A patch of green

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During the dry season the two predominant colors in the landscape of the Libertador Ramon Castilla Community Agricultural Society (SAIS) are the yellow of the prairie and the blue of the sky. Bare rocks or rural hamlets occasionally appear as dark patches in the scene. Not far from two of these hamlets in the Sierra, the Central Peruvian mountain range, the visual monotony is broken by a green field. Such a bright green at an altitude of 4000 metres and in summer is hard to explain. It is the result of an “injection of technology” following an agreement between two Peruvian institutions — the SAIS and La Molina Agrarian University.

The puna, the dry bleak plateau in the high Andes, from 3000 metres up, has little agricultural value except for its natural pastures. Used for grazing, these pastures are of poor quality because they lack water and nutrients. The Peruvian Sierra encompasses about 20 million hectares on which most of the country’s sheep, cattle and camelids (llamas) are raised. Sheep and camelids adapt best to the altitude, the climate and poor nutrition. Cattle, raised to a lesser extent, do not compete for the same food.

Centuries of overgrazing, water shortages, and severe lack of soil nutrients limit the potential of the Andean highlands for livestock raising. Nevertheless, a large proportion of Peru’s rural population depends on livestock for its livelihood, as this region offers no other means of subsistence.

The SAIS (Sociedad Agricola de Interes Social) is a special creation of the Peruvian land reform program. As part of that program, the SAIS Libertador Ramon Castilla — named in honor of Major-General Ramon Castilla, the famous liberator of the slaves in Peru — was established in August 1972. Seven farms were assigned to the rural communities of Tamatambo and Pomacancha, and to the José Olaya Ltda. Cooperative Association No. 265, made up of former farm workers. These three groups formed a partnership whose lands cover more than 29 000 hectares, 22 000 of which are natural grasslands. More than 700 families live here — approximately 3600 people — making this particular SAIS one of the most densely populated.

During 1978-1979, the sheep population reached 23 687: there were also 1000 cows, 1200 guines (a breed of guinea pig), and 70 horses. The SAIS general manager, Justo M. Egoavil notes that “the area is not suitable for farming, and the only reason we plant is to provide work for members... farming simply is not profitable in this environment.” However, potatoes, barley, quinoa, oats, and vegetables are grown on a small scale.

As established by the Peruvian land reform program, the SAIS is governed by a delegate assembly that appoints two councils in charge of administration and supervision. There may also be other specialized councils. Production and general management are the responsibility of the administrative council. The nature and structure of the SAIS make possible the participation of the rural people involved. They are not individual land owners, nor do they hold deeds to the land. They receive salaries for their work, but also participate in the running of the society through their delegates. Profits or surpluses go to the participating communities and the cooperative association to improve schools, transportation, and other community services.

Although progress has been made in sheep raising — SAIS’s main source of income — members are well aware of the limitations resulting from the lack of water and the deterioration of the grasslands. The technical assistance proposed by the University was very well received, therefore.

This then explains the enthusiasm with which La Molina and SAIS staff have undertaken the project, financially supported by IDRC. According to Mr Arturo Carrasco, director of the Animal Sciences program at the University and project leader, the project aims to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the inhabitants through livestock raising.

This goal is pursued primarily through the improvement of animal nutrition. “Improvement starts in the stomach,” states Carrasco, and he adds that by improving nutrition, there is a 90 percent possibility of raising the level of production. It was soon found that there was a need to form an interdisciplinary team with specialists from La Molina University in soils, livestock raising, veterinary medicine, economics, and sociology.

SAIS Ramon Castilla, representative of this type of association in the Sierra, was chosen for the project because of its members’ receptivity, and good access from Lima. Similar experiments are being conducted in Puno, in the South of Peru, under the guidance of a New Zealand team. Information is exchanged between these two groups, and the
The initial impact of the project — green pasture and irrigation — was "like a gift from heaven."