



Short communication

# Mediating wolf–livestock conflict: a case study in La Rioja, Spain

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## Socio-environmental conflicts and their management

Conflict is classically defined as a situation in which different activities are mutually incompatible; in other words, the development of one or more activities makes it difficult or impossible to develop others [1]. This formulation allows us to understand conflict as a perceived divergence of interests or a belief that the aspirations of the parties involved cannot be achieved simultaneously [2].

Although conflicts have traditionally been approached from a psychological and legal perspective, leaving environmental-related issues as the responsibility of sciences such as biology [3], the truth is that socio-environmental conflicts have both a social and an environmental component, which calls for a holistic approach [4]. However, interventions usually aim at mitigating the impact of human activity on the environment or the impact of wildlife on human activity, without adequate consideration of the social aspects that influence the conflict. In the case of the conflict around the presence of wolves (*Canis lupus*) in extensive livestock farming areas, the environmental perspective has prevailed for decades, mainly focusing on

mitigation of impacts (depredations) of wolves on livestock, but recently it has begun to be understood that this conflict also requires a sociological approach [5].

The conflict around wolf presence in extensive livestock farming areas is a socio-environmental conflict, a type of conflict of a social nature, but one that has developed around issues related to the environment or, to be more specific, around the different visions of how humans should relate to the environment [6]. The perspectives of livestock breeders, conservationists, hunters, scientists, public administrations and others all come into play. Each perspective has something to say about how the wolf should be managed and how extensive livestock farming should operate where wolves are present. The main barrier to overcome is the perception of the different stakeholders that their position is the only valid and functional one, which makes it necessary to promote mediation and dialogue to modify these perceptions and reach agreements between initially irreconcilable positions through direct collaboration among those involved [7].

Socio-environmental conflicts in general, and the conflict around wolf presence in extensive livestock farming areas in particular, are not one-off problems, but long

processes of escalating conflict in which deep feelings of grievance and injustice emerge, which manifest themselves in various dimensions and whose mitigation requires a process of trust-building and dialogue between the parties [8]. This can be achieved through social tools and mediation techniques that make it possible to diagnose all the elements that shape the conflict, to recognise all the positions held and to facilitate dialogue, listening and empathy in order to reach agreements that ensure that all parties feel included, recognised and heard [6]. Based on this perspective, an innovative process was developed, in which social tools and active collaboration with the public administration allowed a group of stakeholders with diverse interests to reach consensus and develop plans and policies to address the conflict around wolf presence in extensive livestock farming areas in La Rioja, Spain.

## Livestock and wolves in La Rioja

La Rioja is a region of northern Spain where the wolf population declined from the late 1980s until it had practically disappeared by the early 2000s. In the absence of wolf predation risk, livestock management systems changed. However, the recent expansion of the species has led to the reappearance of wolf packs in the region [9] and attacks on livestock have compelled farmers to adopt preventive measures that had not been used for decades.

These circumstances are aggravated by the geographical characteristics of La Rioja, in which two-thirds of the landscape is forested. Extensive livestock operations account for more than 60% of all farms and are a fundamental element for the conservation of the region (Fig. 1). Farming therefore takes place in a landscape that is perceived as complex and difficult, making it hard to manage livestock and prevent wolf attacks. Extensive grazing is considered a fundamental activity for the economic and social survival of rural areas, yet the perception of those involved is that it is not sufficiently valued by either urban residents or public administrations, which contributes to exacerbating the conflict.

To this situation, already an ideal breeding ground for conflict, was added legislative change at state level in September 2021, when the Iberian wolf was included in the List of Species under Special Protection Regime. This placed strict limitations on lethal control and was supported by the government of La Rioja at that time [10]. The new regulation, and the support of La Rioja at a social level, escalated the conflict and increased tension between the extensive livestock sector, the conservationist sector and the public administration [11], as shown by numerous press articles, hostile discourse on social media and demonstrations by farmers.

