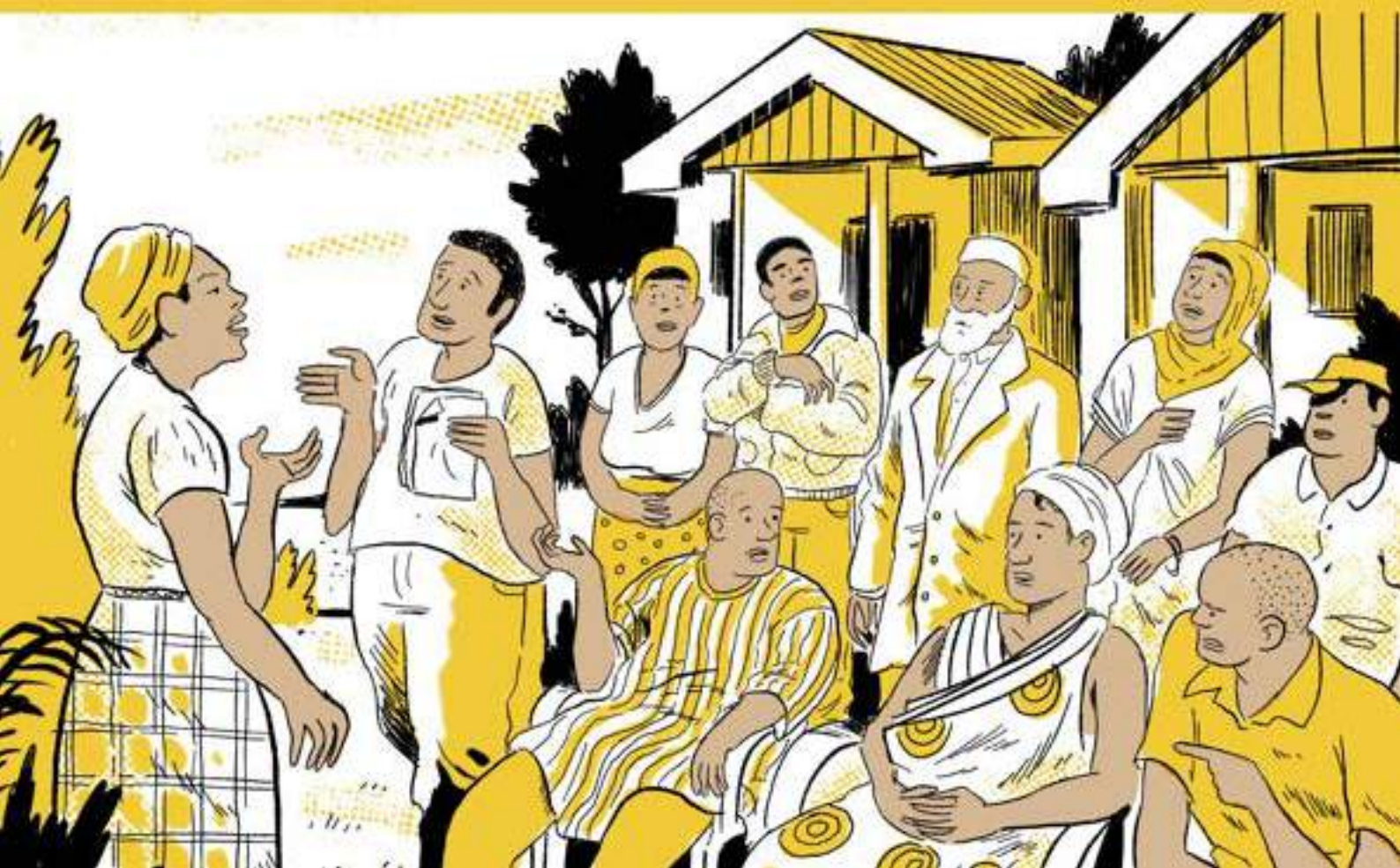# Community-based legitimacy for advocacy organizations

Introduction

How do community members value the activities of their advocacy partners? Which sections of local communities are reached through these activities, which voices gain prominence, and who may be left out? As advocacy organizations increasingly intend to shift power to Southern partners, questions about community interactions and local power relations regain relevance.

