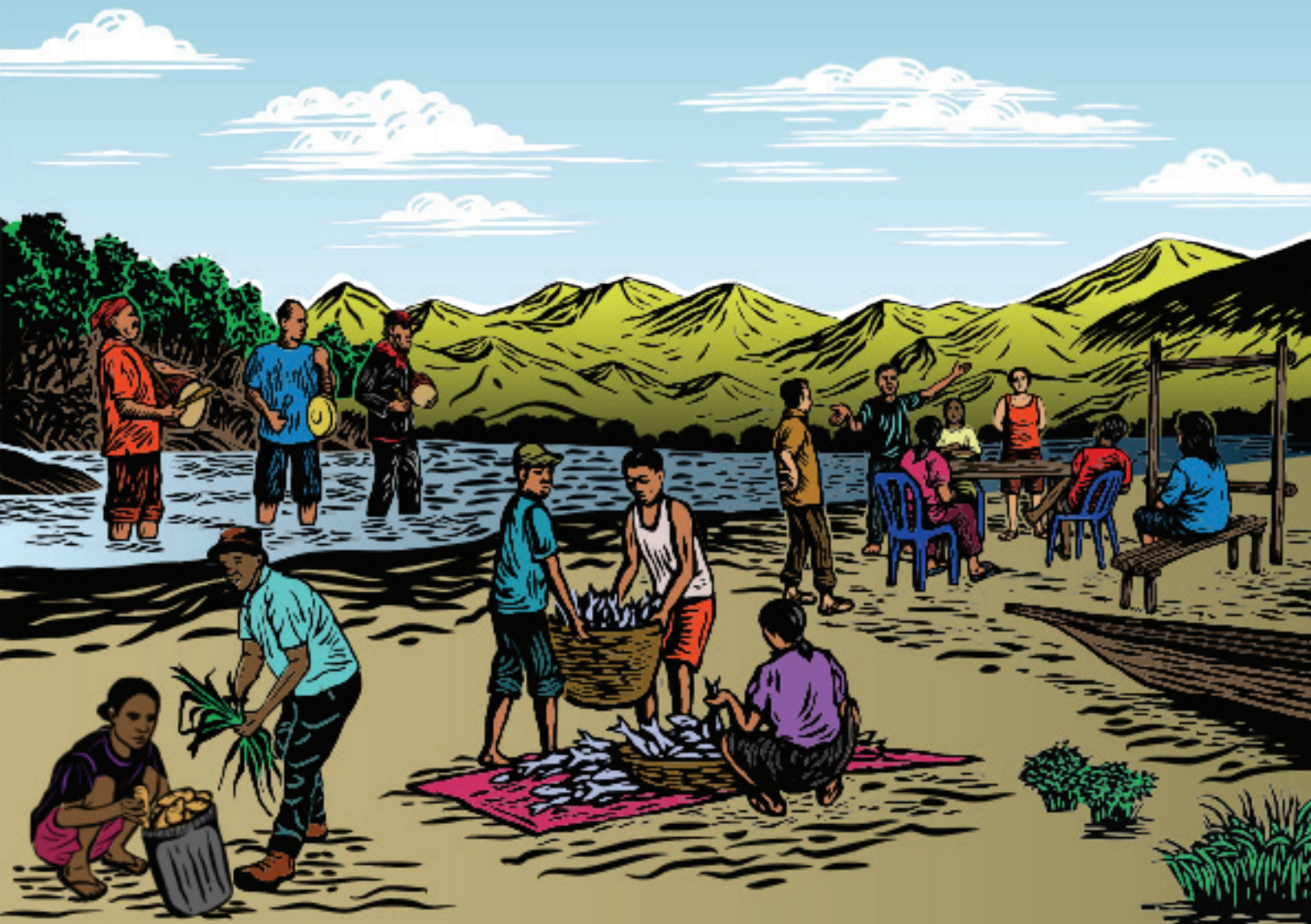


INTERNATIONAL  
**ACCOUNTABILITYPROJECT**

# CO-CREATING COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT PLANNING:

An Evaluation Report of the  
Global Advocacy Team 2021-2025



# Co-Creating Community-led Development Plans

An Evaluation Report of the Global Advocacy Team 2021-2025

**Illustrators:** Haris Ichwan and Tias Ester Widhari

**Layout Artist:** Tias Ester Widhari

**Photo Contributors:** Carlo Manalansan, Centre for Community Mobilization and Support NGO (CCMS), PAMANGGAS, Tom Weerachat.

## Featured Partners:

Affected Citizens of Teesta

Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara, Maluku (AMAN-Maluku)

Centre de Formation pour l'entraide et le Développement Communautaire

Centre for Community Mobilization and Support NGO (CCMS)

Insiza Women in Mining Trust

Community Initiative and Action Group Kenya (CIAG-K)

Paghugpong sang mga Mangunguma sa Panay kag Guimaras (PAMANGGAS)

Daniel Faggiano

Habiba Mirzad

Jessica Amon

Maurice Odhiambo

Thilak Kariyawasam

Vanarath Hem

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195 Plymouth Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201 USA

[accountabilityproject.org](https://accountabilityproject.org)

[ews.rightsindevelopment.org](https://ews.rightsindevelopment.org)

[iap@accountabilityproject.org](mailto:iap@accountabilityproject.org)

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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**T**he [Global Advocacy Team \(GAT\)](#) is an initiative co-created and co-led by community leaders and the [International Accountability Project \(IAP\)](#), designed to shift development away from top-down models and toward community-led, rights-based planning. GAT's core mission is to exchange tools and learning with communities so they can define their development trajectories through participatory research and localized planning. The initiative supports communities with training, peer exchanges, funding, and resources, so they can speak directly into development policies and decisions that affect them.

The initiative convenes community organizers from around the world to carry out community-led research to influence and transform the way development is designed, funded, and implemented. Through this approach, local expertise becomes the foundation of advocacy and policy change.

The first GAT (2013–2016) brought together community leaders from 8 countries, resulting in the impactful report [Back to Development — A Call For What Development Could Be](#). It influenced global institutions, garnered international recognition and established a platform for rights-based community-led development. The second GAT (2021–2024) expanded the model across 7 countries, culminating in [7 Unique community-led development plans](#) collectively publicized in May 2025.

## Purpose of the Report

This report's primary purpose is to systematize the lessons learned from the second iteration of the GAT initiative and to generate practical recommendations for future iterations and for other groups that might want to put together a similar or related initiative. The focus is on capturing the insights, experiences, and reflections of those directly involved in the initiative in order to inform and strengthen the ongoing development of IAP's community-led advocacy strategies.

IAP received 110 applications in 2021 from 42 countries around the world, expressing strong interest in being part of the Global Advocacy Team to explore community-led development planning. Despite overwhelming needs and interest globally, we could only work with a limited number of groups, but we want to share through this report what we have learned and continue building with the broader community and movements interested in this approach.

By documenting both the successes and the challenges encountered during this phase, the report aims to:

- Highlight key learning moments from the implementation of the GAT model across diverse regional contexts;
- Provide a structured reflection on the processes, methodologies, and outcomes of the initiative;
- Offer concrete, actionable recommendations for enhancing future iterations of the GAT and similar participatory and community-led advocacy efforts.

Ultimately, this report contributes to a broader effort to deepen understanding of what it takes to support community-led development planning and rights-based advocacy at a global scale, ensuring that future initiatives continue to be rooted in the experiences and priorities of the communities they are designed to serve.

## Acknowledgements

We want to extend our deepest gratitude to everyone who made this report possible. To all GAT members who generously shared their time: your voices and perspectives shaped the heart of this work. Thank you for sharing your insights and experiences through the survey and discussions. To the members of the Advisory Group, and our allies Just Ground, Coalition for Human Rights in Development, ESCR-Net, and Movement for Community-Led Development, whose reflections and strategic guidance helped us think bigger and go further. And to the IAP staff and partners who supported the process every step of the way. This collective effort reflects the strength of our community, our shared commitment to accountability, and the belief that meaningful change is only possible when built together.

## Methodology

The evaluation of the second iteration of the Global Advocacy Team (GAT) initiative was designed as a participatory and inclusive process, reflecting the values of a community-led approach that guide IAP's work. The goal was to assess the implementation, outcomes, and lessons learnt of the GAT initiative from the perspectives of the GAT members, allies and partners, the GAT advisory group, and IAP staff.

