



Hello,
my name is
Mela!

EXPERIENCES WITH COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH: ZIMBABWE

Melania Chiponda is from the Marange community in Zimbabwe, and is the Regional Campaign Coordinator at WoMin, an African gender and extractives alliance that works to advance an African post-extractivist, eco-just, women-centered alternative to dominant destructive models of development. Previously, Mela was the founder and Projects Coordinator of Chiadzwa Community Trust.

I am a community organizer from Zimbabwe. For the past eight years, I have worked with communities across Africa to promote transparency in extractive industries. I train and support communities to conduct their own research and define the development challenges they are facing. I believe community-led research is a powerful tool that allows communities to share their stories and realize the kind of change that they would like to see.

I first conducted community-led research within my own community in Marange in Eastern Zimbabwe. In 2006, diamond deposits were discovered in Marange leading to a mining boom that resulted in many human rights violations. Through the process of community-led research, we wanted to try to collectively understand the roots of our problems.

One of the most important steps in this process was to identify and agree upon a research topic. In Marange, we discussed how we had lost our land, resources, and livelihoods to the companies that operated the mines. As we talked, we realized that if we

could stop private companies from forcibly taking our lands, we would also be able to protect our resources and livelihoods. We identified land grabbing as the root cause of our problems.

Sometimes, it might not be easy to identify the primary problem right away. You need to be flexible and adjust the focus of the research based on how people answer questions. For example, in another community, we initially believed that land-grabbing was the main issue, but during the research process, we saw that everyone was talking about the loss of access to water. We realized then that this was the main problem the community wanted to address, and we made sure our research report reflected that.

In Marange, our research team was made up of seven local youth, but in other cases, community leaders and organizers came together to lead the research. We surveyed people in small groups and encouraged women to speak up. If there were no women present, or the women were silent, we organized a second discussion with only women participants.

We started the discussions by explaining the reasoning behind the research, and letting participants know that they had the right to withdraw if they felt uncomfortable or unsafe during the process. During some of the focus group meetings in Marange, armed soldiers from the military base in the area came to meetings and listened to what was being discussed. Community members refused to be intimidated. As one participant said, *“As long as what we are saying is the truth, we are not going to relent in our struggle for our lands and livelihoods.”*

The survey template we used was not designed to be rigid and allowed the community to tell their stories, even if specific questions were not asked in the survey. The smaller discussions gave us a lot of rich data which we analyzed along with the responses to the survey. We also conducted one-on-one interviews with people who did not feel comfortable taking the survey in a group. It was really important to include the perspectives of everyone in the community, and we made a point of reaching out to all those affected by the diamond mining operations and evictions.

The community-led research we carried out in Marange strengthened the struggle of our community in a remarkable way and was a powerful mobilizing tool in enabling communities to organize and rally behind a common agenda. Today, people in Marange are no longer afraid to openly talk about their problems with diamond mining, or to ask the government questions. Because the community owned the process and this research, they are making sure their voice is heard.



Mela is a part of IAP's **Global Advocacy Team**, an initiative which brings together community organizers who experience development projects first-hand to conduct community-led research and mobilize their communities to change how development is conceived and implemented. Read more at:

[bit.ly/IAP_GAT]

The survey used in Mela's research was created by the **Global Advocacy Team**, and can be accessed at

[bit.ly/CommLedRschSrvy]