EQUATOR INITIATIVE

UNDP

ASOCIACIÓN DE PRODUCTORES DEL PUEBLO ARHUACO DE LA SIERRA NEVADA DE SANTA MARTA (ASOARHUACO)

Republic of Colombia

EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER

Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

UNDP EQUATOR INITIATIVE CASE STUDY SERIES

Indigenous Peoples and local communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and the Planet. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impact, 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. This is precisely the reason why this case study has been crafted through a collaborative process with the representatives of the winning initiatives. The goal is to thoroughly integrate their voices and experiences, showcasing their efforts in driving local action within their respective environments.

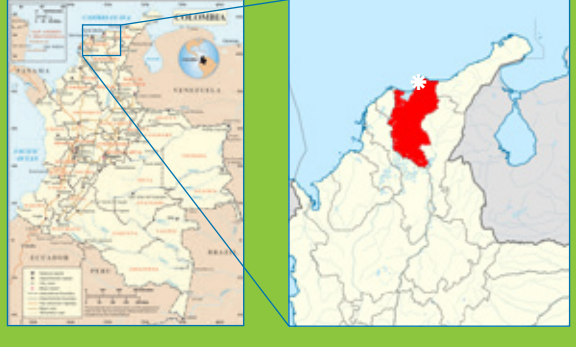
The **UNDP Equator Initiative**, supported by generous funding from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), awarded the Equator Prize in 2024 to 11 outstanding Indigenous Peoples and local community-led initiatives from eight countries. The winning organizations showcase innovative, nature-based solutions for tackling biodiversity loss and climate change. Selected from a pool of over 600 nominations from 102 countries, this year's winners align with the Equator Prize 2024 theme 'Nature for Climate Action,' showcasing groundbreaking solutions across three categories: Nature for Climate Mitigation, Nature for Climate Adaptation and Resilience, and Nature for a Just Transition. All 11 winners were celebrated at a high-profile event, held virtually, on October 3rd, in the lead up to the biodiversity and climate change negotiations at CBD COP16 and UNFCCC COP29. The event was part of the **Nature for Life Hub**, a four-day series of virtual events designed to raise ambition for nature-based solutions in global biodiversity and climate policy. The Equator Prize 2024 winners are restoring ecosystems, advancing regenerative practices, and fostering a green, circular economy, with innovative solutions that mitigate emissions, build climate resilience, and drive a just, inclusive transition to a zero-carbon future.

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 scale nature-based solutions essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

PROJECT SUMMARY

Nestled in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta—the world's highest coastal mountain range in the tropics and a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve—the Arhuaco Indigenous Peoples and three other Indigenous Peoples have protected their sacred lands for decades. In 2015, Arhuaco leaders founded *Asociación de Productores del Pueblo Arhuaco de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta* (Association of Producers of the Arhuaco Peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta or ASOARHUACO by its acronym in Spanish). ASOARHUACO is a sustainable enterprise association that enhances sustainable livelihoods and protects Ancestral Territory. ASOARHUACO focuses on agroforestry and local value-added products, including cultivating organic coffee, cocoa, and sugarcane, and producing traditional handicrafts, supporting 120 Arhuaco women. Today, these products have successfully entered European markets.

In its pursuit to protect Ancestral Lands, the group established community monitoring by Indigenous youth on over 2,550 hectares of forest, planted approximately 500,000 trees in agroforestry systems across 285 hectares, trained over 300 Indigenous producers in technical and environmental practices, and established home and communal gardens with over 300 households directly benefiting around 1,406 Indigenous families. Demonstrating their commitment to environmental and social harmony, ASOARHUACO partnered with the Sacred Forests initiative in 2023 to accelerate the purchase and reforestation of Ancestral Lands. By mid-2024, the initiative had acquired 69 plots of land, totalling 5,682 hectares. In its efforts, ASOARHUACO reflects the community's collective dedication and connection to Mother Earth and is guided by the active participation of their spiritual leaders, the Mamos.



