Vibrant Mountain Communities
Regional Development in Mountains:
Realizing Potentials, Tackling Disparities

Sustainable Mountain Development Series
Marketing native crops to improve rural Andean livelihoods

Native potatoes are important in livelihood strategies for most poor Andean families. A systems-oriented approach for fostering pro-poor development in value chains has helped to identify business opportunities, facilitate collaboration among value chain actors and enhance information flows to increase competitiveness.

Potatoes have been a staple of Andean families for thousands of years. Because native potatoes (local landraces, a unique plant genetic resource) grow better at higher elevations (above 3300 m asl) where small-scale farmers predominate, the Peru-based International Potato Center (CIP) decided to concentrate its activities around those potatoes to promote pro-poor market innovation. Andean farmers grow over 3000 varieties of native potato, mostly to meet household needs rather than for sale. They are often at a disadvantage when it comes to doing business in high-quality food chains and ensuring compliance with standards, given scant access to financial and other services, and limited capacity for collective marketing.

CIP coordinated with its partners to develop new value chains for native potatoes anchored on the Participatory Market Chain Approach (PMCA). The PMCA, an innovation systems approach, applies principles of action research and collective action to foster inclusive value chain development. It engages multidisciplinary research teams and small farmers with other value chain actors, public officials and service providers, such as NGOs, in facilitated group processes in which business opportunities are identified and market-oriented innovations developed. The PMCA process was implemented over 12 to 18 months and comprised three phases, each ending with a public event for sharing and promoting results with value chain actors, service providers and policy-makers (Figure 1) [1, 2]. To empower small farmers, the PMCA was complemented by local platforms that facilitated interactions between potato producers, local authorities, the private sector and service providers. The platforms proved useful for consolidating innovation processes after a PMCA process. Through its emphasis on building on the assets of the poor and mobilizing local as well as scientific knowledge, the PMCA is consistent with gender transformative approaches. Subsequently, CIP issued a guide for integrating gender in the PMCA [3].
The PMCA identified opportunities and developed commercial innovations for high-value niches. It contributed to raising the visibility and uses of native potatoes. Selection, labelling and creation of new processed native potato products, such as gourmet chips, added value and expanded the market for these colourful and extraordinary potatoes (Figure 2). In Peru, the PMCA process proved to be an innovation trigger contributing to technological, institutional and commercial innovations.

These innovations had several outcomes: enhanced social networks which stimulated value chain innovation; a dramatic expansion in demand by urban consumers for native potatoes (the volume of native potatoes sold by farmers increased by more than 70 percent as prices rose); and policy changes recognizing these potatoes in the formal seed production system [4]. Institutional innovation such as the establishment of a National Potato Day in Peru further promoted native potatoes and stimulated demand [5]. NGOs strengthened the capacity of small producer organizations and improved links to market agents and processors. They also provided technical support to improve quality and consistency in production, and to achieve economies of aggregation. Women involved in the intervention were empowered to make choices and decisions about production and marketing issues, giving them greater authority to negotiate with other value chain actors [6].

The approach was also successfully implemented in Ecuador and Bolivia. Experiences in disseminating the PMCA highlight the importance of promotion and institutional support, capacity development, organizational change and funding. CIP is building on this experience and seeking to include a broader set of crops with the Andean Initiative, to address the threats of agrobiodiversity loss, climate change and malnutrition in an integrated manner [7].

Lessons learned

- Making use of new market opportunities will require an array of other innovations including institutional and technological ones. The approach used to improve native potato value chains in the Andes could be expanded to other Andean crops and to crops with similar potential in other regions.
- It is possible to utilize the unique genetic resources of mountain regions to generate income for farmers, by revaluing these resources as heritage foods in urban markets.
- Innovation-oriented approaches like the PMCA require flexible research and development programmes that allow creative adjustments to fit local circumstances, while respecting the basic principles of the approach.

Figure 1. The Participatory Market Chain Approach (PMCA)
Figure 2. New product development triggered by the PMCA in Peru

![Collaborating with chefs to promote the image of native potatoes (© CIP)](image)

![Potato harvest in the Andes (©J-L. Gonzale)](image)
References

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