

# Working with a women's group in Titilaca, Peru to form a knitting association: An example of value based groupwork

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**Abstract:** *This paper discusses in detail just one group meeting using the social action group work approach for a group of women in Peru wishing to establish themselves as a knitting association. We describe the context of the work and the different elements and challenges when facilitating the workshop. The meeting was part of a community development process supported by an NGO Amantani and a local hotel, Hotel Titilaka.*

**Keywords:** *participation, facilitation, international work, groupwork; group work*

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**Photographs** were taken on the day with consent. They are reproduced in the supplement to this article.

**Note:** *The facilitators of the session, Thilo and Jennie, are both Europeans. Thilo is fluent in Spanish and English, Jennie only speaks English, mastering a just few pleasantries in Spanish. Neither speaks the local language Aymara.*

## **Introduction**

The Hotel Titilaka (<http://titilaka.pe/en/>) in Peru contacted the NGO Amantani (<https://www.amantani.org.uk/>) to support their social responsibility initiative to work with the local Aymara community and to develop sustainable projects addressing the needs the community had identified previously. One part of this was to develop the skills of a local group of indigenous Aymara women from Titilaca, a community that lives on the shores of Lake Titicaca in the district of Plateria in Puno, Peru. Women were already knitting individually and were keen to form an association both to develop their skills and profit from government initiatives and finance available to such groups.

The importance of fully exploring the cultural, economic and social context is already well known within group work practice. We found this was an important place to start to ensure the facilitators show deep respect, consideration and politeness and building trust as the foundations that groupwork can be built on.

The development work dealt with important issues, we were aware of from the beginning, in particular that its impact would depend on the work which could be done afterwards with the local support from the Hotel Titilaka. Groupwork in community development is a long-term process of facilitation and empowerment so it is paramount to have a solid long-term strategy in place from the start to avoid not meeting community hopes and expectations and being a divisive force within an already fragile context.

We understand that facilitators need to walk with the group at its own pace, travelling with them and not jumping to actions that the group is not ready to embrace. Gaining autonomy and empowerment are long processes which have many highlights and drawbacks. The continuous commitment of the Hotel Titilaka through its social responsibility programme to community development and their support through their expertise, time and financial assistance have been key to the successes of the work.

In the work we describe in this paper, Thilo was a lone worker in the community. He was supported by Jennie through regular discussions on WhatsApp and email exchanges with Jennie. These covered such topics and ethical issues such as gaining trust, the pace of the work, disagreements and progress. These conversations were crucial to how

the work developed and keeping Thilo committed and true to the aims of the work. The group meeting we describe here was planned and co-facilitated by Thilo and Jennie when Jennie visited Titilaca.

## **Context**

The Aymara people live on the shores of Lake Titicaca as they have done for centuries. The Aymara people have a strong identity through their common language, customs, traditions and ways of thinking. Traditionally the common activity around Lake Titicaca was fishing, alongside raising of livestock and agriculture. (Alanoca Arocutipa and Quispe Curasi, 2017) This small-scale farming is characterised by a low level of productivity as a result a range of challenges, including ineffective use of agricultural inputs, adverse climatic factors and the lack of irrigation systems. Since the arrival of Spanish conquerors in Peru the high Andean regions such as Puno have been subject to socioeconomic exclusion and marginalization because most of the economic development has been concentrated in the low coastal area. (Paz Paredes Mamani and Escobar Mamani, 2018)

Puno is located in the Peruvian highlands between 3,800 and 4,500 metres above sea level. According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (INEI) Puno is the fifth most populated region of Peru. The Puno region is among the poorest regions of Peru, with a poverty rate around 36.1% and extreme poverty at around 9.8 per cent in 2016 (INEI 2016).

The Titilaca community is made up of several smaller settlements sometimes also referred to as 'Ayllus'. The ayllu is the traditional form of a community in the Andes, especially among Quechuas and Aymaras. Ayllu functioned prior to Inca conquest, during the Inca and Spanish colonial period, and continues to exist to the present day. Ayllus have defined territories and are essentially extended family or kin groups, but they can also include non-related members. Iriarte (1979) asserts that the Aymaras are deeply community orientated people: their work, leisure, dance, important decision-making, prayer, everything must be done within the frame of reference of the social group to which they belong. Thus, the wealth of institutions of mutual aid, reciprocity and collective work in the Andean cultural world is remarkable.

