

COMMUNITIES TELLING THEIR OWN STORIES: our experiences with community-led monitoring



photo credit: Nazdeek

Coordinated by the ESCR-Net Monitoring Working Group
and featuring eight ESCR-Net member organizations

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development | Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia
Fundar - Centro de Análisis e Investigación | Hakijamii | International Accountability Project
Nazdeek | Participation and Practice of Rights | Video Volunteers

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Introduction

What Is The ESCR-Net Monitoring Working Group?

We are a collaborative group of organizations from around the world that seek to secure economic and social justice. One of the key principles of our network is to ensure that our activities are grounded in the lived experience of people affected by ESCR violations and social injustice. We accomplish this primarily by seeking the inclusion and leadership of social movements and grassroots organizations.

As the [ESCR-Net Monitoring Working Group](#) (MWG), we recognize the critical role data and evidence play in advancing social justice and understand community-led monitoring as a key approach for producing ESCR data – one that puts communities at the center of monitoring and documentation.

What is this brief about?

Community-led monitoring is a process through which people collect and analyze data on issues that affect them, in order to organize, campaign and advocate for their rights and broader structural changes.

Throughout the next year, as members of the MWG, we will connect with fellow ESCR-Net members to collectively reflect and exchange information on ways to center the perspectives of people directly affected by ESCR violations. This brief is an initial step in that reflection, specifically addressing the question: What does it mean for monitoring processes to be “community-led” in practice?

Eight member organizations from ESCR-Net engaged with that question by exploring the role of communities in monitoring and documentation processes in this brief — an initiative that was born out of a strategic discussion we held in September 2017. (The collection of short case studies on the work of these organizations is available at this end of this brief.)

Following an overview of our work on community-led monitoring, this brief examines different approaches used in designing monitoring projects and collecting and analyzing data; it concludes with members’ reflections on short-term and long-term impacts and challenges of community-led monitoring.

Organizations featured in this brief:

- Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD)
- Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia (ACIJ, Argentina)
- Fundar-Centro de Análisis e Investigación (Fundar, Mexico)
- Hakijamii (Kenya)
- International Accountability Project (IAP, International)
- Nazdeek (India)
- Participation and Practice of Rights (PPR, Northern Ireland)
- Video Volunteers (VV, India)

Issues monitored:

Across the projects analyzed, we work alongside our communities to monitor of a range of issues, including:

- Delivery of public services that realize socio-economic rights, like housing, food, water and sanitation, and maternal and child health (ACIJ, Hakijamii, Nazdeek, PPR and VV)
- Budget allocations and expenditure (Hakijamii, ACIJ and Nazdeek)
- Infrastructural and development projects financed or carried out by states and international institutions, like the World Bank and the European Union (IAP, FUNDAR and ACIJ)
- The changes resulting from women's organizing, mobilization and campaign work, and the needs of grassroots movements to make such actions more effective (APWLD)

Data collection methods:

- Pen and paper survey tools: door-to-door surveys), focus group discussions and interviews (Fundar, IAP, Nazdeek and PPR).
- RTI, Right to Information requests (Hakijamii, Nazdeek and ACIJ)
- SMS, text messages, and web technologies (Hakijamii, Nazdeek and ACIJ)
- Visual-media, such as videos and photos (VV, PPR and Hakijamii)
- Participatory methods, such as narration of personal stories and diaries, cognitive mapping of problems, power mapping, and community mapping (APWLD, PPR)

Who conducted the monitoring?

- Organizations' staff (ACIJ, IAP and, FUNDAR)
- Community leaders and trained activists (Nazdeek, VV, IAP and APWLD), or wider sections of the community (ACIJ, Hakijamii and PPR)

Type of outputs produced:

Data for participatory budgeting processes, quantitative and qualitative reports, infographics, maps, court evidence, videos, photos and other advocacy materials

How the data was used:

- To discuss findings and seek accountability in meetings with officials - In judicial and non-judicial remedies (e.g., grievance mechanisms and litigation)
- In policy advocacy
- In narrative-shifting campaigns (e.g., street protests, pickets and media exposure)

A. Designing a monitoring strategy

Who owns the monitoring process?

Monitoring processes are often part of a wider advocacy campaign strategy led either by communities or member organizations. Deciding on monitoring needs, and designing the steps of the monitoring process, has key implications on who owns the content, and, in turn, who controls its outcome.

For monitoring strategies to be owned by community members, decisions about the scope, the strategies and methodologies of data collection and analysis, and the uses of the data need to involve the community meaningfully. Across our work, communities had different degrees of involvement and control of the process design.

