



KFW



RECOVERING CERKA ANCESTRAL PRACTICES TO RENEW THE MAYAB - CHIBCHA - KAKAWIRA FOREST



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The municipality Cacaopera is located in the Department of Morazán, El Salvador, approximately 178 kilometers from San Salvador; its formed by 7 cantons: Agua Blanca, Calavera, Estancia, Guachipilín, Junquillo, Ocotillo and Sunsulaca. It spans over 135.73 sq.km, with an estimated population of 11 000 inhabitants, and sits at an altitude of 520 meters above sea level.

The main economic activity of the municipality is agriculture, specifically the production of corn, beans, sorghum, seasonal fruits and vegetables. Its inhabitants also rear backyard animals, such as chickens, pigs and cows. Furthermore, a large part of the population is dedicated to manufacturing hammocks from local materials, specifically jarcia and henequén (vegetable fibers obtained from the Agave plant).

The municipality of Cacaopera shelters the Kakawira indigenous people, one of the most predominant in the Salvadorian territory. This indigenous group maintains many of its traditions and customs, including the Dance of Feathers, which goes back to colonial times. However, the inhabitants of this municipality struggle to recover and strengthen their cultural manifestations and identity.

Cacaopera has a Municipal Development Committee (CODEM) that is integrated by members of each of the 38 Communal Development Association (ADESCOS) of the municipality. The CODEM was legally and formally constituted in June of 2003, and its purpose is to promote the development of social, economic, environmental, the recovery of cultural and indigenous

ancestral traditions, specifically those related to cultural manifestations and celebrations, and reviving the Pisbi language.

At the offices of CODEM, Vice coordinator Wilbert Omar Martínez,; Secretary Virginia Ortíz; and María Santiago Martínez - responsible for social activities; and Ruiz Majín Argueta-responsible for cultural activities, mentioned a few of the challenges faced by the population of this municipality, as well as the main results obtained after the development of actions from the support received by the Central American Community Farmer's and Indigenous AgroForestry Coordination Association (ACICAFOC, for its Spanish acronym) and the German Development Bank (KfW) from the Federal Republic of Germany.

Wilbert explains that population has faced a series of social challenges dating back decades, particularly those related to the loss of ancestral cultural practices, specifically traditional dances and the Pisbi language, as well as food and nutritional insecurity and high soil degradation and the destruction of the forest.

Regarding the loss of ancestral cultural practices, although it is a village of origin- and as in many similar cases throughout the country and in the region – they simply lacked the necessary support and recognition, and people stopped practicing the few ceremonies and cultural dances that were left, which unfortunately resulted in the loss of the Pisbi language- their original ancestral language.



*“Airú santa kamalka Kakawira”
 (“Welcome always to Cacaopera” in Pisbi)*

Regarding food and nutritional safety, the situation is also quite precarious; there was a particularly complex situation with the agricultural and livestock production. Beans and corn were harvested once a year due to climate conditions, which would only be enough to cover the basic needs of the families for a short period of time. In addition, the elaboration and sale of handcrafted hammocks was significantly reduced due to a shortage in raw materials (Agave Plants) that has equally been affected by climate change, including the over-exploitation of the agave plant.

High soil degradation and deforestation is particularly due to bad agricultural practices developed by the villagers, and deforestation was caused by the needs of the villagers to cut down trees to be used as firewood for cooking.

Firewood obviously had toxic effects on the health of villagers, with many of them being seriously affected when breathing in smoke when stoking the fire or blowing into the wood burning stoves. Families would end up having to purchase firewood at a much higher price when unable to obtain it on their own.

These bad practices also had significant adverse effects on the availability and quality of water, which the inhabitants suffered from the scarce amount of potable drinking water and from agricultural activities.

“Families who couldn’t obtain firewood, would have to buy it; every bushel (approximately 50 lbs) cost about 5 dollars, which would be enough for two or three days”.

-Moisés Daniel Santiago
CODEM technician

Through CODEM and with the support of the Integrated Indigenous Natural Resource Management Program funded by the German Development Bank (KfW) from the Federal Republic of Germany, a sub-project called “Recovering CERKA Ancestral Practices to renew the Mayab-Chibcha Kakawira Forest” was implemented in 2018, with an investment of EURO€ 116.800; 45% of these funds came from resources obtained from local contributions from CODEM and its beneficiaries.