This toolkit zooms in on experiences on the local community level and community members' relations with advocacy organizations that are based in regional capitals as well as in the Global North. It presents academic literature on these interactions based on research conducted from 2018-2023 in Ghana and Kenya around case studies on land and extractives. Science comics were designed about these cases, which are partly reproduced in this toolkit with a link to the full comics at the end. Printed versions of the comics were previously distributed to community members involved in the research project, both in English and in the local languages.

The first section of this toolkit summarizes literature originating from one of the projects commissioned by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the title

New Roles of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) for Inclusive Development, which investigated the assumptions of the Theory of Change of its former policy framework 'Dialogue and Dissent'. Our project looked specifically into legitimacy of CSOs in Kenya advocating on land rights around large scale investments, while projects in other contexts also touched on the issue of legitimacy. In our research CSO legitimacy was characterized as a balancing act: different actors value and prioritize various sources of legitimacy, and CSOs cannot cater to all needs equally. This toolkit focuses specifically on the perspectives of local communities, while acknowledging that other stakeholders in the advocacy chain may have different and sometimes competing priorities.

The next section focuses on the experiences of local community spokespersons who are selected by advocacy organizations

to represent their communities. Based on research conducted in rural environments in Ghana and Kenya, a number of issues emerged pertaining specifically to their experiences as intermediaries between local communities and (trans)national advocacy organizations. This section highlights the unique position of these informal intermediaries and some of the challenges they face in their work, particularly in relation to community demands, financial constraints, and threats to their safety.

The last section presents a set of discussion questions that advocacy organizations can use within their own offices as well as with partners in project countries in order to assess their legitimacy towards the communities they aim to assist.

This toolkit is intended to connect the work of advocacy organizations and academic research conducted in local advocacy environments. The findings are particular to the context under study, in this case the large scale extractive projects in rural areas of Ghana and Kenya. It is important to acknowledge that each community, each advocacy campaign and each organization has its own specificities and therefore the findings in this toolkit may not apply one on one to other contexts. The toolkit is intended to raise awareness on issues around community-based legitimacy and ask analytical questions that may be of use to advocacy organizations aiming to assist local communities through rights-based advocacy. Comments, questions and suggestions are most welcome via the contact details in the acknowledgements.

Research

Power dynamics within communities

Research

Community-based legitimacy for advocacy CSOs

As communities consist of a plurality of actors with different interests, no organization can be expected to represent all community members. Advocacy CSOs often emphasize that communities need to speak with one voice and present a common agenda. Tensions may arise in case of competing priorities, for example where the organization pursues a feminist agenda that goes against traditional power relations, or where significant financial interests are at stake.

In the context of extractive projects, young men are particularly likely to diverge from advocacy goals as they tend to prioritize economic opportunities. Local elites, such as businessmen or politicians who often reside outside the affected area, may try to influence community priorities in their favour. A long-term presence on the ground helps organizations assess these various interests and the voices that emerge claiming to represent local community interests. However, involvement in long-term struggles can also result in a form of community fatigue whereby individual community members are inclined to give up their struggle.

Community-based legitimacy is a vital precondition for advocacy CSOs, as it ensures a 'license to operate' in project areas that are far removed from most organizational headquarters. A common definition of legitimacy in the context of CSOs is 'a sense that an organization is lawful, proper, admissible and justified in doing what it does, and saying what it says, and that it continues to enjoy the support of an identifiable constituency' (Edwards 1999, cited in Lister 2003: 176). Being viewed as legitimate offers organizations

opportunities for taking certain political or social action, making credible statements, or influencing public policy.

