LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE COLLABORATION AND EXCHANGE OF EXPERIENCES AMONG IAT ORGANIZATIONS

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Content

Presentation

This document aims to collect and share the exchange and communication practices between indigenous, Afro-descendant, traditional and community-based organizations (IAT) found and used during the project: "Recognizing our practices and knowledge from different perspectives, interests and ways of learning" in the framework of its objectives, initial strategy, and adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The general objective of the project was: "To contribute to the strengthening of their organizations, through a process of communication, dialogue, exchanges and meetings between the organizations themselves, related non-governmental organizations and the Ford Foundation within the framework of the BUILD program".

Two international face-to-face meetings were scheduled. The first in Mexico City, Mexico and the second in Bogota, Colombia. It was also foreseen that before and after these, the consulting team would facilitate the establishment of a semi-permanent communication platform between the IAT organizations. Challenges such as communication, bridging huge distances, ensuring smooth dialogues between peoples speaking different languages and connecting with organizations in the Americas, Africa and Asia were considered from the beginning.

The COVID-19 pandemic, recognized by the World Health Organization as such in March 2020, forced to transform and adapt the almost completely face-to-face communication modality by virtual communication. The IAT communities were under great stress due to the pandemic and the adverse or repressive measures taken against the communities by the States in the context of the pandemic. Therefore, it was decided to establish a pause in the original project agenda, preventing further pressure and workload on IAT organizations.

The consultations and exchanges facilitated by the CCARC consulting team within the framework of the project was a process of experiences sharing, ancestral knowledge recognition and construction of perspectives towards new horizons. The COVID-19 pandemic added problems but helped reveal the capacities and needs of the IAT peoples and organizations. The following is a summary of the main experiences in the shared agenda developed by IAT organizations involved.

Addressing race, ethnicity, age, social class, and disability in the organizations.

Despite the different characteristics of the IAT organizations, there were no discrepancies or attempts to weight one situation over another throughout the project. This is understandable given the maturity and experience of the participating organizations, as well as the similarity and coincidence of the strategies and tactics used by the respective state structures and local power groups, vis-à-vis the IAT peoples and organizations.

The project sought to contribute to this collective maturity without sacrificing the specificities of the participating organizations. For this reason, in agreement with the participants, the project promoted two major convenings, which constituted spaces for discussion to address common situations and exchanges. This enabled discussions on specific experiences and lessons of each organization. In addition, exchanges were organized between cohorts of organizations that coincided in specific interests related to gender, culture, and ethnic affiliation.

Class differences within IAT communities were not highlighted by the participants. This suggests that there is a consensus among them on the deepening poverty that looms in the communities; for example, Ikal Ang'elei, co-founder and Director of FoLT in Kenya, pointed out:

Lake Turkana is a region with 96.7% poverty. Climate change has caused more famine and drought, which in turn has led to the death of children due to lack of food. Support has been received from non-governmental organizations that are now withdrawing and leaving the country and the populations in greater vulnerability.

Attending to people with different capabilities, according to internationally accepted criteria, was not discussed. This is attributable to the fact that IAT communities and organizations incorporate different capabilities within the concept of "vulnerability". In this regard, the pandemic increased the self-perception of vulnerability as peoples, communities and individuals inserted in increasingly racist societies. In this regard, Giselle dos Anjos Santos, historian at CEERT in Brazil, stated:

"There is serious social vulnerability and labor inequality between women of African descent and white men; in addition to systematic violence directed at young black people".

1. Lessons learned about processes of exchange and learning experiences with indigenous, Afro-descendant, traditional peoples and community-based organizations

IAT facilitators are critical to the success of an exchange among IAT communities

When the invitation, organization and management of the exchange is facilitated by individuals who belong to and have an identity close to the community or communities to be approached, more closeness and ease of communication is established. The interaction takes place with someone who knows the community, its context, its problems, its traditions, and languages, among other values.

The incorporation of members of participating organizations in the facilitation of the exchanges was crucial for their successful implementation.

