



# *From Darkness to Blue Skies*

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*Listening to Indigenous Peoples, local communities,  
and Afro-descendant Peoples about their journey  
to a better future*



Over the course of 2022, one hundred leaders of grassroots networks in twenty-two countries<sup>1</sup>—men, women, and youth among Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendant Peoples—were interviewed about their hopes, dreams, and fears for the future.

The interviews, commissioned by the Rights and Resources Initiative and conducted anonymously, used a “blue-skies thinking” approach, in which we created a freeform space for brainstorming and new ideas. We encouraged participants to be open-minded and to think beyond day-to-day concerns. As appropriate, we spoke in Bahasa Indonesia, English, French, Nepali, Portuguese, and Spanish, sometimes with interpretation in Indigenous languages. We sought clarity on what these leaders want the world to be like in 2030 and beyond, how such a world could be brought into being, and their worries about the journey to get there.

*This is what they told us.*



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<sup>1</sup> Leaders interviewed from Latin America – Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru; Africa – Cameroon, the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, and Madagascar; Asia – Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, and Thailand.

## FUTURE VISIONS:

# “My blue sky”

The leaders we interviewed expressed diverse views on almost all topics, but they shared at least one universal vision. In a blue-sky world, their communities would have secure rights to their communal lands, forests, and territories; including the rights to govern these areas and exercise control over who lives in their territories and who uses their resources.

“The desire of every Indigenous People is to see their territory free of foreigners, of people outside the territory,” an Indigenous leader in Latin America told us.

“Customary land and forest rights-holders want to have autonomous territories within the national territory and under the authority of the state,” said another community leader in Africa. “The future we want is the one where we negotiate directly with investors when we agree to an investment on our land and forests.”

An Indigenous leader in Asia put her vision in more personal terms.

“I want a future where I can live with my children safely and there is no fear,” she said. “Where I can breathe without tension in my body and uphold common values and my own identity, where I have freedom to live with dignity and can be sure I won’t be arrested.”

In the vision of the leaders we spoke with, women, men, and children living in their territories will be safe and free from harassment. They will exercise their rights freely, decide for themselves how to conserve and develop their territories, resources, and ways of living, and protect themselves from the unbridled predatory growth they see happening around them. They will also contribute to the greater good of people everywhere.

“With my “blue sky”, what will change ... is that, through the possession of secure rights, the Indigenous Peoples and local communities are rationally and sustainably managing their customary and ancestral lands for the present and future generations,” said an Indigenous leader in Africa. “Our interconnections with the natural environment and our traditional knowledge will lead to significant climate benefits for ourselves, our country, and the rest of the world.”

Some leaders expressed a vision of “living well”, which includes adequate access to education and health services; the conservation of culture, forests, biodiversity, and water; equal access

*This narrative, produced by Alastair Sarre, is based on a global synthesis prepared by P. Davies, F. del Gatto, K. Edwards, D. Moenggorro, J. Nelson, P. René Oyono, B. Paudel, and A. Vianna and also draws on the following five regional reports: for Brazil by A. Vianna (1); for Spanish-speaking South and Central America by F. del Gatto (2); for Africa by R. Oyono (3) and J. Nelson (4); and for Asia by B. Paudel, D. Moenggorro, and K. Edwards (5). All these reports are available [here](#).*

to land and resources; and using natural resources to generate income and livelihoods in proportionate, fair, and sustainable ways.

***“What I imagine to be living well is this,” said a Brazilian Indigenous leader. “It is not utopia, and it is not romanticism: it is to think of the territory with all its riches and people with their ways of life and cultures preserved and protected.”***

“I see a blue sky when land and forest rights-holders make a tremendous effort to self-mobilize on issues such as peaceful conflict resolution, equitable benefit-sharing, local governance, management of financial resources, dialogues, [and] acquisition of negotiating skills with the private sector,” said a community leader in Africa.

Many leaders in Africa said they envisioned a future in which the advantages of keeping land in communal hands are more clearly understood among grassroots and community

elites. This, they hope, will reduce the subdivision of land into private holdings, especially as urban centers grow and when mines and bitumen roads arrive.

“We do not believe in private title—the people will sell and become poor,” said one African leader.

***“You need to look at the drivers of land subdivisions [that is, the individualization of titles],” said another. “These are growing, and we need to think about them.”***

A third leader in Africa saw nuance. “Our dream blue sky is for everyone to have secure titles for their land,” he said. “This can be communal or, even for many Indigenous Peoples, individual, for example when they want land near towns.”

The visions of some leaders<sup>2</sup> go beyond the delimitation of territorial boundaries and territoriality to include the right to mobility—that is, the right to adapt and vary their roaming according to seasonal and climatic changes in the availability and location of certain resources.

