

“ We are interested in democratising resources ”

Ecosystem restoration combined with socio-economic development and based on human rights is the motto of the Costa Rican environmental organisation Diwö Ambiental. We talked to its CEO Marlon Webb about his work and vision, and about obstacles an organisation like this is confronted with.

Marlon, how did the idea of Diwö Ambiental come about?

We started in 2015. We were a group of university students, and we came up with the idea of creating a platform where young people could do something for the environment and rural communities, with our activities based on self-governance. In those days, many large NGOs were working in Costa Rica, but we had the feeling that things were maybe not being done properly. At that time, the 2030 Agenda was perhaps not so much in the air, but was coming with the Paris Agreement and the dynamics happening around that time. Then the Diwö Ambiental association was born in 2016.

What does the name mean?

It is a word in the indigenous languages of Costa Rica; in Bribri, it means Sun, and in Cabécar, it refers to an eye of water or spring, according to what indigenous people from these territories have told us. When we started, we were young and did not have the information we have now. We are aware of the implications of using an indigenous name without being an indigenous person, but we just wanted a name coming from the roots of being Costa Rican. Now the organisation has evolved into a tool for some indigenous territories.

What were your first activities?

We were helping various rural and urban communities on a voluntary basis, and we started working on some small projects until, in 2018, some transnational companies – such as Pfizer – and national companies got in touch with us to try to have some positive impact on the management of the communities, and so we started working with corporate social responsibility. At the end of 2017, a hurricane affected some communities in the Brunca region in the south of the country, and we ran a food collection campaign, and various organised groups helped us, providing seed and training. That was where we launched a pilot scheme with a group of women entrepreneurs here in the community of Boruca which opened doors for other groups in the community. We started a pilot scheme and operated in three areas: lo-

cal capacity building, volunteer day and forest landscape restoration.

You also work with international development cooperation. How did this come about?

In 2020 we were selected for the Cemex-Tec 2020 Award, which recognised us among about 135 projects as an innovative social project. And in 2021, we started working with the Global Landscapes Forum, with the Restoration Steward programme. These two opportunities gave us some international exposure, and we began to engage with international cooperation, initially with the French government and its Fisca Fund, and then with the European Union's Great Forests of Mesamerica programme. And other actors such as the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company, 3M, and the Inter-American Development Fund are starting to arrive.

What are the focal points of your current work?

The strongest area of the organisation is forest landscape restoration. Here we help to improve the eco-systemic conditions on the farms of the people involved by providing them with plant material for reforestation. The second axis is climate change awareness. We work in educa-



Delivery of trees for afforestation.

Photo: Marlon Webb



Photo: Jimena Araya

Marlon Webb is an Environmental Management Specialist with experience in ecosystem restoration and climate change adaptation in indigenous and rural communities in Costa Rica. He has led international cooperation projects in collaboration with the Government of France, the European Union and the Pan American Development Foundation, promoting sustainability and climate finance.

tional centres, and carry out national and community communication campaigns on various topics related to climate change – always with a focus on human rights. And the third axis is local capacity building, which is supported with training for women, mainly women entrepreneurs. We also support organised groups that have a business model, for example, the association of coffee growers in San Joaquín de Boruca, in which Doña Iris's (*Editor's note: see Box on page 20*) husband is also organised. We seek to support these groups with training. For next year, we hope to have a financing portfolio providing us with seed capital and some options in economic resources. In the end, our mission is to ensure that the resources go directly to the communities.

In other words, are you providing practical support and at the same time trying to raise funds for communities?

Exactly. Take the example of ecosystem restoration. We have helped establish two community nurseries, and we have partnerships with two other private nurseries for a capacity of about 50,000 thousand seedlings. This year, there are about 156 different families adopting a total of around 30,000 seedlings. We seek to enrich the farms, to have more diversity of coverage, more diversity in the species pres-



A Boruca indigenous woman using her loom.

Photo: Marlon Webb

ent, more species from the area. The idea is to ensure that the producers or entrepreneurs can receive an economic incentive for environmental improvements or compensation for their activity, because at the moment we are assisting them as volunteers in this respect. And the socio-economic conditions may not allow people to take out a week to plant trees voluntarily on their farm. So we are looking for a more sustainable financing structure for people interested in improving ecosystem conditions.

