Fondo Acción
Environment and childhood

20 years creating possible territories

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Fondo Acción

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20 years creating possible territories



Prologue

In her book *Telling is Listening*, the U.S. American writer Ursula K. Le Guin wrote that any true communicative act is a genetic exchange that structurally modifies everyone involved. Twenty years have passed since Fondo Acción began the organizing that has made it what it is today, and Le Guin—known among other works for the feminist ecological utopia of *The Word for World is Forest*—gives us words that seem to describe the experience: this organization, like any other living being, has taken shape through interactions with others, not by imposing paradigms, but by engaging in an exercise of deep listening and dialogue.

In essence, the book you now hold in your hands is the record of how an organization was built, how it gestated with its allies, growing and getting stronger as it empowered and dynamized the growth of other organizations. It begins with dialogue, shoulder to shoulder, in a team of women and men who have been given the responsibility of collectively imagining high-impact ways of investing in both the environment and children using funds from debt swaps between the Americas Initiative Account and the Tropical Forest Conservation Agreement (TFCA). It continues with the construction and consolidation of a financial mechanism—also produced in dialogue with the economic reality of the world—that allowed this organization to reach long-term financial sustainability.

This book also gives an account of collaborative work with RedLAC (Network of Latin American and Caribbean Environmental Funds), which led to the design of the first model for REDD+ projects in the Amazon and brought this model to black and indigenous communities on the Pacific Coast. It tells the story of the Conserva Colombia project, created hand-in-hand with The Nature Conservancy, which resulted not only in the declaration of locally protected areas, but also brought this organization into creating social and democratic agreements between civil society and authorities for the protection of the natural world. This book continues with a difficult move to the first tier: the organization's first steps into the department of Caquetá together with ACT (Amazon Conservation Team), looking for ways to stop forest degradation and disappearance by strengthening local governance and encouraging sustainable lifestyles within communities. It culminates in the voices of allies from across Colombia illustrating the process and result of investments that the organization has concentrated on over the years (conservation, childhood, sustainable rural development and climate change), and the book concludes with projections about the future, imagining the actions and investments of this organization in the year 2040.

This is the twenty-year story of an organization that has understood its work to be one of self-recognition as a small and powerful piece of a natural, social and cultural fabric—an organization that, like a mycorrhiza following its path through the ground, should exist in symbiosis with others.



CHAPTER

1

House repairs

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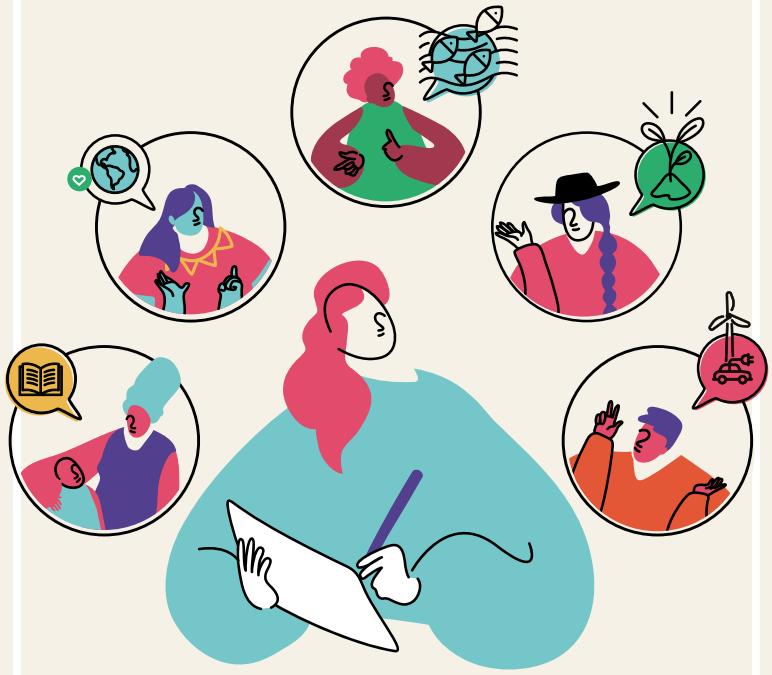


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Weaving a story

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Imagining the future

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Investing in the power of people

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Our history



2000
A new fund for children and biodiversity is born in Colombia

We were created to administrate the first debt-for-nature swap that was signed between the governments of the United States and Colombia.

2004
Protecting tropical forests through the TFCA

We became Colombia's administrator for the Tropical Forest Conservation Act (TFCA) that was signed between the governments of the United States and Colombia, and with support from Conservation International, TNC and WWF, we began to foster initiatives for forest conservation and for promoting the sustainable use of the forests.

2005 – 2008
A private fund with an entrepreneurial vision

We began using the Balanced Scorecard method (BSC), which helped us evaluate and improve our productivity as an organization.

We set up the first endowment that would guarantee the longevity of our organization.

We created the first endowment for a protected area in Colombia, the Malpelo Fauna and Flora Sanctuary, thanks to contributions from the people of the United States and Conservation International.

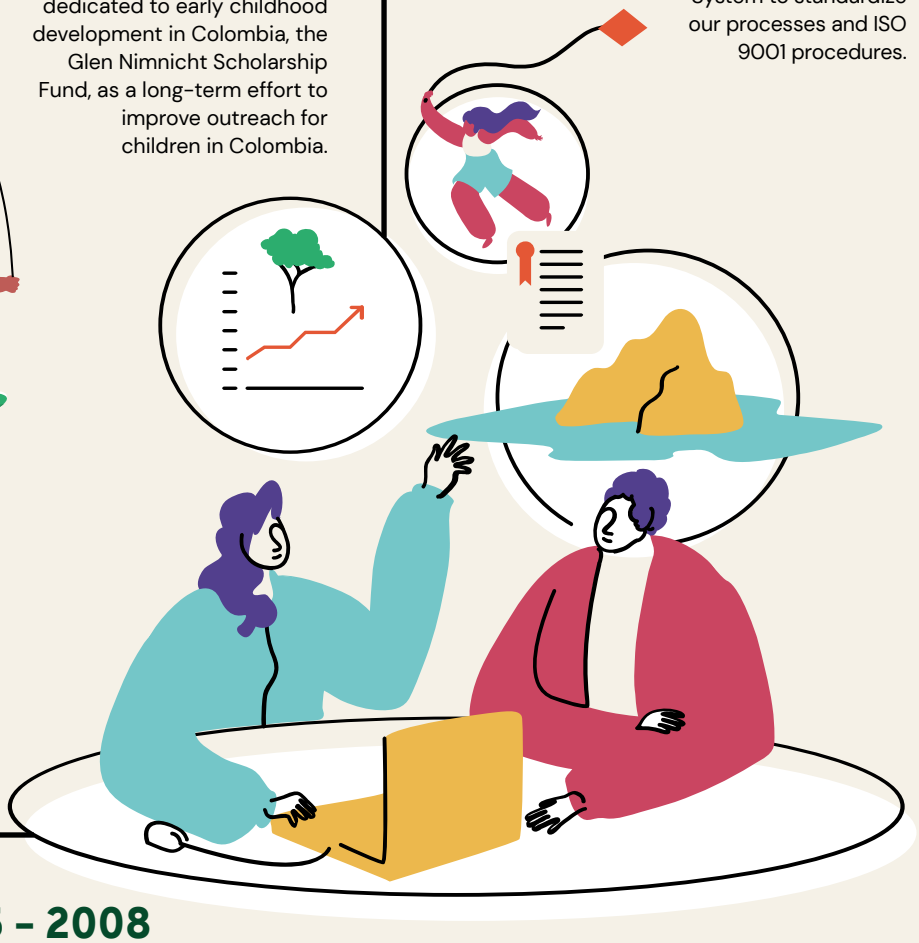
We strengthened our relationships with project executors by providing comprehensive guidance for their financial, administrative, legal, technical and leadership skills.

2006
Working for the children of Colombia

Together with CINDE Foundation, we created the nation's first endowment dedicated to early childhood development in Colombia, the Glen Nimnicht Scholarship Fund, as a long-term effort to improve outreach for children in Colombia.

2008
Improving our processes

We implemented the Quality Management System to standardize our processes and ISO 9001 procedures.



2009 – 2012
We continued growing hand-in-hand with new clients

Through our strategic plan, we try to help our clients diversify, connecting them with the private sector and creating a multi-donor, multiple-account plan that allowed us to expand in this period.

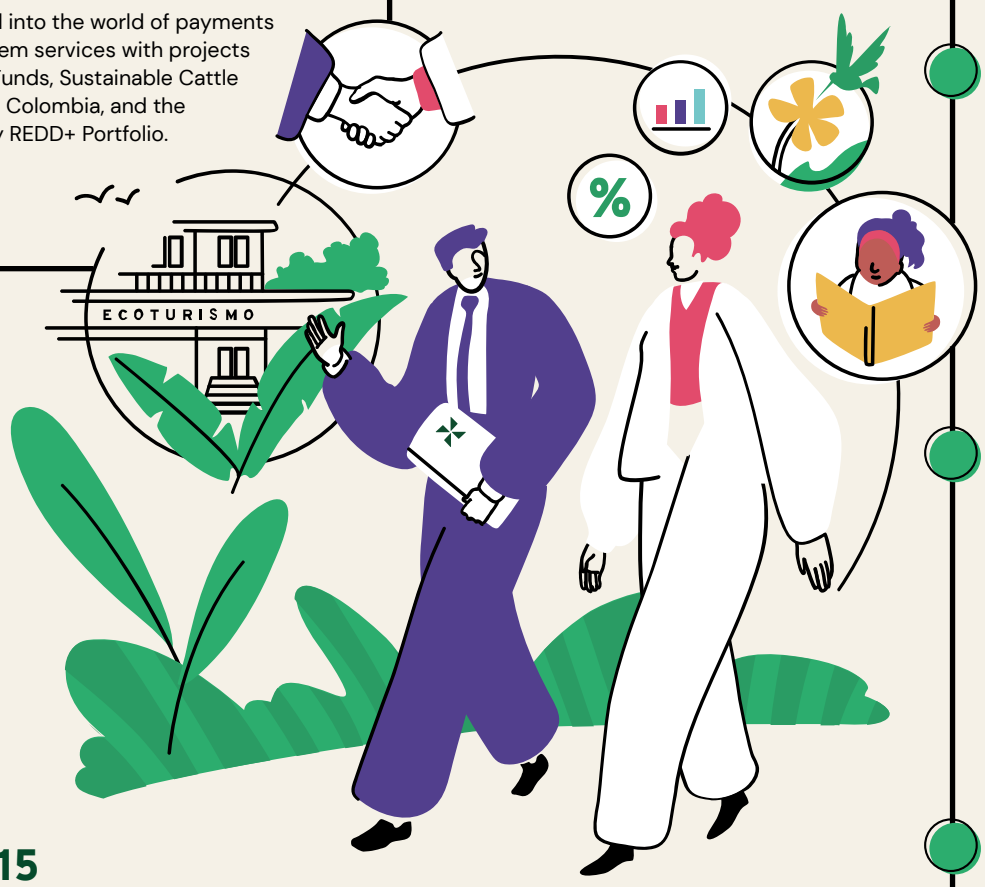
We entered into the world of payments for ecosystem services with projects like Water Funds, Sustainable Cattle Ranching in Colombia, and the Community REDD+ Portfolio.

2013 – 2016
From project administrator to direct action on the ground

We moved forward in our consolidation, directly executing the Connected Landscapes Caquetá project, which motivated us to create an information management area and to improve our communications area.

2020
Towards a 100% sustainable investment portfolio

We transformed our traditional endowment portfolio of investments into a 100% sustainable portfolio.



2018
We are the first NGO in Colombia to be accredited by the Green Climate Fund

Accreditation by the Green Climate Fund allows us to directly channel resources for mitigating and adapting to climate change.

2018
We invested in sustainable businesses through FIMI

We created the Impact Mission Investment Fund (FIMI in Spanish), which upholds the power of sustainable businesses that want to have a positive impact on communities and the land.

2015
We rewarded work with early childhood development in Colombia

Together with the CINDE Foundation, we created the Marta Arango Montoya award to recognize research and work on early childhood development in Colombia.

2017 – 2020
Our goal: to build peaceful, sustainable territories

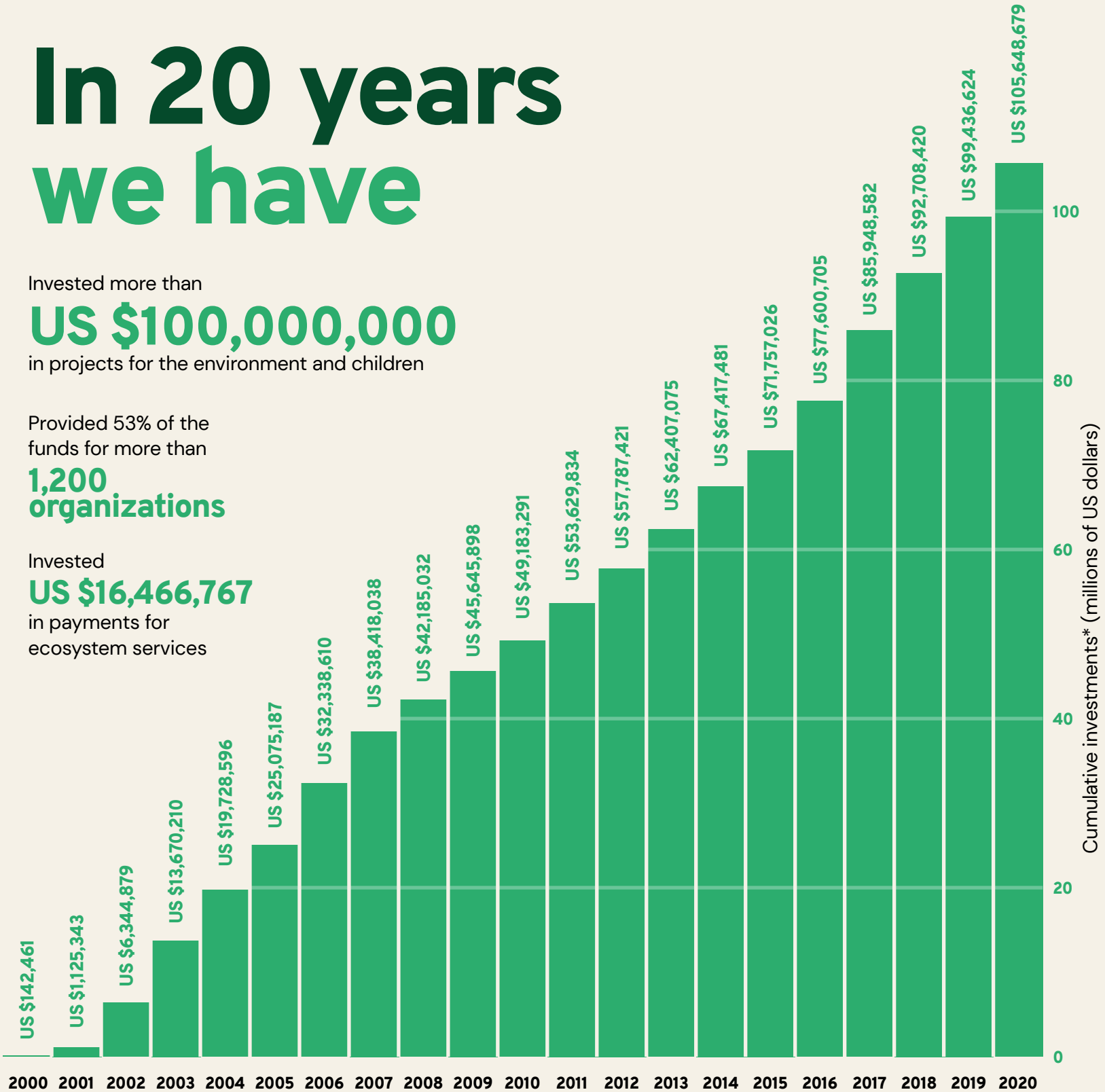
We aim to strengthen the synergies between environmental sustainability, rural development, fairness and peace in the countryside, with a focus that involves children and adolescents, thus reinforcing generational sustainability.

In 20 years we have

Invested more than
US $100,000,000
in projects for the environment and children

Provided 53% of the funds for more than
1,200 organizations

Invested
US $16,466,767
in payments for ecosystem services



*Values were calculated according to each year's average representative exchange rate.

We created

6

financial mechanisms

The Minga

To guarantee the financial sustainability for three protected areas on the Pacific Coast.

Impact Mission Investment Fund (FIMI)

A fund for investing in sustainable businesses that produce social, environmental and financial gains.

Forest Project Anchoring

A mechanism that supports the creation of projects for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Glen Nimnicht Scholarship Fund

The first endowment in Colombia dedicated to early childhood development across the nation.

Malpelo Endowment

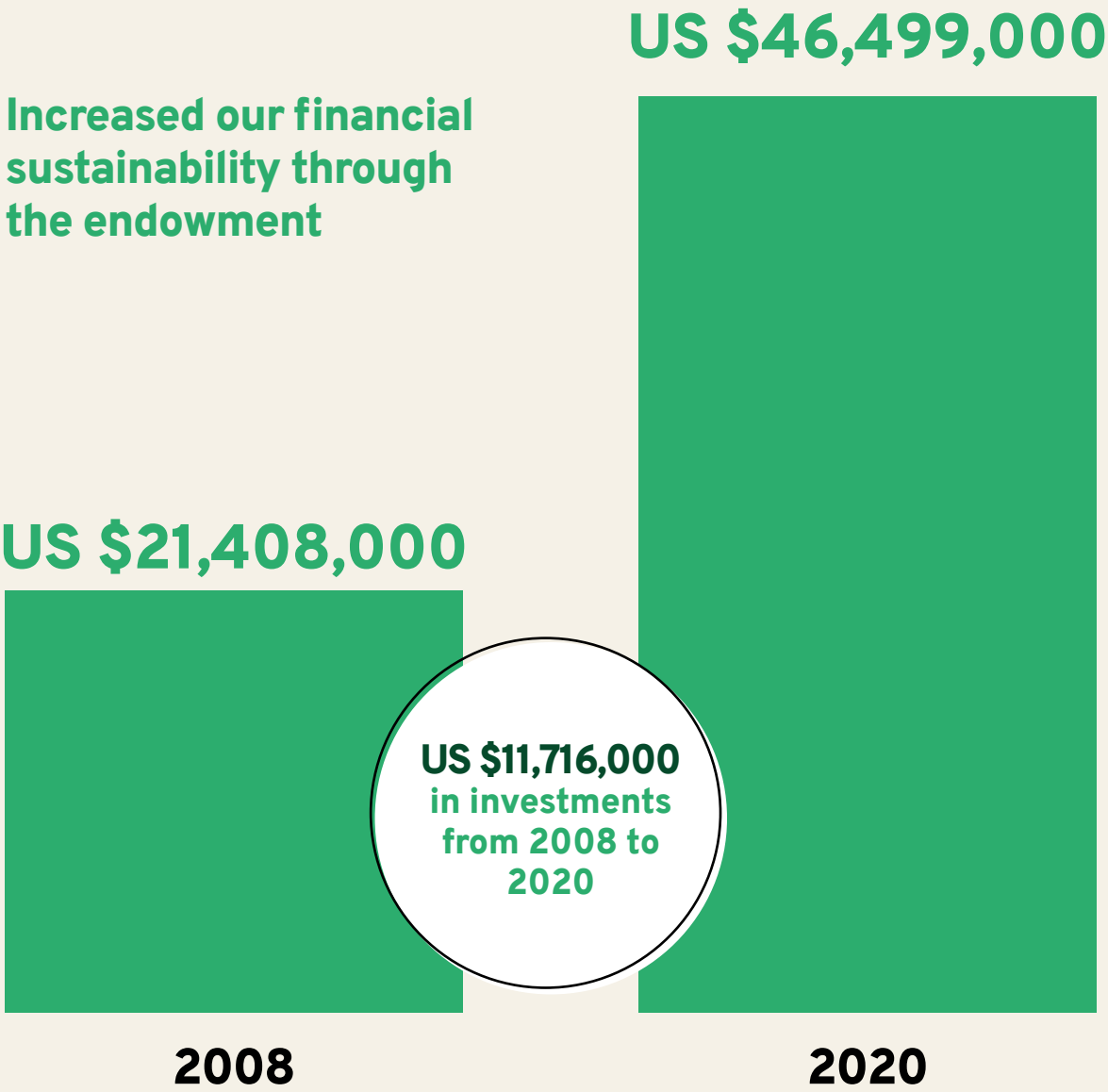
The first endowment for a protected area in Colombia.

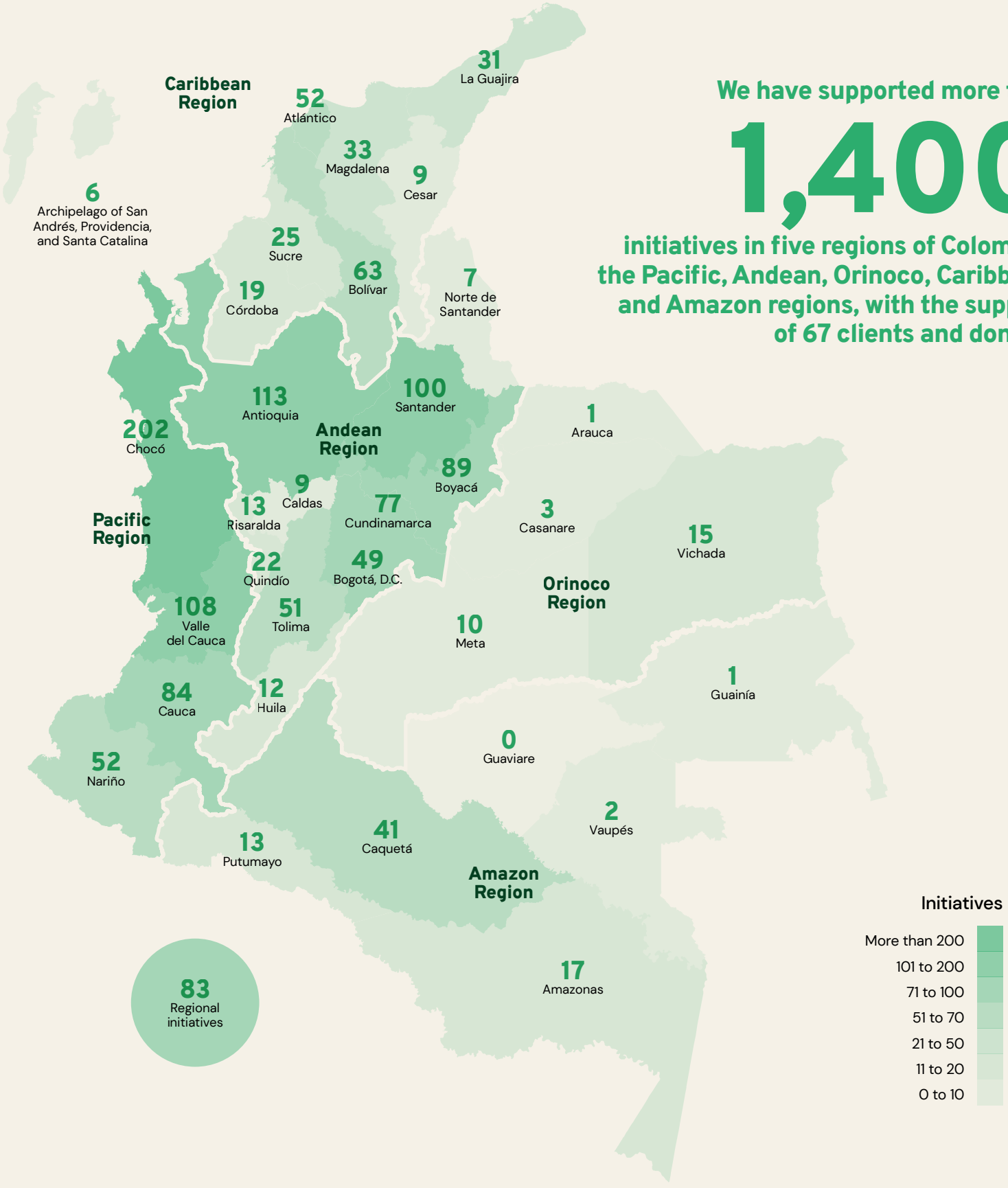
TFCA

To promote initiatives in civil society for conserving, protecting, restoring and promoting the sustainable use of tropical forests in Colombia for the benefit of local communities.

