



Impact Story

Empowering Communities through Gastronomy, Dance and Culture in South America

Countries: Colombia and Ecuador

Program: Volunteer Cooperation Program 2020-2027

Partners: Fundación Leo Espinosa (FUNLEO) and Fundación de Asistencia Social Sra. Cleotilde Guerrero O.

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Key themes: Community Economic Development, Food Security, Inclusion, Tourism & Hospitality, Women's Economic Empowerment

Context

At their core, grassroots organizations are developed and led by the communities they serve. It is the support and determination from community members that drive social change and make it possible for initiatives to thrive. For the **Fundación Leo Espinosa (FUNLEO)** and the **Fundación de Asistencia Social Sra. Cleotilde Guerrero O.**, two partners in Catalyste+'s flagship project, Accelerating Women's Empowerment (AWE), the motivation and ideas of the people they work with runs deep. Even though the communities they support have historically been marginalized due to their heritage, income level, or geographical location, these organizations have worked tirelessly to highlight the strength and talent of their members, allowing them to build trust with the communities and to increase the impact and sustainability of their projects.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, both foundations saw an opportunity to build their own capacity and grow while their activities were put on hold. They worked with Catalyste+ Advisors (CAs) to strengthen their technical and institutional skills and knowledge, so they could continue promoting community economic empowerment and improving women's leadership, participation, and access to resources.

FUNLEO is a non-profit organization in the agribusiness and the tourism and hospitality sectors. By partnering with other non-governmental organizations, development agencies, and community producers and restaurants, FUNLEO strives to empower and develop Colombian communities through gastronomy. One of their projects, the Zotea Culinary Experience, was created in 2017 in partnership with Fundación Choco Emprende and the local community. Based in the small village of Coquí, Colombia, the Zotea project began with the community's idea to create a space that served as both a restaurant and a place to exchange alternative forms of knowledge with people outside of Coquí.



*The Zotea Project in Coquí,
Colombia.*

Working closely with the Coquí community, the two foundations helped develop the project aimed to foster economic development and women's empowerment, while sharing traditional culinary knowledge that has been passed down by women for generations. Since its inception, the project has been led by female community members who aim to promote their Afro-Colombian heritage and traditions through a gastronomical and cultural tourism experience.

As with many businesses, organizations, and initiatives, the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the project. The decrease in international tourists, combined with the goal of transferring the ownership of the project to the community, led the former local coordinator of the Zotea project, Catalina Ramírez, to explore ways to develop a business plan for Zotea with Catalyste+'s support in the summer of 2021.

Further South, on Isla Trinitaria, one of the most densely populated sectors of the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, **Fundación de Asistencia Social Sra. Cleotilde Guerrero O.** works to build an “Island of Peace,” countering the region’s historic trend of violence and impoverishment. Through music, culture, and community, the foundation aims to inspire youth to choose a path of artistic expression while showcasing Afro-Ecuadorian culture to the world. They offer a variety of initiatives that include running a community center, hosting dance classes and performances, and during the pandemic, handing out food and sanitation supplies to the community.

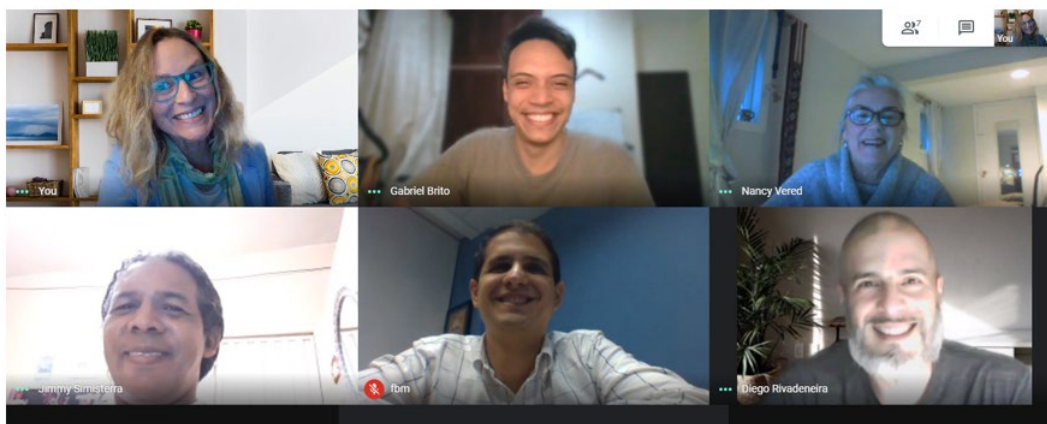
Similar to the Zotea project, female leadership and empowerment have always been at the forefront of the foundation’s activities. Women have been leading voices in the development and implementation of the initiatives, with the current CEO of the foundation, Marisol Caicedo, being a woman.