A thorough desk review of key documents from the second phase of the GAT initiative was conducted. This included internal reports, published materials, planning documents, and communications developed over the course of the initiative. These materials provided essential background, helped frame the evaluation, and informed the development of data collection tools, such as questionnaires and interview tools. To ensure relevance and rigor, early drafts of these tools were shared with and refined based on input from the GAT members and Advisory Group. Consistent with the participatory nature of the initiative, the Advisory Group was consulted first in the evaluation to provide feedback on the overall evaluation approach, as well as the design of the data collection tools. This ensured that the tools were appropriate and reflective of the values and priorities of the GAT initiative.

Surveys were sent to the GAT members, allies and partners, Advisory Group members, and the IAP team. The surveys were designed to gather both quantitative metrics and qualitative responses, offering a comprehensive view of the experiences, perceived outcomes, and suggestions for future improvement. Responses from the surveys were analyzed using a thematic approach, with qualitative data analyzed to identify recurring patterns, perspectives, and themes. Quantitative data were reviewed for trends and aggregated to support triangulation with qualitative findings.

Preliminary results were also shared with the Advisory Group and the wider GAT for transparency and alignment with the participatory approach of the initiative.



## 2. OBJECTIVES AND OUTPUTS

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The second iteration of the GAT initiative was grounded in the [8 Steps to Community-Led Development](#), a framework developed from one of the most extensive community-led surveys on global development convened by IAP. The first of these steps, “Start with a People’s Plan,” is a core principle that inspires the second GAT to explore this path. The second GAT supported members to work with communities to document priorities, articulate collective visions and develop community-led plans that reflect local needs, knowledge and strategies for long-term wellbeing.



**Objective 1: A global team of community organizers and leaders in community-led development are brought together and supported with trainings, organizing and advocacy via the Global Advocacy Team.**

**Created Through Global Solidarity:** IAP convened *Global and Regional Expert Meetings* that brought together 53 community organizers, activists, and practitioners from 25 countries and 46 organizations in 2021 to discuss community-led development planning and establish a foundation for the second GAT initiative. These experts, representing communities deeply connected to land and natural resources, met online to share strategies, tools, and methodologies while strengthening cross-regional solidarity. Participants collaborated to design training materials and modules for community-led development plans to be integrated into the GAT Initiative. IAP published a report [Unity in diversity: Shared learnings and solidarity from global experts on community-led development planning](#).

**Collective Leadership:** Participants of the Regional Expert Meetings nominated and selected their regional representatives to form the Global Advocacy Team Advisory Group, consisting of seasoned community organizers from 5 regions. Advisory Group members committed to advising and supporting the GAT Initiative to maintain accountability, participating in regular online meetings to share experiences and exchange tools and strategies on community-led development planning, and co-creating reports and resources. They also provide input on community-led research processes, offer one-on-one research support, and work alongside allies to help GAT members develop their community-led development plans.

**Inclusive Selection Process:** IAP and the GAT Advisory Group created an inclusive selection process to recruit the new Global Advocacy Team on Community-led Development Planning. The Call for Application launched in October 2021 in 5 Arabic, French, English, Russian, and Spanish, with applicants encouraged to apply in any language. We received applications from 46 countries, mostly from outside IAP's immediate network. The selection committee - comprising the GAT Advisory Group and IAP's regional staff - reviewed applications by region and language, shortlisting 30 candidates for online interviews. In January 2022, online interviews were conducted in multiple languages with candidates from Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Middle East and North Africa, Europe and Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, resulting in [8 new GAT members](#).

**Co-learning Sessions:** In February 2022, IAP and the Advisory Group welcomed the new Global Advocacy Team and began facilitating online [learning sessions](#) in 6 languages with simultaneous interpretation. Over the four-year span, more than 20 sessions such as Participatory Data Analysis, Risk and Security, and Building People's Power for Community-led Development enabled GAT members to exchange strategies, share challenges, and build collective strength across contexts. GAT members received training from IAP and allies to enhance their understanding of community-led development, research design, power dynamics, intersectionality in research, and other critical topics.

**Inspiring Stories from Members:** GAT members wrote [7 blog articles](#), 5 translated into local languages, to provide details about the communities and organizations involved and the context for their community-led research and development plans. These stories showcase how communities in different regions confront environmental challenges and harmful investments through community-led action research. They highlight mobilization strategies and advocacy tools used to address interconnected issues affecting women, children, and people with disabilities while advancing community-led development planning.

**Community-led Research:** Each GAT member was trained to facilitate a community-led research process in their community to identify development priorities, build evidence, and reflect community aspirations. Between July 2022 and June 2023, the Global Advocacy Team conducted community-led research in 7 countries to determine their development challenges and priorities. GAT members formed research teams with community members possessing

unique local knowledge, representing intersectional identities including gender, ethnicity, age, and occupation. The research involved 945 participants, including 388 women, youth, and marginalized groups, using participatory methods such as focus group discussions, community-led surveys, storytelling, visual methods, and community meetings. By combining existing experience with new tools learned through the GAT initiative, communities identified critical issues and development priorities that embody their common dreams and uphold their right to development.

**Learning Exchange:** GAT members and IAP convened in Thailand for a week-long learning exchange to share findings, reflect on their processes, and discuss collective recommendations. The insightful findings and powerful learning from each community-led research processes in 7 countries were presented and discussed during an impactful [week-long in-person learning exchange in Thailand](#).

The initiative began with eight GAT members, though one was unable to continue due to capacity limitations and did not contribute to research outputs or advocacy efforts. The findings and outcomes presented in this report reflect the work of the seven groups that completed the full initiative.



**Objective 2: Communities are recognized as decision-makers in development and community-led development plans are organized, created and implemented.**

**Collective Report:** Uniting the process and outcomes of community-led research in 7 countries, a comprehensive report co-written with members of the Global Advocacy Team details the process to conduct community-led research and create community-led development plans. The

report captures the insightful findings and powerful lessons presented and discussed from each community's research process. In May 2024, IAP and the GAT launched a global collective report, [In Search of a Different World: Turning Dreams into Community-Led Development Plans](#), emphasizes communities as rights-holders, knowledge-keepers, and changemakers in the development process. The launch of the collective report marked a key moment for IAP and GAT members binding separate struggles into a unifying global force showing how the GAT members learn from each other and opportunities for other communities to learn from them. The report has been widely distributed and continues to inspire other communities to learn more about 7 examples of how community-led research informs community-led development planning in various contexts globally. The responses received from the launch were truly inspiring.

**10 Actions To Prioritize Community Expertise in Development Planning:** From shared learning and collective insights, the GAT members were able to create [10 Actions To Prioritize Community Expertise in Development Planning](#), recommendations from direct experience and shared analysis through vigorous community-led research processes across Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. It's available in 7 languages for GAT members to use in their advocacy efforts. IAP and the GAT use these recommendations to advocate towards local and national governments, companies, and development banks, promoting [community-led development](#) as a viable alternative to inform other communities and influence current development decision makers.

**Collective Video:** IAP launched a 10-minute advocacy video entitled [Charting a New Course: The Path to Community-led Development](#) that chronicles the journey of the second GAT. The video features their collective dreams, experiences, and analyses gathered through 2 years of learning, collaboration, and community-led action research. It showcases how GAT members empowered communities in 7 countries to create their own development plans and advocates for what genuine community-led development should look like. This powerful advocacy tool has been used to influence policymakers and development practitioners at both local and international levels, demonstrating the effectiveness of community-led approaches and inspiring other communities to pursue their journey.

**Community-Led Development Planning:** The [7 unique community-led development plans](#) were collectively publicized in May 2025. GAT members facilitated engagement with more than 1,000 people who shared their visions and solutions. Each plan built on evidence and knowledge created by the community through multiple dialogues and consultations precisely tailored to address specific challenges, fears, hopes, and dreams identified by community members to strengthen resilience and shape their own development pathways for a more just and equitable future. These community-led development plans are visible evidence that development should be led and lived by the community.



