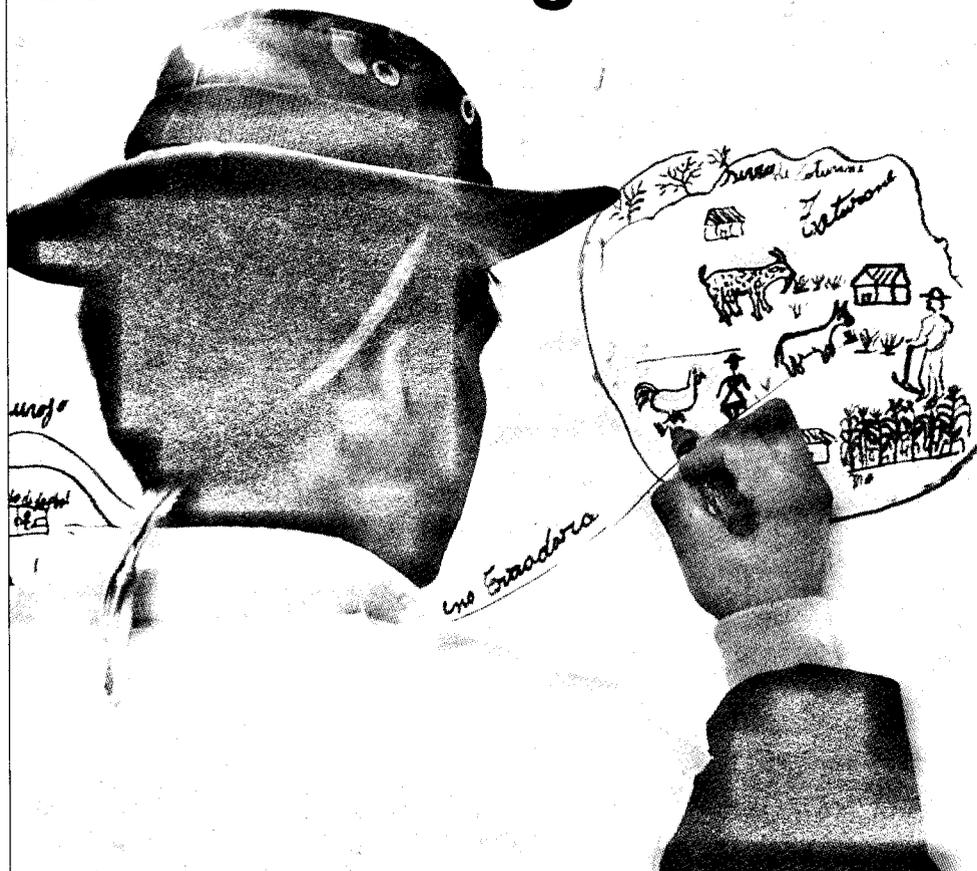


Joint learning about cosmovisions



In many places in this world, farmers follow a logic which is quite different from the conventional scientific rationale. In their world view or cosmovision not only the material but also the spiritual world is considered relevant. Thus, farming also includes activities that structure the relationship with the spiritual world. Last April, the project for Comparing and Supporting Indigenous Agricultural Systems (COMPAS) organised an intercultural dialogue in the farmers' community of Capellani, near Cochabamba, Bolivia. This article summarises the main findings.

Photo: Florencio Peres del Barco

COMPAS partners

For the Andean farmers of Bolivia, a ritual is a spiritual activity carried out in order to create the spiritually right conditions for a certain material or social event that they wish to happen. Rituals are therefore present in all important social and productive activities. Every year on Carnival Tuesday, the farmers go to their fields to celebrate their crop, just then in full growth, with a ritual called *ch'alla*. This ritual is held in honour of "Ispalla", the soul and spirit of all food which strengthens those who eat it. A good crop, quantitatively and qualitatively, does not only depend on the appropriate technologies, but also on the accompanying rituals.

Among the tribals of India, the link between mankind, earth and the spirits is deeply ingrained in their perception, their social life and rituals. Tribals in Eastern Ghats believe in the existence of natural and supernatural divine beings and spiritual forces. Bivine beings and spirits inhabit their houses, villages, agricultural fields and mountains, forests, rivers and burial grounds. In order to communicate with divine beings and spirits on behalf of the community, they have sacerdotal heads known as Kotpaik, Disari, Poojari, Guniya and Gurumayi. Soil testing by colour, weight and taste of the land as well as selecting land for cultivation is a skilled knowledge retained by Disari. Similarly, for the conservation of food grains, they celebrate different festivals. Touching, eating and selling the

grains without celebrating the related festivals is a taboo. A comprehensive oral literature is available in their folk songs, related to agricultural practices. Knowledge is also preserved in the form of symbols, known as *gondas* or chalk marks. Disaris and Guniyas use these *gondas* to propitiate or to appease the bad evils and protect the crops from man, animals and witchcraft.

