

Green  
Livelihoods  
Alliance

**BRIDGING VOICES FROM  
THE FOREST, FROM THE  
AMAZON TO ASIA:  
INDIGENOUS ECONOMIES,  
GOVERNANCE AND AUTONOMY**



# PARTICIPANTS

Bridging voices from the forest, from  
the Amazon to Asia:

Indigenous economies, governance and autonomy

## May 2025



**Green  
Livelihoods  
Alliance**

**Gaia**  
Amazonas





## INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES DELEGATIONS

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Helsio Héctor Rodríguez Meneses  
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Arr Mu Htoo, Naw Khin Moe.

### Indonesia

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### Myanmar

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Bilong, John Jau Sigau, Lawrence  
Win anak Duka, Boneka anak Parie,  
Alon anak Amet.

### Vietnam

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### Philippines

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## DELEGATIONS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

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A group of people in a blue raft are navigating a river through a lush, tropical forest. The raft is positioned in the lower third of the frame, with several individuals wearing orange life jackets. The background is dominated by a dense wall of green foliage and a large, moss-covered tree trunk that arches over the water from the right side. The overall scene conveys a sense of adventure and natural beauty.

# CONTEXT OF THE PHILIPPINES AND PALAWAN

Photo by: Felipe Rodríguez Vásquez



Photo by: Felipe Rodríguez Vásquez

The Philippines is one of 18 mega-diverse countries in the world, containing two-thirds of the earth's biodiversity. New species of flora and fauna continue to be discovered within its landscapes and seascapes. However, these rich biodiversity areas are increasingly threatened by infrastructure development, mining, and agro-plantation projects that are pursued under the government's development priorities. **Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IP&LCs) play a crucial role in preserving these areas, managing biodiversity hotspots, providing Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and promoting sustainable practices.**

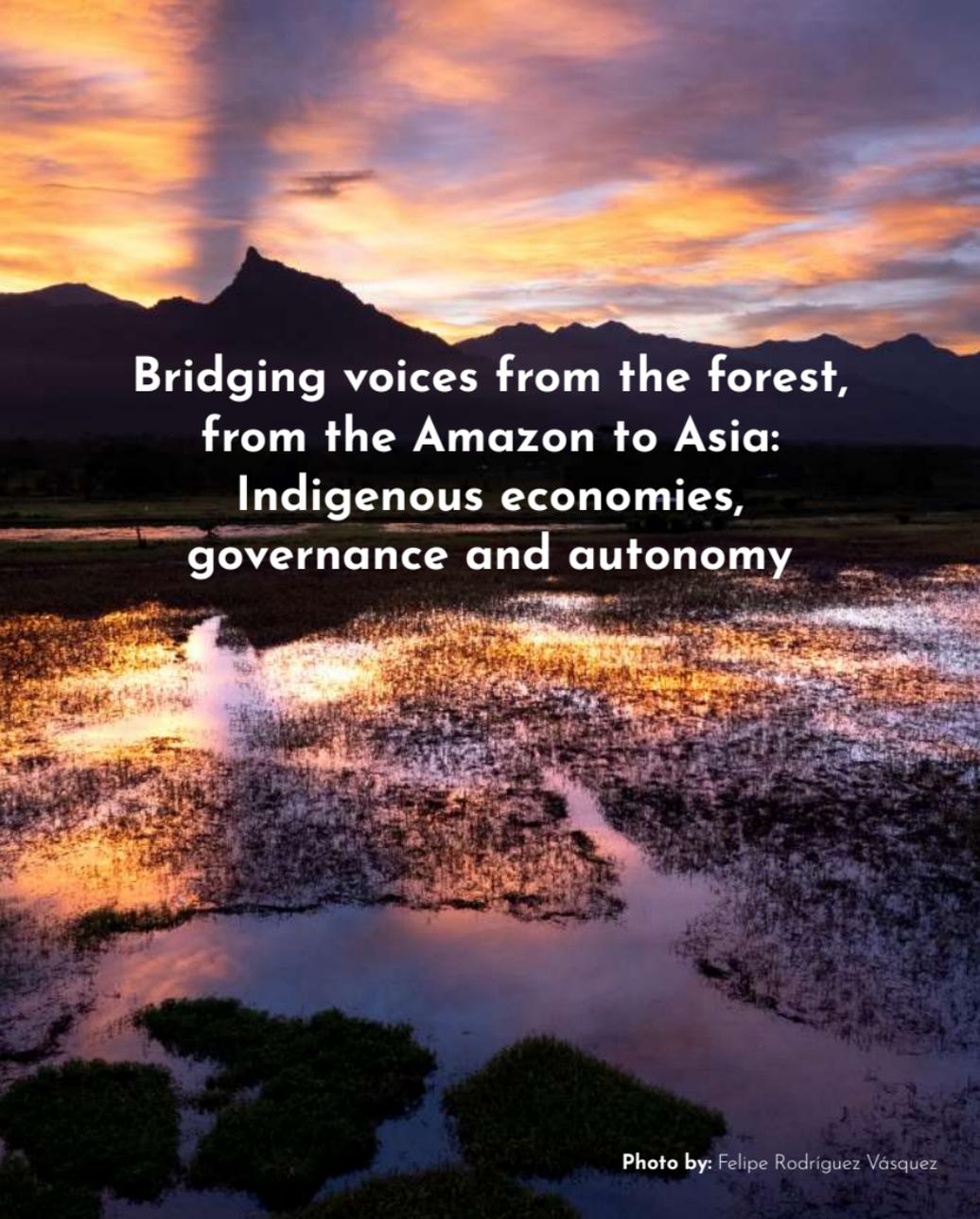
Palawan, an archipelagic province located in the southwestern part of the Philippines, is known as the Last Ecological Frontier. It harbors some of the country's most pristine and biologically diverse natural environments, both on land and in the sea. The province is home to a wide variety of endemic species of flora and fauna, while its surrounding waters feature vibrant coral reefs and endangered species. Palawan is also inhabited by various indigenous groups, such as the Pala'wan, Tagbanua, and Batak, who traditionally manage and protect the forests and coasts based on their ancestral practices. For all these reasons, Palawan was the chosen place to carry out this exchange.



