



# Building hope from **chaos**

Culture, politics and the protection of the Colombian pacific mangroves



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**“Talk without action is empty.  
Action without talk is blind.  
Talk and action outside  
of the community spirit ... is death.”**

# Reflections

## on change

### What they are

*Reflections on change* is a series of stories exploring the changes taking place in the lives of people living and working in areas where WWF is striving to make a difference. The stories, which are built upon and around the views of individuals and groups, offer a close-up, multifaceted view of a world in which reality is complex and messy, competing interests abound, happy endings are not assured, and where people's livelihoods and well-being are critically and intimately connected to the natural world.

### What they are not

As candid and critical portrayals of life in the raw, the *Reflections on change* stories are not intended to be shining examples of good practice, or to explicitly test and validate WWF's programmatic objectives – and indeed at times may run counter to the received wisdoms.

### What they offer and for whom

Reflections on change stories are vivid, individualistic, and sometimes contrary perspectives, which provide WWF staff and other interested parties with rich insights into the complexity of social change and the challenges faced by organisations and their staff, who while trying to facilitate change are themselves subject to social and organisational pressures.

### Social change and an action-learning initiative

In a recent Network-wide broadcast, WWF International's Director General, Jim Leape, acknowledged that "everything we do is about social change" and in similar vein that "we are only successful in the long term in conservation if we are meeting the development needs and aspirations of local communities, and vice-versa, that conservation of natural resources is essential to sustained success in fighting poverty".



The increasing convergence between conservation and poverty, he argued, "needs to be a priority", and "should be central for every programme". But WWF is not alone in its efforts to mobilise social change. There are many other players and factors influencing people's lives and shaping conservation outcomes. WWF's contribution as a change agent is difficult to separate and thus often poorly understood.

*Reflections on change* is a new WWF-UK initiative which seeks to address the challenge of causality and attribution and open the door to action-learning. Each story is the outcome of a facilitated learning process involving various WWF staff at different stages. The storyline itself has been shaped and written up by an independent consultant to amplify



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the voices of those people involved in or significantly affected by WWF's work, who might otherwise go unheard. Dialogue with these and other key stakeholders is used not only to improve resolution of the bigger picture, but also to provide the stimulus for people to reflect on the way they work, to revisit and challenge underlying assumptions – their own, and those of the programme or organisation. Learning then becomes part of a cycle in which the reflection and questioning phase results in a re-framing of prior understanding or experiences, and invites improvement to future actions. *Reflections on change* is more an open ticket for a journey than a final destination.

The development of WWF-UK's *Reflections on change* methodology and the initiatory stories

from Colombia and Kenya were funded by DFID and facilitated and richly enhanced by Jennifer Chapman and Antonella Mancini. *The Reflections on change* portfolio is being developed and managed by Kate Studd ([kstudd@wwf.org.uk](mailto:kstudd@wwf.org.uk)) and Mike Morris ([mmorris@wwf.org.uk](mailto:mmorris@wwf.org.uk)), who would welcome any form of feedback.

*Reflections on change* has been informed by a number of related initiatives, notably ActionAid International's Critical stories of change, but also earlier work, including that of Panos' Oral Testimony Programme.

# Building hope from chaos

**Colombia is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world. Between mountain ranges, valleys and cloud forests; Pacific and Atlantic coasts, reefs and islands; Amazon rainforests and eastern plains, it has a geographical, ecological and cultural diversity that is as wide as it is unique. The mangrove forests of the Pacific coast are an important ecosystem which not only provides a home to over 100 communities of Colombians and defence against the ravages of the Pacific Ocean, but also provide a habitat for many species and a nursery for fish and shellfish to reproduce.**

Colombia has also suffered from a decades-long history of political and ideological struggle that has produced numerous guerrilla groups and private paramilitary forces, and has led to the country's armed forces playing a central role. This ideological struggle has been piggybacked in recent decades by competition for something much more profitable – cocaine production. The political, financial and physical force of the narcotics gangs is such that their power struggles are visibly played out from the smallest community to the national government. The US Government also has a long history of involvement, either working directly to destroy and undermine cocaine production, or through attempts to influence the government of Colombia to flush out the narco-traffickers.

This story tells of the experiences of the piangueras, groups of predominantly poor women whose livelihoods are tied to collecting piangua, an edible mollusc found amongst the roots of the mangroves. Pressures from commercialisation and increasing competition, amongst other things, are depleting the natural resource base and advancing environmental degradation. Integrating the knowledge and addressing the needs of local people are deemed crucial to effecting processes of change that will conserve the mangrove ecosystem and sustain livelihoods. WWF Colombia, with other local organisations, has introduced and facilitated the conservatorio, a process of dialogue and negotiation intended to enable local people to more effectively engage their local authorities and other key stakeholders. The conservatorio relies on building up the capacity of marginalised groups, often outside of the political process, for collective action and participation in decision-making to influence policy and planning; a process which itself takes time.

Significant agreements are reached with the authorities responsible for services and management of the environment, but ensuring delivery of the agreements is very much on-going business. While WWF has worked with particular collectives of piangueras, and the conservatorio is intended to be open and inclusive in its support for marginalised groups to hold the authorities to account, the majority of people collecting piangua continue to do so independently. In some areas, where the land is managed by community councils or the national park, changed behaviours and sustainable management of the mangroves have allowed the piangua to recover; but in many other places this is not the case and the state of other resources is also deteriorating. What can be learnt from WWF's current approach and efforts – strengths and weaknesses – that will improve future planning and help us to better enable people in Nariño province, and similar circumstances elsewhere, to effect sustained improvements in their environment and well-being?

BELOW: Carmen Julia Palacios, president of ASCONAR

RIGHT: Viento Libre. The neighbourhood with the least public services and highest charges in Tumaco.



## WWF Colombia

WWF has been working in Colombia for more than four decades, establishing a physical presence in 1993. WWF Colombia works for the conservation of three very special regions of the world, the Choco Darien, the Northern Andes and the Orinoco and Amazon basins. Conservation of these vast areas requires interventions at multiple levels, transcending national boundaries. This is the case for the coastal mangroves of the Pacific where the cutting down of the mangroves in Ecuador has shifted the pressure on mangrove resources to Colombia. WWF works to address underlying social, political, cultural, institutional and economic drivers of this degradation and loss of biodiversity at all levels: local, regional, and global. WWF's work is carried out by a multi-disciplinary team which links up strongly with partners in the country, and works across a range of issues, such as policy, governance, and resource management.

WWF's four approaches to addressing Colombia's conservation challenges are:

- working in large protected areas, and supporting the community to uphold their rights to manage these areas;
- promoting responsible policies in agro-industrial sectors;
- promoting responsible forest management and trade; and
- building more effective governance and policy systems for sustainable development.



**“Our villagers still don’t understand that the land, the landscape, our culture is power.”**

Lidoro Hurtado Quinonez, Leader of the Bajo Mira y Frintera Community Council

# Introduction

Sitting around the table are a group of leaders of the black communities of the Nariño, at the southern tip of the Pacific coast of Colombia. They are proud of their communities, full of ideas and hopes of what they can do, and clear about the problems they face. “The community is weak;” Lidoro Hurtado Quiñónez, leader of the Bajo Mira y Frontera Community Council<sup>1</sup> tells me, “we still depend politically on people who are not interested in our wellbeing.”



ABOVE: Map showing the location of the towns and mangroves of the Pacific coast of southern Colombia.

RIGHT: Viento Libre.

The history of the area, I am told more than once during my visit, is one of extraction and exploitation. First gold, and slaves, then timber, now fish. The sustainability of the mangrove, and the communities who have lived in and from it for generations, is not a major interest or concern of those who have real political or economic power. Environmental laws and policies compete with powerful commercial

interests, in some cases illegal and armed; with political corruption, intimidation and apathy and lack of resources for implementation or monitoring; and with the poverty which drives people to overexploit resources. “Our villages still don’t understand that the land, the landscape, our culture is power. It is our capital, our history, the inheritance of our future generations.” Lidoro explains.

Yet amongst these huge challenges I caught glimpses of small spaces being opened, and remarkable individuals and groups pushing to expand and connect these spaces, to regain control of their lives, livelihoods and the mangrove, and build pride and self-confidence in their marginalised communities. This story is about another section of the community, the shellfish collectors, known as piangueros, who have been involved for over seven years in a process of learning, empowerment and social accountability facilitated by WWF Colombia.

