



The AGRUCO experience, Bolivia

# MASTER'S DEGREE

## in Agro-Ecology, Culture and Endogenous Development

**M**aster's programmes are a lucrative business for many Latin American universities, often developed purely for the money earning potential they represent for faculties. The Master's in Agro-Ecology, Culture and Endogenous Development at the Universidad Mayor de San Simón (UMSS) in Bolivia was started for very different reasons. It developed out of AGRUCO's wish to mainstream the knowledge and experiences it had gained in natural resource management, organic agriculture and endogenous development. This programme aims at facilitating interaction between endogenous development and other experiences and concepts.

The first pilot course was launched in September 1998, with support from the Centre for Development and Environment of the University of Berne in Switzerland. By 2002 the quality and efficiency of the programme had been recognised by the accounting department of the UMSS, and its rules and regulations were used as an example for other master's programmes at the university. Today the Agro-Ecology, Culture and Endogenous Development master's is regarded as one of the most prestigious courses at the university. This is largely because of its integrated approach, emphasising the relations between the spiritual, social and material worldviews. Also important is the programme's focus on research and its methodology, in which theory and practice are interrelated.

### Programme content

When the sixth edition of the programme started in 2006, some changes to the structure and content were incorporated. The endogenous development module has been strengthened, drawing on the ten years of experience gained in the Latin American COMPAS programme. The result is a course with three equal modules:

- Agro-ecology and biodiversity.
- Endogenous development.
- Village management and community projects.

Students can now choose to follow all three modules or just one separate module. They must do one year of thesis research in order to obtain their degree. The main objective is to produce professionals in endogenous development who have had intra and inter-cultural training based on knowledge, experience and understanding

Agro-ecología Universidad Cochabamba (AGRUCO) is the Centre of Excellence in the Faculty of Agronomy at the Universidad Mayor de San Simón (UMSS), Bolivia. It was established in 1985 with institutional support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (COSUDE). AGRUCO is also the Latin American coordinator of the COMPAS programme on Endogenous Development.

of the potentials and limitations of the wisdom of indigenous people and of modern science.

Theory and practical experience are given equal weight in the programme. Theory learning is supported with preparatory written material that students can study beforehand also makes lectures more

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fruitful. On the practical side, an introduction in the current sixth edition of the programme is the Supporting Local Innovations workshop. This takes place in a rural highland community and is compulsory for all students. Field visits like these provide an opportunity for exchange and interaction with Andean peasants on topics including territory and natural resources management, climate prediction, peasant farming, agro-ecological production techniques, in-situ biodiversity conservation and revaluation of conservation techniques. A student explains: *'Talking with peasants way out in the community made me conscious of the value of their practice and wisdom for the endogenous development of the Andean highlands.'*

The added value of the master's programme stems from its focus on a different professional profile. It focuses on the specific context of marginalised Andean highland farmers who face problems of natural resource management and severe poverty. This, combined with a critical attitude towards mainstream agricultural practice, results in professional graduates with a highly developed social sensitivity and well equipped to understand different contexts and enhance the self-esteem of poor people. Most Latin American professionals have had an education that is more oriented to developed areas and large-scale agricultural production for external markets and have

been trained to offer ready-made packages to poor Andean farmers. In contrast, the UMSS participants work together with local groups to develop new directions for sustainable endogenous development. They are trained specifically to work together with local people, using and developing participatory research methods, and without imposing exogenous models.

### Holistic approach

The teaching in the AGRUCO programme is strongly based on experiential learning. This means 'unlearning' the old mono-disciplinary and 'relearning' a more holistic approach to acquire more transdisciplinary knowledge. Participatory action research helps the students to gain a better understanding of the complex reality of



The methodology used is active cooperation between students and community members through participatory action research.

differing local contexts and to adapt solutions likewise. This way, new paradigms, based on the wisdom of indigenous people, can be (re)discovered, created and promoted.

So far about 75 students have participated in the six editions of the master's. Only 15% have graduated. The rest still have to complete their thesis, a common stumbling block at the master's level in Latin America. Many participants are employed in NGO's or local government. Most work on strategic programmes for Andean farmers, covering subjects such as soil management and conservation, biodiversity management, agro-ecology and revaluing farmers' knowledge. One

student gives an illustration: *'The focus on endogenous development becomes very clear in the process of setting up a normative framework for conserving native forest. This is done in close cooperation with the communities living there. Likewise, working on conserving native germplasm in traditional crops is an example of reviving endogenous development in the community.'*

Looking to the future, there is still much work to be done. More systematic impact studies are needed to assess how useful the participants' coursework has been for improving the well-being of Andean highland farmers. Creating networks of former participants could make follow-up easier and be a way of mainstreaming

## Interacting worldviews in the AGRUCO Master's Course

### Spiritual

(Re)discover and promote the indigenous concept of 'living well': the values that allow harmony, love and reciprocity between human beings, nature and the spiritual world.

### Social

Workshops in rural highland communities in which students and peasants work together.

### Material

Create sustainable agro-ecological production systems oriented towards food sovereignty and safety. Revitalise local fairs and marketing systems to improve the family economy.

endogenous development more systematically. Ways of avoiding the current high rate of participants that do not obtain a degree are being looked into, which may result in less conventional forms of support and development of the master's thesis. The Master's in Agro-Ecology, Culture and Endogenous Development is certainly a pioneering example of professional training that is helping to mainstream endogenous development in Latin America.



Based on earlier articles by Nelson Tapia, coordinator of the master's programme.

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