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Collective Protection for Communities and Rights Defenders at Risk: Lessons from Grassroots Advocacy in Colombia

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Cover photo: Voting during the ACADESAN General Assembly, March 2023.

Credit: ACADESAN

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Key Insights

Rights defenders around the world face unrelenting violent reprisals for their work protecting marginalized communities and their territories.

Some governments respond by committing to protect these citizens at risk—mainly with individualized, police-style safeguards. Colombia's government has Latin America's largest protection agency by far and has gone beyond its many individual measures to also promise collective protection to communities at risk.

In Colombia's Pacific region, ACADESAN, the Community Council of the San Juan River region, defends the rights of its 72 Afro-Colombian communities in areas affected by armed conflict. ACADESAN calls for bottom-up approaches to protection of the communities they represent—in contrast to the government's conventional focus on individual leaders. Their key advocacy win was to persuade a wide range of government agencies to commit to a comprehensive package of measures, going beyond the limited options offered by the National Protection Agency.

ACADESAN has worked to hold the government accountable for delivering on its legal and policy commitments to protect communities at risk by providing comprehensive measures that offer tangible, sustained support for the organization's autonomous capacity for community self-protection, as well as ensuring economic and social rights.

This Accountability Note describes ACADESAN's breakthrough advocacy campaign for collective protection. It shares insights relevant for efforts to protect rights defenders and communities that go beyond conventional measures. It is based on the story told in Spanish by Mauricio Parra Bayona, ACADESAN human rights advisor, in his [Accountability Working Paper](#), and the prefaces to that paper by former ACADESAN representative Elizabeth Moreno Barco and Jonathan Fox of ARC.

In his conclusion, Parra reflects on how collective protection must further be adjusted to better serve at-risk communities and organizations, especially those that are smaller than ACADESAN, have fewer allies, and are not prioritized by national government. Recommendations include:

- Collective protection procedures should go beyond the limited set of measures provided by the government's National Protection Unit, via expedited special measures that are independent of conventional, often unresponsive public service delivery mechanisms.
- For a collective protection policy to have significant impacts on risk reduction, most (if not all) government agencies should develop strategies that are designed to respond to at-risk communities and social organizations. Policymakers responsible for delivering collective protection should coordinate agencies and ensure funding for comprehensive approaches.
- The provision of public resources to strengthen grassroots self-protection strategies is positive but not sufficient. Support for self-protection strategies should be only one of the collective protection measures offered by the state.
- The implementation of collective protection also requires anti-corruption measures and public servants with the necessary skills and ethics. Anti-corruption behaviors by public servants implementing collective protection must be reinforced.
- Collective protection measures must be led, coordinated, and principally implemented by national government agencies, with presence on the ground in high-risk territories—rather than relying on local officials.

Learning from Advocacy for Collective Protection

Jonathan Fox

While international awareness about violent reprisals facing frontline rights defenders appears to grow, rights violations persist around the world. Rights defenders under threat respond with a wide range of heroic efforts to mitigate risk; known as self-protection, these strategies are grounded in mutual support and defenders' social standing in their own communities. Committed national and international allies contribute to this self-protection, providing crucial material, political, and media support. To deter future abuses, legal strategies litigate for national and international accountability in emblematic cases.

Yet you can't shame the shameless. Year after year, human rights reports document persistent attacks on frontline defenders, which suggests that international awareness has yet to translate into significant, sustained reductions of risk on the ground. Those who are taking the greatest risks to defend their territories continue to face multiple external threats because of persistent government failures to end impunity, defend community land rights, protect the environment, and enable sustainable livelihoods. Their fight for survival is also a fight for accountable governance.

In Colombia, despite a comprehensive Peace Accord, violence, insecurity, and impunity persist. Rights defenders have questioned the limits of conventional, top-down governmental protection measures intended to safeguard individuals. They call for bottom-up approaches, with broader, collective measures to protect social organizations and the communities they represent.



Panoramic view of the San Miguel area of the San Juan River.

Photo courtesy of Santiago Ramírez M. All rights reserved.

This brief shares insights from the precedent-setting experience of Colombia's broadening of the protection agenda, led by ACADESAN, the community land council from the territory of the San Juan River region, in the Colombian Pacific region. ACADESAN is part of Colombia's vast collectively-titled ethnic territories. They are bastions of autonomous self-governance which include both Afrodescendant community councils and indigenous reserves. But they are also contested terrain, invaded by multiple armed groups and by illegal miners, loggers, and ranchers.

This is the context for ACADESAN's experience with advocacy for collective protection, underscoring a bottom-up approach to addressing the fundamental duty of a government to protect its citizens. It contributes lessons both to human rights strategy and to national and international discussions of accountability and governance.