We have also achieved direct funding for some community initiatives, a number of sustainable buildings have been constructed in some associations, mainly women's associations, and small aqueducts have been established for important farms at community level. We have also helped with accessing economic resources, either seed capital or credit for products and some organised groups.

What criteria do you use to select the regions in which you work?

We do not have established criteria to select the communities. They usually look for us organically, or the funders propose us according to our organisational profile and experience. However, there are five things that all the communities in which our work makes sense share. They have vulnerable populations whose rights are violated, they have problems with access to land or conflicts related to its management, there is no employment in the area, they live with an important ecosystem, and there is an interest in having a good relationship with nature. Generally, we are looking for a landscape approach where connectivity is generated – not only forestry connectivity, but also social connectivity in the communities and a productive chain.



Native bee workshop for honey production.

Photo: Marlon Webb

What distinguishes your approach from that of other organisations?

The vision of the organisation is to achieve a model that allows us to advance in the fulfilment of local sustainable development objectives, which is why we have sought to be a tool to strengthen capacities and attract direct investment to the communities that allows for the restoration of the forest landscape, economic diversification and self-management. We are not interested in making communities dependent on Diwö Ambiental so that we can capture resources and work according to our own interests, but rather in democratising resources, especially financial resources, for the most vulnerable populations.

“Working with Diwö has empowered us” – a community member comments

Here in the Boruca indigenous reserve, we are mainly involved in handicrafts in two areas: weaving and masks. These masks are part of the Brunca culture. They are carved in balsa wood and painted, and are sold as souvenirs and art. I myself make bags, purses and wallets out of textiles with yarn. We used to work a lot with natural thread, domestic cotton. But it is difficult to handle and almost non-existent, which is why we now buy yarn. Here in the village, a community museum run by three people sells masks and weavings. Several village houses have small workshops, where the rest of the produce is sold. Some villagers have already established sales contracts with people outside the country.

Working with Diwö Ambiental has been very beneficial for us economically, socially and for our families. We have taken courses in which we have learnt to add value to our products. On other occasions, we have been given courses on how to enhance women's status. There are many things that we used to be forbidden to do, and which we are not used to doing. Another thing that has helped

us – most of all perhaps – is to put a lot of love and care into nature. Before, we would plant a tree without knowing whether it was an important species. Now we know such things. All this has changed our vision, our way of being, and our way of treating our own family.

There is still a lot of machismo in Costa Rica, and indigenous men tend to be even more macho than men in other cultures. When we started with Diwö, there were about two or three women in my group who were going through unpleasant situations, and with the talks and other things we engaged in, I know that at least for some of them, their way of life has improved a lot. Many times, while we know that there are laws, we are afraid to defend ourselves. But when we realise that there are laws that really protect us, that are going to help us, it's different. One day one of these women told me: “If they do something to me again, I'll call Marlon.” Although we are only a small group of women, working with Diwö has changed these things a lot, and has empowered the women.

We have been hoping for the realisation of a bee project for a long time. What we would like to see is each woman in my group working in her own enterprise, starting to work for ourselves, for our families. It is true that with handicrafts one makes great progress, but with all of us doing more or less the same thing, it sometimes makes sense to change a routine. The same holds at a personal level. I feel very happy to know that in the future I will have something that I have always wanted to do. And I hope that our community will also benefit in one way or another. I always say to myself: “If I have my business, do it well and do it with love, when I go to sell something from my business, for example, I will follow this chain of happiness, of love for other people.”

Iris Mora is from the Boruca indigenous reserve in the south of the Costa Rica, a community of about 2,000 people. She belongs to a group of eight women who have been working with Diwö Ambiental for several years.

What are you proud of?

One of the main things we do is to discuss or promote issues that are of interest to the community, with respect to the Sustainable Development Goals. This is a very broad objective and includes economic, social and environmental aspects. In the case of Buruca, for example, we worked on a really important campaign on gender equality and domestic violence in 2022, with the participation of various indigenous women from the community, and led by Jimena Araya and Sofia Barquero, part of the organisation's team at the time. Moreover, through self-management, we have managed to increase our resources 50 times over in three years to support the vulnerable communities we work with. Another important point is that 75 per cent of the resources that come into the organisation stay directly in the communities.

