

Decolonising action-research: the Potato Park biocultural protocol for benefit-sharing

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Introduction

This article describes the process of developing the Potato Park biocultural community protocol (BCP) for equitable benefit-sharing: an innovative action-research approach, which was led and shaped by indigenous Quechua communities in Peru. It was a process of empowerment for the communities and their institutions, enabling effective control of decision-making, particularly in defining the content of the BCP. While this process was carried out throughout the three-year project period, the development of the protocol itself took approximately 15 months.¹

Background

The Potato Park in Cusco, Peru was established by six Quechua communities in

2002, with support from ANDES and IIED. The park currently incorporates the communal land of the Amaru, Chawaytire, Pampallaqta, Paru Paru and Sacaca communities, covering a total area of 8240 hectares, with over 6000 residents.

This area of the Andes is a known micro-centre of origin and diversity of the potato. The park serves as a genetic reserve, with 700 local cultivars, 410 varieties repatriated from the International Potato Centre (CIP), and another 151 being preserved for communities in Ayacucho and Apurimac. In addition, many native Andean crops and medicinal plants grow in the area.

The Association of Communities of the Potato Park (the Association) governs the park based on Andean values, customary laws and practices. Elected members from

¹The process was part of an IIED-led project whose aim was to assist indigenous and local communities to protect their rights over their biocultural heritage in accordance with their customary laws and practices. It sought to identify new alternatives to ABS that promoted ecological sustainability and resilience and that economically benefitted the poor. The project took place in five countries – Peru, India, China, Kenya and Panama – between 2005 and 2009. It was funded by the International Development Research Centre and the Christensen Fund.

²Asociación ANDES is an indigenous NGO whose activities are focused on alleviating poverty by developing and disseminating alternative models for community-led management of biodiversity and landscapes.



A traditional Andean farmer, Potato Park, PISAQ, Peru.

each community comprise the Board of Directors. Various economic collectives, based on the conservation and sustainable use of biocultural heritage, contribute to the livelihoods and development of the park.

Methodology

ANDES understands that knowledge comes from a variety of ways of knowing, and that any single perspective or approach is laden with assumptions, blindnesses and limitations. This action-research project began with a methodological orientation that combined the complimentary

Box 1: Methodological approaches

Participatory methodologies: involve relevant stakeholders in the decision-making processes and actions/activities that affect their lives.

Emancipatory/decolonisation methodologies: these begin with critiques of colonial relations in past research involving indigenous peoples, and highlight some methodological considerations for carrying out such research. The aim is to 'ensure that research with indigenous peoples can be more respectful, ethical, sympathetic and useful'. It is based on developing relationships and following community protocols, and explicitly addresses issues of power and rights.

Indigenous methodologies: rooted in indigenous cosmologies, conceptual frameworks and ways of life.

Source: Smith (1999).

approaches of participatory, emancipatory/decolonising and indigenous methodologies (Box 1). The methodologies for the project were designed and implemented collaboratively with indigenous community partners. An explicit focus on decolonising approaches to access and benefit-sharing was incorporated, where traditional cultural beliefs, practices and ways of learning in Quechua communities were valued and asserted in the research as a way of resisting dominant discourses. The methodology sought to place control of actions and decisions that affect their lives in the hands of indigenous peoples themselves: from how problems and actions are conceptualised to how actions are taken and by whom.

The collaborative methodology design began with the process of free, prior informed consent (FPIC). This was especially important as the scope and framework for the investigation had already been pre-defined by the overarching project. ANDES staff and local researchers carried out consultations in village assemblies and focus group meetings with indigenous community members to re-interpret this framework from the perspective and needs of the community members. The objectives of the project became to:

- identify Quechua customary laws that govern access to and benefit-sharing of traditional resources and knowledge according to the holistic concept of collective biocultural heritage; and
- apply these norms in equitable ABS models with the aim of asserting the rights of indigenous peoples over their collective biocultural heritage at local, national and international levels.

