Green Livelihoods Alliance

Forests for a Just Future

Locally-Led Sustainable Development:

Insights and Recommendations from GLA partners

November 2025

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Photo: Palawan women doing Rainforestation (planting of native trees) in Brookes Point, Palawan © NTFP-EP Ph Jonas Vertudez

Locally-Led Sustainable Development: Insights and Recommendations from GLA partners, November 2025
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GLA Forests for a Just Future

Alliance

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Philippines: NTFP EP Philippines, Institute for the Development of Educational and Ecological Alternatives, Inc. (IDEAS), Environmental Legal Assistance Center (ELAC), Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center (LRCKSK/FoEPhils), Mabuwaya Foundation, Alyansa Tigil Mina (ATM), Kitanglad Integrated NGOs, Inc. (KIN), Lilak Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights (LILAK), Forest Foundation Philippines and the Samdhana Institute.

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Photo: Indonesia © Stephanie Broekarts/IUCN NL

Summary

Learning sessions with civil society organisations (CSOs) from eleven countries on the topic of locally-led sustainable development - where 'local' refers to levels varying from community to municipality to subnational - yielded the following insights and recommendations:

1. Value local knowledge and wisdom

Local knowledge, rooted in generations of lived experience, is foundational, like roots to a tree. It shapes values, practices, and customs across all phases of locally-led initiatives.

- Recognise Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IP&LCs) as the true experts; adapt your methods to learn from them.
- Respect the diverse forms in which knowledge is expressed.
- Integrate Indigenous and local knowledge into project design, indicators, and reporting.

2. Prioritise basic needs and secure livelihoods

Basic needs and secure livelihoods are not a luxury, they are the soil without which nothing can grow. Without them, long-term goals like forest protection remain out of reach.

- Prioritise urgent needs like food, shelter, and safety while introducing sustainability frameworks.
- Support initiatives that emerge from within the community, especially for marginalised groups.
- Leave room for immediate needs and urgencies.

3. Advance inclusion through practice

True growth means moving in step with communities, honoring local customs, and uplifting marginalised voices - such as women, youth, and elders.

- Adapt to the lived experience of marginalised groups
- Recognise that participation and inclusivity may differ from mainstream practices.
- Allow for an ample time frame needed for a thorough process.

4. Context matters: no one-size-fits-all

Locally-led approaches must reflect unique ecological, cultural, and social conditions - and be adaptable as these conditions change over time.

- Support IP&LCs in creating their own methodologies, tools, processes, and indicators that reflect their own unique context and values.
- Treat locally-led initiatives as living systems that can evolve with time, shifting conditions, and community needs.

Photo: DRC © Paul Villaespesa/IUCN NL

5. CSOs can act as bridges

CSOs can connect IP&LCs with external actors, amplifying voices and protecting space for self-determination.

- Increase awareness on rights, and link to international law.
- Support community-decision making, ensuring space and time for dialogue.
- Ensure safety and security for both CSO staff and communities.
- Promote fair and transparent consultation processes.
- Safeguard land and cultural rights in alignment with legal frameworks (e.g. UNDRIP).

6.Strengthen collective voice

Like a forest canopy, strong networks foster resilience and influence.

- Support trusted local leaders -especially women and youth- to build (intergenerational) networks.
- Facilitate inter-community exchanges and dialogues that deepen solidarity and shared strategies.
- Create spaces for communities to collectively advocate and negotiate with external actors.
- Invest in long-term support for network building.

7. Rethink funding mechanisms

Shifts in funding structures are essential for moving forward with locally-led sustainable development.

- Invest in long-term flexible funding
- Simplify access to resources for local actors
- Align funding with community priorities

FPIC GLA 2.0 Program in Indudur Village

Introduction

For the Green Livelihoods Alliance (GLA), locally-led sustainable development is more than a principle, it is the basis for real and lasting change. Shifting the decision-making power in conservation efforts from distant actors to those with ancestral, cultural, material and/or spiritual ties to the land in question seems to be a promising way forward. Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities[1] are often in the frontline of protecting landscapes from external threats such as mining, logging and infrastructure development. They know best how to care for and defend the land, often based on generations of knowledge accumulation. The shift toward rights-based, community-driven initiatives is supported by mounting evidence that locally-led efforts yield better social and ecological outcomes than those that are externally controlled (Dawson et al., 2021).

