

# IN SEARCH OF A DIFFERENT WORLD:

Turning Dreams into Community-Led  
Development Plans



INTERNATIONAL  
**ACCOUNTABILITYPROJECT**

**GLOBAL ADVOCACY TEAM**





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# PURSuing COMMON DREAMS: THE GLOBAL ADVOCACY TEAM'S COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT PLANNING JOURNEY





Imagine there's a special group of people who work together, learn from each other, to make change happen, and to show that a different world is possible. This group is called the "Global Advocacy Team." They are like real-life superheroes, but instead of capes, they wear passion and commitment toward community-led development.

The *Global Advocacy Team Initiative* brings together community organizers and collectives to conduct community-led research and mobilize their communities to change how development is designed, funded, and implemented.



## The Beginning of the Global Advocacy Team

From 2013-2016, International Accountability Project hosted the first *Global Advocacy Team* from 8 different countries and contexts: farmers and rural communities in Burma, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe; urban neighborhoods in Cambodia and the Philippines; and indigenous groups in Egypt, Mongolia, and Panama.

During its first iteration, the community-led research and mobilization process in 8 countries led to a report written by the Global Advocacy Team and strengthened advocacy campaigns directed at those determining and funding development.

The first of its kind, **GAT's report *Back to Development – A Call For What Development Could Be*** shows how community-led research on development and human rights can both document abuses and recommend alternatives in policy and practice.



“Start with a People’s Plan” is the report’s first recommendation, audaciously proposing that the people’s plan should be the first engagement when considering development anywhere. This inspired the second iteration to explore the path. After consulting with the existing members and expanding our global partnerships, the Global Advocacy Team built on its achievements and added new members and a new collective advocacy goal centered around Community-led Development Planning.

The wealth of knowledge, experience, and skills accumulated by the first GAT members were transferred into the creation of the Community Action Guide on Community-led Research by International Accountability Project. This guide stands as a crucial resource, empowering the new Global Advocacy Team to effectively navigate their action research process and uncover their community’s development priorities.



## The Vibrant Second Global Advocacy Team

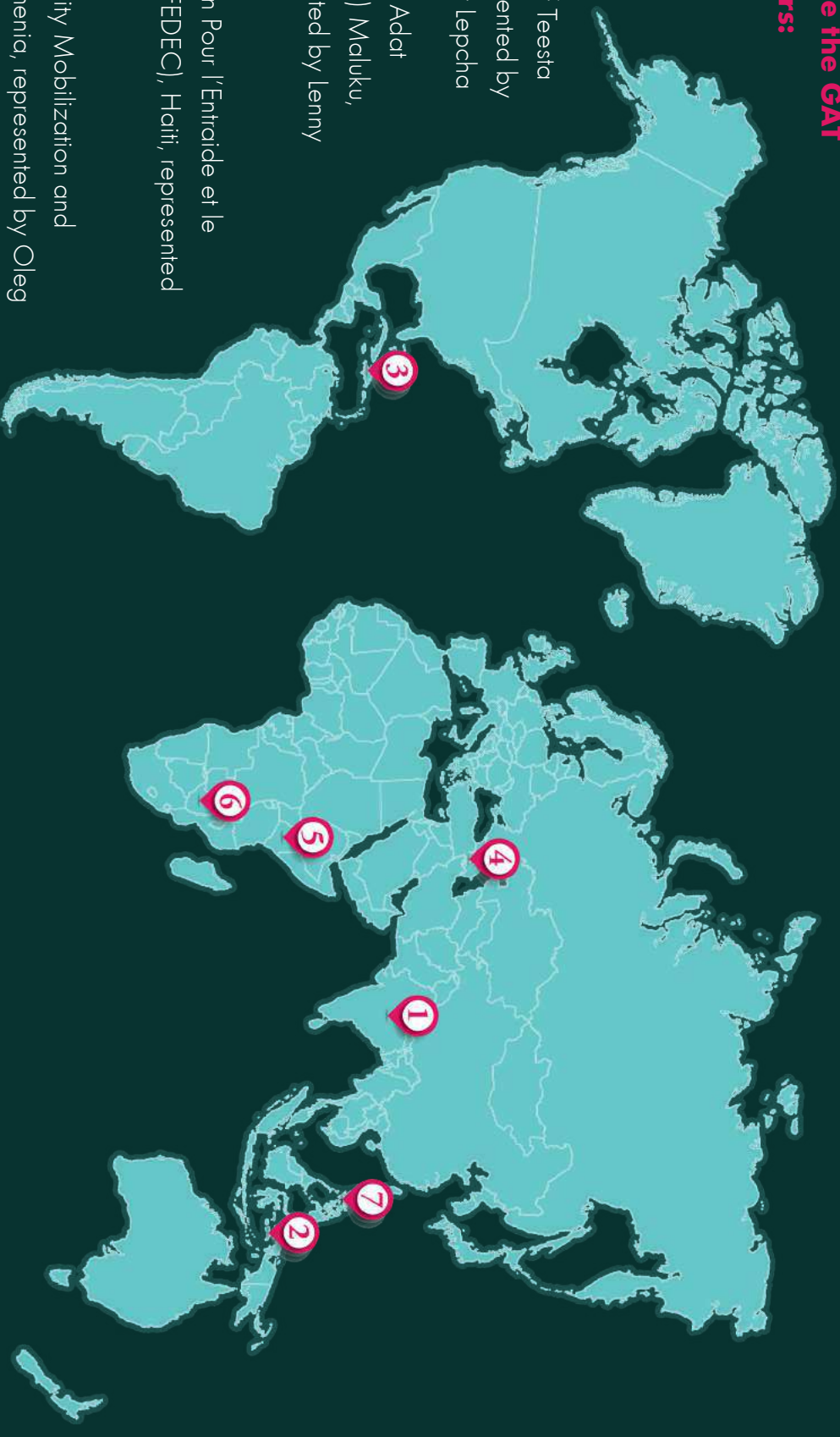
Like a radiant garden of flowers, the new generation has blossomed. Through an inclusive selection process, International Accountability Project has assembled, trained, and supported a global collective of community organizers and activists from 7 countries to create their own community-led development plans in Armenia, India, Philippines, Indonesia, Haiti, Zimbabwe, and Kenya.





## Who are the GAT members:

1. Affected Citizens of Teesla (ACT), India, represented by Mayalmit Mayalmit Lepcha
2. Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN) Maluku, Indonesia, represented by Lenny Patty
3. Centre de Formation Pour l'Entraide et le Développement (CFEDEC), Haiti, represented by Paul Edex
4. Centre for Community Mobilization and Support NGO, Armenia, represented by Oleg Dulgarayan and Julia Amiroghyan
5. Community Initiative Action Group Kenya (CIAG-K), Kenya, represented by Chrisphine Owalla
6. Inziza Women in Mining Trust, Zimbabwe, represented by Kundai Chikonzo
7. Paghugpong sang Mangunguma sa Panay kag Guimaras (PAMANNGAS), Philippines, represented by Salvert Magapa



The Global Advocacy Team are the co-leaders of the initiative, making collective decisions to shape their joint journey. The GAT members' learning started in February 2022, together with seasoned community organizers and activists who serve as the GAT Advisory Group, representing GAT initiative allies and partners from 6 regions as well as IAP staff based in those regions.

The group co-designed, co-facilitated, and exchanged through an online learning series during the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance our understanding of community-led development, community-led action research design, power dynamics, intersectionality approach, addressing risk and security, and other important topics. These co-learning sessions helped equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively conduct community-led research to identify the needs and concerns of communities facing social, environmental, or human rights challenges and be able to determine their development priorities.

The unstable internet connection, through 5 language translations across different global time zones during the 10-months of learning sessions helped build empathy and grow the solidarity among Global Advocacy Team members and the communities they work with. People who were once strangers became a group of friends who use their power to empower each other to understand and overcome challenges collectively.

GAT members utilized various participatory tools such as focus group discussions, interviews, community-led surveys, mapping, storytelling documentation, and policy analysis. Each member's community-led research project demonstrated its unique and diverse approach.



## What They Fight For

1. The Lepcha community in **Dzongu, Sikkim, India** is protecting their indigenous cultural identities and promoting a community-led development alternative to proposed hydropower dams on their sacred Teesta river and territory.
2. The indigenous Haruku are creating a community-led plan to cope with climate impacts using their customary governance system in their ancestral island in the **Maluku Province of Indonesia**.
3. The farmers in **La Victoire Commune and Limbé Commune in the Nord department of Haiti** are determining a community-led plan that addresses damages caused by climate change and sustainable and climate-resilient farming
4. Farmers and villagers of beautiful mountainous Mart village of **Tumanyan community in Armenia** are working towards a participatory alternative development plan that protects the environment and human rights



5. The Luo communities in **Yala Swamp in Western Kenya** are demanding accountability from private investors and governments to reclaim their land and to have community-led sustainable wetland management that respects their rights and helps secure their livelihoods.
6. Women, children and persons with disabilities are leading the promotion of environmental sustainability practice and alternative solutions for mining activities in the Amazon community in **Filabusi of Zimbabwe**, which is severely impacted by climate change.
7. The fisherfolks of the **Barangays Santiago and San Francisco, Barotac Viejo, in Iloilo province of Philippines** are advocating for a change of law and policy affecting fisherfolks' livelihoods;



## Shared Values

**F**ighting for a cause could be lonely, and facing obstacles alone could make us hopeless. The Global Advocacy Team brings a breath of fresh air of hope and energy to these communities' struggles worldwide by exchanging lessons learned, and strategizing community organizing tactics. Some of these struggles have persisted for over a decade.

The Global Advocacy Team crystallized the shared values from our collective real life experiences. "Collectively working towards robust community-led development that firmly respects human rights and harmonizes the contributions of every group."

The GAT members aspire to gain a stronger experience to be able to help more communities, so that each community that is mentored becomes an example for other communities in carrying out development as they desire. We hope that by sharing this journey we are able to build and expand our networks, so that everyone respects each other and is grounded by a community-led and human rights approach to development.







## Common Goals

Community-led development is the only paradigm that remains true to the inclusive and participatory vision of what development should be. It is the model that ensures the right to development and protects human and environmental rights. We demonstrate the experiences and examples of the Global Advocacy Team to illustrate that communities are the experts for their own development decisions.

We really care about what people have to say. We actively listen to and document our communities' ideas and concerns to challenge the top-down model, acknowledge local expertise, and to support solutions for development that come from and are led by those affected by the development plan.

We collectively write from our diverse but connected experience about what we see, hear, feel, and learn in conducting community-led research in 7 countries. We are sharing our recommendations based on this vigorous community-led action research journey.

Our research is the main recipe for crafting and fortifying our community-led development plans for the communities of the Global Advocacy Team. These plans are drawn from the collective dreams of our communities. We understand that achieving recognition and implementation of these plans will require our unwavering dedication and effort.

In 2024, GAT members in each country will target decision makers at local and national levels to influence the development process and advocate for the recognition and implementation of the community-led development plan in 7 countries.

Collectively, we work on changing rules, policies, and practices around development to make them fairer for everyone. The GAT will target decision makers of 'community-led development' initiatives at development banks, government development agencies, and donor organizations to change their policy and practice to prioritize community-led development planning. We will continue to encourage community-led development as a preferred model at local, national and international levels.

Based on the research and recommendations of the Global Advocacy Team, we will produce accessible training materials in the Community Action Guide series, to assist community organizers around the world who wish to start or improve their own community-led development planning.

We will continue to exchange our learning, experience, and examples of GAT's community-led development approach with civil society organizations and social movements globally. We are weaving these meaningful stories into the fabric of our communities and passing them on to our children. We hope that this journey serves as an inspiration and a wellspring of strength for other communities as they pursue their own shared dreams.



# COLLECTIVE ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT DOES COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT MEAN TO US?





## Overcoming Structural Barriers to Community-led Development

The members of the Global Advocacy Team belong to different contexts and geographies, but we are united by our common struggles and resolve to work towards community-led development. We come from indigenous, rural, and fishing communities whose identities, livelihoods, cultural traditions, and knowledge are closely connected to the ecology that surrounds us, which we have been preserving for generations.

Our communities also bear witness to the direct impacts of corporate capture, colonialism, destructive projects, and climate crises on their land and territories, which have affected our rights to land, natural resources, culture, and livelihoods. Each of the communities represented in the Global Advocacy Team faces different symptoms of this extractive, neoliberal model of development such as mining, large hydropower and agribusiness plantation projects, and the impacts of climate change. Due to these, we are confronting various and multiple challenges such as land grabbing, environmental pollution, health issues, loss and diversion of natural resources, food insecurity, loss of livelihoods, and gender impacts, among others. A major gap that we have witnessed in this model of extractive development is that communities' consent, knowledge, and rights are neglected for the interest of investors, government, and companies.

The Global Advocacy Team members have come together under difficult circumstances to put forward the knowledge and voices of communities from the Global Majority and work towards a common goal of community-led development. In doing so, we have worked in extremely challenging conditions, with many of the members facing flooding, landslides, and other natural disasters due to the growing impacts of climate change and environmental destruction.



Around the world, many community leaders advocating for community-led development, including members of the Global Advocacy Team, face escalating security threats and reprisal risks. This makes it even more important for us to hear and honor their stories, which come directly from communities themselves, in their own words, in their languages.

The community-led research done by the Global Advocacy Team thus aims to shift the existing power structures by facilitating communities in directly documenting their knowledge and experiences. The resulting community-led development plans build on the Team members' research to articulate communities' priorities and recommendations for development to be community-led. Ultimately, they strengthen community cohesion and resilience.

Through the community-led research and resulting development plans, communities that are a part of the Global Advocacy Team reinforce that community leadership and knowledge need to be at the core of planning and decision making for development projects and policies, in their countries and globally. They declare that communities are not just 'beneficiaries', they are rights holders, they are knowledge keepers, and they are visionaries who collectively work towards a world that is equitable, just, and sustainable. Let us listen to them and learn from them!



## Key Trends and Findings of Our Research

The community-led research coordinated by the Global Advocacy Team members in different countries shows how connected our struggles are and why it is important for community leaders to come together on a global platform to determine the path for a truly community-led development. The following are some key trends and findings emerging from the research:

- We reject the neoliberal, extractive model of development that has led to extensive land grabbing, environmental pollution, and diversion of natural resources. This model of development has deprived communities of their rights and not provided them with any benefits.
- Access to information and free, prior informed consent, which are necessary pillars of community-led development, have not been complied with at different stages of the development process. Communities shared how they had limited or no information about a development project or government policy in the early stages.
- The vulnerabilities and impacts faced by communities have been aggravated due to the ongoing climate crises. These changes are induced by human intervention via development policies and infrastructure projects that are planned without understanding the local context and without including communities in the planning and decision-making.





- The collective findings of the community-led research provide a deeper understanding of the impacts of climate crises and development aggression, including loss of livelihoods, cultural and social harms and food insecurity faced by communities. The irreversible loss and damage are also displacing communities from their land, forcing many of them to migrate and become climate refugees.
- Simultaneously, there is also a strengthening of the state-corporate nexus, dilution of progressive policies, and an increase in authoritarianism and militarisation in many countries – all of which are putting communities at further risk.
- The research has also documented the gendered impacts of development, which are symptoms of the failure to include women in participation processes, leaving women more marginalized due to a lack of alternative sources of livelihood. The social changes caused due to increased unemployment and influxes of outsiders have also led to conditions of violence against women and girls.
- The impacts on children and youth include loss of livelihood opportunities and lack of proper facilities for education and demonstrate how their futures remain uncertain.
- Local and traditional knowledge of communities and their customary laws are critical and need to be conserved. Even in the face of multiple crises and limited resources, communities have devised innovative solutions using their local knowledge and capacities.
- A common recommendation that emerges from the different research studies is that development planning and climate response must start from the ground up by incorporating community knowledge and data from community-led research. Communities are the real experts, well aware of the solutions and priorities needed to work towards an alternative model of development that is community-led and protects the planet for future generations.





