

# WorldView

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SOME IDEAS  
FOR THE NEXT  
PRESIDENT.**



# RECORDING WHERE COWS GO

## Lessons learned in Colombia's Orinoquia

Amanda Dickson

The morning after my flight into the sprawling, brightly-lit capital of Bogota, my escort drove me off the mountains to Villavicencio, a city in Colombia's northeast, a plain as flat as Illinois or North Dakota. You know what that is: a place where you can see for miles in every direction. The heat and the humidity took my breath away, and it reminded me of those long afternoons in Paraguay during Peace Corps when I escaped to a shade tree, fanning myself and drinking ice-cold terere, Paraguay's green tea.

My bosses at Purdue University's Cooperative Extension Service had asked me to teach record keeping to Colombian farmers for the U.S. Agency for International Development's venerable Farmer-to-Farmer (F2F) program. For me, it was an easy fit after my agriculture work in Paraguay and Peace Corps and four years as an Agriculture & Natural Resources Extension worker in Morgan County, Indiana. This particular F2F program is implemented by the Volunteers for Economic Growth Alliance (VEGA) and Purdue University to help improve the lives of many smallholder farmers. I worked with two groups of farmers in two regions: livestock owners and flower growers, including a very clever hibiscus grower by the name of Bety. All were chosen by Purdue and its local partner, the Universidad de los Llanos.

My first stop was in Puerto Lopez, a small town three hours from Villavicencio on a two-lane, highway with no shoulders and lots of buses filled with people and swerving back and forth all over the road.

This region is prime flat ground for raising livestock. All around me there were cattle, chicken, and pig farms as far as I could see.

Halfway down the road to Puerto

Lopez, our driver stopped the car and told us to get out. The fan belt on my van broke, he said. We had to wait on the roadside for the company to send another van. Now, personally, I like to look for the positive in every situation, so there we were at a roadside stand where on Friday nights they hold cockfights. Today, though, they only sold an interesting new food I was eager to try: a mixture of ground corn, fresh cheese, and milk, mixed by hand and scooped into a cone-shaped banana leaf and boiled in water. It had a terrible smell but it tasted delicious. It was chewy and cheesy and just what the doctor ordered for our roadside wait. I also got to learn a bit about cockfights.

### Breaking the ice

My first class in record-keeping started the next day at 1 pm.

I thought I'd get their attention with my Paraguayan Spanish.

"Hi," I said. "My name is Amanda Dickson and I'm from Purdue University in the United States. I'm single and looking for a husband, so if you all know anyone you could introduce me to, I'd appreciate it."

All the cattlemen laughed. Then some of them pointed at Javier. He was single and ready to mingle, one *caballero* or cowboy said. It broke the ice and set the stage for the learning environment for the week. But his classmates teased Javier mercilessly for the whole week. You must prepare your home for a new wife, they joked, and you need to start thinking in dollars, not pesos.

About 60 percent of these farmers around here didn't keep any records at all, and those that did kept incomplete records. So, right off the bat, we started



Amanda and Ramon observing their afternoon ritual with cups of terere.

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with a sample farm selling similar products and we used the farmer's current methods to figure out if the sample farm was losing money. Needless to say, we couldn't determine if this sample farm was losing money or making it, or how much milk, pounds of beef, and chicken they were producing. So we started learning about the theory of and basic techniques for production and income/expense records.

At one point in class, one woman caught my eye. Her look had an authority about it. She turned out to be Bety, the association's president and a clever businesswoman. I was having a hard time explaining a complex procedure when Bety, a hibiscus grower, got it. She asked if I would mind if she spoke to the class and tried to explain it another way. It worked. I spoke with Bety one-on-one later about her hibiscus growing practices. She told me that the first year she grew hibiscus plants, she made a lot of money and her neighbors noticed. So everyone wanted to grow hibiscus as well. She decided that she would sell them the seed, but because she knew the market would be flooded with the plants, she decided to not grow any of her own that year. As Bety suspected, hibiscus prices dropped that year and the neighbors decided they wouldn't grow them anymore. Then of course Bety grew hibiscus the following year and benefited financially from a high demand and low supply market. Very clever, that Bety.

### Gaining altitude

The second week we headed to the mountains and an area where the majority of the fruit in Colombia is produced. Lejanias is a small town shrouded in a hazy fog at the base of the Andes Mountains—cool and damp like Bogota. Many of the farmers live on small farms of five to ten hectares filled with groves of fruit trees. Some were old and well-established orchards.

Colombian fruit growers face common supply-and-demand problems that result in plummeting prices and wasted fruit.

### The 14-year-old daughter tried to keep track in her head the number of cows in each pasture and for the most part she did a good job.

Imagine this: all fruit becomes ripe at about the same time, floods the market, and has a short shelf life. People get tired of eating the same fruit and cannot consume the quantity available. Therefore, a lot of tree fruit is thrown away. One of the areas where fruit producers could potentially benefit is making value-added fruit products.

The growers in my class were thinking about making fruit leather, pulp for juice, and dehydrated fruit, but they were unsure if these ventures would be beneficial, or if they should stick with what they knew. So a part of our class was figuring out how much each of these ventures would cost and how much potential income they could make. We wanted to see if the value-added products would be worth doing.

All but one of the growers who came to my record-keeping class were new growers. The exception was a dairy farm

Volunteers for Economic Growth Alliance, or VEGA, is one of seven NGOs that implement the Farmer-to-Farmer program in about 30 countries with U.S. Agency for International Development funding.

Volunteers with Farmer-to-Farmer have provided short-term hands-on training to more than a million people around the world. Farmer-to-Farmer says in the last five years their volunteers have raised annual incomes by \$132 million, and more than a third of those beneficiaries are women. In Farmer-to-Farmer's 30 years about 16,000 people—many of the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers with ag experience—have taken short-term assignments in more than 100 countries. To learn more about it visit [Farmer-to-Farmer.org](http://Farmer-to-Farmer.org).

family who invited me to spend a day at their dairy operation to help the family learn how to keep records of their herd.

To organize the cattle in an efficient manner, they sorted the cows into three pastures: bred, not bred yet, and milking. The family of four had no way of tracking which cows were in which pastures. They would just move the cows as needed when they checked them. The 14-year-old daughter tried to keep track in her head the number of cows in each pasture and she did a good job, but animals were frequently lost, misplaced. The operation was inefficient. They also needed a way to track when cows were bred and their expected birthing dates when they needed to be supervised in the barn. We agreed on a simple tracking method that worked.

### Terere keeps on giving

I had come to Colombia's hot plains with an ample supply of terere, a traditional drink in Paraguay using yerba mate, herbs, and ice-cold water and served to friends. A cattleman named Ramon recognized my terere and asked to drink with me. Ramon and I drank terere every afternoon and we invited others in the class to join us.

When I got back to Morgan County, I sent Ramon a packet of yerba mate and *bombilla*—the special straw for drinking it. I stay in touch on Facebook with the F2F project staff and the dairy farmer's daughter and get updates on their progress with record keeping on their dairy operation.

The Farmer-to-Farmer experience—the kindness of hardworking cattlemen and orchardists in the classes, being stranded along a road in the middle of the plains—reminded me of why I love to work in different cultures, in international development, and with farmers.

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