

The Persevering Woman:

Rosario Quispe's Dreams for the Puna

The landscape through which Rosario Quispe moves is measured in geologic time but she's in more of a hurry. Her pickup truck rooster-tailing dust, she careens across the arid Argentine puna, an immense plateau that was once ancient sea bed before tectonic plates collided and hurled it more than 11,000 feet into the sky while the peaks of the Andes, surging another mile or two higher, took shape around it. Millions of years of weathering followed, eroding mountains, sculpting stone and soil into weirdly twisted columns, evaporating inland seas into great salt beds, exposing mineral ores in phantasmagorical bands of color on the slopes. At first sight, the puna seems as inhospitable as the moon. Yet across its vast loneliness, hundreds of scattered adobe villages shelter thousands of families of Coyas, Argentina's largest indigenous group. For almost two decades now, Quispe and the organization she founded, Warmi Sayajsunqo (WARMI), have breathed new life into those communities with a uniquely indigenous vision of development.

Quispe is a familiar figure in the villages, immediately recognizable under the broad-brimmed hat shading her cinnamon skin and dark eyes from the relentless, unfiltered sun, coal black hair twisted in a rope-like braid, dark trousers and moccasin-style boots, a pastel blouse under a wool shawl or poncho pulled close against the puna's penetrating chill after the sun sinks into Chile. Her frequent circuits of puna communities can cover up to 400 kilometers a day on potholed and washboard-rippled roads. To ride along with her is to see what development on indigenous terms looks like. For five centuries, the native peoples of Latin America were impoverished, exploited and ignored. In more recent times, they became the object of assistance plans conceived by "experts" in Latin or foreign capitals. WARMI, though, was a 100 percent indigenous response to an economic crisis on the puna. As it grew, it received initial support from the Avina Foundation of Switzerland and later the Inter-American Foundation, both donors willing to fund WARMI's ideas, not impose their own. Those ideas include a deep skepticism about the value of non-Coya experts and insist instead on indigenous control of the process and reliance on knowledge drawn from the Coyas' 8,000-year history on the puna. They fuse with contemporary approaches to development, such as microcredit that is helping realize Quispe's vision of at least one profitable enterprise in every community, an idea that comes straight from her childhood memories of life on the puna.

She was born Rosario Andrada in 1959 in Puesto del Marqués, just 50 kilometers south of Bolivia. Chile starts at the tips of the mountains visible to the west. This far corner of Argentina, the province of Jujuy, is home to most of the country's estimated 200,000 Coyas. It is also one of the poorest Argentine provinces. Yet Quispe tells you proudly that her grandfather, Serapio Cussi, "had 300 cows, 800 sheep and fields of alfalfa and maize. He never had a salary, but who says we were poor?" Memories of his ranch, the sustenance and security there, would eventually provide the-back-to-the-future approach that drives her work. Her story is one in a series of profiles for Grassroots Development investigating the experiences that shaped successful grassroots leaders in Latin America and the visions they have distilled from those experiences. Quispe's life

and vision suggest the power and potential of the indigenous peoples of Latin America to overcome a half-millennium of subjection and build their own future.

Leaders, like mountains, emerge when tectonic forces shift. In Quispe's lifetime, puna society has changed dramatically. Her grandfather's world, so vivid in her memory, was based on patient exploitation of the puna's resources and far-flung trade. For millennia, trading routes snaked, tendril-like, through the mountains and across the puna, anchoring themselves in the occasional oasis where clear water bubbled to the surface. Along those routes, the Coyas exchanged their animals and hides, grains and fruits, salt, textiles and precious stones between climatic zones. The Spanish conquest added new products to the trade, wheat, for example, and mules. Long pack-trains moved minerals and other goods to colonial ports in Lima and Buenos Aires. The Coyas adopted the mules for their own month-long trading trips and kept the network intact. Not until the railroad arrived late in the 19th century did true upheaval come.

