THE WUASIKAMAS
MOVEMENT OF THE
INGA PEOPLE IN APONTE
Colombia

Equator Initiative Case Studies
Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities
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. The Equator Initiative aims to fill that gap.

The Equator Initiative, supported by generous funding from the Government of Norway, awarded the Equator Prize 2015 to 21 outstanding local community and indigenous peoples initiatives to reduce poverty, protect nature, and strengthen resilience in the face of climate change. Selected from 1,461 nominations from across 126 countries, the winners were recognized for their achievements at a prize ceremony held in conjunction with the United Nations Convention on Climate Change (COP21) in Paris. Special emphasis was placed on the protection, restoration, and sustainable management of forests; securing and protecting rights to communal lands, territories, and natural resources; community-based adaptation to climate change; and activism for environmental justice. The following case study is one in a growing series that describes vetted and peer-reviewed best practices 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.
PROJECT SUMMARY

In the midst of armed conflict, the indigenous Inga people in the village of Aponte, a population of 3,651, successfully fought to regain its sovereignty and rights over 22,283 hectares of ancestral land. The Wuasikamas Movement, which in the native language of this ancient village means “guardians of the land, keepers of the territory” secured an unprecedented alliance with the Government of Colombia to redevelop a national program created for paying indigenous peoples to rid their land of drug plantations. In Aponte, the Inga people negotiated a communal fund to support the community and strengthen its governance when liberating the territory from the guerrillas, paramilitaries, and armed drug trafficking groups who, between 1986 and 2004, violated their territorial rights, degraded local ecosystems, and hindered the area’s sustainable development. After expelling these groups, the Inga people designated most of its territory as a sacred area of 17,500 hectares. The community was organised using a model of local governance based on a shared vision of justice and collective action to ensure health, education, community services, restoration of ecosystems and sustainable sources of livelihoods. At the same time, the movement created the Tribunal de Pueblos y Autoridades Indígenas del Suroccidente Colombiano (Court of Indigenous Peoples and Authorities of the Colombian Southwest) to help other indigenous peoples to claim their ancestral territories and independence from drug trafficking.

KEY FACTS

Equator Prize Winner
2015

Founded
2003

Location
Aponte, in the municipality of El Tablón de Gómez, Department of Nariño, southwest Colombia

Beneficiaries
3,651 Inga inhabitants of Aponte

Areas of focus
Protection, restoration and sustainable management of forests; protection and obtaining rights to lands, territories and communal resources; community advocacy for environmental justice and securing solutions to climate change

Sustainable Development Goals Addressed

5 Gender Equality
8 Decent Work and Economic Growth
10 Reduced Inequalities
12 Responsible Consumption and Production
13 Climate Action
15 Life on Land
16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

EQUITAR PRIZE 2015 WINNER FILM
In the Department of Nariño, in the southwest of Colombia, the Inga people in Aponte trace their origins to the Inca civilization which expanded across the Andes Cordillera mountain range and dominated some of the present territories of Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Argentina, and Colombia between the 13th and 16th centuries. The Inga are descendants of an Inca colony that immigrated from the Peruvian tropical rainforest to Colombia via the San Miguel River. Currently, the descendants of this group inhabit the Colombian departments of Caquetá, Putumayo, Nariño, and Cauca.

This indigenous community worships the Earth as a Mother and considers all visible and invisible beings as part of a single family. Wuasikamas, in the native language of this ancient town, means “guardians of the land, keepers of the territory.” Today, the Inga in Aponte are responsible for protecting 22,283 hectares, recognized as a resguardo (protected reserve) by the government of Colombia, based on a legacy testament by Carlos Tamavioy, who they called Taita de Taitas (The Father of Fathers), dated March 1700 and officially convened before the Spanish Crown.

Attaining this resguardo, however, was not easy. Since 1700, the Aponte community has faced lawsuits threatening their territorial claim. This has led to a weakening of their own cultural values, putting their future physical and cultural survival at risk. Since 1970, the area has been affected by deforestation and the continuous presence of guerrilla groups, drug traffickers, and paramilitaries. In 1991, the planting of opium poppies (Papaver somniferum) began in the indigenous territory, reaching more than 1,500 hectares of cultivation for illicit use in drug manufacturing.

The situation escalated with the implementation of Plan Colombia, a bilateral agreement made between the governments of Colombia and the United States in 1999 to combat the guerrillas and drug trafficking in the country, and to run social programs encouraging alternatives to illicit crops for farmers. While internal armed conflict in the country was exacerbated, the spraying of the illicit poppy crops (Papaver somniferum) with glyphosate left profoundly negative impacts on the indigenous inhabitants and farmers in the area.

