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The Protection of the Indigenous Barí Territory in Tibú, Catatumbo, as a Model for Sustainable and Self-sufficient Agriculture

In the northeastern part of Colombia, there is a region called Catatumbo where the recognized indigenous community of the Barí lives. People whose culture, tradition, values and survival are deeply rooted to their territory. For centuries, the Barí have lived and cultivated their land through spiritually meaningful and ecologically mindful practices; however, their ancestral territory has been dramatically reduced and affected by decades of armed conflict, forceful displacement and constant violence (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018).

Today, as the world seeks innovation for change to address urgent global matters, the Barí people show that innovation can also mean revitalizing what has sustained humanity for years. Restoring and protecting ancestral knowledge isn't just looking backward, but also integrating traditions as powerful solutions for the future.

The Barí have inhabited Catatumbo's rainforest between Norte de Santander and Venezuela for many centuries, and have maintained their worldview of seeing land as a living entity that is sacred and essential for survival, where every living being holds spiritual meaning. The Barí population in Colombia is over 3000 people distributed across 23 settlements, with the majority living in different areas of the municipality of Tibú, Catatumbo. Their community is organized in groups of about 40 to 50 people, who share two to three large communal houses known as "bohíos" or "malokas". Each bohío is spacious enough to hold several families, and they come together in larger settlements which usually brings together around 150 residents in total in a community.

The Barí lifestyle is based on gathering, fishing, hunting and, since agriculture is their main economic activity, farming isn't just taken as an income source, but as a community centered activity that creates connection to their homeland and between their members. Their typical crops include *yuca* (cassava), *corn*, *cocoa*, *ají* (chili), *plantains* and *different medicinal plants* that are local to the area, They are all cultivated with a traditional agricultural model that causes minimal ecological impact and

holds a deep respect for the local biodiversity, which mainly consists of organic fertilizers, crop rotation and avoiding the use of synthetic chemicals (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018). This model is a great example of indigenous food autonomy, which showcases the right of indigenous groups to define their own food systems, that maintain a self-sufficient, balanced and integral lifestyle, where they not only plant to survive, but to honor their ancestors, strengthen their social bonds and protect the rainforest and its ecosystems.

Currently and despite their years-long resilience, the Barí community located inside Catatumbo, mainly in the municipality of Tibú, is facing significant threats and challenges that put their integrity at risk. The main threats being:

- **Armed Conflict and Illicit Crops:**

The Catatumbo region is considered one of Colombia's most violent and militarized areas in recent years because of the presence of various illegal armed groups, and because it is an important strategic zone because the area shares a border with Venezuela. Some of the best known armed groups include the *guerrillas* (armed left-wing insurgent groups) of the *National Liberation Army* (ELN), and dissidents of the *Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia* (FARC) (BBC News, 2025). These groups have destined the use of indigenous land to cultivate *Erythroxylum coca* (coca), replacing native forests, and destroying multiple crops that are essential for the survival of local communities in order to later produce and sell cocaine. At the same time, the presence of land mines and force recruitment further limits the mobility of the Barí people.

In January 2025, *Reuters* reported that hundreds of families within Catatumbo, including Barí, have been displaced from their homes because of the escalating violence in the area of Tibú.

- **Environmental Exploitation and Displacement**

For many years now, Barí people have been killed and exiled from their land because of multiple oil exploration contacts, where different oil companies like ECOPETROL, have displaced and killed the population of the Barí in the area by 80%, while having taken approximately 70% of their ancestral territory (CNTI, 2024). These massive oil explorations have caused significant repercussions to the local biodiversity, causing contamination of soil, and water by oil spills, deforestation for infrastructure that has fragmented ecosystems while threatening the lives of protected species, and polluting the air by the use of contaminating equipment. These environmental crimes are not only harming nature, but also harming the collective memory and spiritual connection of the Barí people

to the area, showing how economic interests are prioritized over indigenous rights, a contradiction that undermines international human rights commitments.

