We sit down, and Mamani and Vargas wait anxiously for the government representative. On the door, a sheet of paper scrawled in black marker with the letters “ALBA-TCP” is all that alerts visitors that this is the local office of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, a cooperation agreement between Venezuela and Cuba signed in 2004. “TCP” stands for Peoples’ Trade Agreement, which was added to the original pact to implement some of its provisions.

Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and Cuba’s Fidel Castro created the ALBA as a counter-proposal to the U.S.-backed Free Trade Area of the Americas, but it actually involves little conventional trade. It is more accurately described as an aid and cooperation framework, with investment and aid coming from oil-rich Venezuela and cooperation coming in the form of expertise and services from Cuba, mostly in education and health care.

Bolivia joined the pact in 2006, and the government has earmarked $1.5 million for quinoa growers out of the $100 million provided by Chávez for investments benefiting small farmers. This will include credit for at least five quinoa-related projects in the southern altiplano.

“In the past, we’ve had some help from the government, but nothing radical or decisive,” Mamani says before the government official arrives. “We’re hoping that’s going to change.”

The Elevator Is Broken in Bolivia’s Ministry of Campesino and Agricultural Affairs, so together with Arturo Mamani Poma and Salustiano Vargas Villca, I walk up to the sixth floor, where we find a small, dark office with three desks, a few computers, and a conference table. Mamani and Vargas, both members of the National Association of Quinoa Producers (Anapqui), have come to the La Paz office to request a loan to build a quinoa-processing plant.

I met them a week earlier in Llica, a town in the southern part of Bolivia’s altiplano, the vast highland plains where most of the country’s quinoa is grown. They invited me to attend the meeting, hoping my presence as a foreigner would help them make their case.

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directly tap this growing market. The official turns to me, and I slowly nod in agreement.

The stakes in this are high. Most of the Aymara and Quechua residents of the southern altiplano—the poorest region of South America’s poorest country—survive on the meager income provided by growing quinoa and herding llamas. Anapqui has worked to lessen this daily struggle for more than 20 years, and its efforts are beginning to pay off. Thanks to a sympathetic government and rising quinoa demand, the prospects for campesinos are beginning to look a little brighter.

Mamani, who has been nervously rocking back and forth as he speaks, calms a bit after the ALBA official assures him and Vargas that the asked-for $137,900 loan is theirs. Anapqui, like all other campesino organizations granted ALBA loans, has 10 years to pay back the money at only 4% annual interest, with a three-year grace period.

“Our goal is for this to get you more added value from your product as organic,” the official concludes. “And it is important for this to have a communitarian vision, so ownership of this factory is seen as something that belongs to the entire community.”

Mamani and Vargas are excited as we walk back down the stairs. “I think we did pretty good,” Mamani says proudly.

Vargas agrees, and half-joking adds, “If this TCP is about solidarity, then we shouldn’t have to pay back the money, should we?”

Mamani laughs and shoots back, “Well, if you’ve got a problem with that, you’ll have to take it up with Mr. Chávez.”

ON THE BUS TO LLICA, A CURIOUS Aymara woman asks if I’m a Cuban doctor. When I explain that I’m researching quinoa, she replies, “Ahhhhhh, quinoa. Well, we don’t have a lot of things around here, but if there’s one thing we do have, it’s quinoa.”

The southern altiplano is stunning but nearly inhospitable. Temperatures dip below freezing during most of the year, and annual rainfall, much of it hail, reaches little more than four inches. The winds are fierce, and the sun, despite the cold, is blinding. Because of the nearby Salar de Uyuni—the largest salt flat in the world, almost the size of Connecticut—salt crystals often encrust the farmlands’ alkaline soil. Yet this is the hardy quinoa plant’s ideal environment.

Native to the central Andes, Chenopodium quinoa produces a grainlike seed that has long been a staple food in the region. Archaeological evidence dates its use as far back as 5,000 years. The Incas called it “mother grain,” using it to feed their armies of conquest. But under Spanish rule, quinoa and other native crops were suppressed and replaced with Old World crops, in what researchers Jon Hellin and Sophie Higman describe as a “culinary colonialism that continues to a large extent today.”

