POLICY BRIEF

2025/2

BLUE CARBON, COASTAL COMMONS

stakeholder perspectives and emerging challenges in carbon projects

ZMT LEIBNIZ-ZENTRUM für Marine Tropenforschung

Leibniz Gemeinschaft

"These ‘carbon cowboys’ are offering projects in exchange for the signing of contracts that hand over the right to make decisions about the territory and the corresponding heritage and resources, and/or negotiating on behalf of the communities with a view to managing the funds derived from any carbon trading ventures."
(Global Forest Coalition, 2009)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mangrove forest ecosystems play a critical role in climate change mitigation and the well-being of coastal communities. In Barú, Colombia, they provide food security, coastal protection, and are deeply tied to local culture and traditions. However, these ecosystems are increasingly threatened, notably by private interests promoting coastal 'development', that undermine community governance.

The Barú Peninsula and its surrounding areas, including the mainland town of Pasacaballos and the beach zone of Playa Blanca, are home to predominantly Afro-Colombian communities. In the traditional Barú towns of Ararca, Santa Ana, and Barú, descendants of formerly enslaved people collectively purchased land after the abolition of slavery in 1851. Starting in the 2000s, these communities established Consejos Comunitarios (Community Councils), legal entities rooted in ethnic self-determination aimed at securing collective land tenure and cultural autonomy.

Despite constitutional protections and legal frameworks[1], Afro-Colombian communities are often excluded from decision-making. Superficial consultation processes undermine community governance, disrupt livelihoods, and fail to protect mangrove forest ecosystems, facilitating displacement, land grabbing, erosion of traditional practices, and restricted access to essential resources.

The expansion of tourism in Barú has led to land privatisation, contributing to mangrove degradation and shifting the local economy from agriculture and fishing to a dependency on the tourism industry. With mangroves increasingly recognized as high-capacity "blue carbon" sinks, carbon-credit projects are presented as a tool to finance mangrove restoration and conservation while supporting local communities. Yet communities are often engaged as laborers, not as equal partners, and see little benefit.

Co-management and co-design approaches offer alternatives that center community voices, integrate traditional knowledge, and ensure fair benefit-sharing in environmental management, ecosystem restoration and carbon credit projects. When implemented meaningfully, these strategies can support both environmental restoration and community well-being.

This brief provides recommendations for government institutions, academic partners, donors, and communities. It calls for the enforcement of legal frameworks, meaningful community participation, and strengthened local governance to achieve context-based environmental, social, and economic sustainable outcomes.

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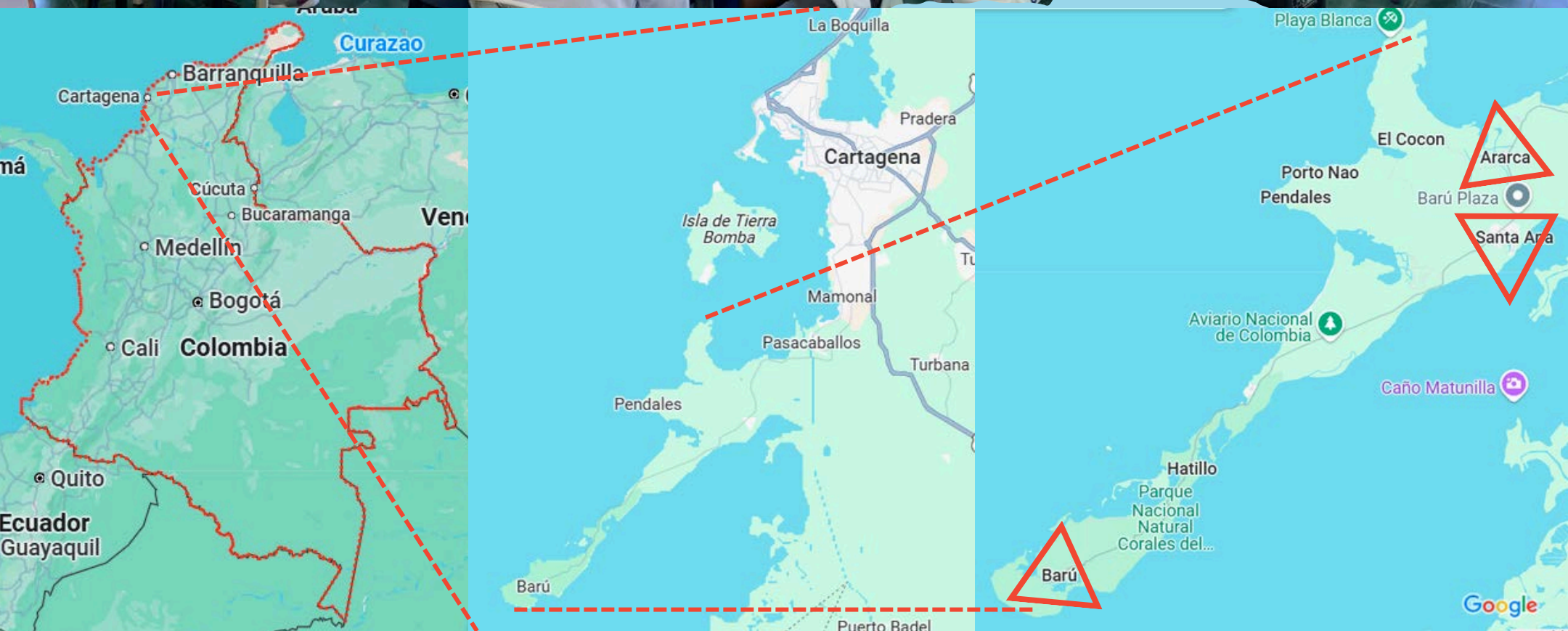
1. In particular, Law 70 of 1993, Decree 1320 of 1998, and Law 2243 of 2022