Their experience shows how much commitment, energy and knowledge local communities can bring to the sustainable management of their ecosystem, to creating and using opportunities for change. But it also highlights the constraints to their action, not only the powerful interests, but their own lack of alternatives, time and energy in the face of severe poverty. Shifting the balance of power in the region into favour with the mangroves and the communities who live there is a task way beyond one group or process, but these piangueros have taken their first steps on the journey.

1. Law 70 of 1993 recognised special rights for black communities, most notably the right to collective titles to the lands they occupy. Community councils established in these new ethnic territories have power over management of the lands, as well as local social policy.



# Life in the mangroves:

## a paradox of poverty and wealth

Father Joseph, the priest of Salahonda, laughs. “Oh the church was full of people praying! The first time I have seen more than three people in here at once!” He is talking about the tsunami warning given to the Pacific coast of Colombia in August this year. The Pacific coast is a tsunami zone and there were two big ones last century which washed away whole villages. Mercedes Urrieta, a local resident and pianguera, stayed at home. “I knew I couldn’t run.” She told me, “So I kissed my children and sat with them to wait for the water.” But she points out that faith in God and the local saint ‘El Senor Del Mar’ is really the only option for her and her neighbours. There is nowhere to go, she explains, nowhere that is safe from a tsunami. After this conversation I walked around soaking up the Saturday night atmosphere of Salahonda, thinking that some day all of this, the sound systems, the bars, the people and their property, could be washed away by the sea, with only 2 hours notice and nowhere to run.



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Salahonda is little more than a village, with a town hall and square and a few streets of houses, shops and bars, the most remarkable thing about it for outsiders is the total lack of cars. It is the capital of Francisco Pizarro, one of the seven districts which make up the coastal strip of Nariño province, in the south of Colombia near the border with Ecuador. The whole area is mangrove, with forest, sea and river mingling interchangeably throughout. While each municipality has its capital, like Salahonda, most people live in the ‘veredas’, or rural areas, in hamlets or isolated dwellings. Elected mayors oversee the management of all five municipalities, working with the other local authorities and management structures. For example, the north of the region falls within the National Park of Sanquianga, and all of the rural areas of the Pacific coast are collectively managed territories of ethnic Afro-Colombian communities, led by elected community councils.

Tumaco, in the south, is the main town of the mangrove region, with a population of around 150,000, and the second Colombian port in the Pacific. Tumaco is also the only point of road access from the rest of the country, while the rest of the region is only accessible by boat, with some people 5 hours in motorised boat from the nearest hospital, bus or airport. The airport in Tumaco is a hive of activity with people arriving from Cali on one of the two daily passenger planes, or bringing goods to the cargo planes. US and Colombian military planes are a visible presence, taking off several times a day on missions to scout for illegal activity, or fumigate coca crops. Apart from fishing and transport, Tumaco’s economy depends largely on cash crops such as the African Palm (*Elaeis guineensis*),

and the production of palm oil and cocoa.

Around Tumaco there are new blue signs pointing out where people should head and meet in case of a Tsunami. The recent warning is still on people’s minds and lips. The mangroves, growing as they do between the sea and the land, create something of a buffer protecting the land from the sea. But in Tumaco, the waterfront is open to houses, shops, warehouses and petrol stations and the mangrove has disappeared. Tumaco is divided into 50 barrios, or neighbourhoods, and Viento Libre is one of the poorest waterfront barrios, cluttered with rows of wooden houses on stilts to keep them out of the water at high tide. Roads and sandy paths give way to planks and wooden jetties around the offices of ASCONAR, an association of groups around Tumaco who collect piangua, a shellfish found in the mangroves of the Pacific.

### THE PIANGUA: LIVELIHOOD AND IDENTITY

The piangua, *Anadara tuberculosa*, is a bivalve mollusc found in the roots of the mangrove, a delicious and nutritious food, but also a natural filter which helps to maintain the integrity and oxygenation of the sediment. Piangua collecting is traditionally a job for women (known as piangueras), with girls starting from the age of seven. Around 10,000 people in the mangrove region, many of them single mothers, rely on the piangua for their income. Pressure is growing as more people turn to the resource in hard times. There is currently no licensing scheme or formalisation of the occupation, and although the number of groups has been growing in the last two decades, most people collecting piangua work alone. This makes it one of few livelihood options for the large number of people

ABOVE: Piangua (*Anadara Tuberculosa*) a delicacy in Ecuador and a livelihood for 10,000 people in Colombia.

RIGHT: A girl pianguera.



**Piangua collecting is traditionally a job for women (known as piangueras), with girls starting from the age of seven.**

displaced within or into the area through violence.

In previous generations the piangua was mostly collected for the family to eat, or to trade for other goods within the community, and only on the spring tide, every other week. It was abundant, and only the biggest were collected, the smaller ones returned to their place in the mud. Between community members they were sold by the basketful, now they are sold by the 100 and sold mostly to traders from Ecuador where it is considered a delicacy, and where stocks are near extinction due to the clearing of mangrove areas for shrimp farming. WWF estimates that around 20 million piangua are extracted per year along the Nariño coast. ASCONAR provides its members with motorised canoes to access the mangrove, buys the catch and sells it on in bulk.

The association has grown from a single organisation of piangueras established in 1991 in response to a cholera epidemic which destroyed the market for the piangua, as shellfish were considered a carrier of the disease. In desperation five women got together and went to see the mayor, who helped them become a formal organisation and apply for support. "We didn't know the meaning of the word organisation!" Carmen Julia Palacios, president of ASCONAR, tells me. Over time they grew, and other groups were formed in the area, until they created an association incorporating 8 groups of piangueros and 124 associate members. They have received support and training in project management and proposal writing, and found funding for new boats, motors and a building including storage and docking areas. The members admit that it has not been an easy journey learning to work together. "There have been plenty of times when we didn't understand each other, people got offended and we drifted apart." Carmen Julia admits. But in the end, the members stuck together because they saw the need for unity.

#### QUALITY OF LIFE: POVERTY AND THE PIANGUEROS

"Things are well chaotic here" Maria Obregón, one of the members and Viento Libre resident, tells me "The life of a pianguera is very sad." Maria started to collect piangua when she was 7, and full time from when she left school at 12. The extra money she brought in helped to support her younger brothers and sisters through school. She is 29 now, with four children, and has managed to establish herself in piangua marketing, meaning she no longer has to go out every day to the mangroves. "I don't want that for my children." Maria tells me, "I want them to finish their education and have a career."

Other members of the association go out all day, six days a week. They leave on a boat when the tide is right to an area of the mangrove where between the thick mud, roots and branches and water pools movement is very difficult and requires great skill. They feel around in the mud between the roots of the mangrove for the hard shell of the piangua. For

protection from the biting insects they burn small fires and smoke cigarettes constantly. They work for four or five hours, as long as the tide permits, then return to count up and sell their catch.

Single mothers, who make up a large proportion of the piangueras, assume or delegate responsibilities however they can to survive and, like Maria, many older children have sacrificed their education to collect piangua or keep house while their mother goes out collecting. Some women are in their 60s, and have been collecting piangua since they were seven. Bent and tired, they cannot retire, because without their daily earnings they cannot afford to eat. When non-routine expenses arise, whether for medical treatment or school fees, home maintenance or some other emergency, there are no savings to rely on. For those women who cannot rely on independent sons and daughters, the moneylenders are often the only option, with their 20% interest. Once in debt, the daily income doesn't even stretch to sufficient daily meals, and some of the women go out for their day's work sustained by just a cup of coffee.

But poverty is not just about what you can eat, drink or buy. The women in Viento Libre talk to me about the effects on their self confidence and social lives, about the psychological and emotional effects and the impact on their environment.

Maria explained:

"You just want a house to be proud of, but people come round once and they don't come back. There is nowhere to sit, you have nothing to offer them, it smells from the rubbish in the water around and the livestock you keep in your house."

Members of ASCONAR, male and female, told me of the isolation that they had always felt. They didn't relate to their own neighbours – too scared or embarrassed to talk to others. Many people told me how they didn't deal well with other people, that they were known for being aggressive and rude. Rosa Maria struck me as a very positive and confident young woman. She is a member of her local pianguera organisation in Mosquera and grabs any opportunity with both hands. But she knows how it feels to be locked into a reality of poverty and hopelessness. "Being a pianguera is the lowest of the low here", she told me. "People look down on you." To feel so powerless, so isolated and friendless, that is what poverty is about for the piangueras.