<sup>2</sup>For example, we spoke with leaders in Africa among the Baka, Bayieli, Aka, and Bambuti Pygmies, Mbororo transhumants, and Masai, and with leaders in Brazil representing the landless women's babassu nut-collector and -breaker movement.



Indigenous women gather in their village in Bengkulu province on the Sumatra island, Indonesia



Annie Gboyah, Peter K. Ben and Thomas Y. Kpue of the Jogbahn clan stand on the boundary line between the oil palm plantation land and their lands in Grand Bassa County, Liberia.

## RIGHTS:

*“I believe fundamental rights are going backwards”*

These blue-sky visions will be difficult to achieve given the harsh realities confronting many Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendant Peoples today. Leaders spoke of escalating struggles for recognition and security of rights on the ground. The availability of resources is shrinking rapidly, leaving people with inadequate access to food, water, and sources of livelihood. Some leaders reported increased harassment, criminalization, and threats to personal security. There are concerns for the mental and physical well-being of many.

"I have not thought of anything good, beautiful, or positive for a long time," said one Indigenous leader in Brazil.

"We already lost our land, forests, cultural identity, and spiritual places, but now we are also facing threats to our personal security from the police and authorities," said an Indigenous leader in Asia.

"What I have seen in Colombia is the roll-back of ethnic rights," said one Indigenous leader. "I believe this is how Brazil now is and this is possibly where other countries are going. I believe we are not in a very good time for ethnic peoples. I believe fundamental rights are going backwards."

"For me, self-determination is the door to claim our other rights—it is the right to speak and

read my own language and wear my traditional clothes," said an Indigenous leader in Asia. "However, we are now paralyzed by fear for our families, our businesses, and our village."

Leaders in all regions worry that they will be increasingly labeled as communists, traitors, foreign agents, and other deliberately provocative terms.

"We are too often being referred to as terrorists by our own government," said an Indigenous youth leader in Asia.

And there is widespread skepticism and suspicion about the motives of governments.

"It is like the state is trying to take the land off of communities," said a community leader in Africa.

"The reactivation of large mining and infrastructure projects [after the pandemic], far from favoring us, is directly undermining the exercise of our collective rights," said an Indigenous leader in Latin America.

Some of the leaders we interviewed see the increasing threats posed by resource extraction, governments, and the pandemic—the present 'dark skies'—as an opportunity to mobilize networks in defense of territorial rights. Solidarity will be more important than ever.

**"We are too often being referred to as terrorists by our own government," said an Indigenous youth leader in Asia.**



Chepkitale, Kenya | Credit: TonyWild Photography

## NETWORKS:

*“It is the quality of influence that contributes to the struggle”*

The leaders said they will need more support for their international work in the future to enable them to maintain a structured political presence. This should be based on a better understanding among themselves of the dynamics of interactions among the Global North, the Global South, civil society, and donors. It will enable stronger connections among rights-holder networks.



Credit: Mina Biyan

A community women's network meets in Liberia.

“We will need to work together more, consolidate and grow, now more than ever, more of us in the communities, and with other experiences, groups, networks, and movements in other places,” said a community leader in Latin America.

***“Brown and Black, North and South, protesting, yes, but also building allies in government or wherever we can find them. We will need to do this and be stronger together if we are to keep and protect our forests from all the growing threats and get more permanent and enduring rights,” the community leader added.***

Some leaders talked about the immense diversity among Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendant Peoples. For example, there are differences between Afro-descendant and Indigenous movements in Latin America; between

traditional sedentary land managers, hunter-gatherer societies, and pastoralists in Africa; those relying more on land rights and those on rights to collect resources; highland and lowland Indigenous groups; Indigenous Peoples and local communities in Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanic colonial legal frameworks; those who wish to stay more isolated and others who are more integrated; those in rainforest and those in drier savanna bushlands; and even within communities in the same country or region. It is important, the leaders said, that international allies understand this diversity; they should encourage unity and avoid actions that would undermine it.

Leaders want greater involvement for diverse national and local networks and movements of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendant Peoples in decisions on internationally funded programs that affect them so that such programs better consider diversity in their design and implementation.

The leaders see a strong need for narratives that unify networks internationally and build social cohesion among them around a shared global agenda. They delivered a warning: without a clear landscape of networks and movements representing diverse Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendant Peoples, the work of international allies could increase disputes and tensions among networks and fragment rights-holder social movements.

Some leaders want more awareness among international allies of what it means to work across multiple levels of rights-holder networks. They envisage that, in the future, non-governmental organizations and governments will preference leaders who are accountable to networks that are community-based and membership-based. They will help such leaders strengthen their communication and accountability across their networks at every level.

“For me it is the quality of the influence that contributes to the struggle of Indigenous Peoples,” said an Indigenous leader in Latin America. “[It is] the network of Indigenous lawyers, the network of biologists, the network

of this, the network of that, of what we can bring together to add into this great network and build this great collaboration in a more meaningful way.”