### **Objective 3: Funders, governments and relevant decision-makers recognize community-led development as an alternative to today's development model.**

**Local Advocacy:** GAT members targeted decision makers at local and national levels to influence the development process and advocate for the recognition and implementation of community-led development plans. Through these efforts, they promoted community-led development as a preferred model at local, national, and international levels. This work advanced changes to rules, policies, and practices around development to make them fairer and inclusive for everyone. There are inspiring examples of how GAT members were able to use community-led development plans. In Armenia, the [community-led development plan](#) was integrated into the community's five-year strategy, combining global recommendations with concrete local actions that amplify the voices of women, youth, and vulnerable groups. This has resulted in community-led initiatives including renewable energy, waste management, education access, and eco-tourism, which are currently being implemented. In Haiti, the plan helped empower community members to lead its own climate adaptation efforts, such as reforestation and food security initiatives, supported by partnerships with national and international organizations. In Kenya, the community-led development plan strengthened a long-running campaign by solidifying the community's own Land Use Plan as a sustainable alternative to defend their land rights and livelihoods from corporate profit making.

GAT members continue to advocate for their respective community-led development plans based on the objectives and strategies articulated in their advocacy plan developed in consultation with IAP.

**International Advocacy:** To complement the Global Advocacy Team’s work at national level, IAP launched a global campaign to transform development decision-makers’ policies and practices toward viable community-led development that respects human rights and the environment. IAP began with a research and scoping study examining perspectives on community-led development from policymakers and partner civil society organizations. Between June and September 2023, IAP interviewed representatives from the World Bank, USAID, and civil society networks. The African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, and Inter-American Development Bank did not provide substantive responses to engagement requests.

Research findings revealed that while institutions like the World Bank and USAID have introduced ostensibly participatory development models, these remain marginal and are still largely defined and controlled by institutions rather than communities themselves. The World Bank’s Community-Driven Development portfolio comprises only 10% of its lending and, despite claims of transferring decision-making control to communities, projects typically remain government-owned and limited to small-scale initiatives. USAID’s Local Works Department had promoted “locally led development” targeting 25% of funding by fiscal year 2025, yet a national [civil society group documented failures](#) such as exclusionary consultations, opaque fund allocation, elite capture, and inaccessible grievance mechanisms. Civil society perspectives underscored persistent obstacles: restricted information access, superficial consultation, non-compliance with free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), and weak transparency across major development finance institutions. The [Movement for Community-Led Development](#) is addressing these gaps by mobilizing members and facilitating dialogue with aid agencies and donors to develop robust national policies. These findings raise critical questions about why development banks persistently fail on FPIC and the right to information, and how institutions can recognize communities not as passive beneficiaries but as rights holders and experts capable of determining their own development priorities.

**United Nations:** Despite limited institutional responses to repeated requests for meetings, particularly from regional development banks, IAP collaborated with UN Special Rapporteur on the right to development, Professor Surya Deva, to provide community-led research findings and testimony from IAP and the GAT members to inform his global work to realize the right to development, including an eventual report to the UN General Assembly on financing for inclusive, sustainable and participatory development. Between August 2024 and April 2025, IAP and GAT members participated in multiple consultative sessions with the UN Special Rapporteur, sharing experiences and evidence-based insights on community-led development planning practices. These ongoing engagements contributed to the UN Special Rapporteur’s understanding of grassroots perspectives and informed his recommendations on participatory development.

In May 2025, IAP co-hosted a public event with the UN Special Rapporteur attracting over 150 participants. The session, titled [Participation in Development: Strengthening Community-](#)

[Led Development](#), successfully elevated community-led development from an aspiration to a recognized requirement for realizing the right to development, featuring case studies, stories and strategies from grassroots movements, community organizers, civil society and development bank representatives. The panelists discussed approaches to strengthening community mobilization, integrating indigenous knowledge, and achieving fundamental shifts in how development is planned. As part of a wider conversation on inclusive and sustainable development, participants emphasized that community-led development is not merely an ideal but a fundamental prerequisite for fulfilling the right to development. This event helped amplify the urgent need to move beyond consultation to genuine community ownership and leadership in development processes globally.

In July 2025, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the right to development, Surya Deva, submitted a report [Financing for Inclusive, Sustainable and Participatory Development](#) to the UN General Assembly explaining why governments and other organizations need to fund development projects that include everyone, protect the environment, and involve communities in decision-making. Through continuous engagements, IAP and GAT's report [In Search of a Different World: Turning Dreams into Community-Led Development Plans](#) was cited as a preferred model for community-led development. The report states that States, United Nations entities, international financial institutions, multilateral development banks, businesses and other actors must only finance development that is inclusive, sustainable and participatory.

*Participatory development, in which people are not merely the recipients of development, is not merely a theory. Community-led development – development that is conceived on the basis of the communities' needs and priorities and respects the environment and human rights – is already being practised in different world regions.*

*In such a model (The Global Advocacy Team), people and communities "lead the design, implementation, and monitoring of development projects" and "planning incorporates local expertise and creates development solutions that originate from and are led by the people who will be affected by them".*

We must continue to push the GAT's recommendations to development banks, governments, and donors until communities are genuinely recognized as leaders of their own development and community-led development becomes the standard for realizing the right to development.

### 3. KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

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**T**he structure of the second GAT, with its combination of regional coordination, collective learning spaces, community-led research, and global advocacy engagements, shaped the experiences documented in this evaluation. These components not only provided technical tools and political grounding, but also created opportunities for members, allies, and IAP staff to reflect, learn, and practice community-led development in diverse contexts. The following section presents how participants experienced this structure in practice, the skills and perspectives they gained, and the ways the initiative contributed to shifting power and strengthening community-led decision-making.

#### Main Accomplishments across Groups

Over the past four years, the GAT has demonstrated significant accomplishments that reflect both the collective strength of its members and the adaptability of its model to different regional contexts. According to the surveys conducted, several key achievements stand out as particularly relevant to understanding the impact and contributions of the initiative.



#### Global Platform for Collective Knowledge

One of the most consistent findings across surveys is that members valued the creation of a global platform that enabled local leaders to come together, exchange, and produce knowledge collectively. Respondents highlighted that this was the first time many community leaders were able to connect across regions in such a structured, supportive way, which allowed them to “conduct in collaboration with seven outstanding global partners.” This reflects the success of GAT in embedding community-led approaches into practice rather than treating them as external advocacy goals.



#### From Partnership to Co-leadership

GAT members, IAP staff and allies emphasized that the model shifted partnerships from initial contact to deeper, sustained collaboration, making communities active co-designers and co-leaders rather than just participants. Many responders described this as a process where relationships built go beyond project timelines, noting that networks established within GAT will continue even after formal programming ends.



## Strengthening Community-led Research Capacity

Another notable accomplishment lies in the capacity-strengthening. Members reported gaining new methodological and analytical skills through the process, particularly in community-led research and planning. An IAP staff person reinforced this, pointing to the effectiveness of hybrid learning formats and participatory methodologies that bridged language and cultural differences. For many, the experience was transformative: *“Teamwork and unity of the community are the most powerful skills to overcome any challenges.”*

### Notable Practices and Innovations

The GAT process also produced notable practices and innovations that contributed to its success. Members repeatedly referred to the creation of safe and brave spaces for solidarity and creativity to emerge. This was not just symbolic. Direct engagement in local contexts made collaboration more meaningful and rooted in lived experiences.



## Flexibility As Core Innovation

IAP staff pointed out that flexibility in program design was one of the strongest innovations. For instance, when members faced personal, political, or environmental challenges, timelines and support structures were adapted without penalizing participation. This differentiated GAT from more rigid initiatives and was key to sustaining engagement.



## Community-Led Methods for Outcomes

Another innovative practice highlighted was the use of creative participatory tools to overcome barriers of language and distance. Participatory exercises and discussion spaces allowed members to express community challenges, aspirations, and knowledge in an accessible and meaningful way. These approaches fostered co-creation of knowledge that was not only analytical but also deeply reflective of local realities, demonstrating how community-led methods can produce outcomes that are more relevant and sustainable than traditional reporting structures.

### Examples of Achievements in Practice

The GAT initiative facilitated more than transactional partnerships: participants described engagement as *“genuine solidarity”* and emphasized that communities could *“position themselves as authors and analysts of their own realities”*. The initiative fostered a sense of collective responsibility and mutual support, creating sustainable networks that extended beyond individual organizations and local contexts, representing one of the most enduring impacts of the GAT initiative.



## **Building Leadership and Influence**

Several concrete examples illustrate the achievements mentioned above. Members described how the GAT initiative enabled them to position themselves as leaders in their own contexts, with greater confidence to influence local policy debates and to share knowledge with peer organizations. This illustrates both the immediate benefits of capacity strengthening and the long-term sustainability of the initiative's impact.



