

Filling the Infrastructure Gap:

Why we need democratic communication and information to achieve climate justice



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• 2026 •



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WACC is an international civil society organization that promotes communication as a human right. 80 Hayden Street. Toronto, Ontario, M4Y 3C, Canada.
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Executive Summary

Climate justice is often framed in terms of emissions, environmental protection, energy transitions, and adaptation strategies. Yet, an essential dimension is frequently overlooked: communication and information.

Communities cannot participate in decisions they don't know about, advocate for their rights without evidence, or hold decision-makers accountable when information is inaccessible or manipulated. They cannot meaningfully participate when there are no platforms to make their voices heard locally and beyond.

The experience of WACC Global as an international civil society organisation promoting communication rights over six decades has shown: **Independent, community-led, grassroots and Indigenous communication initiatives are part of the critical infrastructure that makes climate justice possible.**

Through three case studies from our partners in Colombia, Nepal, and Nigeria, “Filling the Infrastructure Gap” demonstrates how communication functions as a necessary component of participation, accoun-

tability, trust-building, and community empowerment – all of which are at the core of the struggle for climate justice.

» The first case study explores the work of Grupo COMUNICARTE in Colombia's páramos high altitude Andean ecosystem through their decades-long work with local radio stations. **It demonstrates how community media fosters local trust and collaboration, essential components when seeking meaningful participation from communities in tackling environmental threats.**

» The second case study examines the Indigenous Rights Foundation in Nepal and its efforts to bridge the gap between high-level hydropower decision-makers and the Indigenous communities most affected by these projects through publicly broadcast dialogues. **The case demonstrates how communication can connect national**



• Photo: Grupo Comunicarte - Colombia •



climate policy with the priorities, knowledge, and lived experiences of frontline communities, creating spaces where decision-makers are publicly accountable to those affected by their choices.

» The third case study examines the Media Awareness Justice Initiative (MAJI) in Nigeria's Niger Delta, an organisation that has created a robust communications ecosystem consisting of community-led data collection, data dissemination, digital access, and digital literacy. **This case demonstrates how communities can move from passive recipients of information to producers of credible evidence, thus enhancing transparency, strengthening accountability, and enabling more meaningful participation in tackling environmental damages.**

Together, these examples reveal that democratic and people-led communication serves multiple functions in the struggle for climate justice:

- » it helps combat disinformation,
- » builds trust,
- » facilitates dialogue,
- » strengthens accountability,
- » validates local knowledge,
- » enables the generation of locally grounded evidence, and
- » expands meaningful access to information and communication platforms.

Most importantly, it transforms communities from subjects of climate policy into active participants in shaping their futures.

As climate and environmental challenges intensify, investments in communication and information ecosystems must be recognised as strategic climate justice interventions. No climate response can be truly democratic, equitable, or effective without support for independent journalism, community media, grassroots communication networks, digital inclusion initiatives, and local information infrastructures.



The climate crisis is also an information and communication crisis



In 2019, the world watched as the Amazon rainforest burned at a scale not seen since the 2010 El Niño–driven drought. Unlike the earlier crisis, however, the 2019 fires were not primarily the result of natural climatic variability. They were a consequence of the sharp increase in deforestation. In the first seven months of that year alone, deforestation rates [rose by more than 60 per cent](#) compared to the same period in 2018, according to Brazil's National Institute for Space Research.

Yet as the crisis unfolded, public understanding of its causes became deeply contested. Senior government officials, including then-Minister of the Environment Ricardo Salles, [attributed the fires to “dry weather, wind, and heat,”](#) downplaying the role of human-driven deforestation. At the same time, then-President Jair Bolsonaro advanced unsubstantiated claims that non-governmental organisations were responsible for setting the fires in an effort to discredit his administration.

[Subsequent research](#) revealed that these narratives **were part of a coordinated campaign of disinformation.** These campaigns sought to move accountability away from state policies that enabled land clearing and toward civil society actors, particularly

environmental NGOs. This shifted attention from the structural drivers of the crisis and eroded public trust in organisations working to protect the forest.

This moment underscores a critical and often overlooked dimension of climate justice: the struggle over information.

Climate injustice is not only produced through unequal exposure to environmental harm or exclusion from decision-making processes. It is also perpetuated through unequal access to accurate, timely, and context-rich information, and unequal access to platforms through which people can communicate, organise, and make their voices heard.

