

**Sustainable Economic Development as a Strategy to Reclaim
the Naya People's Environment, Politics, Culture and Territory**

presented by

Colectivo de Trabajo Jenzerá¹

1. Geographic location of the Naya River

The Naya River basin is located in the Pacific coast of Colombia in the departments of Valle and Cauca. It extends about 170,000 hectares and is part of the larger geographic region of Chocó, one of the most biologically diverse in the world.

2. The Naya population

¹ Jenzerá is an organization made up of an interdisciplinary team of professionals, specialists and grassroots leaders. Most have ample experience working with the Indian and Afro-Colombian Movement, some going back to the 1970s. Jenzerá tries to give continuity to local-level and rural processes that were interrupted by the country's violence and works on demand of local leaders and organizations.

About 18,000 African Colombians live in the lower and middle parts of the Naya basin in 50 settlements, and constitute the majority of the population of river basin. They are the descendants of African slaves brought to this region in the 17th and 18th centuries. In addition, some 800 members of the Eperara Siapidara people live in 20 communities in the lower Naya. Finally, after the violence of the 1950s, displaced Páez Indians and peasants from the Andean region settled the upper Naya. They now number about 7,000 people.

The Colombian state has very little presence in this hard to reach area of Colombia. The region has no roads, and the river is for the most part not navigable. A mule path connects the Naya region to an Andean town near Santander de Quilichao in Valle.

3. The region's challenges.

All the problems that affect Colombia are also present in the Naya basin. Black and indigenous peoples have neither collective nor individual titles to their ancestral lands. The Naya's geographic location has become of strategic importance for the illegally armed groups to traffic with drugs or weapons, or to hide kidnapped people. As a result of their presence, in 2001, a paramilitary incursion resulted in the massacre of 100 people and the displacement of 1,000 Naya residents. In addition, a significant number of new settlers are coming to this region to grow coca. Finally, the Naya's mineral resources, woodlands, and

mangroves are attracting the attention of extractive industries that—many fear—will only exploit the region’s economic and human resources without investing in its sustainable development. This combination of factors constitutes serious obstacles to the social and economic development of the Naya.

Notwithstanding the fact that this region’s troubles are embedded in a national context and need to be addressed by national authorities, the people of the Naya understand that a solution to their problems begins at the regional level. Since 2002, local representatives of the Afro-Colombian, Eperara, Páez and peasant communities have been designing their own political and economic agendas and redefining their traditional organizations and institutions in order to face the humanitarian crisis affecting them. This local initiative is founded on principles of participation and solidarity among the different ethnic groups and seeks to build strategies to resist the impact of violence and to find economic alternatives to coca plantations and to extractive economic plans.

A 2003 socioeconomic and demographic census gathered by the “Colectivo de Trabajo Jenzerá” with the help of local leaders and community residents in the Upper Naya in July of 2003, demonstrates that the region’s main vulnerability is its lack of food security. The coca trade has deteriorated food security because it quickly disintegrated traditional food markets and production, and turned the population into importers of food.

4. Socioeconomic and political context

The Colombian government has ignored the Naya people's claims to own titles to their lands, which constitutes a problem given the fact that other actors, including the Universidad del Cauca and Smurfit-Cartón (a paper company) have interests in owning this land. The Inter-American Bank is also planning to support investments in the region's development but to this day, has not contacted community leaders to discuss the bank's objectives. On the other hand, the national government has not brought justice to this community after the 2001 massacre, and the 1,000 displaced Nayans are still living in refugee camps as they have no guarantees for a safe return.

The growth of the coca economy also constitutes a problem. As stated before, much of the population now depends on importing food (rice, sugar, corn, eggs, chickens, flour) from markets outside the region. According to our census, coca production involves about half of the population of the upper Naya. Coca production is a vicious circle as it uses high quantities of chemicals which are dumped into the rivers. Furthermore, this economy attracts armed groups, and there is fear of future fumigations by the Colombian government. Finally, the population could be easily repressed by the armed actors by way of blockading the flow of food. Finally, according to our census the lack of balanced and fresh food, and lower food consumption, is to blame for illness and malnutrition.

5. The process of building a grassroots, inter-ethnic organization

UTINAYA—the Inter-ethnic Territorial Union of the Naya River—has advanced notwithstanding cultural rivalries and the threats of the armed actors. This organization has begun a process that aims to integrate the region’s population along a path of political, cultural and economic unity. Leaders from the four groups (black, Eperara, Páez and peasants) have come to basic agreements that generally support the idea that the advance of the coca economy and of the armed groups can only be stopped by developing sustainable economic projects, initially centered on food production and on rescuing traditional market relations. Utinaya has widespread approval among the 20,000 or more residents of the region.

Jenzerá provided ample support and encouragement to this process by facilitating meetings (we sponsored and coordinated four important workshops) and by serving as a bridge between the different ethnic groups and their traditional organizations. We also served as a link between Naya organizations and other organizations of Indian and Black people, who are now active supporters of UTINAYA. It is expected that UTINAYA will strengthen local level authorities, participation and decision- making, as well as a legal economy that does not marginalize the Naya people.

Despite all the important advances mentioned before, UTINAYA is far from established and needs support. Jenzerá is committed to the development of economic and governance projects that uphold the work of Utinaya. For this, we have helped

Utinaya design agricultural projects, political training workshops, communication strategies, and legal mechanism to obtain titles to their lands.