

Case Study

Vetiver Handicraft Production: An Innovative Focus on Community Development and Poverty Alleviation in Rural Venezuela

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The Vetiver “Fundacion Empresas Polar” Project (VFEPP) was conducted in wide and diverse geographic zones In Venezuela and trained approximately 11,000 people over a five-year period. In 2001, The Polar Foundation started the Vetiver Project with the following global objectives:

- (i) to alleviate social inequalities,
- (ii) to promote the manufacture of vetiver handicrafts as an initial step in the implementation of an integrated, economic, ecological and social development project,
- (iii) to develop markets for vetiver handicrafts in Venezuela,
- (iv) to increase the participation of rural poor populations,
- (v) to stimulate the fight against the destruction of natural resources and
- (vi) to enhance the mental well being of the beneficiaries.

The specific goal of VFEPP was to introduce vetiver handicrafts to rural beneficiaries: women, young people, children and later on, the whole family. The project activities begin with a conference *Why vetiver? An economic, ecological and social project*. Shortly after that vetiver handicraft training began by connecting the participants to the market and setting basic principles for maintaining the quality of products produced. Vetiver handicraft production and sales provided extra income to families thus stimulating a great deal of community interest in the Project. It is for this reason that the planting of vetiver with the intention of producing renewable fiber was promoted on sites close to homes where erosion, and contaminated waters were common ecological problems. The social aspect was focused on the principle of motivating self-esteem, stimulating community participation, and increasing community-based political, religious and cultural values. Music was a very important element through the sharing of songs, directed readings and games, whose contents have been created by professionals in the educational area. The groups were consolidated by their desire to improve their livelihoods in poor rural communities and through the interaction of local leaders and the local coordinator who was selected by the participants themselves.

The participation of the VFEPP in each locality had a minimum of three years, and a maximum of five years, until the beneficiaries had created businesses, companies, associations or cooperatives. This method was transferred to other government and private institutions with the intention of promoting the use of vetiver technology in Venezuela. The development of the VFEPP was sustained by academic activities, supported by national universities, and other research and development projects.

Methodology at the Community Level

- Introduce vetiver handicrafts
- Connect village level artisans to the market
- Grow vetiver for renewable fiber production and anti-erosion and pollution control
- Increase community spirit via the use of music and other cultural activities

Association Development, Marketing and Trade

Private sector association development in Venezuela is a viable solution to support the most vulnerable sectors of the population in the fight against poverty. It uses the market-led economic approach; it orients the groups to evolve economic production and trade entities; it stimulates the division of labor; it increases community-based decision making by reducing internal conflicts thus improving interpersonal relationships.

Initial marketing problems included low quality and unreliable supply. Surveys were done at the producer and merchant levels. Ing. Rodriguez was able to serve as an important bridge between producers and the market. As a result, most issues were resolved and today a vibrant subsector exists that incorporates quality control, truthful and accurate labeling, appropriate wholesale pricing and good communications along the marketing chain.

Today, vetiver handicrafts are marketed at national, regional and local levels characterized by:

- Direct sales by artisans themselves bypassing middlemen
- Sales in tourist locations, in individual shops and in various markets
- Local, regional and national exhibitions generate publicity
- Use as corporative gifts in companies and at business conferences
- Press articles, magazine articles, catalogues, bulletins, photographs, radio, TV and films.

An important factor was the quality of the fiber used and its processing including the use of driers especially in humid areas. Equally important was linking handicraft production to environmental protection for which vetiver is so well adapted. The success of this program depended on:

- Innovation to increase the production types and product lines,
- On-going market research to gain information about fashion trends and client needs,
- Added value recovery and restoration of other artisanal pieces made with other materials,
- Continuous improvement and quality control,
- Diversification within product lines to create new products, and
- Respect for the local traditions through the introduction of renewable fiber.

Vetiver Production

Due to its ease of establishment and its prolific growth, vetiver production technology was easily transferred. Demonstrations, however, were needed on problem sites such as riverbanks, polluted water sites, road embankments and around buildings. Demonstrations introduced production in primary schools especially when combined with vegetable gardening. Other uses included land demarcation and slope stabilization in crop fields.