When disinformation spreads, it distorts public understanding, weakens accountability, and undermines the visibility of locally grounded solutions – beginning with those led by Indigenous, local and frontline communities.

Those working for climate justice face a dual challenge. On one hand, we must continue to address the structural drivers of environmental harm. On the other, **there is an urgent need to recognise democratic information and communication as a core pillar of climate justice itself.**



• Photo: MAJI - Nigeria •

Supporting vibrant local communication and information ecosystems – especially in areas impacted by the effects of climate change – is essential to ensuring that local voices are heard. In practice, this entails funding, providing technical accompaniment, and promoting more enabling policy environments in support of community-led local media (radio, television, and digital) and local independent journalism.

There is an urgent need to prioritise local communication-driven efforts that can build trust, transparency, and accountability from the ground up. These initiatives do not just document events in real time. They also provide critical cultural context, elevate ancestral and community knowledge, and highlight localised solutions that often go unnoticed by mainstream outlets.

We must foster spaces where Indigenous, local, and frontline communities can tell their own stories. Doing so helps shift not only what is known about the climate crisis but also whose knowledge is recognised and valued in shaping the global response.

Investing in robust local communication and information ecosystems should not be seen as a supplement to climate justice work but as a foundational part of it.

A lack of trusted media and information initiatives significantly weakens efforts to mobilise communities, influence policy, and build global solidarity. Resourcing local communicators, protecting press freedom, and amplifying Indigenous and local narratives and solutions strengthens these ecosystems. This, in turn, offers a pathway to more accountable, inclusive, and effective climate action.





When conservation felt like imposition, community media found a path forward:

The case of community radio in the Colombian Paramos ecosystem

*When climate and environmental policies fail, it is usually not because they lack scientific knowledge or legal frameworks but because they are disconnected from the social relationships, cultural identities, and communication systems that shape everyday life within affected communities. Efforts to protect natural ecosystems can easily be perceived as external impositions when communities are treated as recipients of information rather than active participants in shaping their environments. The case study of [Grupo COMUNICARTE](#) in Colombia demonstrates that **community media can function as a critical form of climate and knowledge infrastructure, fostering trust through authentic community participation.***

High in the Andes lies a landscape that defies simple translation: the páramos. Often described as a “natural water factory,” these intertropical mountain ecosystems serve as the “Andean glaciers,” capturing moisture from the clouds to provide 70–85% of Colombia’s potable water. The páramos, found only in the high altitudes of Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Peru, are among the most vital and fragile ecosystems on the planet.

In 2018, the Colombian government passed Law 1930 (“The Páramos Law”), a landmark piece of legislation designed to protect this ecosystem from the pressures of mining, hydrocarbon extraction, and intensive agriculture. At its core, the law seeks to delimit the páramos, drawing firm boundaries for preservation.

However, in the reaches of the mountains, these boundaries are often perceived as a threat. For the communities who have called these heights home for generations, the delimitation of land is frequently interpreted as government expropriation. Such long-standing friction has fueled a profound mistrust of state institutions, creating a barrier that prevents meaningful or constructive engagement with the population.

Amidst this tension, a familiar presence offers a path forward. Identified by their signature forest-green and sky-blue vests, the members of Grupo COMUNICARTE have walked these territories since long before the law was drafted or institutional interest arrived. Their





legitimacy is earned through decades of presence and deep-seated trust.

For the communities of the páramos, Grupo COMUNICARTE is not an external observer but a partner that prioritises local interests over the imposition of outside agendas. **Their communication efforts don't just focus on preservation. In the stories they tell through local radio stations, printed booklets, and audiovisual content shared digitally, they weave together the recipes of the region, the stories of the elders, and the myths and legends of the high mountains. In doing so, they recognise the territory as a living whole – honouring its history and complexity rather than treating it as a vacant plot for conservation.**

In 2020, this trust was translated into action through an innovative pedagogical model. The team helped establish a network of 10 community radio stations across several páramos ecosystems. Working together, members of the network produced a series of 280 educational radio magazines dedicated to the preservation of the páramos. These programs were broadcast across local radio stations, which remain the heartbeat of communication in these communities. The initiative helped transform the community's initial skepticism into a collective commitment to protecting their own territory.