Location of Fundación de Asistencia Social Sra. Cleotilde Guerrero O.

When COVID-19 hit, the foundation, founded and led by the Simisterra family, realized that to continue to take on projects without risking financial instability, they needed to make some changes. In 2020, the foundation started working with Catalyste+ on different technical areas, including organizational restructuring, financial planning, and business development.

In addition to improving the lives of people in the regions they work in, what these two initiatives have in common is their most important resource of all: strong communities supporting and driving their work.



Catalyste+ Advisor Nancy Vered working with staff members from the Fundación de Asistencia Social Sra. Cleotilde Guerrero O. and the Ecuador Catalyste+ team.

Partnering with Catalyste+

Fundación de Asistencia Social Sra. Cleotilde Guerrero O. has been formally registered as an organization for 18 years, with their work informally starting about 10 years earlier. As the organization grew, taking on more and more projects based on the community's ideas and needs, it became evident that to be sustainable, the foundation needed technical assistance, leading to their request for Catalyste+'s support. While there was already a motivated team of leaders and an abundance of ideas for projects within the community, Felipe Bucaram, the foundation's Director of Projects, described the organization as having "only existed on paper." With no formal governance structure, processes, or financial mechanisms, it was challenging for the foundation to be self-sustaining.

Balance Sheet

A balance sheet is a financial statement that includes an organization's assets, liabilities, and shareholders' equity at a given point in time.

Assets are what is owned by the company, while liabilities are what is owed. Shareholders' equity refers to the amount of money owners have invested into the organization, equal to the total assets minus the total liabilities. Balance sheets provide a snapshot of an organization's finances and are integral to keep track of its financial stability.

Source: <https://www.bdc.ca/en/articles-tools/entrepreneur-tool-kit/templates-business-guides/glossary/balance-sheet>

Throughout the partnership, Catalyste+ Advisors (CAs) Isaac Persaud and Nancy Vered provided the foundation with tools and tips to track finances, prioritize projects, and sustainably expand through the formalization of the organization. Thanks to their work with CA Isaac, the foundation started using a balance sheet, developing financial statements, and adopting accounting software, which allowed them to offer employees consistent salaries and improve their fundraising abilities. They also improved their financial awareness and abilities, and developed a set of project criteria to help them prioritize which projects to implement. One of these criteria is gender empowerment.

This innovative approach to tracking and prioritizing projects helped the foundation choose which community initiatives to implement within their budget. Likewise, the restructuring work that the Foundation did with the help of Advisor Nancy, which included writing job descriptions and creating a clear institutional structure, led to the establishment of a functioning Board of Directors, and the creation of mission and vision statements based on the organization's core values. This, in turn, made it possible for members to clearly see the impact of their work within the community.

Now, Fundación de Asistencia Social Sra. Cleotilde Guerrero O. has an effective governance system, clear decision-making processes, and a financial structure in place, contributing to the economic sustainability of the organization and its capacity to continue working with the community. Felipe said:

“ The capabilities were already there. The motivation was already there. The talent was already there. The people were already there. But we didn't have the ability to incorporate this vast network we already had into the institution, [working with Catalyste+] opened a whole world to us; to me as well. ”



Felipe Bucaram and his colleagues, Fundación de Asistencia Social Sra. Cleotilde Guerrero O.

Similarly, **FUNLEO** requested Catalyste+'s help at a critical juncture in the Zotea project. Despite being collectively conceived by two external foundations and the community of Coquí, Zotea was always envisioned to be a fully community-led initiative. However, FUNLEO and Choco Emprende needed external support in order to successfully pass the project on to the community while ensuring its long-term sustainability.

