Weaving Solidarity and Hope

Stories of Regeneration and Resilience

Volume I
Contributors to this series
The contributions to this series are a result of collaborations with inspiring people and networks from various regions that the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA) has been connected with. This volume has contributions from South-east Asia, Latin America, Central Asia, Europe, and Africa. 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. This series has been created with mutual respect, care and deep solidarity.

Currently, it is being published using what are colonial languages for much of the world, i.e. English & Spanish. 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 to engage with it as a long term process of cultivating inspiration to reconstruct just societies. We need to weave at every level efforts challenging patriarchal or masculinist, capitalist, racist, castest, statist 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

Weaving Solidarity and Hope - Stories of Regeneration & Resilience

“People who are resisting as an everyday act of resistance against injustice, oppression, patriarchy, occupation, is a beautiful act of humanity” says Dr. Abdelfattah Abusrour from Palestine.

This volume contains seven stories of resistance, resilience and regeneration across the world that highlight how peoples proactive responses to the multiple crises the world faces—ecological, socio-cultural, political, economic, spiritual—are widespread and diverse. These stories thread expressions of varied possibilities of defining and organising social life beyond the oppressive structures of capitalism, patriarchy, extractive development, war & conflicts, and commodification of human and natural lives. These stories are lived realities of people from Indigenous Peoples and other rural communities, from urban neighborhoods, from both the Global South and Global North, from both marginalized sections and the privileged elite.

But why is it important to highlight and amplify these stories? What do they offer in efforts to transform the world? We at Global Tapestry of Alternatives believe that what these stories offer is a possibility, a possibility that already exists in real life. A possibility of organising lives beyond capitalist modernity. A possibility that is acutely threatened but also actively looked for.

The Covid pandemic exposed the deep fault lines of the dominant systems. While the immediate humanitarian crisis was visible and generated widespread spontaneous initiatives by civil society and by several governments to provide relief, much less common were attempts to address root structural causes. It is vital that we accelerate 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 rebuilding our ecological relationship with and within nature.

Our earlier two volumes showed how communities across the world in the most desperate situations responded to the crises with resilience, care, innovation, and adaptability.

This volume brings stories of communities resisting and building transformative alternatives in conflict regions, war zones, exploitation, suppression and violence, all manifested in varied forms. Our first story from Palestine brings the struggle of organising and resisting in one of the world’s most conflict ridden regions and describes “Beautiful Resistance,” which uses culture, art, and education.
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to resist injustice, oppression, and occupation. Our next story is from Ukraine - while at the time of writing of this editorial, it has been 480 days of war and invasion, there have been regional feminist responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

They are building on humanitarian and human rights crises, as well as crises of democracy, economy, care, and future visioning beyond survival. Another story is of how communities in Balkans and in Europe are resisting and organising to stop military plans and insist on developing a positive alternative for their territory—Sinjajevina (Montenegro)—one of the largest communal pasturelands of the continent.

Our next story comes from the Philippines, highlighting the resilience and regeneration of Sitio San Roque urban poor community, currently home to more than 6,000 families. The story brings out the power of community-led initiatives when solidarity and collective action are put into practice by marginalized peoples, especially when these are met with recognition and support from the government. Another story comes from one of the most violent cities in the world, São Paulo in Brazil. It tells about an experimental collective space UniDiversidade that nurtures local wisdom and practices for the development of young people, helps foster livelihood opportunities for them, and strengthens community bonds and collectivisation through art. Similarly, in Thailand, communities are resisting the destruction of their traditional livelihoods by creating systems of forest management & biodiversity by reviving traditional ways of farming.

Our last story comes from West Africa, where communities in Benin by protecting their sacred forests, reviving traditional practices of conviviality, and tending to land are combating results of systemic crises such as food insecurity, loss of forests, loss of livelihoods, and climate change.

These resistances and alternatives are emerging under grave threats by authoritarian states, corporations and other destructive processes unleashed by neoliberal, growth-at-all-costs “development”, and continuing forms of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism. It is not easy for these movements to survive, let alone thrive. However, what we also see is the resurgence of life, and acts of solidarity, cooperation, love, autonomy, and care in all these examples. 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.

These stories located in varied contexts have commonalities. It is in their shared resistance to mainstream forces and policies that these initiatives can be called “alternatives” (though many in their own traditional contexts would be part of everyday life). These movements are based on a foundation of values and ethics, including solidarity, interconnectedness, cooperation, diversity and pluralism, autonomy, rights with responsibilities, mutual respect, equality, non-violence, and peace.
Storytelling is an important act of decolonization and disrupting the dominant stuck systems. With this hope, we share these stories, realising that it is important to read, share, and learn from them. It is crucial in these times that we constructively challenge each other, offer active solidarity whenever needed, interweave the initiatives in common actions, and support the conditions for the radical systemic changes we need. More than ever, we need to work together and stand in solidarity with each other’s resistances and re-constructions.

Shrishtee Bajpai
Beautiful Resistance

Aida camp, Bethlehem, Palestine

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This article is based on the interview conducted by the editorial team with Dr. Abusrour, Abdelfattah (a.abusrour@alrowwad.org).

Dr. Abdelfattah Abusrour is an author, actor, and theatre director, with a PhD in Biological and Medical Engineering from France. He abandoned his career in Biology because he believed in the power of arts and culture as pure humanity where stereotypes vanish, and people are on equal grounds. Alrowwad has been able to build bridges, create exchanges and co-produce artistic works and performances with international groups, touring shows in Europe, the UK and the USA as well as Palestine.

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Alrowwad Arts and Cultural Society is a Palestinian organization that was founded in 1998 by Dr. Abdelfattah Abusrour in the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem Governorate. The organization was founded on the philosophy of “Beautiful Resistance,” which uses culture, art, and education to resist injustice, oppression, and occupation.

Palestine has a long and complex history, with various empires and civilizations occupying the area over the centuries. The ongoing illegal colonial occupation has resulted in violence, human rights abuses, and widespread suffering. Despite various attempts at peace negotiations, a resolution to end the occupation remains elusive. People have been living with frequent incursions by the Israeli occupation army, surrounded by this illegal wall of expansion and annexation and continuous oppression against the population.

Children who are eight or ten years old sometimes say, “I want to die”.
“Why do you want to die?”
“Because nobody cares. And when the Israeli soldiers come in the middle of the night or at two in the morning, there is no one here to protect.”

Alrowwad means, the pioneers and the emergence of this movement lies in being a pioneer of resistance and re-existence in one of the most conflict-prone regions of the world. It focuses on working with children and young people to inspire hope and save lives. Aida refugee camp like many other refugee camps became a site of resistance. For example, Alrowwad established the first children’s theater group in Palestine which was professionally trained in a refugee camp and toured internationally, the first sportswoman gym and the first football team of girls were formed in a refugee camp. The first outdoor film festival in Palestine after building the illegal wall of expansion and annexation at the north of Aida refugee camp in 2004, started back in 2005 by projecting films directly on the wall. People started doing things one way or another, as acts of everyday resistance. That’s where the inspiration for the name “Alrowwad” came for Dr. Abdelfatteh.