Conflict around wolf presence in La Rioja is of great importance for a region where extensive grazing is the main livestock farming model. This system, threatened by



Fig. 1. Extensive cattle farming in La Rioja (Photo: Entretantos Foundation).

significant losses to predation, the difficulty of establishing prevention measures, a growing wolf population and the apparent indifference of the public administration, had become immersed in a complex socio-environmental conflict in which dialogue was complicated and agreements, in the initial situation, seemed practically unattainable. This was the situation in which the regional government entrusted the Entretantos Foundation with the development of a mediation process to recognise the positions of diverse stakeholders and reach agreements to help de-escalate the conflict.

## Diagnosing the conflict and developing an intervention

The first phase of the process was a diagnostic of the conflict through analysis of the media, administrative documents and in-depth interviews with 16 stakeholders, selected for their ability to provide diverse perspectives, their overview of the region and their ability to represent the opinions of entities involved in the conflict. In the framework of this process, stakeholder mapping was also carried out along with content analysis of all information that could be collected. During this diagnostic phase, the mediation team compiled a social perception report (including key information about the conflict, its development and the main issues, ‘red lines’ and perspectives that would need to be addressed in the process), a sociogram of the conflict (a representation of pre-established relationships between the main entities and stakeholders in the conflict) and a database of all relevant stakeholders (a total of 44, including from extensive livestock farming, conservation, hunting, technical, public administration and environmental education sectors) on the basis of which the subsequent mediation and participation process was built and adapted.

Once the diagnosis phase was completed, the mediation phase commenced, in which a social roundtable was formed with 13 stakeholders: four from the extensive livestock sector, four from conservation, one from the public administration and four independent stakeholders acting as representatives of a variety of civil society interests (Fig. 2). Simultaneously, an inter-administrative roundtable was formed with participants from the administrations responsible for wolf conservation and livestock



Fig. 2. Members of the social roundtable collaborating on the development of proposals (Photo: Entretantos Foundation).

management, including technicians, forest rangers, heads of service and general directors. These two roundtables had clearly differentiated functions: the social roundtable was tasked with generating proposals for conflict management while the inter-administrative roundtable was responsible for assessing the viability of these proposals, with the mediation team acting as agents of dynamisation in both roundtables and liaison between the two. The mediation phase was carried out over fourteen months in 2021 – 2022, during which the social roundtable met every two months, followed immediately by the inter-administrative roundtable (Fig. 3).

Despite major initial obstacles, a climate of trust, recognition and mutual acceptance developed in the social roundtable that enabled its members to establish their own style of decision-making and agreement. They gradually elaborated various proposals for measures and criteria to tackle multiple problems deriving from the conflict. These were analysed by the inter-administrative roundtable, which provided feedback on their technical, legal and economic feasibility. The proposals were refined to produce a document of bases and criteria<sup>1</sup> for planning the coexistence of wolves and extensive livestock farming in La Rioja, which was agreed by the social roundtable and approved by the regional government as the reference document in this area. The document resulting from this process included criteria on land management, participation, transparency, environmental education, preventive measures, compensatory measures and damage control

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.larioja.org/larioja-client/cm/medio-ambiente/images?idMmedia=1425671>.

