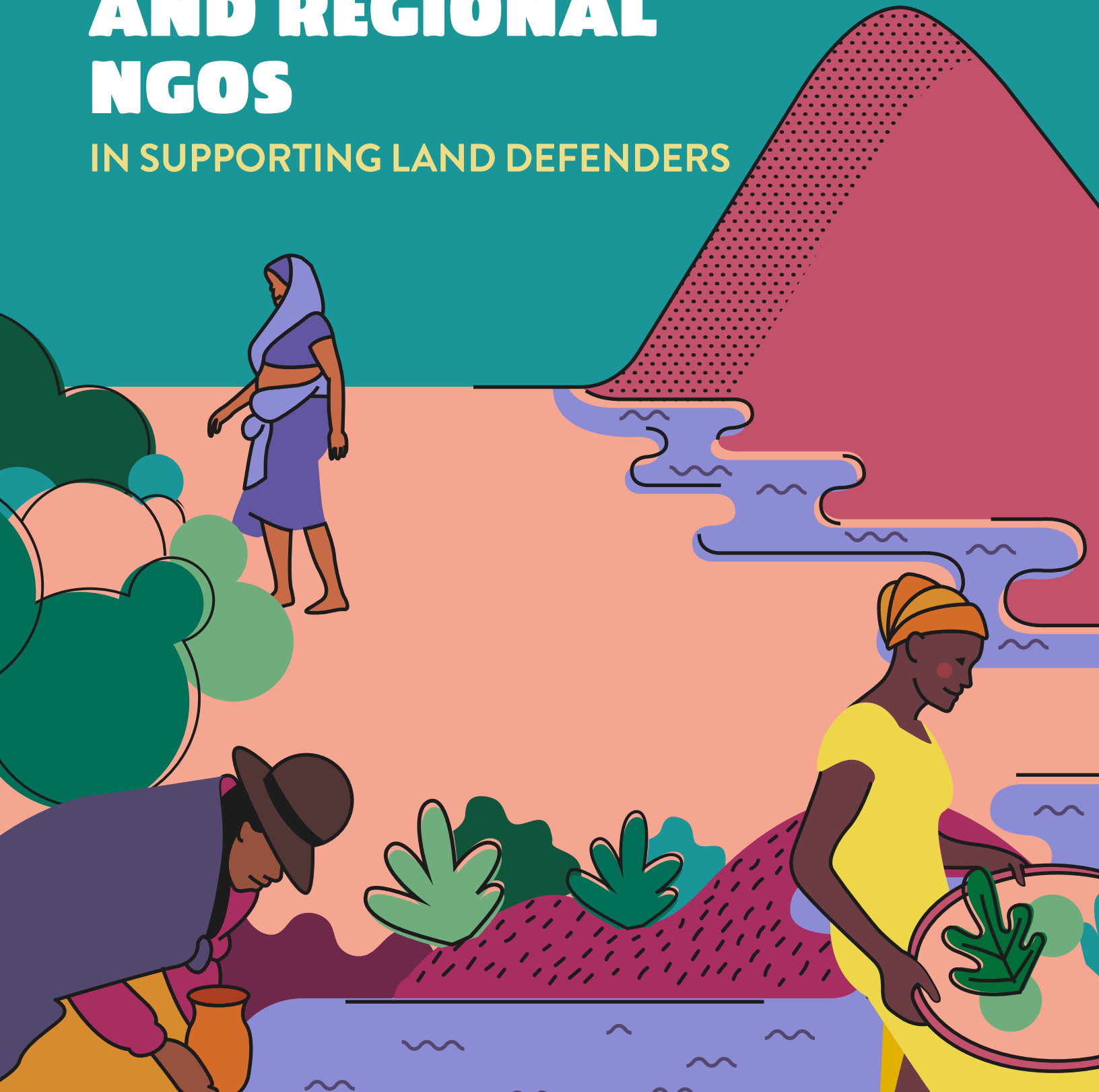


CALL TO SOLIDARITY AND ACTION

# THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL NGOS

IN SUPPORTING LAND DEFENDERS



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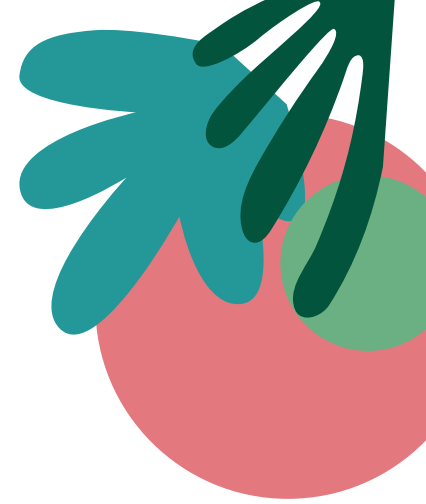
## IN SUPPORTING LAND DEFENDERS

*“In 2020, Global Witness recorded 227 murdered land and environmental defenders – making it once again the most dangerous year on record for people defending their homes, land and livelihoods, and the ecosystems vital for biodiversity and the climate.”*

**-- Global Witness, Last Line of Defense, September 2021**

Among women human rights defenders (WHRD), those defending ancestral lands, waters and territories are one of the groups at highest risk. Their opposition to large-scale extractive projects results in threats, criminalisation, sexual assault and lethal violence. In an effort to support their leadership and safety, the Count Me In! consortium, whose member organisations support and accompany WHRD around the globe, undertook multi-regional research about the drivers and financiers of extractive projects. The research and accompanying land defender toolkit can be [found here](#) in English, Spanish and French.

# THE REALITIES OF EXTRACTIVE DEVELOPMENT



Extractive industries take many forms but are characterised by four defining features:

1. Intensive extraction of natural goods and resources (including fossil fuels, metals and minerals, water, plants, energy, forests, fish etc.)
2. Emphasis on large quantities, often focusing on a single product or crop;
3. Low requirement for processing; and
4. Intention that extracted materials are for export.

**Extractive projects are consistently linked with force, repression, militarisation, corruption and violence** from the state, private companies, paramilitaries or criminal operations, or a mix. That violence includes threats, sexual assault, attacks on defenders and their families and assassination. Land defenders face criminalisation and stigmatisation as anti-development, anti-progress and even “terrorists.”

**Investment chains obscure accountability given the complex web** of local to global actors, including state and private interests, national and transnational investors and owners, and money and agreements running through multiple intermediary bodies, with agreements that are not transparent or terms not accessible to local communities. It is easy to deflect or diffuse responsibility through such complex arrangements.

