
process, the intervening factors, and how these factors have interacted to produce a given event. When we systematize, we sort out the experience and describe it in a structured way so as to understand it in context. This process allows us to make our experiences communicable and replicable.

2. **Reasons to systematize:**

Systematizing is important as it provides us with a critical overview of the experiences and processes being examined. However, it is not an end in itself. It is a tool that can be used to conceptualize how an initiative has been made possible, what results have been achieved, and why certain outcomes have occurred over others. This facilitates the transfer of knowledge and the search for new solutions.

Systematizing aims at **understanding** the experience and the process behind it, so that we can improve practice and learn from our mistakes. This can be accomplished through:

- finding consistencies and inconsistencies in a project
- building on strengths
- improving upon weaknesses
- and establishing better conditions for future projects

Through systematization we can **communicate** and **share** our experience and the lessons we learned from it and, by sharing, learn from other similar practices. An analysis of the results and outcomes of an experience should therefore be made accessible to others (e.g. other organizations in our same field, people interested in our work, academics). Communication is vital if we want to fulfill the purpose of systematizing, which is to create a space for comparison and confrontation among different experiences, based on an exchange of knowledge.
To allow others to understand our work and share with them our experience, we have to make sure that the information we provide is communicable, meaning that it has to be easily understandable and accessible.

3. **How to systematize: a proposed method.**

This proposal is structured in five steps. The methodology will allow you to identify, document and transfer experiences and the key lessons from your project or series of projects so that they can be shared, learned from and replicated.

There are many variations to the following structure and each phase can be adapted. At the same time, the steps highlighted here will help your outcome become clearer and more complete:

I. **Starting point**
   - Take part in the experience
   - Keep records

II. **Fundamental questions**
    - What is the purpose?
    - What is the object?
    - What is the concept?

III. **Recover memory of the experience**
    - Retrace history
    - Organize and categorize information

IV. **Considerations about what happened**
    - Analysis, summary and critical interpretation of the process

V. **Finalization**
   - Formulate conclusions
   - Communicate the results
I. **Starting point (when and who)**

The starting point is the experience itself, our practice. Therefore, systematization comes in at a second moment, as it is not possible to systematize something that has not yet been implemented.

*Take part in the experience*

It is crucial that those who were involved in the experience take part in the systematizing process. This does not necessarily mean that all of the people who are systematizing must have been involved in the experience directly, or to the same degree. What is important is that systematization should be a participatory process that involves people who have been involved in the experience in some way. No participatory systematization can be conducted by any person or organization not related to the experience.

External help, however, can be provided in terms of technical support (e.g. help with methodology or technology), often by a trained researcher.

*Keep records*

Any experience we want to systematize has taken place over a period of time, in which many events have taken place. It is important to keep records of everything that is related to the experience. It would also be best to register any event that takes place as quickly as possible, so that the moment being recorded, its implementation, the expectations and the actual results are noted, as well as any reflections for the future. We should not trust memory, as time can change the way we think things have happened. Not only *quantity* but especially, *quality* of the information recorded is a key to the systematization process.
Keeping records can be done through several tools: personal journals, reports, recording of seminars and workshops, photos, films and videos, charts, maps... Creativity is welcome when dealing with this task, so don’t stop at these proposed tools, but find the most suitable method for your experience.

II. **Fundamental questions**

This phase corresponds to the actual beginning of the systematization process. The whole process will be based on the answers we give to the following questions.

*What is the purpose?*

This question helps us to define, as clearly as possible, the meaning and the usefulness of our systematization.

Example:
An educational centre focused on community work recognizes the need to reproduce its action plans, as the situation in its country is changing. On the basis of previous experiences, its team decides to systematize with the purpose of *creating a new approach to community work* in response to the challenges posed by the national situation.

*What is the object?*

Now we have to choose the experience(s) to be systematized. There are several factors that can influence the decision to pick one experience over another. Whatever experience you decide to systematize, it must have a clearly defined time and space (i.e. exact context) in which it took place.

Example:
The above-mentioned educational centre decided to focus on creating a new form of community work. They could delimit its systematization object to “*experiences of community health work which took place in the urban area of La Union and the rural communities of Palmar and San Jeronimo between 1992 and 1993* (a time when a new government was changing its strategies towards rural communities)”.
What is the concept?

This is not an easy question, but it certainly is the core element of the whole process of systematization. Experiences can be so rich in components that, even when there are clearly defined purposes and objects, we still need to specify the focus of systematization.

The concept can be seen as the theme that goes through the entire experience, or its central idea. There might be various concepts; it is just a matter of deciding which one to focus on in the systematization process.

Example:
Our educational centre could summarize its concept for the systematization as one or more of:
- “work in health, autonomy and capacity building by community members”
- “work in health and women’s participation”
- “role played in the process by health promoters”

III. Recover the memory of the experience

Procedures used and time spent on this task may vary, depending on the duration or complexity of the object and the level of detail expressed in the concept.