## **Flexible Approaches in Difficult Environments**

Responders also emphasized how the GAT initiative created supportive conditions for members operating under challenging circumstances, including political repression and environmental crises. One lead reflected on the difficulties participants faced was *"political repression and disasters"*. Despite these challenges, the initiative's flexible approach enabled members to continue contributing effectively: *"It takes time, patience, trust, and willingness to support each other, having each other back in our team to navigate this role. GAT members who have done their best in their part despite many challenges they had to deal with along the way."*



## **Strengthening Community Engagement and Organizing**

Members reported that GAT strengthened their community engagement and organizing skills. One participant noted that they learned *"community engagement and organizing and many other things that are very useful for our work,"* highlighting in particular how indigenous women were encouraged to participate in community meetings and express their opinions.

Another member described how their community applied what they learned to plan and implement local campaigns: *"Our partner communities were capacitated to draft community plans as well as campaigns to uplift their conditions. Through their initiative, they were able to launch campaigns such as dialogue and petition signing. They were also able to participate in the local development bodies, of which their campaigns were brought to a wider audience, and reached stakeholders who can help realize their local campaigns."* This demonstrates concrete impacts in community organization and engagement with local authorities.



## **Fostering Connections and Collective Learning**

It also highlighted the importance of the networks and solidarities fostered through GAT. One person at IAP emphasized the connections built within the initiative: *"The connections that we were able to build and nurture along the way within GAT's own region. Those reflection conversations were always so insightful and inspiring"*. Similarly, members noted the value of collective learning and shared ownership: *"It was a collective and collaborative process throughout, so it was amazing how we all contributed to shaping the final outcomes as a network."*

## 4. REFLECTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS

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### Transformation Through Participation

The GAT initiative has been a catalyst for transformation across communities, organizations, and networks. Reflections from GAT members, IAP team members, allies and partners, and the advisory group all point to deep learning, stronger community engagement, and a genuine shift in power toward community-led decision-making. While each group offered unique perspectives, their experiences collectively show how the initiative has fostered resilience, inclusivity, and long-term change.

### Skills, Knowledge, and Solidarity Gained

Participants across the board described significant growth in knowledge and skills. Members spoke of learning new approaches to community research, advocacy, and organizing, which broadened their understanding of what communities can achieve collectively. One explained, *“My perspective of community-led development has widened. I have gained valuable skills such as a community research approach and understanding the struggles of fisherfolk.”* Another emphasized that the most powerful skill gained was solidarity itself: *“Teamwork and unity of the community are the most powerful skills to overcome any challenges.”*

The IAP team echoed this sentiment, pointing out that transformation was strongest when communities truly owned the process, rather than having solutions imposed. *“The most important lesson is that transformation happens when communities feel ownership of the process—it is not about delivering solutions but building spaces for them to define their path,”* one reflected.

Allies and partners also admitted their own thinking had shifted, moving from an approach of “doing for” communities to “doing with” them. As one partner summarized, *“Inclusion isn’t just a step—it’s the foundation.”* The advisory group reinforced these views by pointing to the value of structured training, such as community organizing, advocacy planning, and issue mapping, while reminding us of the profound ethos behind the work: *“What if development was designed and lived by the same people?”*

### From Learning to Action

Learning quickly translated into concrete action on the ground. GAT members shared stories of communities drafting their own plans, organizing petitions, and successfully pressing decision-makers to listen. A striking example came from Kenya: *“The GAT initiative empowered the*

*Yala Swamp community to reclaim their land rights, halting a 66-year sugarcane investment, preserving biodiversity and livelihoods through unified advocacy and legal action.”* Indigenous women reported speaking out in public forums for the first time, while youth and people with disability felt their voices recognized and valued.

IAP team members described similar breakthroughs in different contexts, noting how GAT’s recognition as a credible, global actor brought legitimacy to community demands. Allies remembered community gatherings where residents shared their stories directly with decision-makers as moments of powerful connection. Advisory group members stressed that GAT had enabled representatives to push back against externally imposed projects, *“community representatives are able to question the rationales of project designs... and demand involvement during the entire project cycles.”*

## Shifting Power and Empowerment

Across all perspectives, a recurring theme was the way the initiative shifted power. Development should no longer be experienced as something parachuted in by governments or external funders, but as a process shaped and owned by communities themselves. Members described this as a step toward reducing the sense of dependency often created by external development actors and strengthening communities’ ability to shape their own solutions. The IAP team observed that GAT gave legitimacy to community voices in both local and global spaces. Allies valued that the initiative was led by GAT members themselves, and highlighted how the approach differed from traditional externally driven development. As the GAT Advisory Group put it: *“Power shifted from parachuting development by government staff and development finance to inclusive decision-making.”*

This progress was not without obstacles. Members described political harassment, being falsely branded as insurgents to delegitimize their work, and logistical barriers such as poor connectivity. The IAP team lead spoke of the challenge of navigating complex regional politics and ensuring no one felt excluded. Allies shared that the timing of some activities felt unclear from their perspective, which at points made collaboration more difficult, while advisory members emphasized that limited resources constrained opportunities for in-person exchanges and deeper peer learning. These experiences highlighted important lessons: inclusive processes take patience, require political will, and must be adequately resourced to sustain momentum.

What comes through most clearly is the sense of impact and empowerment felt across all groups. Members spoke of a heightened sense of belonging: *“Communities now appreciate the strengths of being one with the organization.”* IAP also expressed pride and gratitude: *“I have greatly valued this remarkable journey. I am proud to have been part of it.”* Allies celebrated GAT as *“a game changer in our field,”* while the advisory group summed it up as *“a step in the right direction to avoid parachuting development but to have an agreeable community-led development.”*

Taken together, these voices affirm that the GAT initiative has built capacity, strengthened advocacy, and created spaces for communities to take the lead in shaping their futures. It has shown that when power is shifted and inclusion made real, communities not only gain confidence but also drive meaningful, lasting change.

## Evidence of Capacity Strengthening

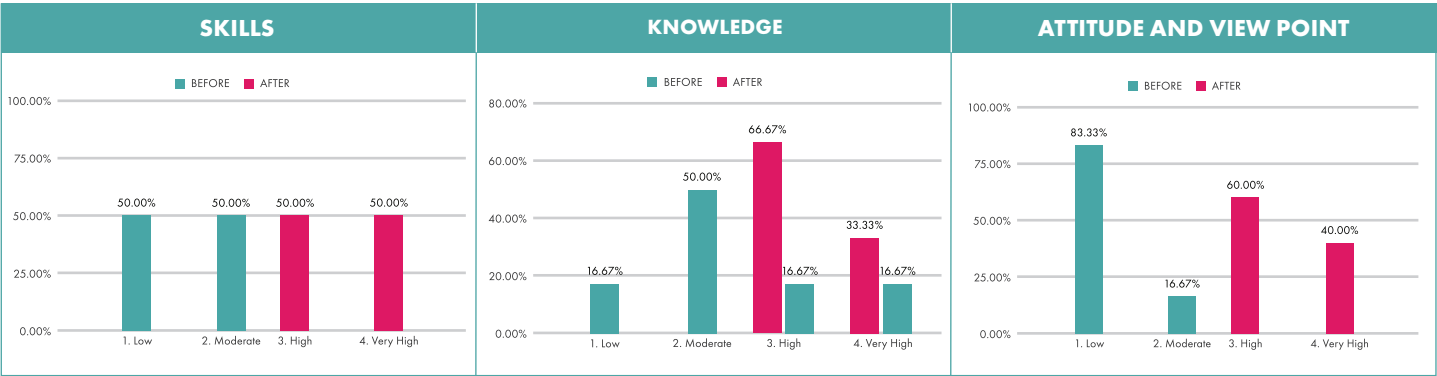
The survey results confirm the transformative impact of the GAT initiative on members’ knowledge, skills, and perspectives across all 5 core dimensions of community-led development planning:

- 1. Community-led Research
- 2. Community Engagement and Organizing
- 3. Resource Mobilization
- 4. Community-led Decision Making
- 5. Partnership Building

Participants reported significant growth when comparing their capacities before and after the initiative. These shifts provide quantitative evidence that complements the rich qualitative reflections shared throughout this section.