DATA COLLECTION

This policy brief draws from literature reviews on Afro-Colombian Community Councils governance, co-design methodology, and mangrove carbon credit projects, alongside fieldwork conducted in July 2023 with the communities of Ararca, Santa Ana, and Barú under the sea4soCiety research project. sea4soCiety aims to develop innovative approaches to enhance the potential for carbon sequestration in coastal ecosystems and engage communities for their perspectives on mangrove (re)establishment, Blue Carbon Credits and test co-design approaches.

Key stakeholder groups were identified based on their interests, impact, and influence. Their perspectives, gathered through focus groups interviews, and a co-design workshop, inform the analysis and recommendations presented here.



STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES AND NEEDS

LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Afro-Colombian communities in Barú are deeply connected to coastal ecosystems. Mangrove forests support their food security, mobility, economy, and cultural practices. These communities hold valuable ecological knowledge and closely monitor environmental changes. For instance, sedimentation from the Canal del Dique blocks channels and dries out mangrove forests, but local communities are not heard when urging government authorities for waterways maintenance.

Despite their low environmental impact, communities are stigmatized as exploiters, weakening their territorial claims. Concerns also exist over the misuse of Community Council governance by outsiders and the declining of youth engagement in traditional practices. While communities contribute to mangrove restoration, they lack sustained support. Their core need is secure access to land and resources. Legal frameworks exist on self-governance, but are weakly enforced, and FPIC processes are often inadequate, leaving them vulnerable to exclusion.

RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS AND ACADEMIA

Research in Barú spans the natural and social sciences. While some research projects support communities with training, awareness, and tools to engage with governmental actors and societal issues. Others are extractive by using local knowledge, prioritizing academic output over local and reciprocal benefit. Over-reliance on intermediaries limits community involvement and reduces project impact. Academic stakeholders call for stronger multi-actor collaborations to define project goals, establish baselines, and ensure that research is both accessible and actionable for all stakeholders, as well as improved dialogue with government agencies, and long-term funding for monitoring.

STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES AND NEEDS

GOVERNMENT ACTORS

Two agencies oversee mangrove governance in Barú: the marine national park (PNNCRB) and the regional environmental authority (Cardique). These are responsible for planning, regulation, land concessions and environmental permits, such as mangrove logging, and the determination of offset replanting. Yet, unclear jurisdictions, limited funding, and staff shortages lead to fragmented governance.

Critics cite weak enforcement, non-transparent decision-making, and FPIC processes perceived as coercive. The reliance of government agencies on private funding from environmental compensation schemes, undermines their accountability. As a result, environmental regulations are more stringent for local communities than private actors. Stronger inter-agency coordination and clearer jurisdiction are needed to ensure equitable governance that safeguards both ecosystems and livelihoods.

CHALLENGES AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

LEGAL EXCLUSION AND WEAK ENFORCEMENT

Afro-Colombian communities are entitled to collective tenure rights and self-governance under Law 70 of 1993, and to FPIC under ILO Convention 169 (Law 21 of 1991) and Decree 1320 of 1998. Law 2243 of 2022 further protects mangroves and promotes community participation. Yet weak enforcement and superficial consultations leave communities sidelined in critical decisions, and enables external actors, and private interests to take over their territories.

