

# RIGHTS FOR ACTION

Putting People at the Centre of Action on Climate Change



## CASE STUDY 1: THE RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

*Rights based Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Action that promotes livelihoods and reduces poverty*

*Janet and Eduardo Obando run their small family livestock farm near Buenos Aires in Puntarenas, Costa Rica. Enabled by the General Environment Law that was adopted by the government of Costa Rica in 1995, they took part in trainings to improve their agricultural practices, make their farming more sustainable and contribute to a healthier environment in Costa Rica. They now contribute to global climate action while enjoying the benefits of a more secure income and improved well-being. Puntarenas, Costa Rica. (Credit: UNDP/ LECB)*

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*This case study is compiled as part of the resource "Rights for Action", first published by the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice in August 2015. The full resource is available on [www.mrfcj.org](http://www.mrfcj.org).*



**Mary Robinson  
Foundation**  
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Eduardo and Janet Obando and their children live near the village of Buenos Aires in Puntarenas, Costa Rica. They are hardworking livestock farmers who are motivated by a desire to earn enough money for their children's education, to improve their well-being and to maintain a productive and beautiful farm.

Eduardo and Janet heard about Costa Rica's livestock NAMA – a nationwide project to reduce greenhouse gases from the livestock sector – from their local representative of the Southern United Livestock Producers Chamber (CGUS). What they heard made sense to them and built on training in sustainable agriculture they had received from the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock over a 9 year period. A technician from the Livestock Corporation – CORFOGA – came to see them on their farm and explained the benefits of the new project and how they could get involved.

The Obando family was able to access information and advice from CORFOGA, who also organised field trips to other farms participating in the project. They applied for and received a loan, subsidised by the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, from the Banco Nacional de Costa Rica. They invested the money in improved pasture management, tree planting for live fences and fodder banks. The result is that they have healthier cattle, higher yields of milk and more cheese to sell. They are also very aware that they are playing their part in safeguarding the local environment through more efficient use of fertilisers which is protecting the water springs on which they depend and by planting trees to improve biodiversity.

The Obando's farm is one of 45,000 livestock farms in Costa Rica. Agriculture and livestock accounted for 6.2% of GDP in 2013 and employment for 14% of the workforce<sup>1</sup>. Livestock production is responsible for 30% of Costa Rica's greenhouse gas emissions<sup>2</sup>. Costa Rica's long standing commitment to environmental protection and sustainable development means that it has set itself the ambitious target of carbon neutrality by 2021, despite the fact that its contribution to global carbon emissions was only 1.7 metric tons per capita in 2011. This compared to the US which emitted 17.5 metric tons per capita in 2011<sup>3</sup>.

In 1994 the Constitution of Costa Rica was amended to incorporate the right to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment. The General Environment Law<sup>4</sup> adopted in 1995 expands on the right to a healthy environment found in Article 50 of the Constitution. One of the principles on which the law is based is that the environment is common heritage and that the State and individuals should participate in its conservation and sustainable use. Another principle on which this law is based is that the State is obliged to ensure the rational use of the environment in order to protect and improve the quality of life of inhabitants of the country. The State is also required to promote economic and environmentally sustainable development, defined as development that meets basic human needs without compromising the options of future generations<sup>5</sup>. Prof John Knox, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, noted in 2013 that 'There can be no doubt that article 50 provides a strong basis for the country's environmental statutes and policies'.

The Livestock NAMA is an articulation of this commitment. The project started in 2013 and will run to 2028. Through the active participation of livestock farmers it is implementing mitigation measures across 80% of dairy, beef and mixed use livestock farms nationally.

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Phase 1 runs up to 2021 and will involve 4,000 farms (10% of the total) before scaling up to cover 80% of the country's farms by 2028. The mitigation measures the farmers implement are i) improved fertilisation planning; ii) rotational grazing and live fences; iii) improvement of pastures; and iv) silvo-pastoral systems.

The result will be an estimated aggregate saving of 12.9 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent between reductions and capture/storage and will all be delivered through the actions of farmers like Eduardo and Janet. This is made up of approximately 1.24m tonnes of GHG reduction from reduced emissions from enteric fermentation due to pasture improvements and improved fertilisation, and 11.68m tonnes from carbon capture in soils, improved pastures, live fences and tree plantations.

But the benefits of the NAMA are not just for the atmosphere. With over 100,000 Costa Rican families dependent on family farming for their livelihoods, and with the poverty rate nationally at 22.4% in 2014<sup>6</sup>, the contributions to improved income and livelihoods from the livestock makes a valuable contribution to the Government's anti-poverty strategies<sup>7</sup>. There are also short and long term direct and indirect benefits on people's lives as Eduardo and Janet Obando can testify. Their participation in the project is motivated by the following benefits:

- More efficient operations result in savings for the farmer – for example less fertiliser use means less money spent on inputs.
- Higher and more stable yields result in a higher and more predictable income for farmers.
- Increased production helps Costa Ricans to realise their right to food.
- Increased resilience to climate impacts as cattle are in better health and improved pasture management and increased use of fodder allow livestock to get through periods of drought.
- Farmers are proud that they are playing their part in the national commitment to protecting the environment, by reducing their GHG emissions and conserving biodiversity.
- Rural families are realising their right to water from unpolluted local springs, and a healthy environment contributes to the realisation of the right to health.

The Obando family and thousands of other livestock farmers are contributing more than their fair share to global climate action while enjoying the benefits of a more secure income and improved well-being – all motivated by the country's constitutional commitment to the right to a healthy environment.

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**FACT:** In Europe, the economic cost of air pollution is US\$1.6 trillion a year due to disease and deaths<sup>8</sup>

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### The Right to a Healthy Environment - Lessons learned

- a) A national commitment to the right to a healthy environment provides a strong moral and legislative basis for climate action informed by human rights. The livestock NAMA demonstrates how the State and individuals can participate in the conservation and sustainable use of the environment as per the provisions of the General Environment law (1995).
- b) Engaging farmers and providing them with access to information and training ensures their active participation in climate action.

<sup>1</sup> CIA - The World Factbook. (2011)

<sup>2</sup> From article titled "Costa Rica leads the way towards sustainable livestock management" available at: <http://bit.ly/1f9rS03> [Accessed: 13/08/2015]

<sup>3</sup> World Bank Data, Catalogue: World Development Indicators, CO2 emissions (metric tons per capita)

<sup>4</sup> A Summary of Costa Rica's General Environmental Law can be found at: <http://bit.ly/1KIY5L3>

<sup>3</sup> See Article 2 of Costa Rica's General Environmental Law. Full text (in Spanish): <http://bit.ly/1Jez0ou>.

<sup>5</sup> CIA - The World Factbook. (2011)

<sup>7</sup> New Agriculturist Country Profile: Costa Rica, 2011 available at: <http://bit.ly/1TuU5kA>

<sup>8</sup> WHO (2015), Economic cost of the health impact of air pollution in Europe: Clean air, health and wealth available at: <http://bit.ly/1JMdpUM>