

# interact

The magazine of **PROGRESSIO**  
CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES



## People power

How participation empowers  
people and promotes change



editorial

## People power

I want to introduce this issue of *Interact* by quoting Edna Tesoro, a Progressio development worker with Rede Feto (the Women's Network) in Timor Leste. I asked her to tell me what civil society participation means to her. She wrote:

'In theory, civil society participation is the inclusion of the local perspective: inclusion in action, inclusion in governance, inclusion in processes striving for change and improvement, and inclusion in the benefits of such involvement. In practice, however, civil society participation sometimes involves only the elite group of civil society. Those who did not participate or were not given the opportunity to participate are often those who do not have the capacity and preparation to get involved. Building the capacity of people to effectively participate is one of the main challenges facing civil society in Timor Leste.'

Empowering people to effectively participate is precisely what Progressio sets out to do, and this issue of *Interact* describes some of the ways in which we and our partner organisations do it. The stories in these pages show that people who get involved can make a real difference. As Navidad Ochoa Sánchez, a community activist in Cusco, Peru, says, if we want to change the way things are, 'It's no good just complaining about problems – you have to tackle them.'

Cover picture: People celebrating in Timor Leste.  
Photo: Irene Slegt/Panos.

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FOR FOUR YEARS, I have been a development worker with CEPCU in Ecuador (the Centre for Pluricultural Studies) supporting its environmental education work. Throughout this time, I applied the saying 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again', because being the only educator amongst so many technical professionals, it was really a challenge to invite my colleagues to discover that they can influence people positively through training: that is, through a real education.

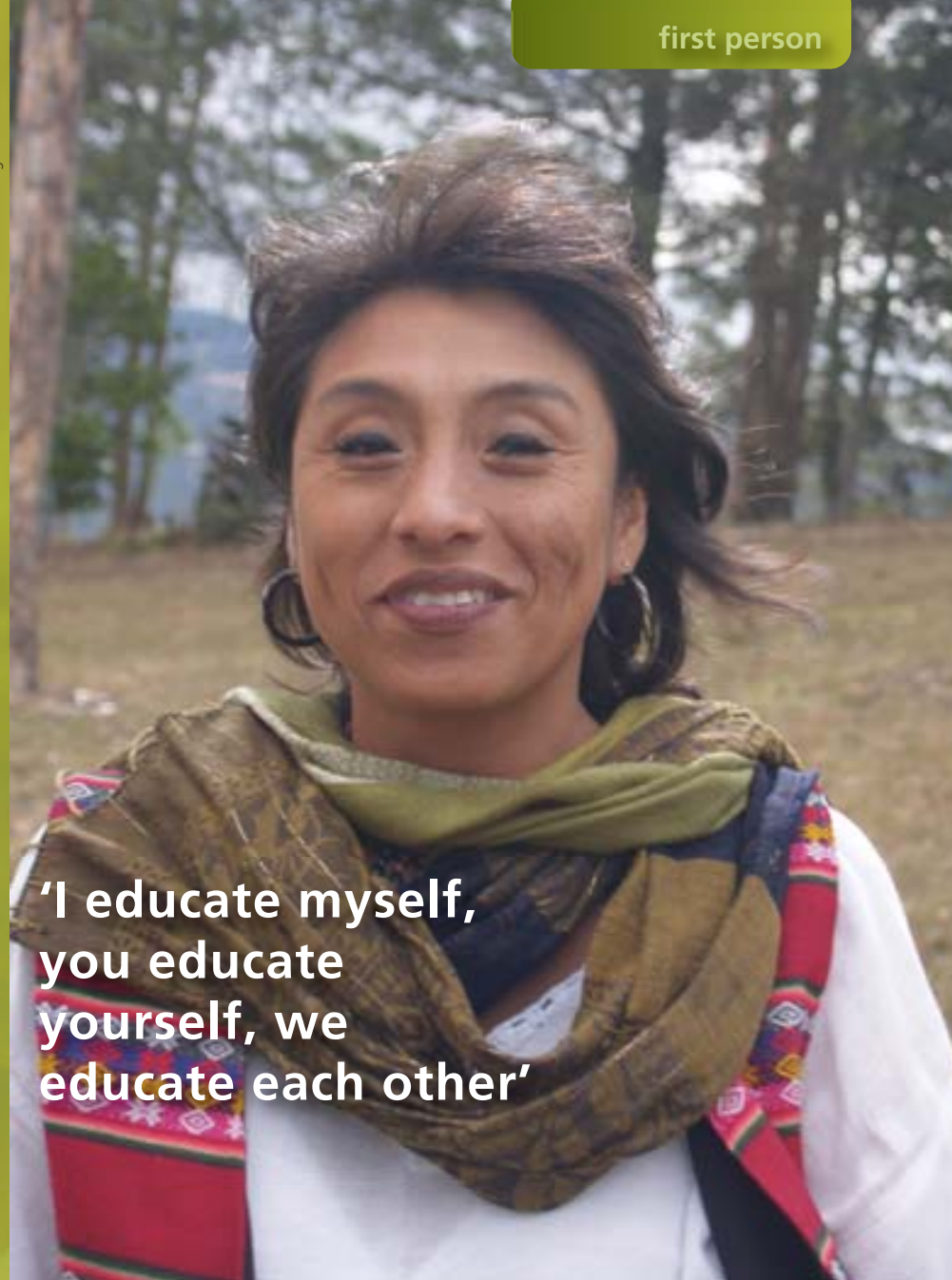
In approaching the subject, we learned to LET PEOPLE SPEAK, AND LISTEN. I identified techniques which helped us – through debate and analysis of the context (a rural area and the Andean cosmovision) – to reach an understanding in tune with people's cultural identity. So instead of talking about quality of life, we talk about *sumak kawsay* – 'living the great life well'. Instead of capacity building, we have *sumak yana* – 'to train oneself in mind, body and spirit'. Instead of 'natural resource management', we talk about *caring for Pachamama* – 'Giving mother earth the care and love she needs'. In this way we guarantee that communities understand and share the objectives of the projects being carried out.

Moving beyond talking to carrying out our work, it was important to respect people's ways of learning. Considering the sharing of people's knowledge as a first stage of planning and designing workshops was key, because knowledge does not just consist of information, but of the background of experiences that a person brings with them (experiences lived, cultural codes, attitudes and skills learned, predispositions). On this basis, activities for the second stage, CONSTRUCTING OR RECONSTRUCTING NEW KNOWLEDGE, were created. That is, generating a meeting of Andean and Western knowledge, and from this meeting, reaching intercultural knowledge relevant to the people's reality – to the context of their life.

The third stage was to put into practice what had been learned: that is, INCORPORATING IT INTO LIFE and applying the lessons generated in these training spaces. Designing the workshops under this new logic implied investing time and much creativity: something that CEPCU had, but was initially reserved about using.

Over these four years there have been changes in the staff's approach. They

Michelle Lowe/Progressio



**'I educate myself, you educate yourself, we educate each other'**

have moved on from listing themes, listing workshops, preparing discussions, and counting the number of workshop participants, to losing their fear, daring to innovate, respecting people's ways of learning when designing workshops, attempting to move closer to visualising changes through more frequent visits to the communities they work with, and building a new understanding of what can be achieved by training. Through this process I consider that CEPCU's most significant educational achievement was opening up to new things, daring to change and investing personal and collective effort.

