

Impact of the climate crisis on the lives of women in the region of Santander, Colombia¹

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GenderCC - Women for Climate Justice and WLOE - Women and Life on Earth.

If there is one thing that we, a group of different associations of rural women, community mothers, environmentalists and fisherwomen in Santander, Colombia, have had on our minds, it's our daily struggle to advance our work on the various subjects we deal with, in order to be able to tackle a range of issues, including the climate change crisis. In order to do so, we have wasted no time in launching dialogue through meetings and exchanges among ourselves, thereby allowing us to analyse and establish strategies and common ground through which to safeguard the environmental and cultural heritage of our region.

The statistics on unemployment, violence and marginalisation do not lie, and at times even fail to demonstrate the true situation of women in Colombia.² Despite the passing years and all the speeches about and promises of better conditions, the struggle for women is hard and inequality persists in all areas of social, economic and political life.



We will be focussing specifically on the department of Santander, located in the north-east of Colombia, which is essentially divided into two ecoregions: the Andean region, with a mountainous topography and the Magdalena Medio Valley, which is relatively flat. We have drawn upon three specific cases in this region that can be used for analysis and debate in order to illustrate the different impacts of the climate crisis on the lives of women.

We will thus present the situation of a rural women's association in the municipality of Lebrija affected by desertification, an association of small-scale fisherpersons which has struggled to defend its territory in the Magdalena River and a group of displaced, vulnerable women and feminist women's networks tackling the challenges of floods in the slums of the Bucaramanga Metropolitan Area.

¹ For more information about some of these case studies, see the following Fundaexpresión publications: *Cosechando Agua y Alimentos* [Harvesting Water and Food] - booklet, *Guardianes de Semillas* [Seed Keepers] – documentary video, *Piña Dulce y Agua Amarga* [Sweet Pineapple and Sour Water] – documentary video. <http://www.youtube.com/user/FUNDAEXPRESION>

² According to official sources, in 2005 63% of the Colombian population lived in poverty; 26.6% of these homes had a female head of household. Extreme poverty affects 31% of the Colombian population; 31.4% of homes in conditions of extreme poverty have a female head of household.

Rural women face the impact of desertification and drought

The first case study involves the *Asociación Municipal de Mujeres Campesinas de Lebrija* (Municipal Association for the Rural Women of Lebrija, AMMUCALE) located in a mountainous region. This group of over 300 female members was founded in 1996 as a community organisation aimed at bringing together rural women from the municipality of Lebrija. Their plan of action has focused on transforming gender relations, fostering their integrated development, improving the quality of life for their associates and that of rural families, and managing and spearheading economic, environmental, social and cultural projects.

"In the context of gender relations, the women of Lebrija are faced with discrimination and subordination in terms of the male gender and society, which limits their access to and control over available resources and benefits for their advancement. As a result, the women of AMMUCALE have had to face limitations which have shaped the course of their experience from the very outset: absence of recognition for the productive, community and domestic labour they perform, domestic violence, subordination and low self-esteem, high illiteracy rates and a low level of education".³

In recent years, climate change has become an increasingly important feature in AMMUCALE's action plan due to the difficulty of accessing water and to droughts. The *El Niño* phenomenon, which is characterised by lack of precipitation and an extended dry season, reached Colombia at the end of 2009 and has caused heavy drought and prompted water levels in water sources to drop. The basins of the main rivers and streams of Lebrija have declined considerably. In Colombia, the *El Niño* phenomenon has occurred four times so far this century, namely in 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2010. On all these occasions it has been of moderate strength, although the 2009-2010 period was the severest of the four.⁴

Paulina Rodriguez, chairperson of the Social Action Committee of the El Salado rural district and member of AMMUCALE says: *"We suffer daily as a result of water pollution and lack of drinking water for our families. This also creates health problems for the animals on our farms. We also face the social and environmental impact of the shortage and poor distribution of water"*.

