



PALMA FUTURO

IMPACT REPORT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SAI is proud to share the impact report for Palma Futuro, a project funded by the United States Department of Labor to promote acceptable working conditions and the prevention and eradication of child labor and forced labor in palm oil supply chains in Colombia and Ecuador.

Palma Futuro has brought meaningful change for workers, companies, and communities in the palm oil sector throughout Colombia and Ecuador, including:

- **88** palm oil entities with improved Social Fingerprint labor performance scores
- **102** palm oil entities with improved Social Fingerprint management system scores
- **67** communities reached through outreach events
- **65** Community Circles formed
- **1,015** stakeholders provided training

This report highlights SAI's achievements and contributions to Palma Futuro, thanks to the efforts of our team and partners. The success of the project can be attributed their dedication and our strategic methodology, which consisted of:

- **A holistic approach:** Engaging with the palm oil industry from every angle – within workplaces, communities, sector associations, and trade unions – allowed us to understand the many complexities of labor issues in Colombia and Ecuador, and work to address them more effectively.
- **Prioritizing listening:** Listening and learning from project stakeholders – from communities to private sector partners – provides rich opportunities to work together on the most vital solutions.
- **Building sustainability into every aspect of the project:** By prioritizing capacity building, SAI was able to ensure that Palma Futuro's learnings would cascade throughout communities and supply chains and continue to have an impact beyond the project's lifecycle.

We look forward to seeing the efforts of Palma Futuro live on and continue to improve conditions for workers at every level of the palm oil supply chain in Colombia and Ecuador.



INTRODUCTION

Palm oil can be found in just about any common product - from food items to cleaning products, cosmetics and biofuels. Because of its versatility, it is the most widely consumed vegetable oil in the world (World Wildlife Fund, n.d.). Despite its usefulness, the palm oil industry has a reputation for damaging environmental and social impacts – namely, significant deforestation and prevalent human rights abuses. This report focuses on Colombia and Ecuador, where palm oil expansion is less likely to come at the cost of additional deforestation, but human rights violations of workers are known to be prevalent (Ordoñez, 2020).

This is often especially true in rural areas in these countries, where oil palm is typically grown on small and medium-sized plantations. Plantations provide crucial employment opportunities in areas with high rates of poverty, but they are relatively isolated from the wider world. It is common for workers to face job opportunities with no formalized contracts or social benefits, unfair wages, unethical recruitment, and the use of child labor. In Ecuador, for example, research has found that migrants from Colombia (and other countries) working on palm farms often work very long hours for little pay through informal contracts with labor brokers. These same migrants may fall victim to labor trafficking due to deceptive recruitment by the brokers, resulting in forced overtime and limited freedom of movement (Verité, 2016).

Improving labor conditions in the Colombian and Ecuadorian palm industries requires addressing complex political, economic, and cultural challenges. There are deeply engrained views on child labor, resistance to new processes and thorny relationships between large palm oil extraction plants and their surrounding communities. Palm oil producers in these regions also differ widely in size and capacity – from smallholders with limited resources and education to larger agro-enterprises with many resources – making “one size fits all” approaches ineffective.

Given these challenges, the United States Department of Labor funded the Palma Futuro project to promote acceptable working conditions and the prevention of child labor and forced labor by improving the implementation of social compliance systems in Colombian and Ecuadorian palm oil supply chains. Social compliance systems help companies at any scale comply with labor standards as a matter of practice and work to improve their labor performance continuously.

From 2019 to 2024, SAI, under the Palma Futuro project, worked closely with companies to build robust social compliance systems that improve conditions for workers at every level of the palm oil supply chain in Colombia and Ecuador—from industrial processing plants to large-scale plantations, to smallholder farms. SAI’s innovative holistic approach engaged industry leaders, workers, and stakeholders, both inside and outside of the workplace. Together with other Palma Futuro partners, SAI then disseminated learnings and best practices from this process to other palm oil-producing countries.

Despite facing the unprecedented challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic in the early stages of the project and the damaging impacts it had on workers and communities, Palma Futuro was able to improve the management systems of 102 palm oil entities throughout Colombia and Ecuador using SAI’s Social Fingerprint® tool, impacting thousands of workers and community members.

Palma Futuro was led by grantee Partners of the Americas, sub-grantee Social Accountability International (SAI), and supported by sub-grantee JE Austin Associates from 2019 to 2024. This report highlights the impact of SAI’s work as an implementing partner of the Palma Futuro project.

PALMA FUTURO METHODOLOGY

Palma Futuro's approach of working both inside workplaces and in the broader community to build awareness of the risks of child labor, forced labor, and unacceptable working conditions, set it apart from other initiatives and certifications in the region. **SAI implemented a multi-pronged approach** that tailored project activities to the needs of various stakeholders, integrating sustainable protections of these fundamental human rights throughout the palm oil industries in Colombia and Ecuador.



PARTNERING WITH PALM OIL EXTRACTION PLANTS

One of the first steps to engaging with the palm oil supply chains in our target countries was partnering with large manufacturing plants, which extract the oil from palm kernels. In Colombia, the palm oil industry is made up of palm nuclei (núcleos palmeros) – hubs of palm oil producers organized around extraction or processing factories. In Ecuador, most producers are small farmers who sell their harvest to various extraction and processing companies.

