Afro-Colombians and inteculturality in the Pacific Region

Afro-Colombian communities in the Pacific region account for 95.3% of the 5,600,000 hectares of their ancestral territories. Collective land use, traditional celebrations and ancestral knowledge predominate in these lands. Despite being a peripheral region, in recent years ancestral territories have been highly coveted by extractive industries, which has attracted illegal armed groups that impose their rules through violence. In this context, the construction of inteculturality and interethnic dialogues are a form of resistance to extractivism and dispossession.

By Marcela Velasco, Fernando Castrillón and Alonso Tobón – November 1st 2023

Afro-Colombians are as diverse as their individual and collective claims. This population includes people who identify themselves as Black, Palenquero, Raizal or simply Afro-Colombian: categories that encompass cultural, racial and ethnic distinctions and help to understand the political complexity of their claims. Although they share common experiences of structural racism, economic discrimination and political exclusion, it is important to clarify that not all of them claim collective territories, as is the case of the organizations and communities of the Pacific.

According to data from the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE – Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas), the Black population represents 10% of the national total, or 4.7 million people. However, this figure has been a subject of debate due to the lack of precision in the methodology used. Thus, the real number of Afro-descendants could be closer to 20% of the population.

Although it may seem a simple technical discussion, in truth, accurately counting the Black population is essential to understand the true impact of racism in Colombia and, therefore, implement ambitious public policies that effectively address this problem. This relevance is
clearly seen in the fact that the Vice President, Francia Márquez, a well-known Afro-descendant activist, is the first Minister of the Ministry of Equality and Equity.

**The Colombian Pacific and the Afro-Colombian People**

The Community Councils are the ethnic authority recognized by Law 70 of 1993. This legislation was passed within the framework of the 1991 Constitution, which introduced important multicultural reforms. The legislation recognized the right to collective ownership of Black *campesinos’* (small-scale farmers) lands located along riverbanks, especially in the Pacific region.

The population residing in the territories of the Community Councils amounts to 300,000 people. This population shares a culture, that is, a set of values and practices different from the rest of the Colombian population. However, in the urban centers of the Pacific (such as Quibdó, Istmina, Guapi, Buenaventura or Tumaco) and in cities such as Turbo, Apartadó and Cali there are people who maintain strong links with the Pacific Coastal cultures. Most of them were forced to move because of the armed conflict or to seek better economic opportunities.

In numerical terms, the people living on the lands of the Pacific Community Councils represent a minority of the Afro-Colombian population. However, they inhabit a peripheral region that is highly coveted by various economic interests. As such, their situation becomes a relevant case for understanding the fundamental ethnic and social conflicts in Colombia, specifically, the struggle for territories and their resources.

**An economic enclave**

In recent decades, the Pacific has experienced an accelerated modernization process, often accompanied by violence, and marked by extractivist policies linked to an economy that focuses on intensive, large-scale, overexploitation of land and natural resources. It is not about the deterioration of natural resources, such as an inventory of trees or fish, but involves the disruption of agroecosystems, ecological cycles, and cultures associated with livelihoods.

The region has never ceased to be an economic enclave. The extraction of natural resources benefits local intermediaries and their external allies operating beyond the borders of the
Pacific and Colombia. The direct consequence has been the depredation of forests, the exploitation of minerals and a considerable impact on the environment. This situation includes the disarticulation of the economies of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, the loss of cultural identity and the disintegration of traditional decision-making institutions.

After years of extractive policies, the Pacific has become the most impoverished, exploited and isolated region in the country. Even though the government of Gustavo Petro, in the context of the 30th anniversary of Law 70, recognizes that the affirmative actions of the Colombian State have failed to ensure the full enjoyment of their territories, the implementation of the rights of Afro-Colombian peoples remains uncertain.

The implementation gap

This "implementation gap" or delay in the realization of acquired rights - a notion proposed in 2006 by the late Mexican sociologist and UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, Rodolfo Stavenhagen - constitutes one of the main problems facing Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups. Faced with the inability or unwillingness of the Colombian State to pass the reforms, illegal armed groups have made progress in imposing their rules in the Pacific region. In so doing, gangs compete for control of strategic regions for arms smuggling, drug trafficking and increased activities such as mining, logging and illicit crop production.

At the same time, this region is experiencing a massive influx of African, Asian and Latin American migrants seeking to reach the United States via unregulated routes through the Darien Gap, the extensive tropical rainforest on the border between Colombia and Panama.

