

**INTERCULTURAL AND GENDER SENSITIVE DIALOGUE AND CONFLICT PREVENTION
IN ECUADOR**

Annual Report
2024

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Acronyms

CETCIS	Center for Knowledge Transfer and Social Innovation (Centro para la Transferencia de Conocimiento e Innovación Social de la PUCE)
LVG	Low Value Grant Agreement (Acuerdo de financiamiento de bajo valor ¹)
DFATD	Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development
IIE	Economic Research Institute (Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas de la PUCE)
GAD	Decentralized Autonomous Government (Gobierno Autónomo Descentralizado ²)
UN	United Nations
PAGA	Open Government Action Plan (Plan de Acción de Gobierno Abierto)
PDYOT	Development and Territorial Planning (Plan de Desarrollo y Ordenamiento Territorial)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
PUCE	Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador)
UNV	United Nations Volunteers

I. Background

In 2024, the country's context and governance conditions presented complex challenges. Ecuador had to face crises in different areas, with complex and interconnected problems, the most concerning ones affecting the security, energy and economic sectors. The national context was not favorable for dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives. The reestablishment of a national dialogue between the government and the indigenous peoples' organizations was not viable, as there were no open channels of communication nor political will on both sides.

The main challenge faced by the country in 2024 was in the field of security, due to the high level of violence, particularly associated with the increase in organized crime activity and drug trafficking. This serious security crisis had erupted in Ecuador since 2023, when records for violent deaths reached historic highs (47.5 deaths per 100.000 habitants). By 2024,

¹ The Low Value Grant Agreement (LVG) is a UNDP programmatic instrument for the implementation of a component of a project through a strategic partner that provides advantages related to the thematic or target audience.

² In Ecuador, there are three levels of political division in the territory: provinces, municipalities and parishes. There is a Decentralized Autonomous Government (GAD), with differentiated competences and attributions, for each of these levels.

although there was a slight decrease in the number of homicides compared to the previous year, the country remained one of the most violent in the region.

Besides violent deaths, other crimes such as kidnapping or extortion have increased. Moreover, the leading cause of children's death in Ecuador is related to violence link to organized crime. In addition, more than a ten of reports from human rights organizations and citizens about suspected forced disappearances or rights abuses have been registered by the end of 2024.

The second major issue handled by Ecuador in 2024 was energy. The country faced a serious challenge due to the drought that affected the South American region. The national electricity system, which lacked the necessary maintenance and upgrades, was unable to cope adequately. Citizens had to live with electricity rationing for about three months, including weeks of blackouts lasting up to 14 hours a day. This event had a serious impact on the country's economy and the well-being of its people. In fact, the only social protests during the year took place within the framework of this crisis, although their level of escalation was not significant.

The situation of the national economy has been the third most important concern for the country during 2024. The increase in violence and complications due to power outages have caused the Ecuadorian economy to show very negative signs. According to the Central Bank of Ecuador's latest reports, the economy contracted by around 2% in 2024, primarily due to lower oil production, declining private investment, and sluggish external demand, something that has not happened since the Covid-19 pandemic. The year also ended with income and employment becoming more precarious. Informal employment rose to 58%, a 17-year high, and adequate employment fell to 33%, particularly affecting women³ and limitations in the provision of public services.

These multidimensional crises have contributed to further undermining governance and weakened democratic institutions. Citizens' concerns have shifted from issues like corruption and public service quality to a growing focus on security. These issues continue to require a policy and programmatic response, agreed and articulated at the national and local levels between the different actors involved.

³ Adequate employment refers to the condition in which individuals work at least 40 hours a week and earn wages equal to or above the minimum wage, regardless of whether they wish or are available to work additional hours ([Ficha-metodologica-tasa empleo adecuado.pdf](#)).

After the dissolution of the National Assembly and the bringing forward of national elections, Daniel Noboa took office in November 2023. In May 2024 the newly elected president declared an 'internal armed conflict' between the State and organized crime groups, opting for a heavy-handed policy to tackle the problem of violence, and moved forward plebiscite that combined measures in the area of security with other economic and labor reforms. However, the national government received ambiguous support from citizens, who approved the security reforms but did not give way to changes in labor and economic policy.

Focused on the insecurity crisis, the national government has not shown a clear intention of pursuing formal dialogue or with the Indigenous and peasant organizations that led the national strikes of 2019 and 2022. In general, it has been difficult to identify a consistent national policy towards Indigenous peoples. In contrast, the national government has advanced several sensitive issues for these groups, including natural resources exploitation, states of exception that curtail certain civil rights, and fuel subsidies policies – the very triggers of recent national strikes. However, likely due to the transitional nature of the government and the upcoming elections in early 2025, this time there was no escalation in social protest comparable to previous episodes.

In this context, characterized by the absence of dialogue spaces between the national government and Indigenous and peasant organizations, and high political instability at the national level, the project has been strategically redirected to the local level to maximize its impact, while creating conditions for facilitating future dialogues at the national level.

Working in territories in support of local governments presented interesting entry points, but also challenges, which will be detailed below. To address these new challenges and maximize impact of the intervention, activities and results have been mainly focused in three provinces of the central highlands, which concentrate the highest levels of Indigenous populations and social tensions and, in a complementary manner, in the Metropolitan District of Quito.

