

Andean countries has become a key resource for reforestation programs to improve soils and vegetation. Blinded by assimilationist policies and dependency on Western resources, planners overlooked the tree species adapted to the landscape over millennia. The Australian eucalyptus tree, for example, enjoyed a long heyday in Latin America modernization programs because of its rapid growth, aesthetic appeal, and practical uses. But its negative impact on soil conservation and ground water supplies available for nearby plants has shaken the faith of even its most die-hard advocates. This change in attitude has led to greater appreciation for native communities as permanent protectors of these resources. Indigenous organizations began mobilizing support, establishing decentralized nurseries, cooperating in research on indigenous knowledge, and even identifying the important place of native trees in indigenous ceremonies and rituals.

Cultural recovery also contributes to school reform in indigenous communities. A monolingual (Spanish) educational policy that exclusively promotes Western values often fails to meet even its own objectives. Instead of turning out productive citizens with the skills and "modern values" needed for a rapidly changing economy, it has left community members with low self-esteem and poor reading and writing skills. The search for solutions to

this crisis led NGOs, grassroots organizations, and local community groups to undertake small-scale bilingual education programs.

Two pilot projects became models for national educational reform plans in their respective countries. In the Andean mountains of Ecuador, a church organization in collaboration with native leaders and educators fended off opposition from the public authorities to organize bilingual (Quechua-Spanish) elementary schools taught by indigenous members of the same community who had received intensive training in their new profession. In the dry, hot, Bolivian Chaco, native Guaranis and an educational NGO established a bilingual school district with teachers-college graduates they themselves retrained in an educational approach which respected and utilized native cultural values. Indigenous federations can provide political muscle to sustain such experiments. For example, in the Ecuadorian city of Latacunga, a protest march by 5,000 federation members mobilized support for the legal recognition of the bilingual school district.

The Andean experience also showed that bilingual education requires overhauling the school curriculum to reflect the culture, history, and physical environment of the participating native communities. Under conventional rural schooling,

## Cultural Energy & Grassroots Development

by Charles D. Kley Meyer

"Culture is like a tree," says Mariano López, a Tzotzil Indian leader from the municipality of Chamula in Chiapas, Mexico. "If the green branches – a people's language, legends, and customs – are carelessly lopped off, then the roots that bind people to their place on the earth and to each other also begin to wither. The wind and rain and the elements carry the topsoil away; the land becomes a desert." Afro-Ecuadorian folklorist Juan García echoes this urgency and, in so doing, offers a solution. "Cultural rescue," he says, "is impossible without

development at the community level. And the converse is also true."

Both of these testimonies imply that cultural expression, in all its richness and variety, is not just a by-product of how a society organizes its social and productive relationships; it is a vital instrument for generating the insights and energy needed to transform those relationships.

Cultural energy is a prime motivator of social action among individuals, groups, communities, and even nations. It is generated by common people through everyday creative expression – in work and in "entertainment," which often

overlap. It is also galvanized by the concerted efforts of cultural activists who consciously use it as a development tool. They realize that the presence or absence of cultural energy can make the difference in whether a project is launched, sustained, and expanded. Cultural energy is a powerful force in the creation and reinforcement of group solidarity, organizational efficacy, participation, and volunteer spirit – all of which are basic ingredients of successful grassroots development initiatives.

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