In 2024 and 2025, GLA partners were invited to come together to reflect on what 'locally-led' means in practice: who makes decisions, whose knowledge is valued and what conditions allow communities to lead. This created a unique opportunity for civil society organisations (CSOs) from eleven countries to exchange and share their experiences. These CSOs work on the sustainable and inclusive governance of tropical forest landscapes to mitigate and adapt to climate change, fulfil human rights and safeguard local livelihoods.

Capturing these insights now feels important. Donors and international actors have been engaging with the idea of 'shifting the power' for some years now, often through consultation at different levels. It remains crucial however to keep grounding these discussions in the lived experiences of CSOs and IP&LCs, especially since the locally-led approach is no silver bullet - it can be complicated and is highly dependent on the context of the situation.

This document adds those perspectives - offering inspiration for peers and a reminder to funders and policymakers of what locally-led development really requires.

Its aim is to serve as:

- *Inspiration:* Provide CSOs with ideas and examples to share with their staff and partners, helping them strengthen locally-led approaches in practice.
- *Advocacy tool:* Equip CSOs to communicate persuasively with donors, INGOs and governmental actors about what locally-led approaches entail, why they matter and how they can be supported.
- *Calls to action:* Challenge all readers to reflect critically on what genuine locally-led development requires, and to take steps that move beyond rhetoric into practice.

Defining locally-led

Locally-led initiatives aim to shift power, agency and ownership of initiatives to local actors and communities. With the term locally-led sustainable development, we mean to include the principles behind terms such as locally-led adaptation (LLA), locally-led conservation and locally-led livelihood improvement. The main concept is that the initiatives are defined, prioritised, designed, monitored, and evaluated by local communities themselves, enabling a shift in power to local stakeholders, resulting in more effective interventions (Rahman et al. (2023). For each project, it is essential to determine, in collaboration with the involved actors, what 'locally-led' specifically means in that context, as well as what is considered 'local'.

[1] While we use the term Indigenous Peaples and Local Communities (IP&LCs), it is important to note that each of these groups have different histories, place-relationships, challenges and interests. Dr. Albert K. Barume, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, states: *'Indigenous Peoples are those who endured historic injustices—land dispossession, forced assimilation, and systemic discrimination—that continue to impact generations today.'* (Barume, 2025).

Key characteristics of LLSD identified during the sessions include:

- The initiative originates from locally-felt needs
- The design of the intervention comes from the community itself
- The project remains locally-led throughout the whole project cycle by facilitating local decision making
- The engagement of local authorities
- Strengthening local leadership
- Inclusiveness, particularly the involvement of women and youth is prioritised
- The initiative is rooted in traditional knowledge and practices.

Short note on methodology[2]

The Learning Trajectory, a collaboration between GLA partners, combined online and in-person sessions to explore the concept locally-led sustainable development. Initial online meetings in April and August 2024 defined the concept, followed by in-person workshops in six countries (Bolivia, Ghana, DRC, Indonesia, Philippines, and Colombia) where CSOs shared experiences, challenges, and opportunities. These discussions revealed six recurring themes, which were deepened in final online sessions in December 2024 and March 2025, see figure 1: *Advocacy for IP&LV rights, Inclusiveness, Interface environmental protection and sustainable livelihoods, Network building, Conflicts with extractive industries & Intercultural communication.*

Insights

During these sessions, stories were shared by those who work shoulder to shoulder with communities to strengthen rights, protect forests and sustain livelihoods. These stories did not arrive as conclusions, but as invitations.

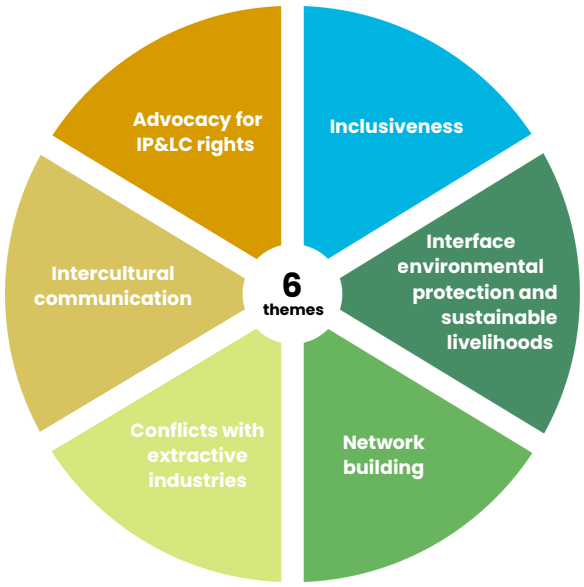


figure 1: themes discussed in online sessions

They asked others to reflect, to listen, to consider what it truly means to support initiatives that grow from the soil of communities, rather than from external agendas. From these stories, shared insights have been gathered. This document distills those insights, and is thus co-produced by CSO partners and by Tropenbos International and IUCN NL to reflect the collective perspectives of participating organizations on locally-led sustainable development.