# TIMELINE

Understanding the GLA Program,  
as context for the Exchange



An aerial photograph of a vast wetland or marshland at sunset. The sky is filled with vibrant orange, yellow, and purple clouds. In the background, a range of dark mountains is silhouetted against the bright sky. The foreground shows a complex network of water channels and marshy areas, with the water reflecting the warm colors of the sunset. The overall scene is serene and majestic.

**Bridging voices from the forest,  
from the Amazon to Asia:  
Indigenous economies,  
governance and autonomy**

**Photo by:** Felipe Rodríguez Vásquez



This exchange took place in the frame of the Green Livelihoods Alliance program (2), which centers on strengthening capacities of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities for the sustainable and equitable management of the tropical forests. Funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and implemented in eleven tropical forest countries through more than 70 civil society partners, this program offers the perfect setting for a South-South exchange of experiences around self-defined economies and local governance. In its fifth year of implementation and as part of its phase-out strategy, NTFP-EP and Gaia Amazonas collaborate in the conceptual and methodological design of this exchange, enabling a cross-pollination across regions and geographies, and beyond language barriers through horizontal dialogues.

# 2021



Theories of Change, specific to each country, were developed by country teams and partners carried out the baseline.



Implementation in each region starts to draw synergies across tropical forest countries, and Gaia Amazonas and NTFP-EP identify each other as potential allies.



Photo by: Felipe Rodríguez Vásquez

# 2022

# 2023

Mid-term review (MTR) is developed, and external evaluators recommend holding South-South exchanges. Gaia Amazonas and NTFP-EP commit to holding a South-South exchange within the framework of the program.



Photo by: GLA 2 archive



# 2024

NTEP-EP and Gaia Amazonas teams get together to discuss and agree upon conceptual definitions, approaches and frameworks for the exchange. Planning sessions start to take place with at least one session per month, in order to facilitate the exchange in May.



