



The local environmental action plan for Olivares commune in Manizales, Colombia

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1. The study, by the Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas (DANE), was based on the 1994-1995 National Survey of Incomes and Expenditures and the National Housing Survey of 1996. To measure income distribution, the study used the Gini coefficient. The value of the coefficient was 0.32 for Manizales compared to 0.47 for the country as a whole.

2. CRECE (1998), *Estudio de competitividad del departamento de Caldas*, Centro de Estudios Empresariales Cafeteros, Manizales.

3. Velásquez, Luz Stella (1998), "Agenda 21: a form of joint environmental management in Manizales, Colombia",

SUMMARY: This paper describes the development of a local environmental action plan in Olivares, one of the poorest areas in the city of Manizales. It discusses both the successes and the difficulties in developing an environmental plan in a low-income area that fully involves community organizations – especially when many projects in the past had failed. It also describes the long process whereby different stakeholders were brought together to reach consensus on priorities and whereby priority items received support from the municipal government. The paper also discusses the different stages of the plan and highlights the degree of commitment by the local government, institutions, universities, the private sector, NGOs and community associations in the development and joint management of various programmes and projects.

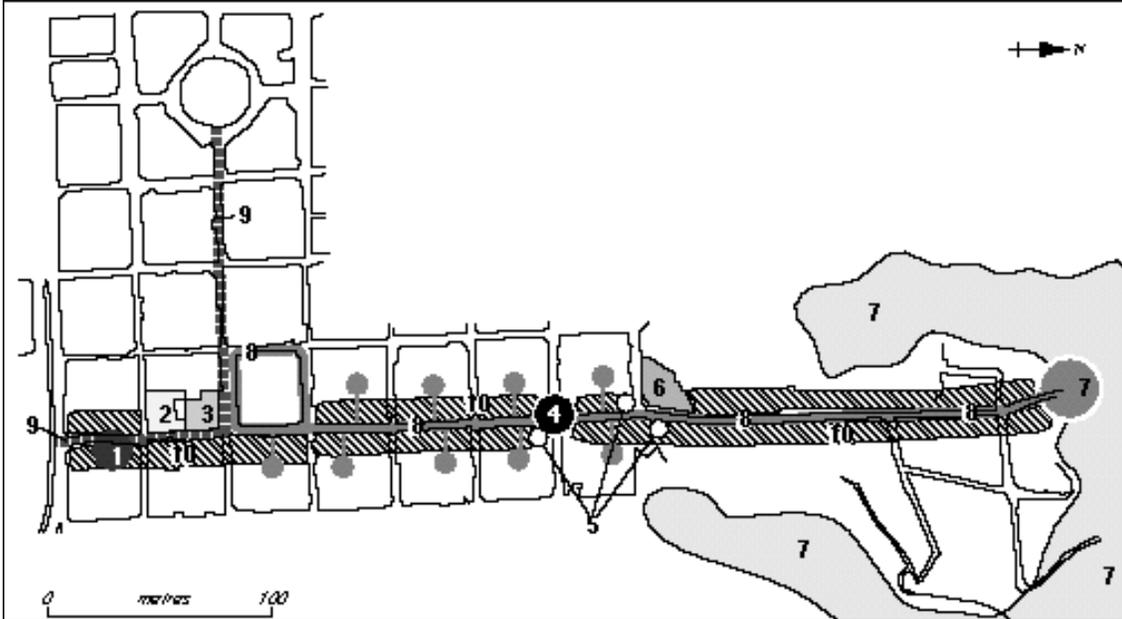
I. INTRODUCTION

A STUDY BY the Colombian statistics office in 1996 found that 47.9 per cent of households in Colombia's 23 provincial capitals were living in poverty.⁽¹⁾ The study also showed that Manizales had one of the lowest proportions of people living in poverty and one of the least skewed income distributions. However, the municipality's effectiveness in putting into practice the goals of sustainable development will depend to a large extent on the way it confronts the current problems generated by rising poverty, a result of the severe economic recession affecting Colombia, especially the coffee-growing region where Manizales is located.

