

AclF | Almanac of the Future

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Motivational Experience No. 56



**Women who do
not stop**

“We are farmers, we are leaders, we are mothers, we are wives”, is the testimony of the members of the Self-Monitoring Committee, an intercommunal articulation of rural women from 18 communities in the departments of Santa Ana and Ahuachapán in El Salvador. These women have been able to turn the tables. They told us: “Only men can build houses and we started building houses”. And they add: “Here we are putting an end to patriarchy”.

We learned what belonged to men

Twenty-four years ago, the Caritas of the Diocese of Santa Ana decided to work on the issue of equality between women and men. The bishop at the time was not very supportive, but Manuel Morán, then coordinator of the work in the rural areas, who avoided attracting attention during the first years of the process, began the work of training and organizing women in the countryside. To this day, Misereor, among other institutions, cooperates financially with Caritas Santa Ana in this work.

As a result of the training and monthly meetings in many of the communities, self-saving groups were formed. The Self-Monitoring Committee grew out of the monthly meetings of the female leaders of these local groups. Similarly, other support committees were formed during the process to address specific issues, such as the Family Support Committee, which provides support for productive initiatives and entrepreneurship. At the same time, promoter committees were created. The starting point for the Self-Saving Groups was a small start-up capital provided by Caritas, which stimulated the savings of the group members. As soon as the group's stability and discipline in saving is proven, the partici-



pants can lend money from the group's fund, which allows them to carry out productive initiatives, whether in agriculture or in other sectors such as clothing production, cosmetics and others.

The Self-Monitoring Committee holds a monthly community meeting among local groups, which allows for the exchange of knowledge and feelings among its members, the majority of whom are women, who continuously convince themselves and decide to take action.

The training covers several topics: ecological agriculture, savings, children and youth, housing, productive initiatives, water treatment, energy-saving stoves, among others. The training goes hand in hand with practical implementation, with visits and exchange of experiences. Laura García, one of the most dynamic members of the collective, recalls: *"The men didn't think it was important, neither the topics nor our meetings, but we learned what was important for the men"*. Jasmin Velásquez, another committee

member, recalls what happened when she put into practice what she had learned about growing tomatoes. Neighbors saw Jasmin's tomato plants and said to her husband, *"Your wife has beaten you"*.

Role and Empowerment

Take on new roles and you will achieve attitudinal change in others. Women, with self-savings, generating their own income and new knowledge in seemingly male domains show this.

Beyond the promoter committees and self-savings groups, the Self-Monitoring Committee is a space for intercommunal encounters that generate relationships of affection, solidarity, fraternity, personal liberation, self-help, dialogues, self-therapy and listening.



Self-savings

Families in El Salvador typically save what little they can in traditional banks. The banks invest the capital they collect and make profits that never reach the savers who own the money. The interest paid by the banks on savings is minimal, and in some cases, they have to pay to keep their money. The women in the self-savings groups have broken with this tradition through a personal transformation: replacing the paradigm of traditional bank savings with community savings. Guillermo Navarro of Caritas Nacional shares his thoughts: *"Since the groups are composed mainly of women, they become a mechanism for women who save to achieve economic independence from their husbands, thus establishing more equitable relationships. This gives them greater self-esteem and self-confidence. The self-savings groups are a means of solving daily needs of various kinds for families who come in search of credit, but they are also a means of stimulating or encouraging the creation of community productive initiatives"*.

Cascades of knowledge

During this process, which has been going more than 20 years, the number of groups in the different communities has increased and not all of them have the direct support of Caritas and its training centers. Faced with this situation, and thanks to the intercommunal articulation of the groups, grouped in the Self-Monitoring Committee, a *modus operandi* has been chosen: with the support of Caritas, promoters are trained in the fields of agriculture and housing, most of them women. The promoters not only put into practice what they have learned, but also share their knowledge with interested people in their communities. Thanks to this cascading replication, the knowledge reaches a much larger number of people.

The women agree that their standard of living and that of their families has improved. They practice organic agriculture, produce their own fertilizer, and carry out biological pest control.



A gardening culture has emerged, with food sovereignty as its primary goal. They do not seek large-scale plantations and monocultures. No one burns the garbage, and the diversity of the milpas reflects the concept of care: care for the family's food, the environment, and the community.