This testimonial is backed by data from the hospital in Lebrija at which intestinal infections, rashes and parasites constitute 20% of the causes of disease in that municipality. This issue is a direct consequence of the water problem, which



³ CIDEMOS - RIMISP - Fondo Mink'a de Chorlavi, *Sistematización de la experiencia organizacional de la Asociación Municipal de Mujeres Campesinas de Lebrija* [Systematic approach of the organisational experience of the Municipal Association for the Rural Women of Lebrija], Bucaramanga, December 2005.

⁴ Data collected from official sources: <http://www.cambioclimatico.gov.co/noticias3.html>

affects the most vulnerable people such as women, children and seniors. In the rural sector of Lebrija, there is only one aqueduct with a potable water system; the remaining countryside inhabitants (approximately 95%) use untreated or inadequate water.⁵

In Lebrija, as in many other parts of the world, climate change is causing drought, soil erosion and desertification, with the aggravating factor of changes to and transformation of the landscape through monoculture and the irrational use of water by agroindustries. Studies have shown that deforestation in the Santander region ranges from 4,500 to 10,000 hectares per year, while the expansion of monoculture, commercial plantations and widespread cattle farming has increased 329% over the last five years.⁶

In Lebrija, the rural women of AMMUCALE who have spearheaded campaigns for alimentary sovereignty, the basic right to water, climate justice, and the boosting of local economies and conservation of forest reserves, have been doubly affected. Recent droughts have prevented these women and their families from growing and supplying their own food, as they had done until recently. In addition, they have had to take on all of the labour and domestic burden, as their husbands and children often have to look for work away from home for their daily wages in order to survive.

The situation of the women in Lebrija has been worsened further still by the fact that property deeds do not belong to them in many cases: "*When land is purchased, in most cases it is the men who make the decision to become the owners, which, according to them, is so that they can later mortgage, rent or sell the land*", says Cecilia Ibagos, one of the founding members of AMMUCALE. This has meant that in critical times such as these, the women are totally dependent upon the men and if there is a need to sell the property or relocate the family, they are completely unprotected.

[Fisherwomen of the Magdalena River, displaced by the armed conflict in Colombia and the climate crisis](#)

On the road to exchange of and dialogue on experiences, AMMUCALE has met on several occasions with the *Asociación de Pescadores Artesanales y Agricultores del Magdalena Medio* (Association of Small-scale Fisherpersons and Farmers of Magdalena Medio, ASOPESAMM), which consists of 15,000 families of small-scale fisherpersons, and which has also suffered the consequences of the climate crisis and the armed conflict in Colombia. The priority at the get-togethers between these two groups of women has been the issue of



⁵ Results from water samples taken in the El Salado rural district by the Santander Ministry of Health (November 2009), show that, in terms of health, the water is not fit for human consumption.

⁶ Data from the *Corporación Autónoma Regional para la Defensa de Bucaramanga*. CDMB action plan / PGAR - 2004.

alimentary sovereignty and the role of women as a pivotal component in processes of social transformation that seek alternatives to the environmental and social issues faced by rural areas.

In recent years, the small-scale fisherpersons, who subsist primarily through fishing in the Magdalena River, have experienced inclement climatic extremes (drought and floods) which affect the water system.

"The flood that occurred in November 2008 was on the same scale as that which hit 30 years ago; there has been no other flood of such magnitude in recent decades. Fishing, extraction of sand from the river, casual business, and public and private sector employment were all affected. Prior to this emergency, farmers focussed on subsistence products and had no capacity beyond their own consumption, due to the scarce amount of available land and its distribution. Due to the scant availability, there is no material or economic access to food. The safety of food for families affected is impacted by poor basic sanitation and a lack of drinking water, which, together with the difficulty of accessing health promotion and prevention programmes, make preparation and biological use of food difficult".⁷

Despite all the difficulties due to social inequality and the climate crisis, as an association for fishing communities and fisherwomen, ASOPESAMM aims to regroup and strengthen initiatives to shore up fishing and recover the wetlands of Magdalena Medio. Small-scale fishing takes place in rivers, streams, marshes and channels for which the Magdalena River is the connecting point, flowing through several departments. Although fisherpersons have limited access to land, they have begun a process of alimentary sovereignty, backing strategies for the repopulation of fish in their streams, supplemented by the creation of family farms.