Indeed, the racist stigma within Bolivian society of quinoa as a third-rate “Indian” or “rural” food remains a hurdle in boosting domestic consumption. For centuries, quinoa languished as a subsistence crop in the countryside, with a small portion going to urban areas and Peru.

Growing awareness of quinoa’s exceptionally nutritious value is beginning to change that, however.

The amount and quality of protein in quinoa is much higher and better compared to rice, barley, wheat, and corn (only soy has more), and it is rich in essential fatty acids and minerals. NASA has even considered feeding quinoa to astronauts on long-duration space missions.

Quinoa production in the Andes bottomed out in the 1960s and 1970s. In Bolivia, the industry somewhat recovered after the government promoted using a small percentage of quinoa-derived flour in the production of crackers, breads, and pastas. As the government project led to rising demand, campesinos began organizing to demand better prices, more market access, and government assistance. But with the 1971 military coup, organizing efforts were put on hold until the end of General Hugo Banzer’s brutal rule in 1978. In 1983, with the return of elections, quinoa growers in the southern altiplano founded Anapqui. Today, the organization represents 5,000 quinoa-producing families organized into seven local chapters in the departments of Oruro and Potosí. The Anapqui headquarters are in La Paz, but it has an office and a modern processing plant in Challapata, a town in the geographic heart of the southern altiplano.

Before Anapqui was formed, miserable market conditions forced growers to sell what they did not use at home for below production costs. Bartering with intermediaries, quinoa producers were forced to trade under patently unfair asymmetries: Three pounds of quinoa, for instance, only garnered one pound of wheat flour.

Berno Rodriguez, a lifelong quinoa farmer and former president of a local Anapqui branch, says times were tough before the organization was founded.
This plant in Challapata, Bolivia, processes and packages almost all of Anapqui’s quinoa.

“Buyers used to barter with us, and we were being cheated,” he says. “But we rose up, organized, and that got us a much better deal, especially now that we have relationships with the gringos.”

With growing U.S. and European demand for organic, healthy foods, as well as fair trade products, Anapqui’s members turned to producing organic quinoa in 1990. Besides the economic benefits, Rodriguez says, “we realized that with pesticides, we were really just poisoning ourselves, so we decided it would be better to do it the way our grandparents have done for millennia, and now it’s written into our communal rules.”

Anapqui offers its members prices above the going market rate for conventionally grown quinoa, 100 pounds of which can go for as little as $25. Anapqui buys organic quinoa for as much as $32—not exactly the “caviar of the Andes,” but the extra $7 can make a world of difference in a country where most people scrape by on less than $2 a day.

With buyers in Brazil, Europe, the United States, and Japan, Anapqui’s quinoa is certified organic by various international regulatory bodies. It has also attained “fair trade” certification from the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International by following strict social, economic, and environmental standards.

Following these rules is not always easy, and many farmers express some frustration with certification. Rodriguez remembers certifiers once rejected half of his organic harvest, saying he used pesticides. “But I told them I had taken good care of my quinoa, without one drop of chemicals,” he says, adding that he ended up selling the “contaminated” half to traditional intermediaries.

Organic pesticides are available to combat the two moth species that can decimate a quinoa field, but they are expensive, and Bemo estimates they only kill 70% of the pests. This means that although organic quinoa fetches a better price, organic fields are less productive—and more labor-intensive. But Bemo doesn’t mind.

“We take good care of our crops, and treat our little quinoa with a lot of affection, because it’s our Pachamama” (mother earth), he says.

José Luis Soto of the Proinpa Foundation, an organization that researches and promotes Andean products, says the biggest problem is that the certifications change constantly, usually getting stricter. Relations between Anapqui’s local chapters and its central leadership are not tension free, either. The main source of friction arises because the processing and packaging of quinoa is centralized at the plant in Challapata. This is why Mamani and Vargas went to La Paz seeking ALBA money to build their own plant in Llica—so they can process and package quinoa without having to go through Challapata.

As Soto notes, “The local offices complain that the economic gain generated by production in Challapata doesn’t return to the local communities, because the truth is, it’s not that much.”