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KEY FACTS

Equator Prize winner

2024

Founded

2015

Location

Santa Marta, Magdalena, Republic of Colombia

Beneficiaries

4,902 direct beneficiaries; 8,370 indirect beneficiaries

Thematic areas

Forest conservation/sustainable development; Sustainable agriculture and food security; Biodiversity conservation

Fields of work

Agroforestry; Ecosystem restoration; Regenerative agriculture

Sustainable Development Goals addressed

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

EQUATOR PRIZE 2024 WINNER FILM

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the snow-capped peaks are considered the centre of the world. When everything was dark, when there was no sun, when it had not yet dawned, it was a state of consciousness and memory (Sen-zare). There, the laws were established. The first men placed upon the face of the Earth were the elder brothers (Iku Gwia Nary), to care for and watch over the world above and the world below, in the four directions of the universe; therefore, they are the 'Elder Brothers.'

When dawn breaks and the sun rises, the Bunachu (Sons of the Sun) are born, and all those who came after are considered the 'Younger Brothers.' The difference between the two types of brothers lies in their knowledge of Nature. The 'Elder Brothers' are responsible for caring for and preserving the world, ensuring that the cosmic cycle develops well so that diseases do not destroy human life and that the harvests are good. They represent two states of time and space: the period of Sen-zare [state of consciousness and memory] and the period of Bun-zare [spiritual order of origin and universal balance].

The Sierra is considered a human body, where the snow-capped peaks represent the head; the lagoons of the moors represent the heart; the rivers and streams represent the veins; the layers of soil represent the muscles; and the grasses represent the hair. Based on this, the entire geography of the Sierra is a sacred space.

The foundation of our existence is Nature and society as a unity, governed by a single Sacred Law—immutable, preexisting, primitive, and surviving all things. The world could exist or cease to exist without altering in the slightest the essence of this Law, which constitutes the universal thought of the unmanifested, the unique origin of life.

— Taken from the Life Plan of the Arhuaco Cabildo Magdalena Guajira

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, located in northern Colombia, is the world's highest coastal mountain range, with peaks rising from the sea to a staggering 5,700 meters. It has been recognized as the "world's most irreplaceable ecosystem" due to its rich environmental diversity, including beaches, mangroves, tropical forests, deserts, páramos, and glaciers. The area's temperatures range from 27 degrees Celsius at sea level to zero degrees Celsius at the summit of its highest peaks Cristóbal Colón and Simón Bolívar. Its broad ranging habitats encompass nearly all the life zones of the Neotropical Region, a major biogeographic division for flora and fauna spanning from Mexico to South America. Its habitats even include tropical dry forests—Colombia's most endangered ecosystem with only eight percent remaining. Thirty-six rivers originate in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, producing over 10 billion cubic meters of water, supplying 21 aqueducts across the Magdalena, La Guajira, and Cesar departments, and serving 1.5 million people. With such incredible and rare diversity across its lands and waters, it is only fitting that Indigenous Peoples consider it the "heart of the world."

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta provides habitats for a remarkable range of animal species, including the jaguar, Andean tapir, páramo deer, squirrel, otter, ocelot, Andean condor, solitary eagle, and white eagle. It is host to many endemic species found nowhere else in the world, including the amphibian genus, *Serranobatrachus*, whose name comes from the word Serrano meaning 'born in the Sierra Nevada' and *batracus*, meaning 'frog.' With 628 reported bird species—equivalent to the

avian diversity of the USA and Canada combined—it also contains several areas designated as Important Bird Areas (IBAs) and Alliance for Zero Extinction sites (AZEs) hosting endangered bird species. The peak of Cuchilla de San Lorenzo, encompasses 57,000 hectares of land that are crucial for Neotropical migrating birds crossing the Caribbean and has one of the highest concentrations of endemic species. The area of Río Frío, which originates in the high-altitude páramo, is a steep valley that includes many threatened and endemic species, notably the Andean Condor (*Vultur gryphus*), a species recognized as vulnerable to extinction by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta was traditionally called *Niwi Umuke* and is the birthplace of the pre-Colombian Tairona Indigenous civilization and its ancient city, *Teyuna*, also known as *Ciudad Perdida* (The Lost City). It was believed to have been founded some 650 years before the famous Incan city, Machu Picchu of Peru. Today, four Indigenous Peoples remain in the area as descendants of the Tairona—the Arhuaco (or Iku), Kogui, Kankuamo, and Wiwa. These communities continue to protect and uphold their magnificent Ancestral Territory as the heart of the world.

The Arhuaco Peoples, in particular, number over 48,000 and centre their identity on the spiritual belief that the Sierra is a female living being. The snow-capped peaks represent her head, the páramo lagoons her heart, the rivers and streams her veins, the soil layers her muscles, and the grasslands her hair. Together, the Sierra is seen as a woman surrounded by hills, each one— from the largest to the smallest—symbolizing her guardians.

