

UNIVERSIDAD SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO USFQ

Colegio de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades

Cultural weaves at risk: The role of UNESCO in the conservation and protection of the *Carludovica palmata* and *Astrocaryum standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia to reduce poverty and inequality

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HOJA DE CALIFICACIÓN DE TRABAJO DE FIN DE CARRERA

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DEDICATORIA

Dedico principalmente este trabajo a los montuvios de mis abuelos, personas que me han apoyado incondicionalmente a lo largo de mi vida, mi más grande inspiración para seguir superándome y ser una persona agradecida con Dios, la vida, y mis raíces montuvias. A mi madre, por su apoyo moral, preguntándome, ¿qué hubiera sido de mí si no hubieras estado para mí? Más allá de ser mi madre, ha sido mi más grande aliada y confidente. Espero que este trabajo les llene, como a mí, de la más grande satisfacción por haber culminado una etapa que no pensé que llegaría a su fin.

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RESUMEN

En los últimos años se ha investigado el papel de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura (UNESCO) en la protección y conservación de la cultura ante el rápido avance de la globalización y el impacto del cambio climático. La UNESCO, a través de convenciones, ha liderado proyectos de conservación y protección cultural y medioambiental como las Reservas de la Biosfera (RB), los Geoparques Mundiales de la UNESCO (UGGps) y los Sitios del Patrimonio Mundial de la UNESCO (UWHS), entre otros, en cumplimiento de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS). En general, se ha investigado el papel de las comunidades locales en la gestión de estas iniciativas y su transformación en proyectos turísticos que permitan una retribución económica para estas comunidades. Uno de los objetivos de la UNESCO al liderar estas iniciativas era proporcionar mejores oportunidades económicas a las comunidades locales, ya que la mayoría de estas iniciativas de la UNESCO son gestionadas por las comunidades locales. Aunque la UNESCO reconoce desde hace años la importancia de las comunidades locales en la preservación del patrimonio, la idea de dar prioridad a su bienestar es reciente. El bienestar de una comunidad local se entiende como aquel conjunto de condiciones necesarias para que un grupo poblacional pueda vivir de manera adecuada, abarcando aspectos culturales, ambientales y de salud.

Palabras clave: UNESCO, tejido cultural, comunidades locales, violencia del narcotráfico, bienestar, pobreza, cambio climático, comunidades étnicas, costera.

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the role of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in protecting and conserving culture in the face of rapidly advancing globalization and the impact of climate change has been investigated. UNESCO, through conventions, has led cultural and environmental conservation and protection projects such as Biosphere Reserves (BRs), UNESCO Global Geoparks (UGGps), and UNESCO World Heritage Sites (UWHS), among others, in compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Overall, the local communities' role in managing these initiatives and transforming them into tourism projects that allow economic retribution for these communities has been investigated. One of UNESCO's objectives in leading these initiatives was to provide better economic opportunities for local communities, as most of these UNESCO initiatives are managed by local communities. Although UNESCO has recognized the importance of local communities in heritage preservation for years, the idea of prioritizing their well-being is a recent development. The well-being of a local community is understood as the conditions necessary for a population group to live adequately, including cultural, environmental, and health aspects.

Key words: UNESCO, cultural weaving, local communities, drug trafficking violence, well-being, poverty, climate change, ethnic communities, coastal.

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Introduction

In recent years, the role of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in protecting and conserving culture in the face of rapidly advancing globalization and the impact of climate change has been investigated. UNESCO, through conventions, has led cultural and environmental conservation and protection projects such as Biosphere Reserves (BRs), UNESCO Global Geoparks (UGGps), and UNESCO World Heritage Sites (UWHS), among others, in compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Overall, the local communities' role in managing these initiatives and transforming them into tourism projects that allow economic retribution for these communities has been investigated. One of UNESCO's objectives in leading these initiatives was to provide better economic opportunities for local communities, as most of these UNESCO initiatives are managed by local communities. Although UNESCO has recognized the importance of local communities in heritage preservation for years, the idea of prioritizing their well-being is a recent development. The well-being of a local community is understood as the conditions necessary for a population group to live adequately, including cultural, environmental, and health aspects.

This research arises from the considerable increase in violence caused by drug trafficking in Ecuador's coastal territories in recent years. One of the objectives is to discuss that poverty and inequality are not the main reasons for the increase in violence. In addition, special emphasis will be placed on the communities mainly affected by the increase in drug-trafficking violence in Ecuador and Colombia, such as the Montuvio, Afro-descendant, and Indigenous peoples, who are the main producers and processors of *Carludovica palmata* and (*C. palmata*) *Astrocaryum standleyanum* (*A. standleyanum*) palms along the coastlines of both countries. We get two cultural artifacts after processing, which include weaving, two cultural artifacts such as the toquilla straw hat in Ecuador and güérregue basketry in Colombia, by the

Montuvio and Wounaan people, respectively. These artifacts result from cultural expressions with a history of thousands of years. Therefore, the role of UNESCO is fundamental, since this organization considers peace a fundamental right for the sustainable development of communities; without peace, there is no progress. This idea is complemented by the well-being of local communities and the preservation and conservation of cultural and environmental heritage; a community in the absence of peace cannot achieve well-being, nor can it preserve and protect its cultural and environmental legacy. In other words, UNESCO should take a more active role in the search for sustainable peace through preserving and conserving cultural and environmental heritage and promoting the well-being of Afro-descendant, Indigenous, and Montuvio communities in collaboration with Ecuador and Colombia.

The analysis presented in this thesis consists of structuring and logically relating existing quantitative and qualitative data on the topic mentioned. I used data such as the percentage of Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations in Ecuador and Colombia by province and department, respectively; homicide rates, poverty, and inequality by province in Ecuador; deforestation, coca plantations, and violence due to drug trafficking in Colombia. The lack of data was complemented by academic discussions and information available on the internet about the role of UNESCO, Ecuador, and Colombia in preserving and conserving these two palms. The analysis presented in this research is guided by the central research question: What is the role of UNESCO in conserving and protecting the *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia to reduce poverty and inequality?

Context

In Ecuador and Colombia, the conservation of the toquilla or iraca (*Carludovica palmata*) and mocora or guérregue (*Astrocaryum standleyanum*) palms is essential because they serve as a means of economic sustenance and cultural expression. These two palms have been

intrinsically related to local traditions for centuries, serving as raw material for cultural artifacts such as toquilla straw hats in Ecuador (Regalado, 2010). However, the activities that stem from these two palms face the risk of discontinuation due to various factors, including climate change, globalization, and lack of government policies. Thus, third-party entities, such as non-governmental organizations or international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and its agency UNESCO seek to promote international cooperation and preserve ancestral cultural practices, particularly the artisanal production made of these two palms. In this context, the following question arises: how can UNESCO intervene to preserve these plants by promoting international cooperation between Ecuador and Colombia and contribute to reducing poverty and inequality in both countries?

Both Ecuador and Colombia are plunged into violence caused by organized crime through indiscriminate attacks on citizens and state property. For example, the Ecuadorian Attorney General's Office (FGE) reported 254 attacks in 2023 and 110 attacks as of January 13, 2024 (Primicias, 2024). Ecuador went from being one of the safest countries in Latin America in 2017 to one of the most insecure in 2024 (Noboa Gonzalez, 2024); this transition occurred for different reasons, such as inadequate state policies, the weakening of state institutions due to corruption, economic and political instability as a result of the 2016 earthquake, the 2019 protests, prison crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, drug trafficking, assassination of Ecuadorian politicians between 2022 and 2023, among others.

The violence exercised by organized crime began to be more present in the Ecuadorian media after the murder of a group of journalists in 2018 on the border with Colombia by the dissident group Oliver Sinisterra Front (Miranda, 2018), which emerged as a rejection of the peace treaty between the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) and the Colombian State in 2016. Since 2018, Ecuador has been in a downhill spiral as the State has progressively lost

control. The two neoliberal governments that preceded Noboa's government slowed investments in education, security, and agriculture (Rojas Sasse, 2024). In 2019, another crisis of violence would begin, the prison crises, which would worsen in 2021 with the murder of 79 incarcerated people as a result of the disputes of criminal gangs such as Los Choneros, Los Lobos, Los Lagartos and Los Tiburones for the control of prisons (Primicias, 2021).

In addition, between August 2022 and September 2023, the FGE has reported 15 attacks against Ecuadorian politicians, 7 of which have ended in murder, including the assassination of former presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio; of these 15 crimes, 14 remain unprosecuted (Primicias, 2023). The motivation for the actions of these criminal groups is purely economic, but not ideological; for this reason, it differs from guerrilla groups such as the FARC, which had a clear ideological motivation, which was a communist guerrilla of Marxist-Leninist inspiration. These guerrilla groups arose within the framework of the Latin American liberation struggles, fueled by the US-Soviet tension during the Cold War.

In the long term, these groups have found it necessary to employ economic strategies such as the illegal production and sale of cocaine to countries in the Global North to survive. For example, organized crime gangs such as the drug cartels, be it the Medellin cartel in Colombia in the 1970s or the Jalisco Cartel - New Generation (CJNG) and the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico today. Both Mexican cartels extended their influence to countries such as Ecuador and vie for control of corridors and support networks through alliances with Ecuadorian drug gangs to ship cocaine along their coasts to Central America, the United States, and Europe (Torres, 2021). This influence also extended to the institutional spheres of the Ecuadorian state when around 30 people, including judges, prosecutors, and police, were arrested as part of an investigation into drug trafficking-related crimes, according to the president of the FGE, Diana Salazar (AFP, 2023).