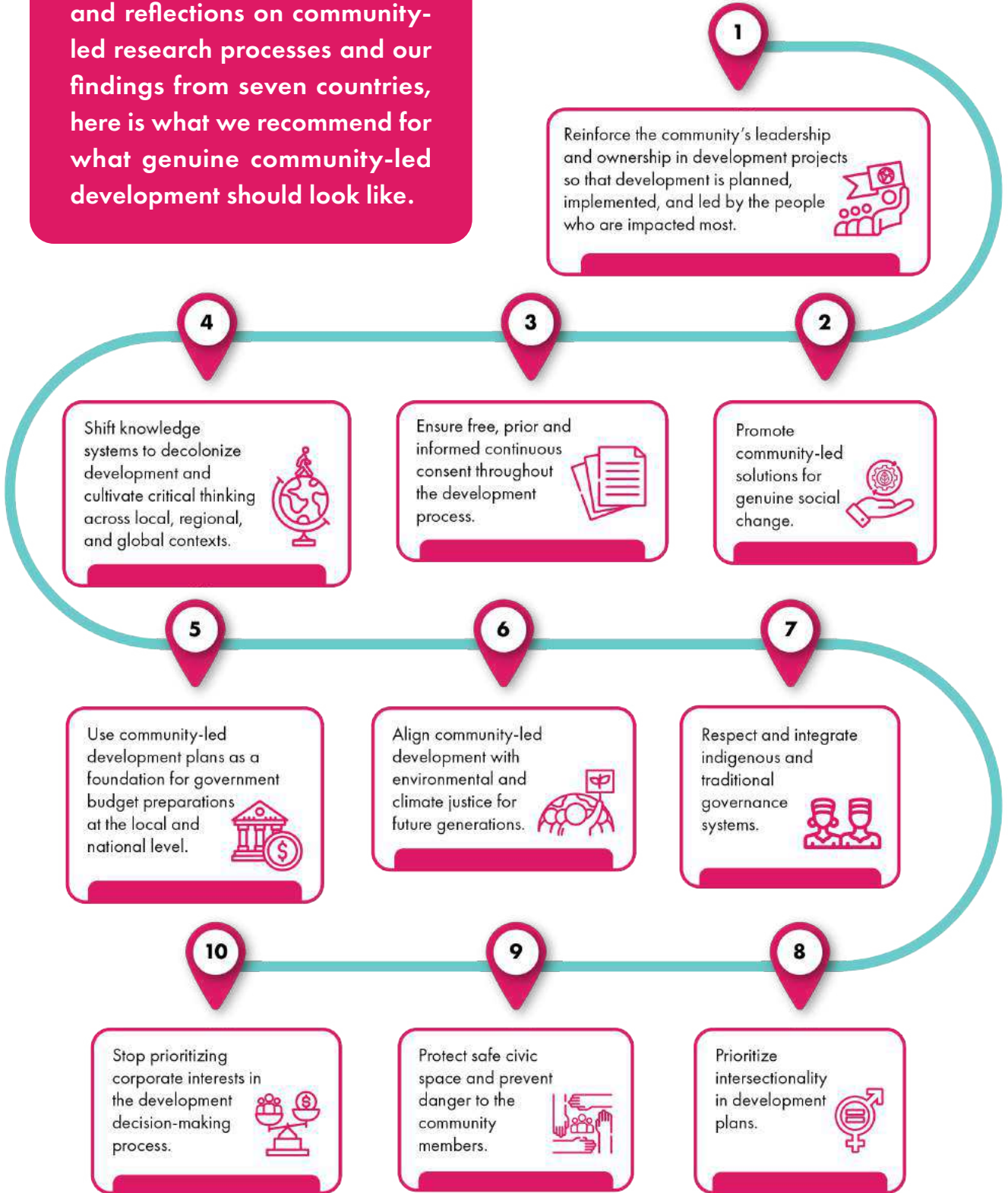
## Our Recommendations: Make Community Voices Visible Through Development Planning

**D**evelopment should start from the communities' dreams and priorities and respect the environment and human rights. People and communities should lead the design, implementation, and monitoring of development projects. Community-led development planning incorporates local expertise and creates development solutions that originate from and are led by the people who will be affected by them. This development model draws from the expertise, dreams, and recommendations of communities and prioritizes their development visions.

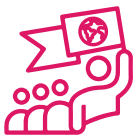
A development process that empowers local communities to exchange their firsthand knowledge about their communities, environment, and territories, as well as the political, economic, and climate-induced impacts will lead to solutions that truly work because they acknowledge community experiences and recognize their expertise. Community-led development is the only paradigm that remains true to the inclusive and participatory vision of what development should be - a recognition of the dignity of all people.



As a result of our two-year journey of continuous discussions and reflections on community-led research processes and our findings from seven countries, here is what we recommend for what genuine community-led development should look like.







## **1. Reinforce the community's leadership and ownership in development projects so that development is planned, implemented, and led by the people who are impacted most.**

- Development decisions must be the people's decision. Community-led development actively involves the community in all decision-making processes.
- Community members should have active, major roles and ownership in every step of the development process from the inception, consultation and design, to implementation and monitoring.
- The community, as a collective, should be in the driving seat to shape project goals and objectives based on their priorities and to decide on whether to implement projects that affect them directly and indirectly.
- Communities should be recognized as the experts in decisions that impact their own development, and shift from mere participants to leaders in making those decisions.
- Decision-making processes should be transparent, accountable, and inclusive, with the community as a collective in the lead.
- Existing barriers, including laws and policies, should be removed to empower communities to lead development planning.
- Community-led development should be at the forefront of any development plans in the community to ensure that the rights and the ideas of the community are respected.



## 2. Promote community-led solutions for genuine social change.

- Community-led development plans must be built on the motivation to pursue community-driven solutions that lead to genuine social change that improves peoples' lives.
- Marginalized communities should be empowered to identify development strategies and solutions that address structural problems, systems and actors that create suffering for communities locally and globally.
- Solutions to community development issues and priorities should come from local communities and be brought up to the global level, not the other way around.
- Collaboration with the community should be recognized as key to ensuring the success of development projects. Development will succeed only when the community is involved from the beginning. There is no way to create and implement a development plan without including the community throughout the process.
- Community-led development upholds community cultures and identities and promotes a healthy environment. Governments that consider the vision, desires, and demands of the local communities are better able to ensure that the economy will prosper while the environment is also protected.





### 3. Ensure free, prior and informed continuous consent throughout the development process.

- The development process should only start when collective decision and consent based on meaningful information access and analysis are obtained. As the process moves forward, the community must have the right to withdraw their consent.
- People who are directly impacted must be directly involved and must have the right to accept or reject a development plan or process.
- Free, prior and informed consent is important for the learning of the community and those involved in the community-led development process.



### 4. Shift knowledge systems to decolonize development and cultivate critical thinking across local, regional, and global contexts.

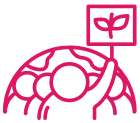
- Community-led development plans should be the first step for any project to be considered as development.
- Leadership attitudes must change to allow citizens to drive their destiny and define what they want. When governments are not elected democratically, it is hard to achieve community-led development. Citizens must take back their power and leaders should recognize that people know what they want.
- Local development should be linked to the global context, to increase allies and solidarity and achieve community-led development goals locally and internationally.
- Community knowledge and community-led data should be respected as credible for the development planning process.





## 5. Use community-led development plans as a foundation for government budget preparations at the local and national level.

- Community-led development planning process brings the community's valuable perspectives on how resources should be distributed and utilized in their community.
- Governments should facilitate the creation and implementation of community-led development plans by providing appropriate funding.



## 6. Align community-led development with environmental and climate justice for future generations.

- Community-led development policy should put people's social and environmental welfare as a priority and consider the rights of future generations.
- Indigenous communities have deep, inherited knowledge of the environment and climate, which needs to be put at the forefront in plans for mitigation and adaptation to increasing climate crises and disasters.
- Governments should integrate climate change resilience into development plans. The impacts of climate change require information, capacity, and accountability at local, national and international levels. Local knowledge and resources are needed to build adaptive capacity.
- Communities are most impacted by human-made development activities that are accelerating the rate of climate change and are causing immense loss and damage to their territories. In response to these crises, they are working on the ground with local resources, capacity and traditional knowledge to mitigate the impacts of climate change. Thus, they should be at the forefront of decision making with regards to climate policy and action.





## 7. Respect and integrate indigenous and traditional governance systems.

- The process and narrative of change must come from the community itself and value the traditional local knowledge and rules, customary laws and oral narratives, stories, and history as development knowledge and expertise.
- People must have the opportunity to plan and design their development according to what they have, their identified needs, and the direction they want to pursue.
- Community-led development shall not displace indigenous communities and shall protect and promote their identities, values, environment, and the land they love.
- The knowledge of the elders of the community should be considered and documented to pass on to future generations.



## 8. Prioritize intersectionality in development plans.

- Community-led development should serve the oppressed. Communities should not be seen and treated as homogeneous. Different intersectional identities such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, ability and disability, as well as their history, should be understood and considered in approaching community-led development.
- Attention must be paid to gender and power dynamics. A lot of the knowledge of communities is with women, however they often don't get equal opportunities and space to participate. Women's voices and demands should be acknowledged with dignity and respect.





## 9. Protect safe civic space and prevent danger to the community members.

- Community-led development requires a free and widened civic space and atmosphere, where communities enjoy the freedom to express their opinions and to choose the development they want.
- Community members, especially marginalized groups, should be encouraged and supported to participate in any decisions affecting them without fear of attacks.
- Governments at all levels must ensure that communities are recognized as development experts and are protected from any form of attacks and rights violations as they play active roles in the development process.



## 10. Stop prioritizing corporate interests in the development decision-making process.

- Development happens when the grassroots community itself collectively benefits from development programs and policies, not when corporations make a profit.
- It is important to have a community-led platform to address and resolve problems and conflicts that may occur with companies during development processes. This platform should have the capacity to navigate relationships and trust among the community, government, and companies.
- There must be accountability from private actors on the damages and disasters that have been caused by development aggression.



**“As a community, we understand very well what kind of development is suitable for our needs. With the community-led development plan process, we were able to systematically further organize our ideas by mobilizing our community members and allowing them to contribute. This process enabled us to realize our critical role in shaping the collective vision of community development for the present and future generations.”**



## Our Research Approaches

The Global Advocacy Team, together with their communities, undertook community-led research in seven countries between **July 2022 and June 2023** with the goal of determining their respective development challenges and priorities.

Community-led research is a process where a community uses its local and indigenous knowledge, combined with community organizing methods, to understand pressing issues or problems, think carefully about them, and collectively propose solutions. Community-led research revolves around the participation and action of those most impacted by the research. The process involves various groups of people within a community to play important roles in leading every aspect of their research, from setting objectives, identifying research tools, collecting and analyzing data, and deciding how the research data and findings are used.

Community-led research is a powerful tool that empowers communities to shape their development plans and exercise control over their beloved cultures, resources, territories, and their present and future in a sustainable way. It strengthens the collective voice of communities, enabling them to articulate their development priorities and effectively address challenges. It also provides valuable data and insights that guide community actions in defending their rights and asserting their role in decision-making processes related to development.

Members of the Global Advocacy Team in each country formed research teams comprised of community members who possess unique knowledge about their communities, environment, and territories. Each research team represents the intersectional identities of their communities including gender, ethnicity, age, occupation, and other relevant community issues.





## Where:

The GAT community-led research projects took place in the following locations:

1. Dzongu Valley, Sikkim, India
2. Haruku indigenous community, Maluku Province, Indonesia
3. La Victoire Commune and Limbé Commune, Nord Department, Haiti
4. Marts Village, Tumanyan Municipality, Lori Province, Armenia
5. Yala Swamp, Siaya County, Western Kenya
6. Amazon community, Filabusi, Matabeleland region, Zimbabwe
7. Barangay Santiago and Barangay San Francisco, Barotac Viejo, Iloilo Province, Philippines

The Global Advocacy Team members and their community research teams combined their existing experience, methodologies, and stories with new tools and skills learned through their participation in the Global Advocacy Team initiative. The GAT members and their communities shared a common goal in creating a plan that concretizes their common dreams and upholds their right to development. Each had unique research objectives and created research questions corresponding to their economic, social, political, and cultural context to tackle issues that are most important to them. They exchanged their research designs collectively before conducting their research in their respective home communities.

## Participants:

The GAT members, together with their community research teams, prioritized marginalized and vulnerable groups, especially those most affected by the research topics. The research teams discussed and identified these groups, seeking guidance from community leaders, particularly on how to engage with women. They conducted face-to-face meetings and used purposive sampling in the communities, carefully choosing specific individuals based on the purpose and needs of the research.

In total, the GAT members' research included 945 participants, among whom 388 identified themselves as women. Representatives of youth and marginalized groups also took part in the data collection process. This diverse group of researchers helped us gather insights and information from a wide range of perspectives of and experiences with community-led development across the seven countries.

## How:

GAT members consulted their communities to identify their critical issues and concerns, which if solved through community-led development planning process will improve their lives and fulfill human rights. GAT members shared among each other their research goals and specific research questions they wanted answered to achieve their goals. Subsequently, they learned and exchanged research tools and strategies to collect both primary and secondary data in ways that are inclusive and intersectional.

The community research teams used various participatory data collection methods and approaches namely:



**Focus Group  
Discussions**



**Individual  
Interviews**



**Community-led  
Surveys**



**Storytelling and  
Community  
Testimonies**



**Community  
Meetings**



**Photo/Video/Visual  
methods**



**Law and Policy  
Review and Analysis**

These methods facilitated an inclusive and comprehensive gathering of information in a manner sensitive to each community's values and practices.

As a whole, the GAT initiative felt that it was important to involve the communities in every step of the research process, including data analysis, the most challenging but critical step. The research teams involved the best equitable representation of community members in the data analysis process using participatory approaches that are accessible to communities, including creating multiple spaces and opportunities for the community to process and understand the data being collected.



## Our Reflection and Learning from the Research Process

**A** crucial aspect of taking this community-led research journey together globally was our connection through online meetings. These virtual gatherings provided a platform for us to exchange insights, share learnings, and navigate through the similar and unique challenges that we encountered along the way. That included taking collective deep breaths to check in and refocus. The research process is an illuminating journey. One team member expressed how the methodology used was both accessible and required adept community facilitation skills: "This method used is quite easy and requires team skills to apply in the community."

It became evident that effective communication facilitated the collection of authentic and accurate information from the community. A team member reiterated this sentiment, highlighting, "Good communication facilitates the collection of real and accurate information." Another GAT member conducting research with indigenous people added "I learned that you should be on point and do community participation in structuring your questions. Observe the community you are working with so that you don't discriminate by using these methods."







Furthermore, the participatory research method built a space for inclusive engagement, fostering exchanges and training opportunities where everyone actively participated. Community-led research as a participatory approach enriched our understanding of the community's complexities and challenges, as expressed by a team member who said, "I could learn more information regarding our area and the issues."

Moreover, the community-led research participatory methods shed light on gender dynamics and power relations within the communities, allowing for the recognition and validation of women's experiences. As one of the GAT members working with women groups emphasized: "It helps highlight, recognize, and validate women's experiences and interrogate gender impacts." Additionally, the process unmasked barriers faced by marginalized communities, encouraging steps toward equitable participation: "It helps in analyzing the practical barriers to marginalized communities' participation and take steps to ensure all can contribute during the meetings."

Through these robust processes, we reflected that community-led research requires sufficient time, resources, and flexibility, especially when seven communities are conducting research simultaneously. We learned firsthand about the need for the ability to respond to dynamic situations within our communities, including political changes, natural disasters exacerbated by climate change, and security threats.



## Understanding Power and Key Decision Makers

As part of designing community-led research, we conducted an exercise to understand the different actors that are involved in our research topics, especially those who have a stake in the research goals. Toward the end of the research process, we conducted a collective power analysis to identify key influencers in achieving individual and collective advocacy goals toward mainstreaming community-led development planning.

We observed that the common actors holding decision-making powers across the seven research projects are corporate actors that implement and benefit from so-called “development projects” as well as national government agencies that frequently centralize the decision-making power regarding development.

1. National Hydropower Companies
2. Agro Companies
3. Prime Minister and the Central Government
4. Chief Ministers/ Ministers of State
5. Ministry of Energy and Ministry of Agriculture
6. State Security Agencies/ Armed Forces
7. National Investment Agencies

We analyzed that these powerful actors may not share the same perspective and understanding of community-led development as us. It is important to influence them using community-led research processes and data and to redistribute the power in making development decisions closer to communities affected by them.

The Global Advocacy Team believes community-led development processes demonstrate what the actual fulfillment of the human right to development should be. The process cannot be built without the economic, social, and cultural rights prerequisite to the fulfillment of the right to development, including the right to information, the right to remedy, and the right to freedom of assembly and association.

