

“ We act in such a way that future generations can follow our path ”

For Indigenous Peoples, who live closely with nature, it is particularly important to conserve the natural resources and simultaneously valorise them to secure the livelihoods of their communities. This is a bold venture, as Fredy Gerónimo, the President of the Kanuja cooperative in Peru, explains to Rural 21.

Fredy, tell me a little about Kanuja. How did the idea for the cooperative come about?

Five years ago we signed an agreement with the National Commission for Development and Life without Drugs, Devida, which is an official agency of the Government of Peru. Within the framework of this agreement, we started to plant coffee with state-of-the-art technology. We are located in a zone between 700 and 3,700 metres above sea level, which means we are in a medium and high zone, where coffee is produced very well. So we planted 1,000 hectares – 500 hectares of coffee and 500 hectares of cocoa – advised by agronomists, and with our ancestral knowledge. Then the question arose: what do we do with this produce? You must know that my parents have been farmers too. In those years, when my father sold his cocoa and coffee, they bartered. The trader came with a sack of salt and exchanged it for three quintals of coffee, which was an abuse to us. It is from this situation that the idea was born. We want our product to be seen by the market and intend to

get a fair price for it – to improve the quality of life of the more than 10,000 affiliated families.

What market are you targeting?

We are a new cooperative, but we draw on very strong ideologies. The ultimate goal is to make our products known internationally. What do some cooperatives do nowadays? They take a photo of the Nomatsigenga and pretend that the product they have put on sale is from these original people. We want to make sure that the Nomatsigenga producer is the one who sells the product on the market, with our own seal and identity.

How do you market your products today?

Our members sell us the produce, we do the processing, and then we dry the products and sell them as grain to a central cooperative. We still don't have a local market, let alone a national one. In the commercial environment, we are looked upon by the big buyers as children. But nothing is impossible, and as I said, we are ready to go to the markets. In addition,



Fredy Gerónimo is President of “Asi Omagaro Kanuja” (“we are all Kanuja”), the indigenous Asháninka Nomatsigenga agrarian cooperative of the Pangoa Valley in the central jungle of Peru. Eighty per cent of Pangoa’s territory is titled territory of the Nomatsigenga native communities and 20 per cent belongs to the Asháninka people. The cooperative was founded in 2019 and represents 57 villages, with 10,500 families and a total of 24,000 inhabitants.



The cooperative harvests, ferments and dries around 150 tonnes of coffee a year.

Photos: Kanuja

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We are going to resist in order to exist.



The cooperative is proud of its wide range of artisanal bakery produce.

we already have a small chocolate processing plant installed where our producers make their own derivatives. The idea for this coming year is that through the Ministry of Education, if it accepts this agreement, we want to supply our chocolates to the educational institutions in our territory, thus promoting internal consumption in our own communities.

And as for raw materials, do you receive a better price thanks to the cooperative?

Thanks to Devida, we already have an organic certification. Before, coffee was sold at 3 or 4 soles per kilo, now it is sold at 8 soles or more. The same goes for cocoa, the market is currently very good here.

So you have changed the way you produce in the context of the agreement?

Exactly. My parents, for example, had ten hectares of coffee in an agroforestry system, with many ancient coffee plants, and from these ten hectares, they produced 15 to 20 quintals. Today, more than 120 brothers and sisters in this cooperative know how they can sustainably produce high yields. With the state-of-the-art technology that Devida has taught us, we are planting 3,500 plants in each hectare. With improved cultivation, the higher yields and the better price, what used to be 1,200 soles per hectare is now almost 20,000.

And in the context of the agreement, Devida is supporting us now with 12 hectares of coffee and 12 hectares of cocoa. We now know how to graft cocoa, how to fertilise and prune, which we weren't able to do before. We are also looking at administrative training to learn how to manage the money we get from the sale of the two crops. So in our cooperative, the change from what we used to do to what we are actually doing today is enormous.

You also have an agreement with the International Bamboo and Rattan Organization ...

Yes, we started this project about two years ago. INBAR provides support in the planting of bamboo. With the plants, the degraded area where trees have been cut is reforested to slow down soil erosion and counteract climate change. The plants serve as raw material for the construction of our homes, for handicrafts and furniture, but also for the production of various products such as flour for bread and cake. Our community has native bamboo, and we have begun to put it to appropriate use.

What distinguishes your products in particular?

We indigenous people are environmentalists. We have a very close relationship with nature, with the forest, with the rivers ... The products we grow are 100 per cent organic. And we act in such a way that future generations can follow our path.

And is that what they want? Or do they prefer to live in the city?

Actually, the people that I preside over are already an original people brought up to date in today's world. But this does not mean that we are going to forget our culture, our customs and traditions. On the contrary, we are going to continue with them. As parents, we are also concerned about the education of our children. They have to migrate in one way or another to the cities of Huancayo or Lima to study.

And then they return, or do they stay in the cities?

I estimate that 80 per cent return to their village so that they can help in the development of their town, to support their organisation, so that the others who come behind also have that job opportunity. Maybe later on we will see more permanent migration, but we doubt it, because the young people are trained with the idea of helping others in their home communities. We have had professionals such as nursing graduates and technicians coming back to work in the village centres. There are

Focusing on models of sustainability

Raphael, why does INBAR support organisations like Kanuja?