As part of a local capacity building initiative, Amantani worked for several months with a local group of indigenous Aymara women from Tivilaca. They came together as they wished to form a woman's knitting association. Women were already working making little wool animals and finger puppets which they sell at the local market for a very low price (taking into account the minimum wage). Alongside knitting to generate a small income the women were also engaged in agriculture and the many tasks at household level and childcare. In order to generate more income for their households, the women themselves identified the need to come together and get organised to benefit from the multiple development initiatives and support from the Peruvian government available to formal associations.

Velásquez writes that commercial craft production, such as knitting has become an important aspect of the rural economy in recent years and is one of the main non-agricultural sources of income in the region. He goes on to say, 'It is generally characterised by low capital investment and the use of traditional technologies and is considered to be a complementary activity to farming.' (Velásquez, 1988 in Forstner, 2013, p.48)

In Puno, craft production is being promoted by the regional municipality as a development strategy for the indigenous community and especially with women's groups. 'The commercialisation of craft production is one option for diversifying rural livelihoods and is closely linked with the increasing ties between Andean communities and regional, national and global markets. As such, it both forms part of and represents a response to a changing economic environment.' (Forstner, 2013, p.48)

The work Amantani proposed was twofold. First, working with the community to organise the very dispersed group of women from different settlements and second, to develop their capacity to earn through their knitting by delivering a capacity building programme. For this Amantani worked in partnership with a specialised design and training organisation, 'Klaud'. Klaud, no longer exists, but at the time it specialised in working with women building on their existing skills and using local materials, to help them design knitting patterns based on their traditional clothing. This work was based on the recognised understanding that 'the promotion of ownership, bottom-up approaches and endogenous development are related concepts that

are now considered in project planning and management. Capacity building has been related to rural development and sustainability of rural development projects. It enhances community decisions to improve their lives and at the same time their resources are better used and not depleted'. (Sastre Merino and Fernández Moral, 2013 p.1)

It is important not to fall into a false idealism that presents the Aymara world as an idyll of union and mutual solidarity. It is also crucial to be aware of the serious divisive tendencies that coexist in the Aymara culture, mixed within a strong sense of group (Iriarte, 1979). Organisations from outside the Aymara world have often incentivized divisive individualistic and factionist tendencies for their own economic or political interests. Whilst recognizing the community spirit it is important, we must not 'ignore the individualistic and factionist tendencies if we want to carry out an effective educational action and if we want to counteract the disintegrating activity carried out, not infrequently, by external agents.' (Iriarte, 1979, 54).

At the start of the project Thilo found himself working within a community where many women didn't trust each other and there was an animosity to working together, based on a lack of trust and a certain amount of envy. There was also a big distrust of the role of Thilo, as an outsider, not part of the community. There has been a huge influx of national and international NGOs into Peru over many decades. With this has come a number of scandals involving 'politicians and public figures and the activities of some NGOs more interested in their own finances than their 'beneficiaries', there is an alarming distrust of all politicians, NGOs and indeed anyone in a position of power or authority in Peru.' (Lavers 2004, p.62)

Thilo was very aware of this situation and how the women would see his position. He started working with the women by firstly listening to them talk about their lives, learning about what they saw as their needs. As Smith (2008) highlights, as amateurs we have to 'be around' for a time in many settings before we are approached or accepted:

It may seem obvious, but for others to meet us as helpers, we have to be available. People must know who we are and where we are to be found. They also need to know what we may be able to offer. They also must feel able to approach us (or be open to our initiating contact). (Smith and Smith 2008: 17 in Smith 2008, p.2/7).

For over a year he worked with them learning of their skills and strengths and the challenges and obstacles they face. Several times Thilo spent weekends living in a small house owned by a community member but mostly he stayed in the service quarters of the hotel. Thilo was not trying to be part of the community, but to enable both to get to know each other better and this was an important part of building trusting relationships. Small conversations, sharing food, visiting families are all little moments to get to know each other. Thilo acknowledged the distrust and the abuse communities had experienced and left it to the group to give him a chance and have a try at working together. After four months of this slow relationship building, the women from Titilaca finally told Thilo that he was not like any other man who came into the community with arrogance and superiority. They told him that they felt that they could talk to him, laugh with him and that he was approachable. This was a huge step!

