

Almanac of the Future

A STORY OF SUCCESS

Motivational experience No. 21



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esperanza
de la región

On the way to solidarity economy

ON THE WAY TO SOLIDARITY ECONOMY



Luís Eduardo Torres
Director of the cooperative
COOMULDESA

The alternative to “Every man for himself”

Luís Eduardo Torres is the manager of the savings and credit cooperative COOMULDESA and considers the cooperative as part of his life. The cooperative was founded 54 years ago in Galán, a town in the Comunera Province, south of the department of Santander (Colombia); Luís Eduardo took over management 32 years ago when the cooperative had just over two thousand associates, six employees and two offices. Currently, COOMULDESA employs three hundred people and maintains 24 offices in most of the municipalities of the southern provinces of the department of Santander (Guanenta, Comunera and Vélez), in the capital Bucaramanga and has ventured into municipalities in other provinces of Santander and the Department of Boyacá. It has more than one hundred thousand associated people, corresponding to about 40% of the population of the territory. This high per-

The Guanentá, Comunera and Vélez provinces in the south of the department of Santander – Colombia, are home of a process where the socio-organizational structure of their habitants and solidarity economy in the form of cooperatives have tried to mark the contemporary history of this region, breaking paradigms, for example, through a financial economic system, managed by people’s cooperatives for the people and the construction of a solidary territory with a logic of development that departs from the territory and the identity and culture of its habitants. What began fifty years ago by the initiative of several people and supported by development programs is currently supported by its own dynamics, with capacity and projection to the future.

tage is due to the trust that people have in credit unions. "I think the experience of COOMULDESA is showing an alternative to the capitalist motto every man for himself," said the manager during the extensive interview he has given us. "Cooperativism, for some time did not have very good acceptance in many regions, people felt a great distrust, especially in the rural parts. This mistrust was based on bad antecedents (embezzlement of funds) that have never been absent in the credit unions. This has also happened in our region. Despite these obstacles, COOMULDESA managed to regain the trust of the people and we managed to grow, while remaining what we wanted to be". The image of being the "ugly duckling" within the capitalist financial system is something of yesterday for a credit union that handles more clients than any commercial bank in the region.

COOMULDESA managed to grow without losing sight of the direct benefit for the associate, investing its profits in a development with social inclusion. To this end, COOMULDESA has created its own foundation that carries out activities for social and community orientation, finding its base of existence in the commitment of the cooperative with its social responsibility.

Growing without losing identity

"Principles and values, based on awareness of the benefits of credit unions have been the recipe for our success, the rest comes in addition" explains the manager. "A democratic government structure, in which politicking has no chance of interfering, and a business vision that includes responsibility and a social function, not as a marketing strategy but as a commitment, characterize our style of cooperative". Luis Eduardo has sought the growth of COOMULDESA but not at any price: "There are credit unions that work in a small scale but do not grow, not having the capacity to answer to the demands in question

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of economic development to its associates". COOMULDESA has understood the need to grow but looking for a slower and more organic advance. "We have not undergone changes in our identity, competing within the financial system". COOMULDESA has nothing of a "backyard-bank", that is the image that the credit unions frequently have in the banking world. The facts speak clear: the cooperative does not need refinancing from other institutions and offers loans up to half a million dollars.

Generational change and new ideas

29,000 savers of the cooperative are 18 or younger. Reason enough for Ángel Yesid Amado and the COOMULDESA Foundation team to address the younger ones through their actions. The foundation is funded by a portion of the profits of COOMULDESA. "Actually, credit unions are required to reinvest half of their profits by law", says Angel Yesid Amado, head of the foundation. "COOMULDESA provides more than the legal requirements for the development of the region and its interests."

The range of activities of the Foundation is enormous. In 2015, 87,000 people participated, among members and the population in general. Information and education are a main part of the repertoire. For Angel Yesid it is important to accompany the generational change in the region: "The future of our credit unions and thus the solidarity economy in the region depends to a large extent on a successful generational change." We know from experience that it is easier to break paradigms with younger people, for example with agroecological production, we are addressing younger people who like to live in the countryside through our vocational programs".

In the area of communications, the foundation tries to counteract mains-



“The foundation is only continuing the work that the cooperative pioneers began: strengthening the cooperative movement and the regional solidarity economy. We are influencing public health policy making, awakening interest in public authorities for the solidarity economy and we are strengthening the role of civil society,” says Àngel Yesid. Building a regional solidarity economy is not an easy task and can only be achieved through clever networking.

