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CORONAVIRUS REVEALS INEQUITIES FACING COLOMBIA'S INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

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EII's national program coordinator in Colombia, Maria Adelaida Fernández, recently met with Mateo Estrada of the Colombian Amazon Indigenous Peoples Association (OPIAC). Estrada is coordinating national efforts for a response to the coronavirus pandemic in support of Colombia's indigenous communities. In their conversation, two main themes emerged: how to help indigenous peoples living in urban areas, and how to leverage traditional knowledge to build greater resiliency for indigenous communities during prolonged periods of isolation. Below, Fernández shares highlights from the exchange and discusses the broader impact of the pandemic on her work on low-emission development in Colombia.

What are the most pressing challenges among Colombia's indigenous communities during the coronavirus lockdown?

There are at least two broad groups of indigenous communities that need help, and they are facing different challenges. One group is the communities that live in the *resguardos*, territories where indigenous peoples have sovereignty. People in these areas don't have access to health care and are far from hospitals, so the strategy for now is to keep them isolated so the virus doesn't get into their communities. But they will need help with other things… for example, salt. They have the capacity to grow their own crops to feed themselves. But they will need basic things like salt. We are discussing ways to have specific kits delivered to them to ensure they have these essentials.

Image available online: view image

A flyer from OPIAC, which represents Indigenous communities in Colombia's Amazon.

What is the other group you mentioned?

The other group are those indigenous peoples living in urban areas, many of them having fled their traditional homelands during the civil war. They face similar conditions to the non-indigenous poor in cities like Bogotá, which means they cannot go out to make a living and they don't have money to buy the essentials during quarantine, which began late March and was just extended through May. Many of them are also students, and they have been requesting things like computers to keep up with

coursework that has now moved online. Others don't have savings or access to credit… they are not part of the formal economy.

Indigenous peoples living in urban areas are also counted in a government database separate from the database on urban populations, and so in cities like Bogotá they are invisible. This means they do not receive the help the city is providing to poorer residents, and they cannot access the same hospitals other people do. This makes them very vulnerable under this current situation.

There are definitely big challenges ahead. This is going to take time. COVID (the illness associated with the coronavirus) is revealing a lot of things that we as a society have been trying not to see in terms of inequality. And with indigenous peoples, conditions are even worse.

OPIAC is also working to reintroduce traditional knowledge to indigenous communities to make them more resilient to this and other crises. Can you expand on that?

We did an analysis of *resguardos* in the Colombian Amazon some time ago and what we saw was that more remote communities tend to have larger areas geographically, and they tended to do better at conserving not just their ecosystems but also their traditional knowledge. They know how to sustain themselves within their environments, how to grow food and use traditional medicine. So, they are better prepared to isolate themselves. But indigenous communities that are closer to cities and towns normally have less land and they become more dependent on the local economy. And when that happens, traditional knowledge begins to fade. So, OPIAC is working to reintroduce some of these traditions, to show these communities that their traditional knowledge is key to their resilience in times like this.

The pandemic has taken a severe toll on the global economy. What does that look like in Colombia?

Everything is now being adjusted to the challenges of the coronavirus. The government is adjusting department budgets and is expected to make cuts of up to 25%, which I think is optimistic. But for a territory like Caquetá, for example, where EII is working with local partners to put in place a department-wide low-emission development strategy, even that 25% is a huge reduction. So, regional plans are being reduced to very specific strategies focused on strengthening local health sectors and restarting the economy, with less attention to the environment.

But the reality is we don't have a full picture of how the economy will be affected by all this. The global price of oil recently dropped below zero. While falling demand for fossil fuels is a positive for the environment, for Colombia oil exports are one of the most important sources of government revenue. This is going to have huge and long-lasting repercussions.

How is the economic turmoil affecting your work on low-emission development?

As far as our own strategies, we will need to make more of an effort to convince the jurisdictions we work with of the need to move toward a “Green New Deal”-style approach to recovery. Many will be inclined to try and go back to what has worked, like cattle ranching for example, which means more deforestation. So, we need to make the case that green strategies are better for them—both economically and from a public-health and sustainability perspective. We need to keep that message foremost in their minds.

Other than that, the challenge remains connecting local products to markets in order to show producers that sustainability is better for their bottom lines. That challenge is always there. What is changing is how to connect to markets that are being impacted in ways we don’t even understand now. Commodity prices are falling, people are not buying… but food is needed. We need to eat, we need chocolate… it can help boost mood and fight depression!

What would your message be to companies that have committed to carbon neutrality operating in this new climate?

What I would say is give us the opportunity to show the world that this new way of producing—using less land and using it more efficiently while protecting standing forests—is a possibility. And let us show local producers that they can obtain a better income if they follow this path. Give us a chance to show that these jurisdictions are developing in a sustainable manner. We need to change the way we produce and the way we buy to avoid an even more catastrophic future. We need to take this opportunity to change our economies for the better. Because we are realizing that maybe we can do things differently, the silver lining of the coronavirus crisis may be that we have been given an amazing opportunity to invest sustainably in sectors that will be key for human survival. And we need to do this at a global level.