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WORKSHOP REPORT

Advancing Community Rights in Area-based Conservation



CONTEXT

The Convention on Biological Diversity Conference of the Parties (COP15) held in late 2022 marked the adoption of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and its main area-based conservation target, which calls for conservation of at least 30 percent of terrestrial, inland water, and coastal and marine areas by 2030 (commonly referred to as 30x30). Central to this target and to the Framework in general was the recognition of the significant contributions of Indigenous Peoples and local communities to biodiversity conservation.

The adoption of the GBF has opened new opportunities and risks for implementing its area targets in keeping with community-led and rights-based approaches to conservation (RBAs). With the negotiations now concluded, it is essential to shift attention and action to the implementation and monitoring of RBAs for these area targets, especially at country levels. This also requires building increased mutual understanding and collaboration across key constituencies and organizations that can support rights-based conservation.

In this context, Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), Campaign for Nature (C4N), the ICCA Consortium, and the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities (GATC) organized a one-day workshop during the New York Climate Week, aiming to mobilize **collaboration and action** on RBAs for the implementation and monitoring of 30x30 targets.

OBJECTIVES

- Provide a space for Indigenous and local community rightsholder organizations from different regions to share their visions and priorities for rights-based conservation.
- Connect rightsholder organizations with civil society, environmental, and donor organizations working on 30x30 targets to build common understandings and agendas on rights-based and community-led approaches.
- Develop an initial strategy and action plan for rights-based implementation and monitoring of conservation area targets.
- Explore interests and opportunities for ongoing coordination and collaboration.

Over 25 participants joined the workshop, consisting of leaders from Indigenous and community organizations, NGO, civil society organizations, and donors with programs focused on rights-based approaches to conservation.

The Climate Week theme of this year, “We Can. We Will,” which focused on the urgent need to scale up action, looking to the future and exploring new opportunities collectively, served as the workshop’s backdrop. Along these lines, participants reflected on what they can and will do to ensure that the rights and priorities of Indigenous Peoples and local communities are at the center of global efforts on area-based conservation.

OPENING SESSION

RRI opened the workshop with a warm welcome to all participants, thanking the co-organizers and introducing the workshop’s key themes.

Cover Photo: New York Climate Week, September 17-21, 2023. Photo by Priscila Tapajowara from the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities GATC.

In the opening session, speakers emphasized that while the GBF includes the strongest recognition of Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' rights in the Convention on Biodiversity to date, persistent structural barriers to rights-based and community-led approaches to conservation remain at country levels. This situation requires concerted efforts to overcome these barriers and ensure that the rights and leadership of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, including women within these groups, are recognized and supported – drawing on their own values, knowledge, and governance systems to maintain Earth's natural diversity.

Rights-based and community-led conservation also requires increased financing to scale up the formal recognition of communities' land rights, conservation, and sustainable management of their territories – which is the goal of the [Community Land Rights and Conservation Finance Initiative](#) (CLARIFI), a new international funding mechanism spearheaded by RRI and C4N.

A round of participant introductions and an overview of the agenda and goals for the day completed the opening session.

RIGHTSHOLDER-LED AGENDAS

In the first discussion, a panel of speakers shared rightsholder-led visions and agendas for advancing rights in area-based conservation. The aims of this discussion were to:

- Inform participants on key challenges, opportunities, and priorities for advancing rights-based conservation in different regions.
- Develop a shared understanding of rightsholder agendas and priorities.
- Identify key common elements across regions in rights-based conservation.

In Asia, a key challenge has been the limited implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Sixteen years after its adoption, only five countries in Asia have officially recognized and are using the term *Indigenous Peoples*. There is also an increasing drift towards authoritarianism and a dominant extractive mindset which disregards the worldviews of Indigenous Peoples and local communities and sees environmental safeguards and human rights as impediments to economic interests. These groups remain outside the decision-making process for the declaration and governance of protected areas, and free, prior and informed consent is generally unimplemented.

