

Linking Ethics and the Market

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Linking Ethics and the Market

Campesino Economic Strategies in the Bolivian Andes

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The economic behavior of campesinos has long been a prominent issue in development debates. Models used to explain economic behavior have generally been based on the theoretical assumptions of specific (Western) schools of thought. Consequently, economics is determined by the theory that informs a particular study without considering the meaning that campesinos impart to the economy as actors in a social context. For example, barter, reciprocity, and trans-

formation are far more relevant forms of economic activity than production for market. An actor-oriented approach that is not based on preconceived, nonlocal concepts can therefore be helpful in reconstructing “internal” concepts that allow new inputs for reflection, thereby contributing to innovative economic approaches and activities in development programs.



FIGURE 1 Barter is a strategy for ensuring food security and quality. It is based on friendship and solidarity among farmers producing different types of food. This exchange involves a pot of maize for a pot of potatoes. (Photo by AGRUCO)

Reality from a local perspective

Adopting an actor-oriented approach to development means trying to perceive reality through the eyes of local people—in this case, actors in the joint Bolivian–Swiss Agroecología Universidad Cochabamba project (AGRUCO). Reality from an actor-oriented perspective must be understood as the result of the interplay between essential elements in the domains of material, social, and spiritual life (Figure 1). All aspects of everyday life need to be analyzed and interpreted in terms of their material, social, and spiritual dimensions. Using this approach to analyze the economic strategies of Bolivian *campesinos* makes it possible to gain new insights into the strategies of social actors.

Participatory research has shown that one way of grasping actors’ economic perceptions is to look in detail at allocation of agricultural production (see Figure 2).

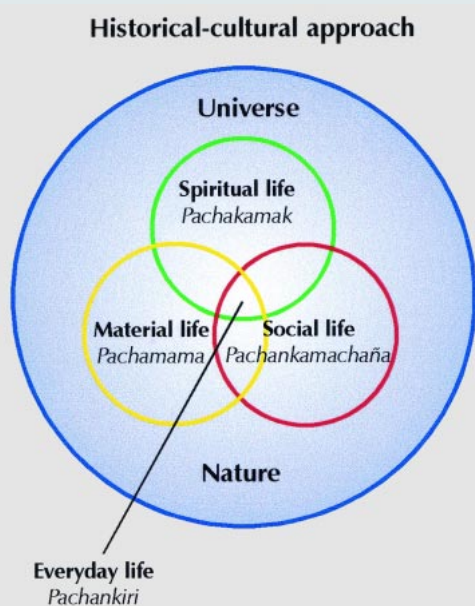
Although potatoes are the most important cash crop for Andean highland farmers, only about 4% of the harvest is sold; 96% of all production is used for household consumption, transformation (*chuño*), redistribution between families in the community (barter and reciprocity), or reproduction of the next crop cycle (seeds; see Figure 3). Monetary analysis of this economy, while certainly possible, would not shed light on the reasons for its specific ways of distributing production. Potato production is guided by multiple objectives to achieve simultaneous satisfaction of productive, social, and cultural needs in the short term as well as on medium- and long-term bases.

The fact that marketable commodities are not the basis of decision-making among Andean farmers does not mean that farmers ignore the logic of the market economy. On the contrary—when asked whether he was looking forward to selling a large crop due to a good growing season, one Aymara farmer answered that he hoped to sell little since the price of potatoes had dropped as a result of overproduction. He planned instead to preserve and store most of his crop for later use (Figure 4). Too many projects that promote “technology packages” designed to increase production and cash income ignore such insights and contribute to the decline of food prices by failing to take actors’ perspectives into account.

Reciprocity: a marginal traditional residue or a modern strategy?

The persistence of reciprocity and barter, which are as important as marketing in terms of allocation, is often seen as a

FIGURE 2 An actor-oriented historical-cultural approach to understanding the Andean cosmovision that informs everyday life. (Source: San Martín 1997)



missed opportunity for increased commodity production. Consequently, very little attention is paid to social relations of this sort, either at the analytical level or with respect to their potential for enhancing livelihood strategies. Adoption of an actor-oriented perspective, however, reveals that this results from a bias in favor of economic reductionism. Figure 3 shows that, in addition to commodity production, some potatoes are used as seeds to assure the next crop cycle. Because of the great diversification of agroecosystems in the Andes, it is crucial to have the right potato variety for every microclimate. Consequently, families cultivate over 40 varieties, of which only about 4 have commercial value. This is the basis of subsistence-oriented production to ensure basic food security at the family and community levels.

But even after technology, ecology, and food security are taken into account, certain hidden factors still remain to be considered. Campesinos explain this as follows: “For us, potatoes are living beings; every one has its own potato family. If we mistreat them, they get angry and tired and some day they will abandon us.” This intimate relationship between human beings and seeds illustrates that, even with better opportunities for commodity production, any productive activity would

continue to be shaped by cultural factors.

