

Elena Tenelema, Tzimbuto Quincaguan, Chimborazo Province

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June 21, 2010

Elena Tenelema is a young indigenous woman from the small village of Tzimbuto Quincaguan, tucked at over 4,000 meters high in the folds of the Chimborazo Province. When Elena was 16, she joined her father (president of the community) at town meetings, where she learned to participate in local decision-making. At age 33, she has become a respected town leader and Coordinator for the newly formed association *Nuevo Amanecer* (“New Rising”), which consists of over 50 regional farmers.



As a young female, Elena’s position in her community is unique, however, her progressive vision for Tzimbuto’s future has been more controversial than her gender or age. Elena has encouraged equality, harmony, and cooperative work within families and the community, as opposed to conventional norms that separate women and children from men. Elena explained “it has been difficult for the town elders to accept certain changes, but eventually some begin to understand that men, women, and children must work together.”

Elena’s biggest challenge has been empowering the women in her community ; “like the farm animals, the women would rarely leave their homes and didn’t have any rights.” It has been a long journey, but Elena’s efforts are finally coming to fruition. “There are now about ten women who have become leaders in the community - they are no longer afraid to speak openly and participate in town meetings. Also, many more young women are attending high school and college.”

Unlike most women, who are excluded from capacity-building workshops and discriminated by their family for taking on responsibilities in the community, Elena had the support of her parents and siblings. However, her extended relatives continue to be skeptical of Elena’s work. “My uncles and cousins ask me why I would go into the streets if I have everything I need in my home – what could I possibly be looking for? But I know my motivation is different, and with my father, mother and siblings’ understanding, I can be confident and happy in what I do.”



In a community workshop, Elena explains biodiverse cultivation on a participant’s farm, an agroecological method of production for preserving plant diversity and maximizing space and output (as opposed to growing one single crop, or “mono-cropping”).

Thanks to her family's support, Elena is finishing her studies this year, and has already become a community educator. She helps Tzimbabwe's youth learn how to invest in their education and their land through micro-credit loans from a community savings fund. Elena also runs agroecology courses for adults in the community garden. "Before, almost everyone emigrated to nearby cities, leaving their land unattended or to be managed by the women who stayed behind. Now, about 50% of the community emigrates, but most of them realize it is better to work in agriculture, and soon return."

There is still a lot of work to be done, but Elena's biggest goal is to give more women like her the chance to improve their confidence, learn to read and write, and recognize that "women have the right to participate and make decisions!"