So how do I feel now? I feel very good, because I think that persisting with what you believe in, and in what you can do well, is very important and satisfactory. I think that the whole CEPCU family, myself included, educated ourselves through our efforts to change

and improve our practices.

Now we are spreading our learning. Many of the professionals that I learned with are no longer with CEPCU. They left because their projects finished, or because they were looking for other professional experiences. These friends now work in other spaces, coordinating or directing professionals from different branches, and all the time influencing people and sharing with them what they have learned. Now I am beginning my task again because there are new staff, and it is time to discover new ways to reach their *shunku* (hearts), sensitising their practices and their understanding in order to reach the longed for *sumak kawsay*.

And you, have you reached it?

*Rocío Sotelo López is a Progressio development worker in Ecuador. She is from Peru.*

## Conference celebrates Populorum Progressio message

A CONFERENCE TO DISSEMINATE the social teaching in the encyclical Populorum Progressio and analyse its relevance for today's world was held by a Progressio partner organisation in the Ecuadorian capital Quito in November, writes Michelle Lowe.

FEPP, which also takes its name, Fondo Ecuatoriano Populorum Progressio, from the encyclical, is a Catholic NGO which works in rural development in Ecuador. It organised the event, which was partly funded by Progressio, together with the Ecuadorian Bishops Conference.

The director of FEPP, José

Tonello, explained that they wanted to hold the event because of a concern that organisations with Christian roots are forgetting the important messages in the encyclical and other Christian social teaching:

'Back in May we held another event with a group of NGOs with Christian inspiration at which it became clear that there is very little understanding of ... what the social teachings say on issues like the family, nature, equality, justice. We believe that it is important for us to familiarise ourselves more with the church's social teaching so that we can take it as an inspiration and a point of departure for our work.'

'The Populorum Progressio encyclical has a lot of important things to say. It addresses issues of poverty from a perspective of structural causes and solutions, justice and the need for a new

order of things.'

At the conference FEPP launched a book 'The Encyclical Populorum Progressio, in the past, today and tomorrow' which outlines the teaching and 'aims to motivate people'. José Tonello said:

'The encyclical sets out the need for bold transformations and big changes. There is a lot of work to be done but we are now, as a group, thinking about the future. I'm not suggesting that we are capable of a huge revolution but after the conference we are all now more motivated to work together. There were some very inspiring presentations and discussions which will help us to take the next steps.'

*Michelle Lowe is a Progressio development worker, working on advocacy and communications in Ecuador and Peru.*

## Love people and the planet

PROGRESSIO'S 'Say NO to Terminator Seeds' campaign is now in full swing. Due to our concerns over the environmental and socio-economic threats presented by this unique type of genetic modification, Progressio's supporters have been asking UK MPs to put pressure on the UK

government to do all it can to ensure that the current moratorium on Terminator is maintained and strengthened by the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, meeting in May this year.

Thanks to you, nearly 2,000 seedpackets have so far been sent to MPs! Replies were received from both the MPs themselves and the departments for International Development (DFID) and Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). In January, Progressio representatives and other organisations met with DFID and DEFRA to discuss Terminator and its potential effects. The pressure of Progressio's supporters has put Terminator on the agenda, and we would like to thank you for your continued support.

The next phase of our campaign targets the EU Commissioner for the Environment, Stavros Dimas. We are asking Commissioner Dimas to ensure that decision-makers in the EU understand that the people of the UK are concerned about the threats posed by Terminator seeds. At this time it is especially

important to target the European Union as the European Commission has been funding research into 'Zombie seeds' (a new type of Terminator) and we feel it is urgent that people act to counter-act the pro-Terminator voices that may be influencing decision-makers at the European level.

Under the banner 'Love People and the Planet', we are asking our campaigners to send Commissioner Dimas a Valentine's card expressing their concerns. If you would like more information, instructions on how to make a Valentine's card for Commissioner Dimas or suggestions for the content of the card, please visit [www.seedsaver.org.uk](http://www.seedsaver.org.uk) or write to [info@seedsaver.org.uk](mailto:info@seedsaver.org.uk).

This action represents a great way to be creative and we hope will particularly appeal to young people (and the young at heart!). Together we can communicate our concerns to the EU and keep Terminator seeds out of the marketplace!



## Somaliland government comes down hard on human rights network

**U**NWARRANTED INTERFERENCE by the Somaliland government with a Progressio partner organisation, the Somaliland Human Rights Network, illustrates a disturbing recent trend of the Hargeisa government towards authoritarianism and reliance on extra-legal actions, *writes Steve Kibble*.

SHURO-Net, an umbrella network of organisations concerned with human rights, had become increasingly effective in raising issues, particularly around the arrest of journalists from the independent media and politicians trying to form a new party (Qaran), as well as general concerns over the wider human rights practices of the government. These include concerns about increasing use of extra-legal powers, imprisonment as a penalty for allegations of civil offences, and an over-reliance on the use of the police force.

The Somaliland government seems to have responded in

particular to criticism of the existence of both national and local security committees with the power (probably unconstitutional) of arrest and imprisonment for one year without due process of law.

The government sought to deflect the criticism by inciting some members of SHURO-Net to hold an extraordinary AGM in October and unconstitutionally elect a new Board of Directors. Despite protests from genuine members of SHURO-Net, very few of whom attended the meeting, and after extremely heavy-handed police intervention, the fake SHURO-Net was allowed to claim the organisation's offices with (the real) SHURO-Net now attempting to work out of NAGAAD offices (the women's umbrella organisation and also a Progressio partner).

Progressio is concerned not only about this dangerous trend and its possible effect on the forthcoming local and presidential

elections, but also that one of the cultural norms of Somali society of seeking peace and reconciliation through prolonged and clan-based mediation is in danger of being set aside through extra-legal actions. It is equally worrying that Parliament and specifically the House of Representatives do not immediately see their role as a watchdog of civil liberties, or indeed seek to engage on such issues as emergency laws and the existence of national and local security committees with arbitrary imprisonment powers – leaving it to the beleaguered human rights network to do this.

Progressio will play its role internationally and domestically to try to ensure that SHURO-Net and other partners, and civil society in general, can play the participative role in building democracy that we, and others, are committed to.

*Steve Kibble is Progressio's advocacy coordinator for Africa, the Middle East and Asia.*

# liveit!

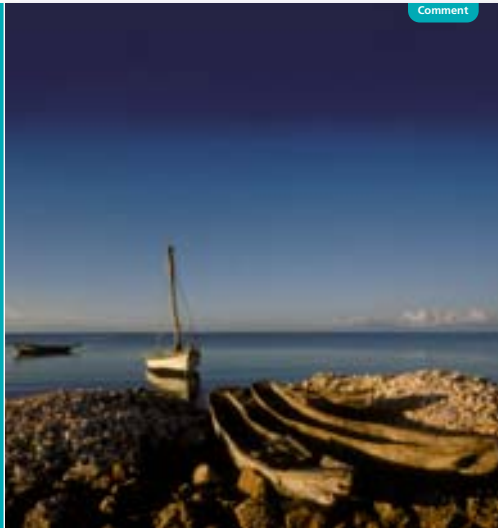
## Change yourself ... to change the world

**T**HE *livesimply* CHALLENGE has brought together people of all ages to act for social justice. Thousands of you have heeded the call to live more simply and sustainably, in solidarity with people who are poor. Now is the time to turn that commitment into action – to take stock, celebrate achievements, share good ideas and plan for the future.