The Aymara communities often have community assemblies where all the community members discuss and make decisions about community issues. All community members have the right to vote. Each family unit is represented by the head of the family or the widow and the assemblies are the highest authority within the Ayllu. Leaders are elected by majority vote and all important aspects concerning the life of the group are agreed upon. One has to be aware that in areas such as Puno, the society is very hierarchical and male dominated. Quite often in decision making meetings the leaders give long monologues and do not work in participatory ways. In our experience, sitting together whilst women are knitting in small groups is an effective way to work with them. It is in these more informal ways that important and meaningful conversations can take place, interspersed with laughter and sharing food.

After seven months of working together the women realised that they had gained confidence and become much clearer that they wanted to work together and started to think about forming themselves into a formal association. Long standing group animosity does not disappear magically this was still going to be quite an ongoing challenge to achieve.

## Starting a Knitting Association

Jennie and Thilo have worked together for many years in the UK. When Thilo moved to Peru, they continued to share their experiences through skype and Whatsapp conversations. Jennie became an important mentor and ‘friendly ear’ for Thilo. They also facilitated training and team sessions together in Peru for the Amantani team. Groupworkers need support (Fleming and Ward 2013:43). Jennie worked with Thilo from afar to look at the group as a whole. She provided supportive feedback and helped Thilo look beyond the immediate issues to the broader long-term goal. She challenged him to remember to push decisions back to the group, helped him think through how to open up discussion, cope with the unexpected difficulties of working in a different cultural setting.

Smith (2008) writes, that in groupwork, the worker

‘seeks to help people to help each other. Crucially, it [groupwork] is concerned with the ways in which both individuals and groups can build more fulfilling lives for themselves and for communities of which they are a part. It also looks to wider change. (Smith (2008, p.2/8)

He also points us to the writings of Allan Brown (1992:8 in Smith 2008) who writes that groupworkers should look beyond helping the individual with a problem, or even a group with a problem and focus on ‘*action and influence as well as reaction and adaption*’. For us, these are important aspects of groupwork that were crucial to our work with the women from Titilaca.

During the work with the women from Titilaca, Jennie played a crucial role. The group dynamics and the lack of trust and the initial animosity were very hard at times. Whilst Thilo is aware of the importance of looking at the group processes, because of the demands of the consultancy role, he often found he had become rather task orientated. This mentoring relationship became crucial for the work with the group. It helped Thilo to cope with the pressure and stress but also provided him with an outside view which helped to focus and shape the work. Through the mentoring and conversations Jennie helped Thilo to be in touch with himself and the women he was working with and to be more able to facilitate an empowering process which enhances the groupmembers’ autonomy.

An example of how this support worked relates to difficulties experienced at the beginning of the work, when Thilo was trying to make contacts in the community. Some of the Aymara women treated him with hostility, questioning the work, the aim of it and his integrity. Thilo whilst mostly optimistic found this rather distressing and questioned the viability of being able to ever do meaningful participatory work in such circumstances. Thilo thought of abandoning the work because he got caught up in endless discussions than never seemed to move on. At this moment Jennie gave him a lot of reassurance but also challenge. Was he really keeping to the social action participatory process? Had he really been able to put any agenda aside, just be there, listen to people and let them take their time? Jennie also recommended to have a very informal workshop with the women to explore what their lives were like, what were they needs, hopes and expectations. Whilst this is something Thilo would do normally in his work with communities, due to the limited local support and the commissioner's expectations of outcomes, he had skipped this fundamental part of the participatory process jumping straight into getting the women to identify a need. He changed his approach as a result of the discussions with 2, and these sessions helped to build trust and highlighted some of the broader challenges that the woman and the project would face.

We share an approach to groupwork – based on social action/self directed groupwork, an anti-oppressive model which aims to empower group members (Fleming and Ward 2013 and 2017). A notable feature of the model is a clear value-base, which is outlined in the form of six practice principles, emphasising: the avoidance of negative labels, the rights of group members, basing intervention on a power analysis, assisting people to attain collective power through coming together in groups, opposing oppression through practice and the fact that group workers facilitate rather than lead. It was this process that Jennie reminded Thilo to stick to.

We saw it as our role to facilitate a participatory process where the women themselves would identify their way of working, using the skills and knowledge of the group to create a plan of action to address these. For this to become real and meaningful we needed to build on the significant relationships Thilo had developed over the previous months and the knowledge Thilo had gained through working with the community. The women had agreed to take part in a group session



that would be facilitated by us both in which they would agree the aims and objectives for their association and decide how they were going to work together.