Currently, conventional governmental 'protection mechanisms' assess risk and then sometimes provide protection measures for individuals. Yet these measures are often limited and unreliable. Bullet-proof vests and panic buttons offer little protection to community organizers. Plus, those at risk do not often associate police protection with security. Social leaders and journalists face the challenge of balancing their fear of reprisals with their mistrust of the government and its police-style approach. In their experience, governments rarely take their side, or deliver on their commitments. Indeed, some frontline community leaders decline offers of official 'protection measures' for individuals, relying instead on their own organizations' longstanding independent efforts for mitigating risks—as in the case documented here. Rights defenders face similar challenges throughout Latin America, especially those seeking environmental, ethnic, and gender justice.

Colombia's 2016 Peace Accord promised to bring "territorial peace" to conflict zones. The state committed to deliver democracy, development, and social inclusion to long-excluded regions, with numerous specifics reinforced by precedent-setting ethnic and gender rights provisions. Public oversight efforts document both progress and bottlenecks with Peace Accord implementation.

Yet every year hundreds of social leaders throughout the country continue to be murdered with impunity, while untold numbers live under the oppressive power of armed groups and organized crime.

“Colombia’s 2016 Peace Accord promised to bring “territorial peace” to conflict zones ... Yet hundreds of social leaders throughout the country continue to be murdered with impunity, while untold numbers live under the oppressive power of armed groups and organized crime.”

While the Colombian government is currently engaged in negotiations with armed groups to seek "Total Peace," violent conflict continues to threaten and displace entire communities—as is frequently the case in the department of Chocó in the Pacific region, including the territory of the San Juan River. This report shares ACADESAN's experience with advocacy for government support for their own self-protection efforts, including a combination of measures that are both collective and comprehensive ('integral').

Colombia's government has the largest official protection agency for individual citizens and public servants in Latin America by far, based largely on 'hard schemes' (police-style) and bureaucratic risk assessments. Yet in contrast to other countries in Latin America that have replicated this approach, the Colombian government also has made less well-known legal and policy commitments to collective protection measures for entire communities at risk. For social organizations like ACADESAN, the key challenge now is to get the Colombian government to deliver on those commitments.

This impasse underscores the limits of defensive, reactive, top-down approaches and calls for more emphasis on strategies that address the underlying causes of threats to communities and social organizations. Violence prevention requires the effective administration of justice—as well as strengthening the grounded, autonomous social organizations that constitute key sources of countervailing democratic power in conflict zones. Delivering peace and security with justice, in turn, requires the systemic transformation of nation-states—which Colombia's 2016 Peace Accord promised.



During the humanitarian caravan along the San Juan River in 2021, Taparal community.

Photo courtesy of Santiago Ramírez M. All rights reserved

Here Mauricio Parra and Elizabeth Moreno tell the story of ACADESAN's campaign for tangible, sustained support for their organization's autonomous capacity for community self-protection, from numerous government agencies. They were in the room where it happened. Their call for a comprehensive ('integrated') approach addresses underlying causes of threats as well as defensive measures, by emphasizing meaningful community development and restoring the social fabric.

ARC has published this Accountability Note, and the longer Working Paper, as part of its commitment to learn from and with frontline rights defenders and social organizations about their strategies to seek accountability.

How does ACADESAN understand collective protection?

Elizabeth Moreno Barco



“For us, collective protection is an overarching thing. It means attending to all the 72 communities that make up the territory simultaneously. This collective protection covers the whole territory and involves the protection of all its inhabitants. We work with Afro communities because that is what the ACADESAN mandate tell us to do.

The protection is not a question of walking around accompanied by others, and doesn't involve militarization; it's not a question of armed men—that's something for individuals. Collective protection means we have to seek out tools and strategies that are rooted in our way of doing things, in our culture.

The proposals we came up with are to improve health and education, to heal our territory; it's a matter of collective transportation systems; it means seeing how we can progress and prevent the risks that are encountered in different places. It's a question of safe transportation and a safe environment in which to live. It means examining and mitigating the risks people face in their territories on a day-to-day basis.”

Overview of ACADESAN's Campaign for Collective Protection

Mauricio Parra Bayona

The pivotal case of ACADESAN's advocacy targeting the Colombian national government prepares the ground for a change in the paradigm of public policy on protecting rights defenders and people at risk. As a result of ACADESAN's strategy, comprehensive collective protection measures were agreed that focused on entire communities and not on individual leaders.