The unprecedented references to the rights and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples in the GBF provide a unique opportunity to prioritize a rights-based approach to all biodiversity actions in Asia. The growth and proliferation of Indigenous Peoples' networks in Asia will be the key to leveraging this opportunity.

Current opportunities and priorities in Asia include:

- Promoting the recognition of Indigenous and traditional territories as a “third pathway” to the implementation of Target 3.

- Shifting the role of Indigenous Peoples' networks from the status quo of policy taking, to policy making. This includes shaping National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs) in a consultative process between policymakers and Indigenous Peoples.
- Building government decision-makers' capacity around human rights, UNDRIP, and on how to engage with Indigenous Peoples and respectfully and meaningfully include them in government processes.

To pursue these opportunities, the Asian Indigenous Peoples' Pact (AIPP) has initiated an annual stock-taking on the implementation of the Paris Agreement and the GBF with an emphasis on human rights and the customary land rights of Indigenous Peoples. Starting next year, the national stocktaking will be carried out by Indigenous Peoples' organizations followed by a dialogue with national policymakers that will include building the latter's capacity on rightsholders' issues.

Participants from Indonesia identified as a key challenge the ongoing criminalization of communities in their own territories, many of which have been designated as national parks without their consent. In contrast to this fortress conservation model, which excludes local peoples from participation, Indigenous and local communities' own territorial management and monitoring systems are conserving lands and sacred forests across Indonesia. They noted the following opportunities and priorities in Indonesia:

- Restitution of lands held by companies under concessions, which extend far beyond the areas they are using. These lands are to be returned to communities for the creation of community-led conservation areas.
- Increased investment in the restoration of Indigenous lands degraded by concession activities such as palm oil and mining.
- Promotion of Indigenous-led research, specifically involving Indigenous youth.

In the **Amazon**, Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities face severe challenges due to governmental policies that are often enacted without a comprehension of their context on the ground and who do not deliver on their commitments. Speakers from the region shed light on how the criminalization of environmental rights defenders is an acute threat to the Amazon's communities, as the day they disappear will be the day that the Amazon disappears.

To counter these threats, Indigenous Peoples are taking leadership in the protection of their territories through initiatives such as the one led by the Sacred Headwater Alliance. This is a movement developed by Indigenous Peoples and local communities in Peru and Ecuador who share the bioregion and a common vision of protecting life, territories, and ecological integrity. Their efforts to ensure the safety of their communities during the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates powerfully how Indigenous knowledge and governance can protect local communities and their environment.

In the **Congo Basin**, the regional organization REPALEAC has been using the Indigenous and community conserved areas (ICCA) approach in eight countries to secure support for community conservation. In the Republic of Congo, for example, ICCAs were identified in the Southern region and are in the process of being extended, including establishing transboundary ICCAs with Cameroon. To support this work, REPALEAC is in the process of strengthening its capacities and finding new funds, coordinating action and ideas between governments and communities.

Common priorities for advancing rights in area-based conservation identified by the participants from the Congo Basin include promoting:

- The importance of **securing rights to Indigenous Peoples and local community lands and territories**;
- The need to **reform conservation laws and policies towards rights-based approaches**, with participation of Indigenous Peoples in policy decision-making at all levels;
- The need for **Indigenous governance institutions to be in leadership roles** in conservation of their areas, also ensuring that rights to free, prior and informed consent are respected;
- The challenge and critical need to **reform and build the capacities of governments** to play more supportive roles;
- The urgent issues of **addressing threats to Indigenous and community lands** and **protecting human rights and environmental defenders**; and
- Conservation's connection to livelihoods and sustainable use of natural resources.
- **The importance of including women in all stages of planning and decision-making processes** around biodiversity conservation, building on the recommendations from the First Subregional Forum of Indigenous and Local Community Women in Central Africa and the Congo Basin.

Across these issues, all participants urged a shift from recognition to action, not only acknowledging Indigenous Peoples and local communities' knowledge and management systems, but acting to place them at the center of conservation practices.