We had created a loose plan in the days before Jennie arrived in Peru via WhatsApp calls and email. It contained some exercises, some role play and much discussion. Throughout our conversations we were aware that many things we took for granted whilst working together in the UK were not applicable in the setting of Puno. Jennie had to be reminded more than once that many of the women were not literate in any language, some spoke Aymara and not Spanish so translation at times would be from English (Jennie) into Spanish (Thilo) and then Aymara (bi-lingual group members). Despite these issues of language, Jennie and Thilo did co-facilitate the group meeting, though Jennie very much relied on the linguistic skills of Thilo and we both relied on the bi-lingual group members. The bilingual women in the group also already had some experience in trading and selling their products in Puno city; especially Margarita who already was the leader of a small knitting group and who later became the president of the whole group and Juana, a woman who at first was distrustful, but eventually became a strong leader within her community group.

Forget electricity, flipcharts, post-it notes and a stack of coloured pens...all these resources, key to many group activities in the UK, are limited or even useless in remote community settings in Peru. The room we hoped to meet in had one table and only a few chairs; the key was held by the community president who frequently arrived up very late to open the room for meetings. Our experience of participation and groupwork from the UK was rather different to that of the Aymara communities with their autocratic structures.

We had agreed with the women to work for a whole day to work together to decide what they wanted their association to achieve and how they would work together to do this. The group decided to meet on a Sunday between 9 am to 2 pm. The group was looking forward to meeting Jennie, a woman - an important factor for them - who was an 'expert' from the UK and is also is a keen knitter, and was coming especially to work with them.

Our plan was to start with an experimental action exercise to involve everybody and then to get people thinking, reflecting on the exercise. Thilo would then talk about what the group had achieved so far and

remind them what the purpose the session was: to work towards forming an association, something they were hoping to achieve. Jennie would talk about groups and what helped them work well together – for example trust and clear norms. In small groups they would then discuss these aspects in relation to their group and make recommendations to the large group for decision. Margarita and Juana played an important part of this, being very outspoken and managing the small group dynamics. We would then role play a scenario of when things go wrong in groups and they would consider how their suggestions might help, or not, and adjust them if they felt necessary. The whole group would then decide on their 'rules' and ways of behaving together and end with a nice reflective exercise reviewing the achievements of the day.

## **So how did it go?**

When living and working in Peru you quickly learn that your lovely formulated plans constantly need to be changed and adapted. Flexibility and adaptability without losing professionalism is essential to success!

In the morning it was raining. When we got to the meeting place just before 9am, the door was locked and a couple of women were sitting outside knitting. Because of the rain the other women were taking their animals to pasture later than usual, and so did not start arriving until after 10 am; a number came with babies and young children. Eventually there were about 30 women in the group. By now the room was unlocked, but since it had just one table and a wooden bench the women chose to sit outside on the ground knitting and chatting. There was no electricity, no toilets and no running water – though there was a nearby well. As the women arrived it became clear that alongside the group session, they had decided to prepare a meal for everyone. Thilo was very aware that in community meetings and the Mink'a (Andean form of mutual aid which consists of cooperating together for the execution of works for the benefit of the community, working together for the benefit of the whole community) sharing food was an important part of the group's activity. However it was also important to recognise that this was a rather special moment because the women brought fish from Lake Titicaca, used for special occasions – partly as a celebration of the group's work and partly in honour of the foreign guests. Whilst

the women clearly were interested in the workshop they were also peeling potatoes, cleaning fish, lighting fires and knitting.

In such a moment, the facilitator has to respect the culture and wishes of the group, whilst also keeping in mind the aim of the workshop: to progress the Women's Knitting Association. We had to quickly adapt to the circumstances and we agreed that while the initial workshop plan was already quite informal, it was still too formal for this setting. Despite having our framework and activities planned, in agreement with the group, we decided to adapt it. Thilo had experience working with Andean communities, knew that group activities have their own patterns of accepted behaviour which are different to those in the UK. In this case that, as a group, they were perfectly capable of knitting, preparing food and still taking an active part in group conversations. We all moved near the cooking fire so everyone could take part, Thilo introduced Jennie and her opening remarks were greeted with applause – not a usual experience for groupworkers in the UK.