To support this process, Catalyste+ Advisor Martha Nelson introduced different management tools to the Zotea team so they could assess potential business opportunities and establish next steps for the project. The Advisor worked specifically with Catalina, one of the Zotea Coordinators at the time, to develop a business model, create a customer profile, draft a value proposition, and use a SWOT analysis to evaluate potential expansion and partnership opportunities.

SWOT Analysis

A strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis is a framework that organizations can use to evaluate their market competitiveness. SWOT analyses are an assessment tool that can be used during an organization's strategic planning process to help identify the next steps for a business.

Source:
<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/swot.asp>

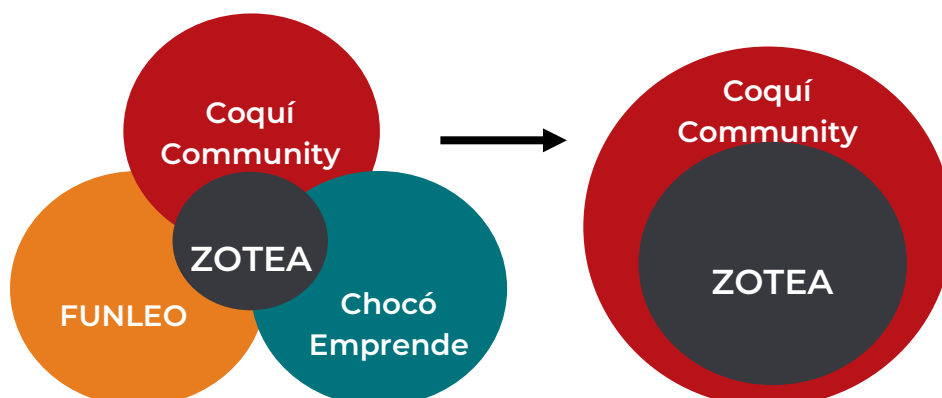
As a result of their collaboration with Catalyste+, Zotea conducted a customer survey in hotels in the region to better understand Zotea's potential clients. This innovation led them to partner with well-established tourism agencies such as Colombia Inspira and Wonder Travel in order to attract more national and international tourists. They also developed strategic alliances with different stakeholders in the Coquí community, including hotels, foundations, and community members to expand Zotea's services and increase tourist visits year-round.

Another opportunity Zotea took advantage of was partnering with groups in the community that champion environmental sustainability, such as local eco-guides who offer mangrove tours in canoes. The goal of this partnership was not only to provide a more comprehensive experience for tourists but also to promote environmental awareness among them.



Catalyste+ Advisor Martha Nelson working with the Zotea team and the Catalyste+ Country Representative in Colombia, Natalia Naranjo.

Overall, the collaboration between Catalyste+ and the Zotea team in the development of a structured business plan for the project helped the transition to community ownership. From the beginning of 2022, Catalina started transferring her knowledge to multiple local women, including Indalida Palacio, who is now in charge of the project. Together, they have reviewed each step and component of the business plan to ensure an effective and smooth shift in leadership.



Empowering Communities

By working with Catalyste+ to improve their technical capacity, both organizations were able to take on more projects and have a greater impact within their communities.

A year and a half following **FUNLEO's** partnership with Catalyste+, the ownership of the Zotea project has been fully transferred to the local community. The project has expanded beyond a culinary experience to a holistic Coquí community experience that not only includes participating in a cooking workshop led by female community members and eating at Zotea's restaurant, but also touring the area's mangroves and visiting the Local Knowledge Museum. The experience also includes a garden tour, where visitors can learn first-hand, from women in the community, about native plants and foods, and how these are incorporated into the Pacific cuisine.



Zotea project female leaders.

By expanding the types of experiences offered, Zotea increased its reach and benefits to community members, many of which are women. By the summer of 2022, five years after the project began, approximately 50% of the 150 inhabitants of Coquí were involved in Zotea, either directly or indirectly. People who work in transportation, at the Zotea restaurant, and at the community's hotels, museum and mangroves were all included in both the project and its economic benefits. With the expansion of the project, Zotea became integral to the economic empowerment of the Coquí community.