The citizens of the region and the organizations that represent them face a context of dehumanization and violent integration into an extractive economic model. The damage to the population is reflected in the abuse of their territories and ecosystems that once represented freedom, the bounty of nature, and solidarity among diverse cultural groups. Their social networks that maintained peaceful relationships and resilient economies have been broken down as an extractivist and violent social order takes hold. Given this implementation gap and the lack of effective actions by the State to guarantee the security
and well-being of these communities, the most important socio-political decisions are left in the hands of other actors, such as local politicians, intermediaries, traders, or armed groups.

**Interculturality as a form of resistance**

Amid such a demanding situation, alternatives emerge such as the resistance work conducted by Afro-Colombian and Indigenous social movements and leaders that often promote joint processes. In the Pacific, multiculturality is a reality: Afro-Colombians, Black and Mestizo small-scale farmers, and Indigenous people coexist and depend on the same economic, political and ecological systems. Each group is organized in different institutional bodies, such as Indigenous councils, or Black community councils, which at times contribute to creating divisions and not to resolving differences. In other words, Indigenous peoples are supported by regulations that grant them rights to authorities and access to fiscal resources, while Afro-Colombians in collective territories do not enjoy the same rights. Despite these divisions, organic and collaborative agreements must be reached to develop collective strategies.

Intercultural relations are active and dynamic processes of relationship and integration between different peoples and cultures. The purpose of these linkages is to create shared spaces for recognition and decision making. These spaces also play a fundamental role in a joint defense against common threats, as the local populations of Bajo Calima or Naya have done in a number of opportune cases. **Without intercultural coexistence, the diverse cultures that share a territory may lose the strength to sustain themselves and their lands.**

The foundations of this interculturality are not built by adopting a simplistic view of others and, much less, by resorting to stereotyped and immovable visions of what the culture or identity of others means. In cultural terms, instead of seeing everything in black and white, one must recognize the existence of a wide range of nuances, which is the result of centuries of exchanges of cultural expressions. Therefore, interculturality is a living reality, an active practice and a vital necessity for the survival of ethnic Peoples.

**A commitment to political training**

Understanding the complexity of intercultural relations has been the purpose of the work of Colectivo Jenzera (Jenzera Collective), a group that was formed during the accompaniment of
Black, Indigenous and small-scale farming communities of Naya that suffered a paramilitary massacre in 2001. In this process, land titling was fundamental for the reparation and reconstruction of these communities, since only the Eperara Siapidaara people had titles to their reservation. Even more important was the strengthening of inter-ethnic practices and agreements.

Inspired by this work, since 2008 Jenzera has developed an interethnic leadership training school in the Pacific. This school is based on intercultural dialogue, the collaborative study of ethnic-territorial governance and the promotion of new leaders, especially young people and women. This project has materialized thanks to the support of Afro-Colombian, Indigenous and small-scale farmers’ organizations. One of the central objectives is for the new leaders to understand not only the problems of their own communities, but also those of other marginalized groups with whom they share territorial visions and face the impact of extractivism and plunder.

In the research conducted with the participants of the training school, common values and practices have been identified that sustain intercultural life in the territory. Some examples are traditional celebrations, shared forms of work such as work sharing (minga) or labor exchange (mano cambiada), and ancestral knowledge of medicine, botany, nutrition, construction, hunting, and production.

**Dialogue and joint initiatives**

The socioeconomic crisis in the Colombian Pacific is dire. The harsh reality undermines the social foundations of Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples and additionally, it generates a collective trauma that could further weaken community social relations. This situation impacts all communities in the region equally.

It is the Afro-Colombian communities that have borne a particularly heavy burden due to State neglect and structures that perpetuate their political and socioeconomic marginalization. This situation has been further aggravated by the difficult humanitarian situation in Colombia that has weakened their social networks and hindered decision-making
in their territories. Unless profound changes occur, the political will to implement reforms or create new institutions will have limited impact on these communities.

At this transcendental political moment, it is essential to promote interculturality and interethnic dialogues. The persistence of isolated actions has only contributed to generating unnecessary tensions. To this end, Colombia has elected an Afro-descendant vice-president with a long history in the struggle for territories, the government is taking steps to regulate Law 70 and the Ministry of Equality and Equity has been created. Without losing sight of differences and diversity, fostering agreements and strategic actions between Afro-Colombians, Indigenous peoples, and Mestizos becomes an imperative.

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