

# Community models for a living earth

## Amazonian chakras

### Case Study Database

A compilation of good practices and lessons learned to bring innovative subnational solutions to global problems

## Introduction

Amazonian chakras, an ancient agroforestry system stewarded by the Kichwa peoples of Ecuador, are an example of an Indigenous, environmental, territorial, social, solidarity-based and circular economy. They embody agroecological production, environmental conservation and social justice, and their relevance is growing in the face of the climate and food crises.

## Project summary

Amazonian chakras are a traditional agroforestry system practiced by Kichwa communities in the Amazon region of Ecuador. An Amazonian chakra combines food production, regenerative practices and the transmission of ancestral knowledge. Associations such as Kallari, Wiñak and ASOPROMÁS have strengthened fair trade, incorporated certifications and developed strategies against external threats. This model is structured around a community-based, multi-sector and resilient approach that improves community income while protecting the Amazon ecosystem.

## Key information

**Location:** Provinces of Napo, Zamora Chinchipe, Pastaza and Morona Santiago, Ecuador

**Key areas:** Biodiversity, agroecology, indigenous economy, local governance, gender

**Sustainable Development Goals addressed:**

SDG 1, 2, 5, 12, 13, 15 and 17.

**Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework targets:**

Targets 1, 4, 9, 10, 11, 13 and 23.

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# Special collection

This case study is part of a special collection developed by Regions4 as part of its work on

## Just Resilience

With the support of CONGOPE, its goal is to highlight Indigenous and community-based economic models that integrate sustainable practices, ancestral knowledge and collective organization while actively contributing to environmental conservation and territorial resilience.

These experiences were identified during the Breakthrough Workshop on Indigenous Economy and Just Resilience held in Napo (Ecuador) in January 2025.

The case studies include practical recommendations for subnational governments to recognise, strengthen, and collaborate with these models through their public policies, fostering a fairer, more inclusive transition in harmony with nature.



## CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

**THE ECUADORIAN AMAZON,** particularly in provinces such as Napo, Pastaza, Morona Santiago and Zamora Chinchipe, is home to great biological and cultural diversity. These regions are inhabited by Indigenous peoples such as the Kichwa, who for generations have developed productive systems deeply connected to the natural environment and their ancestral knowledge. One of the pillars of their traditional economy are the Amazonian chakras, an agroforestry system managed at both the family and community levels.

A chakra is more than just a production method – it represents a way of life. It is a territorial space where production, culture, identity and knowledge transmission come together. Its use and management are deeply rooted in Indigenous knowledge, especially that of women, who take on the role of chakramamas – the caretakers, planners and teachers of this ancestral system.

Within this context, associations such as Wiñak, Kallari, Tsatsayaku and ASOPROMÁS have been created with the aim of revitalising traditional systems, enhancing their participation in fair trade markets, safeguarding their territories and confronting pressing issues including mining activities, biodiversity loss and degradation, restricted access to certifications and youth migration.

This system has been formally recognised in local policies such as the ordinance of the Napo Provincial Government (2017), which defines the chakra as a family-based, biodiverse productive space, managed with an agroecological approach and respectful of ancestral cultures and practices.





## KEY ACTIVITIES AND PRACTICES

An Amazonian chakra functions as a complex, multifunctional and biodynamic agroforestry system. Its design mirrors the structure of the Amazon rainforest, establishing plant layers where short-, medium- and long-cycle crops coexist simultaneously. These include:

- **Staple foods:** cassava, plantain, corn, sweet potato and beans, among others.
- **Commercial products:** fine-aroma cocoa, guayusa, coffee, annatto.
- **Amazonian fruits:** papaya, orange, pineapple, chonta palm, arazá, goldenberry (uvilla).
- **Medicinal plants and rituals:** ayahuasca, guayusa, nettle and black pepper, among others.
- **Timber and shade trees:** cedar, laurel and cinnamon.

