

Sowing for the Future: Growing Skills & Hope in the Chaco Context

"We abuse land when we see it as a commodity. However, when we understand it as a gift from God, we treat land with respect."

The Gran Chaco, South America's second-largest ecosystem after the Amazon, stretches across Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay. It is a land of dry forests, wetlands, and winding rivers. Yet this vast landscape is also one of the world's fastest-disappearing ecosystems, threatened by deforestation and the relentless spread of industrial agriculture, which relies on chemical inputs and large-scale monocultures that prioritise high yields and efficiency over ecological balance.

For centuries, the Wichí people lived in harmony with the Gran Chaco, moving as semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers and relying on its forests, rivers, and wildlife for sustenance. In recent decades, however, widespread forest clearing, land grabbing, and the fencing of once-communal lands have disrupted their way of life. Today, many Wichí communities face malnutrition, the loss of traditional resources, and growing uncertainty about their future, as the land that sustained them for generations is steadily disappearing.

In the 1970s, as Anglican leaders launched efforts to secure land for Indigenous peoples, Alejandro Deane, a newly trained agriculturist from Buenos Aires, arrived in the Gran Chaco. Leaving the familiarity of city life behind, Alec stepped into a world of sprawling forests, winding rivers, and communities whose ways of life were under threat. By working alongside the Wichí with humility and cultural sensitivity, he earned their trust and built deep, lasting relationships, demonstrating that true partnership grows from respect, presence, and compassion.

Today, Alec, together with Wichí Anglican Church leaders, works with communities through health and social development programs that promote dignity and self-sufficiency, including:

- Drilling wells to provide clean water.
- Promoting agriculture through drip irrigation and family-based farming.
- Supporting artisans by promoting Wichí crafts and art.
- Offering vocational training in textiles, baking, and motorbike mechanics.

Agricultural training is also led by Wichí facilitators in their own language, ensuring that farming knowledge is effectively shared within the community. The results have been encouraging: corn, squash, beans, cassava, and watermelon are cultivated during the summer months, while peppers and tomatoes thrive in six greenhouses throughout the frosty season. These efforts have not only enriched local diets but also generated new sources of income through the sale of surplus produce.

Building on this success, new initiatives such as 'Sowing for the Future' now engage 4,500 Wichí children and young people across 45 rural schools. Students learn gardening, soil care, and nutrition by creating "green classrooms," with training, seeds, and basic tools provided. Led by Wichí educators, the initiative empowers participants to grow healthy food, gain practical skills, and nurture a sustainable future for their communities.

"Every life deserves to be treated with dignity, no matter how poor or damaged the shell that carries it."