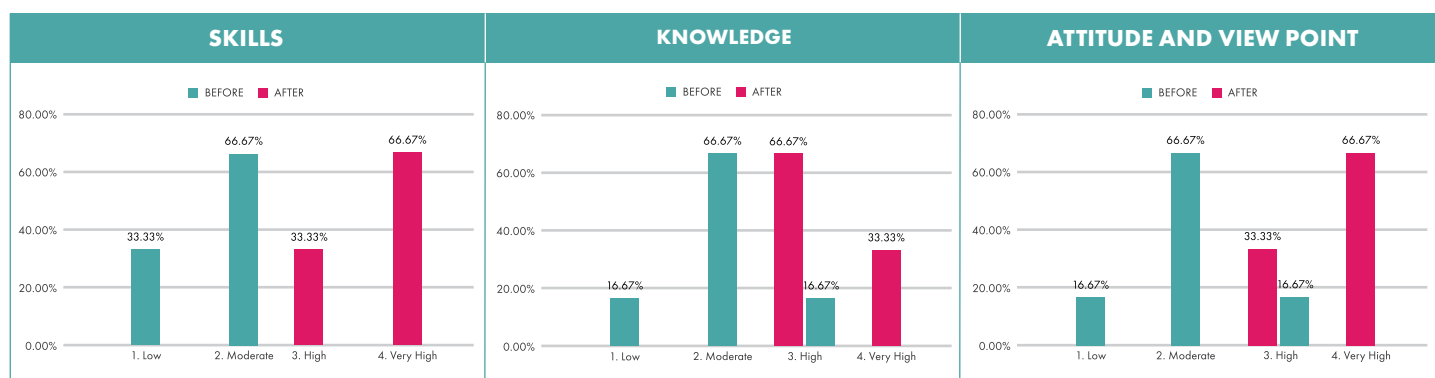
- 1. **Community-led Research.** Members reported marked improvement in their ability to design and carry out community-led research. Before joining GAT, most rated their skills and confidence as low to moderate. By the end of the initiative, the majority reported high levels of knowledge and practical ability, emphasizing that they now felt equipped to generate evidence from their own communities to influence decision-making.

Figure 1. How participants rated their **community-led research** skills, knowledge, attitude before and after the initiative.



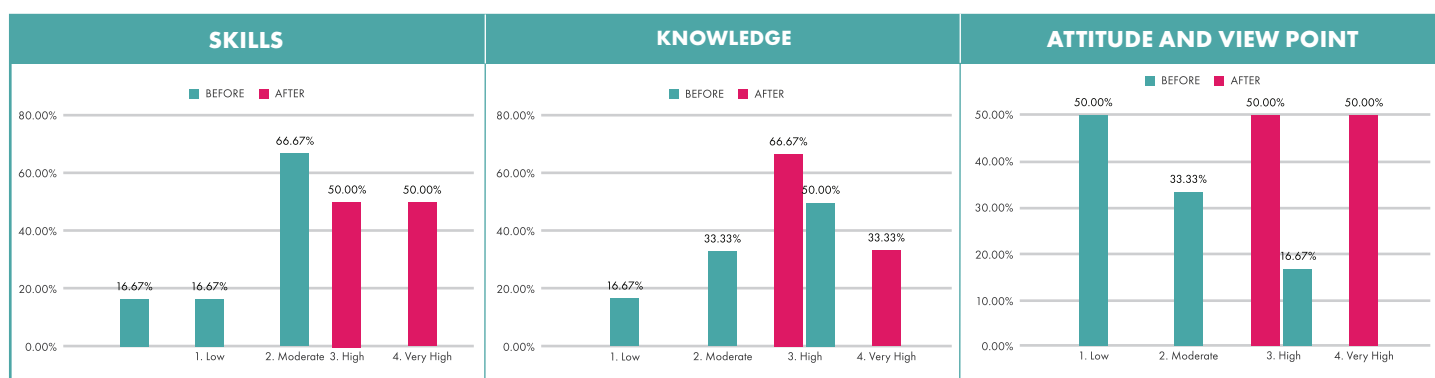
2. **Community Engagement and Organizing.** One of the clearest areas of growth was in community organizing. Survey responses showed a strong shift from limited experience to a confident understanding of how to build inclusive, participatory processes. Members highlighted that GAT gave them practical tools to bring more people into decision-making and to strengthen the solidarity within their own communities.

Figure 2. How participants rated their **community engagement and organizing** skills, knowledge, attitude before and after the initiative.



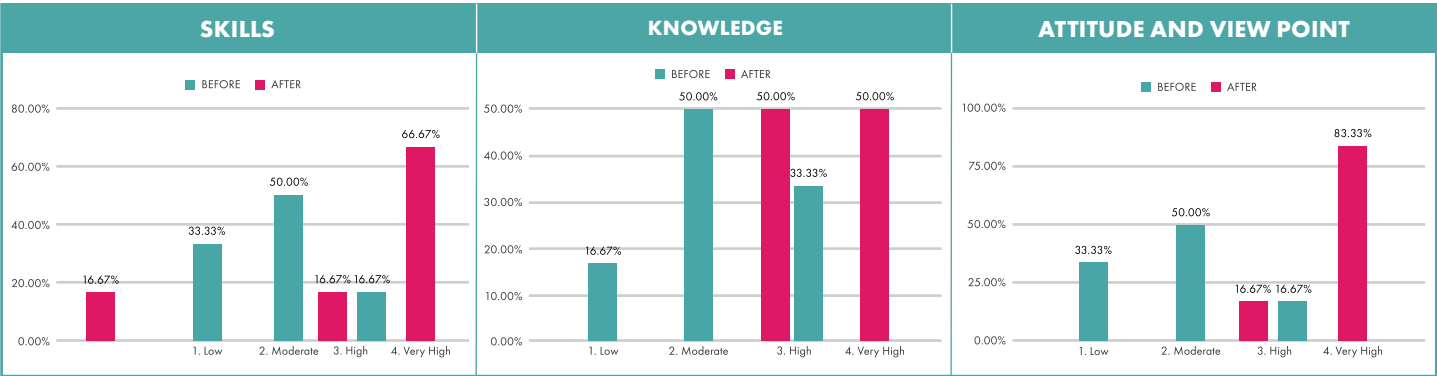
3. **Resource Mobilization.** While improvements in resource mobilization were less dramatic than in other areas, members still reported a notable increase in their capacity to identify and leverage local resources. Some also reflected that the initiative helped them think more strategically about sustainability, even if external financial barriers remained a challenge.

Figure 3. How participants rated their **resource mobilization** skills, knowledge, attitude before and after the initiative.



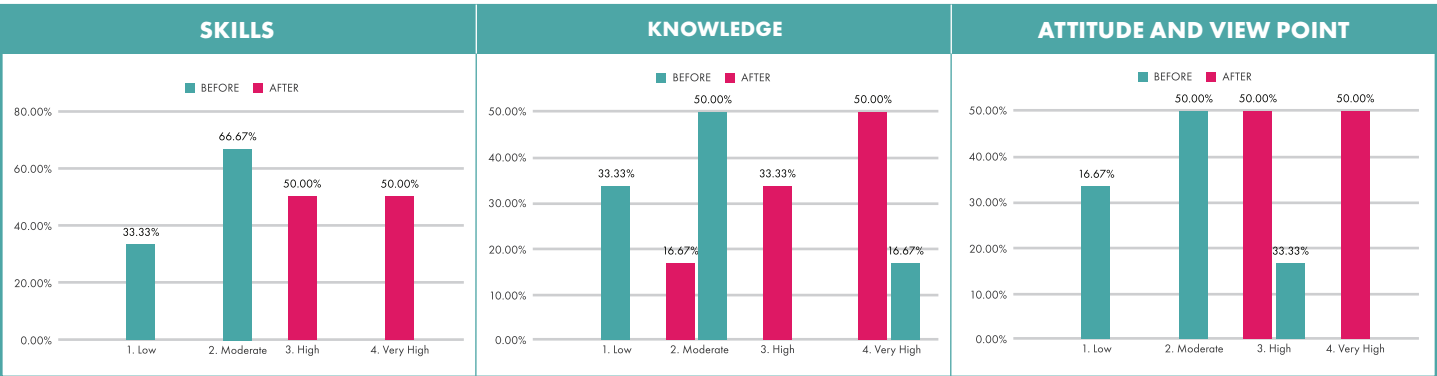
4. **Community-led Decision-Making.** The most striking shift was in members' perceptions of their own role in shaping development. Before the initiative, many felt decision-making was imposed from the outside; after GAT, participants reported high confidence in facilitating collective decision-making processes within their communities.

Figure 4. How participants rated their **community-led decision-making** skills, knowledge, attitude before and after the initiative.



