

Bertha Pumaquero, Chimborazo Ecuador

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Like hundreds of rural farmers from the Chimborazo mountain province in Ecuador, Bertha Pumaquero abandoned her community when she was young and emigrated with her parents to the provincial city of Riobamba. They were in search of better access to education and health care, something difficult or nearly impossible to find in her native village.

When Bertha reached adolescence she became a wife and a mother, and quickly understood the difficulty of raising a family while overcoming the hardships of poverty. She took a job as a secretary at the Chimborazo Provincial Office of Bilingual and Intercultural Education (DIPEIBCH), which supports bilingual (Kichwa and Spanish) education at both the grade school and adult, non-formal education levels. Bertha's job gave her the opportunity to attend and learn from a number of courses, workshops and conferences. "I started without knowing much at all – but little by little I became a community educator, and then a representative. They trusted me with more and more responsibility because I knew the needs and intricacies of my community."

Bertha began making visits to the smallest villages in the Chimborazo province. She even traveled to a community only accessible by horseback and more than 15 hours from Riobamba. Bertha pointed out: "In that community, there were many health and education needs. I said to myself, 'there is a lot of work to be done here; everyone deserves to be looked after and attended to.' I knew it would be difficult because in rural villages like this there is high illiteracy and there are no health centers."



Bertha administers a literacy test in a community.
Photo: Stephen Sherwood

Motivated by her experience, Bertha began searching for resources for these villages, and used what little influence she had as an educator and representative to encourage the communities to become better organized. However, when the educational authorities changed their policies in 2003, Bertha's efforts were interrupted; she was forced to prioritize office work and her visits to the communities became limited.

“I was put on “lock down” in the office; they ‘clipped my wings.’ But by doing so, they gave me another set of wings to keep flying.” It was then that Bertha and other local women joined forces to create the Foundation *Achik Ñan* (Quichua for “the shining way”). “We have a name for our organization, but we don’t have any funds. What we do have is an overwhelming amount of love and devotion to work hard in order to help our fellow farmers and community members.”

From this small dream, Bertha has empowered and trained women to become qualified midwives, catalyzed a movement for small organic gardens, and initiated a number of other activities in diverse communities. For Bertha, it is crucial that rural people not only acquire modern knowledge, technology and skills, but that they also conserve their traditions.

Bertha explains; “In order to improve our lives we must learn more, but should continue to value and preserve our own ways and recognize the wisdom in our ancestral practices.”



On a “Farmer Field School (FFS) Day,” Bertha guides a diverse group of visitors through an organic farm. *Photo: Stephen Sherwood*

Thanks to *Achik ñan*, Bertha has successfully fueled change in many of Chimborazo’s communities. However, with growth, the organization has encountered new challenges. For example, “people think that we have a lot of money, and they ask

us to build them a health center, or give them farm animals, but we simply don’t have enough funds. Our biggest problem is always our budget, but in spite of this, we continue to push forward.”

Bertha never stops dreaming of the future. She says that she is a “passenger” on this path, and that many more will follow in her footsteps: “what I want more than anything is to see more female leaders who have the confidence, love and work ethic to serve their community. I know that there are more indigenous women like me; we just have to do away with fear. I used to be a coward who was frightened to speak in front of anyone. Now I am a leader, and I’m sure that there will be many more women that will gain the confidence to follow this same path.” Every day, Bertha helps empower indigenous women in the Chimborazo province to overcome their struggles and discrimination.

In collaboration with Bertha, DIPEIBCH and EkoRural support integrated health-agriculture development in 21 of the 460 communities supported by the bilingual education program.