There is a big difference between someone who cuts down the forest and develops a monoculture and someone who has always been living sustainably from the forest and develops productive alternatives associated with the forest. Indigenous organisations like Kanuja develop this second option. They follow sustainable models that go hand in hand with environmentally friendly processes.

Kanjuja is a good example of how communities can also have access to globalisation. They too have this desire, this capacity to be able to link themselves to international and local markets, positioning an ideology not only to sell a product, but also to rescue the ancestral, cultural aspects and guarantee the sustainability of their organisation. For in the country, we have many agricultural and agro-industrial cooperatives that only focus on economic issues. And this does not reflect the real development in the social aspect of the community members themselves. There is something very interesting that Fredy said: "For whom are we going to leave all this? It is our children, our young people, who will take over later on." And that guarantees the process of sustainability.

The native communities associated with the Kanuja organisation have bamboo as a natural resource in their territories. Proposing a line of productive diversification is an alternative – teaching the communities to manage their mixed forests with bamboo, taking advantage of them in a sustainable manner and providing local use of their products with a market approach. This is an initiative that we are promoting with the native communities.



Raphael Paucar is Project Manager of the International Bamboo and Rattan Organisation (INBAR) in Peru.

Photo: INBAR



Afforestation with bamboo counters erosion and creates income diversification.

also bilingual teachers who have returned to work in their own village. For example, in the community where I live, at the primary level, 22 teachers are teaching, of whom 20 are Nomatsigengas and 2 are “civilians”, as we call them. What does this mean? The teachers are prepared at the university and go back to teach their cousins, nephews and brothers in the same village. We also have a lawyer. This coming year, he is going to get his license. He is helping us in the organisation of the cooperative, with the legal issues. That is why I say that I am very sure that the Nomatsigenga brothers and sisters who go to study in the cities will return 80 per cent. Twenty per cent will stay elsewhere because the labour and economic opportunities are more favourable for them in other places.

Is there support for the education of young people?

In the past, the universities were far away, and the financial means of the families were not sufficient. You have to pay tuition fees, travel expenses, rooms and materials, all of which involves money. We have never given this opportunity to our children, not because we

didn't want to, but because the economic conditions wouldn't allow us to. Only few young people have had the opportunity to study at international level because we don't have the means to contact those universities that can award us scholarships. Recently, just a few universities have been created close to the core of our organisation. The agreement between Kanuja and Devida has opened up these avenues for us a little more because it has allowed us to save money to educate our children.

More than 50 Indigenous Peoples live in Peru. Are their concerns sufficiently taken into account?

We have already existed in the ancestral territories that our grandparents left us for more than 200 years. We will continue to exist and to resist the things that are coming against our people. We have the motto: “all for one – one for all”. This is the same notion that the Nomatsigenga people recently referred to when calling a meeting for a mobilisation against the government. The 10,000 Nomatsigenga people have come out to be able to address inequality and discrimination, which is the everyday reality the original people live in.

How exactly does this reality manifest itself?

There is discrimination in the sense that Peruvian government programmes do not take us into consideration. Let's take the issue of education. On social networks, it is sold by the government or the ministry of education saying: “Look, in rural schools we are doing this and that.” But the images that they sell are not real. Of the 100 per cent the Peruvian government has invested in education, only three per cent goes to the native villages. It is similar with health. In some communities, there are

communal health kits with only one alcohol bottle, one Temolina, a pack of cotton wool and some first aid medicines. This is the reality in my native communities, which are affiliated to our organisation. Looking at social services, basic infrastructure, sanitation, etc., 0.1 per cent of the Peruvian government's budget for these sectors goes to the native communities. There is no drinking water supply. We take water from the rivers that are close to our villages. That is why I said: “We are going to resist in order to exist.” That is another motto of the Nomatsigenga People.

What have the biggest obstacles been in the development of Kanuja?

The most difficult part has been the financial side; we didn't know what funds to raise in order to be able to register the co-operative in the public registry. Now that it has been created, what is fundamental is technical support. Today, we are worrying about how to be able to pay the professionals so that the cooperative's objectives can continue to progress.

Does this mean that there is no more support from Devida? Or no other kind of support?

No. The coming year is the last year of this agreement. There are 10,500 families and a total of 24,000 inhabitants who are affiliated to Kanuja. At the moment, 12,000 brothers and sisters are part of this agreement. Now what do I do with the others? To plant one hectare of coffee, you need 180,000 soles. This will be the bottleneck. Where do we get the money for them to plant? So we would welcome any cooperation with organisations and others – of course all in a transparent way.

How will activities carry on?

Our expectation is that our cooperative does not stop here. It has to grow a little more. We want to achieve this through training and awareness-raising. Young people and also women have to be part of this whole process. The brothers of the cooperative are preparing to continue expanding more hectares of coffee and cocoa plantations and other crops in a sustainable way.

And what is your most urgent wish for the future?

We would like to find a market where we can sell our products, and we would like to enjoy support for fair trade certification. This would be the most important thing for the cooperative members at the moment.



For the Nomatsigenga, living in modern times does not mean forgetting customs and traditions.