

## Voices from the Ground: Communities in Movement and Resistance Strategies



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# Voices from the Ground: Communities in Movement and Resistance Strategies

## Our Viewpoint

### How to Strengthen Resistance Movements?



It is a fact that forests continue to be devastated at a rapid pace. More and more thousands of hectares are being destroyed to make way for mining projects, oil or gas extraction, tree plantations such as eucalyptus or oil palm, dams, logging concessions and mega infrastructure projects, among many other activities.

But in addition to the many and undeniable profound damages that these activities are causing around the world, they also cause something else to emerge: the **strong and diverse resistance movements of affected communities defending their territories, livelihoods, cultures and beliefs, and even their existence.**

Despite the severe criminalization and violence on the part of corporations and current governments to allow these harmful activities, as well as "development" agencies' and other financial institutions' monetary support for business to continue; communities and peoples have not stopped mobilizing, organizing, coordinating and resisting the onslaught of the so called "development" model. Without these struggles, forests, watersheds and territories would be destroyed on an even larger scale.

This bulletin is a reflection on the diverse resistance movements and enormous challenges that exist today, and on those that are to come. **We ask ourselves: how can resistance movements and organization at the grassroots level be strengthened in order to stop the destruction of forests and peoples in the current global context?**

An interview with Kum'Tum of the Akroá-Gamela people, at the gateway to the **Brazilian Amazon**, takes us into a personal and collective process in which **recovering memory and voice as a people was key in reconnecting and reclaiming lands and life.** "We do not reclaim land only for production. We reclaim the land because it is a sacred place; it is a place that gives meaning to our existence," Kum'Tum reminds us.

From **Sierra Leone** comes the story of a community in Port Loko, wherein—after almost ten years of struggle against a company that appropriated their lands through trickery and filled them with oil palm plantations—a **court ruled that the lands be returned to the**



**communities.** A process of coordination among local, regional and international organizations seems to have been crucial in the struggle. They are now trying to determine what they should do with the large tracts of land filled with rows and rows of oil palms.

From **India**, an article explores various forms of reinvention and reconstruction of grassroots organizations in Korchi, Maharashtra. With a special emphasis on women's collectives, the article highlights **how they made their voices heard—not only to resist mining but also in new forms of decision-making at the village and supra-village levels.** These collectives develop forest strategies with local control, revive their cultural identity, affirm direct democracy and gender democracy and question existing development models, among other actions.

From **Latin America**, another article reflects on **the multiple attacks on women defending territories.** It shares how women achieve different actions that have enabled them to position their unique perspectives, and how on many occasions they have managed to temporarily halt or paralyze extractive activities. They underscore the **healing process as fundamental in the dialogue of knowledge among peoples, contexts and generations—and from a place of vindication of the memory of women ancestors.**

This bulletin also includes **an interview with Cameroonian activist and human rights defender, Nasako Besingi.** Besingi invites us to reflect on what it means that in most African countries' laws, the land "belongs to the State." **He also points us to important strategies and challenges in building strong movements.** "Strengthening solidarity among communities and exchanges among people directly and indirectly affected by development projects—in order to build trust at the community level—is the backbone of any successful resistance," he says.

From **Southern Africa**, an article tells us about **the Permanent Peoples Tribunal**, where more than twenty cases from the region were presented. The Tribunal has been **an important platform for communities to share their struggles and build solidarity.** The case of the community of Xolobeni in South Africa is emblematic. In November 2018, after 16 years of struggle against an Australian mining conglomerate, the court ruled in favor of the community; it stated that, before granting mining rights, the "full and formal" consent of the town of Xolobeni must be obtained.

Another article shares the story of the plantation company, **Green Resources, in Tanzania.** It shows us that these companies always need to ensure access to a large area of land, and that in order to do so, they make a series of false or very poorly-met promises to convince communities to give up their lands. Nevertheless, the community of Nzivi learned about these experiences in time and decided to say no to any company that wants to control significant areas of their lands. This highlights **the importance of sharing stories and experiences among communities facing similar situations.**

The Struggle Continues!



## Brazil: I am Kum'tum, I am of the Akroá-Gamela



### People

According to maps and information from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Gamela people, as the Portuguese called them, lived in Maranhão in the Baixo Pindaré region—which includes the municipalities of Codó, Monção, Cajari, Viana and Penalva. My grandmother was born and grew up in the village of Capibari in Penalva; and my mother was born in Monção, in a place called Jacareí, where I was also born. It is a large territory which was, and still is, inhabited by the Akroá-Gamela people.

I am the result of this process of violence and colonization. While she was still very young, my grandmother was taken from the village by a white family from the city. My mother was born away from the village. I was born away from the village. And because **the marks of ancestry are in the body, but also—and especially—in the soul**, there came a time in which I began to wonder about the marks that I bear. It is from this process of seeking, which I would call conscious return, that I made the decision to reconnect with those ancestral roots, to understand these marks on my body and in my soul. But it is not an individual search; it is always collective. **We are discovering that we are not alone in the world, and that these marks are not the marks of an individual; they are the marks of a people, with common and deep roots.**

For a long time, my grandmother and mother used silence as a strategy. In the face of the State's negation, the decision was to be quiet. My reading today is that silence is a form of



resistance. It is a time in which we must be quiet in order to continue existing. So, contrary to what one hears, silence does not mean assenting to the State's violence. For our indigenous peoples, silence was—in general—a resistance strategy. **Understanding and feeling why a people do one thing or another is only possible when one accesses collective memory.**

Our grandparents say that today we are in Taquaritiua, which was the place where the indigenous people would come. The indigenous people would come from the rainforest, particularly starting in August. That was interrupted. A telegraph transmission line was installed, which began to break up the territory. And in the 1960s there was a violent process of "grillaje" (land grabbing), of fraudulent notarized documents. **The objective of all this violence was to negate that ancestry rooted in the land.** Our very existence as a people was negated.

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That negation starts creating a separation. A separation from the land as a whole: person, forest, water, river, sacred places. As fences get put up, people also begin to separate from one another; a boundary and limit is placed between people. And relationships between people are also interrupted. When we do the work of action, rescue, and reconnection with our collective ancestral memory, that perspective is possible as we reconnect with the places that give meaning to our existence. These two things are always very closely linked. **The reference to places—even those that are still fenced off—is because they give meaning to our existence as a people.** That is what the work of accessing memory is about. It is a process that happens in the heart. It is something that is only possible to wake up, or dust off, if it happens in the heart.

### ***History, Territory and Land Reclamation***

Documents appeared about a [land] donation made [to the people] in the colonial period, in 1759; which is a paradox because we were given something that already belonged to us. Now I am talking specifically about one of those lands: Taquaritiua, which is in the municipality of Viana. Those documents from 1759 speak of about 14 or 15 thousand hectares. It was a confinement.

In 1969, Sarney's land law (1) made public lands available for appropriation, and in the 1970s, Maranhão suffered a violent process of "grillaje" (land grabbing). In the 1970s and 1980s, we lived through a process in which the territory donated in 1759 was partitioned and fenced off. The result is that now in 2018, all of the land that appears in that deed from the 18<sup>th</sup> century is registered in the name of individuals in the Viana municipal registry.

But by the end of the 1990s, an internal "*rumo*" movement began in the areas that had been grabbed, in order to guarantee survival. "*Rumo*" is when your family goes to work on a piece [of land] in areas that have already been registered in the name of other people. It is an old process of land recovery. There was a lot of pressure to evict the families recovering land. A decision was made: "No, from now on, invaders are not going to put up more fences; we are going to demarcate the plots." It was a very important resistance for the continuity of the people, even if it was on a very small piece of land. Other families were evicted and they went to the city; the people dispersed. **But a more recent territorial reclamation process was possible where there was greater force behind this movement.**

In 2015 we decided to reclaim some pieces of land, in particular those around and very close to the houses, in order to guarantee a place to farm. But there is an element to this recovery process that is fundamental for us, coming once again from a place of memory: reclaiming

sacred places. **We do not reclaim land only for production. We reclaim the land because it is a sacred place; it is a place that gives meaning to our existence.**

It was significant when we decided to reorganize again and tell the world that we exist as a people. This is what I was saying before: there is a time for silence in order to exist, and there is also a time to speak in order to exist. We are in a time in which it is necessary—it was necessary and it continues to be necessary—to speak so that we continue to exist.

### ***Organization, Hatred and Violence***

From the beginning, we wanted our organization to be very circular. There is no figure who becomes a spokesperson: the voice is of the community. **We have to establish an ongoing process of conversations amongst ourselves to make decisions.** It is a permanent process of assembly, of building agreements amongst ourselves; and again, it is based on what elders tell us about how we were always organized—which for a time was silenced in

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order to continue to exist. But it was not lost, and we continue to say "this has always been our way."

In 2014 we started to get threats due to our reorganization as a people. That year, the energy company of Maranhão, Cemar, began to build a new power transmission line. We asked them to suspend construction in order to regularize the situation with environmental agencies. Cemar's discourse is that "alleged indigenous people" are impeding the development of the region. It is remarkable that many people who repeat this idea are never going to benefit from what they call development; but they still say that we are preventing it.