Conflict continued until 2002, leading to grief and hardship for the indigenous people in Aponte. Many children of school age were forced to work farming illicit poppy crops, leading to a loss of cultural identity. Little to no effort was made to confront and overcome these problems. In response, Inga women faced with loss of their children’s future began to form initiatives to envision new futures for Aponte. In 2003, a strategic partnership between the community and the Inga indigenous authority was formed to address the elements deteriorating life in this ancient village. As a result, a process of institutional strengthening and unprecedented cultural reinvigoration began.

After 300 years of history, the Inga population in Aponte achieved a landmark victory with the passing of Resolution 013 on 22 July 2003 by the Instituto Colombiano de Reforma Agraria (INCORA, or in English, the Colombian Institute for the Agrarian Reform), granting them ownership of their territory under the legal category of resguardo. This is the collective land title issued to indigenous communities for a defined territory that is are inalienable, imprescriptible, and immune from seizure.

At the same time, the Inga People of Aponte also reached an agreement with the government of Colombia to modify the Programa Nacional Familias Guardabosques (National Programme for Ranger Families) so that it would respect their communal values. The program was designed to pay indigenous people and peasants to eliminate illicit crops from their lands. However, the Government traditionally only paid families, so many members of the community did not qualify. Representatives of the Inga People of Aponte negotiated to receive a communal fund that would allow them to support the community and work together to strengthen their governance and liberate their territory of guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and drug traffickers, who between 1986 and 2004 had violated their territorial rights and degraded local ecosystems.

These government funds, received between 2004 and 2006, financed the community’s liberation from drug trafficking, as well as the restoration of their forests. Since 2007, the community has not received any money from the
government and has strengthened its sustainable means of livelihood, governed by the Integrated Life Mandate for the Survival of the Inga People of Aponte. At present, the Inga are focused on improving their quality of life, health, and education, and strengthening their high quality Kusny Awanigmanda coffee business.

In addition, the enterprise Hatuniuiaipa S.A.S. was created in Bogotá for the marketing of products under the brand Wuasikamas, including coffee, handicrafts, sugar, fruit, and community tourism. The aim is to help strengthen the economic autonomy of the Inga people and other indigenous peoples and farmers of the region lost in poverty, drug trafficking, and illegal mining. The shop has been highly successful and is gaining popularity on social media.

At present, the resguardo of the Inga people in Aponte covers 22,283 hectares in the municipalities of El Tablón de Gómez, in the Department of Nariño, and Santa Rosa, in the Department of Cauca, between 1,500 and 3,800 metres above sea level. At present, the resguardo’s population is 3,651 indigenous inhabitants (951 families) and 620 non-indigenous inhabitants (105 families), according to the 2015 census. The community declared 17,500 hectares of protected land to be a sacred area containing 18 lakes and three highland moors (páramos).

The resguardo of the Inga People in Aponte is part of the Colombian Massif ecoregion that is located in the Andes mountain range in the southwest of Colombia, covering an area of 4.8 million hectares. Here, the Central and Eastern cordilleras originate and join the Andean, Amazonian, and Pacific ecosystems together. In addition, the five most important river arteries of the country originate in the Massif: the Magdalena, Cauca, Putumayo, Caquetá and Patía rivers. This is one reason why this ecoregion has been called the Colombian fluvial star.

The 22,283 hectares of the resguardo are extraordinarily biodiverse and contain about 471 species of birds, including parrots and the Andean Condor, as well as other important animals such as tapirs (Tapirus terrestris), spectacled bears (Tremarctos ornatus), mountain toucans (Andigena hypoglauca), and golden-plumed parakeets (Leptosittaca branickii). Notable plants include the Colombian conifer (Podocarpus oleifolius) and the encino (Weinmannia pubescens), a type of shrub that is commonly found in Colombia and Venezuela.

**Origin and structure**

The Wuasikamas Movement of the Inga People in Aponte was founded in 2003 based on the principles that one must not steal, not lie, not be lazy, be worthy, and live well. With this model in mind, the initiative was undertaken to recover autonomy, sovereignty, dignity, spirituality, and the rights of Mother Earth within the 22,283 hectares of territory which belonged to them. To that end, the governance and legality of the Wuasikamas Movement were reorganised through a Greater Council as well as through the smaller councils for health, education, communication, economy, public and community services, justice women and family, childhood and youth, and the Inga guards. Through these processes, the Integrated Life Mandate for the Survival of the Inga People of Aponte was adopted.

