

# 1. Thinking and acting from the fields

A participatory process is a space where multiple voices interact: that is the core of this documentation. The writer created a frame for the Andean farmers at the heart of this process to express their ideas. It is these individuals who have determined the direction and the contents of the words and graphic representations embodying the strong culinary cultures which inspire their actions in defence of food sovereignty.

## A global initiative

Since June 2008, farmers from three ecological zones in the southern Peruvian Andes have been reflecting upon their food cultures and transforming their ideas into innovative actions related to food sovereignty as part of a global initiative supported by the IIED involving rural communities in India, Mali and Iran. The initiative is embedded in a participatory action research (PAR) process called 'Democratising the governance of food and agricultural systems: Citizens rethinking food and agricultural research for the public good'. Each partner was invited to design and construct deliberative and inclusive processes by which individuals and communities can gain voice and access to healthy, sufficient and nutritious food, by practising the citizens/producers' right to define the quality and diversity of agricultural produce in accord with their cultural and economic conditions.



## The communities

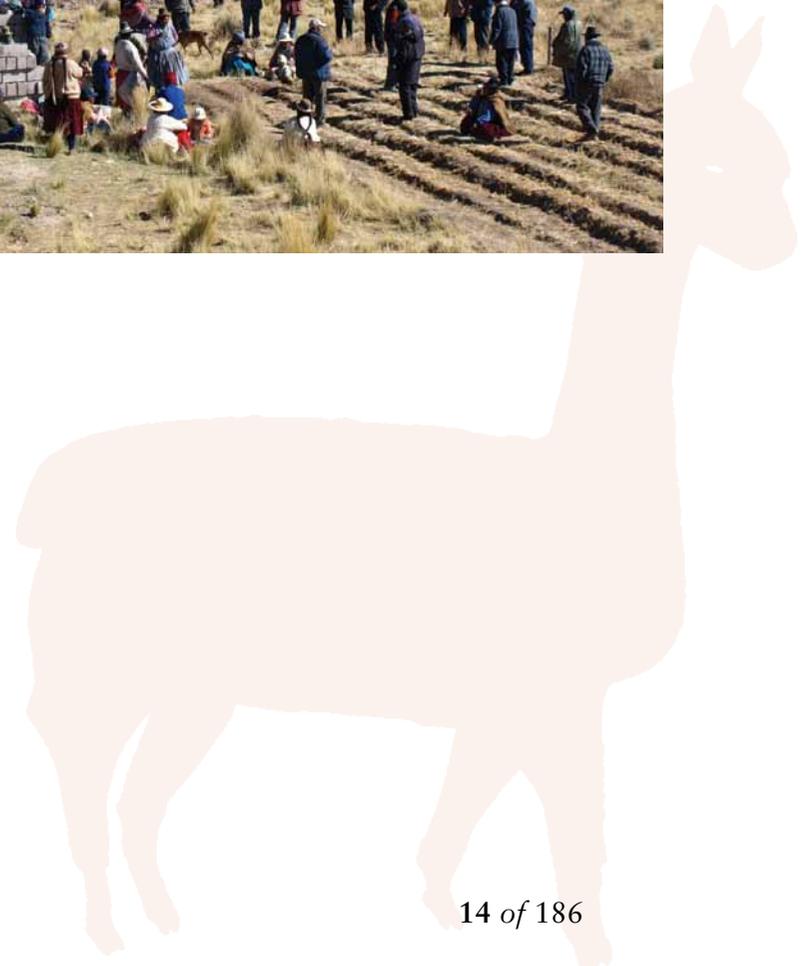
Along the shores of Lake Titicaca in Puno, four Aymara communities in the higher zones, Perka, Vilurcuni, Sanquira, and Ayrumas Carumas as well as the Quechua community of Aymaña from Carabaya accepted the opportunity to talk about their daily food. Later, two groups from the Vilcanota Valley in Cuzco, **Sara Mama** (mother maize) and **Sumaq Kausay** (good life or well-being), from the Quechua communities of Raqchi and Queramarca respectively, joined the initiative.

These communities articulated original ideas about how and to what extent they wanted to produce diversified food as the basis for the continuity of community life as well as Peruvian society more broadly. Working on these issues, they gained varying degrees of awareness and confidence in their culinary imaginations.