In April 2017, in an interview with a local radio, [federal] deputy Aluísio Mendes called us "alleged indigenous people," rioters and invaders, and said that we were robbing orderly people of peace and calm. They held a "peace action," but we now know that from the beginning, this was an action to prepare an attack on the land reclamation movement. They went and attacked. (2) The participation of Assembly of God church leaders in this process [is] another significant factor. They were the ones organizing the action in the region, and—more than organizing—they were spreading discourse [about the] "invaders threatening the peace and order." All of this laid the groundwork to attack. On the radio people said that the "attacks" we were carrying out had already caused some elderly people to die and some women to suffer an abortion. So that was like gunpowder and fire for them to attack us. If you can imagine, they began to blame us for the deaths of people who had nothing to do with the situation. A climate of revolt and hatred was formed against us.

### ***Organized Communities***

In the Fabric of Traditional Peoples and Communities of Maranhão, we already have indigenous groups, quilombolas, riverside dwellers, fisherfolk, coconut cutters and peasants, with the support of state entities. It began in 2011, when the Moquibom quilombola movement occupied the INCRA (National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform) due to the violence, and to the 400+ quilombola community processes presented before this organization—about which no action had been taken (3).

On October 30, 2010, Flaviano, a quilombola leader from Charco, was murdered. The Public Prosecutor filed a denouncement against landowners, intermediaries and gunmen. We saw this as a very clear message to all the quilombola movements that were emerging. In June there was an encampment in front of the Maranhão State Court of Justice because of the

habeas corpus granted to the landowners thought to be guilty of Flaviano's murder. That encampment later moved to the INCRA, because we understood that the paralysis in the quilombola land demarcation processes led to violence and death threats.

That year, over seventy leaders in Maranhão received death threats. **It would be impossible to resolve the threats and physical violence without resolving the land issue.** The occupation lasted twelve days. We found ourselves amongst quilombolas and indigenous peoples, and indigenous peoples and quilombolas; and we perceived we had something in common: **the struggle for territory based on a feeling of belonging.** Later there were other occupations, and in November 2013 we had a gathering in Santa Helena, in which seven peoples of Maranhão and many quilombola communities gathered. We then said "we have to formalize an alliance." It was nice, because we used the symbol that a single stick is easy to break, but if many sticks are gathered together, it is hard to break them. And that remained as the symbol of the willingness to continue uniting in the fight for territory.

**We want free territories.** For this, we need to free the earth and remove the fences that enclose the earth. But there are other fences that enclose our bodies. **Free the earth and free our bodies. We see the body as a node of relationships between ourselves and**

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**the land, water, plants and bugs.** In other places, this will mean a process of decolonization. When people feel the energy of the earth, that energy can reach their hearts to free them.

The Fabric is this project of alliance amongst those of us who are carrying out the struggle. Our perspective is not of what others are going to do for us. **It cannot be an associated or allied organization; it cannot be the State. It is ourselves. And from the inside. And again, those elements of memory are essential.** When we tear down the barbed wire fence, we tear it down because it was not always there; rather, one day they put it there. **When we talk about tearing down the fence inside of us, we are talking about prejudice, racism, violence and patriarchy.** It is from this ancestry, from this reconnection with the energy of the earth, that we must carry out the struggle.

And there is no room for the idea of private ownership of land—be it large, medium, small or very small. One cannot divide a *juçara* into lots (4). A *juçara* is a space for common use. **To divide land into lots is, fundamentally, to reproduce on a very small scale the mentality that the earth can be like a thing, a thing which I can later sell. The earth does not belong to us. It is we who belong to the earth.** And it is in this relationship of belonging that our existence makes sense.

Let's talk about the methodology of the Fabric: We cannot imagine a meeting with a table to discuss an issue, as important as it may be. It has to be a space where people can talk. The amount of time to talk is the amount of time that each person needs to talk about their experience, their existence. Dance, singing, drums, maracas—all of this is part of what we might call the content. It is not accessory. It is part of the content.

If we do not come from our own ancestry, all that struggle will always end in violence. A government that does not respect these ancestries is a violent government—whether right wing or left-wing. The same goes for movements, however well intentioned they may be: if they do not come from a place of ancestry, they will reproduce violence, because they would be reproducing the negation of that otherness, of the other, of that diversity.

(1) Law No. 2979 from June 15, 1969 put public lands up for sale and caused land grabbing and agrarian conflicts. The law is named after José Sarney, one of the biggest oligarchs of Maranhão,

state governor at the time and Brazilian president between April 1985 and March 1990. (2) On April 30, 2017 over 30 indigenous peoples suffered an extremely violent attack that left five people wounded by bullets (Kum'tum among them), two people with their hands severed (one of them beheaded) and another fifteen injured, including adolescents. For more information, see:

<https://www.campoemguerra-reporterbrasil.org/eles-sao-mesmo-indios-a-pergunta-po> (3) Quilombola communities are formed by descendants of African people who were subjected to slavery in colonial and imperial Brazil. Moquibom is one of the quilombola organizations of Maranhão, which is the state with the largest number of communities of this kind. INCRA is the agency responsible for registering quilombola lands.

(4) A *juçaral* is a group of *juçara* palm trees or fan palms, which provide food for the communities.

## **Villagers in Sierra Leone ponder their future after winning their lands back from a palm oil company**





Mamanka Village. Ph: Grain.

Villagers in Port Loko District, Sierra Leone are celebrating. **After nearly a decade of struggling against a company that grabbed their lands and erected oil palm plantations, a court has ruled that the lands must be given back to the communities.** Now they are trying to figure out what they should do with the large areas of lands that have been occupied by rows and rows of oil palms.

This saga for the Port Loko villagers began in 2009, when a former British special forces soldier came to Sierra Leone to acquire land for oil palm plantations on behalf of an obscure UK company with no experience in agribusiness. Within three years, Kevin Godlington secured deals covering over 200,000 hectares of lands in the districts of Pujehun, Tonkolili and Port Loko. (1) Soon after, most of these land deals were sold for millions of dollars to other companies who set to work clearing the lands and erecting oil palm plantations. The land deals in Port Loko were sold to the Siva Group-- a company based in Singapore that is owned by an Indian billionaire businessman. (2)

Godlington's deals were made in violation of the most basic international standards of community consent. **In several cases, community leaders thought they were signing receipts for Christmas gifts when they were in fact signing documents giving their lands away.** (3)

Mamanka Village, in Bureh Chiefdom, Port Loko District, is one of the communities that lost their lands through this process. In 2009, Godlington's company, Sierra Leone Agriculture Ltd, signed a land deal giving the company 6,557 hectares of their lands, leaving the community without lands for their own food production. The deal was part of a larger deal for 41,582 hectares, involving several other villages in the district. A year later, the Siva Group bought 95% of Sierra Leone Agriculture Ltd, with Goldington maintaining a 5% share. (4)



areas affected by oil palm plantations in West and Central Africa on a visit to Mamanka village as part of a workshop (5) organised by the Sierra Leone Network on the Right to Food (SiLNoRF), Women's Action for Human Dignity (WAHD) and other organisations.

We brought with us a copy of the land agreement that had been signed with Sierra Leone Agriculture Ltd. (6) To our surprise, this was the first time that the villagers had seen a copy of the agreement. When they looked at it, they quickly realised that it was a fraud. They told us that **none of the local authorities from their community had signed the agreement, and some of the signatures were of people who are not even land owners in the area.** The villagers also said that they had opposed the project when it was presented to them, and that they were severely threatened and intimidated when they tried to peacefully prevent the company from clearing and occupying their lands.

The villagers also told us how the company had made numerous promises to them, such as the provision of good jobs and schools for the children, and that none of these promises ever materialised. **Only a few of them were hired by the company since it began operations, and it had been nearly a year since the company had paid workers for their wages.** When we visited other nearby villages affected by the same land deal, they told similar stories about how the company had not fulfilled its promises and had increased poverty and food insecurity in the area.

The women of Mamanka Village were, however, very moved by the stories they heard during the Port Loko meetings of leaders from communities in other parts of Sierra Leone and other African countries also affected by oil palm plantation companies. **They realised that they were not alone in their suffering and that actions could be taken to reclaim their lands.**

At the end of the meetings, the women and other participants from Mamanka had arrived at a clear set of demands for the company: the return of their lands; the payment of unpaid salaries and rent; and the annulment of the land lease agreement. All 36 organisations participating in the meeting signed a statement supporting these demands.

According to the woman chief of Mamanka Village, Yarbom Kapri Dumbuya (formerly Mamusu Dumbuya) their fight to get their lands back intensified after these meetings. **"We learnt a lot from experiences shared by other women across the country and within Africa,"** she told Aminata Finda Massaquoi of Culture Radio, during a visit to the village in November 2018.

Their struggle eventually got the attention of a legal rights organisation, NAMATI. Officers of the organisation visited the community and agreed to provide them with legal representation to take the company to court. **After several sessions at the court, the court ruled in favor of the community, ordering Sierra Leone Agriculture Ltd to return all of the lands to the Port Loko villages and to pay them US\$ 250,000 in unpaid rent.** (7)

Speaking through tears, the women of Mamanka Village told Aminata what a relief it was to be able to once again step on their farm lands without being harassed. They thanked all those who have stood by them during their struggle.