The presented insights are not exhaustive or definite, they are the beginnings of conversations. Conversations that need to take place now, between all those involved, to ensure the good intentions become more than just that. That they contribute to a meaningful long-lasting effect. All this to enable true local decision-making. The people who are rooted in the area - with their histories, practices, and aspirations - are best positioned to know what is needed. And they are best placed to decide which tools and offered solutions from outside are welcome, and which are not.

> ‘Genuinely respect and trust the decisions of the IP&LCs, they know what is best for them, based on their own aspirations’.
>
> **CSO from the Philippines**

> ‘When something is done for me without me, it is against me’.
>
> **CSO from DRC**

[2] See Annex I for further details.

Seven Key Insights

1. Value local knowledge and wisdom

Organisations working with Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IP&LCs) from around the world consistently identified the inclusion of local knowledge as a defining feature of locally-led approaches. Indigenous peoples, rooted in a place for generations, often possess deep ecological knowledge and cultural insight. They understand the land intimately - what thrives, what fails, and how to coexist with non-human species. Practices have been adapted over the years to ensure alignment of their livelihoods with the non-human species inhabiting the areas. Even in areas where communities' ties to the land do not run back generations, their lived experience equips them with a nuanced understanding of local challenges and opportunities. This is not to suggest that Indigenous peoples or local communities will invariably act in perfect harmony with nature or that unsustainable practices will never occur. Rather, it emphasizes that their local knowledge and lived experience should play a central role in shaping the project. They know what works in their context, and what doesn't, and why (not). This grounded perspective is invaluable.

> 'Initiatives arising from the community, which use local natural resources and capitalize on local knowledge and wisdom, lead to success.'
>
> **CSO from DRC**

Enhanced success

Indonesian organisations emphasised the importance of grounding conservation efforts in local priorities, cultural traditions, and rights, to ensure both ecological and social sustainability. For example Walhi states: *'A key principle is to prioritize local knowledge of ecosystems and long-established practices. When sustainable development leverages this local wisdom, the initiative tends to be more in line with the local environment and have a more sustainable impact'.* From the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), stakeholders stressed the importance of valorizing traditional knowledge and practices, as well as reinforcing local values. Similarly, in Bolivia, organisations called for a renewed recognition of traditional wisdom, arguing that it's inclusion is essential to building solutions that last.

> 'Adaptation must be based on local knowledge and experience. Local communities have a deep understanding of their environment and the challenges they face'.
>
> **Sawit Watch, Indonesia**

Embracing diverse knowledge systems

So how can organisations working with IP&LCs truly respect the traditional knowledge, holistic approaches, customs, practices, values and world views of IP&LCs and include these in the initiatives?

It starts with respecting the different shapes and forms in which knowledge can come. Sometimes this means leaving behind ideas of indicators, pre-conceptions and methodologies, and adapting towards the concepts of the IP&LCs in question.

> 'Myths and methaphors also are a way of transmitting intergenerational knowledge on the landscape and its features such as names, explains the deep connection IP have to the landscape, a demonstration of the rootedness of the community and passing on of stories to younger generations, it does help to use/include that in the evidence'.
>
> **NTFP-EP Asia**

Recommendations

- Recognise IP&LCs as the true experts; adapt your methods to learn from them.
- Respect the diverse forms in which knowledge is expressed.
- Integrate Indigenous and local knowledge into project design, indicators, and reporting.

2. Prioritise basic needs and secure livelihoods

Imagine this: The land that has cared for your ancestors, the soil that remembers their footsteps, the forest that once sang with birdsong and bore fruit in season is now torn open, its heart scooped out by machines that do not know how to listen. Where once there were trees offering shade, there is now a wound in the earth, raw and gaping. The forest has vanished. The animals no longer pass through. The people are hungry.