Leaders also had other messages for their international allies. There is a need for more support to link local networks together and help them learn from each other and also to link local and national networks with each other and with global networks.

“We are a young network, and we are working out how to govern ourselves well ... but there are no resources to do anything together,” said a community leader in Africa.

Two leaders suggested creating a simple but inclusive global messaging framework to enable more participation in global forums and reduce the fragmentation of public messaging. Such a framework could revolve around (for example) secure territorial rights; no criminalization and killing; free, prior and informed consent; and direct access to finance.

Afro-descendant Peoples in Latin America believe that their territorial claims are closely linked to the fight against racism, which also penetrates other agendas.

**“I believe that there is some sort of invisibility over the Black agenda, and there is a dispute over narratives,” a leader of Afro-descendant Peoples in Brazil told us. “I think it might be necessary for Indigenous and Black people to develop a wide and unified understanding on the racial agenda.”**

“I always say that the environmental agenda will be diminished if it does not address the racial agenda,” said another Afro-descendant leader. “It is important to include the racial agenda, which the environmental debate may have missed or overlooked.”

## THE PRIVATE SECTOR:

*“We should be growing together; not one winning and the other losing out”*

While some leaders think private companies can be allies, many leaders told us they have no appetite for dialogue with predatory private companies and investments. Instead, they fight them through grievance cases, by seeking compensation, and by engaging with government to strengthen its oversight.

***“While we have people starving in the Amazon and the Northeast, others are spending money on tourist trips to the Moon,”*** said a leader in Brazil, frustrated with extractivism. ***“This is the big issue: corporations don’t want to give up on their profits, they don’t want to give up their comfort zone.”***

“When the government says, ‘let’s form alliances with businesses so that you can produce and earn more,’ it is opening Indigenous territories up for any type of exploitation,” said an Indigenous leader in Brazil. “When they enter [Indigenous lands], Indigenous Peoples no longer have power over them—they will be used as cheap labor, and be abused, that’s it.”

Some leaders, however, think private companies can be allies, involving relationships that go beyond basic supply-chain partnerships to develop more sustainable approaches.

“We have some working partnerships with private companies that don’t just focus on marketing products but look beyond and try to see what needs communities have and what priorities their organizations have,” reported an Indigenous leader in Latin America. “We call it ‘growing together,’ not one winning more and the other losing out. We want fair and equitable markets for both parties.”

To scale up such partnerships, governments need to better perform their supervisory roles and enable traditional peoples to participate equitably in markets. Private companies should also be taking active stances in defense of the territorial rights of traditional peoples and communities.

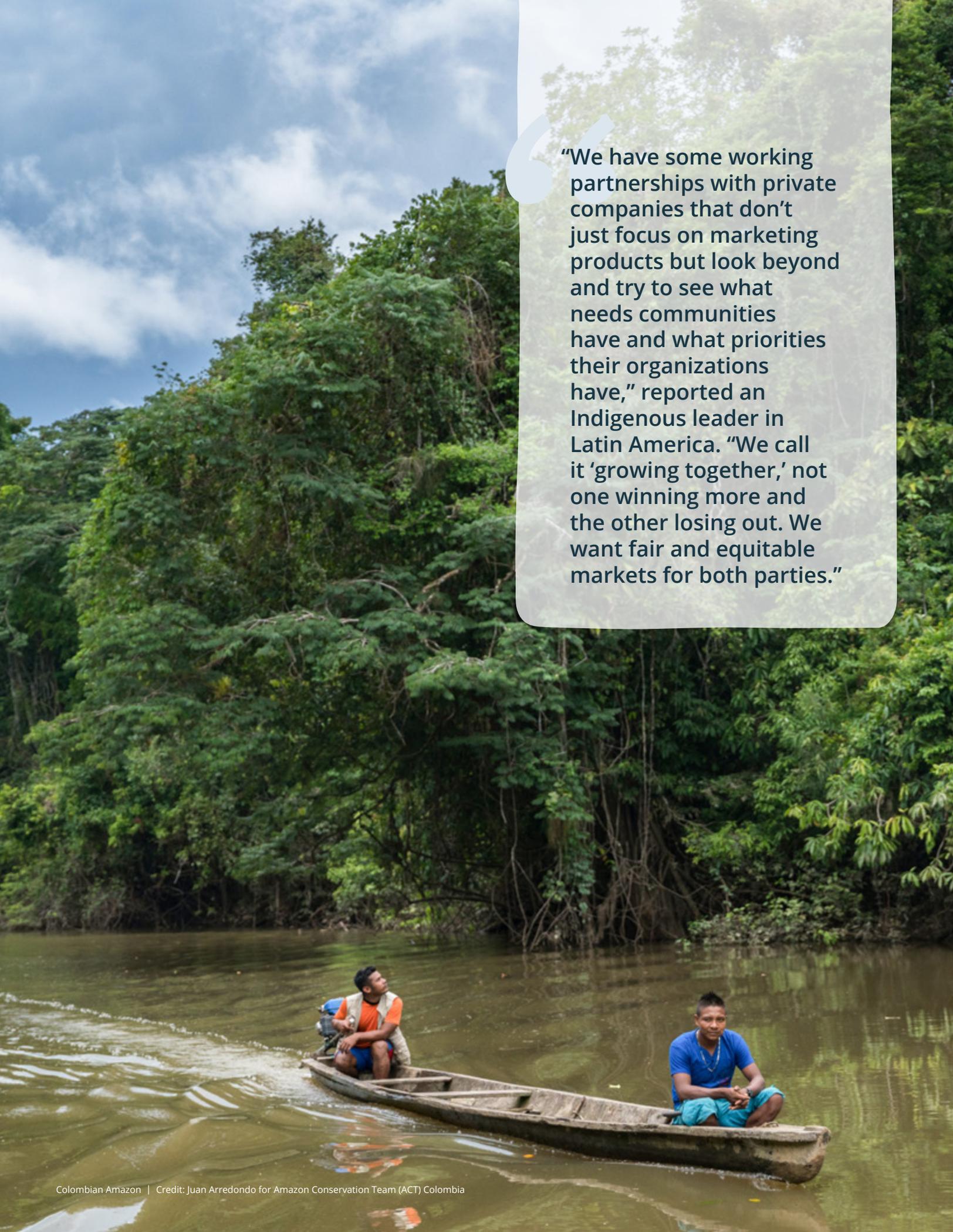
“We need to build a healthier relationship with both companies and the government,” said a traditional leader in Latin America. “Agribusiness associations want to discuss sustainable production, but you don’t see them facing down a law that is designed to destroy traditional territories, for example.”