Yet many challenges remain for the community. The company left them with a dangerous, half-finished well and about 1,500 hectares of their lands are now occupied by industrial oil



palms. The villagers of Mamanka are not sure what they should do about these plantations. Should they try to remove the oil palms and produce other food crops? Should they form a cooperative to produce their own palm oil? Is there some way to integrate the two?

One company that might contact the Port Loko villagers to try and entice them into signing a new deal is the Dutch company Natural Habitats. It runs oil palm plantations in the country, but is also pursuing contract growing schemes with farmers to produce organically certified palm oil. For this reason, the company is sometimes described as being better than the big plantation companies. But the villagers of Port Loko should be wary. Kevin Godlington, the very person that orchestrated the land deal that robbed them of their lands ten years ago, is Natural Habitats' Chief Operations Officer! (8)

**The courageous victory of the villagers of Port Loko to get their lands back is an inspiration to communities affected by oil palm plantations from across Africa and the world**, some of whom are also struggling against land grabs by the Siva Group. Now a new struggle begins for the Port Loko communities to ensure that they never lose control over their lands again.

*This article is based in part on a report from Aminata Finda Massaquoi from her visit to Mamanka Village in October 2018.*

(1) The various land deals can be viewed here: <https://www.farmlandgrab.org/post/view/22876-land-deals-in-sierra-leone-involving-kevin-godlington>

(2) GRAIN, "Feeding the one percent," 7 October 2014: <https://www.grain.org/e/5048> (3) Caitlin Ryan, "Large-scale land deals in Sierra Leone at the intersection of gender and lineage", Third World Quarterly, Vol. 39, 2018:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2017.1350099>

(4) Interview conducted by Joan Baxter and provided to GRAIN, 2013

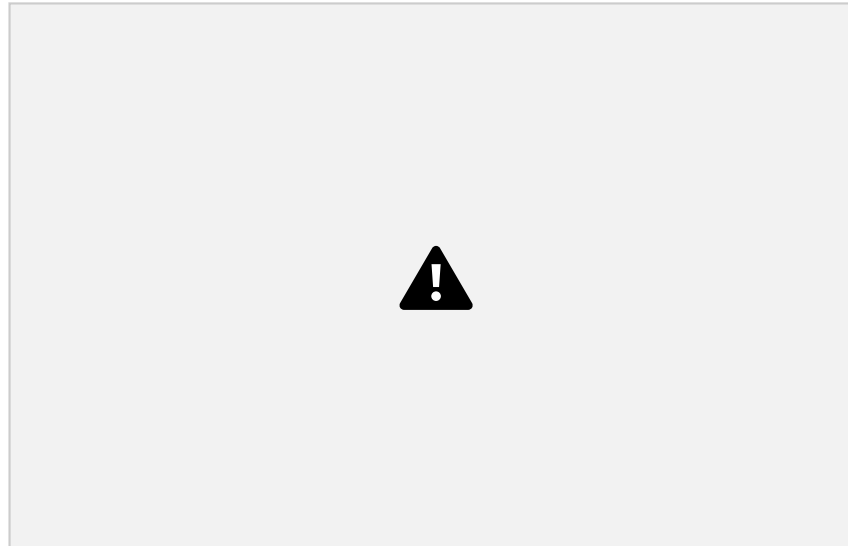
(5) Porto Loko Declaration: Women say "We Want our Lands Back!",

<https://www.grain.org/e/5788> (6) The land deal can be viewed here:

[http://farmlandgrab.org/uploads/attachment/Sta\\_Bkm\\_1.pdf](http://farmlandgrab.org/uploads/attachment/Sta_Bkm_1.pdf) (7) Cooper Inveen, "Sierra Leone ruling against palm oil company will empower communities – campaigners," Reuters, 12 November 2018: <https://farmlandgrab.org/28563>

(8) <https://www.natural-habitats.com/about/team/>

# Reimagining wellbeing: Villages in Korchi taluka, India, resisting mining and opening spaces for self-governance (1)



Women Parishad's meeting, January 2018. Ph.: Neema Pathak Broome

*Gram Sabhas* (village assemblies) in Korchi *taluka*, Gadchiroli district, state of Maharashtra, India, along with local resistance against state-sponsored mining, are actively engaged in reimagining and reconstructing local governance institutions. 90 out of 133 *Gram Sabhas* in the Korchi *taluka* (a type of government administrative level) have come together to form a federation of village assemblies that they call *Maha Gramsabha* (larger *Gram Sabha*).

At the same time, women's collectives have also started to assert their voice not only in resisting mining but also in the newly emerging village and *taluka* level decision-making institutions, including the *Maha Gramsabha*. These collectives are emerging as platforms to resist mining, devising strategies, rules and regulations for forest management and conservations, localizing control over their livelihoods and other economic resources, reviving cultural identity, raising social and equity concerns, asserting direct and engendered democracy and questioning existing models of development. This article is an attempt to provide a glimpse of why and how this process is unfolding.

## ***Resistance and organization from below***

Although officially administered by the Gadchiroli District Administration and elected Panchayats (executive committee of one or more villages elected to be the first unit of governance in India's Panchayati Raj System, or local self-government), people in Korchi *taluka* informally continue to have their traditional *Gram Sabhas* and *Ilakas* (territories constituting of multiple villages) as village and supra village level self-governance structures. With little political and economic powers these informal institutions till recently only focused on socio-cultural activities or conflicts. Inhabited by 133 *Gram Sabhas* with 43,000 people (73 per cent belonging to Gond and Kanwar indigenous tribal communities), the Korchi *taluka* has three traditional *Ilakas* namely, Kumkot, PadyalJob, and Kodgul *Ilaka*.

Nearly 85 per cent of the Gadchiroli district is covered by forest. Almost the entire population depends heavily on the forest for a cash-based and also subsistence livelihood. Besides

forests being important for local economies and livelihoods, they are an integral part of the *adivasi* (indigenous) socio-cultural practices and political identity. Yet, people till recently had restricted and limited access and use rights because of colonial, centralized forest governance and management laws, policies and bureaucracy, leading to a culture of bribes and atrocities for using forests. These forests are also important for the state government. Commercial extraction of timber and other non-timber products has conventionally been carried out by the forest department through leases given to contractors and paper and pulp companies and, in more recent times, to mining companies.

**For decades, people in Gadchiroli have resisted against the oppressive and alienating forest policies, bribes and atrocities committed on the local tribal communities. Adding to this, the recent state-sponsored mining.** Between 1990 and 2017, 24 mining leases have been sanctioned or are proposed in the District, collectively impacting approximately 15,000 hectares of dense forest directly and over 16,000 hectares indirectly. In Korchi *taluka* alone around 12 mining leases are proposed despite strong local opposition, impacting over 1032.66 hectares.

In 2006, submitting to a long-standing grassroots struggle across India against alienating, oppressive, top-down forest and conservation policies, the Parliament of India enacted a landmark legislation: The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act 2006, also called Forest Rights Act of India (herein referred to as FRA). FRA provides for recording 14 kinds of pre-existing but unrecognized customary forest rights to scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers. Most important among these being the ***Gram Sabhas* to claim rights to use, manage, and conserve their traditional forests and protect them from internal and external threats**. The Act also requires free, prior and informed consent of the *Gram Sabhas* before their customary forests are diverted for non-forestry purposes. **Among the many radical provisions of this law and the most significant is the powerful envisioning of the basic unit of governance to be the *Gram Sabha* - to be self-determined by a group of people residing in a settlement which may or may not have been described as a village in the government records thus far.**

### ***Empowering Gram Sabhas***

After a sustained campaign, rights to use, manage, and conserve their traditional forests of 85 *Gram Sabhas* in Korchi *taluka* were recognized between 2009 and 2011. These empowered the *Gram Sabhas* to govern their forests and also sustainably use it, since it was now under their ownership.

Some local leaders, particularly from villages which had received these specific rights but were also facing threats from mining projects, used this opportunity to understand how laws like FRA could strengthen and empower *Gram Sabhas*. And also to **mobilize local people towards understanding how legally empowered *Gram Sabhas* could work towards self determination and self governance, including asserting greater but equitable control over forests and local economy**. *Taluka* level meetings lead to intense discussions on the functioning, rights, powers, and duties of a *Gram Sabha*. By 2017, 90 villages in Korchi *taluka* had reconstituted and strengthened their village *Gram Sabhas* to be an inclusive decision-making body, transparent and accountable at the village level. Each *Gram Sabha* opened a bank account, appointed a secretary and a president. These office-bearers are in



charge of the village communication with the government officials and other outside actors. *Gram Sabhas* began to negotiate and market their non-timber forest products. The profits

were now entirely with the *Gram Sabhas*, which paid for the labour (all families in the village), retained some percentage for the village bank account and distributed the remaining as profit shares to the collectors. *Gram Sabhas*, which until then were economically and legally disempowered, began to gain both. For example, from nearly zero income in 2014, the 87 *Gram Sabhas* had a total income in 2017 from the sale of non-timber forest products of over 120 million rupees (about US\$ 1,700,000).

