Equator Initiative Case Studies
Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

NASA PROJECT
Colombia

Equator Prize Winner
Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative.

To mark its 10-year anniversary, the Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap. The following case study is one in a growing series that details the work of Equator Prize winners – vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in community-based environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. These cases are intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication. Case studies are best viewed and understood with reference to *The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize*, a compendium of lessons learned and policy guidance that draws from the case material.

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The Nasa Project (Proyecto Nasa) aims to increase the political and organizational capacity of Colombia’s indigenous Páez peoples, who have been disproportionately affected by violence in the Cauca region. By strengthening regional political autonomy and exercising their political rights, the indigenous groups involved in the project have successfully lobbied for access to a greater share of public funds and services. Their struggle has led to legal recognition of the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples, including recognition of the autonomy of their communal indigenous lands in the 1991 Colombian Constitution.

This work has been complemented by a programme of sustainable natural resource management within the Nasa’s indigenous lands, which both border and fall within key protected areas. Sustainable natural resource harvesting and improved agricultural practices have helped to mitigate environmental impacts and underpin sustainable livelihoods for the Nasa people.

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KEY FACTS

EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2004

FOUNDED: 1980

LOCATION: Cauca

BENEFICIARIES: Indigenous Nasa population (app. 186,000)

BIODIVERSITY: Los Nevados Protected Area
The Nasa Project is a grassroots indigenous movement dedicated to securing the fundamental rights of Colombia’s indigenous Nasa people through the defense, recovery and conservation of their ancestral lands. The Nasa (formerly known as the Páez) have sought to unify several indigenous reservations located within the department of Cauca, in the southwestern Colombian highlands, in order to gain independence both from landowning groups backed by the government and from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerilla insurgents. The group embodies a holistic approach to community empowerment and environmental stewardship, articulated in their visionary “Life Plan” which is based on the philosophy that the Earth is a living, spiritual entity of which man is part and within which everything is interrelated. The Plan serves as a constitution for the Nasa people, mandating the development of, “a new, aware, united and organized community,” that provides educational and economic opportunities while preserving the rich environment that abounds in the region.

Conflict in Cauca

The Nasa people live primarily within the department of Cauca and number roughly 186,000 individuals. Ever since Spanish conquistador Sebastián de Belalcázar founded the nearby city of Popayán in 1537, the Nasa peoples have dealt with centuries of colonial and military intrusion onto their lands. And over the past several decades, indigenous and human rights groups have documented how Colombia’s native peoples have been increasingly targeted in the region’s armed conflict. Indigenous groups such as the Nasa find themselves caught in a dangerous crossfire between the Colombian military and other paramilitary groups. They are simultaneously accused by the paramilitary and the army of being guerrilla supporters, and by the guerrillas of lending support to the paramilitary forces. The lands they inhabit are coveted as corridors for the movement of supplies and troops, and provide fertile ground for the illicit cultivation of lucrative coca crops, whose sales help to fuel the conflict. Today, Cauca is considered to be the epicenter of the Colombian armed conflict, and is one of the most violent departments in Colombia. As part of a growing, worldwide indigenous movement, the Nasa Project is helping to forge a path towards a culture of peace in the region, and a greater appreciation of the value of traditional and cultural heritage.

Traditional livelihoods under threat

The majority of Nasa are subsistence farmers. Their primary crops are corn, bean, potato, blackberry, coffee, plantain, cassava (Manihot esculenta), white carrot (Arracacia xanthorrhiza), and rascadera (Xanthosoma). Many Nasa also work as cattle ranchers or as migrant laborers on sugar cane plantations. However, the rugged geomorphological features of their lands present multiple challenges for Nasa communities. The steep terrain and shallow alpine soils of the region help to accelerate the erosive effects of heavy tropical rainfalls. Furthermore, although indigenous lands, called resguardos, are recognized as communal in nature, prohibited from sale or rental, and governed by indigenous authorities under Colombian law, they are rarely acknowledged by the paramilitary and guerrilla groups operating within the region. As a result, indigenous presence in many parts of the country is an obstacle for these armed groups. Indigenous communities throughout Colombia have had their lands forcibly expropriated, and suffered kidnappings or massacres which have drastically undermined their authority and sovereignty. Furthermore, the controversial aerial spraying operations to destroy the coca and poppy crops used in the production of cocaine and heroin cause significant environmental, social, and economic damage, and disproportionately so to the indigenous communities found in these regions.

