

# Threats to ICCAs and community responses—

facilitating grassroots analyses

and the development of a picture story

of the Ayoreo Indigenous Territory in the Paraguayan Chaco

Synthetic written report

## a. Executive summary

This photo story shows what the Ayoreo people, organized in the UNAP (Union of Native Ayoreo People of Paraguay), are doing to recover their land and dignity, which are, as they say, the essential elements of Eami, their territory.

The efforts of the Ayoreo People to maintain the environmental and natural attributes of their traditional territory are similar to the efforts by numerous other Indigenous Peoples around the world who are aiming to conserve their indigenous territories as ICCAs. In the case of the Ayoreo of Paraguay, they pretend to conserve the whole of their traditional territory, as there are still members of their People living in the bush in voluntary isolation. The Ayoreo who now live in settlements and in contact with the involving western society, organized in the National Union of Ayoreo People (UNAP) of Paraguay, render all the efforts possible to them to achieve this goal. These efforts encompass advocacy, legal and scientific research, environmental monitoring, biodiversity conservation and monitoring of the movements of the uncontacted Ayoreo, this later, to avoid dangerous interactions between the involving society and the uncontacted Ayoreo people.

## b. Background about the context and the community

The Ayoreo People are the last people south from the Amazon Basin who still have members living in voluntary isolation. They conform a brave warrior people who remained free from colonial exploitation for many centuries. They live in the remaining dense semiarid bush and forests in the north of the Chaco. The traditional Ayoreo Territory covers some 300,000 Km<sup>2</sup> between Paraguay and Bolivia and it is known to them as Eami (the bush, the planet).

The Ayoreo People used to live unperturbed in this bushes and forests until the 1930s, although, efforts to forcefully settle them started already in the seventeenth century. Most of them were finally forced out of their territory in a process starting in the 1930's and, through massive efforts by missionaries from Mennonite and Evangelists religious sects and the Paraguayan Government, were forced to live in confined settlements.

Most of the Ayoreo people were taken out of the bush and forests of their ancestral territory

and were established in the 19 settlements shown below. The way of living they practice now is completely estranged to them, as they are culturally nomadic hunter-gatherers and not sedentary. They master the resources offered by nature for their wellbeing, but, nowadays, the access to those resources is drastically impaired by the privatization of virtually all of their land.

During the last two decades the Ayoreo started recovering their notion of territoriality and started organizing themselves in people's organizations. Particularly, the National Union of Ayoreo People (UNAP) of Paraguay, is the most important and active institution working to recover the territorial, cultural and human rights of this People.

The maintenance of the environmental quality in their territory is one of the key objectives of the Ayoreo, as they do not deem living worthwhile in a degraded Earth.

### c. The ICCA as described by the community

The Ayoreo People considers the whole of their traditional territory as its 'ICCA'. For the purposes of this work, this definition was adopted for the elaboration of the present photo story. The vast territory of the Ayoreo encompasses more than 30 million hectares (300,000 km<sup>2</sup>), almost the entire northern portion of the Gran Chaco region of South America, bordered by the Paraguay, Pilcomayo, Parapetí and Grande Rivers.

This territory is naturally covered by, mainly, two types of vegetation, a semiarid-subtropical bush and a dry tropical forest. There are also important wetlands and some subtropical moist forests along the large rivers, which cross the Chaco, such as the Paraguay River.

The fauna and flora of the area are rich and thousands of useful species are available to the aboriginal communities who live in it. Traditionally, Ayoreo communities –at the moment those who still live in the bush in voluntary isolation- practice a very well adapted form of agriculture, using the natural fertility of a particular soil formation, rich in lime and moist by sub-superficial waters, called *Amotoco*.

Water is usually a limiting factor in the Ayoreo territory. Annual precipitation in the area is of about 800mm distributed within a quite marked seasonality from November to March. There are ephemeral watercourses, which nurture the vegetation and the water holes from which animal and humans drink. These are managed strategically by the Ayoreo and have significant value in maintaining the population's wellbeing.

