

## Sowing Change in Colombia: Stories of Transformation and Hope

Across the lush landscapes of Nariño, Colombia, Indigenous and local communities are restoring their landscapes and rebuilding their livelihoods through the Sowing Change program, part of the CARE–WWF Alliance. The initiative empowers families to revive degraded lands, develop sustainable nature-based enterprises, and strengthen the social and ecological connections that sustain both people and the environment.

These stories highlight eight remarkable individuals—Berta Hernández, Jorge Samuel Botina, Omaira Bonilla, Lorena Matabanchoy, Fany Jojoa, Nancy Mery Pejendino, Isaías Antonio Cuichala, and Olga Pejendino—whose lives embody the program’s vision. Each has chosen a path of renewal and restoration, turning away from extractive practices toward conservation, entrepreneurship, and community leadership.

Through beekeeping, agroecology, seed saving, ecotourism, and youth engagement, they are proving that environmental restoration can also mean economic opportunity and community resilience. With the support of CARE and WWF, these local leaders are nurturing ecosystems back to health while empowering their families—especially women and young people—to shape a more sustainable and equitable future.

**Together, their journeys tell one powerful story: when people have the tools, knowledge, and trust to lead change from within, they can sow the seeds of transformation—healing their land, strengthening their communities, and inspiring hope for generations to come.**

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### From Logging to Leadership: Berta's Journey Toward Conservation

In the lush landscapes of Nariño, Colombia, Berta Hernández once relied on logging and charcoal production to make a living—activities that not only provided minimal and unstable income, but also consumed vast quantities of native forest and kept her community tied to extractive energy practices. For years, charcoal was one of the few available options in a region shaped by poverty, marginalization, and the long shadows of armed conflict.

But as the forests thinned and the impacts of deforestation grew impossible to ignore, Berta's understanding began to shift. Having

lived through the violence that fractured her community, she came to see how land degradation, lack of opportunity, and conflict were deeply interconnected. She realized that for her community to thrive—and for peace to endure—they needed to transition away from destructive energy sources and toward more regenerative forms of livelihood.

Berta made a bold choice: to leave charcoal production behind and champion a local energy transition. She now raises guinea pigs for income and nutrition, supports her community's native plant nursery, and helps families build livelihoods rooted in restoration rather than extraction. She works alongside women and youth to develop sustainable enterprises—such as beekeeping, honey production, community gardens, and eco-tourism—that generate income while reducing pressure on forests and decreasing reliance on charcoal as a primary energy source.

Through her leadership, Berta is helping her community envision a future powered by healthier ecosystems, diversified incomes, and cleaner, more sustainable energy practices. Her journey from forest extraction to forest regeneration reflects the determination of a new

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generation of rural leaders who are not only restoring their landscapes, but also redefining what energy, prosperity, and resilience can look like for decades to come.

### From Logger to Guardian: Jorge's Path of Transformation and Leadership

For more than forty years, Jorge Samuel Botina has made his home in the community of Santa Isabel, Colombia. Deeply rooted in his territory and respected for his leadership, Jorge has dedicated his life to strengthening the well-being of both his community and the landscapes they depend on.

At just 12 years old, Jorge began working in logging—a livelihood that provided for his family but fed into the production of charcoal, a key local energy source that placed growing pressure on the surrounding forests. Twenty years ago, he made a courageous decision to change direction. He wanted to model a different path for his children—one that viewed the forest not as something to exhaust, but as a living legacy to protect for future generations.

Like many families in the region, Jorge lived through the years of armed conflict that fractured communities and disconnected people from their land. Instead of walking away from these challenges, he chose a path of healing—for his family, his community, and the environment.

Jorge once feared bees, even resorting to throwing hot water to keep them away. With support from National Parks and encouragement from his neighbor, Doña Berta, he came to understand their vital role in pollination, food security, and ecosystem health. Today, beekeeping has become a thriving family enterprise led by his son Jhony, strengthening intergenerational bonds and providing a sustainable alternative to forest-degrading livelihoods.

The family has also diversified their income by raising trout and guinea pigs, adopting sustainable practices that support both household resilience and ecosystem restoration.



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Through the program's farmer field and business schools, Jorge now collaborates with 26 other community members in a growing beekeeping initiative rooted in shared commitment to conservation.

