

Market access for indigenous women producers in Guatemala

David Viñuales

‘Before, we planted, but we cannot sell anywhere. Now, it is not only the cabbage but also other products. We have better incomes because we sell the whole production at once’. The words of Heidi Rodríguez, mother of two, show how she found the way to help her family income.

‘Before we began to export to El Salvador, everything was for the local market and for the neighbours and the price was low. With the profits that I have now I can buy food, clothes and school equipment for my kids’ said Rodríguez.

She is one of more than 300 indigenous Mayan women that are associated to ALANEL, which means ‘creating women’ in Mayan language. The community-based organisation was established to help the women of 12 villages to find ways of improving their family incomes - not only through farming but also with textiles and handicraft initiatives.

Three years ago, before the hurricane Stan hit Central America, the farm production of the ALANEL associates, which are in the Solola area in the Western highlands of Guatemala, was almost all for their own consumption; but the potential existed for diversification and producing some products for market. The women had the land, they were already organised and, most important, they had the desire to improve their living conditions.

The women had to overcome several difficulties. They looked for the support of the men of the communities who, in general, viewed the project favourably. With this support, the effort was then concentrated on improving their farming skills: it is not the same to produce for household consumption as for markets. They had to learn how to prepare the products better for marketing and find ways of handling two countries’ bureaucracies in order to market across the border.

‘We already have the market and we have the attitude to keep working. We just don’t need to think how to spend our time, we have work to do’, said Ana Garcia Ochi, 54 years old and mother of nine. This feeling was growing among the group.

They relied on the help of two organisations: the Association of Agriculture Development of Micro Enterprises (ADAM - the Spanish abbreviation), and Agrolempa, a grassroots - Salvadorian trading company, that was created through a project co-funded by Oxfam GB and the EU. The first one was responsible for building their capacity in farming production; the second was the link with the Salvadorian market.

This case study was written as a contribution to the development of *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World*, Oxfam International 2008. It is published in order to share widely the results of commissioned research and programme experience. The views it expresses are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Oxfam International or its affiliate organisations.

Agrolempa was born in 2000, when a group of 60 small-scale farmers decide to pool their efforts to look for markets for their products. As soon as they began to grow, they faced different challenges, among them how to increase the volume of products on offer. At that time, the trading association began to look at other countries including Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras.

‘We needed to increase our offer because the demand for our products is great’, said Manuel Avila, manager of Agrolempa. ‘We are selling the cabbage of the Guatemalan women to national hospitals and to a restaurant chain.’ The project is a success but is not enough: exporting only one product was not generating profits, because of the high cost of transport. Now, ALANEL has also begun to export carrots, potatoes and onions.

The best result is that Mayan women have found that they can do whatever they want, if they want it badly enough. Heidi Rodriguez illustrates this change of attitude with her future plans, ‘We want to export to more countries and sell in the big markets in Guatemala. We want all of our associates to be part of this project. With the right support, we can do it.’

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This case study was written by David Viñuales July 2007. It is one of a series written to inform the development of the Oxfam International publication *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World*, Oxfam International 2008.

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