



# RESILIENCE

in the Face of COVID-19

Volume 01

of the series

**Weaving Solidarity and Hope: Beyond Pandemics and Lockdowns**

GLOBAL TAPESTRY *of*  
**ALTERNATIVES**

## Contributors to this series

The contributions to this series are a result of collaborations with inspiring peoples and networks from various regions that the Global Tapestry of Alternatives has been connected with (GTA). The first volume has contributions from Africa, Latin America, South and South-east Asia and Central America. The decision to include these was based on active collaborators who were available to contribute to the series on a short notice as we do realise that such groups are active everywhere. Additionally, we wanted to bring forth stories from the Global South and regions that are under-represented in the corridors of power. These series have been produced with mutual respect, care and deep solidarity. We are truly grateful to all the contributors for sowing the seeds of future envisioning.

Currently, this series is being published using what is a colonial language for much of the world, i.e. English. We do, however, feel that regional languages are an important tool for the dissemination of these stories. Hence, we intend to translate these stories in multiple languages and would urge you as readers to offer to translate these stories in your own mother tongue, in case you can and would like to.

Our request to the readers is to also see this collection as a work in progress and engage with it as a long term process of cultivating inspiration to create better societies that are already being created. We need to weave at every level efforts challenging patriarchal or masculinist, capitalist, racist, casteist, and anthropocentric forces, and advance the continuation and continuous reconstruction of a pluriversal world in which many worlds can be embraced.

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Global Tapestry of Alternatives **is an initiative seeking to create solidarity networks and strategic alliances amongst all these alternatives on local, regional and global levels.** It locates itself in or helps initiate interactions among alternatives. It operates through varied and light structures, defined in each space, that are horizontal, democratic, inclusive and non-centralized, using diverse local languages and other ways of communication.

For more information please see: <https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/introduction>

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# Introduction

These times define a historical moment where the current structural inequalities have exposed the ugly systems of oppression. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the deep fractures and the baseless promises of well-being that the capitalist model made to the whole world. Neither the market nor the State will be able to take care of a vast number of peoples, except in a transitory and limited way. People's struggles for survival and their expression of agency will be a significant factor in defining the outcome of these exceptional circumstances. It has shown to us, especially the ones who pretend to be blind and deaf, that the earth is alive. Not only alive, but she can in no time wipe out the static edifices that humans pride upon. The crisis points to the terrible physical, cultural, and spiritual alienation of *Homo Industrius* from its own home '*oikos*'.

Over the past two years, the COVID-19 crisis has been well documented, highlighting the plight of the working class, small scale farmers, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, urban migrants and many people living in the margins of our societies. Our access to basic needs such as food, shelter, water, housing and human contact have all been threatened, affecting millions, if not billions. It also shed light on our folly of depending on long distance exchanges and trade for meeting basic needs. It has shown the deep links between ecological devastation and socio-economic deprivation. Overall, the inequality and unsustainability of predominant models of 'development' have been clearly demonstrated.

While the immediate humanitarian crisis is visible and has generated widespread spontaneous initiatives by civil society and by several governments to provide relief, much less common are attempts to address root structural causes. It is vital that we use this opportunity to simultaneously rethink the economic, social, political, cultural and ecological approaches to life. We need to urgently find alternative pathways of well-being that help generate dignified livelihoods for all and that help us move towards ecological sustainability. We have to construct an atmosphere of hope against the politics of fear—keeping mutual care and healing at our core. We need to facilitate the self-empowerment of communities (rural, rural, urban) while building their capacity to govern and manage food, health, water, energy, shelter, education, and other basic needs and aspirations in ways that reach towards self-reliance and, wherever possible, self-sufficiency. And we need to recognise that the earth belongs not to humans alone, but to millions of other species, and that as an integral part of nature we have to be responsible custodians.

However desperate the current situation has been, communities across the world have responded to the crises with resilience, care, innovation, and adaptability. The resurgence of life that we see in innumerable actions of solidarity, cooperation, love, and care in these times are rooted in the aeons-old articulations of indigenous peoples and local communities. This spirit circulates among many grassroots expressions of collectives and networks, as dignified rage against systems of

oppression as well as the affirmation of their resolve to defend their dignity by articulating a pluriverse of alternatives.

This is the first volume of a collection of various narratives from around the world based on collaborative writing. Together, they provide us multifaceted expressions of resistance to dominant forms of oppression—to defend local ways of life, strengthen local autonomy, and reconstruct societies. These examples show that COVID-19 and the problems it has highlighted in society (all of which have been around for much longer, of course, but are more sharply visible now) have solutions—already demonstrated by communities, initiatives and civil society. They give important lessons and pathways for just, equitable, and ecologically resilient futures.



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# To Heal Ourselves we must Free Mother Earth

📍 **Geo-localisation:** North of Cauca, Colombia



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Photo courtesy Patricia Botero Gomez



Painting by PLMT on their struggle

## Brief description

In Colombia, 0.4 percent of landowners own 41 percent of the land, 25 million hectares of land are sanctioned for mining, and glaciers have lost 85 percent of their ice. Sugarcane occupies 330 thousand hectares of land in the Cauca River Valley and uses 25 million litres of water per second (Laing, 2018). It is for this reason that the indigenous Nasa people (from the North of Cauca, Colombia) say, “Our mother is not free to live...all of us are slaves along with the other beings until we don’t recover our mother’s freedom” (Proceso de Liberación de la Madre Tierra, 2016).

This is the collective vision of Proceso de Liberación de la Madre Tierra, or the Process of Liberation of Mother Earth (PLMT), a movement that emerged from the North of Cauca, Colombia. It has emanated from the indigenous Nasa people, who, similar to many indigenous communities on this continent, have suffered dispossession through war and genocide. Their ancestral territories have been inflicted with violence—they have been confined within indigenous reservations with the permanent threat of ceasing to be what they are. However, the Nasa people have continued to resist. These millenarian guardians are caretakers of the territories of

life. Their struggle is not only about redistribution of land but also about healing the land (Proceso de Liberación de la Madre Tierra, 2005).

The PLMT has emerged from a long path of struggle and resistance which has been going on for more than five hundred years. Since 2005, the PLMT has worked to restart direct action and struggle for land in Cauca. The struggle is about reconstitution and recovery of territories and with this, it aims to liberate Mother Earth.

This territory is largely occupied as private property—‘slavery’ here is reflected by the intensive monoculture of sugarcane. As a by-product of the Green Revolution, large-scale industry-intensive production of sugar and ethanol has resulted in massive depletion of underground water reserves. In 2008, about 90 percent of water used for sugarcane cultivation in Cauca Valley came from surface water sources and 20,000 year-old reservoirs of water by digging wells that were 450 metres deep (Laing, 2018).

### **Process that led to the community being resilient (Pre-covid)**

In order to push ahead with the Nasa people’s struggle, the PLMT began occupying and liberating the private farms through organised *mingas* to cut sugarcane. *Minga* refers to collective work—in this ancestral practice, nobody is paid because working together is an act of celebration that holds the communitarian spirit alive. This has been just one part of liberation. The community has also continued with other long-term *minga* exercises: Cultivating corn, cassava, bananas, beans, growing vegetable gardens and practicing cattle grazing which helps in pulling out the roots of sugarcane (so that they do not sprout again with the next rain). But growing food and bringing water back to the springs are not easy tasks. The land is tired and eroded after so many years of damage done by harmful technology and the chemically-intensive packages of the Green Revolution. However, these are still not the biggest challenges faced by the community.

In December 2014, the community entered the first private farm to reoccupy it through collective organising in Corinto, a town in Cauca. Since then, they have been attacked more than 300 times by the plethora of armed forces, i.e., the army, paramilitary, guerrillas and the militarised police known as the ESMAD (Mobile Anti-Riot Squads of the National Police). It is worth mentioning that in the liberated haciendas (farms), the army has positioned itself within the private farms, making it very clear that the forces of the State serve only to protect private property (Nasaacin, 2015). Twelve liberators have been killed in these attacks and six hundred have been wounded—some of them seriously.

If anyone knows and understands the meaning of resistance, it is the native and Afro-descendant people who have been walking on this path for centuries. The COVID-19 pandemic can be understood, in this context, as one ill more, because therein lies the unending memory of all the threats to life that they have had to overcome.