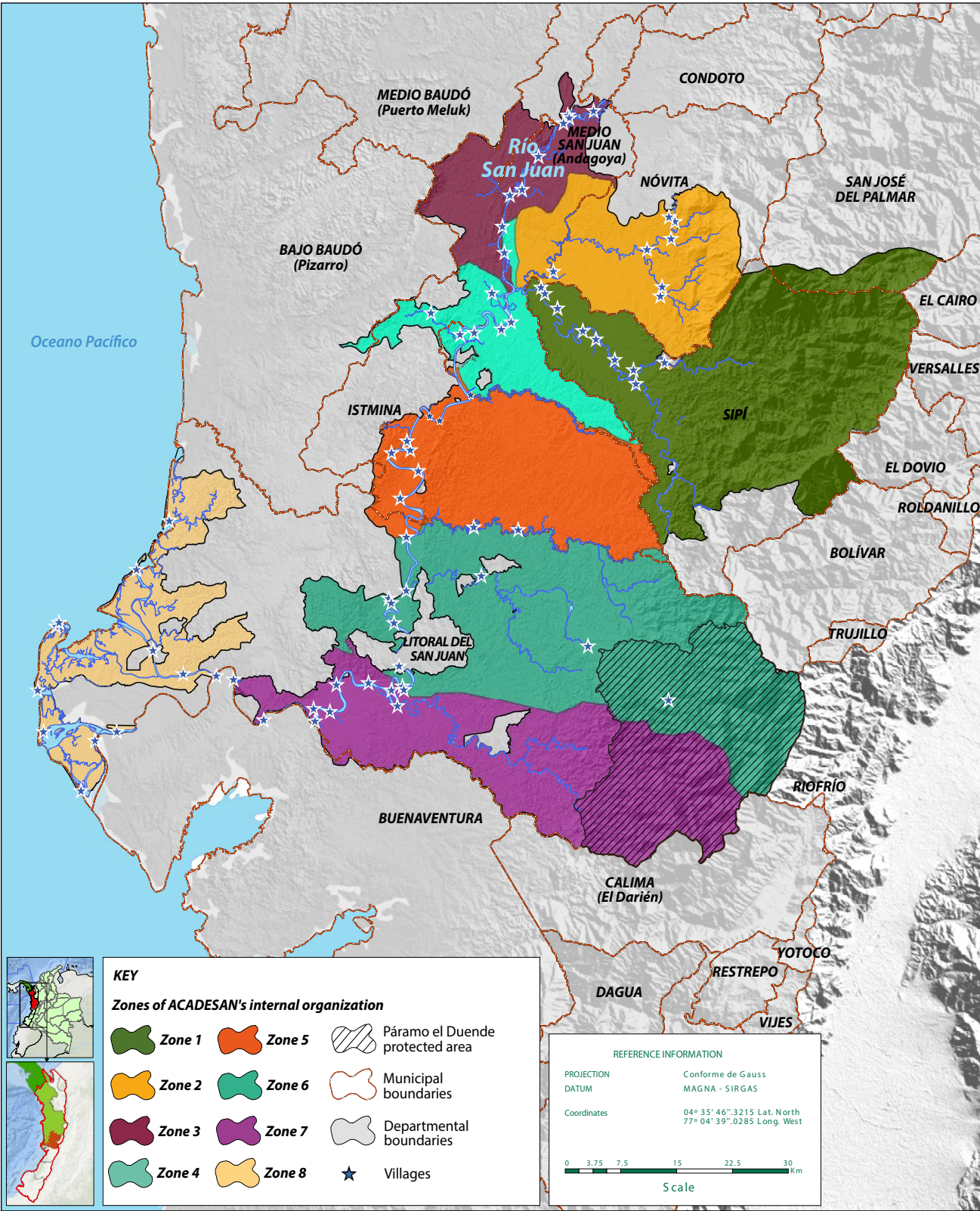
ACADESAN is a territory of black communities who have collective title to their lands, granted by the Colombian state. It covers 72 communities in the southern part of the Department of Chocó on Colombia's Pacific coast and has a total population of at least 15,000 people who have collective ownership of over 683,000 hectares. ACADESAN is also an organizational process with a threefold mission: to represent its constituent communities through their ethnic authorities; to protect the collective territory against private interests; and to strive for dignified living conditions for the black inhabitants of the San Juan River.



ACADESAN's collective land title.

Credit: Santiago Ramírez M. All rights reserved.

Figure 1. ACADESAN's Collective Territory



Credit: Based on a map from ACADESAN and IIAP, February 2023

The ongoing armed conflict means that the people of the San Juan River face extreme levels of risk and persistent violations of their rights.¹ In 2022, this led ACADESAN to publicly state during a speech at the United Nations Security Council² that its communities are undergoing a process of physical and cultural extinction.