By 2016, the traditional *Ilakas* began to see themselves as supra *Gram Sabha* bodies. **Traditional *Ilaka sabhas* (assemblies) began to include conversations on *Gram Sabha* empowerment, direct democracy, self-determination, FRA, mining and its impacts, growth and development, colonization and imperialism, among others.** Efforts were made towards re-visiting the meaning of the word '*adivasi*' (indigenous), *adivasi* cultures and histories, re-telling the stories of tribal revolutionary heroes (usually invisible in mainstream historical narratives) and understanding cooption of animistic *adivasi* cultures into dominant religions.

### ***Maha Gramsabha – A Federation of Gram Sabhas***

As the *Gram Sabhas* began to gain empowerment and recognition, it was important for them to get stronger in order to support those which were just beginning to re-organize themselves as well as for the required mutual learning and support. Harvesting commercially important non-timber forest products and selling them required skills, knowledge and strength to deal with the market forces. **Understanding and addressing divisive strategies of the mining companies required collective action.**

The traditional *Ilaka sabhas* had their limitations in being able to address these issues. To ensure that markets do not exploit the weaker, that equity in benefit sharing is achieved and that sharing of knowledge, learning and handholding takes place, in 2017, a federation of 90 *Gram Sabhas* was created. *Maha Gramsabha* (MGS) is now a political, economic, social and cultural space that aims to obtain the recognition of local people's normative regulations for governance. Each *Gram Sabha* selects 2 women and 2 men to represent them in the MGS, passes a resolution to join the MGS and adhere to its rules and regulations. All designated representatives are obliged to report back to their *Gram Sabhas*. Newer policy prescriptions or information is discussed and informed decisions are taken, but only for these to be taken back to the constituent *Gram Sabhas* for ratification. Before acceptance, proposals for future action are discussed and details of expenses incurred are shared.

### ***Women, mining and role of women' collective***

In this predominantly patriarchal society, women had little say in traditional village and forest governance. Women also faced a number of social challenges, including domestic violence abetted by alcoholism, lack of resources, property or decision-making rights.

Supported by local NGO Amhi Amchi Arogyasaathi, slowly, women *parishads* (collectives) started to monitor the implementation of laws and schemes that would empower women. These *parishads* became a support group for women facing injustice, oppression, violence or

any other issue within the family or in the larger society. **As the awareness among the women increased and they found the confidence to voice their opinion, many women brought out that their wellbeing and that of their families was integrally linked to the**

**wellbeing of the forests. Hence, it was important for women to discuss issues of forest degradation and rights to use and protect them.**

This became particularly critical for women in 2009, especially in villages which discovered that their traditional forests were being leased out for mining. Through their *parishads*, women became one of the formidable forces in the resistance against mining. **Their physical opposition and vocal expression in various meetings against mining, including the state sponsored public hearings, ensured that the mining lease has remained pending until this date in the Korchi taluka.** Subsequently, through their *parishad*, women have had numerous discussions around the impact of mining in their lives, families and forests and the need for protecting forests. The *parishads* have also been crucial in bringing up women leaders at various platforms to narrate their struggles and opinions, including their conception of wellbeing, which is deeply linked to healthy forests.

During the resistance against mining in the Korchi *taluka*, women leaders in the *parishads* began to realize and discuss that while women were always at the forefront of the resistance, they had no space in traditional decision-making processes, about the village or the forests. By 2015, the discussions on *Gram Sabhas* as units of self governance were gaining ground, *taluka* level meetings were being organized, implementation of the FRA was being spoken about in various *taluka* and *Ilaka* level meetings. However, none looked at the issues of women's participation, women's rights under the Acts and economic empowerment of women from the forest produce. Some of the women leaders began participating in the *taluka* level meetings.

In one of the first meetings of the *Maha Gramsabha*, the *parishad* members insisted that **along with challenging the hegemonic and top-down bureaucracies, it was also important to challenge the established traditional structures that legitimized oppression on women and restricted women's role in decision-making, including decisions around forests.** They ensured that MGS includes 2 women representatives along with 2 men from each *Gram Sabha*. Having the first unit of decision-making in the *Gram Sabhas*, within their villages, rather than the *parishads*, which are far away from the villages, already provided much greater opportunity for women's participation. Through the efforts of the *parishads*, some *Gram Sabhas* have also made special efforts to ensure that meetings are held at times when women are able to participate. The *parishads* also ensured that Korchi *taluka* is one of the few in the country where rights of the women under the FRA are being focused on. FRA provides for joint land titles over land for a wife and husband. In many villages in Korchi, titles have been issued jointly but others also in the name of women as first owners or women as exclusive land owners.

Going a step beyond, many *Gram Sabhas* have also taken the decision that women will get the daily wage labour as well as the profits from the sale of non-timber forest products directly in their own accounts, instead of their husbands. In fact, one village, Sahle, has decided that the entire profit earned by the family from forest produce will go only to the account of the women of the family – a powerful and unique decision.

## Conclusion

The process of assertion of rights, self governance and forest management in Korchi is still in its initial years and is unfolding organically. A number of enabling factors have played a critical role in the process towards resistance, self-rule, and assertion of local conceptions of

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wellbeing in Korchi. These include a **long history of political mobilization and debates on ‘development’, creating spaces of strong local leadership of men and women; presence of unique leaders leading to ideological debates and discourses; legal spaces provided by enabling laws such as FRA; people to people learning and exchanges; greater economic benefits from localizing non-timber forest products economy; enabling yet non imposing support by organizations and individual activists.**

**This has lead to the ever-alert, agile, and multi-dimensional process of responding to internal and external challenges.** This includes responding to hegemonic and oppressive state policies, including heavy militarization and macro-economic policy deeply skewed in favour of corporatisation and privatization; or addressing internal hegemonies and patriarchy. **Inclusion of women’s voices in decision-making and benefit sharing has meant a more equitable social organization, stronger resistance against mining, more effective forest management and conservation and a culturally appropriate and ecological sound conception of local wellbeing as an alternative to extractivism based model of development.**

*Neema Pathak Broome, Shrishtee Bajpai and Mukesh Shende*

*Neema and Shrishtee are members of Kalpavriksh, based in Pune and Mukesh works with Amhi Amchi Arogyasaathi and is based in Gadchiroli*

(1) This article is based on a long-term study being carried out by Kalpavriksh, with Amhi Amchi Arogyasaathi (AAA) and Korchi Maha Gramsabha as part of the ACKnowl-EJ (Academic-Activist Co Produced Knowledge for Environmental Justice) project. ACKnowl-EJ is a network of scholars and activists engaged in action and collaborative research that aims to analyse the transformative potential of community responses to extractivism and alternatives born from resistance (<http://acknowledgej.org/>)

## Resistance by women defenders of territory to extractivism in Latin America



Ph.:Cristina  
Chiquin

In Latin America, women have always been part of the historical struggles in defense of territories and the environment. Through mobilization protests and in their daily practices, they have resisted extractivism and all forms of violence against women. **As well as being at**

the forefront of such struggles, literally "using their own bodies" to stop the destruction of their territories, they have also proposed critical views on the patriarchal and racist nature of extractivism. By way of the feminist assertion that "the personal is political" they have questioned sexist practices within social movements, transgressed stereotypes and gender roles, and created autonomous spaces based on solidarity and collective caring. In the following article we will share some reflections on their struggles, offering a brief overview of the current context of the extractivist model in the region and its specific impacts on women's lives.

Extractivism is an economic and political model based on the commodification and unrestrained exploitation of nature. In Latin America it has become more prolific since the 1990s. This model produces irreversible damage, polluting the air, soil and water sources and causing high losses of biodiversity. Furthermore, it contravenes the human and collective rights of the affected communities, destroying traditional ways of life and economies, and making such communities dependent on external markets.

**Extractivism, in its various forms, is characterized by plundering and usurpation.** It is based on the structural racism that manifests itself in the dispossession of ancestral territories, the denial of cultural practices and ways of caring for nature of indigenous peoples, afro-descendants and mixed race native islanders (Raizales).

### **How does extractivism operate in Latin America?**

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the usurping and violent nature of the extractivist model is evident both in the negative impacts it produces and in the different strategies used by

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companies to take over entire territories, in collusion with the governments where such activities are carried out, and often with the collusion of their own governments of the countries of origin where such companies are based.

**The complicity between companies, governments and in many cases, illegal armed groups and other shadowy forces, can be observed in the different levels and stages of socio-environmental conflicts:** a) legislation and policies favorable to the entry of investments and companies in the targeted countries; b) the violation of the right to prior, unrestricted and informed consultation and in general to the participation of civil society, which allows projects to be set up despite local opposition; c) the defense of the companies' installations through the militarization of the territories and coordination with armed groups and organized crime; and d) the interventions of judges and prosecutors who deny that companies have any responsibility, thus allowing impunity to prevail.