## How resilience that was established has helped during the pandemic

In the middle of the nation-wide lockdown, the PLMT, through a process called Food March, collected parts of the harvest from all of their liberated farms and sent two truckloads of yucca, beans, squash, medicinal herbs and much more to the city of Cali and other urban areas. The community has done this twice since 2018, and this was the third Food March, or Pandemic March—as there is no pandemic that can stop the liberation of Mother Earth. The Nasa say that their struggles, and now COVID-19, has taught them to be strong and rooted, and from this rootedness, to dream of seeing Mother Earth free.

The PLMT has also implemented technologies to liberate Mother Earth and it is supporting the formation of Nasa Yuwe School to recover the mother tongue of local indigenous communities. During the pandemic, the PLMT's radio programme *Vamos al corte* (Let's go to Court) has been broadcasting slogans to weave together the collective consciousness among all members of the community: "Sow to liberate"—"Under the cement is the food"—to liberate in ways that all beings can fit in a pluriversal world—"We require not only land for the people, but people for the land" (Radio Program PLMT, 2021).

This is part of the process of recovering Mother Earth while continuing with collective farming. The most important intention is to recover and liberate the territory from monoculture, resist private accumulation, and regenerate biodiversity so as to allow life to become bountiful and resilient in times of ecological crises.

As the Nasa people say, "Neither confinement, nor hunger, nor the virus are something new; we have been enduring these disasters for five centuries that devastated our people. We are the survivors of viruses and wars. We have been caged for three centuries in corners called *resguardos*<sup>1</sup> while in the flatland, the agro-industry privileges sugarcane plantations that only serve powerful industries. We have endured long periods of famine while the rich in the city live in the midst of waste and throw us crumbs and say: These are your rights."

## Lessons learnt

The COVID-19 pandemic conjures up hundreds of thousands of humans dying worldwide. However, the announced disaster of the Plantationocene—climate change—will be of even more epic proportions for the web of life. In the face of this oppressive system, liberators make it clear that we are part of Mother Earth. They do this by resisting the occupational logic of the coloniser with their practices of re-inhabiting Mother Earth with care, reciprocity, and mutuality.

Over time, a symbiotic relationship among different creatures will be recovered, with humans occupying a part of it instead of trying to control everything on this land. Rooting oneself in local knowledge, reviving indigenous seeds, promoting cropping diversity, practicing convivial farming, and embodying ecological practices can help achieve food sovereignty and ecological sustainability. Healing ourselves from the pandemic implies breathing with liberated Mother Earth.

<sup>1</sup> Indigenous reservations are a legal and socio-political institution of a special nature, made up of one or more indigenous communities, which, with a collective property title that enjoy the guarantees of private property, own their territory and are governed by the management of this and their internal life by an autonomous organization protected by the indigenous jurisdiction and its own regulatory system. (Article 21, Decree 2164 of 1995). <https://www.mininterior.gov.co/content/resguardo-indigena>





PLMTs poster on the politics of water

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## Sows of Life, Harvests of Water

**Geo-localisation:** Cauca Valley, Colombia



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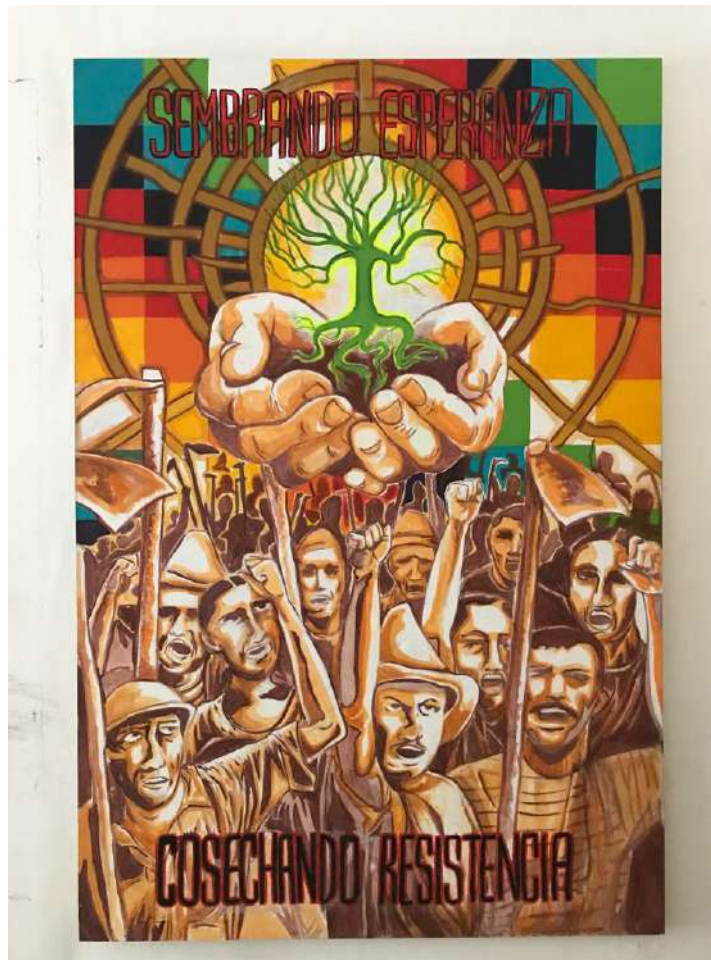


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Photo courtesy Patricia Botero Gomez



Poster on Sowing Hope, Harvesting Resistance

### Brief description

Located in Valle del Cauca (Cauca Valley), Colombia, the township of Montañitas lives a complex reality due to a scarcity of water caused by the dry ecosystem of this region. This scarcity is accentuated by pine and eucalyptus cultivation for paper production by the Cartón Company of Colombia, which has historically faced charges of deforestation, destruction of natural ecosystems, and being an ally of paramilitarism in this region (Álzate, 2017). Similar to other territories within the country,

the Cartón Company has violently displaced peasants and destroyed ecosystems by having the support of local political elites and pro-extractive legislations.

From her home, embedded in the mountains that adjoin the Cauca desert of Valle del Cauca, Carmen Hoyos recalls the situation of their village, "Before the pine and eucalyptus plantations, we would load water on horses from some nearby water births. Now, with the plantations, the water has dried up and we no longer have those births. We don't want more pine and eucalyptus crops because they are water-intensive."

The Montañitas community has historically struggled to resolve the shortage of water which is needed for agriculture and domestic consumption. A small aqueduct supplies water every 15 days and families have to store it in jars or tanks for daily use.

In the face of these hardships, the community, with the help of civil society organisations, has come together in a collective process which is focused on developing practices that help solve the problem of water scarcity in their territory.

### **Process that led to the community being resilient (Pre-covid)**

Surcomún and the Yunka Wasi Foundation are organisations working on organic agriculture, local economy, environmental education, and social technologies for rural sustainable development. In 2014, they developed a working relationship with the Montañitas community. Together, they promote organisational spaces focusing on water-based issues as well as farmers' training. These spaces intend to work towards recognising peasant rights and propagating techniques of organic agriculture and rainwater harvesting. They have organised several events to discuss environmental problems and water scarcity, such as the Water Fair in the La Virgen township, Valle del Cauca in 2017. Thus, the community, along with Surcomún and the Yunka Wasi Foundation, has forged a path of struggle for water.

In Montañitas, this relationship has given way to the formal birth of the Association of Agro-Environmental Rural Communities (ACORA) made up of 30 families. A work plan has been prepared by ACORA to provide alternative solutions for water-related issues and to pursue dreams together as a community.

Julia León, a member of the association, tells us, "Our neighbour Nilba invited me for a programme with Surcomún. With the first meeting, this seemed important to me because it was something that we had been fighting for without any guidance." Another member, Carlos Mosquera, adds, "I came to my first meeting with the thought of learning how to prepare organic fertilisers, but then I stayed there and joined the group with the desire to continue learning."

These days, self-managed activities such as bingo halls and raffles have been developed where the entire Montañitas community is involved. Funds are collected to buy and install Zamorano tanks for storing water for agricultural and domestic use. Participating in activities such as bingo halls, where the community has to find water for public toilets, water for lunches and snacks etc., makes the community think and reflect on what it is to live without water.