The development of an appropriate methodology for the action-research was based on the following requirements:

- the methodology is oriented towards meeting the needs of the communities and contributing to their development;
- it uses flexible methods to collect and vali-

date scientific information and traditional knowledge, and link these two knowledge systems; and

- indigenous researchers act as a bridge between western and indigenous knowledge systems.

Capacity building for local indigenous researchers was an important part of the process, since the research tools had to be in the hands of trained indigenous peoples – for their own ends and in harmony with their own cosmovision and traditional cultural approaches to knowledge – learning, dialogue and decision-making.

Research phases

For planning and implementation purposes, the research was broken into three phases.

Phase 1: Identifying community norms and customary laws on benefit-sharing

The main objective of the initial phase was to identify and document customary laws and the underlying principles that relate to access to biocultural resources and the equitable distribution of benefits within the Potato Park. ANDES also trained 14 indigenous researchers (seven women, seven men), who represented the six communities of the Potato Park. They were chosen by their community assemblies, based on community criteria such as knowledge of customary laws and practices related to biocultural resources, and leadership experience. They learnt how to carry out research through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, study groups, participant observation, data analysis and the recording and filming of activities. They played a leading role in the design of the research and in its facilitation through study groups.

We used the following approaches in this phase:

- **Literature review** of customary Quechua laws and norms to identify potential principles and practices relevant to the investigation.

Box 2: Study groups

Study groups have been a key approach used throughout ANDES work with the Potato Park communities. Their objective is to systematically gather and analyse existing local knowledge and to generate new knowledge through dialogue. These groups are defined territorially. Meetings take place in convenient locations such as traditional family and group meeting spaces in the evenings. They employ a variety of appropriate tools and techniques such as participant observation, video documentation, interviews, narratives, informal conversations, focus groups, surveys and questionnaires. During the BCP process there were six main study groups (one for each of the park's communities) of between eight and 15 people, depending on community size, including a mix of traditional authorities, adults, elders and youth of both sexes.

- **Thematic working groups** which identified key themes to be addressed. Discussions focused on the principles and practices identified in the literature review such as *voluntad* (willingness), *ayni* (mutual assistance) and *minka* (exchange of labour), where equity in distribution of benefits/goods is a function of the equitable distribution of work. These groups provided important capacity-building for researchers, especially in relation to integration of traditional knowledge (TK) and indigenous concepts and approaches.

- **Study groups** held in-depth discussions on themes identified in the thematic working groups. Participants identified principles derived from customary law relevant to the context of access to biological and genetic resources, associated knowledge and benefit-sharing. The study groups also created capacity among community members and provided valuable input into the project research on indigenous concepts (Box 2).

- **Participant observation** was an important approach to research on customary laws because the customary laws of Quechua people are not written down, but embodied in everyday actions. Customary laws influence benefit-sharing in terms of the distribution of seeds, agricultural work,

Box 3: Customary laws related to access and benefit-sharing

Reciprocity (*Ayninakuy*): what is received must be paid back in equal measure. All of the elements of nature, including human beings, give and receive, contributing to the common good and harmony of the world. *Ayni* is the mechanism by which the principle of reciprocity finds expression; therefore *ayni*, defined as mutual assistance, can be applied both to people and to elements of nature. This principle can be seen in seed exchanges among the communities and in the distribution of agricultural work.

Duality (*Yanantin*): the cosmos is divided into two opposite but complementary halves. This can be seen in the division of labour between men and women (which, while differentiated, does not denote superiority or subservience, but mutual interdependence); or between rights and obligations, both of which should be met to achieve harmony and maintain equilibrium. This principle can be found in the transmission of knowledge related to agricultural practices, where the roles of women and men complement each other.

