



# Voices

MAY 2002

When the Rural Women Producers' Association of Ucayali (AMUCAU) was founded in February 1994, Elena Trigos-Grandes eagerly volunteered to be one of its 140 pioneer members. Like the majority of rural dwellers in the lowland Peruvian Amazon—a region characterised by rapid resource degradation, poor market links and high population growth induced in large part by migration—Elena was searching for production alternatives that could offer a route out of poverty for herself and her family. However, as a woman in a society that has traditionally entrusted land management decisions to men, she was also searching for a greater voice and greater participation in the development and implementation of these alternatives.

Elena's first several years with AMUCAU were a constant personal struggle. Like many other women in the association, she faced many physical challenges, such as arising at 2 am on meeting days to make the almost 30-km trek to Pucallpa, the main market town in the region. She was also confronted with resistance at home from a husband who did not understand her proactive role in the association and misinterpreted her ambition. Nor did the association meet with immediate success. Various initiatives failed due to inexperience, inadequate economic resources for ambitious projects, poorly administered technical assistance and other organisational challenges.

AMUCAU has met these challenges through the hard work and dedication of its members and leaders like Elena, who has served as AMUCAU's President since 1997. With a present membership of more than 650 individuals, AMUCAU is a name widely recognised today by public and private institutions that support rural development in Ucayali. Perhaps equally important, AMUCAU has gained the recognition and respect of men and women alike in the region. Following a decision in 1998 to extend membership to both sexes, 80 men have joined the association, including Elena's two sons, Vicente and Jackson. Elena considers the support for and inclusion of men in AMUCAU as one of the association's major accomplishments.

AMUCAU's members participate equally in a variety of projects including the communal raising of bees and poultry, the installation of tree nurseries that produce valuable germplasm

"Before, I didn't even know how to organise a meeting. When I spoke [in front of a group], I trembled.... Today, through AMUCAU, I am participating at the national level to help develop a forestry strategy for Peru."

— ELENA TRIGOSO-GRANDES

and reforestation projects using priority agroforestry species. In one of the reforestation projects under development, AMUCAU is collaborating with a private company in the production, processing and eco-label certification of the native timber species 'bolaina blanca' (*Guazuma crinita*) and 'capirona' (*Calycophyllum spruceanum*). This project—the first of its kind in the Peruvian Amazon—emphasises local community participation, sustainable secondary forest management, value-added processing and links to a secure market for the timber products.

ASB scientists are helping to facilitate this innovative partnership through the promotion and dissemination of cost-effective technologies and through the strengthening of AMUCAU members' management and organisational capacity.

Although AMUCAU continues to face challenges in its daily operations and in meeting its long-term goals, its members are acquiring valuable technical and managerial skills that will enable them to increase their incomes, thereby improving their quality of life and raising their expectations for the future. According to Elena, members have also become more aware of the natural value of their land and plants, and the responsibility they have to manage these resources effectively and pass this knowledge on to their children. The association's monthly meetings, in addition to providing a forum for discussion about such communal responsibilities, offer a safe and open environment for members to share their personal stories and experiences regarding the unique challenges they face as women—including ways of overcoming these challenges.

Recognising the strong link between women's economic and social position, AMUCAU has recently established a House of Refuge for sexually abused and mistreated women on its communal plot just outside Pucallpa. In addition to providing such women with a sanctuary, volunteers hope to build their self-esteem by helping them work and earn an income for themselves, and by instructing them on their rights and how to defend them.

J Lewis



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