



Interlude 1

Sunday talks on watershed management in San Miguel

Sunday is the market day in San Miguel del Valle. Early in the morning, small farmers come to town from the hillside villages to sell their vegetables, fruits and handicrafts and to shop. Most trade takes place before 11 o'clock, when church services begin. Later, knots of people gather in Park Square to comment on the week's news. The discussions, gossip and arguments of this informal forum are the life blood of municipal governance.

Ignacio de la Rueda, San Miguel's young and energetic mayor, is aware that his new watershed management project will be on trial in Park Square today. He has been pushing for this project since he graduated in hydraulic engineering, and over the last ten years has spent a lot of time and energy convincing his fellow citizens that seasonal floods in the lower San Miguel valley can be controlled by canalizing the streams and torrents flowing from the Apo peak, through the orchid forest on the northern slope of the valley. The work will reclaim more than 800 ha of fertile, irrigable land, and a small hydropower dam located at the mouth of the canyon could supply very low-cost electricity to the municipality.

So far, lack of funds and political will have prevented this project from being implemented. However, after winning the municipal elections, Ignacio has convinced his party colleagues in the government to include the project in its national sustainable development agenda and recommend it for donor funding. The project was approved by the government and the donor, which requested formal ratification from the municipal council. Ignacio has reassured the council that the project would benefit the whole constituency, gaining bipartisan consensus for the first time in San Miguel political history. However, he is aware that it will have very little chance of succeeding unless Park Square groups endorse the council decision.

After church, Ignacio is approached by Don Eleuterio, the old botanist who is in charge of the orchid biotope, a protected area supported by an international NGO. Don Eleuterio comes straight to the point: "I am really disappointed by the way in which the council dealt with conservation issues. I supported you in the election, because I thought that you were sensitive to biodiversity and willing to protect the orchid biotope. But last week you mentioned drying the forest piedmont swamp. That swamp provides the humidity that many forest orchids need to grow and blossom. It also hosts many rare bird and endemic plant species. The swamp should be treated as part of the biotope, and not as a buffer zone where anybody can dig channels."

Ignacio answers gently: "You should not take the draft plan as final. Many important aspects are still to be considered in depth, including the exact location of the channel catchments. Most of the piedmont swamp is marked on the map as a buffer area for the biotope, which means that only very limited interventions will be made, according to the findings of an environmental impact assessment. I am as interested as you are in conserving the mountain forest: that's where our water comes from." "All right", says the botanist, "we will discuss this when the Ministry of Environment team comes for the environmental impact assessment."

Ignacio is crossing Park Square when a child calls him to tell him that Don Emiliano wants to buy him a drink at the coffee shop. Ignacio is not eager to talk to Don Emiliano and his landowning and business friends, but he realizes that it would not be polite (or politically advisable) to ignore the invitation.

Don Emiliano is sitting at a table with Don Victor and Don Arturo: “The San Miguel business community owes a lot to you for this brilliant project, which will bring prosperity and progress to the whole community”, he says. “We were not among your voters at the last election, but we congratulate you for the way you are handling this issue. Please take a seat and tell me what you would like to drink.”

“Don Emiliano is happy”, says Don Arturo, who owns half the arable land in the valley, “because he is already counting the money he will make from supplying contractors with food, beer and materials and accommodating foreigners in his brand new hotel. I and the other big farmers in San Miguel also expect to have a role in this development. We are sure that our entrepreneurial spirit and investment capacity will be taken into account when the land and water that your project reclaims are distributed.” Then, looking slyly at Ignacio, he adds, “I am sure you will agree that government and donor efforts to improve agriculture in our municipality should not be spoiled because land and water are made available to people who do not know how to make a profit from them.”

Don Victor explains: “It is no secret that the Small Farmers’ Union is putting you under pressure to assign the reclaimed land to a small farmer cooperative. They say it is for social justice, but these cooperatives have no business experience or working capital. I really hope that all the work you have done so far does not end up with such a populist conclusion.” “By the way,” Don Arturo adds, “we can pay the municipality a higher rent and offer a share of our profits, if needed...”