**FORM A GROUNDED  
MOVEMENT TO ASSERT  
GENUINE COMMUNITY-  
LED DEVELOPMENT  
ON PANAY ISLAND,  
PHILIPPINES**





I am Salvert Magapa, a community organizer in rural communities of peasants and indigenous peoples on the island of Panay, Philippines. I have been involved in community organizing initiatives and capacity development efforts in rural communities of peasants, fisherfolks, and indigenous peoples. I work with communities and organizations on various campaigns and advocacy work related to agroecology, agrarian reform, the environment and climate change, indigenous peoples right to self-determination, and human rights. Alongside PAMANGGAS or Paghugpong sang mga Mangunguma sa Panay kag Guimaras, I am currently leading the coordination of the Global Advocacy Team (GAT) initiative in Panay. But before I took on the role in convening the GAT work in Panay, it was Roque Cris Chavez who was instrumental in leading the GAT work and the creation of the GAT research team. Roque Cris was the Secretary General of PAMANGGAS and a former member of the National Council of Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas or KMP. The GAT research team and PAMANGGAS have been practicing and cultivating the principle of collective leadership, which provides a space for younger generations of activists like me to take the lead. We are proud to be a part of the GAT initiative that laid the groundwork for the implementation of community-led research and community-led development planning with partner communities in Panay. Ultimately, we would like to bring our expertise and experiences in working with fisherfolks communities towards bringing about social justice.



## Our community

For more than a decade of working with communities in the barangays (villages) of Santiago and San Francisco in the municipality of Barotac Viejo in Iloilo Province, I have seen how the villagers heavily depend on the bounty of the sea for their families' subsistence and unpredictable survival. Fisherfolks toil in the middle of the sea from dusk to dawn, trying their luck at finding a good catch. Some even sail out long before dusk, as early as 4:00 in the afternoon, when the target fishing ground is far. They are usually back home at around 5:00 in the morning, with a group of expectants – residents, family members, small vendors, and tricycle drivers – waiting ashore. During peak season, one fishing vessel – considered as one team – is able to earn P9,000.00 (approximately \$180 USD) gross worth of fish catch on a single trip. Meanwhile, they only get P2,800 (around \$50 USD) during off peak. Net earnings are then equally divided among team members.

Fishing remains to be the main source of livelihood and food for the communities in Santiago and San Francisco. However, the lifeblood of the fisherfolk communities has been persistently in peril due to the enforcement of national and subnational laws and policies governing the fisheries and aquatic resources. Since the ratification and implementation of Republic Act 8550 (RA 8550) also known as the Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998, as well as Republic Act 10654 (RA 10654), which amended RA 8550, our fisherfolk communities have experienced multiple layers of hardship.

Under these laws, the government imposes a 3-month fish ban, from November 15 to February 15, on herring, mackerel, and sardines. Fisherfolks and their families practically lose their livelihood and food, resulting in food shortage and loss of income. This law hits the poorest of the poor the hardest. During this period, the subnational government does not have a clear and concrete intervention to assist the impacted communities.



In addition, RA 10654 prohibits municipal fisherfolks from fishing beyond their municipal fishing boundary and was implemented despite that villagers forwarded their positions against it. Those who are caught fishing outside the defined municipal boundaries will be apprehended and fined by the bantay dagat (sea patrol). Before the existence of this law, fisherfolks were free to go in areas with abundant fish, without causing conflicts with other fisherfolks and communities.

With the current policies and laws in place, communities are struggling and this situation is aggravated by the worsening impacts of the climate crisis. As coastal communities, the manifestations of harsh climate conditions have significant consequences on their lives. During strong typhoons, the community suffers when big tidal waves destroy their boats and fishing gear, paralyzing their main source of food and income. This is in addition to the damage to their houses brought about by strong wind and heavy rain.

Families often look for temporary and alternative income sources to support their basic and daily needs. When I asked what alternatives they usually have, most of them said that loans from microfinance institutions have been the most accessible and dependable means to get the necessary emergency funds, even if it drowned them in debt. Failed government responses, as well as limited subsidy and financial aid in times of calamities, have only worsened their socio-economic vulnerabilities.

Their experience taught them to place their hope in each other in finding solutions to their concerns. They organized and formed their own community-based organization, Asosasyon sang Magagmay nga mga Mangingisda sa Santiago (AMMS), to collectively assert their rights, especially to

their sources of livelihood and to basic social services. Consequently, they have strengthened alliance building with organizations and institutions that provide social and economic services, like alternative livelihood and capacity development. The organization is also active in joining multi-sectoral campaigns and advocacy engagements both at the national and subnational levels.

But these efforts to build their collective aspirations are threatened by relentless attacks from the government. The government labels community leaders and members who are critical of its policies and programs as terrorists and rebels. Community members feel unsafe because of multiple security risks associated with the terrorist label. For example, Melbert Balbon, a community leader in Barangay Santiago, fears that someone suspicious is following him every time he's in the town center running errands and attending official meetings. In recent years, there was an incident where military men stayed overnight in the community without any clear objective and residents were afraid that something bad would happen.



## Our community-led research

Our research focuses on the impacts of the Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998 and its amendments (RA 8550 and RA 10654) on the economic life of the fisherfolk communities, one of the most vulnerable and marginalized sectors in Philippine society. In addition, the research hopes to gather and consolidate sound policy recommendations from the communities. These recommendations will be presented to the proper authorities for policy making and/or policy reforms.

The communities participating in the research are Barangay Santiago and Barangay San Francisco, two of the eight coastal communities in the municipality of Barotac Viejo - located in the northern part of Iloilo province. By sea, Santiago and San Francisco are connected. But by land, these two communities are separated by Barangay Puerto Princesa.

We started our research project through social preparation, such as community meetings with the villagers. We also submitted letters to the offices of municipal agriculture and the mayor and vice-mayor of the municipality of Barotac Viejo. Letters were also sent to village chiefs of Santiago and San Francisco. Our team also coordinated with the chairman and members of the Executive Committee of Barotac Viejo Small Fisherfolk Association (BASFA), a municipal federation of fisherfolk in 3 communities, to request a courtesy meeting with each government office in relation to the conduct of community-led research.



We used the following methods and tools:

1. Individual surveys
2. Focus group discussions
3. Key informant interviews
4. Case studies

Individual surveys, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and case studies looked into the socio-economic profile of the villagers. In particular, these tools contained questions about villagers' sources of income, level of knowledge in relation to laws governing fisheries and aquatic resources, community-led socio-economic programs and projects, and the community's recommendations. Moreover, individual surveys gathered additional data on income gaps during fine weather and typhoon season, villagers' perceptions of a strong, community-based organization, and their overall recommendations to improve their socio-economic status.

We ran a pre-test for the focus group discussions and individual surveys with seven and ten respondents, respectively. The pre-test was conducted to know how effective the tools were and to identify ways to improve the instruments. Thereafter, we started the final and actual research process.



In August 2022, we organized one community assembly per barangay as part of the social preparation. We mobilized 22 community members – including 12 women – in Barangay Santiago while 59 community members – including 35 women – in Barangay San Francisco. In September 2022, focus group discussions and initial individual surveys were conducted in two communities. We facilitated another round of focus group discussions amongst the women and youth, individual surveys, and case studies in October 2022. A total of 31 women out of 59 participants joined the focus group discussions in Barangay San Francisco and Santiago.

Core to community-led research is the central role and participation of community members. Our research team is composed of eight members belonging to the following groups:

- Four community-based organizers (three men, one woman)
- Four villagers (one man, three women)

The team selection process was done through consultation meetings with the leaders of a Barotac Viejo Small Fisherfolk Association and PAMANGGAS. Members were selected based on their capacity to carry out the tasks associated with the research, including their capability to implement the research methods and tools, as well as their experience in facilitating discussions that address their issues and in campaigning.

Our team relied on the data collected and information provided by the leaders of the fisherfolks organization and community members. These people also helped in shaping the focus of the research through sharing of thoughts, ideas, and practical experiences on the implementation of the fisheries laws and policies. The rich data and information provided context and situational analysis of fisherfolk communities covered by the research. In addition, the data and information provided by the villagers were validated and collectively analyzed through a series of community meetings and assemblies.

The results of the community-led research reveal communities' interest in policy dialogues to replace existing laws and policies with ones that truly contribute to the development of the community and that respect human and environmental rights. We aimed for our community-led development plan to be founded on the people's right to development. Specifically, our vision of a community-led development plan is the one that upholds the principle that the community has a right to reject or accept development plans and programs that directly impact their lives and survival. More importantly, we seek to mobilize the community members to exercise their right and power to formulate and decide on what kind of development responds to the needs, context, and aspirations of their people.



## Our community-led development priorities

Finding: The Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998 and its amendments (RA 8550 and RA 10654) have adversely impacted the livelihoods of the fisherfolk communities in Santiago and San Francisco.

1. Close of the fishing season or fish ban - During this period, fisherfolks using several types of fishing gear, such as *sikob*, *likos*, and *pukot*, designed to catch mackerel, sardines, herring and other species, must stop their operation, which proportionally reduces their income. The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, together with the provincial government units that implement the fish ban, do not provide emergency assistance to affected fisherfolk. In addition, there has been no alternative livelihood presented to them.

Community-led Development Plan Recommendation: The fisherfolks noticed that the spawning period of fish is year-round, not only confined to November to February. They also noticed that adult fish spawn every three months. Likewise, the communities initially recommended reducing the number of months for the fish ban. It would be bearable to reduce it from 3 months to 1-2 months only. The local government should identify areas that will be considered as a fish sanctuary and will be off limits to the fisherfolk. The local government, through the *bantay dagat* (sea patrol), should ensure that the sanctuary areas are protected.





2. Municipal boundary - The municipal boundary under the RA 10654 limits the fishing grounds of the municipal fisherfolk to their municipal boundaries. Those who are caught fishing outside of their defined municipal boundaries will be apprehended and fined by the *bantay dagat* (sea patrol) of the municipality where they were caught.

Community-led Development Plan Recommendation: The community proposed to forego the implementation of the municipal boundary for fishing because it limits their fishing grounds. In the case of Barotac Viejo, their fishing grounds are limited due to the geographical location of the town, which harms their livelihood. Instead, they suggested that the government implement an island-wide boundary, to allow more fisherfolk to fish within the waters of Panay.

3. Prohibition of the use of fine mesh fishnet - Under RA 10654, fine mesh net is defined as nets whose eye is 3 centimeters and below. In the municipal waters of Barotac Viejo, fisherfolk who are operating traditional fishing gear, such as *tangkal* and *punot*, use nets that are less than 3 centimeters. As a result, they were not issued permits for the year 2022 until 2023.

Community-led Development Plan Recommendation: Allow the use of current nets (#12 or 2.75 centimeters) in stationary fishing gear like the *tangkal*. In addition, the law enforcers should strictly implement the banning of *hulbot-hulbot* that are destructive to the coral reefs.

4. Excessive fees - The renewal fee for permits for fishing gear are higher as compared to 2019, with little to no explanation. Overall, the penalties and fines imposed for violating the laws and policies also increased to an amount that ordinary fisherfolk cannot afford.

Community-led Development Plan Recommendation: The community proposed to reduce the fees and fines to a rate that the public can pay. The communities also proposed to the local government that they should conduct regular consultation with fisherfolk to know their situation and collectively identify the support needed to improve their situation. Lastly, government agencies should conduct information campaigns about existing laws and policies in the sea that affect fisherfolk communities.

5. Different challenges faced by women - Women are directly impacted by high prices of commodities when the price of fish remains low. They do not have alternative sources of livelihood thus affecting their income to cover their daily needs. Women in the community have a difficult time in ensuring their family's access to healthy and nutritious food as well as affordable health services.

Community-led Development Plan Recommendation: Active participation of women in campaign and advocacy activities that seek to lower the prices of commodities in the market through government regulations. Women suggested having comprehensive health training, such as first aid and developing alternative medicine from herbal plants available in their community. In addition, they proposed to have a *bagsakan* center (one-stop shop) wherein the local government will serve as the buyer of the fish caught to ensure that the fisherfolk get a fair price for the catch. They also joined the call for support to the fisherfolks sector during monsoon season and the fish ban.

6. Youth involvement - Youth - who cannot continue their college education due to inability to pay school fees - serve as economic providers by helping their families in making fishing gear and participating in daily fishing activities.

Community-led Development Plan Recommendation: The youth also shared the recommendation in pushing for reforms in the fisheries law, such as providing a subsidy during the close of the fishing season, shortened implementation of the fish ban and close of the season, higher prices for their catch, and lowering costs of basic commodities. The youth also identified some recommendations in relation to community cooperation for the cleanliness of their village as well as better and accessible road infrastructure to and from their schools and community. Since most of them wish to continue their college education, they also call for the abolition of all school fees and education for all.

7. Terrorist labeling - In addition to the dire economic situation in the community, known leaders and villagers in Santiago and San Francisco - who are active in community organizing and campaign work - experienced persistent terrorist labeling by the government agency such as the NTF-ELCAC or National Task Force to End Local Communists Armed Conflict. The GAT Research Team and PAMANGGAS, who are helping the fisherfolks in community-led development planning were also tagged as terrorists by NTF-ELCAC.

Community-led Development Plan Recommendation: The community calls on the local government to ensure that communities are protected from any form of attacks and rights violations that undermine their role as effective development actors. The communities also support the passage of the Human Rights Defenders Bill in the legislative house.

For decades, the government's development priorities have not been aligned, if not totally conflicting, with our vision of community development. We know that our struggle for a genuine community-led development is like sailing through rough seas during the monsoon season. There are institutional barriers that prevent our participation in decision-making processes. We are often excluded in discussions concerning our land, environment, livelihood, and survival.

As a community, we understand very well what kind of development is suitable for our needs. With the community-led development plan process, we were able to systematically further organize our ideas by mobilizing our community members and allowing them to contribute. This process enabled us to realize our critical role in shaping collective vision of community development for the present and future generations.



# INTEGRATE INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICES IN RESPONDING TO CLIMATE IMPACTS IN MALUKU, INDONESIA



I am Lenny Patty from the Ullath indigenous community, Maluku, Indonesia. I am the current chairperson of Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN) in the Maluku region. My organization, AMAN or Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago, is the largest indigenous peoples organization in Indonesia. We work closely with indigenous communities in Maluku by providing assistance and capacity building, particularly to indigenous women and youth, with the hope that the community members themselves will be the masters of their own customary lands or indigenous territory.



**H**aruku Island – administratively known as Haruku District in the Maluku Tengah Regency, Maluku Province, Indonesia – is the home of the Haruku indigenous peoples. From Ambon Island, the capital of Maluku Province, it takes about 30 minutes by boat to reach Haruku Island, which is one of the smallest islands in Maluku Province. Upon arriving at Haruku, you easily notice the busy dock and community market. Villagers sell their vegetables and forest products as well as fresh catches from the sea.

To this day, Haruku indigenous peoples still practice customary law and local wisdom in managing their resources and ancestral lands. Saniri Negeri – their customary institution – has been in place since the 17th century. The Raja Negeri Haruku, or King of Negeri Haruku, holds the highest authority in the community and is followed by the Kewang, or local ranger.

The Kewang is in charge of implementing Sasi, or customary rules. Sasi is a set of rules that prohibit natural resource exploitation. Through Sasi, community members in Haruku Island are barred from taking or using natural products from particular areas for a certain period of time. The Kewang usually opens an area to harvesting of natural products in a given time frame. Kewang and the indigenous elders are the main people who set the date for Sasi. The aim is to let nature recover after being used by humans. If the Sasi is violated, the involved community members will face a customary trial and be subject to penalties. Haruku community members have long agreed to social sanctions being implemented for those who violate Sasi. Apart from implementing Sasi, the Kewang also has the authority to issue a permit for any construction project on Haruku Island, especially if it uses the natural resources in the area. This rule applies even to private property owned by the villagers.

The local wisdom and customary law play a central role in Haruku and strengthen the community's response to proposed development. For example, the gold potential in Haruku Island once attracted mining investors and companies, but the communities upheld strong values against extractive and destructive mining and the companies abandoned their exploration.



As indigenous communities within an island ecosystem, we benefit from the abundant marine resources. On the other hand, our communities are vulnerable to environmental challenges brought about by so-called development projects and climate change. In recent years, we have observed alarming manifestations of climate change in our communities. Sea-level rise around Haruku Island has been rapid in the past decade, making coastal communities susceptible to the adverse effects of tidal waves and high tides.

