

# DEFENDING FOOD, LAND AND WATER



ENABLING COMMUNITIES TO  
**ACCESS THE RESOURCES**  
THEY NEED TO THRIVE

June 2011

**“All lands that are known to their owners—in spite of the fact that they now are under the control of others—belong to their owners.”**

— Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Laws of Claimant and Respondent 11:1

**“...measures shall be taken in appropriate cases to safeguard the right of the peoples concerned to use lands not exclusively occupied by them, but to which they have traditionally had access for their subsistence and traditional activities.”**

— Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, Article 14<sup>1</sup>

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**Written by Sandhya Gupta, Gitta Zomorodi, Angela Martinez, Sarah Gunther, Jaron Vogelsang and Diego Merino**

Many generous people assisted us in the preparation of this paper. We would like to thank our grantees for their courageous efforts to realize human rights around the world, and for trusting us with their stories. In addition, many grassroots activists contributed to this paper who remain anonymous because of security concerns related to their work. We would also like to thank Monica Larenas from the Fund for Nonviolence for her incredibly helpful feedback. Finally, thank you to our colleagues at American Jewish World Service and all of the grantees and organizations mentioned in this paper, who have shaped our understanding and strategies of these vital issues.

---

<sup>1</sup> International Labor Organization, Indigenous and Tribal People’s Convention. 27 June 1989. Available at: <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/convde.pl?C169>.

## Table of Contents

<b>OVERVIEW</b>	1
<b>Case Study: Amazonian Communities Defend their Land Rights</b>	1
<b>Why Resource Rights Matter</b>	1
<b>AJWS's Grassroots Approach to Natural Resource Rights</b>	3
<b>NATURAL RESOURCE RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL LAW</b>	2
<b>THREATS TO NATURAL RESOURCE RIGHTS</b>	3
<b>AJWS GRANTMAKING STRATEGIES IN SUPPORT OF NATURAL RESOURCE RIGHTS</b>	4
<b>Advancing Accountability for Resource Rights Violations</b>	5
<b>Supporting Community Participation in Decision Making</b>	6
<b>Promoting Safety and Security for Natural Resource Rights Activists</b>	7
<b>Promoting Food Sovereignty and Sustainable Resource Management</b>	8
<b>Promoting Inclusion, Equality and Diversity</b>	9
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	11

## OVERVIEW

### **Case Study: Amazonian Communities Defend their Land Rights**

On June 5, 2009, indigenous groups staged a peaceful protest near Bagua, Peru, to oppose two new laws that would open up 70 percent of the resource-rich Amazon region to the extraction of oil and timber. If enacted, the laws would lead to pollution on the people's land, endanger their indigenous culture and allow for extensive exploitation of resources that local communities have depended on for generations. The protest—led by the organization Inter-Ethnic Association for Development in the Peruvian Amazon (AIDSEP)—was violently suppressed when Peruvian police brutally attacked the unarmed protesters, killing an estimated 25 to 40 people (the final death count remains unconfirmed) and detaining at least 150.

Peru's indigenous communities were outraged, and more than 10,000 protesters flooded Lima five days later in a nation-wide strike organized by AIDSEP and other civil society leaders. Peruvian congresswoman Hilaria Supa, a member of the indigenous community, led a parallel protest in Congress, for which she was suspended by the government. These efforts paid off: Members of the Peruvian cabinet and indigenous Amazon organizations convened on June 17th to sign an agreement that withdrew the offending laws. However, indigenous leaders are still seeking justice for the deaths of many innocent people.

Unfortunately, this experience of indigenous Peruvian communities struggling against powerful interests is not unique. As mining and megaprojects proliferate around the globe, marginalized people everywhere are having to defend their right to the land and resources under their feet.

### **Why Resource Rights Matter**

The remaining undeveloped land around the globe is extremely valuable—both to those who seek to mine it for profit and to the communities that survive on the bounty of its rivers, forests and fields.

Throughout the world, local communities<sup>2</sup> are at risk of losing the resources that form the basis of their lives and

---

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, "local communities" refers to the populations that have traditionally managed the natural resources of their areas.

livelihoods, due to interests like the wood and mineral extraction industries. These small-scale farmers, indigenous groups and tribal peoples<sup>3</sup> have been connected to their lands for generations and rely upon them for their basic needs. As a result, many local communities have found themselves cut off from the resources that have enabled them to maintain their way of life and to support families in both a profitable and a sustainable manner. Though they have lived independently on these lands for generations, many are now facing deep poverty and food insecurity.

