

INTERNATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY PROJECT

Asia-Pacific Roundtable Community-Led Research for Development We Want Chiang Mai University Chiang Mai, Thailand August 19, 2016



OVERVIEW

On August 19, 2016, Chiang Mai University and International Accountability Project (IAP) hosted a day-long event to discuss community-led approaches to development. As part of the day, we hosted “**Community-Led Research for Development We Want**,” a roundtable discussion with civil society partners in the Asia-Pacific region to exchange approaches to and experiences with community-led research. The roundtable was designed with the following objective:

The roundtable will exchange experiences and best practice on community-led research, including how community-led research can reinforce advocacy campaigns and what tools, materials and approaches are being used. Through proactive contributions from everyone, participants will gather expertise to improve community-led research initiatives.

The discussion was an incredible opportunity to consolidate the collective expertise of participants on three topics: (1) approaches to community-led research; (2) community-led research informing advocacy; and (3) tools and resources to support community-led research.

WHY COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH?

What if development projects were designed and lived by the same people? Through its work with the Global Advocacy Team—eight advocates, leaders, and innovators from eight countries facing forced evictions and other harms imposed by development projects— IAP witnessed how development can be improved by those who have seen it directly. With the support of Chiang Mai University, we convened this meeting because we believe that local experts are best placed to advise on the development process and priorities. Community-led research recognizes and captures local priorities, plans, and expertise, so that those affected by a project can shape the development agenda. The process is both a means to capture and share information and knowledge and a process that builds movements that demand for development that respects human rights.

“In the past, the government said we only express feelings, and we have no evidence. But now we have this.”

WHAT IS YOUR APPROACH TO COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH?

Participants began the roundtable with a discussion of how their respective organizations have approached community-led research and, specifically, what steps they have employed in conducting that work. Discussant, Living River Association, started the dialogue with the organization’s experiences gathered from over 15 years of conducting and supporting local research in Thailand, Vietnam, southern China, and Myanmar – and shared an example of how research has been used to support communities impacted by dams to register an area as a protected wetland.



“This is research led by villagers. Along the way, the community builds capacity on how to present and share information,” the discussant from Living River Associations shared. Living River Association then described their six-step methodology for community-led research, which includes: (1) building an understanding that community-led research is important; (2) identification of research topics; (3) planning of research topics and data collection; (4) monitoring progress; (5) validation of information; and (6) producing materials or media based on the data. Living River Association has replicated this methodology to train hundreds of community researchers.

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) discussed their Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), which they have conducted in 27 communities in 13 countries since 2012. “*The objective of community-led research is to build movements,*” APWLD stated. In the past APWLD supported about 8-10 organizations per year through sub-grants, technical and coordination support, and capacity building.

“We need to challenge the idea that communities have no knowledge. Actually, they own the knowledge.”

Reflecting on the methodology for supporting community-led research, participants highlighted that:

- The participant organizations use different data collection methodologies for community-led research using the framework of FPAR. Participation and capacity building are fundamental to the success and process of community-led research initiatives. Capacity-building could include several workshops, sharing of technical materials, and coordination support. As several participants noted, capacity-building does not require high literacy and can be visual (such as power-mapping to understand the path to advocacy).
- The data generated by the community-led research is valuable, at times capturing environmental and human rights impacts that are not captured by typical academic research.
- The evidence generated has been successfully used to support local knowledge and build movements; as a baseline for community negotiation with policy makers; and to inform and lobby a range of targets, including development decision-makers at national, regional, and international fora.
- Participants noted that community-led research challenges a power structure, where the knowledge of villagers is discredited, or simply not accepted as valid. Pointing to the tension in how the community-led research product is received by external stakeholders and academia, one participant noted. Another participant said, “*One focus we highlight is that communities use their own language, not academic language [in the research]. The narratives are localized.*” With these comments noted, however, several groups shared that support from universities can be useful and may make community-led research initiatives more sustainable.

In addition, participants had a robust discussion about the role of civil society in supporting community-led research. Highlights of that discussion include:

- Communities should own the research. The role of civil society should be to support. Living River Association shared, “*The villagers have to do it by themselves. NGOs and academics are research assistants.*” APWLD, who provides sub-grants, technical support, and coordination for community-led research, stated that if the research is “*part of their [community] struggle,*” then communities can and have decided at times to stop the research, due to security concerns, for instance.
- Care should be taken to ensure that all populations can participate in the research. APWLD shared that the participation of women in community-led research can be low. To address this, APWLD ensures to create safe space for women for participate and voice their demands. Women are given the agency to choose their research topic, author the research and decide on the development agenda. Mekong Youth Assembly discussed how youth can be involved in monitoring impacts of development projects on children.
- Cultural aspects and languages should be incorporated into the research. Where indigenous community lands are impacted, research questions are translated into the local languages. As another example, one organization shared that, when presenting data from the research, they do not focus solely on written materials, but integrate cultural practices, such as traditional performances, to share information.



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH MOVES INTO ADVOCACY? WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

Next, participants turned their attention their experiences using community-led research to support local and international advocacy. Sustainable Development Corporation began the dialogue by sharing experiences, opportunities and challenges using GIS for community-mapping in a local community’s struggle in Thailand against deforestation.

