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In contrast to the conservation committees, the San Luis Watershed Management Association involves the population of the whole district.

## From local committees to a district association

**César Gonzales Alfaro**

The district of San Luis is found in the high Andes, some 385 km north of Lima, Peru's capital. The whole district is at least 3800 metres above sea level and poverty is widespread. There is very limited access to basic services (electricity, drinking water), and almost half of the population is illiterate. In spite of the altitude, agriculture is the major activity of the district's inhabitants, mainly growing potatoes and other Andean tubers for consumption. Yields at this altitude have never been high, but during the last three decades the situation has become increasingly difficult. The division of community-owned lands, together with a considerable population growth rate, led to overgrazing and the disappearance of nearly all tree cover. Degradation of the natural resources is evident with the disappearance of the native forests, the local flora and fauna, and in the district's decreasing productivity.

The Ministry of Agriculture's national soil conservation programme, known as PRONAMACHCS (*Programa Nacional de Manejo de Cuencas Hidrográficas y Conservación de Suelos*), started working in San Luis in 1996. They began by setting up a number of "conservation committees", being groups of farmers that the programme could work together with on soil conservation and other natural resource management issues. A committee was set up in every village in the district, and generally composed of 20 to 30 families. Responding to PRONAMACHCS' initiatives, these village committees built terraces and established agroforestry systems. Each committee worked on and around its village.

Trying to widen their impact, the leaders of three of these village committees proposed forming larger groups, to be able to work at district level. The original idea was to set up two

groups, one in the upper part of the district and another in the lower part, considering the district as one watershed. Eventually one single group was formed by the leaders of all the village committees. Its task was to support the village level committees, organising regular meetings and monitoring and evaluating their activities. This district level group was also meant to look at common problems and to help identify solutions. In practice, however, its main role was that of an intermediary between PRONAMACHCS and the village committees: requesting money or inputs for a specific committee, or simply co-ordinating the regular visits to every village.

### The organisation of a farmers' association

In 1998, with funds from the World Bank and the national government, PRONAMACHCS started implementing a new natural resource management project in different parts of Peru's highlands. Together with five other districts, San Luis was chosen as a pilot area with the objective of "developing a participatory approach to natural resource management". Focusing on participatory planning processes and on the generation of site-specific technologies, this project aims to increase productivity and contribute to the eradication of poverty. One of the advantages of working in San Luis was that farmers had already tried working together through the formation of the village committees and through the larger district group. Recognising the limitations this larger group had had, its members agreed on the advantages which this new project would bring. Forming an effective association would help with the implementation of the new project, but it would also serve their own interests, representing everybody in the district.

The project's staff started by identifying the existing committees, organisations and institutions in the 19 villages of the district. General meetings were held in each village,

identifying the main difficulties so as to prioritise future actions. These meetings were also meant to present the idea of forming a larger association, and to see the villagers' interest and commitment. After several months, leaders of 16 villages formed the San Luis Watershed Management Association, immediately approving its statutes and electing its representatives. It was officially registered in October 2002.

At the moment, the Association has a small office in the district's capital, where formal and informal meetings are held every week. Village representatives, as well as farmers or representatives of other institutions, are welcome every Thursday. General assemblies are held every three months, where the Association's directors present all the activities implemented and all the results achieved. One of the issues discussed regularly is the use of the Association's funds. Every village agreed to pay a monthly fee of 50 *soles* (approximately US\$ 15), which is used for the Association's regular expenses (office costs, or trips outside the district).

#### Four years on

The first difficulty faced was trying to involve all the villages in the district. This was especially relevant as the Association considers the district to be one watershed with interrelated problems, and not a set of disconnected villages or communities. Three villages decided not to join for several reasons: in one case it was because villagers do not own the land they work on (as that area was not covered by the 1969 Land Reform Act), in another because the village is too close to the district's capital and farming is not the villagers' main activity. Later on, two other villages decided to stop paying their fees, and were therefore excluded from participating any further. Another difficulty which still exists today is that of reaching consensus or having all the different representatives agreeing on one particular issue. This was especially clear when they were drafting the Association's statutes, when some farmers found it easier to express their opinions than others. Similar problems have been seen in general meetings, when participants are reminded to look at the interests and needs of the district as a whole, and not at the situation of a particular village.

In contrast to the earlier village committees, the Association has always been keen to represent the whole district and all stakeholders in its decisions and actions. Even though some villages are not involved, this idea has gained ground by assigning responsibilities to the representatives of all villages, thus "covering" the whole district. Another positive step has been to invite other institutions present in the area to meetings and discussions: the schools and the educational authorities, the church, the political authorities and even the police. Their participation has been active, leading to interesting results. It has been more difficult to achieve representativeness at the village level, as farmers in some of the villages (especially in those with a very strong village committee) felt that their representative was not doing a proper job, or that, coming from the committee but not having been chosen by the villagers, he was not really representing them at all. Democratic elections at the village level have therefore also been promoted, trying to ensure that the Association does not only reflect the interests of the local committee or of those better linked to the Ministry of Agriculture's project.

The project's extension officers have been active in promoting the need for a strong Association, and in providing specific training for this. During the first year, a thorough training programme was implemented, with courses in basic administration and financial management. According to the

farmers, one of the most interesting aspects was that these courses were not centred on the activities or specific objectives of the project, but rather on the needs of the Association itself. They also recognised the fact that these courses were open, encouraging the participation of all villagers and not just the leaders. The authorities and other institutions were invited to participate in courses, and this was seen as a positive way of presenting their ideas and interests, contributing to identifying the Association's activities, and defining their own role in them. The main difficulty has been the participation of women and of illiterate farmers, a challenge which is recognised by the Association's leaders.

#### Results and further challenges

One of the most interesting recognitions of all these efforts came at the end of 2002, when the provincial government invited the Association to participate in the *Mesa de Concertación Provincial*, the body that represents all the institutions and organisations in the province, aiming at concerted actions towards development. The farmers of San Luis presented their point of view in relation to the plans drafted and carried out in the whole province. Recognising the importance of improving the way natural resources are managed in this district, discussions in the *Mesa* convinced the regional authorities to assign 54 000 *soles* (approximately US\$ 17 000) for a reforestation project in San Luis.

Active participation by the Association's leaders has also led to other concrete results. Negotiations with the representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture led to the construction of a 2000 m<sup>3</sup> reservoir, benefiting 285 families. Additional funding was also secured from the Ministry of Agriculture, the local municipality and the church for small scale production projects (trout production, a bakery, guinea-pig modules) run by different villages. An agreement was signed with the representative of the national government and the police, aimed at preventing forest fires and protecting the district's resources. In addition, the Association was able to persuade the education authorities to hire two extra teachers for the local schools, and convinced other stakeholders of the importance of organising regular production fairs, where farmers have been able to sell and exchange their products.

After several years of working together, farmers in San Luis recognise the importance of managing their resources so as to ensure sustainable yields. Though the work of the village level committees showed some results at the village level, the work of the Association has convinced its members of the advantages of working together at a higher level, and with a longer-term perspective in mind. Positive results have motivated the Association to think beyond natural resource management issues, and discussions have already taken place about the need to work together around organic production, marketing and commercialisation of local production, and even around health and education issues.

Further capacity building courses are needed. A good indicator of the Association's success, however, is that it is not only participating in PRONAMACHCS' courses, or accepting their invitations, but that they recognise their own needs for capacity building, and are now actively requesting various trainings. ■

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