

# Lessons Learned

Indigenous peoples around the world are mounting campaigns to protect their cultural heritage, as well as the natural resources upon which they depend. As global warming and rainforest depletion become growing world concerns, indigenous peoples are joining forces with people around the globe who are awakening to the need to empower indigenous peoples to act as stewards of the planet's last remaining rainforests.

The three case studies in this report shed light on variables that can help to ensure successful campaigns that meet indigenous peoples' needs. They also highlight common mistakes made by grassroots people, as well as the institutions that support them, as they develop campaign strategies. The lessons outlined in this report provide support for indigenous peoples, as well as outside institutions that work with them, in their efforts to define effective organizing models for the defense of indigenous lands.

The case studies point to three variables needed for effective campaign development. These are the following:

1. Strong leadership roles for indigenous peoples, as well as a core team of indigenous leaders and trusted professionals that can guide the process;



2. An ongoing strategy for developing grassroots capacity to participate in campaign design, as well as to strengthen the ties between indigenous leadership and their grassroots base; and

3. A plan to connect campaign efforts to a broad-based coalition of groups nationally and internationally that can support campaign goals.

This section of the report focuses particularly on the Darien Gap Link campaign, which was the most effective of the three initiatives in achieving indigenous peoples' goals. In this case, indig-

nous peoples were able to lead an international campaign that stopped an intercontinental highway from being built through their lands.

## The Leadership Team

Most campaigns include a leadership team that is in charge of guiding and implementing the initiative. This team's responsibilities may vary but generally include defining consultative strategies, organizing meetings and actions, fundraising, developing alliances with partner organizations, defining media strategies, conducting research efforts and managing funds.

The people included in this leadership team are critical in determining the outcome of a campaign and the interests that the campaign ultimately serves. If indigenous or other local peoples are not included in this leadership team, then their interests will only be at best partially reflected in campaign results. If outside professionals are not included, then the chances of actually achieving campaign goals are significantly reduced.

Of the three case studies, the Darien Gap Link campaign used the most effective leadership team model for meeting grassroots needs. In this case, indigenous peoples created the Indigenous



Pan-American Highway Commission (IPAHC) to act as the leadership team for the campaign. This team included representatives from several indigenous congresses in the region, as well as a technical support staff consisting of professionals from Panama and the United States.

Led by indigenous peoples themselves, the commission became an important vehicle for indigenous peoples to develop initiatives that reflected their own aspirations. At the same time, the inclusion of outside professionals on the team greatly enhanced the ability of indigenous peoples to support their goals with strategic alliances, financial resources and technical expertise. The multi-ethnic team combined local leaders with trusted professionals to catapult the wishes of indigenous peoples effectively into the international debate and stop the construction of the Darien Gap Link.

Another important element of the leadership team for the Darien Gap Link campaign was that the team began with members from only one congress. The Embera-Wounaan General Congress, working with outside professionals, shaped the strategic direction for the effort and began educating their own people with respect to project plans before expanding the commission to include members from other congresses. This early planning gave them the time to ground the national initiative fully in the reality of the lives of their community members. With their clear vision, they were able to



convene other congresses, educate them quickly regarding project plans and play a leadership role in developing campaign strategies for the larger coalition.

The initial leadership model used for much of the Bayano dam campaign was less effective. For the first two decades, indigenous peoples led the efforts with minimal outside assistance. During this period, they were able to sign important agreements with the government committing the state to respond to their needs.

However, the government continually broke these agreements and many of their demands were never implemented. In the 1990s, indigenous leaders began to work more closely with outside partners. By 1996, they had received their comarca. Most recently, they have taken their remaining grievances to the OAS for redress.

The leadership model for the IDB-funded *Darien Sustainable*

*Development Program* also had significant limitations. In this case, only IDB and Panamanian government officials made up the real leadership team for the project, through their inclusion on the IDB project team and the Program Coordination Unit. Participation by grassroots organizations was relegated to committees, which gave these groups opportunities to provide input but not to take on a leadership role in the design of the program. The result has been that the program has, thus far, only modestly addressed indigenous concerns with respect to land rights, natural resource protection, and resolution of land disputes between farmer and indigenous populations.