This system not only ensures food sovereignty and diverse nutrition but also generates income through the sale of processed products such as chocolate, dried guayusa, herbal infusions, oils and natural cosmetics.

Productive activities span from cultivation and harvesting to artisanal and semi-industrial processing.

The internal organisation of the model is community-based and democratic. Associations operate through general assemblies and rotating leadership. The system also adapts to emerging market demands and contemporary challenges.

Some farms have begun to diversify into community-based agrotourism, ecological restoration using native species, and the revalorisation of ancestral cacao, including grafting techniques to preserve original genetics.

The chakra is not only a productive unit but also a space for learning, identity and cultural transmission. Its revitalisation has included innovations such as **organic certifications, participatory guarantee systems, ancestral cacao routes and sustainable agrotourism projects.**

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**Youth and women** play central roles in the model's revitalisation. Although they face challenges such as migration and mining activities, new strategies aim to attract them back to rural areas through economic improvements, rural education and territorial innovation projects.

The chakra model has been strengthened by **organisations such as Wiñak, Kallari and ASOPROMÁS**, which enable the collection, processing and export of products.





**Wiñak** is a Kichwa indigenous organisation founded in 2010 by farming families to promote the sustainable development of their territories and break free from dependency on intermediaries. It brings together 250 members (66% of whom are women) and works with 80 communities in Pastaza and Napo, indirectly benefiting around 4,000 families. Its productive base consists of diversified chakras located in high-biodiversity areas, such as the foothills of Sumaco and Napo-Galeras, combining native crops to generate income, conserve the environment and strengthen the social fabric. For over 14 years, Wiñak has organically certified 614 farmers, with a strong focus on empowering young women.

In its early days, Wiñak marketed its products through a private company under a ten-year contract with unfavourable conditions. Without its own machinery or institutional recognition, it launched a five-year legal battle while its youth received training. After the legal process, it established direct contacts with international buyers and, with support from cooperation agencies, acquired new machinery and strengthened its institutional capacity. Today, it exports products such as guayusa to India and cacao to Japan, innovates with new flavours, and manages traceability and quality processes internally.

This journey has made Wiñak an example of how indigenous organisations can transition from commercial dependency to economic sovereignty, blending tradition, innovation and fair trade.



**Kallari** is a Kichwa association founded in 1997 that unites more than 850 families across 21 communities in Napo. Its model is based on the chakras and minga (collective work) as foundational principles for organisation and production, combining environmental sustainability, social justice and direct marketing. Over time, it has developed value chains of cacao, guayusa, coffee, vanilla, timber and crafts, eliminating intermediaries and promoting fair trade. Its success has been made possible through a combination of community empowerment, partnerships with international cooperation and a professionalised technical structure that integrates ancestral knowledge with modern tools. The association manages continuous training, technical assistance, organic certifications, traceability and community tourism.

One of their innovative pillars is the Kallari Cacao Route, an experiential tourism initiative that connects agricultural production with cultural knowledge and markets. The association also leads conservation efforts protecting over 7,000 hectares.



## The Association for the Production of Cacao and Aromatic Derivatives of the South (ASOPROMÁS)

was founded in 2013 under Ecuador's Law on popular and solidarity economy (SEPS) and operates mainly in the provinces of Zamora Chinchipe and Morona Santiago. The association is composed equally of Shuar nationals and mestizos, with 49% women and 51% men. Since its founding, it has built a model based on agroecological education with a gender perspective, combining training, inclusion and sustainability. Through agroecology schools, it trains communities in the production of bio-inputs, pruning and sustainable agricultural techniques, promoting regenerative practices and reducing external inputs. Simultaneously, it encourages youth participation through training and labour insertion within the cacao value chain, helping young people find economic opportunities in their own territories.