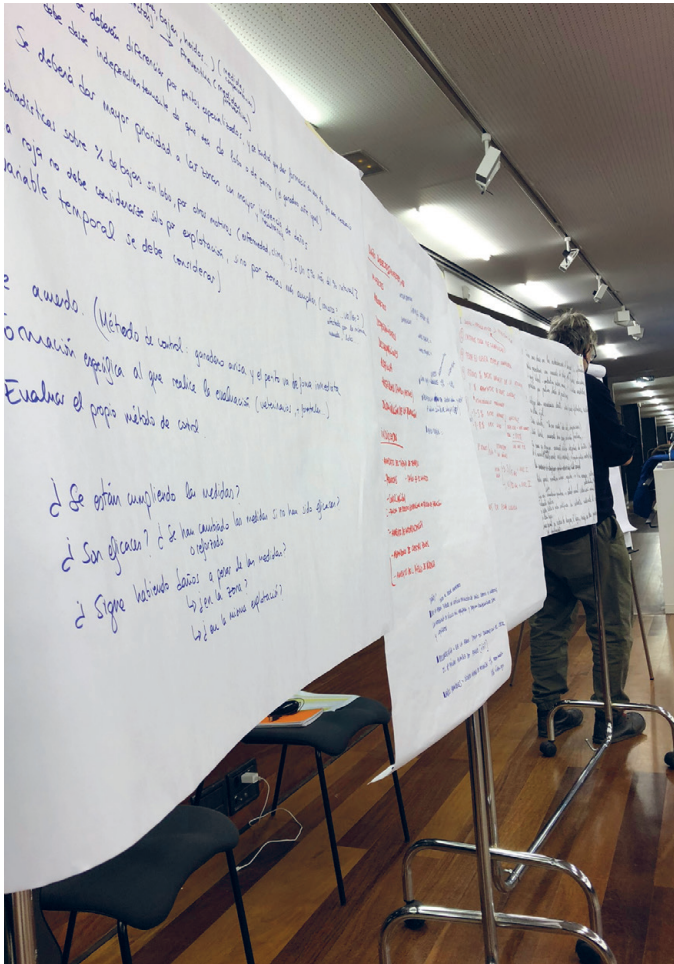


Fig. 3. Social roundtable agreements ready to be transferred to the inter-administrative roundtable (Photo: Entretantos Foundation).

that would be applicable to the specific regulations to be drawn up in La Rioja.

After the public presentation of this document (Fig. 4), which strengthened the commitment of the regional government to the results achieved during mediation, a new phase began, the objective of which was the participatory elaboration of a wolf management and conservation plan including the agreements reached in the process. This third phase of the intervention, based on participatory processes rather than mediation, culminated in the approval by the regional government in 2023 of the Management plan for the coexistence of the wolf and extensive livestock farming in La Rioja<sup>2</sup>, which included the agreements and proposals reached throughout the process and validated and accepted by the stakeholders that participated in it (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. Participants in the process jointly presenting the agreed bases and criteria (Photo: Entretantos Foundation).

## Key elements

The success of the mediation process developed in La Rioja can be attributed to a series of key aspects that were maintained throughout:

- **Transparency:** the objectives, scope and expected outcomes of the mediation were formulated in a transparent way towards the different stakeholders.
- **Commitment:** the regional government undertook to carry out the measures and proposals agreed as long as they were economically, technically and legally feasible.
- **Diversity:** diverse stakeholders with knowledge of the conflict were invited to participate in the process to facilitate mutual enrichment through listening to different perspectives and incorporating new elements and visions into deliberations.
- **Guardrails:** a set of ‘rules of the game’ were proposed, discussed and approved by the participants, which included what was and was not acceptable in terms of attitude and behaviour within the process and the mechanisms by which discussions would take place or consensus would be reached.
- **Boundaries:** the roles of the two roundtables were clearly delineated to keep the responsibilities and expectations of each clearly separate.

<sup>2</sup> [https://ias1.larioja.org/cex/sistemas/GenericoServlet?servlet=cex.sistemas.dyn.portal.ImgServletSis&code=oumCvWIGBUF6lChv9ZDgP\\_hXhSM\\_FmCH8Rn6Y38EfP7ApHyqPVxRsoD-HW0E2YV6LEXZYsr1AOEL%0AT0baqOthG5yygacK6a7wS13w34QVisg%3D](https://ias1.larioja.org/cex/sistemas/GenericoServlet?servlet=cex.sistemas.dyn.portal.ImgServletSis&code=oumCvWIGBUF6lChv9ZDgP_hXhSM_FmCH8Rn6Y38EfP7ApHyqPVxRsoD-HW0E2YV6LEXZYsr1AOEL%0AT0baqOthG5yygacK6a7wS13w34QVisg%3D).