To support this broader movement, the Alianza de Mujeres Indígenas de Nariño (Alliance of Indigenous Women of Nariño) was created and strengthened to share stories and experiences of indigenous women in the. Similarly, El Tribunal de Pueblos y Autoridades Indígenas del Suroccidente Colombiano (the Court of the Peoples and Indigenous Authorities of the Colombian Southwest) was founded, with the participation of seven ancient peoples living in Caquetá, Cauca, Putumayo and Nariño in the South of Colombia (Awá, Cofán, Eperara Siapidaara, Inga, Nasa Uh, Quillasinga, and Siona).

The main objectives of the Wuasikamas Movement are that:

1. The Inga People of Aponte shall set their own rules and procedures that have allowed them to survive while maintaining their autonomy, territory, traditional practices and customs, language, religious and spiritual system and its life principles: “do not steal, do not lie, do not be lazy, be worthy”.

2. The Inga People of Aponte shall not let their collective feeling of community, self-government, autonomy, jurisdiction, worldview and thinking die; it is clear that their Right of Origin is Mother Earth, source of their Territorial Right.

3. The people shall overcome the vices learned from Western culture, by which the community was strongly divided and lost many important life values.

4. Decisions shall always be based on the Territorial law guided by the Taita de Taitas (Father of Fathers) Carlos Tamaviyo, Higher Law, Indigenous Law and other policies covered by the principle of orality.

Thanks to the process of reorganisation and institutional strengthening, in Aponte the Inga people now generate their own income and directly support intercultural health services, utilities (water, power, sewage systems, recycling, internet), food security, education, communication and culture, a club for young people, and a club for the rights of women, among other initiatives.
LOCAL CHALLENGES

Deforestation and soil degradation

Poppy cultivation for drug trafficking is highly detrimental to the environment, leading to soil sterilisation over time. During the years that the Inga in Aponte cultivated poppies, hundreds of hectares of forests were destroyed in mountain ranges over 2,000 metres above sea level. Consequences include loss of water, restricted movement of wildlife, large landslides, and the deterioration of flora and fauna, with impacts on the food security of the Inga people.

Loss of indigenous culture

Colonisation and intermarriage, coupled with the presence of guerrillas, drug traffickers and paramilitary groups, weakened the cultural identity of the Inga people (language, dress, ways of thinking, spirituality), risking their physical and cultural survival in this area over time. Illicit poppy cultivation and increased exposure to Western culture also led high consumption of alcohol, prostitution, young single mothers, domestic violence, and loss of lives. During this period, Aponte was termed the ‘red light district’ of the Department of Nariño.
After obtaining title to their territory in 2003, the Inga people in Aponte reunited with their worship of Mother Earth. They devoted themselves to recovering an area of 3,500 hectares directly affected by poppy plantations through processes of natural regeneration and reforestation with crops for growing coffee, banana, sugarcane, fruit trees such as orange, avocado, tomato, lulo, lemon and soursop, and timber such as myrtle, oak, Colombian pine and guayacán, among others. These crops are produced using organic production methods and organic fertilizers in indigenous gardens in order to avoid glyphosate spraying. Sustainable livelihoods have been created, including the production of special coffee, trout farming and dual-purpose breeding, improving local incomes.

As a result of these efforts, the mountains have returned to their natural green, and native flora and fauna are in the process of being restored. Hundreds of birds have returned to the area, including the bronzy inca (Coeligena coeligena), the small-billed elaenia (Elaenia parvirostris), the white-breasted wren (Hemicircina-crowned), the green and black fruiteater (Pipreola Tanager), the white-sided flowerpiercer (Diglossa albilatera), and the fionectes flycatcher (Mionectes tyrant). Likewise, mammal populations of spectacled bears, tapirs, and deer are increasing.

**KEY IMPACTS**

**Reforestation and environmental restoration**

- Three páramos and 28 lakes were declared sacred areas in order to protect water sources.
- Uncontrolled fires have been eliminated.
- Organic food is produced and consumed.
In 2003, women and young people tired of so much death and destruction undertook a process to recover their identity and dignity, working to promote a ‘Good Life’ for the Inga people in Aponte recognizing the fundamental rights of Mother Earth.

One of the first initiatives, also in 2003, was the launch of an indigenous community radio station called Inga Stereo by the Council for Communication. Inga Stereo broadcasts in the Inga language and in Spanish to strengthen intercultural communication. Other councils within the community participate in the programming to strengthen governance over the resguardo.

