

Summary of the ICCA Consortium's first round of global calls for and on territories of life during the COVID-19 crisis

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This is a summary of the online discussions held on 9 April, on the subject of territories of life and their initiatives during the COVID-19 crisis. In total, more than 70 people participated in the call. This is not an exhaustive account of the exchange, and even less so of the ICCA Consortium membership's situation as a whole. In fact, these discussions are continuing as we write, and many experiences and point of views are necessarily missing. This report is part of our effort to document actions, build solidarity and plan together, and does not represent the views or position of the ICCA Consortium.

Purposes of the global calls for and on territories of life during the COVID-19 crisis

These meetings represent a pause in the current crisis of the global pandemic, a way to continue our work and encourage our Members to continue providing updates, ideas, and courage to the network! We hope it will encourage exchanges and provide food for thought.

What will you find in that report?

To the greatest extent possible, the speakers are identified, both for reference, and so that they can be contacted in order to continue the exchange.

We will give a brief overview of the departure points of our reflections and then present the different methods that various communities are implementing, or the realities they are facing. The final segment is a reflection on what concrete actions the Consortium might take in the different contexts.

SUMMARY OF THE CALLS

The call sessions were opened by Emma Lee, *trawlwulwuy* woman from Tebrakunna country, in Tasmania, for the call in English and by Felipe Gomez, Maya Kitche of Guatemala, for the call in Spanish. They both invited us to speak from a place of kinship, love and solidarity.

1. General Context

Ashish Kothari started by formulating the question: *are we as humanity on the right path, or have we done something so fundamentally wrong?* The climate crisis should have raised this existential question, but it did not, the COVID-19 crisis does.

More and more people seem to understand that the pandemic does not have a single cause; that it was not caused by the nature, but rather by what humans have done to nature. This includes economic globalisation, and the resulting huge scale animal farms in recently converted wildlife habitats that have an enormous capacity to generate viral and bacterial novelties of great damage to us (**Grazia Borrini Feyerabend**). The current pandemic makes clear that this model of development, the economic system that promotes it, and the resulting accumulation of wealth by international corporations, are very deeply flawed.

Ashish Kothari continues: It seems that the kind of areas we work in and represent, the territories of life, are part of the many initiatives across the world on food, water, energy sovereignty, agroecology, socially and responsible enterprises, re-building relationships of sharing and caring in economies, that challenge domination and fight for equality among genders, ages, etc. These initiatives have already answered the crisis. Is the crisis affecting us less because we have a remaining relationship with nature and with each other?

Society could start by rebuilding and strengthening kinship, love, solidarity and self-reliance, both for basic needs, and for social and political equity. Many of these values were present in ancient times, but have been lost in modern times, and some new ones are coming to complete them, such as ecofeminism, etc.

Emmanuel Sulle added that a key message emerging in **Tanzania**, and not only from Indigenous peoples, is that people now need to go back to their own communities and indigenous knowledge, to find how they have addressed viruses like this. **Felipe Gomez** balanced this in the Spanish webinar, explaining that many communities are not actually prepared for this shock. Very often, communities do not have food sovereignty.

Grazia Borrini Feyerabend added that even if some fine dust particulates common in air pollution have been shown to carry saliva micro-drops (and viruses) over much larger distances, thereby enhancing contagion, the virus itself remains 'natural'.

Amina Amharech, Amazigh from **Morocco**, pointed out that the pandemic is a reminder that policies which exclude Amazigh and Indigenous peoples are unsustainable. Many Moroccan women are forced to seek work in Europe because they no longer have access to their land. Young people, too, must leave their countries for Europe and some die at sea. Indigenous peoples are the future of the Earth because of their relationship with their lands and territories: their cultures, their knowledge and beliefs are based on sustainability. These values are increasingly necessary with climate change and especially now with COVID-19.