How did we decide on what to monitor?

Overall, the choice of what exactly to monitor is based on:

- A. the needs and priorities of communities—often as parts of broader alliances—with special consideration given to particular groups such as women
- B. human rights standards, existing regulations and legal provisions— which provide a framework for data collection and advocacy

Both elements are central to the design of monitoring processes, but the relation between these two varies across MWG member practices. The decision of what to monitor may have rested entirely on what communities wanted to collect data on (VV, PPR and APWLD), and/or on existing laws, policies and human rights standards, which provide a framework for communities to define the the monitoring scope (APWLD, Nazdeek, IAP, ACIJ and FUNDAR).

Monitoring, Research and Learning as Feminist Movement Building

APWLD used an approach called [Feminist Participatory Action Research \(FPAR\)](#) to support grassroots women activists in conducting research, analysis and developing evidence-based collective actions. Accepting that all forms of knowledge and evidence are gendered, FPAR challenges existing power structures and norms that define whose knowledge is legitimate, and empowers marginalized women as experts in their own

lives.

Rooted in movement building, FPAR facilitates a space for women activists to learn, connect and amplify their struggles for social justice by monitoring and reflecting on their experiences, responses and needs. For instance, the project [“Amplifying Voices, Strengthening Feminist Movements for Development Justice.”](#) involved 10 grassroots organizations of rural, indigenous, migrant, and urban poor women (RIMUP). Young women researchers were identified by each organisation to investigate three questions:

1. What are the biggest problems we face?
2. What is the evidence?
3. Where are the spaces to make change, and who holds power?

The research explored issues of growing inequalities (of wealth, power and resources) and unfair development practices and exploitation from the lived experiences of RIMUP women to inform collective advocacy and campaign actions. More importantly, the FPAR process was a way for local organisations to track the changes they are making in their local context, and reflect and improve their goals and strategies towards long-term structural changes. (see section D)

The data was collected through participatory methods, decided on by local organizations and communities during the planning stage and refined along the way. Methodologies used included focus group discussions, participatory observations, narration of personal histories and mapping methods (such as power mapping), participatory problem structuring, and community mapping. Methods were selected on the basis of how meaningful they were to the community—so in a community with limited literacy, imagery, graphics and oral histories may be prioritised.

Deciding who collects the data and how

Deciding on how the data is collected has obvious implications on who will collect it. For instance, the use of questionnaires or written surveys may pose a barrier to people with low literacy levels, whereas videos and SMS text messages may be more accessible. Who collected the data, in turn, will have implications on how it is used and by whom.

Supporting community voices in consultation processes of development projects

Fundar supports indigenous communities in Mexico affected by large-scale infrastructural projects by monitoring consultation conducted by the government with concerned communities. Through interviews and testimonies, right-to-information applications and official documentation reviews, Fundar gathers evidence used by affected communities (and other civil society groups) to strengthen their voices in consultation processes, redress specific instances of violations, and, more broadly, support indigenous people's struggles for land rights. While community members do not collect the data directly, Fundar neutral "watchdog" role ensures a higher degree of neutrality and independence that may help legitimize [the evidence collected](#).

Some organizations work with community volunteers (mentor-trainers in the case of APWLD) to develop data collection tools and strategies. In other cases, organizations undertake data collection themselves, upon the request of communities and on the basis of needs identified by community members (see Fundar's previous example).

Other organizations instead established a mechanism or a process for community members to gather and report data on specific rights and entitlements. Here the monitoring is conducted by communities, but in ways established by organizations. These strategies can be particularly effective for collecting large-scale, up-to-date data in ways that can be used for advocacy. (e.g., ACIJ's Caminos de Villa and Nazdeek's SMS project – see section C).

A community-driven approach to the progressive realization of ESCR

In Northern Ireland, Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) has been working with communities to create their own monitoring process, therefore ensuring that community members own and control the process from beginning to end. Community-based groups or individuals seek the support of PPR to strengthen their struggles and work with the organization to help them develop campaign strategies that are in line with their needs and capacity.

Once community members identify specific issues that affect them, PPR supports them in collecting evidence to establish a baseline (e.g., who is affected by that particular issue, how were they affected and how many were affected), develop data collection strategies and tools and gather the data. From this baseline, and in light of the state's relevant legal obligations, community members set human rights indicators and benchmarks to hold the state, and its agencies, accountable for its obligations. Indicators are designed to measure the progressive realization of ESCR over a time-bound period, in a way that [respond to concrete needs of community members](#).