In many regions of the world, the land is also the source and foundation of culture, language and spiritual belief systems. When the land is confiscated or made uninhabitable by deforestation or the building of dams or other megaprojects, many traditional communities lose a vital connection to their identities. Loss of the ability to live off the land also leads people—especially youth—to migrate to cities. This population drain undermines the long-term viability of indigenous communities and cultures. It also puts migrants—particularly young migrants—at risk, since they end up in unfamiliar, urban environments where they face poverty, lack of opportunity and exploitation." And as developing countries become increasingly industrialized and adopt new technologies, there are greater pressures on communities to abandon traditional lifestyles that are tied to the land and other natural resources.

Protecting local communities' natural resource rights is an essential part of a government's responsibility to its citizenry. As development experts Shalmali Guttal, Maria Luisa Mendonça and Peter Rosset write, "fair and equitable access to land and other resources like water, forests, and biodiversity is perhaps the most fundamental prerequisite for... nations to provide all of their citizens with a decent standard of living and make possible more ecologically sustainable management of natural resources."<sup>4</sup>

Governments must also protect the safety of citizens who stand up for these rights. In 2009, among AJWS grantees

---

<sup>3</sup> Article 1 of the International Labor Organization's Convention 169 refers to "tribal peoples... whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations" and defines indigenous peoples as those "who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions." The article also specifies that self-identification as indigenous or tribal is a fundamental criterion for determining the groups to which the convention's provisions apply. To download the full text of ILO Convention 169, visit <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/convde.pl?C169>.

<sup>4</sup> Shalmali Guttal, Maria Luisa Mendonça, and Peter Rosset, "Preface: A History and Overview of the Land Research Action Network," in Rosset, et al., *Promised Land: Competing Views of Agrarian Reform*, p. xiii.

alone, 33 human rights defenders were killed because of their involvement in peaceful efforts to defend the resource rights of their communities.

But solutions to these problems aren't just the responsibility of the governments in the countries where they occur. We all play a role in compromising local communities' resource rights. The growth of the global economy is hastening a double environmental crisis: the depletion of natural resources and the related change in climate. While the world's wealthiest countries are primarily responsible for climate change, poor countries and the most vulnerable populations within them are

the most severely affected and least able to cope. By promoting sustainable community stewardship over land and water in our own country, we are respecting the resource rights of local communities in the developing world.

These issues matter deeply, because all people are entitled to a dignified livelihood, a healthy environment and a meaningful voice in the development of their communities. But in many local communities, the loss of natural resources has had a landslide effect on these other rights. By protecting natural resource rights, we are defending the human rights of local communities overall.

## NATURAL RESOURCE RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

There is a growing body of international law designed to uphold and defend local communities' natural resource rights. Article I of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states that "all peoples may, for their own ends, freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources... In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence."<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the covenant, which was drafted in 1966 and adopted by the UN with ratification by 160 countries in 1976, hasn't been enforced, allowing for the continued exploitation of tribal and indigenous lands.

In 1989, realizing that the rights of local communities continued to be violated despite these international legal protections, the International Labor Organization created the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, also known as ILO Convention 169. Article 14 of the convention asserts indigenous and tribal peoples' rights of ownership over the lands they traditionally occupy and calls for measures "to safeguard the right of the peoples concerned to use lands not exclusively occupied by them, but to which they have traditionally had access for their subsistence and traditional activities."<sup>6</sup>

This convention, though signed by only 20 countries, represents an important step by the international community to recognize the special relationship that indigenous and tribal populations have with their lands and natural resources. However, the convention relies upon national governments to take action to protect these rights; without an enforcement mechanism, securing ownership of traditional lands remains difficult.

