



2026

« **Le foot qui nous unit** » (the football that unites us)

Football pitch, Mamou – Guinea, June 2000

Dear friends

My journey to some countries of the South has started with a practical training in Guinea in April 2000. Thereby, I was interested in understanding how the population used local resources for everyday life with their community-orientated way of life.

Fascinated by the impression made in Guinea I headed for a career in development and cooperation after my graduation as a forestry engineer. In Vietnam, Bolivia and Namibia I gained distinct experiences of collaboration with colleagues, representatives of communities as well as public and private institutions in the field of rural development and sustainable resource management.

Time for reflection and discussions with colleagues allowed me to process my experiences and to analyse approaches of development cooperation that I have become familiar with. How do we achieve collaboration with our partners that rely on their self-development and work thereby sustainably towards the intended impact?

The short-listed calendar pictures present scenes from my distinct assignments. The text often describes a personal event that ends with a learning experience or with a critical thought.

I look forward to sharing my experiences with you and initiating your reflection!

Zofingen, December 2011



2nd edition in English: January 2026

«Kori bara k'araa ancas – Golden stick on a bare ridge»

(in Aymara)

Grazing areas, Curahuara de Carangas – Bolivia, June 2006

At the first glimpse, the countryside of the Bolivian highlands appears sparse; nothing else than stone formation and meagre grazing land. Only after the rain period the pasture shine in strong green. As a result, the local vicuñas, alpacas and lamas will jump higher. The fur of the vicuñas also appears golden in the sun. Indeed, vicuña furs are highly demanded in the textile manufacture and generate high revenue.

This shall illustrate to us, that the origin of development can lie in the apparent emptiness. We often need time and patience to realise the value of something in its entirety. Only if we know, how we have to look at our surroundings, we understand it and subsequently harvest the fruits of our perception.

In Curahuara de Carangas I had plenty of time to familiarise myself with the country and its people. The women group, that I advised, was “unorganised” according to my perception. The quality of their handicrafts out of alpaca wool merely responded to the national market requirements.

However, the more I familiarised myself with the traditional values and rites in the commune, the better I understood the influence of the cultural heritage to their everyday life. I finally concluded, that the paradigm between tradition and modernity can only be reprocessed with a holistic approach in order to support the women group in a successful development.

« Hà Nội – City within the rivers »

(in Vietnamese)

Hanoi – Vietnam, September 2004

The traffic in Hanoi is characterised by so-called “bike-waves”. The crossing of roads can present a nearly insurmountable hurdle for non-locals. It is never known, how and when such a “wave” can be broken.

I remember well the first time I stood at the side of the road. Waiting and becoming increasingly helpless I was relieved when I could join someone to cross the road. Although the locals assured me that I only should move slowly, steadily and always ahead, but never stop, it took me some time to “navigate” the roads with confidence.

This scene visualises that it is vital to understand the rhythm. It is like an unwritten code, that everyone adheres to. You orientate yourself forwards, are patient when a “whirlpool” forms and are attentive when you need to take advantage of a “current”.

During my journey in countries of the South I required time to understand the local rhythm. I learnt to value the advises from my local colleagues to orientate myself in unfamiliar territory. To know what to focus on and how to behave accordingly.



March

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« The more wood, the more power »

Property of a village member – Namibia, March 2011

The central North of Namibia is home to the Ovambo. They dedicated at arable farming and cattle raising and live with their families in traditional “homesteads”. These are large estates consisting of individual open dwellings separated by “walls made from timber poles”.

The number, size and arrangement of these poles often indicate the closeness to the still available forest resources, however certainly about the rank of the owner: village member, village chef, section chef or king of the clan. A further indicator for the “wealth” is the number of cows, that owns a family. Their condition is however of secondary importance, so that many old, emaciated animals adorn the roadsides.

To change these traditional values in the sense of a resource-extensive and more economic development is not achievable from today to tomorrow. The community forestry project with the target to sustainably use forest resource and to generate income from forest and alternative products is not everywhere equally successful. Its success depends on factors such as availability of resources, ethnic belonging, structure of local organisations, political orientation, small-scale initiatives and others.

It therefore aims at identifying a path for a tailor-made local approach together with the local people and in harmony with the local lifestyle that correspond to the interest of the entire project. Because if something works in one place, it does not necessarily have to work in another place.

« Les chaînes des hommes et les chaînes des femmes »
(the chain of men and the chain of women)

Prayer ceremony, Lapoo – Guinea, September 2000

During a training seminar on integration and collaboration in the village of Lapoo I witnessed how the village community gathered for the official prayer. The seating order corresponded with the local Islamic ritual: Iman in front, followed by men and then women and children.

This separation of both sexes built a red line throughout the entire seminar. I remembered that my local internship supervisor explained to me, that I as the only woman in the team could socialise with the women about their concerns. On the other hand, I should never pay attention to the Iman or to touch him. That was quite unusual for me.