The worst tidal flood followed by erosion happened in July 2022, when our research team was about to conduct discussions and data-gathering activities. At least 200 houses were impacted, with 50 of them heavily damaged. In addition, a bridge collapsed, which hampered land transportation on Haruku Island. The coastline seawall was also destroyed, resulting in the temporary displacement of 750 community members. Ultimately, climate change impacts have been greatly affecting the livelihood and income of the villagers, not to mention the safety risk it poses to the fisherfolk, who can be carried away by the strong currents.





## Our community-led research

Our recent experience in Haruku Island concerning tidal floods, sea level rise, and other impacts exposed the absence of programs and systems that would mitigate the risks that climate change poses to our communities. These risks are particularly severe for the most vulnerable groups, such as women and children, people with disabilities, and the elderly.

Together with the Haruku indigenous community, we decided to conduct community-led research to:

1. Understand the community's perception of development;
2. Map out climate mitigation policies at the subnational level; and
3. Identify ways to strengthen the customary laws and practices like Sasi to help them protect their ancestral lands and resources.

These topics emerged from the results of discussions with local communities on Haruku Island. We also took into account the high vulnerability of indigenous territories in relation to climate change impacts. After the tidal flood that destroyed the seawall, Sasi Lompa was not held due to the erosion that caused siltation and sedimentation on the river where the Sasi is usually held. Sasi Lompa is a Sasi that is implemented to prevent the exploitation of Lompa Fish (*Trisinia baelama*). This species of fish has similarities with trout or salmon fish and can be found in the river mouth. In Haruku Island, this fish can be found in the mouth of Learisa Kayeli River.

The island itself is still prone to potential disasters due to abrasion and underwater earthquakes.



The research team conducted research on food security amid climate crisis threats. Whenever a disaster happens, the government only sends out instant noodles as aid, which isn't enough for the community's food security. Therefore, having food barns will be a strategic move. These food barns will be located in the safest area on the island, which will not be affected by flooding or earthquakes. So, during extreme weather events, they will not rely on the government's aid as the community will be able to pick up some vegetables from the garden.

In our community-led research, we employed the following methods:

1. **Storytelling:** This method was conducted with elders in Haruku Island who talked about the preservation of the dried food diets. There were 3 elders participating in the storytelling session who talked about dried food diets as a means to maintain food security during extreme weather conditions such as frequent and severe typhoons. Besides that, they also discussed Sasi Lompa. In addition, this session was used to get the elders' perceptions of development, their initial understanding of community-led development, and their knowledge of climate change
2. **Interviews:** The interviews were focused on discussing the level of involvement of 5 young people, 10 indigenous women, 2 elders, and 5 people with disabilities in designing development for their village. During the interview, it was discovered that the government lacks sufficient knowledge about climate change mitigation and disaster response. Communities expressed concern that the government predominantly focuses on distributing aid, such as instant noodles, to address the immediate food crisis when a disaster occurs, rather than proactively mitigating the underlying issues. According to the community, the government should have known that Haruku Island is vulnerable to floods, earthquakes, and landslides because these happen often. According to their response, the government should provide more knowledge to the community regarding emergency response to disasters, so that when it happens, the community knows what to do.
3. **Survey:** The survey instrument was maximized to understand and know what kind of development the community needs and wants from the local government. A total of 20 community members consisting of 10 indigenous women, 5 men, 2 girls, and 3 boys, completed the survey. The questions were made to accommodate a personalized answer from each respondent. Questions in the survey mostly talk about what development means to them, whether they have been involved in development planning initiated by the government, whether the development in their village is sufficient to meet their needs, and what type of development each respondent will prioritize if they're given a chance to plan it.

4. Focus Group Discussions (FGD): After collating the results of the interviews and surveys, the research team conducted focus group discussions among 25 women and 30 men in Haruku Island to identify their collective vision of development. The FGD was conducted separately based on gender because women in Haruku are still hesitant to express their opinions in public. They feel way safer to express their opinion in a private forum without the presence of men. During the FGD, it was revealed that there is a low level of awareness among community members regarding government rules and policies related to land ownership. Participants also expressed concerns about the government's approach to climate change mitigation in relation to food security. Disasters like tidal floods that often happen in Haruku Island immediately impact food security. Instead of proactively mitigating these impacts, the government consistently relies on distributing instant foods to address the crisis. Consequently, the community believes that establishing food barns could serve as a viable solution to effectively address the challenge of securing adequate food stocks in the event of a disaster.

We also conducted community meetings to gather community members, discuss the objectives and importance of community-led research, and understand the expectations of those who agreed to take part in the research initiative.

We were able to mobilize women, youth, men, people with disabilities, elders, and sub-national government staff. The research participants were all indigenous peoples who attended and participated in AMAN activities that we had organized before the Global Advocacy Team (GAT) community-led research.

Our research team used data categorization and qualitative data analysis from the information collected through surveys, interviews, storytelling, and focus group discussions. After we processed the data, we organized community meetings to verify our collective analyses and initial recommendations for a community-led development plan.



## Our community-led development priorities

**Finding 1:** No official data related to people with disabilities – When we did the data collection from local government offices, we found out that there is no information about people with disabilities in Haruku Island. But when we started the survey and community meetings, at least ten people with disabilities participated in the activities. The total number of people with disabilities in Haruku Island might be more than ten if the local government does a census. However, getting the exact number of people with disabilities has been a challenge because people with disabilities are viewed as a curse in Indonesian culture.



**Finding 2:** Varying understanding of development – From the survey we conducted, 10 percent, or ten out of 100 people, understood what community-led development is. The rest of survey participants associated development with the presence of infrastructure projects.



**Finding 3:** Low knowledge of government rules and policies regarding land ownership – The community members said during interviews that the land ownership process is confusing or unclear. At the village level, Haruku customary law recognizes Haruku indigenous peoples as the owners of the land. However, the government law does not recognize it unless indigenous peoples register the land through government processes and bureaucracy. The Haruku indigenous peoples claimed that the process for land rights ownership is not properly communicated to indigenous communities.

**“ We never knew about the latest regulations or policies issued by the government, they just came out of the blue to measure our land (Katong seng pernah tau tentang aturan terbaru ,nanti ada petugas datang ukur tanah baru katong tanya dan tau). – One of the landowners in Haruku Island**

**“ The government has never shown any concern to mitigate the impacts of climate change impacts, they only showed up once the disaster happened, distributing aid (Selama ini seng perhatian seng turun untukantisipasi atau apa bagitu, nanti kalo sudah terjadi baru datang lia saja deng bawa bantuan).  
– FL, indigenous woman**

**Finding 4:** Need for an improved local government response to climate change impacts – Based on the interviews with villagers, the local government constructed a breakwater to protect the community from tidal waves, storm surges, and currents. But the community felt that the technology the government used is not appropriate because the breakwater gets damaged and must be replaced every year. The community prefers planting mangroves instead of having an artificial breakwater, but the local government did not consult the community before they began construction.

Our community-led research results reveal that the indigenous peoples of Haruku still have traditional knowledge and strong customary practices for regulating our way of living and natural resource management. Our communities continue to aspire for genuine social change to improve the lives of our people as well as our persistent defense of ancestral lands and the environment. However, the process of change must come from the community itself, including our leaders and our indigenous parents, so that we can ensure that this process continues to run well.

# HARNESS THE POWER OF LOCAL CULTURE TO BUILD AN INDIGENOUS-LED DEVELOPMENT PLAN IN DZONGU VALLEY, SIKKIM, INDIA





I am Mayalmit Lepcha, an indigenous woman human rights defender from the Lepcha indigenous community from Dzongu Valley in the state of Sikkim, India. I am the president of the Sikkim Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association and the general secretary of Affected Citizens of Teesta. In our traditional Lepcha language Rongring, my name means a citizen of Mayal Lyang which translates to 'land blessed by the gods'. I work with members of Affected Citizens of Teesta and the people of Dzongu to protect the Teesta River and the pristine ecology of Dzongu Valley from destructive hydropower projects that have been proposed over the years by the state-owned National Hydropower Corporation Limited and other companies.



## Our community

The Lepcha indigenous community considers Dzongu Valley to be the holy land from where they originated. It is located in the northeastern region of India, in the northern part of Sikkim, a state sharing its borders with the countries of Tibet and Bhutan. It is surrounded by the third highest mountain in the world, Mount Kanchendzonga, and by the Teesta River and its tributaries. Dzongu was legally recognized as a specially protected area through Notification 3069, passed in 1958 via a royal decree when Sikkim was an independent Buddhist kingdom. This special status was upheld by Article 371 (F) of the Indian Constitution when the state of Sikkim acceded to India in 1975. According to this decree, land rights in Dzongu Valley are reserved for Lepchas from Dzongu, no non-Lepcha or Lepcha from outside of Dzongu can acquire land in the valley.



The Lepcha community, or as we call ourselves in our language, *Mutanchi Rongkup Rumkup*, are considered to be the earliest inhabitants of Sikkim. Our community is believed to have originated from *Itbu Debu*, the 'creator,' who created us from two pure snowballs from Mount Kanchendzonga, which we consider to be our sacred deity. When we die, our souls travel back from the holy river Rongyong to *Pomzoo Lyang*, the soul resting place located in the foothills of Kanchendzonga. Our culture, customs, and traditions are inextricably linked to our deep bond with the surrounding nature and ecology of Dzongu.

We have been severely impacted by multiple hydropower projects proposed to be built in and around Dzongu, mostly by National Hydropower Corporation and other companies, including Himgiri Hydro and Teesta Urja Limited, which have been supported by the governments of India and Sikkim. Our community has been continuously resisting the proposed hydropower projects through protests, hunger strikes, and advocacy through the community-based collective, Affected Citizens of Teesta. Through a three-year-long, historic, rolling hunger strike, started in 2007 by members of Affected Citizens of Teesta and Sangha of Dzongu, we were successful in scrapping four hydropower projects proposed in Dzongu, Ringpi (70 MW), Rukul (33 MW), Rangyong (141 MW) and Lingza (120 MW), and four projects outside of Dzongu as well. However, other hydropower projects have been constructed around the region of Dzongu, such as the Teesta Stage V (510 MW) and Teesta Stage III (1200 MW), which have caused immense destruction to the fragile and eco-sensitive topography of Sikkim.

We are currently challenging two projects planned to be built on the last free-flowing stretch of the Teesta River, the Panang Hydropower Project (320 MW), proposed by Himagiri Hydro Energy Private Limited, and the Teesta Stage IV Project (520 MW), proposed by National Hydropower Corporation. Panang Hydropower project is on hold because of a landslide in 2016 while the Teesta Stage IV is also on hold due to opposition by our community.

The Teesta Stage IV project is particularly risky because it will require tunnelling, which could be disastrous, as the region falls within a seismic zone, including the young fold mountains of the Himalayas. This project will also directly impact the Lower Dzongu region, as we have seen the impacts caused by the previous dams. We have strongly opposed this project, which is still on hold as the forest clearance for this project was rejected by the panchayat (village council) of an affected village in Lower Dzongu, Hee Gyathang.

The disastrous impacts of the existing hydropower projects were witnessed by the Lepcha community and people of Sikkim on October 4, 2023 when a glacial lake outburst flood in the Himalayas led to the washing away of the existing Stage III and damages to Stage V and VI dams. This led to massive flash floods that caused immense damage to our landscape and cut off our villages due to damage to roads and bridges that completely broke off access routes.

Through our research, it also became clear that our community has been speaking out about the disasters that may occur, not only for Dzongu, but the whole of Sikkim if more dams are built on the Teesta River. Hence, we come together through this research to demand that no more dams be built and that the Teesta River be left free-flowing. It is time for governments and hydropower companies to take accountability for the immense damages caused by the previous hydropower companies and stop promoting large hydropower projects that are only destructive and not “renewable”.

In this crisis as well, the Lepcha community’s traditional knowledge came to the rescue as we mobilised and volunteered to provide relief, rebuild the broken structures and re-establish connectivity. We utilised our indigenous techniques and knowledge such as building of bamboo bridges and conducted rituals to seek forgiveness from the local dieties for the disturbance caused to the ecology. Our communities are the most vulnerable and impacted during such disasters which gave us no time to mourn and grieve the irreversible loss and damages we suffer. Instead, we are actively working on ground, giving moral support to each other and coming up with innovative solutions to respond to such disasters.



## Our community-led research

As a part of the Global Advocacy Team, we have been coordinating community-led research to gather the local perspectives, opinions, and demands of the Lepcha indigenous community concerning the proposed Teesta Stage IV hydropower project. The research also documents the oral narratives, stories, cultural beliefs, and rituals of our Lepcha community and our linkage to the ecology of Dzongu.

Mayalmit Lepcha facilitated the research process, along with Minket Lepcha, a storyteller, and Dr. Reep Pundhi, an assistant professor at Sikkim Government College. The research process included the participation of youth, women, elders, *mun boongthings* (traditional indigenous priests), and Buddhist monks. These participants supported the research by helping to coordinate the surveys and discussions, providing information, and collecting and documenting oral narratives and stories

This community-led research allowed us to develop and preserve a deeper understanding of our community and our culture. Our elders are dying, taking rich indigenous knowledge with them. The younger generation needs to come together to preserve this knowledge and pass it ahead.

For this research, we focused on the following groups from the Lepcha community:



- *Mun boongthings*: They are traditional priests and priestesses. They are the main messengers between the community and our creators and serve as our healers and protectors. Their boundless and incredible knowledge includes medicinal plants, different kinds of rituals, flora, fauna and natural resources of the region, the local deities, and the origin of the different Lepcha clans. They are even known to stop landslides, hailstorms and bring rain, such is their spiritual power.
- Buddhist monks: After the Lepcha people converted to Buddhism, we followed the *Ning ma pa* sect in our region. This Buddhism is very different from the rest of the world because it is also centred around nature worship.
- Youth: The youth represent the future generations that can mobilise the movement and carry the legacy of the Lepcha community. They have the biggest responsibility for protecting the land and resources.
- Women: The Lepcha women are the backbone of the movement and have stood very strong in opposition to hydropower projects, especially the women from the self-help groups. They also have a lot of knowledge that has not been recognized and are the most vulnerable to the impacts if the projects move forward. This is because their livelihood is linked to the land and also because they play an important role in preserving the cultural practices and rituals of the community.



We used different methodologies to conduct this research and gather the perspectives of different groups.

Initially, a survey questionnaire was conducted in three villages – Hee Gyathang, Gor Tarang and Lingdong Barfolk – with 53 women, 21 monks, 16 *mun boongthings* and 4 youth. The objective of this survey was to understand: the participants' relationship to and knowledge of the land and resources of Dzongu, how those relationships and resources will be impacted by the proposed Stage IV hydropower project, and what perceptions and opinions they have of the project.

As part of this research, we also documented the origin stories of the different clans of the Lepcha community of Dzongu Valley. Each Lepcha clan has an ecologically based origin story and each clan has their own *chu* (mountain), *lep* (pass) and *doh* (lake). We mapped the 30 different clans in the Lepcha community, after which we were able to get together members from 15 of the clans, with each clan represented by two members – one elder and one youth.

The origin stories were prepared through a three-day workshop in Hee Gyathang in January 2023. During the workshop, the participants learned about the importance of collecting Lepcha oral stories that have been passed on from generations and that we should be grateful for our rich knowledge. It was an emotional and powerful experience for all of the participants. The workshop brought us all together by allowing us to connect to our ancestors. During the workshop, a comic artist from Assam, Amrith Basumatary, conducted training on the basics of drawing comics and how stories can be documented in the form of grassroots comics. We chose to document these stories in the form of grassroots comics because it is a very interactive and child-friendly format that can be preserved and passed on to later generations. At the end of the workshop, all of the participants had up to three months to go to their village and collect their origin stories from the elders. Once the stories were collected, each of the representatives sketched the story in a comic-book format, based on what they learned at the workshop.

In July 2023, we had another workshop to bring all of the stories together to share among the participants. On the second day, we organised an exhibition where the elders from each Lepcha clan of the community were invited to see the comics and verify the stories. We also invited media and representatives from the Sikkim Lepcha Literary Organisation to witness the stories presented.

In Dzongu, until now, most of the research on the Lepcha community has been conducted by outsiders. This is the first time communities have come forward collectively to document our perspectives and stories. We Lepchas are the living environmental history of this geography. This history should be documented and preserved through our own inherited knowledge.