This is not a metaphor. This is the lived reality of Indigenous communities whose ancestral lands were devoured by open-pit mining - as shared by CSOs from the Philippines and DRC. The forest, once a generous relative, has been replaced by absence. And in that absence, livelihoods vanish - food, medicine, income, identity.

Honour needs

What does a community in this situation need? A lecture on sustainable practices from an organisation from abroad? Or meals to ease hunger? A foundational aspect of locally-led initiatives is that they are aligned with livelihood needs. They are answers to questions asked by the community itself: *What do we need now? What do we long for?* In some cases this means that before sustainability can be spoken of, the basics must be honoured: food on the plate, and being able to care for one's family. When these are covered, then there might be time and space for setting up sustainable livelihoods. *For example, when the pandemic led to food shortage amongst Indigenous peoples in Mindanao, the Samdhana institute adapted their projects to include agriculture.*

Increased self-confidence

During the sessions another promising aspect of securing livelihoods was brought forward; its significance for women and youth. Once women have stable livelihoods - whether through access to land, by running a business, or with financial support - they tend to have more decision-making power, more time, and a stronger interest to join sustainable development efforts.

CSOs from the Philippines found that when women actively engage in securing their livelihoods, it often leads to increased self-confidence which can enable them to take on leadership roles in local initiatives.

> 'In the case of an Indigenous community, simply because their Indigenous land was already so much destroyed and they were nearing famine-level crisis. They need food and income now, they are not open to NTFP, forest-based livelihoods'.
>
> **ATM, Philippines**

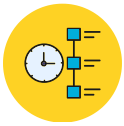
Recommendations

- Prioritise urgent needs like food, shelter, and safety while introducing sustainability frameworks.
- Support initiatives that emerge from within the community, especially for marginalised groups.
- Leave room for immediate needs and urgencies.

Photo: Women arranging nursery bags © A Rocha Ghana

3. Advance inclusion through practice

Between those working for environmental organisations and communities, there might be differences in practices. What might be a normal way of working for CSO staff might be strange to an Indigenous elder, and the other way around. In setting up locally led initiatives, the organisations participating in the learning sessions emphasised staff should:



follow the local rhythm and local time lines

show respect and humility, listen, and have open conversations

build long-standing relationships of trust

facilitate the initiatives in local languages

> 'You have to be very flexible when working with IP&LCs, because for example their notion of time may differ from Western timelines. We need to understand the context the people come from, and be respectful. It is also important to decolonise our vocabulary, and ensure that we adapt our methods and processes, together with the people to ensure that these are meaningful and relevant to them.'
>
> **FCSD and Tropenbos Colombia**

Centering all voices

Inclusivity of all groups should be a priority. In one of the sessions, IDEAS (Philippines) stated *'locally-led should not be misconstrued as being led by dominant local personalities, but it should ensure voices of majority (at least) are considered in decision making.'* Hereby, participation of marginalized peoples should be guaranteed too. Who is marginalized might be different in every case, but think of women, youth, very poor people, and also invisible spirits (e.g. water, air, plants).

Ensuring the meaningful participation of marginalized groups, such as women and youth, requires far more than simply extending an invitation. It demands a deeper understanding of their lived realities, and a willingness to adapt. For staff, this means moving beyond standard procedures and embracing flexibility in both design and delivery.

Practical measures

Some CSOs have found that organizing separate meetings for women and youth can create safer, more open spaces where voices are not overshadowed. In other cases, practical barriers must be addressed: if women are primary caregivers, asking them to leave their children behind to attend a meeting may be unrealistic. A simple yet powerful adjustment is to welcome them to bring their children along and facilitate child care. Safety is another concern - especially in remote or conflict-affected areas. In Colombia, one CSO recognised this and secured funding to ensure safe and comfortable travel for women who faced a three-day journey just to attend. The message is clear: if you want women to participate, you must be willing to change your ways.

