



# Paraguay

## Introduction

The Community Conservation Resilience Initiative assessment in Paraguay is based on discussion and debate with three rural communities facing various challenges. They are the San Miguel community in Minga Porâ, and the Maracanã community, both campesino communities in the East of Paraguay; and La Esperanza, an Enhlet indigenous community in the lower Chaco region.

Eastern Paraguay, which represents 39% of the total area of the country, was once mainly covered by wooded savannahs, grasslands and dense humid subtropical forest. Nowadays, however, the majority of these types of vegetation have been altered and they have been replaced by cattle farming and industrial-scale agriculture, key drivers of deforestation. The Chaco accounts for the remaining 61% of Paraguay's territory. It is an alluvial plain formed by the erosion of the Andean foothills. Covering the Chaco is an area of vegetation that is influenced and often flooded by the Paraguay and Pilcomayo rivers.

Paraguay already has a broad policy framework in place that is supposed to protect biodiversity, guarantee and promote access to land, and

restrict the abuses associated with industrial-scale production. However, the corruption that prevails across all sectors of the state and in the private sector mean that abuses and irregularities continue to be committed with impunity.

The primary threats to community conservation resilience in Paraguay are industrial agriculture and poor governance. The country's forests have been devastated in the race to free up land for industrial-scale export-oriented agricultural production, especially of genetically modified soybeans and beef. Many small farmers have been persuaded to sell or lease their lands (although many have found the returns were

not what they were told). The remaining community members spoke about empty schools, and land and water contaminated with agricultural toxins, which are killing crops and animals as well as making people sick. They told of increasing problems with agricultural pests invading the toxin-free community plots.

Communities face a combination of corruption, minimal law enforcement, and illegal and often violent land seizures that are condoned by the government. There is an absence of effective government and a lack of drinking water, health services, roads and schools.

Land acquisition and grabbing is rife in Paraguay. Ronnie Hall/CIC



# Community Conservation Resilience in Paraguay

Nevertheless, all three communities have taken the initiative and are actively engaged in restoring habitats and reversing environmental damage. This is primarily done by planting pioneer tree and other plant species to facilitate the spontaneous growth of native vegetation through natural succession. The communities' traditional agricultural practices also have minimal impact since they involve less tillage and no toxins.

Minga Porã is an example of what this environmental and social neglect means in practice. It has fertile laterite soils that used to support highly biodiverse subtropical Alto Parana moist forests with some 4-5,000 vascular plant species. However, the land where this community has settled has been much in demand since 1980, and the expansion of soya and cattle ranching has had a great impact on the environment. The region has now been heavily deforested and there are just a few scattered patches of forest remaining. In 1990 a group of 90 'landless' families took over 260 ha of land, after decades of struggle and violent evictions. This area is now known as the 'San Miguel' community. Of the original occupants only 15 families maintain productive agroecological practices, without any state support, and they sell their surplus production in local markets. They have protected a small area of some 4-6 ha, to preserve native plant species before it is too late. They plan to use this oasis of biodiversity to restore larger areas of forest in coming years.

The community in Maracaná faces similar difficulties. Its dense Alto Parana forest had previously been destroyed and degraded to exploit a rich abundance of Yerba Mate (*Ilex paraguariensis*) to make the regional Mate tea drink and to harvest valuable timber species. The soil has a high sand content and is susceptible to erosion.

The spread of the industrial model of agriculture is now causing small producers to disappear. The community says that the main challenge they face is pressure on people to sell or rent their land to large neighbouring landholders farming transgenic soy. The community is also threatened by the toxic chemicals applied to the soy, which affect their crops, domestic livestock and income. They also cause community members to fall sick and even die. Another threat identified is a lack of technical knowledge about how to improve the sustainability of production and accelerate the recovery of the community's forests. They are fighting back though: the community is pro-actively recovering watercourses and wetlands themselves.

In the west of Paraguay the isolated La Esperanza indigenous community lives in a landscape of grasslands, bush forest with some dry and some moist Chaco, and palm-covered savannah. The 200 families that occupy the 11,200 ha of La Esperanza are organised in six small villages. The community settled here is very much dependent on the environment, and the restoration of native vegetation and the water

cycle is essential for them. They have a rich culture of making materials using diverse plant fibres.

The clay soils are salty, flooded in the wet season, and not suitable for agriculture. The main challenge here has been cattle ranching, which has resulted in native vegetation including forests disappearing and watercourses being deliberately blocked which impedes the flow of water across the area's natural slopes. They also complain of pressure from evangelical churches and political groups who want them to abandon their traditional knowledge and practices, including rituals and making handicrafts.

The Enhlet people's strengths are their capacity to produce in a sustainable way (including farm products for consumption and small-scale cattle ranching), and the maintenance of their culture and foods, health and spiritual traditions, in harmony with their environment.

They already play an important role in managing water availability for fauna, and this role is ever more important in the face of illegal dams and increasingly frequent water shortages. They are striving to restore native vegetation and the natural water cycle, and working to build awareness about these issues amongst local authorities and landowners. They want to make sure no new dams are built and that the old ones are dismantled. A group of 66 women from La Esperanza has expressed interest in organising the production of materials and educating young women about these techniques.





# Preliminary Conclusions and Recommendations

The communities participating in the CCRI are all already engaged in successful initiatives to practice agroecology, save seeds and restore degraded soils and habitats, which could be expanded and replicated with the right support.

Such support needs to include backing for communities' land rights claims. It should also focus on protecting traditional knowledge, and enabling communities to incorporate new knowledge, abilities and technologies. There is a need for more effective public policy and law enforcement to secure compliance with existing standards.

There is also a need to strengthen legal support networks that defend communities against human rights violations by large industrial producers. Networking and sharing information between communities and consumers and other potential allies at the local, regional, national and global levels would also be beneficial.

This CCRI has focused on dialogue with women and young people in particular, as both groups are identified as the principle victims of these pressures on the communities' territories and cultures. They are also key actors in the recovery of communities' knowledge, practices, conservation capacities and resilience.

The three communities all expressed their determination to stay and defend their lifestyles. They variously identified their communities' strengths and resilience as unity, cooperation,

deep cultural roots, and self-sufficiency in food production. In addition to restoring their environment, other priorities include ensuring access to land, strengthening training, education and market opportunities for agro-

ecological production, especially for young people, and raising awareness about the threats posed by monoculture tree plantations. Support for all of these could help to revive resilient communities and community conservation.



**Soya fields stretch to the horizon and beyond, Paraguay. Hugo Hooijer/CIC**



**Cargill processing plant in Paraguay. Ronnie Hall/CIC**





## Testimony

Lucia Arévalos: "I understand that as a Paraguayan citizen I have a right to health, education and resources, but I can't access these rights, because our ability to produce food and other things is disappearing. We can't even visit our mother who lives far away because we can't afford it now. I want everybody to come and see what's happening here. Soy is being planted everywhere, even right next to the creek, which is being poisoned. And where does the water go? It runs through our land, and is the root cause of all our diseases. On the lower part of our land there's a stream we all used to bathe in, but we can't do that any more, it makes us itch and gives us hives. People are being driven away and the schools are empty. And it's not just us, this is happening everywhere."



Miguel Lovera/CIC



Custodia Policial Taba Jopoi in Curuguaty, Paraguay. Villagers, including women and children, in a stand off over land rights and pesticide spraying in soy fields near their homes are confronted by armed military and police personnel. In 2012 a violent clash on a soy estate in Curuguaty was used as a pretext for the impeachment of President Lugo. Luis Wagner/CIC

Peasant farmers protest against land grabbing with road blockade, Paraguay. Hugo Hooijer/CIC