The railroad had less need of oases; many communities that had been hubs of traditional trade were bypassed and declined. Others, like Abra Pampa, rose beside the tracks to become a gateway to the puna. The main reason for the railroad was to open industrial-scale mining of lead, silver, zinc, copper, gold, tin and lithium. Mines offered salaried jobs and Coya men were drawn from their lands and their flocks to rip mineral-rich rock from the mountains. Large-scale agriculture in the subtropical valleys drew more Coyas to seasonal harvests of sugar cane and tobacco. For much of the 20th century, the puna economy was based on the migration of men to mines or plantations. Similar changes were taking place in many parts of the Americas, indeed throughout the world. The generations that came of age in the middle decades of the 20th century saw the economies of their grandparents disappear. Those economies, usually based on agriculture, largely self-sufficient, supporting large families, withered as capitalist investment spurred growth and concentration in mining, manufacturing and agribusiness. The family farm declined, the people who had worked the land became wage earners, often far from home.

Quispe was eight when her family moved to Minas Pirquitas and her father went into the mines. In school she took part in sports programs organized by the parish priest, Pedro Olmedo, a Spanish Claretian. At 19, she married Alfredo Quispe, a mineworker, like her father. Over the next several years she bore seven children and earned money as a domestic. In the mid-1980s, more tectonic changes came to puna society. Latin America had gone deeply into debt to finance its import-substitution economy, which it could no longer afford. Mexico defaulted in 1982, the region stagnated. Factories, mines and construction closed down, jobs melted away in the hundreds of thousands. Alfredo Quispe lost his job in 1988.

Rosario Quispe had been working since 1984 with the Claretian Organization for Development (OCLADE) headed by now-Monsignor Olmedo. Its goal was to organize the people of the puna to improve their situation. Quispe was assigned to a project encouraging women to participate. OCLADE's key staff were experts from outside Jujuy, but the initiative was eventually to be turned over to local people. Since OCLADE

reached into some 200 communities, Quispe's work gave her a perspective on the region. On her regular visits she witnessed how communities that had become dependent on the salaries their men earned fell into real poverty when the salaries stopped. In 1993, when the last train chugged down the steel rails that had brought so much change, and vanished into history, the puna was emptier and poorer than when the railroad had arrived. What remained were the Coya women who stayed behind, taking care of houses, animals, pastures, when men left home for salaried work. With the crisis, the world the men had learned to navigate tumbled down around them. When they returned to the puna, without jobs and suddenly dependent on the work the women did, traditional male dominance weakened. Despite their customary reticence, women increasingly took on more initiatives in their communities.

OCLADE was changing as well, but not in the direction Quispe wanted to go. Thanks in part to its training, new leaders had emerged, but influential staff resisted ceding authority. Fundamental splits appeared and widened. By 1990, Quispe and others had been forced out of OCLADE. These included economist Raul Llobet and Agustina Roca, an anthropologist and a founder of the organization. "Rosario was left in the street," recalled Roca. "but she already had the idea of what she wanted, a process led by the Coyas themselves."

The break with OCLADE crystallized Quispe's thinking. "We had to do something different," she wrote in a short autobiography. "If we continued the way we were, we would all die of hunger." She and her husband moved to Abra Pampa, a town of some 12,000 inhabitants, and there, in 1995, she invited a group of 10 other women to meet in her home. "We decided to work together, to come up with our own solution, not wait for someone to save us," Quispe recalled. The Quechua name chosen for their organization—which means persevering women—captured both the past and their intended future. In a few months, it had 320 members. Two problems defined their first activities: the need for income and an alarming health situation. They began by working with traditional skills, spinning and knitting wool, and built a small headquarters on the outskirts of Abra Pampa, with space for a shop where they could sell the yarn and garments they produced. At the same time, they struggled to understand what seemed an unusually high rate of cervical cancer from which many women were dying.

By 1997, the Geneva-based Women's World Summit Foundation had awarded Quispe its prize for "women's creativity in rural life," recognition that helped draw attention from the Avina Foundation and others to the problems of poverty and health on the puna. International medical organizations showed up, but a wary Quispe thought they might be more interested in publicizing their presence than in getting services to the communities. One organization gave her a stack of its posters. "I'll distribute the posters when you've done something," she replied. She contacted Jorge Gronda, an Argentine doctor who became interested in her reports of cancer among women in the region. Eventually he opened a medical center in Jujuy and he credits Quispe's guidance for its success.