Beyond logistics, cultural sensitivity is essential. FCSD and Tropenbos Colombia explained: *'The women taught us about methodological moments that cannot be skipped for them. To ensure harmonization, a good atmosphere, the Indigenous women begin the meeting with dance and music. That's not easy, because there's no time set aside for that, and it's not the standard way, but it's very powerful and effective. … It is important that these initiatives use languages closer to women and spaces where they feel more comfortable expressing themselves.'*

> 'Respect is super important, not coming with pre-conceptions, methodologies, and ways of thinking, such as the gender approach.'.
>
> **FCSD and Tropenbos Colombia**

Representation builds trust

CSOs from Indonesia and the Philipines highlight that trust grows when NGO staff originate from the communities they serve. Local staff bring with them not just knowledge, but shared experience. They understand the customs, the rhythms, the unspoken codes. When CSO staff themselves are women and youth, this can build trust and encourage other women and youth to participate.

Trusting local ways

And in some cases, participation might not look exactly as imagined from an outsider perspective. In the Philippines, one CSO described the delicate balance of locally-led and inclusive approaches: *"We have to trust the community that in their way women and youth do participate in decision making. We do also influence the traditional leaders, to be more open, and to know that women and youth also know things."*

Investing extra time and resources into thoughtful design and methodology isn't a luxury - it's a necessity. Without it, entire projects risk collapsing once the funding ends. But when done right, these efforts pay off - not just in outcomes, but in dignity, ownership, and lasting change.

Recommendations

- Adapt to the lived experience of marginalised groups
- Recognise that participation and inclusivity may differ from mainstream practices.
- Allow for an ample time frame needed for a thorough process.

Photo: women making nut oil in Indonesia © Stephanie Broekarts/IUCN NL

4. Context matters: no one-size-fits-all

The strength of locally-led approaches lies in the adaptation to the local context. When an initiative is developed from the local place, it can be perfectly fitted to that specific place. Hereby we don't only mean a national or provincial level: even two neighbouring villages may shape different initiatives. What works in one place may not take root in another. Hereby it is key to recognise that contexts change over time and that flexibility and adaptability are needed.

Diversity within IP and LCs

The intricate diversity among IP&LCs must be recognised. There is a great difference amongst Indigenous peoples and other local communities. Dr Albert K. Barume, Special Rapportteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples states *'Indigenous Peoples are those who endured historic injustices - land dispossession, forced assimilation, and systemic discrimination which led to loss of their ancestral lands and distinct culture - that continue to impact generations today.'* (Barume, 2025). Their specific rights are outlined in the United Nations Declarations on Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). They are often based in an area for hundreds of years, leading to a deep connection to the land and nature. These historic conditions for Indigenous Peoples, and how these shaped the specific circumstances need to be considered. The differences between Indigenous peoples and for example peasant communities can be illustrated by an initiative in southern Colombia's Solano landscape, where Indigenous and peasant communities live side by side, but with very different relationships to the land. For Indigenous families, the forest is home and the foundation of their livelihoods. In contrast, peasant settlers who arrived several decades ago saw the forest as land to be cleared for cattle pastures, sometimes encroaching on Indigenous territories and fuelling tensions. The CSO facilitated intercultural dialogues that helped to build trust, agree on territorial boundaries, and establish shared rules for resource use.

Within and between Indigenous groups there is a wide diversity. For example, ATM highlights that *'in the Philippines all the IPs are very different, with different livelihoods. Some are very strong and aware, others are impoverished. They all have different perspectives on livelihoods'*.

> 'It is important to have people who facilitate spaces like this who are flexible, who are willing to dialogue, to understand different contexts, languages.'
>
> **FCSD and Tropenbos Colombia**

Changing contexts

Context is not static, so initiatives need to be adapted not only to place but also to time. Just as rivers shift course and forests regenerate, the conditions under which communities live are constantly changing. Extractive industries encroach. Policies and customary laws evolve. The costs of living rise, and sometimes, traditional ways of sustaining life no longer stretch far enough. Climate change, population growth and changing consumption patterns can further exacerbate challenges. With changing contexts, the original locally-led initiatives might no longer all be enough to make a living, because of extraction industries and the need for money. Locally-led efforts must respond to these changes. They must be flexible - not fixed blueprints, but living frameworks that can grow and adapt. This means that communities must retain the power to reshape, renew, or retire their own approaches.

> 'Adaptation processes must be flexible and responsive to changing conditions.'
>
> **Sawit Watch, Indonesia**

Recommendations

- Support IP&LCs in creating their own methodologies, tools, processes, and indicators that reflect their own unique context and values.
- Treat locally-led initiatives as living systems that can evolve with time, shifting conditions, and community needs.