Terror would seize Ecuadorian citizens when an armed Ecuadorian drug trafficking group, Los Tiguerones, took hostage journalists, technicians, and administrative personnel in the studios of the public channel TC Televisión on January 9, 2024, located in the north of Guayaquil. This act provoked an immediate reaction from the president of the Ecuadorian government, Daniel Noboa, who declared an "internal armed conflict" and labeled these drug gangs as terrorists and any criminal act committed by them as a terrorist act (Agencia EFE, 2024). Ecuador is immersed in an unprecedented wave of violence; has the population always felt alien to this type of violence, or was it simply a reality ignored until it developed into an advanced national security threat?

The declaration of war against drug gangs by Noboa's government is not new; it has already been seen in Colombia against Pablo Escobar's Medellin Cartel and in Mexico in 2006 with former President Felipe Calderon against Mexican cartels. The war has been successful in the short term; however, in the medium term, as Jaramillo (2024) mentions, it has not been effective in reducing the drug trafficking business, violence, and corruption. On the contrary, there has been a boom in drug production and trafficking in these countries; its productivity is on the rise, from 5.8 to 6.4 metric tons per hectare per year between 2019 and 2022. The price in countries such as the United States, Europe, and Asia could reach an approximate value between USD 65 million and 130 billion, depending on the market. The profit for participating in this business for producer countries would be around 8%, that is, between USD 5 and 10,000 million. Therefore, it has caused drug trafficking groups to strengthen their arms and political strength by buying politicians, judges, private businesses, and public forces (Jaramillo, 2024).

Ecuador and Colombia have been involved in a violent environment due to the war against drug trafficking, which both countries have declared as part of their state policies. In Colombia, the war against drug trafficking intensified beginning in the 1980s, when the country

experienced violence from the Medellín and Cali cartels. Throughout the following decades, several Colombian governments implemented strategies to combat drug trafficking, with the support of the United States through initiatives such as Plan Colombia signed in 2000 (Rosen & Zepeda Martínez, 2016). This plan, despite some improvements in security and "partial victories," did not fulfill its main objective of reducing drug cultivation in the country. On the other hand, Ecuador, being located between Colombia and Peru, makes it a transit and operational point for drug traffickers. As a consequence of the lack of control at the ports, the fight between the Mexican and Colombian cartels for the internal market, and the violence unleashed in the war of hired assassins have contributed to the growth of the drug business and its power in the country (Escalante, 2023).

The high demand for cocaine and the diversity of criminal actors that dispute its control (production and sale) have led to an increase in the cost of commercialization in Colombia due to the excess supply of the product, especially in the south of Colombia. It is estimated that transporting one ton of cocaine in Colombia costs around USD 1.6 million, while in Ecuador, it would cost around USD 800,000 (Jaramillo, 2024). Therefore, it is more profitable to transport it through Ecuador due to low production costs. Faced with the collapse of cocaine prices, Gustavo Petro's government invited Europe to help Colombia through investing to give other options to the farmers to move away from coca production (Página 12, 2023). Although Colombian academic experts assure the existence of alternatives to coca production, no crop is more profitable than coca. However, producing iraca palm ensures the occupation of the land, turning it into productive land and guaranteeing an income that promises to grow; growers would have an alternative for subsistence and good commercialization and would increase family income (Muñoz López, 2020).

Government authorities must employ other strategies to counteract the advance and strengthening of drug trafficking groups. Drug trafficking groups achieved their strength through the sale of narcotics, such as cocaine. In times of crisis, such as the one the drug cartels are facing, the authorities should take advantage of weakened cartels by focusing their energies on generating alternative agricultural production plans, as Colombian President Gustavo Petro has suggested. My research suggests focusing on two palms produced in Ecuador and Colombia. The palms are *C. palmata*, known in Ecuador as the toquilla palm and in Colombia as the iruca palm, as well as *A. standleyanum*, also called the mocora or güérregue palm, in Ecuador and Colombia, respectively. The raw material from these plants is used to make handicrafts or artifacts highly valued in the global market. These palms have a high economic and cultural value for both countries. The objective is to offer safe and economically viable alternatives to people who make a living from agricultural production.

Additionally, the populations that rely on the production and sale of these two palms face structural problems such as economic and gender inequality, as well as violence from drug trafficking groups that seek to forcibly recruit or coerce them into working in coca fields. These individuals live in a constant state of vulnerability, closely tied to their territorial circumstances, as violence is mainly concentrated in the Costa region (El Universo, 2023), often lacking state policies addressing their crucial needs, such as education, electricity and energy, water, sanitation, waste removal, and healthcare. For example, in Ecuador, the communities most vulnerable to drug violence are those on the coast, including Afro-Ecuadorians and Montuvios, as well as Indigenous communities living near the border with Colombia, such as the Emberá Katío, Emberá Chamí, Emberá Katío, Emberá Dovidá, los Wounaan and the Tule (Tarazona, 2023).

On the Ecuadorian coast and in southern Colombia, these two palms are often cultivated and processed by people from ethnic communities, such as the Montuvio and Afro-Ecuadorian communities in Ecuador. The result of processing the two palms is handicrafts or artifacts, such as hats. The Montuvio community gives a cultural significance to the toquilla straw hat, apart from daily use as protection from the sun, since they use it to celebrate their traditional festivities, such as the Chigualo Festival through typical dances like the "Baile del Sombrerito" (Little Hat Dance), in which the hat is an essential part of the celebration. Furthermore, the cultural significance of these palms is evident when people name places in recognition, such as the Paján canton in Manabí, Ecuador, known for its abundance of mocora palms (Paucar, 2017). Similarly, in southern Colombia, the Wounaan Indigenous community gives cultural importance to the artifacts produced from processing the güérregue palm. In the Montuvio and Wounaan communities, women are responsible for crafting handicrafts and artifacts. The latter utilizes the fibers of the güérregue plant to create solid vases adorned with particular patterns representing everyday life situations, elements of nature, and the beliefs of the Wounaan people (Artesanías de Colombia, 2024). Meanwhile, men are in charge of the physical parts such as cultivation, harvesting, and transportation. There is a clear gender division in the allocation of work tasks.

A problem that has not been considered as much but which, in the long term, can have significant consequences and further widen the existing social inequality in these communities is climate change and its impact. Latin America and the Caribbean are facing grave effects of climate change, with projections indicating an increase of more than 1.5% in global temperature in the coming years (CAF, 2023). This projection is worrying, especially when UNESCO has declared that of 318 World Heritage cities, nearly 1/3 are coastal and are impacted by climate change (UNESCO, 2021). Initiatives like the Provincial System of

Conservation and Sustainable Use Areas (SPACUS), approved by the Santa Elena Provincial Council, aim to protect vital ecosystems, preserving over 80% of the province's native forest and safeguarding crucial water sources for the region's inhabitants and economy (Friedman, 2022).

So, is it possible to reduce the levels of violence and structural problems through investment focused on preserving cultural heritage so that ethnic communities can make a sustainable living from it? Yes, it is possible, especially when there are projects such as “Tejiendo el Desarrollo Sostenible en Pile” [Weaving Sustainable Development in Pile], which equips artisans and young people from the community of Pile, Manabí, Ecuador, with tools to strengthen the value chain of the Ecuadorian toquilla straw hat, in collaboration with UNESCO, the National Institute of Cultural Heritage (INPC) and funding from the French Embassy in Ecuador (UNESCO, 2023a).

Justification

The violence of drug trafficking has represented one of the greatest challenges for the Ecuadorian state in recent years, not to mention Colombia's complex history in the same area. Therefore, creating peaceful spaces is not a need but an obligation for governments, especially when their populations demand it. In the Ecuadorian case, violence has led to an unprecedented increase in the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants along the coastal territory, severely affecting its communities.

The official narrative by the media and international organizations states that the main reason for the increase in violence is due to poverty and inequality. However, the problem goes further when drug violence intertwines with structural issues such as migration due to a lack of job opportunities, climate change, and lack of access to basic services such as drinking water,

electricity, or education. These aspects are fundamental for the new generations to be able to progress and mobilize socially. In addition, these problems have resulted in the loss of cultural identity. New generations show little interest in participating in artisan activities and in continuing to make traditional crafts. This situation reflects an additional challenge for the preservation of cultural heritage and social cohesion in communities affected by drug violence. It is essential to address these problems comprehensively, considering both the immediate causes of violence and its deep roots in social inequality, lack of opportunities, and loss of cultural identity. Only through effective public policies and coordinated actions at the national and international levels will we be able to move towards building a more peaceful, inclusive, and prosperous society.

This research arises from the need to address a problem in an interdisciplinary manner, which aims to reduce the long-term structural issues faced by communities dedicated to the cultivation and production of toquilla or iraca and mocora or güérregue palms. It is a regional problem that has been neglected for many decades by the Ecuadorian and Colombian states, even more so given the lack of understanding in terms of foreign policy.

Research Objectives

Principal objective

1. Analyze the role of UNESCO in the conservation and protection of the *Carludovica palmata* and *Astrocaryum standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia to reduce poverty and inequality.

Secondary objectives

1. Discuss how the conservation and protection efforts for *Carludovica palmata* and *Astrocaryum standleyanum* palms fit into UNESCO's broader goals and objectives.
2. Analyze the challenges for biodiversity conservation and protection of the *Carludovica palmata* and *Astrocaryum standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia.
3. Establish a holistic approach via the term cultural weaves that can contribute to understanding the socioeconomic challenges in the conservation and protection of the *Carludovica palmata* and *Astrocaryum standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia to reduce poverty and inequality.

Research questions

Primary research question

1. What is the role of UNESCO in the conservation and protection of the *Carludovica palmata* and *Astrocaryum standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia to reduce poverty and inequality?

