Media Development

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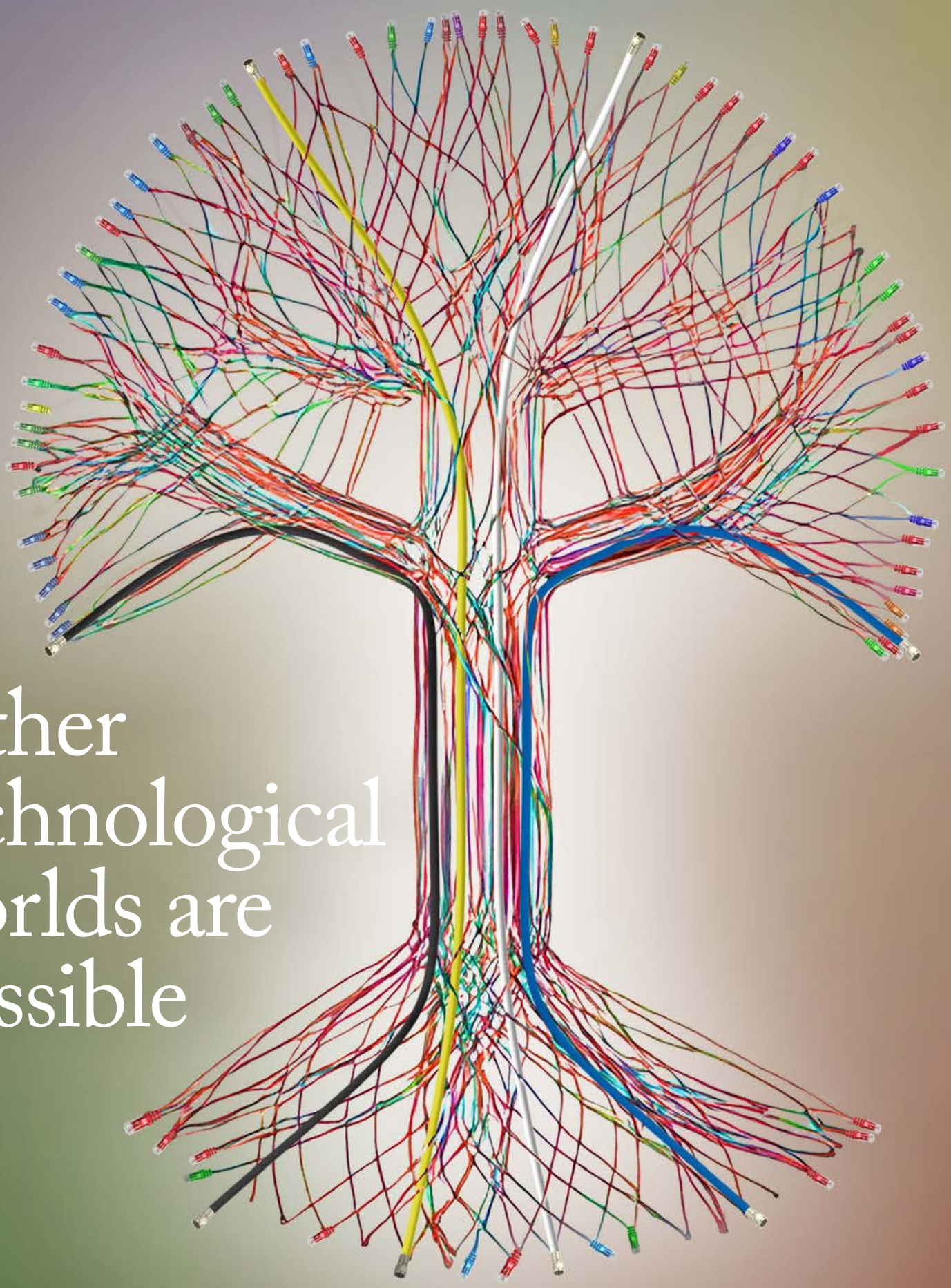

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In the next issue

The 3/2026 issue of *Media Development* picks up the twin themes of digital justice and the role of Artificial Intelligence in an increasingly complex world.

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EDITORIAL

It is a challenge to engage with digital communication technologies in ways that relate meaningfully to local community realities, and yet without undermining inherent values and traditional knowledge. In response, this issue of *Media Development* focuses on digital media literacy and cultural integrity to highlight the interaction of digital communication technologies with local cultures/communities and to identify key concerns as well as some of the practical solutions communities are developing.

Digital colonialism is the economic and political imposition on the nations of the Majority World of digital technologies largely developed in the Minority World i.e. the Global North. In the field of communication studies, many scholars long ago recognised the need to tackle the behemoth of the transnational corporate system – which evolved into globalisation – and to practise what Cees J. Hamelink in his book *Cultural Autonomy in Global Communications* (co-published in 1983 by WACC in its series on Communication and Human Values) labelled "cultural dissociation". In the spirit of the then New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), Hamelink urged nations seeking political sovereignty and independent development to create their own cultural and information structures.

Over four decades later, digital sovereignty – the collective ability of nations and communities to shape, govern, and safeguard the digital infrastructures, data, and standards that underpin their societies, including Artificial Intelligence – became a key principle of the UN's Global Digital Compact (see *Media Development* 4/2025 Integrity and Trust Underpin the Democratic Digital Sphere). The GDC affirmed the indispensability of a rights-based, people-centred digital order to ensuring equitable access, protecting human dignity and including the Majority World in norm-setting processes.

As Adrián López Angulo notes in his article in this issue of *Media Development*:

> "We must counter the idea that there is only one technological future, and that, for me, is the main task of critical digital literacy. Other technological worlds are possible, and they are being created by the indigenous peoples of Latin America and the world: through community radio stations, community connectivity networks, community digital archives, and social and community-based mobile virtual network operators."

It may be that the Global Digital Compact will only become effective when groups of nations (e.g. within Latin America, Africa, Asia) and rights-based advocacy groups unite to take action to replace media monopolies and digital technocrats with structures rooted in decolonized understandings of social justice. In his article in this issue of *Media Development*, Aniruddha Jena remarks that:

> "Community radio in India should not be treated as a residual or supplementary medium. It is better understood as part of a plural communications ecology that protects democratic difference. It can host the everyday labour of cultural continuity: intergenerational storytelling, the circulation of local vocabularies, the recognition of customary practices, the public expression of grief, memory, and protest, and the translation of institutional processes into forms communities can inhabit."

In his collection of essays titled *Decolonizing Language and Other Revolutionary Ideas* (2025), the late Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls for stripping language of the psychological and material impacts of colonialism, past and present. In particular, he points out that colonization in the sphere of language "meant a negation of native languages as valid sources of knowledge and means of

intellectual and artistic inquiry. The lack of roots in our base creates a state of permanent uncertainty about our relationship to where we are, to our abilities, even to our achievements."

There is a direct parallel here with the "language" of data technologies and algorithms that are known to embody implicitly Westernized, autocratic or imperialist features, and cultural constructs. The UN's Global Digital Compact stops short of identifying the need to decolonize code and data. However, in relation to Artificial Intelligence, it does want to ensure that "the application of artificial intelligence fosters diverse cultures and languages and supports locally generated data for the benefit of countries and communities' development" (53).

A starting point will be for the Minority World to relinquish its grip on the development and deployment of digital technologies and to encourage the Majority World to develop and deploy its own. The World Summit on the Information Society's principles of inclusion, openness, and people-centred governance offer a clear path towards a global architecture which is more balanced and capable of addressing the thorny issue of decolonization. Other technological worlds are possible in a world of genuine inclusion.

Such a revolutionary idea demands shifts in geopolitical and economic frameworks that governments and corporate interests will strongly resist. But, as the Swahili proverb says: *Lisilo budi hutendwa* – What has to be done, must be done. ▪

Digital sovereignty in The Highlands of West Java, Indonesia

Gustaff H. Iskandar

The digital divide challenge remains a critical barrier to sustainable development in the Global South, with nearly one-third of the global population – approximately 2.6 billion people – remaining offline.[1] This divide is not merely a lack of infrastructure; it is a complex intersection of policy making and regulatory framework, geographic isolation, socioeconomic disparities, and gender gaps.[2]

Traditional top-down and centralized models often fail in rural and remote regions for many different reasons, which include technological availability, economic viability, and geographical difficulties. In regard to these complexities, rural and remote areas also have increased necessities for "Meaningful Connectivity" – access that is not only available but also affordable, reliable, and safe, enhancing essential services such as education, health, public service, and economic empowerment.

Making internet access and connectivity to become strongly relevant to local needs, challenges and complexities, Community-centred Connectivity Initiatives (CCCI) have emerged as a vital alternative and complementary access model. Connectivity solutions are built for, with, and by local communities to ensure long-term digital sovereignty, while local ownership and resilience to access and connectivity is becoming a critical

tool for safety, education, access to services, and maintaining ties with family and community.[3] Initiative in the Global South, including Indonesia was starkly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced education, commerce, and governance being pushed into the digital realm. However, for many inhabitants of the Global South, particularly those in the Indonesian archipelago, this transition was met with the harsh reality of the digital divide challenges and disparities.

Despite the completion of the National Palapa Ring project in 2019 – a monumental fibre-optic backbone intended to unite Indonesia's islands – the "last mile" connectivity gap remains persistent. While urban centres enjoy 5G speeds, rural and remote areas remain disconnected due to geographic isolation, lack of commercial viability for major ISPs, and inadequate power infrastructure. In West Java alone, at the height of the pandemic in 2020, tens of thousands of students were effectively barred from education due to a lack of signal.[4] Against this backdrop, the Kasepuhan Ciptagelar indigenous community, nestled within the rugged terrain of the Gunung Halimun Salak National Park (TNGHS), has emerged as a beacon of digital sovereignty. By building their own infrastructure, they have proven that technology, when rooted in local wisdom and community engagement, are able to become a tool for cultural preservation rather than disruption.

Context of Kasepuhan Ciptagelar

Kasepuhan Ciptagelar is an indigenous community (*Masyarakat Hukum Adat*) that maintains a centuries-old way of life centered on traditional rice farming and ancestral practices. In the Sundanese language, the term *"kasepuhan"* comes from the word "*sepuh*". In this sense, Kasepuhan can be interpreted as the elders. Despite their deep adherence to local culture and tradition, the community is remarkably open to new knowledge and digital technology. Under the leadership of their customary leader, Abah Ugi Sugriana Rakasiwi, the community has long embraced technology that serves their needs – ranging from micro-hydro power plants to their own community radio and television station (Radio Swara Ciptagelar and Ciptagelar TV).

This indigenous community is often associated with the ancient 15th-16th century Kingdom of Sunda Padjadjaran and was historically known as "Bareusan Pangawinan", a specialized task force for the ancient kingdom. With an estimated 25,000–30,000 members, the Kasepuhan Ciptagelar indigenous community acts as a "mother village" (puseur), which consist of inhabited members with approximately 568 hamlets and 360 villages scattered across Sukabumi and Bogor in West Java Province, and Lebak regencies in Banten Province. This community also still adheres to nomadic tradition where the central village and customary institution periodically relocate based on ancestral guidance. Up until now, there have been 19 such moves and 11 changes in traditional leadership since 1368. Currently the central village just moved from Ciptagelar to Gelaralam in 2023.

The leadership is led by a customary head

Peer to peer training facilitated by Common Room at the Ciptagelar technician basecamp in Burangrang Village in 2023, participated by representatives from Ciracap Sub-district. (Photo: Common Room).

called Abah (father), supported by Emak (mother) and various Rorokan (ministries) that manage specific affairs like agriculture (Rorokan Pamakayaan) or water (Rorokan Manintin). Furthermore, the geographical context of Ciptagelar is both a sanctuary and a barrier. Located roughly 1,100 meters above sea level, the terrain is characterized by steep valleys and dense forests. For mainstream telecommunications companies, installing backhaul towers here is a logistical nightmare with a low return on investment. This neglect by the market necessitated a "do-it-yourself" (DIY) approach to digital connectivity.

Indigenous wisdom and tech innovation

For the Kasepuhan Ciptagelar indigenous community, paddy cultivation is a spiritual endeavor rather than an economic one. Selling rice is strictly prohibited by tradition as it is equated to selling one's own life, while paddy cultivation is considered as a sacred cultural and spiritual practice. One of the examples is the sacred planting ceremony, held at the *huma rurukan* (sacred swidden land), which marks the start of the planting season for the entire community. It involves prayers, traditional *angklung buhun* performances (bamboo traditional music), and the planting of ancestral local paddy varieties.