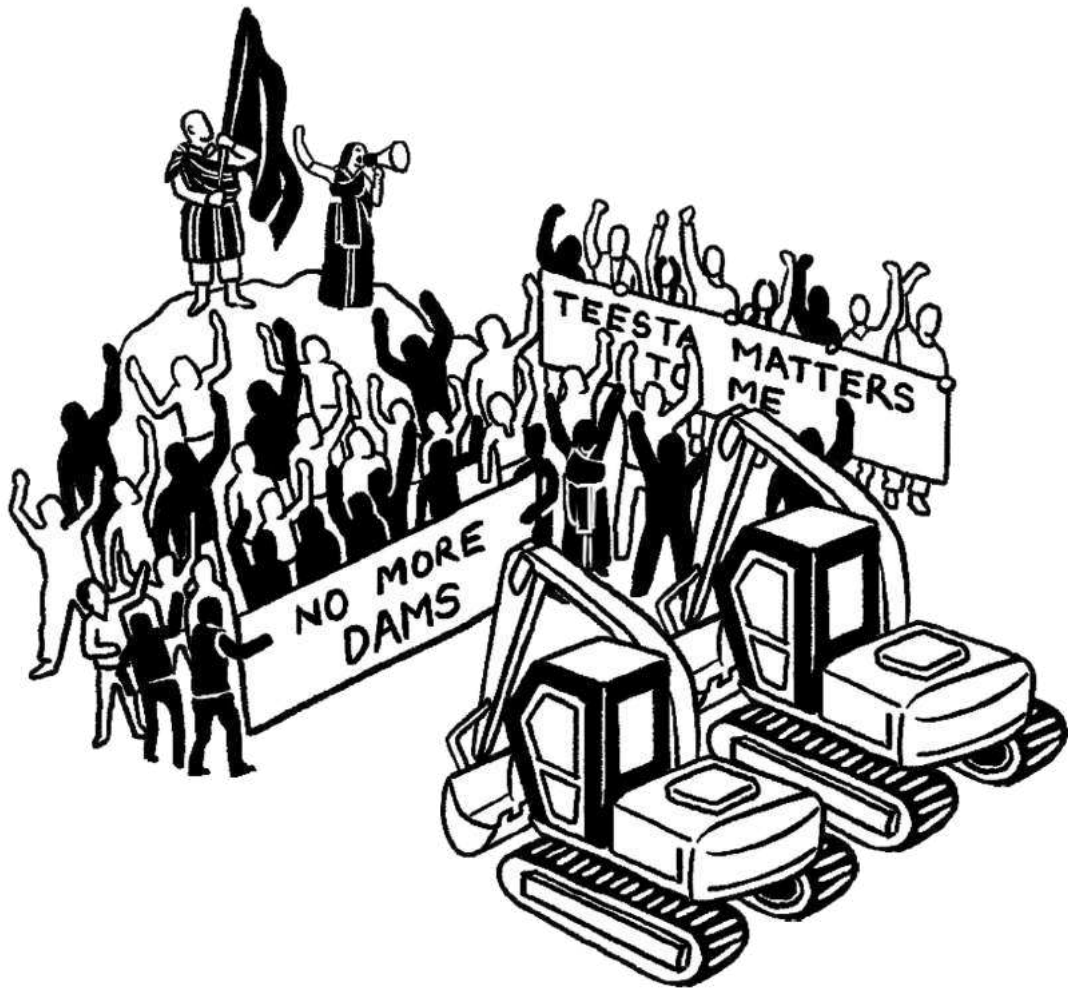
## Our community-led research findings

**Finding 1:** All (100 percent) of the respondents are against Stage IV and other hydropower projects on the Teesta River. When asked about their views on proposed projects, everyone who participated in the survey vehemently opposed them because of the destruction it has imposed on their land and environment, with many of them quoting their experiences of landslides and flash floods as a result of the Stage III and Stage V projects near Dzongu. The respondents shared that the future dams could have a destructive impact on our land and natural resources, which also causes them to feel insecure for their children and future generations. The monks and mun boonthings shared that they oppose the dams, as it would destroy their freedom of religion and Lepcha culture, which is linked to the lakes, mountains, and rivers of Dzongu. One of the respondents shared, *“Our ancestors’ legacy and our legends should not be harmed in the name of development, we are developed enough with the beauty of nature that surrounds us.”*

**Finding 2:** The participants also shared the impacts they faced from the previous Stage III and Stage V hydropower projects. Out of those interviewed for this survey, 96.5 percent shared they have faced the impacts of landslides regularly. One such incident took place in 2016 when a massive landslide occurred in Mantam Village in Upper Dzongu. Until today, 12 to 13 villages remain completely cut off from the rest of the world because debris from the landslide broke the bridges they used to cross the river. In addition:

- 84.9 percent shared that their roads have been affected, with cracks seen on many roads in Dzongu due to underground tunnelling work;
- 75 percent of people shared they have seen a drying up of spring water and streams in Dzongu;
- 69 percent shared how their agriculture has been affected, this has been prominently seen in the decline of the large cardamom crop which was once native to Dzongu and grown all around, and by the fact that the oranges that are grown now are not of the same quality;
- 65 percent of the people surveyed have experienced cracks in their houses; and
- 61 percent shared that they were affected by floods.

This survey was taken before the October 4th, 2023 Teesta floods occurred.



**Finding 3:** Of the people surveyed, 92 percent were aware of the Teesta Stage IV hydropower project. When asked what they knew about it, they shared that they were aware that this project would directly impact the Lower Dzongu region, especially the Hee Gyathang GPU and Lum Gor Sangtok GPU, which lies in the affected area. However, while they were aware of the project, 82 percent of respondents reported that they were neither consulted nor informed about the Stage IV hydropower project by the government or the company. They shared that they only received this information through hearing from their fellow villagers and by participating in meetings organised by Affected Citizens of Teesta.

**Finding 4:** The survey also revealed that 99 percent of the respondents were concerned about the project, as they are aware that River Rongyong and the last free-flowing stretch of the River Teesta will be diverted to run through a tunnel as a result of the Stage IV project. Respondents shared how this is the biggest threat to the Lepcha community, as River Rongyong is their holy river, from where they believe their souls travel back to Pomzoo Iyang at Mount Kanchendzonga. If this process is impeded due to the construction of a dam, it will harm the cultural identity and practices of the Lepcha community. *“The rivers stand as witnesses whenever there is a ritual in our culture. As a nature-worshipping community, rivers give us a sense of belonging and pride”*, shared one of the monks who was interviewed for the survey. A ritual that is important to the monks and deeply



connected to the rivers is Chitoor, which is performed on the riverbanks of River Rongyong for the well-being of the family and the community. This ritual is performed with a particular kind of river fish which is dried and this variety of fish is only found in Rongyong.



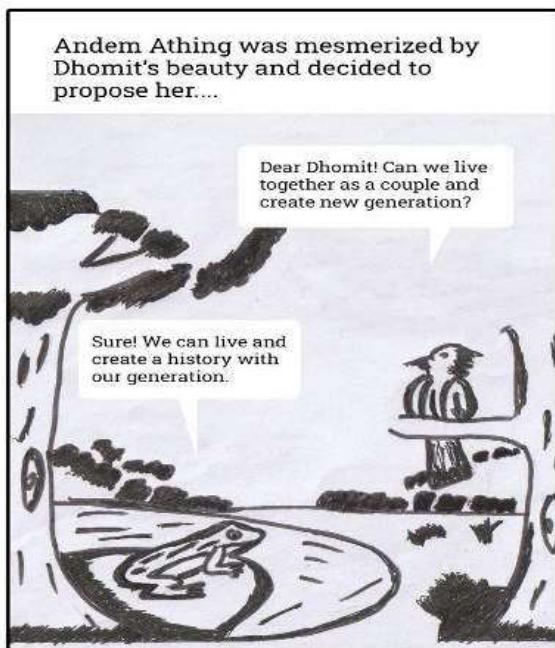
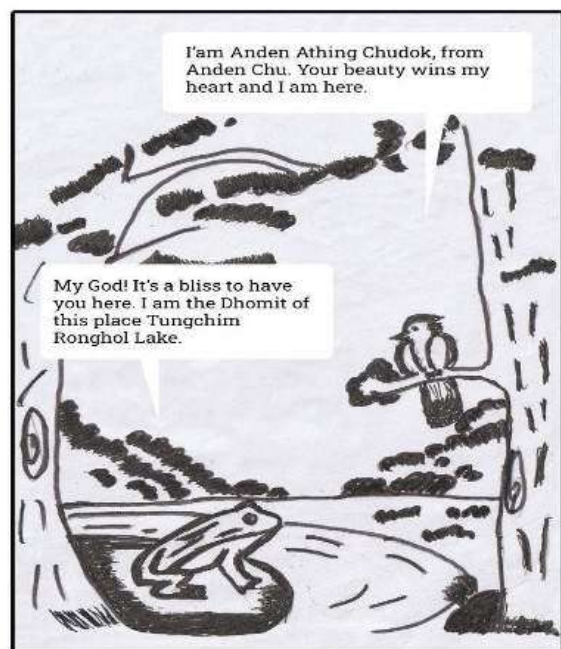
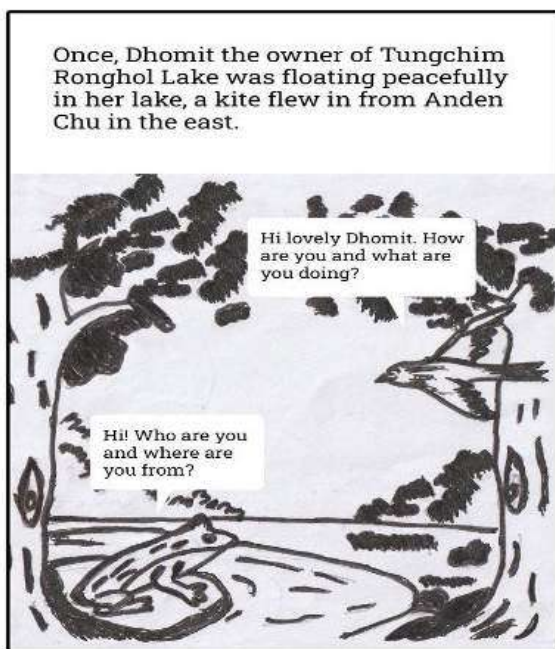
## Our creation stories

In an attempt to preserve our rich Lepcha culture, we decided to document the origin or creation stories of the Lepcha clans. We also sought to address the huge gap between the older generations and younger generations. Younger generations have moved to cities and urban areas for modern education. Older generations have been left behind in the villages. Their rich indigenous knowledge is not taken into consideration. Through this process, we have tried to initiate a bridge to close this gap between the elders and the youth of our community. Through this documentation of our clan stories, we have realised that our indigenous knowledge is rich and powerful; and efforts to research, document, and preserve it for our younger generations are long overdue.



These stories are evidence that we belong to this land; we haven't migrated from outside. We were created from Mount Kanchendzonga and our ancestors were from here. Our existence and identity are interconnected with the ecosystem of Dzongu because Lepcha clans originate from the lakes, waterfalls, rivers, and mountains of the Dzongu Valley, which are our cultural heritage and pride.

One of the creation stories documented is that of the Dzumchungmoo Clan and the contributors of this story were Renee Chumsi Lepcha and Narok Lepcha. They are from Lingthem Village, Upper Dzongu. The origin of their clan started from Tungchim Ronghol Lake, with the marriage of Dhomit, the frog owner of the lake, and Anden Athing Chudok, a kite who flew to Tungchim from Anden chu (Anden Mountain in current-day East Sikkim). This story is in English and the Lepcha language, *Rongring*.





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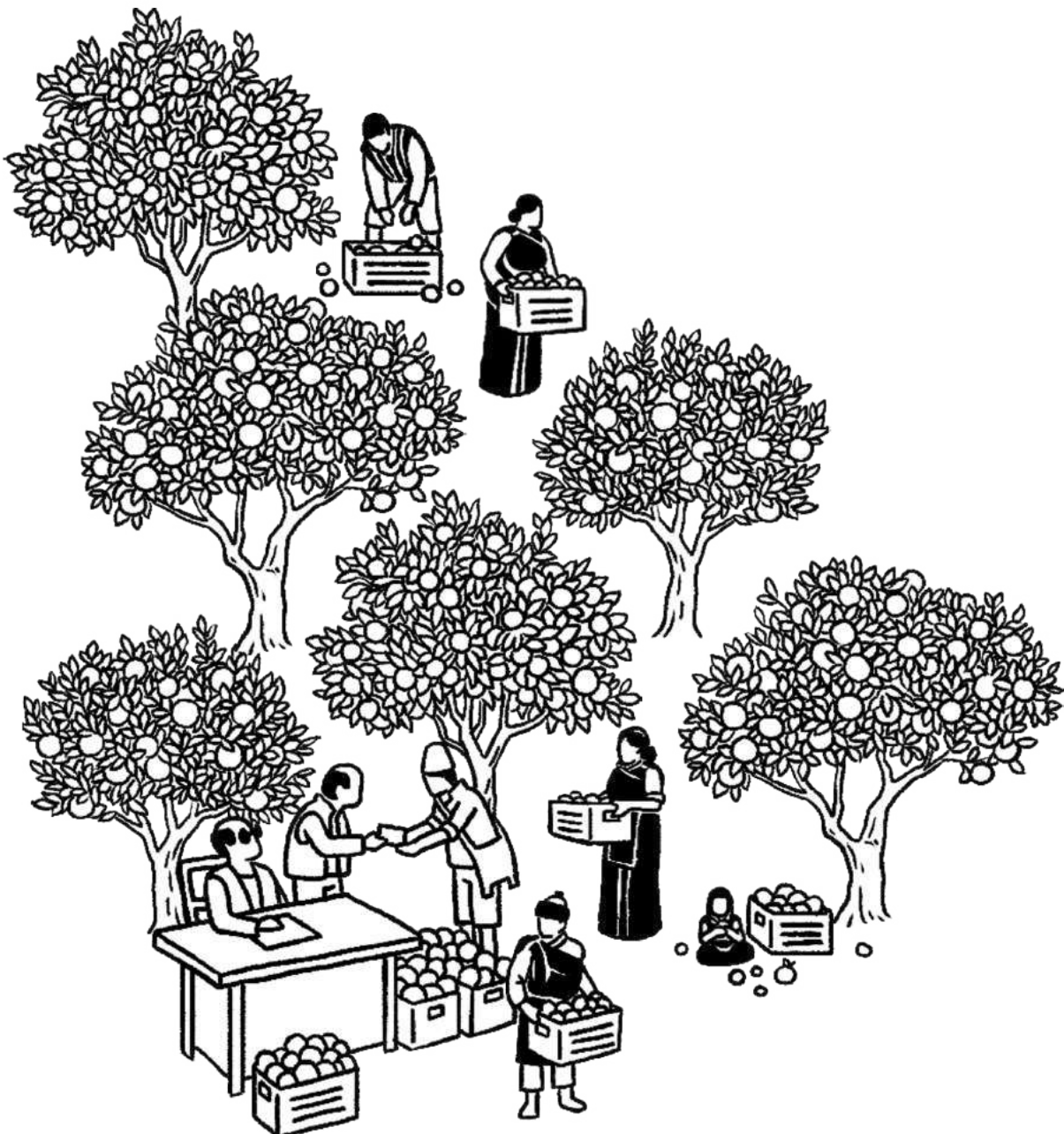


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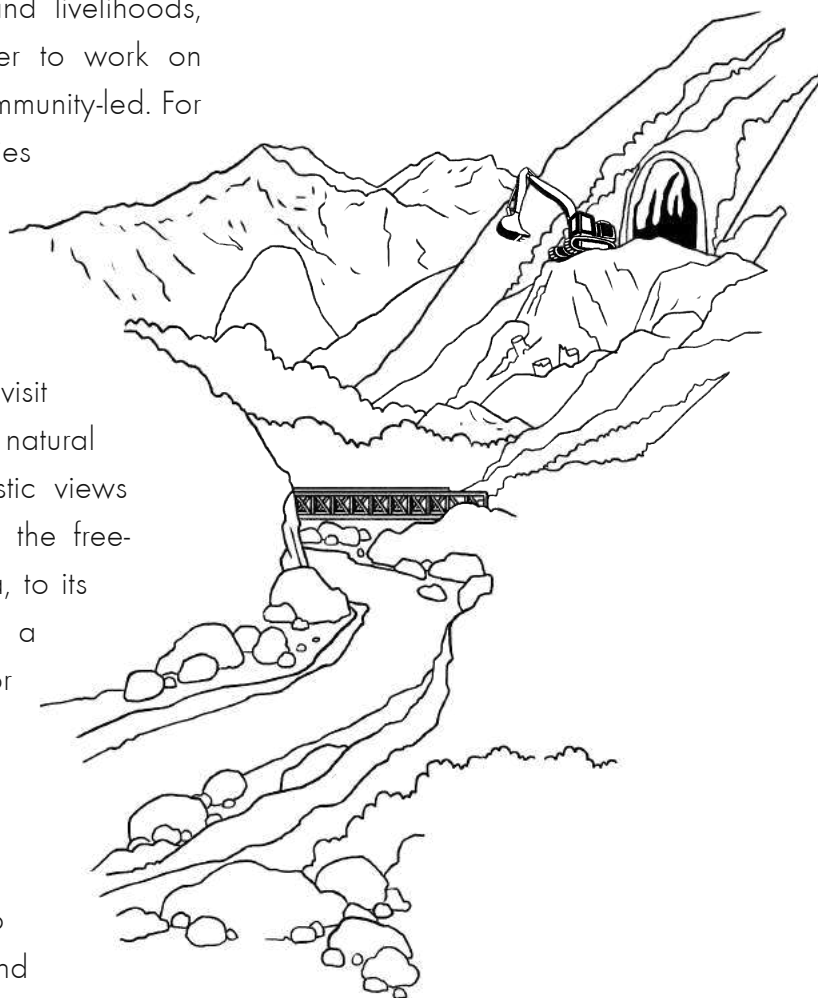
## Our community-led development priorities

**W**e, the Lepcha community of Dzongu, reject the destructive development on our lands brought upon us by hydropower projects and we strive to continue to work towards protecting our ecology through promoting our local economy, rich indigenous knowledge, and culture. In light of the Teesta floods, we demand a strict moratorium to be imposed on all hydropower projects on the Teesta River.