2. Direct actions mentioned during this call

The positioning of Indigenous peoples

In East Asia, Taiwan, **Sutej Hugu** explained that in the **Indigenous Taiwan Self Determination Alliance (ITW-SDA, Member of the Consortium)** study circle, people are discussing their situation. What is the “indigenous way”? In their everyday life, they should follow and keep in pace with their natural cycles and rhythms, as part of their indigenous local knowledge system. However, sometimes, we can only adapt to natural disturbances and chaotic catastrophes. What is the human relationship with viruses? Is it war or is it adaptation? See Sutej Hugu article on that reflections [here](#).

Food and water sovereignty and strict lockdowns organised by communities themselves

In Yucatan, Mexico, **Sara Oliveros** and **Yamili Chan Dzul**, both Maya, represent the *Centro Interdisciplinario de Investigación y Desarrollo Alternativo, U Yich Lu'um* (ICCA Consortium Member). This familial organisation works on valuing and rethinking life as it relates to Mayan agroecology. They work on the sovereignty of their communities, which includes rethinking their relationship with nature. They are restoring ceremonies, expressing gratitude for the air and for the first harvests. They value their local and traditional seeds instead of the hybrid seeds that are in circulation. They are including their children when they plant and work, to teach them the traditional ways. They are working to avoid fragmentation of knowledge, because they understand that individuals need to know many things: about caring for fruit trees and vegetables, when and how to sow – sometimes determined by the constellations - and even how to defend their territory. *“Let us remember that if we do not see the land, we will not defend it. That is how the sale of land and dispossession is facilitated. We bring these questions to rethink what we need in order to continue defending what we are doing: how local actions influence global work.”*

Cristina Eghenter explained that for many communities in the interior of **Borneo**, food sovereignty systems are solid and resilient because they are not solely cultivating rice in sufficient quantity to sustain the community, but are more widely integrated, with access to forest and rivers. Furthermore, a 'social safety net' exists: they ask for rice and exchange with neighboring communities in case of harvest failure or other calamities.

Giovanni Reyes, Sagada-born Kankana-ey Igorot, in the Philippines, explained that lockdowns are not new to his community. It is the usual practice as soon as disease outbreaks occur. The Kankana-ey tribe calls it *Ubaya*. Although usually *Ubaya* are just for a few days, this time it is lasting longer. Thanks to their traditional knowledge and practices, there is no worry of food shortages; there are rice granaries (*agama* or *alam*) in every community. The rice eaten now is from the previous year, while the new harvest is stored in *agamas*.

In **Guatemala**, **Estuardo Secaira** pointed out that some Mayan people, such as the Indigenous mayor of Sololá, have taken even stricter measures to contain the pandemic than the national authorities. **Ronald Suarez** mentioned that in the Peruvian Amazonian region where he lives, they have closed their borders: no one enters or leaves the community.

Leonel Hoeffler, who is Comcaác, added that the borders of his community (in Sonora, **Mexico**) are closed. They live from fishing, but are located in the desert, so they are limited by the freshwater to be found there.

Concha Salguero said that in **Spain**, the position of transhumance and pastoral communities is now weakened. There are no national food strategies, and these communities are based on pastoral systems. Some communities no longer have access to small markets, and they cannot work for restaurants and bars so they cannot sell their products and now have no income. In some cases, slaughterhouses have closed, so some communities have to keep their animals and continue to feed them. Some can use the pastures nearby, but others have to buy industrial food for their animals. Despite this, [some communities have organised themselves to give their products for free](#) to hospitals or other groups.

In **Nunavut**, Northern Canada, there are no cases of COVID-19 yet. It is an area of 2 million square kilometers (the size of Mexico) and it is Canada's area of strictest lockdown. Travel to Nunavut now requires prior approval, and non-essential returning residents and teachers must self-isolate for 14 days at approved facilities in southern Canada before entering Nunavut. There are not enough health facilities in the region, so the vulnerability is very high. Of great importance is the fact that the Inuit have maintained their traditional lifestyle and hunting practices. Because there is less food coming from the south, the Canadian Government has funded the hunters' and trappers' organisations and allow them to do a sustainable harvest for their communities to guarantee access to food

This raises the questions on how to monitor food, energy, and water sovereignty, and how to respond to cases of need.

