

January 1, 2021

To All Whom This Concerns:

Please consider this letter as a letter of commitment to the project entitled “Platform for Training, Education and Knowledge Transfer of the Circular Economy within the Agricultural Sector in the Andean Region” currently being developed under the guidance and vision of engineers Johanna Ochoa Ruilova, Pablo Guzmán Cárdenas, and Francisco González Jiménez at the School of Environmental Engineering, University of Azuay, Cuenca, Ecuador. The project includes a platform for training, education, and knowledge transfer within vulnerable communities to promote a circular economy approach to the agricultural sector in the Andean region. This letter is being sent in response to the 2020-2021 Special Grant Round to support innovative use of digital technologies to strengthen relationships between Australia and Latin America and to contribute to economic recovery and bioeconomic development during and following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Karen Merritt is a consulting environmental engineer, University engineering lecturer and community public health coordinator based in the Maine, USA. Maeve Carlson is a consulting water and wastewater engineer and the Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont State Representative for a US-based, student-led organization, called Engineers Without Borders USA (EWB-USA). We have worked in association with Professors Ochoa Ruilova and Guzmán Cárdenas and Mr. González Jiménez since 2017 in relation to EWB-USA. Through the EWB-USA student chapter at University of Maine, we worked with the Ecuadorian engineering team to evaluate strategies for improving water quality and water supply for a rural community in Ecuador. This project was an opportunity for us in the U.S. to work with, and learn from, Ecuadorian engineers in service to a goal of increasing local capacity and self-sufficiency. The partnership formed during this initial project has led to continued work and other opportunities, including being invited to speak in Pittsburgh, PA at the 2019 Engineers Without Borders USA National Conference, where Mr. González Jiménez and Ms. Carlson presented a session titled “Partnerships Without Borders”.

Over the course of 2020, we have been strategizing with Professors Ochoa Ruilova and Guzmán Cárdenas and Mr. González Jiménez regarding the need for food sovereignty development in urban and peri-urban neighborhoods in Ecuadorian cities (specifically, Cuenca) in direct response to economic and food-related shortfalls resulting from COVID-19. We believe in the ecologically-sound, small-scale, nutrition-oriented and self-supporting nature of community agriculture and are working to build support for, and skills transfer associated with, these ideals within the city of Cuenca.

We are interested in this funding opportunity through COALAR based on our awareness of the robust agroecology and permaculture movement in Australia. Karen Merritt has been aware

of Australia's strong focus on sustainable, local food production and permaculture through a personal connection – that is, her cousin is married to an Australian and they have worked to build a home and community in New South Wales following these concepts. Through their experiences she has been following The Permaculture Institute (<https://www.permaculturenews.org>) and Permaculture Australia (<https://permacultureaustralia.org.au>); in the context of the COALAR funding, we see organizations such as these as templates for the digital skills-sharing and platform development that COALAR funding would provide the proposed food sovereignty and bioeconomy project in Cuenca, Ecuador. Working in concert with Australian organizations, there would be significant opportunity for communication, digital platform development, community outreach (presentations, demonstration gardens, short courses) following models and mentoring from successful Australian bioeconomic / permaculture initiatives.

As stated in the introduction to this letter, please consider this letter as a statement of commitment to the project described in the attached proposal. It is our intention to continue working with and supporting Professors Ochoa Ruilova and Guzmán Cárdenas and Mr. González Jiménez in their effort to develop this project and to improve community access to funding, skills, knowledge and support around local food sovereignty in Cuenca, Ecuador.

Sincerely,

Karen Merritt, PhD; MPH [2021 completion]

Wood Environmental Service Consulting ([www.woodplc.com](http://www.woodplc.com))

University of Maine, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering

Maeve Carlson, M.Eng., E.I.

Wright-Pierce (<https://www.wright-pierce.com>)

Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont State Representative, Engineers Without Borders USA