The leaders we interviewed, especially in Africa and Asia, said that more international support is needed to enable the formal processing of communal claims and legal documents. This, in turn, is needed to increase their bargaining power with large transnational companies and local elites.

But leaders also see that their credibility in the eyes of their grassroots constituents is linked to the success of innovative business models, Indigenous enterprises, and community-managed services in their territories. Local enterprises can develop new value chains that tap into demand among growing diaspora now living in urban centers where processing and markets are located. They can also retain more value locally and provide viable options for retaining more young people in communities.

“If we could massively support and establish forest-based enterprises, the current trend of out-migration would stop and youths who are out for the job would return to the village,” said an Indigenous leader in Asia. “This will also make rural women more confident and economically empowered.”

“A large part of our territory has been encroached upon by large extractive and oil-palm companies,” said an Afro-descendant leader in Latin America. “So, our dream is that, in 20 years, we have managed to recover all that territory and it is completely administered by us.”



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## PROTECTED AREAS:

# *“Conservationists say we are the problem”*

Some leaders in Latin America, think that overlaps between their territories and protected areas offer a basis for negotiating and claiming rights and better protections and creating opportunities for community conservation. Some in other parts of the world see conservation education as a way of restoring awareness among the young about agroecology and traditional forest practices. They consider international environmental non-governmental organizations as actual or potential allies.

Others, however, see protected areas as increasing pressure on their lands. The creation or enforcement of protected areas can also lead to the on-the-ground presence of guards and other authorities from outside. Leaders fear that the establishment of more protected areas will mean more forced resettlement and exclusion.

“Conservationists says we are the problem, but we have always been here,” said a community leader in Africa. “We are being pushed out.”

Some leaders—especially in Africa and Asia—think that the global “30×30” conservation movement<sup>3</sup> will be an ongoing threat. They fear that the creation of new protected areas

will override community rights, reduce their control over customary lands and resources, and decrease investment in community forestry. We encountered similar views about schemes for mitigating climate change through reduced deforestation, sustainable forest management, and forest restoration (often referred to as REDD).

**“REDD and carbon projects keep taking in more land, they get bigger all the time, but we do not benefit,” a community leader in Africa said.**

<sup>3</sup>30×30 is a global target agreed to by more than 95 countries to conserve 30 percent of the Earth's land and sea areas by 2030 through area-based conservation measures like national parks.

Palm oil fields in Sumatra, Indonesia



## GLOBAL FORUMS:

*“The movement must turn the discourse around”*



Credit: Isabel Albee

Members of the Jobbahn clan discuss community land tenure in the face of ever-expanding palm oil plantations on their lands in Grand Bassa County, Liberia.

Some of the leaders we spoke with who are living in rural areas seemed unaware of the extent to which national and global pressures are already affecting them or the potential of such pressures to permeate their day-to-day lives in the future. Some indicated a desire to be better informed about global trends and processes.