Talents and Initiatives

Don't restrict your imagination by thinking and dreaming from scarcity and problems. **Take the path of women, thinking and feeling from abundance to build new realities, greater equity and better self-esteem.**

Solidarity Audits

There are currently 35 productive initiatives, most of which are family-owned and run by women, including agricultural and poultry enterprises, clothing, shoes, cosmetics and lingerie production, among others. As part of the Solidarity Audits, visits are made by the Self-Monitoring Committee to strengthen skills in accounting and marketing, finance and organization.

The committee brings together the different groups and initiatives of the communities at the regional level, guaranteeing their representation; at the same time the committee guarantees access for all to new knowledge, feedback on local projects and dynamizing community life at the local level.

Ahuachapán and Santa Ana are no exception to the rural exodus: most young people migrate to the city and abroad, preferably to the United States. The women of the collective

have two open questions regarding their children. Through education, they avoid reproducing the classical and patriarchal role in their sons. At the same time, and especially from the self-saving groups as the main nucleus at the community level, they offer activities for children and adolescents, involving them in playful spaces and concrete activities in the processes of self-management, food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture. The challenge in all this is to correct the general negative image that living in the countryside is synonymous with a lack of opportunities. The second generation is already participating in the committee and in the local groups; the intergenerational aspect is in full swing.

Diversity, abundance and protagonism

As diverse as the productive enterprises in the different communities are, so too are the self-saving groups, in terms of the number of members, the volume of





sell the food we produce, along with other items, in a small community supermarket; the motivation for us to buy there instead of in other places is that by buying in our small supermarket, we make sure that the profit stays with us and at the end of the year we share the profits". Doña Ena is the head of her family, she has more than a thousand laying hens and distributes the egg production in her town on her motorcycle. Doña Ena's dynamism is something the women of the committee have in common: they don't stop!

Entrepreneurship and Well-Being

The diversity of women's small businesses **aims at quality of life and local well-being rather than quick profits.**

The Committee and its local groups, with the support of the diocesan Caritas, have oriented their work and their desired future from a reading and conviction of abundance, overcoming scarcity as an emotional and motivational limiting factor in the search for the future. Starting from this abun-

dance and putting into practice their conviction and ability to create new realities has become the path and the protagonism of women; or in the words of Marta Julia Puente: "We are liberal women". And, undoubtedly, empowered.

What can be your choice of initiative?

Think on how you could apply these lessons in your own community.

Mind maps and a recipe for success

When asked to express in a single word what the committee process means to people, there was a flood of words, some of which were: "happiness, knowledge, human fabric, unity, quality of life, hope, strength, independence, solidarity, pride, empathy, commitment, potential, harmony and coexistence". And as lessons learned,

the people gathered share with us: "Perseverance, faith, affective nurturing, desire for self-improvement, strengthening self-esteem, accepting ourselves as we are, tolerance". And as a moral: "The path is not easy, but it is not difficult either".

What other tips do you apply in your empowerment process?

Leave us a message on our social networks to share with the community!

Messages to the Future

- 1 "From the moment we realized that we are capable of much more than what we have always been told, we have not stopped". When new knowledge and organizational accompaniment intersect with people's protagonism and autonomy, self-determination is born and the implementation of the creation of new realities.
- 2 The analysis of reality from a reading and conviction in abundance, overcoming scarcity as an emotional and motivational limiting factor, opens new perspectives to outline and achieve desired futures.
- 3 The experience shows the feasibility of shifting and transforming paradigms: from redefining roles and overcoming patriarchy to rehabilitating the degraded image of rural life.



Almanac of the Future

The text was prepared based on conversations with several members of the self-monitoring committee, among them members of its board of directors: Isabel Samayoa, Laura García, Cecilia Martínez, Vilma Esquivel, Concepción Pineda and Concepción Valle and people from the Caritas of the diocese of Santa Ana, among them Rosaura Aguirre and Manuel Morán during a day in the community La Coyotera, in the department of Ahuachapán by Jorge Krekeler (coordinator of the Almanac of the Future - facilitator of Misereor on behalf of Agiamondo) in July 2024. Thank you very much to all for your openness, love and interest. Special thanks to Guillermo Navarro of Caritas El Salvador for his support and accompaniment throughout the tour of the country, generating complicity around weaving synergy to build the future from the present.

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