II. Executive Summary

After the project's amendment was approved in November 2023, the implementation of the was reoriented towards the provinces of the central Ecuadorian highlands. This zone met certain conditions that made this reprogramming viable and allowed working using a different approach with some of the stakeholders originally considered.

Through a agreement signed with the Catholic University (PUCE), the capacities of the CETCIS – the unity responsible for the implementation of training programs within the PUCE – have been strengthen in terms of promoting conflict prevention and peacebuilding training, as well as in facilitating the development of research work and analysis related to interculturality and conflict prevention. Activities related to capacity strengthening had a strong focus on local actors and leaders, in order to strengthen capacities in territories, create a leverage effect and promote sustainability. Research and analytical activities included topics such as the fuel subsidy policy, justice, peacebuilding and existing social conflicts in the territories of intervention.

In a complementary manner, technical assistance has been provided to local governments to strengthen the capacities of local actors in the prioritized areas, in alignment with the objectives and priorities of each local authority. This component also included the training of local actors and the strengthening of their leadership, through programs designed by the Catholic University, or through technical assistance directly implemented by UNDP, in cooperation with the local governments of Chimborazo, Cotopaxi, Riobamba, Ambato and Latacunga.

As the technical assistance has expanded compared to 2023, connections with new cooperants and partners have also been strengthened, primarily within academia, local governments and civil society. This new focus on activities implementation in territories and broadening of collaboration with new stakeholders have also brought a series of challenges, related to the institutional dynamics and management capacities in the prioritized territories. However, these challenges have provided valuable lessons related to the mitigation measures applied. In this context, a workplan for 2025 has been developed, characterized by maintaining the lines of action initiated in 2024 and carrying out specific actions to achieve results and adequately conclude the implementation of the project.

III. Results by outcome and output

In 2024, following the amendment signed on January 5th, the implementation of the project was reoriented towards specific territories, since there were very few probabilities for establishing and strengthening dialogue at the national level between the state and Indigenous organizations. A new project workplan was established to concentrate efforts in the provinces of the central Ecuadorian highlands, based on following criteria:

- 1) According to the 2022 National Census, one out of every four inhabitants are Indigenous (on average: 25.37%; in detail, Cotopaxi province: 24%; Tungurahua province: 13.2% and Chimborazo province: 38.6%).
- 2) The mobilization capacities of their peasant and Indigenous grassroots organizations.
- 3) Pachakutik, the political arm of CONAIE, is heading the local governments of the three provinces, in addition to the Ambato mayor's office.
- 4) Local government of Ambato, Tungurahua's capital city, along with the Cotopaxi prefecture, are led by indigenous women as their highest authorities.

The project maintained its basic structure, as originally approved, but focused interventions in components related to training as well as knowledge creation and dissemination. It also strengthened the lines of work in these 3 provinces. Cooperation with the Catholic University was reoriented from a focus on institutional strengthening towards leveraging the university's experience and pedagogical resources for the development and implementation of a training and knowledge management offer directed to key local actors. Within this framework, the agreement established with the university - under the figure of a Low Value Grant - was executed during 2024 and is projected to close in the second half of 2025.

The results achieved in 2024 are presented in detail below.

Intermediate Outcome 1: Enhanced capacities of Catholic University, local leaderships and local public officials for conflict resolution and social dialogues monitoring, with an intercultural and gender-based approach.

As part of Intermediate Outcome 1, the capacities of PUCE's Centre for Knowledge Transfer and Social Innovation (CETCIS) were strengthened to develop and implement pedagogical offer on conflict prevention and transformation as well as interculturality and collective rights directed to key actors for inclusive public management and social change, including local authorities, local leaders as well as teachers from territories. A senior United Nations Volunteer (UNV) specialist was hired to support the CETCIS for the management and implementation of the agreement signed with UNDP at the end of 2023.

In addition, support was provided to develop analysis aimed at enhancing the understanding of conflict dynamics, with a view to informing action. This included a governance analysis from an institutional approach, as well as a characterization of the population of the provinces of the central Sierra, where this project has an intervention emphasis. It is expected that both products will reinforce the decision-making process of local authorities in the focused territories.

Furthermore, a citizen’s laboratory for training in rights was created and the diploma course in conflict management and peacebuilding for public servants was developed and implemented, which were two of the three components of the agreement signed between UNDP and PUCE. The training in human rights and the diploma course in conflict management and peacebuilding for public servants were complemented with investigations, including a qualitative analysis of the impact of changes in state fuel subsidy policy, the generation of inputs for a security and justice agenda and, a characterization of local conflicts in the Central Highlands of Ecuador. The analysis on fuel subsidy policy reform was shared with the Ministry of Economy and Finance and informed decision-making processes related to this sensitive topic, which led to mayor social and violent conflicts in 2029 and 2022, involving indigenous peoples’ organizations.

Immediate Outcome 1.1. Improved operative capacities of the Catholic University's team to design and implement a program of training and knowledge sharing on intercultural and gender sensitive dialogue and conflict prevention.

Output 1: <i>Operative support to the Catholic University to design and implement a program of training and knowledge sharing on intercultural and gender sensitive dialogue and conflict prevention.</i>	
Progress status	Achievements
Completed	One “senior” specialist hired and assigned to Catholic University.

The planned training agreement with the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador (PUCE) had important results in 2024, which will be detailed in the following sections. One of the successful factors was the operational strengthening, clear organization and coordination capacity of the Centre for Knowledge Transfer and Social Innovation (CETCIS). A UNV colleague, with the status of ‘senior’ specialist, joined the team. This UNV, who replaced two “junior” profiles who served in 2023, ensured an adequate articulation of approach and operation of the activities foreseen in the framework of the agreement for training and knowledge management signed with PUCE.