Overall, however, many leaders told us they believe that the political situation in their countries (and in some cases globally) will worsen for their communities in coming years. Some said they will increasingly seek to participate in regional and global forums to make their cases because it could become more difficult to do this directly with their governments. Many said they see global forums primarily as means for putting pressure on their own governments.

“We must look at building a more joint territorial agenda and one that is more comprehensive and broader, not just at the level of the countries, but of the region, allowing us to have a more permanent stable agenda in each country in front of our rulers,” an Indigenous leader in Latin America told us.

Some leaders said they hope that, in the future, non-governmental organizations will act less as gatekeepers in global forums and more as “door openers.” They envision that, in the future, leaders of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendant Peoples will have greater access to global information and allies relevant to their local struggles. They intend to prioritize regional and global forums held in their countries and regions; those where key international allies have convening power and can help open doors to government leaders and funders; and those where national and global messages can be aligned.

Overall, the leaders told us they lack faith in the ability of the top-down approaches embodied by global forums to bring about meaningful change.

As one Indigenous leader in Latin America told us, global forums on climate change, the Sustainable Development Goals, and others might have good intentions, but they are “topsy-turvy” because they are coming up with global solutions that simply won’t work locally.

“In the next 10 years, the Indigenous movement must develop the capacity to turn this discourse around and address the problems from another side [from the bottom up],” said the Indigenous leader in Latin America.

But the diversity of international forums and processes is daunting, we were told (and have observed). Leaders are finding it difficult to judge where best to invest their scarce time and resources. They face growing demands from their civil-society partners, international cooperation agencies, and even allied social movements. These are all important because they provide greater global visibility—which informs national political action—and financial support, but dealing with them all is challenging.

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**Forums of interest to the Indigenous and community leaders we interviewed include the following:** *The Africa Union; the community of Central African States; the Summit of the Americas; Mercosur; the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; the Convention on Biological Diversity; the G7; and the G20. Also of interest are internationally funded programs like the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility and the Central African Forest Initiative; bilateral partnerships and agreements aimed at minimizing deforestation and ensuring timber legality; and the various road maps, dialogue tracks, and discussions associated with these processes.*



Credit: Isabel Albee

Andiko, a senior lawyer for Indonesia's AsM Law which provides legal support to Indigenous land tenure activists, addresses members of the Jobbahn clan in Grand Bassa County, Liberia.

## REPRESENTATION:

*“We are facing barriers to quality representation”*

The leaders we interviewed acknowledged that not all people in leadership positions have the greater good of their communities in mind, and not all representative organizations are focused on positive local change. According to a community leader in Africa, “Sometimes elite community members take their people for a ride.”

Many leaders expressed concern that, as representative organizations grow in size and power, they are losing touch with their constituents.

***“In most cases, people who are ‘elite’ within the Indigenous groups are representing others in forums and are themselves unaware of the nitty-gritty issues of Indigenous Peoples,” said an Indigenous leader in Asia. “Therefore we are facing several barriers to quality representation.”***

A similar point was made by another Indigenous leader in Asia. “The key issue is our central-level organization that is investing less and less in community empowerment, knowledge sharing, and capacity development,” he said.

Those leaders living in rural villages especially want much stronger connections between grassroots community members and the leadership of subnational and national networks. This will help increase awareness among those higher up in the hierarchy of the fundamental issues affecting communities.

Some leaders said they think improvements in communications and social media will enable better connections and information flows among networks and between network leaders and their grassroots territories and communities. Some envisage the democratic election of more diverse leaders.

In most regions, the leaders said they want more people from their own communities and networks representing them in local and national governments, administrations, and

legal systems, and they plan to put in place programs and strategies for this. They believe this will advance their agenda of securing territories, increase their contributions to development policies, and give them more influence over national and local reforms.

“Make the Parliament Black,” said a Brazilian Afro-descendant leader. “Blacken the judiciary.”

Obtaining strong representation in broader forms of government is immensely difficult but important for meaningful change.

“We are only a small minority, and we do not have any of our people in the council,” said a community leader in Africa. “This makes it difficult to get change.”

Nevertheless, the leaders believe they can add value to national leadership.

***“I imagine a totally autonomous Indigenous movement, with the conditions of being in the decision-making spaces, being involved in making public policy, in politics for all peoples,” said an Indigenous leader in Brazil. “Because I think that we cannot just get stuck only in the Indigenous agenda; we have every possibility and duty to participate in the politics of the whole country.”***

## WOMEN:

# *“We have become stronger”*

Leaders in all regions see that ensuring high-quality leadership into the future will require empowering women and young people.

“It is difficult to think that a community or an organization can get ahead in its fight for rights by keeping marginalized more than half of the population that are women and also young people, without voice or vote in the vital decisions affecting the community or the organization,” an Indigenous leader in Latin America told us.