Alrowwad began with a children’s theater group that was designed to give young people the opportunity to express themselves creatively and showcase of their talents on stage. Their belief is that theater is one of the most powerful, thoughtful, and politically creative ways to express oneself and build peace within individuals to be peace-builders in their community and in the world.
Weaving Solidarity and Hope

Alrowwad aims to provoke change and build bridges between people and communities by breaking down stereotypes and promoting equality. This would be through several initiatives: a minibus that travels throughout the West Bank, providing access to theater, dance, music, games (play bus to make education fun). Another is through a mobile cinema which includes a screen, projector, and sound system and it aims to revive the culture of cinema in the region. This develops around the backdrop of cinemas during the first intifada after 1987. The mobile cinema initiative aims to connect communities across the West Bank on cinema and the celebration of art. Mobile Beautiful Resistance aims to serve as an act of resistance against the segregation of Palestinian communities from each other.

“*When one sees a film, a theater play, a painting or a photo, listens to a piece of beautiful music, or reads a book, one likes or doesn’t like it based on how much it touches them. In those moments of creative explorations, stereotypes and ideologies disappear and we are on equal grounds as human beings, as creative persons, and as individuals to shape a better future for children and the generations to come.*”

Touring internationally is also an important way to allow young people to see normal life in free countries. It is a way to see that there are a lot of things we share as human beings and these similarities should bring us closer to each other. Beautiful Resistance builds on the idea of celebrating human diversity and difference, as beautifully articulated below by Dr. Abdelfatteh -

“*Differences are the most beautiful gifts that we have because they are ways to enrich us and not marginalize us or make us afraid of each other. We share and defend these values that we call justice, freedom, peace, equality, and love, whether we are Muslim or Christian or Jewish or Buddhist or Hindu, or atheist, or whatever, we have no compromises to make on these values. This is the essence of our humanity and heritage.*”

The initiative aims to respond to the dominant media that has become a powerful tool for propaganda, brainwashing, and promoting sectarian agendas. While the media is being used as a tool in promoting hatred, violence, and racism, Alrowwad aims to counter that usage by promoting it to build equality, humanity, love, and justice.
While the media can be used to promote agendas, it’s important to remember that not everything is black and white. There are things that one cannot be politically correct about because you have to do what is just and what is right. When it comes to sharing on media, it is important to utilize alternative forms of media, including video and other non-linear formats. Media should be neutral, but at the same time it is important to show facts, and not just declarations that have no real basis that are presented as facts. Alrowwad media productions and actions with children, women and youth, and international tours and conferences, through creative and peaceful ways, opposing the narrative that Palestinians are born with hatred and violence, showing that Israeli occupation oppression and injustice inflame violence and not peaceful demonstrations that are always confronted with armed violence and tear gas.

It is important to highlight how transnational solidarity is important to make significant changes in international and local politics. Building networks and collectives to support each other is necessary. Those who have the financial means can support those who are less privileged in terms of equipment or expertise or responding to their priorities and needs.

**Key Lessons**

From Alrowwad’s journey, we learn that art is an important mode of everyday resistance that can offer healing possibilities from the trauma of war, occupation and destruction. It gives a sense of hope in most dire situations, the possibility of creation and building collective solidarity. In authoritarian state repression, the creation of modes of self-expression are powerful modes of exercising autonomy and struggle. Dr. Abdelfattech adds, “Change is not easy and needs patience. So when we are talking about social change, change of behavior,
change of politics, or change of attitude of people, it needs time, we need to be patient, we do not need to hurry”.

These movements/initiatives need support and strength from networks. Hence, the need for cross-border solidarity networks providing both ethical and financial support is very critical for the survival of such initiatives. These networks are useful in offering support when the local activists are under threat and they also help in outreach to larger audiences.

**Challenges faced**

- Humanitarian aid is critical during emergencies, but it should not be the only response. For long-term improvement, developmental work is needed. The donor countries must consult with Palestinians and help them create infrastructures to create jobs, maintain their dignity, and avoid transforming them into permanent beggars. The use of passive forms of charity only perpetuates poverty and humiliation.

- One of the main issues is the belief that good intentions are enough; they need to be followed by good actions. The current funding culture prioritizes humanitarian aid over developmental work. Art can help address these issues, but it is not a priority for most funding organizations. While the importance of teaching young people about AIDS prevention prevails while it is not a priority in Palestine, there are other issues that are more pressing, such as teeth caries or junk food in school canteens and garbage on the streets. It is a challenge to address problems based on what is known and what can be done rather than being solely driven by funding priorities.
“We need to revolutionize the culture and make significant changes together. It is also crucial to make people aware of the importance of having a voice and not settling for the least bad. The programs and agendas should be accessible to everyone, not just the elitist community and we need to support cultural and artistic organizations and make arts a part of the school program. This is a challenging process, but it needs to happen fast, and we need to make a collective effort to make it happen.”

• Creating social impact in Palestine is uniquely challenging. This is due to the complicity that many countries have had with those who oppressed Jews in the past and who are now the oppressors of the Palestinians in the present. As a result, it is required to have allies who truly believe in our work and values.

For countries in their own regions, the priority must be to promote peace and stability within their borders, as well as globally which involves diplomacy, conflict resolution, and addressing issues such as poverty, inequality, and climate change. In the Israeli-Palestinian case, it is crucial for both sides to work toward peace based on justice and equality. This involves addressing issues such as illegal settlements (colonies) and apartheid laws, as well as promoting a truthful and serious dialogue and understanding between both sides. An important component of social change is also inward which is to say that to build peace in a community, one needs to start by building peace within oneself.
Movements of resistance can indeed be slow and require perseverance, but they can also be powerful and transformative. Resistance is an act of everyday living. It is essential to continue fighting for justice and equality, even in the face of adversity.

Such alternate ways of resistance help to create new narratives within the dominant narratives generated by those in power. They open up new ways that highlight the experiences of marginalized communities and the systemic injustices they face. This medium can also be used to inspire collective action by creating works that speak to the shared experiences and struggles of a community. As the world continues to grapple with issues of inequality, injustice, and oppression, initiatives like Alrowwad’s “Beautiful Resistance” continue to play a critical role in shaping Sumud and promoting social justice.

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Weaving Solidarity and Hope

From Full-scale Invasion to Full-scale Resistance: Regional Feminist Responses to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Nino Ugrekhelidze is a feminist activist and philanthropic advocate from Tbilisi, Georgia. Over the past 10 years, she has been working with regional (Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central and North Asia) and global grassroots-based feminist, gender justice, and anti-militarist organizations and movements to advance social justice and human rights. Through her work, Nino is committed to building context-responsive and community-centered emergency and long-term grantmaking and programmatic strategies for communities impacted by wars and crises. The author would like to thank Marta Musić for their feedback and co-editing of this piece, as well as Erika Schmidt and Nastya Podorozhia for their generosity of time and conversation.
February 24th, 2023 marked one year into the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It has been a year of immeasurable loss and grief, and immense bravery and resilience in the fight for liberation from Russian imperialism. It has been a year of full-scale resistance and seismic shifts not only in Ukraine, but in all post-soviet countries in Eastern and Central Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

I write from the position of a feminist resource justice activist from Georgia, a country that Russia waged war against in the 90s and in 2008. I have spent the last 10 years mobilizing resources for feminist and gender justice movements in my region, in Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central and North Asia and globally. In this piece, you will get to know three feminist initiatives who have been at the forefront of addressing multiple crises generated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and growing authoritarianism in the region, and in doing so are building and nurturing systemic alternatives and community resilience.

Since the first day of the invasion, the ongoing war grew tidal waves of grassroots-led frontline response led by community-based organizations, informal unregistered groups, and pre-existing mutual aid systems weaved by feminists, the LGBTQIA+ community, and social justice organizers across Ukraine and neighboring countries.

