



**WHERE THE RIVER
REMEMBERS US:
WEAVING THE FUTURE OF
DZONGU**

GLOBAL ADVOCACY TEAM



INTERNATIONAL
ACCOUNTABILITY PROJECT

This community-led development plan is part of a groundbreaking series created by the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) and people of Sikkim, Northeast India in partnership with the Global Advocacy Team initiative, convened by the International Accountability Project.

This initiative unites inspiring community organizers from around the world to conduct community-led research, engaging 945 people across 7 countries. Through co-designed and shared learning, this three-year journey has resulted in a series of transformative community-led development plans focused on locally rooted, globally connected solutions.

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Who We Are?

Where We Live?

Nothing compares to what Nature creates, and this is especially true for Dzongu, North Sikkim, in North-east India. Through the Private Estate Office of the Queen of Sikkim and official notifications issued in 1954 and 1958, Dzongu was set up as a reserve exclusively for Indigenous Lepcha and was administered directly by the Chogyal, or monarch, of Sikkim. Although there is no longer a monarchy, Dzongu's special status is still protected under Article 371F of the Indian Constitution and India's Representation of People Act of 1980. Dzongu is a holy place, and only Indigenous Lepchas are allowed to own land and settle there. Additionally, entry into the Dzongu Reserve, which is a protected area, is prohibited to outsiders, even from within Sikkim or elsewhere in India, except under special permission.

The main tributaries of the Teesta River flow from the Dzongu region, and the countless streams flowing down to these tributaries add a very rich biodiversity. The area is home to the rarest species of flora and fauna, and its sacred forest is of great environmental importance.



The Rongyung River in Dzongu, Sikkim, Northeast India. (Photo by Carlo Manalansan)

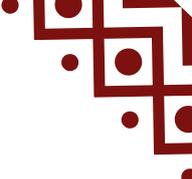
Upon entering from one of the three police check posts that protect the area (Phidang, Rong Rong, and Songkolong), you will be greeted by bountiful beauties, from the ladybirds to the Himalayan black bears. The place inspires emotions from the awe of an innocent child to the loyalty of an adult, all waiting for you to experience. Dzongu gives you unexplored Kishyong Lake, the Dawa Thang plains, the Lingee Chu Mountain supported by the Kongchen Chu Range, and the beautiful Teesta and Rongyoung Rivers, which give you peace of mind from the first glance. Also, you cannot forget Tholung Gumpa, one of the most sacred monasteries in Sikkim. Presently, Mantam Lake is attracting local tourists because of its rich flora and fauna, along with the hot spring in Lingdem. Dzongu has also been one of the most sought-after spots for researchers and scholars from India and abroad.

Our History, Cultures, and Identities

Dzongu belongs to the Indigenous Lepcha people. The Lepcha are basically hunters and gathers, although we also love working in our fields and were once the largest sellers of cardamom in the region.



The Lepcha people have a long history of hospitality. The book, *Himalayan Lepcha Village*, by Geoffrey Gohrer, made us realize that our present trend of extending hospitality through homestays and Airbnb has its roots from long before this was common in the world. Over the years, our traditional practices and knowledge have been documented and studied by many outsiders, but only few have given back to the community.



Dzongu has a rich history and culture that includes the following features:

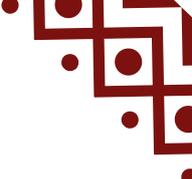
Lepcha Origins

The Lepcha people strongly believe that they have been created by our creator, Rum Itbu Debu, from a pure snowball from Kaongchenkaonglo Chu (Kanchendzonga Mountain). God called the first man Fudong Thing and the woman Nuzong Nyu. In our native language, Rong Aaring, the Lepcha Indigenous community call themselves Mutanchi Rum Kup, which in literal translation means “Mother’s loved one, children of God”. The Lepcha are the Living environmental history of this geography. Each of the Lepcha clans has a creation story based on ecology, with connections to Chu (mountain) Lep (soul resting place) and/or Daa (lake).