**Local communities are often the last to know**, as the complexity of these deals makes it difficult for people to find out who is behind proposed projects or where the decision-making power actually lies. And by the time they find out, plans are often well advanced.

**The power inequities are stark when it comes to extractives**, with local communities pitted against huge international companies and investors without equitable access to information. Even with information, communities are at a disadvantage. If they oppose a project or want to seek redress for damage and risk, the available mechanisms are limited and can be hard to access and costly to pursue. Power disparities also mean most women and marginalised groups are further disenfranchised and face barriers to justice mechanisms due to ongoing discrimination.

**Community perspectives are overridden, and women excluded:** When they occur, community consultations are often pro forma and don't include women. Community perspectives and decisions are not given much importance. Contrarily, they are often silenced or ignored.

**The real harm is caused by a global economy heavily invested in extractive industries.** The impacts on climate, environmental sustainability and human rights are well documented. Unfortunately, the approach to “sustainable” development models are replicating the same pattern - failing to respect community processes or to engage with women in those communities and allowing projects to be imposed without regard for human rights or environmental impact. Investors need to take responsibility for the impact of their investments and support local women in seeking real feminist solutions.







# CALL FOR INTERNATIONAL NGO SOLIDARITY AND ACTION

*Despite many international NGOs not fully having a nuanced understanding of the local context, they hold more influence in the international arena and reach than grassroots actors in these global spaces. These organisations should share the space, stand in solidarity with and listen to local grassroots groups, foster movement-building and avoid monopolising the sector.*


– Alia A, JASS Southeast Asia


1. **All communities have the right to free, prior and informed consent - in essence, the right to decide on any proposed extractive project in their territory.** This includes the right to reject an extractive project and have that decision respected.


