



**Ysabel Agustina Calderón Carlos** is a chemical engineer, ecopreneur, bee keeper and farmer. In 2017, she founded the environmental enterprise Sumak Kawsay, which, in addition to producing honey and panela, offers agrotourism. Furthermore, she has taken up the conservation of native stingless bees, of which she is preserving three species. Together with several researchers, Ysabel has developed a methodology to restore ecosystems and preserve biodiversity doing applied research. In the context of this work, which she is conducting together with the farmers in the region, she is restoring over 1,500 trees in mountain ecosystems. The most frequently restored trees include Palo Santo (*Bursera graveolens*), Hualtaco (*Loxopterygium huasango Spruce ex Engler*) and Higuierón (*Ficus insipida Willd*).

Ysabel has been rewarded several national and international prizes for her work, including, only recently, the Midori Prize for Biodiversity by the AEON Environmental Foundation and the "Premio Carlos Ponce del Prado". The latter recognises professionals who actively contribute to the conservation of Peru's biological diversity.

Ysabel is a Quechua-speaking descendant of the community Inkawasi in the northern Andes of Peru. She is based in the mountain village of El Higuierón in the San Francisco de Asís peasant community in Lambayeque region.

## “ When you put your heart and soul into something, it starts to grow ”

From the business idea to what is, in the best case, a thriving enterprise, there is often a long way to go – and the going can be tough. This still applies in particular for women. Ysabel Calderón, founder and CEO of the environmental enterprise Sumak Kawsay, gives an account of how she cleared obstacles in a machismo environment, who helped her on the way, and what she would do differently today.

### Ysabel, in 2017 you decided to found Sumak Kawsay. Where did you get from?

I always had a special connection to nature. I was born in the city and went to school there, but in my holidays I always travelled to the mountains to work with my mum on her farm. I remember the cows, the sheep, the ducks and all the trees, and I have this memory of my mother working the soil. Listening to the wind, feeling the rain, triggers strong feelings in me. I feel connected to the elements.

### But first you went in another direction ...

Yes, indeed. I studied chemical engineering at the university. My father paid for my education, and people of his generation have another mentality, with attitudes such as: "You have to study this because you get paid more here, you have to study that because your cousin studied this ..." So on finishing my studies, I wasn't really happy and decided to start my own path, the path of my heart. I have a very clear memory of some grandparents from the Andes who work with medicinal plants and conduct ceremonies to help other people. One of these grandfathers told us: "You come into the world to do what you love to do and offer this service to the world. That is your role." It became very clear to me that I had to choose my own path, working with and for nature.

### And why did you decide to work with bees?

Before studying at University, I had been going through a difficult phase, asking myself what I should do with my life. I had been really clear about wanting to work for the nature, in the nature, but I didn't know how to get there. During one of the ceremonies I just mentioned, a woman next to me saw me crying and offered me a spoon of honey. It was then that I thought of maybe finding the answer in bees. So I started with one hive to complement what I had been doing in the past – helping my mother to sell her honey. While studying at university, I also prepared seed-

lings and grew trees in my home community to restore the mountains. And when I finished University I knew what I had to do.

### So you founded Sumak Kawsay. What is the philosophy behind it?

Being a neologism in Quechua, Sumak Kawsay can be translated as "living in harmony with nature" or "good life". So we don't see nature as an object that has to keep on producing. We not only seek profit, but also respect the processes and seasons, also those of the bees, and take only what can grow back. Respecting nature and the conviction that every individual has his or her role to play form the basis of our philosophy.

### What skills or tools helped you to start your business? And how did you prepare for it?

I had already worked with an entomologist specialising in bee species, and also with a forestry engineer. As for the tools, I am an environmental activist and have always been involved in relevant initiatives, mostly international ones. I love getting to know people from other cultures, from other countries. This is how, in 2013, I got to know "Make Sense", an organisation based in France that supports initiatives with a social impact. There I got familiar with the method of design thinking – a creativity technique that helps you find solutions to various problems which I was fascinated by. In 2017, I was selected to join a programme at the University of Peru that worked like an incubator, Innitec UNI – PROIN. There, I learnt about business development, entrepreneurship, how to develop a project and focusing on what I want to do. All these tools helped me to launch Sumak and adapt the business model. I also learnt soft skills there, such as how to express myself.