Five years later, the participants and their groups were able to clearly express and defend their particular life visions and food perceptions through a process that began with recalling their oral traditions. Individuals interpreted afresh the celestial signs that tell when fields need to be nurtured and when to increase their seed repositories; and they reconsidered their relationships within the family, the community and with nature. They have recreated permanent seed storerooms according to customary rules. Remembering how to ask the hearth to be steadfast, their yearning for traditional dishes made them recreate old recipes, with much appreciation for their earthen stoves, clay pots and wooden cooking utensils. By partaking of a mouth-watering dish of *qarachi* – a fish native to Lake Titicaca – stewed with potatoes, chilli and mint to capture its earthy flavour, they were once more able to work tirelessly in the fields in the Andean tradition.



## The culture of food

The initial conversations in cross-generational groups conjured up food and farming memories as well as an interest in recording present culinary practices. Each of these food discussions yielded a body of knowledge and practices documented by the groups in the form of drawings and, after some training, videos. The focus on local gastronomy created a fruitful, sensuous space rich in ideas which encompassed a more meaningful whole: the continuity of the earth's life cycle,

the rugged mountain landscape, the people of yesterday, today and tomorrow. Children, youngsters, parents and grandparents sparked off each other's ideas, transforming them into actions beyond communal boundaries that made them all feel part of the food sovereignty movement.

In Ecuador, the members of PASA linked up to the peasant movements to defend food sovereignty and local seeds (<http://www.pasandes.net/node/21>).



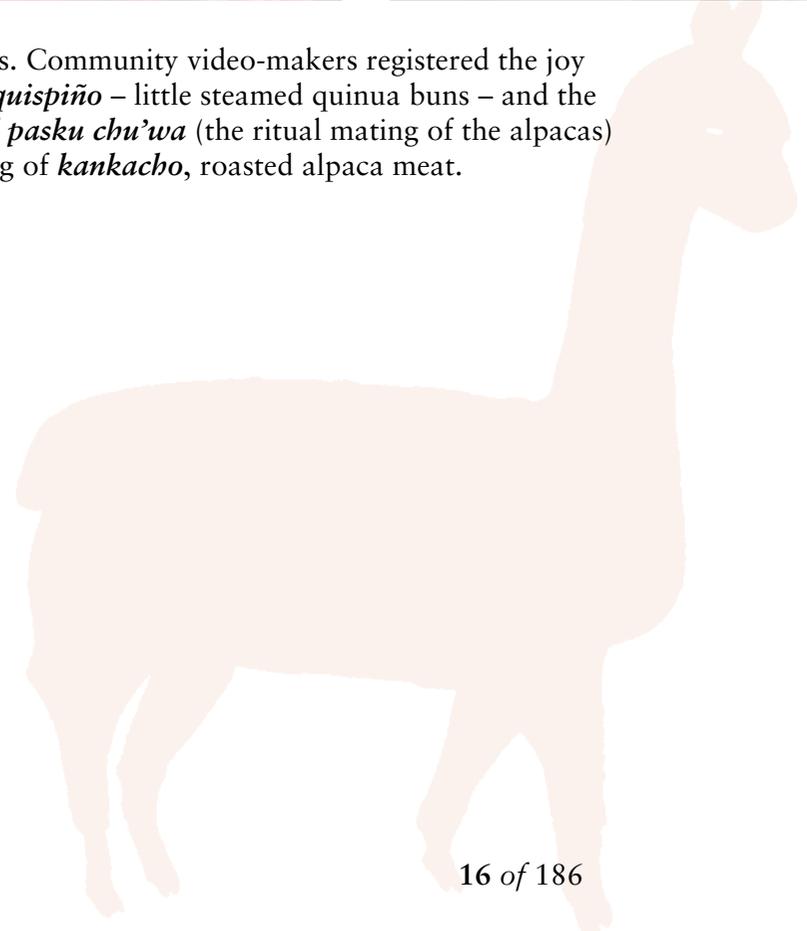
In Bolivia, they entered an exchange of methodologies with NGOs from Cochabamba and La Paz. (<http://www.pasandes.net/node/20>)

The cultural preference for food obtained directly from the generous soil re-established the ancient pact with *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) who is bountiful year after year in response to the devotion and respect that she receives from farmers. Sometimes she nurtures with her own blood, the rock salt – *puka cachi*, at other times, she offers *chajo*, clayish soil, with a high mineral content that nourishes people especially during times of scarcity. The Aymara and Quechua communities gathered together and exchanged their wisdom and practices in an ongoing recreation of the profound Andean belief that everything – plants, animals, landscapes, human and divine communities alike – is alive and therefore nurturing the cycle of life is a fundamental value.

