Everyday Experts: How people’s knowledge can transform the food system

The People’s Knowledge Editorial Collective
Everyday Experts explains how knowledge built up through first-hand experience can help solve the crisis in the food system. It brings together fifty-seven activists, farmers, practitioners, researchers and community organisers from around the world to take a critical look at attempts to improve the dialogue between people whose knowledge has been marginalised in the past and others who are recognised as professional experts.

Using a combination of stories, poems, photos and videos, the contributors demonstrate how people’s knowledge can transform the food system towards greater social and environmental justice. Many of the chapters also explore the challenges of using action and participatory approaches to research.

The chapters share new insights, analysis and stories that can expand our imagination of a future that encompasses:

- making dialogue among people with different ways of understanding the world central to all decision-making
- the re-affirmation of Indigenous, local, traditional and other knowledge systems
- a blurring of the divide between professional expertise and expertise that is derived from experience
- transformed relationships amongst ourselves and with the Earth to confront inequality and the environmental crisis

To read any of the 28 chapters in this book freely available to download, please visit:

www.coventry.ac.uk/everyday-experts

The Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series seeks to encourage debate outside mainstream policy and conceptual frameworks on the future of food, farming, land use and human well-being. The opportunities and constraints to regenerating local food systems and economies based on social and ecological diversity, justice, human rights, inclusive democracy, and active forms of citizenship are explored in this Series. Contributors to the Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series are encouraged to reflect deeply on their ways of working and outcomes of their research, highlighting implications for policy, knowledge, organisations, and practice.

The Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series was published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) between 2006 and 2013. The Series is now published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, at Coventry University.

To read any of the 28 chapters in this book freely available to download, please visit:

www.coventry.ac.uk/everyday-experts

ISBN: 978-1-84600-075-1
Everyday Experts: How people’s knowledge can transform the food system
Cover photos:

(Left): Field teaching by Farmer Research Team members about planting methods, Lobi area. Photo taken by C. Hickey, December 2014. Used with the permission of project participants.

(Right): The Coventry Men’s Shed participatory video project exploring “What’s Eating Coventry’ and unpacks social justice issues related to food in the city of Coventry. More information at www.peoplesknowledge.org
Everyday Experts:
How people’s knowledge can transform the food system

The People’s Knowledge Editorial Collective*:
Colin Anderson
Christabel Buchanan
Marina Chang
Javier Sanchez Rodriguez
Tom Wakeford

*Listed in alphabetical order. This book was a collective endeavour and work and responsibility was shared evenly amongst the editorial team. All chapters have been peer reviewed by a minimum of two reviewers and revised accordingly as a part of a non-blind open peer review process.
Published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) at Coventry University

The Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) is driving innovative, transdisciplinary research on the understanding and development of socially just and resilient food and water systems internationally. Unique to this University Research Centre is the incorporation of citizen-generated knowledge - the participation of farmers, water users and other citizens in transdisciplinary research, using holistic approaches which cross many disciplinary boundaries among the humanities as well as the natural and social sciences.

The Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR)
Coventry University
Ryton Gardens, Wolston Lane
Coventry, CV8 3LG
United Kingdom

E-mail: CAWROffice@coventry.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0) 2477 651 601
Web: http://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/areas-of-research/agroecology-water-resilience/

To cite this publication: People’s Knowledge Editorial Collective (Eds). (2017). Everyday Experts: How people’s knowledge can transform the food system. Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series. Coventry: Coventry University.
Available at: www.coventry.ac.uk/everyday-experts.

The Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series seeks to encourage debate outside mainstream policy and conceptual frameworks on the future of food, farming, land use and human well-being. The opportunities and constraints to regenerating local food systems and economies based on social and ecological diversity, justice, human rights, inclusive democracy, and active forms of citizenship are explored in this Series. Contributors to the Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series are encouraged to reflect deeply on their ways of working and outcomes of their research, highlighting implications for policy, knowledge, organisations, and practice.

The Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series was published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) between 2006 and 2013. The Series is now published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, at Coventry University.

