



AGRUCO's methods strengthen self esteem and cultural identity

In Bolivian society, indigenous culture is associated with backwardness, poverty and ignorance. Some indigenous communities believe that their traditional culture and worldview are the causes of their poverty. They feel they have to learn from outsiders and behave like them, rejecting their own beliefs and identity, if they are to escape from poverty and social exclusion. However, in AGRUCO's experience, the most effective formula for overcoming these problems seems to be the opposite: to revalidate their own knowledge, to reaffirm their own cultural identity and to begin a real two-way dialogue with outsiders where neither party submits to or is subjugated by the other.

AGRUCO (Agro-ecología Universidad Cochabamba) has been working in the Jatun Mayu basin since 1999. A sociologist and an agronomist have worked with 350 families in seven indigenous communities, implementing a sustainable endogenous development approach in the Jatun Mayu basin. The AGRUCO-COMPAS team started by presenting itself at a meeting of the indigenous farmer organisation, which was attended by the heads of the seven communities. It was agreed that an evaluation of the community would be carried out, to decide on the kind of activities to be included in the project.

Drawing up a local agenda

The community self-evaluation proposed by Agruco sought to gain understanding of the natural, social and spiritual resources. It consisted of inventorying farming and agroforestry productivity, pests and diseases (natural), forms of organisation, relationships of production, migration, family income (social) and ritual calendars related to production, rituals and indigenous people's worldviews (spiritual). Agruco presented this agenda and then left the community to establish their own priorities for the evaluation. The themes that the community added were: the role of elders in the revitalisation of local knowledge; the situation of young people and the need to support them in processes

of professionalisation; and how to motivate the young to respect their elders, and appreciate their cultural identity and the values associated with it.

The techniques used in the evaluation are shown in the table below, indicating where endogenous development techniques differ from participatory development techniques.

Techniques used for community evaluation

Techniques	Aspects common to participatory development	Aspects where endogenous development differs
Interviews	Structured and semi-structured with key informants; focus groups through workshops. Questions formulated simply and in local language.	Gaining confidence through an attitude of equality in relationship; accompaniment and informal dialogue with families (case studies). Interviews with at least 20% of community.
Transect walks	Joint participation in both local evaluation (uses, local names) and outsider evaluation (scientific names, density, taxonomic classification) of natural resources.	Deepening of and placing greater value on cultural relevance of natural resources. More and richer local criteria in classification (e.g. of soils).
Talking maps	Value and local relevance of resources available in the community.	Location of sacred places included. Local views and criteria on social organisation of agro-ecological production.
Joining in social and spiritual activities	Participation in events that are not directly related to objectives of the field programme.	Sharing same 'values' in socialising and customs: dance, drink, food. Not trying to be a member of community, but avoiding sense of distance and superiority.
Community workshops	Results of interviews and perceptions of technical team are presented and community gives feedback on outcomes.	Prompting of debate on topics of local knowledge that highlight importance of self esteem and cultural identity in programme implementation

Points of convergence and conflict

The self-evaluation was facilitated by the AGRUCO-COMPAS team and the results of the evaluation were disseminated in the regular meetings of each of the communities. In subsequent meetings they concentrated on identifying points of convergence and/or conflict in the community, to encourage debate and stimulate the interest of the participants.

The joint preparation of calendars of production and related rituals is important. These include the time to observe signs for weather prediction, celebration of the first harvests, and prayers for rain. The calendars also include the amount of time needed to carry out the different activities. This is a very useful tool for planning field activities for improving agro-ecological production. For example, it became clear that the team and the community had been setting their targets too high, given the large amount of time that families devote to their various tasks.

Programme activities were jointly identified both at the community level and for each family. These were drawn up in an Integrated Community Plan for Autonomous Administration and Sustainable Endogenous Development. In the case of Jatun Mayu, the plan included organisational strengthening, food security and cultural reaffirmation as the three main areas of work. The final step in this phase was to agree on the responsibilities of the communities and of the AGRUCO staff.