# 2025

Photo by: Felipe Rodríguez Vásquez



# ABOUT THE EXCHANGE: **GOVERNANCE AND SELF-DEFINED ECONOMIES**

In the lush mountains of Palawan, Philippines, where trees whisper stories from the ancient past, where rivers carry the island's history of extraction in its veins, and where the land holds memories of indigenous protection, a gathering unlike any other transpired. From May 5 to 9, 2025, over 35 Indigenous delegates from across Colombia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines came together for a South-South learning exchange co-organized by Gaia Amazonas and NTFP-EP (Non-Timber Forest Products-Exchange Programme).

Titled **“Bridging voices from the forest, from the Amazon to Asia: Indigenous economies, governance and autonomy”**, the exchange became a living testament to heritage handed down by ancestors, as well as the deep, subtle yet powerful patterns connecting Indigenous Peoples across continents, in spite of language barriers. It was a meeting of hearts and histories. From dialogues and field visits emerged a recognition between cultures, cutting across oceans and languages, that Indigenous communities share a sacred bond with the land. **They are not merely stewards of tropical forests, but they are part of them. It is the forest what shapes their culture.**



Over five days, together with partners from NTFP-EP and Gaia Amazonas, the participants walked through ancestral forests, sat in community kubos, and listened deeply to each other and the land itself. In Brooke's Point, Palawan, the Pala'wan people welcomed the delegates with humility and pride, offering a glimpse into their relationship with Almaciga forest trees. They demonstrated how tree tapping is performed with care, an old practice handed down by their ancestors. Participants witnessed how the Almaciga resin is sorted and valued, with its story interwoven with the Pala'wan people's own journey toward sovereignty and autonomy. Amazonian delegates shared how chili is both livelihood and lifeline. Karen representatives from Myanmar reflected on their struggle for recognition in a country that disregards their Indigenous identity. In each shared experience, threads of deep ecological wisdom from the land weaved a tapestry of Indigenous economies, governance, and autonomy that defied borders.

## AGENDA

Sunday May 4th	Monday May 5th	Tuesday May 6th	Wednesday May 7th
Accomodation and Welcome  Traveling to Palawan	<b>Discussion around governance:</b> Exchange around the historical and cultural context based on governance processes and recognition of rights specific for each country/ region	<b>Discussion around local economy:</b> Exchange around own definitions and approaches to local economy, what needs do these approaches address and how they participate on mainstream economy	Field visit to communities in the mountains - how they harvest Almaciga

Thursday May 8th	Friday May 9th	Saturday May 10th	Sunday May 11th
<b>Exchange</b> around their specific alternatives, products and community enterprises	<b>Visit handicraft community + debriefing and conclusions</b>	<b>Visit to Underground River, Puerto Princesa</b> + flight from Palawan to Manila	Flight to Colombia and other Asian countries



Photo by: Felipe Rodriguez Vasquez



Photo by: Felipe Rodriguez Vásquez



## INSIGHTS ON WHAT APPROACHES TO GOVERNANCE WERE SHARED BASED ON GUIDING QUESTIONS OF THE DISCUSSION

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**Territorial governance:** Dialogue sustained amongst diverse governance levels in a territorial scope, involving decision-making at a community level and the family unit requirements. Shared administration and coordination amongst the different levels.



**Governance implies**, in addition to local coordination between their traditional and administrative authorities, taking into account that they are multiethnic -that is, that in a single geographic space they can different indigenous peoples come to live together-, that the times of internal social and political life are determined by the cycles of nature, and that in the management of their territories -considered as an organic whole- non-human entities intervene with whom there is constant communication and negotiation.



**Territorial wellbeing:** Well-being or Well-living: is determined by the traditional knowledge system that guides and orientates the way in which the territory is managed and ordered so that all the beings that inhabit it live in harmony, with respect and care. It is to be healthy and have enough food, thanks to the good management of the chagra, the forest and the rivers.

This notion recognizes the interconnection between biodiversity and cultural diversity, and how both are intrinsically related to the sustainability of the territory and the well-being of local communities.