Research conducted in various rural areas of Kenya, however, indicates that CSO legitimacy is relational and context-dependent. While characteristics such as having relevant expertise and being transparent were valued by all types of actors, other aspects were less universally appreciated. Community members particularly valued long-term presence and engagement in the field, responsiveness to urgent needs or requests (preferably by phone), and the ability to demonstrate concrete output in the form of visible results on the ground. These community expectations sometimes clashed with the advocacy focus on long-term goals, as well as the fact that human rights advocacy may merely result in the prevention of worse outcomes. Other sources of legitimacy, such as having a cooperative attitude and a moderate tone of voice, were valued by state and business actors but not necessarily by community members, who expected CSOs to side with their cause.

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For donors, online visibility of campaigns was viewed as a source of legitimacy. In one example, a demonstration against coal mining organized in Nairobi was considered particularly successful by donors and (trans)national advocacy groups, because it had been highly visible while costing 'less than $5000', and had reached newspapers as far as the United States. Community members, however, complained that there had been insufficient funding to bring more than a few of them to Nairobi, and that the organizers had not come back to report on the outcomes of the demonstration and the demands that had been made towards the national government. The organization's tendency to communicate mostly through online channels was considered unsuitable for passing information to community members, many of whom had limited access to internet.

Representatives of local advocacy CSOs indicated that they would like to have a large role in decisions on funding allocation and agenda setting, as this would enlarge their impact for, and legitimacy towards, local communities. Regular shifts in donor priorities and lack of budgetary influence complicate their work on the ground, as it disrupts continuity and trust building on the local level. Our research indicates that demonstrable legitimacy with local communities is a prerequisite for CSOs to successfully take on such roles in decision making processes.

Measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have had a negative impact on relationships between advocacy organizations and local communities. Meetings and other forms of communication moved almost completely online, limiting access for many community members and complicating trust building with CSOs. Moreover, forms of service delivery that were paired with advocacy activities, such as assistance for agricultural or educational needs, have been strongly reduced since the pandemic and the economic crisis that followed. This has left many communities in a state of heightened poverty and more likely to prioritize short-term economic survival over long-term advocacy goals.

Research
Community spokespersons as intermediaries

Some community spokespersons come to act as intermediaries between their communities and advocacy organizations active in their area. Rather than having formal leadership status, they are selected as representatives due to their level of knowledge or education, their eloquence and willingness to speak out, and their ability to communicate in English. Once selected, these spokespersons (often referred to as champions, ambassadors or similar terms) take on powerful roles in formulating demands and expectations on behalf of the community. They tend to have good local reputations and be passionate about their work, which they often do in low or unpaid capacity.

Nevertheless, this intermediary role comes with a number of challenges. Community spokespersons are invited to engage in frequent travel for exposure visits and public forums on the (inter)national level, which raises questions as well as high expectations. Community members may suspect that they are in it for the money, and that they are susceptible to bribes from politicians, business representatives or others perceived as opposing community interests. On the other hand, community members expect to be informed about the advocacy work conducted by the spokespersons, who have limited time and resources to do so. Advocacy CSOs, in turn, often use information and images provided by intermediaries without compensating or crediting them for their work.

While they receive frequent praise and appreciation, community spokespersons also face distrust, slander, and even threats. As they speak out on behalf of affected communities and are usually