Secondary research questions

1. How do the conservation and protection efforts for *Carludovica palmata* and *Astrocaryum standleyanum* palms fit into UNESCO's broader goals and objectives?
2. What are the challenges for biodiversity conservation and protection of the *Carludovica palmata* and *Astrocaryum standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia?
3. How can a holistic approach via the term cultural weaves contribute to understanding the socioeconomic challenges in the conservation and protection of the *Carludovica palmata* and *Astrocaryum standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia to reduce poverty and inequality?

Literature review

The conservation and protection of a given territory's natural and cultural resources has been one of the main challenges of international organizations and states today, even more so when those resources are disappearing due to the overexploitation of natural resources, lack of effective conservation policies, and privatization of heritage sites, mainly influenced by globalization on the economy and social dynamics, which has generated territorial and social conflicts (Hernández, 2009). Understanding the role of International Organizations (IOs) in facilitating cooperation among states, overcoming market failures, and addressing collective action dilemmas is essential. Moreover, they exercise power by constructing the social world, influencing development, security definitions, and international discourse. Despite potential inefficiencies and dysfunction, IOs are essential in managing rapid technological change and globalization and promoting peace as an alternative to conflict (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999). In this context, it is fundamental to understand the role of UNESCO as one of the most influential IOs worldwide in promoting the transition to a peaceful and sustainable economic development system. For example, it laid the foundations for advancing interdisciplinary and systematic understanding of environmental problems through the International Environmental Education Program (IEEP) (Román Núñez & Cuesta Moreno, 2016).

The conservation and protection of *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia necessitate understanding the complex social network that involves the interaction of diverse social agents, from Montuvios, farmers, Indigenous, and Afro-descendants to the private sector and its socioeconomic challenges, from the cultivation of the palms to the artisanal sale as a result of their processing. Understanding this social system as complex is crucial as it shifts the focus from simplistic solutions to holistic comprehension. Embracing complexity helps avoid oversimplification, fostering a deeper understanding of the

underlying causes, and promoting resilience in addressing challenges within social structures (Poli, 2013).

This paper's literature review on UNESCO's role in the conservation and protection of *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia to reduce poverty and inequality is divided into three parts: First, conservation and protection efforts within the framework of UNESCO's broad objectives; second, challenges of conservation and protection of these two palms in Ecuador and Colombia; third, seeking a holistic explanation through the term "cultural weaves" of the socioeconomic challenges in conservation and protection to reduce poverty and inequality in these two countries. This review aims to critically examine the role of UNESCO in conserving and protecting emblematic natural spaces, often considered cultural heritages. Likewise, this review seeks to encourage UNESCO to take a more active role and participate as a third actor in the cooperation between Ecuador and Colombia, in search of common objectives for the protection of natural areas, which in turn allows for addressing the specific challenges that both countries face in the conservation of these two palms, such as inequality, poverty, violence, environmental pressures, among others. Through an exhaustive review of the available literature, we seek to understand these conservation efforts and explore the concept of "cultural weaves" as a lens to understand this complex social system that involves socioeconomic and cultural challenges in the conservation of these two palms, with the ultimate goal of offering recommendations to strengthen policies and actions in these areas to reduce poverty and inequality.

Conservation and protection efforts within the framework of UNESCO's broader objectives

UNESCO was founded in 1945 after World War II to promote peace and security through international collaboration in education, science, and culture. As a specialized UN agency with 195 member states, UNESCO seeks to foster intellectual solidarity and intercultural understanding to prevent conflict. Over the years, UNESCO has been instrumental in managing World Heritage Sites with outstanding universal value (OUV), including natural sites of exceptional beauty or ecological significance, advocating for sustainable development, and defending cultural diversity and heritage preservation. This has been evidenced in conventions like the 1989 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore or in the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in 2005, which emphasizes states' rights to protect and promote cultural diversity (Seeger, 2015).

UNESCO's objectives encompass safeguarding intangible cultural heritage through conventions, as well as focusing on promoting cultural diversity and expression and aiming to promote the conservation of biodiversity, ecosystems, and natural resources through international cooperation and agreements. In addition, UNESCO supports research, education, and awareness-raising initiatives to promote sustainable development and environmental conservation efforts worldwide. It also assists countries in the Global South (Bhargava, 1951; Seeger, 2015). UNESCO's objectives include building an environment of sustainable peace by promoting the following strategies: education, training to promote peaceful conflict resolution, sharing relevant information on the values of peace and security, supporting community initiatives that foster social harmony and peaceful coexistence, and promoting values of democracy, equality and respect for human rights (Ilcan & Phillips, 2006).

The relationship between the construction of a peaceful environment and the conservation of natural and cultural heritage lies in the fact that it builds a peaceful and

harmonious environment. In other words, it promotes respect for diversity, strengthens collective identity, and fosters respect for interculturality -essential elements for peaceful coexistence and sustainable development (Iltis & Phillips, 2006). The preservation of these elements not only preserves historical memory and cultural heritage but also strengthens social stability through peaceful environments and the prosperity of their communities.

Among UNESCO's projects to promote an environment of education, protection, and sustainable development in Latin America (LAC) is the UNESCO Global Geoparks (UGGPs). This project seeks to promote and align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda. These geoparks combine conservation with sustainable development and involve local communities; their objective lies in seeking strategies and best practices to manage these areas of international geological importance to develop these protected areas sustainably (Rosado-González et al., 2020). The 7 UGGPs are Araripe, Brazil (2006); Grutas del Palacio, Uruguay (2013); Mixteca Alta and Comarca Minera, Mexico (2017); Colca and Volcanes de Andagua, Peru (2019); Kuttralkura, Chile (2019); Imbabura, Ecuador (2019); and Rio Coco, Nicaragua (2019) (Rosado-González et al., 2020, p. 3). According to Rosado-González et al. greater benefits to SDGs 5, 8, 10, 11, 15, and 17 were evidenced in 4 of the 7 UGGPs, which contrasts with UNESCO's expectations regarding SDGs 1, 4, 5, 8, 11, 12, 13 and 17 (2020, p.11).



Figure 1. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. United Nations. (2018). Communications materials. *United Nations Sustainable Development*; United Nations. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material/>

Challenges for conserving and protecting the *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia

The palms *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* have different names in both Colombia and Ecuador. In Colombia, *C. palmata* is known as iraca palm, while in Ecuador it is known as toquilla palm. On the other hand, *A. standleyanum* is known as güérregue palm in Colombia and as mocora palm in Ecuador (Hoyos Sánchez et al., 2020; Regalado, 2010; Casas & Lozano, 2018; Pedersen, 1994). The importance of these two palms for these two countries lies mainly in the socioeconomic and cultural aspects.

The importance of the güérregue palm for Colombia lies in its cultural significance, as it is considered one of the most developed craft trades in the sustainable management of raw materials. Its use in the production of handicrafts reflects the natural and cultural richness of the country, involving diverse communities, from Indigenous groups to local artisans in rural areas (Casas & Lozano, 2018). On the other hand, the iraca palm is of great economic importance to Colombia, especially in rural areas of the departments of Nariño, Caldas, Atlántico, Chocó, and Huila. It is used as a non-timber forest product, industrial product, food product, and source of plant fibers in biocomposites (Hoyos Sánchez et al., 2020).

In Ecuador, the toquilla palm, with its fibers used in the production of straw hats, represents a cultural relevance rooted in the country, as part of its heritage for more than 4,500 years. In addition to its historical value, this industry, especially in regions such as Manabí and Santa Elena, plays a crucial role in the country's economy, contributing to its income by producing and exporting high-quality hats (Regalado, 2010). The mocora palm is also significant for Ecuador in both economic and cultural terms. The fibers extracted from the young leaves are used commercially in manufacturing hats, hammocks, mats, and furniture, generating significant income for the local economy. In addition, its presence in agroforestry systems not only highlights its cultural relevance but also promotes sustainable management practices, contributing to biodiversity conservation and offering development opportunities for local communities (Pedersen, 1994).

The challenges for the conservation and protection of these two palms are the following: deforestation, climate change, poverty, inequality, and drug-related violence. It should be clarified that there is not an abundance of academic information that addresses these issues and relates them directly to the proposed topic. Therefore, the purpose of this literature review is to interconnect the available information and offer a new perspective for academic discussion.

1. Deforestation, climate change

The impact of climate change on the conservation of natural and cultural spaces is significant since the increase in temperature, changes in precipitation, and extreme weather events can negatively affect the materials and integrity of these sites. In the case of Ecuador and Colombia, there are climatic phenomena such as the El Niño phenomenon. The inclusion of climate change in management plans, awareness raising, constant monitoring, adequate maintenance, and the adoption of adaptation measures are required to preserve these spaces in

the face of climate risks and ensure their long-term conservation (Sesana et al., 2018). In Ecuador, the case of the mocora palm is reflected in deforestation and climatic variations that have reduced its natural habitat, leading it to be found mainly in agricultural systems as scattered individuals. Although no direct impacts of climate change on the palm have been identified, the loss of forests and climate change conditions could affect its distribution and regeneration, highlighting the importance of implementing conservation and sustainable management measures to preserve this endangered species (Pedersen, 1994).