The impressive level of crop diversity in the Andes is related to a land-use system based on a sectoral fallow system known as *ayanoka*, in which crop production for all families in the community is concentrated in rotating sectors. This compulsory 3-year crop rotation is followed by a 9-year fallow period. Thus, even with better opportunities to produce for the market, potential potato production would be restricted by a sustainable land-use system based on the natural restoration of soil fertility.

Many reciprocal forms of social cooperation take place in the context of the *ayanoka* system (Table 1). The common principles underlying these social relations are solidarity and redistribution in search for equity. These forms of cooperation result from different combinations of temporarily shared assets such as labor, land, animal traction (for plowing and transportation), and products. The absence of money is an important feature of all these forms of mutual relationship.

The example of *waki* illustrates the effect of these relationships. When a family possesses more land than it can cultivate with its own labor (eg, older or “richer” families), it associates itself temporarily with another family that has surplus labor available (eg, younger or “poorer” fami-

FIGURE 3 Typical allocation of the potato production of 3 families in the Aymara community of Mujlli, 4000 masl, in 1996.

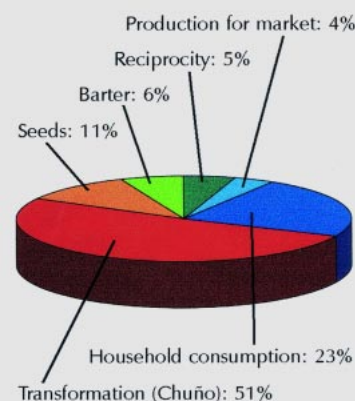


FIGURE 4 Several varieties of potato are spread on the field after harvest in preparing *chuño*. (Photo by AGRUCO)



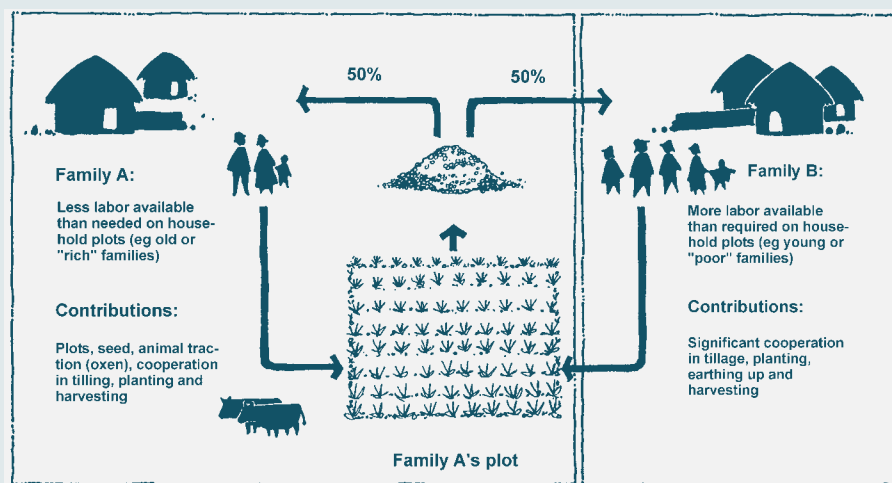


FIGURE 5 *Waki*, an Andean form of cooperation based on reciprocity.

lies). The harvest is evenly distributed, permitting a greater total food production for the two families (Figures 5,6). *Waki* and other forms of reciprocal cooperation, for example, *ayni* (Figure 7), help to compensate for differences in access to land or labor and other resources. The aim is to guarantee a minimum level of subsistence for all families through social cooperation. Principles of solidarity and equity are thus internalized by the families and become moral values. This puts exchange relationships in an ethical perspective.

TABLE 1 Forms of reciprocal cooperation in the community of Mujlli.

Type	Characteristics	Practiced in	Possible types of gifts exchanged		
			Product for product	Product for labor	Labor for labor
<i>Yanapa</i>	Spontaneous, voluntary cooperation. No immediate exchange of gifts required. Implies acceptance of long-term reciprocity without fixed terms of exchange.	Productive, social and spiritual (ritual) activities	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Ayni</i>	Spontaneous among related families. Obligation to give back gifts in short to medium term.	Every kind of activity	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Umaraka</i>	Arranged in advance, work in groups of 6–15 families. Good and abundant food is offered; host participates in <i>umaraqas</i> with guests.	Agriculture and home-building	No	No	Yes
<i>Waki</i> or <i>compañia</i>	Specific and formalized cooperation over 1 to several years. Practiced within and between communities.	Agriculture, livestock, handicrafts, off-farm activities	No	Yes	Yes
<i>Minka</i>	Little formality; practiced within and between communities and also with traders.	Harvesting	No	Yes	No