Lepcha Culture

The Lepcha are rich in our Indigenous knowledge of and deep connection to nature. The Lepcha people are nature worshippers. We have extensive knowledge of the whole landscape of Dzongu and our natural resources and their uses, including wild mushrooms, wild edible ferns, bamboo shoots, medicinal plants, buckwheat, and different varieties of millet. We believe the world’s third highest mountain, Kanchendzonga, is our guardian deity. The Lepcha do not believe in heaven or hell or rebirth. The Lepcha strongly believe that after we die, our soul travels through the Rongyoung River back to Poomzoo Iyang (soul resting place), which is at the foothills of Mount Kanchendzonga. For that reason, the Rongyoung River is the most sacred river for the Lepcha people of Sikkim and the Darjeeling District of West Bengal, as well as the Lepcha of Bhutan and Nepal.

The Lepcha have a rich tradition of dances, songs and an oral tradition of folktales, along with festivals and rituals. Most of our dances and songs are based on ecology, on mountains, rivers, breezes and nature. We play archery as a key aspect of their culture and have unique traditional foods made from millet, called khuri. Lepcha also takes pleasure in taking a local alcohol, called chi.



We practice rituals related to nature. For example, in the Muth Rum Faat ritual, male members from each family clan go to the forest and perform the rituals of thanksgiving and ask for protection from the forest deities. Other rituals, like Lee Rum Faat (house rituals) are done at home after the end of the year, which means at the end of the paddy harvest. The women in the family prepare all the items that are required for the rituals, such as fermented rice beer and alcohol made from millet. There is another very important community ritual, called Sootap Rum Faat, which means offering to hailstorm deities. It is performed by the Lepcha shamans to protect crops from getting destroyed by hailstorms.

The Lepcha people also have traditional healers, or shamans, including Boongthings, Mun and Pudim, who are rich in Indigenous knowledge. According to the Lepcha shamans each peak, hill and mountain has its own deities, to which we have to offer respect. Before doing any kinds of rituals, the Shaman must ask permission from the local deities and at the end of their rituals they have to give thanks to all of those deities.

The Lepcha are well known for their unique weaving and bamboo crafts, including weaving from stinging nettle, which we have been practicing for generations. We have our own costumes and ornaments. The Lepcha women wear dumvun, a loose blouse called a tago, a belt called nyumrek and a cap called taro, while the Lepcha men wear a thakro, which is weaved by Lepcha women. Cultural artefacts, such as Lepcha handlooms and handicrafts, are renowned for their unique designs. We also have our own traditional form of home construction, known as dokemoo lee, which is earthquake resistant.

Identity and Legal Status

The Lepcha are the autochthonous inhabitants of Sikkim, which was colonized by the Tibetan Namgyal Dynasty in 1642. In addition to Sikkim, the Lepcha also live in West Bengal in India, eastern Nepal, and the southern part of Bhutan. The last King of the Lepchas was Gaeboo Achok. The anniversary of his birth is still celebrated every year on 20th of December in Sikkim and in the Kalimpong and Darjeeling Districts of West Bengal in India.



In Sikkim, the government declared the Lepcha as a primitive tribe in the year 2006. In 2018, the Sikkim government designated the “Dzongu Area” as “Lepcha Indigenous Habitat” under Notification No. 700/SJE&WD, for the promotion, preservation and further enrichment of the Lepcha Indigenous culture for sustainable development. Sikkim’s land laws, under Revenue Order No. 1, restrict the ability of Bhutia and Lepcha people to sell, mortgage or sublet their land in Sikkim. Under Notification No. 3069, entry to Dzongu is restricted to outsiders and people from other parts of Sikkim are restricted from owning land in North Sikkim. The people of North Sikkim, however, are free to buy land in other parts of Sikkim.

What Do We Mean by Development?

Our Right to Development: What is development according to the Lepcha community?

Every individual, every society and every country looks forward to development, but development should not be at the cost of the Lepcha Indigenous People of Sikkim and the environment. The Lepcha Indigenous community worships Mount Kanchendzonga and the Teesta and Rangeet Rivers and their origin stories are based on these.