According to another recent study⁽²⁾, 115,428 people in Manizales, representing 36 per cent of the municipality's total population, may be regarded as being vulnerable because of their poverty levels. A paper published in *Environment and Urbanization* last year⁽³⁾ described how the local authority had managed to address many environmental problems – including increasing the availability of open space and recreational facilities to the poorest population, improving their housing conditions, enhancing the physical stability of individual buildings on vulnerable terrain and relocating those living on particularly dangerous sites. But the current economic recession has reduced the capacity of the local authorities to continue this work. According to a 1997 survey,⁽⁴⁾ the main social problems which result from poverty in Manizales are the high levels of overcrowding that affect 65 per cent of the poorest population, limited access to training in poor communities, the low educational levels

MANIZALES

Figure 1: Examples of projects being implemented along Calle 27 (Street 27) in Olivares



Project 1: House for citizen's environmental education centre. This is a city-wide project where the main environmental education programmes are being developed.

Project 2: House of culture. Renovation of a building representing the local architectural heritage to be used for a range of community cultural activities.

Project 3: Museum of religious art.

Project 4: Improved traffic intersection.

Project 5: Urban balconies. Public space, park for recreation and the visual enjoyment of the landscape.

Project 6: Community house and youth club. Physical

renovation of a school to be used as a meeting place by the young.

Project 7: Vegetation research centre. Nursery used for research and for providing seedlings of native species of trees for use in construction.

Projects 8 and 9: Street park and commercial streets. The main promenade used for social encounters by the local inhabitants. Serves the dual purpose of recreation and commerce.

Project 10: Renovation of buildings. Renovation, reconstruction and change of function of existing buildings to make better use of them for housing and commerce.

for men and women heads of households, and unstable sources of income such as trade, on which 31.8 per cent of the poorest population within the municipality rely. There is also great concern about the rapid increase in unemployment; by mid-1999, the unemployment rate in Manizales had reached 20.6 per cent of the labour force, above the national average of 19.3 per cent.

The local authority, trade associations and other local institutions have increasingly sought to respond to worsening social conditions, reactivate the city's economy and give priority attention to programmes and projects to reduce urban and rural poverty. It is in this context that a pilot local environmental action plan (LEAP) for one of the poorest areas in Manizales, the *bio-comuna* of Olivares, was earmarked as one of the current municipal development plan's priority actions.⁽⁵⁾

Despite the difficulties described below in getting this LEAP off the ground, the pilot plan has already produced positive results. One of its more important achievements has been a genuine sharing of the practice of environmental management within a sustainable development framework among the private sector, NGOs, universities and community organizations. Through a range of programmes and projects, it has helped bring about improvements in quality of life in one of poorest sectors of the city.

Environment and Urbanization
Vol.10, No.2, pages 9-36.

4. SISBEN (1997), *Encuesta para el sistema municipal de información a beneficiarios*, Bogotá. SISBEN is a means-tested national government welfare system of subsidies administered by local authorities.

5. Communes (or *comunas* in the Spanish original) are geographical sub-divisions within a municipality. In the case of Manizales, the population of a commune ranges between 30,000 and 50,000 inhabitants.

II. BACKGROUND

IN 1992, SOME lecturers and students at the National University in Manizales initiated a programme of community training for the environmental management of Olivares, as part of an undergraduate architecture course on the urban environment. The aim was to encourage community participation in the design of projects for the recuperation of public spaces, parks and recreational facilities in the commune.