Cosmovision: The Andean view of the universe and reciprocity

As in the case of potato seeds, social forms of cooperation also have a cultural dimension. They are conceived as forms of reciprocity that shape the relationship between humans and *Pachamama* or “Mother of the Earth.” *Pachamama* is one of the principal spiritual elements in the Andean cultural universe. A peasant from Japo expressed this as follows: “If a person is good-hearted, he will always have at least some production; he will then receive the benediction of *Pachamama*.” Production thus takes on a moral connotation that links the spiritual world of *Pachamama* to the social, personal, and natural spheres of life.

Farmers’ perceptions of production thus involve concepts that go beyond mere economic and materialistic considerations: production is the result of interplay between human beings, their communities, and the spiritual entities that animate what the Western world calls “natural resources.”

Much of the potato crop is used for barter. By contrast with market conditions, barter is based on equivalents that have a constant value. The aim of barter, which is

FIGURE 6 *Waki*: Parents help their son and daughter-in-law by sharing oxen, which a young family cannot yet afford. (Photo by AGRUCO)



motivated by the complementarity of Andean ecosystems, is to ensure general food security. At the moment he decided the quantity of potatoes he would plant, a farmer from Mujlli (at an altitude of 4000 m) pointed to some furrows ready for planting and exclaimed happily, “I will use these few furrows of potatoes to ‘crop’ the maize *Pachamama* is giving to the valley people.” He was referring to the quantity of maize he would obtain by barter with his potatoes, independent of prices or availability of capital. Barter thus plays a major role in guaranteeing ethical redistribution through social relations based on the Andean world view.

Preparation of *chuño* plays a primary role in transformation. After harvest, potatoes are spread across the fields so they can freeze and thaw repeatedly for several days in the cold and frosty nights of the postharvest season until they have lost nearly all their water (see Figure 4). Now known as *chuño*, these potatoes can easily be stored for several years. *Chuño* is distributed in much the same way as fresh potatoes: most is for family consumption. The rest can be sold as a commodity or used either as a bartering object or a gift.

Contrary to barter or market exchange, gifts have no fixed value. They are offered as an expression of spiritual and emotional affection to another person, to a family, or to a community. The main function of this form of reciprocity, or *yanapa*, is to enhance existing friendships and establish new ones in terms of explicitly expressed social and spiritual responsibilities. The exchange is based on affinity rather than an interest in earning additional income or social prestige. The mere quantitative aspects of exchange are replaced by Andean ethical values such as friendship, solidarity, autonomy, food security, and equity.

The *campesinos* of the Altiplano have practiced *yanapa*, or *cambiacuy*, in their annual journeys to the lower valley region of Ayopaya since time immemorial. Visitors carry *chuño* as well as a special cheese produced during the rainy season and other typical products. On arrival, they practice *cambiacuy* and also barter with their relatives, who wait eagerly for gifts in the form of products they cannot produce in their own ecosystem. In turn, they offer the best maize and other food to their highland visitors, who are happy to complement their diets with the tasty products of the valleys. The diets of both valley and Altiplano dwellers are thus improved in quantity and quality by food from a complementary ecosystem. Some researchers have labeled this the “moral economy.”

Reconquest of the market by the “moral economy”

Many attempts have been made to implement a market economy since the Andes were first colonized. Although these attempts at “modernization” have brought some success, external elements are still interpreted in the context of indigenous strategies. This results in an ongoing internal reshaping of modernity. This counterdevelopment becomes apparent if we analyze how *campesinos* began to reshape market relationships. Some 25 years ago, communities began to organize their own weekly markets. The first step was community organization (Figure 8). The *agente de feria*, or “market guardian,” was added to the existing rotation of honorary community posts.



FIGURE 7 *Ayni*: Llamas are shared for transportation of crops from the field to the settlement. (Photo by AGRUCO)



FIGURE 8 Frequently held community meetings are a forum for deliberation of the blend between local Andean economic traditions and the modern market economy. (Photo by AGRUCO)

Besides collecting fees from the traders, the *agente* has to make sure that dealers do not get a chance to buy products from arriving farmers outside the public market place before the latter have a chance to know the current prices. He is also responsible for preventing traders from using rigged scales and identifying violators and reporting them to the community board of authorities for sanctions.

Control of barter is another important responsibility of the *agente*. He must determine whether barter equivalents are used honestly and intervene when a trader seeks to trick a farmer. The *campesinos* claim the “right” to choose whether they want to purchase something offered by traders or barter for it. If a trader repeatedly refuses to accept barter, the *agente* must intervene to make the trader understand that even people who lack money must have the chance to purchase things they cannot produce with their own hands.