Jorge's story illustrates a profound transformation—from contributing to deforestation through charcoal-related logging to becoming a champion for forest protection. His journey shows that conservation is not only about preserving nature, but also about rebuilding dignity, unity, and hope for the next generation.



### **Rooted in Renewal: Omaira's Journey of Leadership and Conservation**

In the mountains of Nariño, Colombia, Omaira Bonilla has turned her family's land into a living example of how people and nature can thrive together. As the founder of El

Arrayán Nature Reserve, Omaira welcomes visitors to experience the beauty of her community, its traditions, and the power of sustainable living.

Her days are filled with the rhythm of the land—raising guinea pigs, tending a garden full of vegetables that nourishes her family and sustains her reserve. Through her efforts, she shows that rural entrepreneurship and conservation can go hand in hand.

Beyond her own land, Omaira is a driving force in community collaboration. She helps run the Minga Asoyarchocha community nursery, where families work together to grow native plants, strengthen food security, and restore degraded landscapes. She also supports the Herederos del Planeta (Planet Heirs) youth group, teaching young people to reconnect with the land through traditional cooking and hands-on environmental learning.

A guardian of traditional knowledge, Omaira also grows medicinal plants and has rescued native seeds—like four varieties of broad beans—helping to preserve her region's agrobiodiversity. Through the Sowing Change program, she has gained greater visibility for

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community-led green businesses and the marketing of local products, ensuring that conservation also creates opportunity.

When she looks around her land today, Omaira sees signs of renewal—trees taking root, and birds returning after years away. For her, each seed planted is more than an act of restoration; it is a promise of balance, hope, and a shared future between people and the planet.

### Case Study: Growing a Future at Home: Lorena’s Story of Youth Leadership and Conservation



In the Quillasinga Indigenous territory of Nariño, Colombia, Lorena Matabanchoy represents a new generation of rural leaders who are choosing to stay, to lead, and to build sustainable futures within their own communities. Together with her family, she runs Los Anturios Nature Reserve, where they combine agroecological production, product transformation, and community-based tourism to protect both their land and their culture.

At Los Anturios, Lorena cultivates a wide range of crops using methods that honor the soil and preserve the balance of the ecosystem. And her vision extends beyond her own reserve: she coordinates the Asoyarcocha Minga, a collective of farmers and Indigenous families working together to strengthen conservation, women’s leadership, and community communication across the region.

Lorena’s passion for environmental education began early. As a child, she joined the Heirs of the Planet: The Toucans of La Cocha, and today she mentors a new generation—leading youth campaigns to protect the iconic wax palm and organizing bird festivals around the Laguna de La Cocha Ramsar wetland. She also helps create communication materials that share the Minga’s restoration and education efforts, inspiring broader awareness and action.

Through her family garden, Lorena keeps traditional agricultural practices alive, cultivating native herbs, vegetables, and potatoes, and promoting seed exchanges. As part of the

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Sowing Change program, she is helping to strengthen the Minga's community nursery into a thriving green business that supports both people and nature.

By actively participating in ecological restoration to reconnect biological corridors, Lorena is not only protecting the environment—she's ensuring that future generations can continue to live, learn, and thrive on the land that has sustained her people for centuries.



### **Seeds of Change: Fany's Path of Conservation and Community Leadership**

In the heart of Nariño, Colombia, Fany Jojoa is cultivating more than crops—she's cultivating a model of harmony between people and nature. From her family's Cuatro Esquinas Nature Reserve, Fany leads by example, demonstrating how sustainable production and

conservation can coexist to protect her community's most vital resource: the land itself.

On their farm, Fany and her family raise livestock and chickens and maintain a thriving home garden, using agroecological practices that restore soil health and ensure responsible management of natural resources. Her dedication to sustainability is matched by her commitment to community. As a member of the Asoyarchocha Minga, she helps coordinate efforts around nature reserves, community communication, and women's leadership—strengthening the spirit of cooperation that sustains local conservation efforts.

Fany's love for nature began in childhood, when she joined the Heirs of the Planet: The Toucans of La Cocha youth group. That early passion grew into a lifelong commitment to environmental education. Today, she shares her knowledge with visitors and community members, inspiring others to value the plants, birds, and biodiversity that define their home.

Together with her parents, sister, and nephew, Fany has revived traditional agricultural knowledge—experimenting with seed germination, protecting native varieties, and nurturing agrobiodiversity. Through the Sowing Change program, she has deepened her work in native plant research and in strengthening the Minga community nursery, now a green business that bridges science, tradition, and sustainability.