In Sri Lanka, mantras are used by many Bhuddist farmers. It involves the chanting of a certain verse addressed to an invisible spirit who is then believed to grant redress. In agriculture mantras are used to obtain higher yields and to protect crops from damage by pests and wild animals. For example, for protection against the paddy fly, farmers go to the paddy field early in the morning, catch a fly at the entrance to the field, chant the specific mantra seven times and then release the fly.

Sharing and comparing

COMPAS is a network of people and organisations trying to understand indigenous knowledge from the logic of the farmers themselves. Nine partners came from India, Sri Lanka, Ghana, Peru, Mexico, the Netherlands and Norway to meet, share and learn with the Bolivian partner and the farmers they work with. All COMPAS partners have worked in development for over a decade now as NGOs or as Agricultural Universities. During the meeting in Capellani, the nine cases were presented and discussions took place around topics like: the relevance of cosmovisions and

spirituality; interaction of traditional knowledge with outside sources of knowledge, methodology and planning strategic actions.

There was consensus that outside agencies such as NGOs and Universities or extension services can only be effective in their work in rural communities if they have a profound understanding of the existing situation. It was believed that a major factor for the lack of success of development activities is the lack of appreciation of the cosmovision of the rural population. The COMPAS partners agreed that development should be seen as endogenous: development from within. Indigenous communities are not static, but dynamic and often quite tolerant to new ideas. Farmers pick and choose information from external sources, including modern knowledge systems, as they build their cosmovision and modify their land use. It is important to realise that any piece of new information will be integrated in the existing concepts of life. Reciprocity is often an important feature in the relationships between mankind, nature and supernatural beings.

After elaborate discussions, cosmovision was defined as: "the way an individual or a certain population (community or cultural group) perceives the world and cosmos. It includes assumed interrelationships between the spiritual, natural and human world and provides the basis on which people relate with nature and the spiritual world and take decisions." Cosmovisions may differ from culture to culture and from person to person. It was empha-

When the farmers of Capellani saw the posters drawn by COMPAS partners, they laughed: "We can also make such posters and even make them better, as we have the trees and mountains right here with us." They presented their village life and the international appreciation strengthened their awareness of the importance of their tradition and cosmovision.

sised that cosmovision is not something abstract, but a reality based on concrete observation and experience. Spirituality is not always accepted by the mainstream and it is not easy for development workers to know how to relate to it. Conventional training does not include spirituality.

Participants felt that so far, the increasing interest of development agencies in and recognition given to indigenous knowledge is rather utilitarian and limited to technical aspects. Only part of indigenous knowledge is validated, based on formal (material) criteria and isolated from the value system, belief system and own logic of the local population. The way the different partners could work with cosmovisions differed a lot. In the cases of Bolivia and Ghana and the tribal areas in India the traditional cosmovisions are still rather intact. Agricultural production takes place through bio-physical as well as spiritual activities. The agricultural calendar and the ritual calendar coincide. In the rural areas in India and Sri Lanka and in Peru, the traditional cosmovisions are presently subject to considerable erosion. However, after further probing, many elements of the traditional cosmovisions were found. In the case studies from the Netherlands and Norway and to a certain extent also in Mexico, it seems that the traditional cosmovisions and spirituality have almost completely gone. There is a widespread discontent about the materialistic way of modern farming and a small number of farmers want to restore the spiritual vision on agriculture. In these cases indigenous institutions may no longer exist, and new institutional allies may have to be looked for. Of the partners, only AGRUCO and IDEA had experiences with enhancing endogenous development based on the cosmovision. In Ghana, Peru and Sri Lanka the interest exists and the partners are ready to adopt a more explicit approach for this. In the other countries there is a varying degree of interest. Some institutional barriers have to be overcome to fully adopt a cosmovision approach. In many cases, there are individual professionals who have an interest and personal commitment to include work at the level of spirituality, but there is a lack of support from the mainstream. The participants realised that this is a major challenge for development agencies in general.