To revive our local economy and livelihoods, we also want to come together to work on development that is local and community-led. For the past few years, many families in Dzongu have successfully started sustainable community-led tourism initiatives by starting homestays and conducting guided tours for tourists to visit Dzongu. Dzongu has abundant natural beauty to offer, from the majestic views of Mount Kanchendzonga, and the free-flowing tributaries of River Teesta, to its dense green forests. We curate a special, localised experience for these tourists who stay with our families, eat the food grown in our lands, and understand our history, culture, and way of life. We ensure that the tourists who come here are responsible and respectful towards the cultural heritage and natural environment of Dzongu and do not litter or pollute the environment.



Along with homestays, we have also started promoting our traditional Lepcha festivals for tourism such as the Namprikdang Namsoong Festival, the Lepcha New Year Festival, 'dzotim' (paddy festival), and the Chalum Damroo Orange Festival, when oranges are harvested. These festivals are great opportunities to highlight and preserve our local indigenous food, traditional handicrafts, music, and games.

These local community-led tourism initiatives have proved to be a self-sustaining model, which has helped us to revive the local economy and spread awareness of our cultural knowledge to outsiders. These have benefitted the entire community, as everyone works together and supports each other. We want to work towards strengthening community-led tourism initiatives as a sustainable alternative through which we can earn revenue on our terms, protect our land, and work towards the development of Dzongu through community leadership and participation.

# AFFIRM WOMEN-LED SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS FOR ZIMBABWE'S AMAZON COMMUNITY



I am Kundai Chikonzo, a founder and trustee of Insiza Women in Mining Trust (IWMT). At IWMT, we strive to empower women-owned mines in the artisanal gold mining sector, focusing on economic sustainability, community development and growth in the small-scale mining sector. The Trust is legally registered and performs several different roles, including: enhancing the participation of women in mining, catering for people with a disability, providing opportunities for community development and promoting education for children.

We work with artisanal miners in the Amazon community in the Filabusi region of Zimbabwe. Over the past 20 years, these miners have practiced small-scale mining alongside companies engaging in large-scale gold production. Initially, much of the mining in the community was individual. Over time, the community members realized that they needed the support of a collective and opted for organizing themselves into trusts for collective action.

We work with women leaders in the Amazon community to address issues such as drug abuse, early pregnancies, early marriages, mining concerns, and other social issues that affect youth and workers, particularly women and children. Being a part of the Global Advocacy Initiative has opened up a space for the Amazon community to address community concerns and to develop plans for advocacy for their community development demands.



## Our community

Traditionally, we are a pastoralist community known for keeping domestic animals such as cows, goats and chickens in our homes. Our sources of income are limited, which causes over-reliance on agriculture to sustain us, despite the challenges associated with climate change. The strain arising from the reduced agricultural productivity prompted us to embrace artisanal mining, which has added small-scale, registered mining as an alternative source of income.

Mining in the Amazon community dates back to the time when the land was occupied by white settlers. Even though the white settlers never declared that the land possessed minerals, when they left and we took over the land, we noticed that they had been clandestinely undertaking mining operations. We started mining as families and later it spread through the community until we had a significant number of registered, small-scale miners. The first miner in the Amazon community was registered in 2002, when the government authorized mining in our community through registration of small-scale mines. Since then, legal miners have established mining operations in our community, although illegal mining operations still exist.

Community members are employed in the small-scale mines and artisanal mines to operate mine shafts, offer labor in the minefields and provide services to mineworkers. Women are employed to pan the gold and to provide services, such as vending food to the mine workers.



However, due to the limited monitoring of small-scale mines by the government, we have seen an influx of children within the mines. Children are seen working with their mothers for long hours in the mines, without protective gear, and accessing unsafe areas like tunnels within the minefields. They are also exposed to silica dust. Some of the children are further exposed to drug use, which leads to them offering unprotected sex as sex workers when they are high. This exposes them to sexually transmitted diseases and has further resulted in early pregnancies, gender-based violence, high school dropout rates and exposure to drugs.

Mining operations have also affected our environment and made it largely uninhabitable for the community members. We have raised our concerns with the relevant authorities to address the air, water and noise pollution, soil contamination caused by spills of hazardous material, soil erosion arising out of tree cutting and the open pits left after trenching and explorations. This was worsened by the restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted many people to get involved in the mining operations due to their inability to seek an income outside the community due to restrictions on movement and the closure of schools.





## Our community-led research

**A**s the Insiza Women in Mining Trust, we set out to assess, over the past five-year period, the impacts of artisanal and small-scale mining on the environmental and health rights of women, children and people living with disabilities in the Amazon community. We sought to understand the hardships that the community is facing and possible solutions in order to increase the quality of life and move Zimbabwe closer to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.



We identified three community members and supported them in conducting the research. They conducted key informant interviews with law enforcement agencies in the mining sector as well as focus group discussions with affected community members. They used agreed-upon interview guides, which were translated to Ndebele, the local language. From July to November 2022, the research team reached out to 80 people in the community, including 20 men and 60 women. The interviews highlighted the community's concerns related to human rights violations and environmental degradation, as well as the community's inability to collectively monitor and stop the negative impacts of mining on the land, owing to the fact that they don't own the land.



## Our community-led development priorities

Our community-led research revealed the impacts of artisanal and small-scale mining on the people and the environment and suggested ways to remedy the existing challenges. The findings relating to impacts on people and the environment over a period of 5 years



- 60 percent of the grazing land has been left bare due to tree cutting and open pits created by the miners that have been left unattended. This makes it hard to farm the land and leaves animals susceptible to injuries.
- 70 percent of women in the community need to travel a distance of 20 km to access water due to contamination of their community water sources with mercury and cyanide used for gold mining.
- 30 percent increase in women subjected to gender-based violence in homes.
- 30 percent increase in sexual offenses and transmission of sexually transmitted illnesses due to prostitution and drug abuse.
- 80 percent increase in incidents involving animals and humans in particular women and children due to lack of a fence to keep away the wildlife from the community and mines.
- Child labor is on the rise, as children as young as 9 years old dropout of school to be employed in the mines as laborers
- Child marriages are on the rise, with girls as young as 13 years old getting married off by their parents in return for money.



Based on the experience with artisanal and small-scale mining in our community, we propose the following measures to address the issues above.

- The communities where mines exist ought to be given priority when the government is offering mining agreements, for they are more responsible in ensuring sustainability.
- The government, in collaboration with the community leaders, should enforce measures that prioritize the environment when monitoring the operations of mining companies. These measures should also be emphasized in the mining agreements that companies sign with the government.
- Mining companies should facilitate access to clean water through installing solar-powered bore holes and putting in place measures to limit contamination of water sources.
- The government should require that mining companies provide for fair compensation for persons affected by mining activities and promote the employment of local community members in the mines.
- Government and mining companies ought to involve those affected by the mining operations in developing solutions to the harmful practices. This will facilitate the application of local knowledge to the existing challenges.





**SECURE COMMUNITY  
RIGHTS TO LAND AND  
ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE  
OVER CORPORATE  
PROFIT IN YALA  
SWAMP, KENYA**





I am Chrisphine Owalla, the executive director of the Community Initiative Action Group (CIAG) in Kenya. The CIAG supports the communities in Yala Swamp to promote social justice and the rule of law through capacity building, knowledge sharing and institutional support initiatives. This affords the communities a voice in decision making spaces where priorities for their development are determined.

As a human rights advocate and a community member whose ancestors lived in Yala Swamp, I was approached by Yala community members to help them protect their livelihoods. The local communities living around Yala Swamp are mostly fisherfolks and small-scale farmers. From the year 2003, when an international firm started investing in mechanized agriculture within the swamp catchment area, the locals have raised several allegations including claims of compulsory acquisition of their land without compensation.

Land confiscation has aggravated their poverty because they can no longer engage in commercial fishing or meaningful crop production. The community members, through their local leadership, approached me and a few other organizations such as Action Aid and Centre for Peace and Democracy (CEPAD) to intervene.



## Our community

**Y**ala Swamp is found in Siaya County and is predominantly inhabited by the Luo community, but also has several minority communities, such as Luhya and Basuba. The main economic activity is fishing and agriculture, including both crop and livestock production. Crop and livestock production in the area are largely subsistence, with a focus on maize, beans, cassava, finger millet, sweet potatoes, bananas, tomatoes, sorghum, cattle, sheep, goats and chickens. Women and children make mats and baskets from papyrus and sisal from the swamp. Among the Luo, Yala Swamp is a sacred shrine where they hold cultural and spiritual rituals. Yala Swamp is also known in East Africa for its rich ecosystem.

In the past, settlements by local communities existed in Yala Swamp, including Gwenohula, Dom, Kabora, Ndiwo, Odhuro, Mago and Ramogi. However, in 1968, the Kenyan government conducted a study that proposed reclamation of the wetland to stop the flooding that displaced the communities that had settled in the swamp. The government reclaimed a total of 3,700 hectares and declared it trust land to accommodate 82 families that had been displaced by floods. However, the government also intended to use the reclaimed land for investment, and in 2003, awarded Dominion Investments a 25-year lease for rice production.



The operations of Dominion Investments involved the construction of irrigation dikes, weirs and roads that disrupted the water flow, caused flooding of community farms and destroyed the ecosystem. They also restricted access to the wetland, which was the primary source of livelihood for fisherfolks in the community. The spray application of chemicals to their rice farms contributed to water pollution and caused the death of chickens and other animals in the community.

When Dominion Investments ceased to invest in Yala Swamp, the government awarded a contract to Lake Agro to continue operations, despite that the community demands to address human rights violations and adverse effects of environmental degradation by Dominion Investment were not heeded. These challenges are exacerbated by divisions in the community and within the clan leadership, limited participation of women in decision making, and threats of violence and political harassment by the police and county government officials.



## Our community-led research

**C**ommunity Initiative Action Group (CIAG), working with the community in Yala Swamp, set out to assess the role of the community in the management, control and use of their wetland resources. Based on the challenges before them, the assessment sought to document human rights violations and empower local communities to engage companies operating in Yala swamp to seek favorable business terms and agree to benefit sharing, and to influence the government regarding legislation on climate change.



Our community-led research contributes to *#TheCommunityOwnsYalaSwamp* campaign, which seeks to secure community livelihoods and promote climate justice in Yala Swamp by pushing back against any expansion of sugarcane production in the swamp. The campaign involves community mobilization and sensitization to the effects of climate change, support for public interest litigation for the violation of the rights of community members and awareness raising to ensure visibility of the efforts of Yala Swamp communities to protect their land and way of life.

As part of the assessment, we engaged three community members, who facilitated focus group discussions within the community and conducted key informant interviews with representatives of government and investors. The data acquired from the community was buttressed by the literature available on settlements and investment in Yala Swamp over time and the experiences in other communities facing similar challenges. The research team reached out to 215 people with 144 men and 71 women in the community in the period of September 2022 to March 2023.



## Our community-led development priorities

**W**e recognize community-led research as an opportunity for CIAG to interact with the community living in Yala Swamp, to document their challenges, and to work with them in developing strategies for community organizing, mobilization and advocacy. The government representatives and community members shared their experiences with corporate activities conducted in Yala Swamp, which we have summarized in the findings.

The communities residing and earning a livelihood from Yala Swamp oppose corporate activities that aim at reclaiming more land in the swamp. Apart from the 82 original families that were resettled, there are other claims for Yala Swamp's wetland resources by, among others, the national authorities that protect wildlife and water resources, the county government that wants the land for economic development, and impacted community members, who want to designate conservation areas. The impacted community members should take precedence in considerations for allocation of land in the swamp, but they are left out of the process, without the requisite information to facilitate their request for the land.

This is made worse by the actions of the Siaya County government, which does not consider public participation as part of their due diligence in their decision making process regarding land use in Yala Swamp. The actions of the county government and people applying to the government to use the Yala swamp land violate the rights of the community members living in Yala Swamp, who are not empowered enough to claim their stake in the land.



The companies already operating in Yala swamp are making the situation worse. The company has closed the public road that connects the two communities of Siaya and Yimbo, without government approval or any process for public participation. Instead, the company pays for police and private security guards to enforce the road closure and implement trespassing laws by arresting those who use the roads that cross through the company's farmlands. As a result, such actions have served to intimidate the community and leave it divided, with local politicians better able to persuade some community members to abandon their opposition to the expansion of Lake Agro's operations in Yala swamp.



We also established that the farming methods practiced by Lake Agro are a major contributor to environmental degradation in Yala Swamp. The company has established large-scale sugarcane plantations using chemicals and fertilizers for high yields. This contributes to air and water pollution. The health of the community living next to the dams constructed by the company has also been affected owing to the stagnant water that breeds mosquitoes that spread malaria.

In addition, in some areas, water sources have been reclaimed. The swamp that hitherto acted as a filter for the water has been reclaimed and replaced with settlements. This too has contributed to the loss of the indigenous fish types, which were a source of livelihood and food for community members.

Regarding promotion of investment as a facilitator of community development through employment, we established that most of the laborers working for the company are from outside the community. These laborers are from Western Kenya and are a threat to the security of community members, for they move and operate in gangs. Community members that have been able to secure employment in the company expressed their dissatisfaction, citing poor pay and lack of appropriate safety equipment. This is in violation of the requirements for acceptable standards of occupational health and safety.



Ultimately, given the centrality of land as a major resource in the community and the inconsistencies surrounding its allocation, we recommend that companies that seek to operate in Yala swamp negotiate for land directly with the communities and not the county government, which only holds the land in trust for the community. If this is heeded, it will form the first step in ending human rights violations linked to land acquisition in Yala Swamp, rebuild a relationship between the companies and the community and foster meaningful investment that benefits all. We also believe that, when trust is built between companies and the community, this will create a platform to address the environmental, health and labor issues, and any other issues of contention in Yala Swamp.

Working with the Yala Swamp communities, we share our asks:

- We call on the National Land Commission to cancel the 66-year lease granted to Lake Agro Company and revert the Yala Swamp land to the community of Yala Swamp by 2023.
- We call on the Governor of Siaya County to initiate a process of registering Yala Swamp land to the Community of Yala Swamp by 2024, as per the requirements of the Community Land Act.
- We call on civil society members working for Friends of Yala SWAMP to file a public interest litigation case in court by December 2023 to stop Lake Agro from taking over community land from the residents of the Yala Swamp community.
- We call on the Siaya County Assembly to endorse the Yala Swamp land use plan by the end of 2023 and make a commitment to secure a budget to support the implementation of the plan in the year 2024.