Other participants commented on how they have addressed the challenges of community-led research for advocacy and movement building:

- APWLD shared how they supported community-led research within the context of documenting climate change, an area with little community documentation of evidence of impacts. Drawing from their work in Nepal and Papua New Guinea, they explained how community-led research has been used by women to document impacts and advocate on a local and international level.
- AIPP discussed its experience using community mapping as a tool for negotiation and highlighted one challenge encountered in Thailand: community maps are not admissible as evidence in the Thai judicial system. It was noted, however, that other judicial systems do recognize community maps as evidence (ex: Malaysia, Philippines). Another participant shared that they have successfully used community-led mapping and GIS to negotiate land boundaries.
- IAP shared two ways in which it has used community-led research to advocate for changes in World Bank policies and international development finance agendas. The first is through the Global Advocacy Team. The other approach is through the Early Warning System -- when we reach out to community to say that funding is proposed. We are working to present a range of community response options. One of those options is community-led research. If community-led research is done, then that research is given to banks and governments. Key questions for IAP included: *“How will national and local campaigns be supported based on this collective research? Where is our focus really intended to be? How do we manage expectations regarding impacts of change?”*
- Participants identified three main challenges. The first is the inherent power imbalance that can serve as a barrier in connecting community knowledge to international decision-makers. The second is time: *“If we want to make good advocacy, we have to engage with stakeholders and government at the earliest stage.”* This is not always possible, given resource constraints and restrictions on transparency. The third is the challenge of ensuring that community asks can responsibly be amplified and translated in regional and international fora.

“If we want good advocacy, we have to engage with stakeholders and the government at the earliest stage.”

WHAT TOOLS AND RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH?

Finally, participants identified the resources (training materials, case studies, methodology) that could be shared with communities interested in community-led research. Discussant AIPP began by describing the tools that AIPP has used in advocacy. According to AIPP, community maps have been some of the most effective tools used in advocacy, but they have taken a



flexible approach to their methodology, fitting it to the context and the advocacy targets. EarthRights International shared experiences supporting co-building environmental impact assessments, which have been used by communities to campaign and designing community-led grievance mechanisms.

Participants concluded that there is not currently a community guide on community-led research, but existing tools and practices are available:

- AIPP - Human Rights Violation Factsheets and Database
- AIPP - Indigenous Navigator Tool
- APWLD – Training modules on Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) and Feminist Community Phone App
- IAP - With local activists, IAP produced the A Community Action Guide to ADB. Another Community Action Guide to development is in the works. Community-led research will be one response discussed in the guide.
- IAP is also in the process of adapting the research methodology used by the Global Advocacy Team into a checklist and survey for community-led research in development impacts. Through the Early Warning System initiative, IAP and partners have supported community-led research in Malawi and are exploring pilots in other countries.
- Participants noted that where a community already has a strong capacity to lead the research, they provided support through a Training-of-Trainers workshop.
- ERI- Environment Impact Assessment Manual bring together an analysis of the EIA systems of each six Mekong countries. The first edition aims at practitioners, civil society, lawyers and project proponents.

CONCLUSION

The half-day discussion provided an important starting point to understanding the landscape of community-led research initiatives in the Mekong Region. It allowed participants a space to share experiences, challenges, strategies and tools. It also allowed enabled participants to see the gaps. One key challenge to the community-led model is how to make it accessible to more communities. While there are existing tools (see above for examples), there is not an overall guide or resource to assist communities in conducting this research. IAP will continue to keep in touch with groups to share resources.

NEXT STEP

IAP and some other participant organization are developing materials to capture the community-led research methods and lesson learn for community and partners to use in the future. Participants agree to share the draft of the learning modules, guide and exchange feedback and comments to improve our public community-led research resource pool.



PARTICIPANT ORGANIZATIONS

The roundtable discussion was hosted by Chiang Mai University's *Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development* and IAP. IAP is a human rights organization that works with individuals, groups and networks to advance access to information and convene community expertise to reinforce grassroots struggles, boost advocacy efforts and reinforce community-led development. IAP staff from Brazil, India, the Philippines, the USA, Thailand and Uganda participated in the Roundtable.

Participant organizations were community-led research practitioners working in Asia-Pacific and the Mekong Region who support indigenous communities, youth, women's rights and feminist groups, and other populations facing development struggles.

PARTICIPANTS' CURRENT COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH INITIATIVES	
<i>** Please note that this is not an exhaustive list of all activities</i>	
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)	Works on indigenous peoples' issues in 14 countries in four sub-regions (South Asia, Mekong, Southeast Asia, East Asia). Has worked on community-led research initiatives, including community mapping.
Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD)	Has conducted Feminist Participatory Advocacy and Research (FPAR) in 27 communities in 13 countries between 2012 and 2015. Provides sub-grants, technical support, capacity-building and coordination as part of FPAR to support rural, indigenous, migrant and urban poor women.
EarthRights International	Supports community-led project grievance mechanisms in development projects.
International Accountability Project (IAP)	Supports community-led research in development finance projects through Global Advocacy Team and Early Warning System. Community-led research and trainings are one option in a range of community responses to development.
Legal Advocacy Center for Indigenous Community	Provides legal aid for communities affected by land and forest policy and dam affected communities on Salween river.
Living River Siam Association	Works on local research and trainings in Thailand and neighboring ASEAN countries, including Vietnam, southern China, and Myanmar.
Mekong Youth Assembly	Works on child rights, human rights, and development issues in 6 Mekong countries. Has worked with youth researchers to conduct child impact assessment.
Sustainable Development Foundation	Supports community to do community mapping for recognition of community land title by Forest Authorities and be able to continue livelihood in the national park.



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