In 20 years we have

Increased our financial sustainability through the endowment





We have supported more that

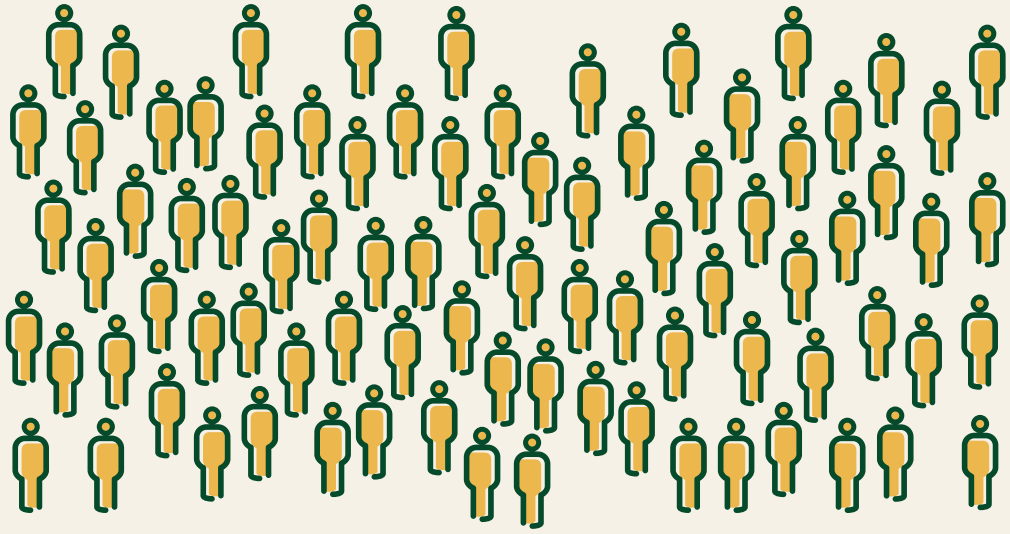
1,400

initiatives in five regions of Colombia: the Pacific, Andean, Orinoco, Caribbean and Amazon regions, with the support of 67 clients and donors.

We have achieved

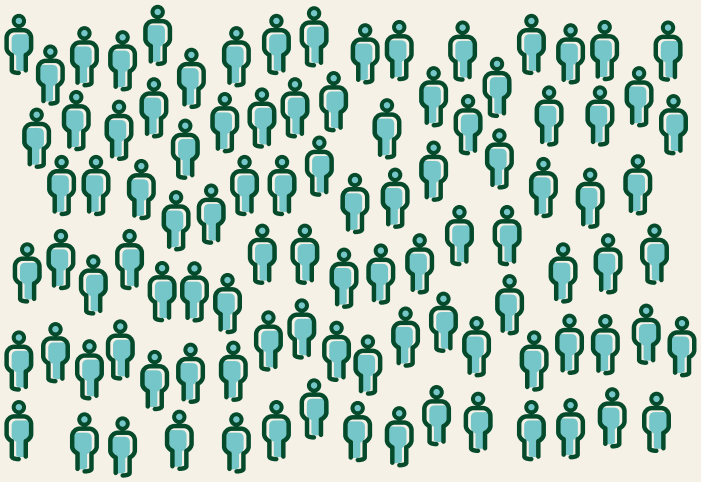
5,603,005 ha

of habitats under conservation and sustainable use management



19,466 people

with improved competencies for working with the environment or children



8,600

children and adolescents

who benefitted from investments in education, caretaker and teacher training, improved spaces and infrastructure for their development

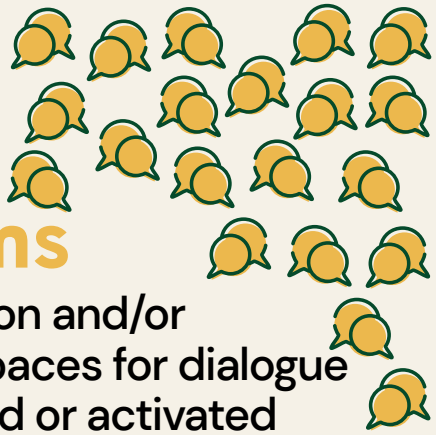
92



texts with

information related to public policy were produced and distributed

95



platforms

for participation and/or operational spaces for dialogue were fomented or activated

45



spaces

for working with the environment or children were improved (through infrastructure, adaptation, staffing or administration)

19



production

chains were reinforced



CHAPTER 1

House repairs

A vision beyond limits

From a window 27 floors up, in the offices of Fondo Acción, the city stretches away until it runs up against the Eastern Andean Range. The many ridges along the spine of that dinosaur mark a limit, a visual boundary. You can go no further, they seem to say. There is no horizon.

"Fondo Acción was a sinking fund," says Germán Botero, Administrative and Financial Director for Fondo Acción. "That is, it had an account with some financial resources that were supposed to be distributed until they ran out. When this happened, we were going to stop existing. The money would have run out more or less around 2014 or 2016. But look, twenty years have gone by, and here we are".

To understand the origins of this organization, we have to go back to the year 1990, when then-President of the United States George Bush gave a speech at the White House titled "Remarks Announcing the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative," where he proposed ideas for working together with Latin America and the Caribbean on three key issues for the economic development of the hemisphere: commercial exchange, investments and foreign debt.

To understand the origins of this organization, we have to go back to the year 1990, when then-President of the United States George Bush gave a speech at the White House titled "Remarks Announcing the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative," where he proposed ideas for working together with Latin America and the Caribbean on three key issues for the economic development of the hemisphere: commercial exchange, investments and foreign debt.

In regards to the third issue, Bush pointed to the importance of strengthening environmental policies throughout the hemisphere, and he proposed a possible a model for foreign debt swaps: debt-for-nature swaps that would be administrated by environmental funds in Latin America and the Caribbean. The interest accrued from debts acquired by the United States could be put toward financing environmental projects in debtor nations under the concept of a debt swap for nature conservation.

In 1993, as a result of this initiative, the governments of Colombia and the United States signed a bilateral agreement that established The Americas Initiative Account and Board of Directors, which would promote activities intended to preserve, protect or manage Colombia's natural and biological resources in a sustainable and economically viable manner. In addition to this, it would promote child development and survival within what the agreement called "a vision for sustainable development based on the idea that both are critical elements in forging an economically sound ecological future for the countries of the Western Hemisphere, recognizing that children are the greatest resource, represent the future, and deserve a solid base of natural resources for a quality life and protection from the health threat of preventable environmental degradation and pollution."

Initially, the money from this debt swap was administered by Ecofondo, an entity that operated with funds from an agreement signed between Colombia and Canada for the conversion and payment of the debt. However, after a few years, the governments of the United States and Colombia decided to create an independent organization for administering The Americas Initiative Account debt swap: this is how Fondo para la Acción Ambiental y la Niñez (the Fund for Environmental Action and Childhood) was born in

the year 2000, after the two governments signed an amendment to the agreement.

In this first phase, though the agreement emphasized work with children, the efforts were largely concentrated on investing in the environment.

"When I arrived in 2004, Fondo Acción was investing the funds, but the implementation rate was low. The money was put into environmental projects, recycling, conservation, and managing protected areas. There were alliances with National Parks. We were close with organizations like Conservation International and autonomous regional corporations. We were faced with the challenge of defining a concept that could connect everything", says Germán Botero.

Germán's phone rings and he answers. The sun that a few minutes ago was powerfully shining, as often happens in Bogotá, disappeared in the blink of an eye. Gray storm clouds cover the sky. It has been raining for the past few days in Bogotá.

Germán speaks with a foreman about the gutters on his house that were damaged by the rainstorm last night.

He has a strong Antioquia accent. He speaks to the foreman with the same poise and confidence that he has been telling this story with so far. He is cheerful but firm in his words. His image doesn't match the stereotype of a financial director in any way. He has no tie, no button shirt; he wears jeans and has a gray beard.



You might think he looks ready to work in the fields.

"The thing is", he says as soon has he hangs up, "when we came on board, the organization was at a complicated crossroads because, after a second attempt at the debt-for-nature swap, they were deciding if Fondo would survive, or if the deal was over".

Germán was invited by José Luis Gómez, who had come from the

National Planning Department and was the executive director for Fondo until 2018. They were accompanied by Claudia Correa as technical director, Cristina Aristizábal as legal director and Germán as financial and administrative director. The four headed the re-structuring of Fondo Acción.

The first thing they did was to review the state of operations for the organization.

"José says to me, Germán, how about you work with me, and he shows me some papers that showed the financial information for Fondo, and I saw some charts that were put together in a really complicated way, that were really hard to understand. I saw a lot of numbers, really big numbers, and I said to José, all this money, this isn't real", Germán laughs. "I had this idea that NGO was synonymous with poverty".

Claudia Correa, technical director for Fondo until 2014, recalls those first months as some of the most challenging and exciting of her life.

"I have this image, the four of us working together at a table that looked like a pool table, surrounded by papers, shoulder to shoulder, every day. We didn't have offices. We had temporary contracts. We didn't know what was going to happen, if we were going to be able to move this project forward. That sounds really uncomfortable, really unstable, but at the time it was really gratifying because that was when we started to build a really strong relationship. And it was that relationship that let us push ahead".

The team started to work nonstop.

"In those months, we didn't know where we were headed. There was no clear information. We tried to organize subjects, which projects we would finance, what our expenses looked like, which payments were already scheduled to go out, and we got into it and started to understand how things would work, finding lots of opportunities for improvement, for organizing, for systematizing. We started to think together about what this organization should look like".

Six months later, they presented a new flow chart. In it, they defined what would happen in the technical area and the ideas they had been mulling over for their first strategic plan.

"They approved that structure, but that was only the beginning", says Germán.

The clouds through the window are getting heavy. It looks like rain. The mountains are completely covered.

"Thing about living in a closed apartment complex is that my gutter is the same as all the other houses. To fix it, you have to consult all of the neighbors", says Germán.

If the mountains and the broken gutters were metaphors for the beginnings of this organization, you could say this first team ignored the apparent limits imposed by reality, the projected lifespan for a sinking fund, and they found that the only way to do house repairs was for everyone to agree about the next steps.

We, the directors of the financial, legal and technical areas, worked with the organizations ourselves. We went into the field. We worked with them. We did assessments and helped them improve what we saw as their greatest weaknesses. We went way beyond what the project itself had proposed, and up to today, that's still what happens.

Reengineering

"I remember Alejandro Acosta, director of the CINDE, in the first meeting between the work team and the board of directors", Claudia Correa says through the screen, recalling the first meeting they had with the board of directors where the low level of investment in children became apparent. They left that meeting set on developing their first team proposal for a strategic plan.

She is in a warm and quiet place on the outskirts of Bogotá. Every once in a while, she looks over the screen, as if she were finding the memories she wanted to capture: "If this thing is called a fund for the environment and children, we have to do something for children, and fast. No one here has done anything for children, Alejandro told us".

The board of directors that Claudia is talking about, to the present day, has a representative from the United States government, a delegation from the National Planning Department and the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, as well as five delegates from non-governmental entities dedicated to environmental activities, community development, the private sector, the academic world, and childhood development.

The CINDE (International Center for Education and Human Development), an organization that Alejandro Acosta directs, specializing in work with children, was part of this board of directors.

"The truth is, since the debt swap was first negotiated, nothing serious had been done for children. The investment was minimal, without commitments and without a conceptual development of the role that Fondo was supposed to play", says José Luis Gómez.

He is a slight man with narrow eyes who, when he speaks, threads his ideas together so coherently that they flow, clear and organized, like someone making sure his listener can catch everything.

In addition to this, one of the most obvious challenges they faced, there was another: until 2004, Fondo had been working with external experts, auditors and inspectors who supported the technical and financial oversight. The new team had been hired to take over the responsibility, personally, through their direct work in the technical units.

"When we got there, there was an inspection, or auditing, method. That is, an oversight method. Fondo Acción did not directly monitor the organizations that it awarded donations to", says Germán Botero. "We subcontracted. We had an outsourcing program with other organizations, and they were the ones who visited the organizations to see how things were coming along with their projects, according to previously stated objectives".

This oversight method would not work as a way to improve capacities for recipient organizations.

"So, what we did from the beginning, through our work with the technical units, was to plan the way we would do follow-up. For 2005, we, the directors of the financial, legal and technical areas, worked with the organizations ourselves. We went into the field. We worked with them. We did assessments and helped them improve what we saw as their greatest weaknesses. We went way beyond what the project itself had proposed, and up to today, that's still what happens".

Last of all, the board of directors had given Fondo Acción the goal of becoming financially sustainable.

"Throughout this whole process", says José Luis, "Scott Lampman's external evaluation was essential. He worked for USAID, which had also contracted Alberto Galán, the current director of the Natural Heritage Fund, and Silvia Escobar, until recently the president of Terpel. They gave us fundamental recommendations: diversify the sources of income and search for financial sustainability".

Added to these two essential challenges for creating a strategic plan, there was another. During that same period, TNC (The Nature Conservancy), CI (Conservation International) and WWF (World Wildlife Fund) together with National Government,



National Parks and Ministry of the Environment (today, Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development) had begun to negotiate the TFCA (Tropical Forest Conservation Agreement) and needed to find someone to manage it. Fondo Acción nominated itself as administrator.

"I believe it was based more on the promise of the changes we were going to make than on their trust in the organization as it was at the time. The board gave us their total backing, we managed to negotiate with lawyers from all of these organizations, and we signed on as administrators for this second debt swap, which was added to The Americas Initiative Account swap".

Scott Lampman from USAID recalls that, more than a blind vote of confidence, the reason they backed the new team was because of the very clear way they had organized their first strategic plan:

"José Luis has always been a very studious man", he says. "Every time I see him I ask what he's reading, what he's working with. At the time, when I started working with Fondo Acción, he had been organizing everything with the help of the Balanced Scorecard method. This Balanced Scorecard method" (BSC) was proposed by Kaplan and Norton as a way to evaluate and improve the efficiency of a business. It's based on the search for a balance between the elements of a global strategy and its operative elements.

"Our strategic plan hinged on the idea that an organization like Fondo Acción adds value for its clients —that is, to everyone who works with it, insomuch as it values and invests in its intangible assets: in essence, the people, the technology, the

information management, the brand and its reputation", says José Luis. "You have to invest in the assets, especially the people. You have to train people to have the best information system possible, because if a donor asks for information and you can't give them a real-time report, that's no good. If you don't take care of your brand, don't associate your reputation with the donor's reputation, which is the brand, you're going to lose".

Multilateralization

Once the conceptual foundations for this first strategic plan were ready, they began to invest in childhood development.

"I started to put together a team of people who had worked with children. Julia Simarra and Silvio Pereira came to work with us, two people with experience. I told them, you have to explain everything to me, even what it means to be a caregiver. Teach me. We started together and that was how we built a whole area of work, and really interesting things happened. They were our teachers and they also let us follow along. We built things together".

"The CINDE, together with Marta Arango—its founder—and Alejandro Acosta, were our first partners. That was when we started to really work in strategic partnerships with UNICEF and Save the Children, and we made our first open call specifically for childhood development projects. We were very active as national donors in that field," says José Luis Gómez. "At some point, we even thought that we could divide Fondo and create two organizations, one for the environment and another for childhood development. But after thinking it over with the board of directors, we realized that the new challenge in the long term would really be to make these two issues converge".

Within the strategic objectives, one of the central ones was to multilateralize Fondo.

"We were searching for more opportunities to receive money, to connect with other donors, because what we wanted was to prolong its existence. The funds from The Americas Initiative Account would run out at some point, but we wanted to become an organization that finds projects, that comes in and out of the game. That was why we started to work on creating an endowment", says Germán Botero.

The TFCA, the account that they had received during the reengineering, already included a financing scheme through an endowment. By 2006, it became clear that philanthropy was changing, and creating endowments was a worldwide trend.

"The most influential NGOs in the world had already realized that it was impossible to keep thinking they could survive exclusively through third-party funding", says José Luis Gómez.

An endowment is an investment of capital in the financial sector whose earnings can only be spent according to set guidelines, such that the original capital is maintained and part of the gains are recapitalized so that they retain value over time. This creates an annual flow of funds, and expenses and investments are paid with money produced by the original investment yields.

"The Americas Initiative Account was going to run out at some point, so we said, lets propose to the The Americas Initiative Account Board of Directors that we create an endowment. We have a finite amount of money that we manage with four trustees. It doesn't make sense for Fondo to disappear with all of this knowledge. At the time, Fondo was set to become a major player among environmental and childhood development investors", says Germán Botero.

The creation of this first endowment in 2004 completely changed the course for Fondo Acción.

In 2008, they began to create subaccounts within the endowment to assign funds to specific projects. The first of these was the Malpelo Flora and Fauna Sanctuary, a milestone in sustainable conservation financing in Colombia, because it was the first endowment subaccount created to

provide long-term financing for a nationally protected area. In 2006, UNESCO declared Malpelo was part of the natural heritage of humanity, a place of vital importance for conserving marine biodiversity, including species in danger of worldwide extinction.

This subaccount became the model for opening many others over the years, providing sustainable financing for a variety of projects.

The endowment of The Americas Initiative Account allows Fondo to have a subaccount whose earnings are used to sustain base operations. It also includes a leveraging subaccount, which allows Fondo to offer matching funds for projects that are financed by cooperatives or private-sector investments.

"If, for example, the European Union opened a call for tenders", recalls José Luis, "we could offer matching funds in cash and in kind to make ourselves more competitive, to win the project, expand our capacity for intervention and diversify the financing for Fondo".

This first phase in the work of Fondo Acción, like each phase that followed, was arduous, but it laid the foundations for what they would do over the long term.

Since its beginnings, it was clear that Fondo could only continue working for the environment and children if it managed to diversify its financing sources to become more sustainable in the long term.

TFCA, the long-term logic

In the case of the Tropical Forest Conservation Agreement (TFCA), the financing scheme that the United States government established in Africa, Asia and Latin America included the creation of an endowment, but in Colombia it had two special features. The first one connects civil society to the program: effectively, three of the biggest environmental NGOs in the world, each with a long history of environmental conservation, were part of the agreement: WWF (World Wildlife Fund), CI (Conservation International) and TNC (The Nature Conservancy). The second feature is that this debt swap should be paid by the Colombian government in biannual instalments over a period of two years, which is to say that the funds arrived gradually according to the timeline for the swapped debt.

"This is very different from the other swaps that were happening in the rest of the world, because it involved civil society organizations who bought a portion of Colombia's debt with the United States, and that was how they entered into the swap", says Germán Botero, Administrative and Financial Director for Fondo Acción.

This is why, in the Supervising Committee, which is the program's governing body, the Colombian and United States governments have representation, as well as three



NGOs, and it is their representatives who make all of the decisions about the distribution of funds from the accounts, the prioritizing of forested areas, and the financing of projects submitted to open calls.

Originally, the program anticipated interventions in the buffer zones of five protected areas in Colombia, namely The Caribbean corridor, which includes the protected areas of the Sierra Nevada National Nature Park of Santa Marta, the Tayrona National Nature Park, the Ciénega Grande Flora and Fauna Sanctuary of Santa Marta, Salamanca Island Road Park, and The Flamencos Flora and Fauna Sanctuary, as well as their buffer zones: Serranía De Los Yariguíes National Park, the Andean Oak Forest Corridor, El Tuparro Biosphere Reserve, and the Tinigua-Sumapaz Corridor. Later, out of safety considerations for the work in some areas, and to create more impactful investments, the areas of intervention were reduced to three: the Serranía De Los Yariguíes, the Andean Oak Forest Corridor and El Tuparro Biosphere Reserve.

"We were supposed to direct 50% of received funds to the endowment, which could be used after 2010. The other 50% would be used to begin operations immediately. That is, $5 million were directed toward financing short-term projects, and the earnings from the other $5 million would be used once the sinking fund ran out", says Germán Botero.

Once the fiduciary management of the debt-swap money was established—also through the Supervising Committee—the procedures and schedules for financing projects were defined according to the sums that would be received annually.

"The management of TFCA funds was better than expected. Even so", Germán Botero stresses, "opening the endowment was not enough. The available funds had to maintain their value and grow. And we did really well, since the first withdrawal from the endowment, planned for 2010, was able to be postponed until 2017, seven years later, once the $5 million from the donation account had been used".

This was the result of a project financing strategy based on the projected availability of funds, both from debt-swap capital as well as from the excellent financial earnings produced by trustees like BBVA, the first financial administrator, and Servitrust GNB Sudameris, the current financial administrator, who managed the accounts defined in the agreement: the debt servicing account, where the Colombian government paid the $10 million USD from the debt swap, and both the sinking account and endowment that it distributed to.

"The Ministry of Finance handed over the promised funds in pesos, according to the exchange rate on each day a payment was made", says Germán Botero.

The first open call for projects financed by the TFCA happened in 2005. Fondo Acción had $300,000 USD from the donation account to finance projects selected from the open call.

"What we had in mind, at that time, was the debt flow for the following three years, and we carried on that way. The interesting thing about this model is that, once the endowment had been established, its yields went into the donation account", says Germán Botero.

Up until 2009, these sums allowed for relatively large projects to take place, like the Pijiwi Orinoco, implemented by the Omacha Foundation and the Horizonte Verde Foundation, with the support of the WWF, which led to a map of the wetlands in El Tuparro Biosphere Reserve and laid the foundation for what would be its land use planning.

The TFCA agreement stated that earnings from the endowment could only be used once the planned sum of $5 million USD had been reached (50% of the total debt swap). Additionally, the agreement included a clause according to which the minimum balance at any given time had to be $5 million USD, so if the sum were to drop below that for any reason, the balance would have to surpass $10 million USD to reactivate the use of that fund.

This apparently severe clause wound up creating an investment policy that ensured the preservation of capital and efforts to expand the portfolio. By the time the required sum should have been reached—according to the trustee's investment strategy for the endowment—the clause had shown its effectiveness, such that, by the end of 2016, before making use of these earnings, the endowment had reached $7.7 million USD. In 2017, the first funds from the endowment were put to use and, as expected, they stuck to the investment strategy that had been established since the beginning of the TFCA program.

"We had more than $2.7 million in yields that could begin to be fed into the donations account. The endowment had been amply secured, which allowed us to finance new open calls. We had left the machine well-oiled and running", says Germán Botero.

"Today, the available financing comes from the yields, because we always have to maintain the value of the capital that was put into the endowment. Based on this model, what Fondo Acción achieved as administrator for the TFCA was to keep the seed capital from the debt swap, consolidating the endowment with a spending rule that ensured the value is maintained over time and, as such, its sustainability as a long-term source of funding".

"The financing strategy of the TFCA shows that, despite an initial reliance on important resources from the donations account for project implementation, the endowment yields can maintain the historical annual average for financing while also covering the operating costs for the program. In that sense, we can declare that the strategy worked and has been sustainable in the long-term", says David Celis, Administrative and Financial Coordinator for TFCA.

Currently, Fondo Acción is administrating the endowments for both The Americas Initiative Account and the TFCA in a consolidated way, spending less on management and transactions while opening the doors to better investment portfolio offers.

Based on this model, what Fondo Acción achieved as administrator for the TFCA was to keep the seed capital from the debt swap, consolidating the endowment with a spending rule that ensured the value is maintained over time and, as such, its sustainability as a long-term source of funding.

A Key Operating Scheme

In the administration of TFCA funds, Fondo Acción plays multiple roles. On the one hand, it implements the Supervising Committee's decisions about funds administration. On the other hand, it allocates the same funds through open calls. Yet, in addition to this, it also does the technical, legal, administrative and financial oversight of organizations that carry out projects in Colombia.

From 2005 to 2019, the TFCA received 162 proposals through open calls, and 29 of these became projects with a total investment of $10.6 million USD: $6.8 million in funds allocated by the TFCA and $3.8 million in matching funds leveraged by the organizations implementing these projects and their local partners.

The condition that project executors contribute matching funds has been a mechanism for ensuring a higher level of commitment to partnerships for project implementation, thus achieving a diminished dependence on donations. Organizations contribute not only in cash funds, but also in kind—through their logistical operating capacity and their familiarity with communities and the land—to make the projects a success in a more efficient way.

"The work with organizations begins when we evaluate proposals and we present them to the Supervising Committee. We tell them which projects we think are viable or attractive, and if they get selected, we oversee the implementation so that the organizations make the best use of the funds and achieve their stated objectives", says David Celis.

More than supervision, the work that Fondo does is comprehensive oversight. They provide technical, financial and legal support by periodically visiting the project site to interact closely with the organizations that execute projects and the communities that participate in them.

"As program administrator, Fondo's job has been to ensure that the money is invested in a given region and that it positively impacts communities. We want to improve the living conditions for peasant families through sustainable production methods, we want to reduce the negative effects of human activities in protected areas, and we want to make logging, animal trafficking and the unsustainable use of natural resources unnecessary", says Óscar Orrego, Environmental Coordinator for the TFCA.

In an early phase, the projects developed from 2005 to 2009 received significant monetary contributions from the TFCA.

The implementing NGOs had the technical, administrative and operating structures necessary to develop wide-reaching projects. They were also in a position to contribute equivalent matching funds, which made their local socio-environmental processes sustainable.

"Many community-based organizations improve their capacities through these projects", says Oscar Orrego.

Later, from 2010 to 2017, a greater number of local and community-based organizations were selected as executors for TFCA projects in the Andean region. This was because, during the previous phase, many organizations that applied for funds improved their project management skills. Thus, there was a natural transition to local organizations managing the funds, which consolidated active processes, involved more peasant families, and made forest conservation, restoration and use more sustainable. An example of this transition is the participatory ecological restoration initiative of the Middle Magdalena Peace and Development Program (PDPMM, according to its Spanish initials). This project involved peasant communities—as part of their life project—in the recuperation of forests that had been degraded or turned into pasture land. The PDPMM worked on improving the capacities of local communities and their peasant organizations using funds from the TFCA. In the municipalities of El Carmen de Chucurí and Simacota in Santander, environmental projects and participatory ecological restoration were led by community-based organizations.

