

Murumamani – Seeds of Development¹

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A rich harvest of seed potatoes.

Sunday, nine o'clock. It is freezing in Murumamani (4'200 masl). It is a very special Sunday. The morning sun is slowly warming up the football ground in the center of the small village and the majestic Illampu displays its beautiful white cap of eternal snow.

The people of Murumamani got up early today, the women, with the aid of the younger children prepared carry-on food and the older boys tied the cows to

sticks. Today nobody will pasture them. Once the food ready, the women shoulder the *awayo* (tissue used to backpack things) filled with their sports cloths and the entire family heads towards the football ground. The leaders of the local farmer's union have already made the last call to initiate today's activity. The football ground, which on other occasions hosts community meetings such as the *fiesta* to honor the patron of the village with colorful dances and meetings to discuss issues related to the marketing of agricultural products, hosts one of the most important events of the year, the women's regional football championship. For this day the women feature there well guarded, numbered sports dresses, keeping their long, black tresses as the only left over of their traditional look. The practice to play football in the traditional wide skirts (*polleras*) which is still common in many places, after considerable discussion, was abandoned for being unsuitable for highest performance on the football ground.

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With a sharp whistle the referee initiates the long-awaited game. Amalia Quispe, in the best style of professional players passes the ball over to the gifted feet of Encarnación Silvestre who hits to ball full span with tremendous security in direction of the goal of the adverse team. Gooooal! The triumphant shout of dozens of throats echoes from the newly build school complex and from the church where tranquility reined just before the magistral action of the two star players. When the game is over, the Murumamani team has one more time fulfilled the expectations and hopes put on its shoulders. The fatigue felt by the teammates is nothing compared to the pride and the excitement of the entire community over this new triumph.

The trophy is carried across the village and it becomes obvious that Murumamani has little in common with other villages of the region with their poor, often abandoned houses. In Murumamani some houses are completely new, built with modern materials also used in cities, most of them have recently been painted and many have TV and radio antennas on their roofs.

Andrea de Silvestre, the captain of the football team explains: "Some years ago, we learned through radio emissions that other communities on the *altiplano* (inter-Andean high plateau of Bolivia) had made very positive experiences with growing and selling certified potato seed organized in associations. Hence the people of Murumamani asked the technicians of the then active potato seed program (PROSEMPA⁵) and of the regional seed bureau (ORS-La Paz) to help them found their own association of potato seed growers. At first, the technicians were no excited at all to start working in Murumamani. In fact, the region is known as one of the most difficult areas of Bolivia in terms of social conflicts with constant uprisings of the *aymara* people on the grounds of their historical revindicaciones against the European intruders in what they consider to be their national territory. But the community insisted and finally convinced the technicians that it was feasible to work in the region. In 1996, the first potato seed producer group was formed with six families. There were few growers to begin with, but the discussions within the community and the consistent work of the technicians produced impact. In 2001, the *Asociación de Productores de Semilla de Murumamani* (ASEM) was formally established with 14 groups and over 150 families as members.

The process that led to the creation of ASEM however, was not an easy one. Elder women opposed the initiative at first and especially the idea to send young men and women to *Chuguiago Marka* (aymara name for the capital city La Paz) and even in Cochabamba where the seed company SEPA SAM and the potato research program PROINPA which are both supported by the Swiss Development Cooperation are headquartered. However, slowly the conviction grew that the community needed to know more about new potato technologies and also about the potential markets to sell the seed. So a group of women and men went to see the potato plants grown in bottles (*in vitro*) at SEPA and understood that this technique serves to obtain virus free plants of imported and of native potato varieties.

By today, ASEM produces six varieties and wants to expand its production to new *cultivars* taking advantage of the growing demand for native varieties. However, a constant problem for the seed growers is that producers for consumption find it difficult to buy the certified, high quality but also high price seed of ASEM. The price of certified seed ranges between 20 and 23 US dollars the bag of 50 kilos whereas the price of potato for consumption is of 15 dollars. Because of this, ASEM in coordination with the PNS, introduced a new category of seed, still of good quality and certified, but with fewer requirements than the highest level of certification. Thanks to this new product, more farmers can afford to buy seed of "good quality" and take advantage of the yield increases offered by it.

Speaking out in the name of the majority of the community, Don Clemente Quispe, the current president of ASEM, confirms that the community of Murumamani is much better up today than 10 years ago. It's economic and social perspectives have much improved. The decentralization policies implemented by the central government have helped a bit through increased public investments by municipalities but the decisive impulse came from increased revenues through the sale of potato seed.

For the whole of Bolivia it is estimated that the national seed program with its allies such as SEPA, PROINPA, private seed growers and many others benefit the country with several dozens of millions US dollars per year. These benefits are distributed among seed growers, potato producers and, through lower market prices, potato consumers, of which the urban poor are an important part.

⁵ Special Program of the PNS with support for the Government of the Netherlands



Women's regional football championship.

The contribution of SDC to the success of the Murumamani community is the long-standing financial and conceptual support to various actors of the potato seed chain with the PNS and the Ministry of Agriculture as the umbrella. In fact, the functionality of the PNS with its decentralized structure and its private and public sector allies is the key element, which brought seed technology to farmers. It cannot be overemphasized that the successive Bolivian Governments, throughout all political changes and disturbance have always maintained the PNS as a technical program mostly free of political interference. The production of high quality seed in SEPA and research inputs from PROINPA adequately feed into this scheme. The support by the development agencies of Holland, Denmark, the European Union and especially at initial stages of the PNS by the United States has also been crucial for the success of the PNS.

However, despite the success stories, much remains to be done for the PNS and for the Murumamani community. Only three percent of the seed used in Bolivia is quality-controlled seed. There is still a huge potential for growth of the seed industry which needs some government support such as tax reductions in order to become competitive with seed imports.

Murumamani must continue improving and diversifying its production. It also needs to worry about the sustainable use of its water and soil resources in order to avoid productivity and quality drops in the years to come. The farmers recognize this challenge and many young people leave the village to study agriculture and come back and continue the work of ASEM. The seed of development has been put into the *Pachamama* (mother earth) of Murumamani: To keep it alive continuous efforts are required.