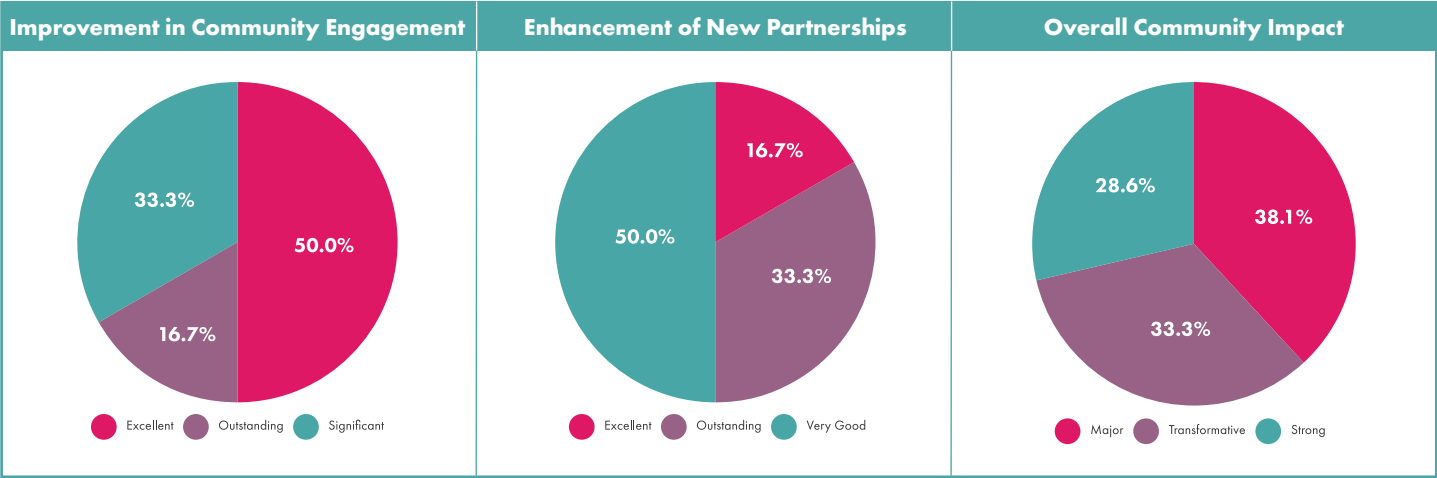
5. **Partnership Building.** Members also expressed stronger capacities to build and sustain partnerships with allies, movements, and institutions. The before-and-after ratings indicate a transition from isolated efforts to more systematic collaboration, reflecting GAT’s emphasis on co-leadership and solidarity across borders.

Figure 5. How participants rated their **partnership building** skills, knowledge, attitude before and after the initiative.



When asked about the broader impacts of the initiative, members reported notable progress across three key areas. The GAT members had 10 options to respond ranging from None to Outstanding/Transformative. The total results show that on community engagement approaches that promote community-led development, most rated their improvement as significant or higher, reflecting that they had adopted more inclusive and participatory practices. Regarding partnerships, responses showed meaningful gains, with many highlighting that GAT helped them establish new collaborations and strengthen existing ones. Finally, when asked to rate the overall impact of the initiative on their communities, the majority scored it between strong and transformative, underscoring that GAT was perceived not only as capacity building but also as a catalyst for deeper structural and cultural change.

Figure 6. Participants Responses to: **“How would you rate your improvement in community engagement approaches that promote community-led development?”**, **“How has the GAT enhanced the new partnerships formed as a result of this initiative?”**, and **“Rate the overall impact of this initiative on your community”**.



These results demonstrate that GAT was not only a platform for advocacy but also a practical school of collective learning. The combination of training, peer exchanges, and direct practice produced measurable shifts in skills and confidence, which in turn enabled members to take more active leadership in their communities and networks.



## 5. CHALLENGES

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**W**hile the GAT has achieved significant outcomes, members, allies, the advisory group, and IAP also identified several challenges and areas where the initiative could be strengthened. These challenges highlight both the internal dynamics of the model and the external contextual barriers that shaped its implementation.

### Key Challenges in GAT Implementation

Members highlighted several challenges related to participation and engagement. Political pressures and threats to safety emerged as significant barriers. Additionally, logistical and contextual difficulties affected engagement, such as limited resources for fieldwork, connectivity issues, and environmental hazards, which made consistent participation challenging for some communities. These challenges underscore the need for flexible timelines, targeted support, and adaptive strategies to ensure that all members can contribute meaningfully.

The IAP team also reflected on coordination challenges that emerged throughout the initiative, particularly the different capacities, workloads, and communication dynamics across regions. One IAP person noted that even within a single region, *“the context and dynamics are quite complex... it takes time, patience, trust, and willingness to support each other, having each other’s back in our IAP team to navigate this role.”* These reflections highlight that structural, political, and logistical differences shaped how quickly members could engage and required continuous adaptation from the facilitation team.

### Coordination and Sustaining Engagement

Internal challenges primarily revolved around coordination, communication, and sustaining engagement within the GAT network. An IAP person reflected that the co-design and co-leadership model, while transformative, required significant time and energy to maintain: *“Co-design and co-leadership... require time and energies in coordination and communication skills... we could have invested more time in strengthening our own capacity.”* This highlights that even when structures for participation are in place, ensuring that all members are aligned and supported is an ongoing effort.

Members also pointed out challenges in maintaining momentum and embedding new capacities in their communities over time. One participant emphasized the importance of nurturing leadership and expanding local capacities, stating, *“We aim to engage community leaders... and increase*

young people's capacity to implement mechanisms for change." Another reflected on the necessity of follow-up support to consolidate gains: "We will make the work of leaders more effective. We will repair the damage caused by climate change".

In practice, these internal dynamics were compounded by workload and delays. As one person at IAP put it: "Delay in getting responses is one major challenge because everyone is holding so much." Taken together, these reflections suggest that while GAT's trainings and exchanges were impactful, sustaining engagement required more structured continuity, mentoring, and strategies to avoid overburdening participants.

## Contextual Barriers

GAT members and IAP also highlighted the significant influence of political, social, and environmental contexts of the initiative. Several communities faced political repression, harassment, or state surveillance that directly affected participation and collective action. One member described: "The greatest barrier... is the constant harassment of the community and its leaders... some members were swayed with constant threats and a vilification campaign by the state forces". The IAP team corroborated these dynamics, noting that uneven political contexts, differing capacities, and resource limitations created imbalances in how members were able to engage. They also observed that environmental and infrastructural conditions significantly affected participation. Members working in remote or disaster-prone areas described challenges such as recurring connectivity disruptions and periods where their communities were "almost cut off," making it difficult to stay consistently active. These conditions required the initiative to remain flexible and responsive, adapting timelines and support mechanisms so members could continue to participate meaningfully despite external constraints.



## 6. LESSONS LEARNED

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The GAT process offered important lessons for improving the initiative and for other collaborative advocacy efforts. Also, as stated at the beginning, for others to replicate.



### **Context and Capacity Considerations**

A recurring lesson from the GAT experience was the importance of managing expectations and workload. Members highlighted that while the initiative was enriching, participating alongside their regular responsibilities sometimes created challenges. One GAT member noted that coordinating research teams was challenging, particularly when commitment from local collaborators varied. This shows that without adequate support, ambitious programs risk overburdening participants.

Unequal capacities and context-specific constraints also affected participation. The IAP team observed that political pressures, disasters, or limited familiarity with community-led research among some GAT members could slow engagement, requiring patience and flexible support structures.



### **Key Contributors to Success**

Across all perspectives, several factors consistently emerged as central to the success of the second iteration of the GAT initiative. Diversity, horizontality, flexibility, and a strong culture of care shaped both the process and the outcomes, enabling meaningful participation despite varied contexts and constraints.

Members repeatedly highlighted the value of bringing together organizers from different regions, sectors, and experiences. This diversity broadened perspectives, enriched discussions, and generated insights that strengthened advocacy strategies across contexts. Exposure to alternative approaches helped members identify connections and solutions they had not previously considered.

A horizontal approach to decision-making further contributed to the initiative's impact. Treating all contributions as equally valuable fostered trust, ownership, and mutual learning. IAP staff emphasized that this approach empowered members to speak from experience, strengthened relationships, and encouraged active knowledge-sharing.

Flexibility was another critical success factor. The initiative adapted timelines, workloads, and support structures to accommodate political pressures, environmental disruptions, and personal challenges. This responsiveness enabled sustained engagement and differentiated GAT from more rigid initiatives where such participation might have been lost.