Jennie then talked about things that groups need to work well, these were:

1. goals and common purpose;
2. criteria for members and process of joining group;
3. clear roles and responsibilities for all members including Junta (committee);
4. communication systems;
4. decision making systems;
6. what to do when people do not keep the 'rules';
7. ways of dealing with conflict.

This was translated by Thilo into Spanish, and then into Aymara by Margarita and Juana for the few who needed it. Jennie emphasised that whilst all groups might need these elements to work well, it was up to the group themselves to discuss these issues and agree how they wanted to work together and what processes they thought best in their group.

The first task was for the women to agree the aims for their group. They had discussed this in general terms before but not agreed exactly on their key aims. In three groups they agreed the three main things they wanted the group to achieve. Bearing in mind the community

tensions, it was not a surprise to us that they started off saying that they wanted to be organised, avoid conflict and trust each other. Whilst not dismissing these issues, we stopped and explained again what a goal or aim was; Thilo used the phrase *meta y sueño* to explain - the nearest translation is goal and dream. Here it was important to contextualise what we meant by goals and dreams and Thilo gave examples from farming, reassuring the group that we would deal with all the issues but first we needed to know where they wanted to do as a group.

It became very clear at this moment that the seemingly diverse group was in fact very much in agreement about their aims and with support from Jennie in only condensing and merging their ideas, they agreed the three main aims for the whole group which can be summarised as skills, income and recognition:

1. Queremos aprender a tejer mejor;
2. Queremos producir más y ganar un sueldo mejor;
3. Queremos ser las mejores tejedoras conocidas en el Perú e Internacionalmente;
1. We want to learn to knit better;
2. We want to earn more and get a better salary;
3. We want to become the best knitters known in Peru and internationally.

Having agreed their aims Margarita and Juana (who became more and more the group leaders of the different communities) together with some other more outspoken women suggested they work in three small groups and each group discuss two of the remaining things that groups need to work well together. So, one group discussed criteria for members and process of joining group and clear roles and responsibilities for all members including Junta; the second looked at how they would communicate with each other and decision-making systems; the third addressed what to do when people do not keep the 'rules' and ways of dealing with conflict. As is usual for the community when they have meetings, each group was led by a member of the Junta and another woman took notes to ensure decisions were recorded. However, what was new to them was working in small groups. Quite often in the larger group meetings everybody talks, the meetings last for hours and it is difficult to come to an agreement. Whilst the

conversations were going on, women were knitting and some tending the fire and preparing the food and it was definitely noticeable that whilst doing other activities most women were all also giving serious attention to how their Association was going to work.

The conversations in the small groups were all in Aymara, so we could not unobtrusively listen in to what they were discussing! However, the conversations were very animated, the women joked and laughed quite a lot. Thilo did go around the groups after a while and ask them what sorts of things they were talking about. Topics included: how well does someone have to be able to knit to be part of the group? Who will decide if they knit well enough? Will there be associate or honorary members of the group? What would they do? How many meetings can you miss before you are no longer part of the group? Should women be 'banned' from the group for breaking the rules? Or are financial sanctions better? Who should make decisions – a committee or all the women?

What we noticed at this point was, that despite the overall agreement, in the small groups, some tensions started to be visible. Despite not understanding what people were talking about Jennie observed the interaction in the groups and made Thilo aware of some rising tensions. Because of Jennie's lack of Spanish, her role developed to be an acute observer, whilst still being a facilitator. She supported Thilo, the more active facilitator by keeping things on track, holding things together, a quiet voice which through observation co-facilitates the process. Whilst there was a good atmosphere, some women became slightly upset; we were concerned that they might feel isolated and not involved in the decisions, and this could disrupt the groupwork. Thilo had noticed in this his previous experience with the group that the Aymara women seemed quite direct with each other, they also have a sharp sense of humour - they teased Thilo quite a lot. Understanding humour is rather important when working in a different cultural setting and Thilo started to talk light-heartedly with them, and joke whilst taking care not to cause further upset and this smoothed the tensions and focused the group again on the commonalities and agreements.

Once they had finished their discussions in the small groups each gave feedback to the main group in Aymara and then in Spanish for Thilo (who then translated into English for Jennie).

