

Ffynhonnau Byw

Supporting
people's fight
for justice



Yalenis Medina - Organisation África En Mi Tierra

Colombia is located in the north west corner of South America, with a population of around 52 million people and is divided into 32 regions or departments. Reflecting its colonial past, Spanish is the official state language, but another 65 languages are recognised as regional languages. By the mid-16th century, Spain had colonised much of what we now know as Colombia. The country gained its independence in 1819, becoming the Republic of Colombia in 1886.

Since independence, the country has suffered much violence. This has included disputes with other countries over land but also significant violence within the country between different political factions. In 2016, a peace agreement was signed between the government and the FARC guerrilla group – a conflict which displaced some 6 million people over a 50 year period. Whilst much of the violence has come to an end, some dissident groups remain committed to using violence to bring about their political goals.

Colombia has one of the world's richest biodiversities, ranking first, for example, in the number of bird species.



The country's economy has performed well in recent years and is ranked 32nd in the world in terms of its GDP. One key economic sector is the export of coal and petroleum, with 40% of the country's exports based on these two sectors in 2022. Despite this, there is a great deal of inequality in the country with some people suffering acute poverty.

Christian Aid and Colombia

Christian Aid has been working in Colombia through local partners for over 20 years. Until recently, much of its work was involved in supporting communities affected by violence. By today, supporting the peace building process remains an important aspect of the work but the charity also supports women's rights, defending the land rights of indigenous peoples, supporting climate change adaptation within agriculture and the protection of essential ecosystems.

This fact sheet will present two examples of Christian Aid's work in Colombia and serve as an example of the charity's work worldwide. Funds raised through **Ffynhonnau Byw** will support Christian Aid's work generally around the globe.

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Protecting water in Santurbán

The indigenous peoples of Colombia consider water sources to be sacred, believing them to be vital to life. Scientists would agree on the importance of water, as Colombian biologist Mario Avellaneda says, 'Water is the source of all life. And as such we can't damage it, we mustn't attack it. We must conserve nature to conserve water.'

In the country there are 37 peatland ecosystems in highland areas which provide water for more than 70% of the population. However, some of these water sources are in danger from mining, an industry that can harm the delicate balance of nature and negatively affect the water sources. The Santurbán peatland area in the Santander Department is one such example and Christian Aid partner **Corporación Colectivo De Abogados Luis Carlos Pérez** (CCALCP) - a lawyers' collective - has been helping the local population to defend this crucial environment.

In a landmark case in 2017, CCALCP managed to win an injunction against the government on how mining was controlled in the peatland. The intention was to mark out zones where mining would be allowed, with the understanding that while the water courses within that area would be affected, those outside the zones would be safe.

Local campaigners realised that this would not be the case however. Mayerly López of Christian Aid partner **Corambiente** explains: 'When we began to study this policy of demarcation of the peatlands, we realised that it was a trap. You cannot say that the moorland is going to be protected from a line, and some metres



Santurban mountains, Colombia

below, less than 100 metres below, a large mining project is going to be allowed to construct an underground mine more than 700 metres deep.'

During the legal process, it emerged that a proper scientific study to determine any zones was not being completed. The case has meant that no further zoning can happen without such scientific studies. Another positive outcome of the case was that the voice of local people must now be heard in any future plans. Community participation is now a must and has meant local people have access to the corridors of power.

Lowland communities

The effects of mining on fresh water isn't just an issue for the general population's drinking water, it can also have an effect on the small farmers and communities of the land directly below the peatlands. Corambiente has also been working with these communities.

'Our starting point is the food production process for food sovereignty, for self-sufficiency. Then with any surplus we can generate income for women,' explains Mayerly López. The partner has been working with women in particular to promote more sustainable farming, which has less emphasis on chemical fertilisers.

The result of this work is that yields have been improving, meaning that there is a surplus to sell in the local markets, giving the women additional income. Another aspect of this work is encouraging young people to take a more active role in environmental protection.

Karen Daniela Pulido of **Minigua**, a young people's organisation, explains, 'We have to learn to recognise our native trees, our native species, and keep records so that we can get to know our surroundings in these mountains. There are also young people who have their own crops, and who work the land. I have several colleagues who already have their own coffee and many of their own products. They work and already have their own income for their own needs.'