All ACADESAN communities have been affected by forced displacement, many of them several times, and have returned to their lands without the proper support of state institutions. In this context, communities are also at risk from private companies and land grabbing. In one case, documented by a prize-winning independent news report,³ a business network with connections in Panama, Canada, and the United States legally dispossessed ACADESAN of more than thirty thousand hectares.

In response to the blight of violence, the government has created a costly institutional apparatus centered on individual protection measures. Over the past ten years this National Protection Unit (UNP) has been the subject of several reports regarding human rights violations, corruption, crime, and links with armed groups. The current UNP director has also publicly denounced some of these situations.⁴

Without denying the importance of individual protection measures, various NGOs, international organizations, the judiciary, and State oversight bodies have called for the implementation of collective protection strategies. This implies recognizing the relationship between the protection of life, the defense of territory, and the preservation of the environment. Many of the risks of violence have their origin in legal and illegal economic interests that affect fundamental rights.

Governmental individual protection focuses on protecting specific individuals using a limited set of physical measures, while collective protection seek to ensure the safety of entire organizations or communities by way of integrated strategies. This can include the provision of community transport (including fuel), strengthening forms of artistic and cultural expression to bolster collective identity, productive projects, public recognition of at-risk organizations, guaranteeing internet and cellphone access in areas without coverage, improving health and education, among many others. These different collective protection measures constitute a strategy insofar as they come together to strengthen the health and safety of the communities and their organizations.

Colombia's Law has clearly established that a broad range of organizations have a right to receive collective protection measures when they face serious risks. Most of the government's legal obligations and policies have been responses to the legal claims of social organizations being upheld by the Colombian Constitutional Court, going back to its emblematic T-025 Ruling (2004)⁵ that ordered protection for internally displaced people and at-risk populations.⁶ These social organizations have had decisive support from NGOs, aid agencies, and international organizations, with the UNHCR and the UN Human Rights Office playing an especially important role.

Yet different actors understand collective protection in different ways. Box 1 shows three understandings of the State's obligation to provide these measures that have emerged in Colombia. Comprehensive collective protection occupies an intermediate position between minimalist and maximalist positions. ACADESAN has adopted this approach on the grounds that the rights to life, liberty, and integrity are rights of immediate fulfillment, requiring urgent responses that adapt to the characteristics of the risk. This is not only in terms of the threat or source of danger but also the economic, social, and institutional conditions that increase the community's exposure to threats.

1 *La Cola de Rata*. 2022. "When the Blasts Sound." Online report, July 17 <https://www.lacoladerata.co/conlupa/when-the-blasts-sound/>.

2 *El Espectador*. 2022. "Las denuncias de la primer líder afrocolombiana ante Consejo de Seguridad de ONU." Video, English captions available https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLxpH_-jHxU.

3 *Verdad Abierta*. 2021. "Invisible dispossession of a Chocó jungle." Online report. <https://verdadabierta.com/especiales-v/2021/despojo-invisible/en/index.html>.

4 *Noticias UNP*. 2022. "Augusto Rodríguez y la UNP." Online news item, December 22. <https://www.unp.gov.co/augusto-rodriguez-y-la-unp/>.

5 Republic of Colombia Constitutional Court Third Review Chamber. 2004. "T-025-2004." Court ruling. <https://www.escri-net.org/caselaw/2023/t-025-2004>.

6 For recent discussions on the role of constitutional justice in protecting the rights of IDPs, see an international event hosted by Colombia's Constitutional Court, UNHCR, and DEJUSTICIA (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHcA0g-B0oM>).

It is also crucial to highlight that in the absence of comprehensive, appropriate, robust, and timely collective protection measures, it will not be possible to implement the structural transformations necessary to comply with the Colombian Constitution's rulings, or to advance stable and lasting peace.

Box 1. Three Approaches to Collective Protection

Minimalist (dominant during the Juan Manuel Santos and Iván Duque governments)

- Reduction of collective protection to a few low-cost measures through UNP and the Ministry of the Interior.
- Giving impression that the state is fulfilling obligations.
- Communities and organizations forced to seek their own help, but do not have resources to request assistance from multiple government agencies.
- The actions of those government agencies contribute very little to reducing risk, and they lack clear and adequate procedures for effectively guaranteeing rights.

Comprehensive

- Collective protection is understood as the urgent implementation—over a period ranging from months to a few years—of a set of measures to reduce the organizational, economic, social, cultural, and environmental vulnerabilities that increase risk levels. Some of these protection measures should also strengthen organizational capacity for self-protection.
- An institutional design is needed that allows for a wide and flexible range of possible collective protection measures, involving the majority (if not all) of national-level institutions.

