Lessons Learned
GFAR Write Workshops

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1. Introduction

The team responsible for organizing and facilitating the three foresight writeshops – composed by Gerard Baltissen and Mariana Wongtschowski (KIT), Cristina Sette and Javier Ekboir (ILAC) and Robin Bourgeois (GFAR) – was unanimous in saying that the mission was largely accomplished. An important reason for that was the good team work between the three organizations (and the individuals) involved.

This document brings the lessons learned in each of the three writeshops. All comments and conclusions mentioned here have been previously discussed within the organizing team. They do not represent solely KIT’s opinions, but a consolidated view of what went well, and what did not.

2. Rome Writeshop, 26-29 June 2012

Facilitated by Gerard Baltissen, Mariana Wongtschowski

In general, we are happy with what was achieved. Although the quality of the briefs (will) vary greatly, we believed that the process has improved them considerably.
The fact that we achieved what we came to Rome to do was also a result of a good division of responsibilities between facilitators/team members both for plenary and for group work. We worked well together, and that reflects in a group atmosphere that is more open and helpful.

Preparatory phase:
Initially, people struggled with the outline. Facilitation was needed to make them truly understand what we were looking for.
Importantly, it needs to be made clear that coming for shorter period is just not a viable option (as some of the participants who did so later recognized)

Workshop itself
Evaluation of the first and second days were very positive. It was mentioned that the facilitation was good in “steering” the process without being a dominant factor in it.
The last day’s evaluation brought the following main points:
- What went well:
  - Feedback process: fact that both colleagues and editors both looked at the papers.
  - English editing overnight was very helpful
  - Good writing atmosphere
  - Good facilitation, creating an informal set-up that allowed for creative and productive time
  - Preliminary work was efficient
  - Plenary discussions worked well.

- Suggested improvements:
  - Logistics: less travel time between hotel and workshop venue
  - Start the “real” writing earlier on, already on Day 1; also allowing more time for peer-reviewing.
o More informal interaction so that participants can get to know each other
o Examples of briefs could be helpful
o Deal with conflicting feedback on drafts (what to do when people have different suggestions?)
o Do the table with all cases directly in Excel (this was discussed and considered that it was still important to work on the big sheets. Firstly, because it becomes a joint product, visible to all and not a simple request from the organizers that goes into a “black hole”. Secondly, because it provides a break from computer work)

Although participants have a lot of experience in writing academic papers, adapting that style for a different audience was in general difficult. In the same line, many of the participants found it difficult to think about the “impact” of the work they do. They live in their “research comfort zone”, but acknowledged, after the initial days of the workshop, that such “thinking beyond what we do” was needed.

**Final recommendations**
- It was good that we managed to summarize and document key outputs of group work quickly, and feed those back to participants. These should be also done in San Jose and Bangkok.
- It was important to – early in the process – recognize the briefs which needed extra support, and provide this support as we went.
- Avoid having the same person preparing two cases. This was shown to be very difficult... And suggesting to have two cases by one person creates a pressure that is not very helpful to participants.
- “Clear quality standards” of what will be accepted as a “brief” and what won’t need to be defined beforehand. This has to be clearly communicated earlier in the process. Is the fact that we are putting all briefs in the webpage, but only using some of them as actual cases for the GCARD a way to bypass this?
- Group discussions on “improved foresight” and on the report outline were helpful to GFAR in elaborating the “global report”.
3. Bangkok Writeshop, 04-06 July 2012

Facilitated by Gerard Baltissen

General
Objectives of the Bangkok write shop were achieved; participants elaborated seven briefs documenting a variety of visioning, foresight work and regional research priorities in Asia. All participants were present from the beginning up to the end, so no late arrivals or early departures. The facilitation team functioned very well; everybody knew his or her task, we supported each other in facilitation, in documenting workshop results and in editing. A group of only seven participants is easy to handle. Logistics were good: the workshop room was nice, big and quiet (and a bit cold), and food was more than excellent.

Preparatory phase:
Although all of them have been contacted several times and promised to deliver, only three out of seven participants had sent bullet point drafts based on the outline during the preparatory phase. Miok from PNG and Thanapol from Thailand were not able to attend the write shop, they will send first drafts next week and will be guided virtually.

Workshop itself

Day 1:
Following the recommendation from the Rome workshop we started writing earlier, in the afternoon of the first day. This helped in lowering the pressure on participants to achieve deadlines on day 2 and 3. Some participants had difficulties starting up: two were invited only a week before so they could not prepare bullet-point drafts; one of them was not briefed properly and did not know about existing foresight reports of his organization. Some participants had difficulties in understanding the outline or the foresight objectives. First draft presentations: limiting the feedback to two cards only (feedback to presenters, general lessons learned) worked well. Ajit used the soft systems approach (CATWOE) for the general feedback in the plenary. The facilitator’s team noticed that some participants would needed extra support in English before sending the briefs to Brett. First day (dart board) evaluation scores on content, facilitation, group atmosphere and logistics were between good and average.