The mentality of poverty is reinforced by the practical and tangible environment in which the members of ASCONAR live, especially in urban areas such as Viento Libre. While rural communities may be deprived of cash, services and infrastructure, they can usually rely on productive agriculture land to supplement their diet. Furthermore, many of these communities have now been awarded collective ownership of their lands, and have more control over management. In an urban environment poverty has no such palliatives.

Viento Libre receives very few services. There are few roads, and many of the houses are accessed by the wooden jetties which are made and maintained by the people themselves. With no roads, the rubbish collection vans can't get in, so people throw most of their rubbish straight into the water – the same water in which children play and bathe. "It is the neighbourhood with least public services and highest charges in all Tumaco" Ever Ledezma, another ASCONAR member, tells me. He is helping to organise a meeting to challenge the council and service providers, demanding them to commit to actions and changes. Ever's proactive approach stands out in this community of people who tend to expect very little from their public servants.

### WEALTH TO POVERTY: A CHANGING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MANGROVE

The region of the mangroves is largely populated by people descended from freed and escaped slaves, and in many ways it feels as though this has defined their relationship with the wider society. People in rural areas and villages have been getting on with their lives for generations without much input from the outside world. The unique and richly biodiverse environment provided people with most of their needs, through subsistence farming, hunting, fishing and use of available resources such as timber, palm fibre and freshwater. "We are not poor here, we are rich from the mangrove", Martina Granja, one of the older members of the Salahonda piangueras organisation AMCOFP explained, listing the natural variety of seafood found there "we have the piangua, different crabs, fish, river shrimp, sea shrimp..." Local knowledge and understanding of their environment, the complex patterns of the tides, the lifecycles and behaviours of these species, as well as how to prepare and eat them, has been developed and fine-tuned over generations.

But alongside a process of social and economic change in these communities has come a shift in the relationships between people and their environment. Traditionally, wood was felled in order to provide timber for houses, which need building and replacing at a rate easily in balance with the surrounding forest production, and to supply the railroad expansion inland. However, from the 1950s timber production intensified, foreign investment came in and the operations were centralised and mechanised, with a corresponding growth in wage labour. By the 1980s, this unsustainable exploitation of the forests surrounding the mangrove collapsed and many were out of work.

Other natural resources such as fish and piangua were also increasingly commercialised over this period. With commoditisation, and as money became more important, social stratification and status also became more marked, and piangueras have ended up at the bottom. When the cocaine business arrived in the area, first through transportation along the network of rivers and later

in growing and refining, the promises of big, easy and quick money accelerated and deepened social change. A local rural development worker explained:

"Cocaine changes the concept of community. The parameters of life change very quickly. It takes a very long time to build strong, collaborative community action, but attitudes and culture can change for the worse so quickly."

Don Abilio has lived near Salahonda all his life, and is happy to live from the land. But he sees his version of paradise slipping away. He told me that his coconut palms were wiped out in a recent coca fumigation raid. When I asked him if he planned to replant he replied "Why bother? They take five years to start to bear fruit and by then I will be 70. My sons aren't interested in working the land any more." As the relationship with the mangroves becomes ever more exploitative, the opportunities to live sustainably are being undermined. Mercedes Urrieta, a young mother who has become active in local organisation and politics of Salahonda said "we haven't agreed amongst ourselves to live with what we have."

**"Cocaine changes the concept of community. The parameters of life change very quickly. It takes a very long time to build strong, collaborative community action, but attitudes and culture can change for the worse so quickly."**

Many of the changes happening within communities such as Salahonda are originating from the outside. People mark the point at which the piangua catch deteriorated with an oil spill in 1995. Before that, they say, you could collect 2000 in a day. Since then 200 if you are lucky. They mention the aerial fumigations of nearby coca crops in relation to the increasing cost of many of their staple foods, such as plantain or coconut, or the destruction of their own subsistence crops. They tell me that areas where they would go to extract timber have been cleared by 'people from outside with the culture of the chainsaw.' They told me about how the construction of a canal through the mangroves by loggers rerouted much of the freshwater, affecting irrigation of crops and upsetting the ecological balance, killing many species and forcing people from their lands. They mention the fact that people are moving into their villages and neighbourhoods from outside, fleeing violence in other areas. Some of these people are turning to the piangua and fish to survive, adding to the competition for these resources and increasing overexploitation. They see these things happening, and feel the effects, but in general they don't act, they don't defend their interests. These things seem so far out of people's control it as if they were acts of God.

# The mangrove ecosystem:

## important on paper

Over the past decade, those more than 100 communities dependent on the mangrove for their habitat, culture and nutrition have been enjoying stronger alliances and support. National and international recognition of the ecosystem, and political and social processes such as the establishment of ethnic collective territories, have increased interest and action around the protection of the mangrove. Among these allies in Colombia are public environmental and social agencies, including *Corponariño* and *INCODER*, National Parks research institutes such as *INVEMAR*, and conservation NGOs such as *WWF*.



ABOVE: Female worker in the mangroves.

BELOW: Preparing for the collection.

The mangrove ecosystem predominates all along the Pacific coast of America, from Mexico to Peru, but in the south of Colombia, in the department of Nariño, it is at its densest, most extensive, and best preserved. It is an important ecosystem not only because it provides breeding grounds and nurseries for many species of fish and invertebrates, and a highly biodiverse habitat for many species of bird and some mammals, including the sloth, but also because of the protection it affords communities and the hinterland. Some of the species, including the piangua, have been declared as vulnerable to extinction in the Colombian 'red book'. Therefore, for *WWF* Colombia, the mangroves of Nariño are an area of interest and concern.

### THE SCOPE FOR SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF THE MANGROVE:

There are some national and international policies and regulations which provide opportunities for protecting vulnerable species such as the piangua and the mangrove. Research had shown that the piangua breeds early in their lifecycle, and that by the time they reach around 5 cm in size they become reproductive. Minimum sizes of capture have been introduced in the countries along the Pacific coast of America, discouraging the collection or sale of smaller specimens.

Other regulations relate to the felling of trees or the sizes of nets, or the imposition of closed seasons on certain species of fish and shellfish. But laws are not visibly affecting practices in places like Tumaco and Salahonda.

Even where there are institutions in place to implement and police those regulations, they are up against inaccessible areas, powerful enemies and scarce resources. A local fisherman I got chatting to in Tumaco told me that the regulations don't get enforced because "there are not enough resources, and not enough personnel." There is

political will then? I asked. "Oh!" He laughed, "not that either!"

While this may be true, the reluctance of public officials to get involved goes deeper than lack of political will. In the past few years at least two civil servants working in environment and rural development agencies have been moved out of the area after death threats were received.

A current manager of a state environment agency illustrated that this situation has not diminished:

"You go along the coast and people might steal your boat. Others might threaten you, saying that you are trying to take away their daily bread. The rivers running through the mangrove are used to move cocaine. If I go along there one day to look at something, and the next day the army shows up, they will think that I informed them – then the next time I go down there I won't be coming back."

*WWF* Colombia, recognise that in order for laws to have an impact on the conservation of ecosystems such as mangroves, they need to be part of a wider, more integrated process of change; in attitudes and behaviours, in culture, economy and society. Before workable and effective rules, and the conditions for their observance, are developed it is necessary to have a thorough understanding of the whole ecosystem, including the people living there. Much of this understanding is inevitably held by the people living there, but what's missing is their capacity to participate in decision-making and the space for them to influence policy.

On paper the Colombian constitution provides opportunity for individuals and groups to engage with public servants and institutions to ensure that their rights and needs are being met. But in reality there is limited culture or capacity for public accountability or citizen's engagement. The quality of knowledge of local people moreover, seldom extends to what goes on outside the ecosystem or on the wider political stage. Threats and influences



from outside are not so visible or predictable, although the impact that they have on the mangrove and the piangua is clear. There are individuals however, who are thinking about how to bring about these integrated processes of change. Pablo Ramos of the Javeriana University, Bogotá, mentioned a series of factors which need to pull together to complement such regulations and make sustainable management work in practice. His is a systemic vision, in which strong civil society and legitimate community authorities

are able to communicate and control acceptable social and environmental behaviour, with strong relationships with policy makers and service providers. The conversatorio is a process which aims to provide both the capacity and the opportunity for this to happen.