In the past year, 12.8 million people have been forcibly displaced and sought refuge in safer parts of Ukraine and abroad. The ongoing war, ‘partial military mobilization’ in the Russian Federation, as well as the ongoing and future economic and political crises are directly impacting people across Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central and North Asia (CEECCNA).

The war in Ukraine clearly demonstrated the depth and scope of intertwined human rights and humanitarian crises, and shed light on a multitude of systemic failures in both humanitarian and philanthropic responses. For example, only 0,0003% is given directly to local NGOs and CSOs in Ukraine, and similar trends are observed in Poland, as well as all border countries.

Against the backdrop of the multiplicity of devastating, grassroots organizers and grassroots-based grantmakers took over the lifesaving frontline work of crisis response and recovery and modeled what community-led responses truly look like. Thanks to their intersectional politics, deep relationships, knowledges of local contexts, and being in tune with the needs and priorities of local communities, the systemic alternatives built by these grassroots-led organizers are an engine for forcibly displaced people in reclaiming their agency and human dignity.
Examples of movement-led response and resistance in Poland, Hungary

With the right-wing populist governments in power, Poland and Hungary have been reported as rapidly shrinking spaces for civil society. Pre-existing human rights crises and deep inequalities were further exacerbated by the impact of the invasion of Ukraine with crumbling legislative, human rights, healthcare, and educational systems. However, locally-based organizations mobilized resources, harnessed local knowledges, and built people-centered approaches to address the emergency, mid and long-term responses to the impact of the war.

Led by young Ukrainian feminists, Martynka is a solidarity in action with women and gender non-conforming people fleeing to Poland. Nastya Podorozhia, founder of Martynka is a sexual assault survivor who herself was not given adequate legal support from the Polish police. When the full-scale invasion started, she decided to proactively support refugees from Ukraine and kicked off Martynka as an alternative peer support bot and hotline.

According to the European Contraception Policy Atlas, Poland is the only country in Europe going backward in accessing contraception and has almost completely outlawed abortion. In the informational vacuum on contraception, safe abortion, and human trafficking, Martynka provides accessible multilingual information for refugees, and it is one of their most demanded services alongside psychosocial support.

In its first 8 months of its existence, Martynka worked on over 350 cases of refugees from Ukraine and helped them navigate tangled healthcare and legal systems, provided free psychological and legal consultation to survivors of gender-based violence, and continues to the role of intermediary as they bridge gaps between refugees who seek support, and service providers based in Poland.

For over a decade, the Association EMMA has been supporting, accompanying, and advocating for the reproductive health and rights of pregnant people and mothers. Centering on their life, health, and well-being, Emma’s work is a feminist proposition to obstetric violence and abusive maternity care practices in Hungary. Since the invasion of Ukraine, EMMA started a feminist frontline response in collaboration with Nane and Patent, local feminist service provision organizations. The referral system they set up is a case-based partnership and system of mutual support aiming to

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provide services for refugees from Ukraine to navigate healthcare, educational and legal systems. They make appointments, accompany refugees for pregnancy care, abortion, or contraception and push public systems to provide the support needed for refugees. For EMMA, their Ukraine emergency work is a response to the need which is not accommodated by the government, humanitarian, or UN agencies.

‘The UN expects us to do the government’s job, grow as big, and provide systemic support. They do not understand the time it takes to build trust-based relationships not only with locals but with refugees’ - Says Erika Schmidt from Association EMMA.

With the tireless lifesaving work of feminist and gender justice organizations like Martynka and EMMA, the invasion of Ukraine pushed alternatives from the edges of the system towards the mainstream. The question now is **how will these systemic alternatives survive, thrive and interconnect**, considering that regardless of the crucial role they play in humanitarian and human rights systems, international philanthropic and humanitarian funding does not reach their work.

To address this question we have to look to an emerging regional alternative aiming to bridge gaps in philanthropic and humanitarian systems as there is a critical need to build a better-coordinated and systemic strategy to address the complexity of ongoing multiple crises not only in Ukraine, but in the whole CEECCNA region.

**Seeding of the CEECCNA Feminist Collaborative Fund**

Acknowledging the critical responses and historical resistance led by grassroots organizers, and the urgent need to sustainably resource movement-led responses to multiple crises in the region, the seeds of the CEECCNA Feminist Collaborative Fund were sowed.
Initiated by feminist resource justice activists across post-soviet countries, the fund seeks to be a vehicle of crisis preparedness and response. The CEECCNA collaborative fund aims to fill critical gaps in resourcing the region with holistic, long-lasting, and consistent movement-defined and movement-led strategies and mechanisms. It hopes to redefine and expand the notion of crisis and work on interconnected humanitarian and human rights crises, as well as crises of democracy, economy, care, and future visioning beyond survival, and supporting the building and thriving of systemic alternatives such as Martynka, EMMA and thousands of other initiatives that have emerged in response to the multiple crises in the region.

One year into the resistance against Russia’s full scale invasion of Ukraine and decades of Russian imperialism in the region, we see alternative visions and practices built by social justice organizers multiply across the region, focusing not only on crisis response but crisis recovery. These seeds will fully flourish into the prefigurations of the better, more just, and sustainable worlds we desperately need.

**Key Lessons**

Trust and solidarity are integral to fighting a crisis resulting from conflict. The many facets of this crisis, and the fallout of this war, can only be combated if we’re working together. Martynka, EMMA, and CEECCNA are all organisations that have proven to be models of community-led responses, and we can learn how their deep convictions, along with their strong values, create an enduring sense of solidarity and hope much needed to survive this seismic conflict.

But the biggest challenge these life-affirming networks face is the fact that the international philanthropic and humanitarian funding does not reach them; and thus, CEECCNA bridges this gap successfully by creating a collaborative fund to promote systemic and long-lasting change and strategies. It is this bridge that needs to be replicated in such conflict-stricken regions.
Save San Roque and Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap

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Located in North Triangle, Bagong Pag-asa, Quezon City, the Sitio San Roque urban poor community is currently home to more than 6,000 families. Majority of them work in the informal economy as precarious contractual low-wage workers, construction vendors, transport workers, among others. Exemplifying the resilience and ingenuity of the urban poor, San Roque residents built their community, with its own roads, water and electricity networks, institutional, recreational, and commercial spaces—in spite of government neglect and the absence of state housing provision and development programs.

An estimated 17,000 families reside in the community before the development of the high-end township Vertis North, a project of the 2009 joint venture agreement (JVA) between the developer Ayala Land Inc. (ALI), and the landowner National Housing Authority (NHA), which owned the land. Since then, the residents of Sitio San Roque faced violent wide-scale demolitions, and various attacks from this alliance of ALI and NHA in the form of road widening projects, clearing operations, arsons, “voluntary” and pocket-sized demolitions, eviction notices, which meant to clear the land and dispossess the residents of their community.