Up until now, the Kasepuhan Ciptagelar indigenous community were able to preserve and plant at least 146 local paddy varieties inherited over generations, despite political pressure happening during the Green Revolution period in the 1960's. Planting cycles are guided by astronomical observations, specifically the Orion (Bentang Kidang) and Pleiades (Bentang Ranggeuy) constellations, to harmonize with micro-climates conditions and natural cycles, as well as certain vegetation and insect reproduction cycles.

The Kasepuhan Ciptagelar indigenous community also strongly regulates forest zoning as part of their culture and tradition. Land is managed through four distinct zones: entrusted forest (leweung titipan), protected forest (leweung tutupan), production forest (leweung garapan), and sacred forest (leweung sasangetan). In regard to this, their traditional systems ensure massive paddy reserves; while other regions of Indonesia faced crop failures during the 2015 and 2023 El Niño, Ciptagelar's yield production actually increased significantly, maintaining long-term food security. While deeply embracing their traditional roots and identity, the community also accepts modern knowledge and new technology that serves its values, such as using micro-hydro turbines for independent electricity since 1997,

The first online workhop in Kasepuhan Ciptagelar during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020. (Photo: Common Room).

Radio Swara Ciptagelar and Ciga TV in 2000's, until Community Networks deployment, which was started in around 2014 until present.

Chronology of digital connectivity in Ciptagelar

The path to embrace digital sovereignty in the Kasepuhan Ciptagelar indigenous community region can be traced in the following steps and trajectory.

1. Early Satellite Attempts (2009-2013)

The first brushes with the internet came through government-sponsored satellite (VSAT) programs. While these provided a window to the outside world, they were plagued by high latency, limited bandwidth, and a total dependence on external maintenance. When the hardware broke and government funding was discontinued, the community remained "dark" for months.

2. The Search For Autonomy (2014-2016)

In 2014, Common Room, alongside local volunteers from Relawan TIK Sukabumi, began exploring independent alternatives after a call from the chief leader himself. The goal was to move away from satellite and toward terrestrial radio networks. In 2016, there was an attempt to conduct an experiment using OpenBTS (Open Base Transceiver Station) technology in collaboration with ICT Watch. This technology aimed to create a private cellular network, allowing community members to make calls and send SMS via local GSM frequencies. However, the regulatory environment in Indonesia regarding GSM frequencies and the high cost of maintenance led to the suspension of this particular project.

3. The Breakthrough (2018-Present)

The turning point came in 2018 when Abah Ugi forged a partnership between Common Room and Awinet, an ISP based in Rangkasbitung, Banten Province. Unlike previous top-down models, this was a collaborative infrastructure project. High-capacity microwave links were established from the nearest fiber-optic points in Banten and Sukabumi, beamed across mountain peaks into Kasepuhan Ciptagelar indigenous community region. This initiative was then also supported by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) as part of Connecting The Unconnected: Supporting Community-led Approaches to Addressing the Digital Divide Indonesia (LocNet Project) in 2019. By then, the network was no longer a pilot; it was a functioning utility. What started as a connectivity project in one hamlet rapidly

Discussion about gender and digital connectivity led by Sely Martini during the 1st Rural ICT Camp in October 2020. (Photo: Common Room).

expanded. As of 2025, the infrastructure covers roughly 44 hamlets across 13 villages, spanning in the borders of West Java and Banten Province.

Technical architecture and community networks management

The "Ciptagelar Model" rests on two pillars: Hybrid Backhaul and WiFi Mesh Distribution. In later development, the technical architecture was developed into a hybrid model with the adoption of fiber optic infrastructure with the following:

1. Hybrid Backhaul: The "main pipe" of the internet arrives via long-distance radio links, where later was enhanced with fiber optic cables, spanning from small villages around the Banten and West Java border.

2. Distribution: Within the villages, access points are installed in traditional communal houses and private homes.

3. Voucher System: To ensure sustainability, the community uses a "Prepaid Voucher" system. Local residents purchase internet vouchers for an affordable fee only when they need to access the internet. This revenue remains within the community to pay for the wholesale bandwidth, infrastructure maintenance, electricity, salaries of local technicians, and a savings account where they can allocate reinvestment funds to expand the local services in the region.

Crucially, the maintenance is performed by local youth and technicians who actively engage in regular training facilitated by Common Room. These "barefoot engineers" have been trained to climb towers, align dishes, and troubleshoot routers, ensuring that the network is resilient against the frequent lightning strikes and storms often occurring in the highlands. The training and capacity building program was run by Common Room as part of the School of Community Networks (SCN) activities in Indonesia, which was also developed in other areas.

In regard to these initiatives, Common Room deliberately integrates existing open-source tools and low-tech infrastructure (aligned with the 5L principles: Low Tech, Low Energy, Low Maintenance, Low Learning Curve, Local Support), and community-centred platforms

rather than building proprietary systems. This reduces dependency, lowers costs, and increases local ownership and adaptability. The ongoing development of the CCCI model is designed to be assembled from existing, affordable components that communities can maintain independently – a composable architecture for replication.

Ciptagelar and the other Ccci initiatives In Indonesia

To understand the scale of Ciptagelar's success, we need to look at it through the lens of the Community-centred Connectivity Initiatives (CCCI) development which was led by Common Room in some rural and remote areas in Indonesia, while comparing it to other piloting sites like Ciracap Sub-district and Taliabu Island. Comparative observations of the CCCI development in these different locations reveal distinct developmental stages and governance models tailored to their local contexts. Kasepuhan Ciptagelar, the most mature pilot project, began its current radio-based infrastructure in 2018, scaling significantly by 2019, and eventually expanding to 44 hamlets across 13 villages by 2025. It supports approximately 1,000 to 2,000 daily users and has generated a total gross revenue of $603,247.37, managed under a customary governance led by Abah Ugi in collaboration with Common Room and Awinet. In contrast, the Ciracap Sub-district initiative, which started in 2020, covers 7 villages with approximately 400 daily users and a total gross revenue of $90,922.56, operating under a legal entity PT. Internet Desa Digital (iDes) for its governance.

The most recent frontier is Taliabu Island, established in 2024, which currently serves one village as a pilot project with roughly 300 daily users and monthly revenue of around US$2,854.93. Part of the infrastructure development costs in Taliabu Island are supported by the Village Fund, while the local internet service management is carried out by the village-owned enterprise (BUMDes), with cooperation with DewataNet as the main internet service provider company. Ciptagelar model emphasizes a decentralized approach with local technician teams established in every hamlet to ensure sustainability. These variations demonstrate how the CCCI framework adapts from ancestral customary leadership in Ciptagelar to formal enterprise structures in Ciracap and government-linked village administration in Taliabu.

The observation also reveals that Ciptagelar is not just an internet provider; it is an economic engine, as well as the steward for culture and environment. The revenue generated from Community Networks services in Ciptagelar is significantly higher than in other locations, as the initiative has successfully developed the network into a regional hub for indigenous sovereignty in the region. Meanwhile, in Ciracap Sub-district, we can see it has reached exponential growth, as it not only provides internet services but also facilitates training and capacity building for the local community, as well as empowering small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Taliabu Island, by comparison, continues to show slow growth due to its geographic isolation on a remote island where bandwidth costs are relatively high compared to other areas. Nevertheless, community-centred internet services in Taliabu Island continue to thrive because they are integrated with public and health services for local communities.

Beyond bytes: Social and ecological impact

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the CCCI piloting project in the Kasepuhan Ciptagelar indigenous community region is how it serves the community's traditional values:

Environmental Stewardship: Abah Ugi, the chief leader of the Ciptagelar indigenous community has successfully integrated the community-centred internet business with reforestation efforts. Over the last five years, part of revenue from the Community Networks services have funded the planting of 45,000 trees in the customary forest. This creates a virtuous cycle: the modern technology that requires clear line-of-sight across the hills is used to fund the pro-

Mr. Nezar Patria, the Vice Minister of Communication and Digital Affair (KOMDIGI) visiting the local server in Burangrang village that provide internet services for Kasepuhan Ciptagelar indigenous community region in July 2025. (Photo: Common Room).

tection of the very environment it overlooks.

Cultural Preservation and Local Content Creation: The community uses the internet to document and broadcast their traditional culture and rituals (such as harvest festival or *Seren Taun*) to a global audience. Through the "Media Lab" established in 2020 with the support of the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and Medco Foundation, local youth are trained in video editing, photography, and digital literacy. Instead of the internet acting as a "cultural vacuum" that pulls youth away from their roots and identity, it has become a "cultural tool" that amplifies their shared heritage.

Logistical support for the nomadic tradition: In 2022-2023, the community underwent a "Kampung Gede" or central village relocation – a periodic movement based on ancestral guidance – from Ciptagelar to Gelaralam. The Community Networks infrastructure was having a pivotal role in coordinating this massive logistical feat, and the revenue helped offset the costs of building new communal infrastructures.

Challenges and the road ahead

Despite its success, the initiative still faces significant hurdles:

1. Regulatory Grey Zones: Indonesian telecommunications law and regulatory framework is often designed for large corporate entities. Small, community-run networks often operate in a legal "grey zone" regarding spectrum use, ISP licensing, business model, and taxation policy. Making an ongoing effort in providing reliable and affordable internet service becomes uncertain and challenging.

2. Sustainability vs. Modernity: There is a constant dialogue within the community about the social impact of the internet – addressing risks like online gambling, misinformation, and the potential erosion of face-to-face communal traditions, as well as larger cultural disruption impact.

3. Climate Change: Increased frequency of extreme weather poses a physical threat to the towers and radio equipment in the long run. In late 2024, a prototype of a bamboo tower for internet backhaul in Gelaralam village collapsed due to heavy rain and strong wind. A robust solution for local and sustainable infrastructure, which is also environmentally friendly is strongly needed to address this growing climate challenge. Currently, efforts to integrate local knowledge with the use of the internet and digital technology have begun, in collaboration with the APC

and WACC, in order to increase climate resilience at the local level.

Conclusion: A blueprint for the future

The experience from the Kasepuhan Ciptagelar indigenous community offers a profound lesson for local and global digital development. It proves that the digital divide challenge is not an inevitable fate, but a policy choice. When indigenous communities are given the tools, training, and autonomy to build their own networks, they do not just "consume" the internet; they "author" it.

The success of the Ciptagelar/Gelaralam community networks, which now serve up to 2,000 people daily and generate hundreds of thousands of dollars in community-reinvested revenue, serves as a blueprint. It demonstrates that the most effective way to connect the unconnected is to empower them to connect themselves. In the hills and deep forests of Halimun mountain in Sukabumi, the hum of microwave radio and fibre optic cables, enhanced by the ancient rhythm of paddy cultivation, now exists in harmony with traditional sounds that pave the way to a digital future. ■

Notes

1. ITU/UNESCO Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development (2023). The State of Broadband 2023: Digital Connectivity. A Transformative Opportunity.
2. Report of the High-level Committee on South-South Cooperation (2025). Review of Progress in Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries.
3. Internet Society (2025). What Is Community-Centered Connectivity and why should we care?
4. 42,000 Siswa Di Jabar Tak Dapat Layanan Internet (42,000 Students in West Java Can't Get Internet Service), Harian Pikiran Rakyat, 17 July 2020.

Gustaff H. Iskandar graduated from the Fine Arts Department, Bandung Institute of Technology (West Java) in 1999. He then managed Poros Art Management, where he curated, wrote, and organized art exhibitions until 2000. Later he initiated Trolley Magazine (2000-2001), an independent local magazine focused on art, culture, music, and fashion. In late 2001, he co-founded Bandung Center for New Media Arts with Reina Wulansari, R. E. Hartanto, and T. Reza Ismail, dedicating himself to developing media arts and multidisciplinary artistic practices in Indonesia. With the later development of Bandung Center for New Media Arts, he was engaged in the formation of Common Room Networks Foundation (Common Room) in 2004. Since its inception, Common Room has been committed to provide space for freedom of expression and community empowerment.