Regional coordination played a key role in anchoring the initiative in local realities. Having leads embedded in different regions enabled timely support, helped bridge global and local perspectives, and amplified the visibility of members' work in broader networks.

Finally, collective care and solidarity were foundational to long-term engagement. Members and leads described how emotional support, a learning-oriented atmosphere, and trust-based relationships contributed to confidence, perseverance, and deeper ownership of community-led work. This culture of care created the conditions for sustained collaboration and strengthened commitment to shared goals.



### Recommendations for Adaptation

Looking to the future, there was a shared call for the initiative to expand and deepen. Members urged greater inclusion of young women leaders, more resources for fieldwork, and the replication of the model in new communities. The IAP team pointed to the need for stronger communications, more in-person convenings, and continued investment in youth and women's leadership. In this case, the recommendation is not about the composition of the GAT or Advisory Group, which were intentionally selected with representation in mind, but rather about strengthening leadership pathways within the broader ecosystem of community-led research. Teams observed that young organizers and women leaders often face additional structural and political barriers to participation, and emphasized the importance of supporting their visibility, influence, and long-term engagement.

Allies called for sustained funding for grassroots groups and emphasized embedding gender equity and community-led development at the heart of global debates on climate and energy transitions. One explained, *"From a norm-setting perspective, we need to position community-led development as the solution for a just energy and economic transformation."* Advisory group members recommended documenting live case studies to track changes over time and expanding partnerships with allied organizations.



## 7. CLOSING REMARKS

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**T**he GAT initiative has provided a profound space for learning, adaptation, and collective growth. The challenges faced by IAP staff and GAT members provided valuable insights into our resilience and ability to evolve. Resource constraints were one of the most significant challenges that nearly limited the extent to which we could support community-led development plans in person with the depth and scale that we envisioned. Similarly, the diversity of members' capacities, from writing skills to language fluency and budget management, required differentiated approaches that demanded flexibility and creativity. External pressures such as political repression, climate disasters, and security threats further tested our endurance, which highlighted the complex environments in which our partners operate.

To address these challenges, we prioritized flexibility. We made adjustments to our timeline and used hybrid methods to maintain engagement despite obstacles. Although COVID-19 prevented early in-person meetings, we successfully created meaningful online interactions. The eventual in-person convening in Thailand confirmed the irreplaceable value of face-to-face interaction and co-learning for building collectivism and shared analysis. This led to a meaningful hybrid approach that built upon the deeper connections established in person.

We also incorporated participatory methodology and creative learning tools to help bridge cultural and linguistic barriers, while security protocols and partnerships with experts provided essential protection and support. These experiences gave us reaffirmation of our ability to adapt quickly, optimize resources, and remain committed to inclusivity.

Looking ahead, the GAT initiative can be the model of spaces where communities lead. IAP's role in the initiative was to facilitate such spaces. This clearly signals a deeper alignment of development justice and community self-determination. The path forward should be guided by co-learning, accountability, and collective imagination that ensures that community-led approaches move from the margins to the standard in shaping sustainable and equitable futures.

### Get in touch with us!

While this second GAT initiative formally concludes, we remain committed to supporting community-led development advocacy. Reach out to us to sustain continued collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and strategic engagement by emailing us at [iap@accountabilityproject.org](mailto:iap@accountabilityproject.org). Follow IAP on social media – **Facebook:** [bit.ly/IAP4FB](https://bit.ly/IAP4FB), **X:** [@4accountability](https://twitter.com/4accountability), and LinkedIn: [bit.ly/IAP\\_Linkedin](https://bit.ly/IAP_Linkedin).

## 8. GAT CO-CREATED RESOURCES

You can find all resources and materials co-created and collectively published through the GAT Initiative over the years on the GAT webpage on [IAP website](#).

Access all resources via this all-in-one link: [bit.ly/m/IAP-GAT-CLD](https://bit.ly/m/IAP-GAT-CLD)

### Communities Leading the Way: Inspiring Community-Led Development Plans

Read all 7 development plans crafted by our communities across 7 countries. These plans are the result of a collaboration between local communities, the Global Advocacy Team, and the International Accountability Project. More than 1,000 people contributed their visions and solutions for a better future. Each plan demonstrates how local communities can take the lead in their development journey.

[bit.ly/GAT-CLD](https://bit.ly/GAT-CLD)

#### Armenia

##### The Alternative Way of Development in Marts Village, Lori Region, Armenia

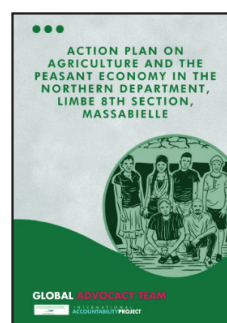
This [community-led development plan](#) was created by Marts Village in partnership with the Centre for Community Mobilization and Support NGO, a member of the Global Advocacy Team. Read in [Armenian](#).



#### Haiti

##### Action Plans on Agriculture and the Peasant Economy in The Northern Department, Limbe 8th Section, Massabielle

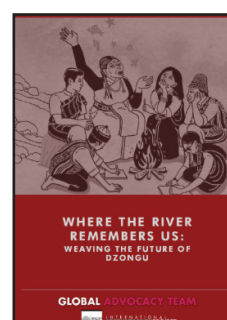
This community-led development plan was created by Massabielle Community in Haiti, with the Center de Formation pour l'Entraide et le Développement Communautaire, a member of the Global Advocacy Team. Learn in [English](#) and [French](#).



#### India

##### Where the River Remembers Us: Weaving the Future of Dzongu

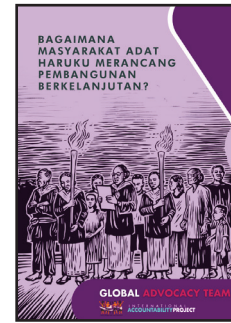
This [community-led development plan](#) was created by the Lepcha Indigenous people in India, in partnership with Affected Citizens of Teesta, a member of the Global Advocacy Team.



## Indonesia

### How Do the Haruku Indigenous Peoples Design Sustainable Development?

This [community-led development plan](#) was created by the Haruku Indigenous Peoples, in partnership with Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN) Maluku in Indonesia, a member of the Global Advocacy Team. Read in [Bahasa Indonesia](#).



## Kenya

### Beyond Conflict: Community Driven Pathways for a Just and Sustainable Yala Swamp

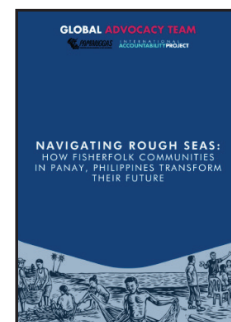
This [community-led development plan](#) was created by the Luo community in Kenya, in partnership with Community Initiative and Action Group, a member of the Global Advocacy Team.



## Philippines

### Navigating Rough Seas: How Fisherfolk Communities in Panay Philippines Transform Their Future

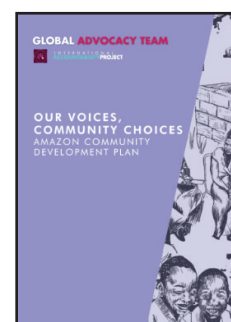
This [community-led development plan](#) was created by the fisherfolk of Santiago and San Francisco in partnership with Paghugpong sang mga Mangunguma sa Panay kag Guimaras (PAMANGGAS), a member of the Global Advocacy Team.



## Zimbabwe

### Our Voices, Community Choices: Amazon Community Development Plan

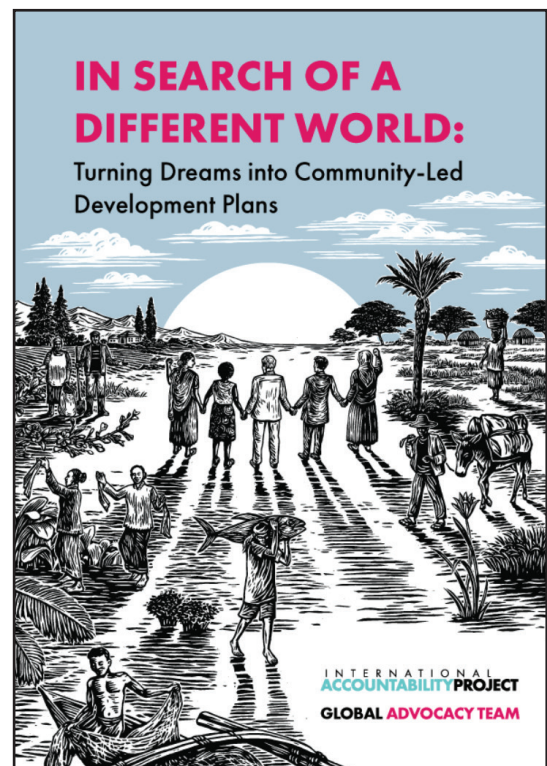
This [community-led development plan](#) was created by the Amazon community in Zimbabwe, in partnership with Insiza Women in Mining Trust, a member of the Global Advocacy Team.