Thanks to collective work and international cooperation support, ASOPROMÁS established its own chocolate processing plant, launching the brand “Kujeñito” and actively participating in national and international fairs. In 2019, it won the award for best cacao paste at Expo Amazonía, strengthening their market position. As part of their expansion, they made their first direct cacao export to Chile in December 2022, sending 500 kg of dried cacao. In 2024, through an alliance with Wiñak, ASOPROMÁS's production reached Japan, meeting strict traceability and food safety protocols developed with support from the USAID Farmer-to-Farmer programme. Currently, the association has 160 producers in the organic certification process, 84 of whom are already certified, while the rest are transitioning. The idea is to invest in their own machinery to process cacao paste, aiming to diversify derivative products and strengthen economic autonomy.

The association has also focused on rescuing and reproducing ancestral cacao trees prized for their high organoleptic qualities and percentage of white beans, which makes the cacao unique and special. This cacao is paid to producers at a premium rate, incentivising its conservation.

Additionally, ASOPROMÁS is in the process of implementing its own biofactory for bio-inputs, aimed at strengthening sustainable production on cacao farms.



Photo: ASOPROMAS website



## ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

The environmental impact of the Amazonian chakra is overwhelmingly positive and represents one of its core pillars. **This agroforestry system contributes significantly to biodiversity conservation, soil restoration, carbon sequestration and the maintenance of essential ecosystem services that sustain life in the Amazon.**

By mimicking the canopy of the Amazon rainforest through diverse plant layers, the chakra protects soil from erosion, retains moisture, promotes nutrient cycling and provides habitat for both wild and domesticated species of flora and fauna. Unlike monocultures, this system significantly reduces the need for agrochemicals, thereby supporting both human and ecosystem health.



The chakra also functions as an effective carbon sink, contributing to climate change mitigation. In addition, it strengthens biological corridors by preventing habitat fragmentation, a critical factor in such a fragile ecosystem as the Amazon.

This model also safeguards traditional plant varieties, such as ancestral cacao trees, which are being identified and selectively reproduced to prevent their disappearance. This enhances not only the genetic resilience of crops but also the value of ancestral knowledge related to cultivation, harvesting and selection practices.

**Organisations have also developed participatory environmental strategies, including training in agroecology, reforestation with native species, in situ conservation of heritage trees and the promotion of responsible land use.**



## SUSTAINABILITY AND CHALLENGES

The model is sustained by its strong cultural and community roots, as well as its agroecological design, which promotes territorial regeneration and social cohesion. However, it faces multiple challenges that threaten its continuity. Limited access to financing and the lack of local technical capacity restrict investment in infrastructure, the ability to obtain international certifications and the adoption of technological improvements. Moreover, market volatility creates additional pressure. When cacao prices rise, some associations lack the working capital needed to pay producers, leading to financial imbalances that have forced some leaders to take on personal debt. Further barriers include the inability to export products that lack prior customs classification – such as powdered guayusa – and difficulties in accessing markets or identifying projects.

External threats are especially severe. Illegal mining has expanded alarmingly: in 1998, it occupied barely 3 hectares, and today it exceeds 2,000 hectares in the Napo river basin alone. This expansion has released large amounts of heavy metals like mercury and lead, polluting water sources and severely affecting human health. Women and children, who use the river daily to wash food, clothes or bathe, are particularly vulnerable and have reported increased cases of gynaecological and skin diseases. In response, campaigns have been launched to obtain community water purifiers.

Other ongoing challenges include the loss of territorial control, youth migration, the disappearance of traditional tree species and the lack of sustained governmental support. Despite this, the model continues to show resilience: production is being diversified, native species are being recovered, and efforts are under way to build alliances to scale and internationalise these practices.