Fig. 5. Process participants and regional government representatives after presentation of the management plan for wolf–livestock coexistence (Photo: Entretantos Foundation).

- *Documentation:* all debates, doubts and agreements that arose in the social roundtable were recorded in detailed minutes that had to be approved by all participants, thus maintaining transparency and providing a continuously updated documentary archive of the entire process.

A series of difficulties arose that had to be overcome in order to make progress. The most important of these were the definition of ‘red lines’ (turning points for different stakeholders, where it initially seemed impossible to reach agreement) and the creation of a climate of trust and collaboration necessary for a process of this nature, which was achieved thanks to the work of the mediation team, complete transparency towards stakeholders as well as the acceptance of and strict compliance with the agreed rules.

## What was achieved?

Throughout the process, which lasted more than two years, important milestones of a more-or-less visible nature were reached. The most obvious ones are the approval of official documents focused on coexistence between the wolf and extensive livestock farming in La Rioja. Beyond this, other achievements included the full collaboration of public administrations, the progressive

de-escalation of the conflict between stakeholders that participated in the social roundtable and the acceptance of a participative process for the approval of a management plan on a very sensitive issue. Moreover, the channels of dialogue and communication did not end when the process was completed, but continue to be open and, as a result of the intervention developed, other projects have taken shape in the region, in some cases thanks to the impetus of people who participated in the original process.

The La Rioja wolf–livestock intervention has generated effects on three levels. On the personal level, it has led to changes in mentality, perception and perspective, helping to depolarise opinions. On a social level, it has been demonstrated that it is possible to reach agreements to de-escalate socio-environmental conflict and how these agreements can be accompanied by a change of perspective on the part of the different sectors involved. Thirdly, at the policy level, official documents have been produced that reflect the agreements, consensus and participation achieved during the intervention. More about the results of the process and documents and regulations generated within its framework can be found (in Spanish) online<sup>5</sup>.

Wolf management in La Rioja is now carried out in accordance with Decree no. 12/2023. This approves the management plan, recognises the conflictive nature of

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.larioja.org/medio-ambiente/es/biodiversidad/coexistencia-ganaderia-extensiva-gestion-lobo-rioja>.

the presence of wolves in livestock grazing areas and establishes objectives aimed at delimiting the distribution area and population of wolves, as well as reducing conflict with extensive livestock farming. Its objectives include reducing unnatural mortality of wolves, promoting coexistence, supporting rural development initiatives related to wolves and increasing public awareness and knowledge about both wolves and extensive livestock farming. With regard to promoting coexistence, it establishes ten specific measures, currently in operation, including: economic mechanisms for the implementation of preventive measures; advisory measures for extensive livestock farms; measures to compensate for damage caused by wolf attacks; measures to promote transparency; and a protocol establishing conditions for the removal and capture of wolves. The plan also establishes numerous indicators to ensure proper functioning of each measure.

## Conclusions

Socio-environmental conflicts in general, and those around wolf presence in extensive livestock farming areas in particular, do not have simple solutions. On most occasions, it will not even be possible to speak of solutions, but rather of de-escalation of the conflict and the generation of agreements based on small concessions by all stakeholders. However, the intervention in La Rioja shows how appropriate social tools, such as mediation and participation, can bring seemingly irreconcilable positions closer together, allowing agreements to be reached which might otherwise seem impossible.

The process highlights the importance of the involvement of public administrations in the mitigation of conflict. It is indisputable that a large part of the success of this intervention was due to the commitment of the regional government to the agreements reached by the participants, which shows how the involvement of administrations with the capacity to generate significant change, and their willingness to listen to stakeholders, is vital.

In short, the intervention is a good example of how the application of a social and integrated perspective to conflict, whether related to wolves and livestock or some other issue, can be much more effective than traditional approaches to conflict management, helping to reach agreements, generate consensus and have a significant

impact on the way in which the conflict is managed in a specific territory.

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