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COLOMBIA RIVER STORIES

Glasgow, 28 June 2018

Dear Minister Murillo,

Re: Response from Colombia River Stories Project Team.

Following the very useful meeting that we had with you in August 2017 we have continued to be closely involved with the *Guardianes del Atrato*, civil society organisations and universities working on the implementation of Constitutional Court decision T-622. We have received funding from the Newton Caldas Fund, Economic Social Research Council and Colciencias to continue our work with the riverine communities on the Rio Atrato and its Tributaries and we look forward to working more with your office in the coming years.

As we mentioned to you in the meeting, we have brought together a group of experts from three UK Universities who have global experience of working on the recuperation and restoration of rivers that have been contaminated, as well as the social, political and economic effects of protracted conflict and illicit economic activities. We have put this expertise at the service of this project. As a result, the communities have sent the documents on the baseline study and Environmental Action Plan.

We would therefore like to share with you our thinking on the plans in an effort to ensure that what we have learnt from our experience on other similar projects will be of use to you and help your efforts to devise an effective plan and avoiding the pitfalls that we know can occur.

Below we identify four key questions around the approach and methods that underpin these documents and offer three recommendations that could improve them.

1 What is the methodology used for the data collection? What are the strengths and limitations?

The different documents bring together various secondary literatures and data sets on the region. However, this collation of information does not appear to be systematic or sufficiently robust. The documents do not present or justify an overriding framework or rationale for the data gathering method that is grounded in the requirements and emphases of the Court Ruling itself). Similarly, the information presented is not integrated in order to derive meaning and inferences from it (i.e. is there any evidence of inter-relationships and/or feedbacks between what is captured in the different components of the baseline data?). The most effective way forward would be to understand and explain what data and information requirements the implementation of the Court Ruling demands and assess whether these are readily available and/or can be gained. **This will help prevent unrealistic targets and expectations being set and help to ensure any future assessments of the impact of the implementation of the five-year plan are robust and adequately evidenced.**

We would recommend that further analysis is undertaken of the data and information that are present. We know from experience that it is vital to understand and identify where data sets have been gathered from, understand the methods by which the original data were collected, and to assess the robustness and quality of the information presented

Similarly, there is a lack of critical engagement with questions around the quality and fitness-for-purpose of the information that is presented. Providing this sort of information and ensuring that data and analysis can be independently accessed and tested by others, is the foundation stone that will provide sound scientific methodology. Acknowledging what we do not know, as well as the limitations of what we do, is an important goal of research in itself, especially when using evidence to design interventions that will have multiple repercussions for the socio-environment.

2 To what extent are the data reliable and what are the continued gaps in our understanding of contemporary processes of socio-environmental destruction?

The majority of the scientific data presented on the river system itself are more than a decade old, are *ad hoc* (i.e. there appears to be no overarching design to the monitoring work that has been accessed) and are not longitudinal in nature.

There is a need to structure and present the data in a more meaningful way, and in this regard, it may be helpful to think about how the Atrato Basin functions as a bio-fluvial system. Even a very simple structuring around the river basin concept of zones of production, transfer and deposition would be useful and meaningful as much of the other bio-geographical information (and to an extent the demographic and sociological data as well) contained in the baseline data report can be sensibly grouped into these regions.

The data presented in the report provide a potentially useful (if limited) set of 'snapshots' of the status of the environment at specific places at specific points in time but say little about what the undisturbed state of the Atrato Basin was (something that is vital given that there is a stated intention to 'restore' to some previous state) nor how it is currently changing and the rates of change. For example, data on sedimentation and water quality are from the early 2000s yet our analysis of satellite imagery in certain catchments (e.g. Rio Quito) has shown that the speed and scale of environmental degradation has increased dramatically in the last ten years. The authors of the report need to be more candid about the scale of the gaps in knowledge and the options and opportunities for filling these gaps through work aimed at 'reconstructing' past socio-environmental conditions and tracking and tracing the patterns of change over the last three or four decades.

