INTEGRATING COMMUNITY-BASED MONITORING INITIATIVES AND THE NATIONAL FOREST AND CARBON MONITORING SYSTEM IN COLOMBIA

March 2021

SNAPSHOT

What

A strategic, multi-step approach to build capacity, connection, and mutual trust among community-based forest monitoring initiatives throughout Colombia, and between these local efforts and the national Forest and Carbon Monitoring System (SMByC).

Who

- » Local communities, including rural farmers, Afro-Colombian, and Indigenous peoples

- » National Community Monitoring Initiatives Network (RNIMC)

- » The Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology and Environmental Studies (IDEAM) of Colombia

- » Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development (Minambiente)

- » Food and Agriculture Organization-United Nations Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (FAO-UN-REDD)

- » The Interinstitutional Working Group on Community Monitoring (GITMC), made up of national and local NGO partners, including Fundación Natura Colombia, Fundación para la Conservación y el Desarrollo Sostenible (FCDS), Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Asociación Ambiente & Sociedad, Fondo Acción, WWF-Colombia, and international cooperation agencies like the United Nations Agency for Food and Agriculture (FAO), and the German Cooperation Agency (GIZ)

Where

Colombia

When

2016-ongoing

WWF Project Team

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SUMMARY

This Inspiring Practice describes how WWF and its partners worked under the leadership of IDEAM with participatory community-based forest monitoring initiatives throughout Colombia to build greater connection, communication, technical capacity, and trust–both among these initiatives and between them and the agencies tasked with forest monitoring at the national level.

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Beginning with an inventory of and outreach to local monitoring efforts, and then unfolding through a series of meetings reflecting on the actions of monitoring at different scales and practical workshops in which community monitors engaged directly with IDEAM and its partners, this work strengthened local-to-national integration and led to the establishment of national guidelines for participatory monitoring. It also created an effective and empowering collaborative network for community monitoring initiatives, through which monitors can exchange information, organize for advocacy, and connect over shared concerns, challenges, and achievements.

CONTEXT

Across more than a million square kilometers, Colombia encompasses great biological and cultural diversity.

It is home to Andean highlands, Amazonian rainforests, Orinoco savannah, Choco humid rainforest, dry forest relics and more than 3,000 kilometers of coastline along both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, along with vibrant Afro-Colombian, Indigenous and other ethnic communities and cultures found nowhere else in the world.

But this vital landscape faces significant threats. Deforestation has increased sharply in recent years, surging from 124,035 hectares in 2015 to nearly 200,000 hectares in 2018. Land grabbing, overgrazing, illicit crop cultivation, mining, illegal logging, the expansion of agro-industrial cultivation (for palm oil, among other products), and the construction of roads all continue to drive deforestation and forest degradation, and climate change presents the additional threat of rising temperatures and altered rainfall patterns in the region. Political turmoil, weak environmental governance, and the legacy of more than five decades of internal conflict also make it difficult to combat forest loss, by limiting opportunities and incentives for conservation.

WWF has worked within this context for more than two decades, collaborating with local stakeholders to foster participatory processes around community-based mapping, land use planning, monitoring of natural resources, wildlife protection, community wellbeing, and developing social and environmental safeguards. From 2013 to 2016, WWF also supported IDEAM in the establishment of the National Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) System to track greenhouse gas emissions and removals country-wide. But community monitors and national technical experts remained largely separate: community members did not trust national technical experts to use their data responsibly and with community benefit in mind, and national monitors had limited awareness of community initiatives and significant skepticism of their methods and data.

In 2016, IDEAM led the establishment of the GITMC and set about integrating the community-based monitoring efforts with the national system, bringing together the stakeholders driving monitoring on each level to build their mutual understanding and trust and to support their collaboration moving forward. They also sought to integrate these efforts "horizontally"–to cultivate connection and knowledge exchange between community initiatives, in order to enhance both their technical capacities and their resilience in the face of considerable challenges and risks associated with monitoring. Through this vertical and horizontal integration, the stakeholders hoped to strengthen the SMByC on all levels nationwide, and to generate national monitoring guidelines that are informed by the full diversity of community experiences and perspectives.