The wise men and women pooled together their deepening understanding of the food they eat day by day, year upon year, and displayed it in a festival of visual representations and



oral narratives. Community video-makers registered the joy of preparing *quispiño* – little steamed quinoa buns – and the celebration of *pasku chu'wa* (the ritual mating of the alpacas) with the eating of *kankacho*, roasted alpaca meat.



Food became an empathetic space among the peoples of the shores and mountains surrounding Lake Titicaca as well as from the Vilcanota Valley. They recognised the magnetism of sharing the taste of local dishes based on *mashua*, *oca*, *olluco*, *tarwi*, *kiwicha*, *cañihua*, *quinua*, and a wealth of potato varieties, both ‘sweet’<sup>1</sup> and ‘bitter’. They acknowledged the importance of diversifying crops in the *aynoqas* – sectoral rotation fields –

which look like gardens hanging from the steepest Andean slopes – requiring the use of local seeds and the collective coordination of farming and long-term territorial rights. They reconsidered *ara* (wild quinoa) in terms of its nutritional value especially for children and the elderly when it is drunk as *chicha* – a beverage – and eaten as porridge. *Ara* is also a powerful plant for the rituals to *Pachamama*.

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1 ‘Sweet’ potato refers to *Solanum andigenum* that grow from 1000 – 3900 masl. ‘Bitter’ potato refers to *Solanum juzepczukii* growing from 3900 - 4200 masl.

The peoples of Titicaca call the lake the Great Crystal Ancestor, and hence they do not neglect fishing, its technology and the rituals required to renew their agreements with the lake’s wind



and waves. They recall the food that is taken to the *pukara* – mythical and real places where the endemic fish spawn and regenerate – to alleviate both the effects of the voracious introduced trout and the unlimited fishing of *qarachi*, *suchi*, *mauri*, *ispi*, *umunto*, *punko* and *qhesi*.

In the high mountain areas they recalled the custom of complementing diets with *s'iki* – the generic name for rainy season wild food that grows hidden in craggy terrain or at the edge of creeks, for example, *sankayu*, *muchkhara*, *llankallanka*, and *qawra*. These are just a few of the great diversity of miniature plants that are the wild relatives of the crops cultivated in the *chacra*, the fields.



The herders from Ayrumas Carumas and Carabaya shared their knowledge on the nurturing and breeding of llamas and alpacas. They talked about healing practices and of how important it is to increase the varieties of alpacas and llamas, rather than raise large monochromatic flocks; besides, they added, the very act of counting how many alpacas one has brings bad luck.

The idea of life as a journey across different ecological zones was also revived and recorded in a video by a group in Carabaya. Following a harvest, they took off on ancient routes over the mountains to visit families with whom they could exchange food. They loaded their llamas with produce from the high zones – jerky, dried potato, cheese and wool – and after a week or two they brought back delicious maize grown in the valleys. The journey's hardships were compensated for by the diversity of food obtained through bartering and the very act of traversing the clean natural landscapes where sacred waters spring.

In the Vilcanota Valley, the **Sara Mama** and **Sumaq Kausay** groups attempted to revitalise ancient farming practices to nurture a greater diversity of maize varieties, hoping to rely less on market-bought goods and feed their families with more nourishing produce from the fields.



## Wisdom networks

As a consequence of the initial process of reflection about food in groups, some elders, men and women, as well as youngsters began to feel the vitality of their own voices. Each one expressed his or her knowledge; while this was deeply embedded within their communities, each story had a personal accent. In some cases these knowledgeable persons could remember experiences of more than three generations ago, conveying them in sometimes puzzling metaphors. Their intuitive logic relies on

sensuous images and their oral explanations reveal an intimate relationship with nature. Seeds are persons, the Earth is a mother, the Mountains sacred, the Springs connect to the underworld; one can communicate with the Wind, the Stars, and the Frost. They construct time in agro-ceremonial cycles, celebrate rituals according to the flow of the seasons and at every stage of farming, they ask mother earth and the sacred mountains for permission. Their knowledge is interwoven in a complex repertoire of ideas, a sophisticated and dynamic universe of explanations impossible to reduce, quantify or simplify.