Director Alma Montoya, communicators and workshop facilitators Esmeralda Quevedo, Eliecer Pinto, and Edwin Sandoval of Grupo COMUNICARTE offer three ways in which community media foster trust in the communities they are immersed in: **participatory communication, horizontal education, and creative resistance:**

1.

Moving beyond traditional journalism toward participatory communication: Traditional journalism often maintains a rigid boundary between the “expert” who provides the information and the “passive” receiver. Community media, however, dissolves this line. Through formats like radio dramas, the act of communication



What is community media?

The work of Grupo COMUNICARTE exemplifies what scholars and practitioners describe as community media. Community media is a form of alternative, grassroots communication that operates outside the influence of commercial or government-controlled systems. As communication scholar Dr. Clemencia Rodríguez **defines it**, community media is “media technologies in the hands of communities producing media narratives for those communities.” Unlike mainstream outlets that often prioritise ratings or state agendas, community media is a localised tool for self-representation and collective action.

Community media is recognised by UNESCO as a vital component for a pluralistic media ecology. It decentralizes media ownership and ensures that the right to freedom of expression is accessible to everyone, not just those with institutional power.



becomes a collective process where anyone can be a creator. At Grupo COMUNICARTE's workshops, for example, it is common to see a grandfather collaborating with his grandson or the local store owner working alongside a student to weave their shared reality into a script. This participatory approach ensures that stories are not just “about” the community but “of” the community, making the information feel close and accessible rather than technical or forced.

2. Participation through the recognition of local expertise: Traditional climate education often relies on a top-down approach: officials instruct a community on how to take care of resources. In community media, however, instead of being lectured, community members are invited to reflect on their own daily lives, examining their own practices of care with their environment – or the lack thereof. The act of sharing personal struggles and successes in protecting natural resources becomes a contribution to a collective body of knowledge. This process validates lived experience as a legitimate form of expertise. **In doing so, community media ensures that climate action feels relevant, achievable, and locally owned.**

3. Strategic resistance through creativity: In regions where, for political or economic gain, armed actors target those defending the land, trust becomes a matter of survival. Communities are more willing to engage with and act on information when it comes from communicators whom they trust and who can comprehend the dangers they face. Through creativity, community-led media have developed ways to continue denouncing injustices without exposing communities to greater risks.