With the work of ACORA, Surcomún and the Yunka Wasi Foundation, many families have been able to install Zamorano tanks in their homes. Ten families have 7,000 litre tanks and several families have plastic tanks of 3,500 litres. These are managed



by public entities with contributions from each family and resources saved by the association in the various activities carried out.

“We have always fought to achieve this. With the effort of ACORA, we have reached the achievement of installing Zamorano tanks for the collection of rainwater” says Nilba Muñoz, one of the women who rallied for this organisation and has tirelessly insisted on organising the community for a better life.

The Zamorano tank has become a real solution to the problem of water scarcity in the township. The water is collected from the rooftops or from a water source as in the case of Carlos Mosquera who lives in the lower part of Chancos and can take water from a nearby stream. Currently, he has two tanks of 14,000 litres for domestic use as well as irrigating his garden and fish farm. Julia Leon has started raising pigs and chickens after installing her Zamorano tank.

It is also important to highlight that the initiative of the Zamorano tanks aroused creativity in some people, such as Carlos Mosquera, who decided to make a 3000 litre tank with zinc, wood and plastic. The work is hard but the organisation stresses on advancing concrete solutions to everyday problems to retain hope and keep creating possibilities of life.

Photo courtesy Patricia Botero Gomez



Poster by Surcomún

## **How resilience that was established has helped during the pandemic**

The pandemic has been difficult for rural communities as they weren't able to organise their regular meetings or carry out their collective work. Plans had to be postponed, families became isolated and the work-dynamics of the community stalled.



However, having rainwater stored in the tanks has allowed the community to grow their own food, which has also been supplied to neighbouring areas which are facing food shortages. Many migrants who returned to the countryside have used this opportunity to work on the land and realised the need to take care of it—as it nurtures them when nothing else can.

With the availability of water, the raising of animals and birds such as chickens, ducks and pigs is increasing. This is contributing to the families' food requirements and generating economic income from the sale of surplus. Now, the associates have proposed training meetings to learn to feed animals so that their dependence on external inputs and the foreign market is reduced.

With time, the association has found ways to meet in the midst of the pandemic. During 2021, meetings have been held that are allowing the organisational work to be resumed.

There have been many adversities that the community has had to face. But their resilience has generated unique responses, such as peasant markets in the townships and the promotion of local food. Families who bought food from supermarkets in the city now buy their food on the sidewalk. This is helping in revitalising the local economy and, in turn, helping in recovering the social fabric of societies.

"We want the association to grow and keep going", says Julia León.

## Lessons learnt

In these difficult times, ACORA has been a big support for peasant families. Their collective is strong and the community feels the need to continue their struggle to protect their territories of life. The association has strived to bring improvements in the living conditions for the community, thereby solidifying the belief that solidarity and collective work are key to their work.

Today, there are many families sowing life on Earth in hope of a bountiful harvest. These are families who have recovered their relationship with the land—which implies a recovery of memory and culture, and a positive transformation towards the future.

We recognise that water is essential to life. In the field, planning agricultural activities while keeping water use, its efficiency, harvesting, and storage in mind allows us to sow the land—that is to sow life. A self-sufficient society must plan life around the sustainable functioning of dynamic ecosystems to have fewer environmental impacts and more reproduction of life.

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Interviewees: Nilba Muñoz, Carlos Mosquera, Carmen Hoyos, Diego Muñoz, Maribel Urcue, Sergio Morales and Julia León.

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## Towards Dignifying our People of the Sea: Relaunching Small-Scale Fisheries in Costa Rica during COVID-19

**Geo-localisation:** Caribbean and Pacific coasts of Costa Rica



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Photo courtesy CoopeSoliDar R.L. 2020-2021



Tarcoles Marine Responsible Fishing Area, Costa Rica

### Brief description

Costa Rica is a Central American country with a unique geographical position between two continents and extended territorial waters. Only one-tenth of the national territory is land. As a result, fishing and harvesting coastal products are important activities in the country—both at the national level as an industry-intensive sector and at the local level for supporting local economies and providing food security to communities (CoopeSoliDar R.L., 2020). According to Solórzano-Chavez et. al. (2017), while men tend to predominate fishing and harvesting, women play important roles in the diverse

value chains of fish products. Fishing, therefore, is “not just a simple economic activity, but rather a complex social and cultural dynamic that influences the quality of life of men and women fishers, the satisfaction of their families’ needs, and the integrity of their communities” (Solórzano-Chavez et. al., 2017). It is a way of life.

However, the highly aggressive neoliberal market in Costa Rica inhibits the possibility of small-scale fisheries to place their products at important markets. It also diminishes the possibility of approaching the market from the diversity of territories of the sea. Even though Costa Rica has two coasts with relatively easy access, the country has not been able to develop a significant urban consumption of seafood. Additionally, the traditional seafood market has seen reducing access to only a few products. Due to the neoliberal market, the import of seafood from other countries—many of these products coming from aquaculture production at very low prices—has also affected the purchase of national products.

As stated by CoopeSoliDar R.L. 2020, it is important to note that, although social development, employment, and decent work are recognised as fundamental for all citizens within the country’s constitution, Costa Rica is yet to recognise these rights for the majority of small-scale artisanal fishers. According to international studies, the country has about 15,000 artisanal fishing families, but only 2,000 are formally recognised and issued licenses by the State. For the fisherfolk, this makes equal access to social and economic services null in contrast to other Costa Ricans who have developed various types of productive activities. Therefore, most small-scale artisanal fishers women and men operate informally in vulnerable conditions with many of them living below the poverty line.

Photo courtesy CoopeSoliDar R.L 2020-2021



Tarcoles Marine Responsible Fishing Area, Costa Rica

## Process that led to the community being resilient (Pre-covid)

In 2004, the idea of developing a network of small-scale fishing communities was born with three major objectives: To provide a legitimate voice for the sector in

national and Central American discussions, to initiate a conscious and continuous effort towards responsible fishing, and to promote the wellbeing of small-scale fishing and marine communities.

Since then, two organisations, namely, CoopeSoliDar R.L. and the Marine Responsible Fishing Areas and Marine Territories of Life Network have participated in actions aimed at strengthening the capacities of fisherfolk, mollusks-gatherers, and their organisations within a framework of human rights, equity, and participatory governance.

The Marine Responsible Fishing Areas and Marine Territories of Life Network is a conglomerate of organisations containing diverse fishing organisations, communities of marine management areas, indigenous groups, afro-descendants, and mollusks-gathering communities, among other forms of fishing and community organisations. Thus, it is a broad, open, and heterogeneous group. Currently, the Network integrates 22 Marine Territories of Life<sup>2</sup>.

As an organisation providing technical support, CoopeSoliDar R.L. has used different actions, strategies, and methodological instruments—in conjunction with the Marine Responsible Fishing Areas and Marine Territories of Life Network—for the recognition of rights of artisanal fishers and mollusk-gatherers in the environmental, economic, social, and legal context of Costa Rica. The work done by these organisations has been essential to maintain the vitality and resilience of the sector—reducing poverty and ensuring food security.

Photo courtesy CoopeSoliDar R.L. 2020-2021



Processing sea products

<sup>2</sup> A Marine territory of life is an area where there exists a close and deep connection between the marine territory and an indigenous people or local community. The custodian people (or community) makes and enforces rules and decisions about the marine territory through a functioning governance institution. And, the governance decisions and management efforts of the concerned people or community contribute to the conservation of nature as well as to community wellbeing



## How resilience that was established has helped during the pandemic

As a response to the commercial and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on small-scale artisanal fisheries of Costa Rica, CoopeSoliDar R.L. put to work a Solidarity Fund created from the resources of its associates. This has been used for fair and equitable marketing of seafood bought from small-scale fishing communities that have been affected by COVID-19.

Photo courtesy CoopeSoliDar R.L. 2020-2021



Working on a net

The funds are meant to help communities that have been heavily impacted by the lack of tourism and the inability to access markets. The funds are utilised for travelling to many territories and buying marine products at fair prices. Artisanal fishing organisations are contacted directly in each territory to promote collective action and well-being. The fisherfolk are consulted on the type of product and the fair price for their products. A process has been initiated through which social networks are being facilitated to create a new market of solidarity and support for families who depend on the sea. These communities have been using their traditional knowledge systems for generating dignified livelihoods and ensuring food security, not only for themselves, but also for thousands of other Costa Ricans who live in urban areas.