## INSIGHTS OF WHAT IS UNDERSTOOD BY SELF-DEFINED ECONOMIES

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-  **The “care of the house”** is defined by the context and the way in which political and socioeconomic dynamics are intersected by monetary and external socioeconomic dynamics. Involves: i) Cultural Aspects which define the notion of territorial wellbeing ii) Dynamics associated to pressures and threats to the territory iii) Social transformations which imply monetary needs.
-  **Sustainable livelihoods:** “A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities or assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base”. (DFID, 2001)
-  **Alternatives of cultural and economic value:** Based on products that through their collection and production process potentialize biodiversity and agrobiodiversity of the region, respects the life cycles of the species involved, strengthen governance and territorial management, an indigenous knowledge systems, with the purpose of creating and equitably distributing incomes.
-  **Livelihood systems:** Self-defined food systems and local exchange dynamics based in traditional knowledge and practices, which economic dynamics do not involve monetary exchange, rather are based in self-management, collaboration and reciprocity (extends not only to exchange between humans, but involves the more than human world).
-  **Community enterprises:** Community Enterprise is an additional livelihood that can augment income to support not only household needs but also community needs. It is owned and managed by the members.
-  **Value chains:** Chain of activities through which the product gains value on its downstream journey from production to the final outputs. It aims to deliver maximum value to the end user for the least possible total cost.
-  **Sustainable climate adaptive community livelihoods:** Sustained incomes from territories through community-based enterprises (CBEs) aim to meet community income and well-being needs as well as to reinforce community links with natural resources management and conservation. To achieve scale, stability, and profitability, CBEs need increased capacity, effective private sector engagement and partnerships in place, enabling the context for CBE and long-term support programs. Livelihoods and CBEs also need to be proactively climate-proofed.



Photo by: Felipe Rodríguez Vázquez

# SUSTAINABLE RATTAN

Management in Namo Village,  
Central Sulawesi, Indonesia

Indonesia's forest governance has evolved through policies promoting land reform and social forestry. Land reform -guided by Presidential Regulation Number 86 Year 2018- aims to reorient the control structure, ownership, use and utilization of land, while enabling social forestry grants community-based management rights over forest areas to improve welfare and environmental stewardship. **Namo Village, in Central Sulawesi (Indonesia)**, provides a strong example of how social forestry can empower local Communities to manage forest resources sustainably. Through the social forestry with village forest scheme, formal management rights have been granted to the Village's Forest Management Institution, facilitating the development of forest-based enterprises and improved local livelihoods. The Social Forestry Business Group Rattan enterprise has been established in accordance with statutory provisions and aims to **help forest communities to manage forest resources legally and sustainably and increase their income through the businesses developed.**

In Namu Village, rattan plays a vital role in the local economy and its management is deeply rooted in traditional wisdom. To ensure long-term sustainability and market credibility, the community implemented the PGS ROLES (Participatory Guarantee System Rotan Lestari or Sustainable Rattan). PGS ROLES establishes clear criteria for harvesting mature rattan, including indicators such as age (3-4 years), bark color, surface condition and stem length. Only species Batang, Lambang, and Tohiti are often crafted into furniture or woven products. The community applies a rotation harvesting system, shifting between forest zones every 1-2 years to allow for regeneration. Violations of harvesting rules are subject to customary law, including traditional fines for unauthorized collection, reinforcing local governance, and accountability. To support transparency and traceability, harvested rattan is recorded in a web-based database (<https://rotanwallacea.com>) which allows buyers to trace the origin of certified rattan products and ensures fair pricing based on sustainable practices. The integration of social forestry policy, Social Forestry Business Group enterprise structure and PGS ROLES certification has transformed rattan management, in Namu Village, into a model of ecological, economic, and cultural sustainability. Highlighting how local communities can become stewards of the forest and drivers of the local economy.