A cursory glance at the River Quito, for example, shows that the sedimentation process is seriously affected by mining activities and deforestation, while recent research by WWF Colombia, the universities of Glasgow and Cartagena provides a snapshot of the heterogeneous spatial distribution of heavy metals (including mercury) within the entire basin.

We encourage the researchers from the different ministries and agencies (under the auspices of the Ministry of Environment) to engage in discussion with other relevant experts – in line with T-622 guidelines – to assess what data exist and how comprehensive and reliable these are for facilitating and evaluating progress towards the strategic objectives of the five year plan. Similarly, discussion with relevant experts should help to make clear the gaps in current understandings, the implications of these gaps, and whether there are opportunities to fill them via additional analysis. Unless there is a clear and explicit recognition of the gaps in our knowledge and the implications of these, the design of interventions will have foundational flaws and outcomes and impacts of implementations will not be able to be evaluated.

3 Where is the integrated analysis of different elements of problem?

A unique and fundamental element of T622 is its recognition of the river as inextricably bound up with the lives of the people who live in the wider basin. It recognises that environmental degradation is driven by a complex network of interactions between people, politics, culture, economics and the environment itself, and that changes to one or more elements of this 'system-of-systems' will have implications for the others through complex dynamics and feedbacks. The reviewed documents agree that the overall aim is to eliminate the causes of degradation, yet the baseline study and five year plan fail to offer robust and integrated analysis of the complex networks of the drivers of mechanised mining (illegal and legal). The structuring of the document indicates that the teams that have contributed to it have carried out their research separately and have not been required to position their work within a broader 'system-of-systems' framework. This results in little or no integration/communication between the different elements for analysis such as natural environment and socio-political context and a lack of understanding of the implications that findings associated with one element may have on others. By considering each element in isolation, a

meaningful analysis of the interdependencies between the different components is foreclosed.

An integrated and *systematic* analytical approach, which underpins the very spirit of the Court Ruling, is both necessary and urgent. Actions in one arena will have an effect on the other and **understanding these relationships is crucial** for the design of any plan of interventions.

4 Whose participation and what kind of participation has fed into the baseline studies and the design of interventions?

Both the baseline study and T-622 foreground the importance of participation in the planning, design and monitoring processes that will support interventions. It is vital that the different stakeholders take seriously this guiding principle of the court ruling. The documentation does not make clear how local communities have been included as active participants in the production of the baseline, nor the action plans that draw on the information it contains. As a result, the plans risk not benefitting from the normative (enhancing citizen empowerment), instrumental (enhancing the legitimacy of the decision-making) and substantive (improving the quality and effectiveness of interventions) benefits that participation brings. 'Dissemination' (socializando) of these documents does not equate to participation.

5. Recommendations

1. Develop and use a conceptual framework to re-structure the baseline information and action plan that is grounded in a holistic understanding of the high-level socio-environmental functioning of the Atrato Basin and that can facilitate the integration of the different strands of baseline data and information that exist.
2. Design, agree and implement a standard for the full and critical documentation of data and information that can direct a revision of the baseline and action plans. Particular attention should be paid to making clear the extent to knowledge about *where* and *when* change has occurred from pre-disturbance to the present day. The standard should include requirements to explicitly document the original scope and purpose of the data and information, the locations and timings of collection, the explicit identification of all sources and methods of processing and analysis, and any known limitations (e.g. quality, uncertainty, and robustness). The standard should also include an explicit identification of gaps in the data and information needed to support the implementation and evaluation of the action plans.
3. Early and regular engagement of community representatives (guardians) as active participants in the development of the baseline data and action plans. This is entirely in the spirit of T-622. The testimonies and knowledges of the communities are baseline information in their own right and should be captured and reported. They are also vital for informing the development of strategies for designing, monitoring and evaluating action plan interventions.

If you should require anything further, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mo Hume', enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

Dr Mo Hume
Senior Lecturer in Politics
Mo.Hume@glasgow.ac.uk
@ChocoStories

(on behalf of Colombia River Stories Research team)