Over 3,700 people worked directly growing vetiver with more than 11,000 indirectly involved, 75 stores sold vetiver handicrafts, and 204 exhibitions were held over the five years. The amount of vetiver grown for artisanal use equaled that which can be grown on 70,000

square meters equaling many millions of vetiver plants. Family-based income soared with increased demand over the life of the project.

Examples of project sites

Polar Brewery East Strategic association with 25 communities and the following sites:

1. Santa Cruz De Aragua involved introduction to 500 poor families.
2. Malpica the Toro developed a line of furniture incorporating vetiver fiber to replace palm fiber.
3. Bauxilum the Pijiguaos offers alternatives to mining especially in the off-season also reduces the pressure on palm fiber, which is less renewable.
4. Santa Ana. The project introduces vetiver handicrafts to retired people and was led by the church.
5. Santa Rosa of Southern Venezuela demonstrated with 40 families the use of vetiver for erosion control on deforested lands as well as for artisanal production.
6. Polar brewery in San Joaquin tested wastewater treatment using vetiver with a view to transfer simple techniques at the community level to deal with poor sanitation and the need for potable water.
7. Birongo, a coastal town of 2600 families developed many product lines combined with cocoa products

Each community or site determined how to modify existing handicrafts, use community structures and institutions to allow the rapid adoption. Each had its unique set of outputs and was greatly facilitated by the project and its set of dedicated staff.

Training for Project Staff

The Latin America Vetiver Network supported VFEPP from the beginning. The technical manual developed by the Pacific Rim Vetiver Network (1999) was very useful. Later on, Venezuelan materials were developed for design and marketing and support was obtained from the Spanish government. Other institutions also assisted including participation in a trade fair in Lausanne, Switzerland. Other training subjects included the art of dyeing fiber, community mobilization and small business management. Universities in Venezuela also provided agricultural training in erosion control on all kinds of different ecosystems. Many research projects were carried out by students obtaining advanced degrees such as “Waste Water treatment with vetiver” by Ing. Monica Scavo. In addition, commercial companies also paid for advanced research in such areas as water shed management to insure long-term supplies of fresh water from aquifers.

Conclusion

It is possible to introduce vetiver technology into poor communities if a well conceived and implemented program is used. A piece meal effort is not sufficient. The use of Vetiver renewable fiber is instrumental at the community level in generating new revenues while at the same time reducing the use of non-renewable fibers previously used. Combining handicraft production with erosion control reaches different segments of the population thus maximizing project beneficiaries. Emphasis on high quality handicrafts if well managed, opens new markets and dramatically affects potential profit margins. However, it is the combined agricultural, environmental and handicraft approach that has worked best in very poor rural areas of

Venezuela. One cannot overestimate the value of self esteem gained from this handicraft-based project. It is in the long run one of the principal factors that insure overall success.

Lessons Learned

Getting vetiver technology used sometimes needs innovative approaches to persuade beneficiaries to invest their time and effort in something new. In Venezuela, the vetiver technology surrounding community-based handicraft production turned out to be the most appropriate avenue for extending the vetiver message across multiple zones over time. Motivating women and children to adopt a new input into a well-established system of handicraft manufacturing worked, but required traditional support (vetiver hedgerow establishment, nursery establishment, and applied research). However, in Venezuela other supporting mechanisms also were used such as music. Being aware of social needs and incorporating these into implementation programs greatly increase the probability of success. In the long run though, it was the dedicated effort of the Polar Foundation and key vetiver promoters that generated the movement forming the basis for sustained use of vetiver technology in Venezuela today.

Key words: Handicraft, community development, erosion control, waste water tertiary treatment

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Brief Introduction to the Speaker

Dr. Dale Rachmeler has been with the Vetiver Network International since 1996, at the time he working in Madagascar. He is a professional tropical agronomist and agribusiness specialist. He has worked on projects funded by USAID over a career spanning more than 30 years on the African continent. He is currently working in Ghana on a business sector advocacy project. He has been a senior officer of TVNI since 2003 when he was elected President during ICV-3. He helped start-up vetiver programs in Madagascar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Morocco and Ghana.