Changing from within

Indigenous communities in the Peruvian Amazon can be empowered to pursue their own concepts of sustainable development

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High value: Ashaninka women, members of a mothers' association, examine a cedar (*Cedrela oderata*) seedling produced in their community nursery. *Photo: R. Guevara*

THIS REPORT is based on the experience gained in working with seven indigenous communities of the Ashaninka ethnic group living mostly along riverbanks in the Pichis River Valley in the Central Rainforest Region of Peru.

Deforestation has been increasing in the valley as the agricultural frontier expands on lands not always suitable for agriculture. Colonisation by landless, immigrant farmers and the establishment of settlements close to roads and ports have had major effects on traditional communities and their economies. These new population centres are the targets of intermediary trading in all sorts of (legal and illegal) goods and services. Such intermediaries buy timber and other forest products, fish and domestic animals, sometimes take part in international drug trafficking, and sell products from other regions.

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Timber loggers, known locally as aguaneros, first harvested all available stocks of mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*, known locally as aguano) in the valley before turning to cedar (*Cedrela odorata*). More recently, they have extracted ishpingo (*Amburana cearensis*) and are currently logging the last few tornillo (*Cedrelinga catenaeformis*) trees in the area. These loggers use highly selective methods, extracting only the best trees, and their logging techniques cause a high degree of damage to the soil and remaining vegetation.

The truth is that poverty forces the indigenous communities to allow and even encourage these practices. It is a vicious circle in which human need and environmental degradation feed each other. To escape this trap the communities need to acquire the technical capacity to take control of their forest resources and, for this, external assistance can help—and may indeed be essential.

To this end, ITTO PROJECT PD 14/98 REV.1 (F): 'Sustainable use and reforestation of Amazon forests by indigenous communities' was initiated in June 2002 with the financial support of the Common Fund for Commodities; it aims to integrate traditional indigenous forest practice with modern systems of production to capture more of the value of forest use at the local level and to maintain the integrity of the forest ecosystem. The project is a follow-up to an earlier ITTO project (PD 16/94 REV. 1(F)), which worked mostly with the community in El Milagro (see *TFU* 6/4 for a report on this project). The current project was developed at the request of the indigenous communities in the region, who are now working with staff at EDMAR (Ecodesarrollo, Medio Ambiente y Reforestacion)—a non-profit, non-governmental organisation that is the official implementing agency of the project (in cooperation with Peru's National

Sheltered: families typically live in dwellings such as this in the Divisoria Ashaninka community. *Photo: R. Guevara*

Institute for Natural Resources—INRENA)—to incorporate traditional economic activities into the framework of a sustainable forest management plan.

For this process of change to take place, the families must make themselves available to the project so that they can be trained in aspects of forest management, processing and marketing. There is a risk, however, that this will actually increase household poverty in the short term because the selected family members will not be able to perform their usual productive functions; in a subsistence economy, a training program of this nature would undoubtedly become increasingly difficult and its objectives unattainable. Thus, the project includes an economic incentive program promoting reforestation with high-value species and the introduction of agroforestry techniques to compensate participating families for the time invested in training.

The start-up environment

Towards the end of the last decade, in a pre-election period, the incumbent national government initiated a number of projects to introduce cattle-raising activities in Amazonian communities for which there was only one selection criterion: the availability of land. Undoubtedly, the main forest 'predator' in the Pichis River Valley during that decade was the Pichis Palcazu Special Project of the Ministry of Agriculture, which promoted a change in land-use from forests to pasturelands along the stretch of road serving the project's area of influence.

The native communities still wish to bring cattle-raising to their territories. Indeed, this is only prevented by a lack of financing, as the above-mentioned program is no longer in force. However, cattle-raising is not always an appropriate land-use in the area: pasturelands have recently been established on lands that should be used for agricultural crops, for example, and even along riverbanks. Moreover, cattle-raising has not always led to an improvement in the farmers' economic circumstances: cattle-raising fosters a relatively low level of employment in the field, except during establishment, and requires expensive technicians and technical assistance from outside.

The welfare culture

Another negative factor hindering the promotion of sustainable forest management was the welfare culture that had taken root among the communities due to government efforts during the election period in the late 1990s. This was strongest among those communities more closely linked to the western Peruvian economy, to the point that some community members thought that the purpose of the project was to solve everyday problems and that no local counterpart contribution was required. This flawed understanding of the concept of a development project is still firmly entrenched in the minds of some community leaders, some of whom attempt to maintain or recover influence in the community and the benefits associated with community leadership by way of the administration of project assets and resources. Thus, project staff must continually stress the real purpose of the project: to facilitate a process by which the communities will find their own solutions to the planned use of their communal lands, including forests, and will maximise the benefits of harvesting the valuable products available from these resources.