-  Insist on communities' right to self-determination and to decide what they need and want.
-  Work in close collaboration with communities and land defenders to ensure that they are properly consulted when a project is proposed. The consultation should be in line with the standards of free prior and informed consent – and ensure that the decisions are respected.
-  If a project is approved, ensure that communities' voices, rights and demands are respected and protected and that they know and can exercise their legal rights.

 Where communities reject the project proposals, **monitor whether their decision is being honoured** and help them leverage accountability mechanisms that support the community's decision and rights.

2. **Respect the leadership, knowledge and power that lies in communities.** International, regional or national NGOs may come and go in a given community due to project cycle lifetimes. In contrast, land-based communities have occupied the land before, during and after resistance to extractives.

 First and foremost, **follow the leadership of communities** about what they want and need.

 If your assistance is welcomed, offer support, resources, research, legal assistance, access to platforms and solidarity for community resistance to extractives.

 Contribute to a community assessment **of power dynamics and risks** related to a proposed extractive project, including relevant historical and contextual factors that add to an understanding of risk.

 Help communities with **safety and security needs in a way that builds on existing local practices and knowledge** and strengthens local capacities – from digital tools and equipment, security assessments, and support for community-led safety strategies (including wellbeing, collective care and healing).

3. **The vitality and survival of communities depends on their ability to to oppose oppression and foster positive transformation.** Communities, especially those most marginalised, know what will bring benefit or harm, but they are often shut out of crucial decision-making.

- ➔ Ensure that the voices of women and land defenders are included, heard and respected in any decision-making process that will affect their land, territory, water, livelihood and health by any extractive project.
- ➔ Support and invest in grassroots organisations, communities and WHRDs to give them an amplified voice, access and power in decision making.
- ➔ Leverage allied networks, access to spaces and information, and offer other resources to enable women and land defenders to present their demands and protect their rights safely.
- ➔ Mobilise for legal intervention and political accountability for any threats, violence, harassment or other abuses against women, land defenders, their families and communities.

4. **Communities must be proactively informed about any project that would impact their land, water livelihood, and way of life.** Too often getting that information is complex, often by design, and time-consuming.

- ➔ Lend expertise to help communities **access information, undertake needed research and gather evidence on the impact of projects.** This should include connecting communities to international organisations and academics that can support research and help engage international mechanisms.
- ➔ Help map the investment chains and potential pressure points where land defenders could have influence and push for change.
- ➔ Leverage your positioning and power to amplify demands and the influence of land defenders and communities globally.

Support the **interpretation of information, research findings,** and recommendations are accessible to the communities and organisations involved.

5. **Communities need and deserve full transparency and accountability from financial institutions and other investors** (including investing bodies like World Bank and regional development bodies such as the African Development Bank and Inter-American Development Bank) concerning any projects impacting those communities. And yet, local communities are often treated as if they are a problem to be managed and not central to decisions affecting their lives and lands.

- ➔ Leverage your access to resources and **put pressure on relevant companies, shareholders, financial institutions, investors or governments** to comply with all legal and contractual obligations.
- ➔ Help communities, where appropriate, **to access and use UN mechanisms and other accountability and legal avenues** - at both national and international levels - to advance their concerns and to seek redress for any abuses or retaliation.
- ➔ Insist that communities are provided with **transparent, accessible and regularly updated reporting** on all trade agreements, investment contracts and contracts with foreign governments.
- ➔ Investigate and **document how local communities are 'meaningfully engaged'** throughout the projects and how adaptations have been made in line with their needs and recommendations.



6. **Given the enormous power inequities, local communities need international solidarity to amplify their demands.** Experience has demonstrated that community resistance when supported with national, regional and global solidarity and pressure, yields results that would be impossible if communities stood alone. While respecting community self-determination, NGOs have power, leverage, voice and resources that can be used to support communities that are at an extreme disadvantage in terms of power:

- ➔ **Mobilise and stand in solidarity at regional and global levels** with targeted advocacy, public education and media exposure.
- ➔ **Publically hold investors accountable** for human rights, labour and environmental standards on an extractive project - using media, targeted advocacy, legal platforms and public forums to amplify demands.
- ➔ **Expose abuses of human rights and environmental standards** related to extractive projects to bring pressure on investors.
- ➔ **Support communities seeking redress, reparations or other remedies** for abuses or losses related to a project.