
Panama: The experience of Apaquiset in community-based resource management

Bordering with the Republic of Colombia, the Province of Darien is located at the extreme East of the Republic of Panama and is one of the areas in the Central American Isthmus with the greatest biodiversity. However, at present it is undergoing resource destruction at a fast pace.

The region is inhabited by peoples of four ethnic groups: Afro-Colombians, Embera-Wounan indigenous people, Darienite peasants and settlers from other regions of the country --landless peasants seeking to improve their living conditions.

The Chepigana Forest Reserve, established in 1960, is located in the Southeastern part of the Province of Darien, within the districts of Chepigana and Cemaco (Embera-Wounan Region). It covers an area of approximately 316,840 hectares, with a forest extension of some 75,000 hectares and is considered a major source of forest resources, medicinal plants, water resources, fauna and flora. It also plays an important role in protecting species of fauna and flora in danger of extinction.

In 1994, the law authorising the government to carry out a new demarcation was promulgated. This demarcation was to exclude the land devoted to agriculture and livestock exploitation. In 1996 the Association of Agro-Forestry Producers of Quintin and Seteganti --Apaquiset-- was created by small producers from these communities. One of its main objectives at the time was to achieve a new demarcation of the Forest Reserve, excluding the lands devoted to agriculture and stock-raising where their members live, and to develop activities aimed at reconciling the need to produce with that of managing and preserving, seeking new production alternatives for their lands.

Apaquiset promoted sustainable production practices among its members, endeavouring that traditional agriculture and stock-raising be done in such a way as to cause the least damage possible to the natural resources of the Reserve. The Association developed a series of information and advisory activities in the communities involved, with the aim of giving a clear idea of the action to be undertaken to all the people concerned, promoting the creation of a Joint Commission that would include the institutional representatives involved, political authorities and representatives of organised groups and two members of Apaquiset. All this was done to achieve an active participation in the new demarcation of the Forest Reserve in which they live.

After a lengthy series of negotiations, an agreement was achieved with institutions, authorities and the community to define the limits of the new demarcation and the exclusion of agricultural areas. At all events, the group considered that the process had not ended with this achievement, but rather that the struggle had just started, and therefore prepared a strategy for political management to continue with the process and achieve a more adequate management of agricultural and forest areas. A new round of consultations and negotiations was held with the local and institutional leaders to transmit information on progress in the demarcation process, and to put forth the ideas aiming at building up a joint proposal with the indigenous groups, settlers and Afro-descendants, to achieve sustainable community-based management of the area, maintaining it as a Forest Reserve, once the agricultural lands had been excluded.

As a result of the local process, presently steps are being taken towards the establishment of an organisation that will gather Apaquiset and members of all the groups and communities living in the hinterland of the Chepigana Forest Reserve. This will make it possible to set up a broad organisational structure --representing all the communities-- to have access to community resources affected by the establishment of the Reserve and to strengthen their negotiating abilities in seeking real mechanisms for co-management of the natural resources it contains.

On starting this process, various challenges arose: the scant training in technical and political issues regarding co-management and the responsible government bodies' lack of clarity regarding a future vision of the protected area intended for co-management; the identification of forest management experiences and development of productive activities in the hands of peasant groups to exchange with the Apaquiset members; the investment of time, energy and money to generate the basic conditions to enable people to see the benefits of a forest management system in forest areas outside their farms devoted to agriculture; the investment in an awareness, information and training process to empower the group, enabling it to implement and propose other possibilities of work and management; the identification and implementation of concrete mechanisms, in common agreement with other local groups involved and with the relevant government authorities; the conservation of water sources and work in reforestation, grassland management and better agricultural practices, making adequate use of the resources without depleting them.

The members of Apaquiset consider that there is a lot to be learnt from their experience and especially from "doing" as they have done. The "source" where decisions are taken, should always be sought, and it must be approached to convince it to take decisions that the group considers to be advisable and that favour it. Patience and tenacity is required to share information with all those involved, creating conditions of confidence that make it possible to have access --through basic agreements with the various inhabitants and resource users-- to the responsible national authorities and to attempt influencing them in their decision making.

Sharing these lessons learnt by the Apaquiset members is an attempt to support those who are about to launch themselves in the experience of community-based management, a process that must be seen as long term, but where joint goals must keep the members of the community united, supporting each other throughout the efforts.

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