Ignacio cuts off the conversation, finishing his drink, “This is a complex and sensitive issue, which the council will consider carefully. I am confident that we will reach consensus in the end, but any statement I make at this point would be premature. So thank you for the pleasant conversation and the drink and have a nice Sunday.”

Back on Park Square, Ignacio hears a loud voice: “See what happens to those who are blessed by education and politics: they sit at the rich men’s table and forget about their friends and comrades.” It is Jorge, his childhood friend, who is sitting with his Small Farmers’ Union colleagues.

As Ignacio nears the group, Jorge says: “I bet my harvest that the three coyotes you have been talking to were trying to convince you to sell them the land you already promised to us.” “Come on Jorge!” exclaims Ignacio, “You know very well that I am not entitled to promise the land to anybody, including union members. But I will do all I can to make sure that this land is used wisely and sustainably.”

“What does that mean?” asks Don Pepe, one of the small farmers. “Let’s take your case as an example, Don Pepe,” answers Ignacio, “tell us about your land”. Don Pepe starts: “My father left me 1 ha of hillside plot. To make a living out of it, I had to cut down all the trees and shrubs. Then, year by year, rainy season showers dragged all the good soil downhill, and I am left with a plot of stones and clay.” “Well,” says Ignacio, “sustainable use means preventing that sort of thing from happening.”

“How do you think you will manage that?” asks Lucho, the vice-president of the union. “By leasing valley land at special conditions to hillside farmers who are prepared to plant trees on their sloped plots. That will prevent soil and debris from sliding downhill and filling the channels and reservoir.” Jorge interrupts: “Do you really want to force people to plant trees on their ancestors’ farmland?”

“I do not want to force anybody to do anything,” Ignacio replies, “but I believe that our ancestors would agree that maize, beans and vegetables grow better on the flat, fertile and irrigated land of the valley, while hillsides provide excellent ground for fruit, coffee, cocoa and timber trees.” “Right,” says Don Pepe, “that is how my grandfather managed the farm. But when the landlords took away our downstream plots, we were forced to sow maize and beans on the slope. Can we be sure that this will not happen again when the flooded land is reclaimed?”

“To be honest, I do not know”, says Ignacio. “but this time the council is politically committed to giving small farmers a chance. Can we talk about this later? I am terribly hungry and my wife has lunch waiting for me.” “All right,” says Jorge, “we know that you are doing your best to make the project work for poor people too. I tease you because I do not want you to become a selfish, boring politician.”

Nearing home, Ignacio sees a brand new car parked in front of his front gate. Doña Elisa, the vice-mayor, is standing by the car. When she sees Ignacio, she calls him: “I have just arrived from the capital with some friends who would like to meet you. Do you have five minutes for us?” “I am in a bit of a hurry,” says Ignacio “but we can shake hands.”

Doña Elisa, does the introductions: “Mr Gutierrez from Water and Electricity Ltd and Mr and Mrs Alameda, the owners of Alameda Country Resorts. You have a meeting with them on Monday.”

“We had planned to come tomorrow,” says Mrs Alameda “but then we decided to take advantage of this sunny day to enjoy the valley. I am sure that when the swamp is drained and the White Canyon lake has been established, San Miguel will be a great place for tourists: a nice small colonial town in a rural environment, with a fresh climate, good air, an orchid forest and a little lake for swimming and sailing.” “That is what our urban customers want,” adds Mr Alameda, “San Miguel has a great future in the tourism industry.” “Not only that,” says Mr Gutierrez, “I have seen where the dam will be built and calculate that with a minor engineering change, the hydropower plant could produce much more electricity than planned. You can sell us some of the power we need to supply the district capital. Water is also interesting ... but we will talk about all this tomorrow.” “Yes, of course,” answers Ignacio, “In the meantime please relax and enjoy the place.” “Great, goodbye,” say the visitors.

Ignacio crosses the street and opens his front door. Suddenly, the unmistakable spicy smell of his wife’s roast meat makes him feel safe; until tomorrow, at least.