2. Poverty, inequality, and drug-related violence.

In Colombia and Ecuador, the scarcity of resources and opportunities due to poverty and inequality limits access to adequate education and health services, which hinders the development of skills needed to improve artisanal production (Checa & Ortiz, 2014). Vulnerable groups such as farmers, and Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations in Colombia are affected in various ways. In areas where deforestation pressure is high due to armed conflicts and coca plantations, such as in Tumaco, Catatumbo, San Lucas, La Macarena, and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, farmers may face threats to their security and livelihoods due to the presence of illegal armed groups and the expansion of coca cultivation. Coca production, which is often used as a source of funding for illegal armed groups, can influence deforestation patterns, which can lead to loss of land and resources for local farmers. Violence associated with drug trafficking and armed conflict can also create an insecure environment for farmers, affecting their ability to work the land and live sustainably (Negret et al., 2019). On the other hand, Ecuador's northern border provinces, where illegal activities such as mining, logging, and drug trafficking are concentrated, are the most affected by the interrelationship between deforestation and violence associated with drug trafficking. Marginalized ethnic and

racial groups in these areas face greater risks and challenges due to this complex situation (Defensoría del Pueblo et al., 2021).

It is important to mention other social challenges such as gender inequality and lack of state policies focused on accessing basic services. In Colombia, women, especially Wounaan Indigenous women, play a vital role in managing the güérregue palm for crafts. As Estrella Insuasty (2020) discusses, their craftsmanship reflects their skill and dedication, but they face challenges due to gender inequalities, which hinder their access to opportunities and resources. Similarly, in Ecuador's Manabí province, women face poverty and limited access to essential services. Toro Galárraga (2016) underscores the necessity of effective state policies to address these issues and ensure sustainable development in artisanal activities like toquilla palm cultivation. Discussing these matters is crucial for advocating gender equality and sustainable development in both countries.

The holistic approach of “cultural weaves” to understanding socioeconomic challenges in the conservation and protection to reduce poverty and inequality

Natural and cultural heritage conservation can address socioeconomic challenges by promoting a balance between environmental protection and sustainable economic development. For example, in Costa Rica, the transformation to clean energy and environmental protection has spurred growth in eco-tourism, generating employment and economic opportunities. In addition, integrating culture and nature into development strategies can foster creative and tourism industries that preserve cultural identity and generate income for local communities. This integration can contribute to economic diversification, social inclusion, and the promotion of community solidarity, thus addressing socioeconomic challenges holistically and sustainably (Yúdice, 2018).

To understand the socioeconomic challenges in the conservation and protection of these palms, an analogy is drawn between this complex social system and the production of toquilla straw hats. The processing of the toquilla palm for the production of fine toquilla straw hats involves several stages. It begins with the harvesting of the palm fiber, followed by boiling and bleaching to prepare it for weaving. This is followed by the weaving of the toquilla straw, which includes the splitting of the straw and the actual weaving process. There are two weaving techniques, the "crab" weaving technique and the "mat" weaving technique, the first consists of 8 strands, while the second consists of 16. Finally, the final finishing touches are made to give shape and quality to the hat, culminating in a unique handcrafted piece that represents a deep-rooted cultural tradition in Ecuador and a symbol of national identity (Regalado, 2010). To understand these socioeconomic challenges it is essential to interconnect them with each other, as if it were one of the weaving techniques mentioned, each strand is needed to shape the hat, and not to analyze them individually, simplifying them, otherwise it would not be possible to propose effective solutions. Therefore, the term 'cultural weaves' seeks to explain the socioeconomic challenges of the production processes of those artifacts that are part of the cultural identity of an ethnic group, and without previously solving these challenges, it is very difficult for such marginalized groups to advance socially through the sale of the cultural artifacts of their communities.

In conclusion, the theoretical approaches addressed in the three sub-themes are interwoven to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges associated with the conservation and protection of natural and cultural resources. The perspective of international organizations, such as UNESCO, highlights the importance of global cooperation and the fundamental role of international policies in promoting conservation and sustainable development. On the other hand, the analysis of the specific challenges faced in the

conservation of *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms highlights the complexity of the social, economic, and environmental interactions involved in natural resource management. Finally, the concept of "cultural weaves" provides a lens for examining the socioeconomic dimensions of cultural artifact production, highlighting the importance of addressing inequalities and structural barriers affecting marginalized communities. Linking these approaches reveals the need for integrated and collaborative approaches that recognize the interconnectedness between natural and social systems and promote equitable and sustainable solutions to conservation and development challenges.

Positionality and Reflexivity

As the author of the thesis, I have always faced the difficulty of accepting my ethnic identity, belonging to the Montuvio people, in a society in which the state apparatus and the public media have made use of their power to discriminate and use racist tactics against people who widely identify as Montuvio -from classist to racist comments, categorizing us exclusively as farmers, with low economic and educational levels. However, the mestizo society of the Andean and Coast region, in their need to search for a homogeneous and white society, has left aside *other* types of people, such as Afro-Ecuadorians, Indigenous, and Montuvio people. For this reason, my position is to emphasize my Montuvio identity, above those classist, racist, and stereotypical comments that marginalize my cultural heritage to rurality, poverty, and lack of education. Even though I grew up in an urban area, I frequently visited the Montuvio territorial belonging (countryside/rural area) thanks to my mother's side of the family, mostly coastal farmers, who find their identity in the Montuvio culture.

From that ethnic identity position, I have tried to find through research and academic debate that we are not a class identity, as many academics have discussed the Montuvio identity in Ecuador. There is a cultural history from the beginning of the colonial era showing records

of Montuvio traditions. However, it should be clarified that like any marginalized group, we are victims of the reproduction of violent mechanisms, such as reproducing racist and sexist acts. Therefore, in identifying myself as a Montuvio, it is also worth clarifying that I do not identify with all the customs that many community members reproduce, such as those mentioned above.

This is how I have selected the research topic, as it is often stated that the problems faced by communities that produce and process *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms are primarily economic, meaning they are poor communities, such as the Montuvio people in Ecuador. Ecuadorian society in conjunction with the Ecuadorian state, has imposed a vision of class identity on the Montuvio identity, so it is not surprising that they think that the main issue this community is facing is poverty. However, it is necessary to mention, as I do throughout the dissertation, that other problems are strongly related to each other, so each problem should not be treated in isolation but analyzed in its complexity. Moreover, I realized that not only the Montuvio community faces this and other problems, but also other communities in Ecuador and Colombia, where these palms are cultivated and processed in an artisanal way, beyond the economic one, such as the following: gender inequality, especially when there are established gender roles; men, for the most part, are in charge of cultivation and transportation, while women are in charge of artisanal processing, resulting in artifacts of high cultural value and getting low payments for them; lack of access to basic services due to the lack of public policies; vulnerability to violence by drug trafficking groups; deforestation; climate change, among others.

Living in and visiting urban and rural areas has allowed me to witness the inequalities between these two territories. Therefore, it is not surprising to hear the testimonies of my grandparents, who were forced to migrate from the countryside of Manabí to the city or other

cities for economic reasons, where thousands of people migrate for the same reason (Ramos, 2024). The idea for the topic under discussion arose when I visited Montecristi in 2023 to learn to weave toquilla straw hats and witnessed a woman artisan earning \$20 for making a hat; a process that takes over a month without considering the preparation of the *C. palmata* palm before manufacturing it. Highlighting her experience, which she shared with me, she revealed that she has been weaving for more than 40 years. However, she mentioned that she lives in a remote sector of Montecristi and that she must always travel to the city to weave at the request of hat sellers. Curiously, when I bought two hats, it cost me approximately \$90.

That experience motivated me to understand this social phenomenon perpetuating the social inequalities of the people dedicated to the cultivation and handicraft elaboration of these palms, which are still in force. It is paradoxical that, even though the toquilla straw hat is sold on the foreign market for hundreds to thousands of dollars per unit, its artisans continue to live in marginality. This inequality is reinforced when it seeks to represent this hat as a symbol of Ecuadorian identity and unity abroad when it is far from this reality. I firmly believe that this artifact is essential to the Montuvio traditions. However, Ecuadorian mestizo society overlooks the cultural value of the hat for this ethnic community, and paradoxically, feels proud of it without knowing which community has elaborated it, whether it is the Montuvio community or the Cholas cuencanas, since both communities have different techniques of weaving the hat. This ignorance, in one way or another, perpetuates the abuse by hat-selling companies and other handicrafts made from these palms, as they make their artisans invisible and provide them with little economic compensation.

The methodology used in the research is mixed, using both quantitative and qualitative data in the literature review, discussion, and analysis. The reason behind this decision to use quantitative data as part of the discussion is to explain socioeconomic challenges, with which

authorities and academics have tried to quantify the magnitude of those faced by these communities, such as the correlation between high levels of deforestation and high levels of violence by drug gangs and low levels of deforestation in areas protected by Afro and Indigenous communities (Negret et al., 2019). In addition, the use of statistics in this dissertation is to explain the economic inequalities faced by these communities.

On the other hand, the use of qualitative data to complement that information that the quantitative has not been able to analyze, especially those data collected that express the importance, for example, of the role of women in the manufacture of handicrafts from these two palms (Casas & Lozano, 2018; Estrella Insuasty, 2020). It is important to note that the use of both methodologies may be due to a bias from my standpoint on my topic, trying to explain exhaustively the dynamics that occur in the artisanal manufacturing of these two palms, which are usually explained in isolation and not in their complexity. Governmental public policies focused on revitalizing cultural dynamics such as crafts and artifacts usually respond to economic aspects. For example, creating entrepreneurial spaces for these artisans; however, they do not take into account the socioeconomic conditions in which many of them live, such as the lack of access to stable jobs, basic services, or adequate infrastructure for their mobilization to these spaces. Therefore, in the work, I try to collect information about different cases and apply it to the topic under discussion.