In recent years, the emerging concept of "collective rights" has bolstered protections for indigenous people's natural resource rights. Collective rights guarantee the preservation of cultural identities and the development of shared resources based on common, local consensus. While ILO Convention 169 started this conversation, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, supported by 148 countries, moved the dialogue forward in 2007. The declaration affirms that "indigenous peoples possess collective rights which are indispensable for their existence, well-being and integral development as peoples"<sup>7</sup> and recognizes indigenous communities' rights to remain on their ancestral lands, to determine their own priorities and strategies for their development, and to assume management of the lands and resources that they have possessed through traditional ownership.

Most recently, in February 2011, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights released a report that reinforces indigenous and tribal peoples' communal right to land and natural resources. The report emphasizes how important natural resource rights are in enabling communities to access the range of other basic human rights, especially the rights to life, personal integrity, a dignified existence, food, water, health and education.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. A/RES/21/2200, Annex.

<sup>6</sup> International Labor Organization, Indigenous and Tribal People's Convention. 27 June 1989. Available at: <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/convde.pl?C169>.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. A/RES/61/295. Available at: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html>

<sup>8</sup> Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, "Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Rights over their Ancestral Lands and Natural Resources."

Web. Accessed 23 February 2011.



Members of Asociación Interétnica De Desarrollo De La Selva Peruana speaking to the Peruvian Congress. PHOTO EVAN ABRAMSON

## ***AJWS's Grassroots Approach to Natural Resource Rights***

As an organization committed to advancing the rights of the world's most marginalized people, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) recognizes that communities' ability to access available natural resources directly impacts their livelihoods, well-being and way of life. AJWS supports over 450 grassroots, community-based organizations in Africa, Asia and the Americas that are working to create a just and equitable world. AJWS grantees are promoting ethical and sustainable approaches to the use of natural resources and are advocating for development initiatives that benefit local populations and involve communities in decision-making processes. These organizations seek opportunities to direct their own development, to manage their resources in ecologically sustainable ways and to pass on cherished cultural traditions to future generations.

Our grantees face great risks and many setbacks in their struggles to claim and retain their natural resource rights. Yet we have witnessed profoundly inspiring instances of local people working against the odds to hold governments and corporations accountable for their actions, to protect the health of their environments and to promote their communities' participation in their own sustainable development. To stand with them, to believe in and support their struggles, is an expression of *tikkun olam*—the Jewish imperative to repair the world.

## **THREATS TO NATURAL RESOURCE RIGHTS**

In a world of increasing—and increasingly global—food and energy demands, local communities face a variety of challenges to their ownership, management of and access to their natural resources. These challenges come from a range of actors, including national governments, multinational corporations, multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, large landowners and paramilitary groups. In their pursuit of economic development, profit or power, these entities may ignore local communities' concerns—or actively repress them. National governments may introduce legislation to enable themselves and/or corporations to exploit resources without the consent or approval of local communities, but often they just bypass the law altogether.

In Uganda, for example, the recent discovery of oil has the potential to generate billions of dollars in revenue and could help lift the country out of poverty. But the extraction effort has proceeded despite the lack of laws to guide oil revenue management and reinvestment, and the Ugandan government has already signed oil production agreements with international companies without the input of the communities who might lose their land in the process. AJWS grantee National Association of Professional Environmentalists is educating and organizing grassroots groups to demand accountability and respect for human rights as the oil development proceeds.

The impact of these projects is immense. In the process of setting up and maintaining extraction projects

and megaprojects such as large dams, companies and governments encroach on agricultural lands, engage in deforestation, and contaminate local soil and water reserves. These projects can deplete water sources, diminish water tables, and pollute rivers and streams, threatening the food security of local populations and making traditional, agrarian lifestyles untenable.

Privatization of land and water resources can cause severe hardship for communities already living on the edge of poverty. For example, indigenous small farmers in Oaxaca State, Mexico, have seen water privatization schemes—implemented without consultation and with poor regulation—severely limit their access to fresh water. Since privatization, farmers have faced shortages, contamination and increased prices for water, jeopardizing their ability to sustain their livelihoods through agriculture.

