CONSULTANCY ON COLLECTIVE PROTECTION AND TERRITORIAL SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS, LAND, AND ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

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ALLIANCE FOR LAND, INDIGENOUS AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS

BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT AND STAKEHOLDERS

Peace Brigades International (PBI) is a non-governmental organization providing international accompaniment to human rights defenders and at-risk communities. PBI is a member of the ALLIED Network, a global civil society network founded to encourage multi-stakeholder action to influence systemic change for the recognition, support, and protection of Indigenous, Land, and Environmental Defenders (ILEDs). As co-chair - together with the World Resources Institute (WRI) - of the Support and Solidarity Group of the ALLIED Network, the Universal Rights Group (URG) has asked PBI to participate in the implementation of the project "Territorial Accompaniment and Collective Protection in Latin America".

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

This project aims to consolidate the knowledge of both PBI and the ALLIED Network on collective protection and identify concrete opportunities that will allow ILEDs in the Latin American region to strengthen their collective protection strategies. To this end, a **participatory diagnosis** was carried out in Latin America, aimed at understanding the context ILEDs face and the diverse strategies developed in response to it. Through this analysis, it was decided to conduct a more **in-depth investigation in Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, and the Amazonian tri-border region linking Peru, Brazil, and Colombia.** Three case studies were organized in Colombia, Brazil, and Ecuador to connect with local organizations and obtain first-hand information.

FINISHED PRODUCTS

The main product produced as a result of the participatory assessment is a **final report** (which presents an analysis of the context and the existing legal framework on the subject, a conceptual framework for collective protection and a mapping of existing strategies in the territories, the findings and the main recommendations, with special emphasis on those directed towards donors). The second deliverable consisted of a **methodology** to strengthen the collective protection capacities of ILEDs facing risk on the front line in the territories. It consists of 4 modules: Introduction to Collective Protection and Context Analysis; Conducting a Collective Risk Analysis and Sharing Collective Protection Strategies between Territories; Introduction to the Legal Framework for the Defense of Human Rights, Indigenous Rights, Land and Environmental Rights and the Construction of Advocacy Strategies and; Construction of Emergency Responses.

CONTEXTUAL

Macro-criminal networks are currently the primary aggressor at the regional level. In other words, political, economic, and criminal powers unite to establish criminal governance to generate profits, a pattern observed in all the territories analyzed. Moreover, they do not hesitate to diversify and combine their illegal activities and trafficking.

To enter, maintain, and establish their power in a territory, macro-criminal networks seek to annihilate the collective processes of resistance and/or, depending on their ultimate goals, expel the entire population from the land they want to control. This can be achieved through various strategies, such as community division and/or criminalization, violence, and terror.

This increased territorial control of depoliticized criminal actors is highly worrying as they represent actors who are not sensitive to political costs and, therefore, not accountable to international law. This concern increases, as it was analyzed that States are at the origin of the proliferation of criminal power and continue to benefit from its presence and the illicit activities perpetrated. Economic, political, and criminal interest associations increasingly blur the line between legal and illegal extractive economic activities. Thus, despite an increasingly robust legal framework, States demonstrate a profound unwillingness to implement it. Even when there is interest on the part of the state apparatus to eradicate illegal armed groups, it is worrying to note that there is a lack of genuinely effective mechanisms for subjugation and inter-institutional coordination.

During the course of this research, drastic changes in the context were also observed. Among them, the alarming deterioration of the security situation of a territorial defender who actively collaborated in the participatory diagnosis and the humanitarian crisis in various parts of Colombia, particularly in the Catatumbo region, stand out. Likewise, looking to the future, it is considered that the return to power of President Trump in the United States marks a before and after in the consolidation of techno-capitalist alliances and far-right policies worldwide, with all the harmful consequences that this brings particularly for the region, and more specifically for racialized, diverse bodies, and the defenders of land and life.

Thus, given the contextual findings mentioned here, it is essential to reaffirm the profound need to read violence through the lens of systemic and historical analysis to understand how it originates. The current violence cannot be dissociated from the hegemonic racist, discriminating, patriarchal, and capitalist system in which we live today.

OBSTACLES AND CAPABILITIES OBSERVED

As a result of the context described above, observing the precariousness in which many of the defense processes of those who collaborated in this research was worrisome. It is also a cause for concern to hear how ILEDs are in agreement that community division is one of the main threats they face. On certain occasions, in addition to the intentional strategy of the aggressors to "divide to rule better," there is the damage generated by the action of NGOs and/or donors who, due to their lack of understanding of the community dynamics and the territories they approach, end up reinforcing the already existing gaps. Linked to the above, an underlying threat shared by ILEDs is the process of "dis-identification" to which Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities are subjected today by the hegemonic culture. Associated with this, the depoliticization observed within some organizational processes is also of concern since losing the memory of the defense process, forgetting the structural causes of the damage suffered, and, therefore, losing the sense of resistance usually results in more internal divisions and struggles that are not sustainable over time. In the face of the threat of dis-identification and depoliticization, self-determination appears as a fundamental exercise. However, it also increases the risk for ILEDs, since it implies that the aggressor actors refuse to give up an entire territory and the profit opportunities it represents for them, which they are not willing to accept.