This process of agreeing activities and responsibilities, which lasted approximately

Techniques used when implementing the programme

Techniques	Aspects common to participatory development	Aspects where endogenous development differs
Learning sessions	Setting out appropriate locally adapted techniques for implementation of a particular activity. Explaining and discussing them, and arriving at conclusions based on local perceptions.	Technical personnel also learn much from the community. Being open to learning from the community and reaching agreements compatible with community's rhythm in terms of time and material possibilities.
Info sheets revalidating local knowledge	Collecting local knowledge.	Disseminating and validating local knowledge in learning sessions. Rebuilding and giving it a collective value, thus increasing the self-esteem of the community.
Info sheets disseminating experience	Dissemination leaflets with basic teaching elements: photos, figures and simple words.	Materials developed from local perspective, with examples from community's own reality. Systematic presentation & dissemination of successful local experiences within community.
Meetings for political/social debate	Presentation of a topic of local interest. Questions and answers.	Presentation of a topic, on which community debates and decides its position. Disseminating position taken to higher peasant management circles.
Family and collective rituals	Matching project activities to rhythm of local rituals.	Encouragement of ritual practices as a mechanism for cultural reaffirmation; building confidence between locals and outsiders. Project activities are guided by ritual calendar.
Attitude of respect towards environment	Not contravening local social etiquette and rituals; respecting them and adapting to them.	Participating in reaffirmation of social and cultural protocols. Adapting to them and trying to understand them as a central theme of community development.
Demonstration areas	Participatory development of technologies.	Participatory development of technologies appropriate to each ecological niche in community, and to family potentials and limitations.
Shared experience	Incorporation of family dynamics in implementation of a particular technology	Participation, revalidation, mutual learning and cooperative synergy in development of production technologies.

a year, yielded an important lesson: obtaining the widest possible participation and encouraging debate are the keys to establishing joint responsibilities for carrying out the activities.

Programme implementation

Once external financing had been secured for the project, field activities started. These were conducted in a spirit of participation, mutual learning, revitalising indigenous knowledge, co-responsibility, respect and trust concerning rituals and cultural identity. The AGRUCO team started by setting up learning sessions. Previously called 'training workshops', the team realised that this term was inappropriate because what was actually going on was an exchange of information

again showing how they differ from other participatory techniques.

Voicing opinions

After three years of implementing the project, it was time to evaluate the results achieved through the field activities. The evaluation consisted of two elements. The AGRUCO-COMPAS team interviewed the families, focusing on the opinions they expressed about the field activities and about AGRUCO's work and behaviour in the community. The community leaders assessed the extent to which each family had achieved the objectives set. The team then compared the initial aims with the results of the measurements and interviews, to stimulate debate within the community. The families voiced their

Communities feel the need for a strong social organisation as it helps them to become less dependent on help from outsiders

between local and external participants; hence the name 'learning sessions'.

At key dates in the agricultural calendar, collective or family rituals were performed, depending on the significance of the date. At least ten family rituals and seven collective ones took place in the period of a year. In the process of sharing with the communities, the team learned that rituality and spirituality were much more important than they had believed.

The techniques used in the project are described in the table on page 18, once

opinions, in some cases justifying delays and lack of progress, and in others highlighting the most important achievements.

The result of the discussion was interesting. The conclusion was that the most important learning point in the process was the need for strong social organisation to support and conduct production projects, so as not be so dependent on help from outsiders. Another conclusion was that the objectives achieved had been possible because they were based on local practices, on the

Interacting worldviews in AGRUCO's methods

Spiritual

Participation in rituals, seeking blessing of sacred sites for proposed actions.

Social

Discussion sessions on political and social themes of importance to the communities.

Material

Increasing food security balanced with social, spiritual and cultural objectives.

experience of the families themselves, with the help of the technical team on specific points.

First steps towards better wellbeing

While the communities may not have emerged from their material poverty, nor achieved all of the millennium development goals, they *have* begun a process of positive change. This is based on the affirmation that their own abilities, culture and way of doing things are not bad and are not the cause of their poverty, but rather the basis from which to take the first steps on the path towards wellbeing. AGRUCO learned that increasing self-esteem turned out to be the best outcome achieved, rather than the aims and objectives initially proposed.



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