

Almanac of the Future

A STORY OF SUCCESS

Motivational Experience No. 50



**WHEN UNION MAKES
MORE THAN STRENGTH**

In Monquentiva, a village in the municipality of Guatavita in Colombia, three generations of farmers associated with the COLEGA de Guatavita Cooperative are demonstrating that their cooperative tradition allows them to face with optimism some of the great challenges posed by the global changes affecting humanity. The cooperative, managed by José Ignacio Tamayo and presided by Elías Romero, is celebrating its 25th anniversary, reaching higher and higher levels of welfare for its 50 members, thanks to a practical interpretation of cooperatives under its particular social, environmental, economic and political conditions.



A HIDDEN VALLEY

An hour and a half by car, northeast of Bogota and in a hidden inter-Andean valley with an area of about 7,800 hectares, at 2,650 meters above sea level surrounded by moorland, there are about 25 peasant houses randomly distributed. The scenery is beautiful, so much so that in the past some visitors bought land to build their recreational houses, but there is no more room for them. Two small rivers that flow down from the peaks join at a central point in the valley; they are the veins that feed the plots where white, red and black spotted dairy cattle graze.

Two particular buildings can be distinguished in the distance. One with a large, red, semicircular roof that is undoubtedly a school. And the other, which when you get closer turns out to be two united; one of them is the headquarters of the COLEGA dairy cooperative and the other is the HolaAndes Cheese Factory, both



taste a *tinto*, that obligatory Colombian coffee that is drunk very hot, accompanied by a circle of cheerful voices, in front of the large meeting room built with their own contributions.

INSTEAD OF GENERATIONAL HANDOVER

Originally a motoring journalist and publicist, José Ignacio Tamayo, manager of COLEGA since its inception, came to the Monquentiva hamlet some 38 years ago, accompanying a friend who was passionate about fishing and discovered this paradisiacal place. To do so, at that time, implied a hazardous trip through a narrow road that crosses the Guasca moor. There in Monquentiva he found more than enough reasons to buy a small piece of land and little by little build a house for him and his wife for the years to come. However, beyond simply enjoying the landscape and the company of his peasant neigh-

bors, José Ignacio began a fruitful dialogue with himself, his family and his neighbors in Monquentiva, which led him to perceive a promising future if he could unite to sell at a better price the little milk that allowed them to survive at that time with an elementary economy.

José Ignacio's relationships allowed him to reach COLANTA, a huge dairy cooperative of national scope, which buys milk under strict quality and compliance commitments. Thus began a process of cooperative training and technical learning that spread among the farmers of Monquentiva, until the COLEGA cooperative was formally established 25 years ago. Along the way, he managed to promote the formation of cooperatives in several neighboring villages, eventually joining the Association of Dairy Cooperatives of Guatavita ASOLEGA, a second-level solidarity organization that represents about 600 small producers, with regional and national economic, political and environmental implications.

distinguished by an extensive patio with a cement floor where every morning and afternoon the farmers take the fresh milk from cows that have been improved in a continuous process of breeding adjustments, as well as their technically cultivated pastures and demanding practices to guarantee quality. This allows the cooperative members to achieve productions between 18 and 24 liters/cow/day, with very high levels of quality.

A humble pride can be perceived in the voice and look of any of the farmers, who arriving to deliver the freshly milked milk, meet with their neighbors, partners and relatives to

José Ignacio Tamayo together with Elías Romero are part of the generation of 24 pioneers, who over the years and thanks to the cooperative process, have promoted under the tender name of COLEGUITAS (little colleagues) the formation of new generations that are familiar with the philosophy of cooperatives: associativity, reciprocity, solidarity, identity and territory. This is how the children and grandchildren have joined in.

When asked when the generational handover will take place, José Ignacio explains: *"I prefer to talk about integration"*. This comment reflects one of COLEGA's mottos: to work on preparing new leaders among the cooperative's young people. In fact, you see quite a few young men and women, families with their little ones, delivering milk, girls in different jobs in the cooperative, or playing with their dolls in the corridors of COLEGA. In talking with them we learned that some have lived in the city, working or studying, others have

studied university degrees from a distance; but almost all have returned to the countryside or simply stayed in their village, and not for lack of opportunity to leave, but for the instilled love for their homeland and their cooperative enterprise.

For most teenagers, leaving at that age usually means migrating permanently; however, the cooperative with its economic dynamics, the challenges of continuous improvement, the quality of life in their native environment with a welcoming socio-organizational fabric have outweighed the urban temptations, often mere illusions of the metropolis.

Both Elías and José Ignacio are thinking about a generational transition very soon and they see this transition with great peace of mind, since in Monquentiva they have achieved what in many places has not been possible to achieve: to sow the future in the countryside where young people are growing up, opting for a quality life in their native land.