RIGHTS-BASED STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

A second panel of speakers presented experiences and strategies for achieving rights-based conservation at the national level. The session's objectives were to:

- Introduce pathways and solutions to achieve the priorities identified by right-holders.
- To increase cross-learning on promising approaches to rights-based conservation.

Speakers highlighted the following key pathways to increase recognition and support for rights-based and community-led conservation:

- **Better documentation of community-led conservation processes:** This is needed to counter the current invisibility of community practices in various regions and demonstrate that these lands are indeed being conserved by local peoples.
- **Mapping investment:** Expand the mapping of Indigenous and local community lands as a basis for securing recognition of community-conserved areas.
- **Use community evidence to inform policy:** Collect information that shows the contributions of community-led conservation initiatives to achieving the 30x30 goals, and advocate for the modification of policies and NBSAPs that ignore these communities' role in conservation.

- **Advocate for the integration of Indigenous Peoples’ and local communities rights in conservation policy** at the national level, as in the case of Indonesia.
- **Develop specific policies to recognize Indigenous and community conserved areas**, drawing on the experience of the national policy on ICCAs in the Philippines. Even though the Philippines recognizes Ancestral lands, the ICCA designation is being pursued to provide interim protection to communities during the long titling process and to establish “no-go” zones to protect them against manipulation of consent processes.
- **Combat capitalistic approaches to conservation** that decouple communities from their spiritual connection to lands based on the rhetoric that they only gain commercial benefit from their territories.
- **Bring attention to injustices occurring in the name of conservation** to bolster opposition to conservation approaches that are not rights-based or community-led.
- To support strong local governance and genuine partnerships:
 - **Invest in the development of talented and effective local organizations**, including organizations led by Indigenous and local community women, recognizing that this does not mean “building capacity” to fit the needs of external donors and partners. Examples of innovations in leadership development include AMAN’s Next Generation Leadership Program and the MesoAmerican People’s Alliance School for Leadership.
 - **Build genuine collaborations with Indigenous and community organizations**, moving away from the transactional, top-down types of partnerships that have tended to dominate the conservation field. This requires thinking long-term and making long-term investments.
 - **Turn “capacity building” on its head** and ensure that governments, conservation NGOs, and donors also build their capacities on issues like human rights, UNDRIP, and respectful engagement of communities in their decision-making processes.
 - **Build solidarity and increased support** from conservation organizations for the inclusion of strong provisions on Indigenous rights in national conservation laws and policies.
- To enhance government support and accountability for rights-based conservation:
 - **Use the power of experiential learning to increase support and allyship from government officials**. Participants shared a recent experience of a group visit to Kenya bringing together community conservancy members and government officials, which illustrated how putting these actors together outside their comfort zones forced them to understand each other and get a better view of the struggles they each face. This visit led government officials to increase their support for community tenure rights on their return.
 - **Enable communities to monitor what their countries are doing towards 30x30** through participatory and/or parallel reporting.

In general, organizations should learn from and strengthen the “playbook” that has been used to promote Indigenous and local community rights and leadership in relation to climate change – this combines science and building the evidence base with networking/building connections and financing.

The participants also noted that much work has already been done to forge connections between and across Indigenous Peoples and local community movements in the biodiversity space, and in some ways biodiversity discussions are ahead in that global partners are now eager to leverage and further built these connections.

INTERNATIONAL ACTORS AND INITIATIVES

The third session addressed how international initiatives and actors can increase their support for rights-based conservation. Presentations and discussion also reflected on key gaps and changes needed in the global arena to shift conservation action towards rights-based approaches and support for rightsholder priorities.

While international conservation organizations and programs have begun to recognize human rights imperatives and the need for community leadership, more significant shifts to **acknowledge past harm** and start conservation conversations around **trust** are still needed. This requires conservation organizations to reconceptualize practices, including acknowledging mistakes and being more transparent about them. This work is ongoing in the conservation sector; for example, the Conservation Initiative on Human Rights is updating its strategy, and recommendations of a February 2023 WCS meeting on Conservation and Human Rights included calls to:

- Decolonize practices within conservation institutions and government ministries.
- Recognize Indigenous science as a contemporary practice.
- Redress situations of the denial of rights within the conservation sector.

