

In Focus:

Supporting Local Communities to Defend Their Resource Rights

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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 Inter-Ethnic Association for Development in the Peruvian Amazon (AIDESEP) -- 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 AIDESEP 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 have to defend their right to the land and resources under their feet.

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.

In a world of increasing -- and increasingly global -- food and energy demands, local communities face a variety of challenges to 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.

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.

Resources for Funders:

- Contact Jaron Vogelsang, Program Officer, AJWS: jvogelsang@ajws.org
- Read the publication from AJWS, *Promoting Natural Resource Rights: Laying the Groundwork for Sustainable Community-Led Development*, June 2011:
http://ajws.org/who_we_are/publications/strategy_papers/0711_promoting_natural_resource.pdf.
- Visit the website of Grassroots International for a list of videos, publications, and articles on Resource Rights: <http://www.grassrootsonline.org/term/resource-rights>.
- Read *Reversal of Fortune* in the *New Yorker*, January 9, 2012:
http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/01/09/120109fa_fact_keefe.