Discussion

The conservation and protection of natural and cultural resources in Ecuador and Colombia is a significant challenge due to overexploitation, lack of effective policies that address inequalities and environmental pressures, and narco violence. International Organizations (IOs) are crucial in facilitating cooperation among states, overcoming market failures, and addressing collective action dilemmas. UNESCO is one of the most influential

IOs worldwide in promoting a peaceful and sustainable economic development system. The conservation and protection of *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia respectively, involve understanding the complex social network of diverse agents, including Montuvios, farmers, Indigenous and Afro-descendants, and the private sector. Understanding this complex system helps avoid oversimplification and promotes resilience in addressing challenges within social structures. This paper reviews UNESCO's role in conserving and protecting these palms, focusing on conservation efforts within UNESCO's broad objectives, challenges, and the concept of "cultural weaves." Based on the research, I suggest that UNESCO take a more active role in cooperation between Ecuador and Colombia, seeking common objectives for protecting cultural and natural areas and addressing specific challenges such as inequality, poverty, violence, and environmental pressures.

Conservation and protection efforts within the framework of UNESCO's broader objectives

UNESCO's conception of the essence of lasting peace has evolved since its creation in 1945. It was to be based on three principles. First, it rested on the foundation of international law that regulates interactions between nations, ensuring stability and order. Secondly, genuine justice in peace is based on respect for human rights, freedoms, and self-determination of peoples, promoting equality and dignity. Finally, the realization of positive peace requires cooperation among states, which, characterized by the efforts of the latter, is complemented by the participation of individuals and communities in constructive endeavors, fostering unity and progress (Mayor, 1992). Today, with the emergence of new actors and challenges in the international system, these conditions have expanded; development is essential since poverty in less developed countries represents a permanent threat to world peace. Excessive inequalities between social categories and strata within states also generate similar risks. In addition,

environmental protection is increasingly recognized as an essential condition for peace (Mayor, 1992). Therefore, UNESCO aims to protect cultural heritage, promote diversity, and conserve biodiversity through international agreements. It also supports sustainable development and environmental conservation, supporting countries of the Global South. In terms of peace, it promotes education, peaceful conflict resolution, and values of democracy and human rights (Bhargava, 1951; Seeger, 2015; Ilcan & Phillips, 2006).

Protecting cultural heritage is a global responsibility due to its irreplaceable nature since its loss or destruction impacts global culture. Cultural heritage refers to the ancestral knowledge transmitted orally from generation to generation within an ethnic community. People with this knowledge handmade cultural artifacts of great value for their communities' festivals and traditions. In this sense, UNESCO's role has been crucial in developing legal frameworks through conventions, which total six. Currently, their protection contributes to the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (Jagielska-Burduk et al., 2021). One of the most important conventions addressing these issues is the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which emphasizes the rights of states to protect and promote cultural diversity (Seeger, 2015). Ecuador and Colombia adhered to it in 2006 and 2013, respectively (UNESCO, 2023b). The protection of cultural heritage also implies conserving and protecting the environment, which reproduces a complex symbiotic system of social interaction that generates cultural expressions, defined in UNESCO's 2005 convention as: "expressions that result from the creativity of individuals, groups, and societies, and that have cultural content, which refers to the symbolic meaning, artistic dimension and cultural values that originate from or express cultural identities" (UNESCO, 2008, p.5). Likewise, this effort to protect the environment and cultural heritage is only possible with collaboration between states, UNESCO, and local communities. In this case, collaboration is necessary to

conserve and protect *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia, aiming to reduce poverty and inequality and foster a sustainable peaceful environment.

The role of local communities is fundamental to achieving this objective since their participation promotes the construction of a harmonious and peaceful environment, consequently, creating a space that respects diversity, strengthens collective identity and fosters respect for interculturality, essential elements for peaceful coexistence and sustainable development (Ilcan & Phillips, 2006). UNESCO increasingly recognizes the importance of local communities in managing heritage sites. Attention to the well-being of local communities is a recent development for UNESCO. Some studies have highlighted the importance of well-being in cultural heritage sites, but often overlook the external relationships of local communities with government agencies and international organizations such as UNESCO. Jang and Mennis argue that heritage conservation must consider the well-being of local communities, including their relationships with stakeholders such as UNESCO, for effective site management (2021, p.2). This paper further argues that local communities' welfare is crucial for conserving cultural and environmental heritage, especially those working with the *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms, as these communities are affected by violence and economic and social inequalities.

Practical efforts that UNESCO, in collaboration with states, has made to work with local communities include the creation and management of UNESCO's Global Geoparks Programs (UGGps), Biosphere Reserves (BRs), and UNESCO World Heritage Sites (UWHS). UGGps benefit the fulfillment of the SDGs, as well as create economic opportunities, including the participation of local communities in UGGps, which fosters cultural pride, environmental awareness, and skills development (Rosado-Gonzalez et al., 2020; Gonzalez-Tejada et al., 2017). Meanwhile, UWHS significantly impacts international tourism revenues

and employment in the tourism sector, highlighting the importance of tangible cultural heritages for destination competitiveness and tourism development (Škrabić Perić et al., 2021). Likewise, BRs foster economic development, cultural preservation, and biodiversity conservation through collaboration with local communities, leading to sustainable outcomes and shared benefits, especially evidenced in Latin America, where stakeholder participation contributes significantly to achieving conservation and development goals (Karez et al., 2015; Stoll-Kleemann et al., 2010). Then, in line with Skrabic et al. (2021), Karez et al. (2015), and Stoll-Kleemann et al. (2010), I argue that human capital should be considered a fundamental factor in enhancing the development and well-being of a cultural and environmental destination, and that, in the absence of effective governance through public policies, the potential of local communities in the production of cultural artifacts, as one of the economic sources of cultural tourism, cannot be harnessed.

Evidence provided by UNESCO to analyze the impact of culture on a country's development is the UNESCO Culture for Development Indicator Suite (CDIS). These served as the basis for UNESCO's Culture|2030, implemented in 17 countries since 2009, including Ecuador and Colombia. Its methodology and framework expand the CDISs, which consisted of 22 indicators that measured the role of culture in national development processes, including issues such as environment and urban planning, promoting their application at the local level and harmonizing responses to ensure coherence with the 2030 Agenda (UNESCO, 2020). The CDIS in Ecuador emphasized promoting a culture for the common good. It recognized the potential of the cultural sector for economic development. However, it suggested greater support to strengthen domestic consumption of cultural goods and services, reflecting the significant economic impact and role in job creation of cultural and creative industries, which contributed 4.76% to GDP in 2010, with 42.6% attributed to support activities and 57.4% to

core cultural activities. (Telesur, 2015; UNESCO Havana, 2016). In Colombia, cultural activities contribute 3.4% to GDP, with around 300,000 people employed in the creative sector, representing 3.5% of the national GDP and highlighting the economic importance of the sector and its potential for economic diversification, job creation, and reduction of social inequalities (UNESCO Havana, 2016). There is yet to be evidence of sources available on the internet that analyze the impact of the Culture|2030 indicators for Ecuador and Colombia.

Similarly, limited online coverage discusses UNESCO's role in consolidating projects to protect these palms. There is only evidence of news or reports about UNESCO about the consolidation of projects to protect handicrafts due to the processing of these palms. For example, the project "Weaving Sustainable Development in Pile" strengthened the value chain of the Ecuadorian toquilla straw hat in the community of Pile through actions to safeguard cultural heritage, training, and tourism promotion, in collaboration with UNESCO, INPC, and the French Embassy in Ecuador (Carrera, 2022). This project is part of the protection initiatives of the toquilla straw hat as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity since it was inscribed as such by UNESCO in 2012 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. On the other hand, there is a lack of conservation projects led by UNESCO in Colombia for the artifacts and the palms from which they originate. In this case, the most representative cultural artifact is the güérregue basketry, which is made from the palm of the same name (*A. standleyanum*), created by the Wounaan Indigenous community, located on the San Juan coast in the department of Chocó (Sánchez Ariza, 2021).

Challenges for conserving and protecting the *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia

Ecuador and Colombia have faced significant challenges in the fight against drug trafficking due to their geographic location and historical context of violence, with initiatives such as Plan Colombia showing partial success in addressing drug cultivation and trafficking (Escalante, 2023; Rosen & Zepeda Martinez, 2016). In particular, Ecuador has experienced a significant increase in drug-related violence since 2018 (Rojas Sasse, 2024). As discussed in this paper, high levels of violence are found in specific territories, in both of these countries' lowland coastal and border regions (BBC News Mundo, 2024; Negret et al., 2019). Coincidentally, these areas are where *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms are produced by communities facing great inequalities, in addition to the violence associated with drug trafficking. The presence of these two palms in Ecuador is distributed along the Ecuadorian coast and in mountainous areas of the east, where the climate is humid. In Colombia, they are distributed in the Andean and coastal regions (Gobernación del Huila, 2022; Mederos-Machado et al., 2020; Montúfar et al., 2013; Pedersen, 1994).

These two palms are of great importance for Colombia and Ecuador, both in socioeconomic and cultural aspects. In Colombia, the güérregue (*A. standleyanum*) is culturally fundamental, being part of one of the most developed and sustainable craft trades in the country, while the iraca has great economic relevance in rural areas of several departments (Casas & Lozano, 2018; Hoyos Sánchez et al., 2020). On the other hand, in Ecuador, the toquilla palm is an integral part of the cultural heritage, especially in the production of high-quality straw hats, while the mocora palm is key both economically and culturally, providing significant income and encouraging sustainable management practices (Regalado, 2010; Pedersen, 1994).

