

Indigenous, Afro-descendant, traditional and community organizations

SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS TO COMMON CHALLENGES

“Recognizing our practices and knowledges from different perspectives, interests and ways of learning”, is the project with which the BUILD program set out to contribute to identify, document and systematize the experience of partner organizations...

*Synthesis of reflections and proposals of
Indigenous, Afro-descendant, Traditional and Community organizations
associated with the BUILD-Ford Foundation program*



Searching for answers to common challenges

The first meeting was a success. On November 27th and 28th, 2019, more than 60 representatives of 29 Indigenous, Afro-descendant, Traditional and Community organizations (IAT+C) from Asia, Africa and Latin America met in Mexico City to recognize their practices and knowledges “from different perspectives, interests and ways of learning”.

It was a space for dialogue promoted by the Ford Foundation and the Caribbean and Central America Research Council (CCARC), with a view to strengthen the IATC+ C organizations in their infrastructure, resilience, as well as reinforcing their communication with donors.

The initiative was part of the Building Institutions and Networks (BUILD) program and took place between September 2019 and August 2020.

Sara Omi, representative of the Emberá Congress of Alto Boyano (Panama), when referring to the meeting, emphasized that "the territory is the most important thing", pointing out among the challenges they face "the pressure and invasion of the land, the loss of forests and illegal logging," as well as the lack of inclusive policies from the State.

The pressure on their territories is also experienced in Kenya, said Ikal Ang'elei, Executive Director of Friends of Lake Tutkana, who pointed out another common element for indigenous, Afro-descendant, traditional and community organizations: "The strongest fight is to strengthen the organization."

In the words of Rainny Situmorang, from Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN), “we fight for the economic independence of organizations and peoples. We have similar challenges and we are concerned about the dependency we have on donors and aid workers. Let us take advantage of the potential of our natural, human, economic, political, social and cultural resources that we have.”

Covid-19

The meeting in Mexico City closed with the commitment to meet again in October 2020. The pandemic caused by Covid-19 changed the plans and forced the suspension of the second face-to-face meeting.

In March 2020, in consultation with the participant organizations, three lines of work were proposed and the result were documents that synthesize the responses of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, Traditional and Community organizations to the pandemic:

- ✦ Impact of the pandemic and response of female leadership;
- ✦ Impact of the pandemic and response of Mesoamerican indigenous and community organizations;
- ✦ Impact of the pandemic and response of Afro-descendant organizations in Latin America.

The pandemic had aggravated the problems and accentuated the threats pointed out during the first meeting and put the organizations in the first line of defense of the indigenous, Afro-descendant and Traditional peoples and communities.

This pandemic has taught us to show more solidarity, as indigenous communities and as peoples. It has taught us not only to be aware of our communities in Guatemala, but also to be mindful of other brothers in countries that have also been experiencing many similar circumstances and problems... That is why during this pandemic, we have been defending and recovering our territories, recovering our ethnic identity, where our spirituality is also located.

**Elodia Castillo, Ch'orti' Indigenous Mayor
COMUNDICH, Guatemala**

In the words of Annas Radin Syarif, from Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN), the organizations understood that "the answers to all crises" were in their hands, so the "focus at this time is how to strengthen ourselves" and "encourage communities to help each other."



Sectoral Meetings

Given the impossibility of holding face-to-face meetings, in November 2020 it was proposed to carry out virtual exchanges, in preparation for the second meeting, to be held in June 2021.

According to Norma Don Juan, from the Continental Network of Indigenous Women of the Americas, ECMIA, “it has been difficult to enter these forms of virtual participation. Here we realize how difficult it is, and the technological gap that this pandemic came to establish.”

The virtual exchanges took place between April and May 2021. The first was between indigenous and community organizations in Guatemala; the second, between Afro-descendant organizations; and the third among indigenous and Afro-descendant women leaders.