Many of the leaders we spoke with applauded the increased presence of women in leadership

roles in their communities and want this to strengthen further. Women can have a powerful influence on broad issues related to territorial and land rights and management—not just in defense of women’s rights, although this is also important. Among the leaders we interviewed, both women and men expressed such views.

“Women are the most important group to work with, along with young people generally,” said a



Colombian Amazon | Credit: Juan Arredondo for ACT-Colombia



**“Women’s participation today is in a moment of transition where we have come away from watching through the window...we have passed through the front door and now up on the stage,” a female Indigenous leader in Brazil said. “We are today occupying several spaces of participation, whether within the Indigenous movement, in organizations, in the social spaces of the village, in university, at work or even in politics.”**

community leader in Africa. “Women take care of their communities and households and are organized.”

***“Women are always concerned about tomorrow because we are mothers, grandmothers, aunts,” said a female community leader in Latin America. “We are teachers, we are wives, and we care about our husbands, children, grandchildren. The whole world is on our minds, and we fight, for women have become stronger.”***

A female Indigenous leader in Brazil said there is now momentum in her community for the role of women as leaders.

“Women’s participation today is in a moment of transition where we have come away from watching through the window...we have passed through the front door and now up on the stage,” she said. “We are today occupying several spaces of participation, whether within the Indigenous movement, in organizations, in the social spaces of the village, in university, at work or even in politics.”

This leader said women can be tremendous catalysts of change.

“We women have the role of provoking changes, of occupying spaces and of sensitizing and bringing people closer together, of bringing society to look, of having this differentiated

look at what Indigenous Peoples and territories mean in practice for all humanity,” she said.

Other female leaders spoke of a huge gap to be filled in Indigenous and community women’s representation and rights.

“We are half the population, but we only have one-tenth the representation,” said one, in Africa.

***“Our custom still prioritizes men, because men are the ones in charge and leaders in every traditional event,” said a female Indigenous youth leader in Asia. “So it is still rare for women to contribute to every decision-making.”***

The leaders said it was important to nurture female leaders as a means for strengthening women’s organizations in their territories. This might include those who, for example, identify as specialist resource collectors, merchants, producers, and entrepreneurs. Female leaders in such organizations will be well-placed to advocate for and exercise specific resource-related rights, such as for tree-nut collector groups, the makers of natural shampoos, and ecotourism entrepreneurs.

“I would like to see women playing a more recognized and greater productive and economic role, leading this type of process in the territories,” said an Indigenous female leader in Latin America.

# Featured Women



**Sara Omi**

Credit: Alianza Mesoamericana de Pueblos y Bosques (AMPB)

*An Embere leader from Panama, marked by Forbes as one of 100 most influential women in Central America*



**Cécile Ndjebet**

Credit: FAOPilar Valbuena

*Received the Wangari Maathai Forest Champions Award from the UN's Collaborative Partnership on Forests*



**Rukka Sombolinggi**

Credit: NHK World Japan

*Became General Secretary of AMAN, Indonesia's largest Indigenous network, and co-president of the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities*



**Bharati Pathak**

Credit: Association of Family Forest Owner's Nepal

*Elected as leader of FECOFUN (Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal), Nepal's largest civil society network*



**YOUTH:**

*“Young people are all heading to town”*

The intertwined challenges of what is happening with young people in communities and the ongoing need to renew leadership were integral to many of the conversations we had about the future of communities, territories, and movements representing Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendant Peoples.

“Our self-determination is the key to our politics, our education, green culture, and our future,” said an Indigenous youth leader in Cambodia. “That’s why we must keep promoting and empowering young people.”

But many leaders expressed the view that young people will increasingly leave their traditional territories in search of new opportunities, with the risk of losing cultural knowledge and understanding.

“Young people are all heading to the town, for school sometimes, but mostly to look around, to get work and cash,” a community leader in Africa told us.

***“Almost 60 percent of the Indigenous youths have migrated out,” said an Indigenous leader in Asia. “The government is further pushing them to move out of their traditional occupations.”***

“We have had no land since the arrival of these two agro-industrial oil-palm and rubber companies 30 years ago,” said a community leader in Africa. “We lost our land and our forests. We don’t know what our grandchildren will do in order to survive ...go to towns?”

“For the youth, what they really care about the most is about their life and education,” said an Indigenous youth leader in Asia. “Because the youth now see that they are not able to depend on traditional knowledge alone with using their own land as the land has been grabbed and the land has been exploited or taken by outsiders.”

Another young Indigenous leader in Asia told us that survival was exercising the minds of many young people in his village.

***“Almost every night youths gather and talk,” he said. “The main topic of the conversation is how we survive in the village. We have tried modern agriculture and entrepreneurship but failed and have no capital.”***

We observed little consensus among the leaders on how they might encourage young people to commit to their communities and movements and place a high value on traditional knowledge and culture. But there was consensus that actively involving young people in communities is crucial.

