



Former national UN Volunteer Sumak Bastidas leading an awareness activity through open talks with the community assembly.  
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## Former UN Volunteer on valuing the ancestral knowledge of indigenous communities

"For indigenous peoples, genetic resources are not simply technical terms or laboratory products, but specific elements of the earth, plants or animals," former UN Volunteer Sumak Bastidas explains. "It is essential that my people are aware of the legal rights they have over these resources, such as medicinal plants, and that governments and private corporations value the ancestral knowledge of native Latin American communities."

Sumak is a member of the Cacha community, part of the Puruwa nation in Chimborazo province, Ecuador. She began serving as a UN Volunteer as part of the partnership between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) in 2017, after working for women's rights in the Ecuadorian National Assembly. She had a personal interest in actions planned to adapt the Nagoya Protocol<sup>[1]</sup> to the reality of her country.

"As an indigenous woman, working in defence of the rights and knowledge of my people was a challenge," Sumak says. She found her service within the UN a means to support ancestral communities like hers and empower the women of the region.

Sumak is a tourism and natural areas engineer, with a Master's degree in Local Development and Territory. She highlights the importance of education in improving the living conditions of indigenous women and safeguarding their rights:

“ Growing professionally as an indigenous woman, from a territory far from the capital, has been a permanent social struggle and an achievement for my community. --Sumak Bastidas, former UN Volunteer with UNDP

### Overcoming challenges

The main challenges to the Nagoya Protocol include developing legal frameworks, compliance and educating the local population about what the protocol entails.

A large number of information workshops have been held since 2017 in local and indigenous communities of five Latin American countries: the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Honduras, Panama and Uruguay. The workshops created open spaces for communication with the community assembly, emphasizing the importance of raising awareness of the community's own resources and cohesion.

“ Each community is different and has its own worldview and its own ancestral knowledge. It is necessary to understand this when planning any action. UN Volunteers have been essential in reaching remote regions and isolated communities, and sharing with them the benefits of adhering to the Nagoya Protocol. --Sumak Bastidas

Collaboration with national and regional authorities, managed by UN Volunteers serving on the ground, was essential in adapting broad legal frameworks to local circumstances. In the case of Ecuador, for example, a legal framework was developed with the assistance of the Ministry of the Environment, the National Service of Intellectual Rights and the Secretary of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation.

### The power of traditional knowledge

An in-depth understanding of the natural environment, as well as the local social structures that bring indigenous communities together, has proven useful in tackling the current COVID-19 pandemic in the most remote regions.

"Acquiring large amounts of medical supplies is not easy in some areas, but people know how to use their traditional knowledge to find solutions that help them. In some communities in Ecuador, indigenous people make homemade masks with *Ambrosia peruviana* (which has antiseptic and analgesic properties) and eucalyptus, crushed and placed on a cloth band in front of the nose and mouth. This way, they can prevent infections and protect their health," Sumak states. "The youth in the community go at specific times to make purchases in the main town. All this is collaborative action, adaptation of national policies to the reality of each community, taking advantage of their ties, organizational structures and the knowledge they have."

### **Volunteering to build stronger civil society**

"The leaders, guided by UNV during the Global ABS project, have been very helpful in the current circumstances," the former UN Volunteer reflects. "During the quarantine, they have been monitoring their community activities through the internet and prioritizing, together with local councils, protocols to contain and mitigate the spread of the virus. WhatsApp has been used to coordinate actions, since it was important to avoid direct contact with the most affected areas of the country, such as Guayaquil." These sorts of actions were coordinated by the Ecuadorian authorities and facilitated by the support structures created by the UN Volunteers that serve with UNDP.

The many lessons learned before and during the pandemic should not be forgotten once it ends.

“ Strengthening the relationship between indigenous communities and local governments, as well as having access to indigenous territories near and far, are among the impact volunteers deliver. This helps programmes increase efficiency, avoid duplicating efforts and articulate chains of support, based on bilateral agreements for local and indigenous communities.

Nature holds solutions to many problems faced by humanity. That is why it is essential to preserve the traditional knowledge and wellbeing of those who best know the genetic resources around them.

[1] The Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity, also known as The Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS), was adopted in


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November 2010 in Nagoya, Japan, as a supplementary agreement to the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Its purpose is to guarantee the fair and equitable distribution of economic benefits related to the use of genetic resources, and the preservation of biodiversity. For further information on volunteerism for access and benefit-sharing, click [here](#); or join the Global ABS Community [here](#).

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