Further work by course participants led to a first environmental diagnosis of Olivares in 1993, which highlighted the main problems and outlined the opportunities for action within a sustainable development framework. This diagnosis was presented to the local authority who used it as the basis for a comprehensive plan for coordinating the inputs of different local institutions. This sought to improve sanitation, recuperate public space, undertake stabilization works on the steep slopes where the commune lies and relocate households whose homes were on land at high risk of landslide. This led to a first project by the municipal government through its community development secretariat. However, despite attempts at creating the first community environmental committee with the participation of local government institutions, the top-down welfarist spirit behind this first approach limited its legitimacy among the local population. As a consequence, the project was only partially carried out. Eventually, the project had to be reformulated to give greater autonomy and leadership to the community.

By 1994, the direct and permanent contact that the university had established with the community through training programmes facilitated the university's role as an institutional coordinator for future projects. Initially, as a result of the partial failure of the first project, community organizations were wary of allowing municipal officials to become involved directly in the management of future projects. Gradually, through a constant dialogue between the municipality and the local administrative board,⁽⁶⁾ some of the credibility that the municipality had lost in the eyes of the community was regained. At that point, the municipality provided support for an environmental profile of the commune.

This profile was to provide details of environmental conditions in each of the commune's neighbourhoods. The initial research effort provided the methodology for a system of "environmental quality traffic lights" for the city through which progress on improving the environment was measured and made public.⁽⁷⁾ It also allowed a consolidation of urban environmental research groups to provide support for environmental management in the commune. In the same year, the municipal government, with support from the national government, commissioned the university-based urban environmental research group (GEA-UR) to prepare a municipal environmental profile using the methodology applied in Olivares.

By 1995, the results of the research for the Manizales environmental profile were used as a basis for developing the policies, programmes and projects of the Manizales environmental plan (bioplan). They also provided the basis for local environmental action plans as part of a Local Agenda 21 process for which Olivares was chosen as a site for a pilot project. There were still difficulties in implementing a style of shared management. By then, the project had gained national visibility and many local stakeholders wanted to lead it. Local political groups sought to appropriate it for their own political benefit. But the independence of the founding group and regular joint performance assessments by the univer-

6. Local administrative boards (JALs is the Spanish acronym) are elected bodies which monitor the delivery of public services and represent the interests of commune residents on the boards of utility agencies.

7. For more information on the "environmental quality traffic lights" methodology, see reference 3.

MANIZALES

sity, the NGOs and the community were instrumental in ensuring the unity of the steering group. This also helped greatly in ensuring continuity for the local plan from one elected local government to the next.⁽⁸⁾

Olivares's environmental action plan has been in place since 1996 and has served as a model for LEAPs in other communes in Manizales. There has been a constant process of reflection concerning the plan's effectiveness, involving assessments of the methodology used, examining shortcomings in ensuring wider coverage of the projects and putting in place monitoring systems. But the most significant achievement is the involvement of a growing number of institutions in the process, including the private sector and trade associations, in its various programmes and projects. This has ensured greater local, national and even some international support for the plan. Community training still plays a crucial role in the process. In recent years, training has increasingly focused on environmental management to support community based enterprises providing environmental services (such as waste collection and disposal, tree-pruning, local road maintenance and so on) both in the commune and in other parts of the city.

III. THE ENVIRONMENT OF OLIVARES COMMUNE

OLIVARES IS LOCATED on the slopes of the northern hillsides of Manizales.⁽⁹⁾ It has a built-up area of 102 hectares and 76 hectares of protected green area. The steep hillsides are prone to frequent landslides. Some 122 households live in areas of moderate or high environmental risk and 16 of the commune's 23 neighbourhoods are geologically unstable. This is why they are given priority attention in the disaster prevention policy of the municipal development plan. This involves programmes for upgrading housing, relocating selected households from high risk areas and soil stabilization works.

Olivares has 33,000 inhabitants, representing 8.2 per cent of Manizales's population. The labour force in Olivares has above average levels of unemployment, under-employment and temporary employment. Many of its inhabitants find work in the local fruit and vegetable wholesale market (known as Galería Plaza de Mercado), the local sanitary landfill and the recycling plant (run by the NGO Ciudad Verde). Some 63 per cent of the working population earns below the current legal minimum wage which, in Colombia today, stands at US\$ 120 per month.