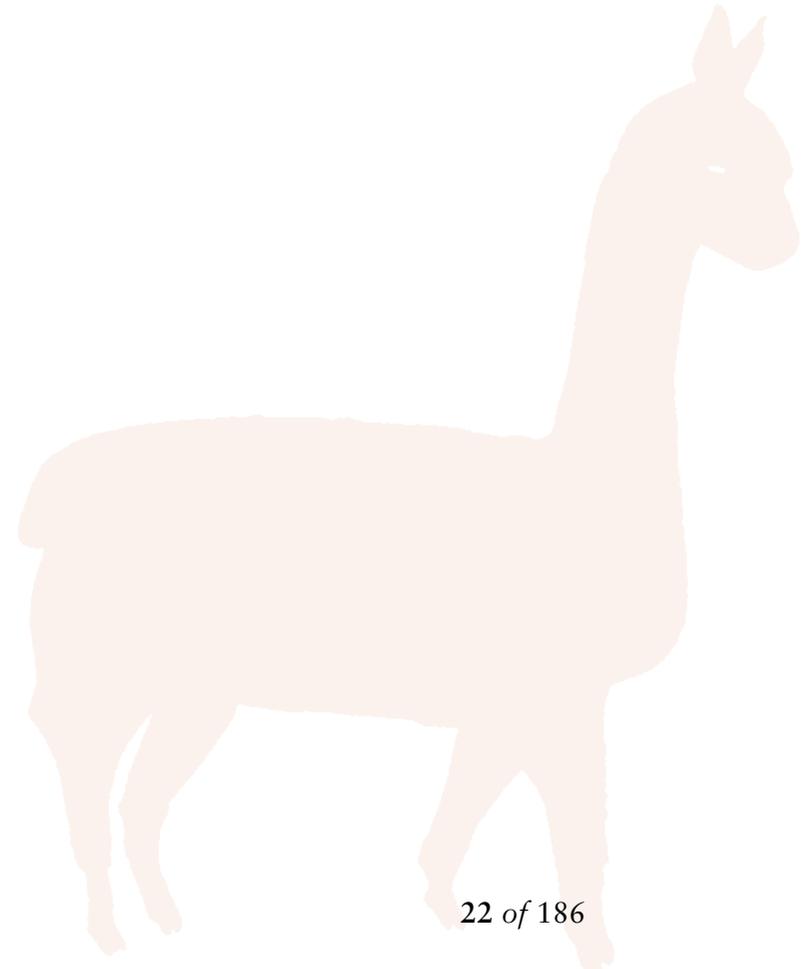
For more than a year, men and women knowers expanded their store of wisdom on topics such as the diversity of potatoes, the colours of alpacas, fish species in Lake Titicaca and improving maize yields. They became involved with their own ideas, concepts and practices, looking at them from within and exteriorising them by means of the visualisations.

Through the lens of their own life stories they explained what this knowledge was about, how they had acquired it, to whom it is being transmitted, why it is changing – and who benefits. It is important to note that this reflexivity challenges some entrenched positions about the role of indigenous knowledge in development, in particular the view that Andean culture is a collective one in which individual thinking has no place. According to this argument, presenting subjective ideas is not conforming to the required anonymity, it decontextualises tradition and falls into the trap of individualistic actions. This approach considers that the farmers' knowledge is already protected well enough within the scenario of cultural affirmation, and accepts the premise that everything is as such. Hence this view of a collectively-based culture robs the Andean peoples of the chance to regain insight and power through knowledge cycles and to recreate tradition as an ongoing flow for the coming generations.

In political terms, the wisdom networks are in essence an alternative source of power that is born from knowing. For that reason they are not in tune with organisations like the peasant federations, or those whose priorities are pre-packaged struggles against corruption, mining corporation abuses or land-grabs rather than original ways to increase the colours of alpaca herds or potato varieties. Such political movements are driven from the top by leaders who cater to the interests of their clients and already have their plans of action.

Nor does peasant, indigenous knowledge find shelter in state institutions immersed in modernising agriculture and promoting food habits, which favour agro-industrial models of production and knowledge.

