

Volunteers
 Story
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Investing in the economic empowerment of indigenous women in Loja, Ecuador

Loja is one of the poorest provinces of Ecuador in the Southern part of the country, sharing border with Peru, and currently is experiencing serious desertification. This land degradation under changing climate impacts particularly rural communities, as they are highly dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods. Especially women in rural areas in developing countries - like those I collaborated with in Loja - are impacted.



Jasmin Blessing (Germany), UN Volunteer in Democracy, Civil Society and Public Institutions, engages with indigenous women in Ecuador.

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Women in Loja, mostly of indigenous descent, play a critical role in their economy, by managing small businesses and/or providing informal care for family members. They participate in crop production and livestock farming, and provide food and fuel for their families. However, indigenous women in Loja are disproportionately affected by poverty, gender inequalities and discrimination and do not enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men. For example, Ecuadorian women bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work. Women devote 18 hours more to housework than men and are paid less than men (79.1 per cent of a man's salary). Thus, they neither have the access to formal financial services nor the opportunity to receive a training that would help to better manage their businesses.

As a UN Volunteer specialist in Democracy, Civil Society and Public Institutions at UN Women in Ecuador, I had the opportunity to directly support UN Women's economic empowerment project "Women leading sustainable inclusive development in the Province of Loja." The project aims to strengthen the capacities of the Decentralized Autonomous Governments of the Province of Loja to develop and implement policies and services that would promote the sustainable and inclusive economic empowerment of women, thereby improving income opportunities

for women in a sustainable manner. In addition, the project is expected to strengthen the knowledge and skills of women in Loja and empower their organizations to influence local decision-making.

I engaged in the process of developing and implementing the project to increase women's economic empowerment by enabling the access to microcredits and providing training on marketing, production, and business. I coordinated project activities in close collaboration with the provincial government agencies, local NGOs, and local consultants. I organized various trainings and events for female entrepreneurs and created the space for engaged discussion between local governments, private sector, and women's organizations which enabled all parties to openly talk about cooperative strategies and plans to enhance women's economic inclusion and empowerment.

Thanks to the project over the last 12 months, 150 indigenous women living in Loja received skills and capability building training. The training helped them build financial literacy, increase and optimize production capacity and shape marketing skills. Moreover, many have been provided with a space to sell their products.

Being a UN Volunteer has enabled me to work directly with the affected population, the local government, the UN level as well with local NGOs. Although working with many different stakeholders involved in this project was the most difficult, I believe that having had the opportunity to work with diverse stakeholders in different areas of the country has equipped me with useful skills for future work assignments, which would require complex coordination and organization skills. --Jasmin Blessing, UN Volunteer Specialist in Democracy, Civil Society and Public Institutions with UN Women

Now, the project is entering the last and most exciting phase. Proposals to economically empower local women have been developed, and ties have been established with local banks so that women can utilize sustainable financial services, such as microcredits, provided by local banks. If these financial services are implemented, a real difference in the life of these women will be made. I look forward to seeing the fruits of the project in next coming months.

Serving as a UN Volunteer has enabled me to work at many different levels both in Quito and in remote areas of Ecuador. There is a big difference working with stakeholders in the capital as opposed to remote regions of the country. Working as a UN Volunteer has enabled me to work directly with the affected population, the local government, the UN level as well with local NGOs. Although working with many different stakeholders involved in this project was the most difficult, I believe that having had the opportunity to work with diverse stakeholders in different areas of the country has equipped me with useful skills for future work assignments, which would require complex coordination and organization skills.

Jasmin Blessing served as a UN Volunteer Specialist in Democracy, Civil Society and Public Institutions with UN Women in Ecuador from April 2015 to December 2017. Previously she worked with UN Women in the Dominican Republic, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in New York, as well as with various foundations in the United States. She holds a Master's degree in Human Rights from the National University of Ireland.

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