Professor Michel Pimbert is the coordinator and editor in chief of the Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this volume are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, its partners and donors.
Women defending their territory and natural resources in Peru: Women of Celendin Fighting to Protect Pachamama

Graciela Romero

Geographical location: Peru

Chapter highlights: This chapter is a reflective account of the author’s work with the Plataforma Inter-Institucional Celendina (PIC, the Celendin Inter-Institutional Platform) and the women’s collective Celendinas Luchadoras en Defensa de la Pachamama (Women of Celendin Fighting to Protect Pachamama or mother earth) in Peru.

It provides an account of buen vivir (living well) as a basis for women’s agency to defend mother earth as a living being and an alternative proposal to the Western paradigm of development, which is based on the commodification and perpetual exploitation of nature.

The chapter reflects on the problematic role of NGOs in development and the importance of embracing an ‘active solidarity’ that addresses the power relations that exist between Northern, paid campaigners and social movements.

Keywords: women, buen vivir, land, water, mining, extractives, social movements, Andean cosmovision.
26.1 Introduction

“I may be poor and illiterate, but I know that our lakes are our biggest treasure,” says Maxima Acuna, the Indigenous campesino woman who has managed to temporarily halt the expansion of the largest gold mine in South America into her land in Cajamarca, Peru. Maxima is not alone in holding this ‘knowledge’, and indeed not alone in her struggle. Alongside her, there is a mass movement of people defending the right to water and land.

The ‘knowledge’ that lakes are a treasure, as Maxima puts it, reflects the Andean cosmovision where every element in the cosmos is alive and interconnected. The spiritual life and material life are part of an inseparable whole. It is a vision of the world where the lakes and mountains are spiritual beings that protect everything (Estermann 2014).

In this chapter, I attempt to bring to the fore women’s voices in the struggle to retain sovereignty over territory, in the face of the plunder of resource extraction. This is a struggle rooted in the values of relatedness, complementarity, correspondence, reciprocity and cyclicality, which are the core of the Andean philosophy of buen vivir (living well) (Estermann 2014). The women’s account of their unity against the brutal repression by the Minera Yanacocha gold mine and the army, both attempting to silence opposition to the mine, bring these values to life. It also shows that within
Andean philosophy the concept of Western development has no place and is perceived as going against life.

The women’s agency and approach to transforming themselves and communities, while defending the integrity of the mountain lakes are also highlighted in this article. Their approach encourages reflection on the way Northern international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and other campaigning organisations interact with grassroots movements.

This chapter stems from my relationship, as a Latin American woman and Programmes Director of an international non-governmental organisation (War on Want), with members of the grassroots movement PIC¹ and the women’s collective Women of Celendin Fighting to Protect Pachamama.

Women from different social sectors and all ages form the collective. They are campesino and Indigenous women, teachers, food vendors (both market and street), health promoters, housewives, religious sisters and students. The collective grew organically around the need to defend their water and land. Initially, they had no intention of forming a group. Only later on during the resistance and mobilisations did they find themselves forming a women’s collective. All members of the collective were individual members of PIC. They are now recognised as the women’s group of the Platform.

My first interaction with PIC started in 2013, when some of its members visited War on Want to seek support for their struggle against the Conga Project.² Prior to my visit to PIC in Celendin in Cajamarca in June 2015, I was working with PIC to raise awareness about Maxima’s resistance and to expose the impact of resource extraction, which was negatively affecting food systems and violating human and environmental rights.

The visit to the communities in Celendin was underpinned by War on Want’s internal partnership principles: as member of an INGO, it was paramount to understand and be critical of the power structures that exist in the relationship between Western-Northern NGOs and grassroots groups. Under these principles, the role of an external person is, when requested by groups or communities, to support processes led by them rather than dictating them. It is mandatory to seek authorisation to collect and reproduce information from or produced by the community/individuals and to speak on behalf of them. Disclosing individual identities and statements must be followed by prior written authorisation and clarification of its consequences. War on Want does not negotiate or talk with multinationals for communities. Any fundraising or

¹ The Inter-institutional Platform of Celendin (Plataforma Inter-Institutional Celendina, PIC) is a grassroots movement formed by individuals and groups from different social sectors. They have members from rural and urban communities. It is a platform made up of civil society organisations not connected to the municipality.