Among Ecuador's 10 poorest provinces, Esmeraldas ranks fourth with 52.9%, Sucumbíos sixth with 50.90%, and Carchi ninth with 35.70%. These three provinces border

Colombia and experience high levels of violence due to drug trafficking, as well as being key areas for transporting drugs from Colombia into Ecuador (Gonzalez, 2023; Garcia, 2024). Four of Ecuador's seven coastal provinces have more than 30% poverty: Esmeraldas, Santa Elena, Los Ríos, and Manabí. These regions also show high levels of violence related to drug trafficking (González, 2023). In terms of inequality, three provinces bordering Colombia in 2022 stand out: Sucumbíos with a Gini index of 0.52, Carchi with 0.51, and Esmeraldas with 0.49. The coastal provinces, although less unequal, have indices in the range of 0.39-0.43 (González, 2023).

Poverty affects 70% of rural areas, and according to the UN (ONU, 2023), violence in Ecuador is rooted in poverty, which is higher in the provinces with the largest Indigenous population. The provinces with the largest Indigenous populations are mainly in the Amazon and Sierra, where poverty is also significant (Noboa, 2023). In total, 12 of the 24 Ecuadorian provinces have poverty rates above 30%, six of them in the Amazon region, four in the Sierra, and two on the coast. Eight of these provinces have a significant Indigenous population.

In Ecuador, the relationship between poverty, inequality, and violence is complex, as some provinces less affected by poverty and inequality show high levels of violence. Likewise, provinces in the highlands and the Amazon show high levels of poverty and inequality, but with low homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants, as shown in Annex A. However, the provinces bordering Colombia, which are the poorest and most unequal, also have high homicide rates (Noboa, 2023). Experts discuss that there is a strong relationship between the increase in homicides and drug trafficking activity, extortion rates, and gang presence (Austin, 2023; BBC News Mundo, 2024; Dalby, 2024). The UN narrative, which prioritizes the Indigenous population, may not fully reflect Ecuadorian reality, as groups such as Afro-Ecuadorians and Montuvios also face difficult living conditions and high levels of violence. The lack of

disaggregated data on the Montuvio population makes their needs invisible and hinders the implementation of effective policies to address drug-related violence. It is essential to consider all communities affected by violence, including Afro-Ecuadorian and Montuvio communities, to develop effective prevention and response strategies, even more so when they are the main growers, artisans, and weavers of *A. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms in Ecuador.

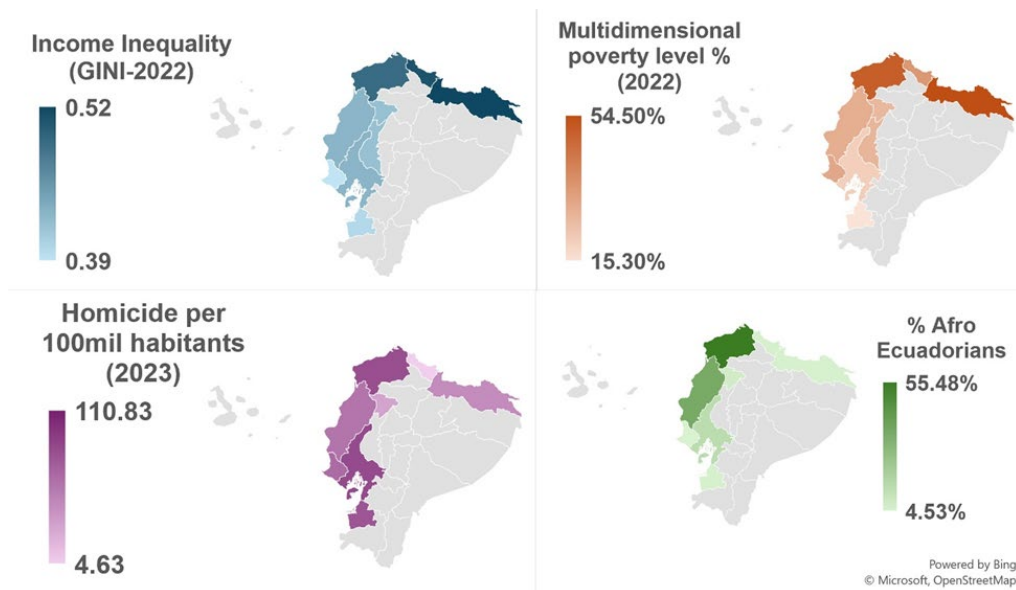


Figure 2. Self-identification, violence, and inequality in Ecuador. Elaborate by Bryan Salas based on data compiled by García (2024), González (2023), and Noboa (2023).

The challenges facing Ecuador and Colombia are not the same, although they are similar in many ways. In Ecuador, violence associated with drug trafficking has been on the rise since 2018 (Rojas Sasse, 2024). In line with Austin (2023) and Dalby (2024), this violence arises in Ecuador because the country has gone from being a mere transit point (UNODC & Gobierno del Ecuador, 2015) to becoming a hub for the distribution of drugs, mainly cocaine, in Latin America (Pichel, 2021). In contrast, Colombia has a complex history with cocaine, especially since the 1980s with Pablo Escobar's Medellin Cartel. Unlike Ecuador, Colombia is “the world’s leading producer of coca leaves and cocaine” (Torrado, 2023). Colombia's

problem with cocaine lies in the massive production of coca crops, especially in regions such as the coast. This has led to the presence of armed groups, drug trafficking, illegal mining, and extortion, generating violence, forced displacement, and poverty in local communities (International Crisis Group, 2019). Is there a relationship between coca cultivation and the other variables? I discuss only the relationship between poverty, deforestation, violence by armed groups, and coca cultivation.

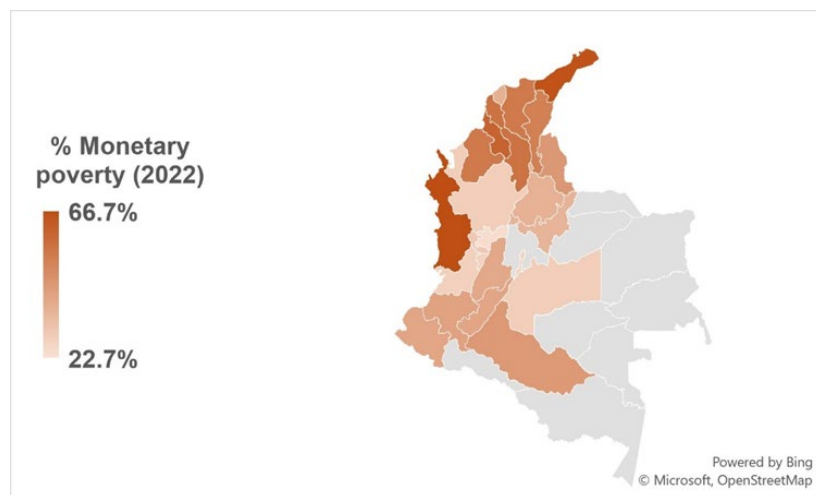


Figure 3. Poverty in Colombia, 2022. Elaborate by Bryan Salas based on data compiled by Ortiz (2023).

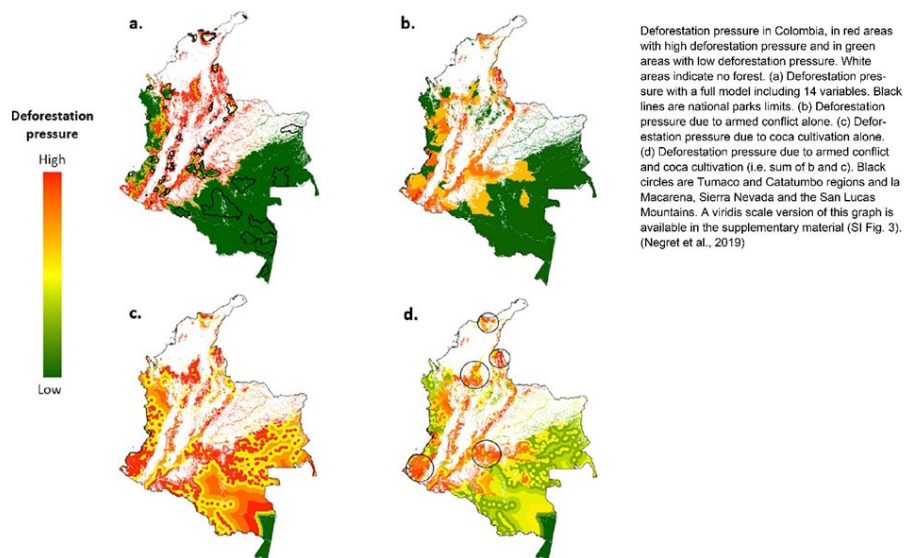


Figure 4. Deforestation pressure in Colombia. Made by Negret et al. (2019).

According to Negrete et al. (2019), areas such as Tumaco, Catatumbo, San Lucas, La Macarena, and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia are experiencing high levels of

deforestation due to the armed conflict and the presence of coca crops, which negatively impact biodiversity conservation. These areas are located in the departments of Nariño, Norte de Santander, Bolívar, and Meta, respectively. In addition, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta covers parts of the departments of Cesar, La Guajira, and Magdalena.

These departments also face high levels of monetary poverty, according to Ortiz (2023): La Guajira with 65.4%, Bolivar with 56%, Magdalena with 53.9%, Cesar with 51.9%, Norte de Santander with 44.8%, Nariño with 40.8% and Meta with 28.9%. In addition, there is a considerable presence of Afro-descendants and Indigenous people in these provinces (DANE & UNFPA, 2022).

Therefore, Negrete et al. (2019) state that local communities, especially Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities, play a crucial role in the conservation and reduction of deforestation in Colombia. Indigenous reserves and Afro-Colombian collective lands have been shown to reduce deforestation. Working with these communities to define conservation objectives in conjunction with economic development opportunities can be an effective strategy to protect natural areas and reduce deforestation.