Keeping the air alive: Community radio, cultural integrity, and alternative voices in India

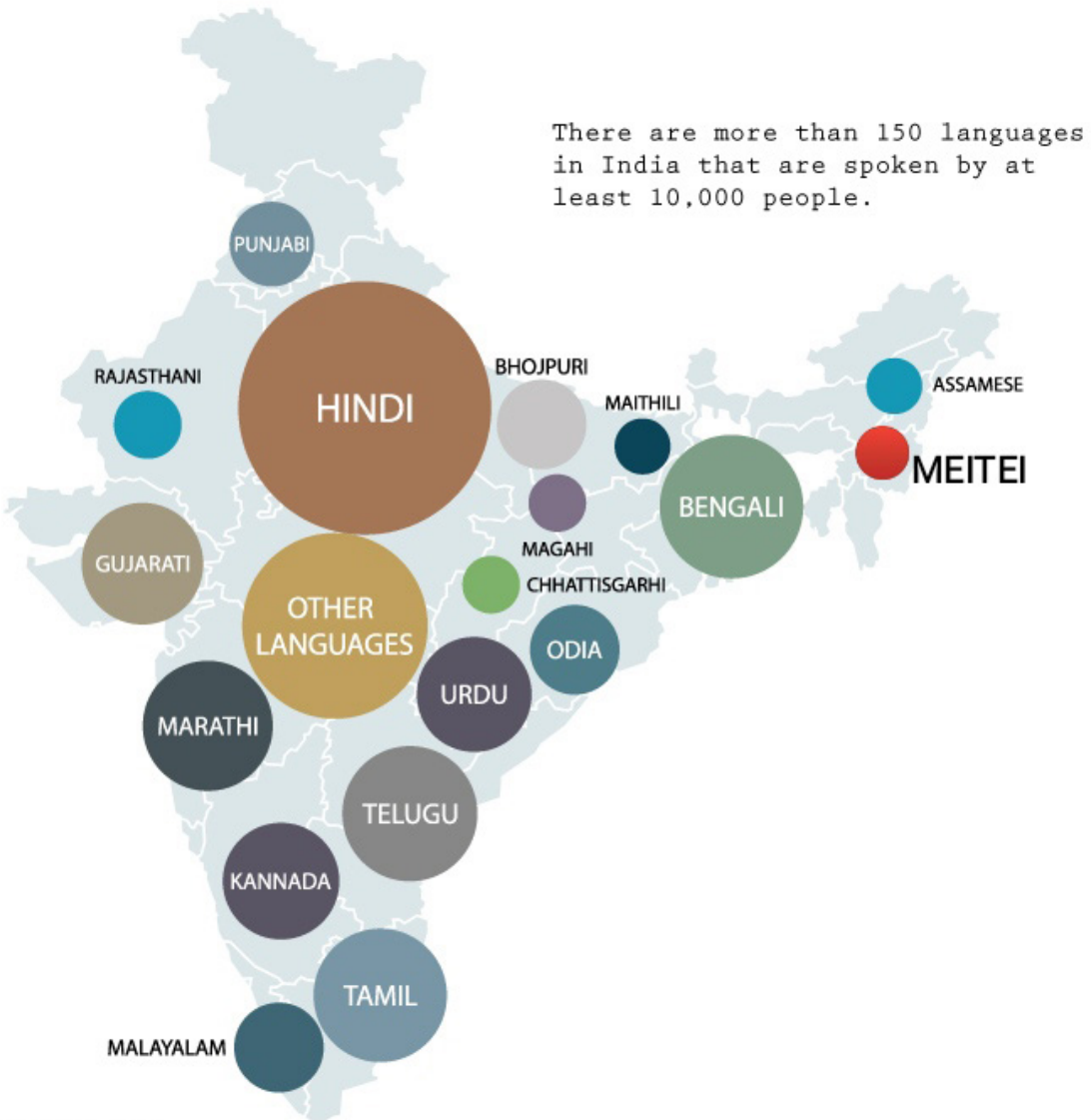
Aniruddha Jena

Across India's marginalised regions, the struggle for communication justice is not only about access to media. It is also about who gets to speak in their own language, whose knowledge is treated as valid, and which communicative forms are allowed to endure in the face of homogenising development. This is why India matters to the theme of cultural integrity and alternative voices.

Few countries compress so many languages, oral traditions, caste hierarchies, indigenous cosmologies, and uneven media infrastructures into one national frame as India. In such a setting, community radio is not merely a small media format. At its best, it becomes a social institution through which communities preserve memory, negotiate identity, circulate practical knowledge, and claim the right to define what development should mean in their own terms.

This argument needs to be made carefully. The language of the "information society" has long promised a more connected world, but critics have repeatedly shown that such promises often confuse information with justice. Classic debates on the information society warned against technological determinism and against the easy assumption that more information flows necessarily produce more democratic or equitable outcomes.[1][2] In the context of the global

Map by Jure Snoj, Call of Travel – This file was derived from: Indian-languages-map.jpg, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=121289740



South, this critique became sharper.

The digital divide, as Robin Mansell, Sundeep Madon and others argued, cannot be reduced to the spread of technical access alone. Development models that assume a uniform path toward an integrated information society often disregard historical, social, and cultural variation and misrecognise what communities actually need from communication systems.[3] Their alternative emphasis is especially relevant here: technologies become meaningful only when they are mobilised for local needs, through local intermediaries, and in ways sensitive to the social worlds into which they enter.[3]

That insight helps explain why communication justice in India cannot be measured only by spectrum allocation, connectivity, or market penetration. It also has to be understood through language, voice, memory, and cultural autonomy. WACC's recent articulation of communication rights is useful here. It insists that communication rights are not abstract ideals but practical conditions for inclusion, representation, and justice, especially for those excluded by digital and media systems.[4] The phrase "nothing about us without us," voiced at the WACC Partner Forum in Kathmandu, captures the deeper democratic demand: communities must not be treated simply as recipients of communication, but as agents who participate in shaping the terms on which communication happens.[4]

For culturally diverse and politically unequal societies, this means safeguarding linguistic plurality, creating safe spaces for marginalised groups to speak, and resisting the pressure to compress all communication into administratively convenient or commercially dominant forms.

India offers abundant evidence for why this matters. In many peripheral regions, communication does not arrive as a seamless public good. It is mediated by geography, literacy, bureaucracy, state priorities, and the market value assigned to specific populations. This is where community radio acquires significance. It works not because

it magically solves inequality, but because it often operates as a human intermediary in precisely the sense described by information-society critics.[3] In developing-country settings, they note, citizens are frequently neither owners nor direct users of complex information systems; intermediaries such as NGOs, community-based organisations, and local institutions become crucial bridges between infrastructures and everyday life.[3] Community radio, when rooted in local participation, performs this bridging work through language, familiarity, trust, and continuity. It translates policy into experience, but it also does the reverse: it translates lived realities into public claims.

This is particularly important in multilingual settings. The pressure of standardised development often works through communication. Dominant languages gain prestige and administrative authority, while smaller languages are reduced to private use, folklore, or disappearance. Yet the issue is not only linguistic substitution. It is also epistemic. When a language is pushed aside, what is often marginalised with it are distinctive ways of naming land, forest, labour, kinship, ritual, memory, and obligation. That is why the defence of community media in culturally marginal regions is not simply a sentimental defence of heritage. It is a political defence of alternative knowledge systems.

Community-led communication processes

One telling example comes from the Koel Karo movement, where participatory communication strategies were inseparable from cultural continuity and collective resistance.[5] The case helps clarify the broader communicative ecology in which community media in India acquire their significance. The movement's strength lay not only in opposing a dam but in sustaining Adivasi ownership through decentralised, community-led communication processes, in which shared identity, ritual remembrance, and collective decision-making were central.[5]

The account of Tapkara Martyrs' Day is especially important. Annual gatherings and traditional rituals did not merely commemorate the dead. They renewed political memory across generations and kept the movement's values alive.[5] This is communication as cultural reproduction, not just message transmission. It reminds us that alternative voices are not created only by opening a microphone. They are sustained by social forms that make speech durable, legitimate, and collectively recognisable.

This point also connects to broader debates on cultural flows in the information society. As Mansell and Madon observe, technologies do not simply spread universal practices. They are indigenised, hybridised, and negotiated within local social worlds.[3] Appadurai's language of hybridisation, invoked in that discussion, is useful because it resists two false binaries: pure tradition versus modern technology, and local authenticity versus global contamination. In reality, communities often take up new media while reworking them through local cultural logics.[3]

Community radio in India has repeatedly demonstrated this possibility. It carries folk songs, oral history, agricultural advice, market information, local grievances, public-health messages, and cultural programming in ways that are intelligible within the rhythms of community life. Its value lies not in being outside modernity, but in refusing the idea that modern communication must always take a singular, centralised, and homogenised form.

At the same time, the defence of alternative voices cannot be romantic. Community media do not operate in a neutral environment. They exist within unequal power relations and narrowing civic space. The article on civil society in India that you uploaded is instructive on this point. It shows that civil society organisations are increasingly expected to function as "helping hands" of government, delivering welfare without asking difficult questions.[6]

Activities that advance the political interests of oppressed castes, workers, or indigenous communities are readily problematised as political or suspect, while "authentic" civil society is defined as compliant, welfare-oriented, and

non-confrontational.[6] This matters for communication justice because the line between cultural expression and political action is often thin in marginalised communities. To speak in one's own language about land, displacement, forest rights, food entitlements, or women's dignity is not only to communicate culture. It is also to make claims on power.

This is why community-rooted communication matters so much. The same civil-society study notes that organisations with strong community support can sometimes withstand state hostility because local legitimacy gives them a degree of autonomy.[7] That observation resonates far beyond NGOs. Community radio, where genuinely rooted, draws strength not simply from licensing or donor support but from relational embeddedness. It matters whether a station is seen as belonging to the community, whether local people hear familiar voices, whether the station reflects local concerns rather than development jargon imported from elsewhere. Cultural integrity, in this sense, is not just content. It is a relation of trust and ownership.

A communicative space anchored in collective accountability

The challenge is sharpened further by the contemporary digital environment. WACC's recent reflection on digital justice notes that digital disparities now concern not only access but the capacity to use technologies safely and effectively, especially for women and rural communities.[4] The piece also highlights how online spaces can become hostile, silencing women and reducing meaningful participation.[4] This has direct implications for any discussion of alternative voices. The migration of communication into digital platforms does not automatically deepen pluralism. It can just as easily reproduce exclusion, harassment, and cultural flattening. Community radio therefore remains important not because it is nostalgic or analogue, but because it offers a communicative space that can still be anchored in collective accountability and local social relations.

The larger lesson is that communication justice must be understood as infrastructural and cultural at once. Infrastructural, because communities need durable institutions, resources, licences, training, and supportive policy. Cultural, because the point is not simply to insert more people into existing communication systems, but to protect their right to speak through their own categories, memories, and priorities. This is where the information-society literature remains relevant. Duff's reading of Daniel Bell reminds us that information and knowledge are not the same thing.[8] Information may consist of facts, reports, and statistics; knowledge involves interpretation, contextualisation, and the weaving of relationships into meaningful forms.[8] That distinction matters immensely for community media. A station that merely relays development information is not yet doing the fullest work of communication justice. The deeper task is to create a communicative environment where information is interpreted in locally meaningful ways and folded into collective knowledge.

Seen in that light, community radio in India should not be treated as a residual or supplementary medium. It is better understood as part of a plural communications ecology that protects democratic difference. It can host the everyday labour of cultural continuity: intergenerational storytelling, the circulation of local vocabularies, the recognition of customary practices, the public expression of grief, memory, and protest, and the translation of institutional processes into forms communities can inhabit. It can also provide something that standardised media and platforms often cannot: a sense that communication is still answerable to those who live with its consequences.

Policy implications

First, communication justice in culturally diverse societies must move beyond metrics of reach and digitisation. It should ask whether communities can speak publicly in their own languages, whether local knowledge appears as knowledge rather than folklore, and whether media insti-

tutions allow people to define their own communicative priorities.

Second, support for community media should not be folded into a narrow service-delivery logic. If stations are valued only as conduits for schemes and behavioural messaging, their democratic and cultural role will be hollowed out.

Third, communication policy must recognise that cultural integrity requires civic space. Where organisations and community institutions are discouraged from asking difficult questions, alternative voices are tolerated only so long as they are harmless. That is not communication justice. It is managed pluralism.

Finally, there is a broader normative point. The future of communication justice in India will not be secured only by more bandwidth or better apps, important though these are. It will depend equally on whether institutions are willing to recognise that marginalised communities are not simply latecomers to a pre-given communication order. They are bearers of communicative worlds of their own. The task is not merely to include them within dominant systems, but to protect their capacity to shape media on their own terms.

That is why India remains such an important case. Its density of cultural and linguistic plurality makes visible what many policy frameworks prefer to overlook: justice in communication is not exhausted by access. It includes recognition, memory, participation, and the right to sustain forms of collective life that do not fit neatly into centralised narratives of progress. Community radio, when it is genuinely participatory and locally rooted, offers one of the clearest institutional expressions of that principle. It keeps the air alive with voices that might otherwise be rendered inaudible. And in doing so, it reminds us that communication for all must mean more than universal transmission. It must mean the durable public presence of worlds that refuse to disappear. ▪

Notes

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Por una alfabetización digital crítica en México

Adrián López Angulo

¿Se imaginan que pueblos originarios de México estén operando su propia red de telefonía e internet móvil a nivel nacional? La historia que les quiero compartir se trata de cómo esa pregunta fue motor para el nacimiento de Wiki Katat y TIC OMV: los primeros operadores móviles virtuales indígenas con fines sociales, comunitarios e identitarios en América Latina que comercializar telefonía e internet móvil con cobertura en todo México.