In the practice of action-reflection-action, the wisdom networks have gained the power of their ideas, generated in groups. They found a common language to understand and defend food sovereignty, exploring their wisdom with growing confidence. At that point of the process, the men and women of the Altiplano entered into a dialogue with some scientists who had the intellectual capacity and power to transform the subalternity of their wisdom into a foreseeable cognitive justice.





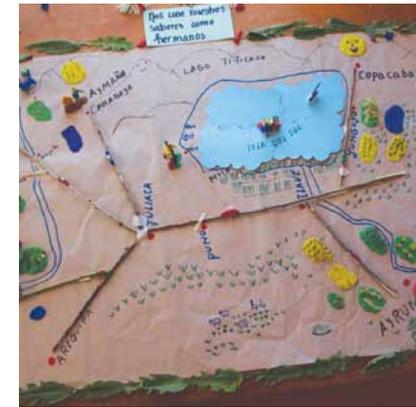
### Democratic dialogue

The time was ripe for a dialogue with the scientists. Wise men and women first visited the research centres, the University, to talk about their living knowledge of alpaca wool, maize and potato varieties, and to show their videos. These visits initiated a new type of relationship that motivated the scientists to deal with the topics brought up by the wisdom networks. The Andean farmers had a pleasant surprise when they found that some scientists could communicate in Quechua or Aymara; many are practising farmers and keep animals in spite of their specialisations in taxonomy, genetics or food technology. In turn, these urban scientists were excited about the invitation to the dialogues. Indeed, two days away from the office sounded attractive, especially for those whose imaginations were sparked by other ways of knowing.



A dialogic interaction has wider horizons than just an exchange of different points of view. Here the aim was to construct a sustainable and common vision of food sovereignty that encompasses multiple voices and actions beyond the divide between local indigenous and scientific knowledge. A dialogue is a face-to-face interaction in a place where it is possible for both knowledge systems to feel safe and on an equal footing. It is a space for creatively expressing differences and commonalities over successive encounters to construct a common research agenda that is new for both parties. Ultimately, the aim is to do justice to the wisdom of peoples whose environment and lifestyles have perpetuated a unique mode of coexistence with nature by producing healthy food, plants and animals. When such a dialogue occurs, the epistemological bridge permits a fruitful transition between knowledge systems, a mutual enrichment that invites to a democratic life plenty of new aromas and ingredients that have the power to make justice palatable to all tastes, however diverse.

The consequences of such a dialogue are as surprising and open-ended as a rainbow that sporadically appears and disappears. We can see a future where biodiversity hotspots are recovered in the Andean *chacras*, small fields; Lake Titicaca rich in endemic fish varieties and free of the contaminating residues of trout farms; alpaca meat as part of a healthy food chain; a revitalisation of families, communities, region and nation – a dynamic spiral linking the local with the global with the intellectual energy of wise men and women engaged in the practice of farming based on food sovereignty. As in *Alasitas* – an Aymara dreaming game and ritual – there will be peaceful democratic transformations that integrate multiple voices, wisdoms and practices that perpetuate life on this planet.



## The structure of this documentation

This first chapter has presented an overview of the complexity of processes lived by community-based groups over four years. The second chapter deals with the actors of this initiative, the international players, the local NGOs and the community-based personalities and how each learned new roles and developed capacities depending on the dynamics of the situation.

In the third chapter the focus is on the logic of this initiative, i.e. the four thematic levels interconnected by a sequence of participatory methodology to generate knowledge about food sovereignty. The chapter shows how PAR and community video-making have yielded a wealth of graphic representations and videos as a product of the reflections of the actors that this documentation is based upon. Chapter four explains the inter-communal construction of food sovereignty, a process that was facilitated by the community actors.

The following chapter 5 reveals the cognitive personalities of the representatives of the wisdom networks; their inner reflections and biographies form the subject matter of chapter 6. This epistemological background is a prelude to the discussion of the wisdom dialogues between scientists and wise men and women, in chapter 7.

This book concludes with chapter 8, which links and loops through past and future as in the Andean time construction when wise men and women remember and foresee the future of food sovereignty by opening themselves to a repertoire of possibilities, yet remaining firmly committed to continuity and perseverance.

The text of this multimedia documentation should be read in tandem with the rich accompanying visual material (photographs, and links to videos) produced by and for the wisdom networks as an integral part of the PAR process.