B. Collecting the data

Involving community members in data collection requires identifying methodologies and tools that can be used by them. Generally speaking, organizations work with groups of community volunteers who carry out data collection. The process usually begins with building a strong and shared awareness of rights and entitlements, as well as strengthening documentation and investigation skills. Organizations then work with volunteers to develop data-gathering tools that are accessible, easy to use and that elicit information that volunteers are well positioned to gather. For instance, Hakijamii trains community volunteers on using Right to Information (RTI) requests to seek data on budgetary allocations on economic and social rights. The information gathered is then assessed against the actual delivery of services in their communities. Video Volunteers, on the other hand, has trained more than [200 Community Correspondents](#) who record videos on everyday issues that affect them or their communities. The use of technology can make monitoring more inclusive by overcoming literacy barriers and the use of videos specifically helps convey the perspective of community members through their powerful stories (see following examples of technologies used for data collection and advocacy).

Connecting communities affected by development projects in different countries to tell their collective story

The International Accountability Project connects monitoring processes taking place at the community level to tell a broader story and inform collective advocacy. In 2013, IAP set up a [Global Advocacy Team](#), which involved communities affected by development projects (funded by international financial institutions) in eight different countries. IAP selected and trained an activist-organizer from each community on research and advocacy skills, facilitated a collective process to identify research questions and developed an advocacy strategy that they pursued at the local level in their own communities, as well as globally. The data was gathered through surveys and interviews, and used for advocacy at the local level.

A further level of analysis was done by looking at findings across communities, and building a collective narrative around issues related to development projects. This led to the development of broader recommendations that are relevant across communities aimed at ensuring community participation in designing and implementing development projects in line with their human rights, adequately addressing resettlements and

relocation, and ensuring accountability for harms caused. The global advocacy strategy involved meetings with officials from the World Bank and the US government to influence their decision-making processes on development projects. These global recommendations informed IAP's work and organizational strategy for the upcoming years.

C. Analyzing the data:

Data analysis can often be a more technical stage where organizations allied with communities tend to play a prominent role, usually by conducting first level of analysis and then validating and discussing the findings with community members.

PPR and Hakijamii facilitate processes through which community members discussed the data collected, make sense of it collectively and articulate it in concrete, time-bound demands for relevant government authorities to act on. Video Volunteers' staff helps correspondents edit their videos recorded by community correspondents and show them to relevant government officials. At times, Video Volunteers decides to provide further support to certain videos, connecting correspondents to other relevant NGOs to amplify and bolster their advocacy actions.

The added value of technology for data collection, aggregation and visualization

Lack of disaggregated data on Adivasi (indigenous) women's access to maternal health services in tea plantations pose a barrier to local groups advocating for improving living and working conditions of tea plantation workers in Assam (India). Similarly, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, ACIJ argued that transparency on how public works are carried out across informal settlements is key for ensuring that these areas would gain adequate access to services.

To address these challenges, both organizations decided to harness the power of technology to make data collection, aggregation and visualization more efficient. "[End maternal mortality now](#)" ("endmmnow") a platform launched by Nazdeek in 2014, allows women living in tea plantation areas to report violations of the rights to health and nutrition via SMS, by using numeric codes corresponding to types of violations and specific locations (e.g., health facilities and food ration shops). Through the platform, Nazdeek and allied communities collect up-to-date data in almost real time from areas that would otherwise be hard to reach (due to their remoteness and limited accessibility). The online platform also aggregates and map the data reported in a way that was not only publicly accessible but also visually compelling. In 2016, the platform was expanded to monitor health, food, water and sanitation in Delhi's informal settlements.

In a similar fashion, ACIJ's [Caminos de Villa](#) gathers, maps and shares key data about public works and infrastructure projects in Buenos Aires' informal settlements. ACIJ's staff collects technical data on ongoing projects (e.g., resources allocated, time-frames for implementation and relevant agencies), which is uploaded on the website and used by community members to assess the implementation of projects on the ground.

Through the platform, information is provided in two ways: from ACIJ to communities (and the public at large) about the details of projects taking place in their areas, and from communities to ACIJ (and relevant public officials) about their actual implementation. Similarly to Nazdeek's "endmmnow," the Caminos de Villa project also allows the aggregation and visualization of large amounts of data, however, in the latter case communities involved are required to have attained higher levels of literacy in order to use the platform and make sense of the data. To mitigate this gap, ACIJ holds community meetings to discuss the data collected and input new data on the platform.

While technology has clear benefits in making data gathering and analysis more efficient, tech-based processes entail equally intense ground-level efforts to coordinate data collection, verify the data gathered and sustain community engagement over time (e.g., through community meetings, awareness raising workshops, support to individual volunteers and additional data collection).