After partnering with several extraction plants (Palma Futuro's private sector partners), SAI conducted baseline assessments to assess their existing labor performance and the maturity of their management systems. This is the first step in SAI's Social Fingerprint – our methodology to measure and improve a company's preparedness to manage a socially responsible workplace or supply chain. These initial assessments revealed where partner companies had gaps in compliance with labor standards (such as no child or forced labor, fair wages and working hours, and freedom of association) and in their social compliance management systems. From there, SAI worked closely with the companies to guide them in the development of customized improvement plans to build robust social compliance systems tailored to their level of maturity and business structure.



SOCIAL FINGERPRINT®

SAI's Social Fingerprint is a set of assessments, trainings and tools that help companies measure and improve their social performance. It is global, flexible, cross-industry, code agnostic, and applicable for companies of any size.

How do companies use it?

- **Brand-level:** Measure and improve social performance of a company and supply chain management.
- **Supplier-level:** Build capacity, establish dialogue, assess risk and provide practical tools necessary for critical management systems.
- **System-wide:** Build ownership with internal stakeholders, vendors, licensees, and suppliers and emphasize a management-systems approach.

PALMA FUTURO'S SOCIAL COMPLIANCE SYSTEMS

Based on the [U.S. Department of Labor's Comply Chain](#) and SAI's [Social Fingerprint](#), Palma Futuro's Social Compliance Systems (SCS) is a framework for palm oil companies and farmers to achieve and maintain decent working conditions – or “labor performance” – through purposeful and systematic business practices – or “management systems”.

To have a successful SCS, one must have effective implementation of these two components – both management systems and labor performance. An SCS is one element of a company's broader CSR, sustainability, or accountability program.



WORKER ENGAGEMENT

Worker engagement is a pillar of SAI's work across all our programs, such as **TenSquared**, which unites workers and managers to find solutions to tough workplace challenges. Active worker engagement is integral to effective social compliance systems – but to be effective, workers must feel comfortable voicing their concerns. This can be difficult when there is a history of mistrust, labor abuse, difficult cultural dynamics, or when workers and management are siloed from one another in their day-to-day work.

As part of our strategy to elevate workers' voices, strengthen cross-functional dialogue, and build workers' awareness of their rights, SAI worked with private sector partners to establish internal **Social Performance Teams**. These teams, made up of workers and managers elected by their peers, are responsible for coordinating and facilitating the organization's social compliance system implementation.

Using the completed baseline assessments, we worked closely with each Social Performance Team to implement their company's customized improvement plan and strengthen their social compliance systems. Through this process and regular trainings, Social Performance Teams built skills in areas such as stakeholder engagement, risk and impact assessment, developing robust policies and processes, communication and training, remediating violations, seeking independent verification, and reporting on performance.

In addition to forming the Social Performance Teams, SAI formed **Workers' Circles** within each company – shared learning spaces where workers met regularly to learn about labor risks and discuss solutions.



PARTNERING WITH PALM OIL SUPPLIERS

Most palm oil in Colombia and Ecuador is produced on small to medium-sized farms. Many are family owned and operated with one or two employees to harvest the fruit. While the objective of implementing social compliance systems remains the same, working with these farms required a different approach to how Palma Futuro engaged with large-scale extractor plants, as most had little to no previous awareness of labor standards or social management systems.

Once suppliers were identified in Colombia, SAI began by conducting a series of self-assessment workshops, designed to introduce them to the meaning and importance of social compliance systems and analyze their existing practices. From there, improvement plans were developed and SAI worked closely with suppliers to implement their own social compliance systems. In Ecuador, SAI partnered with associations of producers to deliver training to their members and implement our training of trainers methodology for their staff.

Supplier Trainings

- Introduction to Social Compliance Systems
- Labor Performance categories
- Management System categories
- Impact of COVID on working conditions
- Advanced OHS Risk Assessment training
- Advanced Labor Formalization training
- First Aid training
- Advanced SPT training
- Internal Social Auditing training
- SCS assessment training



ENGAGING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The challenges of child labor, forced labor, and poor working conditions go beyond the walls of workplaces – they are deeply rooted in cultural norms, family needs, and systemic disparities. To better understand the needs of communities, SAI began by conducting diagnostic evaluations. These evaluations provided valuable insights into the unique concerns of community members, and their perception of nearby palm oil companies, enabling us to tailor our approach to each community's unique needs.

Throughout SAI's programming, we emphasize that engagement of community members and leaders is critical to tackling cultural norms, raising awareness at scale, and developing locally owned, relevant solutions. As part of the Palma Futuro methodology, SAI facilitated the formation and implementation of **Community Circles** – shared learning spaces where farmers, community members, and leaders can be trained about labor risks and discuss solutions.

Through these dialogues, we found a general need for communities to build skills in accessing useful resources relevant to their unique needs – whether economic, health-related, or otherwise. Community Circle members worked with SAI to implement activities addressing these needs, as well as awareness-raising and capacity-building activities related to child labor, forced labor, and working conditions. These initiatives built the capacity of local leaders to access resources and implement activities for their communities in the future.



ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY

Each aspect of Palma Futuro’s methodology is designed to ensure sustainability through building local capacity— so that private sector partners, workers, and community members can continue protecting human rights at work beyond the project’s lifecycle. As part of this strategy, SAI qualified a network of local trainers in key regions of Colombia and Ecuador through a program that involved trainings, technical assistance, field visits, interactive learning activities, and more. These trainers are equipped to cascade learnings and coach companies, farmers and community members on all aspects of our program (also known as the **“Training of Trainers” program, or ToT**).



ADDRESSING UNIQUE CHALLENGES

COVID-19

While unexpected challenges typically arise in any project, the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 was an unprecedented and significant obstacle in the early phases of Palma Futuro's implementation. Faced with travel restrictions and social distancing mandates, SAI adapted our private sector assessment methodology to be conducted remotely, incorporating video site visits and private video interviews with workers. Because our ability to interact with workers directly through site visits and interviews was disrupted during this time, SAI also developed a remote worker engagement survey to help fill the gaps – bringing worker engagement to the forefront of the project's approach.

In partnership with technology company [Ulula](#), SAI used mobile and interactive voice recording surveys to ask workers about how the pandemic had affected them, with particular attention to impacts on labor rights. At the time of these surveys, most responses indicated that workers experienced negative effects in their mental health, their finances, and their family environment. Through this survey, we also found that workers needed more information about government aid programs and labor rights. In response, SAI developed information campaigns within the workplaces and farms, including COVID-19 health and safety information, and implemented a broader SMS campaign that shared information about accessing aid programs and reporting labor concerns and grievances.

CROP DISEASE

In addition to the pandemic, the palm oil industries in Ecuador and Colombia were in the midst of facing a phytosanitary challenge unique to their crop – a disease known as *bud rot*, a fungal disease that causes oil palm trees to rot, which has severely impacted the sector in recent years. Because bud rot is so pervasive – and new oil palm trees take three to four years to grow before producing fruit – many farmers decided to abandon oil palm harvesting in favor of crops with shorter maturity periods (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, n.d.).

Our team worked closely with private sector partners and communities to best understand how to address the devastating impacts of bud rot. For example, we connected community members in Colombia to government-provided trainings about working with new hybrid palm trees more resistant to the disease (see page 32 of this report for more details).

IMPACT

DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE SOCIAL COMPLIANCE SYSTEMS

88

palm oil entities with improved Social Fingerprint Labor Performance scores

- 73 in Colombia
- 15 in Ecuador

102

palm oil entities with improved Social Fingerprint Management System scores

- 88 in Colombia
- 14 in Ecuador

EXTRACTION PLANTS

Working closely with SAI, extraction plants made significant improvements to their social compliance systems. Some examples include:

- **Working hour policies** were updated to address excessive overtime (a common practice before partnering with Palma Futuro) to align with ILO conventions and the change in Colombian national law regarding overtime, ensuring that overtime is understood to be voluntary and monitored regularly.
- **Revising risk assessment processes** to include labor elements and conducting labor risk assessments with trained Social Performance Team members for the first time.
- **Revamping and relaunching grievance mechanisms** to ensure that workers feel more secure in raising concerns.
- **Updating internal training plans** to include labor performance elements in their annual training and new worker onboarding. Workers are now regularly educated on their rights, local laws, and company policies.
- **Supporting suppliers in formalizing their operations**, helping them to develop and issue formal contracts to workers and ensuring they receive benefits such as social security.

EXAMPLES OF PROGRESS

Prior to Palma Futuro, one extraction plant had a complaints box with no accompanying instructions, which workers were unaware of and never used. After working with SAI, the plant replaced the box, provided clear instructions, and communicated the process to workers. They created infographics, publicized the number and topics of complaints received, and detailed steps taken to address these issues.

Another plant extended their new grievance mechanism to be accessible to stakeholders and community members. Now, if there are issues in the farms, workers are aware that they can lodge complaints with the extraction plant if they don't feel comfortable reporting to the farm owner (which is often the case when farms employ only one or two workers).

EXTRACTION PLANTS

"For all our partners, the Palma Futuro trainings, technical assistance, and tools provided a great deal of knowledge and learning about human rights. It was wonderful to see how they deepened their commitment to labor rights and promoted worker voices by creating spaces for them to share their suggestions, ideas, and concerns. I was glad to see that by the end of the project, some companies had incorporated a new human rights training component into their onboarding processes for new employees – using the human rights concepts, games, and tools from our Palma Futuro trainings."

- Yolanda Brenes Hernandez, Palma Futuro Lead Trainer

8

extraction plants provided technical assistance

226

people from extraction plants provided technical assistance, including 101 women



Watch Silena Restrepo Cardón, Head of Sustainability at Palmagro S.A., explain the formation and function of the company's Social Performance Team.



Hear from Andrea Dagovett, Director of Human Resources and Social Responsibility at Palmas del Cesar in Colombia, as she shares her experience being on the company's Social Performance Team.

EXTRACTION PLANTS REESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS

At the start of the project, we found that in general, relationships between palm oil companies and their surrounding communities needed repair. Many companies had little direct contact with the communities surrounding their facilities and often had hostile relationships with them, as communities frequently felt that their needs were ignored or even caused by nearby extraction plants, such as concerns regarding pollution. Contributing to this tension, palm oil companies were known to hire workers from other regions of Colombia with specific skills, rather than providing opportunities to the people in nearby communities who may not have the resources to learn or access job-related skills (see page 32 of this report to read about how Palma Futuro worked to address this issue).