Equilibrium (*Rakinakuy*): refers to proportion and harmony with nature (Pachamama, Mother Earth), the sacred world, and among community members – for example, respect for nature and mountain gods, and the resolution of conflicts to restore social harmony and complementarity (including between ecological niches). Equilibrium needs to be observed in the application of customary laws. This principle is related to a fair and proportionate distribution of profits in relation to needs, capabilities, responsibilities, contributions and efforts. This criterion also features in conflict resolution and decision-making, ensuring the impartiality of all actors.

the use and inheritance of land, and the transmission of knowledge at the individual, communal, regional and generational levels.

These approaches led to the identification of three Andean principles – reciprocity, duality and equilibrium – that underpin the practices of administering traditional resources (Box 3). These principles and other community inputs were then put into practice in the creation of a draft inter-community biocultural protocol.

The drafting process identified the common interests of the communities, the

Photos: Khanh Tran-Thanh



A women's collective produce traditional arts and crafts made from local materials and sell them at the Centro de Interpretación.



Scenic landscape. Potato Park, Písaq, Peru.

objectives and the scope of the protocol based on customary laws and practices. These were used to establish conflict resolution mechanisms and identify mechanisms for sharing information and benefits. For example, institutions

normally involved in conflict resolution at the community level are integrated into these processes. Also, rules around reciprocity are applied to the sharing of knowledge and seed exchanges through barter systems. These mechanisms help to



Photo: Khanh Tran-Thanh

Centro de Interpretación in the Potato Park. The Potato Park is located in a region that is the centre of origin to over 4000 varieties of potatoes. The Centro de Interpretación also functions as a research centre for the continued cultivation of potato varieties.

ensure access by women and other poor social groups to food security and nutrition. The result was the transformation of the draft writing process into an indigenous methodology for the project and the production of a draft protocol based on the Quechua customary law and principles of the communities of the Potato Park.

Phase 2: Consultation, discussion, revision and negotiation of the inter-community agreement

In this stage, the main objective was to expand community participation and control in the BCP development process. A broad-based consultation and negotiation process was initiated throughout the park, involving local authorities and community members in discussions concerning each of the proposed articles in the draft BCP and the options for implementing them.

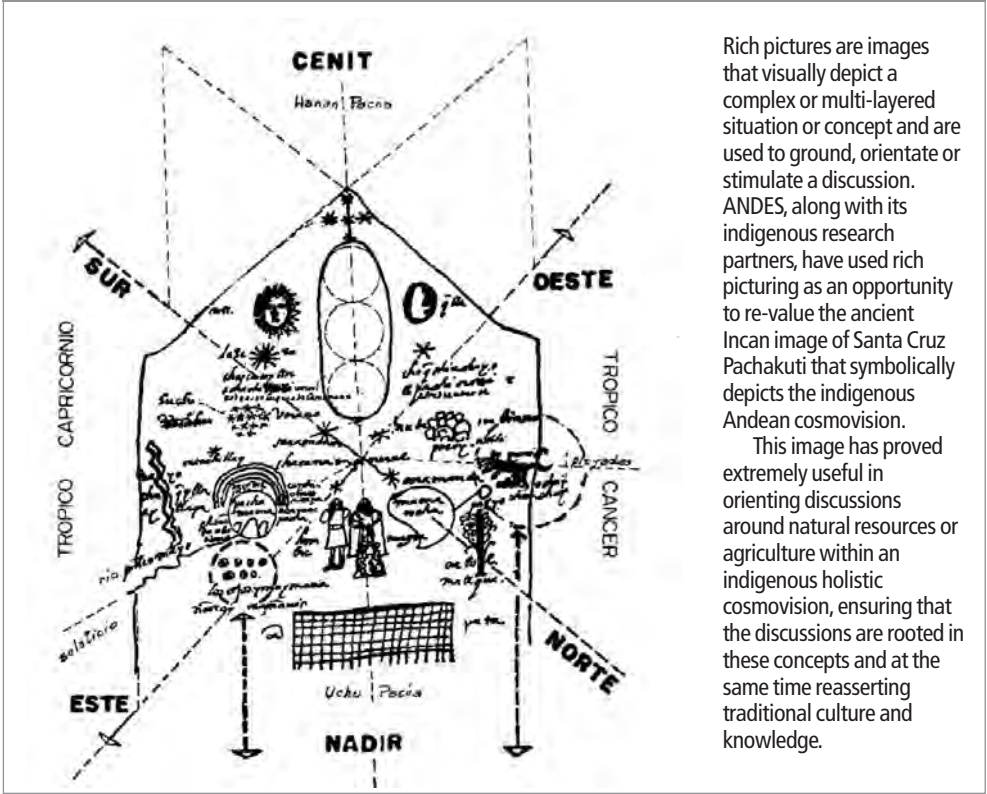
These discussions were also used to collect and incorporate community members' doubts, questions, observations and suggestions regarding the draft and how to improve and strengthen the document.