In many cases, development projects lead to the displacement and breakdown of entire communities. In Guatemala, for example, the huge Chixoy Dam downstream from the community of Río Negro was strongly opposed by the local Maya Achí people when it was proposed in the early 1980s, because it was clear that the dam would make the community uninhabitable. But in 1982, after security forces massacred hundreds of Río Negro's residents, terrorizing and decimating the community and silencing dissent, the dam was built anyway. The dam—largely financed by the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank—flooded Río Negro and more than 3,000 acres of the community's farmland. The survivors were forced into a militarized village four hours away, having lost their source of livelihood. AJWS partner Fundación Nueva Esperanza,

founded by a survivor of the Río Negro massacre, continues to seek justice and reparations almost 30 years later.

Like the people of Río Negro, local populations that organize to defend their natural resource rights often face threats, intimidation or physical attacks. On July 13, 2009, Marcelo Rivera, the co-founder of AJWS grantee Asociación Amigos de San Isidro, was found murdered. Rivera was a leader in the movement to oppose gold mining in the region of Cabañas, one of El Salvador's poorest areas, by the extraction company Pacific Rim. After his murder, two other community activists involved in the movement were killed, and other activists who sought justice in Rivera's case received death threats.

On a larger scale, competition over valuable resources like water and minerals is fueling armed conflicts and widespread human-rights violations in countries as diverse as Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Peru.<sup>9</sup>

## AJWS GRANTMAKING STRATEGIES IN SUPPORT OF NATURAL RESOURCE RIGHTS

AJWS applies a rights-based approach to development in its grantmaking around the world. We are committed to the notion that community development cannot take place where human rights are denied, and we believe that marginalized communities, when mobilized from within, are powerful agents of change. As such, we work with grassroots organizations to help advance their human-rights agendas. In recognition of our commitment to pursuing global justice through grassroots change, AJWS focuses on organizations that conceive of and construct their own visions and plans, and that involve local people and communities in implementing them.

AJWS understands that social change is a complex process and that advancing an inclusive human rights agenda requires long-term investment. For that reason, we provide our grantees with flexible, long-term funding, address gaps in funding and provide technical assistance to help organizations increase their capacity. We also believe in the importance of supporting nascent organizations: AJWS is often among our grantees' first donors, and is frequently the first to provide operational or capacity-building support, as opposed to project-based funding. We promote our grantees' work to other donors to help them secure additional resources. And in order to make



A farmer in West Bengal, India showing the quality of indigenous wheat reintroduced by an AJWS partner organization. PHOTO SANDHYA GUPTA

<sup>9</sup> *Global Witness*, "Faced with a gun, what can you do?" 21 July 2009. Web. Accessed 9 June 2010. See also *Colombia Reports*, "Land, Colombia's Natural Resource Curse." Web. Accessed 9 June 2010.



Women from CASE working in traditional Ethiopian labor groups known as Gejas. PHOTO SARAH GUNTHER

the broadest and most lasting impact, we also support networking among like-minded groups and strive to build democratic social movements.

In our work to promote natural resource rights, AJWS supports indigenous and tribal communities, small-scale farmers and, in Latin America, Afro-descendent<sup>10</sup> groups that are at the forefront of natural resources rights struggles around the world. Through human rights education and community organizing, strategic litigation and media campaigns, these organizations advocate for communities' concerns at the local, national and international levels.

AJWS's grantmaking strategies for natural resource rights fall into five inter-related categories: (1) advancing accountability for resource rights violations; (2) supporting community participation in decision making; (3) promoting safety and security for natural resource rights activists; (4) promoting food sovereignty and sustainable resource management; and (5) promoting inclusion, equality and diversity.

These strategies are far from exclusive, and many grantees use multiple strategies in concert. For example, an

<sup>10</sup> 150 million people of African descent live in Latin America and account for about one-third of the total population. They reside mainly in rural areas, which are characterized by poor infrastructure, few schools and health facilities, low income and high unemployment. Afro-descendants, as they self-define, face widespread discrimination and account for 40 percent of the poorest people in the region. Many of the rural areas in which they live have been impacted by the construction of megaprojects financed by international financial institutions or are areas of mass production of agrofuels and extractive industries.

organization may promote community food sovereignty and household food security in order to address basic needs, while at the same time organizing community members to advocate for government accountability for local communities' rights. Building inclusive, just and diverse organizations and movements is a thread that runs through all of AJWS's grantmaking.