The decision to hire a ‘senior’ expert was taken together with the CETCIS counterpart in order to strengthen the intervention in the prioritized territories. In this sense, a profile with recognized experience in project coordination and implementation was sought, as well as a clear understanding of human rights and credentials with international cooperation organizations and UN agencies. The selected profile, in addition to meeting these

requirements, had background as a public official in management roles and working with civil society organizations and local actors.

The hiring process took place between January and February 2024. He has been performing very satisfactorily since March 2024 and is expected to complete his 12-month contract period until March 2025.

Output 2: <i>The Catholic University analysis and research capacities are reinforced from intercultural and gender approaches.</i>	
Progress status	Achievements
Completed	Analysis of the governance context at national level.
	Central Highlands population characterization.

Starting at the second half of 2024 a set of technical inputs and academic content were generated to better understand the factors linked to social conflicts in Ecuador, at both national and local level, and with a focus on the prioritized provinces. Two key research works were conducted to deepen the understanding of some root causes of conflict, with a view to informing future policies and/or interventions of local governments and civil society organizations:

- A macro analysis of the country context, which identified the governance challenges that the next president in Ecuador will face in 2025 and afterwards. This study was conducted implementing a systemic and institutional perspective, focusing attention on the basic rules of the public administration. Fundamental characteristics of the State that directly affects governance were identified, including its plurinational feature “Plurinational State⁴”. These factors were fundamental to consider as they have been source of tensions in the past and could still feed conflict as they are still to be addressed.
- A description of the main trends in social variables such as population, migration, education, poverty, mortality, housing, living conditions and use of technologies in the provinces of the central highlands of Ecuador. This analysis placed special emphasis on dynamics of structural inequalities and historical exclusions, which are structural causes of conflicts and sources of latent grievances. This included

⁴ According to the Ecuador’s Constitution and national legal frame, In Ecuador, it is defined as a State that recognizes and respects the diversity of its peoples and nationalities, promoting inclusion and interculturality. This implies the coexistence of individual and collective rights, as well as the representation and participation of different ethnic groups in the political and social life of the country.

information on ethnic self-identification and urban and rural divides. After characterizing the main trends in the last intercensal period, salient aspects were selected for a further exploration with the aim to enhancing the understanding of the living conditions of the population and identify some of their main issues. These issues, often linked with trends of inequality within and/or exclusion from political, economic and social spheres, are often structural causes for social conflicts in the region. Understanding them is fundamental to design and implement strategies and interventions aimed at preventing the eruption of violent conflict.

Based on these technical inputs and academic content, the CETCIS and the Economic Research Institute (IIE) staff have strengthened their knowledge and technical tools of analysis, in relation to governance in Ecuador and the living conditions of the population of central Highlands. Both topics allow for a specific analysis of the structural causes of social conflict and deepened its understanding.

As part of the dissemination and sustainability strategy of these actions and with a view to maximizing impact, in 2025 the contents of these analysis will be systematized in a technical guide and shared with decision-makers, local authorities and different actors of civil society. This will allow them to define, design and implement informed and evidence-based policies. In addition, in the second quarter of 2025, Catholic University staff will receive specific training on interculturality and conflict prevention. Based on these elements, PUCE expects to expand the research offer and to deepen some lines for new studies in cooperation with the GADs of the Ecuadorian central highlands.

Immediate outcome 1.2 A program of training and knowledge sharing on intercultural, and gender sensitive dialogue and conflict prevention is designed and implemented.

Output 3 *Design of a training program and knowledge sharing on intercultural and gender sensitive dialogue and conflict prevention.*

Progress status	Achievements
Completed	Implementation of training spaces on human rights, through the citizens' laboratory, with the participation of 199 people.
	Almost 80 public servants were trained in conflict management and peacebuilding through a 156-hour diploma course.
	Generation of research on 1) fuel subsidy policy; 2) technical inputs for peacebuilding with an emphasis on security and justice; and 3) characterization of local conflicts in the provinces of Central Highlands.

The requirements design, provider selection and agreement signature for this training program was carried out in 2023 and approved at the project's board meeting in November. The mechanism implemented to formalize it is a Low Value Grant (LVG) agreement, which has three components that have been implemented during 2024. Details of the current results achieved so far will be developed in this and subsequent sections, as appropriate:

- LVG Agreement - Component 1: Citizen Laboratory: This component was designed for transferring information and learnings on human rights, in specific areas articulated with the project's objectives. The target public was people with experience in local leadership or with background working with civil society organizations. This learning spaces achieved a wide geographical coverage by applying a hybrid modality (between virtual and face-to-face), although emphasis was given to the prioritized territories. A total of four training spaces were implemented: one (1) virtual space on gender and rights related to care roles; two (2) face-to-face spaces, one in Quito and the other in Riobamba, on urban rights and neighborhood agendas; and one (1) space on the rights of nature, in the rural area of Chocó, part of the Metropolitan District of Quito (DMQ). In total, 199 participants have passed these training courses, 83% of whom are women. In 2025, it is planned to have the last course in this block on collective rights for the rural population.
- LVG Agreement - Component 2: Diploma in Conflict Management and Peacebuilding: a group of 78 civil servants, 54% of whom were women, strengthened their knowledge on conflict prevention and peace promotion. This course was organized in two cohorts. The first one has concluded the course, and the second one will finish in January, 2025. This training was conceived as a 156-hour diploma course, organized into three essential axes for addressing conflict in the Ecuadorian context: 1.- Providing conceptual bases on peacebuilding and conflict management; 2.- Debating the role of government agencies in peacebuilding and the understanding of conflict as a positive (when no violent and addressed through peaceful canals) and inherent aspect of society and democratic forms; and 3.- Providing tools for conflict management with a gender and intercultural approach as a cross-cutting element. In the first quarter of 2025, a second cohort of this diploma course will be carried out, with participation focused on the provinces of Central Highlands.