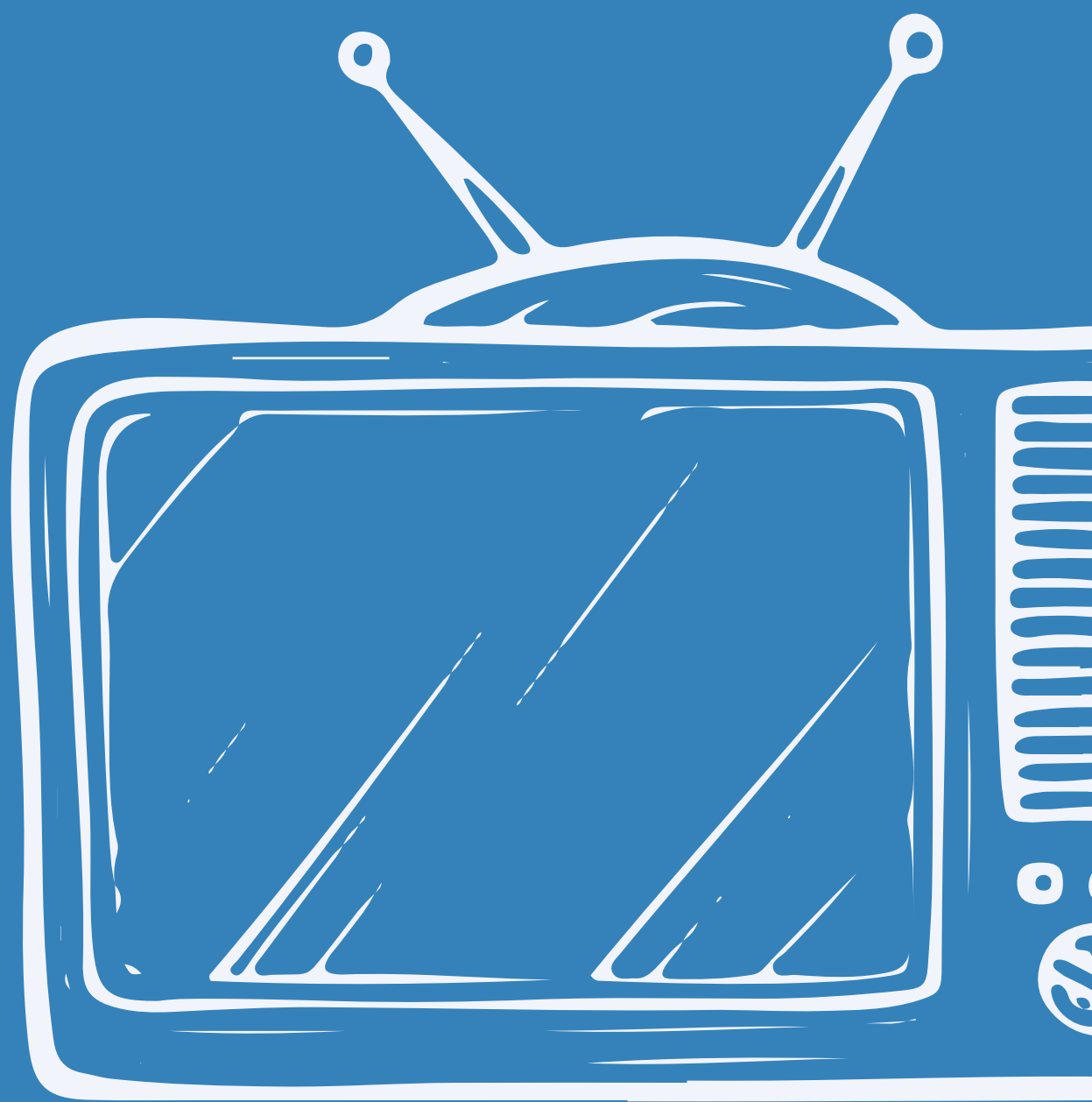


The ten-chapter [radio podcast Killa-rococha](#), is an example of this. Killa-rococha narrates the story of a fictitious town grappling with the arrival of an international corporation and its open-pit mine. Although the characters and the town are fictional, the story reflects that of many communities in the region. The power of this format, says Alma Montoya, lies in its universal resonance: people from entirely different towns listened to the podcast and felt it was talking directly about their own territory. **Framing the harmful consequences of extraction through a fictional lens allows the message to be transmitted across the airwaves in a way that minimises personal risk.**

Grupo COMUNICARTE fosters trust with the communities they work with by grounding environmental education in local culture, lived experience, and participatory storytelling. At the same time, they acknowledge the risks communities face when speaking out against powerful political and economic interests, adapting their communication efforts to inform and mobilise without putting people in greater danger. **Their work reveals that lasting environmental preservation depends not only on laws or institutional interventions but also on the existence of trusted communication ecosystems that communities recognise as their own.**



• Photo: Grupo Comunicarte - Colombia •





When climate policy ignored Indigenous knowledge, a media network created spaces for dialogue:

Bridging grassroots knowledge and policy-making spaces in Nepal



*The pursuit of global climate targets often overlooks a fundamental truth – **policies are only as effective as their connection to the people they impact.** The case of Nepal's hydropower expansion serves as a powerful testament to the need to bridge the gap between high-level decision-making spaces and community-based knowledge. It is clear that without intentional communication channels, even “green” initiatives risk replicating old patterns of marginalisation. The work of the [Indigenous Rights Foundation](#) illustrates how communication allows for national ambitions to align with local realities.*

Under the Paris Agreement, Nepal committed to dramatically expanding its hydropower capacity, from approximately 782–787 megawatts (MW) prior to 2015 to 15,000 MW by 2030 and 28,500 MW by 2035. While this target might initially be seen as a positive step toward clean energy transition, its implementation reveals a deeper tension at the heart of climate policy. **Solutions designed at the national or global level can produce harmful environmental and social consequences when they are disconnected from the realities of frontline communities.**

In Nepal, many of these hydropower projects rely on waterways and lands that have long been stewarded by Indigenous communities. These communities are disproportionately impacted by such developments and frequently excluded from the decision-making processes that shape them, often in violation of the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). This disconnect illustrates a broader structural issue in climate justice – **the marginalization of the very knowledge systems that have sustained ecosystems for generations.**



To bridge this gap, the Indigenous Rights Foundation has developed an innovative model based on local communication. They facilitate dialogues between Indigenous communities, government officials, and developers and broadcast them through TV, radio, and online platforms. These spaces allow knowledge to flow in multiple directions, serve as forums for raising concerns, and provide mechanisms for accountability. Since the dialogues are publicly broadcast, they extend beyond the immediate participants, enabling wider communities to understand projects affecting their territories and hold decision-makers accountable. In the span of one year, this initiative reached approximately 1 million people through cable, satellite, TV, internet, and social media.

