ICCA Consortium:
Indigenous Peoples’ Territories of Life
Contribution to GTI Forum Experiments in Movement Unity

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Background

Indigenous peoples (IP) and local communities (LC) across the globe have faced colonization and extractive exploitation of their lands, waters, and territories to feed the imperial and capitalist powers. In most countries of Asia, Africa, and South America, the postcolonial national governments have continued the colonial practices of land and resource appropriation, for commercial exploitation on the one hand and fortress conservation on the other, by dispossession and non-recognition of IPs’ and LCs’ rights, ways of being, and worldviews. Whatever territories, lands, and waters that remain occupied or used by IPs and LCs, however, continue to encompass significant biodiversity and wildlife and are known to be protecting 80% of the global biodiversity. Their contribution to biodiversity conservation and climate action remains ignored, and they face greater than ever threats from national policies and practices of biodiversity conservation and prevalent practice of corporate-controlled growth, development, and modernization. This is the backdrop of emergence and mission of the ICCA Consortium.

Emergence of a Global Movement

Globally, conventional conservation practices and policies with their colonial roots remain heavily influenced by large international conservation organizations and conventions. In 1994, one of the founding members of the Consortium after becoming the head of the IUCN (International Union for Conservation and Nature) Social Policy Programme formed a Working Group on Collaborative Management of Protected Areas as a step towards inclusion of IPs and LCs. The Working Group pushed for development and adoption of the IUCN programmatic recommendation on Collaborative Management for Conservation along with some recommendations on IP rights and
the need to defend IPs from industrial and mining developments. This seemingly small opening was a big breakthrough within a traditional conservation organization with many governments and conservative conservation organizations as its members.

Those pushing for these approaches, however, had to pay a price for being “too socially minded and radical” and were pushed out of their institutions. These key actors came together to form a loose network and began to connect with others in different parts of the world. Because of their network-building and outreach, the conservation narratives gradually began to shift from exclusively state-led fortress conservation to collaborative and shared systems of conservation and eventually to IPs’ and LCs’ own systems of conservation, including through self-rule and self-determination. The term Community Conserved Areas (CCAs) began to gain recognition and visibility in the global conservation discourses (which over time changed to ICCAs—Areas and Territories conserved by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, and to current ICCAs—territories of life).

ICCA Consortium

In 2010, after much internal reflections and discussions, it became evident that sustaining this momentum and providing meaningful support to the struggles of ICCAs would require some level of formalization and institutional and financial support. ICCA Consortium was thus created.

By the end of 2022, ICCA Consortium had 217 members and 474 honorary members spread across 86 countries. Among the greatest challenges for an association like ICCA Consortium is to strike the right balance to achieve some form of formal institutionalization yet retain the characteristics of a movement. While the former is essential to ensure structured, better coordinated, financially strengthened and sustained support to members, the latter is essential for decentralized decision-making and functioning with flexibility, adaptability, informality, consensus building, transparency, inclusivity, and mutual sharing of responsibility and accountability at all levels and spheres.

The Consortium is currently strengthening its regionalization processes. Members and honorary members in each of the six identified regions are self-organizing, and some are holding regional/
national assemblies. Regionalization processes vary from region to region, ranging from well-structured and formal to informal collaborations. All regions, however, do have regional/national strategies, agendas, procedures, and modalities. As with the Consortium’s global General Assembly, regional assemblies make decisions by consensus, through regular open and inclusive discussions largely online and sometimes in person. Such assemblies are an opportunity for members and honorary members to discuss and share current work and challenges and to co-design and identify priorities and plans for the region. Regional assemblies have been crucial for enhancing mutual learning exchanges on a variety of issues, extending mutual support and solidarity, collectively strategizing, fundraising, and resource-sharing.

**Achievements**

As the global ecological and climate crisis deepens, there has also been an increasing realization that support and recognition to IPs and LCs, their worldviews, bio-cultural governance, and knowledge systems can help us arrive at transformative pathways to address global crises. The Consortium as a collective and its members in their own capacities have been among the key actors in facilitating this changed understanding. ICCA Consortium has emerged as an important actor in global and regional discourses, agreements, conventions, and processes related to conservation, continuing to play a critical role in shifting conventional conservation policies and practice towards greater equity, justice, and inclusivity.

Simultaneously, the goal has also been to bring greater support and visibility to conservation and climate contributions of the IPs and LCs, their self-determination and self-strengthening processes and struggles to defending their territories against extractivism. This has been achieved through regular publications and policy briefs; supporting local, national, and regional documentation processes; facilitating regular interactions among the members on global policy discourses and finance mechanism; facilitating direct participation of the IPs and LCs from ICCAs in various global and regional negotiations and dialogues; peer learning exchanges; support for self-strengthening and self-sustaining processes to overcome internal challenges; among others. Consortium members and secretariats at national, regional, and global levels also work on building deeper collaborative partnerships with bilateral and multilateral organizations, such as UNDP’s small grants program towards greater support to ICCAs, and dialogues with large conservation organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund, whose policies directly or indirectly impact the ICCAs.
Challenges

As is expected, an association like the Consortium would constantly face internal and external challenges. The internal challenges relate to being able to maintain internal equity, accountability, transparency, and power balances. The Consortium has already grown multiple times in its financial outlay and secretariat strength over the one decade of its formal existence. Achieving a certain scale of operation, efficacy, and support and yet being able to avoid concentration of power requires constant vigilance, reflection, and action at all levels. Most decision-making functions within the Consortium rely heavily on voluntary contribution of time and effort from those who are often also engaged in deep grassroots action. It can be challenging sometimes to seek accountability for voluntary commitments, particularly when actors are already overcommitted.

While the Consortium has contributed towards significant gains at the international policy level, translating these policies at the national level has been a huge challenge. Nationally, ICCAs in many regions are facing pushback from the state agencies, as large conservation organizations and state wildlife departments continue to push for fortress conservation, leading to large-scale human rights violations and internal displacement. Provisions of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent are largely violated. The trend to co-opt language of inclusion, equity, and justice in the policy statements, while actual implementation regressing on these values in the worst case or maintaining business as usual in the best, is increasing.

Finally, the enormity of what IPs and LCs are up against cannot be over emphasized: deep entrenched structural power imbalances and injustices, an ever-increasing growth-based extractive model, and rapid internal socio-cultural changes; centralized powers in the hands of authoritarian and corporate-led or controlled governments, gagging media, criminalizing dissent, and squeezing spaces for resistance and financial support; geopolitical conflicts and wars between nation-states.

In conclusion, there are internal reflections and discussions within the Consortium on how to extend support to IPs and LCs in these situations and precipitate the larger global transformative change. In 2023, the Consortium has finalized and adopted a manifesto as a working document to keep learning, reflecting, and acting towards a constantly evolving response to the global crisis.
About the Author

Neema Pathak Broome is the coordinator of the Conservation and Livelihoods program at Kalpavriksh and the South Asia coordinator for the ICCA Consortium, a global movement on Areas and Territories Conserved by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities. Her work includes researching, documenting, understanding, facilitating, and advocating for processes towards decentralized, equitable, diverse, and context-specific forms of conservation governance, especially decolonized and alternative forms of conservation within and outside government designated protected areas.

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