How can we build on what we have achieved? *liveit!* is your chance to have your say. This major event, to be held in

Manchester on 14-15 March, offers you the chance to meet some of the most inspirational people in the UK, and contribute your own ideas to help change the world.

*liveit!* offers speakers, workshops, music, reflection and prayer, and is for anyone who wants to keep making a positive difference as part of a Church of Action. Find out more and book online at [www.livesimply.org.uk/event08](http://www.livesimply.org.uk/event08) or book by phone on 0870 879 1006.



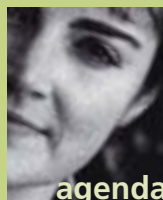
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We need to listen and share in order to build a better society together, writes **Christine Allen**



# Making connections

**W**RITING IN THE 1967 ENCYCLICAL *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI wrote that 'the expert's message will surely be rejected by ... people if it is not inspired by ...love. Technical expertise is necessary, but it must be accompanied by concrete signs of genuine love.'

It probably sounded quite idealistic then, and to some degree, it still does. But looking at the various reflections and insights from the partners and development workers in this edition of *Interact*, it is very clear that 'concrete signs of genuine love' are essential elements of full and coherent development. Those signs? Listening, respect, empowerment and, of course, enabling people's full participation.

Forty years later that view is very much put into practice, we believe, by *Progressio* development workers. They work with partners around the world in a spirit of cooperation and respect, engaged in the shared task of development. Nowhere is this message so vital as in the area of governance and citizen participation.

Andrea Calvi's article (page 17) reminds us that our search for development is about full human development, and finding ways to enable people to contribute fully and address the blockages. He also reminds us quite starkly that international organisations all too often have 'baggage', or at the very least make demands of partners overseas which are not always helpful (whilst at the same time using the language of partnership and cooperation). It is a difficult line to navigate, because all organisations have their needs, but development has to be a shared task and a coming together of agendas and understanding, not the imposition of one line over another.

Although Paul VI wrote his message primarily to the Catholic community, it has a resonance across the world, and indeed was intended to be heard by all people of goodwill. As Rocío Sotelo López illustrates (page 3), one of the concrete signs has to be listening to people and valuing their point of view. From her experience, which is also shared by Nicoletta Velardi (see page 10),

listening to and working with indigenous Andean communities who have been marginalised for 500 years since the brutality of the conquests shows how important this is – especially with communities that have been, or continue to be, marginalised or oppressed. Neither is this a one-way process – genuine listening happens on both sides. Disagreements can be ironed out, but when people do not feel heard, then resentment and often violence results – as we see so often around the world, and in our own local communities.

Such concrete signs of love need to take place within a framework: we cannot expect systematic change if this happens only at an individual level. The development challenge is about developing good governance and helping to build civil society so that the listening and the engagement can take place in a meaningful way between political and civil structures. This is a challenge for all structures, but especially so for local communities and politicians. Within this dialogue groups or institutions such as churches, activists and campaigners, interest groups, trade unions and even political parties face challenges for themselves: how do we all

**It is not enough for the powerful to move over a little unless the powerless find their power**

become and embody for ourselves the sort of participation that we seek from our wider society? Maria Rosa Alayza (page 7 and page 20) reminds us that we have to start by becoming that which we want to achieve.

There is no easy answer to that, but the skills we see in our development workers offer a number of ideas. Time for reflection; thinking about a vision of something different; sharing that vision with others; sharing analysis of the issues and the causes – especially of where the power lies; building confidence through skills; learning from others; making connections with others and feeling part of something bigger. Good governance, or a participatory society, has to be built from both the bottom and the top. It is not enough for the powerful to move over a little unless the powerless find their power.

*Christine Allen is Progressio's executive director.*



*Listening and sharing... Women talk together in Somaliland.*

# LEADING TO CHANGE

**I** COME FROM PERU, a poor country: 48% of the people live below the poverty line. There is great cultural diversity yet little social and cultural integration. Despite the fact that there is a democratic political system, the majority of the population lives at a great distance from the state. They do not feel represented by the state and have little confidence in politics or politicians.

At the same time – though it may sound contradictory – the concept of citizenship has increased. People participate politically in many areas, and civil society participation is becoming a driving force in Peruvian society. The biggest limitation is the huge inequality between rich and poor, which leads to a general feeling of distrust in the political regime and democracy. There may have been changes in the political system but when there are no changes in their income, people think: what is this democracy for if my life is not changing?

We are also living with the after-effects of the internal armed conflict which took place between 1980 and 2000, during which 70,000 people died or ‘disappeared’. The big problem was that neither the Shining Path nor the civil authorities or the military treated the people as human beings: they saw them as mere objects. The people were abandoned and left to fend for themselves.

## A new pact

In 2003, the national Truth and Reconciliation Commission identified the need for a long term process of reconciliation, understood as a new pact between the state and society. This requires that the state develop its presence in every part of the country with inclusive public policies, so providing the population with

**Participating in the processes of democracy offers the chance for renewal and change, says Maria Rosa Alayza**

opportunities for development and participation.

The same year, the Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas began a pioneering work of reconciliation, which we defined as promoting, in the society and the state, recognition of the poor as subjects within the social and political life of Peru. In recent years we have further defined our mission as the formation of leaders from different areas (shanty towns, universities, social organisations, religious congregations, parishes, local radio stations, civic initiative groups, etc) who, through their social, cultural or religious groups, work with others and together with other areas to support human development and democracy. We believe it is important to join forces so that the needs of the poor in our country are highlighted and become part of the construction of democracy in Peru. This can only be done with good local leaders who will make it happen if they become protagonists.

## Active citizens

Society is strengthened by an active citizenship that freely supports processes which try to resolve public problems, but at the same time

gives people an opportunity to think about what kind of society they want. In this sense, we do not have to create a leadership model as such. Rather, leaders must be open to understanding the diversity and the variety of people that are around them, depending on the reality they come from.

The idea of a leader is to serve the people in building fraternal relationships at a micro and macro level. We speak about leadership in terms of the capacity to call together different groups of people or networks, who have the authority to speak in public and who are ethical and care about the common good. All of us, with different personalities, play a leadership role in life when we understand that our lives are intertwined with others and do not depend only on ourselves.

*Maria Rosa Alayza is director of the Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas in Lima, Peru. This is an edited extract from her speech at the Progressio AGM in December 2007 on the theme Taking part: Inspiring people.*

*Participants in a training course for indigenous Quechua leaders run by Centro Bartolomé de Las Casas in Peru (see following pages for more about the centre's work).*





# EMPOWERING PEOPLE

Progressio partner organisations in Peru are meeting the challenge of rebuilding the fabric of civil society and promoting participation, writes **Michelle Lowe**

**‘Y**OU DON’T KNOW what will happen tomorrow, in the country or in your own life. But whatever happens, no one can take away from you the skills, experience and self-esteem that you develop.

They are yours forever.’

So says

Jonham Zanabria Guzmán, a young law student who is taking part in leadership training run by

Progressio partner organisation Coincide in Cusco, Peru. The training course aims to equip participants with the skills to lead their own groups, organisations or communities; to manage projects; and to lobby for change.

Progressio development worker Belén Pont runs the training together with the team at Coincide. The course takes place on Saturdays with two groups from the Cusco region – a rural group and an urban group. The rural group is being trained in project development while the urban group focuses on advocacy. Both courses last a year.

