

Cheese versus poverty

Smallholder communities in the Bolivian highlands have managed to conquer hunger: cheese production offers great hope to the people of the Peñas Valley. Cheese provides healthy nourishment for their children, generates additional income for families, and stimulates the local economy. Education is a decisive factor.

Although the sun still hasn't topped the four and a half thousand metre high peak in the east, Maura Choque is already out in back of the barn, milking her five dairy cows. „They are still too aboriginal,“ says the small farmer as the milk squirts into a plastic jug. „They only produce five to ten litres a day. That's not enough. I plan to sell them and replace them with better dairy cows once we have built the feeder, waterer and the milking parlour.“

Maura Choque, 37 years old, married, mother of five, is the spokesperson for the cheese trade in a dairy cattle project for combating poverty run by Welthungerhilfe. The Quechua woman lives in the remote Peñas Valley, near the mining town of Oruro. The highland valley is one of Bolivia's poorest and most disadvantaged regions. 450 small farm families in 24 impoverished hamlets struggle to eke out a living from day to day. In an effort to alleviate the extreme poverty and malnourishment in the Peñas Valley, Welthungerhilfe introduced dairy cattle production to the region in February 2002.

■ Holstein cows at an altitude of 4,000 metres

„This region has excellent potential for dairy cattle,“ says Ramiro Terrazas, an agricultural engineer with

the Bolivian partner organisation AIPE (Asociación de Instituciones de Promoción y Educación). Indigenous small farm families have traditionally grown potatoes, barley, oats, lima beans and quinoa for their own use. Raising sheep provided essential proteins and was an additional source of income. But this has been far from enough to subsist on for some time. Crop production is extremely difficult at an altitude of 4,000 metres. Climatic fluctuations, droughts and frost have severe impacts on yields. The soil is badly eroded. Hence the men earn their incomes as day labourers in the mines, in construction, or as musicians in the famous bands of Oruro. The women and children stay home and take care of the house and the farm. In the past the indigenous smallholders kept one or two cows as a nest egg. Nowadays the average is five milk cows per family.

„We have started crossbreeding the cattle,“ explains Ramiro Terrazas, who is in charge of the industrialisation and marketing of the products. „The percentage of Holstein blood is increasing and consequently production is also on the rise. The quality of the milk is improving thanks to the building of animal housing, storage rooms, and cheese dairies, as well as the growing of lucerne.“ The agricultural engineer introduced last year's prize cow. The black-and-white beauty produces 23 litres per day. Her owner sells the milk to a factory for 1.60 Bolivianos (14 euro cents) per litre. He earns more than eight euros with the 60 litres that his cows produce daily.

Twice a week, Doña Maura makes the six-hour bus journey to Oruro, where she sells her cheese at the town's market.



Photo: M. Kottmeier

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■ Added value through processing

In order to achieve added value for the population, however, the raw milk needs to be processed as much as possible and the products need to be marketed. In numerous seminars, small farmers learned the principles of modern dairy cattle production and processing, farm management and healthy nutrition. They are gradually upgrading their cattle by crossing them with better dairy breeds, producing a higher quality cheese than that of their competitors in their simple dairy farms which they built themselves, and selling it on the market and to local schools and businesses. Doña Maura produces between ten to twenty 200-gram fresh cheese cakes daily herself, in addition to what she buys from ten local suppliers. Twice a week she sells around 450 cakes each time at the Oruro market. She charges three Bolivianos per cake, just under 30 euro cents. „That’s not much,“ she replies with a smile, „but I earn a living from my cheese.“

Doña Maura and the other small farmers reinvest the money in their farms. They build animal housing and product storage rooms. They have since learned that an udder in housing produces 18 percent more milk than an udder on pasture – it is warmer, and the milking stands and feed and water troughs are more hygienic. And when the cows are fed lucerne rather than grass, the quantity and quality – and hence the sales price – of the milk

Maura Choque makes ten to twenty wheels of cheese every day.

increases many times over. Poverty has thus substantially declined in the last five years. The average family income has more than tripled to 1,200 US dollars a year. In order to pool their labour resources and ideas, the farm families have formed a producers’ cooperative where they develop strategies for marketing their dairy products.

■ A healthy breakfast stimulates the local economy

After a successful meal plan pilot project in the Peñas secondary school, five families now earn their livings producing and selling nutritious, protein-rich meals. In their own businesses, they prepare 400 servings daily and deliver them to the eight schools in the expansive community. The district administration pays for the meals. „Malnutrition is the worst problem in the region,“ explains Matilde Tastaca, school principal in the municipal district of Pazña, of which the Peñas Valley is a part. „A well-nourished student is the prerequisite for a good education. Only then can a just and democratic society free of hunger arise.“ With a 63 percent poverty rate, however, Bolivia still has a long way to go. Eight out of ten rural Bolivians are living in poverty. Only a very few Peñas Valley residents have drinking water, electricity and toilets.



Photo: M. Kottmeier

The small farmers are optimistic. Their producers’ cooperative is currently involved in negotiations with the local mining company, which runs its own schools, to build a milk factory and for the contractual delivery of 800 to 900 litres of milk per day for their school meal programme. If the factory goes into operation and the milk is picked up by truck, if the school meal programme is expanded and if the municipal administration provides drinking and industrial water, the quality of life of the 450 families will improve overnight. Doña Maura is full of confidence: „I will then be able to produce all of the kinds of cheese I learned about in the seminars.“ And in her mind she is already envisioning her colourful cheese stand at the Oruro market: „Spring Cheese, Mozzarella, Pecorino...“

Zusammenfassung

Durch die Einführung moderner Milchviehhaltung haben 450 verarmte Kleinbauernfamilien im bolivianischen Hochland ihren Lebensstandard deutlich verbessern können. Vor sieben Jahren hat die Welthungerhilfe die ersten Milchkühe in das hoch gelegene Peñas-Tal in der Nähe der Bergbaustadt Oruro gebracht. Seitdem entwickelt sich die verstreute Gemeinde stetig weiter. Die benachteiligten Quechua-Familien lernen in zahlreichen Seminaren die Grundlagen der Viehhaltung,

Bodenbearbeitung, Weiterverarbeitung und Betriebswirtschaft. Um ihre Produkte besser vermarkten zu können, haben sie sich in einem Produzentenverband zusammengeschlossen.

Resumen

Mediante la introducción de una crianza moderna de ganado vacuno lechero, 450 familias empobrecidas de pequeños campesinos del altiplano boliviano lograron mejorar notablemente su nivel de vida. Hace siete años, la Agro Acción Alemana

(Welthungerhilfe) llevó a las primeras vacas lecheras al valle de Peñas, situado a gran altitud en las cercanías de la ciudad minera de Oruro. Desde entonces, esta comunidad dispersa ha logrado un continuo desarrollo. Estas familias quechuas desfavorecidas han asistido ya a numerosos seminarios para aprender las bases de la crianza de ganado, el tratamiento de suelos, el procesamiento y la administración de empresas. A fin de poder comercializar mejor sus productos, se han unido en una asociación de productores.