In 1979, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta was named a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve as part of its Man and Biosphere Programme (MAB), recognizing the vital importance of protecting the connection of people and the environment. In 2022, the Ancestral Knowledge system of the four Indigenous Peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Colombia was recognized on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. The Ancestral Knowledge system includes preserved sacred places, rituals, marriage rites, traditional dances, ecological knowledge, and offerings to spiritual powers, and is passed down through language, community practices, and sacred missions. Knowledge is guided by both men (*Mamos*) and women (*Sagas*), who are spiritual leaders with skills and sensitivity to connect with Nature and interpret messages from the environment. This philosophy governs the human relationship with the universe.

Livelihoods in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta are supported by agriculture, including the cultivation and harvesting of coffee, cacao, corn, and plantains. Home gardens are used to grow vegetables and other produce and ensure balanced nutrition within communities. The tradition of barter or exchange of products is also used, especially between products from varying thermal floors. For example, families living in warmer zones and families in the highlands exchange agricultural products they cannot grow in their own lands.

Origin and structure

In 2015, Arhuaco leaders in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta founded the *Asociación de Productores del Pueblo Arhuaco de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta* (Association of Producers of the Arhuaco Peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta or ASOARHUACO by its acronym in Spanish). In creating ASOARHUACO, leaders sought to empower Arhuaco ecological and cultural values while at the same time uplifting alternative economic livelihoods for local Arhuaco families. The association does this by promoting the production and marketing of sustainable goods within the Arhuaco Territory. In addition, it focuses on the management and execution of productive, environmental and cultural projects for the benefit of the community and environment. With years of experience, ASOARHUACO has managed to establish itself as a leading organization promoting the local economy and protecting the cultural and environmental heritage of the region.

Today, ASOARHUACO represents over 1,100 families dedicated to sustainable agriculture and conservation across the Aracataca, Fundación, and Don Diego basins. It operates as an extension of the Arhuaco governing council, a self-governing system that upholds Indigenous leadership and decision-making structures in the Territory.

ASOARHUACO serves as a bridge between contemporary community management dynamics and Ancestral leadership systems, supporting training processes, intergenerational exchange, and sacred journeys to harmonize the Territory, guided by spiritual authorities. Moreover, it promotes the integration of Arhuaco thought into all levels of project planning and implementation, ensuring that every initiative respects the timing, principles, and visions of Ancestral governance. This interconnected approach not only strengthens autonomy and the community's own

decision-making system but also enables the Arhuaco Peoples to address modern challenges—such as territorial pressures, climate change, and community fragmentation—from a position of unity, legitimacy, and cultural coherence. ASOARHUACO also follows the guidance of the Council of Mamos, composed of Arhuaco spiritual and wisdom leaders trained to interpret Nature and guide the community.

ASOARHUACO's activities are deeply rooted in sustainable agroforestry, with a focus on organic coffee, cocoa, and sugarcane, as well as traditional *mochilas* (handwoven bags), crafted by a dedicated group of 120 Arhuaco women. ASOARHUACO successfully entered European markets and continues to enhance the economic resilience of Arhuaco families through the sale of its products. Recently, the organization launched a partnership with the Sacred Forests initiative to accelerate the purchase and restoration of forests in its Ancestral Territory forests in its Ancestral Territory within Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.

From its humble beginnings with just six employees (two women and four men), ASOARHUACO has grown significantly, now employing 277 people, including 29 women. Its organizational structure is made up of a general assembly and a general board with a treasurer, secretary, and fiscal officer. Delegates from each basin, alongside regional authorities, participate in decision-making to ensure that ASOARHUACO's initiatives align with the collective interests of the Arhuaco Peoples across the Territory. Partners like Sacred Forests provide investment support for land purchases while its daily operations are sustained through the efforts of its producers and the commercialization of agroforestry products.

LOCAL CHALLENGES

Mining and agricultural encroachment on Ancestral Lands

The Arhuaco Indigenous Peoples of Colombia's Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta have long faced significant challenges due to extractive industries and extensive agriculture encroaching upon their Ancestral Lands. The region's rich biodiversity is increasingly threatened by activities such as indiscriminate logging, mining, and the expansion of large-scale agriculture. These practices lead to deforestation, erosion, and pollution, severely impacting the delicate ecological balance of the area.

