

experiments with a stakeholder approach for conflict resolution

Burning in hillsides farming



Photo: CIAT

August, the month of winds and kites... One afternoon, I sat down to look at my surroundings and saw how columns of smoke were rising... smoke which causes so much illness, please let's not make so much smoke because we can hardly breathe, plants and animals aren't as beautiful nor as productive as before. To all those who read these lines I beg, let's not encourage unnecessary burnings; let's not turn the sky into a gray and monotonous sky. Let it be transparent, blue and beautiful...

Altrocas (FEBESURCA representative), August 1994, Ventanas

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In Río Cabuyal, a 7000 hectare watershed in the Andes in Southern Colombia, burnings have been a controversy for decades, if not centuries. Despite laws of prohibition, burnings persist as a means of land preparation. A questionnaire survey conducted in Río Cabuyal in late 1994 showed that half of the households use burning in their land preparation (Castaño, unpublished information). Among the features making burning attractive are that it is fast, kills weeds and controls crop pests and diseases. Its drawbacks include the risk of fires going wild, threatening the natural vegetation, particularly around water sources in the upper part of the watershed on which downstream population depend for their water supply.

In September 1994, the discussion on burnings once again broke out, this time in FEBESURCA, the Río Cabuyal watershed user federation. Earlier that year, FEBESURCA had created buffer zones to protect water springs and rivers in the watershed. A fire had partly destroyed this work. Speculations suggested that the fire had

been set as a protest against the creation of buffer zones. Many people in the area are in search for land and therefore perceive buffer zones of 10, 30 or sometimes 50 meters as a waste of land, only serving to invite more snakes. That benefits of such sacrifices are more likely to accrue to downstream populations than to people living close to the buffer zone only reinforces this perception.

A burning issue

However, instead of focusing on the particular incidence, the discussion at FEBESURCA's September 1994 meeting turned towards burnings in general. Some representatives pledged that CVC, the regional watershed authority, should reinforce existing laws prohibiting the use of burnings. But CVC declined due to fears from its staff of being threatened personally by local farmers. And after all, burning is practiced by some 500 families alone in Río Cabuyal, compared with only 5 CVC staff. Other representatives resorted to the launching of awareness-raising campaigns. Nevertheless, there was a feeling of powerlessness: nobody believed in the effectiveness of the suggested measures, but what were the alternatives? On this background, CIAT staff offered to experiment with an alternative approach to conflict resolution, a stakeholder approach.

The stakeholder approach

The basic principle of the stakeholder approach is to lead participants through a process during which they analyze and come to appreciate the conflicting but nonetheless often legitimate interests relating to a particular issue. The stakeholder approach was employed through a sequence of workshops held with FEBESURCA representatives. Obviously, the ideal situation is for all interests to be directly represented in the workshops to allow for direct analysis and negotiation. However, this was not immediately possible, since among FEBESURCA representatives, there is an overrepresentation of farmers who do not use burning as a means of land preparation compared to the population as a whole. Yet, at the end of the first workshop, participants expressed the wish to invite people who would be likely to use burning as a means of land preparation for the following workshops. Moreover, they wished to hold the workshops in the upper part of the watershed where problems caused by burnings were perceived to be most serious. Thus, in the following workshops, people belonging to the *Cabildo* (the indigenous local government) who initially had expressed strong opposition to the creation of buffer zones on the *Cabildo*'s land participated.

Burning analyzed

The first step in the workshop was to brainstorm on types of burnings. Participants suggested different types of burnings and ranked these in terms of seriousness. Participants distinguished between "controlled" and "accidental" burnings and between burnings taking place on the field versus on "open-access" land, such as fallows and forests. Accidental burnings on open-access land were regarded the most serious.

The second step was to identify stakeholders relating to the burnings. Workshop participants brainstormed first on reasons for the above mentioned burnings as seen from the point of view of people responsible for the burnings, and second on reasons against burnings. Why are burnings seen as harmful?

Examples of reasons identified for burning are "...to avoid having to pay day-labourers", "...to increase the area under cultivation", "...to fight crop pests" and "...to protest". Among harmful effects "...the drying out of water", "...destruction of forest reserves" and "...extinction of fauna and flora" were mentioned.

Having departed from the position that people burn out of ignorance or lack of awareness, one of the results of the first workshop was a collective appreciation of the reasons why some people prefer burning for land preparation. This led some work-

shop participants to undertake structured questionnaire surveys in their communities before the next workshop in order to verify people's reasons for burning. Others undertook more informal surveys in their communities. Moreover, the observation was made that while the reasons for burning are individual, the consequences tend to be universal.

Looking for solutions

Based on this analysis, the following workshops looked for solutions. The premise for this search was that burning as a means of land preparation would have to be accepted as long as there are people short of land and labour. Participants concluded that actions should be identified to ensure that burnings would be carefully managed and cause as little harm as possible. To operationalize this decision, a small group of participants elaborated a set of norms, specifying how and when burnings should be conducted (see box). These norms were presented to and later endorsed by the Cabildo and the *Juntas de Acción Comunal* (the non-indigenous local governments) in the watershed.

What later happened...

In August 1995, farmers were for the first time seen to make firebreaks on their fields before burning as recommended in the norms. In some communities, groups were formed to overlook that the norms were followed. Farmers generally seemed to be following the recommended norms.

The successfulness of the norms compared to previous measures taken against burning owes to at least two factors. First, the fact that the norms were developed by farmers themselves rather than by some external institution ensures that they make sense in the local context. Second, rather than reproaching farmers, the norms implicitly appreciate and accept that due to their circumstances some farmers find burning the only feasible means of land preparation. The case therefore elucidates the potentials the exist for local people taking responsibility in resource management.

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Photo: CIAT



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Norms for when and how to conduct burnings

- When is a burning absolutely necessary? When there are big shrubs which are two to three years old (when the shrubs are less than two years old, they can be used as organic manure; dead barriers or mulch to avoid weed growth)
- It is preferable to make participatory or community burnings, for example with the help of neighbours, exchanging labour with other farmers or voluntarily
- Boundaries or firebreaks should be made:
 - if the area is flat and there is no tall vegetation in the near surroundings, the firebreaks should be 2 meters wide
 - if the area is slopy, or flat but with tall vegetation in the near surroundings, the firebreaks should be 5-6 meters wide
- The burning should be conducted early in the morning and at latest at 10 am because:
 - in the morning the vegetation is cold
 - people are more alert in the morning
 - in the afternoon, there are strong winds
- Special attention should be paid where there are pines, sugar cane, forest or houses nearby
- Avoid the use of fuel close to the fire
- Avoid the presence of children or elders
- In case of suffocation due to smoke, people should
 - throw themselves to the ground, face down
 - cover nose and mouth with a wet cloth
- Use clothes made of cotton or linen
- Use high boots made of leather or rubber
- After one or two hours, the burning should be checked to avoid that it spreads
- If there are water springs, a 50 meters wide vegetation barrier should be left. If there are rivers, the vegetation barrier should be 20-25 meters wide