5. CSOs can act as bridges

Across continents, from the tundra to the tropics, Indigenous and local communities stand as guardians of these places, keepers of stories, stewards of soil and spirit. Yet the hum of machines grows louder. Extractive industries - mining, drilling, logging - arrive with maps and contracts, seeing only resources where others see relatives. They come with promises, but often leave behind scars.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) declares that communities must be asked - freely, beforehand, and with full understanding- if they agree, before their lands are touched (*Free, Prior, and Informed Consent - FPIC*). An important concept, with the potential to grow justice. But in practice, layers of deception obstruct the process: consent is coerced or reduced to 'information provision', signatures gathered through intimidation, bribery, or worse. In what ways can CSOs support IP&LCs in these conflicts?

According to the sessions, to support IP&LCs in FPIC processes with a locally-led approach CSOs can:

Increase awareness of rights and provide legal support

Provide accurate information and raise awareness about the long-term risks of extractive plans

Support community decision processes, whether to resist the entry of extractive companies or to avoid harmful conflicts and negotiate a better deal in accepting or working with an extractive industry

CSOs filling the gaps in FPIC process

In theory, governmental actors have the formal responsibility to ensure communities are informed about their rights, and about the policies that can work in their favour. And companies are required to provide detailed information on what they plan to execute on the lands, and on what will be the short and long term costs and benefits. But truth can be inconvenient when profit is at stake. And too often information is withheld from communities. This is where civil society steps in to fill the gaps. CSOs highlighted in the sessions how they translate legal jargon, share critical information, and help communities understand and claim their rights.

> 'People don't know they have the right to demand compensation, nor that they have the right to participate or be consulted.'

CSOs aim to provide communities with the complete information, including the long-term environmental and social impacts. To illustrate, one CSO[3] shared that they support communities to identify and document how their livelihoods will be affected by mining, enabling them to assess whether promised benefits justified the losses. Hereby, a university study was conducted that compared mining with ginger and citrus farming, finding equal returns only in the first five years, after which the benefits from farming will outweigh the benefits from mining. CSOs also explained the benefit of organising exchange visits to other communities that already experienced the extractivist activities. When communities are informed, when they know their rights and the full truth of what (extractive) initiatives are to come, they can choose wisely.

[3] Due to security concerns, the insights and examples in this section will not be linked to a specific CSO or country.

Consequently, community decision-making processes must be actively supported. Civil society organizations emphasised during the sessions that hereby it is crucial to explore negotiation strategies aimed at securing better outcomes and limiting harm, rather than limiting the debate solely to pro- or anti-mining or other extractive activities. CSOs highlighted that these processes can be very complicated; arriving at a consensus to resist or negotiate may take several years. Long-term investment into spaces for dialogue is needed.

> ‘We must strengthen Indigenous peoples' capacities and knowledge of their rights. Without support from private institutions or NGOs, Indigenous communities are left defenseless, subjected to pressure, threats, and extortion. We are working with Indigenous women, strengthening their capacity to generate valuable and relevant information about these threats in their territories. This will enable them to share this information with local authorities so they can make better decisions.’

Security

But truth-telling may be dangerous. Holding the government accountable for their policies and laws, and holding extractive industries to their promises, can come with great risks. CSOs who support communities in standing up for their rights often find themselves standing against a two-headed monster - industry and government. In many places like the Philippines, Colombia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, this resistance has come at great cost. Lives threatened. Offices raided. Voices silenced. Still, they persist. Confronting extractive industries can lead to risks for communities too. So it must be done with care. Because working with communities means taking responsibility for their safety.

> ‘Some people are afraid that they will die protecting their territory. It is very challenging for them to oppose to extractive industries.’

Walk for water Ghana © A Rocha Ghana

Build bridges to governmental actors

Government interests often align with those of extractive industries, creating a powerful alliance that can sideline communities. Yet not all government bodies have the same interests. Especially at the local level, officials may be more attuned to community needs. In these spaces, CSOs can play a vital role as conveners, building bridges between affected communities and external actors who might offer support.

To begin this process, CSOs conduct political mapping: identifying key decision-makers, influencers, and leaders, both within government and within the communities themselves. This helps to select the target for effective advocacy and facilitates meaningful dialogue between IPs and government representatives. By linking community concerns to existing policies and documenting every step, CSOs contribute to the accountability of governments regarding their commitments. Hereby, CSOs emphasised in the sessions, it is key to manage the expectations of the community, and ensure it is emphasised that discussion with governments does not guarantee positive outcomes.