Dev Kumar Sunuwar, cofounder of the Foundation, highlights three key factors that demonstrate how communication can serve as a bridge between grassroots

knowledge and decision-making power:

1. Validating Indigenous knowledge as climate expertise: Indigenous peoples are not merely “vulnerable populations”; they are knowledge holders with generations of experience in ecosystem stewardship. Since their livelihoods and cultural identities are inextricably linked to the land, they possess place-based expertise on resource management that modern policy often lacks. Communication platforms serve to moving it from the margins to the centre of climate discourse where it can be recognised as actionable expertise.

2. Decentring power through on-site dialogues: Traditional decision-making usually happens in urban boardrooms, far removed from the project site. The Indigenous Rights Foundation **rebalances the power dynamic**



• Photo: Indigenous Media Foundation - Nepal •



• Photo: Indigenous Media Foundation - Nepal •

by hosting facilitated dialogues directly within the affected territories. When decision-makers have to be physically present in the community's context, they are forced to witness the physical and social realities of their policies firsthand, which significantly strengthens the legitimacy and grounding of the conversation.

3. Creating a public record for accountability: The act of broadcasting these dialogues transforms private promises into public commitments. When government and corporate actors make statements on the record, the broadcast of these commitments serves as a **permanent accountability tool**. This motivates communities to monitor progress and advocate for compliance.

The Indigenous Rights Foundation transforms communication into a strategic infrastructure for climate justice, bridging the gap between grassroots knowledge and high-level decision-making. When the ancestral wisdom of Indigenous communities is amplified through media, documented through journalism, and integrated into the public record, it transforms "informed consent" from a legal requirement into a lived reality. **This model demonstrates that communication can serve as an essential connective tissue to align national and global goals with local realities**, thus mitigating negative impacts that the transition to clean energy can have on local communities.





Their environmental reality was dismissed as anecdotal, so they started collecting their own data:



Digital justice as environmental justice in the Niger Delta



• Photo: MAJI - Nigeria •

Across many territories, communities live with the daily realities of pollution, extraction, and environmental degradation, **yet their testimonies are frequently dismissed as insufficient within institutional and corporate decision-making spaces that prioritise quantitative data.** The case of the [Media Awareness Justice Initiative \(MAJI\)](#), in Niger Delta, Nigeria, demonstrates how communication infrastructure, digital access, and community-owned data collection can transform environmental advocacy. MAJI has built a local communication ecosystem that enables communities



to collect environmental data, transform it into compelling stories, and make those stories accessible to the people most affected. In doing so, the organisation shows how communication can serve as a mechanism for producing evidence, democratizing information, and enabling communities to actively monitor, document, and respond to environmental harm within their own territories.

For decades, communities in Nigeria's Niger Delta have faced the devastating environmental consequences of crude oil extraction, including oil spills, contaminated water sources, declining air quality, and the destruction of agricultural livelihoods. Although local communities consistently document and speak about these impacts, their experiences are often dismissed by corporations and government institutions due to a lack of quantitative data capable of "proving" the extent of the damage.

This challenge became deeply personal for the environmental activist, audiovisual producer, and digital rights campaigner Okoro Onyekachi "Kachi" Emmanuel. In 2012, Kachi produced [a documentary video](#) highlighting the environmental destruction caused by oil extraction in the Niger Delta. Although the documentary contained visual evidence of oil spills and testimonies from impacted residents, decision-makers and corporate actors questioned the legitimacy of the findings because there was little measurable data accompanying the stories. **The response exposed a larger structural problem – communities experiencing environmental harm were expected to provide technical evidence despite lacking access to the tools and infrastructure necessary to collect it.**





Rather than abandoning the work, Kachi expanded his approach beyond documentary filmmaking and founded the Media Awareness Justice Initiative (MAJI). MAJI developed a community-centred environmental monitoring model that combined storytelling, digital access, and low-cost technology. Through the deployment of affordable sensors capable of collecting air quality data every fifteen minutes, communities were able to independently monitor this issue in real time. This data was then shared through an online platform called [DATACAB \(Data Casting for Biodiversity\)](#), accessible to civil society organisations, journalists, government officials, and community members themselves.