In 2004, the Higher Council for Justice of the Inga People in Aponte was formed and consolidated. This body is made up of 19 senior counselors, one General Justice Secretary, one Higher Council for Justice Secretary, and one Chasqui (Notifier). The Higher Council is responsible for maintaining order in Aponte, according to the ancestral principles which oriented the Wuasikamas process. Between 2004 and 2017, 650 rulings were made across a variety of topics, with criminal matters, domestic violence, and violence against the rights of the Earth being the most frequent.

In 2005, the Institución Educativa Agropecuaria Indígena Bilingüe del Pueblo Inga en Aponte (Bilingual Indigenous Agricultural Education Institution of the Inga People in Aponte) was established. In 2003, the community had just five professional teachers. In 2017, there are more than 30 teachers and 428 students enrolled in primary and secondary education. Over 100 students are carrying out their undergraduate studies at various universities in Colombia and elsewhere. Ninety-five percent of professionals have returned to the territory and are contributing their knowledge to the ‘Good Life’ of the community.

Finally, in 2010, the Institución Prestadora de Servicios de Salud Indígena del Pueblo Inga en Aponte (Indigenous Health Services Provider for the Inga people of Aponte), was created to provide comprehensive health services with an intercultural model. The healthcare provided responds to the needs of both the Inga people in Aponte and of other groups by taking into account differing worldviews and adapting public health policies to different traditions and customs. They are therefore able to both strengthen cultural identity and improve community health.

Through the establishment of these groups and others, the Inga people have created a solid institutional framework that enables them to exercise sovereignty over their territory. They are able to exercise control over outside projects such as mining or exploitation of other natural resources within their territory and to protect themselves from human rights violations. “We don’t have money, but we are at peace,” they say in the community.

**KEY IMPACTS**

**Cultural recovery**

- Launch of Inga Stereo in 2003 has provided free radio programming in Inga and Spanish to promote intercultural communication, strengthen cultural identity, and promote sustainable resguardo governance.
- Creation of the Higher Council for Justice of the Inga People in Aponte in 2004 to maintain order and settle disputes within the community.
- Creation of Institución Prestadora de Servicios de Salud Indígena del Pueblo Inga en Aponte provides comprehensive, intercultural health services.
- Creation of the Institución Educativa Agropecuaria Indígena Bilingüe del Pueblo Inga en Aponte has led to a 600 percent increase in teachers in Aponte. 428 students are enrolled in primary and secondary education, and over 100 young people from the community have enrolled in undergraduate programs in Colombia and abroad.
The Inga People in Aponte have pioneered a sustainable approach to reclaiming their traditional lands. As the national level, they have modified existing policies through the creation of an agreement with the Government of Colombia to modify the Programa Nacional Familias Guardabosques to provide funds to the community as a whole rather than to specific families.

The Inga in Aponte were also among the lobby against the use of glyphosate fumigation as a strategy to combat poppy production, and successfully campaigned for the cessation of fumigations in their resguardo. Based on increasing awareness that these chemicals are highly hazardous for human health and the environment, the Government of Colombia recently banned them for the entire country. In 2011 the Wuasikamas’ promoter and driving indigenous authority was recognized by Semana magazine and the Leadership and Democracy Foundation as one of the top 35 leaders in Colombia driving social change and progress.

In addition, the creation of the Tribunal de Pueblos y Autoridades Indígenas del Suroccidente Colombiano is the first of its kind and demonstrates the power of an external guarantor to support the Inga people’s resistance against drug trafficking and armed conflict. Thanks to the work of the Tribunal de Pueblos y Autoridades Indígenas del Suroccidente Colombiano, the Alianza de Mujeres Indígenas de Nariño, and other population sectors of the region, in 2011 the Government of Colombia issued Decree 4633, which focuses on reparations to victims of the armed conflict, identifies the Earth as a victim in need of reparation in accordance with the worldview and laws of indigenous peoples.

In 2014, spurred by these groups the Government of Colombia issued a public policy to support the agricultural sector in the department of Nariño. Through the National Council of Economic and Social Policy (CONPES), this policy works to strengthen 16 production lines, to overcome drug trafficking, to improve the titling of land to small farmers, and to contribute to a stable and lasting peace.

In 2018, the national Government issued the document from the CONPES which defines a model of sustainable regional development in the Colombian Massif. This model seeks to promote conservation-based development, sustainable production and the preservation of the cultural diversity of this ecoregion.