I once took part in the circumcision of boys. On the other hand, I realised the impacts of female circumcision when I lived with the female students at the forestry school in Mamou. I remember well how young women in local organisation spoke out against female circumcision and tried to raise awareness of this issues among the population.

Only some years later I became to know that this sensitive issue has not been accordingly dealt with in the field of cooperation and development. The focus was only on the role of women, but never on the role of men. It is therefore about changing the behaviour of the entire chain and not just the individual links.



May

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« What determines our actions? »

Mamatalla Juana Huarachi, Curahuara de Carangas – Bolivia, Feb 2007

Upon the traditional values of the Aymara people, each family within a *Ayllu* (clan) leads the *Ayllu* for one year. It corresponds to a defined periodicity that correlates with the distribution of user rights of each family regarding the communal grazing land. Each family is thereby taken into responsibility. At the same time, all inhabitants should be given the opportunity to develop in the interests of the community.

In 2007, the honour to fulfil the role of the *Jilakata* (clan leader) within the small *Ayllu Maestranza* was appointed to Juana Fanny Huarachi; an unmarried, educated woman. It was the first time in Curahuara de Carangas that a woman on her own took the responsibility over that duty. In principle, it opposes with the principle of dualism (*ayni*), that is of crucial significances to the Aymara people. Namely, everything is “in the pair”.

Despite all these circumstances, *Mamatalla* Juana Huarachi managed to win over the local community and her *Ayllu Maestranza* thanks to her commitment. She generously organised the local festival days, like the preparation of the Andean carnival as shown in the picture. She also initiated projects to improve the quality of lama products and encouraged young people and women to take part.

As long as there is no handover of the content of existing projects among the departing and incoming *Jilakatas*, sustainability is often called into question: the wheel seems to be reinvented every time. How do we assess the impact of short-term commitments that leave open processes behind?

« What is in the cooking pot? »

Cooking place, Community forest Ohepi – Namibia, February 2010

At the request of the representatives of all Forest Management Committees within the Northwest Forestry Region of Namibia, the second officially quarterly meeting took place at the Ohepi community forest instead of a venue in town.

The logistical preparations for food, water, simple sanitary installations and transport presented the local forestry team and the community of Ohepi with a number of challenges, which were overcome without any problems thanks to good collaboration.

At the time I arrived together with the more than twenty representatives of other community forests, the reaction of my companions was considerable: no current water, no electricity, no reception for the mobile phone and so on. Despite some initial unease, we experienced two intensive and harmonious days that formed a good basis for the following meetings.

At such meetings I was always astonished about the expectations of the participants regarding the logistical arrangements. It seemed that the frame of an event has been more vital than the content. It was known, that other regional projects could offer other standards due to higher budgets.

Looking back on the two years in Namibia I concluded that some of the community representatives changed their attitude. They recognised the value of such meetings in terms of exchange, mutual advice and cooperation for the further development of their community forests. So suddenly the “salt in the soup” had become the most important thing.

« **Dignity and respect** »

Participants of the field research, Bo village – Vietnam, April 2004

At the end of the field research in Bo village five non timber forest products (yellow cards) had been identified, that were short-listed for the upcoming market survey. That selection based on criteria that the participants, farmers belonging to the Moung people, identified and assessed themselves according to a determined method. My Vietnamese assistant and I were process facilitators. The content and the decisions came from the participants.

That process had been the result of a learning process. In the first of the two survey villages we stronger led the decision-making process. It was as we would not rely on the farmer.

Looking back, I have to admit, that during all my interactions in countries of the South I underestimated the skills of the people at the beginning. It was only through the exchange of knowledge and experience that I realised what is possible when we work together. It however requires mutual trust, respect and acceptance.

For example, my technical input only became valuable when my Namibian forestry colleagues placed it in an overarching social and traditional context. Joint planning and evaluation enabled us to master the situations presented to us in the best possible way.

For me, this collaboration was a sign of recognition that I was being recognised as a consultant. Because it could also be, that recommendations are not accepted and implemented at all.



August

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« Harmonisation of the players »

Le Mont Nimba – Guinea, September 2000

With enthusiasm I travelled with practising foresters to the *Guinée Forestière* region to visit the UNESCO world heritage in the border triangle of Guinea, Liberia and Ivory Coast. It unites a variety of vegetation forms and is therefore an immeasurable treasure trove of countless plant and animal species.

As we arrived at the foot of the massive *Mont Nimba*, we found an abandoned and devastated project infrastructure. As we continued to walk up, we passed two more “project ruins”. When I asked why such infrastructures are not being maintained in this protected area and why a single project site would have been sufficient, my local internship supervisor replied: “One project arrived first, afterwards another; always from distinct donor agencies. Everybody came with its own approach and budget for a certain time.”

This scene visualises how a site of natural richness can become an experimental site for distinct stakeholders.