The group looking at membership and roles and responsibilities

From the notes written by the group members in Spanish

Admisión de nuevos miembros

- Tienen que ser del centro poblado Titilaca
  - La mayoría tiene que estar de acuerdo a que entren
  - Tienen que tener la habilidad de tejer
  - Tienen que estar de acuerdo con metas y reglas
  - (el ser miembro nuevo depende de pedidos)
  - (nuevo miembro debe presentar carta)
- 

proposed that members needed to be women from the Titilaca area, and they would have to show their ability in knitting, and that membership needed to be agreed by the whole group. The number of members should depend on the amount of knitting contracts the Association has, new members being taken on as and when the work increases. Non-knitters could be members as Honorary members but they could not vote nor earn money from the group. Members would be expected to attend all meetings, be punctual and responsible, deliver knitting projects on time and to a high standard.

The group considering communication and decision making said enough women had mobile phones for a combination of a phone tree. Then a network. of those with phones would have responsibility for contacting those without. They wanted the whole group to make decisions, though in an emergency or a situation requiring a quick decision the Junta could make the decision that would need to be explained at the next meeting.

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Responsabilidad

- Todos se comprometen en cumplir con los pedidos con responsabilidad y a tiempo
  - Ser puntuales
  - El producto tiene que ser de calidad
  - Todos tienen que asistir a las reuniones
- 

Decisiones

- Mayoría es 50% mas
  - Todas las decisiones por mayoría
  - En caso de emergencia Junta toma la decisión con los que están presentes
- 

The group considering sanctions and dealing with conflict made a

number of suggestions for how this could be dealt with, including the case for expulsion (e.g. non-delivery of knitting projects or non-return of the groups wool, mis-use of funds).

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Sanciones

- Dos veces disculpados
  - Cuando socia hace problemas y causa conflicto dos veces se disculpa 3ra vez se saca de la asociación con acuerdo de mayoría
  - Primera vez no cumplido con pedido a tiempo ya no puede entregar. Segunda vez no entregado el pedido ya no pueden participar en la asociación
  - Si avisa antes con tiempo, hay disculpa.
  - (si se alguien se queda con el producto o la lana, expulsión inmediata)
- 

Again the level of agreement between then was noticeable. There was virtually no discussion of the small groups' proposals, all were met with applause and agreement. We thought that maybe the decision to not eat the meal until the work was done and also the growing heat had something to do with the lack of discussion, but when challenged the women said they were genuinely in agreement with the suggestions.

The seriousness of the meeting and the formality of it was reflected in the recording of all the decisions in the 'Libro de Actas' (book of meetings and commitments). In the Andean records of community meetings are almost like legally binding documents and are taken very seriously. In a dispute, the recordings are used to resolve any conflicts and the community makes sure decisions are implemented. As the secretary of the group was illiterate her daughter wrote the minutes into the book and then each woman either signed with their signature or with their fingerprint.

The group agreed to start using the rules and review in 6 months. The work was done, the meal was served, and everyone sat down on the ground to eat the fish and potato stew made with small fish caught in the lake the night before - including Jennie a vegetarian of some 40 years who felt it would be disrespectful to not join in the communal eating.

## **Where the group is now**

At the time of writing this paper, after over a year of working with them, the women's knitting group is still working together but they haven't formed a formal association. They have used most of the items they explored

- goals and common purpose;
- criteria for members and process of joining group;
- clear roles and responsibilities for all members including Junta;
- communication systems

They had also to deal with some challenges because Margarita, the president of the Junta left the group taking with her some of the money. Margarita always had been a strong leader within the group, having had her own smaller knitting group and having experience in selling her work in Puno. She even went to Arequipa, a city where some of the best alpaca wool is being produced, to buy alpaca wool for the women and everybody trusted her. Obviously, that had an impact on the already fragile trust between the women. However, with the intervention of the hotel and the support they offered, especially through the support of Virginia Mamani, the Maitre de Maison and an Aymara speaking woman herself, the women were able to continue.

On reflection it seems that the way they decided to deal with things like decision making systems, what to do when people do not keep the 'rules' and ways of dealing with conflict were not yet as robust as they needed to be.