Vamos de a poco. Comenzaré dando un contexto porque hay diversas piezas dentro de la historia que es importante conocer. Mientras les comparto el contexto y los actores me permitiré generar algunas reflexiones en torno a lo que algunos llaman alfabetización digital y cómo la historia que es presento nos invita a reflexionar críticamente sobre el andar de dicho concepto.

Comencemos diciendo que en México desde el año 2014, después de la Reforma Constitucional en Telecomunicaciones, se creó la concesión de uso social e indígena del espectro que permite a pueblos y comunidades indígenas operar sus propios medios y redes de telecomunicaciones. La primera concesión de uso social indígena fue otorgada a Telecomunicaciones Indígenas Comunitarias A.C. (TIC AC) en Oaxaca.

La historia de TIC AC nos permite ubicar un punto que me parece crucial pensando en la alfabetización digital: cómo los procesos educativos nos permiten pasar de consumidores a creadores. Dicha organización congregó a las diversas comunidades de Oaxaca que, con el apoyo de Rhizomatica y Redes por la Diversidad, Equidad y Sustentabilidad AC (REDES AC), construyeron su propio servicio de telefonía celular comunitaria. Dicho de otro modo, las comunidades contaban con su propia infraestructura y, también, su propio sistema de gestión y operaban una telefonía 2G; es decir, podían hacer llamadas y mensajes dentro de la cobertura de su propia telefonía.

La experiencia de la telefonía celular comunitaria en México es amplia, misma que sigue operando hasta el día de hoy; con menor presencia por el cambio tecnológico, pero aún resistiendo. Mi intención no es compartir la historia de TIC AC en extenso, pero sí entender el referente que fue (y es) dicha organización para la comunicación y conectividad social indígena en el país.

La importancia de aprender y apropiarnos de las tecnologías

La primera lección que nos deja la telefonía celular comunitaria es sobre la importancia de aprender y apropiarnos de las tecnologías; en este caso concreto las telecomunicaciones. Pienso que los enfoques de alfabetización digital, por lo pronto los que se promueven desde países de América Latina, se centran en el uso de las tecnologías de la información y comunicación (TICs) como si éstas fueran neutrales; es decir, que no estuvieran atravesadas por relaciones de poder o condiciones de desigualdad social.

Es común encontrar temarios o curriculums de instituciones educativas o de gobierno donde lo que se enseña en el curso de alfabetización digital se centra en la tecnología: "como prender una computadora", "cómo utilizar un celular", "cómo hacer un archivo de Word", etcétera. Y se deja de lado a las personas, en contextos concretos, donde dichas tecnologías no llegan como dispositivos neutrales. Como ejemplo tenemos la telefonía celular comunitaria donde los gestores comunitarios de la red, claro que se capacitaron sobre los dispositivos, pero lo hicieron para con-

struir, en colectivo, su propio sistema de comunicación por una necesidad concreta. La situación es que las empresas y el gobierno no querían o no podían "porque la inversión de la infraestructura no correspondía con el retorno económico". Entonces, en ese caso, las comunidades indígenas de Oaxaca quedaban excluidas de contar con telefonía celular por la lógica del mercado.

Las comunidades organizadas de Oaxaca que tiempo después conformaron TIC AC aprendieron sobre telecomunicaciones desde la lectura del mundo donde entendieron que eran puestas al margen por la lógica del mercado y decidieron apropiarse de la tecnología para crear otro modelo de telefonía celular posible; con sus propios valores, con su propia lengua, con su propio sistema económico, con su propia infraestructura y gobernanza. Hasta aquí ¿podemos ver que las telecomunicaciones no son neutrales? Entonces porque la enseñanza sobre las mismas es enfocada en el uso y no en la creación, si nos enfocamos en el uso nos convertimos en consumidores de tecnologías ajenas, si nos enfocamos en el análisis crítico y la apropiación podemos pasar a creadores de otros horizontes tecnológicos posibles.

Ahora bien, ya conocimos que en México, desde 2015 existe un operador de telefonía que es indígena y comunitario. ¿Cómo es que de tener sólo cobertura en la comunidad ahora existen operadores móviles virtuales indígenas con presencia nacional? Para seguir tejiendo fino la historia, siempre privilegiando la claridad, es importante conocer a la Unión de Cooperativas Tosepan Titataniske (UCTT) en la Sierra Norte de Puebla.

La UCTT es la cooperativa indígena más grande y longeva de México que fue fundada por campesinos masewalmeh en 1977 para enfrentar el intermediarismo y mejorar los precios de sus productos. Actualmente, cuenta con cooperativas regionales y con más de 500 cooperativas locales alrededor de la Sierra Norte de Puebla y Veracruz. Desde los años setenta han generado procesos de desarrollo propio en la región fortaleciendo su identidad como pueblos originarios y también mejorando la calidad de vida de sus socios desde diversos servicios y, también, desde el cuidado y defensa de su territorio.

La UCTT, desde su fundación, ha contado con medios de comunicación propios. Desde las propias asambleas hasta periódicos comunitarios; por ello, en 2011 atravesando una coyuntura política sobre las elecciones del municipio de Cuetzalan del Progreso donde una estación radio gubernamental no permite hablar del tema, la Tosepan decide crear su propia radio indígena comunitaria: Radio Tosepan Limakxtum (RTL). La intención de dicha radio era poder fortalecer el territorio, la identidad indígena y, también, la identidad cooperativista.

RTL nació por una situación concreta y también por una necesidad. Quizá aquí otra lección para los procesos de alfabetización digital; es necesario, que los procesos de enseñanza aprendizaje cuenten con una direccionalidad o que puedan entender cuáles son las necesidades concretas de las comunidades. Por supuesto y quién me va siguiendo en estas líneas entenderá que la alfabetización digital no puede pensarse en molde; es decir, algo que se pueda replicar a escala masiva, sino que debe de ser situada a los diversos contextos; no quiero decir que debamos de empezar de cero en cada caso, más bien debemos de generar metodologías guía para poder anclar la enseñanza a necesidades concretas de las comunidades.

Desde la Tosepan se encontraba (y se encuentra) la situación de falta de conectividad en diversas de las comunidades campesinas e indígenas donde tiene presencia la Unión. RTL fue la responsable, con el apoyo y asesoría de Redes AC, de generar un proceso de formación para que jóvenes del territorio pudieran fortalecer los procesos de comunicación y conectividad que se habían trazado los directivos en ese momento: telefonía celular comunitaria, creación de audiovisuales, redes comunitarias de internet e intranet, etcétera.

Dentro de la asesoría de Redes AC y después de los aprendizajes obtenidos en el Techio Comunitario (Programa de Formación para la gestión de redes TIC en comunidades indígenas y rurales de América Latina), centramos la for-

mación en proyectos; es decir, que las y los jóvenes masewalmeh pudieran aprender y apropiarse de las tecnologías desde que diseñaran, coordinaran y operaran proyectos de telecomunicaciones en contextos comunitarios.

De igual forma, la UCTT llevaba un Diplomado sobre la construcción de Planes de Vida que buscaba fortalecer los valores cooperativistas en los jóvenes que recién entraban a la organización. Al final de dicho diplomado los jóvenes debían de realizar una formulación de proyecto económico que buscara fortalecer al territorio desde la mirada de la economía social solidaria y el cooperativismo.

La enseñanza-aprendizaje a través de proyectos de implementación

Antes de seguir, pienso que otra de las lecciones que tenemos en esta historia para los procesos de alfabetización digital es pensar en enseñanza-aprendizaje a través de proyectos de implementación. Por supuesto sabemos que la implementación implica complejidad, pero los proyectos pueden generar, por un lado, conocimientos amplios sobre las TIC, pero también una apropiación distinta donde no se prioriza el uso, sino la innovación para atender necesidades o problemáticas concretas.

Aquí es donde las historias se entrecruzan. TIC AC desde el 2018 comenzó a asesorar a la Tosepan para la implementación de un proceso de telefonía celular comunitaria con posibilidad de que contara con 4G; es decir que tuviera datos móviles. Dicho proyecto se vio truncado por la pandemia de Covid-19, sin embargo a TIC AC le llegó una propuesta de ALTAN Redes, quién es responsable de la Red Compartida: generar un operador móvil virtual (OMV) que atendiera las zonas rurales y de difícil acceso del país. Para buscar claridad, un OMV utiliza la infraestructura de un mayorista, en este caso ALTAN Redes, mientras éste – el OMV- se concentra en la venta final del servicio.

En ese momento, TIC AC, Redes AC y Rhizomatica, propusieron a la UCTT por la posible expansión que podría tener pensando en la extensión y cobertura que tienen las cooperativas locales en la Sierra Norte de Puebla y Veracruz. Así fue como las y los jóvenes de Radio Tosepan Limakxtum, con la asesoría de Redes AC, comenzaron a pensar la idea de crear el primer OMV indígena de México y de América Latina.

Fue en 2021 cuando nació Wiki Katat donde "wiki" en nawat significa ven y "katat" en tutunakú significa "ven". "Ven, ven" o Wiki Katat es un llamado, en las dos lenguas indígenas que predominan en la organización cooperativista, a la organización desde la comunicación y la conectividad propia. En dicho año el proyecto, después de diversos esfuerzos, comenzó a operar en fase de prueba. Siendo hasta el 2023 que se hizo el lanzamiento oficial del primer OMV indígena con fines sociales, comunitarios e identitarios.

En dicho año, Telecomunicaciones Indígenas Comunitarias también se sumó al esfuerzo con TIC OMV su propio operador móvil virtual. Wiki Katat operando en la Sierra Norte de Puebla y TIC OMV operando en Oaxaca, procesos hermanos con un fin en común: fortalecer los procesos comunitarios de los pueblos indígenas a través de la telefonía y el internet móvil.

¿Cómo ese fin común se ve en la práctica? Por un lado, se diseñó un modelo de sostenibilidad que está basado en la redistribución, no en la acumulación como los operadores grandes nos tienen acostumbrados. Por otro lado, los OMVs indígenas han creado a lo largo del tiempo una Red de comunidades, colectivos y organizaciones que hacen parte del proceso generando activaciones, recargas de servicio y soporte técnico a personas que lo necesiten. La redistribución se refiere a que todo el recurso que entra a los OMVs indígenas se re-distribuye para el pago a ALTAN por la infraestructura, el sostenimiento del equipo operativo, entre la Red de comunidades y para la creación de fondos con fines sociales.

Hasta el día que escribo éstas letras los OMVs indígenas cuentan con más de 3500 personas que utilizan el servicio y más de 100 puntos de venta en la Red de comunidades, colectivos y organizaciones a lo largo de todo México. La

redistribución del recurso es otra forma de pensar y andar las telecomunicaciones. Sin embargo, el corazón del fin común es el fortalecimiento de la identidad y las capacidades de las personas usuarias a los riesgos que pueden tener las comunidades rurales e indígenas dentro de las telecomunicaciones.

La innovación tecnológica para el fortalecimiento de la diversidad e identidad cultural

Quiero concentrar mis reflexiones finales en algunos puntos que me parecen cruciales. Wiki Katat y TIC OMV desde su práctica diaria están generando procesos de alfabetización digital crítica. Uno de los primeros retos que se encontraron (y siguen encontrándose) es a la idea de que la comunicación y la conectividad la hacen grandes empresas; grandes compañías. Como si los pueblos indígenas y campesinos no fueran capaces de crear sus propios horizontes tecnológicos y tuvieran que estar atados al determinismo tecnológico. Pienso que hablar de procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje que apunten a una alfabetización digital crítica debería de abonar a que exista una diversidad de formas de hacer tecnologías.

Otro punto relevante es entender que tanto los celulares como las plataformas que utilizamos; como ya dijimos anteriormente, no son neutrales y dentro de su no neutralidad pueden traer riesgos para las comunidades que las utilizan. Desde TIC AC y Wiki Katat se está promoviendo el sitio Caparazón Digital donde podemos encontrar diversos servicios como de mensajería, red social y navegador web que prioriza la privacidad de las personas que las utilizan.

Cuando un proceso de alfabetización digital sólo se centra en el uso acrítico de las tecnologías deja de lado los posibles riesgos presentes y futuros que las comunidades pueden encontrarse al relacionarse con las plataformas digitales. El hecho de que las personas que hacen parte de los OMVs no se encuentren con una empresa que está enfocada en incrementar sus ingresos, sino con organizaciones que llevan décadas organizadas y buscando el fortalecimiento y el cuidado de la vida y el territorio implica que las telecomunicaciones se conviertan en un pretexto o en un motor de concientización e innovación.