### d. Threats to the ICCA

At present, this territory, especially in its Paraguayan part, is being rampantly deforested to give space to extensive cattle ranching, other types of agriculture and oil prospection. Some 250,000 hectares in average were cleared every year for the last 5 years in the north of the Chaco, in Ayoreo territory. Especially cattle ranching poses a great threat to the livelihoods of the Ayoreo, as most of the deforestation is being undertaken to expand the existing ranches and to habilitate new ones.

There are also a few pioneering croplands being added to the productive realm of the northern

Chaco. There are some 2,000 Ha. of soybean plantations and some 3,000 Ha. of sesame. These operations are, at the moment, only experimental, but the area has the potential of providing some one million more hectares of fertile soils to the agricultural frontier. Another not less important reason for the occupation of large swathes of land in this area is drug trafficking, especially cocaine coming from Bolivia and other Andean countries on its way to Brazil and overseas.

Oil and gas exploration has recently gotten a bust, with the concession of some 4 million Ha of new concessions added to the original 3 million granted in the '70s. This is very problematic as it fragments pristine areas where the uncontacted Ayoreo may live as well as the inherent environmental degradation which this activity causes.

The vertiginous land grab process is accompanied by the instauration of a drug trafficking safe territory overlapping the Ayoreo territory, consequently imperiling the whole civilian population of the area and the Ayoreo People, in particular.

### **e. Community responses and their results**

The first step taken by the Ayoreo 15 years ago was to establish the UNAP. This organization is pivotal for achieving the goals of recovering the rights and territory of the Ayoreo People. As the penetration in the area increased with the expanding ranching surface, the UNAP engaged in a series of actions to protect the uncontacted people in the field. These actions are centered in advocacy, legal and scientific research, environmental monitoring, biodiversity conservation and monitoring of the movements of the uncontacted Ayoreo. In recent months, as the deterioration of the security situation progresses, the communities and UNAP adopted strategic security considerations to their actions, debates and planning.

### **f. ICCA resilience and security**

The representatives of the Ayoreo communities have scored 98/150 points in calculating their 'resilience and security' situation through the tool provided for that effect by the ICCA Consortium.

The apparent high score may give the impression of stability and harmony in the Ayoreo traditional territory. However, this is due to the high scores achieved in the 'Internal Factors' section, particularly high were the values considered under 'Governance Issues'.

### **g. Current action and needs**

The main measures currently undertaken are:

- Raising awareness among ranch owners and workers,
- Raising awareness among the local population and authorities,
- Monitoring the signs of presence and movement patterns of the uncontacted people,
- Monitoring the environmental quality in the territory,
- Mapping the signs of presence and movement patterns of the uncontacted people,
- Promoting legal measures for the protection of the uncontacted people,
- Promoting administrative actions to secure land for suitable use by the Ayoreo People,
- Fund raising to purchase plots of land of strategic importance for the Ayoreo People,

- Production of printed and audio-visual divulgation material,
- Conducting fact-finding expeditions with elders (who were evicted from the bush),
- Conducting expeditions with Ayoreo and western scientists and experts,
- Participating in national and international advocacy fora,
- Building alliances with national and international civil society organizations.

These efforts are mainly oriented to avoid dangerous interactions between the involving society and the uncontacted Ayoreo people, and to reduce the degradation of the environmental quality of the territory.

Additionally to the external financial and political support received from national and international allies, there is an increasing need for strategic security planning. This is due to the deteriorating security situation in the whole of Paraguay and in the north of the Chaco particularly, mainly driven by the land grab process and the instauration of a drug trafficking safe territory overlapping the Ayoreo territory. This support could come as means to strengthen the security measures and strategic planning in the areas of communal defense and contingency options. A good cooperation with defense and legal experts is in order.

## **h. Lessons learned**

The process of preparing the photo story was a very inspiring experience. It provides a medium to convey powerful and touching messages with relatively low effort and at modest costs. The value of the materials prepared may be of great efficacy to inform, report, train, guide and motivate communal actors towards the aims pursued. An option to explore would be to promote similar exercises addressing particular themes, such as biodiversity, medicinal plants, traditional food crops and community/cultural analytical approaches to globalization and economy, etc.

## **i. Reflection on the methodology**

The process was undertaken through participatory dialectic. This methodology is well proven to be suited to the idiosyncrasy of the Ayoreo and is normally used by a group of researcher who frequently work with the UNAP.