

RIGHTS FOR ACTION

Putting People at the Centre of Action on Climate Change



CASE STUDY 5: THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE

In Ecuador, national recognition of the links between the right to participation and environmental rights has brought about benefits for local communities and the climate

A key principle of Ecuador's Climate Change Strategy emphasises the importance of civil society participation and the protection of vulnerable groups in climate actions. Medardo Ortiz and his family are members of the indigenous A'i Cofán people. They have become involved in a government project that encourages the protection of forests and reduces deforestation while enhancing local livelihoods.

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.



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Medardo Ortiz is a husband, father and local school teacher who has lived in Dureno, a small community of indigenous A'i Cofán people in north-eastern Ecuador, all his life¹. The A'i Cofán are one of the oldest surviving indigenous groups of the Amazon. The 1,200 A'i Cofán people are not an indigenous group isolated from the outside world and they use a range of modern goods and services, however, they still hold onto their cultural heritage and live intimately with their natural surroundings. They are known to have a deep understanding of and care for nature, and rely on the forest and rivers around their communities for many of their basic needs – water, transport, food, building materials and medicine.

Eighty families live in the Dureno community on the Aguarico River, who independently earn a living but also support each other in their struggle for economic development². Most of the families rely on selling artisan work locally and supplement this with production using agricultural and rainforest resources.

During the last decade, Ecuador has experienced one of the highest rates of deforestation in South America³. The forests are continuously threatened by increasing pressure from oil companies as well as illegal hunting, mining and logging. Between 2012 and 2013 there was a 300% increase in deforestation in Ecuador, with two thirds of this occurring in the Amazon. The territory of Dureno is one of the last remnants of lowland rainforest in the northern Ecuadorian Amazon⁴. As Medardo explains, the A'i Cofán are very aware of the importance of conserving this small remaining forest area, not only

for their own needs, but also globally.

“The forest for the A'i Cofán people is like a home, a roof. The forest provides everything for us. It's our market and our pharmacy. An A'i without the forest is not an A'i. And forests are also important for the rest of the world; forests absorb pollution and give us clean air to breathe. We have always worked to maintain the health of the forest.”⁵

In 2008 Ecuador's Ministry of Environment launched Socio Bosque, a programme aimed at conserving 4 million hectares of forests, reducing deforestation, and improving the lives of 1 million people⁶. Protecting forests and reducing deforestation ensures local livelihoods but also has global benefits including protecting wildlife and reducing carbon emissions.

The integration of rights into climate actions like Socio Bosque is facilitated at the highest level in Ecuador – in the Constitution and in National Climate Strategy. Not alone does Ecuador's Constitution recognise rights of participation, rights for indigenous peoples and rights for the environment but it explicitly links all three, promoting their mutual integration within Government actions and programmes by expressly obliging the State 'to establish and implement programmes with the participation of the community to ensure conservation and sustainable use for biodiversity'. A key principle of Ecuador's Climate Change Strategy emphasises the importance of civil society participation and the protection of vulnerable groups in climate actions.

The Socio Bosque programme offers indigenous communities and individual landowners direct economic incentives in return for conserving the forests, ensuring that local people have more to gain from protecting their trees than cutting them down.

Most economic opportunities in Ecuador are in the urban areas where 63.5% of the population lives⁷, far away from these indigenous communities. The Socio Bosque programme offers the poorest private and communal forest landholders in this area a unique economic opportunity which benefits not only them but also the planet⁸.

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Each participant voluntarily decides how much forest to conserve and signs a per-hectare agreement with the Ministry of Environment. Through these conservation agreements funds are generated and communities create an investment plan to decide how the funds will be used. The communities hold meetings with full participation by all members so that everybody has a say in deciding what the funds will go towards. Funds can only be used in productive ways that benefit the whole community, through for example education, housing, conservation, healthcare, ecotourism, surveillance and fund saving projects⁹.

The programme has made great progress in protecting forests and enhancing the lives of local indigenous people over the past few years. As of the end of 2014 there had been 2,748 agreements signed with individuals and communities, over 1.4 million hectares of forest protected and direct benefits provided to 173,233 people.