The group continues to be supported by the local Aymara woman who has contracted by the hotel. Her knowledge and experience have helped the group to improve their skills and knit several new items. Some members decided to leave the group preferring to work on their own, due in part to persisting conflicts within the group. Others prefer to stay part of the group for the support and the benefits, for example of buying wool in bulk at a cheaper price. When some members left the group the money the group had created was split between the women leaving and those staying. The hotel continues to support the group by buying their crafts and, as these are now of a high standard, selling them in the hotel shop.



## **Reflection on the groupwork**

Are there things we can learn from this one meeting and the longer process of community working it was a part of? We think there are. We think this example highlights the universality of value based groupwork, the rights of group members, basing intervention on a power analysis, assisting people to attain collective power through coming together in groups, opposing oppression through practice and the fact that group workers facilitate rather than lead. Within this, we see groupwork and community development as part of an open ended process encompassing the need to fully explore the cultural, social and economic context you are working in and also, the role and position of the external expert, for example, understanding and respecting formality and sense of legality within the Aymara community and their need for a formal legal recognised structure for their group.

Sadly like many communities across the world this group has experience of being promised things and being let down, of being taken advantage of by unscrupulous individuals and organisations. They are rightly sceptical of outsiders. Before any commitment can be expected from group members, we must show ourselves to be trustworthy through our own actions and behaviour. Once gained, trust is a corner-stone of successful group work intervention within development initiatives.

Social action recognises that people have skills and knowledge and are the experts in their lives. Recognising and valuing the knowledge and strengths of the women was crucial to how we organised this workshop, and the whole process of groupwork. We started from their knowledge, though also acknowledging our own. The women already had their own ways of working together. This was a strength for the group, but we also had to be aware of the fact there was animosity and some mistrust between sub-groups within the main group. Some of the group's ways of doing things felt rather punitive to us – for example expulsion from the group for non-attendance. We did challenge this with the group, whilst trying to be sensitive to cultural differences and valuing the customs of the community. We believe it is important to challenge behaviour that is oppressive. We suggested they might introduce some understanding and tolerance of people's difficulties, and they did indeed ameliorate the rules slightly. We have found it is

important that people handle their community affairs in ways that are familiar to them.

A further principle of social action is that people have rights, including the right to be heard and to define the issues they face and to take action on these. This was indeed applicable to the groupwork with the women. The work started with the vision of the women and what they wanted to achieve. However, as facilitators we also needed to be honest about what could be achieved realistically within the support available from the social responsibility project of the Hotel Titilaka. For a worker it is not always easy to balance the expectations of the different players of a development project. Honesty, transparency and working as a mediator is always the best strategy.

We recognise that people acting together can be powerful (Fleming and Ward 2013). As we have mentioned before, whilst the Aymara people are very community orientated, there is also an individualistic competitive culture between different communities and groups; this is deeply embedded. At this point stage all we could offer to counter act this were some tools to work more collaboratively and to support each other. The point of the association was for them to be autonomous and have more power. As a group they definitely have become more powerful, mainly through generating a better income. Indirectly this will challenge injustice but this is still in its infancy. In addition, within their community many women told us subsequently that they have started to be more empowered within their family by starting to have their own income and being able to count on the support of other women.

Finally, social action groupworkers are not leaders but facilitators. We were both very clear that our role was to be facilitators and Jennie's role as a facilitator/observer as highlighted above added a new layer and depth to the co-facilitation process. By the time the group came to this session, focussing on how to organise their association, they were familiar with this way of working. However, it had taken Thilo some time, consistently acting as a facilitator not a leader, to arrive at this point. The Aymara culture is one where people are accustomed to have a 'boss' who decides everything. At the start, the group constantly looked for Thilo's leadership or for him to resolve problems. When he did not do so, they initially saw it as a weakness or didn't understand his position. Years of top down interventions and a highly autocratic

culture can't be changed easily. Participatory processes are not the norm which presents both a huge challenge but also a wonderful opportunity.

This paper has given a glimpse of a one group session within a longer process of value-based groupwork. Alongside describing how we approached facilitating a group session with women in Titilaca Peru, we have also considered the relevance of the social action approach in this context. We believe that the approach has much to offer groupwork in many contexts. However, the challenges to groups working to take action on their own issues are greater in the rural Peruvian context than they may be in others. But, nevertheless, we would argue, the positive learning and small but useful achievements accomplished by group members on their own behalf make addressing these challenges both ethically responsible and practically and economically worthwhile.

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The women arriving



Focusing on the knitting



Facilitation



Facilitation



Small group working





Small group working