At present, Latin America continues to be the most dangerous region for those trying to defend their territory: **60% of all murders of people defending the earth and the environment in the world have been recorded in this region.** The countries with the highest figures of such homicides are Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Guatemala, Peru and Nicaragua, according to the most recent report published by the international NGO Global Witness. (2)

Criminalization is one of the main strategies used by companies and governments to stop the



resistance to extractive megaprojects. This occurs through the stigmatization of dissent, defamation through the media or declarations made by public officials, the repression of social protest and the use of litigation or criminal prosecution of defenders. This underlines the double standards of justice systems: while companies enjoy legal security and armed protection to take control of whole territories, those who fight to defend such territories are persecuted and subjected to severe sentences.

### **How are women in particular affected?**

Extractivism is based on and exacerbates the patriarchal culture, which has a particular affect on women's way of life. As some feminist theorists and land defenders have argued, there are cultural, historical and symbolic parallels between exploitation and control over women's bodies and of nature. In the contexts of mining and oil exploitation and hydroelectric installations, for example, a 'masculinization' of territories takes place (3) in which community spaces and daily life are restructured around the desires and values of a hegemonic masculinity.

**The defenders of land and women's rights have denounced that the practices of dispossession and contamination of the territories take place alongside the resurgence of patriarchal violence against women and girls and the exacerbation of gender inequalities.** The above occurs in all areas of their lives and is expressed in: a) increased workloads in terms of the care work undertaken by women; b) loss of economic autonomy and food sovereignty; c) the increase in psychological, physical, economic, patrimonial and sexual violence within family and community contexts; d) the impacts on physical, emotional and reproductive health due to contact with contaminated air, soil and water; e) discrimination based on gender and violation of the right to citizen participation in prior, unrestricted and informed consultation processes (4); f) the increased sexual

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exploitation of women's and girl's bodies and; g) loss of cultural identity and the weakening of the community and ancestral roles of women.

### **Violence against women defenders of territory**

The specific vulnerability and the multiple attacks suffered by women defenders of territory adds to the violence experienced historically by women, within the framework of a society shaped by injustices of gender, race and class. **In contrast to their male counterparts, women defenders are exposed to a greater range of violence, particularly sexual abuse.** In addition to facing attacks by corporate and state agents, such defenders suffer multiple violence on a daily basis within the context of their families and communities, and on many occasions, within their own organizations and mixed social movements.

Although the statistics for murdered women are lower than those of their male comrades, it is important to highlight that the cases of murders or "territorial femicides" as some feminist defenders in Guatemala refer to it, (6) are highlighted and investigated differently. **The absence of recognition of the work of women defenders and the partiality of the judicial authorities who apply misogynistic and racist prejudices, result in such cases being classified as "crimes of passion," thus ignoring the context of the resistance led by such women, or even contriving such cases as suicides,** which as a rule simply

reinforces impunity. (7)

Consequently, such violence does not end with the elimination of the physical existence of the women defenders: the way in which investigations are conducted -or rather the lack of such investigations- re-victimizes the women, transforming them into the guilty party, and preventing justice and reparation for such women and their families.

Differentiated violence also leads to differentiated impacts on the lives of women defenders. These include negative impacts on their physical, emotional and spiritual health, ranging from sleep disorders, weight loss, permanent feelings of fear, depression, to more serious diseases such as cancer. Being criminalized and stigmatized also has a precarious impact on their economic well-being, and in many cases they become isolated in their own communities and families. At a collective level, these aggressions weaken their organizations, spreads fear among their female comrades and sometimes results in the dismantling or stagnation of their struggles.

### **Proposals from Latin American women for the defense of territory and the elimination of violence against women**

Within the framework of their work as custodians and defenders of the environment and nature, women have developed various actions that have allowed the positioning of their particular demands and perspectives, and on many occasions **they have temporarily halted or paralyzed extractive interventions that threaten their territories. In turn, they have generated significant transformations at the personal and collective level**, constructing new practices aimed at forms of comprehensive protection and security.

Some of their repertoires of social action include: a) the creation of spaces for the articulation and exchange of defense experiences at the national and regional levels and the construction of regional networks to contribute to the visibility, accompaniment and

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strengthening of local hubs of resistance; b) protests and de facto actions to prevent the advance of extractive activities, and to recover lands: road blockings, marches, permanent camps to block the installations of companies; c) actions of enforcement to activate protection mechanisms within the national and international framework and advocacy activities directed at local and national authorities, and international human rights organizations; d) documentation and reporting of aggressions and criminalization of female defenders and the formation of communicative strategies to draw attention to their struggles; e) promotion of popular and autonomous consultations so that communities can express their determination regarding the decisions and activities that affect their environment, and the necessity to carry out prior consultations according to international standards; f) daily resistance practices related to food sovereignty - preservation of native seeds and their traditional uses, agroecological practices - and the popular, feminist and solidarity economy and g) practices and reflection around self-care and mutual care, including personal and collective healing.

One of the main contributions of the struggles of women and feminists for the defense of land and common goods has been to insist on the connection between bodies and territories. **Guatemalan community feminists have proposed the category body-land territory to**

**highlight that the struggle for the defense of the land against extractivism must be simultaneous and inseparable from the struggle for women in such territories to live a life free from violence and the exploitation of their bodies.**

From their experiences as land defenders, women have forged positions of transformation based on the care of life in all its multiple manifestations, and with ever-increasing efforts they have integrated care of the earth, of themselves and of the collective as elements indispensable in their activism. This comprehensive vision of care is reflected in the way in which some women's and indigenous organizations perceive protection: **the protection of female human rights and environmental defenders is necessarily interwoven with the protection of territory.** In this sense, the organizations propose measures of protection and practices that reflect indigenous, afro-descendant and mixed race native islanders (Raizales) spirituality. In this context, **healing becomes ever more relevant:** from the dialogue of knowledge between peoples, contexts and generations, and the recovery of the memory of the ancestors, **women defenders not only heal the impacts of the attacks they have suffered because of their environmental activism, but also the deep wounds of structural violence against women.**

*Laura María Carvajal Echeverry, Coordinator of the Women and Territories Program of the Urgent Action Fund for Latin America and the Caribbean (8)*

(1) This article is based on our publication "Extractivism in Latin America. Impacts on women's lives and strategies for the defense of territory," available on our website at: [https://www.urgentactionfundlatinamerica.org/site/assets/files/1346/b81245\\_6cc6d3d7edd447d0ab461860ae1ae64f.pdf](https://www.urgentactionfundlatinamerica.org/site/assets/files/1346/b81245_6cc6d3d7edd447d0ab461860ae1ae64f.pdf)

(2) GLOBAL WITNESS, 2018. At what cost? Irresponsible business and the murder of land and environmental defenders in 2017. Available at:

<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/at-what-cost/> (3) See: CABNAL, Lorena.

Without being consulted: the commodification of our body-land territory, in: Women Defending the Territory. Experiences of participation in Latin America. Urgent Action Fund of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2015, [https://issuu.com/fondodeaccionurgente-al/docs/territorio\\_engl](https://issuu.com/fondodeaccionurgente-al/docs/territorio_engl); and GARCÍA TORRES, Miriam. Feminism reactivates the struggle against 'extractivism' in Latin America. Published in La Marea on 17 February 2014, by the Latin American Network of Women Defenders of Social and Environmental Rights,; <https://www.rebelion.org/noticias/2014/2/181047.pdf> (Only Spanish)

(4) For a broad perspective on the barriers to effective participation of women in environmental issues and experiences of women in different countries with respect to popular, community and autonomous consultations,

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see our collective publication together with women defenders from Argentina, Guatemala, Bolivia and Ecuador: Women defending the territory: experiences of participation in Latin America | 2015, available at:

[https://issuu.com/fondodeaccionurgente-al/docs/territorio\\_engl](https://issuu.com/fondodeaccionurgente-al/docs/territorio_engl)

(5) For a comprehensive overview on the criminalization and attacks against women defenders of territories, see our Regional Report on Patterns of criminalization and limitations on the effective participation of women who defend environmental rights, territory and nature in the Americas available at:

<https://fondoaccionurgente.org.co/site/assets/files/1348/ingles.pdf>

(6) This has been a category promoted by women territorial defenders, including Red de Sanadoras del Feminismo Comunitario de Guatemala (Network of Healers of Community Feminism of Guatemala). (7) For a comprehensive overview on impunity, see our Regional Report on Impunity for Violence against Women Defenders of Territory, Common Goods, and Nature in Latin America, 2018, available at:

[https://www.urgentactionfund-latinamerica.org/site/assets/files/1343/regional\\_report\\_-\\_impunity.pdf](https://www.urgentactionfund-latinamerica.org/site/assets/files/1343/regional_report_-_impunity.pdf) (8) The

Urgent Action Fund for Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean is a regional feminist fund that contributes to the sustainability and strengthening of activists and their movements, with agile and strategic support with respect to situations of risk and opportunity. We support the resistance, struggles and demands of women human rights defenders and territories in the transformation of systems of injustice and inequality, making integral feminist protection and care the main point of focus. For more information please consult our website at: <https://fondoaccionurgente.org.co/en/>

## A reflection from Africa: Conquer the fear for building stronger movements



The WRM International Secretariat carried out an interview with social and environmental activist and human rights defender Nasako Besingi. He is the Director of the Cameroonian organization Struggle to Economize the Future Environment (SEFE), which supports local communities' land rights struggles mainly against palm oil plantations. Nasako has organized communities in their protests against the development of palm oil plantations by the US agribusiness company Herakles Farm. Due to this engagement, he has been the victim of Herakles Farm and government physical attacks, intimidation and criminalization. The activist has vehemently condemned the human rights violations around the current crises in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon.