## Potential

The participants represent a variety of grassroots organisations or groups, from women who run soup kitchens to presidents of communities. They bring hugely different experiences and concerns but share a passion to challenge

injustice and improve their communities. Belén says:

‘The participants are all people who are putting a lot of energy into working for change at their local level. They all have a latent potential inside them which, when awoken, could enable them to participate at other levels. That is what we are trying to do.

‘The course is one small part of the many processes going on in the lives of the participants. They are all very involved in the reality of their communities and neighbourhoods, fighting and struggling every day. In this context the training offers them a space for personal and group reflection, for critical analysis, and for taking positions.’

## Confidence

An important part of the course relates to personal development and growth, covering self-esteem, personal relations, values, democracy, ethical conduct, gender and interculturality. According to Belén, this is the area where the

*Jonham Zanabria Guzmán.*



Main photo opposite: Women leaders on a course run by Centro Bartolomé de Las Casas.

results of the training are most obvious:

'The process of personal strengthening, confidence building and self-evaluation is the first step which opens up the way for other changes. The most notable changes we see in participants are changes in their personal attitudes – more confidence in expressing themselves, enriching their language with new terms, and the ability to construct a discourse with detailed argumentation and evidence.'

The increased confidence that participants gain is evident when talking to them about the course. Josefa Condori Quispe is one of the leaders in the urban group. She didn't have a proper education when she was young because, like many girls from rural communities in Peru, she was sent away from home at a young age to work as a domestic help. She now helps to run an organisation which campaigns for the rights of girls forced into this situation. She says:

'The course has strengthened me – it has built up my skills and my confidence to be able to work with and for the girls. It has helped me to focus my energies effectively. The learning starts with the course but I want to carry it on. Like lots of the girls I work with, I didn't have an education before. Now I want to learn and give myself that opportunity.'

### Opportunities

Jonham Zanabria Guzmán is part of Cojoven – an umbrella organisation for youth organisations in the region. He too talks of the confidence he has gained from the course:

'The course has taught me to express myself better. I think I will be a better professional, a better citizen and a better human being after taking it. It has helped me to raise my

## Being visible

'I would like girls working as domestic servants not to be invisible. They have a right to participate just like anyone else. I aim to make their problems and their rights visible to the rest of society. Like all of the rest of us they have rights including the right to have a decent quality of life.'

'We as citizens should have a voice in the decisions which affect our well-being and quality of life. As citizens we should know our rights and responsibilities and exercise them. Starting with our own neighbourhood, participation is about informing ourselves and then using that knowledge to help ourselves and others and to get involved in improving things.'

'We need to get rid of the attitude of just looking after ourselves and not caring what happens to the neighbour because that is his problem. To live better we need to have the attitude that where we live – our area, city or region even – is our home: it is everyone's home and we need to look after it and look after everyone in it.'

*Josefa Condori Quispe, from the organisation Yanapancekusi ('Let's help ourselves' in Quechua).*



*Josefa Condori Quispe.*

Michelle Lowe/Progressio

expectations of myself. It has helped me to see that there are opportunities and spaces which you can take advantage of to change things.

'From the point of view of my organisation, the training has helped us to position ourselves in a range of spaces where we can give our opinions and ideas, not only on "youth" issues but on a range of issues including national ones: for

example, we have taken part in a campaign on education and in a World Bank consultation group.'

Coincide hope that the impact of the training for individuals and the organisations they work with will contribute to strengthening civil society in the region. Another Progressio partner organisation in Cusco, Centro Bartolomé de Las Casas (CBC),

[cont...]



*Belén Pont facilitating a session on the Coincide leadership training course.*

Michelle Lowe/Progressio

has the same aim through the training courses it runs for indigenous Quechua leaders.

### Rights

Progressio development worker Nicoletta Velardi, who is from Italy, is working with CBC on the project *Amautas y Qullanas*, which is Quechua for 'Educators and Leaders'. The training course aims to promote the political participation of indigenous men and women in the Cusco and Apurimac regions. At present such participation is severely limited because of the marginalisation and discrimination they face. 'Cultural and ethnic discrimination means that indigenous Quechua culture is seen as inferior and communities are marginalised socially, economically and politically. This affects their ability to participate as citizens and to exercise their rights,' says Nicoletta.

'The aim of the course is ultimately to enable participants to construct



Nicoletta Velardi with two community leaders taking part in a CBC training course.

proposals for change which are based on their cultural identity and vision.'

To do this, the course encourages participants to analyse the impact of discrimination on their ability to develop a sense of themselves as citizens and as indigenous Quechua people. As such, it is much more than just a training course providing theory and tools. It is an emotionally demanding process that asks participants to evaluate and critically analyse the roots of their identity and belief systems and build up their own sense and definition of citizenship. Covering topics related to the family, community, health, education, livelihoods and poverty, and analysing issues such as violence, the break with traditions, gender discrimination, land issues and racism, the course aims to facilitate a process in which participants can develop their own initiatives to lobby for the recognition of their rights.

### Ethos

In addition to promoting participation, the course itself has a strong participatory ethos. The curriculum was designed in collaboration with what the organisation calls *sabios* and *sabias* – wise men and women, from indigenous peasant communities.

'Working with indigenous

peasant farming communities means working within a different way of life and world vision,' explains Nicoletta. 'The project is intercultural in its ethos, design and development. We incorporate indigenous knowledge in the design of the curriculum and teaching methods and work with indigenous wise people as co-educators.'

Nicoletta believes that the project's emphasis on empowerment is crucial to its success. 'What is special about this project is the weight it gives to subjectivity – the project works with "subjects" and "actors" (ie active participants) not with "beneficiaries" (passive receivers of the benefits of projects).

'The leaders involved in the project have begun a process of recognition of their cultural identity and their equal role and status in Peruvian democracy. It is an experience of a very different kind for them, in which they value their culture and start seeing its distinctiveness, its importance and its crucial role in the construction of their identity as indigenous Quechua – as well as its role in the construction of their citizenship.'

*Michelle Lowe is a Progressio development worker, working on advocacy and communications in Peru and Ecuador.*

Nicoletta Velardi/Progressio



A community leader taking part in a community mapping exercise at a CBC workshop.

# Taking on the *macho* men

THE NUMBER of women involved in local government in Peru has increased drastically since 1997 when a new law set a 30% quota for women in political parties' lists of candidates. However, although more women are now getting into politics, many lack experience, training and support from their party.

Over the last year Progreso development worker Susana Araujo has been working with the Lima-based Escuela Para el Desarrollo (Development School) on a project supporting a network of female councillors in the south-western region of Ayacucho. Sandra Rojas-Sandoval Cupe, president of the network, says:

'Before the quota there was extremely low participation in politics by women, so female councillors often start off with very little experience or training. The network is a way for us to help each other to carry out our roles well. We also aim to be a different type of women's organisation. Most women's organisations here in Peru just carry out a social function like distributing milk from the government. We want to be a different character of organisation – not an organisation which is told what to do but an organisation made up of women in authority with proposals.'

Susana went to Ayacucho and spent a month and a half living there with the women involved in the network to experience first hand the challenges they face. The region is a difficult place to work. It is one of the areas which suffered most from the



political violence of the 1980s in Peru and is a mountainous, geographically fragmented region, with communication and transport difficulties which make it hard for the women to stay in touch.

'We worked with 14 women and we totally immersed ourselves in their reality to understand and touch and feel it – to really see what their experiences are like as women and wives and councillors. What we learnt is just how difficult the challenges they face are.'

'The process for us was not just one of being interviewers but also being facilitators in a learning process – we had conversations that could be up to three days long, working with the women to evaluate their own experiences and learn from them.'