“Palma Futuro was a bridge between companies and communities. [...] The participation of [Palma Futuro] was relevant to improving this relationship.”

- Community Leader

A palm oil company representative shared that in the past, when the company implemented initiatives with the community, they were rarely developed through community dialogue, but rather from assumptions of what the company considered the communities needed. SAI found that across the board, assumptions made by both companies and communities were often inaccurate due to this lack of communication and transparency. This same representative said that now, after participating in community visits, she has a better sense of the vast differences that exist among the communities – including differences in demographics, levels of education and development, and community needs.

Another private sector representative said that after participating in community visits, they were now more aware of the daily realities of community members and how their lives are directly impacted by the palm companies. By the end of the project period, all of SAI’s partner companies have improved their outlook and willingness to engage with their surrounding areas. They have also reported that they see value in continuing these relationships and had informed communities about the project and how to participate.



Hear from Alba Benavides, Social Worker at Palmagro S.A, as she explains how Palmagro has engaged with the Palma Futuro Community Engagement team and the company's surrounding communities.

SUPPLIERS

SAI's work with palm farmers mostly focused on setting up social compliance systems from scratch. By the end of the project, some had made significant improvements while some were in the early stages of implementing these new processes. With the help of the Trainings of Trainer program (see page 8 for ToT methodology), suppliers will be supported by extraction plants to make strides in the coming years, as they continue to implement their social compliance systems. Notably, many suppliers made significant progress on child labor and forced labor – creating clear policies and engaging in awareness raising efforts with field workers.

159

suppliers developed improvement plans

201

suppliers trained by private sector partners

348

suppliers provided technical assistance by SAI

100

suppliers improved their Social Fingerprint Management System Scores

88

suppliers improved their Social Fingerprint Labor Performance Scores



Luis Ruíz owns a farm in Shushufindi, Ecuador. While he was initially hesitant to make changes to his processes, he eventually worked with the Palma Futuro team to implement each Social Compliance System element on his farm. Watch the video above to hear his story and how this decision also impacted his wife, who runs the farm with Luis, and their employees.



SUPPLIERS

WOMEN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL COMPLIANCE

Zoila and her daughter Diana are palm growers in Ecuador who are part of the **'Botas Violeta' group, which promotes gender equality in the palm oil sector and increases the visibility of women's contributions to productive work.** 'Botas Violeta' participated in training activities that the Palma Futuro project carried out in Ecuador, with the goal of improving and strengthening labor standards in the palm oil sector through the implementation of social compliance systems.

Zoila and Diana have received support from Palma Futuro and, as they say, this support "has allowed us to learn about real working conditions on the farm, identify potential risks, and determine how to mitigate those risks."

They have implemented policies and procedures on their farms that prevent situations of forced labor and child labor; they recognize the importance of not only prioritizing profits in their businesses but also ensuring that workers' conditions are fair and that they have a positive impact on their community.

As a woman, Zoila recognizes that it is not always easy to be both head of a household and a farm, and that good information to guide her decision-making is vital to running her home and business. She says that Palma Futuro's support in strengthening her knowledge of social compliance and workers' rights has allowed her to "push forward by assessing and identifying potential risks in the plantation's work activities to improve procedures and increase productivity, as well as to ensure compliance with laws."

Furthermore, Zoila and Diana both highlight the importance of raising awareness about the risks of child labor and forced labor and disseminating this knowledge to their workers and community.

Zoila and Diana aspire to encourage more women to grow oil palm, demonstrating that, in addition to its profitability, it can have a positive impact for both workers and communities.



SUPPLIERS

FAMILY BUSINESS: SOCIAL COMPLIANCE ON A SMALL FARM

The Romero family lives in Comunidad Miss Ecuador, a small community in the Amazon. They own a palm fruit farm called La Palteñita. Heraldo Romero runs the farm with the help of his adult son and daughter, occasionally hiring one worker outside the family when extra help is needed.



Heraldo connected with Palma Futuro and took part in his local Community Circle and the Training of Trainers program. Once he began introducing learnings from these activities on his own farm, his daughter Lady quickly became interested in these new ideas. Lady was not familiar with social compliance systems previously but saw how they could benefit their farm's processes and was drawn to learn more about how to proactively improve the lives of her family, their workers, and their community.

Lady decided to take the Training of Trainers course herself so that she could better support her father in implementing necessary changes on La Palteñita. She also became an active member of her local Palma Futuro Worker's Circle, saying that the workshops "prepare us to act in the face of a labor emergency, [as well as] promoting gender equity and equal rights to improve social coexistence among the families of farm owners, workers and the community."

Lady now regularly supports social compliance improvements on La Palteñita through her administrative role, beginning with creating a clear contract to hire a permanent worker. Among other improvements made throughout the course of their work with SAI, Lady and Heraldo have implemented a new grievance mechanism and built a safer chemical storage warehouse.



DISSEMINATING LESSONS LEARNED

As part of the project's goal to promote social compliance system practices in the palm oil sector in Latin America, SAI delivered the training of trainers program to the National Board of Oil Palm in Peru (Junpalma) and its six affiliated organizations. All participants in Peru successfully completed the training and conducted field visits to apply their knowledge and perform assessments.