Monitoring the situation

For **Paola Maldonado (Ecuador)**, the digital world is a new territory of dispute, and it must be made a priority. The defense of territories of life will be, or is already being, discussed at this level. It is the place where the reporting of ongoing crises and challenges may be omitted, altered, or blocked.

Paola and her team from **ALDEA** (Member of the ICCA Consortium), in collaboration with several human rights Ecuadorian organizations and epidemiologists, has developed online monitoring systems to target the following objectives:

- Register cases of human right violations as a tool for visibility, reporting and advocacy;
- Monitor and call attention to, the current situation, threats, and specific needs of local communities, as they relate to the spread of COVID-19;

- Analyse the vulnerability of communities and individuals. (e.g. if someone needs to be removed from the community; and
- Develop reports and alerts to demand timely and culturally appropriate attention.

If this self- isolation of communities is indeed necessary to keep contagion out, it unfortunately results in a lack of widespread knowledge about the ongoing situation within the communities: their needs, possible cases of human rights violations, etc. This online “space” therefore aims at documenting the actual situation and focusing response capacities. Via an online system of surveys, communities or the NGOs supporting them, can provide information, alerts or responses to emergencies on the ground for territories of life in Ecuador. Once the information is entered into this secure platform, it can be processed (at the level of organisations and human rights organisations) and alerts and reports can then be elaborated and more broadly shared.

Paola suggested applying this at the global level within the scope of the work theme on "Documenting ICCAs".

A second space was created by the human rights coalition including ALDEA, for the exclusive use of the communities. Here, they can interact among themselves and exchange internally about their needs for food, medicines, the state of fresh water, boundaries, autonomy, etc.

From **Peru**, **Daniel Rodriguez**, explained that they organized at the level of **FENAMAD** (ICCA Consortium Member), to collect updates from each community, every day. By sector or community, responsible individuals, each using his or her most relevant communication means, report to the network. They focus first on epidemiological surveillance. Many people of the Madre de Dios region have been in contact with the rest of the world for fewer than 50 years, and others are in voluntary total isolation and are therefore extremely vulnerable from the health and immunity point of view. The symptoms of COVID-19 are very similar to other common diseases in the Amazon (cough, fever, etc.), but the network provides clear information so that people do not go immediately to health centers in urban areas where they have greater chances to be contaminated. These channels of communication provide information on the disease in all the relevant languages.

Recently, the local economy has been more dependent on mining incomes, and many community members have left their *chakra* (family vegetable gardens and farm), and are no longer autonomous in producing food. As a result, several communities now need humanitarian aid. In this context, FENAMAD defined sanitary protocols for humanitarian deliveries which must be followed by all national agencies so that there are no risks to communities receiving help. FENAMAD is also thinking ahead to the end of the confinement period, as the vulnerability of the people in Madre de Dios will remain high until a vaccine is found. The timing of the emergency state in most of Peru will not be the same as the emergency in this local area. Finally, as most of FENAMAD’s leaders returned to their communities, the organisation and decision making processes were reviewed. A new online space has been organized to ensure coordination.

Governments actions and positions

In the State of Kerala, **India**, **Nalini Nayak** reported that the system of screening the population's health, the lockdown, and the sharing of information started much earlier than in other States of the country. Testing and hospitalization are free, and hotspots of the pandemic were identified early, and will remain longer in lockdown. The government has opened kitchens to provide food for people in need, especially poor migrant workers. Importantly, a priority has been given to small-scale fishers. They are allowed to go fishing, while big scale fishers cannot. Finally, because the region was hit by floods and tsunami over the last few years, the State of Kerala decided to encourage local production, especially of rice (*paddy*), and it will help local farmers harvest the production this year.

From **Tasmania**, **Emma Lee** told us that the national government proved its good will, when it made an exception and authorized the gathering of more than 80 people at the funeral of a respected Elder.

The fact that governments are taking such actions is an illustration of the scope of possibilities.