## ***Advancing Accountability for Resource Rights Violations***

In many of the countries where AJWS grantees work, there is a lack of oversight to ensure that local communities are not adversely impacted by megaprojects and extractive industries. In many cases, governments and corporations minimize or deny the harmful social and environmental effects of their projects. AJWS grantees use a variety of tactics to hold governments and corporations accountable for their actions and to ensure compensation for affected communities.

**Union de Comunidades Indigenas de la Zona Norte del Istmo (UCIZONI), Mexico.** In 1999, large oil spills from installations owned by PEMEX, the Mexican national oil company, devastated the fields of small-scale farmers in several indigenous communities. UCIZONI and the affected communities mobilized local people and took legal action to force PEMEX to the negotiating table. Thanks to these efforts, in 2003, PEMEX committed to long-term support for environmental cleanup and social investment in the communities affected by its work, with the



projects and funds managed directly by community organizations—something no other Mexican civil society organization had ever achieved. Since then, the agreement has brought over \$300,000 to the communities. These funds have been used to plan and build over 50 projects such as health clinics, latrines, roads and bridges.

In many places, laws exist to protect communities from these kinds of rights infringements, but they frequently fall short. Some policies are ineffective and others exist in environments where law enforcement actively encourages violations. When communities experience violations of their natural resource rights, AJWS grantees fight for greater enforcement of public policies and, when necessary, advocate for the creation of new protections.

**Gramin Yuva Abhikram (GYA), India.** When India's economy began to liberalize in the late 1990s, there was a sharp increase in the number of steel and iron ore plants moving into the resource-rich state of Chhattisgarh and encroaching on local lands. GYA had been working in the region, teaching organic farming, reviving indigenous crops and preserving water resources, but when the tribal villagers started to lose their land and water, GYA began advocating against the industrial development. It found that the communities lacked a legal basis to claim ownership of the lands they had been living on and farming for generations, since the land tenancy system was based on outdated and flawed systems created under British colonial rule.

By organizing local communities to engage in peaceful protests and letter-writing campaigns, GYA generated a regional movement to support land rights. This movement grew into a larger coalition of groups and individuals that succeeded in passing landmark legislation in India—the Forest Rights Act of 2006. This act gave local communities the right to file individual land titles for the lands and forests on which they depend for their livelihoods. GYA now works to ensure that this act is implemented in Chhattisgarh and the surrounding states.

In some cases, local communities have banded together to try to halt megaprojects that threaten their lands and livelihoods. These grassroots initiatives defend their rights against tremendously powerful interests by advocating at the local, national and international levels.

**Friends of Lake Turkana (FoLT), Kenya/Ethiopia.** Based in Kenya, AJWS grantee FoLT works to stop the construction of the Gibe 3 dam in Ethiopia. If built, the dam would destroy the livelihoods of 400,000

indigenous people along the Omo River in southern Ethiopia and Lake Turkana in northern Kenya by significantly reducing water flows and destroying the ecology of Lake Turkana. The project threatens communities' food security and access to potable water, and will exacerbate existing conflicts among the indigenous groups that rely on these resources. The environmental and social impact assessment conducted by the government of Ethiopia failed to meet international standards, and there has been no credible impact assessment in Kenya. FoLT has educated and organized the affected communities to call for investigations and has successfully urged potential investors to withhold funding for the dam.

## ***Supporting Community Participation in Decision Making***

In many local communities threatened by infrastructure megaprojects, the lack of community voice in the decision-making process is a major source of conflict. Though international agreements protect communities' right to decide what development projects are implemented on their lands, indigenous and tribal peoples often face difficulties simply accessing information about projects that will affect them. Even with calls for participatory development from institutions such as the UN and the World Bank, governments and private companies often fail to meet with communities to discuss local priorities, determine the impact of potential projects or agree upon viable alternatives.



A fisherman from Gramin Yuva Abhikram in Chhattisgarh, India looking at a formerly public waterway that had recently been privatized.

**PHOTO** SANDHYA GUPTA

Many AJWS grantees make it clear that they are not opposed to industrial or agricultural development in theory, but desire responsible development projects that proceed with their input and demonstrate respect for the communities that depend on natural resources for survival.