Photo by: Felipe Rodríguez Vásquez

# GUARDIANS OF THE FOREST

Almaciga and the Pala'wan Path  
to Self-Defined Economies

## “DAGTANG ALMACIGA, KARUGTONG NG AKING HININGA”: “ALMACIGA RESIN IS PART OF OUR BREATH”.

In the southern highlands of Palawan, where ancestral forests meet the sky, grows a tree long revered by the Pala’wan people: Almaciga (*Agathis philippinensis*). Known globally as Manila copal, its resin—used in varnishes, paint, incense, and traditional healing—has been harvested for generations. But beyond its trade value, almaciga represents a living tradition of care, governance and relationship with the land. It is a symbol of cultural resilience and ecological stewardship for the Indigenous Pala’wan communities of Brooke’s Point.

The Pala’wan in Sitio Amas have long harvested resin, but for years this livelihood was under the control of external traders. Today, that narrative is shifting, and it is now a community-led enterprise. Through the **Samahan ng mga Palawano ng Amas, Brooke’s Point (SPABP)**, the Pala’wan are reclaiming control over their ancestral economy, managing the full value chain—from determining sustainable harvesting methods, classifying, and transporting, to setting fair prices, and building a livelihood that is both rooted in tradition and aligned with forest conservation. Resin is sorted into three community-agreed grades, with tipak (large and small white chunks) fetching up to Philippine Peso (PHP) 50 or or USD 1 /kg —more than double what it once sold for under trader control.

This shift is not just economic—it is political and actions for cultural continuity. Their cooperative functions through an indigenous organizational structure, with roles like classifier, treasurer, and bookkeeper led by members of the community. Indigenous youth conduct yearly **Participatory Resource Monitoring**, ensuring the health and regeneration of almaciga trees in the wild.

In Sitio Amas, almaciga is not just a product—it is breath, it is identity, it is ancestral heritage.



Photo by: Felipe Rodríguez Vásquez

# THE SWEET LEGACY OF WILD HONEY

A Community Perspective

**The story of wild honey among the Cil people is deeply intertwined with their cultural heritage. For generations, they have practiced traditional beekeeping methods that prioritize the health of bee populations and the ecosystem.** This sustainable approach not only ensures the continued availability of honey but also contributes to the biodiversity of the region. Wild Honey Bee PoKao Collective showcases the unique flavors and qualities of their honey, providing a product that is both organic and ethically sourced.

The presentation of honey from the PoKao Collective emphasizes more than just taste; it tells the story of community resilience and sustainability. The farming and collection techniques they apply honor ancestral knowledge while simultaneously incorporating modern practices that enhance productivity without compromising the environment. This blend of tradition and innovation encourages community members to engage in responsible land use, fostering a stronger connection to both their heritage and their natural resources.

Lessons learned from this venture extend beyond honey production. Through collaborative efforts, the collective has created a platform for education and awareness about the importance of biodiversity and conservation. Participants in the project not only gain economic benefits but also develop a deeper understanding of their role in protecting the environment.