# Lessons learned

## and the role of subnational governments

The experience of the Kichwa communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon with the Amazonian chakra model offers valuable insights for the design of public policies aimed at sustainability, inclusion and territorial resilience. One key lesson is that **traditional systems are living and adaptive structures, capable of responding effectively to current challenges such as climate change**, biodiversity loss, food insecurity and economic exclusion. **The chakra system blends ancestral knowledge with social and organisational innovation, functioning as an integrated economic, ecological and cultural system.**

This experience also shows **that sustainability must be understood broadly, including not only economic and environmental dimensions, but also cultural and territorial ones.** The success of the chakras lies in their deep connection to the Kichwa worldview, which promotes harmony with nature, reciprocity and collective work. It also underscores the importance of gender equity and generational renewal as essential conditions for the model's continuity. Women, in their role as chakramamas, are not only stewards of biodiversity and agricultural knowledge but also educate and empower younger generations. **In turn, rural youth become key actors when offered training, recognition and real economic opportunities.**

Access to differentiated markets, the creation of community brands, and the implementation of accessible certification schemes are decisive factors in strengthening the model.

However, these advances are only possible with strong community organisation, as demonstrated by associations such as Wiñak, Kallari and ASOPROMÁS. These organisations are not only production hubs; they also serve as spaces for collective decision-making, learning and resistance to external threats. Furthermore, legal and symbolic recognition – such as the ordinance issued by the Napo Provincial Government in 2017 – enhances the model's legitimacy and facilitates its integration into territorial development plans.

In this context, subnational governments – particularly Ecuador's autonomous decentralised governments (GADs) – can act as strategic allies at multiple levels. First, they can play a key regulatory role by formally recognising the chakra as an agroecological and cultural system. This would allow it to be linked to policies on rural development, biodiversity conservation, and the social and solidarity economy. To address technical needs, GADs could provide support through specialised assistance, ongoing training, farmer field schools and direct support in





agroecology, commercialisation, forest management and post-harvest processes. These actions should adopt an inclusive approach, prioritising women, youth and small-scale producers.

A concrete line of action would be the deployment of technical staff to support organisations in systematising information and developing community work plans or portfolios. This would enhance both the specialisation and diversification of value chains and improve the ability to take advantage of cooperation opportunities. **It is also important to promote knowledge exchange with similar experiences through technical visits and peer learning.**

Another strategic area is support for certification processes. Communities face major barriers in complying with international standards, such as those required to export to the European Union. Technical, legal and logistical support in navigating these processes can make a significant difference. In parallel, GADs could help organise fairs and promotional events at the provincial, national or international level to showcase these communities' products and methodologies.

From an economic standpoint, subnational governments can implement inclusive public procurement mechanisms, prioritising chakra products for school meal programmes, hospitals and other public institutions. They could also offer fiscal or financial incentives for sustainable practices, such as the conservation of heritage trees or certified organic production.

Provincial trade councils could broaden their scope of beneficiaries to include community associations, especially when they face production difficulties. Support could include technical assistance, business development services and even logistical and financial aid to overcome temporary disruptions.

The creation of an Amazonian Chamber of Commerce – comprising local actors – could help channel structured support, with resources from international cooperation, towards needs such as marketing, legal management, administrative strengthening and local workforce training.

In the medium term, GADs could also collaborate in the development of manuals/guidelines on basic financial procedures, internal audit processes, and institutional planning tools to improve community capacity for fund management, project design and access to financing.

Finally, subnational governments can play a symbolic role in enhancing the value of the model by promoting campaigns that recognise the fundamental contributions of rural women, ancestral knowledge and the cultural and ecological quality of Amazonian products.

*You can read more about a provincial initiative supporting Chakras in the Ecuadorian Amazon in the case study ["Cultivating Just Resilience: The Chakra Group as a Community Mechanism for Sustainable Conservation in Napo"](#).*

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about this project, contact us by email at [info@regions4.org](mailto:info@regions4.org) to schedule an informational meeting, clarify your questions, and receive support for the implementation of similar projects.





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## ABOUT REGIONS4

Regions4 (formerly known as nrg4SD) is a global network that exclusively represents regional governments (states, regions, and provinces) in UN processes, European Union initiatives, and global discussions on climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable development. Regions4 was established in 2002 at the World Summit in Johannesburg and currently represents more than 40 members from 20 countries across 4 continents. Through advocacy, cooperation, and capacity building, Regions4 empowers regional governments to accelerate global action.

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