

Solving Problems in an Interconnected World

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We've often heard people say, "Local communities know best what they need, just listen to them." In fact, we've said it ourselves.

Do we really know what we need, though?

Does anyone in this interconnected world know everything they need to solve their problems? Of course not, especially when the sources of those problems may be far away, and the imbalances of power are often dizzying.

We should not confuse the indisputable *right* of communities to set their own priorities with their *ability* to do so effectively without outside facilitation or assistance. Problem solving requires information about the social, economic, and contextual causes of a problem and the skills and connections needed to address these causes. Except for the simplest problems, these resources often lie outside communities. They must be able to access them to decide a course of action and take on more powerful groups.

When information flows, people can decide to act.

For example, in Nayarit, Mexico, a massive electrification project to dam the San Pedro Mezquital River at its headwaters threatened to impact communities all along its 335-mile course to the sea. But in the early 2000s, these communities were largely unaware of the proposed project, or that that the dam would dry up vast stretches of wetlands, damage biodiversity, threaten farming and fishing, and inundate land considered sacred by Indigenous peoples (Allan & DuPree 2020).

Nobody along the river was doing anything about it because they lacked critical information.

It wasn't until conservation scientists and policy specialists began an intensive series of community dialogues across the entire river basin that the communities realized the extent of the danger they faced.

This was the spark they needed to come together up and down the river and decide to oppose the proposed dam. While their specific reasons differed—Indigenous communities wanted to save sacred lands from inundation, for example, and the fisher folk on the coast hoped to protect the river estuary and source of their income—the knowledge they gained helped them all to conceive of a shared objective and carry out an effective advocacy campaign.

No community should be an island isolated from the knowledge and resources it needs.

A community is a closed network if it is isolated from outside information and influence (Granovetter, 1983; Unger, 2000). In a closed network formed around identities (such as women or firefighters), values (such as protecting the environment or the free market), or proximity to each other (such as families, neighborhoods, and concert goers)—we may all think alike. That can be a danger when we are isolated from the information and power we need to solve a problem.

Closed systems are great at organizing and acting together, building on the trust of their members. But they often do not know what they need to know. And they rarely have the skill sets, information, or connections to decision makers required to be successful once they know what they want.

The point is, no community has everything it needs INSIDE of itself.

In the Mexico dam example above, the academics and NGOs knew about the plan for the dam and its potential impacts. But they did not know how the riverine communities were organized, or what was important to them. And these communities were not aware of the major change heading their way, or how to use technical knowledge and the Mexican legal and political system to cope with it. Armed with their own abilities and OUTSIDE skills and information, however, they were able to organize to block the dam, an effort that has stalled it for over two decades now.

Working together with communities drives effective action— at all levels.

In another example, the Zero Tolerance Initiative, a local-to-global partnership of Indonesian forest communities and two NGOs—WALHI (Friends of the Earth Indonesia), and the UK-based Forest Peoples Programme—used citizen influence to change purchasing decisions at several international corporations involved in the palm oil industry.

For more than a decade, a large palm oil company had grabbed the land of forest communities, criminalized human rights defenders, and destroyed their forests. The forest communities organized against it, but their ability to influence this powerful company was limited.

Using already established relationships within the Zero Tolerance Initiative, the members of the Initiative combined their skills and connections from Indonesia to the UK to bring pressure on consumer goods companies that source palm oil from the company. Armed with these resources they began to make a difference. In 2023 five of the world's largest companies in the industry all announced that they wouldn't source their palm oil from the company.

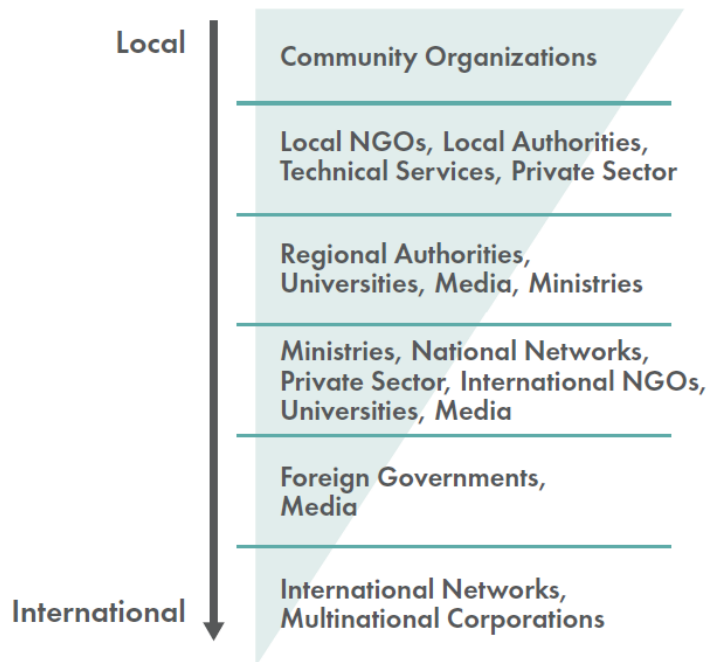
Working together with outsiders was critical to the effectiveness of the campaign. The forest communities did not have the expertise to do that on their own, and the international networks did not have the local knowledge or, frankly, the mandate to act on behalf of the threatened communities. Together they achieved far more than either could have on their own.

Another example comes from the health sector. In October 2019, an outbreak of Ebola in the Mandima Health Zone in the Democratic Republic of the Congo threatened many lives. Doctors and health care administrators flew in from the capital with the training and experience needed to slow the epidemic.

But these doctors from the capital far away needed to know fast who had been exposed, and where the disease might spread next. They were able to stop Ebola in its tracks only by working closely with community health volunteers to track down people infected and those at risk, combined with the medical knowledge of how to manage a disease outbreak. Good surveillance, especially when community-based, enables rapid case detection and early response, urgent and coordinated action, and better control of the situation. (Laurent-Comlan et al., 2022)

Problem solving requires more links, not less, across local, regional and global levels.

The key to solving problems is understanding the source of the issues we are addressing, and what the root causes are. Decisions about problems that threaten our environment, health, and livelihoods are often not made locally. The real decision makers are in national capitals, often not even ours. And this is compounded by financial decisions made by both governments and global corporations. Community members may never meet these powerful actors and have little direct influence over them.



Working together to ensure we have the advocacy and technical know-how is the only way to make a difference at the right levels.

The graphic to the left sketches out a rough map of the different types of organizations that can team up, using their skills and contacts at the right level to address each part of a problem.

We have seen from rural African villages to Asian megacities that community organizations working with local authorities are tackling a host of problems that can be solved locally. But as soon as problems become more complex, it's time to start looking around for allies who bring other capacities and connections.

The power of outsiders has always rolled over communities, deciding for us, and at times decimating us. This was and remains a grave history that we must overcome.

But we reduce our capacity if we do not find a balance. We can and must work together.

The challenge is to engage with communities and allies to open access to knowledge and learn from each other. Whether we are in a community, an NGO, a government agency, or a corporation, we must open channels of access and work with each other as we all become better and better at deciding for ourselves.

To leave people alone to “set their own priorities” in the face of impending doom is not an option.

Sources

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