Quispe realized that financing for WARMI's economic plans might also be available but that WARMI would need help to apply for it. "I was tired of the técnicos who came to the puna," she said. "We disagreed with their solutions. We wanted to decide ourselves how to improve our lives. So I looked for people who would respect us and listen to us." She turned to Roca and Llobet. "I'd seen them work, I had confidence in them. They helped us turn our dreams into proposals for funding," she explained.

Everything would depend, Quispe knew, on the strength of WARMI's connections with the Coya communities. She had to visit them, explain WARMI's hopes and goals, listen to problems, needs and aspirations, and weave it all into ambitious proposals. Those early efforts to extend WARMI's reach into far-flung hamlets were a whirlwind, Roca recalled. "When she said we would go to 50 communities, I thought we would cover 50 in a year. You see, we had never traveled with her before. And she said, 'No, we'll do this in a month. I'll go ahead in the pickup and get people together, and you arrive the next day and start working with them.'"

Quispe's charisma was obvious during those visits. "Women would bring out cassettes that they'd carefully saved of Rosario speaking to them back when she'd worked with OCLADE." Roca said. I had a chance to see that charisma at work when I volunteered to drive her to Moroco, a tiny town in Bolivia. A few weeks before, Angel Gutiérrez, a local leader there, had visited Abra Pampa and invited Quispe to go to Moroco and meet spinners who might sell their wool yarn in WARMI's shop. The border between Argentina and Bolivia is marked only by a sign—no guards, no passport check. As we drove past, Quispe didn't spare the sign a glance. Originally just a line between the provinces of Alto Peru and Argentina on a Spanish colonial map, the border was later adjusted in distant capitals by treaties and arbitration agreements. None involved the Coyas.

We wound up and over a mountain range on a narrow dirt road, the bald tires of my rental car sliding on loose gravel as I hugged the cliff face into which the road was cut because vertigo was the only response to the sheer drop on the other side. After four or five hours, we skidded to a stop before a whitewashed adobe meeting hall in Moroco. Angel Gutiérrez was waiting, along with a handful of men and some 30 Coya women dressed in voluminous skirts, pastel blouses, woolen sweaters and shawls and a variety of hat styles. We moved inside for a discussion of Moroco's poverty and isolation and the need for a market for the women's wool and weavings. It was interrupted briefly for a meal of hot stew, served in enameled bowls. Quispe outlined WARMI's goals and accomplishments, then sat on benches with the women, who studied her intently with sidelong glances.

After the discussion, she moved to a scale hanging in a corner of the large room and one by one the women emptied black plastic bags full of wool that Quispe weighed. The seller's name and the weight and value of the wool were noted. No one disputed the price Quispe offered. In fact, the women seemed quite pleased. When all the wool had been packed into larger bags and the numbers had been totaled, Quispe took from her

purse a sheaf of bills to be apportioned. Then, instead of leaving, she picked up the bags of wool and returned to a table in the center of the room. “I don’t want you to be deceived,” she began, as the women gathered around her. “I arrived here in a hurry, we weighed the wool, I paid for it, not because I’m a fool or because I don’t know better. I paid you because I want you to be enthusiastic, to continue working. But next time, wool like this will not be accepted in Abra Pampa.”

The women were listening in total silence. Quispe reached into a bag, extracted two skeins of wool and stretched one between her hands. “Ladies, this is very poorly made. If we don’t do something to it, the cloth will turn out terrible. This one, however,” she said, picking up the second skein, “this is top quality. You take this to Abra Pampa and without a word we’ll pay you 50 pesos. And if you ask 60, and we need it, we’ll pay you 60. Why? Because we don’t have to pick through this wool to separate out different colors, wash it again, dry it, discard some of it. So, if you want to sell, this is the quality you have to produce. Here. Look at it. Touch it. Then touch the other, so you learn.”

The women stared at her, shocked by her frankness.

“I’m taking this wool with me,” Quispe continued, because I don’t want you to be discouraged and stop spinning. But today is the only time I’ll take it. Otherwise, I’d be deceiving you, letting you think it’s good quality when it’s not. That would harm you as well as us.”

She chuckled, her tone changing. “It’s like husbands,” she said. “If they deceive you at the beginning and you let them get away with it, you’ll never have a good life together.” Smiles broke out around the room and the women nodded and clustered around Quispe to talk as she walked back to the car, then stood together waving on the dusty street as we pulled away.