Their involvement strengthened the consulting team and encouraged IAT organizations to meet virtually and to exchange experiences and share positions as territorial/ethnic blocs.

Self-determined priorities

When organizations and communities engage directly in why they are going to be part of an exchange and define what content they are going to share, there is an ownership of the event. They stop being spectators and there is a different motivation because of the enthusiasm in the preparation and what they expect to get out of the process.

Ideas and concepts shared in a community setting

In the preparation and implementation of the exchanges, within each sector or group, the coincidence in the similarity of experiences and issues created an environment of trust for dialogue. The affinities among the participants contributed to a joint approach to common issues.

We learned that exchanges are valid when there are shared interests, issues, and commonalities and organizations can be integrated as a sector (cultural, gender, ethnic affiliation, locality, or race) and locality (country and region).

For example, some organizations in Guatemala recognized that even though they live in the same political, economic, and social context, they had not met to talk, share strategies, and support each other.

The collective consultations and the facilitators' leadership allowed for a better understanding of the characteristics, contexts, specific and collective proposals of the participating organizations.

Principle of Reciprocity

We learned that for IAT organizations, exchanges are two-way learning exercises. With the same commitment with which they engage in a visit and share in the space of a community, they hope that at another time they can be hosts as a form of reciprocity. To have the same opportunity to share their struggles, their achievements, and proposals in their community. It is also an appreciation.

Before the pandemic began, an exchange between CONPA, from Colombia, and OFRANEH, from Honduras, was in preparation. The event was to be held in Colombia. During the preparation of the event, the leaders of CONPA and OFRANEH underscored that the exchange between the two organizations would be incomplete if the Colombian brothers and sisters could not subsequently visit their Garifuna brothers and sisters in Honduras.

Principle of Continuity

When the exchanges respond to the priorities of the organizations, they cease to be isolated events and become part of the development and strengthening of the organizations. During an exchange, knowledge and experiences are shared and incorporated and new processes are enriched. During exchanges, collaborations and links that transcend the temporality of an event are established.

Multiple constituencies versus achievable objectives

Heterogeneity – Tell stories and recognize common experiences in the life of IAT communities across the globe. Feel that they are being listened to and honor other person's life, presence, and words.

Homogeneity – The narrower the scope and ethnic focus, the easier it is to set specific and detailed agendas – yet the reach may be more limited.

2. What has worked?

Respect and active listening

To promote an environment of respect among all. For each organization to have the space to share experiences and be heard. Time for clarification, an opportunity to deepen the aspects that are relevant to all.

Learning to work as a group.

The facilitators coming from the IAT organizations organized working groups to prepare and conduct the exchanges. This form of organization was notable in the process of the exchange between Afro organizations where their working group built a relationship of trust with all participants. When several people oversee the exchange process, a good organization of the event transmits trust to the participants and opens more possibilities for continuity.

Tangible results.

It is crucial to ensure that the exchanges have concrete and achievable objectives and that all the effort deployed can be perceived and motivate to continue working. The Afro working group was able to create conditions for an enriching exchange, organized participation in ongoing consultations, and carried out a face-to-face meeting that laid the foundations for the continuation of their initiative.

3. Learning about organizational and institutional strengthening

The consultations around the concept of organizational and institutional strengthening of IAT organizations generated a wide range of responses and concerns from the participating organizations. As a result, they have identified shared and individual priorities.

In general terms, the IAT organizations consider that the issue of organizational and institutional strengthening is a multiple, indeterminate, and stochastic process, fundamentally embedded in their territorial heritage and resources. Therefore, the strengthening process is the product of a variety of contexts, forces and actors that turn organizational and institutional strengthening into flows to reach the goals determined by each community and organization and that are facilitated or limited by numerous variables. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that health and communication are contested fields between communities and states. Thus, all the participating organizations proposed to contribute to confronting the health crisis, and to convert their efforts into spaces that would allow them to improve their capabilities, knowledge and prevent their organizations from being destroyed or weakened by local power groups.

