

Growing a Greener Economy in Colombia

by Alejandro Zapata, Co-Founder and Executive Director of *Portafolio Verde* and 2009 YouthActionNet® Fellow



I am optimistic about Colombia's environmental future. Why? Because every day I am privileged to work with people and institutions that are implementing creative solutions to the sustainability challenges—environmental, economic, and social—that we face as a country and as a global society.

In 2005, inspired by our passion for nature and concern for the environment, myself and another young environmental engineer founded *Portafolio Verde*, a social enterprise based in Medellín that designs and implements innovative strategies for sustainable development. Over seven years, we have collaborated with hundreds of companies, governments, NGOs, universities, and grassroots groups to develop solutions to challenges such as air pollution, pesticide use, poverty, and resource depletion.

Often the answers are complex—requiring fundamental changes in how systems operate and how people conduct their lives. But it's that very complexity—and bringing people together—that makes our work all the more creative and rewarding.

With every passing year, we see more people and organizations becoming part of the solution. A growing environmental consciousness is contributing to collective action. Just last month, the World Economic Forum ranked Colombia sixth among nations worldwide in the transition to a sustainable energy model. We see our role within this growing movement as providing individuals and organizations with the tools and targeted expertise they need to achieve their goals in a fast-evolving field.

One area where we've made significant progress is in the corporate sector. To date, *Portafolio Verde* has worked with more than 300 companies to assess their sustainability needs and develop practical strategies. One of our recent clients—a kitchen appliance manufacturer—contracted us to help develop its first-ever sustainability strategy. Working closely with both the executive team and plant workers, we looked at the entire value chain—at the sourcing of raw materials, ways to reduce water consumption in the manufacturing process, and how the company's refrigerators and stoves could be made more energy efficient. The result; an inclusive process that addressed the company's impact on people and the environment.

The public sector, too, has emerged as a leading force for change—initiating a series of reforms and measures designed to decrease our collective impact on the environment. Over the years, *Portafolio Verde* has supported a number of these efforts—working with the Ministry of Environment to spur green business growth countrywide; collaborating with the environmental authority of Medellín to reduce the city's air pollution; and contracting with the State of Antioquia to design an environmental education strategy. Our role often involves engaging diverse stakeholders—business owners, parents, students, community leaders—in developing and implementing solutions.

We also strive to generate awareness and spark action at the grassroots level. Last year, when Disney announced the launch of its movie *Chimpanzee*, we offered to help promote the film's premier in Bogotá and Medellín via our social networks. Filmgoers wanting to attend entered a contest requiring they send us a painting of a chimp. Our alliance with Disney not only helped to reinforce *Portafolio Verde's* brand and expand our social media presence; it rallied people behind the preservation of endangered species. As with much of our work, the campaign was carried out with a spirit of fun and community building.

Much has changed since *Portafolio Verde* began its work. We recognize that we're not alone in working to build a greener economy and are proud to have gained international certification alongside 650 other companies that are using the power of business to solve social and environmental problems. We've also grown as an organization with a team now of 40, the majority of whom are 20 to 35 years of age. Every day, our youthful staff demonstrates their concern, commitment, and creativity in pursuit of our shared mission.

As importantly, *Portafolio Verde* has adhered to its own core principles and remained financially sustainable. All my life, my passion has been the environment and the community. I've always looked to build a more responsible and inclusive society. Being recognized—and supported—for the quality of our work, and the spirit that drives it, is affirmation enough that we're on the right path. While it would be easy to succumb to all the negative news about the state of our global environment, it's far more empowering to be on the side of making positive change—community by community. **Y**