### **3S Rivers Protection Network (3SPN), Cambodia.**

3SPN works with communities that have been impacted by several large hydroelectric dams built in Vietnam and Cambodia. The dams have caused many violations of the communities' rights, including the release of highly contaminated reservoir water into the rivers and the sporadic closing of the dams with insufficient or no warning—both of which are destroying the livelihoods and health of people who depend on the rivers for agriculture and sanitation.

3SPN has organized local communities to stand up for their rights and protest these violations. The organization published a technical report on the dams that communities are using to advocate for proper resettlement and compensation and that has empowered people to demand that the World Commission on Dams' (WCD) guidelines be implemented in the region. 3SPN also advocates with local and national government bodies for the construction of smaller, more sustainable dams that can coexist with local communities, as per WCD guidelines. In creating networks among communities throughout Cambodia that depend on these three rivers, 3SPN is building a mass movement aimed at ensuring community voices in decision making around hydropower and watershed management.

## ***Promoting Safety and Security for Natural Resource Rights Activists***

In 2009 alone, 33 human rights activists affiliated with AJWS grantees were killed for protesting violations against local communities—most of which involved corporate and government exploitation of land and natural resources. Because they often stand in the way of significant profits for these powerful entities, AJWS grantees and communities that defend resource rights are regularly subjected to a variety of threats to their safety and well-being, and many activists have been jailed and detained illegally for extended periods of time. Women doing this work face particular risk: over the past few years, Urgent Action Fund-Latin America, an organization that provides rapid response grants to women human rights defenders in Latin America and the Caribbean, has observed a dramatic increase in violence against women activists working on resource rights issues.

Diverse threats and tactics have been used against AJWS grantees, including violence, economic pressure, psychological harassment, manipulation of local politicians, police repression, fabricated local "consent" for harmful projects and intimidation of communities with spurious criminal charges. Governments have suppressed dissent against megaprojects and extraction by passing laws that punish social leaders who object to policies that favor transnational corporations—essentially criminalizing social movements and protest.

### **Keonjhar Integrated Rural Development and Training Institute (KIRDTI), India.**

With the objective of preserving local lands for local use in the resource-rich state of Orissa, KIRDTI organizes tribal and indigenous communities to peacefully contest the actions of Indian national companies—including Sterlite, Mittal and Vedanta—that are encroaching on these lands in an effort to gain control of valuable mineral and iron ore resources. In July 2008, three KIRDTI staff members, all tribal activists, were arrested on false charges of robbery. The police publicly accused KIRDTI of being a "Maoist" organization and detained the activists on suspicion of Maoist activities. The activists were subjected to extreme violence and harassment while in jail. It was only after significant international attention was brought to bear on their case—in part through international advocacy by AJWS—that they were released in February 2011. AJWS connected KIRDTI with groups such as Amnesty International and Frontline for Human Rights Defenders, which issued urgent actions and statements directed at the governments of India and Orissa.



Displaced farmers working as laborers after their own lands were taken over by large land owner near the Indo-Bangladesh border. **PHOTO** SANDHYA GUPTA



Friends of Lake Turkana conducting a community outreach in northern Kenya. PHOTO SARAH GUNTHER

Though these threats can never be completely eliminated, AJWS's grantees use a range of strategies in order to mitigate the risks they face. These include earning social legitimacy and support in their communities and wider society; maintaining strategic alliances with other organizations; responding promptly to threats and other civil rights abuses with public denunciations; bringing cases of human rights violations before international courts; developing organizational security and protection plans; and employing physical protection measures such as varying routes and avoiding solitary travel at night. AJWS supports organizations to do this critical safety and security work by providing financial support and linking them with organizations that provide protection and security resources to human rights defenders.