Encounters like the one in Morocco, repeated hundreds of times in Jujuy in the last 17 years, help explain the geometric growth in WARMI’s membership from the initial 10 to some 3,600 in more than 80 communities. Quispe is an inspiring symbol of success, internationally recognized yet as rooted in the puna as any woman listening to her. “I’m the same as you,” she often says in meetings. “I never got past the seventh grade. I raise my llamas just like you do.”

In Quispe’s vision the Coyas should live from small businesses, not from subsidies or a salary. “It meant entering the market as an entrepreneur,” explained Llobet, the economist who worked with WARMI until recently, “as someone who owns his or her means of production. We had to introduce the market, but also caution the Coyas about its traps and temptations: greed, selfishness, damage to the environment, the loss of solidarity. The challenge was to give them the tools to enter the market without losing the values that sustain their culture.”

The main tool is microcredit based on cultural as well as economic considerations. Llobet explained: “Microcredit programs generally have an economic focus. But there’s a human side as well. The word credit, after all, comes from the same root as belief, trust. Rural microcredit systems are often not sustainable because overhead costs are high, mainly from lack of trust. Lenders want their money back, so they develop systems of evaluation, of risk analysis, all based on the assumption that the borrower can’t be trusted. We went to communities where systems of trust already existed and built on those systems. Because if there’s trust, any credit program can function, quite cheaply.

“In our meetings, we passed a couple of bills from hand to hand and asked, ‘if a person gives you money, how does he know that afterwards you won’t deny you received it?’ And they said, ‘we trust in a person’s word.’

“Ok, you do. But our world doesn’t. You have to put a piece of paper in the middle. At every step there has to be a receipt. The one who receives the money signs it. Until it reaches the community, where perhaps the paper’s not needed, because a person’s word is enough.’ And they learned the whole system of record keeping, then designed their own ledgers, based on the physical movement of the money.” In the communities, credit funds are controlled by two kipus, or treasurers, one of whom must be a woman. Markas, regional units equipped with computers, gather financial data from five or six surrounding funds for the headquarters in Abra Pampa.

A three-year grant of \$369,000 awarded by the IAF in 2001, followed in 2006 by another \$100,000, allowed the program to expand. WARMI secured additional funding from the Avina Foundation, from Argentina’s Social Development Ministry and its National Institute of Indian Affairs, and, for health programs, from Médicos del Mundo, an offshoot of the French Médecins du Monde. The regional gas company gave Quispe plastic sheeting and other materials to build hot houses for growing fruit and vegetables next to schools on the puna. Radios from another local business accelerated communication among WARMI affiliates. Several Argentine foundations have supported WARMI activities, as has OCLADE, the organization that once pushed Quispe out, and Bishop Olmedo, her old mentor.

The lending program began with lines of credit for raising animals for food and fiber, for agriculture and for handicrafts. Loans for as little as \$11 were available for medical or other personal emergencies. Production loans could run as high as \$1,900. Later, WARMI added credit for housing and education. Out of those loans came fish tanks full of trout for sale to hotels, associations of wool spinners and knitters, tightly stretched wire fencing to safeguard sheep and llamas and chickens, home improvements, shops. The goal, Quispe says, is for Coya borrowers to think like business owners. “Once someone buys, say, a sewing machine,” she urges, “she must think, ‘I’m the boss, not an employee.’”

Somewhat larger loans helped launch more ambitious enterprises. In Cerro Negro, where the only resource was the nearby salt flat, men from the village used to earn \$3 a day shoveling one ton of raw salt from

brackish ponds at 12,000 feet. A \$9,000 loan and training in business skills enabled 12 of them set up a small factory with simple processing machinery, package the salt in one-kilo bags emblazoned with their own brand—Sal Puna—and sell it for \$40 a ton. WARMI now sells yarn and knitted garments to a fair-trade style outlet in downtown Buenos Aires. Its gas station and restaurant serve abrapampeños as well as international traffic on Route 9. But not everything worked out as hoped. A chinchilla ranch, once the biggest in Argentina, had to scale back because the domestic demand wasn't there; the pelts are exported to Croatia. WARMI abandoned a wool depot when prices dropped too low and a tannery because of the toxic chemicals required. Its cybercafé opened Abra Pampa to the Internet but was undercut when multinational competition appeared. An agile WARMI successfully recycled the space into a center that offers training in computer skills through an arrangement with the university in the neighboring province of Santiago del Estero.