Having conducted the initial analysis, Susana and the team presented the findings to the wider network of 60 women for discussion and further analysis. 'The idea was to allow everyone to work through and discuss the findings and to learn from their own experience,' says Susana.

The project also aimed to help transfer knowledge to a new batch of councillors in the region who started in their posts for the first time in January 2007. Roció



Michelle Lowe/Progreso



From top: Roció Pineda Flores; Sandra Rojas-Sandoval Cupe; Susana Araujo talking to presidents of communities in Coracora in Ayacucho region.

Pineda Flores, one of the new councillors, said:

'It's important for us to show that as women we can take on and carry out important roles with responsibility and efficiency. Peru has always had very strong *macho* attitudes and as women we have to face up to that and show that we can meet any challenge.'

'Women with public roles have a double value and a double responsibility – we work in the home and in our official work. The importance of the work women do should not be underestimated.'

'Even now many women are still very fearful of taking on public roles. Many don't dare to take their own decisions and go out to work, they are still controlled by their husbands. I think the network is a powerful way of raising our own awareness about our values and helping each other to carry out our roles better.'

# Learning to speak up

Progressio people and partners in Peru, Nicaragua, Somaliland, Yemen and Timor Leste give a taste of what civil society participation means to them. (Interviews in Peru by Michelle Lowe)



**Evelyn Kala, specialist in local economic development with Progressio partner organisation Guaman Poma, Cusco, Peru**

We try to help people to work together and come to agreements about how to work for the development of their community. To achieve this we run a lot of training for grassroots organisations – community organisations, women’s organisations and young people’s organisations. We aim to give them the skills and confidence to be able to participate in the spaces that are available and to present their proposals in those spaces.

A big challenge for us is promoting leadership that is not just political leadership. The problem is there are very few good leaders who represent their group well. Most leaders are political leaders and many are involved in politics for personal interest and gain. We want to see leaders who are youth leaders, social leaders, small enterprise leaders, and to build and strengthen civil society through a range of different social networks and movements.

**Belén Pont, Progressio development worker with Coincide, Cusco, Peru**

Civil society participation is important because it is a mechanism which allows people to take on commitments and responsibilities to work for the common good. Thinking that politicians (meaning those people with a role within the

government) are the only ones who are responsible for managing public life is very comfortable. I think we all have a duty to empower ourselves, take decisions and act on them to improve the lives of our communities.

**Navidad Ochoa Sánchez, participant in Progressio partner organisation Coincide’s leadership training course, Cusco, Peru**



If we are really going to change things in our society we need to unite. Those of us that have the will to do something about it need to get together, learn together and support each other. We need to do something about our problems ourselves. It is no good just complaining about problems – you have to tackle them.

Participating is not easy. I have to defend myself against lots of attacks and people try to hurt you if you start really standing up for things and challenging their interests.

The main actor in all social change is the population – the citizens. If we don’t get active and take an interest, there will not be real change. For me participation is about getting involved and changing things for the better.

In Wanchaq, the area of Cusco where I live, there are mothers who have to leave for work at 6am leaving their children with just 10 cents each, enough to buy one glass of milk which is their only nutrition for the day. Elderly people who cannot defend their rights are being abandoned. It pains me to see governments abandoning vulnerable people like these. We have to change things and there is an awful lot to be done

**Alexandra Torres, Progressio development worker with Guaman Poma, Cusco, Peru**



We are seeing positive changes from our work. For

example, this year one of the communities we are working with didn’t wait for the participatory budgeting process to get involved in local politics. A group got together and took the important step of organising a meeting for all the candidates for mayor in the local elections. They got them to commit to working with the community and sign up to a work plan including local economic development before being elected. This is a really positive sign as people are taking the initiative themselves to move things forward.

It’s a sign that things are working when you start something off, like our forum of small business people which we support, and people take it on and improve it and repeat it and use the skills they’ve learnt to organise other groups and initiatives.



**Teresa Campos, representative of Centro de Educación Comunitaria and coordinator of the Cusco Regional Educational network in Peru, of which Progressio partner organisation Pukllasunchis is a part**

We want people to participate by proposing initiatives to government, not asking the government for things. That's real participation. Our network, for example, brought constructive proposals and technical support to the discussions on the regional education plan. We weren't just keeping a seat warm in the meetings – we were really contributing.

Our aim is to promote inclusive education – there is a law that education should be inclusive but it isn't put into practice. This is why we need civil society participation at all stages – not only in decision-making, but also in carrying out, and monitoring the carrying out of, projects. It's a big success that the regional education plan has been approved, but now the work really begins. We can't just say 'oh good it's approved' and sit back and wait for it to be delivered. We have to both monitor and take part in the implementation.



**Eulogio Tapia, programme officer for Coincide's project on Strengthening Regional Institutions, Cusco, Peru**

Civil society participation is obviously important because it is a right of all citizens, but we also think it is crucial for a second reason: because it supports good governance. The decentralisation of government going on in Peru means that the way of managing our country is changing and we have a real opportunity to close the huge gap between rich and poor.

However, the process comes with an enormous risk related to governance. There are huge problems because the regional governments are made up of representatives with little support from the population and little experience. They are inefficient and ill-equipped to meet the enormous social demand for change and improvement. I'm concerned that national government is going to use all of this as an excuse to take back power, saying: 'We gave you the chance and you can't govern yourself so we will do it for you.'

For this reason civil society participation is absolutely crucial in order to legitimise the decisions of regional governments. We need people to get involved in planning, budgeting and projects so that we can achieve good governance in regional governments and really see the benefits of decentralisation of power. Only when we have strong civil society participation are we going to see the decentralisation process working effectively and benefiting the people.



**Maria do Carmo Sarmento (pictured) and Francisca Nahak, members of the women's committee of the Tibar camp for internally displaced people, Dili, Timor Leste**

**(the women's committees are an initiative of Progressio partner organisation Rede Feto, aiming to enable women to discuss issues and concerns and raise these with camp management and government officials)**

Before, we women were afraid and embarrassed to discuss issues around domestic and sexual violence. Now we regularly conduct discussions with the women in our camp and provide them with training and education on their rights as women.

This project has brought recognition for the role women can play if they are given the opportunity to become involved in the activities of the camp. For ourselves, we have learned to be confident in taking issues and concerns to the level of decision-makers. We are now actively involved in the activities of the camp, not only in the distribution of things or in listening but in decision-making and joining meetings. And it's not just us – other women have learned to speak up too.



**Benicia Polanco, participant in a workshop to empower indigenous women run by Progressio partner organisation AMUNSE, Nicaragua**

For me, power means that first of all I have to know things, to insert myself into society in order to know what the community is like and how it's developing. And I have to empower myself so that, as an indigenous woman, I can be a representative of indigenous people. My knowledge is practical, not intellectual: my empowerment has been to understand that I am an Indian, and my commitment is to tell my community that we can demand our rights.



**Luis Valles, Progressio development worker with AMUNSE (the Association of Municipalities of Nueva Segovia), Nicaragua**

Through our work, many people in Ciudad Antigua have had the chance to take part in the municipality's strategic planning process.

Participating in the process has been a profound learning experience. They have developed the ability to make a critical analysis of their situation and the interconnections between its various aspects, making it possible to find strategies to improve their living conditions and overcome extreme poverty. Through participating in the process, people feel that they are being taken into account and realise that they can make a valuable contribution to the town's development. They are developing self-confidence and self-esteem: they feel that they know much more than they thought they did, and they are gaining the ability to express themselves in front of other people without fear or embarrassment. They can see now that they can play a part in the community's development.