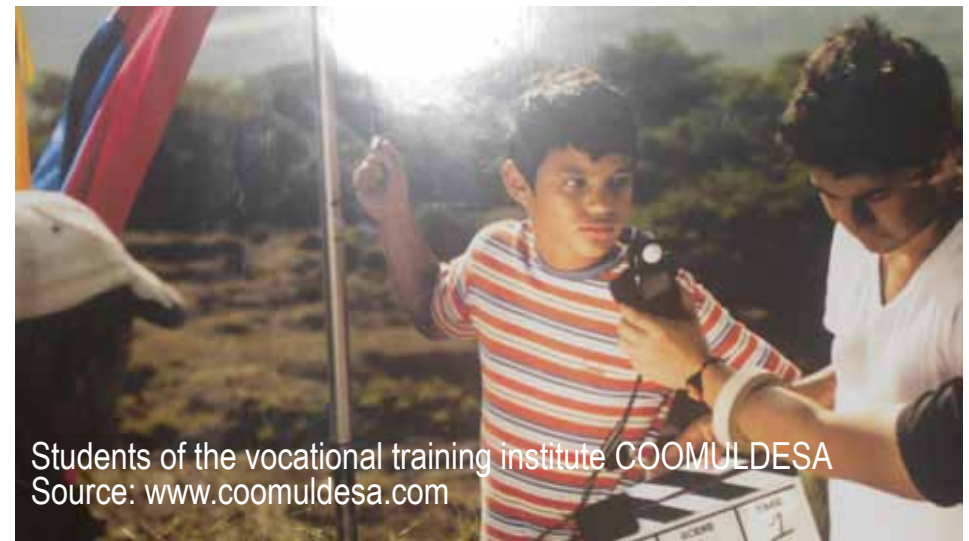
trepreneurial commercial strategies. "The foundation is only continuing the work that the cooperative pioneers began: strengthening the cooperative movement and the regional solidarity economy. We are influencing public health policy making, awakening interest in public authorities for the solidarity economy and we are strengthening the role of civil society," says Àngel Yesid. Building a regional solidarity economy is not an easy task and can only be achieved through clever networking. "Many inhabitants of the region, do not realize how well organized and united the community is, which is why many people lose sight of the fact that

this is the reason why solidarity economy works".

Hands on work: who wants to be solidary?

Among the most visible activities of the foundation are the “saving festivals” and the program “Solidary Explorers”, oriented for the youth. This program is aimed at children and young people with an educational and recreational concept, rescuing the history and local identity of the region.

In the educational field, the foundation has the COOMULDESA Institute, which offers academic programs in communication, agriculture, re-



Students of the vocational training institute COOMULDESA
Source: www.coomuldesa.com

“Our communication work addresses young people: our motto is pass the microphone to the youth”.



Students of the vocational training institute COOMULDESA
Source: www.coomuldesa.com

creation, sports, culture and financial services. The young people who assist the Institute generally achieve a quick insertion in the labor market. Besides this, the foundation assumed the responsibility of the San Gil Cooperative School two years ago, which is constituted as patrimony of the municipality. For the school director, Enrique Martínez, it is an educational proposal which offers quality of education under the principles of solidary economy at low cost for families.

In addition, RESANDER is a regional network of community media that was consolidated with the help of the foundation, and is now a strategic partner of the media unit of the foundation, working radio, television and short films. It organizes the youth film contest and communication program "Who wants to be solidary?". Producing autochthonous short films from the local reality.

All these enterprises and services have something in common: they are emblematic cases that show that it is feasible to provide quality services to the community, replacing profit for service to the "Common Good".

Regional solidarity economy – Alternative to the established developing model

The alliance between the COOMULDESA Foundation, the RESANDER network and UNISANGIL University has launched a research project about the concept and identity of "solidarity territories", finding guidelines that allow to locate



Students of the vocational training institute COOMULDESA
Source: www.coomuldesa.com

with more clarity the concept of solidarity in the imaginary of the people. "What we are looking for is a marketing strategy that starts from the identity of the solidarity territory and that helps to open spaces in the local markets. The cooperative offers financial products, we as a foundation promote educational projects and their conversion into business ventures", explains Yesid. Hence, we also seek research processes as a complement to financial and social strategies; "Cooperative society, the solidarity economy, our cultural identity and our region are the building blocks we have at our disposal, we need to create a solidarity-based development model which differs from the conventional developmental logic".

What started fifty years ago with the vision of people like Ramón González Parra, his work team at the Pastoral Social, and the support of Misereor, navigates today on its own without any external need.

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Messages to the future

- Cooperativism, in economic-financial terms, is an option where the profits are invested in the development of the territory with its people. This concrete example shows that the viability of this model surpasses the capitalist financial system.
- Experience shows that it is possible to pass the ideas of some pioneers to an appropriate collective process for all. The critical and decisive moment for the continuity and consolidation of the process depends on the endogenous capacity and dynamics to allow its future. The motivational experience shows an impact where local commitment and external impulse coincided.
- The region and its people are a central point in the solidarity economy, when this is understood by them a series of possibilities are opened to build and complement territorial circuits and networks, allowing their development in a more equitable and self-determined way. Examples like the one documented show that another development is possible.

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