In India, there is a rich body of classical knowledge described in the Vedas. Today, the original link between the theory in the Vedas and the way farming was practised has been lost, but quite some Indian researchers are trying to revive this link. They are confident

that the future of sustainable agriculture can benefit from the ancient principles described in the Vedas. Dialogues and joint learning paths with other South-based cosmovisions may help. The participants were fascinated by similarities in some elements of the cosmovisions such as the role of cosmic forces and astrology (observed in Sri Lanka, India, Netherlands, Bolivia), the performance of rituals as remedies for agricultural problems (Sri Lanka, Ghana, Bolivia), the role of soothsayers and persons with spiritual powers (India, Sri Lanka, Ghana, Bolivia).

Joint learning

Cosmovisions are often based on theories, holistic insights and ecologically sound practices that are not considered in conventional science and technology. Traditional cosmovisions may contain important information that can help overcome shortcomings of the anthropocentric, materialistic and mechanistic world view of modern society. On the other hand there is no need for romanticising; also within traditional cosmovisions shortcomings and deformations may exist. Despite the problems of one-sidedness of formal science, it has the potential to make a great contribution to solving many problems. The major challenge is to find ways and means to bridge the gap between the different sources of knowledge and to look for synergy through an open dialogue. Farmers are the main actors in efforts to stop the destruction of indigenous knowledge, but also external agents can function as catalysts to initiate processes of learning and revalidating indigenous knowledge.

However, far too often a gap remains between farmers and external agents and scientists. External agents are generally trained by formal education and employed by formal development organisations. The need to be "deschooled" and retrained and the objectives of the development programmes need to be reformulated. To bridge the gap between farmers and outsiders (or between indigenous, cosmovision-related knowledge and conventional science), the outsider "has to learn to walk in two worlds". Bridging is a more of a problem for the outsiders, than for the farmers. It was felt that outsiders therefore should not attempt to define for the farmers what relation they should have with other sources of knowledge. As indigenous knowledge is the mainstream for the farmers, the aim should be to strengthen this mainstream. They will then decide what conventional knowledge to include.

A basic question is whether conventional science, with its quantitative tools of specialised research, is able to validate the holistic nature of cosmovision-related farming practices. Some research stations have moved into on-farm trials managed by farmers, some have also introduced PRA techniques in their work. Such techniques that try to increase the farmers' role to provide and access data could explicitly include cosmovision. Examples of such inclusions could be transects that capture cosmovision and

resource-flow diagrams that indicate the role of farmers' spirituality.

When farmers are to introduce new technologies they may first seek "clearance" from the ancestors or spirits through sacrifices. It was argued that technologies and research activities at farmers' level introduced by institutions should be given the opportunity for similar processing. Farmers should be given the opportunity to similarly "clear them" or also process parts or the entire technology or research activity through their spirituality. Research and extension recommendations should also take into consideration the astronomical calendar of farmers. Comparative investigations are possible to test spiritual claims or astronomical influences on agriculture. Investigations of this nature on farmers' knowledge would make science richer and empower farmers.

Next steps

The first phase of COMPAS has brought better insights into the actual role of cosmovision in rural communities and its impact for intermediary organisations. The next step is to build up experiences to translate these insights into effective field programmes. Each partner agreed to continue to work in their own programme area in enhancing endogenous development. TAAP, the Ghanaian partner, designed a framework for "Empathetic Learning and Action" which tries to come to grips with the two realities: project staff cooperate with rural people in the way they learn and experiment in their own cosmovision, and farmers join in experiments designed by project staff. In general, the participants expressed the need for a follow up in developing field methods that would build on cosmovision and co-operate with indigenous institutions. Further documentation of cosmovision and indigenous knowledge is needed as well. The effectiveness of spiritual practices can be further tested by co-operating with indigenous institutions. Indigenous communication systems will be enhanced to enable farmer-to-farmer communication. Based on the existing contacts and reactions of partners, a growing network could gradually emerge per continent. With the meeting in Bolivia, the first phase of the COMPAS project has ended. We are presently discussing the next phase in which the above mentioned activities can be implemented. If you are working with cosmovisions and sustainable agriculture, you are invited to share your experiences and join the network. We are working on a video to show examples of cosmovisions and agriculture based on slides of participants. A copy can be requested (PAL system); copying and mailing costs will be around US\$ 20.

COMPAS, c/o ETC Netherlands, Bertus Haverkort and/or Wim Hiemstra, PO Box 64, 3830 AB Leusden, Netherlands.

At present, the COMPAS partners are AGRUCO (Bolivia), TALPUY (Peru), CESE (Mexico), IDEA, ADS, ClKS and ETC-India (India), ECO (Sri Lanka), TAAP (Ghana), BD Association (Netherlands), NLH (Norway).