But this work too is not without challenges. Many governments maintain racist, often dismissive perspectives toward Indigenous rights and local knowledge. CSOs must navigate these biases while acting as intermediaries between traditional, place-based knowledge and the shifting dynamics of state and corporate agendas, while also continuing to check their own biases.

> ‘Another challenge is the fixed perspective of governments against Indigenous people. Some of them dismiss Indigenous people’s rights. Right now we are facing a challenge from the government who criminalise slash&burn farming which is not a new issue but increasingly becoming relevant. Even some NGOs are against this type of agriculture and they would like to ban it which is anti Indigenous.’

To convince governments and shift entrenched narratives, CSOs must build a strong foundation of case studies that combine scientific data with local knowledge. Only then can they challenge extractive agendas and advocate for a future shaped by the communities themselves. In the sessions, one insight became clear; in order to do this work CSOs must be deeply rooted in both the communities they serve and the policy landscapes they navigate. Only then can they support truly informed, locally-led decisions.

Recommendations

- Increase awareness on rights, and link to international law.
- Support community-decision making, ensuring space and time for dialogue.
- Ensure safety and security for both CSO staff and communities.
- Promote fair and transparent consultation processes.
- Safeguard land and cultural rights in alignment with legal frameworks (e.g. UNDRIP).

CFM groups reap forest benefits © Jonah Bursatsa

6. Strengthen collective voice

A lone tree facing a storm may bend or break, but a forest stands resilient, each trunk shielding the other, roots intertwined beneath the soil. The same holds true for communities confronting the pressures of extractive industries and external decision-makers. In networks, there is power. How can civil society organisations support the strengthening of networks, to amplify the voice of, and solidarity between communities?

Local leadership

When community leaders or women's groups take the lead in raising awareness about the negative impacts of extractive projects - or the opportunities for negotiation - their message resonates more deeply. They are trusted, because they are rooted in the lived realities of their people. Their credibility allows them to engage neighboring villages in meaningful consultations, building a collective voice that is far more powerful than isolated resistance. CSOs highlight the essential role of emerging women leaders in networking with other communities, and that there should be a conscious effort to include the youth to facilitate the building of networks across generations.

Facilitate exchanges

Exchange visits are a tangible way to facilitate learning and solidarity, for example by asking one community to teach a certain skill to another. Social media and online platforms allow community voices to find each other and collectively travel further, influencing public opinion and policy at regional, national, and even global levels.

> 'We facilitate dialogue, because we believe if we empower these communities they can be part of something bigger. When we do these sessions we also consider the language and we always pair with local leaders. I work with young people, and I always invite people from the community, as well as experts. This is essential, facilitating these sessions. We try to become connected with each other and create networks that can be kept in the future.'
>
> **ATM, Philipines**

Invest time in dialogue

Supporting these networks, however, requires more than just connection - it demands care, patience, and a deep understanding of internal dynamics. Communities are not homogeneous; they contain diverse interests, histories, and aspirations. CSOs can help create safe spaces for these diverse voices to converge and co-create a common agenda. They must invest time in facilitating dialogue, helping people articulate what they want, what they stand for, and how they wish to engage with extractive industries and government authorities. They can play a part in encouraging local leadership, empowering youth and elders alike to ensure continuity and resilience.

Recommendations

- Support trusted local leaders -especially women and youth- to build (intergenerational) networks.
- Facilitate inter-community exchanges and dialogues that deepen solidarity and shared strategies.
- Create spaces for communities to collectively advocate and negotiate with external actors.
- Invest in long-term support for network building.

> 'We organise exchange visits, where communities share skills and experiences, we find this helps in building relationships'.
>
> **Ecological Trends Alliance (ETA), Uganda**

7. Rethink funding mechanisms

A recurring challenge brought up in the sessions is the misalignment between financial resources and community priorities. While there is growing recognition of the value of grassroots leadership, funding mechanisms often remain rigid, short-term, and disconnected from the realities on the ground. Real transformation requires time - time to build trust, navigate complex social dynamics, and adapt to evolving needs. Yet, most funding is limited to brief project cycles of a couple years which rarely allow for the depth and sustainability needed to achieve lasting impact. Long-term, flexible, and trust-based financing is essential to support locally-driven change.