Political climate

The political climate prevailing at the beginning of the project was another important factor that to a certain extent hampered the promotion of sustainable forest management among the communities. The Ashaninka Peoples' Association of Pichis (Asociación de Nacionalidades Asháninkas del Pichis—ANAP) had committed its support to local and regional authorities for the regional and municipal elections of the Puerto Bermudez district. The then incumbent mayor of the district wanted to be re-elected; he was one of ANAP's leaders but acted without the endorsement of the Association. His campaigners and supporters were looking for allies for their political campaign and used project discussions—the purpose of which was to coordinate forest management planning and participation—to promote their own electoral campaigns. This placed a certain strain on relationships. The situation is now being redressed through meetings between the seven participating Ashaninka communities and their leadership and through the participation of EDMAR in the ANAP Congress.

Illegal forest logging

According to Peru's Forestry Law, all logging permits must be supported by a forest management plan approved by INRENA. Even though none of the 108 Ashaninka communities in the Pichis River Valley has an approved forest management plan, trucks transporting timber along the roads can be seen on a daily basis.

Loggers negotiate business deals for the sale of logs or standing trees with community leaders or directly with the heads of families whose farms contain desirable trees. In either case, the price paid is insignificant. Moreover, loggers have various ways of reducing the payment of even these small amounts. For example, more timber than the agreed

(and paid-for) volume may be extracted—because the communities do not have the skills to measure the volume of timber leaving their lands. Moreover, loggers commonly penalise the communities or their members by discarding felled trees with defects or by reducing the amount paid per board foot due to defects in the timber; they also often insist on paying the same amount per board foot of timber for all species, including high-value species that are now rare.

There have also been cases of collusion between timber loggers and community leaders in illegal logging activities. Timber loggers have been prepared to make advance payments for future extractions and are usually very kind to community leaders. Contracts signed without the approval of the community have had an impact on the effective implementation of the project.

From friendship to co-existence

The Ashaninka are a very peaceable but highly suspicious people; therefore, it is best to establish a horizontal or participatory relationship so that the communities can identify with the objectives of the proposed action and can feel that they are conducting the activities for their own benefit. Ideally they will perceive outsiders as supporters who are promoting the interests of the community.

At the beginning of the project, the problem of distrust was quite clear in five of the seven communities. EDMAR had worked with the other two for some years, which had enabled its staff to understand traditional values and customs and also to observe changes in some of these values and customs among the younger generation. As part of the trust-building exercise, participatory workshops on forest development planning were conducted in each of the seven communities. It was assumed that everybody had the right to influence the decisions affecting them. Therefore, if a sustainable forest management project was to be implemented, there should be a forum where all stakeholders could have the opportunity to negotiate their own vision of the plan and the commitments needed to achieve the objectives.

These workshops highlighted the knowledge of the communities regarding the forest, the socioeconomic issues affecting them, their own weaknesses in terms of forest management, and the potential benefits of their actions for their children and grandchildren. The Ashaninka communities know their mountains very well, their paths, gullies and rivers. They know their *purmas* (or secondary forests), the ores where forest animals get their salted soil, their bathing and watering places, the seasons for fruit collection, the times for resin tapping and the best days for bamboo and tree felling. They know which herbs will cure their diseases or heal their wounds, and how to counteract the effects of the poisons of animals that share their environment. During the course of the project they realised that they knew just as much or even more about forest management than the foresters assisting them; they also saw that the success of the project depended on them and that they should therefore make it their own.

Beginnings of a plan: community and project workers plan an inventory of the community forestry in the Ashaninka community of Belén. This forest comprises more than 7000 hectares of mostly unlogged forest. *Photo: R. Guevara*

The role of facilitators

Participatory forest management planning is a complex but viable process if it is under the responsibility of a mestizo technician who lives and works side by side with the local people in their environment, and not of a visiting technician, who has to say goodbye soon after his arrival at the community because he is needed in the city. A technician is more likely to succeed in facilitating a participatory process if he knows many of the community's children and elders by name even if they do not work with him and if he has earned the trust of community members so that they feel free to express their knowledge and expectations.

