



## The varying faces of poverty

By Nathalie Kinnard

*A research project conducted by Université du Québec en Outaouais (UQO) in collaboration with Ecuador clearly shows that Western notions of poverty and society do not coincide with the Ecuadorian idea of buen vivir, or a giving-based community economy.*

In the eyes of the world, nearly a quarter of Ecuadorians live below the poverty line. Guamote Canton in Chimborazo Province is known as one of the worst-hit townships: over 70% of the mostly indigenous Quechua population reportedly suffers from chronic poverty. Faced with this situation, the government and international cooperation agencies spent years investing time and money to alleviate the population's poverty and marginalization. These efforts gained global recognition for helping the Quechua increase their agricultural production. Yet the canton remains as poor as ever, according to the work of the Canadian Research Chair in Aboriginal Governance of Territory, which is led by UQO professor Thibault Martin.

Through the **Canada-Latin America and the Caribbean Research Exchange Grant**, funded by IDRC and managed by Universities Canada, two UQO students travelled to Ecuador to demystify the situation in collaboration with researchers from Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito.



For administrative reasons, the Canadian and Ecuadorian researchers were unable to access reports from NGOs that had worked in the region. They therefore turned to the local residents, who had witnessed the results of the international cooperation first-hand. "We conducted some ten interviews with key people, such as the mayor of the canton, to identify the impact of international aid projects in Ecuador," said student Otilia Puiggros. "We were surprised to see that what Ecuadorians

were telling us was not at all consistent with the statistics!” Fully 70% of residents do not consider themselves either poor or experiencing hunger. Their agricultural production feeds them well. “In addition, Guamote has the largest weekly food market in the country,” says the doctoral student.

Moreover, residents of the canton find that NGOs have not helped them increase their agricultural production capacity. Rather, they noted a significant lack of coordination between domestic and international stakeholders and government programs. People especially criticize the paternalism of the international cooperation, which is not putting money in the right places. “However, they do recognize that NGOs provided them with key support enabling them to get better organized and to update their operations without losing sight of their traditions,” added Puiggros. As such, the Quechua community trained its own staff (sociologists, social workers and gender experts), strengthened the organizational fabric and improved its trade capacity. They also created their own local NGOs.

“We realized that we had to be careful with the indicators we use to measure poverty in a country, since there is a difference between a capitalist economy, as seen in Canada, and the community economy we have in Ecuador,” explains Otilia Puiggros. “The people of Guamote engage in a lot of barter to meet their needs, and statistics do not measure that wealth.”



### **Governing differently**

Alongside the project, the Canadian Research Chair in Aboriginal Governance of Territory held an international symposium on governance in the Outaouais in 2014. Two professors from Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar and one women’s rights leader from Ecuador participated. “This reflective exercise improved our knowledge of aboriginal governance of territory in Ecuador and in Canada,” added the student.

Ecuador is engaged in model constitutional and institutional reforms that aim to redefine forms of governance of aboriginal territory and recognize the place of Aboriginal persons in society. “In particular, the country recognized the collective rights of Indigenous peoples and defined the multinational nature of Ecuador,” concluded Thibault Martin. Workshop participants discussed the impact of these political advances on social and economic change.

A new Canadian student should soon begin a joint master’s project with Ecuador to continue the analysis begun in the workshop.