Tourism is an industry, Quispe argues, that the Coyas should develop and control, offering adventurous travelers the unearthly beauty of the landscape and the tranquility of the Coya way of life. The Valle of Humahuaca, a UNESCO-certified World Heritage Site through which Route 9 passes as it climbs to Abra Pampa, draws visitors from around the world. Beyond Abra Pampa, the views become even more spectacular, especially in the Valle de la Luna [Valley of the Moon] just short of the Bolivian border. Some communities, like San Francisco de Alfarcito, have already built attractive white-washed adobe cottages to house tourists making the circuit of indigenous Andean villages that WARMI is promoting.

With the multiple economic activities, and the promise of more to come, young Coyas are increasingly choosing to stay in puna communities, rather than migrating in search of jobs. In less than two decades, WARMI has moved closer to Quispe's vision of self-sufficiency, and gained clout as well. The world doesn't climb up to Abra Pampa just because of a leader's personality but because she speaks for thousands of people on the puna. "The importance of WARMI is the organization that we have built," Quispe said, "to discuss and negotiate with the big companies, with the government, with the municipal commissions." An Argentine journalist in Abra Pampa to write about WARMI described overhearing a heated phone conversation with a Buenos Aires official in which Quispe opposed a government plan to move lead tailings from the town to another community that also participates in WARMI. Two days later, the journalist reported, carloads of officials from the Argentine Ministry of the Environment were in WARMI's offices to work out a solution.

That visit was one of many signs of how WARMI is changing power relationships that date back centuries. "For 500 years someone else always acted on their behalf," Raul Llobet said of the Coyas, "the curaca, or community representative, who negotiated with the conquering Inca then with the Spanish; the capataz, or foreman, in the mines or on the plantations; the political intermediary who negotiates with the government." With WARMI's growth, a Coya organization now speaks for the Coyas, and it has begun to get results. A number of communities have recovered title to their lands and more cases are wending through the courts. Some of the lead tailings that sat in Abra Pampa for 20 years after the smelting company that put them there

closed down have finally been trucked away, although not before doing irreparable harm. A recent study by Human Rights Clinic of the University of Texas School of Law documented signs of lead poisoning in 80 percent of the town's children. One of Quispe's sons has a mental disability she blames on the lead.

But thanks to WARMI's unrelenting pressure on behalf of women's health, a maternity wing has been added to the hospital in Abra Pampa. WARMI has gained increased government cooperation on preventative programs. The medical center that Dr. Gronda opened has evolved from its initial focus on cervical cancer into a healthcare system with a network of providers serving 70,000 patients in Jujuy and across Argentina. High volume offsets lower fees; a year's membership costs as little as \$10. Quispe recently announced that 72 young Coyas were studying medicine, one more step toward self-sufficiency. Another of Quispe's dreams came true in March when a university center called WARMI Huasi Yachana opened its doors in Abra Pampa. "We lose many intelligent young people who must go away to study," Quispe emphasized. "We want to train them here to manage our resources." Many entering students stressed their intention to stay on the puna during the extended coverage of the inauguration televised nationwide.

One after the other, the pieces of Quispe's vision are materializing, many seemingly willed into existence by the sheer force of her tremendous energy. She urges everyone in WARMI to work hard and she sets the example. "Mami, I've never known another person in my life who works 36 hours out of every 24," one of her sons once told her. But even Quispe needs down time. "About once a month," she said, "I escape for a while. I go to see my llamas." And there this woman whose name and image pop up instantly on Google and Facebook, TED and YouTube around the world, can be seen talking softly to the llamas grazing within the radius of her voice, the earth tones of her clothing and their fleece blending as woman and animals fade together at twilight into the vast landscape.

Patrick Breslin, former IAF vice president for external affairs, retired after 22 years of service. He can be reached at patbreslin1@gmail.com. Gabriela Sbarra of IAF liaison services in Argentina and Paula Durbin contributed to this article