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EDMAR's officers live with the communities, leaving to visit their families in the city once a month for a week. They work with the willing members of the communities, who increasingly comprise women and youth. They talk constantly about forest management and reforestation and share the people's aspirations and problems. As most of the community elders and women do not speak Spanish well, communication must be done in the Ashaninka language. The extent to which project officers master this language is an essential factor in determining the success of the project. Now, they are no longer strangers. They have become friends and partners, and a trusted link to the outside world and the project's resources.

The organisation of women

The project identified an acute weakness in the organisation of community women, as there was only the Mothers' Club of Mankaretoiteri in the community of El Milagro; none of the other communities had managed to achieve any level of organisation among women. Women in all of

the communities have expressed a need to have their own mothers' clubs, but they are limited in this endeavour because very few of them have the minimum level of knowledge needed to secure legal recognition for their organisation. EDMAR officers are providing the necessary assistance and are participating in the formulation of a project proposal to promote ecotourism—the management of which would be a major task for mothers' groups—that would complement and strengthen the sustainable management of forests in the territories of these indigenous communities.

Planning the future

The main centres for attracting the participation of young people are the two schools in the communities of El Milagro and Belén. The former, attended by young students from El Milagro and neighbouring communities, has already seen the graduation of its first high-school class, while the latter, which opened only in 2002 for basic secondary-level studies, has faced a number of problems that led to the dropout of 16 of its 21 registered students.

A number of teacher and student meetings were held at the El Milagro school to discuss the development of school activities, a process that will hopefully lead to changes such as the incorporation of forestry and forest management into the curriculum. Teachers and students have also indicated a desire for the early establishment of a carpentry workshop that was originally envisaged for a later stage of the project; this would make it possible to apply to the Ministry of Education for the assignment of a teacher in carpentry and joinery while project activities are still under way.

The work with the young people of the communities has exceeded all expectations. At present, the most able 45 young men and women as selected by their communities are actively involved in project activities; of these, at least 21 have the potential to eventually be entrusted with the implementation of forest management plans in their respective communities. This number will undoubtedly increase in the next few months and years, but for now it is encouraging to see that there is a core of potential community leaders that link their development to the future of the forests.

Legalising logging

The poor deals offered by aguaneros to the Ashaninka people have been discussed at meetings held with the seven participating communities and steps have been taken to redress the situation. Each community now has people trained in scaling by the project. A minimum price of US$0.065/bd ft for standing timber and US$0.075/bd ft for precious species such as cedar, mahogany, ishpingo and tornillo has been set. Two of the communities have agreed not to sell their timber at all until they have obtained their forest logging permits.

In one case, a young man from the community was commissioned to visit the families to inform them of the implications of the project for logging contracts. Once aware of the situation, the community in question replaced its leaders, who were colluding with aguaneros in logging agreements, and only agreed to honour the advance payments already received with timber from its forest.

At the beginning the aguaneros believed the project was against them, even those who were dealing more openly with the communities. This was not true; the aguaneros provide a link to the market and are therefore an essential partner in the achievement of sustainable forest management. Many aguaneros have been brought into the process initiated by the project: they now know that the development and approval of management plans will greatly facilitate their trade, making it legal and therefore reducing the need to circumvent enforcement efforts or to attempt to bribe authorities for the transport of their timber.

The changing community landscape

In the past, many in the communities have seen the forest as a free asset waiting to be harvested, and they didn't realise their resources were being depleted and impoverished. Even now the oldest members of the communities believe that if a tree can be sold then it should be sold, regardless of where it is located or whether it is the last specimen remaining in the area.

Young people, on the other hand, are aware that the forests they will one day inherit are being depleted and their destruction must be arrested. They seek changes that will enable them to participate in the developments that are constantly taking place in the world around them. They know that the reckless depletion of natural resources is not in their long-term interests. Thus, they encourage the adult members of their communities to introduce changes in their routines, and this can be used by the project to create a sustainable forest management culture.

The curbing of illegal logging has been set by INRENA's local authorities as a short-term goal, and the project is helping in this. It can be achieved in cooperation with ANAP, if this organisation agrees to apply and enforce a policy to that effect among its member communities. This we consider to be quite likely, because many people in the communities are starting to realise that with each illegally logged tree they lose a little bit more of their territory, their culture, their landscape, their history and their future. Deforestation and forest degradation won't be stopped overnight, because the economic forces that are driving it are too powerful. Nor will the project achieve instant success in organising and training the communities; it will probably be many years before communities are able to claim genuine ownership of the process and to decide the role of sustainable forest management among the range of land-use options available to them. Nevertheless, putting effective community development processes in place will increase the ability of the communities to capture more of the value of their resources and to make their own informed choices on how those resources are used.

Translated from the Spanish by Claudia Adan.