After eight months of the Solidarity Fund being put in place, another process was initiated by CoopeSoliDar R.L. and the Marine Responsible Fishing Areas and Marine Territories of Life Network towards creating the Sea Market. This is a fair and equitable solidarity market that provides decent sustenance to small-scale artisanal fishers and promotes sustainable ways of life. An ethical protocol has been co-developed for the operation of this market, which establishes consultative processes and ensures that the benefits derived from this market are fairly distributed among all stakeholders.



in the territories. The marketing is based on the principle of solidarity, respect for diversity, gender equity, and the just and equitable distribution of benefits, recognising all levels of participation along the value chains of the different products. There is a clear objective from the beginning to properly recognise and value the contribution of women within fisheries, market value chains and this specific market initiative too.

In addition to the above, the strengthening of the Sea Market will contribute significantly to the efforts promoted by the Marine Responsible Fishing Areas and Marine Territories of Life Network and CoopeSoliDar R.L. aimed at regularising and defending the rights of small-scale artisanal fishing—proposed under the 12 Paddle model which intends to solve the problem of access to rights suffered by many families engaged in small-scale artisanal fishing in Costa Rica. The 12 Paddle model is a process through which small-scale fishing communities can advance towards better conditions of life and recognition of their rights. Each paddle has its own criteria including issues such as level of fishers' organisation, responsible fishing etc. The communities will be supported to strengthen their capacities and maintain their rights to fish in the long term.

## Lessons learnt

Costa Rica concentrates its population in the urban areas of the country and there is little awareness of the cultures, identities, and products of coastal areas. The Sea Market has managed to identify an important group of people who are willing to consume products from coastal communities and interested in the social, cultural, and product quality aspects that are unique to this market.

Although women have been barely studied or recognised, they continue to play a fundamental role pre-fishing and post-fishing, and they are the strongest channels that have been identified in the diverse fisheries value chain. From this experience, it seems that recognising women for their work also translates into a greater push for collective action over individual action, and therefore, is key for equitable distribution of benefits.

The work carried out on conservation, promoting local knowledge, creating livelihood security and strengthening the capacities of these marine-coastal communities has helped them strengthen their environmental and social resilience. It has provided them the possibility of coping with the difficult situation of COVID-19 in innovative and radical ways.

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# Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia (KPRI)

**Geo-localisation: Indonesia**



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Photo courtesy KPRI



Farmers union Serikat Petani Pasundan organised posko solidaritas (solidarity place) for community members affected by COVID-19

## Brief description

The Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia (KPRI) or Confederation of Indonesia Peoples Movement is a national organisation consisting of federations of women, workers, peasants, fisherfolk, indigenous people, and urban poor. KPRI members consist of 70 unions or people's organisations in 22 provinces and 125 districts and cities across Indonesia (UP CIDS, 2018).

As a grassroots federation, KPRI is the institutional transformation of Perhimpunan Penggerak Advokasi Kerakyatan (PERGERAKAN), or People-Centered Advocacy Organisation for Social Justice. PERGERAKAN started organising themselves from 1999 to 2002 through a series of research studies, assessments, educational activities, and consolidation meetings at the national and regional levels. In 2003, PERGERAKAN was officially founded as a membership-based organisation and held its first Congress in 2005 at Bali, which was attended by CSOs, NGOs, and other social movement actors.

As an organisation, KPRI adheres to the concept of solidarity economy, where the supply chain is independent of the dictates of the global capitalist economy. Solidarity economy banks on the principles of people-centred development in which the primary stakeholders—marginalised and vulnerable populations—have power over the means and ends of production. Through this, ordinary people play an active role in shaping all dimensions of human life: Economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental. It has the ability to take the best practices within the present system—such as efficiency and use of technology—and transform them to serve the welfare of the community based on the communities’ unique values and goals.

This is KPRI’s response to the continuing dominance of neoliberal capitalism in the 21st century that pervades not only the market but also the state. KPRI sees the importance of the solidarity economy as an alternative to capitalism as well as other authoritarian and state-dominated economic systems.

### Process that led to the community being resilient (Pre-covid)

For many years now, KPRI has implemented projects and conducted research on economic solidarity and transformative social protection across Indonesia. These projects have been a part of KPRI’s work to organise and educate working people—on economy, politics, social issues, and culture—in order to achieve its vision of a just, egalitarian, and prosperous society. KPRI believes that mass organisations should realise their historical struggle and re-organise their resistance. It aims for the people to “consume what they produce and produce what they consume” (UP CIDS, 2018).

Photo courtesy KPRI



KPRI and their allies in protest against Omnibus Law



KPRI members have been striving to build a solidarity economy through various alternative community projects and practices. These include alternative schools (that have an emphasis on agriculture and agrarian reform), credit unions and cooperatives, mangrove eco-tourism, community television channels, medical assistance and legal aid for the urban poor, street libraries, urban gardening and much more.

One of the significant factors that has made KPRI resilient and sustainable is their credit unions. By 2018, KPRI had around 1,500 members—who are all part of the working class and members of credit unions (UP CIDS, 2018). These unions aim to make members independent by providing opportunities to access credit that otherwise isn't provided by the mainstream banking system. Each local credit union has established its own structure to ensure that organisational management is kept in place, even if it's a small group of individuals.

A small number of KPRI's peasant unions are small landholders engaged in coffee cultivation. In order to guarantee equitable prices, KPRI is also involved in packaging and fair-trade within the coffee value chain. Its coffee marketing is stationed in Kedai Kopi KaPe RI (KaPe RI Coffee Shop), which are present in Jakarta and other cities.

Photo courtesy KPRI



Children at a community library

## How resilience that was established has helped during the pandemic

Indonesia has been the worst affected country by COVID-19 in Southeast Asia. Yet, despite the government's delayed and inefficient response, Indonesia's grassroots communities have stepped up at the local level. Despite facing mobility restrictions in the middle of the pandemic, member organisations of KPRI have been working tirelessly to secure food. According to Tadem et. al. (2020), "KPRI's peasant federation Serikat Petani Pasundan (Pasundan Peasant Union) harvested their farm produce in

Pasundan (West Java) and distributed freely a significant portion to KPRI members in Bandung. Meanwhile, KPRI's community-owned coffee shop (Kedai Kopi KaPe RI) in Jakarta was temporarily closed and was transformed into a 'central solidarity place' for the relief operation and donation drive, and the production of naturally-made hand sanitisers that were freely shared with the community."

KPRI has worked towards producing protective health equipment, natural hand sanitisers (made with betel leaves and lime), face masks, and has also set up hand-washing facilities since communities were facing difficulties in accessing these items. The organisation's members have built community kitchens, engaged with fundraising, and distributed essential amenities within the community.

Members of Komunitas Pemuda Pergerakan Petamburan and Tomang (Youth Movement Community) in Central Jakarta have worked collectively for food security and the welfare of children along with the local residents. Since many Indonesian children can't return to school or join online classes, these young university students have established a community library and a reading garden for the children. Sastro (2021) also points towards a "planting movement", which refers to the increasing adoption of urban farming, family farming and community farming. Such a movement is also increasing the economic independence of these families and communities. As Sastro (2021) puts it, peoples' movement during COVID-19 is revitalising a "culture of solidarity also known as Gotong Royong (mutual cooperation)."

Photo courtesy KPRI



Children practicing urban farming



With the second wave of COVID-19 hitting Indonesia in July 2021, the KPRI leadership, together with the member federations, has been discussing the possibility of building their own people's hospital with the help of social movements. The Hapsari Federation (Women's Federation) is active in producing herbal medicine to support health workers in Medan, North Sumatra. The Federasi Serikat Buruh Karya Utama or FSBKU (a federation of workers' unions) in Lampung supplies liquid smoked herbal medicine to people who are COVID-19 positive (and in self-quarantine) in various regions.

Meanwhile, in the midst of the health and economic crisis, KPRI has joined other marginalised communities in Indonesia to protest the passage of the Omnibus Law on Job Creation. This controversial new law is believed to have been railroaded in the absence of a comprehensive public consultation while peoples' physical mobility has been highly restricted. This policy immediately has ushered a nation-wide protest and demonstrated the capacity of KPRI to continue their political expressions of dissent despite rising COVID-19 cases and the government's restrictions on social gatherings.