In addition to these components, UNDP Country Office directly implemented three lines of investigation, which are summarized below:

- The first research provided qualitative information regarding the national fuel policy, including the possibility of focalizing subsidies. It was conducted using a qualitative approach, including semi-structured interviews with key actors at the national level. This investigation informed the national government's decision to reform fuel subsidies in June 2024. This process also incorporated a series of recommendations to manage the possible conflict that this decision could generate, considering that this factor was one of the triggers of the last national strikes in 2019 and 2022, which were led by indigenous organizations. The results of this analysis were presented and debated with the Ministry of Economy and Finance.
- A preliminary analysis and a draft document drawing strategic lines for peacebuilding in Ecuador, with an emphasis on the areas of security and justice, was prepared, based on a desk review and interviews with key actors from academia, civil society and cooperation. This product was conceived as a complementary proposal to the social cohesion and conflict prevention approach, both components of the notion of 'human security'. The document was used as a valuable input for a proposal in the area of justice, which was pre-approved by the Government of Canada in December 2024. This analysis was conducted by an international academic, who presented a paper in the International Seminar on Democracy and Security, which was organized by PUCE, together with the Central University of Ecuador and the Salesian Polytechnic University, and supported by UNDP, among other international cooperation organizations.
- A characterization of the most relevant local conflicts in the provinces of the central Sierra was conducted, including their contexts, causes, triggers, actors and projected probable escalation. The purpose of this study was to enhance local authorities and social actors' understanding of the social conflicts' causes and characteristics.

Finally, in 2025, a training in conflict management and interculturality will be provided to the counterparts of the GADs of central Highlands, with emphasis on planning, citizen participation and community liaison teams. In addition, a systematization will be elaborated, to summarize both the research developed under "Immediate Outcome 1.1.", and the social conflict characterization from this section, with the aim to have a synthesis of the main findings and recommendations on the actual situation of the Central Highlands provinces' concerns, related to possible social conflict escalation. This document will be presented to the local government authorities and decision makers.

Intermediate Outcome 2 A network of facilitators and women leaders created to promote and sustain intercultural and gender aware consensus processes as well as local participative development planning.

Training sessions and knowledge management mechanisms were implemented in collaboration with the CETCI/PUCE, to promote leadership of communitarian teachers, civil society and local governments.

Rural and urban teachers, 78% of whom are women, began a training, on the design of tools to develop curricula and other conceptual elements from a peacebuilding approach. This activity, -the third component of the agreement signed between de Catholic University and UNDP - had an extension of 208 hours of training.

In addition, the Decentralized Autonomous Governments (GAD) of the provinces of Chimborazo and Cotopaxi, as well as the municipalities of Riobamba, Ambato and, Latacunga, were strengthened with technical support, provided by UNDP. The aim of this collaboration was to promote the involvement of citizens in the construction of public policy and contribute to improving credibility and trust in public institutions. A series of plans and tools for strategic management, based on participatory processes, were elaborated. These efforts were complemented with training spaces and the construction of tools for the promotion of leadership, with a focus on peacebuilding and an emphasis on women and youth.

Immediate Outcome 2.1 Promoted local actors' capacities on building and supporting local peaceful communities with intercultural, human rights and gender approaches.

Output 4 *A network of intercultural "educators for peace" (men and women) is trained and able to strengthen their pedagogic activities with gender and human rights approaches in order to support peace communities.*

Progress status	Achievements
Completed	32 participants working as unqualified teachers, 78% of whom are women, were trained in a diploma course on curriculum design, with 208 hours of training.

A culture of peace has been promoted through the training of key community and social change actors, who have the potential to generate, support and multiply positive change in their territories. LVG Agreement - Component 3: A group of 32 uncertified teachers in

vulnerable rural and urban communities, received a training to be certified, including a peacebuilding approach. This training is expected to strengthen the resilience of these key community actors, providing them with a recognized certificate, while strengthening capacities for peace in communities through the learning and capacities that these teachers will transmit to their students, therefore generating a multiplier effect.

This was a modular program with four subjects of 48 hours each, except for Curriculum Theory and Design, which had 64 hours. In each modular space, the aim was to articulate the general knowledge taught in the Basic Education degree with curriculum design applications and with a methodological approach of peacebuilding in teaching. This first course, focused on theoretical and conceptual content, will be complemented in 2025 with another equivalent space, but with an emphasis on practical applications of the acquired knowledge.

Finally, the process of teacher professionalization will end with a knowledge-leveling course, as an academic requirement prior to their degree, also planned for 2025.

Immediate Outcome 2.2 Promoted women's political leadership and intercultural and gender themes in local government planification processes.