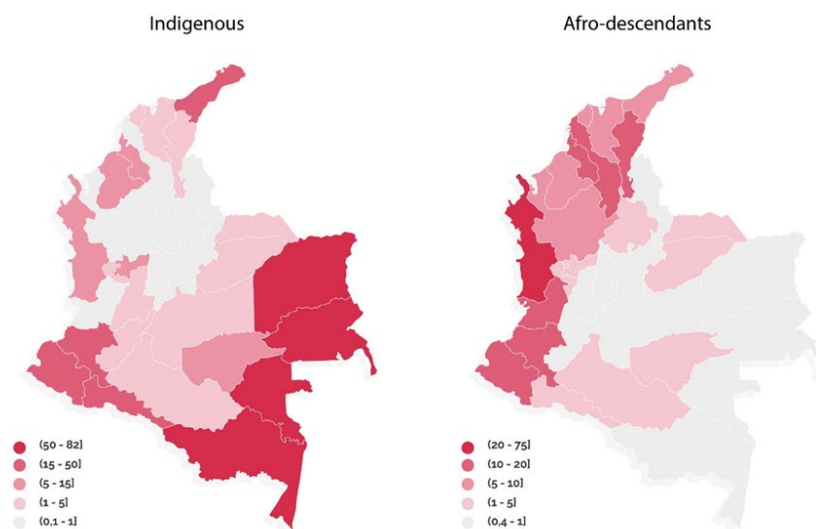


Figure 5. Self-identification in Colombia. Made by DANE and UNFPA (2022).

Another fundamental aspect that represents a challenge in the conservation and protection of these two palms must be considered: the impact of climatic change. In the case of Ecuador, during the year 2023, 205 cantons in Ecuador suffered 3,181 hazardous events due to rainfall. The most recurrent events include floods (41.30%), landslides (33.86%), structural collapse (8.02%), windstorms (5.75%), landslides (5.69%), alluvium (2.33%), subsidence (1.16%), thunderstorms (0.91%), hailstorms (0.88%) and subsidence (0.09%). The provinces most affected by these events were Guayas, Los Ríos, Esmeraldas, Manabí, Santa Elena, Bolívar, Cotopaxi, El Oro, Santo Domingo de Los Tsáchilas, Pichincha, Imbabura and Loja. A total of 148,255 people were impacted, including affected people. In addition, 34,950.78 hectares of agricultural land were impacted (SITREP, 2024). Likewise, the lack of rain negatively affects the agricultural sector, decreasing the production of the raw material, *C. palmata*, needed to weave toquilla straw hats. This shortage of rainfall causes the branches of the plant to not reach the required height for weaving, which jeopardizes the availability of raw materials for weaving artisans in the province of Manabí (Toro Galárraga, 2016).

On the other hand, Ecuador's rural and border Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian communities face challenges such as social vulnerability and the presence of illegal economies such as drug trafficking. Deforestation on the northern border is a serious problem caused by agricultural expansion and illegal activities, with significant environmental impacts (Defensoría del Pueblo et al., 2021). It is vital to implement control measures and promote sustainable alternatives to protect ecosystems and the well-being of local communities, considering that poverty contributes to illegal activities due to the lack of jobs and educational opportunities.

In contrast, Colombian communities, especially low-income Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, are highly vulnerable to climate change due to a lack of access to

basic services and safe housing in at-risk areas. Educational strategies are needed to promote resilience. Colombia faces impacts such as floods, landslides, and droughts, which affect food security and health (Rodríguez-Pacheco et al., 2019). Adaptation and mitigation measures are urgent, especially in coastal areas, the most affected by sea level rise and extreme events that impact local health and food security. Therefore, in line with Sesana et al. (2018), the need to implement adaptive measures for climate change is highlighted, such as monitoring and collaboration between experts, institutions, and the states of Ecuador and Colombia, to address this challenge and preserve the spaces where palms are cultivated along the coastal zone in both countries.

The holistic approach of “cultural weaves” to understanding socioeconomic challenges in the conservation and protection to reduce poverty and inequality

The toquilla straw hat production process in Ecuador is compared to the socio-economic challenges of palm conservation. This analogy, known as 'cultural weavings', highlights the need to understand the challenges in an interconnected way to propose effective solutions and promote the social advancement of marginalized communities through the sale of their cultural artifacts. The 'cultural weaves' refer to the complex and interconnected system of production of cultural activities, goods, and services from the cultivation of raw materials by local communities to their distribution and social association in the marketplace. The cultural weave of *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms faces socioeconomic and environmental risks that threaten their existence, due to the lack of a sustainable plan to keep the elaboration of handicrafts alive in the following generations. The disappearance of this 'cultural weave' implies not only the loss of cultural industries but also the disappearance of intangible cultural heritage: the ancestral knowledge of local communities in the cultivation and management of these palms. The toquilla straw hats of the Montuvio people in Ecuador and the güérrague

basketry of the Wounaan Indigenous community in Colombia are examples of these cultural manifestations, mainly in the coastal areas of both countries.

Artifacts produced through cultural weaving are laborious and usually have a meager monetary return for the work performed. For example, according to Negrete et al. (1994), the mocora production process involves non-destructive harvesting of *A. standleyanum* leaves, followed by preparation of the fibers through various steps such as removal of veins and thorns, boiling, drying, and bleaching, before braiding them into strips to make hats, mats, and furniture. This process can vary in length depending on the scale of production and the methods used, taking several days or weeks to complete. On the other hand, the production process for *C. palmata* to make hats includes straw selection, stripping, splitting, boiling, airing, drying, matching, straw picking, weaving, finishing, and washing. This process can take about three to five months to complete a hat (Regalado, 2010).

It is discussed that the lack of collective organization limits collaboration among producers of cultural artifacts, favoring intermediaries in price negotiations and negatively affecting productivity and access to resources. Establishing an artisan collective would allow economic and social benefits that individually they could not achieve, thus improving the conditions of artisans and agro-producers (Checa & Ortiz, 2014; Toro Galárraga, 2016; Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, 2009). Positive benefits have been observed for artisans in terms of economic retribution through the implementation of projects that promote their associativity. For example, in the production of toquilla straw hats, the following income model per actor in the hat value chain is commonly presented (Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, 2009):

Weavers USD 2.50 → Intermediary USD 4.00 → Exporters USD 10.00 → Wholesalers USD 25.00 → Stores USD 50.00.

Moving from this model to the next, after promoting associativity and creating a cluster of national hat-exporting companies, provided more economic benefits to the artisans:

Weavers USD 5.00 → Associations USD 0.25 → Exporters Alfaro Hats USD 20.00 → Stores USD 50.00.

The predominant cultural weaving or artifact production model should be questioned, especially when more and more young people show disinterest in engaging in this work and opt to migrate to the city in search of better socioeconomic opportunities and to escape drug-related violence in their communities. This situation is even more worrisome when looking at the disparity in economic retribution: artisans who make lower quality toquilla straw hats, which can take 4 to 6 months to produce one hat, are paid between \$5 and \$20, a price that includes the cost of growing and transporting the palms (Redacción El Universo, 2023; Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, 2009). Therefore, there is evidence of economic precariousness at the base of the pyramid of the cultural weave related to toquilla straw hats.

In addition, the cultural industries, which in this context refer to exporters and stores in charge of distributing these products in wider markets, earn significantly higher profits than the artisans and communities dedicated to cultivating, distributing, and processing the palms. For example, in the foreign market, a high-quality hat can reach prices of 10 or 15 thousand dollars (Redacción El Universo, 2023). However, the question arises as to whether all this money reaches the artisans. Reality shows that this is not the case; for example, in Montuvio communities, there is very little social mobility, and the levels of poverty and inequality have remained high for decades.

The concept of cultural weaving vindicates the local cultural identity of the community over the identity that the capitalist system appropriates and homogenizes. For example, the toquilla straw hat is internationally recognized as "Panama hat." However, government institutions and national companies have worked together to promote it in the foreign market as a "Montecristi hat" or as a "100% Ecuadorian" product (Ministerio de Turismo de Ecuador, 2014), thus establishing the hat as part of the national identity of Ecuador. This artificial creation of identity by institutions and companies makes invisible the cultural expressions of artisans belonging to ethnic communities, such as the Montuvio or the Cholas cuencanas in Cuenca, homogenizing their unique weaving process, which differs between the Montuvio community and the Cholas cuencanas. It is also important to note that these hats have great cultural importance for their communities, although people outside these communities see them more as consumer and fashionable clothing (Redacción El Universo, 2023). Furthermore, this concept does not include contemporary artistic productions, since their production is usually the result of Western institutional education, and, therefore, its logic does not consider cultural handicrafts as Art within the contemporary art world.

Under the capitalist and production logic, training schools in cultural expressions have been established to "keep alive" the intangible heritage, such as the elaboration process. An example is a school for artisans in Pile, Manabí, which unfortunately has closed due to a lack of state support (Cedeño Amador, 2023; Toro Galárraga, 2016). However, the goal is to obtain economic retribution and establish a production standard to streamline and massify the elaboration, in response to capitalist market competition. In the face of the cultural Asian export model countries such as China, South Korea, Japan, Colombia, and Ecuador must invest more in their cultural industries. Colombia has taken the first step by approving 1.47 billion pesos for the cultural sector in 2024, representing an 83.7% increase over 2023, equivalent to 376

million dollars (Ministerio de Cultura de Colombia, 2023). On the other hand, Ecuador has allocated a budget of 15 million for culture during the period 2024-2025 (Ministerio de Cultura y Patrimonio de Ecuador, 2024).

These industries not only culturally appropriate local identity and make an artificial national identity, homogenizing the cultural content of cultural activities, goods, and services but also obtain exorbitant profits without assuming social responsibility towards the communities that produced them. Therefore, the governments of both Ecuador and Colombia must ensure that the cultural weaving of local communities is not undermined by companies, increasing investment in culture which would improve their well-being and allow the retention of new generations in the preservation of their intangible community heritage.