While the NHA has a Relocation Program for those to-be displaced by the project, only 30% of the remaining families in Sitio San Roque are qualified by the housing agency, citing budget restrictions with the PHP 1.8 Billion (USD 30 Million) Relocation Fund provided by ALI under the JVA. Moreover, six out of the 7 housing projects under the NHA Relocation program are in peri-urban areas, outside the metropolis (KD-SR and SSR, 2022). Such relocation sites further marginalizes relocated families as they are moved farther from their source of livelihood: the primary reason for them staying in Sitio San Roque (Save San Roque, 2019). An increase in living expenses especially in transportation costs were observed in the experience of relocatees. As a result, their measly budget for food, health, education, and other basic needs are further reduced (Arcilla, 2019). The off-city relocation sites themselves are mired with various issues that deteriorate the living conditions of relocatees: low-quality and poorly-constructed housing units; absence of basic utilities such as electricity and water connections; proximity to danger zones; lack of basic social infrastructure such as schools and hospitals; and unavailability of employment opportunities. Social cohesion and community resilience that is reified in the everyday practices of solidarity embedded in the residents’ lifeways are destroyed by the displacement.

**Process that led to the community being resilient**

Facing homelessness, residents of Sitio San Roque devised a multitude of ways available to them in order to defend the community: mobilizations, protest marches, noise barrages, prayer vigils, and most notably, community barricades. Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap - San Roque (KD-SR), an urban poor mass organization that engages in interrelated issues concerning the urban poor
Weaving Solidarity and Hope

sector: land, housing, human rights, livelihood, wages, and other, are at the helm of these resistance strategies.

In 2010, the residents of Sitio San Roque barricaded the streets, clashing with a team of 600 police officers, firefighters, and demolition personnel. The standoff lasted six hours, causing a massive traffic jam on one of Metro Manila’s major thoroughfares. The ardent defense of Sitio San Roque pushed the then-Philippine President Noynoy Aquino to order a suspension of demolitions of urban poor communities. The altercation resulted in a congressional investigation wherein the NHA admitted that on-site relocation is “unfeasible” as it would greatly reduce the housing agency’s potential earnings from the project.

Although not as triumphant as the 2010 community barricade, Sitio San Roque still valiantly defended their community from the large-scale demolition in 2014. 1,000 police officers and SWAT members were employed by the authorities for the road widening project that affected more than 300 families. As a response, they occupied the street (where the demolition took place) for a week and constructed make-shift shelters using materials they found from the debris around them. This occupation pushed NHA to include the families in their Relocation Program.

After the violent encounters between residents and state forces which drew media coverage, the clearing strategy of NHA and the local government shifted from large-scale demolition to “voluntary” and pocket-sized forced demolitions, often by sections (Save San Roque, 2019), and through arson (San Andres and Viray, 2012).
Cognizant of the limitations of defensive and reactive nature of community barricades, in 2019, KD-SR ventured into crafting and lobbying for a counter proposal which they called the Community Development Plan (CDP) with the goal of pushing for inclusive, decent, affordable, and community-centered housing. To aid the community, Save San Roque (SSR), a network of professionals, students, and urban poor advocates, was formed in conjunction with starting the CDP. The objective of SSR was to aid residents with their alternative housing proposal as well as to amplify the campaign to assert it. Months of planning, consultations, and participatory design workshops went into crafting the counter proposal. The CDP has two sides—the technical and the political. It is a technical document which contains the socio-economic profile of the community, their capacity to pay, a proposal for a medium-rise housing complex with public spaces, and a rough cost estimate for the development. Moreso, it is a platform for political engagement, serving as a reification of the residents’ aspirations to be included in urban development and a platform for their collective assertion for this right (KD-SR and SSR, 2019). In December 2019, the CDP was submitted and was positively received by Quezon City Mayor Joy Belmonte. She has since vowed to find a win-win solution to the problem presented by the community and has promised to include the residents in Quezon city’s in-city housing program.
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How this established resilience has helped during the pandemic

COVID-19’s emergence in the Philippines has aggravated the poverty experienced by the residents. However, despite the lack of government aid, Sitio San Roque residents were able to mitigate these pandemic-induced challenges
Weaving Solidarity and Hope

through the support of sympathetic individuals, and organizations who helped financially support the community’s COVID-19 mitigation projects. At the onset of the pandemic, community leaders, led by KD-SR, immediately drew up three phases of relief operations. The first one involved providing immediate assistance to the residents through food packs which the community leaders themselves procured, repacked, and delivered. A couple of weeks into the implementation of the first phase, it had become apparent to the community leaders that their relief operations must transition to the second phase. This led to the establishment of the Kusinang Bayan (community kitchen) in April 2021. The initiative started with only 3 but steadily grew to 27 as donations came pouring in following a successful social media campaign on the community kitchen. These community kitchens were set-up in different areas of Sitio San Roque as well as in adjacent urban poor communities. In the Kusinang Bayan, it is the residents themselves who plan the meals, purchase the ingredients, and distribute the work in preparing and serving meals to their neighbors. At its peak, as much as 5,000 urban poor residents were being provided for by the initiative (KD-SR and SSR, 2020)

As donations dwindled due to ‘donor fatigue’ among many other reasons, residents moved to the third phase of the relief operations: starting agro ecological community food gardens. The Tanimang Bayan (community food garden), as they call it, is seen by the residents as a more sustainable form of relief, and as an alternative food source. For this endeavor, KD-SR and SSR sought the assistance of farmer groups and advocates to enrich the farming skills of residents and capacitate them further on agroecology. Educational discussions and training on topics ranging from food security, land justice, farm planning, and creation of organic soil additives and inputs were conducted in the community. Aside from reducing food insecurity, KD-SR considers the Tanimang Bayan as part of their effort to reclaim land and resist further dispossession by the alliance of NHA-ALI. This is reflected in their practice of utilizing and cultivating the community food gardens directly on areas that had already been demolished (KD-SR and SSR, 2022; Recio and Shafique, 2022).

Key Lessons

The experience of Sitio San Roque of dispossession and displacement as well as their story of resilience and resistance is hardly isolated in urban centers in the Philippines. Because of the current development model prevalent which puts
profits first before the welfare of people, marginalized peoples are continuously denied their right to the city.

However, it is evident in initiatives of Sitio San Roque (the Barikadang Bayan, Kusinang Bayan, Tanimang Bayan, and the CDP) that there are triumphs and empowerment when the residents themselves are allowed to be a part of and involved in the planning and implementation of development projects. The voice and participation of marginalized peoples allow development to be grounded and better suited to the realities faced by the grassroots. These community-led initiatives, undoubtedly, are a testament to the limitless possibilities when solidarity and collective action put into practice by the marginalized peoples, most especially when these are met with recognition and support from the government.

References


UniDiversidade: A New Approach to Learning

União de Vila Nova, São Paulo, Brazil

Author(s)
This article is based on the interview conducted by the editorial team with Hermes De Sousa (hermes.sousa@hotmail.com)

Hermes de Sousa is a charismatic community leader with a post-doctorate from the “University of Life.” Through his “education process,” he taps into the hidden potential and light within every person. Known for transforming lives in São Paulo’s São Miguel Paulista neighborhood, he brought hope and happiness to many through his devotion and care.

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UniDiversidade das Kebradas is an experimental school nestled in União de Vila Nova, São Paulo, the second most violent city in the world. The space of UniDiversidade values local wisdom and practices for the development of youth, fostering of livelihood opportunities, as well as the strengthening of community bonds. The school’s objective is to bring together diversity, value the intelligence of the favela, and through this improve people’s quality of life and aim at community sustainability.

Founded in 2000, UniDiversidade operates from five interactive and integrated centers that communicate, articulate and strengthen each other by creating a set of initiatives, namely: Art and Culture; Gastronomy and Nutrition; Environmental Education; Community Communication; Entrepreneurship and Income Generation; Ateliê Gambiarra¹.