# The conversatorio:

## a setting and a process for participation

WWF first started working in Nariño, with community councils and pianguera associations, in 1999. Members of ASCONAR had already formulated and prioritised a list of issues and problems, which they presented to WWF in the hope of some support. Over a year later, at a workshop on the management of environmental conflict, the idea of the conversatorio as an appropriate methodology for dealing with these problems was proposed. Together with partners ASDES, Chonapi and the Sanquianga National park staff, WWF began to work with communities and other actors to put the concept of the conversatorio into practice. Carmen Candelo, Director for Livelihoods and Governance in WWF Colombia, is originally from El Charco, in the north of the Nariño mangrove region. She has applied her experience and capacity in citizen participation to the issue of piangua and mangrove conservation, and played a critical role in initiating the 'conversatorio'.



ABOVE: Members of ASCONAR now only collect pianguas over 5cm in length, a way of protecting and preserving the population.

RIGHT: The mangroves of Nariño the densest most extensive and best preserved in Colombia.

WWF, together with partners such as ASDES and the Javeriana University, has provided direct training and support, but has also acted as a facilitator of the process, creating and strengthening relationships in order to build a strong and sustainable process of change. The conversatorio process also drew on technical support from a variety of organisations and individuals working on conservation, rights and social development issues in the locality and nationally. A core team of WWF staff and consultants led on different elements of the training and planning, sharing ideas and contributing specialist expertise to the entire process.

### THE CONVERSATORIO: A DIALOGUE WITH A PURPOSE

"I saw myself as important that day of the conversatorio. It has left me feeling enthusiastic about working in community processes."

Carmelo Castillo.

On December 11th 2003, a group of 40 men and women representing community and pianguero groups across the mangrove region assembled for one of the biggest days in their lives. The conversatorio participants had constructed a shared vision, that in 20 years the mangroves of Nariño would be managed by a community organisation according to the principles of autonomy, ownership and sustainability to satisfy the needs of current and future generations. Over several years they and their colleagues had developed analysis, suggested solutions and alternatives through debate and research, and now was their chance to deliver these to an audience of over 100 people including key local decision makers.

Maricel Estacio, from AMCOFP in Salahonda, tells me that she and her colleagues were so nervous they were practicing in their hotel rooms long into

the night before, and on the day they smuggled in a small bottle of aguardiente, the local spirit, to give them the courage to speak. Carmen Candelo, from WWF, remembers that the women's performance anxiety was obvious as many of them asked at the last minute to be moved to the more familiar and discreet culture and music committee. She admits that she was also nervous at first. "You convince them that they can make a difference, that they can get these commitments on paper." She said, "but until the first positive answer you are wondering if these expectations can really be met."

These expectations were met, however, and every single demand or suggestion received a positive response and a signed commitment from the relevant agencies and institutions. After each agreement there was a musical interlude, with the traditional sounds of the marimba, clapping and singing to lighten the tension. By the end of the day, 14 institutions had signed 50 distinct agreements. It became known among participants as the 'festival of democracy'. All of these agreements were seen as building blocks or foundations towards the broader vision they had constructed for the ecosystem and the culture and livelihood that is part of it.

### THE CONVERSATORIO AGREEMENTS INCLUDED:

- The regional environment agency Corponariño, the national park Sanquianga and the local councils to undertake their distinct activities relating to zoning and management for the mangroves, with participation of local communities.
- The local councils, health service and Corponariño to undertake planning for both hospital and municipal solid waste management.



## What is the Conversatorio?

The 'conversatorio for citizen action' is a term coined by ASDES, the organisation with whom WWF Colombia initiated the first ever conversatorio in the coastal areas of Nariño. It is a process of negotiation and dialogue between citizens and the state, and, as such, has similarities with Citizens' Juries in the UK. The concept evolved in response to the 1991 Colombian Constitution's inclusion of the right of citizens 'to meet and demonstrate publicly and privately'. Its legal basis is further backed up by constitutional principles and a ruling from the constitutional court, and public institutions are expected to uphold and respond to this right. No specific mechanisms or processes for enacting these rights were identified or introduced by the Government, so organisations such as WWF Colombia started to look for opportunities to turn this potential for increased public accountability and citizen engagement into reality. The process has since been applied by WWF and partners in four more areas of

Colombia, where it has been used to promote collective action for resource management through building strong community capacity for participation and negotiation.

A conversatorio is a complex process because it requires building the capacity of citizens and the state to engage and participate more effectively where the relationship and dialogue has generally been limited. Each conversatorio has three stages – preparation, negotiation and follow up. During the preparation phase, capacity, knowledge, relationships and partnerships are built, and the different issues, interests, needs and alternatives are explored. The high-point and most visible part of the conversatorio is the negotiation phase, which is typically a one day event where communities put questions and demands to experts and service providers, and seek to reach and sign agreements to address the problems raised. Engagement and dialogue then continue as partners work together to monitor agreements, and to develop

and implement follow up activities.

The main conversatorio event gives the whole process of capacity building, empowerment and investigation meaning and focus. However, the process by its very nature is amorphous with a large range of actors and participants from different areas and organisations, involved in different elements of the process. Events and new processes are introduced where appropriate, but the process mainly becomes embedded in the existing plans, priorities and responsibilities of the different individuals, groups and organisations involved. This makes it hard to define the boundaries of what is and isn't the conversatorio, and makes each process unique. However, there are important similarities. In particular, the approach emphasises and enables the effective engagement of traditionally excluded groups to analyse and articulate issues affecting them and take part in decision-making.



- Research institutes such as INVEMAR and Pacific Agenda 21 to undertake relevant research for the management of the piangua and the mangrove, with emphasis on the value of traditional and local knowledge.
- The rural development agency, INCODER, to support the control of the minimum size of capture of the piangua through communication, education and regulation.
- Local health authorities and councils to ensure basic health insurance and services, and develop relevant community health interventions, for the pianguero sector.
- Local education authorities and councils to develop proposals for ethnically appropriate education, development of Afro Colombian teaching capacity and inclusion of piangueros in regional literacy programmes.
- Local councils, rural development and agriculture agencies to provide technical and financial support to alternative livelihood and production projects that reduce pressure on the ecosystem and resource, including a commitment of 150 million pesos (about USD 75,000) from MAVDT.
- The departmental government and the local councils to provide transport to the piangueras.
- DIAN, the national tax and customs agency, to collect data on the commercialisation of the piangua, including sales to Ecuadorian buyers where the piangua is scarce due to conversion of mangroves to shrimp ponds.



of local knowledge and perspectives into this dialogue required more than just a space to make it happen. The success of the meeting was founded on a long process of relationship building and capacity strengthening of piangueras, community organisations and other stakeholders. This was based on recognition that collective action requires strong and skilled organisations, but also depends on individuals to have the conditions and scope to dedicate time and energy. Ornela Blanco, a lawyer working with WWF and ASDES on the conversatorio, explained that:

“Only when personal needs are met to some extent can people start to think about the collective, and the mangrove. Only when you realise that the voice that had never been valued, heard or respected, now is (valued)... can we start to work for the rest to be better.”

#### THE PROCESS: BUILDING CAPACITY TO PARTICIPATE

In the case of the piangueros of Nariño, the preparation for the conversatorio meeting took three years. In this time a variety of people from the organisations of piangueros and their communities took part in activities and events, workshops, trainings and meetings. The multidisciplinary team who worked on the process explained:

“It had to take a long time, to gather precise information and create strong arguments, while building relationships with the institutions to ensure that they are receptive to the arguments .... In the end the conversatorio is about negotiation and cooperation, not confrontation, the construction of a future vision which can be shared.”

The objective of the single conversatorio meeting provided a focus for the empowerment and capacity building processes. But in principle, the process was about building the analysis and analytical skills, the organisation and the confidence of the piangueros to participate meaningfully in the management of their ecosystem. Throughout the three year preparation phase of the conversatorio, a range of participants

LEFT: some children have sacrificed their education to collect piangua.

LEFT: Providing a space for piangueros to meet and debate.

Images: © Hannah BEARDON / WWF-UK

The space for different stakeholders in the management and future of the mangrove to meet and debate and agree the way forward has been incredibly important. Fabio Londoño, a leader in the process, commented that “through the conversatorio we were able to understand better the needs of people; and they could confront their own processes.”

Gerardo Arteaga from Corponariño considered: “It is a good model, because people ought to lead on the management of their resources, and get involved. They identified the key issues and demanded action from the authorities. They ask for follow up reports, and put pressure on those who don’t comply. They mobilise, and promote their products. It should be repeated more widely in the region.”

However, as Gerardo suggests, the integration



## “The conversatorio brought the issues of the piangua and the mangrove onto the table”

(clam collectors, community leaders, teachers) from across the region explored and documented the changes in their environment and their lives, livelihoods and relationships. They identified problems, the gaps in their knowledge or capacity to implement solutions. They developed their shared vision for the mangrove, and commissioned and participated in research to expand their knowledge of the piangua, the ecosystem, and alternative livelihoods to clarify the best ways forward<sup>1</sup>.