Since 2017, Fondo Acción has worked primarily with local and community-based organizations. Now, community leaders associated through peasant organizations are in charge of the projects implemented with TFCA funds, and large and medium-sized NGOs are their partners.

Improving leadership and productive capacities for peasant organizations and the consolidation of an endowment both reflect the same long-term thinking: efficiency, sustainability and continuity.

What makes TFCA special in Colombia is its financing structure: a portion is destined for project investment, capital that it rents out to continue financing conservation until 2103, and of course, the work it does with local, regional and grassroots organizations.

"And on top of all this, and more importantly, we build trust on both sides: we trust the organizations and they put their trust in us", says David Celis.

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What makes TFCA special in Colombia is its financing structure.





CHAPTER

2 Weaving a story

Project by Project, Woven by Walking

A tapestry is built by weaving threads, warp with weft, to build an image of events, and every story is woven like a tapestry. The quality, strength, harmony and flexibility of a tapestry depends on the weaver's skill at connecting dissimilar events, despite their asymmetry, to form a whole. A good weaver makes use of the materials they find along the way. They push and pull different threads without worrying about the way the original pattern might change. They don't fear taking a different path or being late because they know that each step adds form, color, shadow and volume to the tapestry. Project by project, Fondo Acción has been incorporating new patterns help them advance. Lesson by lesson, they have been weaving their history.

From the Rainforest Standard to the Carbon Market

The story of the design and implementation of the REDD+ procedure in Colombia—a true story—has all the hallmarks of an epic.

There are many communities and organizations—Fondo Acción among them—who play a leading role. This is plural because their dream far exceeds their individual motives, it embodies a whole collectivity: they want to mitigate climate change to sustain a living planet so that future generations have a place to live. This is the story of a journey full of obstacles, a rational journey, but also an emotional one. It is born of intuition, and little by little, it becomes real through research and dialogue. There are also villains in this story. There are allies. There are partners. There is friendship and camaraderie. Like any story, there is a conflict that takes different forms as the plot thickens. It is a never-ending journey full of obstacles, failures and successes. It is an open-ended epic.

At the beginning, before Fondo Acción began to work on developing a standard for projects for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), a clean development procedure had been invented for the Kyoto Protocol, which was signed in 1997 at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

This international treaty required European countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, like methane and carbon dioxide, and more importantly, it produced technological developments. Factories would learn to pollute less, or for example, landfills would be transformed. All of this within a mandatory market where businesses would assume responsibility, by law, for their contributions to climate change. In fact, Fondo Acción worked with some businesses in Colombia to develop technological improvements to reduce emissions.

In the working groups for climate change, an idea had been circulating for some time that nations could reach their climate goals if forests were treated as living carbon reserves, but there were still doubts about how this would work. Meanwhile, clean development had found a lot of success through the creation of new technology, by retrofitting factories, by inventing transport systems and through political maneuvering that would reduce emissions.

Clean development was, in the minds of developed nations, tangible and low-risk. The results could be measured, and the decrease in energy consumption could be measured from the bills at factories where low-voltage LED lights were installed, or by creating electric public transport systems, like the Medellín metro.

In the REDD+ procedure, commercial transactions happen between individuals interested in climate change mitigation—or greenhouse gas emitting businesses—and the forest owners who commit to caring for the forest on their lands, thus reducing the CO_2 in the atmosphere.



In contrast, financial accounting for the climate benefits of a forest—of that machine that naturally cleans the air by capturing carbon dioxide and transforming it into leaves, trunks and roots—seemed utopian: not only intangible, but risky.

That concept is foundational for REDD+ projects.

REDD+ projects find a third party to pay the owner of a forest to keep it standing so that the trees retain the carbon in their biomass, in their fibers, leaves, roots and trunks, so that it doesn't accumulate in the atmosphere as carbon dioxide, which would increase the greenhouse effect that has been raising the average global temperature.

In the REDD+ procedure, commercial transactions happen between individuals interested in climate change mitigation—or greenhouse gas emitting businesses—and the forest owners who commit to caring for the forest on their lands, thus reducing the CO^2 in the atmosphere.



The transaction happens through a paper certificate, a carbon credit, but what gets exchanged is an intangible service. It is not the trees or the soil that is up for sale, but their ability to retain CO^2, which is an ecosystem service. But how can they measure the service provided by that living, limitless mass? What kinds of guarantees could businesses participating in the carbon market have if forests are at the whim of the climate and under the hand of human beings? If one match is enough to lay waste to thousands of hectares?

How could someone guarantee that the forests would remain over time, conserving biodiversity, and that market participation would benefit communities living in those forests? What hopes were there for a commercial exchange that wouldn't be a perverse incentive for cutting down more forests?

In the midst of this skeptical environment, in 2010, Fondo Acción, together with other organizations from RedLac, believed they could provide the rigor and guarantees needed to set this procedure in motion, and they began to design a standard for REDD+ projects in the Amazon Basin.

They were visionaries despite the common opinion—in international circles and within local forest communities—that this procedure wouldn't be able to finance conservation and mitigate climate change or improve living conditions for the communities living on the land, protecting them both materially as well as culturally.

Fondo Acción contracted Natalia Arango to manage the Colombian group involved in the project.

Natalia had begun connecting with Fondo Acción while she searched for partners to advance the Conserva Colombia project, designed through a TNC initiative, to foment the creation of local protected areas that would be directly managed by Autonomous Regional Corporations, by the municipality or by civil society.

Conserva Colombia had found an ally in Fondo Acción, and while the project was developing, José Luis Gómez, then-Executive Director for Fondo Acción and president of the RedLac Executive Board, realized that Natalia was the right person to lead this project.

Like the Conserva Colombia projects, REDD+ projects would take place in areas whose forests are under threat of deforestation, and the communities, as owners of the land, should be interested in long-term projects.

The future of the world is in their hands too, not only in those of the first-world and its technological developments. Tropical forests contain a natural machine, never before invented by human kind for mitigating climate change.

In Colombia alone, the numbers show that 52% of the nation's continental land mass is covered by forests. In these regions, inhabited by indigenous, black and peasant communities, the REDD+ procedure would be put in place. A similar situation was happening in the rest of South America.

In 2009, after analyzing this then-controversial option, the environmental funds of Colombia, Brazil, Peru and Ecuador—members of RedLac—committed to a joint search for a way to initiate the procedure, and they signed a work agreement with Columbia University, which had received a donation from a private company with a commercial interest in negotiating carbon credits. Though the financiers were motivated by economic rather than philanthropic interests, they were the ones who provided funds for developing the first standard for REDD+ projects in the Amazon.

In broad strokes, the Rainforest Standard was a single document that included the methodology for establishing carbon capture, biodiversity, social benefits and the legal guidelines for setting up REDD+ projects in the Amazon basin and monitoring them. In contrast to everything that was available in the world of emissions-reducing forestry projects at the time, this standard provided guidelines for all the components of a REDD+ project, and it was designed to address the unique ethnic, legal and biological conditions of the Amazon.

Long before beginning work on the new standard, Fondo Acción—which had not yet gone in depth about how to accelerate the workings of the REDD+ procedure—saw it as an effective and sustainable way to finance conservation, and so they organized a trip to explore the area and create a dialogue with the indigenous communities of the Putumayo River.

For this trip, they designed a series of educational materials for discussing climate change and the nascent REDD+ procedure with the indigenous communities. Claudia Correa, Juana Camacho and José Luis Gómez set out for Puerto Leguízamo and travelled along the river for a week, stopping at various communities. What they found on their trip was the impenetrable gaze of the communities. When they told them the story of carbon certificates, armed with drawings and schematics, the people in these communities looked at them like someone who was explaining the obvious. A bunch of white people were telling them to protect the forest—they who were children of mother Earth, they who for eons had lived in harmony with her and lived to protect her. For Fondo Acción, this trip was not a material achievement, but it gave them perspective.

Since 2005, Fondo Acción had been working successfully as a second-tier financial organization, but now, if they wanted to make this procedure a reality, they needed to find a way to adjust the projects that were being designed at office desks in Bogotá so that they would meet the real needs of these communities on the ground. REDD+ was much more than a project for capturing CO^2 molecules, it was also made as a way to protect biodiversity and the social and economic benefits for these communities.

Once everything was ready for REDD+ to become a reality, not only were the possible buyers still confused and skeptical about the effectiveness of the procedure, but the owners of the forests were too.

The Indigenous communities had begun to receive visits from so-called "Carbon Cowboys" who arrived in their land and offered them huge sums of money, making them sign contracts in English written with incomprehensible legal jargon and offering to buy their oxygen. The REDD+ procedure sounded like a scam to them.

This general distrust, united with the memory of the team's attempts to explain the procedure on their visit to the indigenous communities in Putumayo, spurred Fondo Acción to begin imagining a possible horizon grounded in reality. It was clear that these communities not only had their own social, cultural and political contexts, but they also had ways of seeing the world, their own unique cosmologies.

Fondo Acción has always been interested in the idea that, once the projects are ready, local communities should administrate them autonomously.

Any project that Fondo Acción wanted to develop in these lands would only become a reality by working together with the communities.

To make matters worse, from 2008 to 2009 the world economy suffered a great recession, which affected the carbon market in developed nations. Everything seemed to be against them. Nonetheless, Anthrotec, one of the REDD+ developers, and Cocomasur (the Council for Black Communities of the Tolo River Basin and the Acandí Southern Coastal Zone), owners of the Chocó-Darién Conservation Corridor project, contacted Fondo Acción as a fiduciary partner to finish the structuring with an eye toward the carbon market. This union between the Conomasur Council, the project developer Anthrotec, and Fondo Acción not only represented a step forward along the path towards REDD+ projects in Colombia, but it also demonstrated a new way to work for conservation in Colombia. Fondo Acción not only supported the project through fiduciary management, but it also contributed to writing the biodiversity chapter that was a fundamental part of the design, and with that, it put in practice methodologies for strengthening capacities in local communities.

Fondo Acción has always been interested in the idea that, once the projects are ready, local communities should administrate them autonomously.

The Chocó-Darién Conservation Corridor was the first REDD+ community project validated and verified in Colombia. This project and the Cocomasur community marked a path for REDD+ projects in Colombia and were a guide for many other communities that followed their model. The experience with the Chocó-Darién project taught Fondo Acción very important lessons for the work that they are still doing today. Not only because they experienced the design, validation and verification process together, but because, alongside these things, they witnessed a powerful example of social construction as the community worked together to reach a goal. This work with Cocomasur was so valuable that, together with them, they began to spread lessons to other developing projects, like those of the Bioredd portfolio, which was being designed on the Pacific Coast with financing from the United States government.

Cocomasur became a partner who supported the initiative for developing skills for governance, and its construction, in other communities that would then be able to create and implement projects. From 2015 to 2018, eight new REDD+ projects were connected from nineteen communities in Colombia's Chocó biogeography, from Tumaco through Buenaventura, Lower and Middle Baudó, Carmen del Darién and Mutatá. They shared everything there was to teach about governance and building social agreements, including the challenges, opportunities and risks.

Little by little, and thanks to this work that emerged from and was made real through dialogue, Fondo Acción gained the trust of communities, and in 2015, they took on the role of implementing agent for the validated REDD+ projects. They do not own the projects. They do not impose a model for their construction, nor do they own the carbon credits. They are only in charge of accompanying the communities so that they put their projects in practice, are able to sell the carbon credits, and can monitor and accurately report on the carbon retention, the credits sold and the benefits obtained from the transaction.

Fondo Acción applied its capacity as facilitator in carbon credit transactions, giving the entire sales revenue to the communities without going through a commercial intermediary, thus assisting them as a commercial agent sans commission. That was why, without sacrificing its role as a private fund, people from the organization had to learn to sell carbon certificates, diving head first into the Colombian market. Until a carbon tax was finally approved in Colombia in 2016, the transaction of credits was motivated by individual or corporate responsibility. That is, those who bought the credits did so

out of their own sense of responsibility towards the environment. The carbon tax in Colombia states that anyone who consumes liquid fossil fuels should pay a tax. In the case of businesses, they should clearly identify how much liquid fossil fuel they consume, and they can decide if they will pay the tax on that consumption or buy the carbon credits to become carbon neutral. In the case of the latter, they neutralize all or part of the greenhouse gas emissions by buying carbon credits from projects that have already been verified and certified and that do not emit greenhouse gasses. Through the purchase of REDD+ project credits, businesses use their capital to recognize the conservation work of communities and to advance in their carbon neutrality. As this market grows, though Fondo Acción already underwent the process of becoming a commercial agent, they have had to learn the steps and requirements for commercial exchanges with businesses who want to lower their taxes. But this story, which seems to have reached a climax, doesn't end here. To facilitate the execution of REDD+ resources while allowing members of the community to continue their sustainable production activities, Fondo Acción makes its procedures for benefit distribution available, which are the planned social agreements that define the equitable distribution of revenue among the owners of the forest and that ensure these get invested in activities that are compatible with social benefits and conservation.

This is where things currently stand. In their 21st-century epic, from 2009 to 2020, Fondo Acción united its fiduciary capacity as a second-tier organization with its reputation as a guarantor for investment, applying the lessons of working within, for and with communities to make the design of REDD+ projects possible within collective territories.

The path of REDD+ that Fondo Acción began with the development of the Rainforest Standard continued in the Chocó-Darién Conservation Corridor. Fondo Acción arrived to offer fiduciary support, and it wound up not only working with the communities on strengthening their administrative and governance capacities, but it also understood that on the ground, the development of REDD+ projects would only be possible inasmuch as they reflect the realities and desires of the community. Hand-in-hand with Cocomasur, and with support from USAID, it continued along the Pacific Coast. This journey gave them enough experience not only to rationally implement and verify the projects at a technical level, but to support populations and distribute the benefits with the goal of saving lives, forests and cultures. This





path also led them to the world of commercial transactions and the formulation of public policies that are reflected in the commercial exchange—between businesses and the communities that protect the forest—and in the relationship between these communities and the national environmental authorities who were shown the importance of REDD+ projects. The approval of the carbon tax that created the carbon market revived the communities that care for the forests.

Currently, within the weave of this never-ending plot, Fondo Acción is working on land use with new partners in the forest-carbon community. In this new chapter, the main characters—the communities, the environmental organizations and Fondo Acción—set out to have a bigger impact by preventing soil degradation, promoting the conservation of biodiversity, and maintaining carbon-capture forest reserves through sustainable use and by shifting away from inappropriate uses of the land.

Conserva Colombia: The Social and Participatory Agreements

In 2009, through joint work with the Conserva Colombia project where TNC (The Nature Conservancy) sought to foment the creation of protected public areas that would be in the hands of municipalities and autonomous corporations, Fondo Acción began to weave a new design in the tapestry.

At the time when they joined with Conserva Colombia, the declaration of these protected areas was very feeble. Though there was clear legal recourse, lawyers for the environmental authorities and municipalities entering into these processes were extremely cautious. They were worried that the administrative acts declaring protected areas would affect them. In other cases, they lacked funding to move forward with the community consultations and the baseline studies needed for declaring protected areas to be well-designed and socially legitimate.

The Conserva Colombia project produced a guide for interested parties in the technical, legal and financial aspects of the design and declaration of these areas. Thus, when they were declared protected, the municipalities and the autonomous corporations would be able to prioritize the actions, find the necessary funding and rally forces to protect areas for strategic biodiversity conservation.

The project, in short, was about a set of technical instructions and financial support that would help those responsible for protected areas to bridge the gap in their lack of familiarity and resources. Thus, they could manifest their interest and obligation in protecting strategic ecosystems and ecosystems that were underrepresented in Colombia's network of protected areas at the time, i.e. dry forests, tropical savannahs and low-lying Andean forests.

A key part of the design for Conserva Colombia was promoted through alliances between civil society, academia, environmental authorities and regional entities. These alliances were necessary because, as TNC knew, to establish well protected areas, they would need to hire technical teams to construct materials for the declaration and management of these areas in accordance with the plans and priorities of the competent local land-use authorities.

TNC designed this blueprint for technical and financial support, and in 2009, they sought out organizations that had both a technical and financial profile, thus allying themselves with Fondo Acción, who not only became the program operator, but also a donor.

Before the project was set in motion, several researchers had produced analyses of the representativeness of Colombia's protected areas network. Those studies revealed that in Colombia there were very valuable ecosystems (biomes) that were not well represented in the protected areas. Among them, the dry forest of the Caribbean and the inter-Andean valleys stood out,

as well as the Caribbean savannahs of the Orinoco, and some mountain forests. It was in these ecosystems that Conserva Colombia and all of its allies concentrated their efforts and found a path forward.

In the Orinoco region, they faced a big challenge. There were few local civil-society organizations, and the environmental authority at the time was very disconnected from the declaration on protected areas, so Fondo Acción and TNC, through Conserva Colombia, thought of a different strategy: the possibility of encouraging the creation of local private protected areas. The owners of a property, out of a personal commitment, would promise to create a private reserve, register it with the National Natural Parks, and care for it according to a management plan.

Conserva Colombia enticed many property owners to create reserves in the Orinoco river basin and in the departments of Vichada, Casanare and Arauca.

In the same spirit that had governed the investment of TFCA resources since 2005, the conservation areas should not be declared by force, but hand-in-hand with civil society and the authorities through an agreement. These were not unused areas. Rather, they belonged to people who were living off the land, and these people could only commit to upholding the conservation agreements if these agreements would also allow them to make sustainable use of the land, for their own economic stability, through activities like ecotourism or agroforestry.

Thanks to the work of Conserva Colombia, Fondo Acción became better at developing social, participatory and democratic agreements between civil society and the authorities.

The projects developed through Conserva Colombia were always selected through public competitions, and this work by different social actors resulted in the declaration and protection of nearly 202 thousand hectares of natural habitats across 95 protected areas and private reserves that were under threat, mostly in very forgotten regions of Colombia, like the dry forests and the Orinoco savannahs.

Connected Landscapes Caquetá: The Move to First-Tier

In 2013, the Connected Landscapes project began to stop the degradation and disappearance of forests in Caquetá by strengthening local governance and by fomenting sustainable livelihoods. This effort was intended to prepare Amazonian communities

for a low-carbon-emissions rural development model that would harmonize with ecosystems conservation.

Though Fondo Acción had already worked with communities by accompanying NGOs and grassroots organizations that received funds, this would be the first project they directly implemented, providing a close and continuous relationship with the communities on the land. This is what people at Fondo Acción call moving to the first-tier.

Fondo Acción allied itself with ACT (Amazon Conservation Team), an organization that had many years of experience working with communities in humid tropical rainforests in the Amazon. The beginning was difficult due to the geography and the armed conflict. However, as the process moved forward, the organizations gave each other mutual backing. ACT helped introduce Fondo to the people of that region; Fondo Acción's experience strengthened ACT's administrative and financial procedures. The interests of Fondo Acción and ACT became interconnected, and they both grew through their continuous collaboration.

In this alliance, ACT concentrated its work in two municipalities in the Andean foothills, and Fondo Acción went into the municipality of Solano, in the Amazonian plains of the department of Caquetá. In Solano, Fondo Acción found a complex intersection of the social and political in a region that had long been abandoned by the state and left under the control of the FARC (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia). The communities were difficult to read. This condition forced Fondo Acción to rethink their strategies for achieving social legitimacy and building trust in local work.

A year of arduous days interacting and dialoguing with communities taught Fondo Acción a way of working, one they continue to put in practice whenever they arrive in a new territory and a new community. Fondo Acción does not arrive with a predetermined proposal. Rather, it works with communities to understand how the communities are shaped and organized, defining the details on the ground with the people. Using this knowledge, it creates communication channels based on trust for planning strategies that include the voices of women and men, boys and girls. Projects should be born in the heart of the community so that they can put down roots, be transformed and persist. Entering to work in an area of conflict also called for changing outfits. An organization that had mostly accompanied other organizations, distributing resources, now had to learn how to enter highly complex regions and begin negotiating with all of the groups they met there.

While Fondo Acción continued to build trust, paving the way for implementation and learning new skills, in Bogotá the other team members dreamed and designed ideas for new projects so that Fondo could continue to function as a first-tier organization. Connected Landscapes was the tip of the lance for this new path they were following, and that meant not only learning new technical skills for field work, but designing efficient strategies for following financial and administrative proceedings in remote locations, far from formal bureaucracies. Something that had seemed so simple before, like paying a bill or enrolling someone in a program, now represented a new challenge. Time passes in the countryside differently than it does in the city. These communities not only rely on the weather, but on intermittent cellphone coverage, which in many cases is nil. Requirements for paying wages in the city—like affiliation with a healthcare provider or having a RUT number for taxation—are not part of the vocabulary or the reality of these communities.

Growing as a first-tier organization not only implied learning in the field, but Fondo Acción would also have to design new oversight policies and practices along with improving their administrative and financial proceedings. They also needed to bring new people with different perspectives onto the team.

Fondo Acción grew. Connected Landscapes was the seed that invaded logics, that encouraged growth, that quickly pulled Fondo down a new path. And it became their iconic project: the one that received the most resource spending for a single initiative that Fondo had had up until then.

From 2015 to 2016, Connected Landscapes also opened the doors to another geography: Cartagena del Chairá, a municipality where the social situation was even more complicated than it was in Solano. They created a communal committee with the local community to design a detailed intervention plan. This committee operated throughout the year and was a deep dive into community work for Fondo. Every three months, they met with peasant organizations to discuss specific program activities.

The work gave them what they had been looking for since their arrival in Caquetá: a way to reconcile their technical vision with what the peasants envisioned.

That was how those first years of work for Connected Landscapes went. In 2016, when the Colombian government signed a peace agreement with the FARC, other communities that had seen the work of Connected Landscapes with communities in Solano and Cartagena del Chairá began to ask Fondo to work with them on conservation projects too. These communities sought them out because of their reputation and the trust Fondo had earned.

The participatory planning exercises using maps, the construction of a team vision, and the reliance on local knowledge deciding on ideal scenarios for land use were totally accepted and incorporated by the peasants.

This bottom up perspective on work that began when Fondo Acción arrived in Solano—and later in Cartagena del Chairá—also produced other synergies with local and municipal decision makers. Based on everything they had learned about governance and political machinations through their work with Fondo Acción, local communities began to produce instruments for territorial management: communally produced, strategic land-use plans that wound up on mayor's and governor's desks and got translated

Projects should be born in the heart of the community so that they can put down roots, be transformed and persist.



into municipal and departmental public policy.

From 2017 to the present, Fondo Acción shot forward. They continued to be a fund that invests in the environment and childhood, that develops competitive and fair open calls for selecting project implementors, and that accompanies those processes on the ground. Yet, they also became an organization that does direct technical implementation, not only on farms and in the forest, but with public agencies too.

Connected Landscapes Pacific Coast: Being and Doing

When the Fondo Acción team began to work in the Pacific region, they soon found that life there moved like the tides: there were moments of high waters and moments that ran dry, and synchronizing with the communities meant understanding their ways of being with the land.

"The key word for Fondo Acción is ally. We see our project implementors as allies. We don't work for, we work with. When we trained with the productive projects and governance team, and when we started dialogues to reach agreements with the community boards and the Town Hall of Mutata, the first thing we did was to try to read the desires of the communities", says Heidi Angarita Suárez, Director for Connected Landscapes.

The work for Bioredd of strengthening capacities, done in collaboration with Cocomasur, earned the trust of 19 ethnic communities in the Pacific region who chose Fondo Acción for their continued work in REDD+. This trust and the positive experience with Connected Landscapes Caquetá motivated USAID to increase their donations to the program so that it would include the Pacific Region and the REDD+ communities. This way, with the support of USAID and the communities, Connected Landscapes began its Pacific chapter.

As in Caquetá, in the Pacific Coast, Fondo Acción began by spending time with the people to understand their needs and desires, to back leaders and begin planning a path forward together.

From 2014 to 2017, the communities improved their governance and production activities, and when the program was ending, they began to work on the necessary protocols for monitoring, reporting and inspection for REDD+ projects to succeed.

In 2018, when the projects were at a crucial point for the verification

of their carbon credits, the international development assistance funds had begun to run out before the communities had obtained their first carbon harvest.

Convinced that the REDD+ project and the carbon credit transactions were the best and most sustainable option for financing conservation and sustainable development in the long term, Fondo Acción stood firm in supporting the projects: they invested in project finalization and structuring using new financial models. They also managed a new project for receiving financial aid from the Sustainable Colombia Fund, an international cooperative with European donors that aims to stimulate areas affected by the violence with conservation projects, sustainable production programs that give new opportunities to communities framed within sustainable practices that mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Finalizing the verification and sale of carbon credits was imperative, not only for the communities involved in the project, but so that this experience could be a living example of successful REDD+ procedures for Colombia and for ethnic communities throughout the region. An afro-Colombian and indigenous interethnic agenda had been built with the communities, and Fondo Acción was accompanying 19 communities grouped into 8 projects, extending from the Ecuadorian border to the Panamanian border. Fondo's job wasn't to focus on one project, but to work on all of them as part of a collective effort, a portfolio of projects. The communities also had a space for sharing their knowledge, challenges and ideas, and for building collaborative networks. This support made it so that ongoing projects from 2018 to 2020 were verified by accredited international auditors at the United Nations Climate Change Convention. Now, the task was to support communities in the sale of their credits on the national or international market, and finally, the earnings would arrive from the sale of the ecosystem service that forests provide for the world: CO^2 capture and climate change mitigation. In 2020, Fondo Acción, who had entered the Pacific region to support the empowerment of local communities, wound up becoming a community ally. As these communities grow and improve their ability to directly execute project activities, Fondo Acción's role has continued to change.