Maximalist

- Collective protection is understood as the provision of structural solutions that imply the state is fulfilling all its constitutional and legal obligations, especially in relation to the full guarantee of economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights (ESCER).
- ESCER are progressive rights which can take decades to realize, even if government has political will.
- In Colombia, the state does not have the capacity to fully guarantee ESCER in at-risk communities in the short or medium term. Therefore, this approach could leave many communities and organizations without an effective and timely response to their current risks.

In March 2021, ACADESAN's ethnic leadership requested 50 collective protection measures from a range of national government agencies with the aim of reducing social, economic, environmental, and material vulnerabilities that exposed the population to significant risks. Most were denied in November of the same year. ACADESAN rejected the individual protective measures offered by the government, prioritizing protection for the entire population. Furthermore, ACADESAN's leadership had already successfully implemented their own self-protection measures.

ACADESAN persisted, and towards the end of 2023 managed to secure an agreement with 23 different national government agencies to implement 49 collective protection measures. These measures were established by pursuing a single institutional pathway, rather than going through the various routes created to protect communities, or directly asking every single agency to guarantee human rights. These measures may be grouped into three principal categories, as shown below; note that a single measure may contribute to all three categories.

1. Strengthening ACADESAN's organizational process

- Monthly supplies of gasoline for motorboats (11 were already provided to ACADESAN by the National Protection Unit), to strengthen community activities (Ministry of Mines and Energy).
- Financial resources for hiring teams specializing in cultural matters (Ministry of Culture).
- Financial resources for hiring experts to strengthen the ethnic focus of the Community Educational Project (Ministry of Education).

2. Urgent partial guarantees of economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights

- Seven collective protection measures for the strengthening of cultural identity and recovery of ancestral memory and knowledge (Ministry of Culture).
- Develop an integrated land use plan for the territory in order to preserve environmental health and biodiversity (Ministry of the Environment, Water and Energy Transition).
- Implementation of productive projects with a focus on food security, income generation, and the marketing of produce (Rural Development Agency, the National Aquaculture and Fisheries Authority, and the ministries of Agriculture and Commerce).
- Renewable energy projects for communities that are not connected to the electrical grid (Institute for the Planning and Promotion of Energy Solutions and the Ministry of Mines and Energy).

3. Mitigation of the impacts of the armed conflict

- Motorboats for humanitarian missions, to visit at-risk communities, and evacuate communities trapped in the middle of fighting (UNP).
- Construction, improvement, and equipping of health centers in the territory to save lives at times when armed groups deny communities the right to travel (Ministry of Health).



Boat delivered to ACADESAN by UNP, March 2023. Boats contribute to organizational strengthening by facilitating community meetings and visits to the communities by ethnic leadership. They are also very useful for humanitarian missions.

Photo courtesy of Santiago Ramírez M. All rights reserved.

This advocacy campaign pursued accountability from the state for its responsibility to protect its citizens. Eventually, it led numerous government agencies to take on roles and responsibilities to contribute to ACADESAN's collective protection strategy, thus establishing an important precedent for adjusting, broadening, and strengthening public policies for prevention and protection. In December 2023, the government body which decides on the adoption of collective protection measures (Committee for Risk Evaluation and Recommendation of Measures, CERREM) approved 50 measures. Not everything was perfect. For example, a very important measure was ignored by a government agency the National Unit for Disaster Risk Management: the construction of eight community houses in ACADESAN's territory, to be used for organisational activities, but also as a refuge in case of fighting near civilians.

The campaign emphasized that self-protection is not enough and highlighted the need for direct state investment in the territory. The resulting set of measures was an advocacy breakthrough because it involved many government agencies, not only the National Protection Unit. It highlights the synergy between self-protection (initiatives at community and organizational level) and collective protection (state actions), strengthening a social organization to develop autonomous measures to defend life and territory.

A leader's reflections on four years of advocacy for collective protection

Elizabeth Moreno Barco



After more than four years trying to get the Colombian government to commit to the collective protection of the ACADESAN communities, what is your assessment of the process that has taken place?

"It's been a major struggle trying to get the government to step up and fulfill its responsibilities. I feel happy: first, because of the recognition the institutions, the government, have given ACADESAN. Our work slowed down in the aftermath of the 2020 [COVID], but as a movement we never let up.

The best thing about the whole process was working together, the relentless work that organizational processes require. When we come together to pursue wellbeing everything flows, everything is harmony. And the best thing has been the response from the *Gobierno del Cambio* [President Petro's administration]. If the agreement is actually put into practice it will be a major change for the communities.

The worst and most painful thing was the first CERREM meeting, held in 2021 during the previous government. It was frustrating because none of the institutions was willing to take responsibility for anything, none of them had the capacity, none of them was willing to do anything. Even though there was a court ruling in the communities' favor that the government agencies had a duty to fulfill, they weren't willing to do so.