Miriam Gutierrez, an executive member of ASOPESAMM, expresses her concern for the deterioration of this environmental heritage: *"In this drought year, the land was split in two: there was land stripped bare and there was land on which you could walk into the middle of the stream. They ended up as puddles... ASOPESAMM was founded in 2001, but with a different vision: there are no more fish, there is no more water, the wetlands are drying up, it is a struggle to restore the species and maintain the environment. The species has declined; we used to supply 75% of the fishing products from the Magdalena basin, and now*

⁷ The data presented here cover the municipalities of Barrancabermeja and Puerto Wilches, Santander, San Pablo and the Township of Puerto Patiño, municipality of Aguachica, Bolivar and La Gloria, Sur Cesar in the report entitled: *Flood Emergency: Identification of Needs in the Magdalena Medio Region*, work team: ICBF—Santander; Colombian Red Cross, CDPMM, OIM and OCHA, December 2008.

we are contributing just 4%. Where once we produced 78,000 tons/year, we now produce only 7,000 tons/year. According to the latest statistics published by the Corporación Colombia Internacional (CCI), the prochilodus species of fish, which is the most monitored, has been practically wiped out".

In this case, the small-scale fishing that provides one of the best sources of energy in the region has been affected by a series of climatic impacts as well as economic interests, which have prevented fisherpersons from operating in their territory as they traditionally have done. Small-scale fishing, which supports and feeds more than 15,000 families, has been faced with countless threats. The fisherpersons represent the cultural roots of the Afro-Colombian communities in their territory. They are also an example of how resilient they are and how they have protected their wetlands against the impact of widespread cattle farming, mineral and petroleum extraction and palm oil plantations.

As if that weren't enough, the alimentary situation of the inhabitants now looks even grimmer with the threat of the Sogamoso River dam mega-project (*Hidrosogamoso*) hanging over them. This project would close the doors on small-scale fishing since the waters of the river would stagnate. Added to this is the complex situation of public policy and displacement in the region, which has directly affected the leaders of the fishermen and female heads of household.⁸

Miriam, a fisherman's daughter, has carried on her family legacy and demonstrates the tenacity of many fisherwomen who have greater responsibilities for supporting their families: *"My father told me about the struggle of the fishermen and I retained all of that in my head and spoke to him a lot and that's why the thorn stuck in me. I think that's why I stayed with the process, to see how a person who is poor – financially speaking, not in terms of spirituality or wisdom or anything like that – no longer has any legacy to leave to his children but a road or a path... We leave them a path because we aren't even going to be able to leave them a completed road. We leave a path along which our sons and daughters have opportunity... We believe that the process is going to be valid and it's going to continue when it is picked up by the young people and they understand that fishing gives a lot and that small-scale fishing cannot stop, because when small-scale fishing stops, the wetlands are gone, they disappear completely because there is no one to fight for them and look after them, there won't be a single one and it will be the cesspool of the big cities".*

[Displaced women, vulnerable women and social networks address the climate crisis following flooding in the Bucaramanga Metropolitan Area](#)

At a gathering held in August 2006 to discuss the right to food and the defence of native crops, the rural women of AMMUCALE were able to engage in dialogue with associations of community mothers and displaced and vulnerable women, as well as with social organisations such as the *Ruta Pacífica de Mujeres* and the *Fundación Mujer y Futuro*⁹.

⁸ *OBSERVATORIO DE PAZ INTEGRAL* (INTEGRATED PEACE OBSERVATORY, OPI). *Continúa agresión a los pescadores de la Región* (Magdalena Medio) [Aggression against regional fishermen continues (Magdalena Medio)], Barrancabermeja, 2009.

These organisations pursue action for the comprehensive advancement of the society and, in particular, of the women of Santander, in areas such as self-worth, disclosure and defence of human rights, focus on and prevention of domestic violence and a peaceful solution to the armed conflict in Colombia.

There was one very positive thing that emerged from this gathering and that was the fact that urban women became enthused about encouraging agricultural initiatives, planting in their neighbourhoods and providing part of their dietary needs, and in so doing boosted their self-esteem. Likewise, the rural women understood the potential of reasserting their roots in the land and the importance of dialogue between cities and the country in terms of alimentary sovereignty.