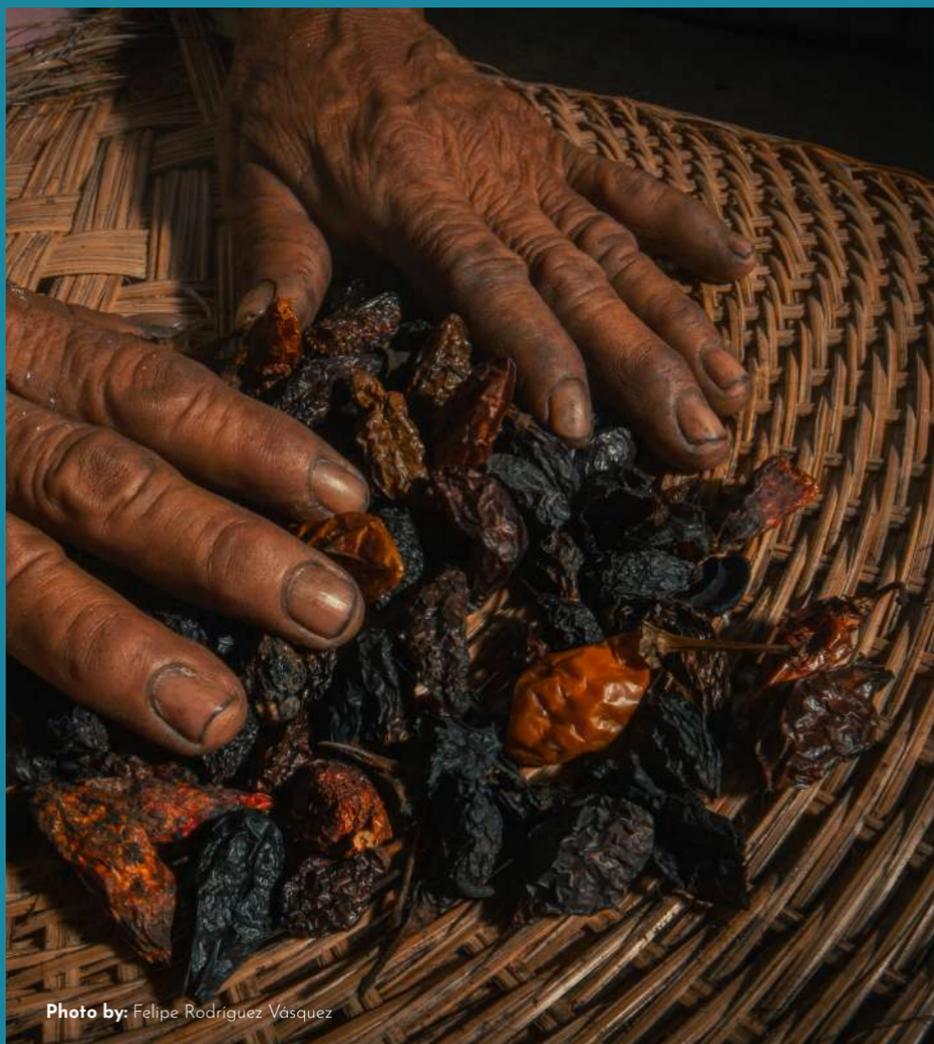


Photo by: Felipe Rodríguez Vásquez

# SMOKED CHILI FROM THE PIRÁ PARANÁ

Women's Knowledge, Buen Vivir,  
and Territorial Governance

**In the heart of the Macroterritory of the Jaguars of Yuruparí, in the Colombian Amazon, the women of the communities of San Miguel and Santa Isabel, located in the Indigenous Territory of Pirá Paraná, are leading an emblematic process to strengthen local economies and implement their visions of self-defined economies through the production of smoked chili.** This initiative, supported by Gaia Amazonas, brings together ancestral cultural practices, community organization, and agroecological production strategies that promote buen vivir -a concept of collective well-being rooted in Indigenous worldviews- and reinforce the exercise of self-governance.

The initiative is rooted in the Plan de Vida (Life Plan) - a political instrument of self-determination- of the Indigenous Territory of Pirá Paraná. It emerges as a strategy to foster family and community well-being through ancestral productive practices that generate surplus and build economic autonomy. It is also the continuation of local research on native seeds and traditional cultivation patterns, techniques and practices previously carried out by the women of the territory.

This collective effort has enhanced women's leadership in territorial governance, revitalized cultural practices through intergenerational and horizontal knowledge exchange, and generated complementary income without compromising food sovereignty and security. Organizationally, it led to the consolidation of groups of fifteen women per community, each accompanied by a traditional knowledge holder and a local expert. On the productive side, it included soil improvement in household gardens, pest and disease management through intercultural knowledge dialogue, and the implementation of pilot drip irrigation systems.

The chili of Pirá is gaining recognition as a biocultural product, with scale-up plans involving more communities and strengthening the Indigenous governance system. Altogether, this experience represents a living model of Indigenous economy—one that integrates territory, culture, autonomy, women's leadership, and sustainability.