The participants agreed that the pandemic had exacerbated some problems, the main ones being the following:

- ✦ Incomplete, excluding and rent-seeking State structures, whose short-term economic model is based on the exclusion of peoples and the unsustainable extraction of natural resources.
- ✦ Resurgence and increase of policies of violence and racism in the power structures of the Nation State.
- ✦ Murder of community leaders and criminalization of the territory by governments, due to omission or direct action that generate public policies of exclusion.
- ✦ Loss of ancestral knowledges, fundamentally due to the death of elders in the communities.

What To do?

The conclusions of the sectoral exchanges were shared at the II Meeting, in June 2021, highlighting the role of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, Traditional and Community organizations to make up for the absence of State policies.

The abandonment of the State was further evidenced by the lack of coordination and specific attention to the peoples... the communities responded by strengthening their organization, essential to address the crisis, provide food security, utilize the resources of traditional medicine, produce food, rediscover the systems of solidarity and barter, with a vision from the territories based on the rights and aspirations linked to the worldview and respect for life and the land.

Manuel Marti
**Regional Research Program on the
Development and Environment- PRISMA**

In this context, the organizations developed their capacities to organize and resist, "using their own histories, cultures, languages and traditional knowledge about Mother Nature, herbal medicine, resource management and sustainable production, protecting the bearers of these knowledge and the new generations".

The experience lived by the Movimento Interstate das Quebradeiras de Coco Babaçu, from Brazil (MIQCB), recounted by Maria Regina Monteiro, reflects the drama that communities in the continent went through: "Initially, everyone thought they would be home for 40 days, and then 40 days became 60 days, 90 days, and 120 days. We made a change in our activities and talked to our donors and contacted other donors to put together basic food baskets because after 60 days, 90 days, we found that we had many relatives who needed food. We got resources to organize the basic food baskets and basic hygiene baskets, because in rural areas not all families have mask, gel alcohol. We forced to the state governments and also the federal government to act. During the pandemic, cases of violence against women and agrarian conflicts have increased."



Organizational strengthening was the first priority, "inextricably linked to the territory and its resources", the organizers of the activity agreed in the synthesis prepared with reflections and proposals resulting from the meetings and exchanges.

Another priority was the individual security of the organizations' leadership against external threats from state apparatuses and de facto powers, as well as the need to form new inclusive and egalitarian leadership, with the growing participation of young people and women.

Silvel Elias and Rodimiro Lantan, representing the Indigenous organizations of Mesoamerica, stressed the importance of not returning to the status quo prior to the pandemic and added: "Support is necessary to respond to these crises that end up being humanitarian crises... We must stop being firefighters and be able to maintain our own agendas that support our struggles. We must strengthen our capacities for governance and the exercise of collective rights over natural resources, lands and territories."

The indigenous, Afro-descendant, Traditional and Community organizations raised as the central point of their demands the urgent need not to return to the pre-pandemic situation, characterized by public policies of expropriation and extraction promoted by Nation states. Above all, they stated that their knowledge and capacities to protect biodiversity and sustainably manage their territorial assets constitute a fundamental contribution to successfully address the climate collapse and the socioeconomic crisis facing their societies and the planet.

Víctor López Illescas, Ford Foundation Program Officer for Mexico and Central America, stated that "although there is a large volume of financial resources from the international cooperation and philanthropy, it is still a reality that activists, defenders who are on the front line taking risks, with high risks to their lives for defending the rights of their communities, ... and the resources do not necessarily reach those people who are on the front lines making the greatest sacrifices."

López Illescas committed the efforts of the Ford Foundation "to continue to be an instrument to channel resources, that allows leveraging more means from other sectors of philanthropy and international cooperation towards the efforts of the communities" and reported that the BUID program was about to enter a second phase "and an important part of the debate is about what institutional strengthening means."

1. <https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/building-institutions-and-networks/>
2. The documents product of that initiative, as well as the reports of later meetings and exchanges, can be found at the following link: <http://entrepovos.org/es/publicaciones>



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