Output 5 Capacities for political transition and participative local planification, with gender and intercultural approaches were built.

Progress status	Achievements
Completed	Strengthening of three (3) participatory planning tools and construction of two (2) thematic plans in provincial and municipal local governments of central highlands of Ecuador.

Public management tools have been developed and capacities for participatory planning have been strengthened in five local governments in the central highlands of Ecuador, including a gender and intercultural approach:

- The GAD of Chimborazo now counts with a set of indicators to monitor the progress of the province's Development and Land Use Plan (PDYOT), which include differentiation criteria on gender and intercultural components to ensure that vulnerable groups' needs are taken into account and met. This assistance considered the GAD's planning team training on the use of the indicators.

- The provincial government of Cotopaxi, which is headed by an indigenous woman leader, received methodological support for the identification of corruption risks in the strategic areas of infrastructure and financial management. Following a criminal investigation for misuse of public resources during the previous period, this technical assistance was crucial for rebuilding citizens' trust in local governments, by anticipating new possible cases of corruption and encouraging enhanced decision making. As part of the final recommendations of this assistance, in 2025 the assistance will focus on elaborating the institutional strategic plan for the local government of Cotopaxi, with gender and intercultural approaches.
- Ambato, the capital city of the province of Tungurahua, is currently headed by a young-female indigenous mayor, the first one to perform as a local authority in this town. Since the last quarter of 2024, the mayor's office team has been strengthened with the support of the SIGOB⁵ project. This project is an initiative of the UNDP regional office. The mayor's office team is now implementing the SIGOB's methodology, and specifically the "strategic agenda" component which promotes an enhanced articulation between institutional objectives and the daily local government performance.
- With UNDP technical assistance, the local government of Latacunga, capital of the province of Cotopaxi, has started to implement the open government model to enhance transparency and governance, including an intercultural and gender approach. This assistance has initiated with a methodological design, which will be executed in 2025, with participation of local citizens, including representatives of ethnic minorities and women's groups. The final objective is to develop an open government action plan (PAGA) that promotes citizen participation, accountability of authorities and public innovation in the city.
- Finally, in coordination with the municipal government of Riobamba, capital of the province of Chimborazo, UNDP is assisting the parish government of Cacha, which is a local rural circumscription composed of a large peasant and Indigenous population from the Puruha nationality, mainly engaged in agricultural and livestock production activities. The objective of this technical assistance is to support in the development

⁵ The **UNDP SIGOB program** (Governance Management Project) is designed to enhance the capacities of institutional management for democratic governance. Operating under the UNDP Regional Directorate for Latin America and the Caribbean, SIGOB develops methodologies and tools to support political action by senior government management. Its main goals are to improve transparency, policy effectiveness, and citizen interaction, while ensuring that government actions align with the law.

of a “life plan” - a local participatory planning tool which has a strong political and cultural meaning in Indigenous communities – as an instrument to realize interculturality and exercise their collective right to self-determination, based on their own worldview and will for development.

The last three technical assistance will be completed in 2025.

Output 6 <i>Political empowerment and leadership of women and other local actors was promoted.</i>	
Progress status	Achievements
Completed	Technical assistance to the municipal governments of Latacunga and Riobamba and to the provincial government of Chimborazo in three (3) processes of training and promotion of local leadership and construction of the social tissue.

During 2024, the political empowerment and capacities of women, youth and indigenous leaders was strategically promoted in collaboration with the local governments of Ecuadorian central highlands and other local actors:

- A module and a teaching toolbox on citizen participation and peace building, with a human right-based approach, were designed for the Citizenship School of the Chimborazo provincial government. This course emphasized the knowledge and use of the tools provided by the Law of Citizen Participation and Social Control.
- In the rural areas of Riobamba, capital of the provincial of Chimborazo, which concentrate a high level of Indigenous population, technical assistance was brought to strengthen social cohesion. Indeed, an investigation was conducted on local practices, social significance and products related with food. It is expected that by promoting the recovery of community knowledge on farming and cooking and emphasizing the specific leadership played by women as protectors and transmitters of food-related practices and knowledge, this intervention will contribute to reinvigorate the social fabric. To promote sustainability of the intervention result, this technical assistance was implemented in collaboration with the “Community kitchen” project led by the local government.
- Also in Riobamba, a “training of trainers” program was launched to strengthen local leadership, promote peacebuilding, and enhance citizen participation. A tailored curriculum and teaching toolkit were developed to equip municipal public servants

with the skills to mentor secondary school students from urban educational institutions in these key areas.

Similar trainings are planned for 2025, in collaboration with the local governments of Chimborazo Province and the Latacunga Municipality. These sessions will specifically target women, with a focus on Indigenous and rural communities.

III. Partnerships

Following the reformulation of the project, approved in November 2023, the partnerships necessary to refocus the project's intervention on the central highlands territories of Ecuador were strengthened. For this reason, during 2024, partnerships with 2 types of counterparts have been expanded. The main aspects of which are detailed below:

A. Academia

Cooperation with academia—particularly with the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador (PUCE)—has been essential in advancing peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts, especially in the areas of training and knowledge management. During the 2022 national strike and the subsequent dialogue tables between the government and the Indigenous movement, PUCE played a key role as both facilitator and observer in the implementation of the agreements reached. This experience allowed the university to accumulate valuable insights and expertise, which the project later drew upon to design a training offer focused on intercultural dialogue and conflict prevention. In addition, the agreement signed with the Catholic University facilitated the administrative procedures of a series of activities that the educational institution.