Photos by: Felipe Rodriguez Vasquez

















What we learned from this exchange

# HIGHLIGHTED AND LESSONS LEARNED



“ The learning exchange proved to be an exceptionally well-structured program that delivered valuable insights while fostering meaningful cross-cultural engagement. ”

- Evaluation from a participant from Myanmar -

**After this exchange...**

## IT IS CLEAR THAT:

- 0 Indigenous governance is crucial for sustainable forest management.
- 0 Women's leadership in NTFP-based enterprises drives both economic and cultural resilience.
- 0 NTFP-based enterprises offer scalable livelihood solutions when supported by fair market access.
- 0 Market access remains a challenge but can be improved through partnerships.

## SOME OF THE METHODOLOGICAL HIGHLIGHTS:

- 0 Field visits—Seeing real-world applications of Indigenous knowledge was inspiring.
- 0 Women's participation focus—Their role in handicrafts and enterprise development was empowering.
- 0 Networking—Connecting with Indigenous leaders from Colombia and Southeast Asia opened new collaboration possibilities.
- 0 Seeing Indigenous communities steward their ancestral lands through tourism (like the breathtaking caves we visited) convinced me: this is how sustainability should work—with communities at the center.

## Some of the specific actions that participants mentioned they will take after returning to their territories:

### WE SHARE TO INSPIRE:

- 0 Sharing these valuable governance and livelihood approaches and examples with communities and highlighting the lessons learnt
- 0 Inspire new solutions in their territories based on the exchanges and experiences
- 0 Follow-up on potential new collaborations and in-depth exchanges on particular issues.
- 0 Set up the conditions for local economic alternatives based on non-timber forest products to promote entrepreneurship and working together within the community, and establishing a community forest enterprise.

## TAKEAWAYS AND CONCLUSIONS

This exchange of experiences around local economies and governance highlighted how deep knowledge of the forest has enabled Indigenous peoples from forest and tropical jungle regions to identify the best strategies to ensure the well-being of both: their communities and their environment. This is achieved through the understanding that, in these contexts, the economy is not only about generating sources of income, but also about the social fabric and the sharing of cultural values that communities seek to continue protecting—without losing sight of the care for the territory, without which no valid response would be possible. This relationship with the land is ultimately what sets these initiatives apart from others that are disconnected from nature.

Likewise, this exchange revealed that Indigenous Peoples across the equatorial belt share a common perspective: the understanding of themselves as part of an organic whole. This manifests in a shared responsibility that they have carried since time immemorial—the care of life on the planet. In this sense, local economies are not conceived for individual gain but for collective benefit. However, they also share challenges related to implementing value chains, such as the impacts and threats posed by climate change, the involvement of youth, engagement with the market economy (including intermediaries) and transportation costs to move products out of their territories, among others.

**Among the various aspects that characterize how these Indigenous Peoples conceive of local economies, the following stand out:**

Community-based and sustainable forest and jungle management, grounded in ancestral knowledge and a holistic view of the territory and its relationship with all forms of life that coexist within it

Collective decision-making based on a shared idea of well-being, both for the people and the land

The strengthening and intergenerational transmission of knowledge, with a respected role for elders who are its keepers.

**Beyond showcasing best practices, the exchange offered a rare space for reflection: What does it mean to live well on this Earth? How do we protect our sacred relationships with the forest, with water, with food, and with each other? What can we learn from each other's struggles and victories?**

The answers came in different forms. They were expressed through song, showcased through offerings from Amazon chili, with an exchange of culture, knowledge, and hugs in place of cash. They were revealed in the quiet dignity of elders who have seen generations rise and fall but whose commitment to life and land has never wavered.

From this exchange emerged a mutual appreciation of diverse practices and a realization that Indigenous Peoples around the world are living different versions of the same story. They are resisting extractive systems, asserting self-governance and building economies that honor their cultural principles and ecological relationships. These are not economies of exploitation, but of abundance. They are not alternative economies; they are ancestral heritage. In participant circles, plenary sessions, and informal conversations, the recurring theme was interdependence - between people and forests, between the past and current generations, between one community and another. These connections are affirmations that ecological balance and indigenous cultural well-being are inseparable.



Photo by: Felipe Rodríguez Vásquez



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