However, they also emphasized specific challenges and strategies. For example, for the organizations participating in the Mesoamerican exchange, organizational strengthening implies not only recovering and defending their territorial heritage and resources, but also improving their human capabilities and means to defend or reclaim the heritage. For their part, indigenous and Afro-descendant women agreed that spirituality should be part of the process of organizational and institutional strengthening.

4. Communication

To achieve the general objective of the project, having such a heterogeneous group was a challenging process, compounded by the travel restrictions caused by the health crisis. However, it also revealed little known aspects of the relationship between IAT organizations and the state and power structures in which they work, which otherwise would have been difficult to understand and explain. All this was done in an atmosphere of respect and active listening to each organization's specificities.

To monitor the situation in the communities, contact was maintained with leaders who had access to Internet. Once the first wave of contagion had passed, we considered resuming the exchanges. During this period, as part of the global process of adopting virtual communication, the CCARC consulting team switched to Zoom communication.

It also urged IAT organizations to incorporate ICT practices. An obvious finding, common around the world, is the marginalization of populations expressing difficulties in terms of Internet access. Despite these limitations and adding efforts to those originally planned, the project managed to complete the scheduled consultations during the pandemic. All this revealed that improving communication within the communities and between them and the outside world is a major challenge still to be met.

A web site was created with profiles, contacts, information, and documentation generated by the project.

Agenda development

Two interconnected processes

The exchanges were dialogues that allowed participants to present their points of view among organizations with affinities in localities or target groups, which produced consensus; the meetings were spaces for linking them.

While issues related to communication, youth, empowerment, inclusive leadership, and memory were the most discussed topics at the first global convening in Mexico City (November 2019), the COVID-19 health crisis and ancestral knowledge, the worsened vulnerability of some groups, youth and women engagement, as well as the physical security of leaders and their communities were highlighted in the exchanges that followed. For this reason, they were incorporated as discussion points in the second global convening (carried out virtually in June 2021).

In the end, issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, internal communication and exchanges are part of the concept of organizational and institutional strengthening of each IAT organization, which will be maintained as a shared agenda in their dialogue with philanthropic cooperation.

Key Challenges

This project has proven that, despite the specificities of the organizations, it is necessary and feasible to have shared agendas to address their common challenges. However, this does not exclude that each organization may want to set its own tactics and goals.

Throughout the project, no situations were found that suggested conflicts between the organizations' objectives. This indicates that there were no conflicts or that the communication established throughout the project helped to overcome or deconstruct such assumptions.

As noted, the agreements and agenda reached present substantive challenges. However, it is possible that as major changes occur, such as the unfolding of the current pandemic and the climate crisis, individual organizational agendas may change shape. Given this likelihood, it is advisable to continue with communication flows similar to those developed in this project.

In resuming the exchanges, priority was given to sharing experiences in the context of the health crisis and government policies. This added several points to the agendas, including healing practices arising from ancestral knowledge, State actions that turned the health crisis into an economic and food crisis, and as stated, the need to substantially improve communication.

5. Achievable and measurable results

a. To have a working group formed by members of the participating organizations to lead the organization of the exchange.
b. To select the team of facilitators from among the members of the working group.
c. To work in close collaboration with both (working group members and facilitators), seeking relationships of trust based on continuous dialogue.
d. To ensure that the exchanges lead to concrete and tangible results that reflect the shared priorities of the participants and that are sustainable over time, even after the conclusion of the project.

6. Strategies for achieving the goals under the new circumstances

The CCARC team maintained constant communication with the Ford Foundation to learn about and report on situations that occurred in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic or those that could affect the development of the project.

Establishing virtual communication with leaders and organizations was a slow and unprecedented process. For this reason, it was decided to incorporate local facilitators, who in addition to their knowledge of local realities and their mother languages, would contribute with local consultations, access, and manage the resources for virtual communication.

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