Both urban and rural women have been the victims of forced displacement due to the armed conflict in Colombia. The Bucaramanga Metropolitan Area is the largest recipient of displaced persons in the department of Santander, with 66,392 people having arrived there. Some 40% of these have come from within the department itself while the remaining 60% have arrived from other regions on account of death threats (31%), following eviction from land through pressure from landowners (28%), to avoid recruitment by illegal armed groups (16%), after having been accused of being informants (11%), and after having refused to cooperate (7%). These are just some of the causes of displacement prompted by paramilitaries and similar groups (54%), guerrillas (40%) and the army (6%).¹⁰

There has been a lot said about Colombia's armed conflict; however, other issues are slowly starting to emerge, such as extreme poverty. People living in extreme poverty are referred to as vulnerable populations and the victims of climate change. All victims, whether of armed conflict, poverty or climate change, have had to take refuge in shacks (*cambuches*), crude homes built with tin sheets and wood, many of them located in areas such as the banks of the forks of the Rio del Oro and the Rio Frio, which flow through



the Bucaramanga Metropolitan Area. Thus, on 9 February 2005, after 17 hours of heavy rain, the majority of the 5,000 homes affected and the 15,000 victims of this particular disaster belonged to families living along the tributaries of these rivers.

In regard to women who are victims of climate change, we can say that both displaced people and vulnerable people suffer doubly from displacement. This is corroborated by the testimonials of Audrey Robayo Sanchez, Graciela Terraza Herrera and Sandra Luna from *Ruta Pacifica* and the *Fundación Mujer y Futuro*.

⁹ The *Fundación Mujer y Futuro* is the overseer in Bucaramanga for the *Red Nacional de Mujeres, La Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres* and the Human Rights Observatory for Displaced Women.

¹⁰ Conclusions from the Forum on: *Incidencias y Perspectivas del Desplazamiento Forzado en el Departamento de Santander* [Incidents and Perspectives regarding Forced Displacement in the Department of Santander], organised by the Participar Foundation, Bucaramanga, 27 May 2009. Available at: <http://co.globedia.com/preocupante-aumento-desplazamiento-forzado-oriente-colombiano>

Graciela Terraza says: *"When the emergency arose on that day in February 2005 due to the cold snap, we started to receive calls asking us for help for the groups of displaced and vulnerable women we were working with. That was when we became aware of their suffering because of the mudslides, avalanches, houses falling down, water pollution and lack of electricity"*. Audrey continues: *"[That day] there had been anxiety for two weeks. It kept raining and the people living in the shacks in the Café Madrid and el Túnel de Norte districts in Bucaramanga and Suratoque in Floridablanca were taken to temporary shelters"*. Years after these floods, due to both corruption and government inefficiency, many of these victims were still being housed in those 'temporary' shelters.¹¹

Graciela Terraza says that the reactions of the women and men to the disaster were different: *"The men were paralysed, they looked afraid. The women did more, for their children, for their families"*. According to Sandra Luna: *"That is where we see how women can take care of life and their capacity for resilience"*. Audrey continues: *"[After the disaster] the women went out to look for work in houses: washing, ironing and even prostituting themselves"*.

When asked about different impacts, they made the following points: *"Women are doubly vulnerable. First, because in the wake of disasters, aside from going out to work or looking for money, they are concerned about continuing the education of and feeding the family and even how to protect their children from potential rape in the makeshift bathrooms"*.

Also, women in general have had a lot of difficulty because they do not have property deeds and when they arrive after being displaced (as a result of the armed conflict or the climate crisis), the individuals who appear as the heads of household are the men, so they are the ones who receive the humanitarian aid, and the women are left with nothing.



"Humanitarian organisations, the government and the Church have put the emphasis on providing help to people displaced by the armed conflict, so when the cold-snap tragedy occurred, help with water, clothing, food and subsidies was only provided to those registered as displaced persons due to the armed conflict. Individuals like the flood victims received virtually no support or humanitarian aid at all. This has brought about envy and, in addition to hunger and thirst, has torn the social fabric apart", says Audrey. In this way, the victims of climate change and extreme poverty become invisible and are forgotten.