With Socio Bosque the A'i Cofán people are rewarded for their work to protect the forest around them. They have always placed a heavy importance on conserving the forests and now there is a tangible economic benefit for them to continue and increase their conservation work.

Medardo is the treasurer in Dureno and one of the leaders who administers funds to the community from the government. Medardo and the A'i Cofán so far have protected over 77,000 hectares of forest through the Socio Bosque programme and in return have received funds that are improving their daily lives¹⁰. As Medardo says:

*"In the past we looked after forest but we've never received any benefit. With Socio Bosque this has changed a lot."*⁵

The A'i Cofán are using these funds for a wide range of purposes that are benefitting the whole community, such as improving fish farming techniques, helping the elderly and purchasing essential medical supplies. There is now an Equavolley, a game unique to Ecuador, court on every block in Dureno, a sign of funds being used for recreational purposes too. The programme is also benefitting A'i Cofán children through using funds to subsidise school books and supplies.

For centuries the A'i Cofán people have been using the Aguatico River for fishing but they continuously face the threat of illegal hunting and fishing in the area. Now with the economic incentives gained from the Socio Bosque programme they are able to guard the area against poachers and protect their resources. A'i Cofán communities are also now able to train and sustain a group of local forest rangers to look after the land by guarding it from outside communities and individuals who may try to steal their trees or other forest resources. This also ensures the protection of the ecosystems that sustain the habitats of tapirs, wild cats, giant otters, monkeys and other species.

Medardo explains how the Dureno community are happy because the Socio Bosque programme acknowledges and values their work now which is leading to better outcomes for them, the forest and the planet.

*"We are happy to maintain our long tradition of taking care of the forest and pass it along to our own children. This programme shows the positive impact we can have on the forest and the planet when our work is valued."*⁵

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FACT: The recognition and implementation of legal forest rights for indigenous communities tends to lower carbon dioxide emissions and deforestation. For example, in Brazil, deforestation in indigenous community forests was 1% between 2000 and 2012, compared to 7% outside them. The higher deforestation outside indigenous community forests led to 27 times more carbon dioxide emissions than were produced from deforestation on indigenous community forests¹¹.

The Right to Participation - Lessons learned

- a) Strong linkages between the right to participation and environmental rights have led to climate action in Ecuador which can bring about socio-economic benefits for vulnerable communities while enabling robust forest conservation. This indicates that climate action which considers people's rights will benefit from more constructive local engagement and therefore will produce better outcomes.
- b) Empowering vulnerable communities to realise their rights through participation in climate action can bring about other ecosystem benefits – in the case of Socio Bosque, the empowerment of local communities has enabled them to stand up to and prevent illegal poaching and fishing.

¹ Conservation International (2015), *How Ecuador is Reducing Poverty by Conserving Native Forests* available at: <http://bit.ly/1GCKiyw> Accessed on 14/08/2015 Extract from interview with Conservation International (2015). Watch here: <http://bit.ly/1J3VSC9>

² INTO (2011), *Comuna Cofán Dureno* available at <http://bit.ly/1UH0wyh>

³ USAID Frontlines (2013) *Cofan: Guardians of the Amazon Forest* available at: <http://1.usa.gov/1Wom5p1>

⁴ Clear Water (2012) <http://www.giveclearwater.org/2012/03/cofan-community-dureno-present/>

⁵ Extract from interview with Conservation International (2015). Watch here: <http://bit.ly/1J3VSC9>

⁶ Conservation International (2015), *How Ecuador is Reducing Poverty by Conserving Native Forests* available at: <http://bit.ly/1GCKiyw> Accessed on 14/08/2015

⁷ Conservation International (2015), *People protecting forests: In Ecuador, it pays to conserve*. Available at: <http://bit.ly/1EqZ0ac>

⁸ CDKN Global (2015) *Ecuador's Socio Bosque Programme*. Available at: <http://bit.ly/1hBCW7N>

⁹ To learn more watch this short documentary by Conservation International Ecuador (2014): <http://bit.ly/1zr68Vk>

¹⁰ Conservation International (2015), *People protecting forests: In Ecuador, it pays to conserve*. Available at: <http://bit.ly/1EqZ0ac>

¹¹ WRI (2014), *Securing Rights, Combating Climate Change* available at: <http://bit.ly/1jWi9f7>