The sub-project had the purpose of fostering CERKA indigenous ancestral practices and improving environmental conditions by planting native tree species, performing soil and water conservation works, and implementing efficient wood burning stoves in the Municipality of Cacaopera.

Particularly, this subproject managed to increase the tree mass area coverage through the reforestation of quick-growth tree species under CERKA ancestral practices that helped promote greater water infiltration and improve the microclimate of the local communities.

Similarly, it triggered the efforts on soil conservation and water harvesting that contributed towards the improvement on the capacity of water infiltration and retention, and soil fertility. The acquisition of efficient wood burning stoves also helped to minimize the risk of respiratory diseases in children and senior adults. These practices also motivated the engagement of children and youth in cultural activities and promote indigenous identity in the Municipality of Cacaopera through specialized workshops, studies and reflection on Kawawira (CERKA) culture.

In terms of results, this subproject managed to reforest 11 water sources with local native tree species, an estimated 35 hectares (50 blocks) were destined for soil conservation; specialized trainings were carried out on the construction and importance of soil and water conservation with different community leaders; living barriers were also planted in coordination with ADESCOS board of directors that are members of CODEM.

This project allowed purchasing 292 efficient wood burning stoves. These stoves saved an estimated 60% of firewood compared to traditional wood stoves. A training session was held for the benefitted focused on proper stove handling and use. This project contemplated the purchase of 200 stoves, but a convincing negotiation process and savings obtained from other project actions allowed to purchase additional stoves that benefited another 92 families.

Furthermore, thanks to the project, the inhabitants of the Municipality of Cacaopera carried out other activities that helped promote their indigenous culture throughout the territory, particularly the two important dance traditions of the community: the Dance of the Feathers and the Dance of the Blacks.

For the first dance: Dance of Feather, musical instruments were provided (drums, guitar and tambourine), as well traditional clothing and accessories, such as a Copil (a traditional local hat), shoes and traditional gaiters. Traditional clothing was also provided for the Dance of the Blacks.

Additional training was provided through workshops, studies and reflection on the Kakawira indigenous culture. Two dance groups were formed, six traditional ceremonies were held and community participation was encouraged for ceremonial celebrations and for the creation of a CERKA program book.



After the subproject was implemented, the impacts or effects on the improvement of the quality of life were visible in the inhabitants of the Cacaopera Municipality; mainly in terms of environmental protection, economic improvement and food and nutritional security and the rescue of Kakawira indigenous culture. The subproject had a significant reach, directly benefiting 200 families, and 1260 families indirectly



One of the most crucial effects has been generating a sense of belonging and cultural identity by the community's youth. This has allowed, not just strengthening the identity of the Kakawira ethnicity among its inhabitants, but also favoring other processes that were developed afterwards to intensify the process initiated within the subproject's framework; such as modifying the academic curriculum from local schools to integrate the Pisbi language and other cultural expressions, and the establishment of a museum dedicated to the indigenous culture of the municipality.

"This subproject was quite useful for the community, especially its cultural revival"

-Virginia Ortíz
CODEM Secretary.

Furthermore, in environmental terms, reforestation and soil protection practices have definitely improved the availability of water for human consumption, and for agricultural and livestock production; similarly firewood consumption has been reduced, thus deterring deforestation and foster the recovery of local seeds.

In financial terms, this subproject has benefitted families by substantially reducing their expenses due to the use of efficient wood burning stoves, and used those savings to purchase food and medicines. Also, thanks to the availability of water during the year and the variety of plants used for soil recovery, the production of food has been diversified which has in turn, increased the income of the families.

Finally, thanks to acquisition of efficient wood burning stoves, health has been improved, especially in women when preparing meals. Additionally, the number of accidents with children has been drastically reduced.

In conclusion, thanks to the support of the German Cooperation Agency and ACICAFOC, the inhabitants of the Municipality of Cacaopera have been able to significantly improve their conditions of livelihood, through sustainable environmental practices, by empowering community leaders, recovering spiritual and cultural practices from the Kakawira people, and the improving the food and nutritional security for its inhabitants and future generations.

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