² The Conga Project is a gold and copper mining project proposed by Minera Yanacocha owned by Newmont Mining Corp, the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation and Peruvian mining company Buenaventura S.A.. The Conga Project is an extension of the Yanacocha mine in the Cajamarca region. The project will cause the loss of four mountain lakes (the source of five rivers) as well as hundreds hectares of land.
communication activity on behalf of the community should be agreed with them in advance.

During the visit I had the opportunity to participate in meetings already planned by communities and to interview people who had been directly affected by actions of Minera Yanacocha and the armed forces.

The style of this chapter aims to reflect that it is a piece of collaborative work. I tried to combine the experiences and reflections of members of the women’s collective, using their own words, with my own reflections on my interactions with them and with other members of PIC.

26.2 *Buen vivir versus development*
Maxima’s narrative about her knowledge of the lakes and the perception of herself as being poor and illiterate moves between two discourses.

Firstly, one regarding the knowledge of the Andean cosmovision, which sees lakes and mountains as living beings that are essential for maintaining the balance of ecosystems. This is a vision of the world that does not see human beings as owners or producers, but as “‘caretaker’ (arariwa), ‘cultivator’ and ‘facilitator’, the only strictly productive force is Mother Earth, Pachamama and its various aspects such as water” (Estermann 2014). This cosmovision involves a philosophy – *buen vivir* – which aims at making visible and expressible aspects of reality that are ignored by the dominant paradigm (Soto 2012). It is a proposal from a radical and spiritual perspective of ecology, and is logically incompatible with development and industrialisation. It speaks of the possibility of living in common, for which the very concept ‘development’ is not only insufficient, but mistaken (Soto and Helfrich 2012).

In this cultural context, to destroy the lakes is to destroy life itself. The land and water are not commodities or goods as seen within industrialised Western development. They are living beings in complete interconnectedness with human beings. Doing harm to one is to do harm to the other. *Buen vivir* (or ‘Sama Qamana’ in Aymara, ‘Sumak Kawsy’ in Quechua and ‘Nandereco’ in Guarani) (Prada 2013) does not preclude the use of natural resources for the production of food and the wellbeing of humans. But achieving these cannot be through perpetual exploitation or production of material goods as presented by advocates of industrialised resource extraction. In the same line of thought, it is not enough to reclaim the land from corporations or imperialist nations, as in the case of resistance against corporate and State land grabbing and extractive industries. It is necessary to propose a model that is socially and environmentally sustainable (Gudynas 2011).

“How are we going to produce food, keep our animals and bring food to the markets if we don’t have land and water? Who is going to bring food if the mine transforms our lands into a desert?” Maxima asked representatives of the World Bank (investors in the mine) during its annual general meeting in Lima in September 2015. Maxima’s pledge to save the lakes is, in its deeper sense, a pledge to maintain harmonic food production while respecting mother earth. It intrinsically challenges the idea of imported corporate food production and distribution.

---

3 It is important to clarify that *buen vivir* is an evolving philosophy within Indigenous communities, policymakers, academics and social movements in Latin America. There are tensions and conflicting approaches on the issue of resource extraction and the impact on the environment (Gudynas, 2011; Prada, 2013).
Everyday Experts: How people’s knowledge can transform the food system

Yanacocha lake before Yanacocha mine

Yanacocha lake - now Yanacocha mine
The second discourse reveals a story of plunder and destruction of nature in the name of progress and development, predicated on an ideology which conceives nature as an object to be tamed by humans and exploited for capital accumulation. Over 20 years of gold extraction in Cajamarca has led to the impoverishment of communities whose livelihoods depend on the land and water that the mining industry has commandeered. Cajamarca is currently the poorest region in Peru with more than 50 per cent of its population living in poverty (Gestion 2014). Although Minera Yanacocha is the most profitable gold mine in the world, there is no evidence that its revenue has contributed to the development of Cajamarca: “The Yanacocha gold mine in South America – which is also the third biggest and the most profitable in the world, according to its owners – has done very little for the country and the region where it operates” (Wiener and Torres 2014).

