Improving the lives of indigenous women in the Andean highlands

The Andean highlands and subtropical valleys of the northern Andes Mountains are part of the region with the highest levels of poverty in Ecuador (39%). Social and economic vulnerability particularly affect indigenous and Afro-descendant women. We support CARE’s operations in the Chota Valley, which aim to develop sustainable means of subsistence, reduce food insecurity and reinforce the resilience of indigenous people facing climate change, with a specific focus on indigenous and mestizo women.

**DURATION:** 2013-2017  
**CHALLENGE:** Women’s Social and Economic Development  
**COUNTRY:** Ecuador  
**PARTNER:** CARE

**CONTEXT**

Ecuador has 14 indigenous nationalities. Despite the 2008 constitution defining Ecuador as a multinational and intercultural nation, which recognises the rights of indigenous communities and their culture, and defends equal and harmonious interaction and inclusion, many minorities are victims of discrimination and social exclusion due to their ethnic origin.

CARE, present in Ecuador since 1962, clearly established that the indigenous and Afro-descendant women of the Chota Valley are among the most marginalised and most vulnerable members of society. The Foundation’s support has enabled a specific programme to be developed for this population, complementing initiatives supported by the European Union focused on food security in the north-western region of the Andes Mountains and based on supporting agricultural production and reducing poverty.
**ACTION**

CARE’s operations in the Chota Valley, a region of vast diversity, aim to develop sustainable means of subsistence, reduce food insecurity and strengthen the resilience of indigenous and Afro-descendant populations to climate change. Priority is given to traditional Andean cultures and the inclusion of women from the local communities. The activities include:

- Setting up 10 women’s associations and implementing a financial and technical assistance programme enabling women engaged in agricultural or livestock farming activities to improve their production and processing techniques, facilitating their access to loans and empowering them to play a leading role in the development of local businesses.
- Strengthening the collaboration between groups of women and different players at different levels in networks and industry (production, supply, processing, distribution) and promoting public-private alliances (for example with primary school cafeterias).
- Completing 5 participatory studies and research on agricultural practices and the rise in vulnerability.

**EXPECTED RESULTS**

The programme targets approximately 300 women from ethnic minorities currently living in poverty as well as 10 women’s associations. The indirect beneficiaries are estimated to be more than 39,800 people. It is anticipated that the following results will have been achieved by the end of the project:

- The independence and income of women in agricultural or livestock farming activities are improved through skills development, access to loans and markets, and production practices that are biodiversity-friendly, as well as being suited to the environment and to climate change.
- 70% of the women involved in the associations and women’s groups improve their technical skills (production, harvesting and storage, industrialisation, negotiation and marketing).
- 10 micro-enterprises or businesses created by women as inclusive enterprises operate according to associative criteria and generate profits.
- 4 local government authorities (or approximately 80 local officials) in the area of intervention focus on gender policies and support the creation of inclusive enterprises.

**LONG-TERM STRATEGY**

This programme is aligned with the government’s national plan focused on promoting a united social economic system and reducing poverty in Andean regions. CARE aims to support local development in the ecological area of intervention and to support local government in the advancement of policies promoting the creation of inclusive enterprises and sustainable agricultural industry (processed fruit, cereals, dairy products) that favour indigenous women or those belonging to ethnic minorities who are in a vulnerable or disadvantaged position.