The school seeks to create a community and democratic space focused on education, citizenship and work, which encourages the well-being of all. The pedagogical pillars of UniDiversidade are

- **Art-Education** as an instrument of social transformation.
- **Diversity**: UniDiversidade is the most efficient way to combat all types of discrimination, respecting and coexisting with differences and promoting social inclusion.
- **Innovation**: Co-creativity and participation in the implementation and dissemination of socio-environmental technologies.
- **Sustainability**: what is socially fair, ecologically correct, and economically viable, in building legacies for the next generations.
- **Ethics**: respect for citizenship rights and people’s physical and moral integrity, as the foundation of relationships with transparency and responsibility.
- **Faith**: Believing in human beings, in their capacity for regeneration and transformation, hope, dissemination of love, humility, solidarity, joy, commitment to a new way of living and coexisting.
- **Transparency**: Considering it essential that society has access to information about our actions in the community.

One of the founders of UniDiversidade is Hermes de Sousa, who after being a chemical addict for 10 years, has been living with the community for over 20 years. On asking about the genesis of the school he said that after serving in prison, he was out of work for a while. He once went to a nearby landfill and started picking up some waste items. A group of children playing nearby went over and curiously asked, “What are you doing?” Hermes explained that he was collecting objects to create art. The children got excited and wanted to join him in creating artwork. This art community slowly grew and that’s how the New Union of Art was created, which is now UniDiversidade.

¹ To use improvised methods / solutions to solve a problem, with any available material
He realized that solidarity is the community’s biggest resource and was inspired to create *UniDiversidade*. This initiative was to create a new kind of entrepreneurial community that shares, exchanges, and creates a new mindset about how to make their own resources. Over a period of time, they brought together people from various races and gender and social groups with different religions and cultures.

One of the biggest problems in the periphery is the deep indoctrination of education. Schools are often viewed as tools for preparing students to enter the workforce and become productive members of society, rather than as places for personal growth and exploration. This has become the mainstream culture. Furthermore, there are significant disparities in the quality of education available to different socioeconomic groups. *UniDiversidade* has been challenging this system of education by emphasizing Educação Desenrolada, which is “education that is based on what to do with the resources that one has now”.

They have initiated various inspiring projects, such as the *Mulheres do GAU* (Women of GAU) Group of Urban Agriculture, *Flor de Cabruera, Escola Embaixo da Ponte* (School Under the Bridge), and others. These projects focus on regenerating abandoned spaces, promoting sustainable agriculture, and recycling waste to create products. They believe that regeneration of spaces and resources can be achieved by looking at the community’s needs, and then taking action to meet those needs.

**Some of the projects are elaborated below**

*Mulheres do GAU (Women of GAU) Group of Urban Agriculture*: This is an agroforest built in a landfill place. There are 300 types of plants, herbs and medicinal plants and they now have a gastronomy that is called resilience gastronomy where they are trying to bring back ways in which they cook traditional recipes. They teach community women, children and schools ways to sustain life through this medium.

*Flor de Cabruera*: This is an enterprise that recycles waste to create products such as purses, bags, etc.
Escola Embaixo da Ponte (School Under the Bridge): This project tries to regenerate places that were once abandoned. Once, when Hermes was walking around in the neighborhood, he spotted a bridge that was unattended and forgotten. Being the curious person he is, he went and spoke with a few children about what they wanted under the bridge. They wanted a place to watch movies, an art gallery, a space to play basketball and soccer, and even a library. Hermes was impressed by their imagination and decided to make their dreams a reality. The team got to work and painted a wall under the bridge in bright, shiny white. This wall became a movie screen, and every week, the community gathered to watch films and have a great time. This space also became their art gallery which is open to the whole community. Ultimately, the idea was to collectively understand that we have the power to regenerate the spaces we live in. And so, the bridge went from a symbol of neglect to a shining example of what can be accomplished when people come together with a shared vision.

All the projects are usually initiated from the intersection between the public sector, private companies and communities. They are funded by private companies that receive a fiscal benefit by doing this social work. After 2 years of receiving funding the projects slowly start to self-organize resulting in them becoming sustainable. The women of the GAU project are entirely independent and self-sustained now, which is a huge feat for the community. They are now trying to establish a school of business, where business is taught in a different way.
An instance that Hermes mentioned was based on how some of the youth made a field trip to an ice cream parlor to study business. As they spoke with the ice cream seller, asking about his secret ingredients and the strategies he used to attract customers, one young girl piped up. She was from a family that made cheese, and she started talking about their business with enthusiasm. The ice cream seller showed interest in her cheese and even proposed a partnership. As they discussed the possibility of cross-selling each other’s products. The ice cream seller could serve cheese-flavored ice cream, and the girl’s family could offer ice cream toppings made from their cheese. The group was amazed at how collaboration could lead to mutual benefits. They realized that instead of competing, they could work together to expand their businesses and reach more customers. The young students left the ice cream parlor with a newfound understanding of how businesses could grow through collaboration and cooperation.

This case offers a concrete illustration of teaching in an alternative way, highlighting the benefits of experiential learning through real-world applications. Rather than relying solely on theoretical lessons and textbooks, the students were given the opportunity to engage directly with a local business owner, inquire about their strategies, and witness firsthand how businesses operate. Such ways of learning allow one to grapple with the intricacies of a subject more closely, fostering a deeper understanding and facilitating long-term retention of the acquired knowledge.
Key Lessons

Their new approach to education is rooted in spirituality, one that seeks to promote the well-being of all, strengthen community bonds, and foster a culture of care and sustainability. Their focus is on seeing the divine in each person by realizing that love is the bigger force of divine spirituality. By standing up for their beliefs, listening deeply, and expressing themselves in different ways, they are on a journey to build a community and instill a sense of belonging where they live.

Uni-diversity’s approach to education and learning is one that does not mirror the dominant educational system and instead embraces the unique characteristics of the local context and available resources. It accounts for the specific needs, challenges, and strengths of the community it serves. Rather than adhering to a one-size-fits-all approach, the focus is on tailoring learning methods that align with the cultural, social, and environmental aspects of the surrounding area. Such an approach seeks to foster a love for learning, cultivate a sense of purpose, and equip individuals with the skills and knowledge required to tackle the diverse challenges we face on a global scale.
Revitalizing Landscapes of Resilience and Self-Determination in the Salween Peace Park

Myanmar

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The Salween Peace Park is a community-led initiative that strives to revitalize traditional knowledge, practice and customs to empower communities to assert rights to manage their territories and resources. Located in Mutraw District in northern Karen State, the 6,000km² Salween Peace Park encompasses the customary territories, or Kaw (as they are known in S’gaw Karen language) of 270 communities. Each of these territories is complete with its own set of traditional institutions and knowledge systems, which have been used for millennia to protect and sustain rivers, forests, and biodiversity. The Salween Peace Park brings together these territories along with Karen protected wildlife sanctuaries and reserved forests, into one indigenous conserved landscape.

As well as marking the harmonious relationships that indigenous Karen communities have with their surrounding biodiversity, the Salween Peace Park is also a symbol of the unremitting resilience, ingenuity and determination of the Karen people. While harboring some of the world’s most vulnerable plant and animal species, Mutraw District has been subject to over seventy years of armed conflict and military oppression at the hands of the Burmese army. Furthermore, it is being affected by the growing impacts of climate change such as floods, droughts, and insect infestations. The Salween Peace Park is an attempt by indigenous Karen communities to build peace from the bottom up, ending protracted cycles of violence and realigning relationships between people and nature through an expression of indigenous self-determination.