Today, Fondo serves as administrator and fiduciary guarantor for the communities that own the forest. They are Fondo's clients.





The key word for Fondo Acción is ally. We see our project implementors as allies. We don't work for, we work with.



CHAPTER

3

Investing in the power of people

Conservation

It's a fact that overpopulation has pushed the transformation of the mountains, valleys, rivers, seas, lakes and coastlines, making them more habitable and productive. This has created a significant reduction in access to clean water, fertile soil, fishing resources and foods, a reality that can be countered through conservation understood as a dynamic and innovative practice.

At Fondo Acción, we believe that the life and well-being of our species depends on caring for, valuing and making good use of the ecosystems that provide clean air, drinkable water and fertile soil. They are natural mechanisms for disaster control, climate regulation, pollination and food. They are landscapes of knowledge, aesthetic appreciation and spiritual experience. This perspective is based on acknowledging the land and current uses of the soil, attempting to recuperate critical areas for good living, economic productivity and biodiversity conservation.

Over the last twenty years, this approach has made it possible to develop strategies for conserving forests, mangroves, swamps, paramos and savannahs through conservation agreements with communities living on the land, incentivizing and creating economic opportunities associated with the maintenance or restoration of ecosystems, creating and implementating priority actions in protected areas, local and regional, public and private.



“I can do this, I want to do this”

Yuriana Cardozo, Local Protomot for the Connected Landscapes program, Cartagena del Chairá, Caquetá

Over three years ago, Fondo arrived in the village of Puerto Camelias. I became friends with the technicians and helped them out with food, whatever I could. Once they had been here working with us for about two years, they held an open call for women leaders, and ten months ago, they offered me a job as local promoter. Now I dedicate my time to going out to the countryside with the technicians, teaching people everything I know about homemade fertilizers and organic gardens, and supervising the food bank and the connectivity corridors with the technicians.

Before we began with the Connected Landscapes project, they were cutting down a lot of trees on the farms, and this was a big tomb made of pastures.

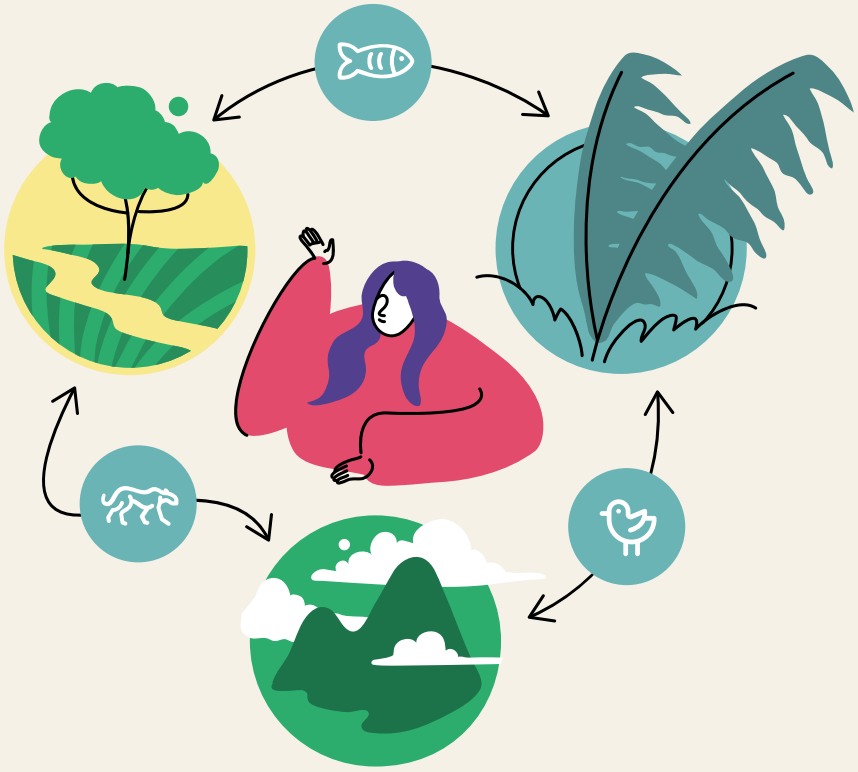
The cows went wherever they wanted. I remember that, at the beginning, when they first came here, people didn’t believe them. We didn’t believe anyone or anything. What happened was, over the years, a lot of people came here and talked a lot of big talk, to get us excited, but nothing ever came true. There were also a lot of smooth talkers, people who didn’t know us, didn’t know anything about this land, and they wanted to tell us how we were supposed to do things.

Fondo earned our trust before doing anything else. The technicians were very polite and they integrated with the community. They talked to everyone, they hung around, but they also spoke clearly, they explained what was happening. They said we would think with them, that we would make proposals, and as time went on, they did their job and made good on their word.

But I was telling you about the women leaders, how I became one. It all started when we got together as two groups of women from Solano and Cartagena del Chairá. Two groups of eleven. The first training session, I remember, was about how women like us could be leaders, teaching children and the community about how to take care of the land. Because there was so much abundance here, we thought it was all about cutting down trees and getting the job done. But that’s not how it works, because the resources, which belong to everyone, also start to disappear. The other thing was that we started to see how men had always had the right to say what should happen, and we women had kept quiet. We didn’t say, “I can do this, I want to do this”.

That was when I learned to let go of my fears and express myself. We used to talk, sure, but about little things. When you had an opinion, you didn’t say so because it was embarrassing, like “What if I’m wrong?” I remember, in that training session, they told us we should say what we had on our minds, because the words would come out, come together and make sense. That helped me so much. You can’t imagine. I didn’t speak and so I didn’t share. And we had to speak to be able to share and learn and tell other people how we could be better for our community and for the children.

I wasn’t the only one who was afraid to talk. There were a lot of us there, and some women didn’t like to participate or even laugh. In that training session, we became aware of all the fear we felt, how worried we were. Later, there were other training sessions, a lot about conservation. These helped us so that women and children would



take an interest in conservation, and now you hear that word all over the place: conservation. The children want to plant trees. There's a couple that owns tree seedlings, a nursery for native trees. And we have conservation workshops for clean, free seeds, and that has been really great because the women and children are taking care of the seeds—collecting them, exchanging them and caring for them.

I also remember a training session for writing poetry and stories. That was really important, not so much because we talked about conservation, but because we shared experiences. That was when we realized how other people lived. We understood our tragedies and challenges, the lives we've had to live. We learned how to encourage each other.

Another really important training sessions was when we went to Cachipay in Cundinamarca to do a workshop on microorganisms and organic fertilizers. We were used to chemicals, which was just a big expense, and thanks to what we learned, we now know that everything we do, everything can be useful, from a paper bag to a plantain peel. Organic fertilizers help us save money, but they also help us eat healthy. Before, you would say, "Ah, this land is no good. One harvest and that's it. Cut down more trees, and next year we'll do the same". Now in every *coscorronero*—that's what we call any little piece of land—we plant and give it some organic fertilizer.

I liked that training session so much, I started to put everything I learned into practice, and that's why I wound up working as a promoter.

Now, on a normal work day, I get up early to get on my horse because the farm is really far away. I go with the technicians, and that's one, two, three hours of travel. We chat along the way. The first thing I do when I get there is to survey the vegetable gardens, make sure they're producing. The important thing is that there are onions, chives, cucumbers, zucchini and herbs, like anise, mint, pennyroyal and bushy lippia. Those plants are for the farmers to consume, for the people themselves, but they also grow a lot to sell, and even to process. Now some people are even pickling onions and making pesto and marinades.

Then I look at the connectivity corridors, the ones that connect the fields with the forest. Here, the farms are big, and a field could have 40, 50 or 100 hectares. So, what we did is that, along the edge, at the foot of the fences, there is a corridor where we plant different timber trees, which creates a corridor so that animals can cross a field from one forest to another. Because there where no tress before, they would have to go straight through a field, and so the birds, the monkeys, the spotted pacas—a lot of animals had been disappearing. The corridors, they connect forest with forest,





and so the animals can pass from one to another them again. The idea is that the birds can come to eat seeds when the trees are big, and the trees cool things down, make shade for the cattle and for us too.

We also check on the food bank, which is where they grow yucca, plantain, sugar cane, pineapple, papaya, squash, and everything for the kitchen, which is different from the vegetable garden because it takes up more space. This is for people on the farms to eat, but also for selling. I mean, can you imagine, we were so far gone that we bought plantains in Cartagena de Chairá, and here we are with all this land. "I have 100 hectares, or 300, or 500, and I don't have single plantain tree." Now they sell bunches for 20 to 30 thousand pesos, depending on the size.

So, my work, as you can see, is to make sure nothing is going to run out. I remind people that it's for their own benefit. I tell them, "Look at how all of this has been useful for you. Look at the example of such-and-such, the pastures he has, the money he can invest. See how you used to have ten cows there in that huge field and you didn't have enough money, and now look, look at how you have a stockpile of grasses".

And the truth is, like I said, people here used to have to rent land somewhere else during the dry season, so their cattle could graze. Now they don't. Now they have grasses for the cattle and food for themselves. If I were to teach you how to protect the forest, I would tell you that you have to clean part of it, and don't burn, just crush the wood, so it will rot and act as fertilizer. And above all else, we have to stop cutting down trees because otherwise the water will run out, for the animals and for us.



"Tra pi suma kiricha kiraka erubaita/ To think like a leafcutter ant"

John Jair Tubequia Domicó,
Emberá leader Mutatá, Antioquia

I am an Emberá leader from the Mutatá communities. I was born in one those communities called Porroso, on the Jaikerazavi reserve. Here in the municipality of Mutatá, in the department of Antioquia, I studied and have been participating in the various processes that are part of the organizational dynamic of the indigenous council of Mutatá, which is the organization that connects us, the more than 2,500 indigenous peoples that are part of three reserves: the Jaikerazabi reserve, located in the Serranía de Abibe mountains, on the border with the department of Córdoba; the Chontadural Cañero reserve, which crosses the border with the department of Chocó; and a third reserve, Colibrí Pegadó. Those three reserves contain fourteen indigenous communities, and we act according to four guiding principles: unity, territory, culture and autonomy, which are directed by five policies that affect all of the program activities under the framework of a life plan: the territory and environment policy, the government and administration policy, the education policy, the healthcare policy, and the gender, generation and family policy.

The principle of Unity is that we, as the Emberá people, as indigenous communities, are part of an organizational political structure that is built from the roots up with community participation, where participation is granted to young people, women, traditional medicine providers, teachers and this whole

team of leaders or community members who are part of the organization. Likewise, we are connected to an organizational structure at the departmental level, the Indigenous Organization of the department of Antioquia (OIA in Spanish), which covers five ethnic peoples: the Zenú people, the Tule people, the Embera Eyabida people, the Tobita people and the Chamí people. At a national level we stand with the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC in Spanish), which links to our actions. The principle of unity moves from connections at the local level towards a focus on other areas of interconnection at a national level.

The principle of Territory is that for us, as Emberá peoples, the land or the territory is the fundamental basis that allows cultural, economic, political and environmental development, which is part of our communities. For us, the territory is like a mother that gives us life. Mother earth is fundamental for us because that's where all the different actions or resources come from that we need as a people to be able to develop a model that allows us to advance in our organizational process.

The other line or principle is Culture. We as indigenous people have fundamental roots that come from our origins, from our ancestors, that we have been practicing for generations, and we want keep these in the future: it is our way of caring for our children and our way of relating to nature, to sacred places, to forests, rivers, lakes and animals.

And Autonomy, because for a long time now, we have been generating political and organizing processes based on our foundations from indigenous culture. We have been advancing and demanding that the state recognize our rights as indigenous communities: the right to life, to have a dignified, peaceful territory; the right to have our culture, our families and our own identity. We the indigenous communities are people too, not animals. We have the ability to think, to react, to look after our needs, to struggle and to tend to the rights and responsibilities of our indigenous communities within their organizational dynamic.

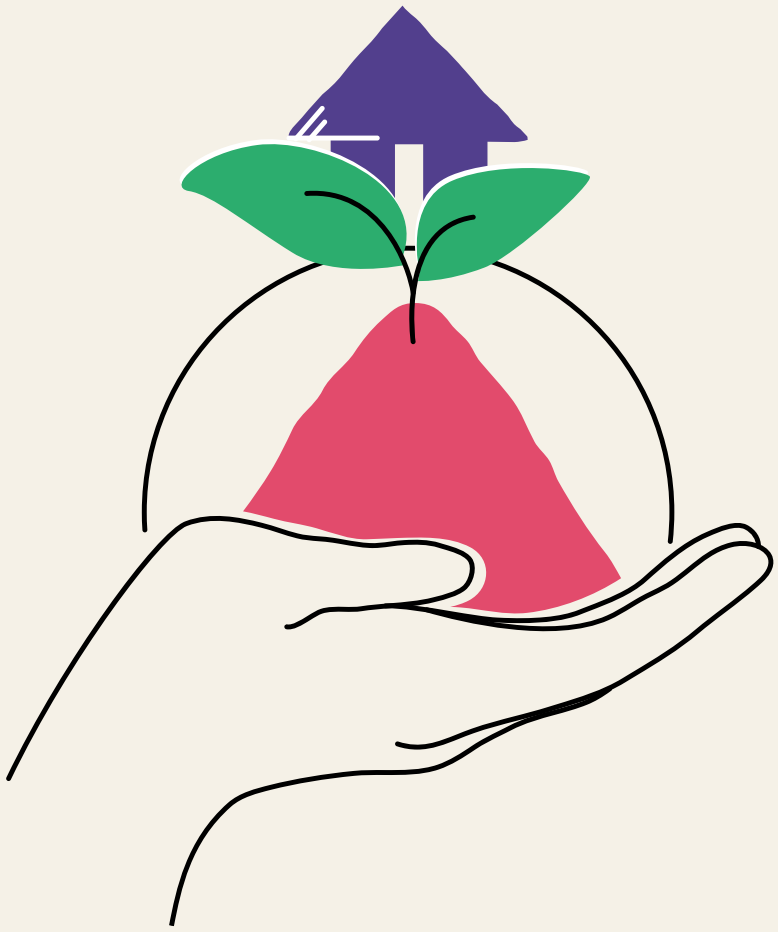
We were drawn to working with Fondo Acción because the objectives laid out in the REDD+ project go hand-in-hand with these principles, with the life plan we have built and reinforced through participation by the Emberá communities of Mutatá with respect for the fundamental principles of territory, unity, culture and autonomy.

They took those elements into account, all those principles and organizational directive policies that govern our superior council. It was a conscientious integration.

I am currently one of the coordinators for the REDD+ Mutatá project that has been working with the indigenous communities to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in our territory. Our forests fulfill a function by providing an ecosystem service that benefits the community—not only we who live in the territory, but the general population, understood as all biodiversity—that strengthens the community and addresses the climate as part of the territorial context.

In the work we do to advance REDD+ projects hand-in-hand with Fondo Acción, we place a high value on the biodiversity of fauna in territories where there are still jaguars, peccaries, deer, armadillos, pacas, macaws, parrots and the great diversity of other birds we have here. Likewise, in our territory we have a diversity of flora—ornamental and medicinal plants that our doctors have been using since ancestral times for developing and practicing cultural values related to the Emberá worldview and cosmogony that we, the members of the council, ascribe to.

Work with Fondo Acción has born fruits that we could call novel for the communities. The whole issue of organizational improvement, of governance, has developed, and women, young people, members of the collective communities and



teachers participate. We have worked with them on issues of production, natural resources management, and agroforestry system implementation, where we are working with cacao in relation to other timber-yielding species, fruit trees and some medicinal trees, and in association with other products that also provide food for consumption, like yucca and plantain. We are also protecting the fauna in our forests. Thus, the strengthening and development of skills has taken place through training processes where women, members of the community and authorities actively participate. There is also an entire process that has been unfolding within the framework of strengthening the indigenous council and the administrative area. These activities have been very positively received within the communities. We also have a social investment line that contributes to infrastructure for education, healthcare, housing, electric grids, channels that bring water to every home and the entire issue of basic sanitation and potable water.

This project that we are advancing is a thirty-year plan. Unfortunately, people from outside the community have brought a very individualistic mentality. They think about economies as individuals instead of as communities. We believe that everything we do should be for the benefit and betterment of the whole indigenous community, so with Fondo Acción, to avoid violating the rights of these territories and communities, we managed to empower ourselves and make this work our own, taking the projects that were planned for those thirty years and projecting them even further into the future, because the being and feeling of indigenous communities won't end in 2043. Maybe then we'll provide a space for evaluation, feedback and continuity so the plans can keep advancing along with everything that the community dynamics represent for the superior council of Mutatá.

We follow the call of our elders: *Tra pi suma kiricha kiraka erubaita*, that we should work in unity for the well-being of all men, women, children, adults, and doctors, the way leafcutter ants do, supporting each other so that they can keep advancing across the land.

“Now that I’m here on this ridge”

Diana Andrea Mejía, Solano, Caquetá

I’m here on my farm, on a mountain ridge, under a tree, thinking, I hope I don’t get caught in a downpour, because a rainstorm is forming. I’m also next to a barrel by the aqueduct for the cattle. We use the barrel for watering the cattle in the pastures. I’m looking at the cows that I milk every day. I run a silvopasture system, which is when you have small pastures and you rotate them to avoid felling trees—when you have cattle on smaller parcels, without clearing the trees. For example, you make ten small fields, ten little pastures, let’s say, ten little strips of land, and you go every day and change the cattle, you move them, so when you get to the last pasture, when the rotation ends, the first one has grass so that you can put them there again, that way you don’t have to cut down the trees. If you let the cows loose, they wander all over the place and trample the food instead of eating it. In the pastures we make corridors and we plant trees. Those trees give the cattle shade, and they give us shade too, and they sustain the forest animals.

These days, I tell people they don’t need to cut down the trees because, if you do, the animals will go away. I teach them to work with what they have. What they already felled is enough. What they have to do is start rotating the cattle between grasses, put water in the cattle aqueduct so that the animals don’t damage the stream, and if they already cut down a lot of trees and don’t have shade in the pastures—because the cattle need shade, like any living being—they should plant trees. You have to plant as many trees as possible, bring the pasture back to life. You have to teach people, share the knowledge you have. The thing here is that we lack the training. With just one training session, you start to think differently. You understand the damage you’ve done, the harm you’ve caused, and you start to retrain yourself: “Look, this pasture doesn’t have a single tree, so let’s start planting”. I’m not going to lie, I used to cut down trees. I would say, this tree, for what? This stand of trees for what? But during the training sessions, we went to really beautiful places, reserves, and my thinking changed, and that was how my life changed.

I’m not afraid to speak anymore. I know I have the right and also the obligation to take care of the environment. I’ve learned to work, to take care, to conserve, to replicate, and now that I’m here on this ridge, talking to you, I remember that I used to have just one big pasture. Now it’s different. I have 27 to 30 pastures, small ones, in quarters, and on these 28 hectares of mine, there’s a forest reserve. I’ve stopped cutting down trees, yes, and now everything looks much prettier with the trees I planted, and the cows have increased their milk production and the air is cooler.







“The work of teaching others comes from the heart”

Luis Toledo, Local Promoter for the Connected Landscapes program, Solano

Right now, we’re 92 families whose lives have been changed by Connected Landscapes. Right now, I’m making cheeses and I’m producing quality animals, crossing cattle that I’ve been buying from other farms where they have milk cows. I’ve been selecting them to have cows who produce more, and now with the rotation, with the silvopasture system, they always have enough food. I think I’ll be able to produce more milk.

I’ve really improved the vegetable gardens. Before, we had to buy onions, tomatoes, green beans and cucumbers. Now, we can invest this money in other necessities for the farm. If I think about what the farm used to be like, it gives me a headache. The cows wandered loose and I couldn’t find them anywhere. I would spend hours looking for them. We had to use candles and gasoline torches to look for them at night. And it was the same on everyone else’s farms. These days, when I go to other farms, many of them have solar-powered generators, and some of them even have refrigerators. And the land, it used to be so ugly. There were no trees to give the cattle shade.

These days, I have a lot of trees, and they make me happy. A day of work is like heaven. I realized I like the trees and the animals a lot. I like to take care of the little animals, so much so that I even let them into my house. I don’t like to see them get abused, so I defend them. The pacas also visit me, which are like pacaranas, but they’re black. And the chachalacas. Here in the mango tree they come to sleep, as if this were their house, and they’re very tame, very pretty.

See, I plant a tree on my farm almost every day. If you could see my connectivity corridors, I’ve been planting soursops, mangos and volunteers, and they look very pretty. Those trees are the ones that let the animals thrive. Those are the ones that capture carbon so we and all our companions around the world, the animals, can breathe. In the corridor there are orioles and blackbirds and peccaries and monkeys and howlers, brown woolly monkeys, brown mantled tamarins, and bebelecos. All those animals. I spend my time watching how they cross the forest, how they eat guava and papaya. They’ve become part of my home, my family. They’ve adapted to me and I’ve adapted to them. Now, around five in the evening, when the sun isn’t as strong, I take a walk along the corridors, to look at them and hear them sing, and along the way, I check on the cows to see how they’re doing.

Here the cows are all milk cows. I milk them myself, and my wife makes the cheese. We have a beautiful cheese maker. Every day we make cheese, and every week or two we bring it to market. Curdled cheese, in blocks of three or four pounds. Fondo Acción is getting ready to leave here, but I’ll keep practicing what I’ve learned. As long as I’m part of this world, I plan on teaching people to make connectivity corridors and small pastures, to think about what they do to the earth and the animals. This is an example that really stuck with me: the people say to me, Lucho, could you teach me how to make an aqueduct for the cattle. And I say, buddy, you need this and that, and I go and I install the cattle aqueduct. The work of teaching others comes from the heart.



Sustainable Rural Development

Many of the rural communities that have lived in balance with the environment have seen that balance deteriorate due to interests and forces from outside their development and coexistence model. This alters their forms of agricultural production, their food sources and their relationship to their surroundings.

At Fondo Acción, we believe in the need to change paradigms for production and consumption. We also believe in facilitating and structuring fair and competitive business models for communities, where well-being prevails through food security and profitable alternatives for progress.

This is why we work with a value chain focus on the base, where production and extraction happen, and on end consumers. We develop projects for sustainable production that promote circular solutions along the length of the value chain. We improve environmentally friendly technical and practical skills for production systems and resource use related to fishing and/or forests. We strengthen chains to add value to the products and have traceability, which helps us connect people and establish fair and competitive prices.

We are interested in promoting responsible consumption to create conscientious, responsible supply and demand when a product enters the market and, similarly, when buying a product at a fair price. In sum, we look for sustainable businesses that will have a positive environmental and social impact.



“If we lose our relationship with the land we lose our culture”

Mercy Dalila España Solis, Specialist in production activities for the Acapa community board , Tumaco, Nariño

I’m from the southern Pacific Coast of Colombia, department of Nariño, but I was born in a vereda in a rural area called Boca de Curay, which is on the cove, on the bay of the municipality of Tumaco, and I’m part of the Acapa community board organization. By profession, I’m an agroforestry engineer. I studied a specialization in social management, and I’m currently studying a master’s in project management. I’m passionate about the agricultural sector, thus my profile, my commitment to the countryside, to productive sectors. I’m the third of five siblings, an evangelical Christian, and I’ve been working with Fondo since 2015 as part of the technical unit for the Acapa community board.

My commitment to the countryside starts with my birth in a rural part of Colombia and with coming from a very strong black culture. This commitment comes from my predecessors and it’s what led me to consider studying something related to the countryside, first of all, because I’m from the heart of a poor family, a family with few options—my father is a farmer and fisherman and my mother is a homemaker—without the possibility of getting educated or coming out ahead in terms of education, yet with a big vision of education as the engine for transforming the region.

My parents always looking ahead. My father has been my greatest mentor. He always told my five siblings and I that studying was the alternative, the only one we had, and it was the best inheritance that he could give us, other than a house, a motor and a canoe, because studying isn’t only for us, but it’s an opportunity for the community. That is, he had this idea that what you achieve is going to impact others, and that was what I’ve done: return to my land. I am always coming back to the heart where I was born, and I think I’ve been able to contribute a whole lot. I’ve been able to inspire others. That has also been my dream, that other people feel motivated to do better.

Being in a rural area creates a feeling of poverty, of neglect. You begin to realize, in school, as you grow up, that the region has all of these unmet basic needs, that it lacks education, healthcare, housing and potable water. You begin to make comparisons when you go to the city, to Tumaco, because you never knew another city and it seems like a big city, lightyears away from where you come from.

For my first years of schooling, I studied in the vereda of Boca de Curay, and there, my father, without means, but a visionary, as I said, instilled the idea in us that we had to go to Tumaco to study. In Tumaco we began to study. First, we came with my grandmother. Later, my mother came to live with us, to take care of us because we’re five sisters and one man.