After further similar experiences in Bolivia and Namibia I am very interested to know more about „best practices“ in terms of harmonisation among donor countries and personal responsibility of partner countries of the South.

« Resource requirements »

Harvesting of Marula grafts, Onayena - Namibia, August 2010

The Marula tree (*Sclerocarya birrea*) in central North of Namibia is an important part of the cultural life of Ovambo. Extracts of the Marula fruit are juice, liquor, food and cosmetic oil that is thanked for at the annual Marula festival. It is therefore not surprising, that the owner of the female trees name them in their local languages.

The production of improved Marula seedlings with grafts of selected mother trees was part of the cooperation among the regional forestry office in Ongwediva with *Eudafano Women's Cooperative*. In this regard, foresters that participated at trainings in grafting fruit trees in South Africa trained their local forestry colleagues and women of the Marula cooperative in this method.

With regard to the ownership rights to the grafting material and the subsequent commercial utilisation of the grafted marula seedling, the owners of the trees were informed, and their consent obtained. It is a first step towards contractually securing traditional knowledge and utilisation of the genetic resources as well as participation in future yields of any kind.

This process of agreeing the utilisation of the genetic resource was filmed as part of the first course on marula grafting in Ongwediva. The documentary was published in English and had its official first night at an international conference. I therefore ask where which impact is expected and who is finally responsible for providing accountability of the success of such projects.

« Who needs whom? »

Cat Ba national parc – Vietnam, May 2004

Interactions between organism of distinct species, as we see here, are omnipresent in nature. Ideally, both partners benefit from such relations. In this case however the host tree will weaken due to the increasing growth of the “strangler” and finally dies off.

In Vietnam we tried to assess the benefit of non timber forest products for poor as well as rich families. It became evident that the extent of the benefit depended on factors such as land distribution, local user rights for natural resources and access to education, markets and credits. As a result, we recognised different strategies for securing livelihoods and prosperity.

In fact, diverse interactions in and between countries of the North and South influence our individual and collective development strategies. The resource-intensive lifestyle of countries of the North is in imbalance with the subsistence strategies of many countries of the South. This situation forms the basis for the global rules of the game, which are expressed in the form of trade agreements, utilisation and processing rights for natural resources, financing instruments and much more.

The question therefore remains as to whether the person who withdraws resources from the other, is weakening himself in the process, as he is allowing his partner to be suppressed and die off; consequently, losing his livelihood. Or whether there are alternative mechanism that enable both partners to have a satisfying existence in the long term



November

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« For how long? »

Arbor Day, Oshaampula community forest – Namibia, October 2010

„The forestry inspector of the community forest makes a routine control tour of the forest – A pile of fuelwood is found – The responsible persons are identified – They collected fuelwood without harvesting permission – They were brought to the traditional authority court – A fine due to illegal harvesting is issued.“

My forestry colleagues of Oshikoto and I witness this role game that is played by school children as part of the festivities of the Namibian Arbor Day in Oshaampula community forest. Our faces are cheerful, and our eyes sparkle with enthusiasm. We recognise that the other audience mostly locals feel the same.

„Did you give the impulse for that role game?“ I ask my forestry colleagues. They deny. I remain deeply impressed.

The real highlight of the event comes now. Adults and their children plant fifty trees in a fenced-in plot under the supervision of the forestry colleagues. The success of this plantation principally depends on the further engagement of the community. The seedlings need to be watered at least twice a week for two years. Afterwards, the fruit trees still needs to be irrigated to allow an optimal fruit growth. The watering happens manually from a central water pipe.

The forestry authority will only assess the progress from time to time. Full responsibility for the prospertiy of the fruit trees lies with the community. Are they ready?

« Until she flowers »

Queñua (*Polylepis tarapacana*), Sajama – Bolivia, May 2006

At the foot of the Sajama, the highest Bolivian mountain, a stand of the “highland- Queñua” grows at 5200 m above sea level. It is estimated to be good five hundred years old. It is the highest site of a tree species on earth. It can withstand very low rainfall, extreme sun intensity, daily and seasonal temperature fluctuations and night frosts in order to thrive extremely slowly on volcanic bedrock. As an evergreen wind pollinator with almost invisible flowers, that are hardly perceived among the small leather leaves, it chooses an efficient way of adaptation.

It shows us, how development is possible even under very hard conditions. On the one hand, it requires a pronounced ability to adapt in order to optimally utilise local conditions. On the other hand, it requires flexibility in order to be able to react to external events in a way that conserves resources but is still as creative as possible. These are fundamental skills that have accompanied me in my work in countries in the South as well as the North.

„*Jallalla Pachamama*“ – Praise be to Mother Earth!

Evo Morales Ayma the former indigenous Bolivian president promotes the concept of „*vivir bien*“. It signifies that we guarantee the wellbeing of Mother Earth to secure our human wellbeing. A concept, that we also can promote and implement!