# MOBILIZE THE COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT PROCESS TO PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT IN MARTS VILLAGE, ARMENIA





**T**he Center for Community Mobilization and Support (CCMS) is a non-governmental organization founded in 2009 and based in Alaverdi, in the Lori region of Armenia. The CCMS aims to contribute to participatory discovery and development of human rights protection, community development, international cooperation, the rights of children and youth, civil society, social and non-formal education, and environmental and cultural protection in the Republic of Armenia. We have more than ten years of experience in advocacy campaigns, environmental protection, community development and mobilization, and non-formal education. Our work seeks to ensure and deepen the awareness of the Armenian people through ownership of problems and consolidating around community-led solutions.

Our best achievements include the following environmental and social campaigns: SOS Mets Ayrum, SOS Alaverdi, Compensation for the Danielyan Family, and SOS Urut. These ended successfully, with the local government meeting the community's demands for better environmental protections, compensation for mining-related health impacts, and improved social services.

As part of our work with communities and in cooperation with international partners, we conduct environmental and human biological sampling in mining-impacted communities throughout Armenia to measure the negative impacts of the toxic chemicals used in mining. Comprehensive studies of this type are a precedent in Armenia. We have completed studies in four regions of Armenia with a metal mining industry (except for Syunik Marz). We widely share the results of our investigations with communities to inform them about the impacts of the mining industry on their health and livelihood. So far, we have analyzed all of the districts in the Lori region and created a visual map showing our findings. For more information, please refer to: Mapping of distribution of heavy metals and resistant organic pollutants in the industrial areas of Tumanyan and Stepanavan in the Lori region in 2018-2021<sup>1</sup>. Based on the results from the Lori region, CCMS helped 70 citizens from the Chochkan and Mets Ayrum settlements to apply to the court for compensation for the damage caused to their health and livelihood, and this process is in progress.



**M**arts is a village in the Tumanyan community of the Lori region in Armenia. The Lori region is full of mining industries, which negatively impact the environment and health of its communities. The mining industry lacks proper regulation, leading to environmental degradation and health issues. The mining stations that are clean pose risks due to climate change and corruption. The mining companies are working closely with authorities, therefore there is a risk of corruption in this sphere.

<sup>1</sup> [https://bit.ly/CCMS\\_Survey](https://bit.ly/CCMS_Survey)

Lately, environmental advocates and human rights activists in Armenia have been frequently encountering pressure from certain companies and their affiliated circles. In 2022, Armenia adopted amendments to its Subsoil Code. According to new law, if a mining company with a license to operate in Armenia cannot meet its deadline for implementation due to civil society or other activist resistance, the government will extend the implementation period. Before the amendment, the law provided that companies could be deprived of their license if they failed to meet their implementation deadline, which is usually 3 years from the time they secure a license. We campaigned against this law at the national level, together with other CSOs, by means of announcements, letters to international organizations and state departments, online flash mobs, press conferences, and other media campaigns. We did not succeed, however.



In the Lori region, the Tumanyan community is one of the few areas where there has been no mining process yet and its villages have kept their natural beauty intact. This includes Marts village, situated on the left bank of the Dzoraget River at an altitude of 1,500 meters above sea level. The village has a population of around 1,000 people and is popular for its beautiful natural environment, including forests, mountains and rivers. The area around Marts is famous among hikers and nature enthusiasts. Marts is also known for its historic monastery, which dates back to the 10th century and was built by the Armenian King Smbat II and dedicated to the Holy Mother of God. It features unique architectural elements including intricate carvings and decorations.

The local economy of Marts is mainly based on agriculture, with villagers growing crops such as wheat, barley, potatoes and beans. Livestock and poultry are also a common livelihood in the village, with many households keeping cows, sheep and chickens.

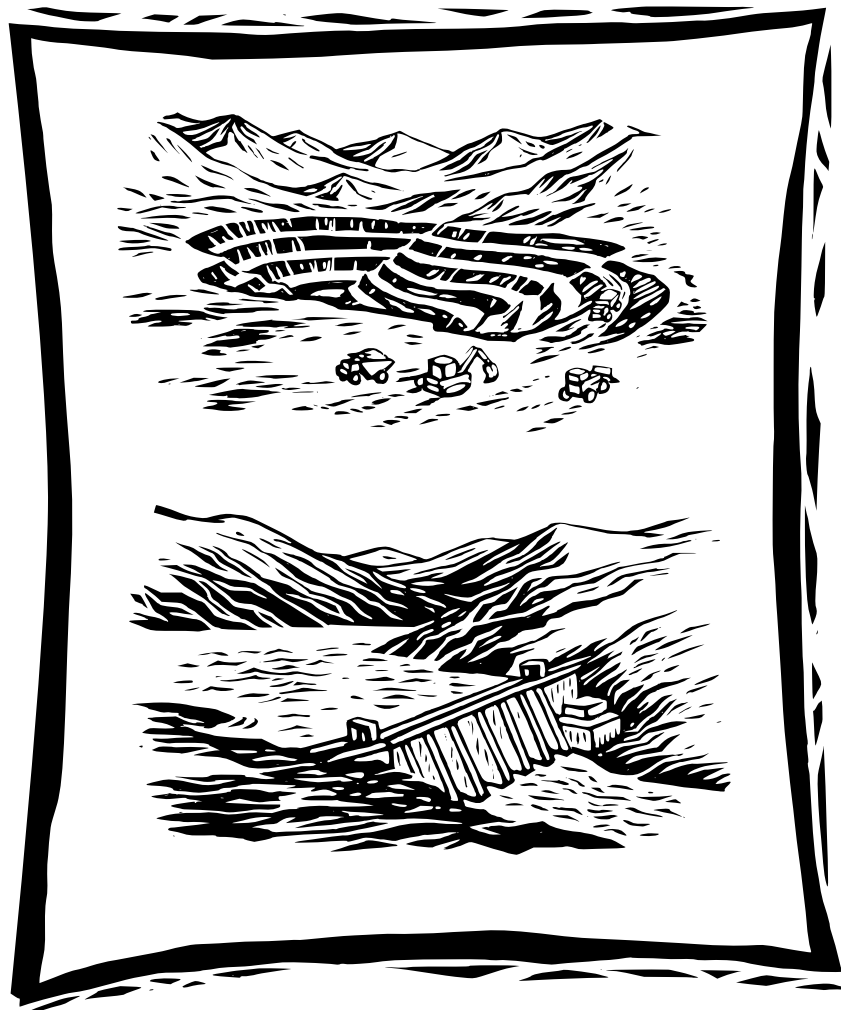
Despite Marts' natural beauty and agricultural production, the community faces a range of challenges that threaten the well-being of its people, their livelihoods and the natural environment. The lack of local employment opportunities, insufficient skills training, inadequate avenues for self-expression, and limited access to professional and educational opportunities for young people contribute to a sense of skepticism about the future. The municipal budget, which is primarily derived from local taxes paid by communities, as well as state grants and subsidies, does not translate to efficient and comprehensive provision of social services. In addition, there is a scarcity of donor

organizations supporting alternative socio-economic and ecological development initiatives. Agricultural development banks provide loans for agricultural workers, but Marts farmers are hesitant to access these loans due to high interest rates. In addition, the operation of hydropower plants pose serious consequences on the environment including loss of biodiversity, pollution, and disruption of local ecosystems. These factors contribute to out-migration, particularly among the youth, who tend to relocate to the capital or regional centers. These development challenges pushed the Marts community to learn from other communities about how to address these issues.



## Our community-led research

**S**ome companies have been attempting to establish gold mining operations in the Marts community for several years. In 2022, Marts residents consistently opposed holding public hearings regarding mineral studies in their community. Therefore, we decided to investigate Marts village in terms of human rights, community members' social and economic status, and risks to its natural environment, including climate change.



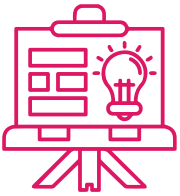
Our main research objectives focused on mobilizing the community to protect its interests and development process through learning about the possible impact of mining industries and risks to the community. We also aimed to assist the community in the creation of an alternative development plan through a collective, participatory approach. The CCMS team is committed to working with communities to build and strengthen their capacity, create opportunities to advocate for their own rights and interests, and meaningfully participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. The primary methodologies of the community-led research we employed encompassed a range of tools, such as individual and group meetings, focus group discussions, interviews and surveys among women, vulnerable groups and young people. We also created questionnaires and used them in one-on-one conversations with community residents and focus group discussions with small groups of residents. These tools focused on discovering the issues facing the Marts community, community members' needs, and how they envision development of their community.

In total, the research process (survey, individual conversations, small focus-group discussions) included 25 women, 30 young people and 15 representatives of socially vulnerable groups. In addition, the 20 participants in the focus-group discussions represented a gender and age balance. These group discussions focused on the review and approval of the community-led development plan.

We did our best to gain the trust of the community and provide them a feeling of safety while they shared their thoughts, ideas and existing concerns. It's really important for the community to learn and understand the importance of participation in the decision-making process at local and national levels, in order to make these practices part of their culture and improve their socio-ecological situation. In addition, led by participants selected from the community, we worked closely with community leaders and members to identify and prioritize community issues and their proposed solutions, and to initiate processes for the protection of their own rights.

We also participated in civic campaigns to address issues, such as environmental protection and road repairs, standing alongside individuals as human rights defenders to safeguard the rights of participants, initiators, and leaders, ensuring they were not violated by law enforcement and authorities. We also ensured broad public awareness of these actions through media campaigns, including the preparation and distribution of live broadcasts and video reports from the hot spot. One of the key instruments involved direct communication with community members and fostering a team spirit to yield results. This engendered a sense of ownership among residents, making them active participants in addressing the challenges that affect their community.





## Community-led development planning

**T**he community-led development plan will be based on the studies we conducted, and created with the participation of community residents. The study results indicate that the community-led development plan will revolve around fostering the community's green economy, with a specific emphasis on advancing eco-tourism and modern agriculture. This plan will define the primary directions for community development and the required steps for implementation, including a series of actions designed to enhance community residents' awareness and knowledge.



## Our community-led development priorities

**Finding 1:** The research findings indicate that, decades ago, Corruption suppressed the local communities' voices and their fight against construction of mines and hydro-electric dams and the environmental and social damage they would cause. Local authorities and criminal circles actively repressed activists in communities and made citizens unwilling to dispute the building of the dam. As a result, the dams were built and are damaging the community's land, drying up the river and repressing their development. At that time, the community got the government to approve the building of a road connecting their village to the broader network, but the hydro-electric project operator blocked its construction, claiming it would affect the company's operations.

**Finding 2:** The people of Marts have been suffering from inadequate communication and road infrastructures, making it difficult to access essential services and resources. For instance, the absence of efficient road and irrigation systems has greatly affected their agricultural activities, livelihood and mobility. According to a local villager, poor road connectivity affects the flow of tourists in the area, negatively impacting their income.

**Finding 3:** Access to drinking and irrigation water remains a major issue in the community. During one of the meetings, the villagers mentioned their fear that the lack of water will adversely affect their ability to grow crops to sustain their livelihood. They also fear a shortage of drinking water.

**Finding 4:** The community realizes that they need to adapt to a climate-friendly economy to live healthily. Until 2018, the primary source of income was through illegal logging. After the Velvet Revolution of 2018 brought about reforms that ended corruption, there has been an increase in forestry oversight, leading to a reduction of illegal logging by more than 90 percent. Village

residents have refrained from participating in illegal logging to avoid potential criminal liabilities. But they need to learn to regrow their infrastructure to support a sustainable future. They see their primary path to development as facilitating access for tourists and building a more significant tourism industry, for example, with better roads and hotels.

Currently, the Marts village community has launched a process to develop eco-tourism. As a result of recent community resistance against mining, companies have so far abandoned their plans for mining operations. In response, villagers shifted their focus towards developing a hotel business and promoting ecotourism. Furthermore, the collective efforts of residents from seven villages within the Tumanyan community to repair a road prompted the government to commit to its repair. Presently, road construction work is underway, funded by the government.



**Finding 5:** Community members are eager to know more about the investors and the hydropower and mining companies that threaten their area. According to community members, these are the same people that are taking shortcuts and destroying their nature. As a community member stressed, “We feel alone with our own problems. There are unknown people who want to get rich at the expense of our nature and future. It’s necessary that our wishes are included in the community development plan.”

The community wants to learn: (1) who is actually in charge, (2) the income the mining companies make, and (3) more in general about what's going on where they live. One resident of the Marts community mentioned that, "Sometimes unknown people and companies come to the community and try to convince the residents to do research to find gold in their area." Another resident highlighted that, in the last 1.5 years, three different companies held meetings in the community, and one company came twice. The resident said, "Sometimes we feel unprotected and it feels like one day, sponsored by the government, they will anyway open a mine in our territory. It makes it difficult for us to develop and bring to life our purposes. "



## Lessons learned

It's important to involve the communities in the development process of their region. In most cases, community inhabitants are not aware of the government's plans and it implements the changes without informing them. Communities' right to development needs to be approached through the cultural, social and economic situation of the community. Therefore, it's important to listen and talk with communities. And the real needs of the community members need to be taken into consideration by the government and companies.

We learned that a social media campaign can play a significant role in terms of achieving justice for the communities, as it is an important platform for informing and solving the communities issues, as people can share their thoughts/ comments without any fear there. Therefore, we created a "Citizen's Voice" media platform, <https://cvmedia.am/>, which is currently doing live broadcasts from public campaigns and making video reports on human rights, the environment, and community-led development issues. It has become very popular in all of Armenia. From January to August 2023, the videos from this platform reached 1.64 million viewers on Facebook 1.640 million viewers. The videos are also available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/@CvmediaAm>.

In addition, one of our main achievements in cooperation with communities, is the collection of environmental and human biological sampling evidence demonstrating the real impacts of mining pollution on humans and the environment. We learned that, when the people see and realize the real evidence of the consequences of the mining companies' activities, their understanding of the situation is much more clear in terms of protecting their health and livelihood.

Moreover, the community representatives have to be part of the project implementation, as they are the local experts on the existing issues and can prevent any kind of violation. We have to work with community members to strengthen their capacity in terms of understanding the role they can play in the decision-making process for their own development process. Once they understand

this, they can take the lead, for example, one of the leaders of the community, Hayk Matevosyan, created a development fund for seven villages for their own community-led development process.

It is important that community members acquire a sense of ownership towards the problems in the community. Their Initiatives – aimed at various aspects of community development, tourism development, human rights protection issues – should be encouraged.

The community members know their needs and obstacles, can identify the right solution for their own development, and can draft their own community-led development plan. Our findings, together with the community-led development plan, will be submitted to the local government for their further consideration. Our hope is that it will be included in the Strategic Development Program of the Lori Region and that the community-led model for development will be used with other communities in the future.



# PROMOTE ECOLOGICAL BALANCE TO FIGHT CLIMATE CHANGE FOR OUR FUTURE IN HAITI



Our research is a product of our efforts in partnership with Paul Edex. He is a local activist from our region and, for more than 14 years, his work has demonstrated commitment to promoting solidarity, inclusion and equity in order to see his and our native region thrive. For the past four years he has been working in Massabielle as a community activist. He is a former executive director of the Training Center for Mutual Aid and Community Development (Centre de Formation pour l'Entraide et le Developpement Communautaire - CFEDEC), an organization in the La Victoire region of Haiti that works with experts from multiple sectors, such as law, health, finance, computer science and agriculture, to seek true development in our region. As a member of the Global Advocacy Team, an international initiative of experts in community-led development, Paul joined other experts and supporting partners to use his expertise as a rural engineer to assist our communities in discussing the problems we currently face and our development priorities.



## Our community

Our communities are located in two regions in Northern Haiti: Massabielle, located in the Limbé commune; and Vieux de Troy, in the La Victoire commune. In Massabielle, we live in the following areas: Gran Bwa, Castillons, Bedoret and Massabiell. And in Vieux de Troy, we live in the following areas: Mayaya, Cange, Haut Guappe, Koli and Magwayave.



We plant fruits and vegetables and we breed poultry and other livestock. In Massabielle, we typically grow coffee, bananas, mango and rice; in Vieu de Troy, beans, peanuts, millet and corn. Working in agriculture is what we know how to do; it is what mobilizes us and ties our society, economy and culture to our green space. This connection is an ancient pillar of our imaginary and the path to construct our identity. This is the path to ecological balance that has brought us here and that will guarantee our future. It is a priority for us that this path continues to exist.