Direct stakeholders

Involved in project design, make decisions, and receive benefits

- Local communities, including rural farmers, Afro-Colombian, and Indigenous peoples

- RNIMC

- IDEAM

- Minambiente

- FAO-UN-REDD Program

Strategic stakeholders

Provide material, human, and other resources

- GITMC

- Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI)

- Norwegian Agency for Development and Cooperation (Norad)

EXPECTED CHANGES

- Develop a complete database of community-based monitoring efforts, that includes information on where initiatives are located, who local monitors are, how long they've been monitoring, what they're monitoring and why, in order to better understand their needs and to generate tools to assist them.

- Build trust and collaboration between community monitors and IDEAM and other national stakeholders to better integrate local monitoring efforts with the SMByC.

- Cultivate information exchange and communication between local monitoring initiatives, so that community monitors can learn from and support each other in their work.

- Create, share, and communicate national guidelines for participatory community monitoring that are informed by the experiences and knowledge of local community members and safeguard their rights and livelihoods, with a special focus on rural communities.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE

1990s: In the 1990s, many community monitoring efforts emerged in Colombia, several of them technically and financially by the entities that would later make up the GITMC.

2013 to 2015: IDEAM establishes the SMByC, beginning the process of strengthening the institution's capacities, and placing it at the forefront on this matter in Latin America.

2016: Under the leadership of IDEAM, with permanent support from FAO-UN-REDD, the GITMC begins monthly meetings to develop ideas around supporting community monitoring efforts and integrating these into the national framework. They establish two key priorities: assessing local conservation and/or monitoring initiatives already under way in the country, and defining national guidelines for community monitoring.

2016-2017: In a series of workshops held throughout the country, IDEAM, FAO-UN-REDD, and WWF and the other GITMC partners meet with community monitors to learn directly about their needs and motivations, in order to better support their efforts and consider options for integration both horizontally and with the national level. They identify key bottlenecks for the integration with the SMByC, in particular the lack of community knowledge about IDEAM's monitoring efforts and a general feeling of mistrust by community actors towards government entities.

December 2017: The second National Forests Seminar on Forest Cover Monitoring organized by IDEAM invites community initiatives to participate for the first time. The RNIMC is established in a session at the conclusion of this seminar.

2018-2019: In order to foster more trust and integration of local monitoring initiatives and national efforts, IDEAM, FAO-UN-REDD, and the GITMC focus on generating spaces for meeting and knowledge sharing. They meet for a series of workshops aimed at strengthening monitors' capacities and creating a space for sharing ideas, experiences, and tools, as much among the local initiatives as between them and IDEAM.

May 2018: With the support of FAO-UN-REDD, IDEAM publishes the national guidelines for participatory community monitoring.

November 2018: For the first time, the National Forests Seminar on Forest Cover Monitoring had a special session about community forest monitoring. Additionally, a meeting of the RNIMC was held to define a roadmap for integration between local and national initiatives.

Throughout 2019: With the support of the GITMC, IDEAM establishes the School of Knowledge on Forest Monitoring of the SMByC and implements (both in 2019 and 2020) the first module on "Mapping and basic GIS for Community Forest Monitoring" with community stakeholders from the Amazon and Andean regions.

November 2019: The Fourth National Forests Seminar on Forest Cover Monitoring takes place with the participation of delegates from community monitoring initiatives and a meeting of the RNIMC is held.

2019-2020: A collective reflection process begins to identify lessons learned, failures, achievements and recommendations to improve the process of integration between local monitoring initiatives and the SMByC.

2020: From with a poll shared to members of the RNIMC, IDEAM carries out an assessment of the connectivity of community actors and identifies interaction strategies for the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on this, the GITMC reflects on working integration mechanisms to continue to support the Network. The Network continues to be active, with approximately 50 community initiatives participating. IDEAM continues to lead the process of integration and strengthening community monitoring in the country, with the support of the GITMC.