### **Grassroots Strategies**

An international campaign led by grassroots peoples should include a plan to ensure that the leadership team and other involved local leaders maintain strong ties to their grassroots base. Specifically, leaders need to define and imple-



ment a consultative and organizing strategy for their constituents.

There are two reasons why proactively developing such a strategy is particularly important. Firstly, campaigns can strain the relationship between local leaders and their constituents. With their many demands and sharp deadlines, these initiatives often pressure leaders to spend more of their time in cities negotiating with power holders and less of their time in rural communities developing their grassroots base. At the same time, such campaigns demand that local people maintain a strong unified response. Local people get their power from their numbers and their ability to agree upon a common set of goals, as well as by standing behind a common strategy to achieve them.

In the Darien Gap Link campaign, the leadership team dealt with these competing pressures by reinforcing existing channels of communication with their grassroots base. In addition to discussing the campaign at annual and semi-annual indigenous congresses, IPAHC organized many additional activities to strengthen grassroots involvement. These included the following:

1. **Seminars in villages.** Seminars in villages give community members the kind of personal contact they need to understand the details of upcoming projects affecting their lands, as well as to participate in campaign design. IPAHC representatives and CEALP support staff traveled to many communities to

engage community members in campaign development.

2. **Training workshops.** Training workshops are critical for helping grassroots people think in new ways about how to achieve their campaign goals. IPAHC and support staff brought in outside groups to train commission members themselves, as well as other indigenous leaders and the grassroots base with respect to how to
  - a) influence bank-funded projects;
  - b) use the Panamanian legal system to protect their rights;
  - c) operate a video camera to record their organizing efforts as part of their media strategy; and
  - d) network with international allies, including U.S. government officials, NGOs and indigenous organizations to strengthen their campaigns.
 Organizations with whom IPAHC partnered for these efforts included national groups such as CIMAS, as well as international groups such as the Bank Information Center, the Indigenous Environmental Network and the Multilateral Development Bank Network for Latin America and the Caribbean (Red Bancos).

3. **Site visits.** Bringing international allies to indigenous territories is also an effective way to involve grassroots constituencies in the international components of a campaign. IPAHC hosted site visits for several visitors, which both energized the villagers and deepened the commitment of the outside individuals who came to support indigenous efforts.

4. **Coalition-building meetings in indigenous territories.** When developing coalitions between different grassroots organizations, the leadership team should make an effort to hold meetings not only in the city settings where leaders often congregate, but also in the homelands of the member organizations. In the Darien Gap Link campaign, each participating congress was able to host at least one coalition strategy meeting in villages in their territories.

Because of their location, these meetings were able to engage a much broader range of people in campaign planning. Women, children and spiritual leaders were all brought into the decision-making circle and their presence helped to ground proposals in the full reality of the village setting. The meetings also helped each congress to feel a strong sense of ownership and participation in campaign development, which significantly strengthened the ability of the congresses to work together on the campaign.

5. **Visits to relevant areas.** An effective educational tool is to hold meetings in places that have already been affected by infrastructure or other projects. For example, two of the coalition building meetings were held in the Bayano region where the dam and the Chepo – Yaviza dirt road had already decimated much of the surrounding land. The Kuna of Kunayala participating in the meetings had never been to this region, and were much less familiar with the devastation that roads



can cause to rainforests and rivers. They were moved by this experience and returned to their communities to warn their people of the possible impact the Darien Gap Link might have for their way of life.