Emergencies need to be tackled

Ted Karfakis, from **Greece**, reminded us that currently people cannot get together and protest, therefore industrial projects are going on which would likely not have been the case if conditions were different. In Guatemala, Mexico, Ecuador, Brazil, and Peru, the mining industry is continuing, allowing the presence of workers and facilitating the circulation of people, and potentially the virus, in the region. Illegal mining is also an issue as miners can be an important vector of the virus in the Amazon. In the Ecuadorian Amazon, a pipeline recently broke and put the livelihoods of communities in danger in Ecuador and Peru.

3. Actions that the ICCA Consortium could take

Although they do not necessarily reflect the position or plans of the ICCA Consortium, the following ideas came up during the online calls, and are currently discussed by the Consortium's leadership and membership:

Documenting human rights violations and emergencies

In many parts of the world, national governments are acting in ways that enhance state surveillance, imperialism, etc., using this crisis as an excuse. This is already impacting ICCAs and communities, and the Consortium should be vigilant about this. (**Ted Karfakis**) Any violations should be shared in our lists for movements of solidarity. (**Ashish Kothari**).

As mentioned in a previous section of this article, **Paola Maldonado**, suggested the creation of an online platform to monitor and document alerts and emergencies at the global level. This is an option that is currently being explored. Paola Maldonado also highlighted the fact that digital space is key and must be made highly secure on any communications related to territories of life.

Sharing information and responses on local practices

We heard many interesting stories of resilience and new forms of solidarity between producers and consumers, and in other areas. The Consortium should seek out the best stories of resilience and solidarity networks, and compile them in a powerful document to be used for advocacy and to encourage communities, as well as to States, that are struggling to find answers right now (**Ashish Kothari**). As we continue the mission of the ICCA Consortium, it is crucial, more than ever, to explore ways to self-strengthen the local processes of territories of life and enable them to learn from each other. This was one of the important goals that emerged in our exchanges, and it was highlighted by several participants.

Felipe Gomez suggested the creation of a web page dedicated to local practices of communities in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, such as those mentioned earlier in this report. They should be systematized and prioritized according to their most important and relevant aspects for Indigenous peoples and local communities. **Ricardo** from **Servindi** (Peru) suggested starting a campaign to share the information, which could then be collected, for example on the platform that Paola Maldonado presented.

Felipe Gomez suggested providing technical and financial support to communities that need help, especially for communication among communities.

Mike Ferguson suggested collecting information on traditional knowledge about zoonotic diseases. He provided the examples of Inuit elders who understand how to deal with caribou showing signs of Brucellosis. Inuit elders, and elders of other Indigenous peoples, know how to handle appropriately various infections in wild animals, even if they may not know about the viruses, bacteria, and parasites that cause the physical and behavioral signs of zoonotic diseases.

Olivier Hymas added that the ICCA Consortium should research the ways Indigenous peoples and local communities have handled diseases that grew into pandemics in the past and the ways they are handling them today. Recognising how peoples have handled past epidemics and their ability to reduce the spread, their innovations in the face of an infection, and how they have survived and conquered the disease may hold promise for resolving our current crisis. It is also important to recognize that epidemics are more common than we think. Not only do we need to position the learning about this within an historical and geographical context, we also need to realise that people working with remote communities are at the forefront of an early warning system for the next pandemic.

Preparing a longer term response

As we continuously advance the self-strengthening of communities, the role of the Consortium is also to advance arguments for the longer-term systemic structural changes needed for the planet as a whole. How can we challenge the paradigms that led to the eruption of this disease? How do we make sure that Indigenous peoples and local communities are invited to participate in decision-making?

The ICCA Consortium should explore collaboration with the United Nations, especially through the Small Grants Program of the Global Environment Facility (**Terence Hay Edie**), and look into working with other human rights organisations, too.

One of the roles of the Consortium will be to influence the narrative of the post-pandemic period. The ICCA Consortium, together with other existing networks and movements, must affect a larger, political change.

As **Ashish Kothari** mentioned, the ICCA Consortium is well placed to raise the following questions:

- What does it mean to be human on earth?
- What are well-being, progress, wealth, happiness?
- Where along the way have we lost kinship?