Olivares is within the area of influence of the city's historic centre. This central location, seemingly privileged, has been an object of discussion concerning its future urban and environmental planning. While some projects suggest upgrading to avoid population displacement,⁽¹⁰⁾ other projects advocate urban renewal as a way of raising the value of the centrally located area.⁽¹¹⁾ Unfortunately, efforts to improve the quality of service provided by local traders are still recent, so there is not much hope that they will attract a wider consumer population. On the other hand, the number of informal sellers on the streets has increased as a result of growing unemployment. This has also made the area less safe for shoppers, while much of the architectural heritage has been lost through the deterioration of buildings, thus reducing the market value of the commune.

Olivares was shown in the environmental profile for Manizales as having the lowest levels of environmental quality in the city. Its problems can be summarized as it follows:

8. The Manizales Urban Development Plan (Bio-Manizales) has provided the development guidelines for four consecutive elected local governments. This is unusual in a political context where elected governments often seek to distance themselves from their predecessors' work. The plan is regularly monitored and updated, with the involvement of local institutions including the universities.

9. For a more complete description of the environment in and around Manizales, see Velásquez (1998) in reference 6; also Velásquez, Luz Stella and Margarita Pacheco (1999), "Research management as an approach to solving environmental conflicts in metropolitan areas: a case study of the Manizales-Villamaría conurbation, Colombia" in Atkinson, A., J. Dávila, E. Fernandes and M. Mattingly (editors), *The Challenge of Environmental Management in Urban Areas*, Ashgate, UK, pages 275-286; and Corubolo, E. (1999), "Peri-urban profile of Manizales" prepared for the Strategic Environmental Planning and Management of the Peri-urban Interface research project, Development Planning Unit, University College London (this paper can be downloaded at no cost from: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu/pui>).

10. A research project where the author was involved proposed a series of programmes and infrastructure projects to upgrade the area of the commune. This included preserving present land uses, upgrading individual dwellings and their environment, renovating old buildings for change of use, locating services there which serve the whole city, attracting investment and generating employment, urban agriculture in common land, and an environmental education centre. See Arias, Gerardo and Luz Stella Velásquez (1995), "El barrio como unidad de desarrollo sostenible de la biocomuna Olivares", *Premio Corona Pro Arquitectura 1995*, Universidad Nacional de Colombia-Fundación Corona, Bogotá.

11. Municipality of Manizales

(1997), "Propuesta de renovación urbana del sector de las Galerías", Municipal Planning Secretariat (mimeo).

- environmental risks of landslides on the steep hillsides;
- high crime rates;
- lack of public space and recreational facilities. With an average of 2.2 square metres of green area and public space per inhabitant, it is much lower than the 6.3 square metre average in Manizales as a whole;
- deterioration of the urban and architectural heritage. Sixty-three per cent of buildings classified as having some architectural value have high levels of deterioration. There are, on average, 1.3 households per dwelling, which points to high levels of overcrowding.

However, the environmental profile also identified some environmental opportunities:

- the beauty of the natural landscape;
- the existence of 76 hectares of protected green areas incorporated into the city's bioplan as green areas of environmental protection, and its ecological potential in terms of both its flora and its fauna;
- the urban and architectural heritage;
- a central location within the city with access to most major urban services;
- good coverage (98 per cent) by public utilities such as water, electricity, telephone, waste collection and sewage;
- good coverage by trading facilities in the whole commune;
- active community participation involving settlers' associations, community groups, cooperatives, civic groups and other community based enterprises; these have developed from the needs of the local community.

