

# Interlearning between farmers and students: Experiences within the framework of institutional collaboration between the University of Reading, the Santiago Antúnez de Mayolo University and Eclósio Zona Andina

By Diana Santos Shupingahua

Food Systems Specialist, Eclósio

Translation of the original article in Spanish published on 28 September 2023 and available here : [Interaprendizajes-agricultores-y-estudiantes-Universidad-de-Reading-y-UNASAM.pdf](#)

The connection between knowledge gained in the field and knowledge acquired in the classroom has always been part of Eclósio's work. As a university-based NGO, the organisation has made it one of its principles to facilitate conditions for the exchange and co-construction of knowledge in an inclusive and fair manner. Under these premises, it has ensured the development of institutional collaborations with study centres in Peru and other countries.



*Photo 1. Farmers, students, teachers, and project team in the Ampirá wetland.*

Since 2021, Eclósio has been collaborating with the University of Reading on the CROPP<sup>1</sup> project and locally with the Santiago Antúnez de Mayolo University (UNASAM) on the SAMA project. These collaborations are based on a participatory action research approach in which farmers – referred to as Farmer Researchers in the project – students, teachers, researchers and the project team work horizontally. An example of this was the visit by the CROPP research team and six students in the second half of June, with the mission of visiting eight communities in just 15 days. During that visit, two conferences were held with UNASAM and various government and civil society actors to share the initial results of the study, which showed the deterioration of water resources in the area due to climate change and how this was affecting the agriculture. Similarly, farmers presented their testimonies as the main actors, and the most vulnerable, in the face of this problem.

Over the following days, field visits were made to collect information (e.g., samples, interviews) that would allow for further analysis of the water problem from an interdisciplinary perspective. The visits to Aija, where the SAMA project is located, were carried out with farmers from the communities and students from UNASAM.

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<sup>1</sup> Eclósio participates and collaborates with the University of Reading in the United Kingdom through the CROPP project (Climate Resilience and Food Production in Peru), a research project on the challenges and strategies for adapting to climate change in the Andes that began in 2020 and ends this year.

Many lessons have been learned from these experiences through the testimonies of some farmers, students, teachers and the project team, highlighting: the exchange of knowledge, the participation and leadership of the communities, the differences in contexts and the role of NGOs in the process.

### ***The exchange of knowledge***

Perhaps the most visible fruit of these collaborations is the constant exchange of knowledge between communities and universities. On the one hand, communities share their experiences and knowledge based on their experiences and/or acquired throughout their careers and participation in projects. Farmers have been able to capitalise on this knowledge and have appropriated discourses on agroecology, field work, environmental protection and its relevance to the survival of cities.

*'...I visited rural communities in the Ancash region to discover the effects of climate change on agriculture and the potential threats it may cause beyond...'*

*Sophia Parr, student at the University of Reading*

For their part, universities collect this knowledge and contrast it with what is learned in the classroom, bringing and transmitting methodologies that can be very useful for communities (e.g., measurements of the health of wetlands).

*"I found it interesting because we were looking at the issue of water, which is gradually drying up, and it was interesting to do these studies with the equipment they brought. I really enjoyed learning and finding out things we didn't know before. To measure the water and the depth of the wetland for monitoring purposes, samples were taken there and wrapped in plastic, which I found very interesting. I would like to learn more in detail because sometimes we forget things when we only do them once, but when we do them often, we learn."*

*Flora, Agricultural Researcher from Aija*

*"Transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary work is interesting for understanding how the ancient populations of the Andes adapted to climate change. This can teach us how we should guide or strengthen adaptation actions in the Andes."*

*Christian Florencio, head of the Water component of the SAMA project, NGO Diaconía*

### ***Community participation and leadership***

Another noteworthy aspect was the commitment and notable participation of the communities, who accompanied the visit to Aija with the aim of learning about the methodologies brought by the students and teachers from Reading. Some community leaders were present at the conferences, where they expressed their concerns and demands regarding water.

*"...The visit to Aija was an enriching and rewarding experience. The people of Aija were welcoming and fully committed to the project's objectives. During our visit to the wetlands, it was great to see so much participation and interest from the local community. They clearly recognise the significance and value of the wetlands..."*

*Nicholas Branch, Professor in the Department of Palaeoecology at the University of Reading.*

*"I had a wonderful time in Peru and feel fortunate to have been able to visit such an incredible country. It was fantastic to be there learning about the Peruvian environment and how it is changing, and to see the impact this is having on local farmers."*

*Ben Rogers, student at the University of Reading*



Professor  
Nicholas  
Branch  
showing  
farmers and  
students how  
to extract  
samples from  
the soils of the  
bogs.

### ***Differences in context***

For the Peruvian students, the visit allowed them to observe the differences between themselves and their peers in Reading. They say that these processes enriched their knowledge and their way of seeing other realities through the exchange. The communities also noticed the contrasts and welcomed them as a positive learning experience.

*"...An educational adventure where I gained a positive perception of their organisation, which enriched my knowledge. I also witnessed the educational approach that they [the students in Reading] apply in an organised manner, maintaining a cultural diversity that is obviously different from Peru, starting with food, dance, language, etc. These visits are important for us as they allow us to continue growing and learning, as well as exchanging ideas in a timely manner..."*

*Vima Melgarejo, UNASAM student*

*'...we shared experiences of our cultures by sharing dances, food and, above all, the research they came to do, which involved studying archaeological remains and the bofedal to assess the decline in water and vegetation cover. Soil samples were also taken for further study...'*

*Alejandro Rosales, UNASAM student*

### ***The role of NGOs in the process***

Similarly, the visit highlighted the role that NGOs play as mediators and facilitators for knowledge exchange. This was expressed by some teachers and students who noticed differences between the activities they conducted themselves and those facilitated by Eclósio and its partner Diaconía.

The value of these mediations is crucial for participatory action research because they are based on close and trusting relationships between communities and organisations, facilitating exchange between students, researchers and farmers.

*"... These experiences allowed me to see the impact that collaboration between research groups and non-governmental organisations can have on communities. I feel that the connections that organisations have with communities gave my own research project more meaning and, hopefully, impact. I also loved meeting and connecting with like-minded Peruvian students who worked on the project."*

*Hanna Horlock, student at the University of Reading*

In short, it is hoped that this work undertaken by Eclósio will become a constant in addressing agroecology from the field, whose knowledge and expertise can be increasingly valued in different arenas, such as academia.