In the face of the main obstacles and threats presented here, the courage and survival demonstrated by the ILEDs who collaborated in the participatory appraisal are even more valuable. Moreover, it can be affirmed that all of them already have one or more collective protection strategies and that, although the context itself forces them to constantly respond to threats and aggressions, most of the collective protection strategies developed are, above all, profoundly preventive, life-creating, community-building and wisdom-building. Likewise, ILEDs often rely on strong and diverse allies and coalitions, which are alerted when needed to support them in meeting the needs they cannot always meet on their own.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR COLLECTIVE PROTECTION

Among the main findings that guided the development of this conceptual framework is the affirmation that **collective protection is intrinsically linked to the strengthening of political subjects and processes.** In this sense, it goes far beyond the digital, physical or psycho-emotional sphere. It is connected to the construction and strengthening of habits, social practices, measures, and strategies framed within the various spheres that socially and organizationally structure the collective. **Combining these strategies throughout multiple spheres enables ILEDs to generate comprehensive and sustainable collective protection responses in the long term.** The preservation of identity, particularly between generations, the recovery of the historical memory of the defense processes, the exercise of autonomy, the respect for the spiritual and cultural practices of the group or the protection of the territory and the diverse lives that inhabit it, among many others, are fundamental parts of the collective protection strategies. Finally, it is essential to clarify that collective and individual protection are not opposed to one another, but interrelated and complement each other.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

To the members of the ALLIED Network:

1 ✦ Transition to accompaniment strategies that address collective protection from a preventive and not only reactive approach.

2 ✦ Expand the traditional protection framework based on the intersection between the physical, digital, and psycho-emotional spheres to respond in a way that is more adapted to the organizational structures of ILEDs, particularly Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.

3 ✦ Overcome the existing polarizations between "territory and external support network", or "the defense of human rights and territorial conservation". It is essential to act from our situated place, recognizing ourselves as part of a diverse ecosystem of actors fighting for human rights and the environment, always putting at the center the agendas and needs expressed by ILEDs in the territories.

4 ✦ Go to the territories of the ILEDs to learn about the realities firsthand, ensuring that security conditions allow it and respecting the principle of action without harm.

5 ✦ Human rights and environmental organizations should pursue internal reflections around the decolonization of their organizations and open spaces for Indigenous and Afro-descendant people in representation and decision-making.

6 ✦ When building projects or any activity in which both the external support network and ILEDs are involved, take care that the logistical conditions, the chosen methodology, and the language used do not reinforce intersectional gaps or colonialist patterns that are not adapted to the cultures, traditions and/or community structures of the people with whom these events are organize

7 ✦ Maintain transparency and accountability to ILEDs about the activities carried out with the information they provide to the ALLIED Network and its members.

8 ✦ Linked to the above, the ALLIED Network has the potential to engage in information extraction without the acknowledgment of the ILEDs who share the information. Beware of this dynamic and acknowledge the time and support provided by ILEDs.

9 ✦ Break with the idea that support networks follow a north-south dynamic and encourage exchanges of problems, knowledge and strategies between south-south territories.

10 ✦ Remember that the psychosocial impacts suffered by ILED people in the territories can also be suffered by the external network and those of us who are part of it, albeit vicariously and differentially. In the face of this, integrating strategies and spaces aimed at working on the care of caregivers is key to making the work sustainable over time.

To the funders:

1 Support long-term processes that strengthen autonomy, local capacities, and the social fabric instead of supporting short-term initiatives that generate dependency and/or are reactive in nature.

2 Broaden the notion of protection: Support preventive measures, such as sustainable agriculture projects that generate collective benefits or spaces of connection and trust building that strengthen the community's participation in the sustainability of struggles.

3 Trust in local authorities and knowledge. It is essential to value communities' knowledge about their own context, risks, and security strategies.

4 Do not intervene in internal conflicts within organizations or networks. When donors refrain from intervening in these conflicts, they respect communities' right to resolve their own internal challenges and strengthen their organizational capacity.

5 Understand the role of funders as part of an external support network. Funders and their resources are important in community protection strategies, but this role needs to be understood as a small component of a broader support network.

6 Ensure multiple routes of transparency and accountability. In addition, the entities administering the funds must conduct an adequate context analysis and maintain ongoing conversations with the recipient organizations to ensure that transparency and communication strategies are sensitive to local realities.

7 Simplify fund application processes. Reduce the complexity and administrative burden of application forms, facilitating access to resources, especially for grassroots organizations and groups with less operational capacity.

8 Reimagine donor support in a continuously changing context As global contexts evolve and resources at both the community and international levels shrink, donors must engage in continuous self-reflection on their role in the ecosystem of networks supporting human rights defenders, activists, and organizations.