Apart from that, KPRI is also involved with Jamesta (Jaminan Pendapatan Dasar Semesta)—which is a campaign about social protection in relation to Universal Basic Income (UBI) in Indonesia—with the understanding that such a social protection strategy could benefit many people in the face of COVID-19 and beyond. KPRI and others in the Jamesta network have started debates and discussions on UBI, alongside their work of strategising and building coalitions. They have also established teams for public campaigns by using their own language: Bahasa. They have written working and policy papers, and created jingles, posters, and short videos. The regular discussions have also explored the idea of organising a Peoples' Assembly, the Jamesta Congress, and online action.

## Lessons learnt

Indonesia faces a multitude of crises entwined with the global crisis of neoliberal capitalism. When the pandemic hit Indonesia, the government's chaotic policies and slow response to the crisis ushered the continued transmission and spread of COVID-19. The situation has shown the state's weak management of the crisis. On the political economic side, the pandemic has also demonstrated how oligarchs have capitalised on COVID-19 by using (and even expanding) their businesses for their own interest.

KPRI, through the practice and study of economic solidarity, remains steadfast in challenging the impacts of neoliberal capitalism. They continue to see the need for organising the unorganised as well as the consolidation of their organised members—which is crucial for the sustainability and resilience of the organisations they are building.

During COVID-19, the idea of economic solidarity has seen increasing acceptance by social movements in Indonesia. KPRI has continued to build (and practice) a solidarity network between unions of farmers, indigenous peoples, fisherfolk, labor unions and the urban poor. The two main issues being focused on are health and food. KPRI also joined the coalition called People's Committee for the Transformative Food System in July 2021.

Learning from various failures and successes in practicing economic solidarity, KPRI realises that one of its weaknesses is the management of economic institutions or

cooperatives. In the midst of COVID-19, KPRI took the initiative to hold a series of workshops and discussions about cooperatives. Participants who attended (online and offline) were cooperatives from various unions and communities, both the successful ones and the failures. From this learning process, KPRI has compiled an educational module for strengthening and forming union-based cooperatives or people's and community organisations.

All these efforts reflect that community-based education, localised governance, networking, regenerative and sustainable leadership, and democratised information and technology are the key elements that KPRI has developed in building towards a model for alternative development.

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## Lumad Bakwit School

📍 **Geo-localisation:** Philippines



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Photo courtesy SOS Network



Protest to save Lumad Schools

### Brief description

The Bakwit School is the fruition of decades-long struggle by the Lumad people in Mindanao, Philippines. Since they only get a mouse's share of state services, these indigenous peoples (IP) have paved the way for alternative practices that cater to their needs while improving their political organisation, economic welfare, and cultural life—thus contributing to the realisation of their own vision of development. The Lumads (formerly an exonym but now self-ascription for many communities), which comprises of eighteen ethnic groups in Mindanao, have built clinics and schools to serve their communities in lieu of distant government institutions (Alamon, 2017). Earlier, only one out of ten Lumad children knew how to read, write, and count (Sy, 2020). To combat the high incidence of illiteracy, religious groups, human rights organisations and IP advocates built community schools for Lumad people of all ages. Starting as literacy and numeracy programmes, many Lumad communities developed them further and began to establish secondary and tertiary learning institutions by the early 2000s (Alamon, 2017; Sy, 2020).

The Lumad schools also serve as political centres for many communities where indigenous leaders, parents, teachers and youth from across tribes meet to plan campaigns and launch protests against encroachment—mostly by mostly foreign corporations—in the Lumad ancestral land. Because of this, many of the Lumad schools have become targets of state violence (Belisario, 2019). The Save Our Schools Network (SOS) has documented these attacks, which occur as harassment, forced displacement, and militarisation. There have been over 1,000 such cases of state violence documented by SOS across Mindanao. To live and fight another day, many Lumad communities engage in what Filipinos call *bakwit*—a popular term for “evacuate”—to find sanctuary elsewhere.

To sustain the Lumad youth’s education, parents, teachers and supporters have created a temporary mobile school called the Bakwit School. In continuing the school students’ education while also keeping their political activism alive, the Bakwit School also moves from one site to another to facilitate the staging of their protests as well as to ensure the security of participants (SOS, 2019b). More than 3,000 Lumad students—disenfranchised by the Duterte administration’s martial law in Mindanao—study in sanctuaries in Metro Manila and other capital cities to expose the situation of alternative tribal schools in Mindanao (Nolasco & La Vina, 2021).

Collaborating with SOS allows for churches, seminaries, universities and colleges to open their doors to the transient Bakwit School (SOS, 2019a, 15). From 2017 to 2018, and from April 2019 until today, around 700 Lumad students, teachers and parents from all over Mindanao have travelled to Manila to seek justice for human rights violations in the form of attacks against schools, communities, ancestral land and resources (Belisario, 2019). Evacuation centres in Davao City, Cebu, and Surigao del Sur also house Bakwit Schools to allow the Lumad to continue their studies.

Photo courtesy SOS Network



Bakwit school students



## Process that led to the community being resilient (Pre-covid)

Despite a lack of resources, Bakwit Schools hold classes with the help of allied institutions and volunteers. Given that only a handful of Lumad teachers were able to leave their communities in Mindanao, volunteers are enlisted to teach specific subjects which the students need to take in order to move up to the succeeding level. The volunteers need not be licensed teachers—many of them are undergraduate and graduate students from different disciplines as well as homemakers, people from religious groups, professionals and activists. Teachers undergo educational discussions that relate the Lumads' current situation, culture, and, ultimately, their historic struggle towards emancipation (SOS, 2019a, 15). Classroom materials were barely salvaged from attacked schools, so teachers and students rely on donations by other volunteers and external institutions.

To ensure the maximisation of resources, students, teachers and staff are grouped into committees assigned to household duties such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry. Some of them work on creative tasks, such as in visual arts and publicity committees where members craft placards for protests and other artistic materials that may be used in the activities of the school.

Bakwit Schools across the Philippines have led successful mobilisations over the years, including the National/International Children's Day protest every 14th of November. While an emphasis on rescinding martial rule in Mindanao was made during the 2018 protest, the National Children's Day protest in 2019 also called for climate and environmental justice—underscoring the fact that the youth of this generation shall be facing the ecological impacts of climate change years later. Students and teachers of Bakwit Schools also join public demonstrations staged by peasants, workers, women and LGBTQ+, and the urban poor. In every protest, students carry their most fundamental call "Save our schools! Stop Lumad killings!" to urge the government to withdraw military presence in their communities. This gives them hope that they may return to their *yutang kabilin* (ancestral land).

On the 29th of March 2019 at the University of the Philippines Integrated School in Quezon City, the Bakwit School's first milestone was celebrated. With allies from the church, academia, and civil society organisations, a moving up ceremony was held to recognise the students' one year of struggle for education in the school. It also saw the first batch of students enter Grade 12 in the Bakwit School.

## How resilience that was established has helped during the pandemic

In response to the pandemic, the Philippine government has, over time, imposed various permutations of community quarantines, forcing the country into a lockdown each time. The Lumads have been burdened by haphazard policies that limit their movements and disrupt their daily lives. It has been especially difficult for the communities that are being militarised and those who are in evacuation. Securing food and other basic necessities has become a challenge to many indigenous communities. Some Lumad refugees have also been forced to return to their (still) militarised ancestral land—land which they have temporarily left due to state violence.



Despite the hostility and violence of the state, students, teachers and staff of the Bakwit School in Metro Manila have been involved in activities amidst the pandemic to help Lumad students continue their education and continue propagating the political campaigns of Lumad communities and organisations. Given that the school year has ended and that volunteer teachers cannot enter the school premises of the Bakwit School, remedial classes on literacy and numeracy as well as intermediate reading comprehension are being conducted so that the students can enter the next school year all at the same level. Older students, mostly at the Senior High School level, are also assigned to assist younger learners in peer-to-peer storytelling and reading activities.

In order to secure basic necessities, SOS has also been organising donation drives to keep the Bakwit School afloat. The drives are meant for provisions of vegetables, fruits, rice and other

healthy foods for the evacuees. Toiletries, first aid and medical kits have also been solicited. Since July 2020, the donation of materials like books and musical instruments are also being encouraged.