Equally pressing is the question of access: how can substantial funds be channeled directly to local actors? Too often, money is filtered through layers of intermediaries, leaving grassroots organizations under-resourced and overburdened by administrative requirements. Many of these groups possess deep contextual knowledge and proven effectiveness, yet struggle to meet donor criteria. To truly empower local leadership, funding systems must be restructured to prioritize simplicity, equity, and direct access. This shift is not just about improving outcomes - it's about redistributing power and enabling communities to lead their own futures.

> 'Financing and other support must go directly to local communities. This will enable them to design and implement their own solutions.'
>
> **CSO from Indonesia**

Recommendations

- Invest in long-term flexible funding
- Simplify access to resources for local actors
- Align funding with community priorities

Bolivia © Sander van Andel/IUCN NL

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Annex I. Content Learning Trajectory

1. Introduction to locally led approaches (April 25th 2024)

- Presentation WARSI, on integrating conservation interests with the fulfillment of IP&LC rights and needs
- Q. Which are the characteristics that make the WARSI case locally led you think?
- Q. Do you have examples of locally led approaches from your own projects/interventions?

2. Learning Trajectory Locally Led Sustainable Development (August 29, 2024)

- Case presented by NTFP-EP, Warsi, CEPED, ETA
- Q. What makes this example locally led according to you?
- Q. What makes this example NOT locally led, according to you?

3. In country sessions facilitated in Philippines, Ghana, Indonesia, Bolivia, DRC and Colombia (September-December, 2024)

1. What, according to you, makes a sustainable development initiative 'locally led'?
2. Which are the specific LLSD initiatives which help to achieve sustainable livelihoods of IP&LCs and protection of forests?
3. What do you do to ensure initiatives are locally led?
4. Learning across countries
    a. What could inspire GLA partners in other countries about your locally led sustainable development initiative?
    b. What do you think GLA partners in other countries can learn from your way of ensuring initiatives are locally-led?
    c. What would you like to learn from other countries, for example to solve the challenges you face?
5. Insights of the session: key take-aways; anything important, new, you learnt or understood?

Both sessions encouraged reflection and mutual learning:

- What works? Why?
- What does not work? Why not?
- Share bottle-necks / challenges

Answers have been analysed, key insights have been extracted, based on these findings 6 key themes have been chosen for further discussion in session 4 and 5.

4. LT LLSD (December 12, 2024)

- **Intercultural communication**: How do you respect the traditional knowledge, holistic approaches, customs, practices, values and cosmo visions / world views of IP&LCs and include these in the initiatives?
- **Inclusiveness, participation:** What concretely do you do to make sure that disadvantaged groups, such as women and youth, are actively and meaningfully involved in decision-making in all phases of LLSD initiatives?
- **Interface environmental protection and sustainable livelihoods:** How do you work with IP&LCs to develop initiatives that both protect the environment and support their sustainable livelihoods?

5. LT LLSD (March 2025)

- How do you support IP&LCs **in conflicts caused by extractive industries**?
    - a. Between IP&LCs and extractive industries?
    - b. Between people in communities?
- Why and how do you facilitate the building and strengthening of **networks** of IP&LCs?
- How do you facilitate a **dialogue between IP&LCs and (local) government** concerning sustainable livelihoods and forest conservation?

Contribution of authors

- **Anita van der Laan** (Tropenbos International) led the learning trajectory, coordinating and overseeing the overall process as well as the content. She developed the guidelines for the in-country workshops; facilitated two of the six country workshops; compiled the collected data for analysis; coordinated the cross-country analysis; organised the working sessions with the learning trajectory team to analyse, reflect and generate insights; led the design and facilitation of the three Exchange and Learning Space sessions dedicated to this topic; maintained communication with the advisory ring for their feedback; and contributed to drafting this report.
- **Femke Schouten** (IUCN NL) was the lead author of the report. She was closely involved in the whole process of the Learning Trajectory, including the analysis of findings, generation of insights, and deciding on the framework for the report.
- **Evelien van den Broek** (IUCN NL) was one of the initiators of the Learning Trajectory, and played a key role in the design of the process as well as in the analysis of the findings and the generation of insights. She also supported the preparation of this document.
- **André Brasser** (Tropenbos International) was also one of the initiators of the Learning Trajectory. He contributed throughout the entire trajectory, providing strategic guidance and supporting the overall learning process.