Day 2:
Everybody was able to finalize a second version of the briefs before the end of the afternoon. An extra English editing round for some participants was included. Daily evaluation: people wrote nice positive appreciations of the writeshop on a flipchart

Day 3:
All briefs were delivered on time. People also completed the overview table. The afternoon discussion on improved foresight was very interesting. Discussions were organized based on the following two questions:

• What are the priority topics for FLAW to come?
• How to improve FLAW?

Day 3 evaluation brought the following main points:

• What went well?
• Writing
• Writing skills learning process
• Process
• Write support
• Feedback
• Exchange of ideas
• Facilitation
• Facilitation process (including delivering all briefs on time)

• Suggestions for San José write shop?
  • More guided input on writing styles and techniques
  • Introducing writing styles in brief
  • Sight seeing
  • More pre-workshop facilitation could speed up the process
  • Assistance for participants before the workshop begins
  • Ice-breaking activities (just to relax)
  • Sharing some cases that are already made
  • Inconsistency of feedback from facilitators
  • Language editing too early

Recommendations and action points (including for San José)
• Thanapol, Miok: Gerard will contact them and is responsible for reviewing and editing of these two briefs
• 2nd brief by Fabien: Robin will review/edit
• Print examples of briefs (Lance, Joost) on A3 paper and expose at San José write shop
• Elaborate a list of interesting leads from the briefs (Cristina) and put on A3 for San José
• Elaborate a short list of suggestions for writing styles (Gerard)
• Referencing should be limited and presented as footnotes
• Results from discussion on foresight improvements will be elaborated by Cristina and send to Robin and Gerard.

4. San Jose Writeshop, 17-19 July 2012

Facilitated by Mariana Wongtschowski

The general feelings is that "we did it". Though this was perhaps the most difficult writeshop in terms of facilitation, it turned out to be very productive. Two thirds of the briefs written are already in good shape, some extra effort will be needed to handle those of Brazilian participants.

Preparatory phase:
As in Rome, some of the participants struggled with the character of the brief and the outline. But considerable time was spent in discussing with participants and reviewing "zero drafts", so that most participants got to the writeshop with a better understanding of what was expected from them. Some participants had already written quite a lot beforehand. This was, on the one hand, positive,
as it sped up the process. On the other hand, it meant some participants finished their work much earlier than others. We had to be flexible and adjust to this reality as we went (and I do believe we managed to do so well).

Workshop itself
Evaluation of the first day pointed to a concern of participants with the "content" of the writeshop (no one said to be truly happy about it). When asked why, a few mentioned that the content was too "basic", or that we were "defining forecast and foresight in too rigid terms". My personal feeling is that the evaluation also reflected different levels of understanding about the process towards GCARD, and the functioning of GFAR and the regional fora. These were discussed in the first day – at request of the representative of Foragro – in more depth than initially foreseen.

In addition, because we had already gone through the writeshop twice (or once, for some of us), a number of things that were obvious to us may not have been that obvious to others, generating some confusion.

The last day’s evaluation brought the following main points:

- What went well:
  - Work dynamics and atmosphere
  - Excellent (human) quality of the organizing team and participants
  - Enthusiasm + Passion of organizers and participants
  - Work was well planned and systematic
  - Writeshop very organized, constructive and professional
  - Support in the work (to be) done
  - Logistics, the place where we met
  - Impressive management of language challenges
  - Possibility to discuss with colleagues, networking
  - Understanding of challenges ahead was built in group

- Suggested improvements:
  - Spell-out clearer the objectives of the meeting
  - Need to get a chance to know the experience and work of other participants
  - Link content and format of briefs to specific audiences
  - Methods are set by the 3rd meeting, so there is less need to brainstorm about how and for whom
  - Less time needed to discuss feedback and writing style
  - Need to keep open-mind about what is "foresight"
  - Somehow ensure only one language is used to encourage understanding
  - More reading in advance about, e.g., foresight, organizational/relationship (IICA, FORAGRO, GCARD, etc)

We had to exercise all our patience and flexibility in accommodating requests and giving space for discussions which questioned our work; without jeopardizing our objectives and the process in general. The team grew a bit tired of the interaction with a few participants – luckily we supported each other and took turns when needed.
In general, facilitators were tired. This meant that we skipped steps which were important, or simply that we were less sharp at moments. Support staff (Viviana, Fanny) worked very well and ensured we could really pay more attention to the process and content.

**Final recommendations**

- Really try to avoid the language mixture. It does not help the team dynamics and interaction
- Use “speed-dating” or other tools to make sure people get a chance to get to know each others’ work without taking too much time (and certainly without lengthy presentations). This should be done in the first day.
- Have alternative activities ready for when a few participants have finished their work before others.
- Though hosting at IICA worked well (better than Rome, with the public transport in between), sleeping and working in the same place or at walking distance is still preferred.