Some spoke of the close relationship between leadership renewal and education, with territorial and land rights movements set to move into the hands of those young leaders with more formal education. Among other things, these new leaders will be motivated by economic opportunities on their communities’ lands and territories. They can be encouraged by long-term support for high-school and university studies, with such formal studies complemented by ethnocultural components.

Some leaders envisage building bridges between academic and traditional knowledge, with new types of young advisors arising from this fusion of expertise. This could include creating new types of Indigenous Peoples’, Afro-descendant Peoples’, and local community professional associations in fields such as law, anthropology, forestry, teaching, communication, and filmmaking. It could involve working with various organizations to offer internships, secondments, and scholarships to young people to enable them to gain experience and leadership training.

***“I imagine young people in a few years as professionals with university studies but also with cultural principles and values to exercise their ancestral knowledge, who can interpret the Western world with the knowledge of the Indigenous world and who have the ability to turn that knowledge into proposals for the good living of the communities,” said an Indigenous leader in Latin America.***

Others stressed that the young leaders of tomorrow need to be grounded in traditional learnings today.

“When I say leadership, I don’t mean just organizational leadership, I mean ethnic leadership, knowing your traditions, customs, and taboos,” said an Indigenous leader in Asia. “This needs to start from a very young age as it

has been fundamentally and deliberately dismantled by elite powers and media.”

Providing the young with sufficient educational opportunities requires external support.

“Most donors do not want to fund long-term education programs ... but these are essential if marginalized groups are going to be able to have their voices heard,” said a community leader in Africa.

There is concern that those with formal education will exert more influence over those with fewer qualifications, and this will need to be guarded against.

“Privileged knowledge-holders with knowledge of the system means that implementation of good or new laws is very weak,” said a community leader in Africa. “In many cases they take advantage of ignorance [of local people].”

Most of the leaders we interviewed feel strongly about building leadership capacity among Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendant Peoples through more than the formal education system. It should be empowering and non-discriminatory, and it should aim to strengthen social organizations and ensure accountability among leaders. It could involve close-to-the-ground experiences and learning as well as face-to-face international and regional learning exchanges and visits.



Archana Soreng, a Khadia youth leader from India has emerged as a powerful voice for Indigenous-led climate action. She is a member of the UN Secretary General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change.



Colombian Amazon | Credit Juan Arredondo for ACT-Colombia

## STATUTORY LAWS:

*“We are excluded from the feast”*

Many leaders told us that national legal settings for the recognition of territorial and communal rights are insufficient. They worry that, on the one hand, there is a lack of implementation of existing laws on the ground and, on the other, that political obstacles are increasing, regardless of formal laws. Many good national legal frameworks are bureaucratically tortuous.

“Everybody is looking for titles now, but our communities do not have the resources to prepare the documents,” said a community leader in Africa.

An Indigenous leader in Asia noted that a recent amendment to land-titling laws would make land titling even more difficult.

“Land titles, when approved, do secure some of the land that Indigenous communities hold but never cover the whole area they’ve been using for decades; the process is also very slow and not successful,” he said. “The new amendment is going to make this process even more difficult.”

“Current land and forestry legislation are not targeting our well-being,” said a community leader in Africa. “They benefit the central state and the market forces. We are excluded from the feast. We want a future with laws that put us at the heart of land and forest management.”

“Our ancestral lands are well known by ours, by each Pygmy clan, through the corridors of our own resource extraction activities,” said an Indigenous leader in Africa. “These lands are not

secure for us to date by modern law.... We are not against protected areas, but we are against land deals that exclude us. We therefore need to have ancestral territories like the [Indigenous Peoples] in some South American countries, with documents and titles to authenticate our irrevocable status as owners.”

Some leaders say they can foresee political change that might enable improvements in national and local government laws and rules. But others think national laws will become more onerous and change suddenly in ways that communities lacking “inside” information will have difficulty following.

Some leaders hope that, in the future, more grassroots community members will be better informed about their rights and opportunities and the pathways for claiming these. They will focus on implementing existing national and local laws and ensuring that territorial governing institutions get the information and support they need.

Others were less hopeful about what will happen nationally, and their priority will be to stop the rollback of laws and protections and to maintain the gains already made.

“Sometimes new laws around land are designed to remove communities from the land,” one community leader in Africa told us.

These less-optimistic leaders foresee that national and local spaces will shrink, even as global spaces become more open. For them, international allies and global spaces will be increasingly important.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

*“We want to run our own businesses”*

Many leaders spoke of the importance of economic enterprises and decent income for families in their communities. Several emphasized the role of women in developing successful economic initiatives.

***“I would like to see women playing a more recognized and greater productive and economic role, leading this type of process in the territories,” said one Indigenous leader in Latin America.***

“We dream of women promoting tourism, of having hotels within the territory, and having women taking the lead on this,” said a female Indigenous leader in Latin America.

