

IN THE MIDST OF A HEALTH CRISIS, THE POTATO RISES HIGH



COMMUNITIES OF THE POTATO PARK SHARE THEIR HARVEST WITH VULNERABLE POPULATIONS IN THE CITY OF CUSCO

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In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Peruvians are facing exceptional challenges as individuals and communities throughout the country as they confront job losses and food shortages in addition to the virus itself. However, these difficult times have an upside, in that they bring out the best in each of us, generating acts of solidarity; in the case of Peruvians it shows how ancestral values of solidarity, reciprocity, and balance remain in practice.

One such action is that of the Association of the Communities of the Potato Park, who on May 13, 2020 distributed more than 1 ton of native potatoes to migrants and other vulnerable groups in Cusco, including to migrants currently in quarantine at the local soccer stadium, a Geriatric Center, and Casa Mantay, a shelter for single abused teenage mothers.

The Potato Park is a biocultural heritage territory located in the district of Pisac, Cusco, composed of five indigenous Quechua communities. The area is globally renowned for its work conserving native potato (they conserve more than 1,300 varieties of potato, making the area home to the greatest diversity of potato found anywhere in the world) and has recently been recognized as an Agrobiodiversity Zone by the Ministry of Agriculture of Peru. The coronavirus has yet to arrive in these communities, but even so, the farmers have implemented exceptional health and safety measures.

Despite COVID-19, the harvest this year has been strong. “This is the result of 20 years of consistent work in re-localizing the food system of our communities in order to assure the right of our people to a sufficient supply of healthy food,” explained Mariano Sutta Apocusi, a local expert from the community of Pamapallaqta. “Focusing on the local has helped us to improve access to and affordability of a great diversity of food products, especially native potatoes, quinoa, kiwicha, other Andean tubers, and maize, which we cultivate using indigenous agroecological methods,” noted Sutta.

As part of their effort, the Potato Park has also created responses to climate change and developed strategies of caring for the environment, particularly conserving Andean biodiversity, food-producing

habitats, and natural water systems. “This has been fundamental for our food security and nutrition,” said Ricardina Paco Condori, a local expert from the community of Paru Paru. “Healthy lands produce healthy foods and farming native crops is much better because we know these strengthens our immunity and resistance to diseases like COVID-19.”

However, assuring healthy food for the entire Peruvian population will require changes in agricultural and food policies. “The pandemic is directly connected to the current global food system, and its corporate nature is creating a parallel food crisis that has deepened the misery of millions of people worldwide. To prevent further suffering, our government need to ensure that trade and investment agreements do not undermine local food systems but rather promote respect for human rights, sustainable livelihoods, and food sovereignty. The Potato Park is showing us that the most significant wealth that we have as a country is our traditional Andean agriculture and food system, not only for the high quality food it produces but because it carries the values that we badly need to pull us out of this crisis. This is the right moment to re-value and strengthen it,” said Cesar Argumedo, director of Asociación ANDES.

Lorenzo Huayta Bayona, the president of the Association of the Communities of the Potato Park asserts that “the potatoes that we bring today to our brothers and sisters who lack food in Cusco is a demonstration of *Ayni*, the Andean principle of solidarity and reciprocity which we have practiced since Incan times. Our food systems are profoundly connected to the principles of *Ayllu* (community), *Ayni* (reciprocity), and *Chaninchay* (equity), and these define our economy, health, and well-being. Our native potato is helping us to maintain these practices and encourages us to practice more *Ayni*.”

“The government should recognize the legacy of our ancestors and promote agriculture and food system with biocultural values. We hope that with these potatoes that we are sharing today, we are contributing to reorienting the response to the current crisis towards the Andean principles of solidarity and reciprocity. Thank you, potato” concluded Aniceto Ccoyo Ccoyo, a local expert from the community of Saccaca.

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BACKGROUND:

The Potato Park

The Potato Park is a biocultural conservation initiative located in the municipality of Pisac, Region of Cusco, Peru. It is composed of five indigenous communities (Amaru, Chawaytire, Pamapallaqta, Paru Paru, and Saccaca) and works in the conservation of Andean biodiversity, the promotion of indigenous rights, and the creation of innovative livelihoods. Asociación ANDES is an NGO based in Cusco, Peru that supports the Potato Park with research, coordination, and capacity building. Together, these two organizations work to create an ideal model for biocultural landscape management and the conservation of agrobiodiversity in Peru and around the world.

COVID-19 in Peru

On March 16, President Vizcarra declared a state of emergency which will remain in place until at least May 24, 2020, precipitating drastic changes to daily life and creating acute difficulties for urban populations in particular.

The spread of the virus in the country has been largely concentrated in urban lowland areas, with Lima alone accounting for 65% of the 76,306 reported cases in the country.¹ A recent survey carried out by the compañía peruana de estudios de mercados y opinión pública (CPI) in the regions of Lima and Callao found that more than 90% of respondents had lost some or all of their income since the beginning of the crisis; only 9% of respondents indicated that government assistance was helping them to cover their costs.²

The combination of these acute economic challenges and high risk of infection has led large numbers of individuals to attempt to leave Lima and other cities, returning to their homelands in the Andes and Amazon and reversing decades worth of urbanization in the country.³ As the pandemic has forced Peruvians into their homes and shut down economic activities from tourism to construction to mining, many people in cities have been left without the means to pay for food and shelter. These two interrelated conditions—hunger and risk of infection—have led tens of thousands of people to flee the city, beginning long walks back to their communities and hoping for government assistance. The government has intervened where possible, attempting to organize transportation for these migrants to safely make the journey home.⁴ However, given the ongoing risk of infection, these migrants must complete mandatory quarantines along the way, spending weeks at a time housed by the government in hotels, football stadiums, and other emergency lodging.

¹ https://covid19.minsa.gob.pe/sala_situacional.asp

² http://cpi.pe/images/upload/paginaweb/archivo/23/cuarentena_covid-19_gran_encuesta_en_lima_callao_24-28_abril_2020.pdf

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/30/world/americas/20virus-peru-migration.html>

⁴ https://cdn.www.gob.pe/uploads/document/file/671270/Lineamientos_TRASLADO_Y_CUARENTENA_-_1_mayo.pdf