ACHIEVEMENTS

- **Through greater interaction and relationship-building between the local and national levels, collaboration and communication are growing.** Community initiatives and national institutions are now better able to exchange information and learn from each other. Community monitors and their organizations have greater access to tools (such as mapping and data analysis software) and information that strengthens their monitoring efforts, and some are now more willing to trust IDEAM and its partners. IDEAM and its partners, in turn, now have greater trust in the skills of community monitors and the data

they gather. This shift on both sides enhances integration of the local systems and the SMByC, creating more visibility and opportunities for recognition of community monitoring initiatives and the important role they play in forest conservation.

- **IDEAM, Minambiente, international cooperation agencies, and NGO members of the GITMC are now better equipped to meet their goal of strengthening community processes.** Greater communication and integration between community initiatives and the national level have given national stakeholders a better

understanding of the needs and challenges of local communities and how to support their processes of conservation and forest monitoring.

- **By making local monitoring initiatives more visible, this process has fostered greater connection and collaboration between communities as well.** For example, in Solano, Caquetá, in a process supported by Fundación Natura, the Inga Indigenous community and the local peasant community found they shared a problem: the deterioration of water sources due to the expansion of livestock grazing and deforestation upstream. The two communities decided to start jointly monitoring water sources, climate, fauna (birds), and early warnings of deforestation, among other indicators of environmental health. This shared initiative has brought the two communities together and highlighted the value of the Indigenous community's traditional knowledge of the forest.

- **This community-to-community "horizontal" integration has resulted in the formation of the RNIMC**, a group led by community monitors to exchange information, organize across communities, and otherwise strengthen local monitoring efforts. This network coordinates with national organizations and agencies, but also meets autonomously to identify and advocate for the needs and goals of the communities.

- **Using WhatsApp, the RNIMC has cultivated a vibrant forum for community monitors to stay connected and share information.** This communication tool has empowered monitors to develop initiatives, solve problems, share insights and challenges—including information about risks and threats, accounting for the violent

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contexts in which many initiatives are found–and build support and solidarity across geographic and cultural divides.

- **IDEAM has made space in national conferences and other knowledge-sharing fora for the RNIMC and its contributions.** In November 2018, the National Forest Workshop on Forest Cover Monitoring included participatory community monitoring in the agenda for the first time and developed the second space for the meeting of the Network, in order to define a roadmap for integration between local and national initiatives.

- **Working together, IDEAM, FAO-UN-REDD Programme, the GITMC and the RNIMC have proposed national guidelines for participatory community monitoring** that include social and environmental safeguards for peasant, Afro-Colombian, and Indigenous communities, within the framework of the Integrated Strategy for Deforestation Control and Forest Management.

- **A comprehensive database of community-based conservation and participatory monitoring initiatives now exists**, including more than 100 efforts from all over the country. This database details, as much as possible, the names and locations of the local initiatives, the type of ecosystem each aims to conserve, what metrics it monitors (for example, local wildlife, forest phenology, or soil and water quality), specifics on the strengths or gaps in the community's monitoring experience and any publications that have emerged from their work, and contact details. This organization of information fosters connections between initiatives, provides a better understanding of capacities, and recognizes the work of the local organizations in the conservation of Colombia's forests and the biodiversity held within them.
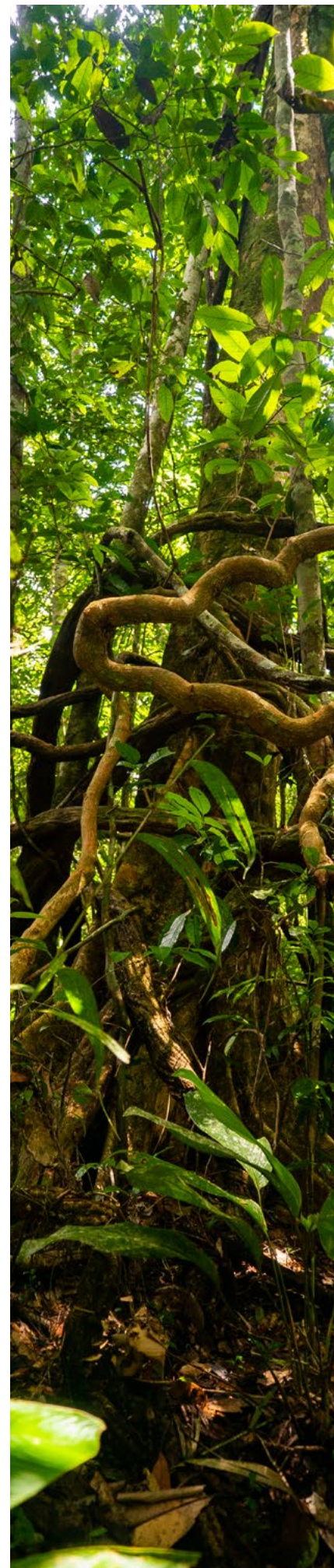
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CHALLENGES