In Irpani, Berno Rodriguez has the same gripe. “We want direct access to markets, because Anapqui also keeps a cut,” he says. But his local chapter decided against building its own factory, afraid it might upset its relationship with the national Anapqui leadership. Despite these differences, quinoa producers see Anapqui as an indispensable institution for improving their livelihoods and representing their interests.

The success of the local chapters depends largely on the quality of leadership at the local level. “There are some [local] leaders who really don’t care about their members,” Soto says. “Some have even betrayed Anapqui, using their contacts and experience to go off and create their own private companies.”
One of Anapqui’s greatest victories was defeating a patent obtained by researchers Duane Johnson and Sarah Ward of Colorado State University. In 1994, the two patented a variety of quinoa called *apelawa*. “The quinoa patent is a shocking example of biopiracy,” said Pat Mooney of Canada’s Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI, now the ETC Group) in a press release at the height of the patent battle in 1997. “By slapping a patent on quinoa the U.S. researchers have selfishly appropriated knowledge and genetic resources that belong to indigenous people of the Andes.”

Anapqui joined with RAFI and Oxfam to launch an international protest campaign. Oscar Mamani, then president of Anapqui, gave a speech at the United Nations declaring the patent illegal and a violation of Andean peoples’ human rights. When Johnson offered to allow the free use of *apelawa*, Mamani responded, “We don’t need a U.S. professor to ‘donate’ what is rightfully ours.” The 14-month conflict ended in 1998, when the university let the patent renovation lapse.

The patent controversy and decades of neglect by the government have made Anapqui’s members wary of outsiders. “Some leaders are really radical, classist, and combative, and they don’t want anything to do with government institutions, foundations, outside technicians, or engineers,” explains Soto. But with the election of President Evo Morales, who was born in a community near Challapata, many growers are finally willing to work closely with the government.

Most people agree that the quinoa industry still needs more help from the government in boosting domestic consumption, since the “culinary colonialism” initiated with the Spanish conquest has had lasting effects. Wheat and wheat flour imports have long dwarfed quinoa production, and Bolivians still consume much more rice, bread, and pasta than they do quinoa or other native grains.

When Anapqui began, some of its biggest buyers were the state mining and train companies, along with the armed forces, which still buys quinoa. In Peru, the government managed to bolster nutrition by using quinoa in school food programs, while also supporting native products and farmers. Many quinoa growers say they hope Morales will follow through on his promise to adopt similar initiatives in Bolivia.

But with demand outpacing worldwide supply, expanding Anapqui’s production capacity is the most urgent challenge, says David Schnorr, head of the U.S.-based Quinoa Corporation, one of Anapqui’s main buyers.

“The problem I see with building a larger market for quinoa in the United States is the availability of the product and the farming-processing infrastructure of the countries producing quinoa,” Schnorr says.

Providing help for an industrial upgrade is where financial support from the ALBA and other government assistance could really bear fruit. Proinpa’s José Luis Soto, however, remains unconvinced.

“The financing from Venezuela for factories lacks a strategic vision,” Soto complains. “It creates white elephants, because our main problem at the moment is that we’re not producing at capacity with the factories we do have. We have bottlenecks in the system.”

Soto also doesn’t consider the ALBA countries viable new markets. “People in Cuba and Venezuela are poor and don’t know about quinoa,” he says.

In fact, a report by the Bolivian Institute of Foreign Trade, a private pro-business group that advises exporters, recently stated, “The reality of the ALBA-TCP does not bear a minimum resemblance to the expectations it created and has caused frustration and worry for traditional exporters, as well as for a growing number of small producers.” The report further charged that “not a single gram of quinoa” has been exported to Cuba.

The debate surrounding ALBA does not seem to bother most Anapqui members, who are happy to get more assistance, even if it comes without the promised new markets. And the ALBA funds—not to mention the Cuban-sponsored health and education programs—should help the southern altiplano’s socioeconomic revitalization, which began with organic production in the 1990s.

Arturo Mamani Poma, as an accountant with an eye on the bottom line, has no doubts about where Anapqui should direct its efforts: “In Europe and North America, they know our quinoa is healthy, organic and exotic, and they are willing to pay extra for it.”

Investigación Periodistica para el Desarrollo Sostenible

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