Furthermore, the project increased women's decision-making, leadership, and access to stable income in the community. In addition to being led by Indalida, Zotea's General Committee includes three women and one man, who represent the Coquí community. They meet with members of FUNLEO and Choco Emprendre one to two times a year to work on the strategic direction and activities of the Zotea project.

As a result of the project, the community's perception of gender roles also shifted. Alejandra Salamanca, the Director of FUNLEO, described how the kitchen, a space traditionally seen as female, opened a channel to discuss gender roles. At the beginning of the project, young men in the community would approach the Zotea team wanting to get involved in the project but were unsure how to do so due to traditional ideas around men's involvement in the kitchen. Although shifting norms took time, the project slowly began countering these gender biases and was able to engage men in the project, most of them as servers in the Zotea restaurant, and two as cooks in the kitchen. Activities that were previously male-dominated in the community, such as coconut oil production, also started to include women, making Zotea's activities more inclusive to all genders.

Even though the project was understood within the community as exclusively feminine at first, the increased involvement of men and boys transformed it into an initiative inclusive of everyone in the community. Moving forward, the goal for the Zotea team is to increase the involvement of youth in the project, ensuring the continuation and strengthening of Zotea by the next generation of leaders. With more youth involved and motivated to continue Zotea's work, Catalina, Alejandra, and women in the community envision Zotea and Coquí to be the most important referent for Colombian Pacific cuisine.



The Zotea team and culinary experience, Fundación Leo Espinoza (FUNLEO).

The work with Catalyste+ Advisors also helped **Fundación de Asistencia Social Sra. Cleotilde O.** expand their projects on Isla Trinitaria and reach more people in the community. Two notable initiatives that the foundation strengthened with Catalyste+'s support include a local tourism project and a marimba band and dance academy, Afro Mestizo Candente, which offers a space for youth to explore their identity through Afro-Ecuadorian dance, art, and song. In the context of Isla Trinitaria, Afro Mestizo Candente was created as a way to prevent vulnerable adolescents from falling into a life of crime by encouraging them to be responsible, stay in school, and earn the community's respect. More importantly, the initiative was developed to create livelihoods and provide a stable source of income for young performers in the community.



The Afro Mestizo Candente Dance Group, Fundación de Asistencia Social Sra. Cleotilde Guerrero O.

Similarly, the community tourism project, which offers a canoe tour of the island's mangroves, a food festival, a performance by Afro Mestizo Candente, and a museum visit, also created an alternative source of income for different groups in the community, including the women who cook at the food festival and the people who operate the canoe tours. Other members of the community, who participate in the foundation's education programs, environmental campaigns, and cultural activities also benefit indirectly from the project's revenue.

These, as well as the foundation's other ideas, became a reality thanks to Catalyste+'s support increasing the technical capacity and financial stability of the organization. The tools shared by the Advisors increased the organization's ability to promote environmental sustainability, inclusion, and innovation within the community, and allowed them to capitalize on the female leadership that had always been strong in the community.

After the organization was restructured, it formalized its work with over twenty female community leaders, who have now initiated multiple activities to contribute to the well-being and empowerment of community members. Two examples of such activities include cooking and serving meals to children who are suffering from malnourishment, and organizing a competition to “beautify” the neighborhood.



The Female community leaders and members participating in the neighborhood “beautifying” competition.

In the future, Felipe envisions Isla Trinitaria as a hub for tourists as well as a place where people can experience and appreciate Afro-Ecuadorian culture. He hopes that the foundation’s work will continue to improve the livelihoods of the community members and highlight the island as a valued part of Guayaquil. It is the strength of the community that pushes Felipe and the foundation to continue working towards this vision:

“What keeps us motivated is that we see incredible talent, we see an incredibly strong community; and it has been constant, through extreme poverty, COVID, crime, and other obstacles. What [our work with] Catalyste+ has been able to do is allow that to flourish.”

For more information on Catalyste+’s partners, please visit:

<http://zotea.org/>

<http://www.funleo.org/>

<https://fundacioncleotildeguerrero.org/>



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