He had this idea that what you achieve is going to impact others, and that was what I’ve done: return to my land. I am always coming back to the heart where I was born, and I think I’ve been able to contribute a whole lot. I’ve been able to inspire others.

When I graduated from high school, I had a lot of hopes. With a lot of effort, I got into the University of Nariño in Tumaco, in the agro-forestry program, and later I needed to move to Pasto. There, I had to rent a room. I didn't have anything but a bed to sleep on and barely enough money to pay for the photocopies from the university. However, by the grace and mercy of God, who was always on my mind, I knew that I couldn't fail a single class or semester because that was time and money, and I couldn't afford the luxury. I came with a mission, and that was to study and finish my degree. I got sick a lot, I had a lot of sinus allergy problems because of my living conditions and diet. I wound up pawning my calculator, which was for my studies, to buy bread, cheese and coffee. These kinds of events, when you come from a family that instilled certain principles and values in you, hard work and courage, help you to find strength where you had none. I'm telling you this, about pawning my calculator, because that was a decisive moment for me, one that motivated me to finish my degree to help my parents, my sisters who were still coming into the world. In 2008, I finished my degree and since then I've been working in community processes.

In 2015, I began another chapter in this journey: working with Fondo Acción. They came to do an intervention within the framework of the REDD+ project, with the Connected Landscapes project, and that was when I became part of the technical team as the person in charge of production, specifically the subject of cacao and coconuts on the Acapa and Bajo Mira and Frontera community boards. To this day, I'm in charge of these production lines. Beyond technical accompaniment in the field, what I'm present throughout the value chain, from production to commercialization, and also in some attempts to transform the product.

Here in the region, we had been working on the REDD+ process for forest conservation since 2012 with Bioredd, the program that operated with funds from USAID for investing in the region, but in 2014, USAID terminated its contract with Bioredd, and Fondo Acción won the bid for tender and began to work with us.

In 2015, they began their first project with coconuts and that was where I came in as coordinator with the Fondo Acción team. We began to offer technical assistance in the field, but we also looked for commercial partners for these products, and we made adjustments to the production infrastructure: we built a crop collection center. We started to look beyond the fruit. There were other alternatives for the market, and that was going to generate added value to the income for the Acapa families that live entirely from coconuts, fishing and cacao. We started to find partners interested in buying coconut, the fruit, but also the milk, and a broader range of products. Things began to expand little by little. We did a first pilot program for commercializing coconut as far as Tumaco. That didn't go so well for us because the costs went up, but we stuck with it, we kept looking for partners.

We have a serious problem with coconuts, a phytosanitary problem: the red ring disease (the red ring nematode), which has been around for over fifty years and affects the plantations.

We've dedicated ourselves to lowering the impact, to making producers aware of efficient ways to manage the issue, so that they will have meaningful levels of production and can provide the quantities that clients request.

It has now been a total of six years that we've been working on this. Today, we've completed two exercises. We are selling coconuts to Súper de Alimentos in Manizales, and we're also doing pilot programs with secondary products: coconut oil, milk and pulp. We also see the need for a regional factory to transform coconuts, one that uses 100% of the fruit. A factory by producers and





for producers will create a huge window of opportunities for generating income, for culture and for lawfulness, because we have a lot of problems with illegal activities in the region.

In regards to cacao, we've been able to link cacao growers in an association called ASPROSEC, and we made it so that, in a commercial partnership with Chuculat in Bogotá, they could make a chocolate bar with our cacao. It is a bitter chocolate bar, very sought after by the market, that has 70% cacao butter and paste. It was very meaningful for the community to have a hand in the chocolate paste using the cacao that they struggled for and worked with every day.

Over the years, working with Fondo Acción has played an important role in empowering people. Within the field of production, Fondo works to train leaders, which is reflected in the autonomy they've acquired, in their ability to plan land use and negotiate.

Our relationship with Fondo Acción has also helped with cultural empowerment.

The mere fact that we are within the framework of a conservation project is important because, over the course of history, black communities have worked for the conservation of natural resources as part of their culture, and meeting with Fondo allowed us to get qualified in the sustainable use of forests, which are the foundation of our culture, our roots. Fondo made us think about the consequences of neglecting the forest. What would happen to us if all the natural resources were ruined? Would we all have to go to the city? If we lose our relationship with the land we lose our culture.



"Good Living"

Alonso Velásquez Bedoya,
General Representative for the Association of Families and Persons Committed to Good Living, Probivir , Duitama, Boyacá

They call me Alonso Velásquez Bedoya and I was raised in Eastern Antioquia. Later, I studied Zootechnics at the National University of Medellín, and at the time, I started to have doubts about suitable technologies. I had always been a part of working-class processes, and I found an experience in Boyacá that caught my attention, and I came here to work in rural development with peasants. It was 1986 and I wound up staying here, I put down roots. My partner is from the area, and now I live in La Chorrera, in a vereda called San Lorenzo below the Estación sector, between Paipa and Duitama. Here we have a small lot where I can plant a few things and have some animals. I'm the general representative for the Probivir Association, which used to be called the Duitama branch of Agrosolidaria. Along the way, I was able to study a master's degree in sustainable development and agricultural systems, and so I became even more oriented towards agro-ecology, and that's what I'm doing now. I met the people of Fondo Acción when I was working in the Seed Association and Agrosolidaria, before we changed names and became Probivir. We execute projects with Fondo: one that has to do with sustainable ranching, through the Seed Association, and another for decontamination and best agro-ecological practices, through Probivir.

But before I continue talking about Fondo Acción, I need to tell you why we changed the name of our organization. Before calling ourselves Probivir, we created associations for primary production of livestock and agriculture, transforming products with funds from self-managed microcredit. We also

ran eco-markets and eco-fairs to distribute goods directly to consumers. That was what we were doing from 2007 to 2014, until we realized that we were seeing peasant families only as producers and not comprehensively. We weren't seeing their essence, that they were not meant solely for the market. We realized something really sad, that their lives were determined by the laws of demand for their products, and that, though they were land owning peasants with wide-ranging knowledge about planting, they had to buy the majority of their food. The blackberry producers grew blackberries; the potato producers potatoes; the ranchers milk. They had to buy the rest of their things at unfair prices, and their food was contaminated by agro-toxins. Being peasants, they were having a hard time accessing food, and so we thought, we have to change this, and we came across the concept of "good living". This paradigm centers existential sovereignty, a harmonious relationship between communities and the natural world, a quieter life and a relationship to common goods.

When we made this change, we designed some programs that were more in line with that way of thinking, beginning with one for reflecting on what good living could be in the particular context of Oak Tree Corridor, which is the region we have focused on for this work. That program is called Living Good and it's a training program. Good living is a paradigm for community living, because in this society we hadn't been centering life. We put accumulation and prestige at the center, but life got sacrificed a lot and in a lot of ways. Thus, good living is a way to go back to caring for life in all of its expressions, not only the human species, but all lifeforms.

Later, we spent a lot of time thinking through the food issue, and we created a second, very important program called Food First, which is a food autonomy program. It's about producing for your own consumption, but producing healthy foods, which is to say organic, local, tasty foods with identity. That's where it connects with everything about the agro-ecology of seed recuperation in local gastronomy. That is, how food gets prepared is also important, a return to culinary traditions. Then we made a program for animal husbandry in the area, which is a program for rural development with a biocultural identity. This program also involves protecting the paramos, the forests, the streams, the fauna and the flora. We also plan on having a diversity of foods in the future and traditional culinary practices, opening up to rural community tourism and eco-tourism.

We were left with one more solidarity economy project called We Create, and it is an initiative for finding and recuperating collaborative work, traditionally referred to here as "manovuelta" or "brazo prestado", a labor exchange without monetary mediation, which is more appropriate for these conditions.

The first work we did with Fondo Acción was a thirty-two-month project for converting traditional cattle ranching to sustainable cattle ranching. The project had a very important complementary component for organizational reinforcement where we were able to create and empower associative groups connected to Probivir. We protected water sources, we established a baseline for defining the forested area on farms, and we created an initial inventory of flora and birds on farms and in forested lots, which in this case are oak forests. There was also a big environmental component, which was that the cattle ranching work would be done without agro-toxins. The organizational and administrative reinforcement work that Fondo Acción provides accompaniment for was very important in this process. From the very beginning there was training in accounting and administration. Not only how to make good use of funding within a project, but for the whole organization. Fondo Acción also facilitated our meetings with other organizations and other projects that were happening in other regions, like the Serranía de Yariguíes, a community that had done meaningful apprenticeship work.

The second project was in the same area, the Oak Corridor between Santander and Boyacá, which includes the municipalities of Charalá, Paipa, Duitama, Santa Rosa de Viterbo and Cerinza. In this project, we wanted to take on the issue of decontamination, of creating a culture of environmental restoration and care. We did a quick characterization of the pollution sources in the area, both from cattle ranching agricultural activities and from domestic sources, and we characterized an organic agriculture component. We worked with the blackberry growers of Palermo, Paipa. We were interested in showing them that they could indeed produce organic blackberries without using pesticides. We set up an experimental field right there, and we took that group of blackberry growers to see it. It was the same with potato growers, leafy vegetable growers and cattle ranchers. When we came back with high spirits, we identified plots that each group could contribute to a pilot program. We began to implement what we had shown them and we started a labor collective to provide technical assistance for the project, providing supplies and infrastructure materials. For example, in the case of the fruit trees, drip irrigation systems were used. An enclosure and informative billboards were put up to get their neighbors' attention so that they, the other growers, would take an interest and learn about what was happening on these plots. The cattle ranching projects were also improved. We had some rotating supply funds from earlier projects, which were available in local feedstores, but they were mostly for cattle ranching. In the project with Fondo, fertilizers were also made available for controlling plagues and diseases, so that people could replicate what was happening in the pilot plots.

The methodology was to learn by making and experiencing, and whoever wanted to replicate this on their own farm could also receive visits and consultations. There was a campaign for training in the use and collection of solid waste. With the issue of recycling, we started from nothing, making people aware that trash is a raw material and can be a source of income for many families that make a living from it. The subject of domestic greywater was also addressed with some simple courses on decontamination using aquatic plants. Some people also implemented grease traps and filtering systems.

Another important thing that happened was the implementation of the first continuous-flow bio-digesters for colder climates. This is a technology that works best in warmer climates, so in these climates it was thought to be inefficient. Thus, an adaptation was made with macro-tunnel greenhouses to provide more heat and maintain high temperatures using thermal insulation on the floor. They were implemented on farms with pigs, the idea being that the manure is very toxic and doesn't usually get turned into fertilizer. In this way we are also using less wood and lowering pressure on the forest.

The organizational and administrative reinforcement work that Fondo Acción provides accompaniment for was very important in this process. From the very beginning there was training in accounting and administration. Not only how to make good use of funding within a project, but for the whole organization.



The farmers were very active, some more than others, but the most important thing is that these projects don't end when the budget runs out. They go beyond financing and technical support. We have been very careful with this. The principal result of these projects with Fondo has been to change our mentality, to create an attitude of commitment and a sensitivity to nature. They show that food production doesn't conflict with conservation, that it's possible to conserve by producing and to produce through conservation and that, in the end, we all benefit from conservation. It also helps people understand the land and how to help it: the Oak Tree Corridor is so important for this region of Colombia, yet so unfamiliar to most of its inhabitants, both rural and urban.

The paramos here are unique, and Boyacá contains the largest area of paramos. They are really the only source of water for the entire population of this country, and they are very fragile. Human interaction is a problem for the paramos. It is very important to know the amount of water they produce, the biodiversity of their flora and fauna, and how they temper the climate, but also how they suffer from climate change. The oak forests are also our heritage. This species arrived in the high-altitude tropic during the last glacial age. This is a very important fact because, in these paleo-climactic shelters, species can specialize, so you find a lot of endemic species: hummingbirds, spectacled bears, deer, wild guinea pigs, squirrels and other mammals, and among the flora: the frailejon, wild Andean blueberries, Macleania rupestris and more. Culturally the corridor is also very interesting because of the mixture of Boyacá and Santander cultures, which have a wisdom about the land, but also about cattle and entrepreneurship. Families are not only food producers, but they also commercialize, make local crafts and music, and have a diverse gastronomy, including all the preparations they make like mashes, cuchucos, soups, cocido boyacense, and the fermented quinoa drinks.

These two projects have helped us not only to develop projects like sustainable ranching, decontamination and a culture of environmental restoration and care, but also to have information about the richness of this area, our grand natural heritage and the

potential for ecosystem and cultural services. This is why it is important to defend and take care of the land.



"The word peasant is broad"

Astrid Cristina González Toro, Peasant, Seed Protector , Santa Rosa de Viterbo, Boyacá

I live in Santa Rosa de Viterbo, Boyacá and I am a peasant laborer, and everything that the word peasant implies for me is really broad, though sometimes people look at us as if we weren't very important, like we're nobodies for this society, and the government doesn't take us into consideration.

I see myself differently because, as a peasant, you have to be able to do and know everything. Better said, if you want to have a cat, a dog, a guinea pig, a rabbit, you have to know how to be a veterinarian. You have to know if the little animal is sick, which plants it eats, which plants you can give it to make it better. You have to know the gestation periods for animals, when they're going to mate and when they'll give birth. A peasant has to know all of that.

And that's just for animals, because we also know about plants. We are agricultural engineers, though we don't have degrees. We have to know about varietals, cycles, how to plant them, how and when they sprout, when to prune them; that if you move them after X amount of time, they'll grow; that if you leave them too long, it's no good. And if, for example, you have a sheep, as I do, I have to know when to breed it and when the wool is ready to shear. And I have to know how to process that wool; if I'm going to sell it raw, as it is after shearing the sheep, or if I'm going to wash it, degrease it, thread it and turn it into a poncho. A peasant knows all of that. I knew a lot of things, but with Fondo Acción I learned about silvopastoral management, reforestation and how to take care of the water, but also how to fight internal and external plant parasites using what the farm itself produces. That was the last project we worked on with Probivir, financed by the TFCA: decontamination. And I liked it a lot because everything was aimed at the vegetable garden so that we wouldn't go back to using chemicals, doing everything organically instead. That way it doesn't affect the soil, the other plants or our health. I learned about composting, about allelopathy with aromatic herbs. Which herbs work to keep bugs away? That was useful for me and all the people in this area, seventeen families from this vereda who have become aware, not only of how important conservation is, but about how bad agrochemicals are.

In my case, I have become the protector of local and native seeds.

Everything started because I've always liked natural foods, and I started to trade with other people. The people from Fondo told me, if I wanted to be in charge to that, they would help me reach more people and get organized, and that's what happened. The idea isn't to keep the seeds stockpiled in a jar on the shelf, instead I should be planting them. I plant some of them in one season, and others later so that they don't cross, because they're susceptible to crossbreeding, and if they mix they'll gradually disappear. There are seeds that nobody knows about, and sometimes people ask me, "What's that one? And what's it for? How do you use it?"

And there are a lot of eating habits that have been disappearing because, since everything these days is about that culture of packets you buy and open and eat quickly, we lose a lot of practices. So, another thing I've done are workshops for slow cooking, those customs that we've been losing all over the country but that continue to exist here, like

Angú, the seven-grain flour that has Santa Isabel peas, three-faced peas, brown peas, fava beans, corn, wheat, barley, quinoa and amaranth. All of those grains are toasted and ground and you eat the result. I put honey on it because I live for honey. I have a small apiary because my idea is to produce everything I eat.

Among cereal grains and vegetables, without including tubers, I have something like eighty-five varieties of seeds. Many of them are disappearing, like the three-faced pea or the brown pea, which isn't commercial because the pea is smaller and the soup gets blackish, and who knows why, but people feel like that's no good. Another plant I had in my garden and I didn't know how to eat is the *maravilla*, or one-day flower. It's an Andean tuber, like a potato, but it comes in segments like an onion.

Here I have almost everything I eat, except rice, panela, coffee and chocolate. I have to buy those things because they don't grow in this climate, but for everything else I have two goats, three cows, guinea pigs and chickens for milk, meat and eggs. I have broccoli and cauliflower. And in the greenhouse, red chard and sorrel, which is like a flavorful spinach. That's what I tell people: try them, they don't need salt or vinegar. Just chop them up and there's your salad.

Living the way I do has all kinds of benefits, because if the world is the way it is, it's because we aren't helping ourselves and we have to try to make it better, one way or another. We have to try to sustain it so that the ecosystem doesn't collapse. If you spray to kill the insects, you also kill the bees that pollinate, and if we keep doing that, we won't have any fruit. So, it's much more viable to keep the world in balance and to try to make it better, each of us in the space we have and with what we can do. We have to save the world because we're already in pretty dire straits.



"We're in paradise and we're going to stay here"

Víctor Garcés, Local Promoter for the Connected Landscapes program, Cartagena del Chairá , Caquetá

I came to Caquetá from Cali, Valle del Cauca in November 1982 as a coca leaf picker. I had finished


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VICTOR

high school and, because Colombia has so few opportunities, I was unemployed and there were family money troubles, I moved to this region to see if I could make some money to pay for university, a bachelor's in mathematics, which is what I liked. But I stayed here, and I was here for the whole coca grower boom, the fumigations, and the substitution of illegal crops. I'm familiar with the whole context and all the problems of this region, and for a long time now I've participated in the community action boards. These days, I'm the president of the community action board, I have a shop and a little land with cattle where I use the silvopasture management system that we started when Fondo Acción arrived to work with us in 2015.

I remember well, the first thing we did with Fondo was an informal meeting with a large group of leaders in the Palmichal vereda. That meeting was when they began to earn our trust. We did a DOFA exercise to identify the region's weaknesses and opportunities, risks and strengths. Basically, what we thought we needed and wanted. We spent three days on that exercise. There were representatives from Chocagúan, from the Solidarity Economy Fund, and from the veredas of Palmichales, Jardín, El Café, Miraflores, Puerto Camelias, Loma Larga and El Tigre.

At the time, we had a lot of problems. The first among them was that no organizations had ever touched this region. We were distrustful because people would come to sell us hopes that became disappointments. Despite our distrust, we made our points and we started to make a community agenda: a tool we built with Fondo. There, we set out our action plan, and in it we decided on some main ideas: conservation, socio-environmental preservation, sustainable rural development, governance and peace as a socio-cultural motivator. We also defined some general dimensions, like citizen participation, gender issues and conservation.

The other problem we had, besides distrust, was the social situation.

At that time here in Cartagena del Chairá, the reconciliation had begun between the government and the FARC guerillas who gave the orders in this region. That's why the subject of governance and peace was so important for us. We felt we had to support the peace process because the end of the conflict had to be negotiated, it was political. That was the only way to end the death and kidnappings. Those people had to reinsert themselves in civil society and become part of our lands. Some parts of the accord were so that they would be able to return and have land to work in peace. Getting back to the story, we were very committed to a peaceful transition, thinking about how we would substitute illegal crops and shift over to legal cattle ranching operations. We were barely coming to terms with the fact that cattle ranching had become a really big problem because of the deforestation, an even bigger and more complex problem than the illegal crops.

The most important thing was our commitment to the management guide that we wrote in the community agenda, that we began developing in 2015 and that we still follow today. The region had to be sustainable, and we would achieve this by abandoning extensive cattle farming, by making more sustainable use of the forest, and by turning the land into opportunities for community tourism. That's what we've been betting on since then, that a hectare of forest would be more attractive than a hectare of grass for cattle.

We've already undertaken various processes to reach that objective. We had a lot of successes with Fondo: people understood that, if we didn't put a stop to uncontrolled deforestation, the land would be unsustainable for everyone, that we needed water, we needed forests.

Fondo set the standard and was essential for us to begin making connectivity corridors, living fences, protecting water sources, and subdividing pastures into small parcels. All of this has been useful for people to make better use of the land. They know about the forest's reserves of timber and non-timber products, that it's important for there to be a balance between cattle ranching, fauna and flora for sustainability.

The social organizations in this region continue to work for everything that we began to outline in that community agenda. We've talked a lot about making a community pact for environmental peace. There is a lot of work ahead of us, but for the time being, what we've done with the parcels of land since we began our work in 2016, up to 2020, has improved the quality of life for sixty families in seven veredas. It improved their income, they began to get deforestation out of their heads, and they learned to live better among the land animals and the birds, among the cows and the springs. They became aware of how important it is to take care of the springs, the pipes, and the river and to keep the forest standing.

We live in paradise because we have everything. We are here and we're going to stay here. We have always lived in the midst of conflict, and now we know that the most important thing is to learn to exercise governance in the region. At this time, we believe that our greatest strength is our support for the peace process. This is why we believe that, under the territorial renovation heading of the Development Plans with a Territorial Focus (PDET in Spanish), it's important that there are environmentally conscious investments in the land, but also that they aim to diversify cattle ranching. We shouldn't stick with it as our only source of income. We can have Amazonian crops, like cacao, capoazú, and arazá, and opportunities for community tourism, preparing trails, for example, where people can hike and go bird watching without hurting the land.

We also have to keep going with productive projects. Here we have a factory for transforming goods in Chocaguán, which is one of the biggest and strongest organizations we have. In the factory, cacao gets purchased and processed. On the other hand, we are working on developing a hub for forest development that will work on sustainable uses for the forest, transforming and making use of timber products from the forest. We are also working on the issue of environmental tracking and bird watching. All of these possibilities, possibilities for the Amazon, that door was opened by Fondo Acción in 2015.

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Childhood

Children and adolescents are an opportunity for a new beginning, a possibility for social change, for transforming the linguistic paradigms that lead humans to perceive the world, interpret it and act in a predetermined way.

Know-how and practices are transmitted to children by their peers and the adults that surround them, through the relationships they build within their family, their schools and the other spaces where they interact. As soon as they arrive in the world, children challenge adults to identify and practice what they say.

In Fondo Acción, we believe in the need to promote positive and harmonious relationships for children through caring, protective spaces mediated by adults and based on connections, representation and education that guarantee their well-being. This way, we create social changes that not only have a long-term positive impact on the life of a community, but on the environment too. Children who protect the place where they live will be protected by the land. Children inhabit and construct possible territories.



“The value of the mountains”

Nelson Geovanny Vela, Rector of La Cabaña educational institute, Solano, Caquetá

Currently, I am the rector for an educational institute. I’ve always dedicated my work life to the education sector. I began in 2002 as a teacher in the municipality of Solano in the Campo Alegre institute, and I was there for six and a half years.

Then they transferred me to the Paujil municipality, to La Niña del Carmen institute, where I worked for two years, from 2008 to 2010. In 2009, there was open call for entering the teaching field, and thank God, I was accepted. In 2010, they gave me a tenured position, but in La Granja educational institute, which is in the municipality of San José de Fragua, under the Yurayaco superintendence. From there, in mid 2016, there was an opening for a rector in charge of La Cabaña educational institute in the municipality of Solano, which is where I’ve been for the last four and a half years.

Right now, I’m in the process of getting tenure as rector.

I took an exam on post-conflict issues and passed.

All of this is to say that I’ve been in this profession for 18 years, and I’m very happy with my career. I studied business administration, but like anything, you fall in love with what you end up doing. I never thought that I’d spend my life as a teacher. When I finished high school, they offered me a temporary contract. I took it basically to avoid unemployment. It was the middle of the year, and I thought I would only do this for six months, then I’d keep going with my business administration studies so that I could set up my own business, which is what I’d been planning. But the following year they came back and offered me the opportunity to continue, and I said, “Ok, let’s keep going”, and as time goes on, you start to love working with children, working with the community, adding a grain of sand. You start to see that you’re teaching a kid to read, and that really motivates you to keep going with community work. People start to come to you, like, “Hey teacher, help me write this document. Teacher I have this project…” And you start to realize that this profession is really important for the people, and you also start to feel attached to it, you fall in love with the profession.

After studying business administration, I did a specialization in educational information technology, and then I did a master’s degree at the University of Santander, and here we are, overcoming and working hand-in-hand with communities.

My parents are peasants, and ever since I was a child, I’ve had to work in the fields. When you grow up in the countryside, you have to balance your studies with farm work. The children here have had to do the same.

I’ve had to face a lot of challenges in my time working as a teacher in this area, starting with the distances. There is the difficulty in getting around, the lack of investment from the state, the lack of communication, the lack of technology, and well, more than anything, the conflicts we’ve been dealing with as a country. When I worked in Campo Alegre, which was a red zone, in the middle of class we would hear the battles and get down on the ground and wait for it to pass. Things have gotten better now, but between 2002 and 2010, we had to deal with a lot of violence.

The children from this area are intelligent and hard-working and they dream of success.

The hardest thing for them is the distance. This is a very densely forested area and they have to walk between forty-five minutes and an


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hour to get to school, or they come on horseback. They often arrive covered in mud. The other big challenge is the lack of commitment by many families because, however much the children dream and commit themselves, sometimes their parents aren't aware of how important it is for their children to study, and they don't support them. They say, look, I didn't have to study to make a living and I have this farm, I have so many cattle, and I don't know how to read or write. A lot of families still think that way. So, you have to come in as a mediator, to try to make the parents understand, especially when they want to pull their kids out of school, that it's not a good idea, that sometimes life works that way and sometimes its doesn't. What we try to do is keep the children from giving up on their education.