We, the Lepcha community of Dzongu, reject the destructive development on our sacred 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, responsible and respectful towards the cultural heritage and natural environment, and that adopts a self-sustaining model. We see our local and Indigenous knowledge as key to guiding development without harming the environment.

Our Community Principles of Practice

The entire landscape of Dzongu is culturally rich. The Lepchas of Dzongu worship nature and we have a vast Indigenous knowledge and practices inherited from our ancestors. Our Indigenous beliefs include spirits and one supreme God, called the creator, the Itbu Debu rum. We also believe our ancestors came from a pure snow ball of Mount Kanchendzonga, the world's third highest mountain. We have a distinctive spiritual relationship with nature. In addition, each Lepcha clan's origin story is based on our ecology and environment.

The Lepcha people have always lived in deep harmony with natural surroundings, believing that every element of nature - rivers, mountains, forest and animals - holds spiritual significance. This is very visible in the way we have been living our traditional way of life. From our daily routine, to forest foraging and agricultural practices; to our songs and dances that represent nature; to our clothing (dumvun) representing Rungnyoo Rungnyit (named for the rivers of Sikkim, Teesta and Rangeet) and the dumpeet (symbolising the confluence where both rivers meet), our clothing material choice (nettle thread or ashyam) and ornaments (sambrangbur or flower ornaments) – all of this revolves around sustainable practices, ensuring that nature remains undisturbed and continues to provide for future generations. The Lepcha community holds nature in high regard.



Our farming methods are influenced and follow the various Mayal Fo (different birds found in the region in different seasons). The farmer does the farming according to the chirping of the birds, not the calendar. For example, first bird which comes in the beginning of the year is called Bhim phu youl in the Lepcha language. When the farmer hears that bird, it is time to sow beans and maize. Then comes Chuk doon Fo (bird) and the farmer has to sow ginger, turmeric and edible tubers. Then comes Cuckoo bird and the farmer has to sow summer buckwheat and millet. Then comes Takpo Fo (bird), when the farmers sow kamdak, kodow and nhakhaw (Lepcha indigenous millet). With the Deng peet Fo (bird), when the farmers try to dig the tuber, it is believed that the tuber will be found in between the rocks, so most of the Lepchas avoid digging the tuber when these birds are found chirping. The last bird is Kandang Lham Fo. When this particular bird starts chirping, it is believed that all the small streams, spring water and all the rivers will swell up.





Our Community's Development Priorities

Key Challenges We Face and Prioritized Issues That Need To Be Addressed

Through our community-led research, we identified the disastrous impacts of the multiple hydropower projects that have been constructed on our lands, as we have witnessed multiple landslides and floods over the years. The Mantam landslide in 2016, for example, led to 12-13 villages being completely cut off from the rest of the world.

The following details emerged from the survey we conducted for this research:

84.9% of respondents shared that their roads have been affected, with cracks seen on many roads in Dzongu due to underground tunnelling work

75% of people shared they have seen a drying up of spring water and streams in Dzongu