But we persevered and our insistent demands that the authorities implement the precautionary measures enabled us to develop these 50 proposals, all of which were approved in a meeting of the CERREM that lasted for 10 hours and during which different people kept coming and going. This is one of the greatest achievements in the history of ACADESAN's work to protect the territory. It's a historic moment."

What do you think led the CERREM to approve the 50 collective protection measures?

"Our leadership's advocacy visit to Bogotá in September 2022 was fundamental. The visit made a lot of waves among the government agencies involved. Even though we had to wait into the night for the director of the UNP [National Protection Unit] to see us, our persistence was vital in making sure that in the end he did. I also want to recognize the tireless work of ACADESAN's technical advisory and administrative teams, without which we would not have been successful. This whole *Operation Sirirí*, this constant struggle, all those sleepless nights have finally paid off."

Operation Sirirí: "this constant struggle"

The common sirirí (Tyrannus melancholicus) is a small, territorial bird whose character emboldens it to attack larger predatory birds. It is so persistent that it may attack hawks that have taken its chicks, seizing them from their talons to save their lives.

(ICRC 2022, 18)

Operation Sirirí is a term coined by Fabiola Lalinde, a woman who spent many years of her life searching for her son, who was forcibly disappeared. "Keep going," Fabiola said, "and kick up a fuss like a sirirí".

"I also want to highlight the work we've been doing with strategic allies like [the newspaper] *El Espectador* and the [online news source] *Verdad Abierta*, which has allowed us to raise awareness internationally of the [illegal private] takeover of 32,450 hectares [of ACADESAN territory] and which led the National Land Agency to publish a document outlining the measures it is taking to resolve the matter.

During this entire process we have also received the support of other allies including Misereor, the Norwegian Human Rights Fund, the Missionaries of the Mother Laura, the *Coordinación Regional del Pacífico Colombiano*, the *Fundación Podion*, the Dioceses of Istmina, the UNHCR, OHCHR and the UN Verification Mission, the *Proceso de Comunidades Negras*, the *Consejo Nacional de Paz Afrocolombiano*, *Somos Defensores*, CINEP, Diakonia, NOMADESC, JUSTAPAZ, the OAS Mission to Support the Peace Process (MAPP-OEA), the American University, and the *Instancia Especial de Alto Nivel con Pueblos Étnicos*, to mention just a few.

The arrival of the new government was fundamental for us as a movement. We presented our initial demands to the Vice President. It wasn't easy [to gain access to her], but after that, given her commitment to the territory, she ordered the process to continue and told the government agencies to comply. The government is committed and the Vice President is committed to ensuring the agencies do what they should. We hope it will end happily."



ACADESAN leaders met Vice President Francia Márquez on September 29, 2022 in Bogotá.

From left to right: Felipe Martínez (current legal representative of ACADESAN), Francia Márquez (Vice President of the Republic), Elizabeth Moreno (legal representative of ACADESAN at the time), María Fernanda Angulo (legal advisor of ACADESAN at the time).

Photo courtesy of ACADESAN.

"I also want to say that I am proud to be from the San Juan: this process has given me enormous satisfaction. The ACADESAN process is an example of unceasing struggle for the defense of our rights but also a struggle to achieve results. It hasn't been easy. Today, ACADESAN has a history of success in our battles: in 2022 we were nominated for the National Human Rights Prize and we won it in 2023. Even though it was awarded to me, as Chava, the nomination was made when I was legal representative of ACADESAN. The same thing happened with the UNHCR's Nansen Refugee Award, because the first conversations about the nomination happened during the ACADESAN General Assembly in March 2023. Currently, I'm the coordinator of the *Foro Interétnico Solidaridad Chocó*, but first and foremost I'm from the San Juan, first and foremost I'm ACADESAN. The fact that I have won the National Human Rights Prize and the Nansen Refugee Award is down to ACADESAN, which enabled me to become a part of the process."

What advice would you give to communities and organizations that need collective protection?

"First of all, you have to be clear whether you really are looking for collective protection or reparation measures, because they are different things. They can be complementary but it's important to be aware of the differences.

Second, we have to unite, work together. As organizational processes we have to look again at how we make decisions, the support we give each other, questions of trust.

Third, I would invite you to start the process and not falter in the face of setbacks. Look for allies to help you get the best possible outcome. We know that everything we have achieved is the result of tireless struggle. Sometimes we have had leaders who distance themselves from the work, or have to leave, but those who join must carry on, continuing to pursue and to realize our objectives and those of the communities.

