

AclF | Almanac of the Future

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Motivational Experience No. 58



**Saving the
future**

In San Martín Sacatepéquez, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, local communities are redefining their future. At the foot of the volcano and the Chikabal lagoon, an association of farmers has found a way to protect the environment and improve their quality of life through ecotourism. At the same time, local governance has been enriched by the recovery of the Council of Elders, which oversees the management of the local government. These local initiatives, accompanied by Aso-Seprodi and supported by Misereor, demonstrate the power of co-responsibility in territorial management to build a better future.

Council of Elders

Jun K'loj Tij Wnaq, or Council of Elders in the Mam language, is an ancestral organization facing challenges today. During our visit to Laguna Seca, at the foot of the Chikabal volcano, we met with some of its members, Don Juan Vasquez, president of the council, along with Miguel Lopez, Andres Perez and Antonio Ramirez, all octogenarian members of the council. Miguel López represents the Council of Elders in the Municipal Development Council-COMUDE. *"In the past, "Los Principales" was the name given to the elders of the communities who assumed the role of governors in the*

territory. But with the law of political parties, the role of the principales was replaced," explains Don Juan. When the Council of Elders was formed a few years ago, it had more than sixty members, men and women, all older adults, representing their communities. *"We elders talk Mam, also to the mayor, but civilized people are indifferent to the wisdom of the elderly,"* explains Don Miguel.

The Council currently has 15 members. In most cases, when their representative on the council dies, the communities have not appointed a replacement. *"The work in the council is voluntary. That is why not many*

older people want to participate. In the beginning, there were women on the council. There is an idea that the municipal government should support the council financially," explains Don Miguel: *"It is not easy to participate in COMUDE because you have to speak Spanish well and, above all, you have to speak in public. In addition, the municipal authorities do not pay attention to the recommendations, especially those related to accountability for transparency"*.

Self-convening and good governance

Initiatives, groups and social organizations, anchored and in solidarity with the territory can play a leading role in facilitating good governance. **Are you part of an initiative in your territory or could you imagine an initiative along these lines?**

Despite the decline in its membership and the difficulties in making its voice heard in COMUDE, the Council continues its work of representing the communities and promoting transparency in municipal management. Their work is hampered by a lack of



resources and the authorities' lack of knowledge of the Mam language.

However, the lack of participation of the new generations and the lack of knowledge of local authorities hamper their work. Nevertheless, the Council continues to strive to keep its culture alive and to promote trans-

parency in local government.

Between the generations

The Council of Elders seeks to preserve the wisdom of the ancestors and ensure its transmission to future generations. But the lack of connection with young people is a challenge. "Young people think that what we are doing is outdated", says Don Miguel. Despite attempts to involve them, such as the participation of Martín, Don Juan's great-nephew, as secretary, they have not been able to create spaces for intergenerational dialogue where they can talk and transfer knowledge and know-how in preparation for the generational handover. The Council recognizes the need to adapt to the interests of young people and to train those who want to participate in governance, culture and territory to participate in community life. The experiences of the elders, such as Don Juan's time as mayor or Don Miguel's time as council representative to the munic-

pal government, could be a bridge to connect with the new generations.

Meeting between generations

The Council of Elders, recently recovered, is facing the threat of disappearing again. What paths and spaces do you know and practice to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and intergenerational relay?

Determining circumstances

Almost forty years ago, in 1986, 160 peasant families from the municipality of San Martín formed a committee, buying 154 hectares of land to clear forest and grow potatoes. The Chikabal volcano, with its crater and lagoon, was part of this property. Juan García, legal representative of the Association of Ecological Farmers - ASAEKO, recalls: "Our initial idea was to use the land to grow potatoes and use the water from the lagoon for irrigation. But the authorities told us that it was a protected area. Faced with this situation,

most of the families decided to leave the committee. And those of us who stayed had no idea about conservation or ecotourism". With the support of the National Council of Protected Areas - CONAP and the NGO Helvetas Probosque, the nineteen families who decided to stay learned about conservation and ecotourism through training and exchange visits to the community. In 1999, ASAECO was born as a collective dedicated to conservation and ecotourism.