Another strategy for reshaping the market economy is to ensure the best possible social and material well-being of the traders. This is motivated by the knowledge that a large community of traders is advantageous for prices as well as barter because it means greater demand. The *agente* is therefore responsible for keeping the marketplace clean and assigning adequate and convenient space to traders. This short-term aspect of the strategy is complemented by long-term projects such as the installation of water taps for drinking water on the marketplace or construction of a modern market hall.

In the cosmivision of Andean farmers, relations with traders would be incomplete if restricted to social and economic dimensions. Consequently, the weekly market is also an arena for celebration of two important feasts in which traders also participate. During these feasts, traders are involved in the exchange of gifts, dancing, and drinking, concluding with the traditional ritual of *challa*. This ritual is carried out to ask *Pachamama* to be benevolent with traders and farmers and help them maintain peaceful relations in the coming year.

Simultaneous use of the market economy and reciprocity is regarded by the *campesinos* as a further strategy. Since they are aware that prices would drop considerably if they offered all their products for sale at once, they try to sell as little as possible when prices are low, preferring to rely on barter and reciprocity. The transformation of potatoes into *chuño* is part of this strategy since it allows fewer fresh products on the market during the harvest season, when prices are too low.

Income and education

Although one aim of *campesino* economic strategies is to obtain a fair market price for products, families still need additional income. Because intensification of agricultural production would be useless under present market conditions, *campesinos* have developed another strategy based on two basic insights: First, they are aware of the economic and ecological limitations involved in intensifying production. Second, they realize that they can earn two to three times more from every workday spent on off-farm activities than by trying to increase agricultural production.

The main off-farm activities, such as production of traditional handicrafts or temporal migration to urban centers or to the Chapare region where coca is grown, have proven to be most worthwhile. A growing number of peasants are also focusing on commercialization of foodstuffs and cattle. This expansion of peasants’ economic strategies follows the same pattern observed in the agricultural sphere. The type and combination of off-farm activities are based on the ethical

principles that govern life in the community. Temporary migration is facilitated through a tight network of parental and symbolic kinship, requiring permanent inputs of material, social, emotional, and spiritual resources.

Families also make great efforts to ensure that they and their children get as much education as possible. "Education is important because it offers our children a chance to earn a living somewhere else since there are simply too many of us to earn a livelihood in our own communities." Education for adults is also considered essential for better orientation in the context of the rapidly growing social networks related to off-farm strategies.

Implications for development projects and policymaking

We have seen that the persistence of reciprocity cannot be attributed only to the lack of market opportunities. It must be seen as an element in the sociocultural strategies Andean farmers use in attempting to reshape the market economy, based on the ethical principles of solidarity, equity, and a minimum degree of ecological sustainability. This is superior to mere maximization of individual benefits.

Even if the amount of products exchanged through reciprocal social relations is marginal, they still play a crucial role in terms of social action, allowing internalization of a set of ethical principles derived from the Andean cosmovision. Diversification of activities is also important in Andean peasant economic strategies to prevent unsustainable land use through various networks unrelated to local natural resources. The effect of social networks is enhanced by a great variety of existing as well as new forms of reciprocity.

Consideration of *campesino* social strategies could be helpful in creating new

Two different views of the economic value of a potato crop

The following dialogue, which took place between a development cooperation expert and an Aymara farmer at the weekly market in Confital, illustrates a frequent bias still inherent in too many projects that promote "technology packages" designed to increase production.

Expert: *What was your potato production like this year?*

Farmer: *Quite good. We had enough rain and only a few minor frosts.*

Expert: *So you are lucky. You will be able to sell quite a lot of potatoes this year.*

Farmer: *Well, I hope that I won't have to sell many.*

Expert: *Why not, if production was so good?*

Farmer: *Well, you know, since the potato harvest was so plentiful almost everywhere this year, the price of potatoes is quite low right now. That's why we'll produce more chuño (dehydrated potatoes), which we can store for many years.*

approaches and innovative methodologies for dealing with rural economies and identifying social and cultural entry points for enhancing these strategies. Andean farmers are taking part in a world-wide movement of people engaged in the creation of alternatives to high economic growth and globalization. *Campesinos* are not opposed to the market economy in principle but are trying to reshape its individualistic and materialistic aspects based on a reevaluation of their traditional world view and the ethical principles they derive from it in a changing and dynamic context.

The combination of market- and reciprocity-based economies is thus becoming an important element in a social learning process. Development programs should pay special attention to this as a means of supporting cooperation activities that are both more sustainable and ethically justifiable. Rather than ignoring the sociocultural roots of development, such activities could take them as an entry point for integrating emerging learning processes into the framework of intercultural dialogue.

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