Instead, communities in Cajamarca continue to suffer constant shortages of water. The supply stemming from a water reservoir built by Minera Yanacocha when the Yanacocha Lake was converted into a mine has proven unreliable. Moreover, a report produced by the Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic (2015) exposes that “mining activity is linked to rising acidity and heavy metal contamination in rivers, drinking water and the food sources upon which local communities depend, all serious risks to the environment and to human health”. In a notorious case, more than one thousand people in Choropampa fell ill with mercury poisoning and related illnesses following a spill of 151 kilograms of mercury in 2000 (Arana 2009). Gold extraction has destroyed the ecosystem of the Yanacocha Lake and surrounding area.

Since its inception, the Yanacocha mine has been the cause of ongoing social conflicts and human rights violations by armed forces and the company’s security staff. Communities in Cajamarca are calling for Minera Yanacocha to stop the expansion of mining in the region with its new venture, the proposed gold and copper mine, the Conga Project.
26.3 Women talking about their struggle

This section describes the conversation held by the women’s collective during one of its weekly meetings. The narrative of their conversation is literally translated and has been approved by the women. They agreed that I could translate their conversation as one way of making visible their struggle and the role of women within it. Thus this section is written in first-person plural to show that the women are directly narrating their experiences. It was also agreed that the writing would be a co-authored piece, and that any resources fundraised with it would be sent directly to the women’s collective to support their activities. During the meeting, the women talked for over two hours as if I was not there. I listened and took notes attentively with a sense of awe and huge respect.

Women have been critically important in the struggle against the Conga Project. This is something that is not always visible or recognised by external actors and when recognised, it has been used to attack or stigmatise us. Very often we have been challenged and accused, in order to divide and create tensions within our families. For example, Maxima has been harassed by Minera Yanacocha staff, who accuse her of undermining the role of her husband, who should be the head of the family. They want him to sign papers to sell their land.

Although shy and timid, we were the first to go around the local communities talking about the contamination of the Yanacocha mine. Men did not believe us at first. The engineers from Minera Yanacocha came to the communities around Conga (the original name of the place where the mine would be located) to tell us that there was no contamination. They also offered the health promoters 6,000 soles. One of us rejected the offer, knowing that this was a way to silence people. The others who did not know about the situation were doubtful. Around that time, a local priest shared a video with us that showed how animals were dying because of the mercury contamination caused by the spill in the province of Choropampa. We took the video, and showed the effects of mercury poisoning to the local people in improvised screenings. The women in our communities cried when they saw animals dying or losing their wool. The video was a powerful tool, which helped to convince people of the truth.

After an initial period of sensitising people to the impact of the mine on our water and animals, men became more involved and finally people went en masse to the lakes. We went door to door to talk with members of our communities, used our blankets to screen the video and gathered people in community meetings to discuss the situation.

In my community, it was a group of five women who mobilised the rest of the community for the first march. We did not have a banner, so one member of the group donated a white bed sheet for us to use. That’s how we went out to march for the first time. We didn’t even know which chants to use. We started with “Water Yes, Mine No”.

402
Then we heard that a state of emergency had been declared. A group of men and women had gone to talk with the authorities in Cajamarca to ask them to ban the Conga Project. The authorities demanded the communities stop all mobilisations immediately. The group of leaders said that they needed to have a general assembly in order to have a collective decision. The authorities responded that they would not wait for that to happen and immediately declared the state of emergency with the deployment of armed forces in Celendin.

People were at the mountain lakes when the police attacked them. Only a local radio station was broadcasting the situation at the mountain, asking for ambulances and doctors as there were many injured people. The mainstream media was silent. Nineteen people were seriously injured while running away down the mountain due to police fire from behind. A man was left paralysed, one lost his sight and another lost his leg. Two of the religious sisters who have joined our struggle walked towards the police with white handkerchiefs to ask them to stop the shooting. After this incident, the strike really took off. Teachers, drivers, city merchants all stopped activities. Hundreds of people took to the streets en masse. There were mobilisations at the lakes, and cultural activities to spread our message.
We had to organise our lives to be able to participate in the meetings and mass mobilisations. We had to look after the children or our parents, to wake up earlier to cook food for our families. Some of the men did not want their wives to go out and participate in the protests. Although the father of my daughter is a policeman, I never stopped supporting the mobilisations. Many of us had to endure our partners criticising us, but this changed when they joined us later on.