MAJI quickly realised that data collection alone was insufficient if the communities most affected could not access or engage with the information being produced. Internet access in many Niger Delta communities remained expensive, with mobile data costs reaching up to one or two US dollars per day for 1–2 GB, an unsustainable cost for many residents. As a result, the very people experiencing environmental harm were often disconnected from the digital spaces where advocacy and information-sharing occurred.

In response, MAJI implemented [solar-powered internet access points](#) connected to community Wi-Fi systems, dramatically reducing the cost of connectivity. Community members could now access unlimited internet for less than 30 cents per day, compared to the significantly higher costs of mobile data plans.

Recognising that access without knowledge can reproduce existing inequalities, MAJI also developed [digital literacy initia-](#)

[tives](#) focused on misinformation, disinformation, data interpretation, web development, and digital communication skills. This last component of the communication ecosystem MAJI has created, is vital in strengthening communities' ability to identify, challenge, and resist misinformation and disinformation – ensuring that environmental decision-making is grounded in credible, locally generated evidence rather than false or misleading narratives.

After five years of implementing this model, MAJI's work highlights three key lessons about the relationship between communication, data, and environmental justice:

1. Community-generated data creates legitimacy in environmental advocacy: While frontline communities often possess deep qualitative knowledge about environmental harm, institutional actors frequently prioritise quantitative evidence when determining whether action is warranted. MAJI demonstrates that communities themselves can generate credible quantitative data through accessible technologies such as low-cost sensors. This challenges the assumption that scientific environmental monitoring must remain exclusively in the hands of outside experts. **Communities that combine lived experience with measurable evidence strengthen their ability to advocate for accountability and policy change.**

2. Access to information is as important as producing it: The existence of environmental data alone does not guarantee justice: information must be accessible to the communities most affected by environmental



harm. MAJI recognised that no single organisation can simultaneously collect data, translate it, and distribute it effectively across all audiences. As a result, the organisation shifted from solely producing media content to creating open data infrastructures so that other storytellers, journalists, and advocacy groups can access the information and use it to share their own stories. Collaborations with youth- and women-led organisations, such as Rooted Rising, helped transform technical environmental information into accessible audiovisual narratives capable of reaching wider audiences and strengthening public awareness.

3.

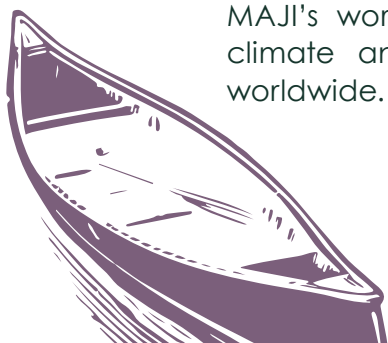
Digital literacy enables communities to actively engage in environmental justice: MAJI's digital literacy programmes help community members to identify misinformation, interpret environmental data, participate in online advocacy, and contribute to digital storytelling efforts surrounding environmental harm. Because organisations alone cannot monitor every rural territory in real time, community participation becomes essential for identifying oil spills and environmental emergencies as they occur. **In this sense, digital justice becomes inseparable from environmental justice – the ability to access, interpret, and contribute information directly shapes a community's capacity to defend its territory and demand accountability.**

MAJI's work offers a broader lesson for climate and environmental movements worldwide. **Communities that possess the**

tools, access, and knowledge necessary to produce, interpret, and mobilise information are better equipped to defend their territories and livelihoods. They can document environmental harms as they occur, challenge misinformation and disinformation, and transform lived experiences into credible evidence that shapes policy and demands accountability.



• Photo: MAJI - Nigeria •





Conclusion

Communication is often viewed as a tool that supports climate and environmental justice. The cases from WACC partners in Colombia, Nepal, and Nigeria show that communication and information systems are themselves an arena of action for climate justice.

Across diverse contexts, from the Colombian páramos ecosystem to the Indigenous territories of Nepal and the oil-rich communities of the Niger Delta, the same lesson emerges – communities are most capable of protecting their territories when they possess the means to communicate, organise, document, and share their realities on their own terms.