SAI also compiled lessons learned and good practices from Palma Futuro to create a handbook and three toolkits for extraction plants and large and small producers to support widespread labor performance improvement in the Latin American palm oil industry. These materials include:



[Social Compliance Systems for the Palm Oil Industry: A handbook for implementation in Latin America](#)



[Social Compliance Systems for the Palm Oil Industry: A toolkit for implementation by palm oil extractor plants in Latin America](#)



[Social Compliance Systems for the Palm Oil Industry: A toolkit for implementation by medium-large palm oil farms in Latin America](#)



[Social Compliance Systems for the Palm Oil Industry: A toolkit for implementation by smallholder palm oil farms in Latin America](#)



IMPACT BUILDING LOCAL CAPACITY

SAI's methodology is designed to cascade learnings so that private sector partners, workers, and community members can continue protecting human rights at work beyond the project's lifecycle. Through the Training of Trainers program, SAI trained a network of trainers – generally employees or consultants of palm oil extraction plants or others who support and train suppliers on topics such as sustainability – who can now deliver social compliance training to farmers and workers throughout Ecuador and Colombia.



Hear from **Nancy Milena Aparicio Pineda**, a Sustainability Coordinator at Palmas del Cesar in Colombia and Training of Trainers participant, who shares her experience of implementing Palma Futuro trainings to their suppliers.

47 stakeholder organizations provided training

789 people from external stakeholder groups provided training

- 242 from civil society organizations
- 406 from schools
- 26 from unions
- 64 from industry associations
- 51 from the public sector

BUILDING LOCAL CAPACITY

SAI also provided training to other local stakeholders, such as:

- **Labor inspectors**, empowering them to better recognize both performance and system issues and to educate the companies they inspect on social compliance.
- **Unions**, empowering leaders and members to educate other workers on their rights and how to effectively engage with employers' social compliance systems.
- **School administrators**, giving them a variety of new methods, tools, and resources they can pass along to their teachers and colleagues enabling them to better identify and address child labor in their students and communities.

"Now after finishing the project, I'm still receiving questions and comments from the people we trained. They reach out to tell me how much the training has helped them and how they are applying it in new situations, at new companies, and more. Seeing how this work has spread throughout the industry and how the mission is living on beyond the project is very impactful to me."

- Florencia González, SAI Lead Trainer for Palma Futuro



BUILDING LOCAL CAPACITY



"Palma Futuro contributed to training the inspectors of the Ministry at the regional level so that they know what to focus on in OSH [occupational safety and health] good practices and compliance with labor regulations according to the palm sector requirements, which the inspectors should supervise. This training and strengthening of the Ministry's inspectors were focused on inspecting palm producers. It can be applied to the entire chain."

- Government Representative (Colombia)



Hear Loreinis Lozano, Secretary of the Agronomy department at Palmagro S.A, talk about what she learned through the Palma Futuro Training of Trainers sessions and how these trainings have impacted the company's suppliers.

IMPACT

ENGAGING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Our **Community Circles**, with support from SAI, applied their learnings from the project to organize awareness raising and capacity building activities related to child labor, forced labor, and poor working conditions. An example of this was in **Maria Angola, Colombia**, where community members developed a five-episode radio program called Palma Futuro: Voices for a Future Free of Child and Forced Labor. The radio program highlighted relevant statistics, Palma Futuro curriculum on child labor and forced labor, interviews with team members, and messages about the project's initiatives and impact. The program reached around 15,000 local listeners, who were able to call in and ask questions to be answered live.

67

communities reached through outreach events

- 59 in Colombia
- 8 in Ecuador

65

Community Circles formed to cascade learnings from trainings

- 57 in Colombia
- 8 in Ecuador

62

actions taken by Community Circles to cascade learnings

- 53 in Colombia
- 9 in Ecuador

"I consider involving the communities to be the heart of the project. [...] This work is an important element to the sustainability of Palma Futuro's mission. Through the Community Circle trainings on labor rights, we developed the capacity of community members and leaders, so that when the project ends, they can continue this work themselves."

-Luisa Trujillo, Community Engagement Coordinator (Ecuador)



COMMUNITIES

SARAY HURTADO

Saray grew up on a palm farm, where her father worked on the plantation and her mother ran the casino (kitchen). From a very young age, Saray and her siblings faced the reality that their parents did not have the resources to help them continue their education and that they would need to pay for their own food, rent, transportation, and other necessities if they hoped to do so. Dreaming of becoming a nurse, Saray worked and studied simultaneously to graduate high school at 17 and move to the regional capital, Santa Marta, where she worked in a family home to pay for nursing school.



Despite her progress towards a degree, when Saray started a family, she was not financially secure enough to raise her children in the city. She moved back to her home village of Tucurinca to be near relatives and have a lower cost of living. However, because there are no health centers near Tucurinca, she had to give up her dream of becoming a nurse. Smallholder farming (oil palm, banana, and rice) dominates the local economy, which has few employment opportunities for women. Saray's husband has supported the family for the past nine years as a mechanic welder on local plantations, but the family now faces some of the same difficult choices Saray experienced growing up. **Saray does not want her children to share her experience. She and her husband strive to help their three children keep up with school and out of work.**

"I dream of living in Santa Marta and seeing my children become professionals. My purpose is to provide them with the possibilities that I did not have at the time, so that they can secure a more stable and prosperous future."

