

# Helping remote communities to help themselves

Helping marginal farmers to improve their livelihoods is a challenge for NGOs and governmental organisations. But when communities are in remote places, in steep ravines or on isolated plateaus, many days travel from the nearest centres of administration, the challenge is even greater, especially when local services are not well adapted to respond to their needs. One example is the communities living in Tarija in Bolivia that farm in the valleys along the edge of the Andes at altitudes between 2000 m and 4000 m. They grow a range of rainfed and irrigated crops such as maize, vegetables and potatoes, small orchards of peaches and quinces and graze cattle and sheep. However, there is widespread poverty and people have to cope with many naturally occurring problems such as droughts, floods, frosts and hail as well as poor soil fertility, salinity along river terraces and pests and diseases that attack their crops and livestock. The local municipality does not have the resources to help them sustain and improve their livelihoods and there are few local NGOs who can provide the advice they need.



How can such remote communities be helped when local institutions are so weak? One solution was to go directly to the

communities themselves and to find ways of empowering people to find and implement their own solutions. It was anticipated that they would need specialist technical help to do this and so the plan was to link the communities with local professionals. Once this process was underway the professionals would withdraw

leaving communities to tackle their own problems but they would be available for advice when it was needed.



## *Communities quickly adapted to the task of identifying problems and finding practical solutions*

### REACHING THE POOREST

Although the majority of people living in Tarija are poor, this project aimed to include the poorest of the poor. But reaching them is not easy. It is the more affluent that come forward first, are more vocal in meetings and are more likely to experiment. The poorest households are less able to migrate regularly to generate cash and are more vulnerable to the effects of environmental hazards. They are not always able to attend community meetings or participate in community-led activities and may live some distance from the centre of the community. Households in one community were thought to be the poorest if there was little family labour available, or little means to hire help. In another it was a lack of land

ownership and in a third it was linked to a lack of livestock. To overcome this, information was sought from local community leaders who knew families well and from schoolteachers who carry out the annual census.

#### THE APPROACH

The central hypothesis of the project was that it must be local people who identify and articulate natural resource management issues. They should not be devised or prioritised by outside professionals. However, local professionals do have an essential role to play not just as technical advisers but also as facilitators for community discussions. This is a new approach in Bolivia as local professionals are more used to taking the lead rather than listening to their clients' needs.

Two local professionals were employed by the project, a veterinary surgeon and an agriculturalist and regular monthly meetings were initiated with the selected communities.

They were encouraged to listen to people and to adopt a diagnostic approach by facilitating community groups to discuss common problems. The professionals contributed their scientific knowledge alongside community-proposed solutions and then helped the communities to implement their chosen solutions. One measure of the success of meetings was demonstrated by the long distances that people were willing to come to attend them, some walking for 2 hours and more. Another was the way in which the meetings attracted people from other communities wishing to participate.

#### PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Communities quickly adapted to the task of identifying problems and finding practical solutions.

#### Managing the grazing land and livestock

Livestock is an important element in the lives of everyone and good reliable pasture is vital. Animals must be moved constantly in search of it and this consumes much time and effort. Cattle go on the hoof for long distances in the dry season to areas where there is more rainfall and better grass. Sheep are also continually on the move and are cared for by the people from poor households. Good grazing is essential at lambing time and to see everyone through periods of drought.

People are now beginning to experiment with alternative livestock management practices. Pastures are being improved by collecting seeds from the best pasture grasses and planting them in protected fields. Animals are being exchanged between communities to enhance bloodlines and improve their quality.

#### Tackling disease

Diseases are a problem both in livestock and in crops. People are learning how to give intra-muscular and sub-cutaneous injections so they can apply some remedies themselves. The vet is designing flash cards to help owners diagnose common ailments and avoid the need for professional help.



Fruit trees have rarely been pruned or treated. Farmers are now realising that pruning mature trees is beneficial. Through the project, people from poor households are learning the skills of pruning and are able to earn money working for those farmers who own fruit trees. As a result fruit harvests have doubled in a year in some areas.

The local agriculturalist has suggested using cheap, partly home-prepared and environmentally friendly sprays to tackle fruit flies, borers and mildew. He has shown people how mixtures are prepared and applied. Up to 80 per cent of households in the project area are now using these to treat field crops and trees.

#### Improving cropping

The local agriculturalist is helping farming families to map their soil types. Areas of good soil have become apparent that are not intensively used at present.

Some groups are experimenting with new crop varieties such as short-season potatoes that may mature before the worst frosts. Some farmers already practice soil conservation and maintain soil fertility and the agriculturalist is keen for them to show others their methods.

#### Communicating with others

Everyone listens to the radio and goes to local fairs and so they provide excellent vehicles for communication. In collaboration with Radio Tarija, run by a Catholic NGO, professionals are making fortnightly broadcasts about the work in the communities. They inform others about the progress being made, about how to attend meetings and workshops and how their community can also benefit.

#### Reaching the poorest?

Local professionals have been targeting the poorest households so that they can monitor how useful community actions are for them.

The poorest people were found to be facing many problems besides those of natural resources. Many cases were reported of poor health, low self-esteem, alcoholism and domestic violence. Although the project did not tackle such issues directly, it is anticipated that improvements in their livelihoods will have wider benefits.

#### THE NEXT STEPS

The project focus so far has been on developing community interaction between local professionals and community groups. This has proved successful in a number of very practical ways but the time has now come when the local professionals must stand well back and let the communities run things themselves. The acid test will be communities coming forward with their own natural resources plans for funding and inclusion in local government annual plans.

This approach also needs replicating if other communities are to benefit. The local municipalities are now being included in the planning and design of further similar initiatives. The project's research, built around its developmental activities, has monitored the community demands and the ways by which local professionals have worked with communities to meet them. This information will be used to define a mode of service provision that is appropriate for remote communities.

#### R7584 Community-led tools for enhancing production and conserving resources

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