**Fanny Jimenez, researcher in the communications department of Progressio partner organisation CEPES (Centro Peruano de Estudios Sociales), Lima, Peru**

Since the Fujimori government in the '90s Peru has seen government policies designed to undermine grassroots organisations and destroy the fabric of civil society. Our big challenge as NGOs is to contribute to rebuilding this social fabric – to strengthen our grassroots *campesino* and civil society organisations so that they can have powerful voices and so that communities feel represented by their organisations – because at the moment they don't.

We need grassroots groups to campaign, present proposals and lobby the government. At CEPES we aim to give rural communities the information and tools that they need to do this. Our aim is to disseminate information of interest to rural communities on themes which do not appear in the mainstream media and we believe this is a powerful tool to give people the knowledge they need to participate effectively.



**Lisa Dioneda-Moalong, Progressio development worker working on capacity building with 11 local NGOs in Hodeidah, Yemen**

Sometimes there is a big gap between the ideal (in theory) and the actual participation (in practice) of people and organisations. One factor is the internal capacity of organisations to participate. This includes their readiness, openness, awareness-level and bargaining power. Thus, participation can be viewed as a process of empowerment of people and their organisations.

In Yemen the participation of people and communities with NGOs is still very minimal. Often a representative of one community where the NGO operates serves as the mouthpiece of the whole community – the only channel to articulate the needs of the whole community. So the challenge to NGOs in Yemen is to promote genuine people's participation – to become truly responsive to the needs of their communities and become genuine champions of social development.



**Ana Urrutia Enciso, Progressio development worker with SHURO-NET (the Somaliland Human Rights Network)**

The majority of the population in Somaliland are discriminated against on the basis of their identity, whether this be their sex, clan, (dis)ability, age or because they are suffering an illness.

Discrimination is embedded in law, culture and practice, and power remains in the hands of a minority. This minority is utterly unwilling to allow the participation of 'others' in the control of the country and its norms. The culture is one of 'we know what's best for them'...

Genuine participation requires all parties to take responsibility: the government must allow civil society organisations to operate freely within the legal framework established for them; civil society needs to unite in the face of interference and push for commonly established objectives that would improve the lives of Somalilanders in general; and society at large needs to take responsibility and demand accountability for unlawful acts by any stakeholder, in particular the government.

# Catalyst for action

Coming together to oppose a huge dam project has galvanised a community in Ecuador, writes Michelle Lowe

FOR MANY COMMUNITIES the concept of 'civil society participation' can seem like a luxury, or nothing more than a nice theory – until they are confronted with a situation in which their way of life and their livelihoods are in danger and they need to stand together and fight for change.

This was the case in the community of Pedro Carbo in Ecuador, where people took little interest in participating in decision-making until, in 2001, proposals for a huge dam served as the catalyst to stimulate community action and involvement.

Progressio development worker Frederic Pinel has been working in Pedro Carbo since 2001 with Pastoral Social Pedro Carbo, a social organisation linked to the Catholic church. Although his original project was supporting the local farmer's federation, the dam project got him sidetracked because, as he says, 'It was too important to ignore.'

## Individualism

Pedro Carbo, near Ecuador's biggest city Guayaquil on the Pacific coast, is a poor area with over 90% of the population living in poverty, 62.5% living in extreme poverty and 45% of children under six suffering from chronic malnutrition. Basic services are limited, with water, electricity and telephones not reaching the whole population and concerns about education being of poor quality.

According to the community themselves, promoting participation is no easy task in the area. The prevailing culture of individualism is a real obstacle to organised participation. As Eduardo Holguin, a small scale farmer in Pedro Carbo, says: 'The attitude of 'what-does-it-have-to-do-with-me' is very strong here. It used to be even more powerful – nobody wanted to work together to help each other, everyone just wanted to look out for themselves.'

When Frederic first arrived he was

shocked at people's unwillingness to work together for the common good: 'I had been working for eight years in mountain communities in Ecuador where people are used to working together. When I first arrived there was a problem and I suggested organising a *minga* (a communal working party) to sort it out. People laughed at me and said "No Frederic, we don't do that here" ...'

## Kick-start

However, the proposed dam kick-started things, says Frederic: 'It made people wake up to the need to work together. The project would have submerged 2,500 homes and some of the community's most fertile land. It would have been very negative for the community.'

The local authority initially denied the existence of the project but the Pastoral Social got hold of the plans, organised meetings and involved local representatives to discuss them. People soon saw that the dam (by providing water for irrigation) would benefit mostly big landowners growing products like melon, mangoes and onions for export, and not local small scale farmers. And even though there was compensation included in the plans for those who would lose their land, very few would have been able to claim as they do not have written titles to their land.

Father Herbert Leuthner, the parish priest and founder of the Pastoral Social, says: 'Together with local people we wrote an alternative development plan for the area. People said our plan was ridiculously optimistic but we believe you have to have hope and something to aim for.'

## Achievement

Through meetings and gathering signatures against the dam project, they succeeded in getting the local council to change its position from being in favour of the dam to being against it – and the



Frederic Pinel.

plans for the dam were rejected. It was a big success which had repercussions beyond the dam project. The movement to oppose the dam created some fledgling structures of participation which the Pastoral Social and Frederic have been working to maintain and strengthen.

Part of Frederic's role has involved supporting a civic committee which grew out of the group which emerged to lobby against the dam. It aims to promote positive changes for the local population and its strategic development plan – constructed through workshops with community leaders and participatory community analyses – is now being implemented in the area.

Frederic says: 'It's a real achievement because it isn't a plan that belongs to the council or to organisations. It belongs to the community and its citizens in both rural and urban areas – to women, children and men. It is a tool so that they can work together with the authorities.'

Frederic's post as a development worker ended in December 2007 but he plans to continue living in the community and supporting the Pastoral Social and the local organisations. He says: 'Some days, you wonder if you will ever achieve anything at all. But other times, at the end of the day, you can think: "I really achieved something today".'

*Michelle Lowe is a Progressio development worker, working on advocacy and communications in Peru and Ecuador.*



Oihane de Gana/Progressio

Children playing in the village of Paruro, near Cusco, Peru.

incorporated into our institutional position on different themes.

### Teamwork

Similarly, there can be no consensual participation without teamwork. As a development worker, I feel that I have an external viewpoint, based on my own experience and previous work. Being able to share this with the Pukllasunchis team allows us to understand each other (which is not always easy), involve oneself more in the work, and allows different opinions to come together in a common and shared language, which allows us to construct a shared position.

For effective participation we must also give priority to the spaces in which we can contribute. We are putting our effort into participating actively in, and strengthening, spaces such as the Cusco Regional Education Network, made up of 32 social organisations and other individuals who seek to advocate for and contribute to the construction of education policies through different approaches (community education, bilingual intercultural education, etc). We also engage with the Regional Participative Council on Education, where civil society and the state participate in devising and monitoring guidelines for educational policies for the region; and the Coordinating Body for the Rights of the Child, made up of six NGOs which advocate for the fulfilment of the rights of the child, among those, the right to education.

All this has allowed us to be part of what we consider to be great achievements in improving regional education, such as the setting up and implementation of the Regional Education Project; the strengthening of the Regional Education Network as a space for reflection and advocacy on educational issues; and the construction and implementation of a national programme for the improvement of rural education in conjunction with eight Peruvian and three Dutch institutions.

