

Gathering cooperation

Women mollusk gatherers of rural Costa Rica are leading the way in becoming self-reliant and organized

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Costa Rica has about 14,800 artisanal fishers who inhabit coastal areas of the country. Artisanal fisheries are among the most vulnerable sectors, with the highest levels of poverty for rural livelihood in the country.

Mollusk gathering from mangroves is an important source of livelihood for women in the country. There are over five thousand women mollusk gatherers, engaged in harvesting shellfish in mangroves in the country. Most of these women are heads of their households and the main wage earners. Chomes district is home to around a hundred mollusk gatherers.

According to the mollusk gatherers in Chomes, they earn between USD 1000 and USD 2000 as annual income. The average family income of around USD 160 per month was less than half the poverty wage of USD 355 per month for the year 2015. The poverty wage represented the average wage of the lowest 20 per cent of the Costa Rican population.

CoopeMoluscos R.L., is a community organization of women in Chomes, who harvest mangrove mollusks for their livelihood. It is located in the Central

Pacific coast of Costa Rica in the province of Puntarenas, in the Chomes district.

The organization of women in the Chomes started with the emergency caused by the red tide that lasted for eight months in 2013, resulting in loss of income for mollusk gatherers. A red tide is a natural phenomenon, the result of an increase in the amount of algae that produces a red coloration in the sea. Such algal blooms produce a lot of toxins that make shellfish and fish unfit for consumption. As one woman explained, “We had to give value to our productive activity. We had to look for work and to find new productive opportunities to survive.” The organizing initiative was supported by the National Institute for Social Aid (IMAS), which coordinated training and work for the women in the community. In 2014, the National Institute for Cooperative Development (INFOCOOP) supported the women to form a cooperative organization.

Today the organization has 96 women members of different ages and from different backgrounds. They have started a mangrove recovery process with reforestation and clean-up actions. The organization has also applied for a use permit by the government so that mollusk gathering is formally recognized and protected against being termed “illegal”. The women also have other entrepreneurship ideas for income generation. These include a soda counter that can sell food to fishermen to take when they go fishing and rural tourism activities such as sharing their knowledge of mollusk gathering with tourists. A storage facility for preserving the shellfish is also on the list.

The women know that the work is not easy, and are aware of the threats facing the mangrove ecosystem on which their livelihood depends. The damage to the mangroves is due to a lack of social awareness in the community as well as a lack of regulation of the activities of large private companies engaged in shrimp aquaculture in the neighborhood. In addition, the women have to worry about health problems caused by difficult working conditions, and dealing with markets that are unfair and heavily dependent on middlemen.

The mollusk gatherers work involves many risks. The risks and hazards the women most frequently encounter include cuts from branches or glass, wounds from thorns,

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falls and broken bones, skin fungus, worms, arthritis and stroke resulting from sudden temperature changes; crocodiles in the channels; intense sun, wind, rain and storm; insect bites, snakes, jellyfish wounds, brittle nails, infections of all kinds, pain in the back, legs and feet, assaults from people outside the community, bee stings, boat accidents, mosquitoes, dehydration, exposure to toxic algae, heatstroke, and allergies from contact with mud.

While it is not easy to counter these problems, the women have devised certain creative protection strategies: they carry food and water and wear gloves and shoes while harvesting; they walk slowly and carefully, smearing mud on their arms or using repellents to prevent mosquito bites; they wear belts or use painkillers to relieve backache; and they wash up thoroughly after getting out of the mangroves, using chlorine to disinfect their hands and feet.

The mollusk gatherers of Chomes are important to the development of their community. They play a critical role in giving their families a better quality of life. Thanks to them, other women in the community are becoming more environmentally conscious. They know how to fish and support their peers in the task. They perform various tasks related to fishing in their community: marking the rope that measures the depth for fishing; helping

with sewing and repairing nets; loading nets onto the boats; and preparing food for the men going out on fishing trips. In addition, they have their own work in the mangroves, and of selling the harvest. Afterwards, they return home to continue with housework. They are the ones who provide childcare, attend to their houses and companions, and help children with schoolwork. Some have even gone back to studying once again. Furthermore, they say: “If fishing is not good, or if mollusk gathering is not good, we organize community activities to raise funds to help the organization”.

The workday of the mollusk gathering women is long and hard. They generally do not receive much help from their partners or other family members. What then is the hope for the future? Organizations such as INCOPECA, CoopeSoliDar R.L. and CoopeMoluscos R.L. have been working towards providing long-term support for this group of women. They hope to integrate the group under the framework of the Small-scale Guidelines, and gain the support of various government and civil society institutions to ensure decent working conditions for these women. They expect that the work of mollusk gathering will be formally recognized by the government of the Republic of Costa Rica within a year, thus ensuring access rights to the territory and the mangrove resources for the community. ❏

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