Fondo Acción has been a very important organization for the municipality. I wound up as head of this institute in 2016, and they had already been carrying out a project with the community. They told me about the school restaurant project that we have now, the Divino Niño cafeteria. They also supported us in purchasing some computers with a surplus from the school cafeteria project. We've done training sessions with them to improve our pedagogy, our curriculum, and they supported us with training sessions for the children, always directed towards environmental conservation, making the community aware of the issue.

We did a really beautiful thing last year with some biologists who came here to do a study on butterflies with the children. They spent three days with them, looking at different kinds of butterflies. They went directly to the forest to see them. The children loved it. They saw something that had always been there but that they hadn't paid attention to before. They learned the scientific names of those butterflies, and more importantly, the real value they have. The children learned a lot, and over all, it helped them start to value the wealth of resources that surround us. One time, I remember we did a mapping exercise with the Connected Landscapes project, and that was like what happened with the butterflies, because they realized how important the forest is, how each little mountain that appears on the map is producing the air they breathe and how they give life to the animals and to us. All of these exercises, they give us a better appreciation of what we have.





“Here, the distances are big”

José Gregorio Hernández.
Peasant and Local Promoter
for the Connected Landscapes
program, Solano, Caquetá

I’m from Caquetá. At the moment, I’m in the vereda of Sevilla, where I currently live. I work in the fields. I work with agriculture using the lessons that the Connected Landscapes program gave us.

I live on a small 20-hectare farm. I worked with Fondo until July 31, 2020 when the project ended. I was a local promoter, and I was in charge of working together with the Fondo Acción technicians and the families that are part of the program.

We gave orientations on what they needed to know, on the things

I do on my own farm, which is forest conservation, taking care of the trees and the water with what I learned about connectivity corridors, water isolation and reforestation for water sources, dividing pastures so you can have many cattle on a small piece of land and the grass will yield more for feeding them.

Before working with Fondo Acción, I didn't know anything about that. Previously, you would cut down the forest and wouldn't leave a single bit of conservation to protect the water. That was normal because that's the way we grew up. That's why it was good to have children study the trees and forests in Solano. I participated with my children, Jhonatan and Johan. We wrote stories, we came up with stories.

The point of this training was that adults would interact with children, that we would have them in mind and that we would stop feeling embarrassed, that we would talk, would communicate better with them about how to take care of the environment, without harming it, without cutting down trees.

Working with Fondo Acción gave us a lot of other good things, like investing in a school cafeteria. Thank God, when we participated in the open call we were selected, and now we have an appropriate cafeteria for the children, one that serves the sixteen of them that are part of the little school. This has changed their lives.

Here, the distances are big, the children live up to an hour away on foot, and now, at the end of the day, they've eaten lunch so that they can deal with the journey home.



"We went back to being the explorers that we used to be"

Kerlys Tatiana Benavides Molano, labor technician for early childhood, Solano, Caquetá

I'm from Solita, Caquetá, and for ten years I've lived in the Puerto Mercedes vereda in the municipality of Solano, Caquetá.

I used to work with the ICBF on early childhood, and that's how I got to meet the people from Fondo Acción and did a degree program with them. In Solano, when I finished school, I studied a technical degree in early childhood services, which was what led me to work with the ICBF as a teacher.

At my first job as an early childhood service provider, I was barely 18 years old and I didn't get any job training from the organization I worked for. They just told me, you're an early childhood instructor, take this stack of papers and your assistant, who already knows what this job is about, will explain it to you. They sent me to a vereda that was forty-five minutes away by boat, and then I had to ride by horseback for two hours into the jungle on a bridle path. That's when I started to say, this is kind of hard, but you get into the rhythm of things and the load settles along the way. I wound up in an indigenous reserve and there were a lot of challenges, beginning with the fact that they only spoke Coreguaje. Nobody besides the translator spoke Spanish. They were all speaking Coreguaje. There were fifty children in all, but there were also expectant mothers.

So, we created activities for the women and children to interact and develop emotional ties. We also had discussions about the importance of maternal lactation. I only spent a month in the reserve, then they transferred me to another one. In that one they did speak Spanish, and the biggest challenge I faced was no longer the language, but

managing the ICBF quality standards. We had to meet around 60 standards, but because we're in a municipality so far from everything else, without a road for cars, the protocols didn't reach us, and we—the psychologist, the nurse, the assistant technician, the coordinator and I—had to improvise.

At that time, the truth is that these indigenous communities didn't have big challenges. Now they do, because they feel cornered by big oil companies, but at that time, what I saw was that they were deeply rooted in their culture, they weren't losing their traditions, and this made them really united. They were closed to the world because opening up would be precisely what would put them at risk of losing everything they had, everything they had been able to hold onto.

With these indigenous communities, I learned about a new culture that was completely different from my own, and I confronted the challenge of having to speak not just to one person, but to thirty at a time. I learned to choose my words carefully so that they would understand me through the translator, who always had to be with me. Adjusting my words was the most significant and beautiful thing about that time, and learning to communicate with children using gestures and my body, because if I didn't, they wouldn't understand me.

I was doing this kind of work with communities when news arrived that Fondo Acción was going to offer a degree in early childhood services, and we were first in line. From the get go, they offered all the economic support and incentives because, at the time, we would say, ok, I want to study, but to do so I have to move to an urban center, and that's expensive. My trip to Solano from the Alternativa vereda where I was living would cost me thirty-six thousand pesos, and it only took twenty-five minutes traveling up the Caquetá river. If you take that and multiply by three times a week, which is what the degree would require, plus housing and meals, it wound up being a lot of money. Fondo Acción took care of all that. In the degree program we talked about a lot of things related to early childhood, but the most important thing was that we worked with them to awaken our own inner child. Whenever we began some new activity, they would say, ok, how can you put that idea at the level of a child. Then I would say, I'm starting to feel like child, to think like a child, to act like a child. They would ask us how a child would react to our surroundings, and that would lead us to act like children. We went back to being the explorers that we used to be. Children ask the most questions, they investigate, they're always looking. That they pushed us to think about that was really interesting, and it was what stuck with me the most from that work. They gave us a lot of activities where we had to act like children. For example, animals, if a child goes and sees a cow and then asks why it moos, why it eats grass, why it wanders, and they go and ask an adult, the adult will think that these questions are out of context. And what the people from Fondo told us is that those questions are very important, that we have to recognize their value, because children will always hold onto the first answers that an adult gives them. We learned to find the value in these questions, to see that you can't feel annoyed about answering them because the question isn't insignificant, because it's in early childhood that children begin to hold onto their memories. We were able to understand that by putting ourselves in their place.

I also learned a lot from the group in the degree program, the intersection of different people who had been chosen for the program, because they weren't only teachers, but also common people from different professions, and that made me think not only from my professional perspective, but I also put myself in their shoes.



In the degree program we talked about a lot of things related to early childhood, but the most important thing was that we worked with them to awaken our own inner child.

Climate change

Climate change is the biggest challenge humans are facing. In Fondo Acción, we understand it through a proactive and constructive lens as an opportunity for innovation, to make new thing and make them well. We work in three spheres: mitigation, adaptation and implementation measures.

Through mitigation, we recognize the potential of forests as carbon reserves, therefore we support projects that reduce deforestation and change soil use within the framework of the REDD+ procedure. Likewise, we know that low emissions development is possible, and we look for innovative solutions through energy providers, waste management, industry and agriculture.

Through adaptation, we work on designing measures for increasing a region's resilience, adaptive capacities, communities and production systems. In our implementation measures, we support economic analysis and the search for funding as well as training processes, communication and public awareness.

We do our work along two lines that come together as one: public policy and implementation on the ground. We believe in a vertical integration of these spheres of action. The policies that are defined as national priorities are as important as all the creative possibilities for solutions that can be found on the ground. This is why we work with government entities at the same time as we work with communities, organizations and businesses on the land.





"People see me as an environmental authority"

Reynel Rodríguez, Coordinator for the Acuasar Committee for protecting the environment, Carmen del Chucurí, Santander

I live in the corregimiento of Santo Domingo del Ramo in the municipality of Carmen del Chucurí in Santander. I was born in Bogotá, but I was raised in this region. My parents are from Boyacá, and they came to this area as settlers a long time ago to develop land and set up farms for agricultural production. The first twenty years of my life were spent entirely in the countryside. I am a peasant.

At the same time, I helped my parents run a shop for agricultural products. Ten years ago, I started to learn about working with the community on environmental issues. When I arrived to live here, the government had made an agreement with the community, but without any administrative organization in place. I saw that failure.

That was around 2008, and that was when I started to see how we could address the issue. In 2010, The Peace and Development Program for the Mid Magdalena arrived, and Fondo Acción arrived at the same time looking for people who were ready and willing to work for the environment. Only then did I start to work on the issue of the aqueduct, gathering information, doing paperwork and proposing statutes until we were finally able to mount a board of directors, get organized and legalize everything. In 2011, we were registered with the Chamber of Commerce and the National Directorate of Taxes and Customs (DIAN in Spanish) and we began to function legally according to the regulations.

Since then, we learned to work the land and make better use of it through Fondo Acción and their training and workshops. We learned to improve our riverbeds and educate people about protecting the streams. Out of everything we learned, the issue that interested me most has been reforestation—reforesting the land we already cleared.

In this town, we are graced by two very pretty streams. Ten years ago, those streams were totally exposed. People had cleared the trees right up to the bank and they hadn't left a conservation zone. So,

we started to work on the issue. We taught people that you have to leave ten, even twenty meters of protective area around a stream. At first, it was really difficult because people thought we were trying to steal their land, and they didn't trust us. But over time, with the talks and training, people began to learn and see that it was something really beneficial for us.

Currently, the thinking is really different in this community. We started to reforest the stream and to plant trees throughout the area. Now, a fully-grown forest surrounds us. The thinking we had was that we had to cut down everything. We thought that, if we leave one tree in the pasture, that tree would damage the soil. Now we think very differently.

We also worked on ecological restoration, the sustainable use of the soil and the issue of switching the chemical fertilizers we use for organic ones. As a Board of Directors, we also had a lot of training where we learned how to do paperwork, what the processes are, how to do accounting, and how to treat people—issues of leadership and administration.

In 2012, we signed the first agreement with the Peace and Development Program. The conservation and restoration agreement for this area to connect it with the Yariguíes zone. The idea was to rebuild those cordons, or protective areas, around all of the riverbeds, so natural species could pass through them to the mountain range. Some species had been trapped, like the chachires and the monkeys who had become like a plague. They did a lot of damage to the farmers' crops.

Another important thing we achieved were the voluntary agreements with about one-hundred farmers who committed to conservation. We completed more than one hundred hectares of conservation zones.

In 2018, we signed our last contract with Fondo Acción, which was really important because we committed to doing what we already knew how to do, which was conserving, caretaking, reforestation and working with communities. We started to work on 20 hectares that were donated by some farmers for conservation and reforestation, and that's where we are concentrating our efforts now.

The results of the work we did together are in sight. This was becoming a barren land, and so we had water rationing in the dry season. That hasn't happened here in four or five years. We have enough water.

About four years ago, there was a really bad dry season, and the municipality had to do severe rationing because there wasn't enough water. When they came to ask us if we needed a tanker to supply us, I told them no, fortunately we had our aqueduct running perfectly. They asked me how that was possible, and so we told them that we had been working on the issue of conservation and reforestation around our spring for several years now, that it's very small but well taken care of and it provides enough water for one-hundred-forty families.

Also, with everything we've learned about leadership and administration, we learned to procure support for infrastructure improvements through the municipality and the governance. In 2019, we managed to get a project for 170 million pesos and, with it, we changed a part of our network of roads.

Right now, we're working with people from Simacota on the Peasant Networks project that supports five-hundred peasants in the region with a hectare of cacao, an irrigation system, and the tools and training they need to do things right. This is an ambitious project, and we're waiting on support from the Ministry of Agriculture to be able to execute it next year.

We're looking forward to continued improvement and growth.

We have a problem with contamination from waste water that will reach the stream. We're working with the municipal administration on the construction of a new water treatment plant because the other one was really old. We already acquired the land, we did the topographical survey, and now the mayor told us it might get built next year.

Another pending issue is the purchase of lots in areas that have springs.

The issue of waste and trash—of recycling and organic solutions—is also pending. The plan is to make a factory for producing organic fertilizer with the waste we produce here.

For our development plan, we're also going to put more water gauges in homes.

These ten years changed my life. People see me as an environmental authority.



"Opening your eyes"

Eider Valderrama, Local Promotor for Connected Landscapes program, Solano, Caquetá

Since 2010, we have been undergoing a process with environmental nuclei in Mononguete. We were two representatives for each community, and in total there were twenty-six environmental committees and one coordinator at the level of the núcleo. We had made some regulations for protecting resources, drafted by the communities themselves, guidelines for protecting the environment. We began this work because we realized that if we continued working the way we had been, in ten, fifteen years we wouldn't have anything for our children.

Back then, the communities, we in Solano, were really skeptical: people were always coming to that far off, neglected municipality just to get signatures. They never followed through on their projects. What most captured the community's attention about the Connected Landscapes project is that it wasn't totally determined, rather we would determine it ourselves. We were going to come up with the ideas and execute it ourselves, always keeping in mind how it would benefit us.

Each family presented their project, and among many other things, we made a record of our commitment to caring for the water sources and improving the conditions for cattle ranching to halt its environmental impact. The project improved our lives because, by learning to rotate the cattle in small pastures, the grass stopped running out. But I think one of the most important things that Fondo gave us is that it opened our eyes to the community. They backed us and trained us to be leaders. Based on the work we started doing with Connected Landscapes, we no longer let strangers in with a project to tell us, "It has to be this way, and that's it".

Those of us who are here in the community of Solano are the ones who know what we need and what should be done. They won't be saddling us with projects and giving us orders from some desk in Bogotá or any other part of the world. The right way to do things is for projects to be made by the grassroots communities where there's a need.

That, our open eyes, was what we learned thanks to those training sessions. Also, they started to change our mentality. Around here, we thought a pretty farm was one without a single tree, because that was how we grew up, because we barely had a radio here to listen to the news once in a while, but there were no televisions, no education, nothing. And women were at home and didn't participate in community action meetings. They said there was a women's committee, but that didn't exist. Women didn't participate in anything, and we thought that's how things had to be.

These days, in the Prodesarrollo meetings, there are seventy, eighty women. We had never seen that. These days, there are even women directors on the community boards.





“The land is our definitive strength”

Hoovert Eladio Carabalí Playonero
Community leader for the Plata Bahía Málaga Community Board, Buenaventura, Valle del Cauca

I am Hoovert Eladio Carabalí Playonero, a man born and raised in Buenaventura, Valle del Cauca, with Cauca surnames from Guapi, Cauca. I’m fifty-one years old and I have more that thirty-two years as a leader in black community processes. I’m an environmental researcher and manager with a deep conviction for the rights of Colombia’s black communities. At a historical moment, I accompanied processes for strengthening governance in eight REDD+ projects, from the border with Panama to the border with Ecuador. We did a lot of work to bring awareness, to realize that we are largely responsible for the reality we are living. This idea is very important when it comes to changing negative scenarios into positive ones. On the one hand, working in this territory is about communities building their own voice, but in that process, it becomes necessary to identify strengths and weaknesses, because it’s the only way to make the communities’ desires a reality, first by finding the negative, what holds them back, so we can then create change.

The process that we worked on with Fondo Acción to understand the community’s desires, so that we could make REDD+ projects a success, began to create an environment of work and integration. We introduced ourselves. We made people introduce themselves too. In the Pacific region, spirituality is really important. We put the meeting in the hands of God, or of the Orishas. We did a collective prayer so that they would help us achieve our goals. The first big step was to reflect on what our individual and collective roles had been in the region. It was an invitation to journey into the past. Who were we before? We split into groups to write or draw the way things had been in the region before, in terms of natural resources, culture, relationships and displacement. Where were the veredas? What were they called? What kind of life did we have? The life that elders still remembered.

People took that really cool journey and they almost always came to the same conclusions, that in the past there was abundance, that there weren’t fights, that the community worked together, that they built their houses together through labor exchanges, that the harvest was also done with a labor exchange or minga, that we went over there to get corn from Peter and we went over here to get sugarcane from John, and so there was no need for money. That man over yonder who wasn’t my father, if he saw me making a mistake, he would scold me, and my father would go and hear him out, and so I would be educated collectively, not just at home.

People brought this history with them, which was really beautiful for them, and then the roof caved in.

“What is happening now? Why are things like this?” we would ask using the same reflective method, and that’s when we would start to find the differences.

There were the general reasons, the results from decisions taken by national and local governments, but there were also the collective reasons, those caused by communities and individuals.

About the present, almost everyone found one difference with the past, and it’s that they didn’t have a clear, legally recognized title. Today they have it. Most of the lands that are part of the REDD+ projects that Fondo Acción accompanies are legally resolved. They have resolved title allocations or collective adjudications. They found other



good things about the present: that the same families were still on the land—the Arroyo-Gonzálezes, the Mosquera-Murillos—and so they were all part of a big family. They had been here for a hundred years. They also found things that weren't so good: their relationship to the land, for example. Before, we had a relationship with it because it gave us everything, but today, we were only using it as a tool for natural resources extraction, sometimes in irrational ways. Definitively, we found that, though there are many things in common between the past and the present, what has changed is our behavior as a culture, as an ethnic group, and our way of relating to the interior, to the land and our territory.

This exercise allows us to create an assessment, and later, based on the reality of present and past experiences, we proposed questions about the future we would like for our territories and communities. We left them with the task of dreaming about all of the dimensions we had discussed. What kind of culture, economy, territory, natural resources and family and community relationships do we dream of? And, of course, how to do it? What will we have to do to achieve these dreams?

The conclusion we came to was that the territory is like a ship that comes from the past, is living a present and is sailing towards the future. The land is our definitive strength because it still belongs to us and will continue to belong to us. We are the same families with the same names as one-hundred years ago. Unless some supernatural event erases us all, our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren will be living on this land, so we have to improve it for them, defining habits, social, economic and cultural actions so that the future of our family will be the best one possible.



"What we protect above depends on what is below"

Omar Tavera, Founder and Honorary Business Partner of the Peasant Networks Corporation for Peace and Comprehensive Development in Simacota, Simacota Community Board Member

At this moment, I am a municipal Board member and my farm is in Bajo Simacota, Santander. I am from San Vicente del Chucurí and am part of the Serranía de Yariguíes National Park. We are between San Vicente and Simacota. We are part of two provinces: Yariguíes and Comunera.

My history of working for the community begins around 2001, when we found ourselves in a region very affected by violence, by the armed conflict.

At the time, I was 21 years old, I had finished high school in Piedecuesta and I was returning to the land that I and all of my family had been forcefully displaced from. When I arrived, I found a shocking level of poverty and social disfunction. There was no communication between corregimientos because we were very afraid that anyone could be a guerilla or a paramilitary or a member of the military. We came back to reclaim our farm and I started to think that I should do something to repair the social fabric, the trust between people.

I started to work as a teacher in the area. We didn't have an official school and, with the teachers who were there, we had to formalize a school.

We managed to create a program that went up to ninth grade, but the violence started to worsen again. The paramilitaries became stronger and the area started to fill with sons of paramilitaries, sons of guerillas,



and sons of military service men who had had relationships with the girls from that area.

In 2006, I started to think we should create something so that we could make ourselves visible, so people would see that we weren't just violence upon violence, that we weren't a place where anyone who showed up would be killed immediately, but that we were just a bunch of peasants immersed in state neglect. So, I said, let's do something, let's do a socio-economic survey and see how we're doing. We visited eleven veredas over five months. We visited houses and managed to do all of the work to make the El Guamo comprehensive development zone program a success. We started to see what there was in this territory, we started to work with women, with children, with community action boards, and we started to do a whole structural framework. We would get together, we would do social gatherings, we cooked sancocho and we realized that we were afraid because we had always had to confront that reality. We told each other about how the paramilitaries came and killed and raped our families, that they killed all the cows, the chickens, the dogs and the children, and that's how we became friends, by sharing our pain.

One day, the people from Fondo Acción showed up with an open call, and they told me, seeing as how you're people who work here in the area and you know everyone, we're interested in having you as our strategic partners. They wanted us to show them around the territory. We're on the hill, on the mountainside, and the connectivity between the rivers is really strong. Our river reaches the Ciénaga del Opón and later reaches the Magdalena River.

We all know that the swamps (ciénagas) are buffer zones for the rivers. When the river grows, it feeds the swamp, and that's why the river doesn't flood. That's why this system is so important. In any case, we went to show the Fondo Acción people around, and we also told them about how our organization had formed and how interested we were in having them invest around here so that we could protect the hillside, because swamps are protected from the top down. It's just dredging. What you do above affects what happens below. That was when we began to set up the project. Fondo

Acción wanted to see more areas to verify what we were telling them, so we showed them the territory. We met up with people. For example, a man who was part of the Peasant Networks, and he told us: "Hey look, I take care of the forest here because the forest protects me, it keeps me cool, but I also have ivory palm for people to make buttons for jewelry. I do conservation, but I benefit from the ivory palm, I have that income alternative." Those things were really interesting for Fondo Acción, and they recognized that, as an organization, we were working with the families that protected the forest. So, we started to work on a bigger project together. We started to learn about and collect seeds. We realized that we had trees in danger of extinction, like the maqui. Thanks to this project with Fondo Acción, we planted eight-hundred trees, and we realized the same thing was happening with other trees, and we said, "Of course, we have to protect them, to make people aware that ecology is really important."

In the project we worked on with Fondo Acción, the most important thing was to learn to recognize our own seeds, to value the importance of having all these different species.

That was when we learned that we needed to have corridors in the fields for animals to cross them, and we started to understand the importance of protection. We developed an awareness of conservation.

This project also really affected our ability to continue existing as an organization and the impact we could have in the area. Also, besides working on the issue of conservation, we received training in administration and finances.

We learned to manage accounts, to keep documents, to make records, to have precise information, to make accounting systems, because we did that a little bit, but we didn't do it so well. From the beginning, we had an accountant who did those things, but we didn't do them ourselves. We learned to do our own administration and to tell our story, to manage the information we had. This also reinforced our confidence, our belief that we could continue working on the land. The accompaniment that Fondo did was very by the books. They met with us, gave us some talks, and gradually gave us guidance on how we could continue as an organization. It was a very lovely partnership, and it was a lot of hard work, because they would show us where we were messing up, where we were getting caught up. You look at the weaknesses you have as an organization and that's like when a father teaches a child to walk. Yes, the Fondo Acción team did that for us as an organization. And that was the project that brought us down to earth as an organization so that we could realize we were strong.

We have a lot of big challenges ahead of us. One is to give added value to our flagship product: fine, aromatic chocolate, chocolate that gives us an identity. We have a problem: we have more than eight-hundred hectares of cacao and the region isn't known as a chocolate producing region. If you look at the chocolate map of Colombia, the municipality of Simacota doesn't appear. There's Santa Helena, Carmen de Chucurí and Lebrija, which I don't think have more than 100 hectares of cacao. That's our challenge now. Also, fixing the roads, uniting the people, having our own chocolate brand and making it an ecological brand. We teach people to work with organic fertilizers, so the cacao should be 100% organic, because that also guarantees that we're taking care of the forests that we've committed to protecting.

This project also really affected our ability to continue existing as an organization and the impact we could have in the area. Also, besides working on the issue of conservation, we received training in administration and finances.

Strengthening capacities

At Fondo Acción, we believe that the foundation for sustainable investment lies in strengthening the skills of the people, organizations and communities that we work with so they can manage positive transformations in the environment, production methods, consumption habits, childcare and the preservation of life. This is founded on: self-recognition and designing life projects or development projects; empowerment and promoting leadership positions; political participation and being able to influence decisions about land use; and designing policies, creating solutions to local problems and managing alliances.

Over these twenty years, we have encouraged an appreciation and incorporation of knowledge, competencies and skills. On certain occasions, we have developed training programs that are locally contextualized. On others, we have provided consultations and accompaniment for project development. Through close, continuous work, we managed to get people to take up better practices for their production systems as well as conflict resolution outlines. We developed a perspective based on caretaking and a connection between being and doing, facilitating practices that define agreements and collaborative work structures in grassroots community groups, exchanging and learning from experiences.



“When it gets hot, I get in the river”

Everildis Córdoba, Community Leader, Legal Representative for Cocomasur, Acandí, Chocó

In the end, I am the result of a lot of things that have to with the place where I was born and the joy of growing up without standards, codes or rules. The best thing that could have happened in my life was to have been born in Peñaloza, on the banks of the Tolo River. That was where I learned to untangle vines to untangle stories. Here, near this river where I still live, I feel like my childhood memories are continue as living experience. A lot of what I saw, this collective existence that is my life, has kept its shape. I was brought up interwoven with a lot of children who were like siblings, a big jumble for playing: “Let’s go to the river”, “Let’s go fishing”, “Let’s go pick guava”, “Let’s collect vines”.

The memories I carry with me in my head and heart, in my case, have made me think my whole life about what I can contribute so that this collective lifestyle can continue, the one I experienced and am still experiencing, so that there will always be a river for children to swim in, so that the people of my community continue building things together.