In Ecuador, the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) has been established with a legal status since the 2008 constitution. Its objective is to promote an alternative development model based on the “Buen Vivir” (BV) paradigm, thus promoting sustainable development and improving the inhabitants' quality of life through solidarity and equitable and sustainable economic practices. However, this economic policy faces challenges such as dependence on public procurement, payment delays, and quality control problems, which have hindered its effective implementation (Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2020). At the Latin American level, the BV model has been a guide for public policies since the early 2000s. However, challenges such as violence, poverty, and climate change have hindered the search for sustainable development that meets the needs of communities in the region.

To promote the general welfare of local communities, which is fundamental to developing cultural weaving, it is crucial to reconsider cultural industries, especially when their goal is to profit from distribution without cultural recognition or social responsibility. As

Yúdice (2018) points out, the production and distribution of Latin American cultural industries must seek to enrich the imaginations of citizens rather than simply reproducing narratives produced elsewhere. Furthermore, according to the same author, there is a need for a cultural policy in Latin America that focuses on achieving comprehensive and sustainable development, addressing social inclusion and cultural diversity. Although the cultural and economic contribution of the creative industries in Latin America is significant, they have experienced ups and downs due to economic crises and complicated political periods in the region (Quartesan et al., 2007). Protecting culture and its interconnected relationship with the environment is a global responsibility that can be a motive for creating a regional culture in conjunction with environmental policy in favor of the artisans' cultural weaving.

To address these challenges, local communities have developed sustainable projects that include environmental and cultural conservation. These projects have focused on community-based tourism, which has proven to have positive effects on both cultural and environmental conservation and the well-being of community members. This type of tourism encourages the active participation of the community in decision-making and the equitable distribution of benefits generated by tourism activity, strengthening community identity by taking advantage of its political and social structures (LaPan et al., 2016; Ruiz et al., 2008). The hegemonic capitalist production model endangers cultural weaving since it only considers the economic aspect and not the socio-cultural and environmental. For this reason, one of the most sustainable and inclusive models of cultural weaving, for the moment, is community-based tourism, which conserves and protects the environment while reducing poverty and inequalities.

The role of UNESCO in the conservation and protection of the *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia to reduce poverty and inequality

UNESCO's role has been passive in conserving and protecting these two palms. For example, the only source available on the internet regarding UNESCO's role shows how UNESCO has been involved in a project to strengthen the value chain of the toquilla straw hat in Ecuador. In Colombia, there are no projects related to the same, since, for example, güérregue basketry is not part of the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In other words, UNESCO takes an active role in cultural and environmental conservation when these are part of its initiatives, such as the BRs, UGGps, and UWHS. Therefore, the Colombian government, seeking a more effective solution through collaboration, should inscribe güérregue basketry as a cultural expression of the Wounaan Indigenous community.

The communities that cultivate and process these two palms confront long-standing structural challenges, including violence, poverty, inequality, and environmental pressures. These coastal communities have been marginalized by their respective states, evidenced by the high levels of violence in recent years in Ecuador—a consequence of decades-long structural neglect by the state. Despite having legislative powers under the 2008 Constitution, the State has failed to provide timely solutions to the Afro-Ecuadorian and Montuvian communities. This is exemplified in terms of investment in culture, given that the Ecuadorian government has allocated only US\$15 million for the 2024-25 period.

Local communities' role in preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritages, such as the toquilla straw hat and güérregue basketry, is critical for their transmission to future generations. Jang and Mennis (2021) state that UNESCO has begun to focus more on local communities due to specific decisions of its World Heritage Committee, influenced by broader human rights interests at the UN. This is reflected in conventions such as the 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

(UNDRIP). Although the idea has been around for years, it has not yet been fully implemented in practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has explored UNESCO's role in the conservation and protection of *C. palmata* and *A. standleyanum* palms in Ecuador and Colombia, as well as their socioeconomic challenges, and how the conceptual framework of cultural weaving allows us to understand them. The essay discusses how socioeconomic challenges affect the conservation and protection of these two palms; poverty, inequality, high levels of violence, climate effects and deforestation were addressed. The evidence shows that there are high levels of these impacts in territories inhabited by ethnic communities such as Indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian, and Montuvian communities in Ecuador and Colombia. Likewise, these impacts are evident in coastal territories along the Ecuadorian and Colombian coasts. These communities suffer from structural challenges, as high levels of poverty, inequality, and climate impacts have existed for decades; however, they have been affected by another challenge: deforestation due to coca plantations, high levels of violence, and displacement caused by drug trafficking.

The finding discovered was the close relationship between the empowerment of local communities and environmental and cultural conservation and protection. Several authors have discussed how strengthening local communities involves cultural and environmental protection and adequate economic retribution, which has allowed them to strengthen their identity and retain young people in their communities. One of the projects mentioned is community-based tourism, which UNESCO has promoted through initiatives such as Biosphere Reserves (BRs), UNESCO Global Geoparks (UGGps), and UNESCO World Heritage Sites (UWHS). These initiatives have provided positive benefits to the communities managing and protecting these

heritage and environmental spaces while contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The relationship between poverty, inequality, and violence is complex. Despite high homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants along the Ecuadorian coast, the poverty level in 6 of the 7 coastal provinces is less than 31%. Similarly, the GINI coefficient ranges between 0.40 and 0.43, which is lower than the national average in Ecuador, excluding the Galapagos Islands due to the lack of available data on this aspect. Therefore, the assertion that high levels of poverty and inequality are the main reason for high levels of violence, as many agencies and the media claim, is false, especially in the case of the Ecuadorian coast. Moreover, there is a higher level of poverty and inequality in the Sierra and the Amazon, where most of Ecuador's Indigenous population lives, and yet they have low homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants, except Carchi and Sucumbios. My argument is not to simplify this problem and reduce it to high levels of poverty and inequality as the main cause of high homicide levels, since this argument does not hold for Ecuador's coastal provinces.

For this reason, it is necessary to understand this problem comprehensively to offer holistic and effective solutions. In this sense, I present the conceptual framework of "cultural weaving" to address these socioeconomic challenges in the artisanal sector of these two palms. The communities responsible for cultivating and processing these two species, for the most part, reside along the Ecuadorian and Colombian coasts. These communities include Montuvio, Afro-Ecuadorian, and Indigenous people, who are highly vulnerable to the violence associated with drug trafficking due to precarious socioeconomic and environmental conditions. This not only implies poverty and inequality but also gender exclusion. Within the cultural weaving of these communities, there are gender roles that assign women tasks such as weaving toquilla straw hats and weaving güérregue baskets. However, the impact of the absence of state public

policies is not being considered, as these communities have low levels of education and lack, for the most part, access to potable water and electricity.

Among the limitations of this work was the short time for writing and research, which was a total of 4 months. Likewise, the arguments presented were based on the visual relation of the available data, without using more complex methods to relate the different variables mathematically. The arguments combined qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data already available, seeking to establish a logical relationship. This research lacks primary sources, so it would be interesting to consider exploring the relationship between the number of people belonging to ethnic communities in Ecuador and Colombia with gender inequality and the absence of public policies. These variables could add a more complex layer to the discussion and avoid the simplification of this problem that affects the communities in charge of preserving their cultural heritage. For this reason, cultural weaving prioritizes the cultural aspect as a fundamental part of the economic dynamics of local communities. One example of cultural weaving is community-based tourism -an alternative model to resource-exploiting capitalism -which not only preserves the environment in exchange for capital but also sustainably sustains the culture of communities and strengthens their identities.

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Annex A: Self-identification, violence, and inequality in Ecuador, Table elaborated on data compiled by García (2024), González (2023) and Noboa (2023).

Ecuador	% Indigenous	% Afro Ecuatorians (2022)	% Multidimensional poverty (2022)	GINI (2022)	Homicide per 100mil habitants (2023)
Los Ríos	0.66%	37.67%	27.3%	0.42	110.83
Guayas	1.29%	13.84%	20.6%	0.43	84.45
Esmeraldas	3.35%	55.48%	50.2%	0.49	82.51
El Oro	0.53%	5.41%	15.3%	0.4	78
Santa Elena	1.23%	4.53%	31.0%	0.39	64.81
Manabí	0.18%	35.42%	29.3%	0.43	59.14
Sucumbíos	16.28%	5.20%	54.5%	0.52	45.22
Cañar	14.71%	1.49%	26.4%	0.44	30.76
Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas	1.39%	7.06%	23.1%	0.42	30.63
Orellana	37.25%	3.70%	59.4%	0.55	29.64
Pastaza	50.83%	1.34%	64.5%	0.58	26.81
Morona Santiago	58.55%	0.78%	65.8%	0.56	15.58
Bolívar	29.50%	1.26%	34.1%	0.46	12
Napo	64.95%	1.71%	63.9%	0.58	11.39
Zamora Chinchipe	18.90%	0.97%	35.2%	0.5	10.81
Pichincha	6.23%	3.48%	15.9%	0.48	9.42
Tungurahua	13.55%	1.14%	20.8%	0.46	7.2
Cotopaxi	23.70%	2.12%	26.3%	0.45	6.81
Azuay	1.99%	1.30%	12.9%	0.43	6.61
Imbabura	28.00%	6.03%	29.4%	0.46	5.11
Loja	3.56%	0.86%	31.3%	0.49	4.9
Chimborazo	37.88%	0.69%	38.9%	0.47	4.66
Carchi	4.24%	5.43%	35.1%	0.51	4.63
Galápagos	9.34%	6.83%			0