

Spreading Our Branches and Roots: Connecting communities in the struggle against harmful development impacts

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There are many inspiring community leaders around the world who are defending human and environmental rights in the face of harmful impacts from development projects. They are leading demonstrations and negotiating with corporations. They are waging media campaigns and sit-ins to protect their lands and livelihoods. They are using their expertise to present their own development priorities, preserve their existing well-being, or seek something better for themselves and their communities.

These leaders often partner with local and national organizations and social movements to complement their actions with other strategies to counter the power and resources of the corporations and governments they are fighting. For example, leaders might engage with legal organizations to help them file lawsuits at the national level. They might look for scientific organizations to help them analyze an environmental impact assessment. Or they might seek help from a research organisation to track down data on financiers or shareholders to generate needed leverage over the corporations involved.

Such partnerships are vital to the success of campaigns against the harmful impacts of development. Says Gustavo Castro Soto of Otros Mundos in Mexico, *“Es fundamental trabajar en red, donde los diversos grupos pueden aportar y apoyar con diversos recursos legales, de solidaridad, de comunicación y difusión, de investigación, etc. Por ello, el trabajo en colectivo y con alianzas amplias es muy importante.”* [English: It is essential to work in a network, where the various groups can contribute and support with various legal resources, solidarity, communication and dissemination, research, etc. For this reason, work in the collective and with broad alliances is very important.”]

Yet although they are vital, these alliances and partnerships depend on chance to form. To begin with, communities can only connect with allies they already know. Normally, that’s a call or email to a friend at a civil society organisation or social movement. If a community lacks the right connections or does not know all the advocacy options available, they may never reach others who can help.

But even once connected, it’s hit-or-miss whether the organisation they reach can help. First off, allied organisations report serious limitations in funding and staffing capacity to meet the demand they already face. Too many communities are left without support because a potential ally simply lacks resource capacity. But second, the ally itself may lack the entire range of expertise or connections to the support the community needs - to test groundwater pollution at a spill site, say, evacuate a defender from a dangerous situation, or wage a successful media campaign in another country.

As Amy Ekdawi of the regional organization Arab Watch puts it, “The biggest challenge communities face is they don't know who to turn to for help. They, if they are lucky to figure it out, seek help from local and national organizations who, in their turn, may struggle to figure out the entire range of advocacy strategies and the expertise they would need for the selected strategies.”

Yet while communities struggle to access the right collaborations for their work, corporations make advances with the vast resources at their disposal.

“Communities have to confront powerful project owners with huge political influence and unlimited resources, supported by staffs of well-remunerated professionals, lobbyists, governmental back up and the media,” said Maia Seeger of Sustentarse, an organization in Chile and partner of the Early Warning System. “The disparities can be insurmountable for communities when trying to defend and protect their rights.”

Around the world, it feels like organizations are starting from zero each time a community requests support, drawing from specific, yet limited personal knowledge and connections to cobble together, as best they can, strategies that too often cannot rival the scope and depth of resources that corporations and governments have.

But what if we could do better?

What if we could spread our branches and roots, as a global civil society community, to be better connected to each other?

“A system to connect community-led campaigns with organizations and experts in different fields such as international law and science, is greatly needed. This could cover all indispensable advocacy angles and level up asymmetries, improving the community's campaign and their chance at having success in protecting and defending their human rights and the environment itself,” says Maia Seeger.

Could we reinforce current efforts to collaborate to enable more comprehensive support for research, campaigning, and defense of human and environmental rights? And could an improved system not just connect local leaders to practitioners seeking to assist, but also connect leaders from around the world to each other to share their experience and expertise?

What's essential is that communities remain at the centre of campaigns and projects for development justice. “Communities know best what is good and bad for them in their local context,” says Prabindra Shakya of the Community Empowerment and Social Justice Network (CEMSOJ). “Indigenous communities, in particular, have sustainably managed their local environment and affairs for generations. So, communities should decide what kind of development or investment should be undertaken for them.”

Given the forces at play in today's world—rising inequality, increasing threats to defenders, and staggering loss of biodiversity—we must be ambitious. And we're not the only ones thinking this big.

With this ambitious idea in mind, and with a small seed grant to get us going, a group of organizations has begun a project to explore whether we could strengthen the ways by which communities and allies connect to exchange the knowledge and resources they have, maximizing their skill sets and streamlining their services, to better confront the harmful impacts of development and ensure community-led priorities are the foundation for development projects.

Many have been part of the exploration so far, and we want to tell you what's been done and invite you to join in the next steps.

What we've done

First off, to be able to design an improved system to link communities with the contacts and resources they seek, we needed to understand what strategies communities and their allies are using to demand respect for their rights and environment. We also needed to know whether they are collaborating with each other to use those strategies.