The Department of Rural Development of the Javeriana University in Bogotá were invited to join the process to share and deepen their own research into the conditions for sustainable management of collective resources. They ran a series of workshops using participatory exercises and tools to simulate decision making around the collective use of natural resources, and explore factors which enable or impede cooperation and sustainable use. Through these, participants were able to explore their own attitudes and behaviour, and those of others, and develop awareness of the dynamic between individual and collective benefits. This also enabled them to look at different rules and regulations, whether community-based or imposed by the state or the market, which impact on the ability for long-term, collective action.

Running alongside this diagnostic and analytical stream was a process of training and awareness raising on the legal and constitutional means to achieve change. ASDES, an organisation working on human rights and law for decades in Colombia, had developed training to enable people to express themselves and defend their rights, exploring the instruments and mechanisms through which they can be heard and participate in government. It combines information about rights with practical advice and information about the means for registering complaints and demands for action, and the roles and responsibilities of different public institutions and officials. This became an integral part of the conversatorio preparation phase.

### A SHARED JOURNEY: THE CONVERSATORIO AS A MULTIDISCIPLINARY PROCESS

“Environmental work is complex and needs alliances. The conversatorio has been more than a methodology. It has been an experience in interdisciplinary work.”

Carmen Candelo

This combination of skills, knowledge, experience, data and organisation strengthened the ability of piangueras and other community members to participate equally in decision making around the

mangrove. They could work out the appropriate activities and commitments to ask for, who to ask and how to ask. This was preparation for the conversatorio meeting, but throughout the process people’s organisations and capacity grew, local knowledge and understanding became more prominent and complex community dynamics began to surface.

The methodology, rather than being static and predetermined, was responsive and reactive to these changing conditions. For example, in some areas legal rights training was extended to cover public functionaries such as local mayors who didn’t fully understand their own roles and obligations. In other cases, organisational capacity building was provided to the emerging community councils with responsibility for managing ethnic collective territories. Throughout, training and workshops were designed and developed to meet the needs and gaps identified, whether in project formulation and organisational management, or through the facilitation of learning exchanges.

“The process required lots of different disciplines: ecologists, biologists, lawyers, sociologists, cartographers, economists, analysts, advocates, communicators...” Carlos Anaya informed me. “We generated joint actions spontaneously, intuitively and actively.” The diversity of approaches, specialisms and themes were integrated through the wider objective of the conversatorio meeting, allowing the multidisciplinary dialogue to be most effective, according to the team. Carlos expanded on this:

“This was the first time I have worked in a team where we have really been able to generate interdisciplinary work. I have learned a lot about how to make that work. You have to be able to explain and defend your own discipline, and communicate that to the others really well. This makes you very clear about your own role in the team and in the wider process. It requires attitudes such as active listening, respect.”

While Carmen Candelo, in her role within WWF, provided direction and continuity to the process, it was clear that ownership and responsibility was widely shared. For each of the different organisations involved in the process of preparation, the conversatorio made sense in terms of their own aims and direction. It was an alliance of organisations working together on common or compatible goals.

WWF’s role as the facilitator of this type of alliance and process is something that they are proud of, and believe could have wider application. “WWF’s role is often hard to explain or quantify,” explains Sandra Valenzuela, WWF Colombia Deputy Director, “We strengthen and prepare institutions to commit what



Image: © Hannah BEARDON / WWF-UK

they can, we create links, construct positive solutions and ideas, undertake research and analysis...” This role is recognised and appreciated by the other organisations involved in the conversatorio. Ignacio Guerrero from Chonapi, the local NGO who helped to coordinate the conversatorio, told me:

“The work at community level doesn’t depend on WWF, but their role as the alliance builder has been very important and continues to give the process momentum. There are lots of organisations, including the national park, NGOs and foundations, who used to work separately. Now there is more alliance.”

The efforts of the piangueras has also received national recognition, when, in 2006, a group of piangueras received the National Wetlands Conservation and Sustainable Use Prize from the Ministry of Environment and the Ramsar Convention for their work in the mangroves.

#### **MONITORING THE AGREEMENTS: HOW MUCH WAS ACHIEVED?**

“The conversatorio brought the issues of the piangua and the mangrove onto the table”, Silvana Espinosa, who has conducted research for and with the pianguera organisations, declared. For her organisation, Invemar, the piangua was already in their plans as a priority for research. But this had not been translated into workplans, resources and action. After the conversatorio they were committed to action, and held accountable by the groups who care most about the piangua.

The signed agreements resulting from the

conversatorio were important not only for what they could achieve, but also for the recognition that they gave the key problems and issues identified by the piangueros and communities. A follow-up committee was formed to monitor the agreements. The members, from different communities and partner organisations, collect information about the status of the agreements and meet quarterly to share information and plan. Carmen Candelo from WWF acknowledges the challenges of this task for the committee, who she feels require more technical expertise and resources to make sense of, and respond to monitoring compliance and impact. Nevertheless, as noted by Sandra Valenzuela, from WWF, many people will judge the success of the conversatorio by the amount of agreements signed off and completed.

The representatives I spoke to from the institutions who signed the agreements all told me that they had fulfilled their commitments, and many continued to work on the issues that were brought to light at the conversatorio meeting. The members of AMCOFP, a participating pianguera association in Salahonda, told me that most of the agreements are being implemented in their area. They are on their third phase of registration of piangueros for health insurance, they have organised training with Corponariño on conservation issues, the situation with solid waste has improved, and they have committed the local authority to establish protected zones for piangua ‘nurseries’. However, according to the women from ASCONAR there is still far to go.

ABOVE: The ASCONAR boathouse: perched on stilts on the very edge of Viento Libre.

# Translating capacity into change:

## a question of opportunity

The conversatorio process addresses action and change at many different levels. The agreements signed in December 2003 covered a significant number of issues and problems identified throughout the process, and represent an important step towards sustainable management of the mangrove ecosystem. The process focused on the capacity of local people to influence future planning and management, as well as adapt their own behaviour, and understanding this moves beyond the monitoring of the implementation of the agreements themselves.



ABOVE: Maria Obregón a panguera and active member of ASCONAR.

RIGHT: Sorting piangua in the ASCONAR office.

### EXPANDING HORIZONS AND POSSIBILITIES:

“Before there were a lot of piangueras who found it difficult to converse with people, to tell them their problems, ask questions. Through the conversatorio process they began to see that they had rights, that the state had an obligation to them. They became more alive, more critical, losing the conformism they had before. They began to feel important and useful to society.”

Lidoro Hurtado Quiñónez – leader of PCN Community Council

From community leaders to the poorest piangueras, participants in the process told of how new knowledge and experience, and relationships, have changed their outlook as well as their opportunities and possibilities. For example, Maria Obregón, an active member of ASCONAR who attended many of the trainings and activities leading up to the conversatorio stated: “When I started this process I didn’t have the strength to stop and understand things. It opened a space for me. I still have far to go, but I can express myself now.” She has been able to apply new skills in money management, and gives advice and help to her friends. She also told me how she had been able to apply the experience to her own personal situation.

I learned, through the conversatorio concept itself, how to link all the institutional actors together. I even made changes in my family this way too. I have been able to use what I have learned to sit down together with my husband to talk about our future, and make plans.”

Maria participated in a large number of the different trainings and meetings throughout the process. In part her thorough participation comes down to her own vision of the future, moving out of the piangua and into business, but in part also because she can rely on the income her husband earns from fishing to cover her absence from work. Other women didn’t manage to take so much time off for workshops and

trainings, especially those bringing up their families alone, and older women who have long given up dreams of studying and changing their lives.

Cruz Hilda Velasco is one of the founding members of ASCONAR, an older woman who did not attend many of the workshops or trainings. She talks nostalgically about the old days, when piangua was more abundant and only women went collecting. But when asked if she feels more secure now or in the past, her response surprised me. “I am more secure now,” she told me. “Before I didn’t have any relationships with anyone, I never left the neighbourhood except to the mangrove. Now I can talk to people with confidence because they know me, I am from the piangueras.”

As Cruz Hilda implies, the process has enabled pianguera organisations in all areas of the mangrove to become stronger and more influential. They have received support to strengthen their management and clarify their direction, and are able to develop more long-term and strategic goals for their own wellbeing and that of the resources on which they depend. Those from the northern region reported that: “Pianguera organizations have grown massively because of all the workshops and trainings. You can really see fruits. We used to all go it alone, now there is integration. Together we are strong.”

