Combining Environmental Protection and Poverty Alleviation in Colombia

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Gerry Toomey

[Photo Caption: With help from CIPASLA, Pedro Herrera now grows a wider variety of crops to feed his extended family and sell in local markets.]

When it comes to growing crops and protecting the environment, Pedro Herrera is on top of things — in more ways than one. The small-scale farmer lives in the upper reaches of southern Colombia's Andean hills, some 1,500 meters above sea level, in the province of Cauca. This is one of the country's poorest regions. But he and his family are active participants in a bold, four year-old experiment to conserve natural resources in the local watershed and to help community members improve their standard of living.

The district where Herrera lives is aptly named 'Buenavista' (Good View). His earthen-floor home overlooks a vast gray-green landscape which — though spectacular — bears many scars of deforestation and erosion. His fields lie at the head of a 7,000-hectare area drained by the Cabuyal River, which in turn feeds into the larger watershed of the Ovejas River. Water running down from Herrera's land eventually makes its way to the populous city of Cali, 100 kilometres to the north.

First line of defence

With help from CIPASLA (Interinstitutional Consortium for Sustainable Agriculture in Hillsides), Herrera and other farmers have agreed to act as the first line of defence for the Cabuyal watershed environment. They fence off mountain springs, plant trees, and protect hillside soils from erosion. In return, CIPASLA members provide research services, technical advice, training, and information regarding agricultural production, processing, marketing, land management, and community organization. They also arrange loans for small enterprises such as milk processing and marmalade making. In CIPASLA's approach to sustainable development, the emphasis is on building local community capacity to plan and execute projects.

CIPASLA was launched in 1994 following discussions involving the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), Colombian government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and community groups. The consortium is funded by the International Development Research Centre, the Colombian government, and CIAT.
Community representation

Today, CIPASLA has 14 members. One of the key players is ASOBESURCA, a beneficiaries association that represents local community interests. ASOBESURCA controls project funds and has two of the five seats on CIPASLA's steering committee.

"You have to understand that this community was tired of politicians, lies and poverty," says Magnolia Hurtado, CIPASLA's director. "Let me use a metaphor from natural resource management. What's basic here is that our community has recovered from a case of 'erosion'. The people are now part of the process of development. They are the ones who decide where they're going."

Social erosion

The "erosion" she refers to is the disillusionment that creeps into a community when development efforts are disconnected from people's real needs. In Colombia, some farmers who can't make an honest living from the land end up cultivating illicit crops such as coca leaf or selling their properties and moving to the city, where life is often even more difficult. Social erosion also refers to the departure of frustrated young Colombians to join guerrilla movements.

Hurtado adds that the Cabuyal watershed was traditionally a "one-crop community, based on cassava. Because of CIPASLA, the farmers have been able to diversify production. This has improved their incomes and reduced the environmental pressure that cassava exerts on the hillsides [when its edible roots are harvested]."

Increased income

Pedro Herrera's farm is now a showcase for the wide array of crops that can be grown on a small farm without causing a decline in its natural resources. On CIPASLA's advice, he has set aside more than one-third of his land to protect five natural springs that feed the watershed. Yet his farm income has increased. The 10 hectares remaining in production provide enough both for his extended family of 15 and for the local market. Herrera's crops include beans, maize, coffee, sugarcane, cassava, sweet peas, and — his pride and joy — blackberries. His cows provide milk for his own table and for sale. He raises carp in a hillside pond. In addition, his wife raises chickens, thanks to credit arranged through CIPASLA.

While Herrera's own resourcefulness and experience are the main reasons for his success as a farmer, CIPASLA has been a catalyst. "For all the questions I used to have about farming, I had to supply my own answers," he recalls. "Now I have technical assistance."

Just a beginning

For CIPASLA, strengthening the social and physical fabric of the Cabuyal watershed is only a beginning. With four years of experience, the consortium is now operating in other areas of the Ovejas River watershed. Meanwhile, in its capacity as an international research institute, CIAT is working in Honduras and Nicaragua to test the consortium model of rural development.

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