The lockdown has had a heavy toll on the emotional and psychological well-being of students. The environment of isolation and the constant barrage of disturbing news about their families and communities being harassed have posed big challenges for the mental health and welfare of many of the students. Different activities that cultivate skills and hobbies are being conducted not only to “distract” the children from emotionally taxing dangers outside the school but also to provide them a temporary comfort. These include intramural sports events, beadwork, fine arts-related activities and music. Some students have suffered a more alarming deterioration of mental and emotional health.

Photo courtesy SOS Network



Bakwit school students

Their anxieties are mostly directed at the safety of their families and communities, the possibility of returning to their home, and the upcoming school year. To address this, psychosocial support from allied health and children's welfare organisations have been conducted, equipping the children with psychosocial training to help themselves and their schoolmates.

On 17th of July 2021, SOS, along with its allied organisations and institutions, held the second historic moving up and graduation ceremony on ground. This was held at the Bantayog ng mga Bayani in Quezon City, a monument and museum complex that honours the country's martyrs for freedom and democracy across the decades. The event was attended by progressive policymakers, volunteers throughout the years, educators, religious leaders and media personalities. They all celebrated the triumph of the 30 students who graduated despite the closure of their schools and the pandemic.

## Lessons learnt

The Lumad people have long been targets of state-sponsored attacks due to their organising and mobilisation against the entry of foreign corporations in their ancestral land. They are, in other words, defenders of the land and its environment. The Lumad schools give the indigenous youth a chance to contribute to the self-sufficiency of their communities. Due to the closure of the schools due to militarisation, the Bakwit School extends the learning environment to different sanctuaries, thus allowing the continuation of education.

The Lumad Bakwit School is a model of the resilience of community-established alternative education. Given that Lumad schools were founded and developed by communities, a mobile school such as the Bakwit School that extends the services provided by Lumad schools is possible through the continued unity of community members and its allies. It represents the continued struggle of indigenous communities for land rights and the role of education in empowering those who participate in this struggle.

This mobile school is one of the many alternatives practiced by grassroots communities and peoples' organisations across Southeast Asia (Tadem et al., 2020). These alternatives pose a challenge to the current socio-economic, political, and cultural systems that shape societies across borders. Even during the pandemic, communities and organisations committed to alternatives have found ways to address the shortfall of elected governments' response to the health crisis.

Despite the challenges posed by the lockdown, the Lumad schools in Mindanao and Bakwit Schools across the country are using various means to reach out and spread awareness regarding the experiences of indigenous communities in Mindanao. They hope that more people will choose to stand with the Lumad in protecting and fully reclaiming their ancestral land for the continuing survival of their communities and the next generation. Indeed, no amount of threat can break the spirit and determination of Lumad students in asserting their right to education which will help them to defend their *yutang kabilin* for generations to come.

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## Reviving our Ritual Ceremonies to build Solidarity in Response to COVID-19

📍 **Geo-localisation: Tharaka, Kenya**



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Photo courtesy SALT



Community members celebrating with sacred dance after ritual ceremony

### Brief description

The Tharaka territory, traditionally known as *Nthiguru iri Njuki* (The Land of the Bees), is located between the foothills of Mount Kenya and River Tana. This semi-arid land is a biodiversity hotspot characterised by lowland scrub and many hill-ranges.

Although the Tharakans had rich cultural traditions—the community's elders with deep ecological knowledge were at the centre of their governance systems—these traditions have been increasingly undermined. This has been so because of the promotion of ill-conceived projects within the region by the government and external agencies, including livelihood projects promoting livestock and seeds that are not adapted to these conditions. The traditional governance system has been eroded as have customary laws that controlled the cutting of trees, hunting of animals and farming too close to water sources. This has all contributed to the community being increasingly vulnerable to pandemics and climate disruptions.



## Process that led to the community being resilient (Pre-covid)

The tide has been turning with the birth of the Society for Alternative Learning and Transformation (SALT) in 2013. SALT is a community-based network of cultural and ecological governance institutions founded and established under customary laws of the Tharaka indigenous community. These cultural and ecological institutions include clans, chiefdoms, kingdoms, councils of elders, custodians of sacred natural sites, diviners and spiritual leaders, traditional healers and so on. SALT has been reviving cultural rituals and ceremonies to build solidarity within the community.

Over time, customary laws that control the cutting of trees, hunting of animals and farming too close to water sources have started being respected and followed once again. The role of sacred natural sites (SNS)—which are rich bio-cultural areas with spiritual significance—is slowly being revived and now, these sites are becoming central to culture, food sovereignty and protection of ecosystems.

The community's elders remember how they have survived other pandemics and plagues similar in nature to COVID-19. They have their own traditional ways of responding to these events that have helped them to be resilient in the face of many similar challenges. These traditional responses are part of the reason that the Tharakan people are still here—despite huge locust swarms that have threatened food crops in the region and diseases like smallpox that have threatened the community before.

One of the responses to these threats is a ritual called *Muriira*. It is a rare ritual which is done only when the community is threatened by illness or pestilence. *Muriira* comes from the Tharakan word *kuriira*, which means to prevent, to stop, to cast away.

Traditionally, the Tharakan elders conducted *Muriira* when they learned about threats originating in neighbouring areas that could pass into Tharakan territory. The elders would gather people together and raise awareness of the threat the community was facing, where it was coming from and why they were concerned.

Photo courtesy SALT



Mugwe, the divine leader of Tharaka, leads in a ritual ceremony

## How resilience that was established has helped during the pandemic

When the COVID-19 pandemic surged through Kenya, the elders gathered the community together to conduct the *Muriira* ritual. For the first time, this brought together the Christians and Traditionalists in the performance of this ritual. Their coming together in solidarity gave the community a relief from the shock created by the pandemic.

*Muriira* requires people to provide and prepare sacred seeds—millet and finger millet—and to source wild herbs for the elders to use. These need to be prepared in specific ways over the eight days of the ritual by community members under the guidance of the elders. Women and men prepare large batches of gruel from the seeds and local honey. Specific plants are used to make *marigi*, which are small models that are made to look like closed doors.

Once all the ingredients for the ritual are prepared, led by the elders, the people go chanting and praying to different homesteads throughout the territory, blessing them using the seed and honey gruel. The processions and the ritual have four key focal points: North, East, South, and West. These cardinal points are very important in Tharakan cosmology. Elders chosen by the community split up to visit the roads or paths that lead into the Tharakan territory in these four cardinal directions. They then dig a hole and bury the *marigi* (the closed door model) in, or, by the road before saying prayers and returning to the heart of the community.

The ritual has helped create harmony between elements of the community that have been in conflict in recent years. For example, some Christian community members are often hostile to the elders who continue to practice traditional spirituality. But, during the pandemic, their eyes have been opened to the value of *Muriira* and the traditional ways of doing things. Some have even donated seeds and herbs to the ritual.

When the elders are asked why the Christians have been compelled to contribute, they say it is because before they are Christians, these people are Africans. They are Africans first. During this pandemic, their minds appear to be opening to the ways of their forefathers. Once again, they seem to be seeing the value in rituals and what they can do for the community. This ritual brings people together—both physically and culturally—to attend to each other's wellbeing and the health of the territory as well as to defend it from threats. It helps people remember who they are as Tharakans and their responsibilities to their homeland. They become spaces to listen to the community's knowledgeable elders. The return of *Muriira* and the community's active engagement with it, even from afar, is a sign of something bigger. It is a sign that the community is turning the tide on the history of loss in their land.

The community has also been working to bring back local varieties of resilient seeds. Over the past five to six years, there has been a huge increase in seed diversity, community seed swaps, as well as the knowledge of how to grow, cook, save, and store the seeds. These seeds are well-suited to the land. They grow well in the local conditions and are resilient to changing climatic patterns and ever-increasing climatic disruptions. The people who have revived these seeds are getting good harvests and eating healthy. Such localised and healthy food is very useful in building bodily immunity against diseases and pandemics. The revival of traditional seeds and

practices has also made the community less dependent on the outside market for their basic sustenance needs.

Through the work with SALT, the community has continued documenting customary laws for legal recognition and protection of bio-cultural diversity. The community also plans to establish a community botanical garden, while strengthening the already existing garden at the local school. SALT remains committed and strategically connected to national, regional and global processes to ensure that their work can contribute and influence all levels of political decision-making.