Recent assessments found 132 active mining titles within their Ancestral Territory, with an additional 395 requests pending, many lacking the required prior consultation with Indigenous Peoples and local communities. Illegal gold mining operations exacerbate environmental degradation, contaminating water sources with mercury and cyanide. These developments not only endanger the physical environment but also encroach upon sacred sites integral to the Arhuaco's spiritual practices and cultural identity. The introduction of new coffee varieties and the spread of illicit crops not only degrades the environment but also disrupts traditional agricultural systems. Forest cover loss, exceeding 80 percent in some areas, has resulted in significant erosion and sedimentation in vital watersheds.

In the context of extraction and large-scale agriculture, land dispossession is a critical issue for the Arhuaco Peoples. Despite legal recognition of certain reserves, they retain only a fraction of their Ancestral Territory, traditionally demarcated by the "*línea negra*" (black line). Encroachment by settlers and the allocation of land for extractive projects force many Arhuaco communities into higher, less hospitable regions, limiting their access to diverse ecosystems essential for their traditional way of life. This displacement hampers the ability to manage and interact with various ecological zones, a practice fundamental to Arhuaco culture and environmental stewardship.

Biodiversity loss in Ancestral Territory

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta contains diverse landscapes and habitats, including coral beaches, sand beaches, rocky shores, cliffs, seagrass beds, mangroves, tropical rainforests, tropical dry forests, xerophytic and sub-xerophytic formations, deserts, plains, páramos, mountains, and glaciers. Due to its location along the coast and extreme variation in elevation, this isolated coastal mountain range contains almost every ecosystem in Latin America. Researchers have called the area "irreplaceable" for threatened species. Such species include the critically endangered Magdalena River turtle (*Podocnemis lewyana*), blue-billed Curassow (*Blue-billed Curassow*), Harlequin toad (*Atelopus arsyecue*), and variegated Spider monkey (*Ateles hybridus*). It is also home to vulnerable keystone species like the jaguar (*Panthera onca*), black solitary eagle (*Buteogallus solitarius*), harpy eagle (*Harpia harpyja*), and Andean condor (*Vultur gryphus*). The humid forests of the area are also home to the endemic species found nowhere else in the world, which evolved to live in its distinct conditions, such as the amphibian genus *Serranobatrachus*, whose name comes from *Serrano*, meaning 'born in the Sierra Nevada.'

Unfortunately, its diverse species and habitats are under significant threat. Mining and agriculture, in particular, as well as intensive tourism, urban settlements, and coal ports threaten the survival of biodiversity and the communities that live there. Unsustainable practices have led to deforestation, habitat fragmentation, and pollution, which degrade the environment, reduce biodiversity, further endanger species, and disrupt the Arhuaco's spiritual and cultural connection to their land.

Despite the Arhuaco Peoples' profound connection to Nature and propensity for sustainable land management, their traditional ecological practices have not been adequately integrated into conservation policy and strategy. This disconnect has resulted in a limited understanding of environmental management within Indigenous Territories and contributes to ongoing land disputes. Insufficient public support for the Arhuaco Peoples has also contributed to an inability of Indigenous Peoples like the Arhuaco to prevent biodiversity loss and undermines the cultural practices that have historically safeguarded these ecosystems.

Changing climatic conditions in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta

The tall mountain peaks of Colombia are undergoing immense changes, including in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Since the beginning of the 20th century, only six of Colombia's 14 glaciers remain across the country. In the Sierra Nevada, the glacial area has shrunk from 8,200 hectares in the mid-19th century to just 530 hectares in 2022. All the glaciers in the area are now drying up due to increased temperatures and reduced humidity.

The Arhuaco see the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta as a living spiritual being and worry that it is broken. They believe it is a response to what humans have given Mother Earth—an effect of our broken relationship with the Earth. Practically speaking, without these glaciers, rivers are in decline and water provision for the whole of Colombia is drying up. Microclimates are shifting and many areas of Colombia are seeing record temperatures, perpetuating habitat destruction and biodiversity loss.

LOCAL RESPONSES

"Protecting the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the heart of the world, and the Indigenous Peoples who inhabit it, is of vital importance, as it is one of the world's most unique and irreplaceable ecosystems."