Participants also highlighted the need to find ways to develop a collective voice on rights-based conservation at the national level. Governments have come together to form the **High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People**, an informal government network of 113 countries, which includes among its aims to promote 30x30 through RBAs. Participation in the High Ambition Coalition provides an extra layer of commitment by governments to Target 3, which can provide an important leverage point to promote their adherence to rights-based conservation commitments. The High Ambition Coalition is also helping governments to get the resources they need to better partner with Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

A range of **donor initiatives** are also mobilizing to support the implementation of 30x30. The **Protecting Our Planet Challenge** is the largest-ever private funding commitment to biodiversity conservation. Its partners (including the Bezos Earth Fund and Bloomberg Philanthropies) have committed that 20 percent of funds raised from the challenge will go to Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' initiatives. Some of these funds are already moving through channels like CLARIFI. The new GEF Biodiversity fund has also stated an ambition to have 20 percent of its financing go to Indigenous Peoples and local communities. In this context, workshop participants called for further critical thinking concerning the role of intermediary organizations vis-a-vis Indigenous-led funds and platforms in receiving these funds. They reflected on the importance of administering funds in a way that is more responsive to the needs of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, so that their organizations can access funding directly and more easily.

Other international initiatives are focusing on the development of **Human Rights Frameworks for Conservation**. Participants learned about a new initiative of the UN Environment Program which has begun dialogues to clarify and reach a group of commitments on what the minimum human rights standard should be for conservation organizations and conservation funders. This is not designed to create new standards, but simply to express clearly what the existing standards call for and how they should be applied. Conducting these discussions swiftly and with clear goals is urgent as billions of new dollars of funding for conservation flow in.

ACTION PLANNING

How can we work together?

The participants used this discussion as an opportunity to develop a collective action plan with next steps for this workshop and ways in which organizations working to promote rights in area-based conservation can continue to collaborate.

The discussion's guiding questions were as follows:

1. What are the priorities and next steps for in-country actions to advance rights in area-based conservation?
2. What is needed for different organizations to work together more effectively to advance these changes?
3. How can ongoing coordination and collaboration advance these efforts?
4. What should ongoing dialogues focus on?

The participants shared many ideas on actions that could be the focus of **collaborations going forward** to ensure that the language around Indigenous Peoples and human rights in the Global Biodiversity Framework is implemented at country levels. These include:

- **Documenting local practices:** Conducting more research to capture how Indigenous Peoples and local communities, including women in these communities, are protecting biodiversity in their territories, restoring habitats, and increasing biodiversity. Documenting and showcasing this evidence offers an alternative narrative for conservation and can be used as a good tool to influence governments.
- **Documenting RBA strategies:** Prepare and share experiences, including case studies, of how rightsholder organizations are promoting recognition and support for their conservation actions to inspire learning and action.
- **Assessing and influencing new conservation areas:** Find out which areas are being targeted for expansion of protected or conserved areas as conservation NGOs and governments pursue implementation of Target 3, and ensure that communities are full partners in that process and have agency to determine whether and how they want their conservation areas to be recognized.
- **Policy analysis:** Analyze conservation policies and where they fall short in complying with the Global Biodiversity Framework; then find ways to work together on policy advocacy to change them.
- **NBSAPs:** Support the participation of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in revisions of National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs).
- **Messaging:** Draft a concrete set of talking points that this group can use as key messages when speaking with governments or other actors. Ensure that success stories are elevated to draw in unlikely allies by illustrating the successes of community-based conservation.
- **Spaces for dialogue:** Support the creation of spaces for Indigenous Peoples and local communities to engage with governments and other conservation actors over the long term, as this is lacking in many countries. Even when they want to engage, there is resistance from the government. Communities should feel safe to share information and to engage and contribute at the national level.