Don Juan tells a curiosity. "In the place where we are now, called Laguna Seca, there was originally a lagoon. People used to frequent this place to wash clothes or bathe, but since it is a protected area, polluting activities were prohibited. Unfortunately, people blamed our association and did not share our interest in dedicating the area to nature conservation and recreation". As the name "Dry Lagoon" suggests, the lagoon has dried up and there is a parking lot and a kiosk that serves visitors; those who want to stay in cabins or in a simple eco-hotel.



Own efforts and external aid

The eco-hotel was built with support from UNDP, Helvetas and the National Fund for Nature Conservation. However, most of the current infrastructure and maintenance of the area, such as trails, bleachers, viewpoints, and roads, as well as monitoring the compliance of visitor with regulations during their stay, has been undertaken by the association and its partner families. Despite the challenges, ASAECO has managed to become self-financing through its conservation and ecotourism project.

Three members of the association work as resource guards and receive a salary from CONAP. Other members organize transportation in all-terrain vehicles from Laguna Seca to the viewpoint. All the families have benefited in some way from the tourism movement. ASAECO has succeeded in positioning the Chikabal volcano and lagoon as a reference for sustainable tourism. When asked if he has personally benefited from Chikabal, the president of the association shares: "The lagoon has given me the opportunity to grow, to train and to learn about other similar experiences; it is true, the volcano and the lagoon have helped me move forward".

Cultural and Spiritual Importance

The Chikabal volcano and lagoon have become a site of great cultural and spiritual importance, and have been declared a sacred site by the Maya Mam spiritual leaders. Thousands of visitors from both Mayan and

other religions come to make prayers, offerings and ceremonies. For the Maya Mam and K'iche' communities, the day of the last request for rain, celebrated forty days after the Holy Week, attracts more than six thousand people; another moment of great abundance is the Day of the Cross, at the beginning of May Ajq'ij's, spiritual leaders from different parts of Guatemala, perform ceremonies at the site, which has made the lagoon a ceremonial center of great relevance. Andrés López, one of the resource guards, shares, "*With the tourists, our organization became aware of the value of our culture and language*".



Regulations and recursion

Instead of clearing forest, take care of nature and go into ecotourism: ASAE-CO's example is a product of recursion in the face of regulations. **Test your recursion in the face of regulations that at first seem rather coercive!**

Sustainable tourism has become an important source of income for local communities, promoting environmental conservation and the revitalization of cultural traditions. The Chikabal lagoon and volcano is an example of how tourism can be a positive force for community development.

What other tips do you apply in your work in favor of good governance in your territory?

Leave us a message on our social networks to share it with the community!



Messages to the Future

1

The Council of Elders and the Association of Ecological Farmers show us two possible paths of salvation, from the recovery of the mechanisms of self-government and from the preservation of the environment. Both paths have in common the revaluation of the culture, the indigenous identity and the spirituality of the territory: essential ingredients for a desired future.

2

Knowledge and mechanisms of good governance require shared spaces and intergenerational relays based on cultural and territorial identities. The process of the Council of Elders, recovered from the ancestors, underlines the importance of the connectivity between generations.

3

Self-convening initiatives of society and local groups, such as the Council of Elders or the Association of Ecological Farmers, show the importance and feasibility of the principle of co-responsibility in the territory.

Almanac of the Future

The text was elaborated based on conversations with Juan Vásquez, Andrés Pérez, Antonio Ramírez and Miguel López of the Council of Elders of San Martín Sacatepéquez and with Juan García, Andrés López and other members of ASAECO - Association of Ecological Farmers during the visit to the Chikabal lagoon and volcano. The visit in August 2024 was made by Jorge Krekeler (coordinator of the Almanac of the Future - Misereor facilitator on behalf of Agiamondo). The Council of Elders and ASAECO are thanked for their time, interest and confidence in the Almanac of the Future. Special thanks to Edgar Ramírez, Lilian Hernández, Mario Monterroso and Francisco Vásquez of the Asociación Servicios a Programas de Desarrollo e Investigación - ASO-SEPRODI, a partner of Misereor, for their support and accompaniment during all activities, taking important steps in a complicity, weaving transformations.

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