What do you see as the biggest challenges in your work?

Managing to secure financial resources or investments related to the projects in the communities has been a challenge because funders sometimes establish certain guidelines that are unfeasible when it comes to carrying out the projects. For example, they do not allow renting a 4 x 4 vehicle, without which I will not be able to reach certain communities. Or, for example, that training activities take place, but that a snack or lunch cannot be offered. Justifying expenses to funders is sometimes complex. Just because you are charging a lot for food, you don't qualify as a potential recipient. But sometimes the food is needed for the snack that people take when they participate in the project. Or maybe the amount of petrol is very large because the communities are far away and there are no bus services.

Prospects for new organisations that do things differently or have a different vision are poor. We are well received in the communities we go to because we are listening or attend to them in a way that neither the public organisations nor other organisations are doing, and that opens doors for us. The work we are doing is necessary, but is not taken sufficiently into account. At the level of funding for indigenous territories, barely two per cent reaches the communities.

What about funding of the organisation itself?

Actually, consolidating a team is difficult because funders often hesitate to accept a competitive salary. And without a competitive salary you are not going to have a good professional who recognises, and is open to the needs of the

community. Or take funds from countries in the Global North, where we know the minimum wages are much higher. Actors come here and don't even pay the usual minimum wage of a country in the Global South. Look at the big fund managers who get 30 per cent in administrative costs, while sometimes they don't give us eight per cent in administrative expenses, and we are in the field, putting our chest out, as they say in the communities. So this utopia that exists regarding the resources that come and the reality in the communities is, I think, the biggest challenge.



Dialogue at the Women for the Ocean Meeting 2024. Photo: Jimena Araya

Are financiers so far removed from reality?

Our goal is to put the community first and not just reach an indicator. The project is always that of the community, while usually, the needs of communities are not considered holistically in funding opportunities, and they are limited. Funders should also opt for democratising resources. There are monopolies in climate finance, with billions going the usual organisations that are not ensuring resources for communities. It is necessary to generate local capacities to reduce dependence on international organisations. It is unnecessary for organisations from the Global North that already have easier access to other resources to monopolise our resources from the Global South. We don't need intermediaries in climate finance. We must generate solid local structures that can manage and generate a positive impact in their territories.

What do you hope for the future?

At organisational level, we hope for three things in the next year or so. First, to further consolidate the team and the necessary resources so that this impact continues to grow and, above all, to be sustained for at least three more years in the communities in which we already work. Second, to start a more active documentation and monitoring process that will allow us to see if we really have a different model or if what we are doing is improving.



Dialogue space on sustainable tourism.

Photo: Jimena Araya

We would like to establish a kind of model there that can be replicated in other places in Latin America, not only in Costa Rica. And finally, we have to conduct a very important analysis of whether what we are doing as an organisation is as far as we can go or whether we can go further.

What exactly do you mean?

We are supporting groups in improving their production and services. But neither the private sector nor the public sector are taking notice of this offer. So the idea is that, perhaps as an organisation, we work more on commercialisation and promotion, that we say for example to the lady who produces honey: "Give me your honey, and I will help you in an ethical, correct and transparent way to place it on the market. Give me your cocoa, let's process it with this ally and be able to export it. Or your tourist packages – let's place them on certain platforms with certain alliances to see if we can get this tourist to come." We could do this instead of looking for the private sector to come and do business with the communities and maybe the public sector to guide them in that growth, because this is not working.

Does this mean that marketing is still the stumbling block?

Definitely. This year, we experienced this with coffee, orange and cocoa producers, and tourism providers, who improved their production, made their model more sustainable, became better organised, etc. But there was still a gap, as we need to take more steps to reach those potential clients who can help consolidate these local nature-based businesses led mainly by women and their families. So with the analysis we are doing at organisational level, we want to see if we must give value added through the organisation to those services and products that come from sustainable landscape management.

Interview Silvia Richter