In contrast, the IDB-funded *Darien Sustainable Development Program* did not include a cohesive strategy to reinforce the ties between indigenous leadership and their grassroots base. The program did include a consultative process with grassroots people, but these were generally not designed or implemented by indigenous peoples themselves. A consultative process managed by indigenous leaders would have allowed grassroots constituencies much greater opportunity to develop common platforms and strategies for influencing the program. Such organizing efforts would have done much more to engage grassroots constituents, strengthen traditional indigenous governance structures, and hold the program implementers accountable to grassroots needs.

In the Bayano dam case, indigenous leaders have relied primarily on congressional meetings, and trips to communities to develop campaign strategies. Until the 1990s, these channels remained adequate for the type of campaign that the indigenous peoples of the area had developed. With national and international strategies kept to a minimum, campaign leaders were able to spend most of their time in their communities, traveling to the city only infrequently.



However, as the campaign moved squarely into national and international arenas in the 1990s, the need to reinforce community participation in campaign design increased. In the last decade, the affected congresses have supplemented their strategies, when funds were available, with seminars and training sessions in their territories.

### **Broad - Based Coalition of National and International Allies**

A broad-based coalition can leverage indigenous voices so that government and business interests feel pressured to respond to their demands. By collaborating with many different organizations, indigenous and other local people significantly enhance the options available to them to engage their government. In each of the three case studies, indigenous peoples were best able to break open the alliance between the government and business interests to include their own interests when they con-

nected with outside groups to support their claims.

However, developing a broad-based international coalition that maintains indigenous peoples in leadership positions can be a difficult undertaking. National and international players often have much greater access to decision-makers, funders and other power holders, and can unwittingly usurp local people from their position of leadership. In addition, grassroots leaders can often be left behind in these environments because they often operate on a slower timeline than their partners do, in part because they need to wait to consult with their grassroots base before making decisions.

In the Darien Gap Link campaign, the leadership team developed several strategies to help ensure that indigenous leadership remained at the forefront of the broad-based coalition that emerged. These included the following:





1. **Campaign stages.** Indigenous peoples can better maintain a leadership position if they are organized well before the campaign moves into national and international arenas. In the Darien Gap Link campaign, before developing an international strategy, the congresses had already created IPAHC to act as the leadership team for the initiative, raised funds to support their efforts, and held many seminars in indigenous homelands. When the campaign eventually reached national and international arenas, they were well positioned to help shape the agenda for the larger movement.

2. **Trips to countries where international work is based.** Trips by indigenous leaders, as well as by trusted professionals supporting

them, to Washington, DC or other centers of power can cement positive relationships between indigenous peoples and their international partners, and help secure partner support in strengthening indigenous positions. In the Darien Gap Link campaign, indigenous leaders had the opportunity to travel to the United States to meet with partners and discuss plans. In addition, CEALP staff spent time in Washington, DC working with partners, including organizing ongoing meetings to discuss strategy options for the campaigns.

3. **Written and visual aids.**

Visual and written materials can help to bring indigenous voices into international arenas, even when leaders themselves are

unable to travel. IPAHC delegates wrote letters for coalition partners that CEALP staff read at organizing meetings for U.S. partners in Washington, DC. In addition, IPAHC worked with London-based Television Trust for the Environment to develop a 7-minute video on the campaign that helped coalition partners understand the organizing efforts taking place in Panama.

4. **Financial support.** Campaign leadership is often determined by who has the money to organize activities. The leadership team had a small budget that allowed them to mount activities and events in indigenous territories as well as in Washington, DC during critical moments in the campaign. These funds allowed them to



respond more quickly to national and international events by organizing activities such as emergency meetings for indigenous leaders and community members. For example, shortly after indigenous peoples halted the paving of the Chepo-Yaviza dirt road, IPAHC was able to hold an organizing meeting for indigenous leaders through out the region, which included international partners, to discuss follow up.

The IDB-funded *Darien Sustainable Development Program* also included innovative structures for developing a broad-based coalition to support the IDB initiative. The IDB invited many influential national and international figures to sit on the various committees set up by the IDB to inform the program. By involving a broad range of individuals in the program, the IDB has been able to give diverse groups of people greater experience with participatory initiatives. This move has been very important in legitimating the need for local peoples' involvement in bank-funded programs.