D. Using the data

Across the work of MWG members, communities involved in monitoring processes have different degrees of control over how the collected data would be used. At the very least, communities articulate their demands to relevant stakeholders on the basis of the findings emerging from the analysis. We provide advice and relevant support for specific advocacy activities (e.g., organizing meetings between community members and government officials, organizing marches and pickets, identifying pro bono lawyers, and mobilizing local media). In some cases, we facilitate a process where allied communities decide on how to use the data to advocate for these demands, and take the lead on key actions (Hakijamii and PPR). In other cases, we play a leading role in carrying out advocacy activities, albeit informed by community perspectives.

In APWLD case for instance, RIMUP women armed with research evidence, took collective action to “protest, march, petition, claim spaces of power, influence power holders, challenge patriarchy at home and in politics, organize workplaces, create supportive community groups and networks, educate, blockade, meet with officials, hold politicians to commitments through United Nations accountability mechanisms.”

Influencing budgeting and planning processes

Hakijamii supports social movements meaningful participation in Kenyan government processes, including budgeting and planning. Under Kenya’s legal framework, the budgeting process is open to community participation, for instance, through the submission of budget and project proposals. Hakijamii’s role is to make budgetary provisions and annual development plans easy for communities to understand and, in turn, to monitor. Along with allied communities, Hakijamii develops monitoring tools and provides technical support for monitoring the implementation of annual development plans and budgets advancing ESCR. The data collected throughout the implementation cycle is then analyzed in a participatory manner, with communities “taking the front seat in using the information to demand for social change,” and redress violations of their ESCR. For instance, the data is used as evidence for litigation, organizing for consultative meetings with policy makers and duty bearers, and towards other advocacy actions, such as the development of petitions and memorandums. In terms of participating in budgeting and planning processes, social movements have been using information from County Integrated Development Plans to develop project proposals and present them during the budget making and planning processes.

E. The impact of community-led monitoring on people's struggles for ESCRs

Across our experiences, short-term outcomes that resulted from community-led monitoring processes includes:

→ Community awareness, organizing and participation

Monitoring processes provides an opportunity to mobilize community members around key issues that affect them. Through data collection and analysis, community members gain an awareness of their rights, entitlements, and decision-making processes. They come together and build a sense of shared identity and articulated individual and collective demands. According to our experiences, an effective way of sustaining community involvement over time is to develop a calendar of key advocacy opportunities, either linked to formal processes (e.g., Hakijamii's work on participatory budgeting processes) or identified by community members (e.g., PPR). For young women researchers involved in APWLD's Feminist Participatory Action Research, the process not only increased their capacity to use feminist theory, research and advocacy skills, but it also enabled them to "better understand themselves, their activism, their politics, and their connection and solidarity with grassroots women in their communities."

→ Obtaining key ESCR data and shedding a light on structural issues affecting ESCR

Data documenting ESCR violations at individual and collective levels can be a strong tool for advocacy and litigation. At one level, the documentation of individual violations can be used both to seek justice for violations faced by individuals and to strengthen and reinforce collective claims (e.g., through powerful individual stories and testimonies). At a broader level, the aggregation of individual cases helps identify systemic gaps and expose structural injustices that are usually difficult to challenge, such as discriminatory practices in the allocation of public resources, endemic corruption or unfavorable laws and policies. For instance, for residents of Buenos Aires' informal settlements to report on issues in their area, ACIJ developed maps of the

settlements, which were not publicly available until then. The mapping of the settlements and of the issues faced by residents led the city government to include some of these areas in the official urban plan. For the first time, the city officially recognized the need for these areas to receive better services and committed to allocate a portion of the its budget.

→ Opening spaces for contestation with decision-makers and increased visibility of community perspectives

Community organizing and the production of data on issues related to ESCR (e.g. availability of basic services, implementation of local plans and projects) can open spaces for engaging with relevant government stakeholders. Initiatives using technology and media to make data publicly available (such as ACIJ, Nazdeek, Fundar and VV) are particularly effective in bringing visibility to community perspectives on ESCR issues. Visibility in turn leads to new spaces for negotiation and increased influence on decision-making processes. For instance, the data collected by Nazdeek's volunteers prompted the District Government in Assam to agree to hold regular Grievance Redressal Forums with community volunteers to address existing issues in the delivery of food and health services.