— Erika Patricia Rueda Zuleta, Executive Director, Sacred Forests Project

Supporting sustainable agroforestry value chains

Asociación de Productores del Pueblo Arhuaco de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (Association of Producers of the Arhuaco Peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta or ASOARHUACO by its acronym in Spanish) implements agroforestry systems to support sustainable enterprises within the Arhuaca Territory in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. With a longstanding commitment to Nature, Arhuaco farmers and producers work together to combine Traditional Knowledge and new agroecological practices to support sustainable production within their context.

Since its inception at the end of 2024, ASOARHUACO members planted over 520,000 cocoa and coffee trees on 536 hectares of diverse polyculture agroforestry systems. Over 700 producers received essential tools, supplies, training, and technical support to develop agroforestry practices, and over 700 home gardens have been established, enhancing food security and biodiversity. Members also established tree nurseries to support the production of coffee, cacao, and other plants from seed. Beyond coffee and cocoa, ASOARHUACO engages in the sustainable harvesting of non-timber forest products. It also supports sustainable agriculture of food crops to diversify incomes and support food security. This multifaceted approach supports the livelihoods of 1,793 individuals, including 676 women and 1,117 men.

Arhuaco farmers cultivate on small plots of around two hectares each, ensuring production can be done adequately without disturbing the natural environment. Farmers develop polyculture systems, as opposed to monoculture, meaning they grow multiple crops together within a small space. This framework, combined with agroforestry, which prioritizes production from trees, helps mimic the look and feel of a natural forest and encourages native flora and fauna to exist harmoniously with cultivated products. These systems across ASOARHUACO producer lands are certified organic and fair-trade.

ASOARHUACO members use equipment that reduces water consumption during coffee processing. They also established a centralized facility for cocoa processing. ASOARHUACO's technical team is working on waste classification processes and ecological controls for production units. These measures help control waste threatening the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta ecosystem.

ASOARHUACO products include single-origin coffee, cacao pulp, Arhuaco-origin chocolate bars, artisanal panela, natural honey, and handicrafts such as traditional bags. Today, ASOARHUACO products can be found in European markets, and it continues to be recognized as a leading organization that protects the cultural and environmental heritage of the region and supports livelihoods.

KEY IMPACTS

Supporting sustainable agroforestry value chains

- ASOARHUACO planted 520,000 trees in agroforestry systems of coffee and cacao.
- ASOARHUACO established 536 hectares of agroforestry systems for coffee and cacao.
- ASOARHUACO supports over 700 small producers in good agricultural practices.
- ASOARHUACO helped community members establish over 700 home gardens.
- ASOARHUACO's sustainable agriculture value chains involve 1,793 individuals.

Purchasing land for Indigenous-led conservation

The Arhuaco Peoples have always practised a deep communion with Mother Nature, motivating them to preserve forests and sacred natural areas. Arhuaco spiritual leaders, called *Mamos* and *Sagas*, observe and interpret information codified in Nature—from the earth, sky, trees, and movement of the animals. Based on these observations and spiritual interpretations, Arhuaco communities have been conserving certain areas of forests and growing crops on others, seeking to live in relationship with one another based on the guidance of Nature.

For over 20 years, the Arhuaco community has actively pursued the strategic purchase and conservation of culturally and environmentally significant lands to recover their Ancestral Territory and protect biodiversity. ASOARHUACO's strategy respects Nature and human beings. Arhuaco leaders recognize that many non-Indigenous farmers who moved onto Ancestral Lands were given legal rights to the land. Therefore, they respect these rights by purchasing back lands through formal processes. Raising and giving this money to farmers supports peaceful exchange, the farmers' livelihood, and the Ancestral Territory.

ASOARHUACO policy sets aside 70 percent of all acquired lands for natural regeneration and 30 percent for growing foods and forest products. Recently, within the framework of a new partnership called Sacred Forests, the percentage increased to 80 percent, further protecting biodiversity. The Sacred Forests partnership includes advanced forest monitoring through satellite imagery, provided by SarVision, to track deforestation, support reforestation efforts, and demonstrate impact to partner brands. Through the initiative, approximately 9,170 hectares have been acquired from 2022 to 2024.