- **Financing:** Continue increasing Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' access to finance. Map funders who can channel funds directly to rightsholders' organizations who are ready to use it. Monitor and influence donors' 20 percent financing commitments to ensure they become a reality.
- **Monitoring and accountability:** Collaborate on tracking the implementation of rights-based conservation, such as through annual reports of progress and setbacks, which should be actively communicated to promote accountability.
- **To work more effectively together,** the conservation sector must build its capacity on human rights and respectful engagement with Indigenous Peoples and local communities, recenter conservation efforts on their knowledge and worldviews, and continue to work on regaining trust where it has been lost with communities. It will be critical to move away from our comfort zone among the "converted" and take this workshop's messages and strategies out to wider audiences, particularly governments and the leadership of conservation organizations.

In addition, some participants suggested providing the recommendations of the workshop to regional conservation programs and groups like CIHR, while others noted the value of getting international human rights mechanisms more engaged, such as by leveraging periodic universal human rights reviews.

Finally, participants highlighted the **value of continued coordination and collaboration**, to mobilize joint actions and learn from one another's experience. This should build on existing networks, strengthening what exists and creating space for "coordinating the coordinators."

While there is a strong value proposition for working together on rights-based conservation, it is important to have actionable and measurable goals and ensure accountability to those goals. Building on the results of this workshop will require ensuring that capacity is in place to coordinate and mobilize resources and deliver results, and clarifying who is responsible for what among participating organizations.

Finally, the participants also recommended defining specific annual results to focus joint actions and show what they are achieving. With these steps, we can turn the ideas shared at the workshop into concrete and practical action, seizing this critical moment of opportunity to advance community rights in area-based conservation.

Workshop Organizers

The **Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI)** is a global coalition of more than 150 organizations dedicated to advancing the forest, land, and resource rights of Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, local communities, and the women within these groups. Its members capitalize on each other's strengths, expertise, and geographic reach to achieve solutions more effectively and efficiently. RRI leverages the power of its global coalition to amplify the voices of local peoples and proactively engage governments, multilateral institutions, and private sector actors to adopt institutional and market reforms that support the realization of rights. RRI is coordinated by the Rights and Resources Group, a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC. For more information, visit www.rightsandresources.org.

Campaign for Nature is a global campaign to safeguard at least 30% of the world's lands and oceans by 2030 while simultaneously advancing Indigenous rights and significantly ramping up global finance for conservation. Only by dramatically increasing the capacity of communities, Indigenous Peoples, and nations to conserve lands, waters, and wildlife can we hope to safeguard the natural world upon which we all depend. For more information, visit <https://www.campaignfornature.org/>

The **Global Alliance of Territorial Communities (GATC)** is a political platform of indigenous peoples and local communities united to defend Mother Earth for all humanity's present and future benefit. The GATC guarantees legitimacy and representativeness thanks to democratic processes, ranging from the community to the plurinational level. The alliance represents 35 million people living in forest territories from 24 countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The five organizations that make us are the Indonesian Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN); the Mesoamerican Alliance of Peoples and Forests (AMPB); the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB); the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA); and the Network of Indigenous and Local Populations for the Sustainable Management of Central African Forest Ecosystems (REPALEAC). For more information, visit <https://globalalliance.me/>

The **ICCA Consortium** is an international association dedicated to promoting the appropriate recognition of and support to ICCAs (territories and areas conserved by Indigenous Peoples and local communities) in the regional, national, and global arena. The Association was established to promote the appropriate recognition of, and support to, Indigenous Peoples' and community conserved territories and areas (ICCAs—territories of life) at local, national, and international levels. This purpose is set in the context of the broader vision of conserving biodiversity and ecological functions, nurturing the sustainable livelihoods and wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and implementing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including self-determination and the full respect of their cultural diversity and collective and individual rights and responsibilities. For more information, visit <https://www.iccaconsortium.org/>