### So communication is an important aspect for a young company like yours ...

Yes, definitely. Because no matter what project you are pursuing, you have to communicate it,

otherwise you won't get anywhere. Last year in October, for example, I was in Rome, Italy, to participate in the World Food Forum and talk about our work. These events give you the opportunity to show your work and expand your network, which is really important.

### Have you received any other kind of support?

In 2018 I attended a three-day meeting of Latin American Young farmers called SISAY – the Quechua Word for “blooming” – which was organised by the Slow Food Youth Network. It is a project to give young people from remote rural areas the opportunity to connect, to share their ideas. SISAY is inspired by Terra Madre, a meeting of Slow Food International that takes place every two years in Turin, Italy. My English was very bad then, but I took the plunge, applied and was selected for this scholarship, which opened doors for me and gave me an opportunity to leave Peru. I learnt that there is more out there, that there are no limits. This is where the future of Sumak started. I realised that there were more opportunities outside Peru, where there is hardly any valorisation of biodiversity. We have the resources but do not value them.

### What about financial help?

In 2019, I applied for the first support programme of EQWIP Hubs for young entrepreneurs, an incubator of the Canadian Embassy. Each of us received 1,000 dollars, which I used to buy my first beehives and equipment. Before, we had had only one beehive from my mum when I had helped her selling honey. Then, in 2020, I was part of the academy women entrepreneurship programme which the US Embassy runs with the University here. I won the first place, and another one in 2022 with the same programme. They promoted our initiative, which enabled us to buy material for our work each year. Our biggest achievement was last year, when I was nom-



inated as a Mountain Ecosystem Restoration Steward, within a programme launched by the Global Landscapes Forum and the Youth in Landscapes Initiative. We won 5,000 euros



I am proud to have the courage to follow my dreams.

to work on ecosystem restoration. With the money, we were able to help the community restore their land and to implement our nursery, our Meliponary, which is the area where there are the hives to manage native stingless bees, and our Apiary – so we have eleven hectares in total as a project pilot. Such opportunities give you security, but also visibility of your work and credibility, which is very important when you are promoting something.

### What were the biggest obstacles in founding and developing your company?

One was the budget, because I started without any money. Then there was my father, who hated me for what I was doing. He thought: “I invest in your education, but you don't appreciate it.” The process was really difficult for me. My mum was the only one in the family who supported me, and I am really grateful to her.

### How many people work at Sumak Kawsay?

We work with six families in the production of panela, in honey production and on the “Bee Honey Route” – *La Ruta de la Miel de Abeja* –, which is an agrotourism experience. We are a small company, but from the beginning, we have always tried to find new opportunities and new customers, and maintain fair prices. The families come from two peasant communities: San Francisco de Asís and San Mateo de Penachi. My rural community, El Higuero village, has about 50 houses.

### Where do you sell your honey and panela?

We sell both items in small quantities to other countries, but via private individuals, for ex-

ample customers who come to us and take the honey with them, or via friends. To export on a larger scale, we would need the relevant documents. Here, we are just in talks with Canada. And in the country itself, we sell via organic markets.

### Would supermarkets be an option to reach scale?

Supermarkets can sell large batches, but they don't pay attention to value propositions and the traceability, for example how the produce

was made, with agroecology and other good practices, and without pesticide residues. They are only concerned with sales. Some honey they sell is not real honey, because the beehives were fed with sugar or other similar food. For us it is important to educate our customers, to have value propositions, which is why we work with biomarkets, for they sell products with an environmental and social impact. In this regard, we also work with restaurants that value the conservation of biodiversity, like Matria or Lady Bee, which use natural ingredients in their beverages.