But while the women of Tumaco were eager to recount the benefits of the training and capacity building they had experienced, they also demonstrated frustration at the continuing poverty and marginalisation they and their neighbours experienced. Some have been able to improve their situations, or feel that they are already on this road, thanks to the work of the association and the conversatorio. They are studying, have borrowed to make investments and so on. But many others are still so caught in the exhausting cycle of work on the piangua that they do not have time to attend trainings and meetings, or space to think about strategies for the future. “When I am in a workshop,” Cruz Hilda

**“There is not enough time in a day to explain the changes that came out of the conversatorio!”**

**Victor Candelo, Mayor of El Charco**

### **ASCONAR**

– a vision for the piangueras:

In Tumaco, the organisations are associated as ASCONAR. When asked about their vision for the future, Carmen Julia Palacios is very clear. ASCONAR want to build the capacity of pianguera families to develop their own micro-enterprises, and integrate as autonomous bodies into the collective association for marketing and development purposes. They want to keep replicating the capacity building and training process, to build more momentum and strength. “That is what will bring us development,” Carmen Julia declared. “If we all are trained.” They would like to be able to package and export the product, control more of the chain and command higher prices. She believes that this way, they will be able to afford to let the mangrove rest and the piangua recuperate more. ASCONAR recently won third place in a small business award which will fund their business plan development and implementation.



explained, "I am thinking about what I am going to eat tonight".

Even those who have not been involved in the process are aware of this dynamic. They don't understand why those who are poorest should have to work so hard for such little personal gain. Jose Requene, a resident of Viento Libre, where ASCONAR is based, gave me his opinion:

"I don't know how many capacity building certificates there must be in this group. It is good, but you can't live off of that. Piangueras need to eat. The old women shouldn't be out collecting piangua at their age, but the government doesn't help them, they have no other source of income. Some people can't make capacity building work for them; they need a source of work, something of their own."

**CONSTRUCTIVE COMMUNITY ACTION:**

"Piangueros are the most demanding of the community groups with whom we work, for all the training they have received ... They actively seek out entities that can collaborate and form projects."

Gerardo Arteaga, Corponariño

"I am 2000% better off now; I know how to defend myself. There is a history of black leadership we should learn from and take pride in."

Ever Ledezma, ASCONAR

It is not only through organisations that participants are applying new capacity to collective ends. Mercedes Urrieta, from Salahonda, is very active in her local pianguera organisation AMCOFP. Like many other women, she told me that prior to the capacity building she underwent through the conversatorio she was embarrassed to talk to new people. Now she is canvassing for election to the local council,

speaking to people on their doorsteps about local issues. She is confident she will get votes. "I have a lot of support," she claimed "because people know that I am a good fighter."

The conversatorio meeting was important to many people as an instance when poor people stood up in public and put questions and demands to public institutions. In all seven municipalities of the mangrove region, people with the interest, time or energy to do so have been inspired by the conversatorio to engage more directly and constructively with those in power. They claim that they are no longer scared and intimidated by their lack of knowledge and understanding; they seek to support and build alliances with local mayors and services, and put forward positive alternatives and suggestions.

As a community midwife Tomasa Rodriguez has always been respected as a leader in her community of La Tola, on the edge of the Sanquianga National Park, and has noticed a difference in relationships with authorities. "To feel part of a community, to become a social person, that makes a huge difference", she said. "We were no good at being in workshops, at thinking collectively. As I learned to negotiate I also learned to respect other people's opinions, even if I don't agree ... Now I have talked to different people and institutions, demanded what is ours from the mayor, the health centre. Through all this I have been able to make new gains, not through asking but demanding."

In Viento Libre the fruits of this negotiation were visible. A day care centre had been set up by ASCONAR for the whole community, providing care and basic nutrition for pre-school children, paid for by the government agency for family welfare. Coverage of basic state health insurance, for those outside formal employment, has been extended through registration and awareness campaigns.

Since receiving training and participating in workshops and analysis, Carmelo Castillo has become much more involved in local politics. "Sometime people say to the mayor, 'why do you always listen to Carmelo?'" he announced proudly, "and the mayor tells them, "Because Carmelo comes to me with suggestions and alternatives that I can work with." His improving relationship with the local authorities, knowledge of local issues, and his confidence to put new skills into practice have already born fruit.

He tells of when the local council proposed to build a school in his village of Juanchillo, and approached Carmelo to ask where to locate it. When he looked at the plans, he saw that the 44 local primary school-age children were expected to study over 4 grades in a building only 7 metres square, with no toilets. Not only that, but it was to be constructed in concrete, which, as Carmelo points out, "the sea doesn't stop bothering until it has washed it away." Initially, the Governor told him the plans couldn't be changed, because they had been drawn up by an architect.



**Setting a proud example:**

"I am proud to be a country girl," Maricel Estacio told me, "that is where I want to be and where I see my future."

Maricel gave a personal example of how she took ownership of her rights, and challenged what she perceived as discrimination against her. She was refused admission onto a health promotion course as she lacked the right

qualifications. She asked to take an entrance exam and was refused. Having learned about mechanisms for formal complaint, she worked with her local community council leaders to challenge the decision. Eventually she was allowed to take an entrance exam and gained entrance to the course. She expects to graduate next spring.

Maricel has three children and is active in her local pianguera organisation AMCOFP, and her community council in Salahonda. "Its good to have people like her to depend on for the future of our community", her neighbour Don Abilio told me.

But he insisted, and in the end managed to get a bigger, wooden school with toilets approved and built.

Carmelo gave other examples of how an organised and aware community can challenge the services provided, or not, for them. Such as a local village who managed to get access to mains electricity that had passed through their land for years. "It's about ownership." He claimed. "If people don't realise it is theirs, they won't even take it."

Participation in the conversatorio process also strengthened the receptiveness of participating institutions, and respect of some participating individuals for the knowledge, values and commitment of the piangueras and their communities. Julio Andres Ospina works on similar experiences with WWF in the Andes. He noted that: "With such a long engagement you really get to understand people, share their problems and concerns. This enables you to develop real commitment, not assuming what people need but really understanding their problems, the inequities in public administration and policy. You don't see yourself as a consultant, but as a person who supports their process when they need technical support"

INVEMAR undertakes research for the Ministry for the Environment, Housing and Territorial Development (MAVDT) to underpin policy decisions, and were involved in the conversatorio as a service provider. They committed to undertake participatory research with the pianguera organisations, and have since developed their own 'knowledge dialogue' process, working with a variety of stakeholders to understand whether conservation practices such as rotation of sites, rest periods and minimum sizes actually work. As part of this, pianguera groups were trained in field research, and their knowledge was blended with scientific expertise. They were paid for their time as equal contributors to the research. Silvana Espinosa, who led the process for INVEMAR, explained that the challenges of this type of research were worthwhile for the quality and relevance of the research. "This is a new methodology for us. It is very difficult to make dialogue like that work, their discourses, ways of thinking and talking are so different. But it is all experience under the belt, all learning for how we can work better."

Sara Ordoñez, legal trainer for the conversatorio process, appreciates the way that the conversatorio methodology can address this issue of correspondence between communities and institutions. "It doesn't matter how perfect the law is, if there is no political culture to use it." She said. "The conversatorio generates that kind of culture, so that people can participate and be critical." Victor Candelo, mayor of El Charco in the north of the zone, reinforced this suggestion that the legal training had translated into practical use, and people were increasingly challenging what they perceived to be denial of rights. While working in the local legal

## Reflections on gender:



Carmelo Castillo

Young men like Carmelo and Ever have a clear sense of the injustice their communities suffer, and actively create the spaces and analysis to confront it. But in this traditionally machista society, men have a cultural advantage when it comes to public speaking and occupying space.

Most piangueros, around 78%, are women. On the conversatorio day women spoke publicly to challenge and demand action from public institutions. Doña Patria Boya, a community leader in Tumaco, remarked on this: "Women never used to have a place to participate publicly. Now we have women leaders representing their communities."

Interestingly, both the secretary and spokesman for the piangueros that day were men. The leaders of the pianguera organisations are all (check) women, but during the Reflections on change workshop, men were often allowed to speak over, before, and for their female colleagues. Yet the women who participated in the process never mentioned gender as a constraint to their ability to capitalise on the capacity building they have received.