All this reflects the fresh air that I spoke about at the beginning... For me, participating is being part of a team, having a voice, sharing, but above all, it is listening, understanding each other and building something together.

*Oihane de Gana is a Progressio development worker with Pukllasunchis.*

# A breath of fresh air

**Inclusive education is best achieved when citizens are involved in creating the education policies they want, writes Oihane de Gana**

**A** BREATH OF FRESH AIR... That's how I describe my work on the Citizen Participation and Advocacy project of the Pukllasunchis Association in Cusco, Peru. I say fresh air because sharing, working collectively, participating in order to reach consensus, creating a common language with multiple actors (fathers and mothers, students, teachers, authorities, NGOs, etc) on the future of education – all of it gives me this feeling.

The Pukllasunchis Association has been working for 26 years on a fresh and innovative approach to education, with the aim of improving the quality of regional and national education. When in 2003 the Peruvian government began a decentralisation process, Pukllasunchis made sure it was a player in regional reflections and discussions about the direction of education policies. And so the Citizen Participation and Advocacy project was born.

### Communication

In the four years since then, the project has helped to crystallise how we in Pukllasunchis understand citizen participation. Pukllasunchis has become a regional reference point for educational issues (intercultural bilingual education, inclusive education, etc) and therefore, an actor with its own voice

and a key participant in the creation of guidelines for public policies related to education, particularly in the Cusco region. However, Pukllasunchis is not the only actor in this process, and is also committed to working with and through existing networks.

Pukllasunchis' approach to participation involves contributing proposals informed by its experience and knowledge. In doing this, it is committed to consensual and dialogue-based participation. Information that is in the education sphere must be shared (for example, the fact that the only test for evaluation of primary school children in a multicultural and multilingual country like Peru is in Spanish) so that debate can be generated which enriches our position on the themes on which we work (interculturality and bilingualism, for example).

There can be no consensual participation without communication, be it through email, virtual forums or monthly meetings. Only by ensuring communication can we show that our participation is sincere and not for public relations. We remain conscious of the need to continue to strengthen the intercommunication between the different Pukllasunchis projects, so that all contributions and reflections are



# Hearts and minds

Getting people to 'acknowledge their own value' is a key step in promoting people's development, writes Progressio development worker **Andrea Calvi**

**I**'VE ACKNOWLEDGED MY OWN VALUE, and how much I can contribute to social change, breaking the silence.' So said a participant in one of the workshops run by Centro Antonio Valdivieso (CAV – the Fray Antonio de Valdivieso Ecumenical Centre) in Nicaragua, highlighting a key component of CAV's approach to leadership training.

Yet many local organisations which say they wish to promote development often lack clear ideas about how to achieve that development. Instead many of them merely apply the judgements and opinions expressed by international funding bodies. Social interventions often do no more than fulfil prescriptions handed out by foreign 'experts' who have a limited and vague knowledge of local conditions and arrogantly consider local knowledge unworthy of consideration. The organisations that claim to promote development are often victims of the dreadful disease of 'projectitis', which leads to a form of uncontrolled activism unaccompanied by critical thinking about what they are actually doing.

## Overcoming apathy

In contrast, at CAV we ask ourselves: How are we to promote participation on the part of civil society if people at large carry the burden of traumas and unresolved personal difficulties that prevent their having clear goals of their own and condemn them to apathy? – and all the more so if the people who claim to be 'promoting participation' are themselves immersed in those conditions? How are we to promote a proactive and combative civil society – how are we to promote community development – if the people who make up the community are unable to achieve their own personal development?

Projects may be able to bring some improvement in people's physical conditions. But are these improvements sustainable if people are not in a position to benefit from them, or to use them to

advance their personal and social development? Traumas and painful situations that are not worked through put enormous obstacles in people's way. They are fragmented, unable to set themselves goals, stuck in a short-term, 'every man for himself' frame of mind. In other words, they make no progress in personal development, not to speak of community development. How, then, are we to promote participation by civil society in these conditions? How effective an impact can we have on government policy in these circumstances?

## Discovering pathways

With these concerns in mind, the CAV team believes it is of fundamental importance to put the person at the centre of development. That was the starting-point for the work with a psychosocial focus that CAV has been developing over the past eight years: because psychosocial work can help people to recover from traumas, overcome obstacles and difficulties, escape from difficult personal situations, and improve their self-esteem.

But the psychosocial approach is not simply that. For the individual it means fuller knowledge of oneself, one's family history, and the things that have happened to one. It leads one to re-evaluate one's experiences, to change attitudes and beliefs, to value the different levels of the person (mind, body, spirit, feelings). And it leads to greater commitment and responsibility to oneself. Psychosocial work seeks to help people discover their own pathways, and as a result to direct themselves in achieving their personal development and promoting that of the community.

## Transforming lives

The promotion of transformative leadership must also address the issue at the interpersonal, organisational and cultural levels. Hence, last year, CAV reformulated its training programme to



Andrea Calvi.

focus on cross-cutting themes suggested by the people we work with themselves: promoting social mobilisation (in Chinandega) and strengthening organisation and building active citizenship (in Malpaisillo).

Using the psychosocial model, various topics were worked on in the past six months relating to these themes, such as: how can we promote social mobilisation if in the first place we are not in good shape ourselves, but are loaded down with a mass of things, are ill, and so on? How can we improve the way our organisation functions and become active citizens if we are embroiled in our own problems and reacting on the basis of our wounds, and are not trying to achieve our dreams and our aims?

That is how we worked, and one of the testimonies recorded at the last workshop in Chinandega and Malpaisillo may give an idea of the progress made: 'Before, I was afraid to put my ideas forward, and I didn't take any initiatives. Now I set myself goals, and achieve them.'

*Andrea Calvi is a Progressio development worker. He is from Italy.*

**K**HADIJA HASSAN HUSSEIN of Sheikh District in Berbera region is employed by the Ministry of Local Government. She has worked there for the last 20 years as an accountant – so she has long experience of how frustrating it is to be a woman working in a government ministry. Promotions and recognition of effort rarely come women's way, and because of that they remain in the same positions, mostly at lower echelons, until they retire or seek alternative employment elsewhere.

Khadija has however started to challenge this situation, with the support of her fellow co-workers, especially the women. She knows it will be difficult for change to be effected but she reckons someone has to start agitating for change – and she is willing to be that person.

### A taste for politics

Khadija has another passion beyond her work: she is a member of the NAGAAD regional political forum in Berbera (NAGAAD is a women's umbrella organisation that is seeking to promote more involvement by women in decision-making in Somaliland). Khadija is also a member of the ruling party, with a personal interest in and commitment to community development, especially health initiatives.

Khadija has been able to gain the support of the traditional clan elders in her area for her initiatives. Most of these elders are low income earners. She therefore gives them incentives to keep them on board. 'We strike a deal with them,' she says. 'They accompany me during the awareness campaigns and talk to the people. In turn, I buy them some *khat* to enjoy during their chewing sessions...'

'The reality is that *khat* is not about to be done away with in Somaliland, and most of the decisions that affect women are reached during *khat* chewing sessions. It only makes sense to use it as an incentive.'

### Ambition to succeed

During her rounds, she collects concerns from community members and feedback for the local authorities. She also incorporates into her health promotion initiatives the message of political participation from NAGAAD's Women in Decision-Making Project.