***Often, one hears that communities in Africa cannot really defend or claim back their lands from companies that get concessions from the national government, because, according to the national Law, “all land belongs to the State”. What is your view on this?***

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First, what constitute a State? It consists of four key elements: population, territory, government and sovereignty. Hence, the phrase “all land belongs to the State” does not imply that land is owned by the government, but rather by the entire population living within the territory of a State, including the people in the government. Most of the population of a State resides in communities, where they struggle daily to defend for themselves such territory. On the other hand, a government is best described as an agency to which the WILL of the State is formulated, expressed, and carried out, and through which common policies are determined and regulated in terms of political, economical and social development. Fulfilling those tasks does not translate into governmental ownership rights on land and natural resources of the State.

It is wrong for any government to claim ownership over land, discarding communities' land rights. As a matter of fact, the problem with Africa's land ordinances was drawn up with the help of colonial masters, who, without the consent of the population, handed over the territory to the presidents, which were not elected by the population but most often handpicked by the

colonizers to serve their long-term interests. Moreover, the notion that “all land belongs to the State” does not give a government the rights to own the land and to dispose it unilaterally, but rather to legislate and regulate on land matters, considering and respecting community interests.

It is the duty of the governments to provide happiness, liberty and peace to the population as well as to protect properties. Adding to that, these governments have ratified international instruments on behalf of the States in order to enhance the rights of the population. Since international law takes precedent over national law, it goes without saying that the ratification of these international instruments override governments’ unilateral disposal of land under the greedy misinterpretation of “all land belongs to the State”, without the consent of the primary element of a State (people), whose daily survival and existence depend on the land.

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the United Nations Charter, the Africa Charter on Human & Peoples Rights and other international instruments make it illegal for these governments to unilaterally cede land for development purposes without community consent. Recently, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has weighed in on land grabs and communities rights’ abuses as crimes that rise to the level of international jurisprudence and pledged to prosecute violators (governments and corporations).

Since I have been involved in community land rights’ movements and organizations in Cameroon and other countries, no single community I met accepted the idea that land is owned by the government. They say affirmatively that the land belongs to their communities and is an ancestral heritage. None of the communities I have worked with agrees with the presence of multinational corporations on their land, claiming that the companies were established through the use of coercive force.

***In your experience, what are important aspects/strategies for building and strengthen movements and community struggles in the African context?***

Movements and community struggles in Africa are still in early stages because of Africa’s dark history of slavery, forced colonization and post independence semi-colonial administration, with no democratic and human rights opportunities. Today the situation looks very different, with partial democracy and discretionary use of human rights mainly due to the conditionality placed by industrialized countries.

The most important aspect of building strong movements in Africa is to conquer the fear and ignorance deliberately instilled in the population by colonial and post-colonial administrations. Identify communities’ concerns is also key while creating awareness and educational manuals that reflect on those concerns. Another important aspect is to strengthen the

capacity of community activists and civil society organizations to know their rights and to know how to defend them in line with their daily livelihoods. Considering that long-lasting movements are those which are built from the base and not from the outside, strong resistance can only occur when glued to community concerns.

The strategies going forward include: establishing a strong coalition of Africa’s civil society organizations and communities with the aim of frequently sharing experiences and information; planning and executing activities around communities’ land rights; supporting advocacy based on defending and addressing violations; making available other forms of education materials for communities; and simplifying informative manuals and videos exposing the strategies and tactics used by corporations to infiltrate and grab community



ancestral land.

### ***And what are the biggest challenges?***

In the context of Africa, there are many challenges which need different approaches for resistance movements to succeed. An important one is the ignorance of communities about their land rights and on how to defend their ancestral land, supposedly due to their inability to confront the rising strengths of conspiratorial land seizure perpetrated by corporations and governments. Another challenge is the bad governance characterized by endemic corruption and the poverty designed to again keep community submitted to the government's will. There are also political obstacles put in place by the government in order to shrink the space of NGOs, civil society organizations and social movements, through intimidation and criminalization. Cumbersome conditions and limited funding opportunities are other challenges that movements have to face.

### ***In your opinion, do you think that international solidarity is important for community struggles?***

International solidarity remains the only best option to stop the senseless and unconscious takeover of community land. It is important for diminishing the clout of corporations and governments from exploiting communities' ignorance and from forcefully grab communal land.

Gaining more knowledge about rights will translate easily in stronger resistances against land thievery. The enlightenment through knowledge sharing at the base, where the violations occur and in countries where the finance and consumers are coming from is an important first step.

Local groups may not be able to handle alone the intimidation, violence and prolonged trumped up legal cases brought against them by the government and corporations. They have not much experience with nonviolent direct actions which consist of having the right information and intelligence to confront the violators.

### ***Which type of international solidarity do you think has worked the best until now?***

Until now, in the African context, I can think of the campaign in Cameroon against Herakles Farms, a US based firm that intended to chop down 73,000 hectares of pristine forest for its palm oil plantations project in the midst of four protected areas, including the Korup National Park. The backlash against Herakles Farms came from local communities, local and international NGOs, researchers, scientists, academics, among others. Immense pressure mounted at both, the local level, where the operations were taking place, and at the international level, where the companies were sourcing for funds to establish the project. In 2013, the president of Cameroon signed a series of decrees reducing the concession from 73,000 hectares to 19,843 hectares. Yet this didn't bode well with the communities'

aspirations as they continued their resistance and echoing original demand of "No Plantation On Our Land". The company abandoned its operations in Mundemba and Toko concession areas in 2015.

Moreover, intercontinental collaborative initiatives such as the one involving GRAIN/WRM and local NGOs and community organisations in Africa under the guidance of the Alliance Against Industrial Oil Palm Expansion across central and west Africa, has done a tremendous job of awakening depressed communities by providing visibility to their struggles,

information and jointly identify opportunities to stop destructive oil palm plantations through community solidarity exchange programs, including workshops and villages visits to encourage them to counter land grabs over their lands. Besides, the joint work also aims at exposing the strategies and tactics used by the multinational companies that grab community lands and alerting those who are now threatened by such grabs.

***Is there a different type of solidarity that you would wish for strengthening the resistance against land grabbing in Cameroon or elsewhere in Africa?***

Strengthening community solidarity and exchanges among villages directly and indirectly affected by developmental projects in order to build confidence at the community level is the backbone of any successful resistance. Other key points are: intercontinental exchanges with different communities for sharing experiences, which help to dissipate and expose corporate deceits and tactics; coherent village visits to keep affected villages and would-be-affected villages on alert against the wrongful expansion of oil palm plantations and other projects without their due consent; a stronger expose of corporate deceits and claims on sustainable development and how they are been tokenized by corporations instead of respecting communities' right to their Free, Prior and Informed Consent.

We need to align local community resistance with overall local community alternative opportunities. Invest on building capacities of local organizations and communities to put in place a "Reliable Community Resistance" capable of pre-empting land grabs and human rights on the continent as they occur. Organise a series of events such as workshops, seminars, village visits, in person and off person meetings among key players.

There is a key need to build a stronger collaborative partnership between northern NGOs and communities and southern counterparts in order to tackle land grab and deforestation, because these ventures are driven and abated by investors and government policies including choices of consumers in northern countries. Exchange meetings among communities from the North and the South will enable a better understanding on how the political decisions, the governments and corporations are affecting the environment and abusing human rights in the South, especially as companies are bombing deceitful communication and advertisement to cover up their destruction and abuses, associated with products which they claim are sustainable.



Xolobeni community against mining. Ph.: Paul Botes.

*“We do not want mining. We don’t want its child. We don’t want its grandmother. We don’t want its family. We have no desire to chat or have any conversations with the people of the mine.”*

These powerful words were uttered by two representatives of the Amadiba Crisis Committee at the Third Southern African Peoples Permanent Tribunal on Transnational Corporations, which was held in November 2018. The Amadiba Crisis Committee represent the Xolobeni community, which has been fighting for sixteen years to prevent Australian mining conglomerate, Transworld Energy and Minerals (TEM), from mining the titanium-rich sand along the Wild Coast of South Africa. (1) For the Amadiba Crisis Committee, land is an intrinsic part of the community’s identity, past, present and future. Nonhle Mbuthuma, a founding member of the group says, **“We believe that we know who we are because of the land. We believe that once you have lost the land, you have lost your identity.”**

In April 2018, the Committee took their case to South Africa’s High Court in a brave push for justice. (2) Now, months later and just over a week after the Peoples Tribunal, **the courts have ruled in favour of the community, declaring that the Department of Mineral Resources must obtain “full and formal” consent from the people of Xolobeni before granting mining rights.**

Across South Africa, and beyond, the Xolobeni struggle has become an emblematic case for communities resisting extractive-driven development agendas and fighting for the right to say NO. Already this landmark victory has galvanised communities across the continent, a welcome reminder that **justice is possible through sustained organising, movement building and solidarity.**

It was this very spirit of solidarity and courageous resistance against corporate power that drove the third session of the Southern African Peoples Permanent Tribunal on Transnational Corporations. (3) This was the last of a three-year process of hearings where communities have presented cases against transnational corporations, exposing their human and

Corporations, in collusion with States and International Financial Institutions, such as the World Bank, propagate this devastating extractivist development agenda that prioritises profit over people and the planet—all in the name of “progress.”

