

Determination

Jacobo Rivera, left, fought in the civil war in El Salvador. Following the Peace Accords he was part of a group of combatants who were given land they thought would provide them with work and income into the future. Here is his story of how, from difficult beginnings, he is now part of a cooperative that benefits the whole community.



“In the beginning when we were trying to harvest the salt from the land, we got in touch with the old locals. They had spent their lives working for the land owners and so gave us some technical assistance but we could not make it pay. We were hungry and could not work hard so the project faltered. Previously El Salvador had signed a free trade Agreement with Mexico and we could not compete with this. Their salt was coming in and being sold for less than we could do it.

“We thought about what we could do and re arranged our structure. We came up with the idea of shrimp farming. We made the walls of the old salt ponds higher and the water deeper. To start with it was very basic as we used wild spawn, but we soon realised that it would be no good because we were only getting 300 pounds per hectare. So, we responded and found another method. We sent people to see what else was in the area. Our production area is a biosphere and is protected by international law. So, we found ourselves in a difficult position as we needed to feed our families. However, we found we could put oxygen into the ponds which gives you a higher density of product.

Now we farm in a semi intensive way with 10 shrimp per square metre. Intensive farming is around 60 shrimp per square metre. We have had technical help from Christian Aid partner, PROCARES in the form of a micro biological lab kit which we use to monitor the water. When there is not enough algae we make adjustments. We make every effort to be good producers but it is still difficult. We constantly worry about warming waters and climate changes.

We adjusted our systems to include women as we are aware we must look to the next generation. With our profit share we have built the day care centre so women can work in the cooperatives. The care is not only for small children but also those wanting to go to university, as we think this is most important. We are currently looking to have an agricultural accredited degree. Most of us did not have formal education so we want to make sure our children do. We believe in handing the torch over to the next generation.

IMAGE: ©Commitment for Life: Jacobo Rivera and other co-operative members