We face many challenges to keeping our cultural and economical traditions. Many of us have little access to social services and technology. Our regions suffer a lot with extreme weather events, such as flooding, droughts and hurricanes. These events have an even greater impact on our lives because the natural vegetation in our region has been decreased to only 1.5 percent of what it once was. Unemployment and lack of resources drive people to extract more wood as an energy source or for construction material, or for economic activities, such as building furniture or selling the wood itself. The lack of natural vegetation, coupled with extreme weather events, result in the constant loss of crops, making us diversify and plant yams and beans, for example. Plant disease and epidemics are also challenges we face due to the constant temperature variations in recent years. Our water resources are also threatened by becoming landfills for waste.

The political instability, violence and high inflation in Haiti also adversely impacts us. Many community members migrate, if not to look for greener areas, then to urban regions or neighboring countries. We, however, are committed to seeking the ecological balance that will allow us to continue living on our lands and in accordance with our identity.



## Our community-led research

**W**ith the assistance of Paul Edex and a data collection team - comprised of George Wilkens, lawyer and member of the Cap Haitien BAR; Elinord Robertha, a graduate in administrative science; Safira Fenelon, a graduate in administrative science; and Dorvil Enderson, agronomist - our communities engaged in research to determine our current state of affairs and what we need to make the future we want a reality. Our research also benefited from a review by the board of CFEDEC.

A survey was the core of our community-led research. It was composed through interviews with our community members and then validated by them. The community members spoke directly to our reality and their input allowed for a range of actors to participate, including farmers, peasants, traders, people with reduced mobility and community leaders. Additionally, those who assisted us conducted a literature review and held meetings and interviews with local authorities. The total number of community members that participated in the research was 120. In Massabielle,

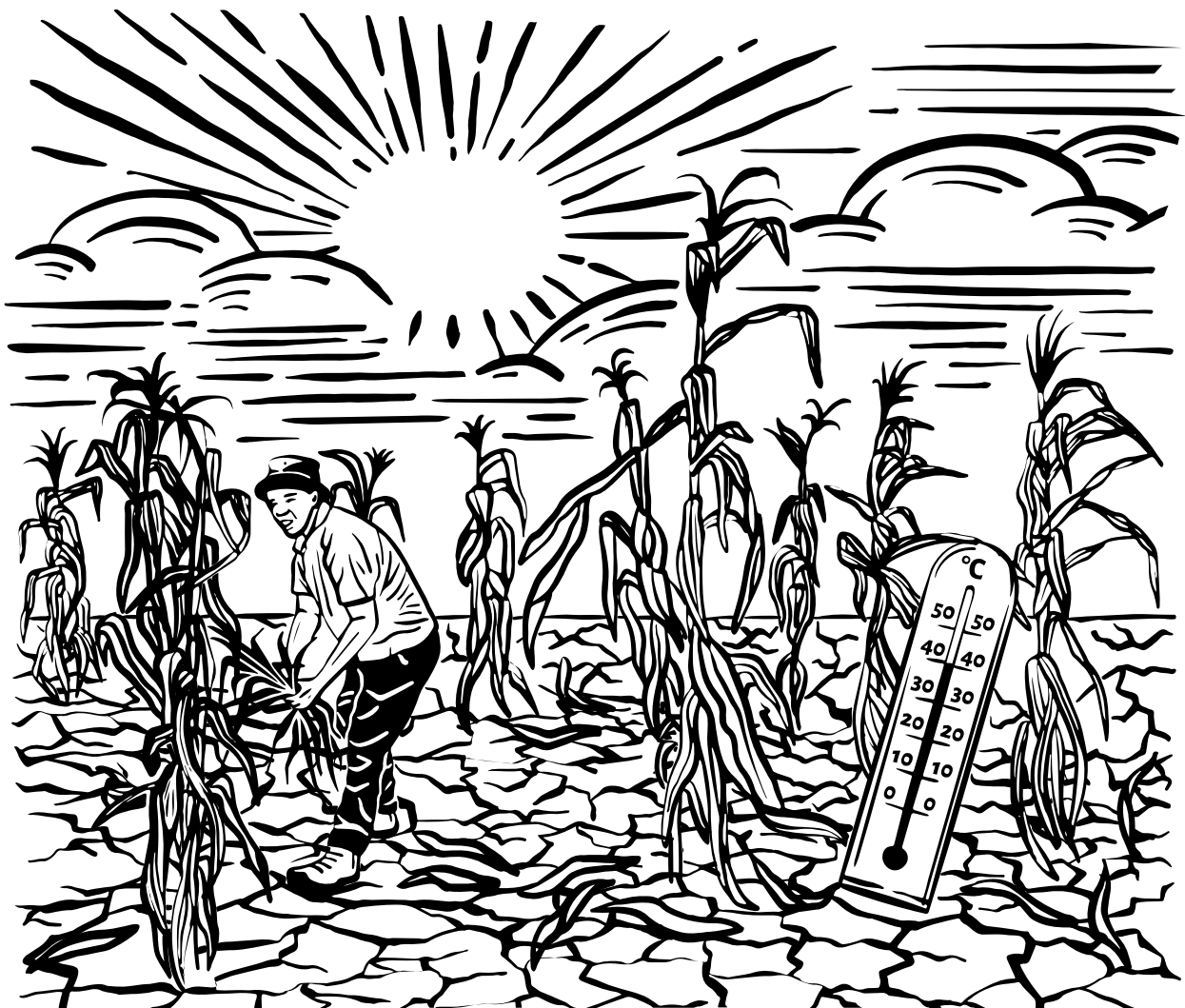
60 people participated; in Vieu de Troy, another 60 people. At least 43 participants identified themselves as women, 18 were young people and 3 live with disabilities.

We decided to focus our research on the effects of climate change on agriculture, due to the perceived impact it has in our lives and the necessity we feel to understand these impacts and how to deal with them in a meaningful way.

Our specific objectives were to:

- Analyze the livelihood threats linked to climate change in our communities (negative effects).
- Based on a gender perspective; reflect critically on the damage caused by climate change, who is most affected by this damage, and describe at what level.
- Determine a long-term community strategic plan that can address the various aspects of the damage caused by climate change.

We will look at the last point of these objectives, the community strategic plan, in the final section of this report. Here we deal with the first two.





## **Finding 1:** Livelihood threats linked with climate change in communities

The results of our survey show that climate change, political instability and economic difficulties combine in a loop of deterioration that threatens our livelihoods. The intensification of extreme weather events such as droughts and heavy rains, along with a clear rise in temperatures, is reflected in the results of our survey. In addition, frequent hurricanes are destroying the soil and our crops, while also impairing our ability to use the roads for transport to sell our products in the market. The following are impacts of climate change on the activities that our lives depend on:

- Temperature variation, along with droughts and heavy rain, is augmenting the pests in our yam production and bringing plant diseases to our plantations, such as those for bananas.
- The excessive heat during droughts, even in areas with vegetation cover, is a further threat to our yam and beans production.
- Crops such as cocoa and coffee are disappearing, along with birds in the area.
- Desertification and soil erosion makes our soil less fertile and our crop yields are diminishing.
- Heavy rains and drought cause the loss of animals and crops. Loss of human life has also been reported as a consequence of heavy rains.
- Animals, poultry primarily, are dying off because of loss of food sources from crops and places to nest in trees and because of diseases brought by drought.
- Food insecurity is pushing people to cut down trees as an energy and livelihood source, diminishing soil fertility, resistance and resilience from variations of temperature and extreme climate events.

## **Finding 2:** Who is most affected by climate change and at what level

Climate change leads to loss of livelihood, food insecurity and lack of employment and therefore political instability and gang violence. This context adversely impacts the whole country of Haiti, but some areas more than others.

Our research verified that women and youth find themselves particularly vulnerable to the violent situation generated by the economic and political instability that is generated or augmented by climate change. Women and youth expressed that they face particular constrictions to participate in public debate and decision-making processes due to the violent situation. In Victoire, the percentage of women who participated in the activities, for example, was around 30 percent. In Marsabiel, that number can be estimated to be below 25 percent.

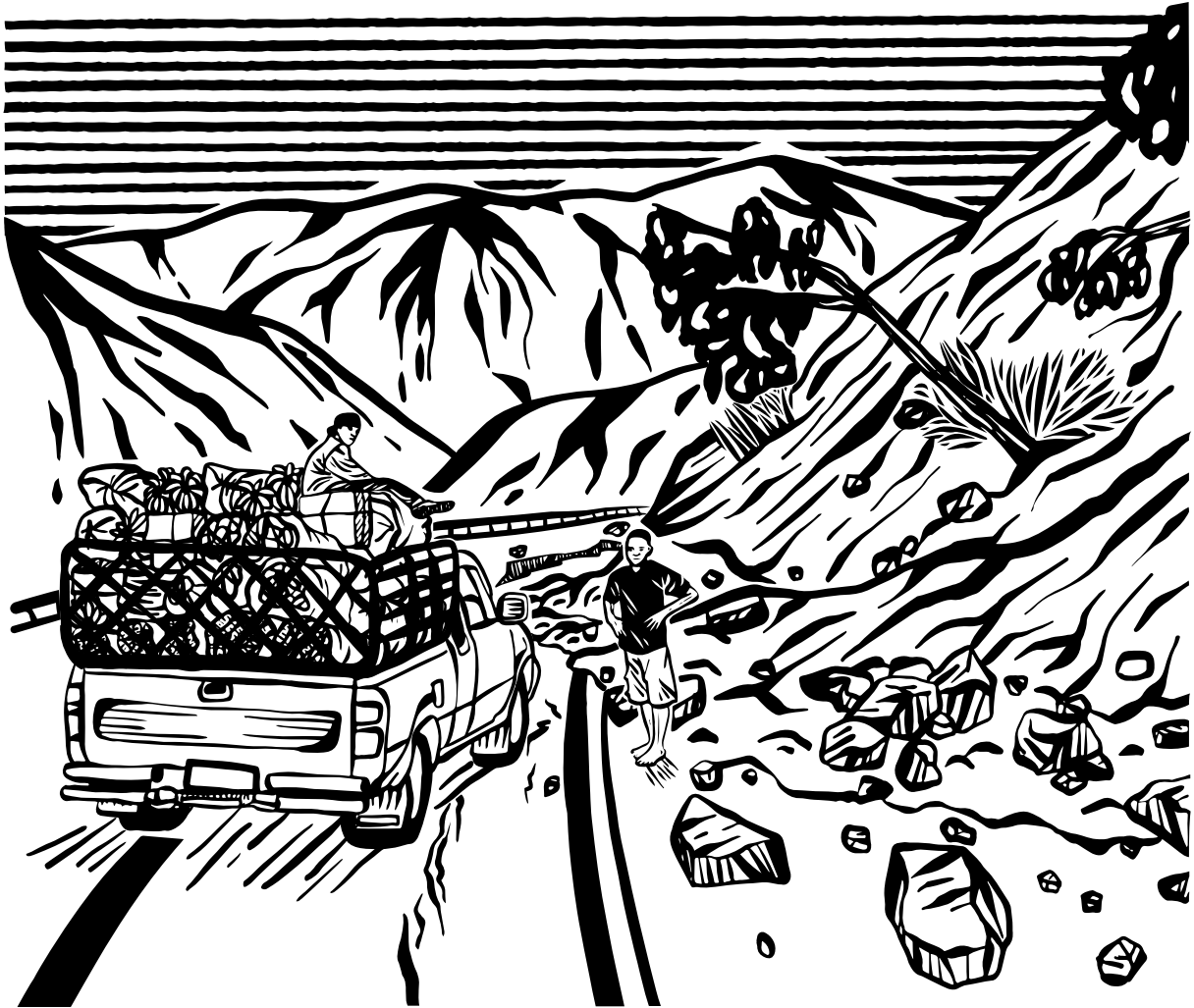
When we see ourselves forced to migrate, we have our situation of vulnerability intensified. Migration does not guarantee that we will be able to make a living elsewhere and the journey can be risky, especially for women and youth. Moreover, while our land is deprived of our force

of production, our youth is also deprived of our ancient ecological knowledge, which guarantees the connection with the land that forges our identity, as already mentioned. Current generations are stealing from future ones their very opportunity to identify as members of our communities and their ancient traditions that care for the environment.



## Our community-led development priorities

Our research allowed us to establish a common vision for sustainable development and to strengthen our network with different actors in the community, such as local authorities, because we will provide them with a report that summarizes what is happening in the community. It also allowed us to collect information about climate change, a topic that does not seem to appear on municipal and other contingency plans in Haiti. Based on the results presented above, we conclude that our communities need assistance through a climate change mitigation and adaptation campaign, including training for sustainable and climate-resilient farming, a reforestation program, and sustainable alternatives to using wood for energy. With the government's focus on investing in disaster preparedness and infrastructure reconstruction, the community members in Massabielle and Vieux de Troy hope that the government will provide climate mitigation and adaptation measures to the vulnerable communities affected in their area. It is essential to see this as an opportunity to integrate climate change adaptation into reconstruction efforts!



In regard to the actions above, we would like to specify certain points, which are not an exhaustive list, of the necessary actions to be taken:

- We demand a reforestation program from the Ministry of Agriculture as soon as possible.
- We request help with innovation of our agricultural systems, which must aim to replace the most environmentally damaging practices. These are activities that can be co-led in partnership with the community members.
- We request training on various soil conservation techniques to address climate change impacts.
- We request that alternative livelihood strategies are provided to our communities, so as to stop the cycle of cutting trees in order to survive.
- We request that the authorities carry out training for farmers in the area on appropriate soil conservation methods.

- We request that the Ministry of Agriculture officials work much faster to introduce crop varieties that are adapted to climate change.
- We request that a financial support system for the development of agricultural activities is established.
- We request that the government provide alternative sources of energy, so we can refrain from using wood and charcoal to survive.
- We request roads and other means of transportation to bring our products to markets, and that they are kept in good conditions.
- We call for a major campaign to raise awareness and educate vulnerable people living in different localities about climate change.
- We request that a safe space is provided for women and youth to participate in discussions and decision-making processes related to climate change and our ways of living.
- We request that Haiti work on advocacy before the international community to deal with the impacts of climate change on food security and nutrition, while promoting our ancient knowledge of ecological balance and recognizing its service to the preservation of the environment and the culture of the country.

The impact of climate change requires information, capacity, and accountability at national and local levels. Lack of awareness of climate change, insufficient technical knowledge, and low financial means are all obstacles to building our adaptive capacity. It is therefore essential to disseminate information on the impact of current and future climate change as widely as possible to compel leaders to integrate climate change resilience into new policies and development plans. We hope that our effort of presenting the findings in this report - as those most impacted by climate change and the true experts of our territories and ways of living - contributes to building such awareness and starting a dialogue that results in the actions we request above in order to guarantee our dignified survival.



# THANK YOU

**W**e are deeply grateful to everyone who contributed to the Global Advocacy Team (GAT) initiative and shaped this collective report. We would like to thank the GAT Advisory Group: Daniel Faggiano, Jessica Amon, Maurice Odhiambo, Vanarath Hem, Thilak Kariyawasam, and Habiba Mirzad, for contributing their invaluable wisdom, time, and guidance from the beginning and throughout the GAT initiative journey.

The GAT initiative was co-created and co-designed from March through July 2021 with an incredible group of 53 community organizers and activists, across all regions of the globe, all of whom have direct experience in various forms of community-led development planning. The rich discussions during the expert meetings and the ideas that emerged as a key milestone in the formation of the GAT initiative. We are truly thankful for their contributions.

We thank the hundreds of communities and collectives globally that took the time to apply to join the Global Advocacy Team, articulating their challenges and ideas for community-led development planning.

We shared an incredible learning journey on community-led research, through unstable internet connections and across multiple language translations. We could not have done that without the kindness of our guest presenters and facilitators. We extend our heartfelt thanks to: Melania Chiponda, member of the first GAT; Oscar Pineda from the Project on Organizing, Development, Education and Research (PODER); Security Expert from Front Line Defenders; and Shauna Curphey from Just Ground, for sharing their experience and expertise to help guide our community-led research processes. We also extend our gratitude to our interpreters, Bisma Putra Sampurna and Elisa Rondineau for their assistance in helping us overcome language barriers.

Our appreciation also goes to the speakers who generously shared their knowledge and time during our meeting in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in January 2023. We express our sincere thanks to: Pyrou Chung from the Open Development Initiative and the Mae Klang Luang community; and to Nittaya Saenbut, who joined and supported us in learning and exchanging in Chiang Mai and beyond.

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