

The birth of AGUAPAN



It is great news that the 'guardianes de papa nativa', or literally the 'guardians of indigenous potatoes' now have an organised interest group for the conservation of indigenous varieties and for the promotion of better economic and social conditions for the small-scale farmers that are responsible for this genetic treasure chest. This makes it possible to maintain the genetic riches of the potato in its centre of origin and, subsequently, also its related culture. It concerns the Asociación de Guardianes de Papa Nativa del Centro de Peru, or in short AGUAPAN: an association that was officially established in the town of Huancayo on 10 July.

Sponsoring by HZPC

'The farmers of Central Peru have a special role in the conservation and the evolution of the crop. Especially those families, who take care of those exceptionally-rich collections of indigenous varieties', according to Raul Canto, agronomist of the NGO Grupo Yanapai, one of the Peruvian organisations that, together with the International Potato Centre (CIP), locally implement the initiative sponsored by HZPC. 'The role of these very special families is recognised in international conventions and is now known as 'benefit sharing'. The conventions point out that these farmers and their communities must be recognised and compensated for the conservation of this unique agricultural biodiversity. However, there are as yet few examples of the practical implementation of the objective,' he adds.

Careful selection of members

Benefit sharing

AGUAPAN brings 43 farmer families together from as many villages from five different areas of Central Peru. The initiative of HZPC, CIP and Grupo Yanapai is also actively supported by the National Institute for Agricultural Innovation (INIA) and the Peruvian Association for Environmental Law (SDPA). The Association will ultimately bring together a minimum of 50 farmers (guardianes) within a year. →



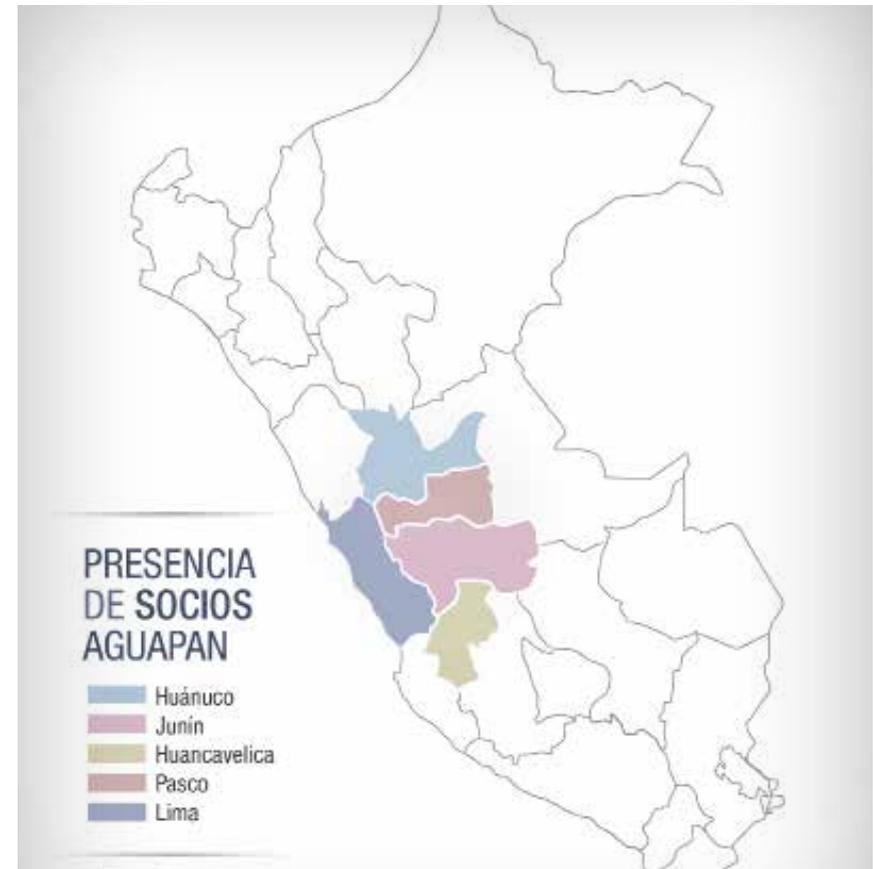
The men and women that are now part of AGUAPAN have been carefully selected by village elders or by a local institution (municipality, NGO). The criteria for admission include: express recognition as guardians of biodiversity, possessing at least 50 indigenous potato varieties, having a need for support on account of the social-economic situation of the family, and respect for gender equality. Another condition was that the farmer must not belong to the same community or family as other candidate-members. The selection process took three months and each of the families was visited at home.

Eventually, on 10 July, the potato farmers travelled to Huancayo for their first meeting at INIA's 'Santa Ana' research station. Some farmers had to travel as long as twenty hours to be present at the meeting. It was a day with a full agenda and high expectations. First, decisions were taken about the set-up, the committee and the name of the new association.

After that, decisions were also taken about legal aspects such as the Articles of Association and the initial investment of the funds that had been made available by HZPC.

Benefit sharing

An important part of the programme concerned the discussion of what the farmers themselves understand by 'benefit sharing', apart from what the international agreements and many publications say. →



According to the guardians present, 'benefit sharing' can't just mean support in cultivation matters. Moreover, they explicitly indicated that they want to be recognised by the Peruvian government. The guardians have requested financial support for the conservation of biodiversity and the improvement of their living conditions such as healthcare, food and education for families and youngsters in the rural areas.

After intensive consultations, the farmers decided that, in the first year, the funds would be divided equally among the AGUAPAN members. In view of the diversity of social conditions and the enormous distances between the villages, it would ultimately be more effective that each family could decide for themselves how and where to invest. It was decided that the funds would be used for activities related to the conservation of the indigenous varieties, education for the children and/or healthcare for the families.

The funds reserved for this purpose were finally transferred to the members at the beginning of August. Each member will account for their investments to the newly-elected committee at the next meeting. Some of the funds have been withheld for the purpose of the formal registration of AGUAPAN in the public register in Huancayo, which can be compared with our Chamber of Commerce, and for the periodic meetings to be held by the committee.

Marketing of indigenous varieties

One member of AGUAPAN, Juana Segama from Allato, Huancavelica, says that for her the greatest challenge is finding a market for the potatoes. 'Like my mother before me and my grandfather before her, I grow a few indigenous varieties,' she explains. 'I have 114 old varieties in total, but always a small surplus of seed. I hope that the Association is going to help me, and the other members, to sell the seed in Huancayo 'The transport to the city is always a problem,' she adds.



Espirito Guerrero from San José de Aymara, Huancavelica, together with her family, has about 180 indigenous varieties. 'In my house, potatoes are the most important source of food,' says the farmer, now treasurer of AGUAPAN. 'My family is extremely proud that I am taking part in this initiative,' she adds. 'I hope that we will make progress on the issue of new markets for our biodiverse varieties during the coming committee meeting in September; the Association will actively support its members in the conservation of our varieties so that they will not be lost for the future.'

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