Empowerment and perseverance are the key aspects of organizational processes. Empowerment comes from the dedication we put into our struggles, from achieving some of our goals, realizing our shared dreams. Devotion, commitment, responsibility. Knowledge helps empower us. It is about dedication and desire, passion, vocation: to be leaders and take part in these processes we must enjoy the work we do. And understand what we are going to focus on.

Empowerment, first and foremost, requires capability, confidence, and vision—not to stand out, but to participate and be part of the team. It demands dedication and commitment, being present where we are needed and where we can contribute the most. These qualities form the foundation for us to drive positive change within the process."

Reflections on Advocacy and Future Directions

Mauricio Parra Bayona

Advocacy Rooted in Strong Organizational Processes

A solid organizational process is essential for demanding and achieving responses from State institutions. It is ACADESAN's view that this emerges as a result of a process of collective decision-making that incorporates the knowledge of community leaders (men and women), elected ethnic leadership, ACADESAN's advisory team, and allied organizations. Humility and affection are fundamental elements in developing the organizational process both in the ethnic leadership and the advisory team.

The concept of "adding, not competing" has been fundamental. In practice, this has meant an openness and willingness to accept support from many places, rather than exclusive loyalty to a few allies. This approach has contributed to strengthening ACADESAN's autonomy.

Transparent administrative and budgetary practices within the organization—encapsulated in the phrase "ACADESAN only asks for and receives what it needs"—have been fundamental for promoting protection and self-protection. The integrity of the ethnic leadership and the advisory team has also been important in garnering and consolidating the support of allies.



Meeting of the ethnic leadership of ACADESAN with the Minister of Mines and Energy on October 13, 2023.

Photo courtesy of ACADESAN.

Operación Sirirí played a crucial role in ACADESAN'S advocacy strategy. The sending of multiple messages, either directly or by way of different allies, made it easier to secure meetings with high level officials. One example is a meeting with the Minister of Mines and Energy during which the issue of providing a monthly supply of gasoline was resolved and progress was made towards negotiating solutions to problems with access to energy in the territory.

The decision to seek meetings with high-ranking government officials was guided by a fundamental principle: given that technical staff or mid-level officials lacked the authority to commit to actions, ACADESAN sought meetings with policymakers who have the political and institutional capacity to respond.

Periodic media coverage of the rights violations in the region proved to be a very important tool for explaining the importance of adopting robust protection measures. Sharing the real pain of rights violations provoked empathy. Together, these approaches made it possible to highlight the core problem: the risk of physical and cultural extinction facing the black communities of the San Juan River.

A firm stance, refusing to accept less than was necessary, while maintaining a respectful, non-confrontational approach, was fundamental to finding creative and appropriate solutions. This made it possible to draw on the relevant expertise of public officials. Discussion and dialog did not revolve around who achieved more, or who prevailed in arguments, but focused on the search for joint solutions to the mutually recognized problem identified: preventing the physical and cultural disappearance of the ACADESAN communities.

A Community Council as large as ACADESAN requires a robust advisory team capable of providing technical advice on a range of topics. Such a team allows qualitative leaps to be made towards strengthening the grassroots organizational base and constructing the network of allies. It also provides advice and accompaniment to the ethnic leadership in their interactions with state bodies in pursuit of guarantees for their rights.

Multiple Actions and Strategies

ACADESAN's experience in demanding collective protection involved the use of multiple actions and strategies to obtain an effective response from the authorities. Among these actions and strategies, those focused on accountability and the responsibility of the state stand out:

1. The support of the Inspector General's Office (a State oversight body) was requested, with the aim of compelling government institutions to provide effective responses.
2. The Quibdó Land Restitution Court was approached in order to highlight the problematic institutional response and request judicial rulings to guarantee rights. It upheld ACADESAN's arguments regarding the legality of the collective protection measures requested.
3. Highlighting the situation of rights violations through media coverage and public statements, to press for an appropriate institutional response for community protection. This strategy also led to the expansion of the network of allies, who helped to raise the pressure on government agencies to implement protection actions.

4. Direct advocacy, using soft pressure on state officials with responsibility for approving collective protection measures. Strong—at times even forceful—direct advocacy was also pursued when officials lacked a rights-based approach or the political will to respond to the measures requested.
5. The change of government allowed for a moment of responsiveness that made it possible for ACADESAN to coordinate and work jointly with the Vice Presidency, the UNP, the Ministry of the Interior. This new cohort of senior officials entered the government with a different view of their institutional responsibilities.

Lessons for Other Organizations, At-Risk Communities, and Public Policy Design

ACADESAN can be considered a success, as it was able to negotiate an agreement covering comprehensive collective protection measures: an approach that guarantees the rights to life, liberty, and integrity, focusing on the economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights that are important in determining risk levels.

