

COLOMBIA: *Forest conservation through Indigenous Local Government*



Photo: Hege Karsti Ragnhildstveit

- **Colombia has created a path to establish Indigenous Local Governments in the Eastern Amazon as part of its municipal structure.**
- **This offers a unique opportunity to include Indigenous self-governance in the public administration and fund it accordingly.**
- **Up to 24% of the Colombian Amazon forests could be managed and governed by Indigenous Local Governments, securing almost entirely intact rainforest with enormous biodiversity and carbon storage.**

Almost half the 400,000 km² of forests in Eastern Colombian Amazon are recognized as Indigenous territories. Of these, 165,000 km² are in non-municipalized areas. Now, Colombia is currently on a path to establish the world's first Indigenous local governments, recognized as legitimate public entities on par with municipalities. This involves a historic decentralization process and transfer of responsibilities, resources, and authority to Indigenous people and their governance.

Since 2019, Gaia Amazonas Foundation and Rainforest Foundation Norway have worked for the official establishment and recognition, effective governance, and stewardship of 15 Indigenous Municipalities. These municipalities will cover an area of 103,000 km², about 24% of the total Colombian Amazon. As much as 95% of the forest covered by the Indigenous Municipalities is intact.

What are Indigenous Local Governments?

Colombia's Constitution of 1991 recognizes that Indigenous peoples have the right to govern their own territories. Decree 632 on Indigenous territories and non-municipalized areas, issued in 2018, creates the route to establish Indigenous

territories that are currently outside the municipal system as Indigenous Local Governments (ILGs). Responsibilities, resources, and authority can be delegated to the ILGs on par with other municipalities.

Rainforests in Colombia

Colombia is considered the second most biodiverse country in the world, with 52% of the country's land area covered by natural forest. The Colombian rainforest covers 533,000 km², and is the third largest in the Amazon rainforest basin. Between 2001 and 2018, Colombia lost about 20,215 km² of forest, and the loss is accelerating. According to Global Forest Watch, there was a 44% increase in deforestation of tropical rainforest in Colombia from 2019 to 2020. This is mainly due to the illegal expansion of the agricultural frontier and illegal mining. Colombian authorities have long signalled a willingness to protect the forest and several policy decisions point in the right direction, but policy implementation is lagging.

Impacts on forest protection and sustainable development

Indigenous territories in the Colombian Amazon show a much lower deforestation rate than that of other protected areas. Despite the increasing loss of tropical rainforest in Colombia the past few years, the area covered by the Indigenous Municipalities have seen very low deforestation rates. This makes them some of the best-preserved areas in the entire Amazon Basin, with indispensable biodiversity and carbon storage.

Establishing the Indigenous Municipalities and harnessing the potential of Indigenous forest management would also make

important contributions to the fulfilment of Colombia's climate commitments (NDC) and the New York Declaration on Forests. Successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Colombia depends on the sustainable management of its rainforest and recognition of Indigenous peoples' land rights.

The goal is that the full governance of the Indigenous territories, with powers and functions similar to those of municipalities, provides effective, long-term barriers against deforestation in the eastern part of the Colombian Amazon. It will secure the environmental services from the ecosystems within these territories, which are indispensable for the sustainable economic development and climate resilience of both the communities and society at large. It can serve as a model for sustainable forest management for the Amazon and beyond. Further, Indigenous Municipalities can contribute to the Colombian peace process by implementing elements of the peace agreement, especially to its Ethnic Chapter.

Milestones and governance

An important milestone is to have the official registration of Indigenous councils through the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In parallel, the general management capabilities and organisational structures of the Indigenous Municipalities need to be strengthened to empower Indigenous communities to govern their own territories. This includes the development of life plans, administrative and financial regimes, coordinating systems with local and national authorities as well as an internal organizational roadmap. They are important for completing the decentralization process and ensuring that ILGs start to function with governing and financing capabilities to manage the welfare, education, and health of their communities.

Financing needs and enabling conditions

The goal is that the Indigenous Municipalities will be financially sustainable over time, enabling them to access domestic public funds on par with other municipalities. Potentially, it would also provide opportunities to access international and domestic climate and biodiversity funding, given its importance for reaching these objectives. The Colombian government should look to reinvest parts of its REDD+ results-based payments in Indigenous territories, including Indigenous municipalities once they have been established, to ensure that Indigenous peoples are rewarded for their contribution to achieving these results.

Currently, there is a need for about \$15 million up to 2025 to implement the next steps towards recognition as Indigenous Local Governments. The project will continue to be implemented by Gaia Amazonas Foundation, Etnollano and Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN), in cooperation with the Indigenous territories. It has been made possible by the support of Norway's International Climate and Forests Initiative (NICFI).

Gaia has been working with Indigenous peoples from the Eastern Colombian Amazon since 1993. It played a key role in the recognition of 100,000 km² of Indigenous territories, the creation of national parks such as the Río Puré National Natural Park or the Yaigojé - Apaporis Park. They also supported the development and approval of Decree 632, in cooperation with the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon (OPIAC).

Etnollano has 30 years of experience working with Indigenous Communities in the department of Guainía. 🌳

POTENTIAL AREA FOR INDIGENOUS MUNICIPALITIES