¹¹ *Reclamo a la discordia en Girón* [Protest on discord in Girón], Félix Leonardo Quintero – Correspondent for *El Tiempo*, Bucaramanga, 06. Available at: <http://reclamospublicos.blogspot.com/2006/02/reclamo-la-discordia-en-gim.html>

The women have tried to address the issue in a political context to ensure that the situation of the women changes; they were thus the driving force behind ruling 092-2008 of the Constitutional Court for women in conditions of forced displacement. There are several aspects of the ruling that are fundamental in terms of the work of women's organisations and the situation of violence against women in Colombia, in particular recognition of women as a political subject, as victims and entitled to rights, and recognition of the systematic practice of violence against women within the armed conflict. This represents a significant achievement in terms of the efforts made by women's organisations with regard to the recognition of the impact of armed conflict and the specific impact of violence against women.¹²

Within the vision of the work of Women for Climate Justice in Colombia, we would like to point out that, as with ruling 092 of 2008, which gives special recognition to displaced women, it is also important to highlight the situation of women who are victims of climate change, in addition to pursuing political advocacy, which goes hand-in-hand with our work as networks of rural and urban women, environmentalists and fisherwomen. The purpose of this is to continue fighting for the fundamental right to water, alimentary sovereignty and protection of the essential ecosystem of forests, swamplands and grasslands.

In Conclusion

- There are countless aspects that would prevent any cooperative project from being fully effective in a rural environment, due to the structural conditions of inequality in the countryside and even more so considering the issue of the climate crisis. However, many women have set an example and hold leadership and coordinating positions within rural associations and social action organisations, and on municipal and departmental planning committees.
- We recognise that the role of women is not easy due to deep-rooted social and cultural patterns in families, communities and on a municipal and national scale. Nonetheless, it is clear that women's associations and networks in Colombia have been historically – and today still are – a platform via which to demonstrate the feasibility of their proposals and living alternatives, with a view to ensuring social, economic and cultural rights.



¹² *Corporación Casa de la Mujer, Implicaciones del auto 092-2008 de la Corte Constitucional para las mujeres en situación de desplazamiento forzado* [Implications of ruling 092-2008 of the Constitutional Court for women in conditions of forced displacement], available at: <http://www.viva.org.co/cajavirtual/svc0122/index%20-%20pagina%207.html>

- The empowerment of women means that they can gain greater awareness of the factors that influence their own lives, develop greater confidence to analyse and express their situations and in so doing broaden the opportunities to enjoy true participation in various areas of community development, in particular, in this case, in terms of alimentary sovereignty, local markets and economic management, a role which is vital for the quality of life of women.
- Rural women have understood the importance of the concept of human dignity as a way of reclaiming customs, tradition, culture and ways of seeing life and conserving and preserving it against competing trends such as commodification, inequality, violence and false solutions to climate change.
- We have seen the positive impact of dialogue between groups of women, which is strengthened through exchanges and meetings with other rural associations, associations of indigenous women and women of African descent, fisherwomen and community mothers; this has enabled them to develop common goals and action priorities for their life projects and to visualise the results that are achievable for other women on regional, national and international levels.
- It is clear that the climate crisis needs to be looked at afresh from the perspective of rural and indigenous women's view of the world to provide a starting point from which to analyse the dietary, cultural, productive and environmental situation. This means recognising the implications of environmental deterioration and unsafe food by virtue of the relationships of power and inequality in access to education, health and collective assets (land, water, seed).



- We must foster and encourage participation of women through national and international gatherings, aimed at prioritising decision-making, by women, in the planning and development aspects of projects on alimentary sovereignty, rural housing and alternative education, and their contribution to options for preventing climate change, safeguarding biodiversity and peace-building processes.
- We aim to reinforce productive projects with rural women, putting the emphasis on sustainable alternatives and rural and community forest reserves. In the same way, their traditional knowledge in terms of access to and rescue and sustainable management of agrobiodiversity is encouraged.