## **Promoting Food Sovereignty and Sustainable Resource Management**

In addition to defending communities against violations of their resource rights, AJWS grantees work to strengthen community management of available natural resources. They are educating communities about strategies for maintaining the long-term health and sustained vitality of their land, and implementing sustainable agricultural

practices that increase food production. The goal of these efforts in vulnerable communities is to establish "food sovereignty," a term coined by the Via Campesina, an international movement of small farmers founded in 1993:

*Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It develops a model of small scale sustainable production benefiting communities and their environment. It puts the aspirations, needs and livelihoods of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations."*

Many AJWS grantees work to revive traditional practices of agriculture that have been sidelined in favor of mass production of food. Modernized agricultural systems have had deleterious effects on the health and vitality of the land. One example is genetically modified seeds—which

<sup>11</sup> La Via Campesina: International Peasant Movement, "The international peasant's voice." 9 February 2011. Web. Available at: [http://www.viacampesina.org/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=27&Itemid=44](http://www.viacampesina.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=27&Itemid=44)

are often prohibitively expensive, are unsuited to the climate or soil and require new seed purchases each year since they don't naturally reproduce. To put an end to these ill-suited practices and regain their food sovereignty, communities are reviving traditional practices like the use of native seeds that are naturally drought-resistant, require less water to survive and reproduce naturally year-to-year. Grantees also hold workshops for their communities about the production of natural fertilizers and the benefits of crop rotation, which help maintain soil health and increase its resilience against the harmful effects of climate change.<sup>12</sup>

**Culture and Art Society of Ethiopia (CASE), Ethiopia.** CASE works to revive the indigenous tradition of *tsires* and *gejas*—local women's farming collectives in which women pool their labor and resources to increase the profitability of their agricultural businesses. By promoting traditional farming practices, CASE protects the land for future generations and ensures that local people can maintain sustainable rural livelihoods. It also reduces the social and economic marginalization of indigenous women and empowers them to become leaders in their communities.

## **Promoting Inclusion, Equality and Diversity**

All of these tactics require empowered communities to be successful, but social marginalization and discrimination against and within local communities can stand in the way. Building strong, equitable and effective movements often requires first addressing intersecting issues of race, age and gender that hinder people working together to effect change. This means confronting racism, exposing power relations between men and woman, analyzing the distribution of resources, and confronting injustice within organizations and movements.

Racial discrimination, particularly evident toward indigenous and Afro-descendent communities in the Americas, results in higher levels of poverty and barriers to civic and political participation. As such, these communities not only face enormous challenges to their resource rights, but also may encounter resistance when aligning themselves with larger movements. While indigenous peoples can draw on international legal conventions that recognize their rights, there is no legal framework for Afro-descendent people who are often further marginalized, even within indigenous movements.

### **Palenque Regional el Congal (PRC), Colombia.**

PRC was founded as a coalition of community councils in Colombia's Buenaventura municipality, where marginalized Afro-Colombian communities face threats to their land, which is in a key port area desired for development. The Afro-Colombian people are descendents of former slaves and have been historically marginalized because of their race. As part of the ongoing conflict in the region, armed groups have disputed the community's ancestral territory, and the government has launched megaprojects and other unsustainable development projects without community involvement. With AJWS's support, PRC has organized successful national and international campaigns to inform the international community of the political, social and economic challenges face by Afro-Colombian people in Buenaventura.

Marginalization of women in particular impacts land rights movements, as women are the primary stewards of natural resources in many developing countries, but have little control over these resources.<sup>13</sup> Women are most often responsible for meeting household needs such as water and firewood, and their participation in the agricultural sector is increasing. Yet inequality, patriarchal gender norms and violence limit their ability to control household resources and to access or own land.

These dynamics are reflected in national and international resource rights movements. Despite women's increasing participation in such movements—for example, indigenous women farmers in Latin America and the Caribbean have played a crucial role in mobilizing communities—many organizations remain dominated by men and male perspectives. If organizations and movements do not consider gender in their work, women may not benefit from their programming or even from their advocacy victories.

AJWS is supporting organizations and movements that do more than "include" women in their work, but rather, view the problems and their impacts through women's eyes and develop solutions based on woman's expressed realities. Natural resource rights movements must promote gender justice and seek to change the gendered systems that prevent women from accessing, controlling and benefiting from resources.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Tim J. LaSalle and Paul Hepperly, "Regenerative Organic Farming: A Solution to Global Warming," Rodale Institute, 2008. Available at: [http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/files/Rodale\\_Research\\_Paper-07\\_30\\_08.pdf](http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/files/Rodale_Research_Paper-07_30_08.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> An international comparison of agricultural census data conducted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations found that less than 20 percent of landholders are women. Available at: [http://www.fao.org/economic/es-policybriefs/briefs-detail/en/?no\\_cache=1&uid=40497](http://www.fao.org/economic/es-policybriefs/briefs-detail/en/?no_cache=1&uid=40497)