As a teacher, I had to wake up at 4am or 5am to be able to participate in the school sit-ins with the other teachers. At the beginning, we had to convince our colleagues, the teachers, that it was important to support the strike, before we finally came together.

We also held vigils in front of the church at the main plaza in Celendín to raise public awareness. Women were at the forefront of the ollas comunitarias (community pots). We took responsibility for collecting money door-to-door, buying food, cooking on the street in big pots for all the people who were demonstrating and to send to the people in the mountains, who were guarding the lakes from the mining company. We organised these tasks in barrio after barrio. Although it was such hard work, we were happy and inspired to defend our lakes. We used to arrive home extremely tired; nonetheless we had to organise things at home for the next day. Some of us also travelled with the men to the mountains.
After 33 days of striking, we were exhausted, but we did not stop until the army attacked. The government never released a statement about the strike and the large-scale mobilisations in Celendin. When the radio made reference to the strike, it was only to say that there were a few people on the streets.

Armed forces attacked the demonstrators with rubber bullets, taking anyone they could to the stadium. There, they were forced to strip. Some were imprisoned in Celendin and others taken to Chiclayo (a city eight hours from Celendin) in order to be sentenced there, despite being Celendin residents. The city became militarised. Lots of soldiers came and marched on our streets.

During the militarisation of the city, soldiers were seen seducing young girls, some of whom later became pregnant by these soldiers. Their parents reported this to the major of the squadron but no one was charged or held accountable. It was the rondas campesinas who chased the soldiers out of the city during a public parade.

It has not been easy for everyone to continue defending our lakes and land. We have seen five of our friends killed in a struggle that has been going on for years, but we have always made time for action. It has been hard, but it has been beautiful to see us united. We have shared experiences that we will never forget. There is still unity among our communities. People from other provinces who are opposing mining and dam projects are coming to us to learn from our experiences.

26.4 “Talking about our experience helps us”

Oral testimonies are central to transmitting knowledge and practices among Indigenous people and peasant communities in Latin America. Remembering and recounting such experiences are ways of healing wounds, but also a way of creating reality, much in the same way that myths do in Indigenous cosmology; by recreating the origins of the universe, they play a role in giving balance to the universe.

The re-telling of our experiences is a way of healing psychological wounds inflicted by State repression and the Minera Yanacocha attacks during our mobilisations, Lynda (from the Women’s Collective) told me. It is a way of rekindling the spirit of the struggle and overcoming the fear that followed the assassination and criminalisation of our friends.

While recounting the stories of years of collective work to defend the lakes, the women of Celendinas Luchadoras en Defensa de la Pachamama have realised that they have been transformed. “We have so many stories that we have shared together and they make us strong. We will continue fighting. If not, who will defend our territory?”

---

4 “The ronda movement emerged as a peasant response to a state incapable of providing services of security and justice to distant communities (Gitlitz and Rojas, 1983: 184). The movement’s administration of justice is based on reconciliation and has always been intertwined with communal as regional social problems (Starn, 1999). The ronda movement provided the region with a structure with which to confront the imposed structure of a continuously expanding mining industry.” (Doron 2010)
The richness of this statement and how it encapsulates the way women build knowledge through telling and re-telling ‘stories’ cannot be taken for granted. They have become stronger because of their understanding of their reality and their decision to change their situation. They became agents of change rather than passive victims. Not only do they act as individuals but as something even more powerful and challenging; a collective. The struggle of Maxima has become the struggle of a community. She has reminded other people about their connection with Pachamama and their responsibility to take care of it.