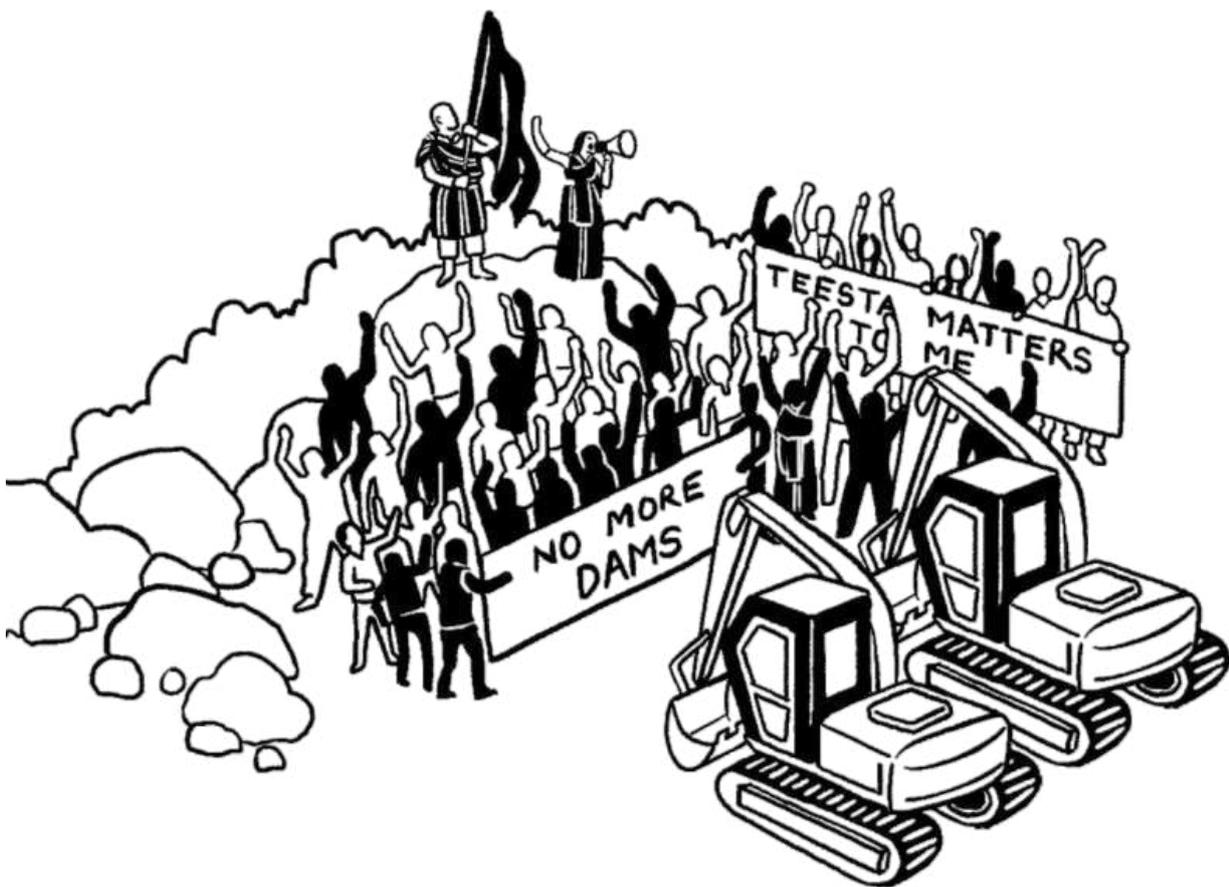
69% shared that their agricultural output has been affected, as prominently seen in the decline of the large cardamom crop which was once native to Dzongu and grown extensively, and by the fact that the oranges that are grown now are not of the same quality

65% of the people surveyed have experienced cracks in their houses

61% shared that they were affected by floods

We also face an impact of loss of cultural knowledge and practices of the Lepcha community as our religion and culture is linked to the lakes, mountains and rivers of Dzongu. River Rongyong is our holy river from where our souls travel back to Poomzo Lyang at Mount Kanchendzonga and is also the last free flowing stretch of the Teesta River.

The disastrous impact of existing hydropower projects were further witnessed on October 4th, 2023 with a glacial lake outburst flood at South Lonar Lake. The outburst washed away one of the largest dams in Sikkim, the Stage III, 1200 megawatt dam, in just 10 minutes and caused extensive damage to roads, bridges and civilian properties. Even the Stage V megawatt dam and the Stage VI further downstream were broken. While this is already climate vulnerable zone, the damage from the flood was exaggerated due to multiple hydropower projects and infrastructure projects that have choked the Teesta River. This is one of the biggest disasters that has occurred in the country, and we have been continuously witnessing massive landslides and floods as a result of it. On 13th June 2024, flash floods and cloudbursts ravaged the lower Dzongu region.





Despite the damage done due to hydropower projects, hydropower companies seem to be benefitting from the disasters. On 10 January 2025, the India Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) decided to amend the environmental clearance and give clearance to rebuild 1200 MW Teesta III dam project without having public hearing or without Indigenous free prior and informed consent for the project. It is shocking to know that the height of the dam was increased by double in the new clearance. Earlier, it was 60-meter high, rockfill concrete dam, and now the environment ministry panel has cleared a proposal to build a new 118.64 -meter high concrete gravity dam in Chungthang, North Sikkim.