The broad-based coalition was chosen by the IDB's leadership team, however, not by the local people that they intended to support. Without local input into these decision-making processes, the coalition will, at best, only partially address local peoples' needs.

In the Bayano dam case, the indigenous peoples had little national and international support during the first twenty years of their struggle, which limited the success of their work. In the 1990s, however, they began to reach out to national and international groups with the result that their efforts became more successful. These new alliances helped them to obtain a comarca, as well as participate in the IDB-funded Darien Sustainable Development Program and the Darien Gap Link campaign.

### Conclusion

This report reviews the history of three campaigns to preserve Panama's Darien Gap. Spanning a period of over thirty years, the case studies give the reader an insider's view into the indigenous struggles that have helped to protect the cultural and biological diversity of this region and to advance the cause of human rights.

Each case study reveals the great courage that indigenous peoples have shown in defending their lands and upholding their ancestral rights. Their campaigns have led them to block roads with their bodies, challenge powerful interests in their own country and abroad and learn new ways of organizing.

In a world where victories for indigenous peoples' rights and

rainforest protection often seem sparse, Panama represents unusual success. Through the campaigns examined in this report, indigenous peoples in Panama working together with outside partners have gained title to a comarca, stopped an international highway from being built through their lands, and stimulated a major initiative by the IDB to include local people in project planning and implementation.

These successes give these struggles global significance. The lessons from these experiences add to the growing body of knowledge regarding ways to organize successful international campaigns led by grassroots people.

Together, the three case studies show that when indigenous peoples can effectively organize themselves to develop common platforms and then link their strategies to national and international allies, they can have tremendous political clout. The triumphs of the Kuna, Embera and Wounaan peoples demonstrate that national and international movements working together for change can tip the balance of the power equation and keep governments and international lending institutions accountable to grassroots needs. Their experience holds out hope for indigenous peoples and their lands through



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## The Authors



### Alicia Korten:

Alicia Korten has over fifteen years of experience as a researcher, community organizer and campaigner in Latin America, the United States and Asia. She received her degree in Latin American Studies from Brown University in 1992. Following graduation she received a Fulbright scholarship to write her book *Ajuste Estructural en Costa Rica: Una Medicina Amarga* (Structural Adjustment in Costa Rica: A Bitter Pill), an indictment of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's economic policies in Costa Rica. Between 1993 and 1996, she acted as the Associate Director for CEALP's Indigenous Program while living in Panama. In this position, she provided a leadership role in CEALP's support of indigenous peoples' successful campaign to stop the construction of the Pan-American Highway through Panama's Darien Gap. She has lived in Washington, DC since 1996 where she worked as CEALP's U.S. Coordinator and currently has her own practice in the field of organizational development and leadership. She is available to do workshops on building international campaigns with grassroots constituencies and can be reached at: [akorten@igc.org](mailto:akorten@igc.org) or at telephone number: (202) 364 – 5369.



### Hector Huertas Gonzalez:

Hector Huertas is a Kuna indigenous person who has been a leader within the indigenous movement in Panama for over two decades. Since receiving his law degree from Panama's National University in 1992 he has become the primary negotiator for ground-breaking laws for indigenous peoples in Panama including three land ownership laws which established comarcas for the Kuna peoples of both Madungandi (Law 24, 1996) and Wargandi (Law 34, 2000) as well as for the Ngobe – Bugle peoples (Law 10, 1997). He was also instrumental in crafting a recently passed law protecting indigenous property rights. Mr. Huertas served as Director of CEALP's Indigenous Program between 1986 and 1996. Currently he assists the Indigenous Program and acts as the technical adviser for the Indigenous Issues Commission of the Legislative Assembly. His publications include *Indigenous Peoples' International Environmental Agenda*, which he co-authored with Bibiana García Romea and Atencio López.