“We have been struck by the extent of the ruthless extraction, dispossession, displacement and brutality shown by the transnational corporations in search of profit,” reads the Jurors’ closing statement at the end of the three-day tribunal. **“All this has been done frequently with the collusion of the State and its actors and organisations in carrying out repression and in some cases massacres of citizens.”**

Throughout the tribunal process, communities have put forward a total of twenty cases against TNCs in Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. These cases range from mining companies and mega dams to major agribusiness and land grabs – and each one speaks to the complicity between corporations, governments and financial institutions in upholding a system of global impunity. ([Read about the cases here](#))

### ***Fighting mega-dams: Stop Inga 3!***

One of the cases presented at the Tribunal was that of communities speaking out against the Grand Inga mega hydropower dam project in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). (4) With its promises to “energise and unlock regional industrialisation” by electrifying the DRC and the African continent, the Inga Hydropower Dam Scheme (Inga 1 and 2) has already displaced communities in DRC. If Inga 3 goes ahead as planned, around 37,000 more people whose livelihoods are based around the Congo River will suffer the same fate.

Mining companies have benefited the most from the hydro-powered electricity generated by the two first Inga projects, leaving many communities without reliable energy supply. Currently, 85% of the population in DRC has no access to electricity. (5) The recently launched South Africa’s Integrated Resource Plan is moving ahead with a DRC-South Africa deal that will guarantee 2500MW of electricity for the latter by 2030. (6) Meanwhile, **the people most directly impacted by this mega-project will not reap any of the benefits while electricity is sent through six countries to power mining and other extractive industries in South Africa.** “We sleep on Inga’s dam site but we live in the dark,” said Jane\*, a Congolese woman activist leader who spoke at the Peoples Tribunal.

At the Tribunal, activists also emphasised the particular burden that women carry when it comes to mega-projects like Inga that threaten lives and livelihoods. One woman activist stated: “We are dependent on agriculture – how will we feed ourselves? How are we going to feed our children? How are we going to survive? We, the women who live in Inga, depend on agriculture – that is what enables us to feed our children. We are now seeing a drought because of the dam. Our food production has diminished because of the infrastructure. My husband has to go to the next village to find small game because here the animals have begun to disappear. Us, who live close to the dam, we don’t even have electricity.”

The communities fighting against the Inga 3 dam have already engaged with the involved States, writing a letter to the South African government. They have also launched a campaign to *Stop Inga 3* ([sign the petition in support and solidarity](#)). They are demanding the withdrawal of Chinese, Spanish and South African companies as well as any State

involvement in the scheme. **Their resistance is inspiring. They work in an increasingly repressive context to fight for the right to Say NO as well as to call for compensation for those who were displaced by the Inga 1 and 2 dams.**

Communities from South Africa have already begun to respond to their appeal, seeing the clear opportunity for joint strategizing and solidarity in holding the South African government accountable. “The Congo river belongs to the people but it has been taken away from them. The communities were never consulted. We, in South Africa, were never told that we would get electricity from the DRC. And even if we were going to get it as community people, we can’t enjoy it knowing the violence, militarisation and destruction that is taking place in DRC,” said Caroline Ntaopane from the African Women network against destructive resource extraction (WoMin Alliance).

**The Peoples Tribunal has been an important platform for communities around the southern African region to share their struggles and build solidarity, present critical cases of corporate violations, and challenge the status quo by exposing the brutal underbelly and unsustainability of so-called “development.”**

Those communities and many more, are currently working together to build a campaign for the *Right to Say No*. This campaign is “a broad mobilisation and convergence of transnational activism and solidarity.” It is grounded in the principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and builds on the dynamic organising of movements, unions, women’s organisations and many others in communities like Xolobeni in south Africa and Inga in DRC, who are rising up to say NO to corporate power, state impunity and a development agenda that harms people and the planet.

*Maggie Mapondera*

*WoMin African Alliance, <http://www.womin.org.za/>*

*\* The name of the activist leader was changed for security reasons*

(1) CIDSE, Xolobeni Community and the Struggle for Consent, November 2017, <https://www.cidse.org/gender-equality-blog/xolobeni-community-and-the-struggle-for-consent.html>

(2) The Guardian, South African community wins court battle over mining rights, November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/22/south-african-community-wins-court-battle-over-mining-rights>

(3) <https://www.stopcorporateimpunity.org/permanent-peoples-tribunal-transnational-southern-africa/>

(4) Daily Maverick, SA does not need the Grand Inga Project, November 2018, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2018-11-08-sa-does-not-need-the-grand-inga-project/>

(5) No to Inga 3, Yes to accessible energy across Congo, <https://stoppinga3.org/en/> (6) South African government releases Integrated Resource Plan draft, August 2018, <https://africaoilandpower.com/2018/08/28/south-african-government-releases-integrated-resource-plan-draft/>



## Tanzania: Community Resistance against Monoculture Tree Plantations



Plantations close to Idete village.

At first glance, the Nzivi village is a village as many others in the area. But a big difference is that it does not allow investors for large-scale activities, such as monoculture tree plantations. Green Resources is the main private plantation company active in Tanzania.

At first glance, the Nzivi village, in the Iringa region in Tanzania, is a village as many others in the area. Its inhabitants live from agriculture and cattle breeding, the main activities communities practice in the area. But anyone who visits the village would be amazed about the huge extent of monoculture tree plantations in the surroundings, mainly of pine but also eucalyptus trees. Together they probably are the biggest plantations in East Africa. By 2016, Tanzania had 583 thousand hectares covered by monoculture tree plantations, of which more than 400 thousand hectares, about 70 per cent, are located in the Iringa and Njombe regions, the so-called Southern Highlands.

But anyone who would talk with the villagers of Nzivi would discover that it is different in at least two aspects: they decided, after learning from other experiences, to not allow investors for large-scale activities, such as monoculture tree plantations. And as a result, Nzivi still has plenty of land for fulfilling villagers' needs.

To understand what made Nzivi's villagers make such a decision, it is important to understand the impacts of industrial tree plantations on the other communities in the area. During a field visit in October 2018, SUHODE Foundation, Justiça Ambiental and WRM visited, besides Nzivi, the villages of Idete, Mapanda, Kihanga, Igowole and Taweta, facing the monoculture plantations of the main private company active in the area, Green Resources, to learn about these impacts.

### ***Green Resources in Tanzania***

Plantations started to be set up in the region several decades ago, first by state companies like Sao Hill and then, since the 1990ies, plantation areas have been also increasingly



promoted and set up by private companies. The biggest private company in the country is Green Resources, a Norwegian company owned in its majority by Norfund, the Norwegian governmental development institution, besides of a large number of other financial market investors. (1)

Green Resources profiles itself as one of the largest 'forest' developer and wood processing companies in East Africa, with tree plantations in Mozambique, Uganda and Tanzania. In Tanzania, Green Resources controls a total area of 74,850 hectares, of which 17,000 hectares has already been planted with eucalyptus and pine plantations. The company affirms on its website that it "believes that forestation is one of the most efficient ways of improving social and economic conditions for people in rural areas and aims to be the preferred employer and partner for local communities in these areas." It also states that for Tanzania "The land areas used for planting are low-value grassland that has almost entirely been acquired from local villages."

Contrary to the current situation in Mozambique in which the company lost the certificate, in Tanzania, the company has FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification, which allows it to claim that its wood comes from 'sustainable' sources. It also has registered and validated its plantations for carbon storage (via the VCS system), and even under the CCBS scheme that, among others, claims its "mission" is "to stimulate and promote land management activities that credibly mitigate global climate change, improve the well-being and reduce the poverty of local communities, and conserve biodiversity." (2)

Green Resources arrived in the communities of Idete in 1996, Mapanda in 1997 and Taweta in 2007. The communities were enticed and decided to accept a lease agreement with the company that secured it access to up to one third of the community land for a period of 99 years. This happened for at least two important reasons. First, because at that very moment, communities did not see the land area lost as crucial for their needs and they had no notion of the real value of those lands. But also, a very important reason to accept Green Resources was its list of promises. Jobs, to start with, as well as the improvement of the villages' infrastructure; for example, building and renovating classrooms, local government offices and meeting halls, dispensaries, water sources, health and education staff dormitories, etc. On top of that, the company also promised to share 10 per cent of the revenues generated from the carbon projects it elaborated, which are based on the carbon 'stored' in the growing pine and eucalyptus trees planted in the three villages. Green Resources put these promises on paper and signed additional contracts with the communities for the carbon revenues, without the communities having a clear understanding of how this market system works.