## Collective Report: “In Search of A Different World!”

[In Search of a Different World: Turning Dreams into Community-Led Development Plans](#) reimagines development by positioning communities as rights-holders, knowledge-keepers, and changemakers in the development process. This powerful report shares the valuable lessons learned, collective insights, and recommendations from the GAT’s community-led research across 7 countries. IAP and the GAT use these findings to advocate with governments, companies, and development banks, promoting community-led development as a viable alternative. [bit.ly/GAT-Report-2024](https://bit.ly/GAT-Report-2024)

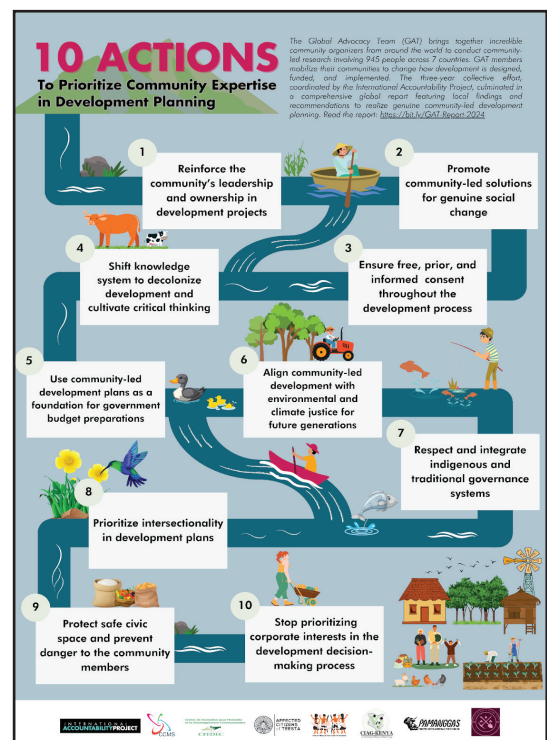
Watch the recording of The Global Launch of the report [bit.ly/GAT-Report-Launching](https://bit.ly/GAT-Report-Launching)



## Infographic: 10 Actions to Prioritize Community Expertise in Development Planning:

Discover how communities can lead every stage of development, from vision to implementation. The GAT infographic recommends ten practical actions that invite all parties to shift power, respect local expertise, and integrate community-led priorities into planning systems and national budgets. These actions range from securing free, prior, and informed consent to decolonizing knowledge systems and fully integrating environmental justice, indigenous governance, and intersectionality into development policy design. These publications highlight essential actions for prioritizing community expertise in development planning. [Download](#) in multiple languages, including Bahasa Indonesia, French, Hindi, Russian, Tagalog, and Thai.

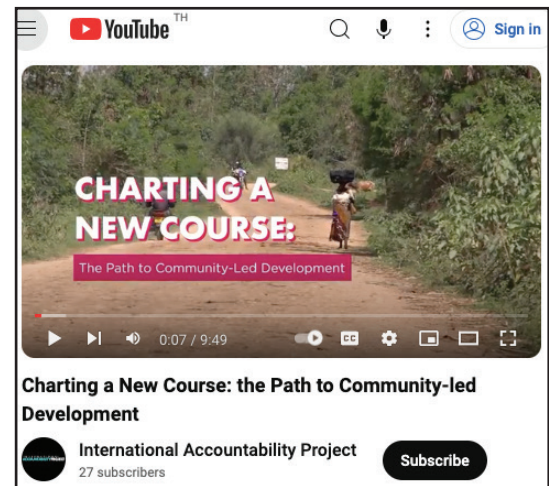
[bit.ly/m/IAP-GAT-CLD](https://bit.ly/m/IAP-GAT-CLD)



## Watch Video: Charting a New Course

IAP's YouTube series, [Charting a New Course](#), chronicles the inspiring journey of the second GAT cohort. Working closely with the GAT Advisory Group, IAP staff, and allies, they've collaborated and learned, documenting their aspirations, lived experiences, and insights. Now, they're empowering communities in 7 countries to realize their own development plans, truly embodying change led by communities.

[bit.ly/GAT\\_Video](https://bit.ly/GAT_Video)



## Watch Development Dialogues: Participation in Development: Strengthening Community-led Development

What does development by the people, for the people look like? Watch the [recording](#) of the workshop, organized by IAP in cooperation with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development and the [Community Resource Exchange \(CRE\) of the Coalition for Human Rights in Development](#). One of the Global Advocacy Team members from the [Centre for Community Mobilisation and Support, Armenia](#), shared their insights on creating a community-led development plan that asserts the right to participation and prioritizes harmony between people and nature.

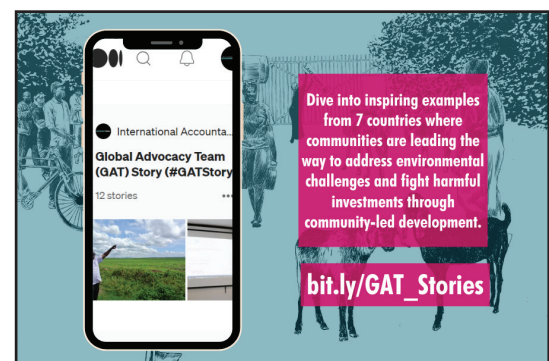
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7wmkHC5Qx8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7wmkHC5Qx8)



## Stories from the Global Advocacy Team Members

Dive into 7 inspiring stories from the GAT members. Discover how communities in 7 countries are confronting environmental challenges and fighting harmful investments, creating solutions through participatory action research. Learn how they've used mobilization strategies and advocacy tools to address interrelated issues impacting women, children, and people with disabilities, driving forward crucial community-led development.

[bit.ly/GAT\\_Stories](https://bit.ly/GAT_Stories)



- Co-creating a path towards a community-led development for fisherfolk communities in the **Philippines**: [bit.ly/GAT\\_Pamanggas](https://bit.ly/GAT_Pamanggas)
- Indigenous communities in **Indonesia** integrate community-led development with customary practices: [bit.ly/IAP\\_GAT\\_Lenny](https://bit.ly/IAP_GAT_Lenny)
- In search of Mayal Lyang: Harnessing the power of stories through community-led research to preserve Lepcha indigenous culture in **India**: [bit.ly/IAP\\_GAT\\_Malyalmit](https://bit.ly/IAP_GAT_Malyalmit)
- Localizing Global Strategies for Community-led Development in **Kenya**: [bit.ly/IAP\\_GAT\\_Chrisphine](https://bit.ly/IAP_GAT_Chrisphine)
- Community-led research reveals multilayers impacts of mining on women in **Zimbabwe**: [bit.ly/IAP\\_GAT\\_Kundai](https://bit.ly/IAP_GAT_Kundai)
- Maximizing community-led research planning in advancing environmental protection and human rights in **Armenia**: [bit.ly/IAP\\_GAT\\_Oleg](https://bit.ly/IAP_GAT_Oleg)
- Addressing climate change impacts through community-led research in rural communities in **Haiti**: [bit.ly/IAP\\_GAT\\_PaulEdex](https://bit.ly/IAP_GAT_PaulEdex)

## Other resources

- Community Action Guides on Community-led Research (3 Booklets are available in 14 languages) [bit.ly/IAP\\_Action](https://bit.ly/IAP_Action)
- Photo Essay: [GAT Learning Exchange in Chiang Mai, Thailand](#)
- Article: [GAT Co-Learning Process](#)
- Report: Read how partners co-created this work in the *Global and Regional Expert Meeting Report* ([PDF](#), [translatable html](#))
- Article: [Meet the 7 amazing new members of the Global Advocacy Team!](#)
- Article: [A global collective can advance community-led development](#)
- Article: [Join us to strengthen community-led development planning around the world](#)

[www.accountabilityproject.org](http://www.accountabilityproject.org)