This case study shows how the Salween Peace Park is building innovative forms of resilience against conflict, displacement and the climate crisis, while also generating transformative alternatives to decades of conflict and environmental plunder.

**The Salween Peace Park: A Landscape of Indigenous Resilience in the Face of Conflict, Climate Change, and Military Dictatorship**

The Salween Peace seeks to restore food, political and cultural sovereignty through the revival and revitalization of traditional knowledge systems and cultural practices. This struggle for indigenous self-determination is set against the backdrop of intensifying armed conflict and growing onset of climate change.

Mutraw District has been the subject to over seventy years of armed conflict. Standing at the center of what has become ‘the world’s longest civil war’, indigenous Karen people in Mutraw have suffered hugely human rights violations and displacement as a result of protracted conflict and militarization.
aerial attacks on the Salween Peace Park, a majority of which have targeted civilian homes and settlements. This has resulted in the displacement of over 104,000 people into the surrounding forests.

**Resilience Through Reciprocity**

The resilience of indigenous communities in the Salween Peace Park to the intensifying impacts of climate change and conflict are underpinned by values of reciprocity. Reciprocity here is expressed both between community members, who share agricultural tasks and pool resources, and between the community and the surrounding forests, rivers, lands, and spirits through local taboos, knowledge systems and collective action conservation initiatives.

Community members perform agricultural work together, each house helping the other to plant rice and vegetable in ku (swidden) plots. After tilling each household’s lands together through collective labour, community members have meals and wine to celebrate, maintaining the communal unity and cohesion which underpin local forms of social resilience.
In response to the pressures of climate change and pest infestations that are increasingly causing shocks and stresses, as well as intensifying armed conflict and displacement, communities in the Salween Peace Park have established a network of 99 rice banks. In each rice bank, households deposit part of their annual rice harvest, pooling resources so that households can withdraw rice in the case of shocks, stresses and emergencies, paying back the amount of rice taken from the following harvest. Where rice harvests are destroyed during conflict, or where communities are displaced, other rice banks contribute shares of rice to ensure local food security.

Apart from pooling rice, community groups have also established saving funds, pooling financial resources together for those with emergencies to withdraw, or to use for local community development initiatives. The pooling of resources in the Salween Peace Park has helped to create a local system of mutual aid in which communities are able to flourish during shocks and stresses from the pressures of climate change and armed conflict.

**Maintaining Reciprocal Ecological Relations**

Community members also take care to maintain reciprocal relations with their lands, forests and rivers, and the spirits that guard over them. In this way, the community protects the forest, and in turn, the forest protects the community. These relations have resulted in the sustenance of rich and biodiverse forests and wildlife, as well as thriving indigenous communities.
One example of this reciprocal relation is the revitalization of fish conservation zones in the Salween Peace Park. Fish conservation zones have long been a traditional practice that through long periods of conflict and displacement had started to decline. Within these ‘community established sanctuaries’, usually located in deep fish breeding grounds in streams and rivers, fishing is prohibited and areas of forest around these areas are protected. The careful management of fish conservation zones helps to maintain clean water, healthy fish populations, and rich forests.

Communities across the Salween Peace Park have now established a network of 41 interlinking fish conservation zones that are helping to protect fish populations, as well as water bodies and surrounding forests throughout the area. Since the revival of this practice, communities report that fish populations are thriving, with populations increasing in streams and rivers across the area.

By maintaining reciprocal relations with the surrounding environment through community-driven conservation initiatives, Karen communities maintain amicable and reciprocal relations with spirits which guard over land, forests and streams. Kaw ka’sa, or the master of the kaw, is responsible for maintaining good relations with spirits, ensuring that lands, forests and rivers are well cared for by performing seasonal ceremonies and managing agricultural cycles.

When a community member cuts trees within a watershed area, or pollutes local water bodies, these relations are disturbed. Indigenous Karen people believe that this will have detrimental impacts on their physical health, resulting in sickness or even death in their household. Local shamans (suda kada) are called in these instances to ask for forgiveness from spirits and mediate remuneration with the spirits for damage caused. In this way the health of the environment and the community are directly interconnected, and the maintenance of good relations with spirits and the resources they guard over sustains healthy and thriving communities.
Food Sovereignty Through Biological Diversity

Indigenous communities in the Salween Peace Park have managed to maintain food sovereignty despite the growing pressures caused by climate change and armed conflict. Communities sustain food sovereignty by maintaining high levels of diversity, both in their ku (swidden) fields, and within the forest and rivers that they steward. The maintenance of biodiversity is central to local food sovereignty, underpinning healthy food systems that are resilient to changing conditions and are supported by strong ecosystems.

Communities in the Salween Peace Park practice seed saving, maintaining a great variety of crops to plant within ku (swidden) plots. This ensures that even if some crops fail due to climate pressures, there is enough variety for fields and communities to continue to flourish. Indigenous knowledge research conducted by communities within the Salween Peace Park has shown that people commonly grow in the range of 200 species within their rotational farms.

Communities in the Salween Peace Park often supplement their agricultural harvests with vegetables, medicines, fish and other non-timber forest products from surrounding forests and streams. Through carefully implemented community conservation initiatives and traditional practices, communities in the SPP have managed to sustain a huge diversity within surrounding forests, streams, and plains. Community members have identified, for example, over 106 mushroom species, 200 herbal medicine species, and 121 orchid species. These rich and healthy ecosystems support sustained food security and sovereignty in the areas, providing an abundance of nutrients to local communities.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Species Identified by Communities in SPP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>106 species of mushroom¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>200 species of herbal medicinal plants²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>121 orchid species³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>200 species of crops planted in Ku rotational farms⁴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>194 plant species and 200 wildlife species⁵</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key Lessons**

The Salween Peace Park is a community initiative that seeks to restore reciprocal relations with the land, forests, rivers and wildlife. Through these reciprocal relations communities have been able to rebuild their resilience to emergent threats such as the impacts of climate change and continued armed conflict. The Salween Peace Park shows us that the relations of mutual support and care within the community, and between the community and nature are vital for the survival of the people and the planet.

Hin Lad Nai: A Successful Model of Indigenous Resistance

Chiang Rai Province, Northern Thailand

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*Thea Walmsley is a writer, storyteller, and communications manager passionate about building a just food system from the grassroots up.*
A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of spending a couple of days with an Indigenous hillside tribe here in Thailand called Hin Lad Nai, and I wanted to share some of that story with you today. It’s the story of a small community who, when faced with a multitude of challenges to their land and food sovereignty, held steadfast to their culture and their traditional land management practices. Through years of resistance and advocacy, they have managed to not only stay on their land, but have significantly influenced both domestic and foreign policy on forest management biodiversity.

Hin Lad Nai is an Indigenous community of Pgakenyaw people living in Northern Thailand. They’re made up of about twenty households living in a forest village which was first constructed in the 1960s (although the Hin Lad Nai people have lived throughout the region for much longer). Their way of life is deeply connected with the forest, as they sustain themselves almost entirely from the plants they cultivate within it.