What do we mean by strategies? Well, things like **advocacy** towards governments and corporations, **campaigns** to raise awareness and demand change, **community organizing** to strengthen community processes, **research** on corporate structures and shady influence, **scientific analysis** of environmental and health impacts, **security support** for human rights defenders, and **access to remedy** through judicial and non-judicial complaint mechanisms.

To launch the project, we began with a survey in January 2019 asking organizations and social movements around the world whether they use these strategies, by themselves or with others, to claim their rights.

We had a great response rate on the survey. Over 120 people took it—from 41 countries evenly spread across the regions of the world, speaking over 80 languages and working on a wide range of issues, from human rights (73%) to corporate accountability (42%), environment (39%), indigenous rights (24%), health (9%), and labour (7%). Over 70% of the survey takers told us they wanted to be kept informed or involved in this project moving forward.

Getting into the survey results can get technical and numbers-heavy fast. Here are the key takeaways:

- Communities and groups are actively collaborating. They are doing, helping others do, or getting help to do every strategy surveyed.
- While every one of the strategies outlined is being used, unfortunately they are not all used holistically by everyone.
 - The most-used strategies, according to survey participants, are advocacy & campaigns and community organizing.
 - The strategy that survey participants currently most rely on others to use is financial and corporate research.
 - And the least used strategies—but also the most highly-desired—are access to security support for human rights defenders and scientific research.

Right there, that gives us all some clues about where collaboration is happening and where more is needed. Communities may already be developing connections to promote advocacy and capacity; they need assistance from others to undertake technical financial and corporate research, and they are looking for more help, more collaboration, in the areas of security and scientific research.

We also asked people to comment on what stops them from using these strategies. We had a hunch the most common barriers would be time, money and expertise—but it was interesting to see which barriers were cited most for which strategies.

- Lack of financial and staff capacity was the top barrier to doing advocacy, capacity building, and access to remedy. Respondents wrote-in a range of comments about this: “WE NEED CAPACITY AND RESOURCES!!” “We are limited by limited financial resources which impedes us from carrying [out] activities in a systematic way. Almost all the work is carried out with the support of volunteers.”

- Lack of expertise was the most cited barrier for security for defenders and scientific and financial research. For example: “We lack expertise to protect our digital security... or for psychosocial counselling [of defenders].” Or, “Lack of capacities and technical knowledge; concern of how companies influence scientific research conducted by universities and other institutions.” And: “We used to [but no longer] have researchers from outside our network like PhD students to do this research.”
- There were many comments about reliance on partners with complementary skills, and also sadly, about lack of contacts to potential partners: “We do not know experts in these areas.” “We have difficulty accessing organizations that do this.” “Lack of contacts with these capabilities with the availability of support.” “We lack the contact details of the banks [involved in development], and also of the people who can facilitate contacts with the banks.”

The survey greatly informs our next steps. Yes, groups are collaborating to use a range of strategies. Yes, there are gaps and needs. Yes, there is a desire for increased collaboration to fill those gaps. Yes, there are common barriers – so let’s get together and solve them.

Throughout this work, the participation of grassroots and community groups is vital. In spite of our best efforts, only 12% of the participants surveyed reported belonging to grassroots and community groups.

We are taking a few steps to more actively involve local groups as the work progresses. First, we have held several consultations on the project and results. Local groups from many regions have attended each consultation, and we have sought to find out if the survey results resonate with their experience and to ask their input on a potential solution to the gaps in collaboration and resources identified. Second, we are involving more local groups in the next phases of the project.

In mid-2019, we created a Build Team to design an improved system that prioritizes the key needs of community-led campaigns and expands, but does not duplicate, existing collaborations. The Build Team offers a range of ways for people to participate in this collective effort, depending on their interest and availability. In October 2019, the drafting committee of the Built Team met and prepared a draft design of the system, taking into account all of the input received to date.

What comes next

In early 2020, we will share the draft design online and in person, asking for your feedback. We want to know:

1. Does this design seem like it will work?
2. Would it be accessible and effective in supporting communities in defense of their rights?
3. What do you like about it? What don't you like about it? What is unclear?
4. What could we do to make this system more manageable? How could we operationalize it?
5. Does it meet the stated mission and principles?

The design will then be revised, taking into account the feedback that we have received. We hope to find the resources to begin implementing or piloting the system by the end of 2020.

If you are a person or group fighting for development justice, contact us at contact@rightsinddevelopment.org in English, French, or Spanish to learn more about the project and how you can contribute to reinforcing stronger, better resourced community-led campaigns.

Join us to help build a new model for community collaboration to protect rights in development.