I met several women in Salahonda who were applying their learning to the public sphere. For example, Ana Granja is in her 50s and dreams of studying law. When people in Salahonda wanted to put a stop to the clearing of forest for a new sawmill, or get something done about the rubbish washing up around their houses, they looked to Ana, and AMCOFP, the pianguera organisation of which she is a member, to help. She tells me that people come to her because she knows how to use the law.

## WWF Colombia – learning and changing:

Over time, this type of engagement has changed the way that WWF Colombia conceptualises and works with communities. Julio Mario Fernandez, head of the WWF communications team, explained how their role had shifted over the years of engagement in conversatorio processes in Nariño and elsewhere. Initially, he said, they would find the stories and tell them to the appropriate audiences, with an eye on publicity and branding. Over time they became aware that people are more than capable of choosing and telling their stories in very engaging ways. As such, they have shifted their role to one of facilitating and building people's capacity to define and tell their own story.

In general, throughout WWF Colombia, work to strengthen community capacity to lead processes is becoming more mainstreamed. This has changed the relationship the organisation has with communities, to become more of a dialogue to build agreements, to supporting the creation of community leaders who can not only analyse, but demand and implement change.

department, he observed first hand the impact of the legal trainings given in his area on the knowledge of people:

“In the 10 years since the tutela<sup>3</sup> was introduced, the department had seen a total of 5 submitted, and these were all by agents, on behalf of other people. In the 6 months after the trainings, 300 were submitted, and nearly all by people themselves.”

#### DIVERSE CONTEXTS AND CIRCUMSTANCES:

“The process opened doors and space for a working dynamic which can be very strong, but you need alliances with policy makers, a good mayor who will stick his neck out.” Ignacio Guerrero, Chonapi.

Those who have participated directly in the conversatorio, and the capacity building, amount to more than 5000 people in total. Every one that I met talked about the positive impact on their personal lives, but analysis of wider change, to the state of the mangrove and the marginality of the community for example, varied massively. At a workshop to reflect on the changes experienced some clear differences emerged. Those from the northern zone reflected together and reported back significant positive changes to almost all areas, from community organisation to the state of the piangua and the mangrove. They reported that:

“The mangrove has improved a lot. The National Park, the Community Councils and the piangueras all help to reforest, manage and monitor the mangrove. There is a real increase in appreciation of the importance of the mangrove, coming from the conversatorio.

Production of the piangua is better. With the higher price, there is not so much need to collect

so many. From the conversatorio people started to be more aware of the minimum size, not to collect the small ones, although some still do. They can't sell them, so they collect them to eat. We think about our grandchildren, we don't want them to hear about the piangua as part of history.”

Those from Tumaco and around the south were much more muted in their analysis of change. They mentioned positive growth in their own organisations, but saw that the improvements to management of the mangrove, for example, were limited by a number of forces.

“The mangrove is mixed progress. On the one hand there is reforestation, mangrove being sown. But on the other there is indiscriminate cutting, both within the community and outsiders. There have been regular oil leaks from the Ecopetrol pipes which are not in very good condition, and once a month they open the valve to pump the petrol and some escapes. The national government is not interested; it is a fight without limits. The piangua production has gone down a lot, you can notice that. Partly because of fumigations, as the chemicals come down through the rivers and kill the piangua. But also due to overexploitation because of population pressure, and the influx of displaced people who don't have any other means to live.

When asked to explain why the story sounded so different from one place to the next a variety of factors were mentioned. While some of the external factors that contribute to contamination of the rivers will affect all regions equally, perceptions of scale and impact are so varied. A major difference between the communities in the north and those in the south is the governance and land management structures. The areas which have been able to register collective ownership of their land and establish Community Councils have much stronger and more autonomous mechanisms for control and management of the mangrove. Support is needed from the outside in order to create real impact. As the southern group explained: “In Salahonda and Tumaco we haven't had the good fortune to have our own legal representatives for our territories. Instead we have to deal with the mayors. We have been missing that push.” Furthermore, some of the northern areas are jointly managed by the national park, allowing for environmental measures such as rotation and reforestation to be overseen with more authority.

Beyond the structure of local government, participants also noted the quality and orientation of local authorities and decision makers as important to the impact of their work. In some areas, like El Charco and La Tola, local authorities have supported the ideas and responded to the demands of the piangueras and their communities. In Tumaco, however, there has been no clear and integrated process with which the piangueras could engage.

Greed, rather than ideology, motivates many political leaders in Colombia, and Tumaco is no exception. The post of mayor is so heavily contested

### A mayor who will stick his neck out...

the case of El Charco:

Victor Candelo became mayor of El Charco in 2003. He describes himself as a ‘son of the conversatorio’, and had become closer to the issues and struggles of the piangueros through his participation in the conversatorio as Director of local NGO Chonapi. He talked about how he has been able to use his position as mayor to support the piangueros and other community groups and respond to their analysis. He has relied on relationships with community groups to ensure that programming priorities are relevant, and underlined that the pianguera groups are stronger, clearer about their needs and more able to dialogue effectively and work collaboratively. For example, during a participatory appraisal process the issue of school drop-outs was prioritised. When investigated further with the pianguera groups, they discovered that most parents don't have the time, or the transportation, to take their children to school before they go to work. Travel depends on tides, and the tides need to be used to go fishing or piangua collecting. In response, the council instigated free school transport, as well as school meals and scrapping of school fees. Since then, the number of children dropping out of school has decreased from 73% in 2003, to only 7% in 2005.

there that in the last four-year period there were, unbelievably, over 60 incumbents. For those who have some influence or wealth, a friend or ally who will give them lucrative contracts is the ideal candidate for mayor. For the many who don't, politics is considered someone else's sport, and votes are to be bought for a few thousand pesos or some basic commodities. The group from the Northern zone stated:

"Too often the big people make alliances and then squash the little ones, they don't care about social development and process. A lot of mayors don't care about their people, or even their towns. Money is all that counts for them."

Alongside this political picture is that of violence and intimidation. Doña Patria Boya is in her 70s and has been a leader in her community for decades. "We used to walk around without a care." She told me. "But now community leaders have started to fall, people are scared to undertake many activities; they want to keep a low profile." Violence is prevalent in all areas, and limits political action to those issues which do not create conflict of interest with local armed forces, both legal and illegal.

#### MANAGING THE RESOURCES:

"We are not where we should be. But we are getting better."

Martina Granja, AMCOFP, Salahonda

The diverse political landscapes described above ultimately underlie the quality of the protection of the mangrove. In some areas, where the land is managed by community councils or the national park, rotation and resting of areas of mangrove have allowed the species to recover. Participants from the Northern zone reported:

"There is rotation of the mangrove managed by the national park. When we tried it out, we saw the difference; it is easier to find good piangua after an area has been rested, so we have started doing it."

In other areas, where there are not clear structures for community resource management, the situation is more difficult to control. Cruz Hilda Velasco, of ASCONAR, recognises the changes in attitudes of those who have been involved in the process, but tells me there is little visible impact in the areas of mangroves around Tumaco where she goes to collect piangua. The problems she identifies are caused by powerful commercial and government players who are less receptive to pressure or influence from community groups. She told me:

"There is so much still to do. You still see drip bags hanging from the mangroves; the army still throw their lead bullets in the water; the petrol stations flush their petrol into it when cleaning out the pipes. All of this contaminates the water in which the mangroves and the piangua grow."

Another threat comes from those people who do not consider themselves part of a collective process or community. Although organisations like ASCONAR, and the conversatorio itself, have

been open and inclusive by intent, the majority of people who collect piangua continue to do so independently. In some areas, participants of the conversatorio have noted a real growth in awareness of the need to protect and preserve the smaller piangua, of the minimum size of capture, as well as reforestation and rotation schemes. Mercedes Urrieta of AMCOFP in Salahonda noted that:

"Those of us who have learned to be aware of the situation don't mind missing a day here or there. I think that what we are doing, control of the piangua, is helping ensure that the product doesn't run out. Otherwise what are our children going to eat when they are big? Will they even know what a piangua tastes like?"

**"The process opened doors and space for a working dynamic which can be very strong, but you need alliances with policy makers, a good mayor who will stick his neck out."**

Ignacio Guerrero, Chonapi

Silvana Espinosa, from INVEMAR, considers that the awareness and commitment of the groups who participated in the conversatorio to the conservation of the mangroves is notable even by international standards. At a recent regional meeting on mangroves in Ecuador, which she attended with a representative from ASCONAR, it was noted how different the Colombian experience was, that the community owned the process, and looked for solutions and alternatives themselves, and that the research was most up to date.