A regional response on behalf of indigenous peoples

In response to the many hazards to which indigenous communities and their leaders are subjected, in 1970 the Nasa, with other indigenous peoples of Cauca, organized the Regional Indigenous
Council of Cauca (CRIC). Their goal was simple: to recover their ancestral lands and defend their cultural and political autonomy. Four decades later, this movement has impacted the Colombian political landscape, producing a vital array of local, regional, and national indigenous organizations that have helped to legitimize and strengthen indigenous authority, reclaim lands, and provide communities with the means to transcend the impasse of the armed conflict. CRIC is now the umbrella organization of over 90% of the indigenous communities of the department of Cauca and has served as a model for organizing native peoples throughout the country.

The Nasa Project was started in 1980 by Nasa priest Father Alvaro Ulcué Chocué in the resguardos of Toribio Tacueyó and San Francisco. The goal was to reclaim the Nasa’s “indigenous consciousness, identity and culture in order to promote concrete and culturally specific alternatives in education, socio-economic and political development and environmental conservation conceived in accordance with the worldview of the Nasa people”. Through the Nasa Project, community leaders have strengthened civic organizations and businesses, empowered the cabildos (councils), which are the traditional forms of authority and democratic governance of an indigenous territory, and protected their territory’s vast natural resources.
For over thirty years the Nasa Project has been empowering indigenous communities throughout the region. It has enabled the Nasa people to recover over 140,000 hectares of land and has developed important income-generating agricultural and tourism projects. Locally-developed participation processes have enabled mechanisms for broad-based decision-making on issues related to the indigenous movement and the content of the Nasa Project itself. Through dialogue and peaceful resistance, indigenous communities united under CRIC and the Nasa Project have managed to regain their autonomy and livelihoods. The project's continued success has influenced many other indigenous initiatives in the north Cauca region as well as nationally.

Specific project activities fall into three areas: improving educational opportunities and income-generating activities for the Nasa people; sustainably managing the area's natural resources; and lobbying for improved indigenous rights and representation in local government to combat the effects of armed conflict on their indigenous lands. In the first and second categories, day-to-day project activities have sought to realize tangible social and economic benefits through the wise use of available resources within the resguardos of Toribio Tacueyó and San Francisco.

Indigenous communities must balance subsistence livelihoods with the conservation objectives within the park. Illegal logging and the expansion of the agricultural frontier are the greatest challenges to conservation in the park, threatening many endangered species. By implementing sustainable agricultural, business, and social practices, the Nasa Project is contributing to the development of a more comprehensive resource conservation and management strategy for the region's natural resources. Examples of low-impact resource management include: the sustainable harvesting and processing of locally-available fibres and plants; the development of eco-tourism; and the preservation of an indigenous agricultural system that emphasizes agroforestry and the use of organic fertilizers.

“Kwe’sx txiwe nwe’way (In defense of our territory)”

Nasa Project slogan
Impacts

BIODIVERSITY IMPACTS

The project’s main conservation impacts have been seen through the improved management of the abundant natural resources within the Nasa’s indigenous lands, which both border and fall within key protected areas. Sustainable natural resource harvesting and improved agricultural practices have reduced the impact of the Nasa communities on their surrounding environment.