Considering the long-term impact on community enjoyment of ESCR, in our experience, community-led monitoring can lead to actual shifts in the power balance between rights-holders and duty-bearers:

→ Communities' ability to advocate for themselves

Organizations across the board stress that community-led monitoring processes have a key impact on building skills, confidence and knowledge of community members to effectively advocate for their own rights. Community members involved in monitoring and documentation increase their leadership and organizing skills, which they use beyond monitoring processes, sustaining advocacy efforts over time. As in the case of APWLD, participatory research processes can strengthen collective action and movement building, and facilitate the articulation of feminist voices that are usually at the margins of public debates. The Manila-based group Tanggol Bayi, for instance, was able to mobilize public pressure and successfully lobby the city government to suspend the privatization of Sampaloc market, where they work. Privatization of public markets threatens women's livelihoods by increasing rent costs of market stalls, mostly run by women. Women from Sampaloc market were also advocating with city and national officials to reform policies regulating the activities of street vendors in Manila.

→ Justice for individuals

In many of our cases, the documentation of violations and the subsequent advocacy or litigation efforts led to tangible advancement of ESCR, increasing access to rights and entitlements for individuals and collectives. For instance, in the case of Video Volunteers, about 1 out of 5 cases documented by Community Correspondents have been redressed, either through low-income women obtaining reproductive health services and cash entitlements, or rural communities securing access to water, electricity and health facilities.

→ Structural achievements

As previously mentioned, community-led monitoring provided opportunities to influence decision-making processes so that they become more transparent and better reflect community priorities and perspectives. In some cases, increased visibility and the articulation of collective demands based on strong evidence led to increased allocation of resources in favor of marginalized groups. For instance, PPR's community-driven campaigns successfully pushed the governments of Scotland and Northern Ireland to invest approximately 4 million GBP towards the improvement of housing conditions and the creation of about 100 social housing units for lower income families—in addition to securing access to existing housing units in numerous other cases.

F. Challenges and potential role of community led monitoring within ESCR-Net

Given the bottom-up nature of community-led monitoring, one of the key challenges faced by many of us is to reconcile community expectations, timeframes, visions and agendas with those of the supporting organizations. Often influenced by funders, organizations have their own agendas and requirements: "... the articulation and coordination with the communities and local actors for the monitoring work, [which] are managed in different times, discourses, agendas and visions, in comparison with the NGOs." (Fundar)

In this sense, reframing monitoring as an organizational practice can help communities and activist groups alike refine their strategies and meet their goals; it can help increase appreciation towards monitoring, which too often is perceived as a "ticking-boxes" exercise to meet donor requirements. An effective reframing would require a focus on community and grassroots activist capacity building in documenting the impact of their actions and the progress towards meeting their goals.

Secondly, another significant challenge is to ensure that consistent and genuine participation of community members is sustained over time, even for initiatives that entail a strong degree of community leadership. Community members may find it difficult to sustain participation due to lack of time, costs associated with monitoring activities, language, literacy and social barriers (especially for women) or declining motivation when monitoring does not lead to expected short-term outcomes.

Thirdly, the context of growing repression poses a threat for activists and community organizers. As monitoring increases visibility of communities and human rights defenders, it also increasingly bears risks for those who document, expose and seek accountability for violations and abuses of ESC rights.

Lastly, we recognize that for community-driven processes to achieve their full potential—making deeper and more systemic change, countering global trends that affect ESCR—documentation and monitoring efforts need to be connected and aggregated across communities in order to amplify the perspectives of community members and influence wider decision-making processes. Fully achieving such connections is an ongoing challenge.

However, to take an initial step in this direction, social movements members of ESCR-Net have developed a [Common Charter for Collective Struggle](#) which outlines common global conditions affecting communities. The Charter has been affirmed by all members of the Network in November 2016, setting the basis for collective actions of ESCR-Net, so that they are grounded in the lived experience and resistance of affected communities. In this sense, community-led monitoring and the work of connecting and amplifying the stories, resistance and visions of communities seem vital to achieving our mission "to build a global movement to make human rights and social justice a reality for all."

Case studies

APWLD - [Feminist Participatory Action Research on Development Justice for Change: “Amplifying Voices, Strengthening Feminist Movements for Development Justice”](#)

ACIJ - [Caminos de la Villa](#)

Fundar - [Supporting indigenous communities by monitoring consultation processes of development projects](#)

Hakijami - [Social movements’ participation to budget processes and local decision-making](#)

Nazdeek - [End MM Now: SMS for Justice](#)

PPR - [Community monitoring of the rights to Housing & Accommodation, Work & Social Security, Health, and Education](#)

VV - [Surveys for Action & India Unheard](#)

escr-net.org/monitoring



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