In the 1970s and 80s, the Thai government gave companies permission to carry out mass logging throughout regions in Northern Thailand, including where the villagers lived. They destroyed sacred areas of the forest, water systems, and the community’s cemetery. Species loss and flooding soon followed. By 1989, little remained of the lush forests that once characterized the land. Further, the area where Hin Lad Nai lived was designated as a National Reserve Forest in 1982, prohibiting human settlement in the forest. In 1992, villagers were told to vacate. They didn’t. This move was met with fierce and coordinated resistance – Hin Lad Nai formed an alliance with ten other groups facing the same issue, forming the Northern Farmer’s Network to advocate for their rights to live on the land.

They fought back using many means: protests throughout the country, appeals to organizations like UNESCO, and joining the National Assembly for the Poor, all of which strengthened their position to advocate for land rights with the government.

But the most powerful tool they employed was continually demonstrating the evidence of the impacts of their forest management practices. Just thirty years after the forest was completely decimated by logging, eighty percent of the affected area has been fully regenerated by the community, who now live almost completely off the bounty of the forest.

There are over two hundred edible varieties amongst the trees, and rotational farming plots provide rice and other staple crops. The community also cultivates tea and honey, which they sell to make shared income. They now manage over 3,000 hectares of forest surrounding the village, which is thriving with a multitude of plant and animal species.

In 2003, the village was officially recognized by the Thai government. In 2010, Hin Lad Nai achieved the status of a Special Cultural Zone, which protects their practice of shifting cultivation under UNESCO’s cultural heritage list.
Ongoing Challenges: Destigmatizing Shifting Cultivation

But even with these official designations, their challenges are far from over. The type of rotational farming Hin Lad Nai practices is still deeply stigmatized both in Thailand and internationally. In many circles, this technique is pejoratively called “slash-and-burn” agriculture, carrying with it the stigma of unsustainability, backwardness, and illegality.

But this perception is borne of ignorance of how the practice exists in context. Hin Lad Nai’s version of this practice is one that has existed for thousands of years. They start a small set of new fields each year, carefully burning the area to clear it, remove pests and weeds, and naturally fertilize the area, removing the need for any kind of additional fertilization. After a short growing season of rice and vegetables, the area is left alone for a minimum of seven years to regenerate. In this region, the practice has been going on for more than four hundred years, leaving a thriving ecosystem in its wake.

Selecting and clearing the plots is no simple operation. These processes are deeply embedded in Hin Lad Nai’s culture, cosmology, and knowledge systems. Before the burns, villagers build fire breaks, carefully consider weather patterns, and construct a system of fire-watching to ensure that everything goes according to plan. Their system considers the humans, animals, plants, and spirits that inhabit the land in the past, present, and future. As such, their approach focuses on ensuring that natural resources remain abundant for future generations.
Hin Lad Nai has been open to merging different systems of knowledge to show the world the potential of properly managed shifting cultivation. Collaborating with researcher Prayong Doklamyai in 2010, they produced a study carried out over multiple years, which found that shifting cultivation absorbs significantly more carbon dioxide than it emits through controlled burns.

Roughly 480 tons of carbon are emitted in a burn, while 17,348 are sequestered in the fallow period that follows. Moreover, more than 85 percent of the land they steward contains forest cover; only one percent is dedicated to shifting cultivation, an amount that secures the entire community’s food needs for the whole year. Only about ten percent of the land around the village is burned each year, and then it is allowed to rest for the next seven to fourteen years, absorbing huge amounts of carbon in the soil and trees that regrow there.

The Hin Lad Nai community is continuing to fight, both locally and internationally, to shift the perception of shifting cultivation. Many people still see shifting cultivation as unilaterally destructive, backwards, and something that should remain illegal. The evidence arising from the community shows how differently the story unfolds when the practice is carried out by those with a deep, reciprocal relationship with the land – when it’s embedded in context. There’s clearly a difference between the type of agriculture Hin Lad Nai practices and the kind of slashing-and-burning that corporations or farmers carry out to permanently transform the land into a plantation or pasture. But too often, especially at policymaking levels, this distinction is not made.

It also shows the absurdity of the view that many powerful development actors hold, that forest should either be “untouched” wilderness or used for industry, leaving no room for humans to engage in reciprocal relationships with the land (which is, ironically, how these “untouched” ecosystems were formed in the first place).

Rotational farming has been practiced for thousands of years, and plays an important role in conserving biodiversity when it’s accompanied by tenure rights and people who have deep knowledge of – and relationship with – the land.

I wanted to share this story because I believe these pockets of resistance don’t get enough of a place in the conversation about systems change. As a result, the world can seem, sometimes, like a bleak place, characterized by unjust power that goes unchecked. And of course, there’s truth to that; destruction, grief, and greed are dominant themes of our time, the consequences of a deep separation between humans and nature. But they do not tell the complete story. These pockets of resistance exist all over the world, and they’re growing. They’re succeeding.
Key Lessons

Hin Lad Nai is made up of one community of just twenty households that are dedicated to protecting their culture, their land, and their ancestral practices. And even though their numbers are small, their impact has been monumental. We don’t need novel, capitalist solutions. The solutions are already here. The question is how we create the conditions for these resistance movements to take root and thrive around the globe.

“We are so focused on technology, agreements, pledges and promises to save us, to somehow allow us to continue living the way that we have been, resisting deep transformation.”

It is my hope that learning about these stories will help to reframe the way we are approaching solutions-making in agriculture (and climate change more broadly). Examples like these show that returning land to the stewardship of Indigenous peoples, genuinely supporting their contributions, and learning from their knowledge and cosmologies is not only the most effective path forward – it may be our only path.
Protecting Benin’s Sacred Forests

Benin

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This article is based on the interview conducted by the editorial team with Appolinaire OUSSOU LIO (aoussoulio@gmail.com).

OUSSOU LIO Appolinaire (OLA) is a Prince DJAKA Atawëvi, High Dignitary of the Tôlima Royal Court. A geographer-naturalist writer, he is an expert in community development and land law. He works for the valorization of endogenous knowledge, the culture of peoples and the protection of forests and sacred sites. Founder of the Nature and Culture Clubs, he is currently President of the Groupe de Recherche et d’Action pour le Bien-être (GRABE-BENIN) and a member of the African Collective for the Jurisprudence of the Earth.

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Benin, located in West Africa, is home to a rich and diverse ecosystem of forests. A long time ago, the ancestors of communities in Benin migrated from Togo and settled in the forests of the region. At that time, the forests were vast and rich in diverse flora and fauna. Over generations, communities living there developed a deep understanding of the forests and were able to live in harmony with the forests.

The community members had several totems and they had strict principles to protect their sacred home. For instance, they refrained from cutting down specific trees or harming particular animals and each family and community had its own sacred grove within the forests, which they took care of. These groves were considered significant places to connect with spirits and ancestors, conduct initiations/rituals/ceremonies, and seek medicinal plants for healing purposes. Their houses were built near these groves, which were all connected to rivers, and served as a source of purification and cleansing for the people. The Zekpon River was especially important to the community as it was a potent source of reconnection during rituals.

The ancestral religion in Benin is Vodun, also known as Voodoo. Despite its negative portrayal, Vodun is simply a religion that honors the elements of air, earth, fire, and water. It suggests that everything on earth, including the mountains, the earth, and the sun, has life and spirit. All beliefs of the community ultimately trace back to the sacred forests, where they have lived, prayed, and healed for many generations.

However, there were claims that people in the sacred forests practiced witchcraft when Christianity was introduced to Benin over 500 years ago by the Portuguese. As a result, the destruction of the forests and the construction of churches in their place was encouraged. Although many people fought against this, more and more people converted to other religions and no longer saw the remaining forests as sacred.