The prioritization of conserving important lands has strengthened the collectively owned protected forest reserve called *Resguardo Arhuaco de la Sierra* (Arhuaco de la Sierra Indigenous Reserve) which covers 202,444 hectares, of which 87,909 hectares are forests. By the end of 2024, ASOARHUACO had purchased 128 plots of land. The reclaimed lands now support over 300 Arhuaco families who live on these lands and serve as guardians of the forests, actively engaging in environmental restoration and conservation efforts. Their involvement ensures the protection of critical.

ASOARHUACO has also undertaken active reforestation, planting over 113,000 trees in degraded areas as part of 520,000 trees established in coffee and cacao agroforestry systems, and is implementing assisted natural regeneration actions on degraded lands that have been acquired. In pursuit of these programmes, ASOARHUACO built a tree nursery with the capacity to cultivate 154,000 tree seedlings. ASOARHUACO also conducts environmental training sessions and workshops that combine the knowledge of biologists with that of the *Mamos* to coordinate actions on biodiversity conservation and prevent incidents with jaguars and other threatened species. Cleanup campaigns are also carried out to collect post-consumption waste.

KEY IMPACTS

Purchasing land for Indigenous-led conservation

- ASOARHUACO's strategic purchase of 128 plots of land for conservation and sustainable livelihoods has led to the protection of 87,909 hectares.
- Since 2022, in collaboration with Sacred Forests, 9,170 hectares were acquired for territory recovery.
- More than 300 families live on acquired land under the Sacred Forests project and act as forest guardians.
- ASOARHUACO planted over 113,000 trees to assist in active forest restoration.
- ASOARHUACO established a tree nursery with the capacity to cultivate 154,000 tree seedlings.

Strengthening the role of Arhuaco women

Through the art of weaving, over 120 Indigenous women from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta are transforming their Ancestral Knowledge into a sustainable enterprise with ASOARHUACO. By leading their own production line with sustainably sourced materials from the forest and an end product that tells a cultural story, women are reclaiming their role as protectors of their land and keepers of knowledge. In the Arhuaco worldview, the Earth is our mother, *Ati Seynekun*, and according to the Arhuaco Law of Origin, women are intrinsically connected to her. By purchasing ASOARHUACO'S woven products, consumers step into this reality ever so slightly, joining a movement that values Indigenous wisdom, sustainability, and gender equality.

Among their woven products are the unique traditional *mochilas*—shoulder bags woven by hand from plant fibres and natural dyes. ASOARHUACO's *mochilas* are made to be more than just handicrafts—they are a means of cultural preservation, embodying the Arhuaco connection to Nature. Each bag is unique, with patterns and colours symbolic of the Arhuaco worldview and expressive of Nature, spirituality, and connection to Mother Earth.

The ASOARHUACO women's process of making *mochilas* is an act of community. Women work together, share stories and teachings, and support each other in an open and safe environment. This approach enriches the final product and strengthens community ties, creating a sense of belonging and solidarity. At the same time, women weavers are a testament to economic empowerment and self-determination. The women's production line supports women in generating income, fostering financial independence, and increasing sovereignty over decision-making in their own lives. This is especially crucial in communities where job opportunities are limited. Women have shown an immense commitment to using their financial empowerment for the health and wellness of their families and communities, ensuring improvements in sustainable development and forest protection for generations to come.

KEY IMPACTS

Strengthening the role of Arhuaco women

- ASOARHUACO membership includes 120 women working on sustainably sourced and created handicrafts.
- ASOARHUACO supports the marketing of the women's sustainable production line, which includes *mochilas* and other handicrafts, symbolic of the Arhuaco culture.

POLICY IMPACTS

"The Mamo is the legitimate authority of governance; he is the central figure within the representation system of the Arhuacos. He acts as the intermediary between celestial forces and humanity. His wisdom and knowledge allow for balance between these forces. Mamos guide the government and the activities that take place in the Territory, spiritually prepare the land, and provide guidance to leaders in decision-making."

— Erika Patricia Rueda Zuleta, Executive Director, Sacred Forests Project

National policy impacts

The work of *Asociación de Productores del Pueblo Arhuaco de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta* (Association of Producers of the Arhuaco Peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta or ASOARHUACO by its acronym in Spanish) is influencing policy at local and national levels. As part of the conservation and protection strategies for the Sierra Nevada proposed by the Arhuaco Peoples, ASOARHUACO supported the four Indigenous Peoples groups in the Sierra in co-creating a dossier for UNESCO. The dossier requests a future inscription of the World Heritage site as having both natural and cultural significance and "Outstanding Universal Value" and includes requisite land management plans. This community-based participatory process, highly inclusive of Indigenous Peoples, was developed, together with the capacity of Colombian national authorities and local stakeholders to protect and manage the unique heritage of the Arhuaco Peoples and other Indigenous Peoples in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta's UNESCO World Heritage site. ASOARHUACO also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Agriculture to collaborate on inter-institutional coordination activities to expand the area of reservations where the Arhuaco Peoples are present.