But there are others who don't take part in this collective process, and haven't made any changes to their attitudes or behaviour. As Carmen Julia Palacios, President of ASCONAR, put it: "There are a lot of people walking around like a loose wheel who don't pay any attention to the rules." While the *pianguera* organisations are clear that they wish to continue to grow in membership and representation, they are aware that while people continue to collect piangua without any association, representation or accountability, their efforts to work together to manage the resource will be undermined. Gerardo Arteaga of Corponariño agreed:

"ASCONAR is concerned about the mangrove and conscious of the fact that the piangua is a finite resource. Others don't think the same; they extract without thinking. They are not part of any process, they are a threat."

Add to this the disruptive nature of displacement, which brings people into the area with immediate needs and little awareness of social norms or organisations, and the continued lack of support for alternative livelihoods at municipal level, and it is clear that the context for the sharing and communication of new norms for sustainable resource management is weak.

# Empowerment, change & conflict:

## how it goes...

**“What we are now is not what we were. Through this process we have strengthened our organisation a lot. If not we wouldn’t have participated. And we are still growing.”**

**Maria Obregón, ASCONAR**

**“You have to get in the canoe and paddle towards the future.”**

**Mercedes Urrieta, Salahonda**



ABOVE: Cruz Hila Velasco, one of the founding members of ASCONAR.

RIGHT: The piangua collection process: a daily routine for many women. Control of piangua collection is helping to ensure that the product doesn’t run out.

The increased power that these women, and others who have participated in the process feel, has made a real difference to what they are able to do, and the influence they are able to affect. In some cases this has been limited to personal attitudes and relationships. In others this has induced changes in the way people relate in their families, communities and organisations. This new feeling of worth, or power, has enabled people to use their skills to clarify problems, develop solutions, identify allies and negotiate action.

As such, the organisations who have grown through the conversatorio experience are now able to accelerate their drive towards self-determination and appropriate development. Doña Patria Boya, a long-time community leader in Tumaco, stated that these organisations are different, more legitimate representatives of their communities, who can take projects forward with a popular mandate, clean up political corruption and form alliances. In the October 2007 elections, several of the winning candidates for mayor or council in the area are new leaders emerging from the conservatorio process and supported by the *pianguero* organisations.

ASCONAR and the community councils are clear that they want to manage their own processes; they don’t want others to take their ideas and provide them with services owned and controlled by others. For example, Community Council leaders explained how they had taken a collective stand against the promotion of palm-oil production as a livelihood alternative, as they considered that this was not in the interests of their own communities. Yet while the conversatorio has clearly succeeded in highlighting

the problems and issues relating to the piangua, the mangrove, and the piangueros, in some cases people complain that this has created more competition and jealousy than support.

Another dynamic which has developed with the growth of the pianguera organisations in collective ethnic territories, is the competition for space and leadership with community councils. Most of the community council leaders I spoke to were very supportive and complementary about the piangueros and the changes they have created. Lidoro Hurtado, leader of the Community Council of Bajo Mira y Frontera, told me: “The piangueros are an example for us, the conversatorio complements other processes. We need to feed and sustain the process of autonomy and control.” In many places piangueros are members of the community councils.

However, the capacity building process relating to the conversatorio coincided with the creation of these new community leadership roles. In some cases new community leaders received less training and capacity building than the conversatorio participants, and this created an awkward dynamic.

“In some cases community council leaders have protested about the conversatorio process, perhaps because they have seen more attention and support for the piangueros.” Carmen Candelo told me “But I think that when marginalised and invisible communities become stronger and change, this can cause jealousy”

The empowerment of the piangueros, who are mostly the poorest and most marginalised women, has clearly created some need for readjustment in their families and communities. In many cases, such as Ana Granja and her colleagues in Salahonda, they have become leadership figures in their community not by right or election, but by example and action. While for many this makes them legitimate leaders of their communities, for others



Image: © David SOUTHERN / WWF-UK



## “It is a challenge to balance community leadership and political aspiration.”

Guillermo Cantillo from Guiza

### Competition for local leadership

The leadership and profile of the piangueras has earned the interest of non-traditional actors in the region. One of these is CordeAgroPaz, a private, non-profit organisation working on rural development based in Tumaco. Initially working on other issues such as palm production and fishing, when the issues of the piangua came to prominence through the conversatorio, they subsequently developed a programme of work to address problems with piangua.

While CordeAgroPaz’s plans and objectives for the piangueros seem to coincide well with those of ASCONAR, and the two organizations worked for a period together, there is now limited cooperation between this organization and ASCONAR and AMCOFP. ASCONAR and AMCOFP expressed a feeling that CordeAgroPaz has taken the spotlight off of the pianguera organisations and assumed leadership in this area. “We trusted them to solve the problem but they set up in competition with us for resources and profile.”

this looks more like a threat to their own power. As Bertha Lucy Arizala, secretary of the monitoring committee, explained: “Piangueras traditionally just accept things as they are. They are very passive. Through the capacity building they can now demand, ask. This creates a lot of jealousy.”

In subsequent conversatorio processes, and through the experience of the piangueras, WWF and partners are focusing on the development of representative community leadership. “It is a challenge”, Guillermo Cantillo from the River Guiza told me, “to balance community leadership and political aspiration.” But if processes such as the conversatorio are to have a visible and lasting impact on the management of natural resources, it needs to be tied into the development of collaborative and representative leadership. At the workshop facilitating reflections on changes from the conversatorio process, the group from the north reported:

“We need to continue the process, influencing and forming alliances with political leaders. When a friendly mayor is in office all is ok, but we need to make alliances with the new candidates. We have learned to negotiate, to be strategic, to relate to and influence the plans. We need to support the mayor to deliver.”

Integration of stakeholders as diverse as business, community and government depends on strong frameworks as much as capacity and confidence to communicate. As the conversatorio has developed, the sense of developing political agency and engaging with municipal plans and strategies has strengthened. The process continues to evolve, responding to the realities that are unearthed.

### LAST WORD:

I sat at the community reflection workshop, listening to the very different interpretations of change from members of groups in the North, and those in the South. In the north everything was sunny, the mangrove is doing better, and the piangueros are together, united and making change happen. In Tumaco, all I had heard were stories of the difficulties and constraints. Jokingly, I turned to Maria Obregón and said: “if it’s so much better in the North why don’t you just move there?!” She gave me a cold, hard stare... “It’s not about moving where things are better,” she said. “It’s about making this better – for everyone.”



Image: © Hannah BEARDON / WWF-UK

## Glossary

Acronym	Spanish	English
AMCOFP	Asociación de Mujeres Concheras de Francisco Pizarro	Women clam collectors association from Francisco Pizarro
ASCONAR	Asociación de Concheras de Nariño	Nariño clam collectors association
ASDES	Corporación de Asesorías para el Desarrollo	Corporation of lawyers for development
Chonapi	Fundación Ecológica y Ambiental Chontaduro , Naidi y Pianguas	Ecological and environmental foundation for peach palm, naidi palm and piangua
Corponariño	Corporación Autónoma Regional de Nariño	Regional environmental authority of the department of Nariño (part of Ministry of Environment, Housing and Territorial Development)
DIAN	Dirección de Impuestos y Aduanas Nacionales	National tax and customs authorities
El Charco		Municipality in northern zone of Department of Nariño
IIAP	El Instituto de Investigaciones Ambientales del Pacífico	Institute for Environmental Investigation in the Pacific
INCODER	Instituto Colombiano de Desarrollo Rural	Colombian institute of rural development
INVEMAR	Instituto de Investigaciones Marinas y Costeras	Marine and coastal research institute ( linked to Ministry of the Environment )
La Tola		Municipality in north of department of Nariño
MAVDT	Ministerio de Ambiente, Vivienda y Desarrollo Territorial	Ministry of Environment, Housing and Territorial Development
Nariño		Department in the south of Colombia
Piangua		Bivalve mollusc (clam) found in the Pacific mangrove
pianguera		a female clam collector
piangueras		a group of female clam collectors
piangueros		a group of clam collectors including some men
Salahonda		Coastal town and head of Francisco Pizarro municipality
Sanquianga		National park in Nariño
Tumaco		Largest Coastal municipality / city in Nariño

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This story has been developed through a process of discussion, dialogue and reflection with the people whose voices are told through this story. Nevertheless, the interpretation of information and the final summary, conclusions and judgements, are in the end my own.

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The mission of WWF is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by:

- conserving the world's biological diversity
- ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable
- reducing pollution and wasteful consumption



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