CUSTOMIZED GROWTH

The cooperative has helped its members in the genetic improvement of cattle, opting for higher yielding breeds, but adaptable to the environmental and topographic conditions of the region; the same has happened with the improvement of pastures. Instead of growing at any price and denaturalizing the critical path of the cooperative community, it has been to grow at its own pace, according to José Ignacio: *"high technology applied with simplicity according to our understanding and our pocket"*. The margin to increase the cooperative's milk volume is limited since almost all the families in the village are COLEGA members and have small plots of land, enlarged with technology and perseverance. They have chosen to work with quality throughout the milk production process.

About 6 years ago COLEGA partnered with the young Dutchman Tobias Rijnsdorp, who sought out the manager José Ignacio Tamayo through social

networks, offering to convert part of the milk into Gouda cheese, the famous Dutch cheese. Behind this offer, which was discussed among the associates, was the hope of improving income for the families, expanding the number of jobs since the manufacture of cheese implied new job opportunities. Thus, was born the HolaAndes company, which today processes one third and seasonally up to half of all the milk.

Since then, the production of Gouda holaAndes cheese has gone from strength to strength, with presentations in its natural state or with spices such as mustard, pepper, thyme or truffle, under the same motto: quality before quantity.

The delicately produced Gouda cheese matures in a natural cellar at the cooperative's plant in Monquentiva and enjoys a select clientele in Bogotá, including gourmet restaurants, delicatessens and private customers. Ángela Díaz and Laura Paola Peña belong to COLEGA's younger generation and work in the cheese

factory. Laura Paola, an occupational health professional, says with a big smile on her face: *"I love my job at the cheese factory"*. Angela, a zoo-technician, adds: *"It would be difficult to find a similar job in the city"*. And like them, there are already several professionals who do not plan to migrate to the city, *"because our future lies in the countryside and in our cooperative"*.

RURAL WELFARE

The cooperative provides support in the professionalization of the young people of the associated families in whatever they decide, from the administrative, productive and other options. It helps financially in the provision of school supplies for students at the beginning of each school year and





finances the the tuition for the semester at the university, which is paid in six installments: 5 installments of 10% each and the sixth, the other 50%, is subsidized by the cooperative, as long as the grade average is good, they have not missed any subjects and they have collaborated in the activities of the cooperative. In case of illness and

costly health treatments, the cooperative supports the families. They have a "mini-supermarket", stocked weekly with all kinds of products for the market. It is normal that mutual help is the answer, in any case. It is also thanks to the cooperative that people manage to make themselves heard at the political level; one COLEGUITAS

(former little colleagues) has already been successful mayor of the Municipality of Guatavita and another COLEGUITA has just been elected councilor of the municipality. Both started working in the cooperative receiving milk at the collection center. Their official management has been a vehicle to serve the municipality with public investments for the improvement of roads, construction materials and organizational influence.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing the cooperative in both milk processing and cheese production, as well as in the members' own homes, is finding ways to reduce and control high energy costs. They use electricity and LPG gas for milk pasteurization, since milk cooling and particularly processing in the cheese factory consume large amounts of these two forms of energy. For this reason, an evaluation is pending within the development plan to identify energy alternatives (energy savings, efficient use, solar energy, micro-hydro energy, etc.).

MESSAGES TO THE FUTURE

- In Monquentiva something beautiful has been achieved, sowing the future in the countryside. Several generations under the same associative roof and where young people opt for their life project in the countryside and not for lack of opportunities outside.
- Associating and networking are very powerful steps to compensate for apparent disadvantages: the associativity in the form of a cooperative opens the way to relate with strategic partners such as the Colanta cooperative and the artisan cheese factory holaAndes, thus achieving a growing and prosperous attractive welfare in the middle of rurality.
- As a lesson learned, it can be summarized that, instead of accepting the race for perpetual growth, COLEGA's experience shows that there are alternative paths, more harmonious with enormous potential for the future, particularly for the younger generations.



Almanac of the Future

The text was prepared, based on conversations during the visit to Monquentiva, Guatavita municipality in Colombia, at the end of October 2023 by Mauricio Gnecco, convinced accomplice of the Almanac of the Future and manager of Campus Universitas and Jorge Krekeler (coordinator of the Almanac of the Future - facilitator of Misereor on behalf of Agiamondo). A big thank you to Elías Romero, president and José Ignacio Tamayo, manager of the Cooperativa de Lecheros de Guatavita COLEGA and to all the people and families who are members of the cooperative, for their time and openness to the curiosity of the visit of the Almanac of the Future.

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