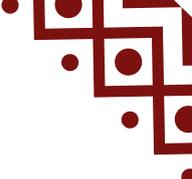
There was no government support provided for communities impacted by the floods and neither did it receive proper coverage in national media. They have lost their land and houses and got displaced from their villages yet they have not received any compensation. There were many bridges that got destroyed which were built back by the Lepchas by applying their indigenous knowledge and using traditional materials such as cane and bamboo.

Our Development Vision

It is important for the Lepcha community to be independent in terms of livelihood, so that we are not dependent on any government or false promises made during elections. Our development priorities focus on organic farming; eco-tourism; and preservation of the last free flowing stretch of the Teesta River, as explained further below.

Organic Farming

Basically, the Lepcha are farmers. We farm millet, ginger and oranges, and recently a few farmers have started producing kiwi fruits. Until 1999, Dzongu was the largest producer of large cardamom but crops have declined due to diseases and today only few stubborn Lepcha are growing large cardamom.



Eco-tourism

Slowly, people are realising that tourism is the best way to earn a living. Dzongu is the best place to do eco-tourism and village tourism because it is rich in biodiversity and abundant flora and fauna. The community have already started homestays, along with organising festivals, like Dzo Tyuim (paddy harvest), Namprikdang Namsoong (Lepcha New Year), Chalum Damroo (orange harvest), and many more. In addition, Tungkyoung Dho (sacred lake), located in Hee Gyathang Dzongu, has been designated as Sikkim's first Biodiversity Heritage Site. Those working on ecotourism, however, are facing challenges because, after the floods, it has become difficult to work toward the future. We want good transport connectivity across Dzongu. Our current road conditions are very poor, especially in Upper Dzongu where we have the most tourist destinations, including: hot springs, Mantam Lake, waterfalls, beautiful views of Mount Kanchandzonga, the famous Tholung Gumpa (monastery) for religious purposes, and Kishong Lake famous for trekking. Lately, more local tourists are coming for picnics and river site camping, fishing and other activities.

Riverine Sanctuary

We want the last stretch of the Teesta River in Lower Dzongu to be declared as a river sanctuary and to halt the Stage IV 520 megawatt dam in the interest of the Dzongu Lepcha Indigenous community, and consistent with notification 3069 regarding Dzongu's establishment as a reserve exclusively for Indigenous Lepcha community.

What will help us realize our development priorities?

1

Promoting Cultivation of Large Cardamom and Local Millet Varieties

There is a lot of potential in organic farming because Sikkim has been declared an organic state in India, and our people already do organic farming to meet the demand for vegetables and spices due to the increase of tourism in the state. We plan to focus on cardamom and millet.

Dzongu was, at one time, the largest producer of large cardamom, but this has deteriorated over the years. This was also the primary source of income for the people of Dzongu. As of this year, the price of large cardamom has been very high, and people have started to realise its potential and the need to revive it.

We have been reaching out to scientists in Bangalore for soil testing, and they found that there is a disease in the soil for large cardamom, which needs to be removed. On their advice, we have been using organic herbicides to plant seeds, and we have conducted a trial in the field of a family in Dzongu. If this lasts, we can take this ahead and maybe also have a training for farmers on the methodologies of cardamom farming. We also plan to reach out to the Spices Board of Sikkim, whose director is from the Lepcha community, for support in reviving the production of cardamom in Dzongu.

There are a lot of varieties of millet found in Dzongu. The Lepcha community has a deep connection with millet. We ferment the millet using local yeast to make a drink called chi, which we consider holy and which is very important to the Lepcha community. We use chi while invoking the deities and when our Lepcha shamans, called mun and boonthing, perform the Rumfaat ritual. They use this holy drink during the birth, marriage and death rituals. Apart from its spiritual significance, the millet is used for different recipes, including khuri, a Lepcha traditional food prepared from buckwheat and millet flour. Lepcha even make millet momos, a famous fast food in Sikkim.