Mayerly López, Corambiente

Karen understands the importance of the younger generations becoming active. 'We want to plant a seed in our young people, we want them to take care of and recognise that this is our life. The countryside is our main livelihood,' she says.

Christian Aid partners have encouraged community action in defence of the water territories, as Mayerly López explains: 'Throughout this process, the value of working together prevails. They have realised the strength of us getting together, uniting. We have shown that the best tool to defend the territory is through social organisation.'

Christian Aid's partners have therefore been essential in helping local communities defend the peatlands, thus protecting the vital water source for Colombia's population in general, whilst also enabling those communities to support themselves through sustainable farming.

Supporting people displaced by coal mining

Since 1975 the largest open-cast coal mine in Latin America has been operating in La Guajira department. Despite Colombia passing the Climate Action Law in 2021, which would have led to less



Karen Daniela Pulido, Minigua

fossil fuel extraction, sanctions against Russia since their invasion of Ukraine have meant that European demand for the country's coal has increased. Central to Christian Aid's campaigning work has been calling for the reduction in fossil fuels which directly contribute to the global climate emergency.

Locally, the Cerrejón mine has displaced 1,500 people from their homes and land in communities like Tabaco and Chanqueta. Among the people groups affected are communities of Afro-descent – those who are descended from enslaved African people of the 18th and 19th centuries. The effects of the mine have been two-fold on these communities: first, the contamination of land and water; and second, the loss of traditions and economic activity connected to their original lands.

In response to these impacts, women of Afro-descent have been organising themselves in different ways, both in protecting their ancestral knowledge and traditions and supporting themselves economically. Christian Aid partners have been supporting these efforts, including the lawyers' collective **Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo**.

Community hub and shop

Yalenis Medina Sarmiento is a community organiser in her village and president of the community council. She belongs to the **África En Mi Tierra** organisation which has been instrumental in opening a shop and community hub in the village.

Now that they have a shop in their own village, their costs have reduced since they no longer need to travel a distance of 17 kilometres or more to find a store.



Cerrejón coalmine, La Guajira

As well as selling goods, the hub has internet and mobile phone charging facilities (for those without electricity at home) and is powered by solar power. They also have plans to expand the services so that children can go there to do their homework and so that doctors can hold their clinics there.

'More than anything,' says Yalenis, 'this project empowers women, through talks and sharing knowledge, because in our society women do not usually have much influence, and that has to start to change a little.'

She is a passionate believer in women recognising their own value and abilities. 'I invite other women to empower themselves, to change that mentality that they are "someone's partner", "someone's mother": we have to be ourselves. And begin to show who we really are,' she says.

Contamination and ancestral traditions

Ana Sarmiento of *África En Mi Tierra* talks about the mine's effect on their water supply: 'The water: contaminated. The leaves are eaten away, and they act like a sieve. The branches turn black from coal dust because we're very close to the mine ... I've been a farmer all my life and there's no pulling the wool over my eyes, because I've been on this land since I was little and I know it better than anyone, and I know that the contamination has done a lot of harm, really a lot of harm.'



Maria José Pinto – Retomando Raíces, Amor Por El Territorio Collective

But it isn't just the effect on farming that water contamination has had; it has also affected ancestral traditions. Previous generations would take 'moon baths' during the crescent moon periods before making important decisions in their life. Clean, running water was essential for a ritual in which they believed that their thoughts could be purified. Now that the water is contaminated and they have been moved away from the water source, these rituals are being lost.

Maria José Pinto Castro belongs to the **Cooks of Ancestral Dreams** collective, an organisation which teaches children about the rituals and traditions of their ancestors. 'We saw the need for women from the community of Tabaco to continue teaching the children what Tabaco was like and for them to begin to understand the memories of their grandparents,' she says.

Maria adds: 'The women [of the collective] are like women fighters, warriors, because in one way or another they are always there in resistance, regardless of what others might say. Before, they tried to dismiss us black women, calling us "rough". But now we've turned it on its head and turned this into something positive that fills us with pride: we're tough, and our ancestors were brave warriors.'

Ffynhonnau Byw

Despite the challenges facing many communities in Colombia, the people there have found the strength to resist and to create a new life for themselves. Through Christian Aid's partners they have been supported in this work and are finding ways to adapt and thrive.

Through the **Ffynhonnau Byw** appeal we will stand in unity with similar communities around the globe, offering hope for a better world.