Participatory methodologies played an important role, particularly in identifying participants to be involved in the consultation and negotiation process. ANDES and park researchers used the Social Analysis System (SAS) to identify social networks of actors involved in the park, and potential project participants.³ The final decisions about inclusion in the consultation process were made by members of the Association of Communities of the Potato Park.

Once identified, key actors were invited to participate in consultation groups which examined and discussed the mandate of the draft BCP as well as the details of each

³ Social Analysis System (SAS) approaches seek to promote participatory social analysis, integrate research into action, support learning systems, and develop a process management approach to the project activities.

Box 4: Rich pictures



Rich pictures are images that visually depict a complex or multi-layered situation or concept and are used to ground, orientate or stimulate a discussion. ANDES, along with its indigenous research partners, have used rich picturing as an opportunity to re-value the ancient Incan image of Santa Cruz Pachakuti that symbolically depicts the indigenous Andean cosmovision.

This image has proved extremely useful in orienting discussions around natural resources or agriculture within an indigenous holistic cosmovision, ensuring that the discussions are rooted in these concepts and at the same time reasserting traditional culture and knowledge.

proposed article and potential regulations for enacting them. In total there were 30 consultation groups involved in this process, consisting of five members (designated by geographic proximity), an indigenous researcher who facilitated the discussions and a member of the gastronomy collective. Traditional leaders occasionally participated. The groups met four times a month at predetermined times to discuss the different aspects of the draft agreement and offer their observations, suggestions and doubts. Local researchers carried out semi-structured interviews with members of the communities for additional feedback. Input from the meetings and interviews resulted in a second draft of the BCP.

Indigenous researchers once again played a central role in facilitating these consultation groups and the discussions that took place. Researchers used methods such as video and powerpoint presenta-

tions and conceptual images/rich pictures (Box 4). A video was developed in Quechua to explain the legal terms used in the BCP and reinterpret the concepts in indigenous terms, even creating new Quechua terms to reflect these new concepts.

The consultation process itself was based on the Andean principles of reciprocity, duality and equilibrium, and traditional practices used for generating and maintaining flows of dialogue and decision-making. For example, members of the park's gastronomy group prepared and served traditional dishes using some of the rare species of potato found in the park to members of the consultation groups, both as a form of reciprocity and to facilitate discussion about biocultural heritage. The concept of duality is reflected in the inclusion of men and women, young and old, and diverse kinds of experience and knowledge.



Photo: Khanh Tran-Thanh

The women's collective that manages and operates the small restaurant provide cooking demonstrations and meals to showcase traditional local ingredients such as quinoa and amaranth.

Phase 3: Final consultation and validation of the inter-community agreement

The final stage was carried out by indigenous researchers and ANDES staff with the goal of finalising and signing the BCP. Community participation was expanded further through consultations and meetings with a wide range of actors from the study groups, micro-enterprises, community leaders, shamans, women's groups, elders, youth groups and the Board of Directors of the Association of Communities of the Potato Park. Indigenous facilitators led discussions focused on objectives, benefits and beneficiaries, rights and responsibilities and forms of benefit-sharing within the BCP. Knowledge gaps were identified and addressed to improve the final BCP drafts which were then reviewed by a group of experts, including a lawyer who specialises in customary law.