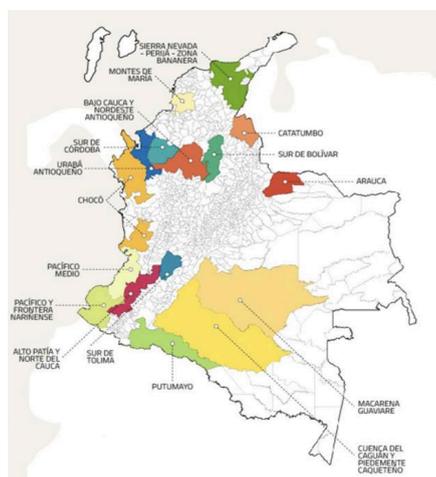
- Lack of State Protection and Conscious Government Intervention:

Colombia's government has historically failed to protect the integrity of Barí people and their territory, because despite them recognizing indigenous autonomy and land rights, the state presence is minimal in regions like Catatumbo, leaving indigenous communities exposed to armed groups and organizations with extractive interests. This has caused the constant suffering of members of the community, being forced to flee their homes in order to escape from danger or live exposed to various ways of exploitation, torture and death.

There have also been many cases where violence against indigenous leaders ends up not being investigated and goes unreported. Members of these communities and activists are vulnerable to being targeted by armed groups to silence them and take over their property. The lack of justice perpetuates a feeling of fear and impunity, where acts like harassment and murder are normalized, leaving indigenous defenders isolated and vulnerable to systematic and direct violence.

Although the government of Colombia has voiced and showed their commitment to rural peace and land justice through programs like *PDET* (Development Programs with a Territorial Focus), that currently aims their plans to rebuild regions affected by organized crime and armed conflict with economic, infrastructure and agricultural revitalization (PDET, 2024). Many of the propositions are imposed without consulting with members of the community, often silencing indigenous voices by not letting them participate in the decision making process of the projects. Because of this, many well-intentioned efforts end up not fulfilling the community's needs and cultural views.

Figure 1. Map of PDET subregions



Agencia de Renovación de Territorio. (2025). Map of the territories covered by the Development Programs with a Territorial Approach. Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial (*Development Programs with a Territorial Approach*) https://www.renovacionterritorio.gov.co/especiales/especial_pdet/

As a result of these different and overlapping threats, the Barí are starting to lose control over their food production and source of income; currently, many depend on state food aid or imports from nearby towns. Their usual traditional and diverse diets that were rich in nutrients, have now been replaced by processed and unfamiliar foods, causing different health consequences and malnutrition, mainly in children of the community.

At the same time, access to basic infrastructure remains limited. Medical services are scarce and serious medical treatment usually requires traveling to other cities through unsafe routes. Schools in the region often lack adequate classrooms, internet or bilingual teachers, which affects the development and future opportunities of the local youth. And poor roads and the absence of reliable transportation make it difficult for the Barí to reach markets and sell their products.

Furthermore, the significant loss of land has disrupted generational knowledge and customs, making it difficult for elders to teach their youth about their traditions and how to farm. If this continues, it will ultimately end up with a loss of identity and knowledge, or even the complete disappearance of the Barí people, affecting food security in the area and the cultural loss of a whole indigenous community.

In order to face these challenges and their possible consequences, it is essential to develop a single integrated proposal with interconnected steps that respond to conflict, environmental issues and cultural loss. In order to ensure the protection of the Barí tradition and way of life:

First, achieving full legal protection over Barí territory is crucial, in order to prevent further displacement and ensure the preservation of ecosystems since the Barí have already lost over 70% of their land. The *Agencia Nacional de Tierras* (ANT) must take urgent action by formally recognizing Barí land rights as they are the primary government agency that is responsible for managing land ownership in rural areas in Colombia. Through different plans, like *Plan Catatumbo*, ANT has initiated efforts to return displaced communities into their original territories and remove illegal individuals or organizations that occupied those spaces so the Barí can maintain their own self-governance systems (ANT, 2025). After ensuring the recognition of their land rights, it is essential to build and maintain permanent civilian government institutions that offer public services and human right protection like

healthcare centers, legal aid and community based security forces, without relying completely on military forces that have shown to cause more violent encounters.

Besides, through programs like the Comprehensive *National Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops* (PDET and PNIS), Colombia's government can voluntarily support the substitution of coca with Barí traditional crops, providing a stable income while weakening the influence that drug trafficking groups and organized crime organizations have over the locals.

At the same time, other initiatives similar to the Plan of Managing "*El Parque Nacional Natural Catatumbo*" could be implemented, since the collaboration between Barí leaders and government institutions, where different kinds of knowledge can be exchanged, is crucial to manage and face the challenges presented in the region (Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia, 2016).

The second step would be to revitalize traditional and sustainable agriculture. The Barí people have long sustained themselves through environmentally friendly farming methods, but since there's been years of displacement and contamination, their usual cultivating systems have significantly weakened. To address this situation, it is necessary to restore and strengthen traditional Barí farming methods through agroecology which is a sustainable agricultural system that works with nature and takes into consideration the circumstances and contexts that different areas have.