B. Local Governments

With the reformulation of the project and its focus on the provinces of the central highlands, the decentralized autonomous governments (GAD) of this region became the main actors for project implementation. Specifically, we have worked with the following local governments: Provincial GAD of Cotopaxi, Provincial GAD of Chimborazo, Municipal GAD of Latacunga, Municipal GAD of Ambato and Municipal GAD of Riobamba.

The project put a specific emphasis on working with vulnerable groups, including Indigenous people and women. In three of these local governments, the highest

authority belongs to indigenous peoples (Chimborazo, Cotopaxi and Ambato). In addition, in two of them, Cotopaxi and Ambato, the GAD is headed by a woman. Finally, the mayor of Ambato is also a young political profile, being her first term as head of the Municipality and the first time that the city is governed by a young and indigenous woman. By engaging with local authorities and community representatives, the project aims to contribute to the empowerment of vulnerable groups and to enhance the visibility and representation of their needs and interests.

Cooperation with local governments in the central highlands area has been significantly strengthened. Most notably, the project's interventions have Progress has been made in positioning social conflict and interculturality – sensitive themes rarely prioritized or even considered by local governments - in local public agendas. These efforts have also been complemented by PUCE-led trainings aimed at public servants and local partners in these territories.

C. Other actors

Complementary collaborations – although on a smaller scale – have been developed with other actors.

- The Ministry of Economy and Finance: the ministry was the counterpart for the investigation on the possible effects of the implementation of a fuel subsidy policy reform in June 2024. To conduct this investigation, a representative sample of stakeholders was consulted, including representatives of government, academia, the private sector, civil society organizations, and indigenous and peasant organizations; These included the Chamber of Popular and Solidarity Economy, the Center for Studies on Good Governance and Sumak Kawsay for the Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador, the Casa Grande University of Guayaquil, the Chamber of Industries of Pichincha, the National Chamber of Aquaculture, CONAIE, FEINE, FENOCIN, the National Peasant Coordinator Eloy Alfaro, the "Acción Ecológica" collective, the Heavy Transport Federation, the National Cab Cooperatives Federation, the "Tricimotos⁶" Association, the national Ecuadorian unions confederations and the Superior Education Students Federation of Ecuador.
- To gather information and open lines of action in justice and peacebuilding, interviews were conducted with representatives and experts from the

⁶ A "tricimoto" is a three-wheeled motorized vehicle commonly used for transportation in some Latin American countries, particularly in rural or semi-urban areas.

Municipality of Quito, the Judiciary Council, the Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime, as well as the FLACSO, IAEN and PUCE universities.

- As part of the analysis conducted to characterize of local conflicts in the central highlands, interviews were conducted with representatives of the local governments of Palo Quemado, Las Pampas, San Miguel de Bolivar; provincial delegations of the Ministry of Environment, Water and Ecological Transition and the Ministry of Agriculture; as well as civil society organizations, such as the Flor de Caña Association, Th Indigenous and Peasant Movement of Cotopaxi (MICC), The Agricultural Services Ecuadorian Center, The Watering Joints of Quilindaña de Alaquez (Cotopaxi) and from Altar parish (Penipe), The Tanner Tungurahua Enterprise and the Committee for the Defense of Water Resources.
- An approach was made with the Ombudsman's Office of Ecuador, which is designing a management model for the prevention and management of possible human rights violations in contexts of social conflict, with assistance from UNDP and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. On this basis, support was provided for organizing a workshop to review the first version of this management model with the staff of Ombudsman's Office.
- Within the framework of the United Nations System, regular consultations have been held with the Resident Coordinator's Peace and Development team to deepen the analysis of the national context, discuss potential scenarios of conflict escalation, and identify the most effective strategies to adapt project implementation accordingly.

IV. Main challenges, lessons learned, and mitigation measures

The amendment and restructuring of the project, approved in November 2023, allowed to overcome a complex scenario at the national level, impacted by a complex institutional and political crisis, which greatly reduced the possibilities of moving forward with the implementation of activities in relation to the agreements negotiated by the government and the indigenous organizations that led the national strike of 2022. Therefore, the reorganization of the work towards the provinces of the central highlands and the linkage with authorities and other local actors has been a necessary maneuver. Within this operational framework, a series of challenges have also arisen, the most important of which are discussed below:

1. One of the main challenges was to reorient the initial design of the project, originally conceived to engage with national actors such as leaders of the 2022 national strike and authorities from the Ecuadorian national government, towards an implementation focused in the central highlands. This shift required reframing the activities with a territorial approach, strengthening or establishing inter-institutional relations with local public administrations and adapting to the policy priorities and operational urgencies of each authority, shaped by their specific context.

Transferring strategies designed for the national level to the central highlands of the country required more than logistical adjustments, as it was necessary to resize the planning processes to fit the territorial contexts, which in themselves respond to shorter cycles and are mostly reactive to changes in the context. Despite the similar geographic and population conditions, there are very particular dynamics and problems at the level of each local government. Thus, for example, the strengthening of public transparency and the recovery of citizen trust was fundamental for the provincial government of Cotopaxi, due to the previous administration's history of corruption.

UNDP took advantages of preexisting lines of cooperation and technical assistance of other projects of its portfolio in the selected geographical area. This facilitated the dialogue and coordination with most of the local authorities, in order to generate synergies and complementarities with previous or on-going interventions.