Retrace history

We should get a global vision of the most important phases of the experience, usually in chronological order. Help will come from the records we mentioned earlier.

Issues considered for the historical reconstruction will depend on the systematization we are carrying out (concept). What is important is that this work provides an overall vision of the process.

Retracing history of Moravia’s community garden with involved women (Medellin, Colombia)
Photo: Shauna MacKinnon
Example:
Our educational centre will retrace previous urban and rural experiences, paying attention to changes that have occurred in national policies with special reference to community-sensitive issues.

Organize and categorize information

Given the overall vision, we now need to organize all the elements that define the experience. A useful tool will be guidelines or a series of questions that will allow us to reconstruct the experience around basic questions. Again, help will come from our records. The intentions and opinions of the participants (those who promoted it, and those who benefited from it) must be taken into account.

Example:
Our educational centre could use the following timeline to organize and categorize each step:
- Goals fixed by centre
- Needs expressed by communities
- Achievements and difficulties
- Effects of the health programme
- Link between communities and governmental bodies
- Perception among community members
- Other

IV. Considerations about what happened

This is the phase in which we ask ourselves the reasons why the experience we are systematizing has taken place. We are starting here with a critical interpretation.

Discussion between local farmers and researchers on indigenous seeds (Kambila, Mali)

Photo: Assetou Founé
**Analysis, summary and critical interpretation of the process**

In order to carry out this deep analysis, we can use a series of critical questions, or a critical guide, that examine the process. This can allow us to identify those factors that were significant to the process and, by analyzing them, help us in explaining the meaning and logic behind the experience.

Example:
Our educational centre that systematizes its experience in community work on health could ask itself:
- Were there changes in the goals? Why?
- Have needs remained the same? In what way have they changed?
- What was the link between goals and needs in the different stages of the experience? Compare urban and rural community needs.
- Has the relation between government and communities changed? In what ways? What tensions and contradictions emerged, and why? Do they still exist?
- What can be seen as the proof of autonomy and capacity building results?
- Which factors contributed positively to these results? What had negative impacts? If there were any, how could they be overcome?
- How can we explain our focal concepts, such as “autonomy”, “capacity”? How can they be related to neoliberal orientations? What do we mean by “neoliberalism”?

**V. Finalization**

With this final step in our systematization process, we should take time to formulate conclusions and communicate results. This is a very important task, because from it stems the most basic outcome of systematizing: understanding and sharing.

*Discussing conclusions on social enterprise creation with community organizations working on HIV prevention (Skopje, Macedonia)*

Photo: Sara Swartz
Formulate conclusions

All of the interpretation that has been carried out up to this point must be summarized through a clear formulation of conclusions, both theoretical and practical.

Conclusions should respond to the purpose we fixed in the initial steps of systematization. Theoretical conclusions should emerge from the reflection on direct experience, and lead to a possible generalization. Practical conclusions, on the other hand, can be deduced from experience and will be used to improve and enhance future practices for the systematiser and your audience.

Example:
Our educational centre could formulate theoretical conclusions about autonomy and capacity building and the extent to which social policies impact communities in a neoliberal context. At the same time, they could formulate a proposal on new approaches and contents of community work in consideration of a new national context. They could try to generalize about positive and negative aspects of the experience.

Communicate results

Finally, documenting allows knowledge to be shared with others. It is worth spending time to make results easily comprehensible to audiences that are not specialized or who do not know the experience directly. A useful tool could be a paper or case study, hopefully written in a creative way. Any other creative form of communication (theatre, stories, video, graphs, comic strips, ...) is welcome, as long as it makes our experience communicable and the language is adapted to our audience.

Please see the following Annex for a guide on how to elaborate a systematization proposal.
Annex:
A guide on how to elaborate a systematization proposal

1. **General aspects**
   - Title
   - Produced by
   - Date

2. **About the experience**
   - What is the experience to be systematized (Define object)
   - Why is it important to systematize it
   - Briefly summarize the experience (when and where it took place, who participated in it, what was the aim, main results)

3. **About the systematization plan**
   - Reason of the systematization (purpose)
   - Main aspects of the experience we want to systematize (concept)
   - What elements are relevant for a historical reconstruction
   - What elements are relevant for organizing and categorizing information
   - What elements are relevant for the critical interpretation
   - What sources of information are used
   - What procedures will be used to systematize, and who will take part in the process
   - Outcomes of systematization

4. **Period of time required and timetables**
   - Total time of systematization process
   - Timetable:

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Useful resources

If you want to learn more about systematization, you can refer to the following online readings, by clicking on them:

- **SELECCIÓN DE LECTURAS SOBRE METODOLOGÍA DE LA EDUCACIÓN POPULAR. CIE “Graciela Bustillos”**

- **SYSTEMATIZATION FOR KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER. Methodological Series on Knowledge Management, Sharing Knowledge for Development Project. Knowledge Management Unit, UNDP Regional Centre for Latin America and the Caribbean**

- **RESOURCE PACK ON SYSTEMATIZATION OF EXPERIENCES. ActionAid International**