In Tucurinca and many other remote communities in Colombia, there are many challenges to maintaining that dream, which deepened when all schools in Colombia went to 100% remote learning for nearly two full years during the COVID-19 pandemic. Power failures, poor internet access, and costs for cellphone data made completing schoolwork very difficult. Saray recounted how this impacted her family: "They are three children who are different ages, in different grades and have different homework, and yet we only have one cellphone to cover everything." Relative to others in the community, even Saray's one phone is an advantage—in addition to supporting her own children's schooling, she also helps several others with her phone.

Barriers to education and a lack of job opportunities are common throughout the region. As a Community Circle leader, Saray, with the support of Palma Futuro, helped identify these and other underlying issues in her community that lead to abuses like child and forced labor, and brainstormed solutions to those challenges. For example, the community members developed an innovative project to tackle two high priority issues in their community - low school attendance and littering. Many people in the area did not have the resources to buy school supplies, which often leads to children dropping out of school and at high risk of child labor. At the same time, many community members were not aware of recycling options, creating a litter problem. To tackle both, the Community Circle created a contest for community members to collect and turn in recyclables at the local school, where they received training on recycling and proper disposal, and received school supplies in exchange for their recyclables.

COMMUNITIES

ADDRESSING CHILD LABOR

Through our community engagement and diagnostics, we found child labor to be pervasive in Colombia and Ecuador. It is common for children to regularly support housework at young ages or accompany their parents to work and help with various tasks, such as carrying things between work locations or collecting fruit. Child labor of this sort is endemic in the communities; it is considered not only normal, but often the best option available, due to a lack of educational opportunities.

Palma Futuro engaged communities in which children must travel miles to school with no public transportation, schools that are in dire disrepair and present hazards to student health and safety, schools that have a single teacher for all primary grades, and communities with no dedicated school. In the latter, children's only education opportunities come from a teacher who rotates through multiple communities in the region. In most cases, the potential for students in these areas to move on to higher education is extremely low. One community leader in Colombia estimated that fewer than 5% of students that graduate continue their education after graduating. These conditions significantly worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools did not return to in-person classes for years and assignments needed to be completed online. Some communities that engaged with Palma Futuro have no internet at all, and in those that do, the connection is often unstable and weak.

With little hope of continuing their education (and in some cases even if they do continue), the only job opportunities are often in the local agriculture sector. Many parents expressed the belief that exposing their children to fieldwork and training them at an early age is their best chance of finding a job to support themselves and their families, as they are often living in extreme poverty. While child labor almost always arises from deep financial need, working rarely helps children escape poverty. More often, it reinforces long-term insecurity by depriving children of education and schooling and reduces access to opportunities that would allow them to break the cycle of poverty and better their lives.



Photo provided by Palma Futuro project, funded by the United States Department of Labor (USDOL)

COMMUNITIES

ADDRESSING CHILD LABOR (CONTINUED)

Even if they are aware of the risks, it can often be a challenge for parents and caregivers to identify and understand child labor, which can take many forms beyond the typical image of an underage worker illegally working for pay. Over the project, we found that hands-on, interactive activities are the most effective way to teach communities about complex and sensitive issues like child labor.

One example of this is the **Festival of Experiences and Stories: Together for a Tomorrow Without Child and Forced Labor (Festival Vivencias y Relatos)**. This series of twelve festivals was developed in Colombia through an in-depth dialogue between the Palma Futuro project, its private sector partners and their surrounding communities. The festivals, organized by the communities themselves with support from SAI, brought hundreds of children, parents, and other community members together to participate in learning about the risks of child labor and expressing their feelings about it. SAI worked closely with the children to share their experiences and stories of hope through drawings, poems, songs, dances, writing, and music. The festivals provided a space for parents and children to learn from each other in a profound way – and they were an opportunity to come together and have fun! Watch our video about the Festivals of Experiences and Stories below.

“We knew that many of the parents who attended the “Experiences and Stories Festivals” had difficult childhoods themselves – many left school for work to help support their families. We also knew that many of them had never had the opportunity to attend events like this, with entertainment, games, dancing, storytelling, and more. At the festivals, you could really see the happiness and emotions on their faces.”

-Leyla Baquero, Community Engagement Consultant (Colombia)



COMMUNITIES

USING CREATIVE TOOLS

In a rural Ecuadorian community, school teachers noticed that young children were often showing up to class tired, their homework incomplete, or not showing up at all. They suspected that many of the children were busy after school helping their parents work – either on farms helping to pick palm fruit or at home with house chores. These types of activities are common for kids in the area but have detrimental impacts on their long-term learning and future opportunities. The teachers were unsure of how to address this sensitive issue.

Following a Palma Futuro Community Circle training about child labor, a local community leader approached the SAI team to ask if they could help these teachers develop methods to begin this conversation with children and parents at their school. Understanding that games are helpful tools for children to learn and express themselves, the teachers wanted interactive activities to initiate this dialogue.

SAI worked with the teachers to implement the “clock activity.” The clock activity is a tool that allows children to visualize how they spend their day by encouraging them to think about what they are normally doing during each hour of the day. Are they sleeping? Eating? At school? Cleaning the house? Playing with friends? After explaining the idea of the activity, each child receives an image of a clock to write or draw their daily activities around.