### Tell us a bit about the “Bee Honey Route”. What does it feature?

To start with, the tourists are offered an energetic cleansing with some medicinal plants. Then we take them to our Meliponary and Apiary. The “Bee Honey Route” is a journey through the heart of the mountains, where we focus on preserving a variety of native bee species, including stingless bees. These bees play a crucial role in the ecosystem and produce a unique honey known for its medicinal properties. Stingless bee honey, in particular, is highly valued for its antibacterial, anti-inflammatory and immune-boosting benefits. Along the route, visitors will not only learn about the vital work of bee conservation but also have the chance to experience first-hand the health benefits and rich flavours of this rare honey. It's an immersive experience that connects travellers with both nature and the cultural heritage of sustainable native bee keeping. They learn, for instance, that not all bees produce large quantities of honey. Out of 20,000 species, there are about five per cent that live in colonies and produce honey. The others are solitary bees, but they also pollinate plants, so it is import-





Native stingless bees.

ant to conserve them. And we make a “Honey Tasting” with all the types of honey that the bees produce and that we sell – not just from this year, but from all previous years, because every harvest is special. We live in a mountain ecosystem with wild flora. The rainfall, which is different every year, also determines which plants grow in which season. And this has an impact on the honey’s scent, flavour and aroma. So the tourists get to know the whole process.

#### Where do the tourists come from? And how do they find out about you?

We have guests from France and the USA, but also from the region. Most of them come because they have learnt about our work, for example through the events we attend in the USA and Italy, and also via social media, although most of them actually come through personal contact.

#### Do you work with travel agencies here?

Not yet, but we are actively seeking partnerships with them. We would be delighted to collaborate with agencies that are committed to community development, ecosystem conservation and the empowerment of women. By working together, we can create meaningful experiences that benefit both the local communities and the environment. We welcome agencies that share these values to join us in making a positive impact.

#### How many tourists come each year?

The rainy season is from January to March, so we can’t open the beehives because the bees are resting. Around 15 tourists come from April to December. That’s not a lot, but we would like to develop this touristic route further.

#### How long do the tourists stay?

Usually, it is a one-day experience. However, those who would like to stay longer are also

welcome to do so. Some people bring their tent with them, but one also has the option to staying with a family.

#### Let’s get to a central aspect of Sumak Kawsay – promoting women. Why is this important to you?

Well, in our community, as in many rural areas, the women have much more responsibility than the men. They run the household, look after the children and their husband, and then they also have to work in the fields – all without pay. In addition, machismo is very, very strong in rural regions. We live in the mountain ecosystem. The higher you ascend into the mountains, the more you encounter villages where women’s voices are getting weaker. As the altitude increases, so too does the level of sexism. In these places, women are often left without decision-making power, and their voices are stifled. And there is a lot of domestic violence in the mountain regions in particular. My mum has experienced this as well, which is why I said: “Stop, I have to do something for the women in my community.”

#### This is certainly a difficult process ...

Yes, of course. Obviously, you can’t change reality as a whole, but you can start with something, and maybe other people will follow, which is what I hope to do with Sumak Kawsay. When we find more consumers, we can work with more communities. And we can give these women a little independence. They are powerful. And when you get a little bit of grounding, it opens your eyes a little, leaving you with a spark that makes you go for more and say “yes, you can”. So the “Bee Honey Route” has a purpose beyond connecting with nature and the bees, it is also an opportunity for women to have a voice. Preparing food for the tourists and accommodating them gives them the possibility to generate an income and be economically independent. It makes them feel that they can achieve something, that they have value of their own. It’s a way to give them strength.



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Ysabel in her nursery.

#### Are women also involved in other ways?

We are monitoring the flowering season of plants visited by bees and other pollinators for this ecosystem restoration project. When the flowering season is over, seed production begins. We have to be attentive to this maturation process in order to be able to collect the seeds. Here I work with women who accompany me in the field, for which they are paid. The idea is to involve them as much as possible so that they can become economically independent, or can at least transmit this message to their daughters, so that they don’t stay dependent. This is the message we want to leave.

#### Has your position in your community changed as a result of your work?

People listen to me. You must keep in mind that it’s the men who come to the meetings in the villages. When I first arrived in the farm houses, they made their macho comments. I was the only woman and first had to show who I was, which is important, too. When you show who you are, what you’ve achieved, it makes you strong and protects you. We work with the children at school, we plant organic gardens, and we teach them to connect with the plants, the seeds and the bees. And they see the results. They see that there



Seeds for re-afforestation.

is someone who wants to make a change. A man in the community once asked me what I wanted to do. I told him: Nothing. I'm here, but for something to change, I need your help. If I'm the only one to initiate something, it won't work.