2. The second important challenge was the fact that social conflict is not an issue identified as a main priority and, in more than one case, is not included in the agendas of local authorities in the central highlands. Thus, the project encountered difficulties in approaching local authorities from the perspective of conflict prevention and transformation. The perception of the project's team was that the local governments' lack of conceptual frameworks on social conflict and preventive approaches, led to minimizing their relevance and to omit them in their plans and development strategies.

The lack of recognition by local authorities of the importance of local conflicts can be attributed, on the one hand, to the fact that conflict prevention does not fall within the direct jurisdiction and competences of local governments, which in turn prevents them from allocating financial resources to address this kind of issues. On the other hand, some authorities may avoid direct involvement in local conflicts, fearing that their participation could be perceived negatively in the medium term, potentially

risking the loss of public support. However, local governments are responsible for other issues that can directly influence structural factors or trigger local conflicts. Neglecting or ignoring these issues may have a direct impact on their institutions and the interests of the population they are meant to serve.

In this regard, references to social conflict and interculturality have been a consistent theme throughout the project activities. This has been evident both in discussions between local authorities and UNDP, where strategic aspects of cooperation were addressed, and in operational coordination channels, where the topic was frequently integrated into the conversation to enrich the proposed activities and action lines proposed by the GADs. Training and knowledge management efforts have been aimed at critically reflecting on the context of social conflict and interculturality in Ecuador, from the institutional, socioeconomic and political elements to the living conditions, dynamics and specific challenges faced by the provinces prioritized in this project's interventions.

3. The third challenge is the persistent racism and discrimination that still pervade behaviors, including very subtle ones, in the dynamics of the central highlands' region. In these provinces, which have high percentages of Indigenous population, the historical structural and productive conditions have shaped relations between communities, often marked by strong discrimination. Cases such as that of Ambato, which has a young, female and Indigenous mayor, have a strong symbolic charge. However, there are many dimensions, including the public administration itself, where there is still much work to be done to achieve full integration of the indigenous population.

This factor is not new and was in fact identified from the moment the project was reformulated. However, during its implementation, the specific and more subtle ways in which racism and discrimination remain in force, despite the progress made in training and public policy, have been confirmed firsthand and through local actors. Beyond powerful symbolic acts, such as the example of the election of the first authority of the Mayor of Ambato, there are still a series of daily practices and other institutionalized components that continue to legitimize and amplify racism, even in institutional spaces.

Addressing this issue is not a simple challenge that can be solved in a short period of time. Especially because any strategy must consider a series of factors, many of them of a more personal and subjective nature, in order to be successful and to avoid closing channels of dialogue and reflection prematurely. In this sense, to address

some of these key issues requires time and efforts that go beyond the scope of this project. Therefore, we have sought to work with strategic actions that, although they may not have a wide coverage, are significant in relation to their multiplier potential. Hence, we have worked on various levels of training on conflict and interculturality, processes that have not only been aimed at citizens, but also at public servants. This component will continue to be implemented during 2025.

4. Finally, the fourth main challenge is the institutional and management limitations that the Decentralized Autonomous Governments (GADs) of the central highlands region face. These gaps are related to their operational capacity, as there is a shortage of qualified technical personnel, technical infrastructure, and operational budgets, among other factors, which hinder more efficient and results-oriented management. These constraints affect the implementation of planned activities due to low sustainability, lack of responsiveness, and coordination barriers that may arise in certain contexts.

Staff, infrastructure, and budget limitations in local governments, among other constraints, have proven to be decisive factors for proper management on more than one occasion, forcing the project to make adjustments and delays in the original planning. In this regard, the following conclusions can be noted:

- In more than one occasion, planned activities do not meet their deadlines, as unforeseen delays, unexpected turnover of technical counterparts, shifts in management priorities, or gaps and overestimations in planning assumptions frequently occur.
- Internal structures and staffing limitations often result in a single team—usually with few members—having to handle multiple topics, making the review and validation processes for outputs and information neither agile nor efficient.
- Technology gaps, such as connectivity coverage, access to equipment, and digital literacy, remain daily challenges that hinder quick coordination and centralized monitoring of activity progress.
- GAD priorities are generally focused on addressing urgent management issues, requiring extra effort to move beyond short-term fixes and pursue more structural actions.

In this sense, adaptive agility, forward-looking planning, frequent technical support, and dialogue and negotiation have been key strategies that allowed the project to advance in its implementation while aligning actions with the framework and

responding to local governments' urgent needs. Additionally, the project has provided technical assistance in institutional strengthening and public servants' capacity building as a complementary measure, as long as fundamental principles such as citizen participation, intercultural approaches, and gender perspectives are incorporated.

V. Monitoring and compliance

UNDP carried out monitoring and follow-up activities on both planned activities and the country's socio-political context that could affect project implementation. The main actions in this regard are described below.