- **The two-way flow of information (between the national and the local) is still slow and limited** due to several factors: the difficulties accessing the internet on the part of the local initiatives, the lack of continuity in some community monitoring processes due to financial limitations, the lack of knowledge on the part of actors at all levels of the potential of collaboration and integration of local and national monitoring.

- **To enrich the data and make sure it flows to and from relevant decision-makers at all levels, more regional and national institutions need to be included in the process,** like the National Union of Natural Parks, the Regional Autonomous Corporations, and the research institutions. However, as at the beginning of the process with IDEAM, there is mistrust and a lack of knowledge between the community initiatives and the government institutions who could be beneficial additions. Overcoming those barriers will require concerted trust building, establishing a genuine and horizontal dialogue, educating both sides on the others' roles and strengths, and opening space for communication and collaboration. This level of openness is not yet found in all participating organizations and institutions, which will also need to be fostered in any new parties brought into the process.

- **Time, capacity, and resources are still a constraint on the strengthening and growth of the RNIMC.** Although the Network brings together a diverse and significant group of local monitoring initiatives, there are still many that are not connected and are unaware of IDEAM's work related to forest monitoring and capacity building. To establish contact with those experiences, generate the ties of mutual trust and understanding, and thus broaden the base of integrated initiatives of the SMByC requires time and resources that provide a dilemma for IDEAM and the GITMC partners of whether to strengthen what they have already built or bring new community initiatives into the process.
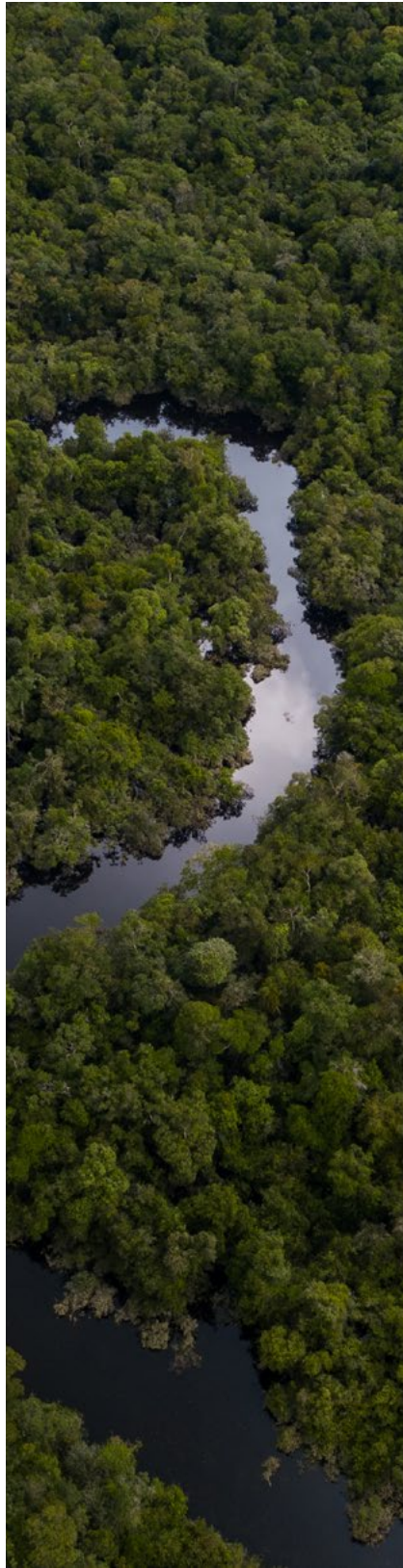
- **Even though they have generated platforms and spaces to exchange knowledge where local monitoring initiatives have participated, greater representation and opportunities to share results remain limited.** In other words, main national actors haven't brought community monitoring— or community monitors—into the larger conversations about monitoring itself. This results in an artificial separation within the national discussion of monitoring efforts, strategies, and priorities, rather than one integrated whole. To remove the barriers, community monitoring initiatives and community monitors need to be more integrated into the larger conversation, their expertise acknowledged and trusted, and their concerns and priorities heard.