IV. DIFFICULTIES OF THE PLANNING PROCESS IN OLIVARES COMMUNE

WITHOUT THE COMMITMENT of Olivares's community organizations, it would not have been possible to prepare and carry out the projects contained in the environmental plan. By the time the environmental profile was prepared, it became clear that the commune's main potential was its community's organizational capacity. However, because many institutions had tried to implement initiatives locally, which had rarely become concrete programmes or projects, it was very difficult to get community commitment for a wider programme of action for the commune. The main difficulties encountered can be summarized in the following questions that the community asked about the plan.

a. The Environmental Action Plan in Olivares Commune: Yet Another Project?

Many of the programmes and projects contained in the municipal development plan are never put into practice. In the case of Olivares, the municipal government had given high priority to infrastructure projects; however, these were generally the result of political interests rather than a response to the real needs of the community. Work would often start just before elections. In some cases, operating expenses were not included in the budget so they offered a poor quality service or the service stopped due to a lack of funds. Similar problems dogged short-term programmes of local institutions. In Olivares, the number of programmes came to surpass the organizational capacity of the community. For example, in terms of social welfare provision, between 1993 and 1995 there were 17 social welfare organizations in operation, 78 programmes were launched,

MANIZALES

of which only 16 eventually survived, and the community was called on to attend 364 meetings.

b. What Political Group is Leading the Project?

A survey of public opinion for the commune's environmental profile showed that 63 per cent of those surveyed believed that participation in the commune was in response to political clientelism and 72 per cent thought that their leaders did not represent them but represented political groups. This meant that the possibility of uniting different interests around a common process was remote and, for 41 per cent of the respondents, the success of any common project depended on whether the political group that led it was in power.

c. Has the Commune Again Become a University Research Laboratory?

Community associations were very critical of the role played by university groups in the commune. Inhabitants complained in the meetings that their private lives were under scrutiny and that the information they supplied was only useful for the university's theoretical undertakings and to undergraduates who were preparing their final dissertations. They never found out what use was given to the programmes or projects developed by academics during their field trips and the reports never found their way to the local libraries. They therefore demanded that formal agreements be signed and that they be made active participants in any future research.⁽¹²⁾

d. Is This a Simple Plan or Does It Involve Attending Many Lectures?

The main challenge for the research group was explaining the environmental action plan using simple language. For this reason, the "environmental quality traffic lights" methodology prepared by the community in 1994 was updated for each of the commune's neighbourhoods, with a public display of information on each one's trends and conditions. Local inhabitants could find up to date information on the environmental situation of the commune and on the plan's progress in public places and in local churches. Meetings were used to answer questions and explore possible responses to specific problems. The programmes and projects contained in the plan are the result of a process of priority-setting. To summarize, the process of preparing the local environmental action plan involved a sequence of actions: environmental profile, priority-setting and, finally, the plan.

12. Inhabitants' irritation can be gleaned from a sign that hangs above the entrance of one of Olivares' modest houses: "Surveys answered after lunchtime for 5,000 pesos" (US\$ 2.50).

V. COMMENTS ON THE METHODOLOGY

BECAUSE OF THE particular social and environmental problems of the commune, it was very important for the local government and for the institutions supporting the process to devise more stable, comprehensible and flexible mechanisms of communication and agreement with the community. This led to the design of a number of phases for the environmental action plan for Olivares for the period 1997-2000.

13. Community action boards were set up in the late 1950s in Colombia to promote self-help community action around the supply of basic infrastructure such as water, sanitation and roads at the neighbourhood level.

14. See reference 6.

15. The successful "Community Mothers" programme, launched by the Colombian government in the early 1980s, allows working mothers to leave their children in the care of a local "community mother" who receives a stipend for caring for them outside school hours.