There is a huge demand for millet now, because there are few people cultivating it in Dzongu. Most people have ceased millet production, but a few people are reviving it. Ren Tshering Gyasto Lepcha, a famous millet grower from Lum Village in Dzongu, was recently honored as an Eminent Agriculturist on Republic Day in New Delhi.

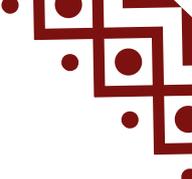
With the potential of millet, we need to again encourage our community to cultivate millet in Dzongu. According to experts and a few local farmers, millet is climate resistant, as it can grow in any climate condition. Initially, we need to conduct awareness raising in the community to encourage a return to growing millet and to promote the potential and importance of millet cultivation in Dzongu.

2

Strengthening and Promoting Community-led Eco-tourism Initiatives in Dzongu

Tourism is a collective activity that allows us to preserve our cultural traditions and strengthen the local economy. Dzongu has very high eco-tourism potential, as there is a lot of activities one can explore, from tasting locally grown organic vegetables and the best oranges grown in the region, to trekking, to visiting Tholung Gumpa and purchasing traditional Lepcha weaving or other crafts. Our Lepcha grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and daughters-in-law in Dzongu still practice weaving using a traditional handloom and available resources, like the giant nettle or kuzu surong. They also weave traditional products, especially for men, called thokro, which our menfolk wear with pride.

Dzongu is also rich in biodiversity. Birdwatchers can explore the many species of birds found in Dzongu. It is also home to a very uncommon species of butterfly, the Gold-spotted Ace, or halpe aucma (Swinhoe, 1893) from the Hesperiiidae family. It was sighted by Ren Sonam Wangchuk Lepcha in Dzongu. There are so many rare species found in the Dzongu region that there is a Facebook account, Thamblyok Butterfly Society of North Sikkim, to document the butterflies found in North Sikkim, including Dzongu.



The Dzongu landscape is also good for people who love nature walks, hiking, and trekking. For example, there is a one-day trek to Tholung Gumpa and a two-day trek to Keyshung Lake. In the winter season, the banks of the Mani chu, Ring chu, and Rongyoung Rivers are enjoyed as places to have picnics. Many new homestays have been opened, and each homestay is trying to promote the Lepcha culture and traditions. Lingdem hot springs are becoming popular among the local and homestay guests and are believed to have medical benefits among the locals.

To further develop tourism, the government needs to improve the roads so that we have good connectivity.- Developing roads and transportation infrastructure is the only development priority that Dzongu needs. Currently, we are trying to form an organisation of homestay owners in Dzongu and get it registered. The goals are to serve the many new homestay stakeholders that are pursuing this type of development, and work on streamlining and formalizing the process ahead.

3

Declaring Teesta as a Free Flowing River and Creation of a Riverine Sanctuary

We want to see the stretch of Teesta River from Sangkalong to Phidang to be declared as free-flowing and create a riverine sanctuary because this stretch is the only free-flowing section now in the entire State of Sikkim. We need to save the river, not only for human beings but also the entire ecosystem.

We need to submit a memorandum to the Sikkim government to declare this stretch as a riverine sanctuary. We also need to build awareness among the students on the importance of the river and to approach the civil organisations in Sikkim to seek support for this initiative. We can also approach the opposition party in the State of Sikkim.

Participation of the Community in Designing and Implementing the Development Plan

Our Roles and Participation in Creating Our Community-Led Development Plan

The following groups participated in developing this plan and will support its implementation.

Women Self-Help Groups

Women self-help groups are informal groups of women who come together to address their common problems. They focus on mutual support systems and helping each other in creating livelihood opportunities. They are the backbone of our society and they take an active part in decision making. There are 26 self-help groups in Hee Gyathang Gram Panchayat Unit and in each group there are 10 members. Similarly, there is a self-help group for Lingdong GPU and Gor Sangtok GPU.