- **Procedures for access, exchange, and use of information from both local and national monitoring need to be tailored to protect communities and community monitors.** While there are procedures in place, there are currently gaps in the protocols relating to information resulting from both local and national monitoring. These gaps are particularly sensitive for communities, who need the guarantee of confidentiality to be able to safely collect and provide monitoring data to protect them from retaliation in their territories for carrying out monitoring activities.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **It is essential to establish trust and open communication between community monitors and national monitoring institutions**. Building greater trust, communication, and integration between community monitoring initiatives and national stakeholders like IDEAM, Minambiente, and their partners benefited everyone. Community monitors can contribute valuable on-the-ground data, traditional and experiential knowledge, and unique perspectives that can enrich national efforts. IDEAM and its partners, in turn, can offer community monitors tools, learning opportunities and resources to support their work. Exclusion and distrust are barriers to productive work at every level.

- **To empower community initiatives, the powerful national entities and NGOs must create space for local voices to be heard.** When IDEAM opened knowledge-sharing spaces, like the National Forest Workshop on Forest Cover Monitoring, to community monitoring initiatives, local monitors found new visibility, validation, and opportunities to highlight their role in forest conservation. But the voices and experiences of national monitors and institutions were still the dominant voices. Institutional stakeholders must consider who is speaking most in these settings–whose voices, experiences and knowledge are being centered–and take intentional steps to bring community voices and knowledge to the fore.

- **Information is power–and its use, communication, and protection are key to the success or failure of monitoring initiatives.** One goal of this work was to improve the flow of information between community monitors and national stakeholders like IDEAM and its partners. This

flow has tremendous potential. When information flows from the national level into communities, it can inform community decision-making in helpful ways. When information flows from communities to the regional or national level, it can increase awareness, provide new data, and facilitate enforcement of forest conservation.

- **Community monitors are best empowered when they are integrated horizontally with other communities *and* vertically with the national framework.** Improved integration with national monitoring efforts' strengthened capacities promoted the exchange of knowledge between the initiatives themselves as well as with the SMByC. But monitors saw equal, if not greater, benefit from their improved connection to each other. The formation of the RNIMC and its digital incarnation on WhatsApp has enabled community monitors to exchange information; share insights, updates and warnings (if a threat has been recently identified); build relationships and collaborations; and organize with monitors in other communities and areas of the country. That interconnectedness is a powerful tool for lasting change.

- **Building a space for inter-institutional work, in order to dynamize the entire process of integrating the local initiatives with the SMByC, turned out to be a successful strategy.** The creation of the GITMC allowed for the streamlining of various components of the process. For example, the access to information and the direct contact with local monitoring initiatives in distinct Colombian geographies facilitated the creation of the RNIMC, then each of the institutional members of the GITMC brought their long experiences to the table, along with the available opportunities of human, logistical, and financial resources required for the distinct activities of the process. This inter-institutional group has been a good example of horizontal work, without the need for protagonists and with the desire to establish synergies. In sum, the GITMC is a space that reflects the fundamental values of WWF's work: respect, collaboration, integrity, and courage.

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OUR VISION

WWF's Forest and Climate team works to ensure that the conservation of tropical forests as carbon stores is secured by green economic development that benefits people, the climate, and biodiversity in transformational ways.
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