Owing to this colonialization, the forests were not protected or revered in the same way. Deforestation due to religious colonization, extractive development, and certain agricultural practices led to the decline of these sacred groves, with only small pockets remaining now.

“Destroying our environment and sacred sites would only harm us and cause vigilantism. Nature can survive without humans, but humans cannot live without nature.”
Appolinaire OUSSOU LIO, one of the founders of GRABE-BENIN, witnessed the beauty of nature in his village with huge trees and a variety of animals when he was growing up. However, on returning to the village after completing his university education, he was disheartened to see that a lot of trees had been cut down and a lot of the wildlife had been hunted down. He realized that the younger generation was seeking a different kind of development, neglecting the wisdom of the elders, and often leaving their villages and communities.

To address this issue, GRABE-BENIN (The Research and Action Group for Well-Being in Benin) was founded in the year 1996 with a mission to restore and reconnect the sacred groves and heal the communities that care for them. GRABE-BENIN is also working to connect the youth with their traditions and allow them to debate through an “Intergenerational Dialogue Center”. It allows the elders to transmit their knowledge and wisdom to the youth. In 2012, GRABE-BENIN worked with the government to pass the “Sacred Forest Law”, which legally recognizes and protects sacred forests. The law acknowledges the sacredness of these forests and recognizes the communities as the rightful guardians of these places. They have successfully integrated some forests into this framework and are working to do so with others. With this law in place, the community can be advised not to destroy the forest but rather be guardians of it, and the government cannot proceed with any projects that would harm it.

They are also working with the local community to have a dialogue and conduct eco-mapping to identify what is important and what is not. They also advocate for local governments to recognize these forests as protected areas, where no activities should occur that would compromise the forests’ spiritual and ecological values. By passing down knowledge and wisdom to future

generations, protecting sacred sites, and living in harmony with the earth, they are trying to ensure that their traditions and culture continue to thrive.

**Some programs of GRABE BENIN:**

**Women and Agroecology:** GRABE-BENIN has established women’s vegetable groups in communities and on school farms to promote ancestral vegetables and empower women in the pursuit of food sovereignty. These groups engage in agroecological production and specialize in producing traditional and common vegetables. There are currently three women’s groups with 102 members.

**Graine Future Farm School:** This program brings together young people in natural environments such as reserves and forests and invites resource persons to share their knowledge of endogenous practices. This is intended to train young environmental leaders who will represent the next generation in bio-cultural diversity and conservation practices. Over the years since its inception in 2006, the program has trained over 12,000 young people and many of these individuals have gone on to become green entrepreneurs, doctors, environmental NGO managers, and professors.

**Seeds and Traditional Knowledge:** In Benin, many seeds that were once easily available in the market are now scarce, such as the “Noussissagbakou” seed, which can only be obtained from Nigeria. In response, GRABE-BENIN is working to preserve the food resources that are able to produce these seeds. They have established seed banks and created test fields to conserve these seeds and promote their cultivation.

**Nature and Culture Clubs:** Nature Clubs are important instruments for environmental education. Many young members are initiating dialogues to protect the environment, improve sanitation, and enhance the living conditions of their communities.
Conservation of forests and sacred sites: The passing of an Inter-Ministerial Decree, which lays down the conditions for the sustainable management of the sacred forest in the Republic of Benin has ensured that 11 sacred forests are now endowed with orders of official recognition and deliberation of the municipal council.

“One thing is to change a system of governance, but it is another thing entirely to change the mentality.”

Additionally, GRABE-Bénin has been monitoring over 919 areas and territories of Indigenous and Community Heritage through the ICCA Benin Association, which was established in August 2017. We are working to update the directory of sacred forests in Benin by region in order to secure them and integrate them into protected areas.

Cultural biodiversity and promotion of APACS: GRABE-Bénin conducts regular assessments of the state of sacred forests through action research, which involves documenting the knowledge and practices of local communities for their sustainability. The organization provides support to various communities in organizing traditional ceremonies and initiation rituals for new members. In addition, they conduct training programs for young environmental leaders to raise awareness about the importance of cultural biodiversity.

Tree plantations: Every year, more than 15,000 trees are planted in forests and sacred sites, public green spaces, public and private administrations, road arteries, schools, churches, mosques and even in houses across Benin.

The impact of slavery and colonialism on the people of Benin was significant. The colonizers ingrained in their minds that anything traditional or indigenous was evil. They are now slowly attempting to confront this challenge of decolonizing mentalities.

Appolinaire is a member of the Tôlinou (Tôlinu) ethnic group that comprises eight million people across Benin and Nigeria. He explains that even though there are over 40 different languages spoken in his community, the four larger ethnic groups (Adja, Ewe, Aizo, and Yoruba) share the same religion and socio-cultural practices. When colonizers came, they forced people to abandon their languages.
In the first schools, which were Christian schools, students were not allowed to speak their own language and were punished if they did. However, now people realize the importance of keeping their language as it is tied to their knowledge of their community.

“When people keep their language, they preserve their knowledge. For me, speaking in my own language is important because it helps me to understand and communicate about my community better.”

He says “In the past, members of my community were ashamed to speak their language, wear traditional clothing, or perform their rituals. This made me sad because I saw the joy that these traditions brought to people, including the food they ate. Many people chose to eat food from other cultures rather than their own. However, things have changed, and now our community is returning to their traditional food and speaking their language.”

People in the community have started believing that protecting their traditions is important, not only for preserving their way of life but also for passing on their knowledge to future generations. As a result, they have started planting trees, especially indigenous ones, and using traditional medicines to treat illnesses. Through dialogue, the community is working to remember and preserve their traditional values. This has led to younger members wearing traditional clothing and speaking their old language.

“*We need to listen to the community and traditional knowledge to learn more about life. People can go to school, but we need to combine knowledge and treasure it. When we get old, we need to go back to our ancestral lands and listen to the land, the community, and traditional knowledge, because nature is the best teacher.*”

**Key Lessons**

- Reviving traditional practices of conviviality, respect for nature, and tending to land could be a powerful mode of combating results of systemic crises such as food insecurity, loss of forests, loss of livelihoods, climate change, among others.
- Struggle for indigenous identity, ways of organizing lives based on community’s cosmovisions and defining ways of well-being emerging from communal living are essential elements of existence and re-existence.
- By reconnecting with our roots, we can find meaning and purpose in our communities and in caring for nature. There is much to learn from indigenous peoples who have a lot to teach us about facing the crises of
climate change, identity, and spirituality.

- To address the challenges of conservation, it is important to involve young people as well as elderly individuals, who have powerful memories and can contribute to a better future.
- Decolonising is an everyday process that includes the assertion of identity, ways of being and learning the laws and culture of our own communities before trying to impose external laws or notions of extractive development. One must respect another’s culture at the same time stay rooted in their own. It’s important that the west reflects on the deep fractures of their own societies and revive the lost harmony between nature and human beings to ensure a peaceful future in their regions.

Despite the global momentum which is geared towards industrialized and extractive systems, efforts of GRABE BENIN have found a way towards more sustainable and equitable ways of living through alternative environmental laws, education and learning, community living, livelihood generation and sustenance, and ecological conservation.

“I hope we can bring those who don’t agree with us to see that God is love. Beyond religions, God is in each of us. We must be in harmony with ourselves, other humans and non-humans. That you can’t cut the tree that is loved by the Creator. The forest is life. We must protect it together. That’s what I am fighting for and I have to continue.”
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