Por supuesto que los OMVs con su práctica diaria van creando una relación más justa entre las comunidades y las telecomunicaciones; desde pensar en costos que sean justos. También van compartiendo habilidades técnicas con la Red de comunidades y los usuarios: cómo configurar el celular para tener un buen servicio, saber identificar fallas, qué es un IMEI, cómo cuidar el consumo de datos, etcétera. Pero la razón de ser y el corazón del proyecto va más allá: la innovación tecnológica para el fortalecimiento de la diversidad e identidad cultural. Ahí que los fondos sociales sean tan importantes para generar encuentros y proyectos que apunten a dicho fin; como la idea de crear un mercado digital entre la Red de comunidades para el fortalecimiento de las economías locales.

Tanto Wiki Katat como TIC OMV, con las organizaciones aliadas y organizadas, están generando telecomunicaciones otras; con otros modelos económicos y persiguiendo otros valores. Hay que contrarrestar la idea de que sólo hay un único futuro tecnológico y esa, para mí, es la principal tarea de una alfabetización digital crítica. Otros mundos tecnológicos son posibles y los están creando los pueblos indígenas de América Latina y el mundo: con radios comunitarias, redes comunitarias de conectividad, archivos digitales comunitarios y operadores móviles virtuales sociales y comunitarios. ▪

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Apropiación tecnológica para la inclusión social de comunidades en zonas rurales en Colombia

Olga Paz Martinez, Marcya Hernández y Mónica Rodríguez Chaparro

Internet representa una oportunidad para las personas; sin embargo, muchas poblaciones –especialmente mujeres, personas en zonas rurales, personas con capacidades diversas, personas mayores y poblaciones étnicas– enfrentan aún muchas barreras para acceder a los distintos servicios digitales y, aunque pueden tener acceso a internet, muchas veces no cuentan con las habilidades digitales necesarias para aprovechar las posibilidades de las tecnologías de información y comunicación (TIC).

En Colombia, aproximadamente el 35% de personas no tiene acceso a internet y de esa cifra el 60% está en zonas rurales desatendidas y a distancias considerables de las grandes ciudades.[1] En muchas zonas rurales de Colombia, aprender a usar internet puede convertirse en una experiencia transformadora, así lo expresa Nathaly Ordoñez, Coordinadora de la red comunitaria Red de Indígenas, Negros y Campesinos (RedINC):[2]

> "Antes las personas que tenían celular lo usaban solo para jugar algún juego que estuviera descargado en el celular, porque no había internet. Pero no lo utilizaban para llamar, sacar citas médicas, estudiar, buscar tareas. Pero ahora sí. Incluso las personas que no están dentro de la red en ocasiones van donde vecinos y estos les comparten internet para hacer alguna de estas cosas que necesitan en el momento."

Conscientes de esta realidad, desde Colnodo hemos diseñado e implementado iniciativas para acompañar a distintas comunidades y poblaciones a transitar por los aprendizajes digitales y la apropiación de las TIC. Hemos caminado un proceso lleno de muchas intuiciones, reconociendo ante todo el lugar desde el cual las personas pueden encontrar beneficios en usar internet. Los intereses, necesidades, contextos y preguntas de las personas no son los mismos, tampoco los ritmos y las maneras de aprendizaje.

En ese sentido, ha sido necesario tener la sensibilidad, así como las apuestas metodológicas para diseñar y poner en marcha procesos formativos que consideren las realidades de las personas en sus diversidades, los posibles temas de interés y los conocimientos digitales que puedan aplicar en su vida cotidiana con los dispositivos electrónicos al alcance.

Una de las primeras barreras con las que nos encontramos hace algunos años, cuando empezamos a compartir aprendizajes en el uso y apropiación de las TIC, fue la falta de contenidos y materiales pedagógicos imaginados y construidos desde relatos comprensibles, didácticos y acordes con las características de las poblaciones no alfabetizadas digitalmente. Las apuestas pedagógicas suelen estar diseñadas para usuarios lectores, tecnológicos, profesionales y urbanos, con narrativas no siempre comprensibles para personas que no corresponden con este perfil.

Ante ese escenario, algunas de las acciones que hemos realizado para llegar a procesos formativos inclusivos es, en primer lugar, conocer las necesidades de las personas; esto lo hemos hecho a partir de instrumentos y aproximaciones como grupos focales, diagnósticos, encuestas y entrevistas dirigidas. También la misma experiencia de trabajo permanente y decidido con distintas poblaciones en todo el país ha nutrido de ideas y propuestas nuestros distintos abordajes. Lo

Alba Ortiz, mujer emprendedora rural, durante capacitación en emprendimiento, mercadeo digital y finanzas con la Red Comunitaria. (Foto: Colnodo.)

que sigue es diseñar el modelo pedagógico y desarrollar los contenidos a partir de varias premisas que suelen ser una constante: fortalecer el pensamiento crítico, animar el trabajo colaborativo entre las personas participantes y proponer saberes prácticos con recursos que puedan aplicarse y que resulten útiles a las distintas realidades. El reto es que las personas aprendan y apropien los temas a la luz de preguntas, acciones y necesidades concretas que puedan atenderse con internet.

Uno de los grandes desafíos en nuestros procesos formativos es llegar al mayor número posible de personas, considerando las grandes brechas de acceso y apropiación de TIC que subsisten en nuestro país, especialmente entre mujeres, personas de bajos ingresos y con escasos niveles de escolaridad, personas mayores y poblaciones rurales. Para ello tratamos de proponer modelos que involucren a facilitadoras de aprendizaje, quienes luego de un proceso de aprestamiento orientan y acompañan las sesiones de formación presencial entre distintas poblaciones en el país. Estas personas facilitadoras suelen tener experiencia previa en la orientación de talleres con comunidades, habilidades tecnológicas en un nivel intermedio y, especialmente, compromiso y sensibilidad para la enseñanza y el aprendizaje.

Todo este cúmulo de saberes los hemos puesto al servicio de las redes comunitarias, comprendidas como redes de telecomunicaciones e internet lideradas por las mismas comunidades rurales que, desde sus saberes, creatividades y contextos, gestionan y sostienen sus propios modelos de conectividad local.[3]

Desde el 2017, en Colnodo hemos acompañado unas 20 redes comunitarias en distintas zonas del país, en un acuerdo horizontal de diálogo y colaboración con organizaciones locales como cabildos y resguardos indígenas, consejos comunitarios de comunidades negras, asociaciones de productores rurales, redes de mujeres, firmantes de paz, colectivas de comunicación y juntas de acción comunal, entre otras. Una de las características de estas redes es que operan en comunidades rurales, las que más carecen de servicios públicos, las más desatendidas, donde usualmente los grandes proyectos de infraestructura y conectividad no alcanzan a llegar y donde los operadores de telecomunicaciones no enfocan sus esfuerzos, con argumentos como la dispersión geográfica, las necesidades de inversión en infraestructura y la baja capacidad de pago de poblaciones cuyos ingresos dependen de emprendimientos locales, agronegocios, agricultura de subsistencia, cría de animales, entre otros.

Jornada de instalaciones en la Red Comunitaria Frailejones: Conexión de Vida en la vereda Tasmag, Cumbal-Nariño. (Foto: Colnodo.)

¿Internet para qué?

Si bien internet es un mínimo básico, la tecnología como tal no es suficiente para que las oportunidades lleguen a las comunidades. Desde fines de los años 90 empezamos a preguntarnos "¿internet para qué?"; nuestras experiencias con redes comunitarias reeditan esa pregunta y la traen al presente con nuevos desafíos: las redes sociales, la inteligencia artificial, los quiebres en la seguridad digital, las violencias en línea, entre tantos otros. Las poblaciones rurales que se conectan a internet gracias a las redes comunitarias llegan con 30 años de atraso en cuanto a conocimientos y habilidades tecnológicas; no tuvieron las oportunidades de aprender a navegar por superficies virtuales desde un computador, no conocieron el correo electrónico, no vivieron el auge de buscadores, redes sociales y otras plataformas digitales que ya ni siquiera existen.

Es complejo hablar de igualdad de oportunidades cuando tantas comunidades rurales en Colombia no cuentan con agua potable, saneamiento básico, servicios de salud, medios de transporte, carreteras o energía eléctrica. Las redes comunitarias representan una oportunidad enorme para visibilizar las realidades de poblaciones rurales, brindar oportunidades de inclusión social y digital y permitir a las personas soñar y transitar hacia el logro de esos sueños.

Con la misión de fortalecer procesos de apropiación de TIC entre las poblaciones en el entorno de las redes comunitarias, con apoyo de la iniciativa Local Network de la Asociación para el Progreso de las Comunicaciones (APC)[4] y Rhizomatica,[5] diseñamos una metodología de apropiación TIC en redes comunitarias que plantea un camino orientado a fortalecer conocimientos y habilidades en el uso de las tecnologías digitales entre los actores de las redes. El diseño y puesta en marcha de esta metodología conlleva varios desafíos; en cuanto al diseño, es importante proponer modelos sostenibles que no desaparezcan cuando los proyectos y el acompañamiento terminen. Esto implica formar y consolidar equipos locales con las habilidades necesarias para continuar replicando y alimentando el proceso, los talleres y los contenidos. Atendiendo a esa necesidad, la ruta de aprendizaje pone como protagonistas a un grupo de personas facilitadoras o líderes y lideresas TIC que, luego de un ejercicio de capacitación presencial, orientan los procesos formativos a distintas poblaciones en cada comunidad.

En cuanto a la puesta en marcha de la me-

todología, una de las barreras que hemos encontrado en los procesos de formación en TIC entre poblaciones en zonas rurales es el acceso a infraestructura, es decir, computadores conectados a internet para realizar los talleres presenciales. De acuerdo con cifras del Departamento Nacional de Estadística, solo el 28% de hogares rurales tiene acceso a un computador;[6] la experiencia en línea sucede especialmente desde un teléfono móvil que, si bien ofrece oportunidades, también representa limitaciones para actividades como usar aplicaciones de oficina, navegar en plataformas de formación virtual o hacer trabajo remoto. Ante esto, desde Colnodo se ha propuesto que las redes comunitarias, además de la infraestructura y los servicios de internet, tengan a disposición un centro de acceso público a TIC con computadores, internet y otras tecnologías, desde donde las personas puedan acceder a distintos servicios digitales y ofertas formativas en línea. Esta infraestructura permite acompañar a las personas en el aprendizaje y fortalecimiento de habilidades digitales en distintos niveles.

Hemos apostado a una formación inicial en modalidad presencial, considerando que en un primer momento las personas demandan un acompañamiento mayor, con dedicación, disposición y capacidad para crear confianza. Se espera que, con el centro TIC, sea posible ofrecer cursos y oportunidades formativas virtuales, considerando que hay una amplia oferta producida desde distintas instituciones educativas, fundaciones, el Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA) y el Ministerio de Educación Nacional, entre otros, que sin embargo no alcanza a llegar a las zonas rurales por falta de canales suficientes de difusión y acceso.

Uno de los objetivos centrales de la metodología de apropiación TIC es transitar hacia usos más significativos de internet; si bien se reconocen los usos lúdicos, la alfabetización digital también se expresa en las capacidades de las personas para avanzar hacia usos más creativos de las tecnologías, donde además de consumir información, puedan producirse saberes, difundir voces no visibles, posicionar demandas ciudadanas y poner a circular relatos no representados a través de los canales y medios tradicionales de comunicación.

Una ruta de aprendizaje para el uso significativo de las tecnologías digitales

La metodología de apropiación TIC se puso en marcha en las redes comunitarias acompañadas por Colnodo desde el año 2025, con el objetivo de construir con las comunidades una ruta de aprendizaje para el uso significativo de las tec-

Grupo gestor de la Red Comunitaria Tejiendo Pazdurante el taller de habilidades digitales básicas de la vereda Colinas Bajo, San José del Guaviare-Guaviare. (Foto: Colnodo.)

nologías digitales a partir de la pregunta: ¿para qué queremos la conectividad en nuestra región? Para ello, se diseñaron procesos formativos en el uso de diversas herramientas TIC con distintos grupos: el equipo gestor de la red; el grupo de líderes y lideresas TIC, quienes impulsan y acompañan cursos y talleres desde el sector educativo o comunitario; y habitantes de la comunidad que fortalecen sus conocimientos y habilidades TIC de acuerdo con sus requerimientos e intereses, agrupados por edad, género o agendas temáticas, como niños y niñas, jóvenes, personas mayores y mujeres emprendedoras.