Using Freire’s argument (1996) it could be said that the women have expanded their conciencia critica (critical awareness) about their role in protecting their water and land. They have grown in their self-empowerment and consciousness of their capacity to change their reality. As one of the women put it, “The struggle and collective work gave us strength to act. I was the one who went to speak to the soldiers when they were kicking one of the men. I was so scared but I did it anyway. That action changed me. It broke the fear in me.” Another woman commented that she talked to the authorities, something that she never imagined she would be able to do. The process of transformation is twofold: an internal process, leading to an act that changes the external social reality. The act of resistance against forces of oppression involves action and reflection, and not only a subjective or intellectual process (Freire 1996).

Their decision to defend the Pachamama has led the women to become involved in other actions that they did not envisage at the beginning. “We are now organising food
fairs to bring the produce of peasants into the city and to educate urban communities. It is a way of showing that our land has been, and is still, for food production. Campesinos are the ones who keep us supplied with food in the city” (Benita from the women’s collective).

The women’s collective has grown as a group. They have created a plan of activities to educate themselves on areas such as ecofeminism and biodiversity. They are clear now that it is vital to continue working with the campesino and Indigenous communities that live closer to the mine. Their animals and crops are at greater risk and there is no support from the government. The women want to strengthen the link between those communities and people living in the urban area of Celendin.

26.5 Reflecting on active solidarity: the problem is also mine

The extractive industry and the NGO sector have something in common. They have been promoted by international institutions like the World Bank and governments around the world as a driving force for development. By way of contrast, there are growing critiques about the role of NGOs (local, national and international) in perpetuating the Western ideology of progress, co-opting leaders from social movements, establishing negotiations with companies and, in many instances, silencing them in order to fit donor agendas (Choudry and Kapoor 2014, Dass and Rose 2015, Manji and O’Coill 2002).

Some Northern campaigning organisations, as well as individual activists who consider themselves more as progressives than NGO workers, are also to blame for reproducing structures of power, control and oppression. They tend to speak on behalf of others rather than allowing people to speak for themselves, taking over the agendas of social movements and maximising visibility for their organisations rather than making visible the struggle and the people (Harvey 2005). As I listened to the women of Celendin talking about their experiences during the anti-mining struggles, I could not help thinking that, for many paid professional campaigners, such a struggle is just another job, and any extra time spent at a Sunday demonstration is something that has to be paid for.

Breaking these patterns will demand a conscious effort to unveil the power relations that exist between Northern, paid campaigners and social movements. Dialogue has to take place based on mutual respect and an understanding of the difference between the two. In this context, my visit and dialogue with the people of Cajamarca defending their territory was led by a conscious perspective of active solidarity.

I have argued in many discussions within the NGO sector that the term ‘solidarity’ has been devalued and co-opted by NGOs and charities. With its use, people have been given a false sense that solidarity is akin to making another charitable donation to help the poor of the world. Instead, I call for active solidarity, which encourages NGO workers, campaigners and their supporters to take responsibility for our reality
and to recognise how it contributes to the problems we are seeking to alleviate. Active solidarity calls on us to re-educate ourselves, in order to challenge our own structures of power and our own lifestyles. The plunder of resources in Cajamarca is rooted in and promoted by Western governments and institutions. Their problem is our problem.

26.6 The struggle continues

The social conflict created by resource extraction in Cajamarca is still at its peak. The repression by Minera Yanacocha and the armed forces has not stopped. The companies’ security guards have once again attacked Maxima, her son and animals. The Peruvian government, the World Bank and Minera Yanacocha have ignored recommendations presented by PIC and Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic (2015) before the US congress about the environmental damage and social conflict caused by the Conga Project.

Communities struggling to defend their water and land from the Conga Project have now joined the resistance against the construction of mega dams alongside the Marañón River. As with the Conga Project community leaders have been blacklisted and criminalised. In December 2015 one of them was assassinated. Two of the women's collective are active leaders in organising the people against mega dams.

I continue working with members of the women's collective and the PIC. We have organised campaigning and fundraising activities with grassroots groups in the UK to expose the situation before the Peruvian Embassy and the World Bank in London.
26.7 References and further reading