CHALLENGES AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

LOSS OF ACCESS AND ENVIRONMENTAL DECLINE

Displacement and land grabbing continue despite collective land rights. Fishing grounds, farmland, beaches, and culturally significant areas have been privatized, restricting community access to important resources and affecting certain cultural traditions, such as the 'Fiestas del Pescador'. This exclusion has forced previously self-sufficient communities to rely on outside sources for food and other basic needs. Exclusionary conservation projects also contribute to this issue in the name of environmental protection.

Some degraded mangrove zones and eroded areas are now fenced off, blocking community restoration efforts. Blocked waterways due to sediment from the Canal del Dique and unmanaged overgrowth are drying out mangroves and increasing salinity. Although these channels are vital for fishing, transport, and trade, communities are often prohibited from maintaining them or using tools like dredging equipment to remediate the issue themselves.

Legal Exclusion and Weak Enforcement

Strengthen legal enforcement and community land rights

Displacement and Land Grabbing

Promote community-led resource management and governance

Environmental Degradation

Implement community-based restoration and maintenance

Restricted Access to Resources

Ensure equitable resource access and community involvement

POWER AND KNOWLEDGE ASYMMETRIES

Strong power asymmetries undermine effective resource management, particularly in co-management efforts. Government and private actors hold more influence over land-use decisions, permits, and project design, using their economic and political leverage to secure permits and concessions.

Community Councils often lack the power to influence outcomes, despite legal recognition. In research projects, communities are treated as data sources with little reciprocity or recognition of their knowledge. These asymmetries allow outsiders to control ecosystems and weaken community governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS & NGOS

Prioritise Local Ecological Knowledge and Culture:
The value of local ecological knowledge and cultural practices needs to be recognised and integrated in mangrove governance and management processes.

Build community technical capacity:
Strengthen Community Councils' capacity with training in carbon credits, environmental management, and access to funding, for long-term, community-led management.

Facilitate dialogue between communities and government actors:
Create the spaces and platforms to ensure community perspectives shape policies and bridging the gap between national policy and local realities.

COMMUNITY INITIATIVES & COUNCIL

Strengthen Internal Governance and Planning:
Strengthen documentation processes, and governance structures to access funding, manage environmental projects, and protect territorial rights. Seek training in legal, planning, and administrative skills.

Develop and lead environmental projects:
Design and manage mangrove and conservation projects based on community priorities, seeking collaborating with external actors for technical support. Explore economic alternatives, such as eco-tourism and sustainable fisheries to reduce dependency.

GOVERNMENT ACTORS

Enforce laws and protect community rights:
Ensure implementation of existing legal frameworks to protect Afro-Colombian territory rights in mangrove regions, with accountability measures to ensure compliance.

Invest in Community Governance Capacity and Coordination:
Equip Community Councils with financial and technical support to lead mangrove restoration and territorial management. Recognize them as decision-makers, not labor, in compensation projects, with access to long-term funding and constant training.

Support community leadership in environmental management:
Highlights Community Councils in mangrove management and decision-making through inclusive, collaborative frameworks that reject top-down approaches and promote local needs and interests.

DONORS & IMPLEMENTATION ORGANISATIONS

Support Climate Adaptation Rooted in Local Knowledge:
Fund and implement climate resilience strategies that address sea-level rise and hydrological changes, integrate traditional knowledge and train communities for local adaptation.

Ensure Long-Term, Transparent Funding:
Provide sustained financial support for co-design processes, mangrove restoration, and community monitoring, with transparent management and equitable benefit-sharing to build trust and continuity.

Promote Equity in Co-Management Structures:
Establish formal agreements to ensure meaningful community participation, with third-party facilitation to prevent dominance by government or private actors.

Embed Conflict Resolution in Project Design:
Develop conflict resolution mechanisms within co-management frameworks, treating disputes as opportunities for learning, dialogue, and stronger partnerships.

Special thanks to all the actors who contributed with their time and expertise. Here, we have compiled the shared knowledge, needs, and expectations, to build hopefully, communal recommendations.

"In order to generate cooperation it is important to have good communication. It is fundamental to create spaces to share the results of the parties, and also where joint strategies can be built. It is also relevant to take care of relationships and build trust."
(Interview, 2023)

"For the project and the cooperation to work, management is needed to ensure a flow of knowledge between the parties, beyond publishing scientific articles. Generate something that really leads to social and scientific changes." (Interview, 2023)

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