Photo courtesy SALT



Community members engaging in dialogues on resilience

## Lessons learnt

If we want to survive on this planet, we have to take care of our own biodiversity. COVID-19 is a wake-up call about how we should live in harmony with nature as the Tharakans once did—and are learning to do so again. They are showing us the importance of traditional knowledge systems as a counterweight to the hegemonic paradigm of modernity. Seed diversity is being promoted and sustainable ecological farming practices are also being adopted. The community members are learning to become the custodians of their ecosystem—which also helps them cope with challenges using non-destructive methods.

The lesson is that we cannot go back to business as usual after this pandemic. Let us not start thinking about how we are going to allow polluting industries to run again. Instead, let us ask ourselves and one another, as if we are gathered in the heart of the village: Do we really want to restore industries that have polluted our air so badly that we cannot see Mount Kenya through the fog? How might we do better?



# 7

## Nayakrishi Andolon

### 📍 Geo-localisation: Bangladesh



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Photo courtesy Nayakrishi Andolon



Farmer Sufia collecting vegetables for cooking

### Brief description

Bangladesh's farmers have struggled for decades to market their produce and earn a decent living. In the 1960's, farmers were persuaded to adopt the Green Revolution model of agriculture. As a result, their livelihoods and other subsistence needs have been increasingly threatened (Mazhar et. al., 2001). In fact, the trade policies within the neoliberal globalised economic system continue to favour the industrial sector over the agricultural sector (Akhter, 2020).

Started in the early 1990's, the Nayakrishi Andolon (New Agriculture Movement) has been building innovative farming practices based around 'seed'. It is currently spread across 3,00,000 diverse member-households in Bangladesh. Its objective is "to demonstrate the *shohoj* way to joyful living by ensuring biodiverse ecological regeneration of nature to receive food, fibre, fuelwood, medicine, clean water, and many different bio-material and spiritual needs of the community" (Mazhar, 2019). As Mazhar (2019) states, *shohoj*, in practice, explores the bio-spiritual potential of human communities in the real material world to transcend an oppressive, painful, and de-humanised existence.



## Process that led to the community being resilient (Pre-covid)

According to Mazhar (2019), farmers are supposed to follow ten simple rules to be a Nayakrishi farmer. The first five rules are considered to be entry level, including clauses such as ‘absolutely no use of pesticide or any chemicals’ and ‘learning the art of producing soil through natural biological processes.’ The next five rules are integrated and advanced practices based on water conservation and organic maintenance of diverse farm species such as fish and poultry. As Mazhar (2019) puts it, “Developing integrated and complex ecological systems maximises systemic yield, contributes to innovating interesting ecological designs, and proves the immense economic potential of biodiversity-based ecological farming as a successful practical resistance against globalisation.”

The Nayakrishi Andolon has built, among others, an institution called the Nayakrishi Seed Network (NSN) which is focused on in-situ and ex-situ conservation of seeds and biodiversity. The NSN works on three levels with the farming household as their focal point. First, the NSN is established in a village by Nayakrishi farmers who then ensure replantation, regeneration, and conservation of local species and varieties. Second, the Specialised Women Seed Network (SWSN) consists mostly of women who collect local seed varieties from different parts of Bangladesh, monitor and document the introduction of new varieties in a given area, and keep updated information of their assigned varieties. Lastly, the Community Seed Wealth (CSW) has been set up for the sharing and exchange of seeds and information between different entities such as villages, districts, and national institutions. All Nayakrishi farmers are free to collect seeds from CSW with the promise of returning twice the received amount after the harvest. The CSW has so far collected over 3,000 varieties of rice and 538 varieties of vegetables, oil, lentils and spices.

Photo courtesy Nayakrishi Andolon



Farmers recovery after flood in 2020



Nayakrishi farmer Fateh in the paddy regeneration field

The Nayakrishi Andolon also encourages the growth of uncultivated food varieties, with low-income farmers collecting nearly 40 percent of their food and nutrition from uncultivated sources. These food sources are also important for medicinal purposes, both for people and animals (Mazhar, 2019). Functionally, Nayakrishi defines agriculture as the management of both cultivated and uncultivated spaces to ensure the maximum yield per acre of land—invigorating various ecological functions of the elements of living Nature.

### **How resilience that was established has helped during the pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought markets and transportation to a halt in Bangladesh. Farmers were not able to travel for harvesting or selling their crops. Modern and conventional farmers who use harmful chemicals were hit especially hard. Since they take credits from dealers and are indebted, with the market being shut, they were unable to pay-off their debts.

According to Mazhar and Akhter (2020), although Nayakrishi farmers faced problems due to the market closures, they weren't affected as badly. Since they practice mixed cropping, a number of their crops were already harvested when the pandemic affected Bangladesh's markets, which they were able to sell off. Only the crops that were being grown and harvested during the lockdown weren't sold. Additionally, the Nayakrishi farmers don't have any debts from chemical fertiliser dealerships, so they haven't had to pay-off any debts unlike conventional farmers.

Akhter (Mazhar and Akhter, 2020) talks about how the Nayakrishi farmers are selling their produce locally or exchanging and sharing produce among themselves as a community. For the next cropping season, they have their own collection of seeds whereas conventional farmers will have to buy seeds from the markets while also facing a cash shortage. The Nayakrishi farmers' practice of little dependence on dominant markets and conventional chemical-based farming practices has largely

helped them deal with this crisis. This is in sharp contrast to other farmers who are facing multiple issues—all of which are linked to their dependence on the (vulnerable) global market.

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*Jamal Hossain, aged 50, is a vegetable farmer with over an acre of land. Due to the lockdown, he couldn't sell most of the produce—only selling some of it at a low price. Although his field was full of crops, transportation services were shut down and the local people had little cash. The market was open only for a short period every morning. So, he went to the market with the crops on a cycle. Still, he could not sell all his crops and sold some at half the price. He also distributed vegetables to his neighbours without charge. He has stored the cereal crops safely and hopes to sell them later for a better price.*

*Jamal has had to work harder because wage labour is not available. But, he feels sorry for commercial farmers using hybrid vegetable seeds which require fertilisers and pesticides. They couldn't buy those input materials as they didn't have cash, the shops were closed and labour was not available. Jamal has used the seeds saved in the household, so he hasn't had to go to the market and also isn't dependent on fertilisers and pesticides”.*

An interesting aspect that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to attention is bodily immunity. Comorbidities have been sharply highlighted, and the importance of having safe and nutritious food is slowly being realised. Though Nayakrishi farmers couldn't buy food from the markets, they have been able to collect uncultivated food from their fields and surroundings, and therefore, they have nutritious food available which is free of harmful chemicals.

The Nayakrishi farmers' agricultural produce such as rice, milk and vegetables have been seeing an increasing demand from urban consumers. These products are now being sold from the organic food shops Shashyaprabartana, as Nayakrishi continues to become a trusted name among city-based consumers.

Photo courtesy Nayakrishi Andolon



Happy children in a Nayakrishi village



## Lessons learnt

Nayakrishi Andolon is showing the way for farmers' resistance against a globalised food chain by using minimum external inputs, building on local knowledge, facilitating local markets, and practicing biodiverse agricultural techniques. They are showing that communities can achieve food sovereignty by being rooted to their soil and embodying ecological practices. The Nayakrishi way of bio-diverse agriculture has proved to be helpful in risk management during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their limited dependence on volatile corporate markets for agricultural inputs has been a key facet of their resilience. Finally, Nayakrishi Andolon is providing alternatives for safe, nutritious, and diverse food which is critical for well-being and survival during a global pandemic (Mazhar and Akhter, 2020).

Pathogens have always been abundant in nature. It is the capitalist practice of having little regard for ecological sustainability that continues to expose the human populace to such virulent disasters. COVID-19, with all the havoc it has wreaked, also presents an opportunity to shift away from destructive, chemical-based, and (exploitative) market-centred farming practices towards bio-diverse ecological agriculture.

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# 8

## Community Forest Rights

📍 **Geo-localisation: India**



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Photo courtesy Shrishtee Bajpai



Active women members of the Maha Gramsabha, Korchi and Mahila Parisar Sangh, Korchi

### Brief description

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, also known as FRA, is an Indian law that recognises the historical injustice against Adivasis (India's indigenous people) and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs) in colonial and post-colonial India as well as the importance of their role in conserving ecosystems. It provides individual rights for cultivation within forests, community rights over common property resources, and habitat rights—thereby ensuring conservation of resources while enhancing livelihoods and food security of the communities (CFR-LA, 2020).