La incidencia de este proceso en las comunidades acompañadas se evidencia en las voces de algunas personas que integran el grupo gestor o de líderes y lideresas TIC, tal como lo manifiesta Sandra Milena Arboleda, lideresa de la Red Comunitaria Tejiendo Paz, en la vereda Colinas Sector Bajo de San José del Guaviare:[7]

> "Para mí, hacer parte del grupo de líderes y lideresas TIC ha sido una experiencia increíble. He podido aprender y crecer junto a personas comprometidas con la transformación digital de nuestra comunidad. Ahora, como promotora local, he crecido superando barreras, resolviendo problemas de conectividad, gestionando cursos con entidades de la región y acompañando a las personas de la comunidad a tomar los talleres programados en el Centro TIC. Es un orgullo para mí contribuir al cierre de la brecha digital y apoyar a nuestra gente a aprovechar las oportunidades de la tecnología para mejorar su vida."

Una apuesta fundamental es ampliar la participación de las mujeres entre el grupo de gestores de la red comunitaria, los liderazgos TIC y las personas capacitadas en cada comunidad, ya que son múltiples las barreras que ellas enfrentan para acceder a las oportunidades de internet, y estos procesos deben contribuir también al cierre de brechas digitales de género.

Alegría Chirán, habitante del municipio de Cumbal, vereda Tasmag, en el sur del departamento de Nariño, promotora local de la Red Comunitaria Frailejones: Conexión de Vida,[8] comenta:

> "Cuando escuchamos por primera vez sobre el proyecto Conectando a los No Conectados, al principio fue algo novedoso para la comunidad, porque sabíamos poco sobre lo que significaba. Pero durante la socialización comunitaria entendimos que iba mucho más allá de la conexión a internet. Este proyecto nos mostró que también se trata de conectar los talentos del territorio, fortalecer las unidades productivas y abrir oportunidades de estudio y comunicación para diferentes poblaciones. Para mí, como promotora y parte del grupo gestor, ha sido una experiencia muy enriquecedora. Hemos trabajado para conectar a nuestra comunidad en distintos sectores de la vereda Tasmag y fortalecer el acceso a la comunicación y al conocimiento."

En el contexto colombiano, si bien un desafío adicional es la situación de conflicto en muchas zonas rurales del país lo que limita el acompañamiento presencial lo cierto es que internet también puede contribuir a fortalecer tejidos y encuentros en los territorios. Al respecto Juan Sebastián Burgos, promotor local y miembro del grupo gestor de la Red Comunitaria Raíces Fuertes, Frutos Compartidos,[9] comparte:

> "Este proceso ha sido muy gratificante para mi crecimiento personal y comunitario. Como parte del pueblo indígena Awá, hemos vivido de cerca las consecuencias del conflicto armado, que ha marcado nuestras vidas y nuestro territorio. Los tejidos sociales que se rompieron por esta causa tomarán tiempo para reconstruirse. En ese camino, los espacios de encuentro y capacitación con Colnodo, en el marco del proyecto Conectando a los No Conectados, han sido muy importantes. Estos procesos nos han permitido reconocernos nuevamente como comunidad: hablar de nuestro territorio, de nuestros sueños, de nuestros proyectos y también de nuestros miedos. Sobre todo, han

fortalecido el vínculo entre nosotros y la idea de apoyarnos mutuamente, buscando estrategias para conectarnos entre hogares, familias y comunidades, y así seguir tejiendo caminos de comunicación y esperanza."

Las estrategias de apropiación en el entorno de las redes comunitarias están contribuyendo al impulso de liderazgos digitales en zonas rurales y al fortalecimiento de procesos de construcción de paz. Uno de estos casos es la Red Comunitaria Tejiendo Paz, en la vereda Colinas Sector Bajo, en San José del Guaviare, al suroriente de Colombia, territorio que se reconoce como entrada a la Amazonía colombiana. Es uno de los Antiguos Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación (AETCR) creados con la firma del Acuerdo de Paz de 2016. Esta red ha sido acompañada en el marco del proyecto "Conectando a los no conectados: Redes comunitarias de internet como vehículo para reducir la brecha digital en zonas rurales de Colombia", coordinado por Colnodo y financiado por la Unión Europea.

Aumentar oportunidades educativas, sociales y económicas

La experiencia organizacional nos ha demostrado que fortalecer competencias digitales entre las mujeres les permite aumentar sus oportunidades educativas, sociales y económicas. En el marco del proyecto "Conectando Oportunidades para Mujeres Emprendedoras de Zonas Rurales en Colombia",[10] implementado entre 2022 y 2024, fueron capacitadas 1.201 mujeres emprendedoras en zonas rurales, un porcentaje de ellas en el entorno de las redes comunitarias. Según la evaluación de impacto, el 82% de las mujeres formadas manifiesta que el proceso formativo contribuyó a aumentar sus ventas y sus ganancias.

Lograr una alta participación de las mujeres es el resultado de un proceso intencionado donde se facilitan horarios, espacios y apoyos en el cuidado de las infancias, con el fin de favorecer una presencia dedicada de las mujeres a los procesos formativos.

Alba Ortiz es una mujer emprendedora rural de la vereda Humalá, del municipio El Cerrito en el departamento de Santander, al nororiente de Colombia. Es madre jefa de hogar y sostiene a su familia gracias a su trabajo como agricultora, especialmente con sus cultivos de uchuva y tomate tipo exportación:

"Con la Red Comunitaria[11] recibimos varias capacitaciones acerca de emprendimiento, mercadeo digital y manejo de las finanzas, y nos sirvieron mucho porque aprendimos a llevar una contabilidad, saber si estamos generando ganancias o no; porque nosotras vamos día a día trabajando, pero al final no sabemos si estamos ganando o perdiendo. Y en cuanto a la parte digital, para dar a conocer nuestros emprendimientos y hacer crecer nuestra economía, porque ahora todo se maneja mediante redes."

Acompañar a las comunidades en procesos de conectividad implica reconocer sus contextos, saberes y prácticas culturales, y entender que el conocimiento se construye de manera conjunta. Fortalecer la capacidad de agencia de las comunidades es fundamental: no se trata solo de instalar infraestructura, sino de promover que las personas participen activamente en la gestión, sostenibilidad y apropiación de sus redes y de las herramientas digitales. La conectividad cobra verdadero sentido cuando se acompaña de procesos formativos que permitan un uso significativo y seguro de la tecnología. Por eso, desarrollar espacios de aprendizaje presenciales y virtuales, centrados en las personas, alineados con los intereses de cada comunidad y basados en metodologías participativas, resulta clave para acercar las oportunidades del mundo digital a las realidades locales. ■

Notas

1. DANE – Encuesta de Calidad de Vida 2022; MinTIC – Informe de Conectividad Rural 2023.
2. Esta red comunitaria ha sido acompañada por Colnodo desde el 2017 y desde octubre del 2023 hace parte de un proyecto con apoyo de la Fundación Internet Society. Ha estado apagada por asuntos relacionados con el permiso de uso de espectro. Actualmente está operando con un permiso temporal de pruebas otorgado por el Ministerio de las TIC en Colombia. Más información en: https://www.

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3. Colnodo. Redes Comunitarias Colombia – Informe de experiencias, 2017–2024.
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6. Colombia. Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE). Disponible en: https://www.dane.gov.co/files/operaciones/TICH/bol-TICH-2023.pdf
7. Esta red comunitaria es acompañada por Colnodo en el marco del proyecto "Comunidades Conectadas – Conectando a los no conectados: Redes comunitarias de Internet como vehículo para reducir la brecha digital en zonas rurales de Colombia" con el apoyo financiero de la Unión Europea. Más información sobre esta red en: https://www.redescomunitarias.co/es/tejiendo-paz-
8. Ídem. Más información sobre esta red en: https://www.redescomunitarias.co/es/frailejones-conexion-de-vida
9. Ídem. Más información sobre esta red comunitaria en: https://www.redescomunitarias.co/es/raices-fuertes-frutos-compartidos
10. Proyecto, coordinado por Colnodo en el marco del Google Impact Challenge for Women and Girls, entre 2022 y 2024. Los resultados del proyecto en: https://colnodo.apc.org/esx/informe-gic
11. La red comunitaria La Chitara Cerritana ha sido acompañada por Colnodo en el marco del proyecto "Conectando Oportunidades para Mujeres Emprendedoras de zonas rurales en Colombia". Más información sobre esta red comunitaria en: https://www.redescomunitarias.co/es/la-chitara-cerritana

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Women, cultural integrity and communication justice in Odisha

Sriyanka Sahoo and Hemanta Kumar Dash

Across several regions of eastern India, accusations of witchcraft continue to function as mechanisms of social exclusion and gendered violence. Women who are labelled as witches are often subjected to humiliation, physical assault, social boycott, and in extreme cases, murder. The Indian state of Odisha has struggled with this issue for decades, particularly in tribal-dominated districts such as Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Rayagada, and Sundargarh.

Despite legislative measures such as the Odisha Prevention of Witch-Hunting Act, 2013, incidents of violence linked to witchcraft accusations continue to occur. Data compiled at the national level indicates that hundreds of killings related to witchcraft accusations have been recorded across India over the past two decades, with eastern and central Indian states reporting repeated incidents. Reports indicate that nearly 83% of recorded witch-hunting cases in Odisha are concentrated in a few districts, including Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, Rayagada, Malkangiri, Keonjhar, Gajapati, and Ganjam [1]. Reports from civil society organisations also suggest that many cases remain underreported, especially in remote tribal areas where access to law enforcement and media coverage is limited [2].

Scholars increasingly emphasise that witch-hunting cannot be explained solely as a consequence of superstition. Instead, it reflects a complex intersection of gender inequality, social

marginalisation, and economic conflict. Research has shown that accusations of witchcraft often emerge from disputes over property, personal rivalries, attempts to obtain sexual favours, or long-standing conflicts within communities [3]. In such circumstances, the label of "witch" becomes a socially sanctioned tool through which violence against vulnerable women can be justified.

This article examines the persistence of witch-branding in tribal districts of Odisha and argues that legal reform alone cannot eradicate the practice. Instead, the issue must be addressed through a broader framework of communication justice that combines institutional action with community-level awareness and culturally rooted communication strategies.

Tribal societies and belief systems in Odisha

Odisha is home to one of India's largest tribal populations. Scheduled Tribes constitute more than one-fifth of the state's population, and communities such as the Santhal, Ho, Munda, Juang, Kondh, Saora, and Bhumij inhabit forested and hilly regions where traditional cultural systems continue to shape everyday life. Anthropological research suggests that many tribal societies maintain cosmologies in which natural and spiritual forces are closely interconnected. Illness, crop failure, sudden death, or environmental disturbances may be interpreted through spiritual explanations when biomedical causes are not immediately visible. Although witch-hunting is often linked to superstition and low literacy, accusations frequently emerge from personal conflicts or failed healing practices, where individuals blamed for illness become targets of retaliation [4].

At the same time, scholars caution against portraying such cosmologies merely as irrational. Indigenous communities possess rich ecological knowledge and long-standing traditions of healing practices rooted in their relationships with forests and natural environments [5]. These knowledge systems often reflect attempts to understand uncertainty within a framework that integrates nature, ancestors, and social relationships. The challenge arises when such belief structures intersect with social stress and economic insecurity. In villages where healthcare facilities remain limited, unexplained illness or sudden deaths may generate fear and suspicion. Communities sometimes seek explanations within their cultural framework, and individuals perceived as socially marginal may become targets of accusations.

Gendered violence and the making of a "witch"

While supernatural belief systems may provide a framework for accusations, research consistently shows that witch-branding often emerges from underlying social conflicts. Studies across rural India have documented several recurring motives behind such allegations. Land disputes, interpersonal conflicts, attempts to gain sexual advantage, and efforts to settle long-standing rivalries frequently lie behind accusations of witchcraft [3]. Labelling a woman as a witch allows perpetrators to mobilise collective fear and legitimise violence. In many cases, such allegations are strategically used by those who stand to gain socially or materially, and incidents tend to rise during periods of disease outbreaks, highlighting the need for coordinated interventions by both civil society organisations and state institutions [4].

Research on gender relations and witch-hunting in India has similarly emphasised that accusations often target women who challenge patriarchal norms. Widows, elderly women, and women who refuse sexual advances frequently become vulnerable to such allegations. Witchcraft accusations are rarely random and often reflect existing hierarchies within the community. In many cases they function as instruments of social control, used to marginalise women who challenge local power relations or become entangled in disputes over property, authority, or community leadership [6].

