

# Sweet Rose in the Field

*This series explores praxis in agroecology transitions. Praxis is a critical concept in participatory research and action and can be understood as the dialectical interaction of theory/reflection and practice/action that opens the possibility for contributing to social transformation.*



Ross Mary Borja is the Director of [EkoRural](#) in Ecuador. EkoRural is a local NGO in Ecuador and a member of the global association organization [Groundswell International](#). Building on 15 years of program experience, EkoRural is committed to helping people help themselves. Before being Director of EkoRural, Ross Borja worked in the province of Esmeraldas with Afro-Ecuadorian communities on issues related to rural development and agriculture. She also worked for the World Neighbors Andes program, developing a global small business system in Ecuador and Peru. She has a BA in Economics from the Catholic University of Ecuador in Quito and a Master's in Professional Studies from Cornell University's Rural and Community Development Program in the Department of Rural Sociology. She also has experience in supporting farmer field schools.

The Agroecological Support (AES) team asked Ross to share some of the lessons she has learned throughout her career supporting participatory processes of agroecological transition in farming communities.

## Interview

**AES:** Based on your experience, what are the keys to processes of agroecological transition?

**Ross Mary Borja:** To answer this question, we need to ask: how do indigenous communities see agroecology? The biggest challenge is creating a synergy between local knowledge or people's science and scientific knowledge. We believe that the farmer should shape the research agenda based on local needs. When scientists and institutions use people-centered methodologies, they generate processes that outlive the lifespan of the project or grant, helping marginalized people to generate improvements in their lives. My organization, EkoRural, is dedicated to helping people help themselves through the strengthening of local



leadership and organizational and self-management capacities. The goal is to support communities to analyze the roots of their problems and find lasting solutions.

**AES:** What happens when a scientific evaluation identifies one limiting factor, and the community is more concerned with another?

**Ross Mary Borja:** Our approach is people-centered, and focuses on endogenous development. We are facilitators of social innovation so that the communities themselves can influence their territory. In each territory there is a team, we have partners that allow us to be close to the field and generate evidence of what is happening. The first thing we do is talk to the local authorities and explain what we are going to do. Then we make life plans, community maps or dream maps with the community. In these processes, agroecology is one aspect of the many that are discussed. This process allows to identify what is happening and what people want to do to support local innovation and influence other organizations.

**AES:** Could you share an example of change in people or communities?

**Ross Mary Borja:** In our work we always identify an entry point that brings people together. The agenda becomes more complex, but it starts with something. To the agroecological producers in Cotopaxi, at the beginning they had interest in the loss of crops and after in how they could access to markets. The community authorities were interested in how to strengthen their agency and how to promote political changes at the municipal and provincial levels. Those spaces formed an organization for women's demands and helped them to become agents of change, which improved their self-esteem.

**AES:** You are highlighting participatory methods. How is the shift toward participatory methods going in agricultural research and development?

**Ross Mary Borja:** That is where we need to be agents of change. The more local the process, the better. And we see the results. During the pandemic, communities with experience in participatory processes were very



resilient, in terms of producing their own food and reintegrating migrants into the community as people lost their jobs in the cities and returned to their communities.

Rather than focus on needs, which becomes a paternalistic search, we focus on resources. What already exists that the community can harness to build an initiative? We look at resources and the potential for local innovation. We call it a social-technological standpoint: what small-scale innovations could help people change their situation?

In the end, the communities find solutions, and there are lessons in this for us. We need to find the kind of people who can facilitate these spaces.

**AES:** Last month, people around the world celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire. Do you think Freire's ideas have relevance today in the work that you and EkoRural carry out in rural agricultural communities?

**Ross Mary Borja:** Without a doubt. In the university, those who graduate in the field of agronomy or engineering have no idea of what rural extension work really is. They think their job is to visit and give recommendations. They don't realize that people need to discover things; there is a need to develop the capacity to observe.

Our work focuses on training promoters. Then we see which are the quickest learners, who are those with a real interest in research, and we invest in these people learning to facilitate processes.

Paulo Freire speaks of the "levels of consciousness". We use this in our work, too. Moving towards a critical consciousness. People learn to defend their position, to consider other positions, to make decisions. Freirian thinking democratizes knowledge.

**AES:** What inspires your work in the countryside?

**Ross Mary Borja:** I have always been inspired by my father's work in farming and his love for the land. He always said that you can have a dignified and happy life working in the fields. The problem is that young people no longer want to stay in rural communities. I work so that young people will dream again that the countryside is an option.

## REFERENCES:

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## Colophon

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**About the Agroecology and Livelihoods Collaborative:** The [Agroecology and Livelihoods Collaborative](#) (ALC) is a community of practice at the [University of Vermont](#), which utilizes an approach grounded in [agroecology](#), [participatory action research](#) (PAR) and [transdisciplinarity](#). The ALC approaches agroecology by integrating ecological science with other academic disciplines (e.g. agronomy, sociology, history, etc.) and knowledge systems (e.g. local, indigenous, etc.) to guide research and actions towards the sustainable transformation of our current agrifood system.

**About the CCRP Program:** The Collaborative Crop Research Program (CCRP) is a program of [the McKnight Foundation](#) that has funded agricultural research since the 1980s. Working in three regional [communities of practice \(CoPs\)](#) in Africa and South America, CCRP projects generate technical and social innovations to improve nutrition, livelihoods, productivity, environmental sustainability, rural vibrancy, and equity for farming communities. CCRP engages in local, regional, national and global processes to support agroecology transitions.