However, it is important to recognize that ACADESAN was successful in this endeavor because of the convergence of a series of very special conditions:

1. It has a solid 33-year organizational trajectory.
2. It is the second-largest Community Council in the country.
3. It has an important network of allies (including bilateral aid agencies, social organizations, some NGOs, international organizations, and individuals).
4. It has benefited from exceptional leadership.⁷
5. It consistently received specialized protection advice over the campaign's four and a half years.
6. It had the support of the Vice President's office, which helped to convene other government agencies.
7. The San Juan sub-region was the first area to be prioritized in the peace negotiations between the government and the ELN guerrilla group.

What, then, is the situation of communities and organizations at risk that are small, have organizational weaknesses and little support, that do not benefit from exceptional leadership, don't have an advisory team, and lack access to national political leaders? This question is critical, because communities and organizations with these characteristics are precisely those facing the highest levels of risk.

It is evident that the current design of official protection policy does not allow most high-risk groups to replicate ACADESAN's results. Adjustments to collective protection procedures are therefore required. They should take the following considerations into account:

⁷ UNHCR, 2023. "Colombian rights advocate defies danger to save and improve lives." News item, 28 November. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/colombian-rights-advocate-defies-danger-save-and-improve-lives>

1. Collective protection cannot continue to be limited to a set of insufficient material measures offered by the UNP, nor be diluted in the form of actions usually carried out by institutions that are not set up to address situations of urgent risk. In general terms, collective protection procedures should be established using special measures that are independent of ordinary government administrative mechanisms. For example, if a community radio station is demanded as a part of a set of collective protection measures, this should be implemented directly through a procedure established by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies, in coordination with the UNP and the Ministry of the Interior.
2. For a collective protection policy to have significant impacts on risk reduction, specific institutional designs must be created or adapted to respond to communities or social organizations living under serious risk. The majority (if not all) of national government agencies will have to be included within the collective protection procedure(s)—not only the UNP. This implies that each government agency should define potential actions, strategies, programs, budgets, and the personnel required to implement collective protection measures within the framework of their legal and institutional responsibilities. This process should be developed in coordination with the Ministry of the Interior, the UNP, the National Planning Department (DNP), and the Unit for Comprehensive Attention and Reparation of Victims. When government agencies establish funded interventions intended to address risks, the agencies responsible for coordinating collective protection can offer a menu of options to groups in danger, in response to a tailored risk analysis.
3. The provision of public resources to strengthen self-protection strategies is positive but not sufficient. Self-protection strategies are not a magic bullet capable of significantly reducing risks; they should be only one of the collective protection measures offered by the state.
4. With regard to the public servants responsible for implementing collective protection measures, all forms of hiring or contracting that involve clientelistic practices, nepotism, cronyism, or other similar dynamics that produce teams lacking the necessary professional, technical, and ethical capacities must be strictly prohibited.
5. To ensure that collective protection procedures manage to reduce risks to life, liberty, and integrity, they must be led and principally implemented by the national government. To rely on local and regional authorities is to guarantee failure, since many are affected by widespread corruption, or lack the budget capacity to guarantee human rights.
6. Collective protection requires the appropriate, coordinated, coherent, and timely intervention of a set of state institutions. National government officials should be physically present in rural and urban territories facing the highest levels of risk. This implies that a presidential instruction to those in control of national agencies should be issued, ensuring their willingness to lend weight to joint efforts and preventing individuals or sectors from grandstanding and thereby hindering the design and implementation of public policies.
7. The concept and approach of collective protection proposed here is not limited exclusively to ethnic communities but should be applied to a range of collective subjects (such as peasant or neighborhood associations, social movements, NGOs, or unions), though always recognizing the specific needs derived from age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic conditions. A territorial approach that acknowledges the geographical, environmental, and social realities that define the places where the protection measures are to be implemented, is also required.

Because of a tendency to inertia throughout the Colombian state, government responsiveness to the collective protection advocacy agenda depends ultimately on the political will of the President of the Republic. Only through an unequivocal and forceful presidential order will it be possible for the agencies responsible for designing public prevention and protection policies to involve all national government bodies effectively and appropriately.

To ensure the President makes this decision, multiple actors must work together, engaging in detailed technical and legal discussions about the adjustments required to design and implement effective public policies for prevention and protection. Spaces must be created to encourage technical discussions, to explore ideas and reach baseline agreements that lay the foundations of a push for policy decisions at the highest level.

In summary, we need to unite efforts to build agreements that enable us to pursue a collective *Operation Sirirí* and achieve the institutional changes that make prevention and collective protection a reality for any community or organization that requires it.



ACADESAN member Dagoberto Mondragón on the San Juan River.

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