

## **Innovations and a cooperative in a “place of escape”**

### **Promoting sustainable agriculture in the Andes**

**Chitapampa lies on the road to the historic Sacred Valley of the Incas, between Cusco and Calca, 3500 meters up in the Andes. Felix Quispe Arqque, Sonia Arqque Usca and their five children are one of the families dedicated to farming there.**

The Arqque Usca family was one of the first to inhabit what was formerly known as the *Ayllu* (Clan) of Chitapampa. In 1947, Felix' great-grandfather got the village officially recognized as a community.

In the local language Quechua, Chitapampa means a place of escape. Felix Arqque proudly tells us: "In the stories of our ancestors, the Inca Yahuar Huacac had an heir who was rebellious and constantly disobedient. He was punished and imprisoned, but escaped and fled to the mountains. But later he formed a great army in Chitapampa to support his father against the Chankas, and returned in triumph."



In the burning bright Andean sun that accompanies Felix and Sonia in all their chores, growing the greenhouse vegetables is what keeps them going. "In our family, we all share the responsibility; my husband does the heavy work, and I take care of the pruning and clearing. When our kids finish school each day, we all work together, weeding, harvesting and taking our crops to the market. Our children always support us. They appreciate the work we do, and our family is blessed with wonderful benefits", says an emotional Sonia.

### **Creativity is born from difficulty**

It is said that tradition defines identity. Sometimes novelty can be worrying because it's unknown and carries no real guarantee of success. Despite this, Felix wanted to change the lack of organization among the community's growers. He says he had to take a risk in bringing them together and explaining the benefits that a new type of collaborative work could bring. Felix recalls: "It was difficult for us to get together. Initially there were only five partners, and that was too few for participation in the Qorichacra\* project. We had to bring together at least eleven."

To get the technical work done properly (assembling greenhouses, implementation, design etc), he initially hired a company. But it did not meet the producers' expectations. That was when Felix put into practice what he had learned from his own training in different skills, which he had undergone on instinct and as a precaution. "We took over responsibility for the greenhouses. After several attempts we achieved what we wanted; we knew about the ley of the land, wind direction and the changes in temperature. So we agreed to build them ourselves," says Felix. The experience prompted him to teach his friends what he had learned.



In the Qorichacra project, the Syngenta Foundation provides technical assistance for the vegetable production and the greenhouse operation. It also supports the collective effort to make an integrated offer and communicate better with the bigger customers. "We are close to Cusco. We can sell vegetables, we have good soil, irrigation and agricultural practices. We knew we could get Cusco to take our products", says Felix with the enthusiasm of one determined to achieve his goal.

Being organized and working hard on the Qorichacra project have allowed Felix to discover a new type of sustainable and profitable agriculture. Felix emphasizes the significant contribution of the Syngenta Foundation in Chitapampa and acknowledges its support.

### **Great progress, further goals**

"Before, we didn't work like this. Our production was mostly for our own consumption and we didn't know about the newer agricultural techniques. The Syngenta Foundation and its partners invested in training us on greenhouses, seeds, irrigation, harvesting, post-harvesting techniques, and the creation of a genuine business network. "

From this experience of innovation and entrepreneurship came the need to create a cooperative. Responsibility for its leadership fell to Felix. "With all the knowledge we have acquired, it's time to grow and to think big. I relish challenges. We have negotiated with big companies like Sodexo, McDonald's and Grupo Gastronomico to buy our spinach, lettuce, celery and other produce."

Felix and his friends from Chitapampa have already achieved a lot. This includes obtaining *AGROIDEAS* support from the Peruvian state. They are also on track to achieve GlobalGAP certification. This will give their products a standard international classification. However, there is also space for further improvement. "We need transportation infrastructure - a truck, a store, a shop or an office in the city of Cusco", says Felix. "We want to be an official company in the region. We also want better housing conditions and a higher quality of life for our families".

**\*More information on the Qorichacra project is available on [www.syngentafoundation.org/index.cfm?pageID=677](http://www.syngentafoundation.org/index.cfm?pageID=677)**



*Photographs and original text: Katherine Tairo  
Adapted from the Spanish by Lionel Stanbrook & Paul Castle*