

Almanac of the Future

A STORY OF SUCCESS

Motivational experience No. 5



**Weaving
with dignity**

WEAVING WITH DIGNITY AND KNITTING SOLIDARITY

Starting from a collective initiative for the cultural rescue of a productive area, the goal is to build a development from the local-productive identity by betting on the commercialization of quality craftsmanship products and, above all, on local identity.



Loom - Symbol of local identity in Charalá

Seeking development from our cultural heritage

1982 in Charalá, municipality in the south of Santander in Colombia, a group of people, some from the same town and others from different re-

gions, agreed on their interest in rescuing the culture of the region and began the experience of a "museum", seeking the recovery of the forgotten textile industry as an important part of their culture. Charalá is part of the Guanentina province, the birthplace of the Guane indigenous culture, known historically for its handcraft

production of cotton fabrics. The initiative was based on the firm conviction that the recovery of textile handwork is a viable way to connect the region's history with the generations of the present and the future.

What initially began as the salvation of regional identity and culture, then took on more concrete forms, using the small furnished museum as a location, an associative microenterprise was formed between some small producers who grow cotton naturally without chemicals and women who spin and weave. Of the 80 partners, nine out of ten are women. The microenterprise constituted as a Corporación de Recuperación-Comunera del Lienzo, but better known as "Corpolienzo", covers the following areas: production (raw material, spinning, weaving), organization, commercialization, administration and financial part.

Meeting the market

It remains a challenge for "Corpolienzo" to enter the market. The passive attitude of waiting for the visitors, that are in a sector of the museum, to buy some product in the store, has already been overcome. They produce clothing, bags, sandals and other pieces. The sales strategy where customers were expected to enter the store to buy did not give much result and did

not guarantee economic survival. Since then, alternative forms of commercialization have been tried without abandoning the principles of not producing a great quantity of products, and that everything is organized in such a way that the production and manufacture can be handmade in a friendly environmental way.

In Charalá, Corpolienzo has partnered with other initiatives that offer agroecological products, such as coffee, or eco-tourism in the nearby area.

The micro-enterprise decided to structure itself around a logic of concentric circles (raw material cultivation, processing, product manufacturing and marketing), unlike the logic of big productive chains.

The relationship of Corpolienzo with the market is a challenge, according to Guillermo Rosales, a member of the collective. In the market, the competition produces using fabrics and industrial machinery. From a conventional logic, Corpolienzo would be obliged to replace, at least part of the manual processes, leaving for example the spinners without employment. "Not at any price" is the position of the members of the microenterprise as they feel a great risk of losing the focus of cultural rescue. And this is constituted for Corpolienzo in a conviction that is not negotiable. There are old ladies who, as spinners, would lose their jobs, if the micro-enterprise would give in to the

“The winds of the market are threatening our principles, but we are sticking to our conviction, which is primarily about what we do and what we produce: textiles for humanity”, explains Guillermo Rosales, co-worker at Corpolienzo



demands or rules of the market. For the people grouped in Corpolienzo, it represents an enormous value that the old spinners speak of the "blessed work". The cotton of height, produced in Charalá to a height of 1200 MASL, perhaps the only place in Colombia where this native seed crop is found, would have disappeared if it were not for the work of Corpolienzo.

"The wind of the market blows and easily carries our idea and conviction, but there is a protective conscience of the importance of what is done: textiles to wear humanity," says Guillermo. The handcraft production of cloth in Corpolienzo reaches one meter per day in each loom. Compared to the hundreds of meters that can be easily produced industrially, you can imagine the challenge of marketing handcraft products with cultural identity with some profit, even when small.

Generational relief

"It is not a matter of gradually transforming into museum pieces", says Esther Monroy, current legal representative of Corpolienzo. The promotion for the generational relief, regarding the cultural heritage of Charalá, has begun groups of pupils and young people come to Corpolienzo, where they take part in the museum activities. "Our dream is that the hearth rate of Charalá is one day synchronized with the rhythm of the looms, and the sense of social cohesion is as authentic

as our cotton fabrics, products, culture and our territory", says Esther. Children and teenagers can also spend their free time at Corpolienzo by producing their own works. The local dance school has designed a choreography devoted to cotton textile work, producing a video.

Sale and ideas

The store in the museum, in addition to welcoming the visitor is an environment to produce the textile products also offers information about the textile history of the area. The delivery of products for sale through craft shops in the capital is difficult as it makes most products expensive, tripling the price. A more advantageous market opportunity is the participation in crafts fairs. Corpolienzo seeks and needs a conscious, responsible and supportive trade. "If they buy us it is because they are aware that they are buying a product with cultural identity and quality"

At the moment, we are working on an offer for active travellers, who during their stay want to learn textile work. Another idea is to create a virtual sales portal. Guillermo Rosales tells us with a laughter on his lips. "We mix with global times, but with our local identity".

Imaginary from the canvas of the earth

The didactic materials and videos produced by Corpolienzo respond to a strategy of the collective to make known beyond Charalá its commitment to a productive-development from the cultural rescue and local identity. Graciela Sanabria, Inés Pita, Otilia Pinzón and Mercedes Álvarez are some of the people who are part of

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Doña Graciela at work

"Hands that weave dreams"

"What is inherited is not lost"

"An out-of-competition initiative"

"Weaving with dignity and knitting solidarity"

Copolienzo; Graciela has been around for 15 years. Here are some of their features:

"There is friendship and companionship and you grow personally, you learn to express yourself, to attend the visitors. One feels part of the group and it is light work".

"The work from the cultural rescue helps to create an income and attracts tourism to the town, benefiting a wider circle. We do not only work for the salary, it is also for the common good".

"Participation in Copolienzo is a source of personal satisfaction. It is easy to feel that you are part of Copolienzo".

"We have not witnessed the whole history of our region, but we are part of it".

The treasurer of Copolienzo, Mrs. Mariela Monsalve expresses the challenges in few words: "to be perseverant".



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Messages to the future

- The past and our history are full of elements we can use to conceive the future (in globalized times), integrating the different generations.
- It is not just about producing and selling, but also about the identity and culture of the people who use their hands to produce the product.
- It takes consumers aware of what they buy: not just an object but a handmade product with identity, in order to organize with others and be part of a community that thinks differently.

The text, which is based on visits and discussions in situ, was created by Jorge Krekeler (advisor Misereor), but initially made consensual with the people visited. Special thanks to Guillermo Rosales, coordinator at Corpolienzo.

Almanac to the Future

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