Homestay Owners

Many people who are educated and unemployed in formal jobs are running homestays in Dzongu and creating differences in the society. We have educated women who are hosting their homestays and making their parents proud by taking care of their elders in the family. A few youths have left government and corporate work and have come back to their villages and started homestays as well. One example is the Mayal Lyang homestay in Dzongu, which has been recognised among “the most admired homestays in India” and has been featured in a 2025 special edition of Travellers’ World magazine as among “the most admired hotels and resorts in India”.

Monk Group (Sanga of Dzongu)

Sanga of Dzongu was formed by Buddhist monks in 2006 to protect Dzongu from harmful and destructive power projects in the region. A few of its members were jailed while protesting against further dams on the Teesta River and they have been active in the decision-making process for this plan. The group is exclusively for monks. Every year, they collectively perform the ritual Ney Sol, which involves prayers to the environment and ecology. Through this group, we can attract tourism for Buddhist scholars and researchers. Local Elected Members and Traditional Governance System: We cannot do anything without the involvement of our local and traditional leaders. The local elected members of the Panchayats manage local affairs along with traditionally nominated representatives from the Gyapun, Youmee and Mondal systems in Dzongu.

Mun Boongthings (Traditional Priests)

They are traditional priests and priestesses of the Lepcha people. 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. They play a vital role in contributing to preserving our indigenous knowledge, language and culture.

Local Elected Members and Traditional Governance System

We cannot do anything without the involvement of our local and traditional leaders. The local elected members of the Panchayats manage local affairs along with traditionally nominated representatives from the Gyapun, Youmee and Mondal systems in Dzongu.

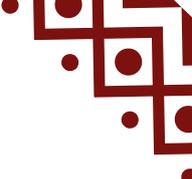
Process of Consultation and Providing Continuous Consent in our Community

We used the following methods to consult with the community:

- Small Group Meetings: Small groups meetings are the only way to meet and discuss matters in our community because the area is large and spread out and there is difficulty with roads and transportation connectivity. The process of working to promote tourism started some time ago, but we still lack good coordination and proper channels.
- Telephone Calls: We are constantly connected through telephones and mobile phones. This is one of the best ways to communicate with everyone, although we do have network issues in our region, especially during monsoon season, when it is quite difficult.



Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) Meeting in Dzongu Valley, North Sikkim. (Photo by Carlo Manalansan)



What We Are Asking

1. We call on potential financiers of National Hydropower Corporation (NHPC) to not provide investment to the Stage IV 520 megawatt hydropower project, rebuilding of stage III 1200 MW, or any large hydropower projects on the Teesta River.
2. We call on the Sikkim State government to halt the rebuilding of the Stage III and construction of the Stage IV 520 megawatt dam and to conduct an independent investigation or study of the carrying capacity of the Teesta River.
3. We call on the Sikkim State government to declare the Teesta River as a free-flowing river and to create a riverine sanctuary.
4. We call on the Indian central government to declare the villages of Chungthang, Naga Namgor, Fidang and villages in the lower downstream zone of the Teesta River as a natural disaster area, provide rehabilitation to families affected by the floods, and provide financial support for the reconstruction of damaged roads and physical infrastructure. In particular, support should also be provided for the education of children whose schools were destroyed by floods, and providing livelihood support to women.
5. We call on the State Tourism Minister to declare Dzongu as an ecotourism hub.
6. We call on the State Governor of Sikkim to protect the rights of the Lepcha Indigenous People of Dzongu.
7. We call on the President of India, the Prime Minister of India and the Ministry of Minority Affairs of India to protect the rights of the Lepcha Indigenous People of Sikkim .
8. We call on the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to take required actions to prevent the destruction of Lepcha Indigenous lands and their landscapes and Indigenous cultural practices in Dzongu.
9. We call upon UNESCO for the protection of Dzongu, as it falls within Kanchenjunga National Park, which they declared as a world heritage site in 2016 in the natural and cultural heritage category.
10. We call on the State Forest Minister and the Dzongu Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), to protect the Dzongu Reserve Area consistent with its legal status as an area exclusively for Indigenous Lepcha.

**Co-Designed Solutions for and by the
Lepcha People of Dzongu Valley, Sikkim, India**

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