

Helping Communities Transform Themselves

// Colombia

“We work with rural communities that lack opportunities, with citizens rarely consulted on municipality development projects. That’s why they’re so enthusiastic and empowered when they can propose ways to improve their lives,” says Beatriz Mejía, Director of Smurfit Kappa Colombia Foundation.

The Foundation has been working with rural communities for over 50 years and, a decade ago, launched the highly successful 'Integral Territorial Development' programme. In 2019, this programme was awarded the prestigious RedEAmérica CSR award for community development.

The focus was in South West Colombia and took a grassroots approach to implementing sustainable initiatives, mostly benefiting the communities neighbouring our forest plantations. As Beatriz points out, “We build invaluable partnerships with these neighbours. For example, they can be the first to inform us of risks like forest fire. In the last year, the SK Foundation has spent over €1.1 million on long-term and large-impact social development projects in Colombia.”

We work with communities, designing and implementing local development initiatives which focus on creating sustainable communities. These are based on a shared vision of the territory, strengthening participatory processes, planning and territorial management. The Foundation gives them tools, capabilities and knowledge to influence their own territory, enabling local leaders to work with government and other organisations to bring the projects about.

For example, El Tambo is one of the four municipalities for which the RedEAmérica CSR award was given. Here, community leaders identified income generation as the main issue – 86% of the rural population qualified as impoverished by a multi-dimensional poverty index. The Foundation provided financial, technical and infrastructure support to help improve productivity. We also helped other projects such as microfinance, water resource management and flora and fauna conservation.

To reduce youth urban migration, we developed productive projects in institutions and established Technical, Agricultural and Forestry Institutes. These offered basic and intermediate, secondary and technical schooling for young farmers.

As Beatriz says,

“The award is for creating ownership and leadership – particularly important for Colombia today. We work by the Colombian saying – don’t give fish, teach to fish!”