Contributions to the global agenda

At the global level, ASOARHUACO supports the implementation of several critical multilateral agreements, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda). For example, by establishing the production and marketing of sustainable agricultural and artisanal products, ASOARHUACO supports 'decent work and economic growth' (SDG 8), 'sustainable cities and communities' (SDG 11), and 'responsible consumption and production' (SDG 12). By empowering women in sustainable production and business leadership, the organization also supports 'gender equality' (SDG 5). Likewise, its development of and support for agroforestry and sustainable agriculture is helping to achieve the global goal of 'zero hunger' (SDG 2), including specific targets like

- Target 2.3 to double agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers—including women, Indigenous Peoples, and family farmers—through secure access to land, resources, knowledge, and markets;
- Target 2.4 to ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that improve land and soil quality by 2030.

ASOARHUACO's work in purchasing Ancestral Lands and setting aside forests for Nature conservation also directly supports goals for 'climate action' (SDG 13) and 'life on land' (SDG 15). These practices keep trees and plants in the ground, sequestering carbon and supporting diverse species and natural systems that uphold life. This work also supports the Global Biodiversity Framework of the CBD, which aims to restore harmony with Nature by 2030 through 23 targets, as well as the UNFCCC, which aims to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations "at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic (human induced) interference with the climate system."

"The Equator Prize signifies a real recognition that Indigenous Peoples are the protectors and conservators of biodiversity. According to our worldview, from the origin of life, understanding that Nature is vital to human life is embedded in Arhuaco culture. I am immensely grateful for this recognition that we receive today and for the opportunity to share our culture with the world."

— Rogelio Mejía Izquierdo, Manager, ASOARHUACO

Replication

The initiatives of *Asociación de Productores del Pueblo Arhuaco de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta* (Association of Producers of the Arhuaco Peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta or ASOARHUACO by its acronym in Spanish) began in two municipalities in the Magdalena department: Aracataca and Ciénaga. Since then, its activities have been replicated in two new Magdalena municipalities, including Fundación and Santa Marta. Its activities have also expanded into new departments, including Pueblo Bello of the Cesar department and Dibulla of the Guajira department. ASOARHUACO uses social media, assemblies, and meetings within the communities, as well as participation in forums and discussion panels on the topic to share about its activities and initiatives, continually helping other communities learn and replicate the model.

Scalability

The efforts put in place by the Arhuaco community can expand at scale across the entire Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, including communities within the Territories of the other three Indigenous Peoples. These communities have a historical worldview of caring for the land. Larger-scale efforts could be a win-win for both national governments and local communities, as safeguarding Indigenous Territories and supporting Indigenous-led conservation serves as an effective strategy in the fight against climate change and biodiversity loss. Initiatives like ASOARHUACO help achieve climate goals, biodiversity goals, and sustainable development goals, protecting ecosystems essential for the survival of people and the planet.

Sustainability

ASOARHUACO carefully manages its projects for long-term sustainability. Committed donors finance the investment phases of land purchases and the establishment of agroforestry crops for the first year of each phase. This ensures that reforestation, agroforestry, and land management are resourced and cared for in the most delicate stages,

including the first year of tree growth. After initial investment phases conclude, ASOARHUACO producers ensure the sustainability of crops and production by reinvesting income from sales. This for-profit model has shown growth over the years and continues to fund and fuel itself as a sustainable enterprise.

FUTURE PLANS

In the coming years, ASOARHUACO will embark on growing its reforestation initiatives, continuing to expand its impact and include new families in processes to improve and expand reforestation, agroforestry systems, food autonomy, and well-being.

PARTNERS

- ***Sacred Forests Foundation:*** Manages and channels resources for the project and provides technical support for execution.
- ***Rituals Cosmetics:*** Financial supporter for ASOARHUACO activities.
- ***National Land Agency (ANT):*** State agency responsible for incorporating purchased lands into the reserve.

SOURCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

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