After the children completed their clocks and explained their drawings, the SAI team discussed the results with teachers. They saw that some children indicated that after school, they go home to clean the house and wash the family’s clothes, then go to the farm to “pick seeds” (referring to palm fruit), before going home to do homework and go to bed.

Following the activity, our team connected the school administrators with a child labor specialist from the Ministry of Labor. The school invited all local parents to a meeting with this specialist to help them better understand what child labor is and the importance of school and recreational activities for children’s development.



The above example of the clock activity includes “going to the river” at five in the morning before “going to school,” and “going to the farm to help my dad” after school.



A drawing made during this activity shows a person with a sad face picking seeds beneath an oil palm tree.

COMMUNITIES

MAKING CRUCIAL CONNECTIONS

Through community diagnostic studies, Palma Futuro found that many communities in rural Colombia and Ecuador were severely lacking government services, despite having great need for improved infrastructure. In Colombia, 35% of the population lives in poverty and in Ecuador, 46% of people living in rural areas live in poverty, with about half of those living in extreme poverty (Macrotrends, n.d.; Statista, n.d.). Many local leaders want to provide economic opportunities to their communities, but often don't know where to start.

In Palma Futuro's diagnostic, we found that while there are often opportunities from the government and private sector companies available, local leaders were largely unaware of these types of opportunities – both how to learn about them and how to apply for them. Following Community Circle discussions about this barrier, our team trained and supported local leaders and community members to identify and seek funding opportunities for their most pressing problems.

"We went into it knowing that communities often are not provided adequate resources and services, and they often feel left behind. The mindset of community members really transformed throughout the project, as we saw them understand that knowledge can be a tool to advocate for rights and guarantee better opportunities. Seeing people gain this confidence to make changes and improvements on their own really meant a lot to me.

For example, one community used stakeholder mapping to make connections and obtain resources needed to improve the conditions in their local school, and others began requesting training courses from the Ministry of Labor to provide more employment opportunities for community members (including women and young people)."

-Maria Camila Lopez Navarro, Community Engagement Coordinator (Colombia)



COMMUNITIES

IMPACTFUL LESSONS IN ECUADOR

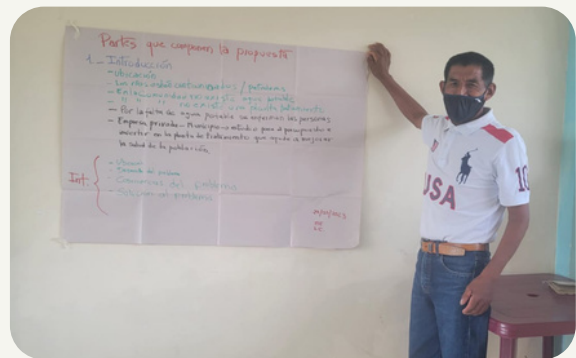
In Ecuador, the SAI team brought community leaders from two towns (Miss Ecuador and Las Cañitas) together for a workshop that focused on how to write proposals for government funding with the unique needs of their communities in mind. Over the course of four days, our team guided participants through the process of identifying a problem that needs solving in their community, identifying potential funders, gathering information and evidence about the problem, and writing the proposal.



The workshop began with a presentation on the rural diagnosis conducted by SAI experts to help stimulate ideas for what problems government funding could help to solve within their communities. The participants from Las Cañitas discussed a recent baking class that the local government had provided to their community. Twenty-three community members took the class, during which they learned how to make bread and pastries. The participants were eager to apply what they had learned to their own community, which doesn't have a bakery of its own and only receives bread when a bread seller visits the community. The Las Cañitas participants decided that they would like to apply for funding to build a small bakery and purchase the necessary equipment, like ovens, tables, and bread cans.

Meanwhile, the participants from Miss Ecuador thought about opportunities related to their neighboring palm oil extraction plant could benefit their community. They decided that garment production would be the most helpful, with the idea of manufacturing uniforms for plant employees. They decided to apply for funding for the purchase of garment machinery and to offer a sewing course to interested community members.

After identifying their proposal topics, participants were given in-depth lessons on the components of a funding proposal and the information needed to convince their audience. During each step, participants were given opportunities to discuss, practice writing and editing, and receive feedback from the instructor. At the end of the workshop, SAI provided a tool for participants to continue developing their proposals, which included a template and guidance for writing each element.



The participants all agreed that this training was the first of its kind they had received that would enable them to better respond to community requests in the future. Following the workshop, both communities submitted their proposal to local municipalities. The leaders from Las Cañitas have begun a second proposal for funding to create tilapia fish lakes for community members.

COMMUNITIES

A SCHOOL'S TRANSFORMATIVE REPAIR IN COLOMBIA

The local school in La Paulina, Colombia was falling apart. The walls and roof were crumbling, the rotting smell was unbearable, and teachers feared the building would collapse all together. Classes were often forced to take place outside, students squeezing together under a tree for shade. When it rained, water dripped from the roof onto papers, so many children skipped school on rainy days. Then, many stopped coming altogether.



The school had fallen into extreme deterioration after years of disrepair, making it nearly impossible for children to learn. There was no running water, no doors to the bathrooms, no cafeteria or kitchen. A mother in the community said that “the walls were cracking, and the desks had almost no chairs because they were damaged, the children had to sit on the floor to be able to write.” A teacher who worked at the school described feeling depressed, knowing that the school’s conditions were often worse than what children faced at home, she said she understood why many children in the area did not attend.