a. First Phase: Induction

This phase saw the launch of a programme called "Environmental participation is a citizen's right". The aim was to raise awareness about the importance of the environmental action plan. The induction phase stressed the objectives of international, national and municipal environmental policies. It also informed participants about the mechanisms for participation included in the recent process of municipal decentralization, Colombia's new political constitution of 1991, the 1993 Environmental Act, as well as the spirit behind greater democratic environmental participation contained in Agenda 21, the document coming out of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) in 1992. Training workshops were organized by the university and the municipality's Community Development Office. Workshops involved active participation by the local and regional environmental authorities, the environmental representative on the regional planning council, commune representatives to the community action boards⁽¹³⁾ and the local administrative boards⁽¹⁴⁾, grassroots environmental organizations, the Committee for Environmental Education, municipal environmental officials, "community mothers",⁽¹⁵⁾ recyclers' organizations and the university based urban environmental research group. The university, participating NGOs and the local government jointly covered costs. This phase saw the creation of an environmental committee for Olivares commune, charged with promoting and guiding the environmental action plan and made up of members of the local community and representatives of the main institutions involved in the plan.

b. Second Phase: Dissemination of the Plan

In this phase, the aims of the LEAP were widely disseminated while securing the firm commitment of institutions involved in the preparation and execution of the plan. The commune's environmental committee took a leading role in this. There was widespread participation in the various meetings involved, including most of those who had attended the first phase workshops, plus church representatives. Resources for this phase were provided by the university, the local government and *Fundación Social*, one of the largest and most active private foundations involved in community development in Colombia. In this phase, an agreement between the different institutions involved in the plan was secured, while tasks were clearly set out for them and for the local community.

c. Third Phase: Environmental Education and Training for Active Participation in the Plan

One of the main commitments secured in the second phase agreement was the development of a continuous programme of environmental training. The key areas were defined as environmental education of leaders and teachers, and environmental training for local entrepreneurs. This has been an on-going programme and has led to improvements in the community's capacity for environmental management. The programme has been funded by the universities and *Fundación Social*. The environmental training for local entrepreneurs has also been very fruitful, especially for recyclers, "community mothers", local cooperatives, traders and young workers, who now see in the environment an area for their economic and

MANIZALES

social development.

The training programme was run in parallel with infrastructure works, slope stabilization, waste-recycling, employment generation and the integrated management of agricultural nurseries. The local branch of the National University, *Fundación Social* and the national government's technical training service (SENA) jointly covered the costs of this phase. This phase also led to the establishment by the National University of the Centre for Environmental Advice for Entrepreneurs in Olivares.

d. Fourth Phase: The Plan in the Creation of a Political Culture

The inhabitants of Olivares and of other poor areas of the city have lost confidence in local political leaders and in government institutions and their activities. To implement the LEAP, it was necessary to create citizens' fora to discuss the potential relevance of the plan to regaining some political leadership. These fora were called by the local administrative board and staff of the National University, and involved the active participation of the local environmental authority, the community action boards, representatives from the municipal council, the regional planning council, the community development secretariat, NGOs and local inhabitants. Funds for this phase came from the local government, the National University and the regional environmental authority (CORPOCALDAS).

e. Fifth Phase: Updating the Commune's Environmental Profile; "Environmental Quality Traffic Lights"

The environmental profile had been prepared in 1994 and the "environmental quality traffic lights" methodology applied since 1995 as a means of evaluating and monitoring environmental programmes and projects. This facilitated a swifter and more participatory updating of the profile. Problems and opportunities were identified and provided the basis for preparing the agenda and for defining the programmes and projects contained in the plan. The local urban environmental studies group updated the profile and participated in the various working groups charged with assessing diagnosis and performance. This also involved municipal environmental officials, representatives from the regional environmental authority and community based organizations in the higher risk areas. Costs were covered by the regional environmental authority, the local government and the National University. This phase led to the establishment of the technical coordination committee for Olivares's environmental action plan.

f. Sixth Phase: Preparing the Commune's Environmental Agenda

The environmental agenda is a vital instrument of the plan, and its development involves a process of negotiation in search of consensus. To achieve this, a series of working groups were charged with agreeing on priorities, examining different scenarios for the implementation of programmes and projects, seeking ways of overcoming plan management problems and committing technical, economic and community resources to its implementation. This involved a range of institutions including the

local government, supporting institutions (such as the universities and NGOs), trade associations, community organizations and local inhabitants. Costs were covered by the regional environmental authority, the local government, and the National and Caldas Universities. The university based urban environmental research group GEA-UR coordinated the working groups and prepared the final draft of the commune's environmental agenda.