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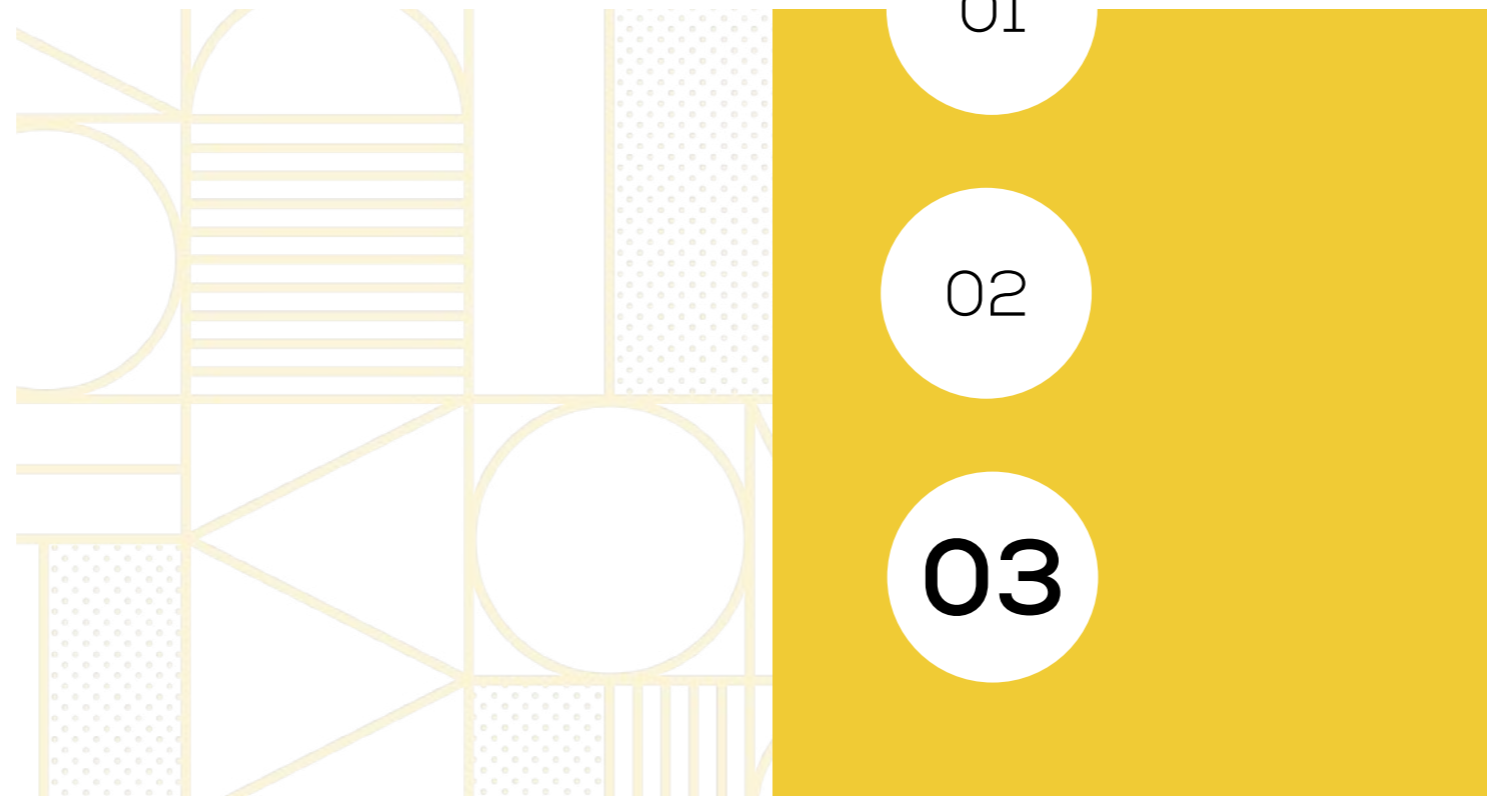
well informed, including on possible wrongdoings and abuses of power, they can be harassed or detained by adversaries who seek to intimidate and silence them. They may be shunned by local power holders and excluded from job opportunities. Their involvement with advocacy organizations can thus create direct risks to their lives and livelihoods, for which they need support from CSOs.

Based on our research findings in Kenya, we recommend that advocacy CSOs facilitate local travel of community spokespersons so they can report back to community members, particularly in more remote areas. Assistance can be in the form of vehicles, contributions to fuel and phone credit. Such small scale financial assistance should be included in budgets and proposals to donors as an integral part of working with local communities. Additionally, CSOs can support community spokespersons morally by acknowledging their important intermediary role, speaking out publicly in their defence, and protecting them against the negative repercussions of their activities.