One of La Paulina’s community leaders, Celia Mejia, knew that something had to be done about the school so that local children could thrive in La Paulina. Ms. Mejia had been participating in the Palma Futuro Community Circles, which emphasized that access to school was an important way to address the risks of child labor. She began working closely with the SAI team to identify and apply for funding from local NGOs and foundations. The process was not always easy and took determination, but Ms. Mejia secured the funding in 2023, and the repairs began.



COMMUNITIES

A SCHOOL'S TRANSFORMATIVE REPAIR IN COLOMBIA (CONTINUED)

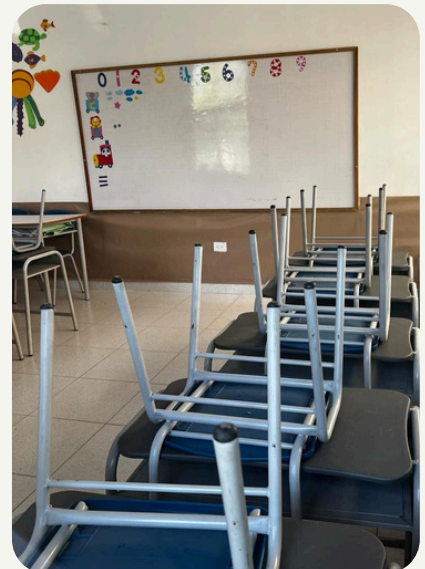
Now, the school not only has a sturdy roof and walls to protect children from the elements, but also air conditioning, desks, a kitchen with a refrigerator and an industrial stove, a cafeteria, and bathrooms with running water for students. It went from one barely functional classroom to six new classrooms, housing 150 students.

A 13-year-old student in La Paulina shared that her biggest concern before the structural improvements was safety for herself and fellow students.



Now, she says, "I think that the most important thing in all this is that the children feel safe in what is their second home, where they are being formed and where they are learning for their future to make a living. So, I think that's what I like the most. It's that [it is] much safer."

Ms. Mejia said, "For me, it's the atmosphere; it totally changed. The children come more cheerful to study, you can see the enthusiasm and the atmosphere. Also, for the community. Now, with the school that is beautiful, we're teaching a sense of belonging [...] 'I take care of it because it is mine.'"



COMMUNITIES

SENA TRAINING

Luis Fernando Márquez Cantillo was always dedicated to his schooling. Growing up, he traveled by donkey for over an hour each day to attend the nearest school to take night classes. Luis lives in San Pedro de la Corona in the Northern Colombian state of Magdalena, which is home to about 750 palm producers who cultivate 130,000 hectares of land (Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, n.d.). Despite his efforts to complete school, Luis had no certifications to work in the palm industry and was unable to find a stable job in the industry he was surrounded by.

Through the community diagnostic, SAI was aware that this was a common occurrence for community members, and that many people like Luis were seeking skills training for potential employment. Companies often hired workers from other regions of Colombia with these skills, while people in the local communities, who have lived and grown up nearby, do not get the same opportunities. SAI began a collaboration with the National Learning Service (Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje, also known as SENA) in Colombia in 2022 to connect people like Luis to resources for skills building.

SENA, an initiative under the Colombian Ministry of Labor, offers free vocational training throughout the country to help community members build skills required for employment opportunities. SENA courses can be requested by companies or communities to be implemented locally, which reduces travel, food, and accommodation expenses for participants, which can be prohibitive. However, they require at least 25 attendees to conduct a course. SENA often struggles to identify enough attendees in communities like Luis's, because community members are largely unaware of the service and training opportunities they provide. As part of this collaboration, SAI engaged with community members to raise awareness about these training courses and identify groups of 25 people interested in participating to encourage safe, sustainable incomes for vulnerable households.



COMMUNITIES

SENA TRAINING (CONTINUED)

In 2023, Luis participated in a SENA training that taught skills required for working in the palm industry, knowing that the certification would help his economic situation substantially. Through the course, Luis learned all about working with palms, including pollination of a new hybrid variety of palm fruit trees. This skill was especially useful to him, as Magdalena's palm population has faced a devastating bud rotting disease in recent years, which led to the introduction of the disease-resistant hybrid palm variety. This variety's care and manual pollination technique is new for everyone, creating a demand for workers trained and certified in this crop.

Luis said, "We are surrounded by palm trees, and we didn't even have the capacity to go to work or be hired to do so. And now, through SENA with [Palma Futuro] and the bridge that we had, we did some training, and we are registered in [SENA's learning platform]. It has helped me a lot in the pollination of the palm, both in the nursery and in growth."

After completing the training, Luis was able to obtain his certification and find stable employment working in pollination, as have several others who took the training with him. When asked if participating in the training was beneficial to him, Luis said, "Very, very much. Economically, the situation has changed - I now have a permanent job, my family, social benefits, all because of this course, without that I would not have been able to do it."

Through this partnership, communities like Luis' have become aware of SENA's vocational certification offerings and the process and requirements to request local courses. Now, they can coordinate future courses on their own, providing new opportunities to secure stable, formal employment for community members.



GET TO KNOW

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- Colombian community partners
- Ecuadorian community partners

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