The Macizo Colombiano and Los Nevados Protected Area

Since pre-Colombian times, the Nasa, as well as other indigenous communities, have inhabited the central highlands of the Macizo Colombiano. The Macizo Colombiano, known locally as “el Nudo de Almaguer”, is a mountainous landscape characterized by extremely rugged terrain rich in both flora and fauna. Covering the departments of Cauca, Huila and Nariño, the region provides approximately 70% of Colombia’s freshwater reserves. The headwaters of the Magdalena and Cauca Rivers, which flow into the Caribbean Sea, and the Caquetá and Putumayo Rivers, which flow into the Amazon Basin, are born here. The Macizo also encompasses roughly 13 tropical alpine biomes composed mainly of giant rosette plants, shrubs and grasses, and contains more than 360 alpine water sources. Central to the worldview of the Nasa people is that human beings are stewards of our living planet. Indeed, the Nasa Life Plan takes this tenet very seriously in mandating the preservation of “the rich environment that abounds in the region”.

Los Nevados National Natural Park (Parque Nacional Natural Los Nevados) is located in the Cordillera Central of the Colombian Andes; approximately 31% of the park’s area overlaps the Nasa resguardos. The park and surrounding region is home to over 1,250 species of vascular plants, 200 bryophytes, 300 lichens and 180 macroscopic fungi. On the lower slopes and in the valleys the Andean wax palms are dominant. The upper Andean forest has trees reaching up to 30 meters (98 ft.) in height. Noteworthy avifauna includes the Blue-crowned Motmot (Momotus aequatorialis), Yellow-eared Parrot (Ognorhynchus icterotis), the critically endangered Fuertes’s Parrot (Hapalopsittaca fuertesi), Rufous-fronted Parakeet (Bolborhynchus ferrugineifrons), Andean Condor (Vultur gryphus), Brown-banded Antpitta (Grallaria milleri), Ruddy Duck (Oxyura jamaicensis) and the Bearded Helmetcrest Hummingbird (Oxypogon guerinii). Mammals include the endangered Mountain Tapir (Tapirus pinchaque), Spectacled Bear (Tremarctos ornatus), Northern Pudú (Pudu mephistophiles), Oncilla (Leopardus tigrinus) and Cougar, and the White-eared Opossum (Didelphis albiventris).

Nasa communities are also enriching local education processes with environmental topics as part of the “Project Green” school councils for environmental education. The project aims to strengthen socio-environmental relations in a sustainable manner by training educational leaders in local municipalities while developing the environmental leadership capacity among the youth.
SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

One of the first priorities of the Nasa Project, and of the Colombian indigenous movement in general, was to begin training bilingual teachers to take charge of primary education in their communities. Much of the primary education in indigenous communities was already oriented by ethno-educational principles, and the formation of the Nasa Project encouraged the development of specific pedagogical models that took into account the cultural uniqueness of indigenous worldviews. Soon thereafter, indigenous peoples began arriving at Colombian universities.

The growing presence of indigenous students in Colombian universities is mainly a phenomenon of the last several decades, and while the precise number of indigenous university students in the country is still unknown, there are approximately 2,500 in Bogota studying social sciences, engineering and health education. Public and private universities have also set aside quotas and offered scholarships and special programs for indigenous students as a result of the academic and socio-political advancement of these communities. Currently, there are seven ethno-education degrees offered by seven national universities, while specialized master’s degrees are beginning to appear, as well as PhD programs in multicultural education.

The Nasa Project is also helping to reduce poverty and strengthen livelihoods through business development and sustainable resource management within indigenous communities and has created a new generation of empowered indigenous leaders. Agroindustries, such as fruit pulp and sugar cane processing, dairy collectives, community farms and the cultivation of fique – a natural fibre that grows in the leaves of Furcraea andina – add value to local produce, while the vast natural resource base also provides ample opportunity to develop the touristic potential of the region. Thermal springs, sport fishing, cultural heritage and archaeological sites, and the abundant flora and fauna are just a few examples of the attractions that the Nasa Project is helping to develop into income-generating projects.