Key monitoring and supervision activities	Findings and summary
Meetings with local government authorities and other counterparts	In March, the UNDP representative held an executive meeting with the Mayor of the Municipal Government of Ambato, Diana Caiza, to coordinate an agenda of joint actions, as well as a meeting with the Mayor of the Municipal Government of Latacunga, Fabricio Tinajero. There was also a meeting with the rector of PUCE, Fernando Ponce, to present the teacher training program for peace. Previously, meetings had been held with the prefect of Cotopaxi, Lourdes Tibán, and with the prefect of Chimborazo, Hermel Tayupanda.
Regular internal and external coordination and follow up meetings	The UNDP team in charge of the project held regular internal and external meetings, both in person or virtual, to coordinate and monitor the project activities: • Internal meetings to monitor the workplan, prepare activities and manage unforeseen events. • Follow-up meetings took place between the UNDP and GAD technical teams to consolidate

	and monitor the lines of work within the framework of the project. Externally meetings were also held, mainly with the Catholic University Center of Knowledge Exchange and Social Innovation (CETCIS) to monitor the work plan implementation, in accordance with the Low Value Grant agreement. To support this process, the UNV expert played an active role in the project coordination and implementation within the Catholic University.
Field visits	Monthly field visits were conducted to monitor the work areas established with the provincial governments of Cotopaxi and Chimborazo, as well as with the municipal governments of Latacunga, Ambato, and Riobamba. The UNV senior specialist assigned to the Catholic University also conducted coordination and monitoring visits to the areas where the project is being implemented.

Regarding the indicators, the activities implemented in 2024 contribute to the fulfillment of these indicators. The progress is highlighted in the Annex 1.

VI. Financial report

The financial resources executed during 2024 are reported below:

Outcome/Output	2023	2024
Intermediate Outcome 1	\$ 98.531,06	\$ 111.074,10
Capacity building of the Catholic University	\$ 51.822,70	\$ 82.322,64
Training and knowledge management	\$ 46.708,36	\$ 28.751,46
Intermediate Outcome 2	\$ 87.008,52	\$ 152.865,06
Promoting of local participation in public planning	\$ 75.505,45	\$ 30.523,73
Strengthening of local leaderships	\$ 11.503,07	\$ 122.341,33
Monitoring	\$ 1.858,60	\$ 13.535,98
Total	\$ 187.398,18	\$ 277.475,14

VII. Workplan for 2025

Since 2025 marks the project's closing year, much of the planning is tied to initiatives launched in 2024, with an already committed budget still to be executed. Additionally, certain activities must be carried out as part of the project closure, such as the final evaluation. Within this framework, and based on operational planning, the following action lines stand out as priorities:

- Implement training activities on intercultural issues and conflict prevention with counterparts from local governments, with PUCE (Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador) and with a group of the UNDP National Office.
- Complete the planned training activities and research under the LVG agreement with the Catholic University and receive management and financial reports from CETCIS.
- Monitor, finalize, and deliver technical assistance lines with the GADs (Decentralized Autonomous Governments) of the central Sierra region.
- Conduct the final evaluation and complete the project's administrative closure.

ANNEX 1. Indicators progress

Indicator	Goal 2023	Report 2023	Goal 2024	Report 2024
1.1 Number of experts (men/women) hired, to support the Catholic University Center of Knowledge Exchange and Social Innovation (CETCIS).	1	- 2 UNV junior specialist hired to work with PUCE / CETCIS.	1	- 1 UNV senior specialist hired to work with PUCE / CETCIS.
1.2 Number of pieces of equipment acquired for the Catholic University / Project activities.	5	- 5 pieces of equipment acquired for the team responsible for the project.		
2.1 Number of prospective analysis or studies elaborated about conflict scenarios in Ecuador.	0		1	*2 research work on fuel subsidy policy and characterization of local conflicts in the provinces of Central Highlands.
2.2 Number of academic studies elaborated and disseminated about main topics related to national or local conflicts.	0		1	2 academic studies elaborated: - Analysis of the governance context at national level. - Central Highlands population characterization.
3.1 Number of participants in the Laboratory about dialogue and human rights.	0		15	199 participants in the Laboratory about dialogue and human rights. 72 participants from prioritized provinces.

3.2 Number of public servants who receive training on conflict prevention.	0		15	36 public servants have received training on conflict prevention. 8 from prioritized provinces.
4.1 Number of educators (men/women, ages, ethnic group, rural/urban) registered to participate in theoretical approach training on peace and conflicts.	0		15	32 educators have participated in a theoretical approach training on peace and conflicts.
4.2 Number of educators (men/women, ages, ethnic group, rural/urban) registered to participate in practical approach training on peace and conflicts.	0		15	The practical approach training will be completed in 2025.
5.1 Number of people that participated in local planning activities.			45	52 participants in local planning activities.
5.2 Number of local planning or civil society engagement processes.	0		2	3 participatory planning tools: - A set of indicators to monitor the progress of Chimborazo's provincial Development Plan (PDYOT) - A methodological tool for the identification of corruption risks in strategic areas of the Cotopaxi's provincial government.

				- A strategic agenda tool for local government management in Ambato (SIGOB).
6.1 Number of products developed for political empowerment and leadership activities for women.	0		2	2 training tools developed: - A module, including a toolkit, on citizen participation and peace building with a rights-based approach for the provincial government of Chimborazo. - Education-communication document on food-related practices and knowledge in Riobamba.
6.2 Number of strategies to mitigate local barriers against women political empowerment.	1	2 actions implemented: - 1 radio campaign on political violence carried out. - 1 leader sponsored to participate in regional Youth, Peace, and Security event.	1	

Note 2024:

- *vvv
- In addition, technical inputs for peacebuilding with an emphasis on security and justice were developed, which contributed to the analysis on conflict scenarios, conceived as a complementary proposal to the social cohesion and conflict prevention approach (indicator 2.1).