g. Seventh Phase: Plan Implementation

The implementation of Olivares's LEAP called not only for the active participation of a range of institutions, trade associations and the community but also of the local government and civil society. This plan was an important political milestone as it demonstrated how the goals of sustainable development enshrined in the municipal development plan (bio-Manizales) could be implemented with active participation from the community. For this reason, it was important that the plan left the somewhat narrow confines of the commune's reality and became the object of wider discussions in citizen fora and in the municipal council. Similarly, there was a need to promote a debate in the lead-up to the formulation of the legal instrument by the municipal council which would ensure the inclusion of the plan's programmes and projects in the municipal budgets.

The regional planning council, an advisory body to the municipality whose role includes providing guidelines in the search for local sustainable development, called for a citizens' environmental forum where the plan was presented to all the citizens. After several debates the municipal council approved the plan.

h. Eighth Phase: Monitoring and Evaluation

For the population of Olivares, the main preoccupations were the effective implementation of programmes and projects contained in the plan and the need to improve the quality of the commune's environment. Their active participation in the plan and in monitoring its implementation was also a priority for many of those involved in the plan. In order to ensure adequate monitoring and evaluation of the plan, a local environmental observatory will be created. This will be one in a network of observatories that are to provide the monitoring system of bio-Manizales (the municipal environmental plan). A prototype of the monitoring system is currently under trial. This has been accompanied by an environmental community training programme to create five of the system's 11 observatories.

i. Ninth Phase: Decisions about Priority Programmes and Projects

Although the plan includes all the programmes and projects to be implemented in the short, medium and long terms, it was necessary that those who are actively involved in its participation set their priorities as to which programmes and projects were to be developed in the period 1997-2000. With this aim in mind, working groups were organized to discuss the different proposals and to ensure the commitment of each of the participants. These groups were organized jointly by community organizations and representatives from the local administrative boards and the commu-

MANIZALES

nity action boards. The criteria for deciding on the list of programmes and projects involved assessments about the working capacity, leadership and commitment of each one of the participating institutions. As a result of this process, a number of projects and programmes were included in the list of municipal projects and each was included in the planned municipal budgets. These are described below. In addition to local and regional support in terms of infrastructure, technical and economic resources, some of these have also received national and international support.

- Integrated waste management in the Ciudad Verde recycling plant. The regional recyclers' association, the cooperative for environmental services (BIOSERVICIOS), Manizales chamber of commerce, *Fundación Social* and Manizales University jointly share the management of the project.
- Urban environmental revitalization and "bio-trade" along Calle 27 street. The National University, *Fundación Corona* (a private foundation), the municipal planning secretariat, the Manizales chamber of commerce, and the Olivares environmental committee share the management of this project.
- Environmental management of the productive protected open spaces and creation of agricultural nurseries. The management of this project is shared by the regional environmental authority, the municipal community development secretariat, *Fundación Social*, the cooperative association of Olivares commune and the Olivares "community mothers".
- Housing upgrading and the change of use of old buildings in Colón and Galerías neighbourhoods. Management of this is shared by the National University, the municipal planning secretariat and local community organizations.
- Relocation of households in areas of high risk and environmental improvement. Management of this is shared by the National and Caldas Universities, the regional environmental authority, and the municipal office for the attention and prevention of disasters.
- Environmental training as support to community processes. Management of this is shared by National, Caldas and Autónoma Universities, the municipal community development secretariat and the Olivares local action board.
- The Olivares environmental observatory, for which management is shared by the National University, the municipal planning secretariat, Autónoma University and the Olivares environmental committee.