### Is the issue of protecting natural resources, of biodiversity being taught at school?

State-run education is in Spanish, a language that many natives do not understand. And the content is often alienated from reality. For example, they teach you everything about the animals in Europe and Africa, but not the ones native to your region, so that you don't grow up by appreciating the bird that lives in the tree next to your house or the plants growing around your village. People migrate to the cities to look for work because they are not taught to value the resources they have. I don't think the state has any programmes helping you to work in your community, with nature.

### What framework conditions would have to change for more women to start a business in your country?

First of all, access to finance. Everything here is very centralised and geared towards Lima, the capital, and, to a lesser extent, the north of the country. But there is a lot of potential among women with incredible dreams in other regions. The problem is that the entrepreneurship programmes, the incubators, don't reach them. Any programme that comes, any embassy that gives you a fund for entrepreneurship stays in the cities. Obviously, reaching out to rural regions is more expensive for them, so it would be good for the organisers to include these costs in their projects, to go to rural communities or at least bring a representative from there for these programmes. For the resources are in the forests, many of which depend on the rural communities, the

small farmers' communities, the indigenous communities. We have to open the general financing process and involve all the regions, especially the rural areas.

### And apart from financing?

One other important aspect is how we can really bring this knowledge of value chains to rural communities so that young people there get involved. In many cases, the communities don't have access to education, to knowledge. And lots of young people go to the cities because they lack opportunities to stay in the countryside and knowhow of adding value to their products. This also holds true for financial education, which isn't taught at school. And when it comes to women in particular, I think machismo and the lack of visibility are the biggest limitations.

### What do you particularly enjoy about your work?

It's nice to see when you pass on a message and it's heard. I realise that if you come with a real message and show others that it works, or at least works in part, then they listen to you. But working with the communities is also a challenge. There are always people who don't like it when others try to change the reality they are used to. It is important to walk the path with those who want change. Tourism offers a very good opportunity here, and nature and our native stingless bees provide us with good energy, too.

### If you were to found Sumak Kawsay again today, would you do anything differently?

I would work on myself to be stronger. And I would try to have more financial education, because nobody teaches you that. But I think this is a global problem, because at the end of the day we are educated to serve, but not to start something, to lead something. Here, you have to learn the right tools, and that's a big challenge. And you have to meet the right people. I also came across a lot of people whose motto was: the more you grow, the more they try to push you down. I hadn't reckoned with that. If you're not prepared for it, this knocks you over. So you have to work internally to overcome the obstacles that stand in your way, to control your feelings, otherwise they'll control you, and you will miss out on opportunities.

### What advice would you give other young people wishing to start a business?

That they look for role models, people who inspire them. That they look inwards and ask



Tourists are also offered honey tasting.

Photos: Sumak Kawsay

themselves: what do I want to do, what makes me happy? Doing what makes them happy and sharing this happiness with others, which is a big challenge. I am very grateful to nature, to all these spirits supporting my work in whatever way and allowing me to carry their message forward.

### When you look at Sumak Kawsay, what are you especially proud of?

Breaking with the ideology that you have to impress others, that you have to be like the others. When you put your heart and soul into something, it starts to grow. I am proud to have the courage to follow my dreams, because many people only work for their salary, for financial security, but are not happy. And I thank the bees. We have reforested the forest, we continue to work with the nursery, we take care of the bees and teach people about the role they play in preserving biodiversity.

### And what are your hopes for the future?

The doors have always opened more for men. We are just starting to see powerful women who believe in what they want to do in the world making an impact. I would wish that they receive more visibility, that they be given a voice. Meeting other women along the way who are also entrepreneurs gives you strength. Reducing the gender gap is important for everyone, not only locally, but also globally. My hope for the future is that there are more initiatives promoting gender equality because it is only together that we can build this change that we want to achieve.

*Ysabel Calderón was interviewed by Silvia Richter.*