International organizations such as the *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations* (FAO) can provide technical support and knowledge on cultivating techniques and crops management, by guiding the Barí with the help of experts from different FAO divisions like the Forestry Division and the Agrifood Systems Division, in developing agrofostery systems that combine cacao, plantain and other native trees to restore their degraded land areas. Strengthening natural pest management based on local biodiversity and promoting soil restorations practices like using ashes from communal fires to enrich their planting soil.

The Plant Production and Protection Division could fund community seed banks, that are appropriate for local climate and weather patterns of a tropical rainforest, to offer accessible genetic diversity, which considering the scale of the operation, would cost an initial investment of approximately 8,000 to 20,000 USD to cover basic infrastructure, storage and training. While it would later cost around

5,000 to 10,000 USD annually, to ensure long term sustainability and distribution within the community.

These resources would help the Barí community rehabilitate the lost biodiversity and ensure the access to nutritious foods within the community.

Additionally, national institutions, like the *Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development*, must adapt their different strategies to support Barí farming cooperatives by creating funding programs and giving subsidies to agricultural initiatives managed by the community, supporting local markets by facilitating public transportation of people living in rural areas and transportation of their products.

However, these aids also present potential challenges if they aren't correctly adapted to the Barí context. FAO technical guidance could backfire if exotic species are prioritized over native crops, and if external methods end up overshadowing Barí traditions. A good approach to prevent these issues would be to prioritize participatory workshops where the Barí guide the process and ensure their traditional knowledge remains in their community. Similarly, community seed banks could fail if they're poorly managed or if they completely replace other seed saving practices, creating dependence on external funding. To avoid this, the FAO should train locals on maintaining good care of the seed bank and appropriately distributing the seed within the community. Ensuring food security, without creating overreliance.

Finally, no strategy can be sustained without investing in the youth. It is critical to develop long-term solutions that are targeted to the younger generations of the Barí based on education. Protecting their territory and agricultural traditions will depend on the current empowerment of the next generation of Barí, since their youth will be the future caretakers of their culture, ancestral knowledge and heritage. But, due to decades of armed conflict, young indigenous students have faced several barriers regarding their education because of limited school infrastructure, limited access to information, loss of language and a disconnection to their traditions.

The first step to solve these should be for the *Ministry of National Education in Colombia*, through the *Regional Education Authorities of Norte de Santander* and the *Population Directorate*, who are the ones responsible of addressing the educational need of vulnerable groups, to partner with local Barí leaders and communities within Catatumbo to expand access to primary, secondary and higher education, which include: a good infrastructure funded by subsidies, donations and community

funds; scholarship programs and internet access for distance learning tools. This way, students can learn at the same time as they live in their territory, being able to connect with their land and community.

Furthermore, organizations such as the *National Indigenous Organization of Colombia* (ONIC) and *UNICEF Colombia* aside from funding these schools and institutes, could also develop youth leadership courses, informative campaigns, and youth projects. This will be aimed to build leadership organization, and problem solving skills, so the Barí new generations can become active participants in the decision making of their territory and food systems while having the tools to advocate for them. By investing in models of education that empower indigenous youth, Colombia can ensure the Barí people will thrive for many generations to come.

This cultural conservation is not only about maintaining but also empowering the youth. The core elements that must be prioritized should be their language (bari ara), their spiritual practices tied to their land, and their traditional knowledge about their environment and sustainable agriculture, since these elements are a big foundation for their cultural identity and should be protected by a complete and thoughtful education.

At the same time, Barí youth can adapt new tools to strengthen their community without abandoning their traditions, like learning digital abilities and developing various skills needed to organize and optimize their community.

In conclusion, protecting Barí territory is essential to ensure food security and independence, cultural survival and environmental protection. By securing land rights, revitalizing traditional agriculture and investing in education for indigenous youth, the Barí can rebuild and maintain self-sufficient agriculture.

This is not only a matter of justice for one indigenous group, it is a call to defend a model of sustainable living rooted in harmony and respect with nature. Protecting the future of the Barí means protecting a vision of coexistence that the world urgently needs, one that shows that innovation does not only emerge from new technologies, but also from restoring and strengthening ancestral traditions. If successful here, this approach can inspire and be replicated across other threatened communities within Latin America.

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