

COMMUNICATING WOMEN-LED CLIMATE SOLUTIONS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

LEARNING TO LOVE THE LAND:

The experience of the women of Santa Maria de la Esperanza,
Santiago Texacuángos, El Salvador.



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A few kilometers from Lake Ilopango, a group of women from the Santa María de la Esperanza community set out on the road to food sovereignty. It all started in their homes. They began to grow the products they used to buy at the supermarket or pharmacy. Along the way, they discovered that they could put an end to what was making the land and their bodies sick: the use of toxic agro-chemicals and transgenic seeds.

Where agrotoxins such as gramoxone (paraquat) and transgenic seeds were once a mandate, today agroecological practices and native seeds open a path that allows women and their families the possibility of reconnecting with the knowledge of their grandfathers and grandmothers.

For Mercedes, there are two environmental problems affecting the Santa María de la Esperanza community: logging and the use of toxic agro-chemicals. "We live near a lake, so all the pollution from insecticides and herbicides that they throw on the land goes into the water," she explains.

This situation makes communities in the area vulnerable to climate change. "We have landslides in which people from our community have died. When there is a lot of rain we are trapped. We can't even go out to the road," Mercedes explains.

In this context, Centro de Desarrollo Comunal de Comunidades Unidas de Santiago Texacuangos (CEDESCO-CU) with the support of Fondo Tierra Viva and GAGGA has among its objectives to raise awareness about the care of natural resources and the rescue of ancestral knowledge.

"We are getting to know everything that our grandfathers and grandmothers have inherited to us: medicinal plants and all the food diversity we can have," says Mercedes Monge of CEDESCO-CU. With support from the Tierra Viva Fund, the organization also built a seed sanctuary where they collect and preserve native seeds.

"The transgenic seed that Monsanto is introducing is very harmful to our health. If we lose the native seed, we lose our lives," remarks Mercedes. One of the activities they carry out is the exchange of native seeds and plants, in this way "the one that has aloe vera gives a little plant to the one that has moringa", she adds.

This work includes the rescue of fruit tree seed and the implementation of analog forestry. "To have a diversity of trees for the birds, for the bees and for water. So that we have the food we need and do not depend on large commercial centers, but that we ourselves can be self-sustainable," explains Mercedes.

Cultivating their gardens and making organic fertilizers is a way of "learning to love the land," says Mercedes. "I think that if we all put in a little bit, although they say there is no going backwards, we are adding people to get them involved in this work of caring for mother earth," she reflects.

For Mercedes and Zoilita, the best way to raise awareness is by example. That is why their houses have medicinal plants, fruit trees and grains. "I can't teach what I don't have. So, I try to make sure that my house has what I am preaching about," says Mercedes.



The organization works in 12 communities. "We do a project in one community, then we go to another community so that everyone has the opportunity to participate," Mercedes adds.

In order not to contaminate the land they use organic fertilizers and agroecological products, they do not burn the stubble, but use it as a vitamin for the soil. "If we kept our houses as forests, with a well productive land, with a soil full of proteins, I think that would help us to have a complete ecosystem where global warming would not affect so much," explains Mercedes.

The awareness-raising work also has to do with knowing the differentiated effects of climate change on men and women. The organization conducted a survey asking its members who among them were most affected.

The majority responded that men and women were equally affected. But after making an analysis and inquiring into who were in charge of caring for the elderly, the children, the house and who fetched the water when it became necessary, their thinking was different.

"We women feel more affected by the fact of taking care of them. We are the ones who take care of the house, we are in charge of getting the medicine, getting water and fetching food," Mercedes emphasizes. Zoilita agrees that these are roles that were assigned to women and that the process of deconstruction is not easy.

The organization is made up of women, but the knowledge is replicated throughout the family. The men are now betting on the use of organic fertilizer. "We are aware that this is a product of the awareness-raising work that has taken place over the years within CEDESCO-CU. Now you see men and women cultivating with more respect for the land," says Zoilita.

Through these practices, each woman becomes a spokesperson in her own home and in the community. "The women of CEDESCO-CU have been reproducing the information. And you will see in every house that they have their crops and chickens, they sell chickens, they buy more chicks and that becomes a habit," says Zoilita.

"When I become aware, I no longer need money to continue. When I have already planted one plant, then I feel like planting another. So first we must raise awareness. We give it a little push, but then people start looking for their own resources," says Zoilita.



The covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of having a vegetable garden at home and of knowing the different uses of some plants. "The pandemic forced us to look at life differently. We were able to see that we didn't go hungry because in our gardens there was food and medicine," says Mercedes.

The medicine was known to the grandmothers and grandfathers of the community. So, they connected their ancestral wisdom with their own research: with herbs they created mosquito repellent and cream for muscle pain. In flowers and roses, they found remedies for physical and mental health.



CEDESCO-CU

Community Development Center of the
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