



Strengthening community engagement and women's leadership in response to land degradation challenges: Corporación Nacional Forestal (CONAF)

Nerquihue (commune of Lolol, province of Colchagua, Libertador Bernardo O'Higgins region) is located in the dry interior of central Chile. Characterised by a subhumid Mediterranean-like climate, the area has been affected by a prolonged drought – a mega-drought – over the past 13 years. Like other localities in the interior drylands, it has suffered progressive deterioration in soil quality due to drought, water scarcity, forest degradation, overgrazing, and the effects of climate change, leading to limited agricultural production and sustainability of the communities.

The people who live in Nerquihue are small farmer families who own small agricultural properties. Due to the lack of water for irrigation, only small portions of the land are worked for food production. A network of rural drinking water systems, managed, maintained, and operated by rural communities organised in committees or cooperatives with state assistance, provides the water supply for daily consumption.

In this context, families have sought strategies to maintain their economy and the small farmer tradition, in which women and men assume distinct roles. As women have taken on the role of care and work in the orchard, they are the ones who note the transformations underway, given their close relationship with nature through planting, caring for plantations, and harvesting fruit, among others. In addition, they are the ones who dedicate time and effort to find ways to maintain their production system, safeguard biodiversity and, thus, maintain the community.



Initiative overview

To respond to their needs, the residents of Nerquihue formed a community-based group – *La Unidad Peumayen de Nerquihue* – led by women, who carry out actions to find solutions to the problems of drought, water scarcity, soil degradation, and the effects of climate change. To this end, they work with institutions to create collaborative networks, joining initiatives that allow them to acquire knowledge, understand the causes of the problems, and design and implement solutions. They presented a territorial scale initiative to the GEF Sustainable Mediterranean Communities project, which provided them with technical and financial support to design and implement solutions based on nature, sustainable management, and care of their territory.

This initiative strengthened community work, requiring the design of an intervention strategy at the landscape scale, for which it was necessary to receive training, highlighting the commitment mainly of women who, with technical support, defined a work plan to facilitate participation.

To improve plant production, they received training in agroecology and implemented three solutions for water management:

- Rainwater harvesting – preparing and using house roofs to install a network of rainwater collectors and an accumulation pond to conserve water
- Rainwater infiltration and runoff storage – intervening in micro-watersheds
- Biofilters – using biofilters to recycle domestic wastewater

Led mainly by women, *La Unidad Peumayen de Nerquihue* has created and strengthened bonds of trust, solidarity, and friendship. In addition to developing and providing training on these skills in decision making, conflict resolution, coordination of activities, administration, and fundraising for the benefit of their community and future development, the role of women as leaders is central to this initiative.

Women's involvement

Within this framework, the women of Nerquihue, especially those participating in the *Peumayen de Nerquihue* Unit, have promoted collective work and solutions to the various land degradation problems afflicting their community. They have been trained and learned techniques to implement technologies and manage resources, which reflects the importance of participation in the design and planning of initiatives meant to serve the local conditions and communities at the grassroots level.



To this end, they implemented innovative actions and techniques:

- They learned techniques to access water, such as rainwater collection and storage and the reuse of grey water, mainly from households.
- To foster sustainable production, they planted 'edible forests', grew vegetables to supply their households, and recovered lost plant species, thereby diversifying their diet.
- They learned to plan their land, which allowed them to make the most of its characteristics. This is important because there are multiple land uses in Chile, where forest species are cultivated in the same management unit as agricultural crops. As a result of the interaction between these, benefits associated with the diversification of production can be obtained in the short, medium, and long term, maintaining soil fertility and optimising water use, thus achieving long-term sustainable production.
- They also learned to prepare and use natural fertilisers composed of organic waste: compost, humus, bokashi, and guano.

The women of the Peumayen Unit work towards food self-sufficiency for economic savings and the supply of products outside their family groups. They have learned that agroecological food production helps maintain good health both environmentally and socially. In addition, they rescue and promote solidarity practices of seed, patillas and food exchange, incorporate the whole family into the cultivation process (planting, harvesting, and postharvest), and create and strengthen bonds of trust and friendship in the community, attending solidarity activities and accompanying neighbours, as well as grandmothers and grandfathers.

Regarding local governance, they have experience in project management, budget management, and democratic decision making processes, and they have gained experience from participating in community activities. Notably, their female leadership enables them to achieve representation in other territorial organisations, such as the neighbourhood council and the organisation for rural drinking water supply and sanitation services.

In this context, this group of women is willing to face new challenges and gain access to public funds in culture, environment, health, and education through their organisation. They have also gained respect, built relationships with community members, and become eligible representatives for elected bodies.

Women champions

Lorena Droguette is the group president and leads the actions benefiting the community. The mother of three daughters and a son is firmly committed to the care of the environment, understanding that it is the basis that allows any development. She is constantly seeking training to acquire new tools that will enable her to support her neighbours, while also being recognised by various institutions for her experience, commitment,

and responsibility. Also, an entrepreneur who has promoted fair trade initiatives, Droguette seeks to empower the women in her community to believe in their capabilities.

Katerine Leyton, a tailor and the organisation's secretary, is enterprising, empowered, highly committed to the community, and able to unite and encourage her neighbours. Drawing on these skills, she supports the development of commercialisation spaces and assists in designing and managing initiatives.

Valeria Valdivia, the organisation's treasurer, assumed the position after a personal growth process, convinced that she could contribute to her community. She is constantly learning to do this while steadfastly ensuring the effective expenditure of resources and their transparency.

Carmen Muñoz, a committed partner who loves the environment, is responsible and always willing to implement new technologies, unafraid of trial and error. She is always present for the activities organised by Peumayen.

Challenges

The following institutional challenges have been identified:

Inclusive land governance: There is a need to strengthen inclusive land governance, focusing on people as the basis for advancing neutral land degradation. This is critical due to the gender gap in land ownership, with less than 20 per cent of land in the hands of women and those who have land owning only a small area. This represents a limitation for initiatives, such as this one, to multiply, scale, and contribute to environmental sustainability and income generation since most women still need title deeds.

Local and regional dissemination strategies: Local and regional dissemination strategies should be implemented to ensure more people have access to information and women's participation is integrated into processes related to neutral land degradation and integrated land use planning.

Financial support: Public and private investment in policies, strategies, and actions should be prioritised, to accelerate progress and gender equity.

Alternatives: Expand the alternatives for new generations, aiming at quality of life and permanence in the territory. The above considerations need to account for rural-urban migration processes.

Environmental conservation: There is a need for forestation and restoration actions with native and fruit species to recover the forest and water and improve soil, and to improve the community's rainwater and wastewater catchment and storage capacity and extend the benefits to other localities.



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