The school in this community, for example, was built by everyone. Everyone had a hand in it because it was a communal decision to stay here and this was the logical thing to do. That is the thinking of a community, the thinking of a big family.

I have a friend who told me one day, when we were going through tough times as a family, “But it seems like all of you are facing the issue”, and I told her, “The same way we share our joy, and there are moments full of joy, we also share our pain”.

In collective living, I think there is a lot to receive and a lot to give. If someone has more, if someone has a bigger piece of sugarcane, you have to share little pieces so that everyone can eat. If everyone has sugarcane, you have to have a really big stomach because you have to eat the whole thing.

This is what gives meaning to our way of collective living, to my job, because this way of life is what I work for and will keep working for.

In general, I have dedicated my life to being a leader in community processes for the black communities of Acandí, but this year I became the legal representative for the Community Board of Cocomasur, which is an abbreviation for the Community Board for the Black Communities of the Tolo Riverbed and the Southern Coastal Zone. The name, Cocomasur, which seem like a real title, refers to the geographic demarcation. This area contains Chugandí, Caleta, San Miguel, Peñaloza, Furutungo, Tibirre, Titiza, San Francisco and Playona. I’m from Peñaloza and my town is right on the banks of the Tolo River.

My work as a leader, if I think about it, began as a little girl. Back then, we had teachers who really loved their jobs, that had always wanted to do what they do. They commit themselves to shaping people, and that’s something really beautiful because, beyond school, the children didn’t have a lot of contact with the outside world. We didn’t connect with anyone other than each other. We were a community apart, and the teachers came to stay and educate us. Because our activities were always going to the river, or going into the woods to hunt for things, the teachers back then would come up with things for us to do so that we would stay active. Since the time I was a little girl, the teacher would say, “Because you like it, you’ll be in charge of this or that”. and she would say to the other kids, “Everildis is in charge”.

I liked to dance. I danced at home and in school. We would participate in events and there, at those events, I would also lead, but there was a time in my childhood when I lost touch with my land. I had to go live in the city, and that changed my life for a time. I was in Cartagena and Medellín. I studied in the city until ninth grade. When I was seventeen, I came back here, to Peñaloza. I got pregnant with my first daughter and then with the second, and I didn't go back to school to finish eleventh and twelfth grade until I was twenty years old.

Going back to school was also a struggle. There were no night classes, and in the day, they didn't accept women with children. There were no other opportunities for us to study, but finally I won that battle and went back to school, and that was when I started to do a lot of things. My eldest was three and my youngest was nine months old. That was hard. I had to go in and out. I had to do social work. I started dancing again, and I went back to being as restless I had been as a girl. With dance, we were able to represent the school in a Regional Competition. We went to dance in Quibdó. There I also wound up in a leadership position with the group, but formal work was an issue. It only started to come together after I finished school.

Around that time, I started a community process, an opportunity to train for a position in healthcare administration. That was during the height of Law 100, which created a national social security system for pensions, healthcare and occupational hazard insurance, and all those solidary healthcare enterprises were forming, which were mixed economy businesses. Because I had been a good student, one day, when someone came to talk about these things, these aunts and uncles came together and recommended me, and that was how I wound up in the process of consolidating the solidary healthcare enterprise for Acandí. Seven people were going to be selected, but they got tired and frustrated because, if it's hard to get in touch with our community now, think about what it was like back then. I held on and followed through. I sent them everything they asked for, followed the directions. One day, we got a call (at the time, you could only make calls at the Mayor's Office or through the Telecom shop). They told me that I was needed in the government, at the Ministry of Health, so they could tell me what needed to happen for the Acandí healthcare enterprise. I finished the paperwork myself, and once everything was ready, they told me we needed to find a manager. People showed up from all over the place, but the community said they didn't want anyone but me, because if no one had stuck around to finish the process, why should they be the ones to get the job.

The first thing I thought was, "I can't do thin, I don't know how", but the people put me in charge and I learned. I kept going, I got tangled up, I fell down, I got up again. They were three years, from 1993 to 1996, that were interrupted by violence in the area. I had to leave Peñaloza again, but when I was working for other people, a lot of wonderful things happened. We went into the communities with medics to treat people. We brought the benefits of healthcare to everyone who was part of the enterprise.

In 2008, I started going to Peñaloza more often, and in 2010, I stayed.

In every place I lived over those years, I wound up in charge of a lot of things. I was the healthcare coordinator for the Mid Magdalena. There, I showed them how we had done things here. In San Juan del Caguán, I wound up being the local healthcare director for the municipality.

Public services had always been there.

When I came back in 2010, the process of conforming with the framework of Law 70 happened. While I had been coming and going, other people had been in Cocomasur's process for addressing the subject of ethnic rights, what we did in the region to consolidate as a community board. So, when I arrived, I got to work doing what I knew how to do.



At the time, we went through a lot with the collective. The community elders were in charge, and there was an emergent process for working on community mediation where they asked me to participate. I started to try to understand how we had dealt with conflict resolution. There were things, written methodologies, but they were written by people who hadn't had direct experience. They say you have to do this or that, how things should be done, but without understanding anything about how people live in these communities, and I thought, we're not going to do this, we're not going to follow some instructions that tell us how to live.

So, I got completely involved in our lives, how we live, in the biggest opportunities we could have for conflict resolution and mediation. This was like going back to the places where I would play as a girl, exploring the forests I would explore when I was bringing people healthcare. It was a return, filling myself up with our collective life again.

Very quickly, I came to realize something about the issue of administration. The Cocomasur board participated in some projects, but the cooperating organizations for resource management, always had to use intermediaries to reach the community.

Why can't the community speak with them directly? I asked myself, why can't we speak directly to the donors?

I talked about this issue with the community. The ideas for doing projects were there. I was firm about continuing this community work, and one day, the legal representative told me that an organization, Anthrotech, had shown up talking about REDD+ projects. They wanted me to look into it to see if it was right for us.

When it came time to work on this, I was already loaded with community projects for everything that was happening in the region, and I started to ask a lot of questions that I wasn't getting answered. So, I started to investigate, to look for information wherever I could. I put my heart and soul into it, like I always do, and once we had made some advances in the process, Anthrotech told us that to be able to partner with them we needed to have a third-party guarantor. They mentioned three organizations and told us that, among them, there was one called Fondo Acción. That name seemed familiar because, uh-huh. It makes me laugh, now that I think about it, because I didn't know anything about Fondo, but I thought, if they work for the environment and children, they can't be bad.

If you do something for children, you're a good person, and the same if you do good things for trees. That was our high-level criteria at the time. In October 2010, we chose Fondo Acción without knowing much about them. We came to the conclusion that there was nothing to worry about if we tried working with them. I had this idea that we had nothing to lose but time.

As soon as we met with Fondo Acción, we understood each other because of the simplicity of their way of relating to us.

Communities always have a lot of weariness and tension towards outsiders. When people feel there is an ease of relating they start to feel respect. Fondo put their trust in the community from the very beginning.

We agreed that Fondo Accíon would accompany the Cocomasur community board for the first five years of the REDD+ project, to reinforce their administrative and financial capacities, and what wound up happening is that they started seeing all the things we needed to learn here.

They didn't just show up with an eye to improvement, they realized there were strengths here. What we did was an exchange. Of course, Fondo Acción had technical, administrative and financial skills, but they didn't know what a collective was, what a collective life like ours was, so that's where the difference lies. What we created was a relationship, and like any relationship, we had arguments. We didn't do everything that Fondo told us to. We always asked, what do you mean? Why?

Within the community board, these discussions began to shape a position on what we wanted, what

we still want, which is to have accompaniment from an experienced organization, but for facilitating community issues, for making technical knowledge simple. I've always said that a good technician is one who can simplify their knowledge, who gives it to the community so that they understand it and incorporate it.

Each of the things that Fondo Acción would do with us felt this way. They were always trying to find procedures so that we could make the projects a success together. How will we do it? How can we succeed? And so, we were making progress through constant dialogue.

There was a will, a will on their part and on ours. Little by little we made this partnership a reality and it wound up going beyond what we needed at the beginning, much further than accompaniment for running the REDD+ project.

Together we began to grow, to find the potential in this project.

By 2012, we made the first agreement between Fondo Acción and Cocomasur. At the time, Fondo Acción was telling us, "What you do is wonderful. No one in this country is doing what you do. If you could tell the nation about what you're doing, a lot of people would feel inspired." But, we asked ourselves, what are we doing? We didn't believe our way of doing things, our way of life, was something to talk about, something inspiring.

Taking that step was a whole ritual. The patience that Fondo Acción had! Around that same time, they had created the HARMOS methodology for leadership training. That was a game-changer for us, working with being and doing, but far beyond that, the work they did with us for organizational coaching, for formulating projects, completely transformed us. We never imagined that the coaching exercise would be so transformative, or that it would strike such a cord with those of us who were heading the exercises. It made us take a different stance in relation to others. We started to sit down with people to tell them what the project had been like, then we wrote until we had a book that became a case study for the Chocó-Darién conservation corridor. And after that book, we started to think, if we were going to tell someone about this, how would we tell them, and that was how, together with Fondo Acción, we wound up traveling along the Pacific Coast telling people about what we did with the REDD+ project, to tell them who Cocomasur and Fondo Acción are and what the REDD+ project had brought to the community. We told them about how our own project had been an opportunity for strengthening the community organization, which doesn't mean it will be the same for everyone. The idea was that everyone would achieve things in accord with their own plans, with the focus they gave to their projects. Success for some people isn't necessarily going to look the same for others. For us, it worked. All of us in Cocomasur are from here, and everything we do, we do for the collective, for everyone's benefit. A lot of the communities we visited developed their own REDD+ projects, and they all met with Fondo to be part of the REDD+ Pacific Coast Community portfolio.

Now we're receiving resources from the Sustainable Colombia Fund, and we chose Fondo Acción as our operator. Fondo goes into negotiations with us. They are the ones who sign with the BID, with the operating government. They are the ones who make deals with each of the spokespersons, according to the agreements we reach.

Right now, we're working on issues of governance, production, and tracking the flora and fauna. We just created a partnership with the Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development for production projects with local boards. We're formulating an ethno-tourism project, and we continue to work on cultural recovery and territory management.

We have a lot of challenges ahead of us. One of the most important ones is preparing the board with legal representation so that we women can continue doing it. It is very rare for black collectives to have women as their legal representatives, so it's


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important for us to leave this resolved so that any woman from the region can decide, I want to be the legal representative for the Community Board.

We have to increase participation by women in the collective's decision-making processes.

There's another really important thing. In the vision statement for our collective that we wrote together, it says that we aspire to be one of the most well-known community boards in Colombia, and in a conversation the other day, we thought, the issue isn't to be recognized, but to sustain ourselves, and that stability doesn't have anything to do with the outside world. It has to do with what's inside, because external recognition will only come when you give yourself recognition.

Another big challenge is to make it so that, in everything we do, we can remain in the territory, despite the challenges this may present. This here has to be so good, so so good, that there is nothing better beyond it. While it's hot, I'll get in the river, something like that. We couldn't lose the north community because of our relationship to institutionalism. With everything there is, we should never forget that the most important thing is the life of the collective, our life, the simple and quiet life without letting in politics, without letting donations change us, without letting anyone change us. That is our biggest challenge: maintaining the collective, maintaining coexistence on the pacific coast. This is why the implementation of Article 1 of the peace accords is so important for rural areas and ethnic groups. This challenge isn't ours alone, it includes all of the Colombian collective. We all have to contribute.



"We have to transcend the barrier of the patriarchy"

Yolanda García Luango,
Executive Director for Asomanos Negra, Guapi, Cauca

Twenty-four years ago, I decided to dedicate my life to leading projects in the Pacific region and nationally. I was a restless girl, a student at a Teacher-Training College in Guapi, Cauca, and I started to realize that what I saw around me was not inspiring for the community or the region. In those days, I thought, why, if I had grown up surrounded by such beauty, swimming in the river, with fishes and gold—because my father was a fisherman and a miner—if we had all of that abundance, why didn't we have electricity or potable water? Why did we have to go to the river for water to do our chores?

I also wondered a lot about the word poverty: why did the illustrious politicians always say, always complain, that the Pacific Coast was so poor? Weren't we rich in our own way?

In the Teacher-Training College where I studied, they gave us really important pedagogical tools that made it possible for me to internalize my context. That was how, asking ourselves questions, some of the young people from the town and I began to create a youth organization, and that organization led us to think about the role of young people, about the changes we knew we could make. We knew then that we had to do something for the community and for ourselves and for future generations. The organization became stronger and it wound up receiving recognition at a regional level. Everyone in Buenaventura and in the department of Chocó talked about how in Guapi there was a group of young people that was really good.



That was when I became visible, and so I was considered for a position in the regional operations secretary for Cauca. At the time, that organization was part of the special commission for black communities that, hand-in-hand with the senators, parliamentarians and part of the government, were responsible for establishing provisional article 55 of the Political Constitution of 1991, which was the only lifeline that could help us save what, at the time, we were trying to incorporate as the rights of ethnic communities in Colombia. In the end, through a lot of hard work, me managed to transform it into Law 70. I was so young. I had the luck and the privilege of being taken under the wing by many leaders and representatives in Colombia tasked with establishing that article and everything that it made possible for Black, Raizal and Palenquero communities.

On this long journey, around 2015, when here on the Pacific Coast we were talking about strategies for emissions reduction to put together what could end up being REDD+, we met with Fondo Acción's friends who were also on their own journey, and we started a process of collective construction, adding each of our unique perspectives to the construction of a REDD+ procedure. We also collaborated on an action plan that would make it possible to implement some concrete strategies with a differential gender perspective for Pacific Coast communities, getting black women from the Pacific Coast and other regions of the country to participate, because there was a need to make these women visible and consider them key actors in the process.

Within the framework of the policy for implementing the REDD+ strategy, it has been difficult for us as women to position the differential gender perspective: that women should be seen as key actors and that their contributions and all of their strategies for regional conservation should be valued. This challenge comes from the very design of the national policy. That's where the gap is. We don't have the opportunity to say which differential actions for strengthening our community processes women can implement from our position, our identity, our condition, our self-awareness. The policy should be expressed with a concrete plan of action, but there isn't one.

So we said, we're not going to wait for the Ministry of the Environment to fill it in. Instead, we're going to dive into our own actions, so women will participate and have a necessary effect on the subject.

Up till now, we continue to try to establish guidelines, we continue to define the strategies, but what we women have clear and what we're saying is that we play a decisive role in environmental and natural resource conservation. Women in the Pacific region

are key to all of its cultural expressions. They are the ones who transmit knowledge and wisdom from generation to generation, but they are also the ones who are entirely committed to making sure those cultural values and principles are maintained. We believe that the differential gender perspective has to be part of any strategy, any policy, any guidelines for a project. That's why we work to be recognized in the project, that we benefit from the conservation action, that we receive a budget and the conditions to be able to do the work we do. Machismo, the patriarchy in organizational scenarios, still reigns, and we have to break through that barrier to be able to make people respect women's rights.

To fulfill this commitment to women, Fondo Acción facilitated financing through an international development assistance project, so that they could incorporate this commitment within the guidelines for participating in REDD+ in the Pacific Region, but also to bring that commitment to other places in Colombia: to the inter-Andean valleys, the Amazon and the Caribbean Coast. Through Let's be Black Women (Asomanos Negra), we were appointed as the community responsible for contracting, using the funds that Fondo Acción made available for implementing the plan for work with women, and it went really well. The work we did reflected all the ways they helped us grow administratively and financially, but also socially, because it opened up a path for accompaniment and consultation.

Based on our desire to fully implement the differential gender perspective, we have done work with them in recent years focused on backing women on community boards.

There are improvements in coconut production, one of the flagship products from this region, as well as in the açai palm project, which began as a private business venture. Today, the communities are aware that this is part of their regional business management, as native communities. There are also fishery projects and fish and seafood processing projects. Women are working on processing the *piangua* (mangrove cockle), a delicious, sought-after mollusk that has a history, a cultural construction, because the women are the ones who collect and make use of these mollusks, and there is a culturally important production system surrounding this trade.

There are cacao projects, handicrafts projects, projects for reinforcing ethnic identities and ecotourism projects, as in La Plata, Bahía Málaga, Ladrilleros and Tumaco. There are also agricultural projects that are more about recuperating seeds. Our region has also been afflicted by certain policies implemented by the government that, rather than alleviate the situation, aggravate it. For example, in the case of illicit crop eradication, the policy of fumigating with glyphosate has ravaged the environment, causing irreparable damage, like the loss of seeds and the deterioration of immense agricultural lots.

Because of this, some organizational dynamics like ours have given themselves the task of recovering native seeds for rice, plantain and taro root. We think these are strong sources of food autonomy for the people, but they can also become a plus for strengthening community business.

With the Environmental Research Institute of the Pacific (IIAP in Spanish), in the case of the Cauca coast, we have recovered seven species of rice seed, and those seeds are already being used in the region. Twenty years ago, those seeds had been lost regionally. Likewise, we're recovering corn and plantain seeds, and Musaceae seeds in general.

All of this work has been done thanks to the relationship we have been building with Fondo Acción, which has been really motivating. It

was really important for us to find a partner who would trust us, what we do and what we build. Today, we have a lot of women leading processes on our community boards. We have regional women leaders who have received training. We have organizational processes that go hand-in-hand with projects that Fondo itself helps to leverage. We have relationships with institutional entities and private businesses, which Fondo Acción made possible through their good services. You could say we have more solid, more consolidated territories as far as their governments, their agreements with national environmental policies, but also in the social policies that our black communities have laid out through rights, recognition and financing, because of course, dreams become realities when they get financing.

There are a lot of good things that have happened, but we also have to mention the difficulties.

We have a huge challenge, right now, with illegal crops that are driving deforestation. Another challenge we have is the way the Pacific region has been conceived of as a space for resource extraction, which is ultimately what impoverishes the communities. And, well, the persecution, threats and assassination of social leaders that is a reality because there is a strong intention to silence the voices of those of us who are speaking out and making it possible to build equitable processes that respect the dynamics that the community itself has built for its benefit and to benefit the planet.

We have always been in a risky situation, one of threats, but the need to do things for the community outweighs that fear.

At the center of all of these challenges is the fact that there is no economic autonomy to be able to have political autonomy. This is why it's important to explore productive activities. Businesses will breathe fresh air into our economy, and that will give us political autonomy. Having overcome the economic difficulties, we have to keep following our path. Consolidating social processes is an immediate concern. We cannot be scattered, not in terms of individual action, but also in terms of our community boards because, as established by Law 70 and by Decree 1745, they were provided with the collective land titles. Having the titles is not a definitive solution for attaining autonomy. The government gave us the titles, but not the mechanisms to make the land viable. Thus, the challenge we face is to consolidate the political autonomy through economic improvement and by making women's processes visible, so they can follow their own path, because we can't get stuck in a hodgepodge of community processes that don't recognize women's roles and make them invisible. We have already seen that our processes have a life of their own.

Environmentalism is a key issue that we have to keep working on, because there are a lot of activities here today that are detrimental to our natural resources and the environment of the region. The presence of businesses that exploit minerals, some with permits, others without, are causing damage with their heavy machinery, and they don't skimp on deteriorating the ecosystem here. Of course, deforestation itself is also a very urgent issue because it has become a source of income for many native families, but also a way for business owners to get rich through intermediation, and they could care less about environmental guidelines. The volume of timber production from these businesses is ravaging the Pacific region and destroying the jungle. The people themselves need to be given the tools to make changes and reaffirm their positive effect on the land. If they aren't given the tools, we're shooting ourselves in the foot, because the trees, not only won't they reestablish themselves, the ecosystems won't recover, and we won't be able to leave the impoverishment that we have been systematically subjected to.



“When there are a lot of words it’s because there’s a lack of intention”

Bernardo Orobio Riofrío, Community Specialist for REDD+ Projects , Buenaventura, Valle del Cauca

I live in Buenaventura, and I am in constant contact with the region and with those who are working with Fondo Acción in Cajambre, La Plata, Bahía Málaga and Bajo Calima. For seven or eight years now, we’ve been advancing in the formulation of a REDD+ project, basically to strengthen the production and governance capacities to reduce the pressure on the forest and, from there, to provide an ecosystem service for the planet and, as such, for the businesses that release their emissions into the environment.

My work with the environment and regional communities was already half written.

When I was a little kid, I would go with my great grandmother to her farm on the Micay river, which was a journey of about twenty-four hours. I would spend the whole night on heavy boats, full of goods they were taking to the El Guayabal vereda where my grandmother Leonida lived. There the houses were more or less three-hundred meters apart, surrounded by crops. No one understood why I would go there if there were no children to play with, but I knew that on the farm my grandmother would eat sugar cane and sapote, swim in the safe part and fish. The only thing I made sure to bring with me was a bag of bread, because there was no bakery there. When the bread was going to run out, my parents would send me a new bag on one of the boats. Everything was so quiet, you could hear when a boat was coming two hours before it arrived at my grandmother’s house. The house was elevated because the river would grow, and beneath it my grandmother had a fire pit where she would make coconut candy in a big pan with a really big spoon. There was no power plant and sometimes, weather permitting, we would connect the black and white TV to a car battery so we could watch television, but that wasn’t the plan. The plan was to be there, in that place, in nature.

On the other hand, my father was also a leader in the black community. He took me to meetings all over the place, and later he bought me a video camera, so I recorded them. I remember well one of the first times I saw him talking about the issue of black communities when I went to the countryside with him. It was a night where he took me to a workshop with the Tatabro community board, which is between Aguaclara and Llano Bajo. We arrived in the evening and we slept in a maloca without walls or mattresses, and the next day they launched into a meeting that had to do with ethnic rights, organizational matters, the conditions on the land and strengthening leadership. That was how I started to travel. I went to Yurumanguí. I had been to Raposo, Anchhicayá and on the Naya River. Since then, a lot of people in the rural area know me as Bernardito, and they know my father, both because he was the rector at several educational institutes there, in that area, and because we always held meetings, talked to the people, trying to give life to what had been written in 1993, when Law 70 came into being.

Because of my life in El Guayabal with my grandmother Leonida, and because of my travels all over with my father, when it came time to study, I chose biology, but what I wanted was to find an intersection of subjects. I didn’t want to go around counting pianguas, birds and trees. I

wanted to talk with the people about natural resources, because the animals, the flora and fauna, they know what they need to do to survive, but it's our lack of awareness as human beings that changes their realities. In my last semesters of university, I came across an elective that was called conservation biology, and then I did a master's degree in environmentalism. That's how I came to dedicate my life to seeing how social issues can be addressed through biology. I've spent eighteen years doing the same thing, and I think I have the best job in the world, though it's a really difficult challenge because of all the issues we face here on the land.

The Colombian Pacific Coast is immensely rich in biodiversity, in joy and tranquility, but it's also immensely poor, overflowing, in social inequality. The income that people have isn't enough to build a decent house, to have a decent roof. Some people call us lazy, tell us we don't know how to manage money, and sure, it isn't an obligation to know how to administer money, because we didn't study economics. Money was imposed on us.

The way to live and establish economic relationships in the Pacific region was different, it was about trade, labor exchanges, other things that have been eroding under the imposition of money.

There is also the problem of education, whether the students can easily get to school from their homes, whether they have shirts and shoes that aren't full of holes, whether they will have to sit under a leak when they get to the classroom, and whether it isn't always the rector's fault. This precarity isn't just caused by corruption—of course there is corruption, clearly—but at the center there is a low level of investment and weak accompaniment from institutions.

And what to say about the healthcare problem. The other day, I arrived in Cajambre, and before we began our meeting, they told us someone had cut their foot. There isn't a single medical provider there. We had to put the man on a boat, fill it with thirty-five gallons of gasoline, look for the pilot and the captain so that they'd take him. A gallon of gasoline on the river is at fourteen-thousand pesos. Do the math. We have all of these natural riches. We're poor because we lack opportunities. If you have to increase expenses this way just to cover basic necessities, that leads to poverty.

This is our everyday life. There is a lot of joy, but there are also some unmet basic needs that must be addressed. The good thing is that we aren't drifting aimlessly. There are leaders, there's a will, and there are organizations like Fondo Acción that work hand-in-hand with us.