Nowadays, many years after the company arrived, the communities are disappointed and angry. They affirm that the company promises were either not or only partially fulfilled. Currently, there is hardly any permanent job created. Both in Idete and Taweta, Green Resources has created only 1 permanent job, and in Mapanda - considering its 5,503 inhabitants according to the village council - not even one single job. The villagers have also many complaints about the working conditions, including the low salaries; the lack of transport for those hired for temporary jobs; the precarious or even lack of protective equipment against agrotoxins; and villagers accuse the company for not having paid to Tanzania's social security system the amount the company discounted from their salaries for such contributions.

Villagers admit that some infrastructure promises have been fulfilled. But at the same time, in Mapanda for example, villagers are still waiting for a new village meeting room. Only after the community put a lot of pressure on the company, it finally promised to build it this year. Nevertheless, the new meeting room is not built yet. In Taweta, the only improvement that villagers remember is the renovation of two classrooms. The office that Green Resources built in this village for administering the plantations in the area has been closed and looks abandoned.

Carbon revenues were only shared with the Mapanda village, where the community received two carbon payments of 30 and 33 million Tanzanian shillings, paid in 2011 and 2014 respectively. These two payments amount to about US 40 thousand dollars, a very low amount for a community of more than 5 thousand people with many infrastructure challenges, as, for example, to improve its water supply. Even so, there was no transparency in the way in which the amount paid to the community was defined. The community was not aware of the total value of the revenue acquired by the company or if the amount channelled actually corresponded to the 10 per cent of the revenues or not. The villages of Idete and Taweta have not received any carbon payments until now. In a public presentation of Green Resources available on internet (3), the company complains that “carbon finance has been a disappointment”, but states that nevertheless “Green Resources has generated USD 2 million (...)”. If one calculates the 10 per cent of that amount, the villages should have received at least US 200 thousand dollars - significantly more than what the Mapanga village received.

The three communities that we visited regret they gave vast tracks of their land to the company and that their access is now restricted, including for collecting straw and clay in areas still to be planted. When asked if they agree with the company’s argument that these lands are of ‘low-value’ or ‘degraded’ (as Green Resources and other tree plantation companies use to argue), they said unanimously that that is a complete lie. They consider those lands to be very valuable, fertile and important for the communities and their future. Nowadays they need to ask permission if they want to enter the land. In Idete, villagers worry that they cannot collect anymore a type of reed used to make traditional baskets, that especially women produce. A woman villager is also concerned about the escalation in HIV/AIDS cases due to the increase of outside workers in the villages’ areas.

Another villager argued that there is no comparison between the losses the community is suffering by giving out their land for 99 years, with the benefits obtained until now. Villages are concerned about their future. One woman of the Idete village reflected with high concern on how her children can probably still be able to farm, but her grandchildren will not have space for their food crops and livestock, which means poverty will increase.

It is of no surprise that the three communities want the lands now occupied by Green Resources back -or at least a part of it. By reflecting on the future of their villages and families, they want to be sure that they will have enough land for the thousands of villagers in their communities, especially in the near future. They nevertheless face a big challenge by having signed an apparently legal contract where they agree on leasing out their village land to the company. But what is the legitimacy of such a contract when it was approved based on a list of unfulfilled promises and when the company’s activities put at risk the future of the entire community?

The findings found in the field suggest the questioning regarding the truthfulness of the company's statements when noting that in Tanzania the company claims it is operating exemplarily and is a preferred partner of local communities in the area.

### ***Information as power***

The story of Green Resources in Tanzania shows once again how plantations companies always need to secure access to a huge land area in order to operate. It also shows how these companies do this based on a number of false or very badly fulfilled promises in order to convince the affected communities to give away their land. The stories and experiences from communities facing Green Resources or other plantations companies are very important for other villages to learn from and reflect upon.

The villagers of Nzivi got to know on time about the experiences from other villages by talking to their neighbouring communities, and, concerned that they might come into the same situation, they decided not to trust the promises and to say *no* to any company that wants to control significant parcels of their land, such as Green Resources. They decided to secure their own control over and access to their land for the future generations.

This does not mean that the villagers of Nzivi would not accept any investment at all. The leaders told us that they separated a relatively small area of the community land for investors, but only for those that do not aim to take over significant parts of their land and are also interested in supporting the community in services that the community consider important but are now precariously offered, like education and health. They see that this different type of investment could be in their benefit while at the same time secure their fundamental right to access their own land, forests and grassland, which they depend upon for their very survival.

Unsurprisingly, no investors appeared yet to make a proposal to the community. This illustrates how far away the profit-oriented interests of investors like Green Resources and the private and Norwegian state investors behind it are from the interests and needs of rural communities in Tanzania, like Nzivi.

*Justiça Ambiental! - Mozambique,  
SUHODE Foundation - Tanzania  
and the WRM*

(1) <http://www.suaire.suanet.ac.tz:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/1659/SAID%20ASIAD.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

(2) <http://www.greenresources.no> and <http://www.climate-standards.org/about-ccba/>  
[http://www.greenresources.no/Portals/0/pdf/GR\\_NewForest\\_for\\_Africa\\_170316\\_\(new\).compressed.pdf](http://www.greenresources.no/Portals/0/pdf/GR_NewForest_for_Africa_170316_(new).compressed.pdf)

## ACTION ALERTS

### **No to ProSAVANA and MATOPIBA. Solidarity with people in Mozambique and Brazil!**

Peasants' movements and civil society organizations from Mozambique, Brazil and Japan met in Tokyo, Japan, in November 2018, for the fourth Triangular Peoples' Conference against ProSAVANA. The final declaration of the Conference "exposed the agribusiness capital agenda of eliminating peasant agriculture in our territories, exemplified by programs such as ProSAVANA in Mozambique or MATOPIBA in Brazil, which are promoted by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), in alliance with the financial capital and governments of these countries." The declaration calls for solidarity with the people in the Nacala Corridor in Mozambique and in the Brazilian Cerrado. Read more in English here:

<https://ja4change.wordpress.com/2018/11/28/tokyo-declaration-we-reiterate-the-rejection-of-prosavana-and-matopiba-and-defend-the-food-sovereignty-of-the-peoples/>

**Borneo: Penan village successfully resists logging operations** After two years of struggle against logging in their forest, the Penan village of Long Tevenga in Northern Sarawak gained a major victory. The Penan tried to prevent the logging company from entering the forest with a barricade on the logging road and last August they built a house across the road. The company had no way to get through. The Sarawak Forest Department has told logging company Lee Ling it can no longer proceed with logging — as long as the community has not given their consent.

Read further <http://borneoproject.org/updates/penan-village-successfully-protects-forest-from-logging>

**Estonia: Government decides to terminate pulp mill spatial plan** In May 2017, the Estonian government launched a procedure for a national designated spatial plan to determine the most suitable location for a planned 1 billion euros pulp mill in Viljandi and Tartu Counties, as well as a strategic environmental impact assessment procedure. The Est-For Invest company planned to build a large-scale pulp mill that would process some 3.3 million tonnes of pulpwood and produce up to 750,000 tonnes of output per year, primarily for export. Following protests by local residents and opposition from local governmental agencies, the government initiated the full termination of the procedures. Read further: <https://news.err.ee/841227/estonian-government-opts-to-initiate-termination-of-pulp-mill-spatial-plan>

**California, US: decision on Tropical Forest Standard is postponed until April 2019**

California's Air Resources Board held a public meeting to consider the endorsement of the California Tropical Forest Standard, which details a discussion about trading forest carbon against continued emissions from burning fossil fuels. The Board finally decided to postpone making a decision until April 2019. A letter signed by 110 social and conservation scientists was delivered to the California Air Resources Board.

Read the letter here: <https://redd-monitor.org/2018/11/20/california-postpones-decision-on-tropical-forest-standard-until-april-2019/>

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World Rainforest Movement 

## RECOMMENDED

**Dercy Teles on the popular movement of rubber tappers in Brazil** In June 2017, the WRM carried out an interview with Dercy Teles, the first female president of a Brazilian Rural Workers' Union, in the town of Xapuri, Acre in 1981. Xapuri became known nationally and internationally because of the union leader who succeeded Dercy: Chico Mendes. She reflects on the rich history of the rubber tappers' popular movement, including its difficulties, lessons learned and challenges.

Read the interview in the WRM 231 Bulletin: <https://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/dercy-teles-on-the-popular-movement-of-rubber-tappers-in-brazil/>

### The last trees of the Amazon

A team of journalists from five Latin American countries investigated how groups of timber traffickers manage to steal and process timber from the Amazon. An article from the newsportal Mongabay exposes how illegally-sourced timber from Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Colombia are incorporated into the international market with falsified official documents that are almost never verified.

Read the article: <https://news.mongabay.com/2018/11/the-last-trees-of-the-amazon/>

**The global farmland grab by pension funds needs to stop** A recent report by the NGO GRAIN highlights how the number of pension funds involved in farmland investment and the amount of money they are deploying into it is increasing, under the radar. This unprecedented take-over of farmland by financial companies has major implications for rural communities and food systems. Leaving it to the companies to police themselves with their own voluntary guidelines is a recipe for disaster.

Read further in <https://www.grain.org/article/entries/6059-the-global-farmland-grab-by-pension-funds-needs-to-stop>

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