

Farmer-to-farmer agricultural extension in Nicaragua

Best practice in agricultural extension- *Programa Campesino a Campesino in Nicaragua*

Since 1987, a movement of small farmers (or *campesinos*) in Nicaragua have been changing the way knowledge services are delivered to improve sustainable agricultural techniques, and increase productivity. PCaC (or Programa Campesino a Campesino- literally *The Farmer to Farmer Programme*) started out during a visit from Mexican dryland farmers to Santa Lucia in Boaco zone of Nicaragua, to exchange experience on soil and water conservation. It has since evolved into a social movement in Nicaragua, spread by word of mouth and grassroots enthusiasm.

Using a system of *campesino* promoters, providing horizontal learning and coaching, small farmers throughout Nicaragua have been able to diversify crops, learn pest control methods, and minimise degradation. The programme is based on the notion that inherent to farmers' indigenous practices is sustainable land management, and that social capital of communities is a useful vehicle for developing human capital of individual households. The success of the programme has been capitalised on by the Government, which now uses the PCaC model in delivering extension services throughout the country.

The greatest successes of PCaC can be seen from the agricultural frontier lands of Siuna, in the mining triangle area of the country. The importance of these agricultural frontier lands cannot be overestimated, as they act as the buffer zone between land under cultivation and the Bosawas reserve, which forms the heart of the Meso-American Biological Corridor. For many years, this buffer zone was subjected to slash and burn and shifting cultivation techniques, and the 'campesinos' were often blamed for environmental degradation in the area. These campesinos were already a vulnerable population, relying on unsustainable agricultural practices to eke out a subsistence living.

Since 1994, the Programa Campesino a Campesino have developed the technical, productive and organisational capacity of farmers in the zone. This has helped convince them to abandon slash and burn methodologies in favour of promoting sustainable buffer zone management, through the cultivation of maize and beans.

Based on these successes, the role of PCaC has evolved somewhat- now they are promoting diversification to higher value crops in the zone, such as cocoa and pimiento, while conserving sustainable production techniques. This implies a redefinition of a successful social movement, to one focused on transformation of livelihoods systems. In 2006, with the support of DFID, PCaC has helped 2,500 small farmers to develop best practices in cocoa production. This has directly contributed to the development of a cluster strategy for cacao in Nicaragua. The cacao cluster will help shape infrastructure investment decisions, the agricultural business climate, and the growth strategy for the Mining Triangle of the country, traditionally a 'lagging region'. The cocoa sector in Nicaragua will also form an important part of upcoming trade association negotiations with the EU, as well as the implementation of the Central America Free Trade Agreement with the US.

What started out as a grassroots social movement aimed at preserving the natural resource base of Nicaragua and ensuring opportunities for poor farmers, has now become a major contributor to the national competitiveness strategy for the country in increasingly globalised agricultural markets.

Contact: DFID staff member Michelle Winthrop (M-Winthrop@dfid.gov.uk)