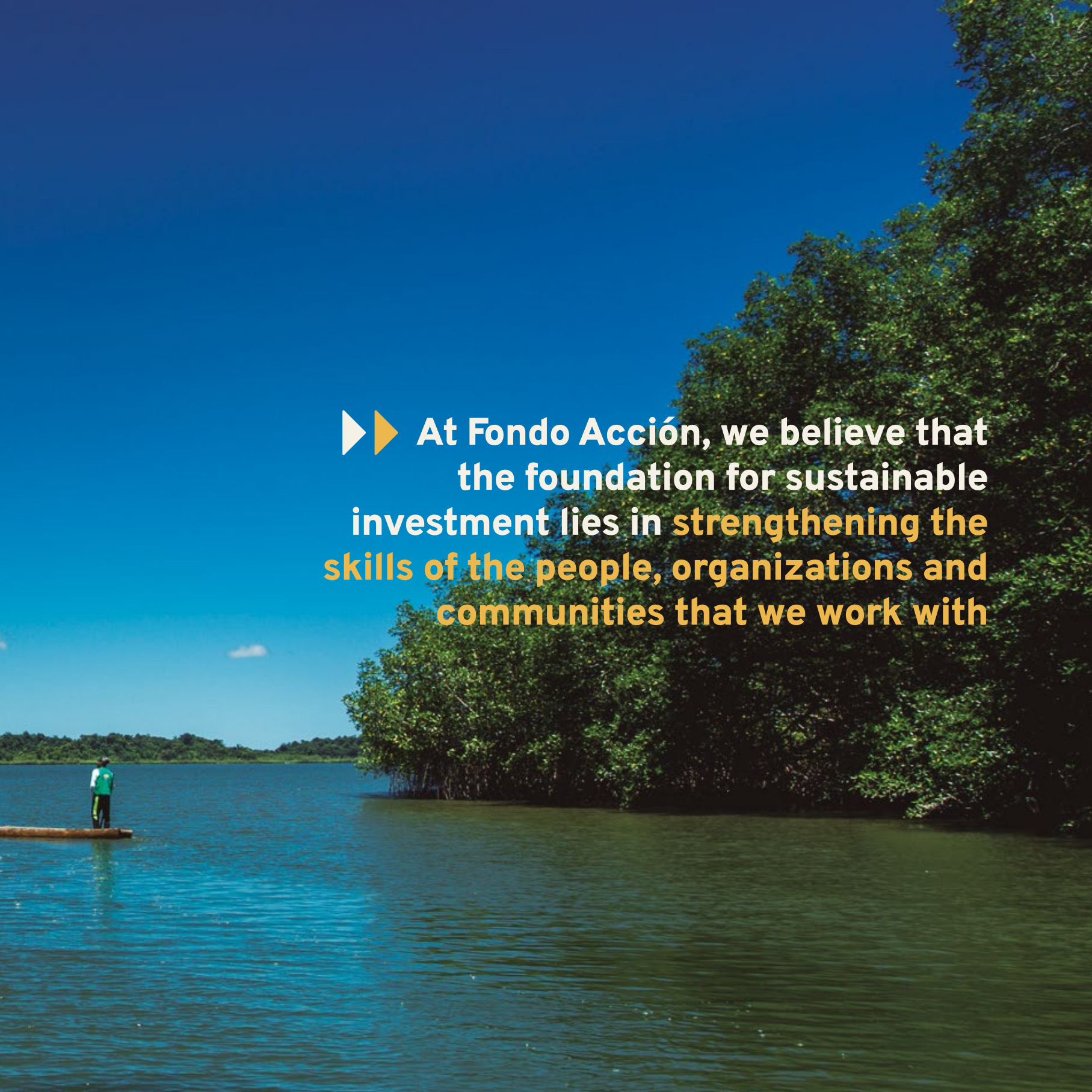
Work with Fondo has increased dialogue around decision making in the region. Most things, if not all things, are discussed. The relationship within the community has improved and created trust in the administration. Fondo gradually opened the valves on administration for community boards. They are the ones in charge of administering resources and leading activities on the land.

It took five years of work to get results. When the project began, the most important thing was to develop trust in the REDD+ projects, that people would understand that they were both a business, a way for the communities to find stability, but also that they were obligated to use the money to conserve the territory. They were going to systemize their everyday life to receive funds for doing so. They needed to understand that they weren't selling the land, they were providing an ecosystem service for their own benefit and to benefit society

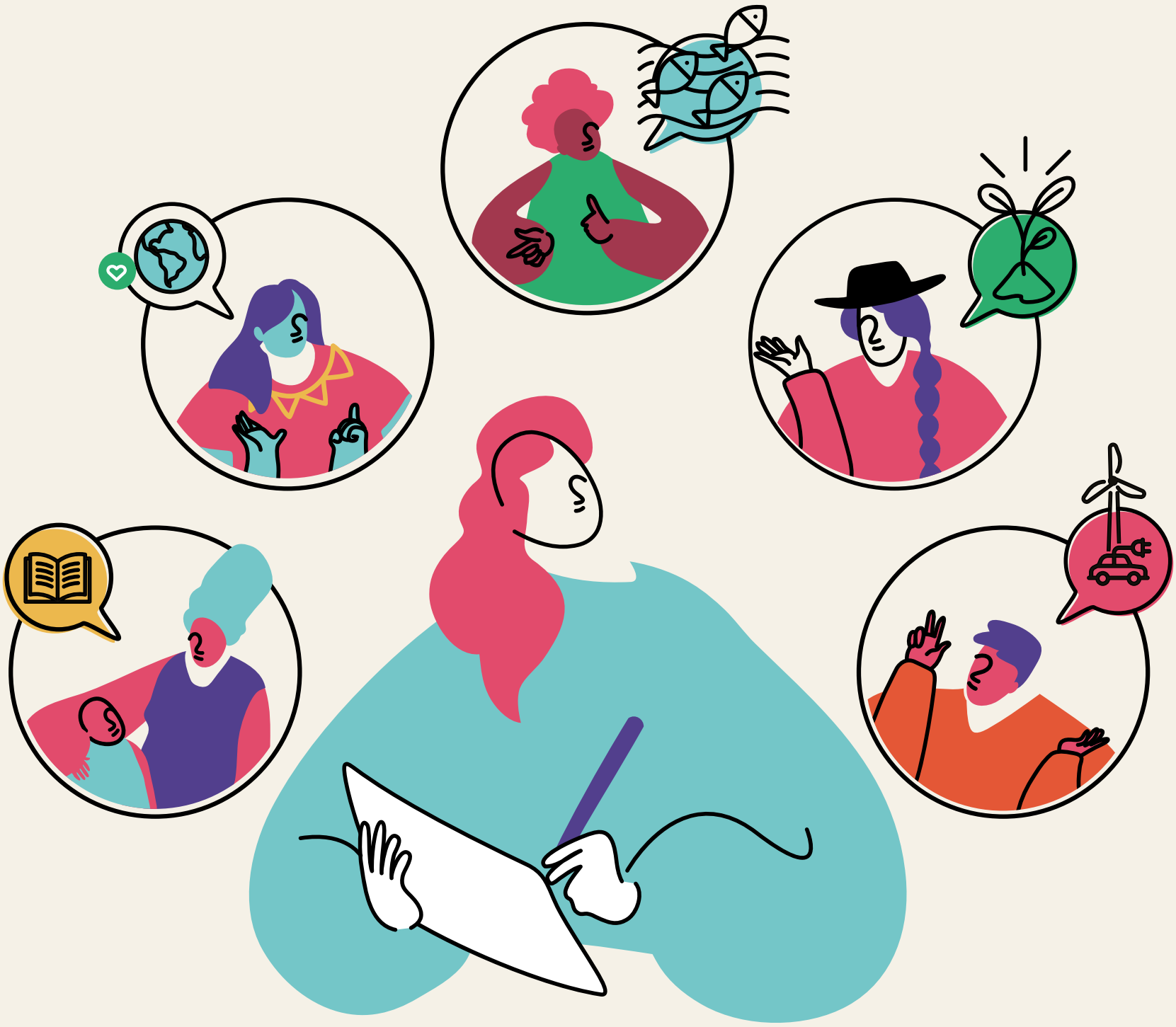
Here, the key for achieving this was to build permanent trust through the workshops, excursions, accompaniment on production issues, and by holding assemblies. Trust isn't built with empty phrases. It isn't a seduction, it's a partnership. It isn't built through the phrase "trust me." That means nothing. When there are a lot of words, it's because there is a lack of intention. The communities are very sensitive, and their foundation is dialogue. You get people talking and what you have to do is absorb, pay attention. That's how you know what they need and want. Trust happens when you let go of your own interests so you can take care of the community, and that's when the work starts.







At Fondo Acción, we believe that the foundation for sustainable investment lies in strengthening the skills of the people, organizations and communities that we work with



CHAPTER

4

Imagining the future

Connecting with all the social sectors

As time goes on, Fondo Acción will have to concentrate even more effort on working with the environment and children. In the coming decades, climate change is projected to increase, which will continue to deeply affect these areas. The organizational efforts and our budget for the environment will have to grow and improve to be able to respond to this trend. Actions on the ground, based on nature, will have to me more efficient, since there will be less and less time to recuperate the ecosystems that keeps the balance on our planet.

All the lessons learned over these twenty years will push the organization to address an ever-increasing demand for low-emissions, climate-resilient projects, but also for green growth and circular economies. These words will be the light that guides the work of our teams.

As conservation efforts face species extinction and habitat loss, we will have to work more for ecosystem restoration, connecting strategic areas and recuperating ecosystem services.

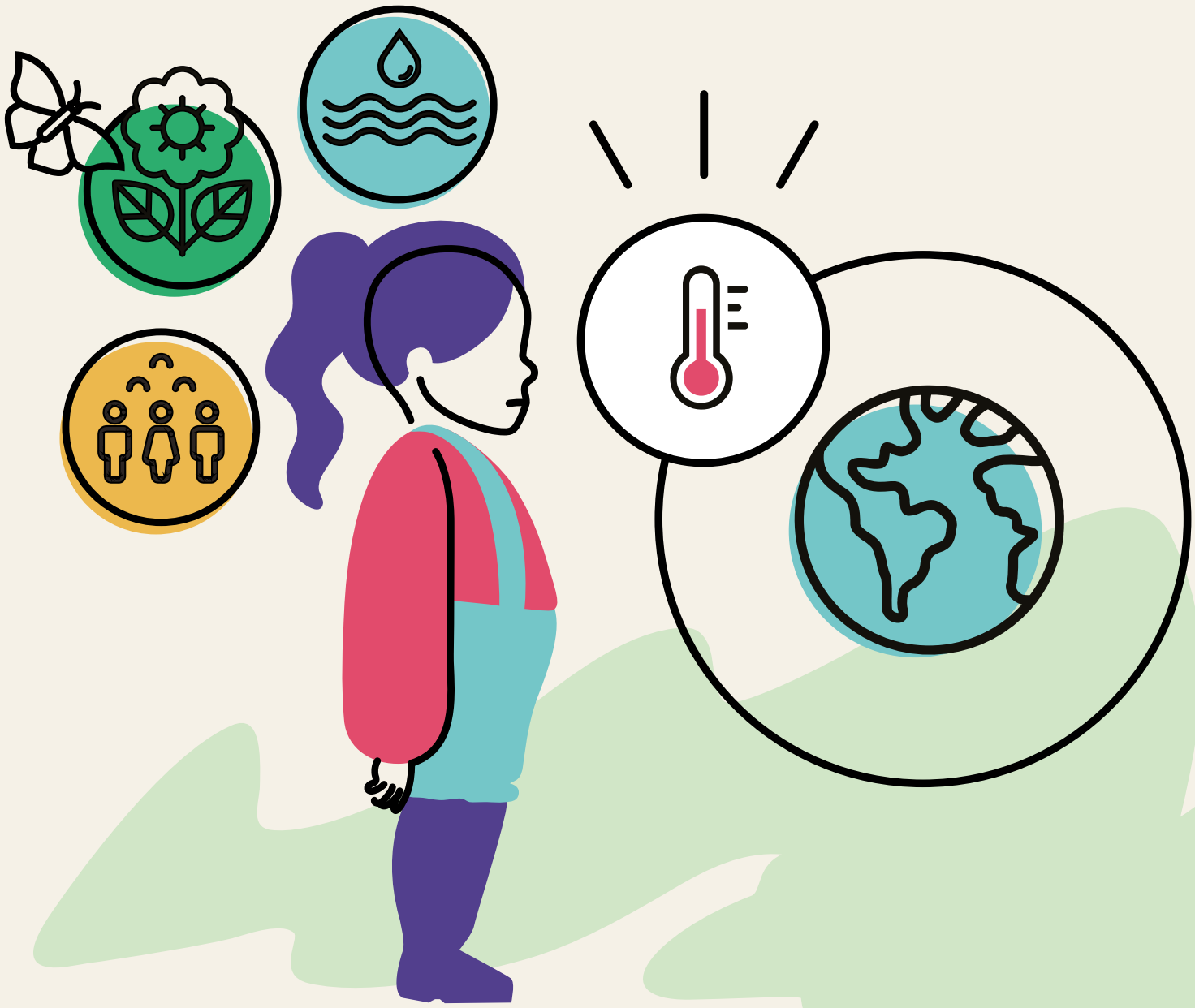
The rural development line and the capacity improvement line, understood as tools for acting on climate change and nature conservation, will continue to help people find alternative lifestyles as active agents for ecosystem transformation. However, based on the understanding that there are problems that transcend local rural development (global effects), we will have to continue concentrating our efforts on offering worthwhile alternative lifestyles for people who live in connection with natural ecosystems. Yet, at the same time, we will have to take efficient actions that transcend the local and involve many more dimensions of society. For example, a project like La Minga, which is developing on the Pacific Coast thanks to international development assistance, can also receive funds from private business that benefit from ecosystem services: for example, those who give monetary recognition for reduced coastal erosion to ensure the ports remain active.

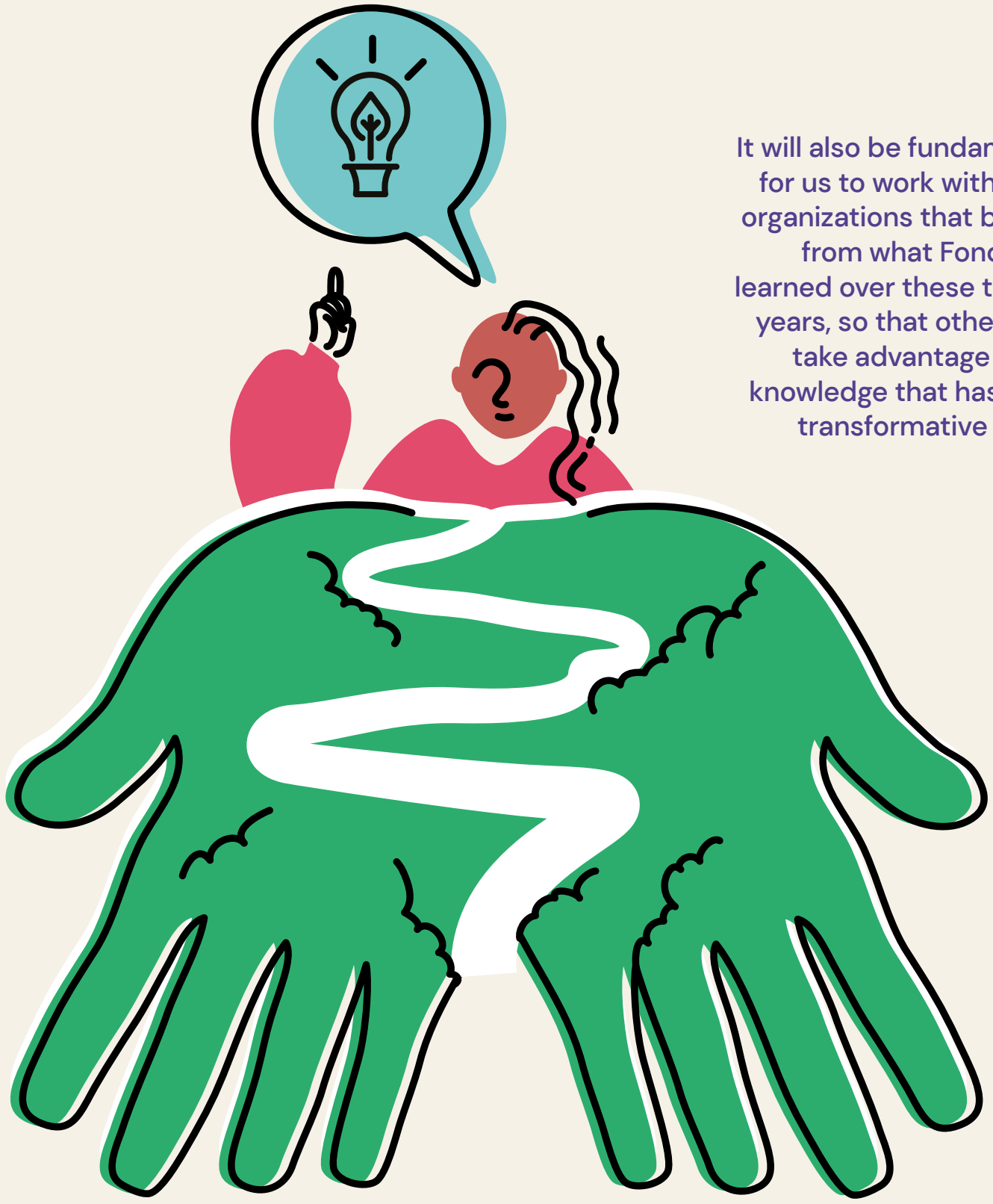
In short, Fondo wants to continue searching for ways to change mentalities and involve society as a whole in the environmental causes that life on Earth depends on. We want to motivate collective work to protect the environment and rights of children and adolescents, so they can grow up in a healthy environment with access to education, food and water. We want to push them to decisively confront this reality, for themselves and for others, out of a real commitment to human life and the life of all living beings on the planet.

Another area where Fondo Acción will have to improve is in expanding sustainable financing models. At present, we are taking the first steps toward becoming an investment for private businesses and to operate a new revolving fund for REDD+ projects. It has become clear that we need to work in mixed modalities with a structure that not only allows for donations, but also loans, so that the environmental conservation initiatives multiply under varied sustainable finance modalities.

Likewise, we will have to expand the portfolio of available ecosystem services, working with erosion prevention

We will have to continue concentrating our efforts on offering worthwhile alternative lifestyles for people who live in connection with natural ecosystems. Yet, at the same time, we will have to take efficient actions that transcend the local and involve many more dimensions of society.





It will also be fundamental for us to work with other organizations that benefit from what Fondo has learned over these twenty years, so that others can take advantage of the knowledge that has been transformative for us.

and water provision through the creation of financing mechanisms. This is precisely where one of the greatest opportunities for expanding our organization lies.

Project support can be done not only with sunk-cost donations, but by providing funds that can later be recuperated by the organization and reinvested in new projects. Fondo Acción should expand high-impact investments through financial, environmental and social returns. In other words, Fondo Acción will work with combined financing modalities that can include loans, investments and donations.

It will also be fundamental for us to work with other organizations that benefit from what Fondo has learned over these twenty years, so that others can take advantage of the knowledge that has been transformative for us. Over the last five years, we've been able to share what we do and expand knowledge management in an attempt to make Fondo a hub for learning, where those who orbit our activities can find lessons and innovative ways to succeed in their work with the environment and children.

We want to become a think tank, not in the academic sense of a research center, but as a facilitator for sharing long-term field work experiences. In this sense, the projects that will take place through 2040 should produce case studies or documents on public policy impacts, so that they not only reach the people they were designed for, but the rest of the country too.

To achieve this, donors can be important for spreading this knowledge in a much more effective way.

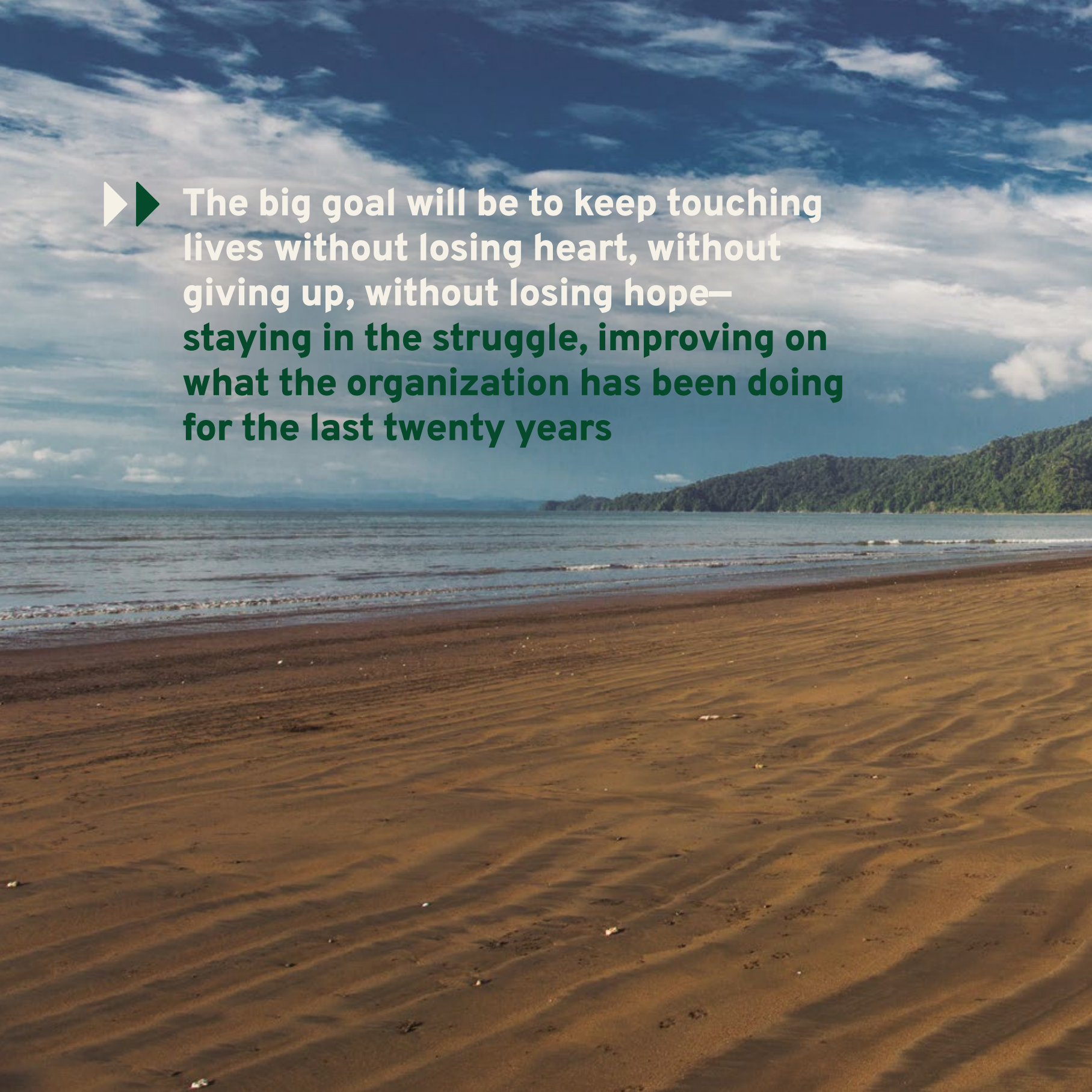
Fondo Acción will also have to create more alliances with other sectors, like the infrastructure, financial, energy and communications sectors. It is imperative that the world change its energy sources. This effort, which will demand a lot of money, requires more than the work of governments and banks, but all the sectors that move the economy, as well as a global policy transformation that imposes harsher sanctions for damaging the environment.

In this effort to connect with all the sectors of society, communications will need a makeover so that strategic messages can reach a wider audience. Though the situation in 2020 is bleak, Fondo will have to keep in mind the idea that has kept the organization going these twenty years: lives change one at a time. We learn from collective work with other organizations and communities, and together we move forward and transform realities, just like we did with REDD+ projects, just like we did with natural heritage consolidation.

Seen in this way, the big goal will be to keep touching lives without losing heart, without giving up, without losing hope—staying in the struggle, improving on what the organization has been doing for the last twenty years and, at the same time, improving the organization's capacity for information building and sharing. The work of improving capacities for decision makers, and more importantly, for the whole legislative body, is essential for facilitating management in every aspect of society. Fondo Acción will have to include more and more sectors of society, especially those that most degrade our environment and threaten the rights of children. This way we can ensure that our contributions to society will be effective and there are compensation plans with the highest possible standards.


Planet
Peace
Quality of life
Tranquility
Strategic
Well-being
Equality
Creativity
Diversity
Research
Resilient
Investments
Know-how
Climate
Forests
Knowledge
Rivers
Trust
Coherent
Colombia
Sustainability
Community
Afro-Colombians
Action
Paramos
Seas
Savannahs
Funds
Global
Women
Ecosystems
Conservation
Local
Children
Possible t


Life
Heart
Public policies
Protection
Innovation
Challenges
Transparency
Businesses
Participation
Adapting
Government
Caretaking
Urban and rural
Efficiency
Grassroots organizations
Water
Indigenous peoples
Clean production
Donors
Leaders
Sharing
Youth
Connecting
Remaining
Academia
Change
Collaborating
Biodiversity
Communicating
Education
Learning
Peasants
Impact
Strengthening
territories



The big goal will be to keep touching lives without losing heart, without giving up, without losing hope—staying in the struggle, improving on what the organization has been doing for the last twenty years





Thanks to the people who have been a part of our story—the communities who believed in us—for working together to protect nature and children in Colombia, finding options for good living, conserving the land and life. Thank you for your solidarity, example and perseverance. Thanks to our partners and donors for your trust and commitment to driving these transformative projects that have impacted society. Thanks to past and present members of our Board of Directors for your time and dedication. You helped us continue to grow and learn as an organization. Thanks to everyone who has been a part of the team. Because of the ideas, passion and motivation that you brought to each region, each community and each project, today we are a fund that creates possible territories.

Fondo Acción

Environment and childhood

Fondo Acción

Environment and childhood

20 years creating possible territories