Branding these women as witches enables communities to justify social exclusion and vio-

lence. Marginalisation based on caste and tribal status also contributes to vulnerability. Studies on social inequality in rural India highlight how communities positioned at the lower end of social hierarchies often experience disproportionate exposure to violence and discrimination [7]. In many cases, women belonging to marginalised groups lack social protection within patriarchal village structures, making them easier targets during periods of social tension.

Institutional studies conducted in Odisha further indicate that illness within families, crop failure, land conflicts, and mental health conditions frequently trigger accusations of witchcraft [2]. Widows and elderly women appear particularly vulnerable because they often lack family members who can defend them during disputes. These patterns suggest that witch-branding functions not merely as a cultural belief but as a mechanism of social power. Accusations become tools through which communities regulate behaviour, resolve conflicts, and reinforce gender hierarchies.

A crime that shocks the conscience

Behind statistical data lie individual stories that reveal the brutality of witch-branding. One such case occurred in Mayurbhanj district when a tribal woman named Sambari Murmu was killed after villagers accused her of practising witchcraft. According to reports, the attackers tied her hands and feet and assaulted her with heavy tools before leaving her critically injured. She later died while being taken to hospital. Several villagers were eventually convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for the crime [8].

Another case illustrates the long-term consequences of such accusations. In a tribal village in Odisha, a woman who had been branded a witch following the death of her husband was expelled from her community. Her young daughter was forced to grow up without her mother for nearly a decade before the two were reunited years later through the intervention of activists and authorities [9].

More recently, a sixty-two-year-old tribal woman in Mayurbhanj district was killed after a villager accused her of practising sorcery that allegedly caused illness in his family. The accused attacked her with a sharp weapon, and the woman died before medical assistance could arrive [10].

These incidents demonstrate that witch-branding is not merely symbolic violence. It often leads to severe physical brutality, displacement, and long-term trauma for victims and their families.

Limits of legal reform

Recognising the seriousness of the problem, the state enacted legislation in 2013 that criminalises the branding of individuals as witches and prescribes penalties for harassment and violence. Yet incidents continue to be reported from several districts. Records suggest that numerous cases linked to sorcery-related violence have been registered in Odisha over the past decade, with tribal-dominated districts such as Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Rayagada, and Gajapati appearing frequently in reports [11].

Human rights observers have pointed out that punishment alone cannot eliminate the beliefs and social conditions that allow such practices to persist. Recommendations have included reviewing the legal framework and strengthening preventive measures, particularly in rural areas where awareness remains limited [12]. Legal intervention often occurs only after violence has already taken place. Victims may hesitate to approach authorities because perpetrators belong to the same community, and the social stigma associated with witch-branding can persist even after judicial action.

Communication justice and the role of media

The persistence of witch-branding highlights the importance of *communication justice*. Justice in media and information systems requires that marginalised communities be able to participate in the production and circulation of knowledge rather than remain passive recipients of

information. Communication rights emphasise that individuals and communities must be able to express themselves and participate in public dialogue, since communication is fundamental to human dignity and democratic participation [13]. In rural contexts, access to reliable health information and scientific explanations can play an important role in challenging harmful beliefs. However, communication gaps often exist between state institutions and remote communities.

Mainstream media coverage of witch-hunting frequently focuses on sensational incidents without examining the deeper social causes behind them. While such reporting raises public awareness, it rarely contributes to sustained understanding of the issue. At the same time, digital communication technologies are beginning to reshape information flows in rural areas. Mobile phones and messaging platforms can spread rumours quickly, reinforcing fear and suspicion. Yet the same technologies can also be used to disseminate educational content and encourage dialogue about public health and gender equality.

However, institutional responses alone rarely produce lasting social change in culturally complex rural settings. Laws, media campaigns, and administrative action represent what might be described as a top-down response to violence linked to witchcraft accusations. While such interventions are necessary, they often struggle to transform deeply rooted social beliefs unless they are accompanied by dialogue within communities themselves. In regions where cultural identity, oral traditions, and collective decision-making shape everyday life, awareness must also emerge from within local cultural spaces.

A more effective strategy therefore, requires a two-pronged approach: institutional coordination on one hand, and community-based communication on the other. When local cultural platforms and respected community voices engage with issues such as health, gender equality, and superstition, they create opportunities for gradual shifts in public perception that institutional messaging alone may not achieve.

Alternative community media and local change agents

In many parts of rural Odisha, locally rooted performance traditions function as powerful forms of alternative community media. Long before newspapers, television, or digital platforms reached remote villages, these cultural forms served as collective spaces where communities exchanged information, interpreted moral values, and discussed social concerns. Even today, performances such as Pala, Daskathia, and Geetinatya continue to draw audiences during village gatherings and festivals.

A Pala performance typically features a lead narrator who recounts mythological or social stories, while accompanying performers provide rhythm through musical instruments. Daskathia involves two storytellers who use wooden clappers to create rhythmic narration that blends humour with social commentary. Geetinatya, a form of musical theatre, combines song, acting, and dance to dramatise social themes before large rural audiences.

Researchers have long recognised that culturally embedded performance traditions can function as effective tools for social communication in rural societies because they translate complex ideas into familiar narratives and symbols [14]. Studies also suggest that community-based performance traditions can help explain scientific information in accessible ways, encouraging audiences to question misinformation and harmful beliefs [15].

In tribal districts such as Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar, where communities including the Santhal, Ho, Munda, and Juang maintain strong oral traditions, these cultural platforms can become spaces for discussing superstition and social harm. Performances that portray the consequences of false accusations or explain the medical causes of illness may gradually challenge the belief that misfortune is caused by witchcraft.

Equally important in this communicative environment are local opinion leaders who mediate between new ideas and community belief systems. Communication research has shown that

information often spreads through influential intermediaries rather than directly from media institutions to the public [16]. In tribal villages, such intermediaries may include elders, teachers, community health workers, traditional performers, and local activists. When these individuals participate in awareness programmes or endorse messages challenging superstition, they help legitimise new knowledge and reduce suspicion toward external interventions. Through repeated performances, discussions, and the involvement of trusted community figures, such initiatives can encourage villagers to seek medical explanations for illness rather than attributing misfortune to witchcraft.

Bridging communities and institutions

Communication strategies must therefore recognise the importance of collaboration between institutional actors and local networks. Information rarely flows directly from mass media to individuals. Instead, it often travels through trusted intermediaries who interpret and adapt messages within local cultural contexts. Teachers, health workers, youth groups, and community organisations often serve this bridging role in rural areas. When equipped with accurate information about health, law, and gender rights, they can transmit these ideas within their communities in ways that resonate with local experience. For example, awareness programmes explaining the causes of diseases such as malaria or tuberculosis can help reduce the likelihood that illness will be attributed to supernatural forces. Educational initiatives in schools and community forums can also encourage younger generations to question harmful practices.

Conclusion

The persistence of witch-branding in tribal districts of Odisha reflects a complex interplay of cultural beliefs, gender inequality, and socio-economic conflict. While legislation remains essential for punishing perpetrators, it cannot alone eliminate the conditions that allow such practices to survive. Addressing the problem requires a broader framework of communication justice that integrates legal enforcement with education, media engagement, and community participation.

Government agencies, media organisations, and civil society groups must work together with local leaders and cultural networks to promote awareness and dialogue. Only when communities themselves participate in questioning harmful narratives can the cycle of fear and violence associated with witch-branding begin to break. ▪

AI Use Disclosure: *Generative Artificial Intelligence Chatbot ChatGPT was used only for improving readability and language clarity during the editing process. The research, analysis, interpretation, and final content remain the sole responsibility of the authors.*

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The human counter-algorithm: Why listening is the future of aid

Pinar Okur – Upinion

Imagine a mother in a displacement camp, hundreds of miles from home. She has a smartphone in her hand – her lifeline to the world. But as she scrolls, she isn't finding clarity. Instead, she finds many conflicting rumours: news that the border is closing, whispers that aid supplies have run out, and strange warnings about the safety of local clinics. She is surrounded by humanitarian organizations, yet she feels more unheard than ever. Her data is being "collected" by surveys and apps, but she never sees the results. She is living in a world where technology is a constant presence, but a real conversation is nowhere to be found.

This is the reality of the "Information gap." **While we have more ways to communicate than ever before, the quality of that communication – and the trust behind it – is at an all-time low**. At Upinion, we believe that the only way to resolve these information challenges is to change the communication model: we take information from the people, complement it with verified facts, and share the complete picture back with them.

Rapidly spreading online misinformation

Today, a few large technology companies have more influence over public information than

most governments. Their platforms are not designed to serve the community; instead, they are programmed to keep users active for as long as possible. In this fast-paced online environment, false claims or alarming rumours spread more quickly than verified facts. As a result, misinformation frequently overwhelms accurate information, leading to widespread public distrust.

As a 2025 issue of *Media Development* questioned[1]: *Is Artificial Intelligence a friend or a foe?* The truth is that AI-driven algorithms have turned the internet into a place where, as Cordel Green argues in his piece[2]: *"...even the most sophisticated critical thinkers are outmatched by the speed, scale, and opacity of these systems."*

For people in crisis zones, this isn't just a social media problem – it's a matter of survival. When people cannot see how decisions are made or where their data goes, **trust evaporates**. They feel like the technology is just "taking" from them, leaving them to navigate a world where the lines between what is real and what is manipulated are increasingly blurred.

In recent years, funding cuts during major crises – such as those in Syria and Yemen – have typically been announced through high-level government or United Nations statements. On the ground, however, these formal announcements often lead to a rapid spread of inaccurate information. Affected individuals do not view these changes as simple budget reductions, but rather as a failure of support. Without direct communication from aid organizations, unverified online reports spread quickly and increase public anxiety. Upinion's ongoing research confirms that trust is built when aid providers are consistently responsive, respectful, and transparent in their approach.

Putting the "human" back in the loop

Upinion was created to be a secure platform for reliable information amidst this online chaos. We don't try to fight the machines with more machines; we fight them by bringing back the human voice. Our approach is built on three simple pillars:

1. The two-way street. Historically, humanitarian communication has often functioned as a one-way process, where organizations provide information and communities receive it. Upinion evolves this model by using the platforms people already use daily – like WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger – to establish a continuous, two-way dialogue. This approach ensures that communication is not just about gathering data, but about creating a mutual exchange. If 1,000 people tell us they are worried about water quality, we don't just put that in a report for a boardroom in Europe. We tell the community: "This is what you told us, and here is what is being done about it."

In the East DRC, for example, we partnered with Mercy Corps to test this "Return of Information."[3] When we asked communities about their urgent needs, this wasn't the end of the data collection. We shared the collective results back with the community, turning a standard survey into a shared piece of knowledge. By ensuring that information flows in both directions, the humanitarian sector acts as an active, transparent partner rather than an unreachable entity.

2. Challenging the falsehoods. During a crisis, misinformation can create significant safety risks. When persistent false beliefs spread – such as unfounded fears regarding a specific aid program – we take active steps to intervene using human-verified information. We provide a platform where individuals can ask questions and receive clear, factual responses.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a clear example of how quickly misinformation can spread. In 2020, Upinion conducted discussions with people in Yemen to identify active rumours and distribute accurate information to the public. To ensure the highest level of accuracy, we shared the latest findings from internationally recognized organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF.

3. Radical transparency. Referring back to the call in *Media Development* (2025/3) to "act transparently", we believe that technology can only be a "friend" if it is understandable. We strip away the mystery of the "black box." Our plat-

form is designed to be a bridge for accountability, ensuring that people aren't just data points on a map, but agents of change in their own recovery. The biggest asset that we have is transparency; even if aid is halted, or unable to deliver, we report this to the communities. Not to shame an organization for not being able to deliver, but to show the complexities and decisions that are affecting the aid from reaching them.

Innovation is not only going for the most complex solution

In the tech industry, innovation usually means something more complex. But at Upinion, we believe the most exciting innovation is actually something very "low-tech" in spirit: **returning the microphone to the people.**

What makes our work exciting isn't just the software; it's the shift in power. By giving people a platform to speak for themselves, we are helping to rebuild the trust that the digital era has damaged. We are proving that you can use modern connectivity without exploiting the user. We are showing that the most advanced form of innovation is **the practice of active listening**.

We are helping people navigate a world where truth is fragile and falsehoods are fast. This isn't just about aid; it's about restoring communication rights in a world that has forgotten how to talk to – and not just at – the most vulnerable.

Conclusion: a new standard for trust

The rapid spread of online misinformation will not stop on its own, nor will the digital era's tendency to treat people as passive data points. As technology continues to develop at an unpredictable pace, the humanitarian sector must decide how it will fulfil its responsibilities to the people it serves.

