

COLOMBIA: Indigenous Women Reclaim Traditional Medicine

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BOGOTA, Oct 14 (Tierramérica) - Luxmenia Banda, of the San Andrés de Sotavento indigenous reserve in northern Colombia, remembers that when she had bruises as a girl, her grandmother would apply the leaves of the 'árnica' (Heterotheca inuloides), of the daisy family, 'to reduce inflammation', and would use crushed oregano to prevent scratches from becoming infected.

"When we were forced from our lands and had to move to other places, all of those traditions began to be forgotten. Reclaiming them was one of the first tasks we took up when we returned," Banda, head of the Association of Alternative Producers, Asproal, told Tierramérica.

Seventy of the 803 women who are part of the organisation, most from the Zenú community, participate directly in growing and marketing medicinal plants.

The project is being developed in an indigenous reserve in Colombia's northern departments of Córdoba and Sucre.

To start, the women made an inventory of the existing plants in the area, their uses, and forms of preparation, explained Banda.

Of the more than 150 plants recorded, they selected 50 that are of widest use and possess the most medicinal properties.

Thirteen women received botanical training in the cities of Medellín and Bogotá to work in producing soaps, creams and infusions using the medicinal plants.

These traditional plants are now being grown on small plots of land for household use, and in three-hectare fields for outside sales.

In addition to árnica and oregano, the women are growing basil, annato (achiote, or Bixa orellana), wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), feverfew (*Chrysanthemum parthenium*), 'anamú' (*Petiveria alliacea*), celery (*Apium graveolens*), Spanish tarragon (*Tagetes lucida*), ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), aloe vera, lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) and valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*).

The initiative has allowed the Zenú community "to share knowledge with other more isolated communities" where doctors and health centres are few and far between, says Germán Vélez, of the non-governmental Grupo Semillas, which is supporting the effort.

Furthermore, "the knowledge has been socialised through a chart that explains the use of the different plants for both human and animal health, and for farm crops," Vélez told Tierramérica.

Banda underscored that in her community the plants are used to cure some illnesses in certain stages, but if the traditional approach does not produce improvements, they do turn to academic or "western" medicine.

Ediani Montaña, head of marketing the products, said the project is somewhat limited because the land where they grow the plants does not have the infrastructure for irrigation. That prevents the women from "assuring ongoing production of the required quantities, especially during extensive periods in the summer," she said.

The Zenú reserve covers 83,000 hectares in an area of tropical dry forest that receives 1,000 to 1,200 millimetres of rain annually, with six-month dry periods and an average temperature of 28 to 30 degrees Celsius.

One member of the association, who requested anonymity "for personal safety reasons", told Tierramérica that Asproal emerged in 1994 as part of a process "aimed at confronting the land seizures by large landowners that targeted Indians in the area, forcing us to sell our land at low prices so they could expand their dominion."

After a long legal battle, the Indians won back some of their land, where they now fight to recuperate knowledge of medicinal plants and implement plans for sustainable agriculture, fish farming, and bee keeping, as well as training in gender equity.

Colombia is caught up in a four-decade armed conflict between left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries and the army. The country has the third largest population of displaced people in the world, three million out of a total population of 42 million.

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