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“You want human communities to adapt to climate change, but you also have to consider what supports them — ecosystems.”

On the first day of the International Conference on Evaluating Climate Change and Development, Lorena Franco Vidal was one of the first, and few, people to point out the glaring lack of ecosystem concerns in climate change evaluation.

As a sustainable development practitioner in the Colombian Andes, Franco Vidal works with local communities to protect wetlands and safeguard livelihoods. Of equal importance to the organization is the promotion of local community participation in hands-on conservation work, as well as monitoring, which is part and parcel of the organization’s projects. Two years ago, Fundación Humedales began building capacity among local communities to enable them to monitor on their own, and community participation in projects on the ground in the Andean wetlands is ongoing to this day.

Climate change is an issue yet to be formally incorporated into Fundación Humedales’ work. Even on the national scale, the issue has yet to penetrate the government’s priority agenda. However, Franco Vidal notes that rapid alterations in wetland habitats are an alarming reminder that action needs to be taken, and quickly.

Water scarcity is a growing concern, with wetlands drying up and water quality worsening. “Wetlands and waterways are no longer being replenished in a way that people can count on,” says Franco Vidal. This affects the social viability of the Andean wetland environment, where people have started moving away from areas that they feel can no longer sustain them. Clearly, not only are ecosystems being degraded as result of climate change, but this degradation also seems to have a resounding cultural echo.

For Franco Vidal, ecosystem vulnerability to climate change in Andean habitats is a priority issue. To learn more about it from a global perspective, she attended the conference to identify organizations working on the assessment of vulnerability and adaptation strategies for both social and biological systems. She also wished to explore potential funding opportunities, which will help her organization incorporate this issue into their ongoing project evaluation efforts and maximize the benefits that result from their current evaluation toolkit. Franco Vidal believes that evaluation methods that focus on ecosystem vulnerability will help her team select appropriate adaptive management practices and adaptation projects. In addition, the conference allowed her to identify networks — namely the International Development Evaluation

Network and the Latin American Network of Monitoring, Evaluation and Systematization (ReLAC) — that her organization can tap for information related to the topic.

However, the conference also raised a few questions for Franco Vidal. Throughout the sessions, she noticed that very little emphasis was placed on ecosystems in evaluation. She notes, “The justification for climate change interventions has a strong environmental argument, which doesn’t seem to be considered in the evaluation process. If we want to provide local communities with adaptation options,” she adds, “we must consider ecosystem vulnerabilities, because it is ultimately the ecosystem which supports the needs of Andean communities.”

She also noticed a certain disconnect between evaluators and what is actually happening on the ground; evaluations are often conducted by people based in offices with little connection to the area or the people within the project’s sphere of influence. In her experience, there is great value in community participation in evaluation, and she would like to see this approach adopted on a larger scale.

Overall, climate change evaluation with a focus on ecosystem vulnerability is critically needed in the region, and Franco Vidal believes that if Fundación Humedales can successfully incorporate this type of evaluation into its work, it would be in an ideal position to promote the adoption of similar systems in other organizations throughout the region, likely using the Consortium for the Sustainable Development of the Andean Region as a platform. With an eye to the future, broader regional scale adoption of climate change evaluation methods will enable the identification of priority sites and issues and allow for better decision-making in terms of regional adaptation selection.

For further information, please visit [www.fundacionhumedales.org](http://www.fundacionhumedales.org)

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