At Upinion, we have made our choice. We address the threat of inaccurate information by facilitating clear, two-way communication. We also reject the standard model of one-way data collection. By ensuring that community insights are always verified and shared back with those who provided them, we move beyond technical data gathering toward honest, accountable relationships. We choose to believe that the people we serve are the experts in their own lives, and our role is to ensure they have the accurate information they need to lead their own recovery.

The future of aid isn't about more complex algorithms; it's about more honest relationships. By taking information from the people and sharing it back with them, we aren't just solving a technical problem. We are rebuilding the very foundation of human trust. ▪

This article was drafted with the collaborative assistance of Gemini, a large language model. In alignment with the ethical standards set forth in Media Development (2025/3), it is disclosed that AI was used to help structure the narrative framework regarding digital communication challenges. However, the core philosophy of "Information for the people, by the people," the specific case studies (DRC and Yemen), and the described humanitarian methodologies remain the verified work and intellectual property of the Upinion team.

Notes

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How frontline communities can drive a better and fairer humanitarian response

Pamela Saab

Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) works with crisis-affected communities around the world to ensure their voices shape the systems that are meant to support them. We're an international NGO, founded in 2012 on a simple but powerful idea: people receiving aid should be in the driving seat of the support they receive. That they should be heard, not as a formality but as a fundamental principle of humanitarian assistance.

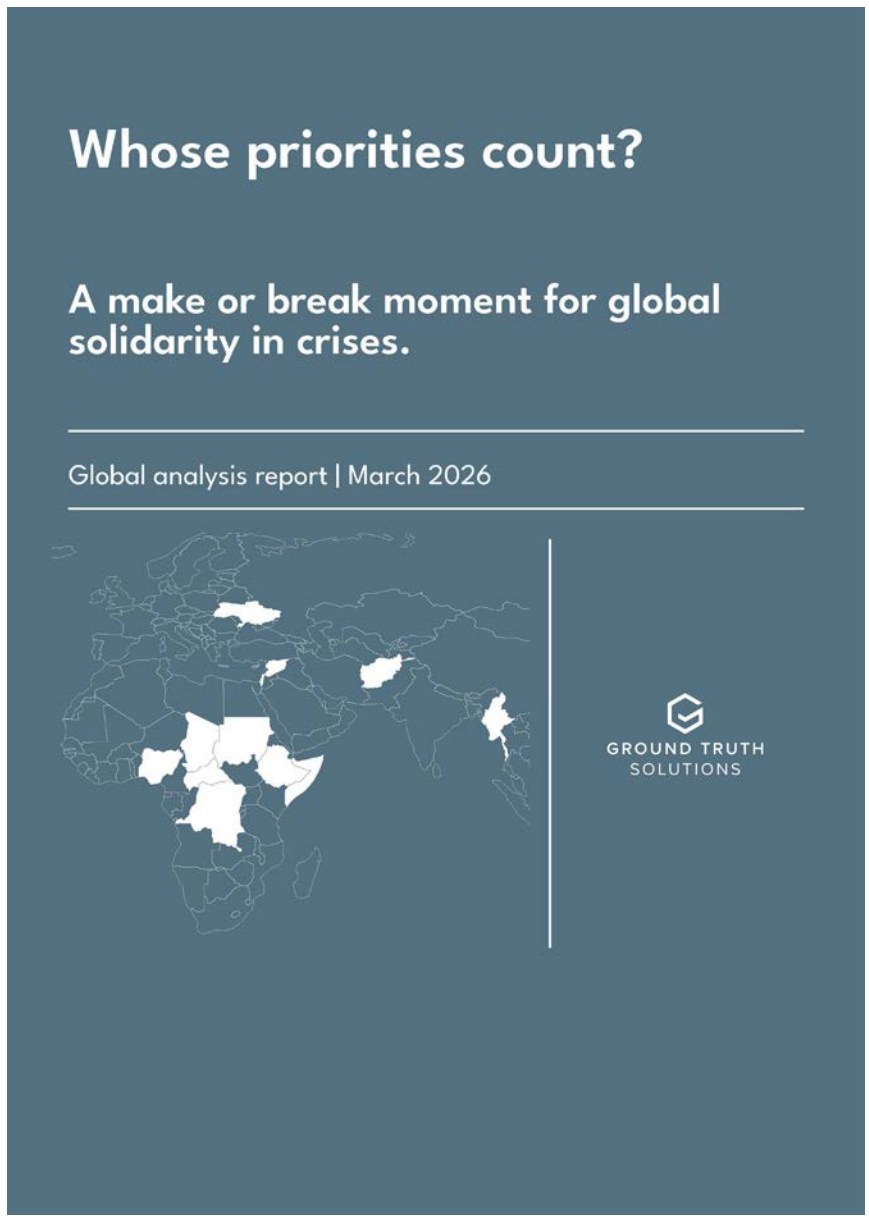
Too often, humanitarian response is shaped from the top down. Aid actors rely on institutional priorities, donor pressures, and legacy frameworks, while the perspectives of people experiencing crisis remain peripheral. They assume what people need and prioritise, rather than asking the question. They deliver what they are set up to deliver, not what communities tell us they need most. We believe this must change. Our work aims to re-centre humanitarian and broader global support systems around the views, priorities, and capacities of the people they serve.

Since we began, we've worked in 35 countries, gathering insights from more than 100,000 people living through crisis. Our goal is not just to improve aid effectiveness – it's to shift power and drive lasting change to whose priorities count. We want aid systems to start from and change in response to the real needs and aspirations of the people they aim to serve.

We face increasingly overlapping crises: climate change, conflict, displacement, inequality, and political repression are combining in ways that put millions at risk while straining the systems meant to respond. Meanwhile, global solidarity is crumbling, aid budgets are shrinking, political and public support for aid is being eroded and space for civic action is narrowing.

Sweeping aid cuts from the US and other major donors meant that humanitarian aid volumes halved from 2024 to 2025, with further reductions planned for 2026, leading humanitarian actors to dramatically narrow the scope of who they can assist and the types of assistance they can provide. The result? Too many people are being left behind, and too many people are being silenced.

And where people are receiving support,



https://www.groundtruthsolutions.org/library/whose-priorities-count-a-make-or-break-moment-for-global-solidarity-in-crises

it's often not the support they most need. People we speak to across countries tell us they feel trapped in short-term cycles of humanitarian assistance when what they want is support which helps them realise their future aspirations and escape aid dependency: education, livelihoods, climate-resilient infrastructure.

> "It's short-term assistance we're getting from NGOs. Give us food, yes, but give us much more something that can serve us in the days to come." – Angelique,* 25, DR Congo

As humanitarian aid shrinks the importance of community-led and mutual aid efforts – always the first line of humanitarian response – has grown even further. Communities express frustration that their own initiatives to navigate crises are not being recognised and supported. We are working to understand and spotlight these initiatives in communities around the world so they can be better supported and enabled.

We are a small, diverse team, united by a commitment to justice and accountability. We're motivated by a belief that aid is not charity but a mechanism of solidarity and justice. That people in crisis should not just be helped – they should be heard, respected, and supported to lead.

Together with local partners, we carry out independent perceptions research and dialogue to understand what people are experiencing and what they want to see change. We use this evidence to influence decisions – from programme design and policy reform to how crises are framed globally. Our work helps ensure that people's perspectives are not only heard but translated into action.

Over 15 years of research makes one thing clear: aid that doesn't listen, fails.

> "The NGOs have come to support the population in distress. But through the ways they're working they're helping to fan the flames of division and conflict between members of the community." – Thierry,* 60, CAR

What we hear is consistent across countries and contexts: people want support that helps them move forward, not just survive. They want decisions to be transparent and participatory. And they want those who hold power – whether governments, donors, or humanitarian actors – to hear their views and be accountable for the choices they make.

Across our work, we focus on four interconnected priorities. We work to support and embolden communities to advocate for their key priorities, and to be heard. We provide the data to help communities drive changes to the aid they receive. We work with communities and local partners to transform systems across humanitarian, development, climate and peacebuilding efforts to address the challenges people face holistically. We aim to build a movement of local actors around the world helping hold aid providers to account. And we aim to change the narratives around global crises, amplifying the voices of those on the front lines.

We know that change isn't easy, but we also know it's possible. Communities around the world are already leading. Our role is to listen, support, and help clear the path for more equitable systems of support. We don't have all the answers, but we do believe the starting point is clear: decisions about how scarce resources are allocated to support people living through crisis must start from the perspectives, priorities and aspirations of those communities. ▪

** Names marked with (*) were changed for confidentiality purposes, but the voices and experiences are real.*

ON THE SCREEN

Saarbrücken (Germany) 2026

At the 47th Film Festival Max Ophuels Prize Saarbruecken, 19-25 January 2026, the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury, endowed with € 2500 by the Katholische Erwachsenenbildung Saarland - Landesarbeitsgemeinschaft e.V. and the Landesarbeitsgemeinschaft für Evangelische Erwachsenenbildung im Saarland e.V., represented by the Evangelische Akademie im Saarland, was awarded to *Wovon sollen wir träumen* (What should we dream of) directed by Milena Aboyan, Constantin Hatz, Germany (2025).

Synopsis: The paths of three women cross at a food distribution centre. Laura has recently been released on parole and is supposed to stay out of trouble. But when a man makes racist remarks to Evîn, a Kurdish woman, Laura steps in to protect her. The situation escalates and police officer Julia arrives to settle the dispute. For a brief moment, the fates of the three women intersect – before they drift apart again and return to their own struggles for survival.

Motivation: What do we carry within us? What do we pass on? Our history, our wounds, our humanity? The movie shows in a gentle way how everything is bound together. Empathy and closeness can be possible and difficult at the same time. With clear pictures the movie invites us to take a deeper look: at the experience of violence, exclusion, internal and external struggles. At the end remains the hope that healing is possible, when one has the courage to break free from fate.

Members of the 2026 Jury: Oliver Gross, Austria; Alfred Jokesch, Austria; Anke Jung, Germany (President of the Jury); Marion Latz, Germany.

Berlin (Germany) 2026

At the 76th International Film Festival Berlin (13-22 February 2026), the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS, awarded its Prize in the International Competition to *Moscas* (Flies) directed by Fernando Eimbcke (Mexico, 2026).

Motivation: This delicate and poetic film portrays an imaginative boy, searching for his mother, and an isolated landlady. In a world of flies, cosmic intruders, and malignant cells, the rich black-and-white images propel us on an exploration of the big city and its inherent inequalities, with openness and curiosity. This unexpected encounter melts away emotional barriers and inspires us to learn from children and their optimistic approach to life.

In the Panorama, the jury awarded its Prize,

endowed with € 2.500 by the Catholic German Bishops' Conference, to *Bucks Harbor* directed by Pete Muller (USA, 2026).

Motivation: Set in the harsh environment on the coast of Maine, this immersive documentary questions masculinity, allowing for resilience and transformation. Following the cycle of seasons, it elaborates on the relationship between human fragility and the force of nature.

In the Forum, the Jury awarded its Prize, endowed with € 2.500 by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), to *River Dreams* directed by Kristina Mikhailova (Kazakhstan, Switzerland, United Kingdom, 2026).

Motivation: Our award goes to a documentary in which the river becomes a metaphor for young women in Kazakhstan to share their experiences, their anger, and their hopes. In a society with rigid gender stereotypes, sexualized violence, and shrinking spaces for protest, this courageous film portrays the beauty of the river as a source of hope for the future, empowerment, and spiritual reflection.

Members of the 2026 Jury: Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, Switzerland; Lea Wohl von Haselberg, Germany; Ingrid Stapf, Germany; Douglas Fahleson, Ireland (President of the Jury); Jean-Jacques Cunnac, France; Stephen Brown, United Kingdom.

Fribourg (Switzerland) 2026

At the 40th Festival international du Films de Fribourg (20-29 2026, the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS awarded its Prize of 5'000 CHF, donated by the Church Aid Organisation in Switzerland "Lenten Offering" and "Interfilm-Switzerland", to the film *The Sun Rises on Us All* (still below) directed by Cai Shangjun (China, 2025).

Motivation of the Jury: Torn by guilt and condemned to a life without love, the protagonist searches for new light and hope. Can this succeed when the weight of an irreversible past crushes the couple, who seem destined to perish in a merciless society? With its restrained cinematography, this film aptly captures the depth of life's inextricable paths in contemporary China. And so, in an unexpected way, "the sun rises on us all".

Members of the Ecumenical Jury FIFF 2026: Frère Thomas Carrique (Cologny, Switzerland); Beat Dietschy (Bern, Switzerland); Elsbeth Fraanje (Gouda, Netherlands), President of the Jury; Claire Zombas (Vétraz-Monthoux, France). ▪