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For Fany, every seed planted is a step toward renewal. Through her work in ecological restoration and the creation of biological corridors, she is helping her community reconnect with the natural world—ensuring that future generations inherit not just fertile soil, but a thriving landscape filled with life.



### **Leading with Strength: Nancy’s Story of Resilience and Community Empowerment**

In the Quillasinga Indigenous territory of Nariño, Colombia, Nancy Mery Pejendino stands out as a leader, a mother, and a visionary entrepreneur. As vice president of the Quillinsayaco community organization, she guides her community toward a future where culture, conservation, and livelihoods grow hand in hand.

A single mother and proud farmer, Nancy has built a thriving local business that distributes fruits and vegetables to nearby markets. Through strategic alliances with public institutions, she is helping open fairer and more inclusive markets for her community—ensuring that local families can benefit directly from their hard work and sustainable production.

Nancy’s leadership extends beyond farming. She promotes responsible, community-based tourism that celebrates Indigenous heritage and fosters respect for nature. At her museum, “La Huaca de mi Abuelo” (My Grandfather’s Sacred Site), she preserves artifacts of Indigenous origin, keeping alive the stories, knowledge, and traditions of her ancestors. In her garden, she cultivates medicinal plants, fruits, and native seeds—protecting both biodiversity and cultural identity.

Through the Sowing Change program, Nancy and the women of Quillinsayaco have strengthened their collective capacity, advancing economic autonomy and the sustainability of their production systems. The program has also amplified their voices, helping ensure that Indigenous women are recognized as key actors in local conservation and development.

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Despite facing personal challenges and regional inequalities, Nancy continues to lead with courage and determination. Her story is one of transformation and perseverance—proof that when women are empowered, entire communities grow stronger, more resilient, and more hopeful for the future.

### Building a Sustainable Future: Isaías' Vision for Conservation and Community



In the scenic highlands of Nariño, Colombia, Isaías Antonio Cuichala is leading change by showing that protecting nature can also strengthen local livelihoods. As a promoter of sustainable tourism, Isaías invites visitors to experience the natural beauty and cultural traditions of his region, while ensuring that tourism directly benefits local families and encourages care for the environment.

For Isaías, sustainability is a way of life. His family's project weaves together small-scale farming, livestock, guinea pig breeding, and rural tourism—each activity reinforcing the others and creating a model of balance between economic well-being and ecological stewardship.

He believes deeply in the power of youth and often says that if young people engage in sustainable practices today, they will carry forward a legacy of conservation for generations to come. His example and mentorship inspire others in the community, especially young people, to see opportunity in protecting the land they call home.

Isaías expresses heartfelt appreciation for the support of organizations like WWF and CARE, whose training and guidance have helped strengthen local initiatives and build confidence that a sustainable future is possible.

His vision is both simple and powerful: to create, from the ground up, a thriving community where people live in harmony with nature—and where conservation is not a sacrifice, but a source of pride, opportunity, and hope.

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### Honoring the Past, Nurturing the Future: Olga's Story of Knowledge and Community

In the Indigenous Quillasinga territory of Nariño, Colombia, Olga Pejendino has dedicated her life to strengthening her community—bridging generations through dialogue, shared learning, and a deep respect for the wisdom of her ancestors. A lifelong promoter of social processes, she has helped create spaces where people come together to build understanding, opportunity, and collective progress.

Olga's commitment to sustainability begins at home. She raises guinea pigs and using good agricultural practices, turns their manure into organic fertilizer to nourish her gardens. Her approach to farming is entirely chemical-free, reflecting her belief that healthy soil and traditional knowledge are the foundation of lasting prosperity.



She also promotes financial literacy and community savings, helping families manage credit and build local systems of mutual support. Through her work, neighbors are learning that financial independence and collective well-being go hand in hand.

At the same time, Olga is a champion of ancestral knowledge recovery, working to conserve native seeds and protect the biodiversity that has long sustained her people. She also plays an active role in community-based restoration tourism, leading experiential activities that teach visitors about the importance of conserving and restoring local ecosystems.

As a participant in the Sowing Change program, Olga continues to strengthen community-driven production systems that connect economic empowerment with cultural preservation. Her leadership shows that true sustainability is rooted not just in the land—but in people's shared knowledge, values, and care for one another.