

# Empowering Communities to Co-Manage Watersheds: Forum for Citizen Action



Community participation is recognized as an essential part of equitable and sustainable watershed management. Stakeholders play a vital role in ensuring that land use in the upstream does not affect the quality and quantity of water that flows to downstream communities. Regulatory measures could potentially address this concern. However, they entail high monitoring costs and compliance is not certain. In theory, stakeholder participation in watershed management can be a solution to these challenges.

#### SOURCE:

Candelo, C., L. Cantillo, J. Gonzalez, A.M. Roldan and N. Johnson. 2008. *Empowering Communities to Co-manage Natural Resources: Impacts of the Conversatorio de Acción Ciudadana*. Paper presented at the Second International Forum on Water and Food, CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 10-14 November 2008.

In practice, meaningful participation is difficult to achieve when communities are unorganized, unaware of their legal rights and responsibilities, and lack the information, education, and confidence necessary to interact with other more powerful stakeholders. The Forum for Citizen Action (known by its Spanish acronym CAC) is an innovative methodology developed in Colombia to empower communities to participate actively and effectively in the governance and management of natural resources.

## The *Conservatorio De Accion Ciudadana* (Forum for Citizen Action)

The CAC is a political and legal mechanism founded on the idea of civil society and authorities conversing in familiar terms about issues of importance to both, and then arriving at agreements for action. It is designed to address the disparities in power, rights, and information between communities and government institutions that often prevent communities from exercising their constitutional rights to participate and to hold their representatives accountable. The CAC's point of entry is the Colombian constitution and the rights and responsibilities that citizens are entitled to but often do not know how to use.

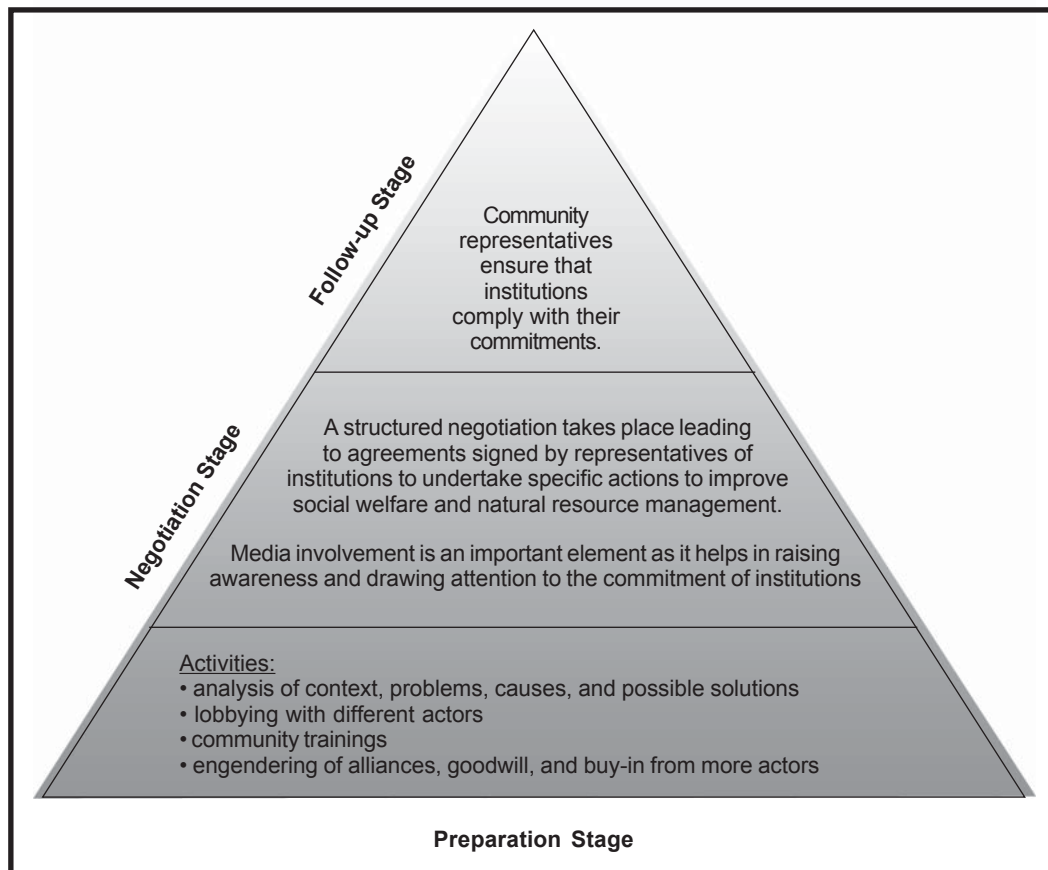
CACs were conducted in three Colombian watersheds between 2004 and 2007. Together, the three CACs led to 76 concrete commitments on the part of institutions to invest a total of more than USD 15 million to improve the welfare of watershed residents and the management of watershed resources.

An assessment in late 2007 showed that compliance rates were relatively high, especially in the communities that had stronger follow up processes to hold institutions accountable for their commitments. The CAC methodology also had significant human and social capital impacts on community members who participated, and led to changes in the ways that communities and institutions perceive each other, in some cases, moving from antagonism to respectful collaboration.

### The CAC Methodology

The methodology consists of three phases: **preparation**, **negotiation**, and **follow up**. A crucial component is the three-pronged environmental, social, and legal capacity building of ordinary individuals and public servants. Topics for the former include concrete legal instruments available to citizens to access information or compel government agencies to act in a timely manner. The latter received training on their roles and responsibilities under the constitution, especially in relation to citizen participation. The CAC also focuses on building social capital and improving people's knowledge of their natural resources.





**Figure 1. The CAC Methodology**

## Conclusions

While the same general methodology was followed in the three sites, each CAC was implemented in a slightly different way due to differences in the lead organizations, the social, political and bio-physical contexts, the available resources, and the level of support from external organizations. The major lessons from these three experiences are:

1. The CAC process cannot be done hastily; it takes time, usually one to two years.
2. Local organizations with experience in community organization as well as research and advocacy are best placed to support a CAC.
3. Links with public institutions need to be established early on to ensure buy-in. Innovative ways of engaging the private sector should also be explored.
4. A core team will always lead the process; however, pressure should be applied to ensure they share and seek feedback from their communities.

## Suggested Readings

Beardon, H. 2008. *Building Hope from Chaos: Culture, Politics and the Protection of the Colombian Pacific Mangroves*. WWF-UK, <http://www.wwf.org.uk>.

Johnson, N., J. García, J.E. Rubiano, M. Quintero, R.D. Estrada, E. Mwangi, A. Peralta and S. Granados. 2007. *Watershed Management and Poverty Alleviation in the Colombian Andes*. *Water Alternatives*. 2(1): 34-52.

Sourcebook on **Resources, Rights, and Cooperation**, produced by the CGIAR Program on Collective Action and Property Rights (CAPRI)