Taken together, these experiences highlight several clear conclusions:

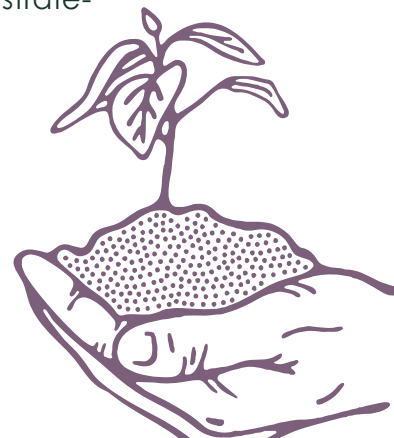
-  **Climate justice is inseparable from information justice.** Communities cannot effectively defend their territories, participate in decision-making, or advocate for environmental protection without access to accurate, relevant, and trustworthy information.
-  **It is essential to support locally grounded communication initiatives, particularly at a time when disinformation campaigns actively seek to weaken environmental justice movements and erode public trust.** Such initiatives counter false narratives, strengthen information systems, and enable communities to make informed decisions about their environment.
-  **Independent and community-led communication initiatives are key actors in advancing climate justice.** Because they are rooted in the territories they serve, they can respond to local realities, build trust, and elevate perspectives that are often overlooked by mainstream media and institutional actors.
-  **The power of proximity matters.** Community communicators live the realities they report on. Their understanding is not derived solely from research or short-term engagement, but from lived experience and long-term relationships. This proximity allows them to communicate environmental challenges with a depth, nuance, and authenticity that outside actors often cannot replicate.
-  **Trust is a climate justice asset.** The effectiveness of WACC partners such as Grupo COMUNICARTE, the Indigenous Rights Foundation, and MAJI stems not only from the information they produce but also from the



- ③ trust they have cultivated over years within their communities. Trust enables participation, strengthens legitimacy, and creates the conditions necessary for collective action.
- ③ **Communication spaces are accountability spaces.** Public dialogues, local media platforms, and community information networks bring decision-makers closer to the realities of affected communities, creating opportunities for transparency and public accountability that might not otherwise exist.
- ③ **Communities are not merely beneficiaries of climate action.** They also are producers of critical knowledge. Indigenous knowledge, local experience, community-generated data, and grassroots storytelling all contribute essential forms of expertise that need to inform environmental governance and climate policy.
- ③ **Technology can strengthen environmental justice when communities control it.** Affordable internet access, digital literacy, and community-owned monitoring tools expand the ability of communities to document environmental harm, challenge misinformation, and participate in advocacy efforts on their own terms.
- ③ **Combating climate change requires investing in and strengthening communication ecosystems.** Environmental solutions cannot succeed when misinformation flourishes, communities are excluded from public debate, or local knowledge is ignored. Investments in communication and information infrastructure are investments in more effective, equitable, and sustainable climate action.

The organisations highlighted here in “Filling the Infrastructure Gap” demonstrate that communication is the connective tissue that links communities to decision-makers, local knowledge to public policy, environmental realities to evidence, and grassroots action to broader movements for justice.

Achieving lasting, equitable, and community-driven outcomes requires sustained investment in independent journalism, community media, digital inclusion, and Indigenous and grassroots communication ecosystems. These are not optional additions – they are fundamental to strategic climate justice intervention.





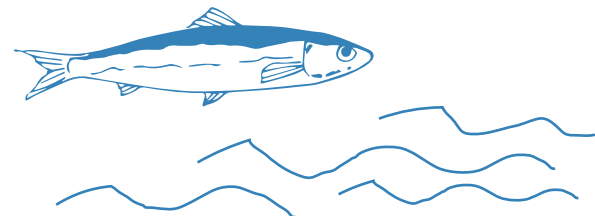
• Photo: ACT Alliance •

About WACC

WACC is the global leader in defending the full spectrum of communication rights—the rights of every person to access information, share ideas, and be heard. We work with communities, faithbased and human rights organizations, media, and international agencies to ensure communication is open, inclusive, and democratic.

Rooted in universal principles of social justice, WACC was founded in 1968 to challenge the misuse of media and uphold their power for the common good. Today, we unite members and partners across eight global regions to dismantle unjust communication structures and build media that reflect dignity, equality, and diversity.

In a world where media and digital systems are too often profit-driven, homogenizing, and polarizing, WACC champions people-centred communication that strengthens democracy, justice, and community. To learn more, please visit www.waccglobal.org





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