Study groups continued the process of simplifying the agreement for ease of understanding and reconceptualising the content in Quechua terms. Incorporating

the results from the study groups and consultations, another version of the agreement was produced and a validation process began. Following traditional decision-making procedures, the BCP was presented and discussed in community assemblies, and then put to a vote. All communities involved approved the agreement by a large majority.

The inter-community biocultural protocol for benefit-sharing

The inter-community biocultural protocol now exists as a broad outline for benefit-sharing that includes all benefits received by the Potato Park that are directly or indirectly derived from its biocultural resources. The BCP shares the benefits amongst the 6000 people of the five communities. A communal fund has been set up for the funds generated from such activities including:

- third-party use of biological resources, seeds and traditional knowledge of the Potato Park;

- activities undertaken in the park, such as research, ecotourism and other related services (e.g. restaurant, lodging facilities);
- repatriation of seeds, especially those derived from an agreement with the International Potato Centre;
- donations, projects or similar activities; and
- agreements with third parties outside of the above-mentioned categories and related directly or indirectly to the use of biocultural resources.

The earnings are redistributed in an equitable manner to park communities at the end of the year. In principle, the Association is in charge of the distribution and redistribution of benefits and goods to community members, although the park is currently being assisted by ANDES. The distribution takes place through a special commission created for this purpose (the Benefits Allocation and Oversight Committee). The BCP guides the distribution of monetary benefits. The park's economic collectives contribute ten percent of their earnings as a measure of reciprocity and as a contribution towards the maintenance of the park's collective biocultural heritage.

The BCP ensures that the distribution and redistribution of benefits is based on a set of criteria that is fair and proportionate to the needs, capabilities, responsibilities, contributions and efforts of the communities and their members. Each year, the Association establishes these criteria for rating community participation in activities that contribute to the maintenance of biocultural resources and promotion of the park. The criteria are organised into an abacus-like matrix (*yupana* in Quechua) where the leadership of the communities applies a simple numeric formula to rank themselves. The benefits are distributed among the communities accordingly. The surplus is used to construct and maintain a social safety net for the poor (e.g. widows, orphans), in line with traditional Quechua solidarity-building principles.

Lessons and conclusions

The BCP represents an innovative approach to ABS that prioritises indigenous epistemologies and norms. As such it contributes to a process of decolonisation from western discursive and legal frameworks and the resulting cultural and legal domination. It represents a broader approach to ABS which includes not only benefits derived from access to genetic resources and TK, but also those from **all** activities related to direct and indirect use of biocultural resources. The BCP is envisioned as a model benefit-sharing framework that can be used by other indigenous and local communities in the Andean region. The process to develop the BCP has strengthened cohesion between the park's communities and strengthened recognition of customary laws that promote conservation and equity, which are now formally adopted by the communities through the agreement. It has also enhanced the park's capacity for ABS negotiation.

The project used an innovative methodological approach combining participatory, emancipatory/decolonising and indigenous approaches orientated towards community leadership: not only in the implementation of the methodology, but in its design as well. High participation rates and leadership and control of the process by indigenous communities were achieved through such approaches. However, the scope and general theme of the framework were pre-defined. This proved a limiting factor for community leadership of the process. Though the process of obtaining FPIC and the collaborative methodology development helped to mitigate this, the methodology could be improved if the over-all project aims could be defined by communities in a bottom-up process, e.g. using visioning activities at the community and inter-community level followed by dialogue and collaborative project design based on the shared interests of communities.

Tools for ABS and the protection of TK – such as the Potato Park's BCP – may fall short without a local to international policy environment that creates a healthy relationship between local societies and nation states. Decision makers need to define national and international policies and legal frameworks for the protection of traditional knowledge based on the concept of collective biocultural heritage.

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