The profits generated from these ventures are now used to scale up existing projects or are reinvested in other income generating activities. These small- and medium-sized enterprises offer viable employment opportunities to communities who are in the process of defining their role within the national context.

The Nasa Project also plays a leading role in assisting communities to meet their long-term food security needs through sustainable resource management and agricultural strategies. Communities in the Cauca region have long been vulnerable to a number of threats to their food security, including, but not limited to, the widespread cultivation of illicit crops and adverse topography. However, through the preparation of organic fertilizers and the production of native fruits, vegetables, aromatics and medicinal plants, panela, and coffee, farmers are able to diversify and strengthen the ‘tul’, their traditional agroforestry system that has been managed by the community for centuries.

POLICY IMPACTS

Another principle objective of the Nasa Project is to increase the political and organizational capacity of indigenous peoples. By strengthening regional political autonomy and exercising their political rights, the indigenous groups of the Cauca have successfully lobbied for access to a greater share of public funds and services. They have also petitioned for increased protection and access to legal recourse from attacks and occupations by militant groups. And by creating partnerships with other social movements and organizations they continue to legitimize their own traditional civil processes within the national political context.

In an unprecedented wave of electoral victories, indigenous councils have sent representatives to national and provincial legislatures, have taken control of numerous municipal governments, and have even been voted into executive positions at the provincial level, supported by coalitions of indigenous, labor, peasant (campesino), and urban popular organizations. Their struggle, marked by repression, killings and even massacres of their leaders has led to legal recognition of the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples, such as recognition of the autonomy and inalienability of the resguardos in the 1991 Colombian Constitution.

The significance of the entry of indigenous peoples onto the Colombian political stage is more apparent especially given that only two percent of the Colombian population is indigenous; these organizations represent a small percentage of Colombians, but have achieved a voice that greatly surpasses their numbers in setting a new agenda for the nation.
The success of the Nasa Project has led to the scaling up of several indigenous initiatives throughout Colombia as part of the Association of Indigenous Cabildos of Northern Cauca (ACIN). The ACIN unites 14 resguardos and 16 indigenous cabildos which help to organize the following projects: the Nasa Project (since 1980); the Jámbalo Global Project (1987); the Páez Unity Project of Miranda (1990); the Integrated Project of the Cabildos of Huellas, Caloto and Toes (1990); the Cxa’cxa Wala (Great Strength) Project of the Cabildo of Corinto (1991); the Yu’ Lucx (Children of the Water) Project of the Cabildos of Munchique, los Tigres, Canoas and Urbano (1991); and the Sa’t Finxi Kiwe (Chief’s territory) in the Cabildos of Guadalailto, Las Delicias, La Concepción, Pueblo Nuevo Ceral, Cerro Tijeras and Alto Naya (2002). This impressive record of replication from the original Nasa Project is testament to its effectiveness and transferability. Together, these community projects currently constitute the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca, which in turn forms part of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC).

These projects are all based upon the same objective, which underscores all indigenous-led initiatives: to transform community actors into leaders responsive to the needs of each community. The attention that the Nasa Project, as well as the many other indigenous movements throughout Colombia, are receiving is a testament to the courage and determination of indigenous leaders and members of civil society who are risking their lives every day to advance local peace-building efforts, end violence, and promote peace, human rights, and human dignity.

Participants liken the Nasa Project to a ‘tree of life,’ rooted in the ancestral territory of the Nasa cosmology and custom. Its trunk is the struggle for unity, land and culture, the establishment of democratic and participatory forms of government, and the continued growth of community awareness. The branches are the various projects and initiatives whose fruits are seeds for the future that are bound with the efforts of other peoples and processes taking place within Colombia and the world. Communities of Cauca are working together to promote productive activities in a spiritual, harmonious, balanced manner respectful of Tierra Madre, or Mother Earth.
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