Others spoke about the importance of developing new business models and alternatives to conventional Western approaches.

“To live well is also to think about a change in the economic model, from one of unbridled exploitation, as it is today, in the end based on greed to exploit wood, minerals, and waters,” said an Indigenous leader in Brazil. “So, this economic model needs to be changed and have another logic that is not so predatory.... It is necessary to use natural resources also for income generation, but not on a large scale, through monocultures. [It involves] use in a sustainable way of what already exists in nature and, of course, free from invasions by prospectors and loggers.”

“Our longing is, in 20 or 30 years, to have an Indigenous economy based on our principles and our worldview with a management model that is different from a capitalist company,” said an Indigenous leader in Latin America. “That is, a company with a focus on conservation and the best use of the products that are within the Amazon Basin.”

“Our idea is to maintain our farming systems, but with more of a commercial focus,” said another Indigenous leader in Latin America. “By working with allies, we can achieve a profitable farm, a farm that can generate a decent income for families. . . . The wealth is on the farm.”

“We want to run our own businesses,” said an Indigenous youth leader in Asia. “Not business for others. We have many products.”

Others see potential in collectives for strengthening locally based enterprises.

“Our overall system is demotivating women in businesses and markets,” said a female Indigenous leader in Asia. “Even people like me must struggle a lot in transportation of the products. Therefore, the concept of a collection centre at the local level, enhancing women’s skill in business negotiation, coordination and bargaining for better price, and training on quality production, could be the solution.”

## TECHNOLOGY:

# *“It’s like a sharp machete”*

Information and communication technology will be a source of both tension and opportunity in coming years, according to the leaders we interviewed.

All those we spoke with think that improved community access to good-quality internet services will be an essential need of the future. Cell phones and other communication tools will be essential for the work of networks—communities will have better contact with their leaders and among themselves, and they will use technologies increasingly for planning, reporting violence, mapping, fighting deforestation, and other activities.

“The use of technologies presents a multitude of possibilities for our actions, one of the most evident being it can facilitate our communication,” said an Indigenous leader in Latin America. “[It] opens many doors and improves the work of Indigenous organizations that manage to develop their capacities [to use them].”

Some leaders think technology can help overcome language and cultural barriers, thereby enabling them to better engage across language groups in the “cultural intermediation” needed to build national, regional, and global networks.

Nevertheless, many challenges will need to be overcome—such as a lack of capacity in the adoption of new technologies and a lack of access to them. Moreover, there was concern among leaders about the negative impacts of new technologies, especially those associated with social media and the spread of misinformation.

“We are living at a time when the power of lies is much greater than the truths that we develop with our communities because there are more people destroying than building,” said a community activist in Latin America.

Some leaders noted that information and communication technologies are intruding on family life.

“These technologies have led to family disintegration, and less listening, because we concentrate on the technology and forget we have someone sitting next to us, that we have another person who needs to be heard,” said an Afro-descendant leader in Latin America.

For some, the negative impacts of information and communication technologies are overriding the potential benefits.

“Technology is now widely misused, only used to play games on cell phones,” said an Indigenous leader in Asia. “It is rarely used to produce information and content related to Indigenous Peoples.”

“Technology is like a sharp machete,” said an Indigenous leader in Latin America. “It depends on whose hands hold it and what it is used for.”



## SUMMING UP:

# *“Reaching for the future”*

In conducting the interviews reported here, we gained a sense that notwithstanding the many centuries of tradition among Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendant Peoples, shifts are occurring in these groups that reflect changes more broadly across the world. This is perhaps best exemplified in a comment by an Indigenous leader in Latin America.

“The longings, hopes, visions, and goals of now are not the same as they were 20 or 50 years ago,” he said. “At the same time, everything has changed and continues to change rapidly. The needs of individuals, families, and communities have changed a lot.... Indigenous movements have emerged with the voices of youth, women, LGBTI people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex), the disabled, Indigenous students, among others claiming their rights with greater vigor.”

Perhaps, in the future, societies will recognize that there is much to gain from listening more to Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendant Peoples.

“What is missing now,” said an Indigenous leader in Brazil, “is for Brazilian society to believe that Indigenous Peoples also understand what it means to manage, and that they have the right to be part of the process of building a better country.”

“Now we need to move for self-determinism, not only for Indigenous Peoples but also for all humans,” said a young Indigenous leader in Asia. “Every human has the right to self-determination.”

One leader (in Latin America), reflecting on the blue-skies thinking approach, said he found it difficult initially but ultimately very useful.

“After some circles, I reached the future,” he said. “I need more time to reflect like this. I wish more allies would help give us time and space to think through what is happening and what is going to happen, and to help put order into it. Thinking in an orderly way about the future is an important capacity for a leader to bring to his or her grassroots and to the strategies we develop.”





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