The Wuasikamas Movement has made numerous contributions to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, the Alianza de Mujeres Indígenas de Nariño allows for sharing experiences among indigenous women in the Department and strengthens women’s empowerment, in line with the goals of gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10). At the same time, the Tribunal de Pueblos y Autoridades Indígenas del Suroccidente Colombiano seeks to enhance the sustainability of the initiatives of indigenous peoples to prevent the influence of drug traffickers, guerrillas and criminal gangs, in line with the objectives of responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16). Finally, the efforts of reforestation and restoration of the ecosystem help protect watercourses, mitigate the effects of climate change, and protect the Andean forests, in line with the objectives of climate action (SDG 13) and life on land (SDG 15).
Replicability

The experience of the Inga people in Aponte has served as a model for the rest of the Inga people in Colombia, a population of approximately 38,000 people. As a result, the Atun Wuasi Iuiai-AWAI (Indigenous Territorial Entity of the Inga People of Colombia) was established in 2017 as an indigenous governance organisation that encompasses all Inga people in Colombia. In addition, six indigenous peoples of the region (Awa, Cofán, Eperara Siapidaara, Nasa Hu, Quillasinga, and Siona) have been impacted directly by the work of the Wuašikama Movement, which sets a powerful precedent for indigenous action. Other Afro-Colombian groups, indigenous peoples, and rural communities have visited Aponte to learn how to apply the best practices of the Wuašikamas Movement in their own territories.

Scalability

The Wuašikamas Movement’s model was scaled in 2008 by the departmental Government of Nariño to formulate a regional policy called ‘Yes we can’, which helps farmers, other indigenous peoples, and Afro-Colombians to live without coca or poppy crops and to reduce fumigation with glyphosate. The Wuašikamas Movement has also contributed to national meetings combatting drug trafficking within the framework of the peace process carried out with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) (Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – The People’s Army).

Sustainability

The Wuašikamas Movement of the Inga People in Aponte has promoted the development of a variety of sustainable livelihood sources. The production of specialty coffee benefits 320 families, who together harvest 290 tons of coffee in one season, garnering $3,200 billion Colombian Pesos (approximately US$1,016,893) for each annual harvest. Trout farming generates one ton of protein each month and mobilizes nearly $136 million Colombian Pesos (approximately US$43,218) per year, benefitting 40 families. Dual-purpose cattle mobilizes some $450 million Colombian Pesos (approximately US$143,000) annually and benefits 95 families. Rearing smaller animals, such as hens and pigs, benefits 310 families and has generated some $1,100 million Colombian Pesos (approximately US$349,553) per year. In addition, 186 families live off the income generated from the production of fruit plants, construction of houses and other infrastructure, and work as day labourers. Families’ incomes have improved substantially. Fifteen years after beginning this process towards sustainable livelihoods for the Inga in Aponte, today the community can live in peace and happily share this experience and their cultural identity with pride.
FUTURE PLANS

- Between 2017 and 2027, all community efforts will be focused on rebuilding the urban area of Aponte, destroyed by a geological fault that triggered an earthquake, leaving 550 families without housing. The earthquake also led to the collapse of the Inga Government building, half of the Bilingual Agricultural School, the Inga Stereo Broadcasting House, the House of the Higher Justice Council, the Inga Women’s House, the House of Handicrafts, the chapel, and the park.

- By 2027, the Wuasikamas Movement seeks to open at least ten Wuasikamas coffee shops in different capital cities around the world, with 40 percent of profits invested in the reconstruction of urban infrastructure in Aponte.

- Between 2018 and 2022, the Wuasikamas Movement will be consolidated as an intercultural territorial management model as part of implementing Atun Wasi Iuiai-AWAI in the departments of Caquetá, Cauca, Putumayo, Nariño in Colombia and the provinces of Napo and Sucumbíos in Ecuador.

- The Alliance of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities of America will be consolidated. Hand in hand with the Tribunal de Pueblos y Autoridades Indígenas del Suroccidente Colombiano, the alliance will strengthen the institutional capacity of regional leaders and organizations working to defend the rights of the Earth. These groups will support adaptation to climate change, promote the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, overcoming poverty, empower women, and strengthen the cultural diversity of this ecoregion.

PARTNERS

- **Government of Colombia**: Modification of the Programa Nacional Familias Guardabosques to supply funds to the community as a whole rather than to specific families.

- **Chamber of Commerce of Taiwan in Colombia**: Support to Café Wuasikamas for the establishment of the first store in the city of Bogotá D.C.

- **Pax Holland**: Supporting for process of strengthening the governance of the indigenous peoples part of the Tribunal de Pueblos y Autoridades Indígenas del Suroccidente Colombiano within the framework of the peace agreements between the Government of Colombia and the FARC-EP.
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Editors
Editor-in-Chief: Anne LS Virnig
Contributing Editors: Jenna Ingram & Martin Sommerschuh

Writer
Marcela Torres

Design
Kimberly Koserowski

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