

Mentor. Visionary. Advocate. Karaoke Virtuoso.

Luis Jara is many things to many people. To Latin America's credit unions, he's a tireless ally in the quest for sustainable growth and serving the underserved. And his close friends say his karaoke puts Mexican singing legend Vicente Fernández to shame.



“Helping the poor. Improving their standard of living is the reason we do what we do.”

—Luis Jara

Luis joined the credit union movement in his home country of Ecuador after 15 years as a branch manager, chief credit officer and compensation officer in the banking industry. Highly successful, he was ready to experience a new kind of organization and assumed credit unions weren't too much of a stretch from banks. Fourteen years later, as a seasoned credit union veteran, Luis concedes there really is a “credit union difference.”

“A credit union's work is beautiful because every day you have the opportunity to explore new things,” he explained. “Reaching out to the underserved is a great reward because it fulfills both a professional and a social aspiration.”

Luis began his credit union career in 1993 with the World Council of Credit Union's (WOCCU) technical assistance program in Ecuador. He has since helped credit unions across

Latin America. His most recent work as project director for the rural credit union outreach program in Veracruz, Mexico, was Luis' first venture into rural development.

The youngest in a family of nine, Luis comes from humble beginnings. He was just 11 years old when his father passed away, and he recalls his mother and siblings taking up various jobs to put food on the table and to get them through school.

“I identify very much with rural people,” he said, explaining his approach to rural credit union development. “I try to think as they do, to recognize their needs, hopes and dreams in order to earn their trust.”

Members of Luis' nine-member team describe him as a very simple man in the field. His outgoing nature and ability to walk in the shoes of others draw people to him. In Luis, people find an advocate they can trust.

Luis' eyes light up when recounting his favorite stories from the field: small children making savings deposits in their *semillita cooperativa* groups (see *Nurturing the Cooperative Seed*, p. 8) in the mountains of Veracruz; women growing their livestock and small businesses because they could access affordable financial services; and credit unions in the north rebuilding communities affected by hurricanes.

The Veracruz project helped six credit unions open 23 rural branches in less than two years, and Luis is quick to turn the spotlight on his team. “WOCCU is an organization that doesn't limit creativity,” he explained. “The staff, WOCCU's vision and the skills we've all developed have led to the program's success.”

Without hesitation, Luis conveys his proudest achievement: “Helping the poor. Improving their standard of living is the reason we do what we do.” ■

Luis speaks at the opening of a rural San Andres Coyutla credit union branch established with assistance from the WOCCU program funded by SAGARPA in Veracruz.