Members of Asociación Interétnica De Desarrollo De La Selva Peruana demonstrating near the Peruvian Congress. PHOTO EVAN ABRAMSON

**National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE), Uganda.**

NAPE is a national organization that is currently focused on promoting transparency around oil exploitation in Uganda's Albertine region. NAPE realized the need to enhance women's participation in its advocacy efforts, finding that in its work with local communities, women were underrepresented and largely silent, even though they were deeply affected. NAPE had heard reports that women's traditional routes to their gardens, wells, firewood lots and the sites from which they purchase fish to sell had been cut off by the oil companies' security guards. With AJWS's support, NAPE is documenting women's perspectives on the oil projects, facilitating dialogues between women and local leaders, and supporting women-led drama groups to raise awareness of the impacts on their livelihoods. AJWS has also supported NAPE to train its staff, board and community leaders to be cognizant of gender bias and the need for inclusion throughout their work.

Organizations and movements provide spaces in which diverse individuals and groups can work collectively toward social change. Supporting the meaningful participation of women, youth, indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples is crucial to building internal democracy and long-term effectiveness, and to achieving victories that change the lives of the most marginalized.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Supporting the rights of local communities to manage their natural resources and protect their communities and livelihoods from destruction at the hands of development projects requires a multifaceted and nuanced approach. Based on input from grantees and lessons learned from our staff, colleague organizations and experts in the field, AJWS has developed the following set of recommendations to guide our grantmaking and that of other interested donors:

- **Advance corporate and government accountability for resource rights violations.** Many funders are hesitant to support organizations or networks that oppose large-scale development projects, yet for many communities, resisting the takeover of their lands and other resources is essential for their survival and well-being. Funders should increase support for grassroots organizations and networks that are building movements to demand the right of consultation and veto power for projects that affect local communities' livelihoods, and to oppose unjust encroachment on their lands.
- **Support participatory community development.** Development initiatives must have the consent and participation of the communities affected. As such, funders should support organizations that advocate for transparency and community consultation. Funders should also support communities to design and implement their own initiatives for sustainable economic and social development.
- **Promote the safety and security of resource rights activists.** Supporting the safety and well-being of the people on the front lines of resource rights struggles is essential to their success, and most resource rights organizations lack the means to take the

steps necessary to improve their own safety. Donors committed to the protection of these leaders need to look beyond emergency response and focus on the creation of long-term protection mechanisms. Funders should build emergency contingency funds into core grants and should support grantees to conduct risk analyses, and develop and implement security plans to better protect themselves against security threats.

- **Promote food sovereignty and sustainable resource management.** Sustainable agricultural practices support the long-term viability of land, promote the health of the environment, encourage biodiversity, foster good nutrition and increase the availability of local food. Funders should support initiatives that encourage communities to grow their own food, access local markets, cultivate native seeds and diversify their crops.
- **Promote inclusion, equality and diversity.** Building strong, equitable and effective natural resource rights movements requires addressing intersecting issues of race and gender. Funders should support organizations and movements to confront oppression and discrimination and to build internal democracy. This is critical for their long-term effectiveness and for creating social change overall.

*Local communities throughout the developing world are rising to the challenge of defending their natural resource rights and, by direct extension, their rights to a dignified livelihood, a healthy environment and a meaningful voice in their own development. By funding grassroots organizations, supporting them to build their capacity, and facilitating movement building, international donors can help transform natural resource rights struggles around the globe. While these efforts involve risk-taking and require long-term investments to achieve impacts, they will lay the groundwork for sustainable community-led development.*

## NOTES

---



**American Jewish World Service**  
45 West 36th Street  
New York, NY 10018

**t:** 212.792.2900  
800.889.7146  
**f:** 212.792.2930

[ajws.org](http://ajws.org) • [ajws@ajws.org](mailto:ajws@ajws.org)  
[facebook.com/americanjewishworldservice](https://facebook.com/americanjewishworldservice)  
[twitter.com/ajws](https://twitter.com/ajws)



Inspired by Judaism's commitment to justice, **American Jewish World Service (AJWS)** works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world.