*Women attending a NAGAAD workshop.*

# A head for heights

Khadija Hassan Hussein is leading the way in seeking a higher profile for women in decision-making roles in Somaliland, writes **Wairimu Munyinyi**

And she can already feel the support of her community growing. She is interested in competitive politics and some of the elders have already proposed that she would perform better as the mayor of Sheikh. She is not taking the compliment lightly. Come July 2008, should the planned local government elections be held, she will be contesting for the seat of mayor of Sheikh.

How does Khadija hope to win the support of the community during the elections? 'I tell them that as a woman, I do not belong to any clan, therefore I am not seeking to be elected in order to perpetuate the needs of one clan to the detriment of another. They should support me based on the achievements I have made so far, and thereafter wait for the changes that will come about as a result of my work.'

She attributes her strategy to the leadership skills training that NAGAAD, through its Progressio development worker, has conducted in the regions. Women were asked to propagate leaders who are committed to service delivery to all members of the community regardless of clan. Women were also urged to rise above party differences when it comes

to political participation and support each other across the board.

As of now, Khadija is the only woman candidate who has expressed interest in a mayoral position in Somaliland. NAGAAD has already identified her as one of the beneficiaries to receive mentoring and support from the organisation in the coming elections. The NAGAAD political forum in Berbera has already started door-to-door informal campaigns to lobby for her support in Sheikh. The next step is for Khadija to get endorsement from the ruling party, of which she is a member, for the seat. Then, come elections in 2008, Somaliland can hopefully boast of electing the first female mayor – and in a rural setting for that matter!

*Wairimu Munyinyi is a Progressio development worker with NAGAAD in Somaliland.*



Wairimu Munyinyi/Progressio

**S**HARING MOMENTS with Yemeni women in the organisations I'm working with, both the younger women and newcomers as well the older ones, made me reflect on how I grew up in the women's movement in my country, the Philippines, in the last fourteen years that I was there. In our time together, I always tried to capture the 'women bonding' moments I had been used to in my own country and women's group – such as when I hear the Yemenis call me *habouba* (loveable), *maskina* (kind/gentle), and other words only the Arabs are known to be for their 'sweet' mouths.

At the superficial level, women come together in their own world, the women's world where they take off their veils, *hiqabs* and coverings to reveal their faces. But doing this does not necessarily mean they unveil also their inner selves to the 'foreigner' even if she happens to be a woman and a sister.

### **I keep on asking myself, 'Even Islam cannot pierce through the barriers?'**

It would take a great deal of people skills and empathy to really pierce through the Yemeni woman's psyche. I happened to work with women translators, women NGO managers, and ordinary staff and volunteers. Some became friends and close to me. The younger ones are more open in their thoughts, more inquisitive and more idealistic in their views in life. The more mature and educated ones are also becoming non-traditional in their views about marriage and family and the role of the woman in it.

At this level of interaction, I tried to engage the women's capacity for sisterhood. I asked myself, is this going to be the breakthrough I can seize for future cooperation and network building among civil society organisations in Hodeidah? To my great disappointment, the more 'political' women were more wary of such an idea. 'Yes, we believe in sisterhood but only within our group,' they would say.

This reminds me of a line I often hear from friends back home: 'politics in command'. The more partisan the women are, the harder it is for them to break barriers and build trust and

# Natural leaders

**Progressio development worker Lisa Dioneda-Moalong sees Yemeni women beginning to explore their capacity for leadership**

David Tanner/Progressio



*Women taking part in a training course.*

cooperation with other women in other NGOs. The same is true for men. However, men are more clever in playing politics, often disguising their agenda in the form of collaboration and open praise for the status quo – sometimes to the point where it is hard to delineate pragmatism from the plain and simple selling of political principles (if indeed they ever had them).

I keep on asking myself, 'Even Islam cannot pierce through the barriers?' Then, one day, I received an email from a friend talking about Islamic sisterhood. 'This is it,' I said to myself. 'This is how it should be.' So many questions on my mind.... Why do these women view other women as competitors? Why do they put so much emphasis on common activities like make-up and enhancing their physical beauty? Of course, to be a woman advocate one need not be grim and determined. But surely, there are

more strategic issues that these women should put their energies into?

I finally said to myself, Islam is one thing, and Arab tradition is another. The

### **'We are so concerned about the *Ayib* (shame) that we forget what is *haram* (forbidden)'**

challenge now is for these women to clear the confusion. I hear the young ones saying: 'We are so concerned about the *Ayib* (shame) that we forget what is *haram* (forbidden).' Maybe there is hope among the younger generation after all.

*Lisa Dioneda-Moalong is a Progressio development worker, working on capacity building with 11 local NGOs in Hodeidah, Yemen.*



Graham Freer/Progressio

*Maria Rosa Alayza at the Progressio AGM in December.*

# Signs of hope

**Maria Rosa Alayza explains how the message of ‘the option for the poor’ inspired her, and can inspire us all**

**B**ELONG TO A GROUP OF PEOPLE who, in the 1970s in Peru, had an opportunity as young university students to undertake a way of life which was illuminated by the option for the poor. We lived in a society in which there were many injustices, and the 1968 Bishops Conference at Medellín challenged us to question this reality. The question is a valid one for every Christian in the world no matter where they live. We have to ask ourselves: what am I doing to respond to the poor?

**The faith experience represents a vital centre of my life, and through it I asked: What is God saying through the poor?**

In the 1970s, I asked myself: How to be Christian in the middle of so much injustice? I felt the necessity to respond both personally and as a member of a group. My first step was to leave my home and my family to get to know poor people personally. In a society so divided as the one in Peru, this implied a series of breaking of ties with circles of family and friends. Along this road I

chose a number of options both professionally and in my way of life which I shared with a faith community.

Each step had its own intensity and questions, but the important thing is that our faith influenced the way we asked questions about life. How to be a professional? How to educate our children? What is the meaning of friendship? These questions helped us to analyse the historical context of our lives, which also influenced our decisions. This helped us to try to be coherent in our personal actions and also, to understand what was happening in the lives of the poor at each moment. The faith experience represents a vital centre of my life, and through it I asked: What is God saying through the poor?

We were never, nor do we hope to be, super heroes. We simply had the opportunity to be educated in the option for the poor as a Christian way of life. It is a strong option for hope that comes from a God of life.

When I look back on the years of our work I am reminded of a phrase Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the founders of the Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas, used when we celebrated 30 years as an Institute in 2004: ‘Hope does not come

from Mars in a parachute, we have to create it.’

We live our Christian faith in the midst of the denial of life for the weak. They are not even considered human, by those in power, those who are corrupt or by the many that are indifferent. The poor are there but we do not see them nor take them seriously. It is important therefore to be aware of and care for the seeds of life, which we find in the many actions and initiatives that we see in people like ourselves. Many of them live in the world of the poor while others do not. We offer all a place of reflection and debate on the huge problems of the country so that we can make connections with one another, with organisations and the processes in which the poor are struggling for life.

There are many reasons that make us lose hope. The mood of the moment is not to be thinking of different social projects or of big changes: the opposite in fact. Individualism, consumerism, and the idea to protect yourself if you can, makes sense for many people. We are dominated by the great powers who decide the direction of our country, including the political system.

In this context, we have learned that our role consists in communicating our

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worries and doubts to the rest of society and at the same time highlighting the many signs of life, reinforcing the positive things that are happening in the world. We have to accept that we are a small group, and at times weak, but I believe that the people with whom we work and those we are in contact with represent signs of hope.

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