As stated by CFR-LA (2020), the FRA vests the 'right to protect, regenerate or conserve or manage any community forest resource which they (Adivasis and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers) have been traditionally protecting and conserving for sustainable use'. It provides the power and responsibility to the *gram sabha* (village assembly) to protect, preserve, and manage the biodiversity, natural resources, wildlife, water sources, and its cultural and spiritual resources, and to prevent any activity

that causes harm to these resources. These provisions are cumulatively known as Community Forest Resource Rights (CFR), and *gram sabhas* have been vested with the authority to make CFR claims.

According to the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act 1996 (PESA), *gram sabhas* are considered competent to safeguard community resources (as opposed to *gram panchayat* or village council). The *gram sabhas* maintain and hold the rights over usage of funds collected from community resources. Community Forest Rights Management Committees (CFRMCs), which are constituted and monitored by *gram sabhas*, are “entrusted with the duty to prepare conservation and management plans for community forest resources.”

These laws, having the potential to unlock decentralised governance for historically marginalised communities, have faced stiff opposition from various power centres. The Union Environment Ministry stated that under FRA, about 56 percent of forests were to be transferred from the Forest Department to the communities. However, years after it was passed as a law, only 13.13 percent of FRA’s potential has been utilised nationwide (Bijoy, 2020).

### Process that led to the community being resilient (Pre-covid)

In India, some of the highest Scheduled Tribe populations are found in Central India, a region covering the states of Maharashtra (10.5 million), Chhattisgarh (7.8 million), and Madhya Pradesh (15.3 million) (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014). This is a region rich in biodiversity and an estimated 183,000 Sq kms of forest cover (Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change, 2017). Consequently, the marginalised communities have seen decades of state violence and repression, land grabbing, and illegal mining. Alongside, there have also been decades-long political movements and armed rebellions for the rights of Scheduled Tribes across the region (Prabhu, 1998 and Jaoul & Shah, 2016).

Photo courtesy Shrishtee Bajpai



Maha Gramsabha meeting near Salhe village



Mining in Surjagad in South Gadchiroli

Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra has a vibrant history of resistance movements over the years demanding village self-rule and rights related to forests and resources. With the enactment of FRA in 2006 and PESA Rules being drafted for the state of Maharashtra in 2014, a strong people's movement in Gadchiroli district was able to bring around 38 percent of forests under the control of *gram sabhas* by 2016.

In Korchī *taluka* (an administrative subdivision of a district), 87 of the 133 village *gram sabhas* had successfully claimed CFR Right titles over their traditional forests by 2012. The local leaders in Korchī started holding multiple open discussions at village and *taluka*-levels on the empowerment of *gram sabhas*, on resisting mining operations, and on their ideas of development itself (Broome et. al., 2020).

In 2016, as the communities were venturing into collection and trade of non-timber forest products, they realised that individual *gram sabhas* weren't strong enough to oppose exploitative market forces. Hence, 90 *gram sabhas* in the district came together to establish a federation called the *Maha Gram Sabha* (MGS). The MGS meetings are typically held once a month. All participating villages are equally represented, and its membership is sensitive to the social dynamics of caste, class, and gender—attempting to provide equal space to all. Over the years, it has evolved into a *taluka*-level pressure group concerning issues related to local wellbeing (Broome et. al., 2020).

Yet another story of community forest governance from Central India is situated in Ambagarh chowki, which is a development block in Rajnandgaon district, Chhattisgarh. It has a majority Adivasi population who are dependent on forest produce and agriculture. According to CFR-LA (2020), six villages in the block received their CFR recognition certificate in 2012-13. However, the certificate was automatically given in the name of the Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC), which is composed of the Forest department and community members. This recognition in the name of JFMC was rejected by the *gram sabhas*, who then went on to form Community Forest Rights Management Committees (CFRMC), which are composed entirely of *gram sabha* members (CFR-LA, 2020).



As stated by Misra (2016), “the forest department continues to harass and threaten the villagers but the community has put up a strong fight.” The *gram sabhas* exercise the rights of CFRMCs to protect and patrol their forests, and practice CFR conservation. The CFRMCs have been an important institution for the proper implementation of CFR in the district (CFR-LA, 2020).

## How resilience that was established has helped during the pandemic

The lockdown resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic affected communities in different ways. Within communities that depend on forests for their livelihoods, it meant that they were unable to collect or sell the forest produce, thereby disrupting their livelihoods and food security.

Korchi *taluka* saw many *gram sabha* leaders coming together to ease the distress caused by the lockdown by distributing essentials using the *gram sabha* funds. Single women and people with disabilities were given a priority in the distribution of essentials, and in some villages, ration kits were provided by the *gram sabha*. A few non-profit organisations have provided single women with seeds and organic manure for kitchen gardens. In the village Kukdale, the *gram sabha* has provided employment to 110 families by planting trees on open lands using compensation received by the *gram sabha* (Jamkatan, 2021).

However, in between all the relief work being done by *gram sabhas* in Korchi, the District Collector sealed the bank accounts of the *gram sabhas* citing irregularities in their relief work. The people of the *taluka* have had to suffer as a result, despite the help they have received from non-profit organisations. Currently, 19 *gram sabhas* have filed a case on the matter, which is pending in the high court. However, such unfair treatment by a malicious state apparatus has only strengthened the resolve of *gram sabhas* in Korchi (Jamkatan, 2021).

Photo courtesy Shrishtee Bajpai



Tendu-pata auctioning meeting in Korchi





Women and her son collecting Muhua in the forest

In Ambagarh chowki, as COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, the *gram sabhas* initiated a full lockdown in their villages. With communities starting to face difficulties in accessing essential supplies, the *gram sabhas* devised systems of solidarity and localisation by distributing locally-procured medicinal plants and vegetables within the communities (CFR-LA, 2020).

The *gram sabhas* have continued their processes under the CFR management plans and the MGNREGA scheme (a pan-India rural livelihood scheme). They have built ponds to initiate fisheries businesses for employment. Alongside, they have also planted many indigenous food plants such as Jimikanda (Elephant Foot Yam) and Kochaikanda (Vine Potato) to ensure forest-based food security.

The CFRMCs have also devised methods to ensure the daily collection of forest goods (such as fruits, tubers, firewood etc) and collection of Minor Forest Produce (such as Mahua fruits and Tendu leaves) in ways that have ensured safety from the virus and equal access to all families. Additionally, in order to prohibit overcrowding, the *gram sabhas* has curbed food distribution at Public Distribution Centres, instead opting for doorstep delivery of essentials. Awareness about public health has been prioritised as well—using slogans and loudspeakers to share information (CFR-LA, 2020).

As Keshav Gurnale, a member of a community support organisation, states “The *gram sabhas* ensured food security for all families, including an estimate of the quantity of food required, especially by the most marginalised. They arranged a free and dry cooked meal for people. Due to the high number of migrant workers returning home, quarantine facilities were made in the district and food was provided to the workers” (CFR-LA, 2020).

## Lessons learnt

While state and national governments have been failing in their attempts to curb both COVID-19 and the resultant failing economy, grassroots governance initiatives

are providing a hopeful political alternative. Empowered with humanistic and ecologically-radical laws, indigenous community assemblies are providing us with descriptive 'real-world experiments' of alternative politics, economics, livelihood generation and sustenance, ecological conservation and social justice.

The two examples from central India stated here are only a few among many such stories found across the subcontinent. There are well-documented cases of Community Forest Rights and *gram sabha* initiatives during COVID-19 from Narmada and Kutch districts in Gujarat; Gondia, Dhule and Nandurbar districts in Maharashtra; Dindori district in Madhya Pradesh; Nayagarh district in Odisha, and so on.

These stories show that if communities are in control of their local means of production, they can counter market forces and guard themselves against the insecurities of the mainstream economic system. While cities, with their heavily-guarded top-down governance, have been at the epicentre of the pandemic and the economic fallout, empowered grassroots communities have fared much better. The hope is that such a characteristic show of resilience by these communities will be a wake-up call to move towards direct democracy.

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