Experiences of intermediaries

Appiah, Ghana

When we saw aircrafts coming to our area, we learned that the government had given an American company a concession to mine gold in our village. The community first welcomed this message, as they thought everyone would get their share. Then we were warned by a neighbouring community affected by mining that land would be taken away, our waterbodies would be destroyed, and we would be unable to farm. Youth would just be employed for three months, because they lack the skills needed by the company. We went to see with our own eyes and learned about waste and polluted water, scarcity of food, police brutality.

When we reported back, the community got divided. We got in touch with the director of an NGO. Their team came to educate us on the effects of mining. After that we started mobilizing against the company. The NGO helped us prepare a demonstration and gave us lawyers. The company came back for a meeting but we could not agree so they left. They offered financial incentives, but none of us accepted. We drove them out and another company too that wanted to mine oil.

We go to churches and schools and speak about the environment. We want to plant trees and create a forest for future generations. We are all volunteers, our activities in the community are supported by the NGO. They have given us knowledge about our rights, exposure, and platforms to meet people outside the community.

I am a zonal officer for the NGO. They are training me as a paralegal to give education to others. Most zonal officers are teachers or farmers because they are unlikely to move. They must have good standing with the community, otherwise people will not follow them. The work is very dangerous, we need to take care of our security. Sometimes we do not sleep at home. The moment you lower your guard somebody can harm you.

It is challenging to reach the whole community. Community members expect us to attend every meeting, but sometimes it is too much. We do not have motorbikes or allowances to travel around. Some activities are done in an emergency situation. When the community sees machines or destruction in their area, we need to respond promptly. We cannot first write to the NGO for assistance. We also need more training in agricultural methods and income generating skills. Some of the activities stopped when funding was reduced due to Covid.

During Covid we could not have group gatherings. Our education was disrupted because we lack internet access. For most of the people we are dealing with internet access is not useful, so it affected our work. We are recovering gradually.

Mariette - Kenya

When I was in secondary school I joined a debating club. Later I worked as a teacher in a Sunday school and as a business lady in Nairobi, then with an NGO in slum areas. In 1995 I moved back to my village. I started working with NGOs on women's rights. I became interested in fighting for human rights and they took me around as their champion.

I feel great working with women, empowering them and giving them awareness. The NGOs gave me knowledge, they helped me visit other parts of the country. Even outside my country I joined the Women to Kilimanjaro campaign in Tanzania. They also helped me get a diploma in community development.

Now I work as a human rights defender, educating the community about women's land rights and the impact of coal mining. Some people were taken to South Africa to see with their own eyes. They understood these NGOs have done a lot, so the community supported them. Our authorities have no ears to listen to our communities. We need an NGO to make sure the community is heard by the government.

We have challenges, like being told by the community that we are selling them. Sometimes they don't listen to us because they think we are given money, but we just want to give information. We are sacrificing our time and our efforts for the community but they think we are employed by the NGOs. When we hold meetings to inform the community, our elders and chiefs will say who are you, who chose you, who gave you this information?

The 'benefits' you get is either death or abuse. One of the lawyers was killed while defending human rights. When we are called to negotiate, we go where there are more people. Not in a private area, because anything can happen. We are in the front so we are careful, we don't go to one-on-one meetings or accept a lift. People may target us because they know we have knowledge. Especially as women's rights defenders the authorities may try to embarrass you so that you do not defend the rights of the community.

Allan - Kenya

I am a businessman and community leader. I am in the management of several local schools. I partner with hospitals to educate people on welfare and nutrition. I am the secretary of a local organization. Our main objective is food security, we help our members plant crops and our youth to start small businesses.

I first met with NGOs through a project for social audits. I was elected by the community to undertake the process. When I completed that contract, I was asked by another NGO to do civic education. They saw I was transparent and can work without supervision. Since then I have been doing several projects on human rights.

We get some allowances, we don't call it payment. When one member is out representing the organization in Nairobi, we just provide some money for a cup of tea, lunch and transport, so coming back nobody can claim that you need to share your allowance.

In this vast area transport is a challenge. We need more funding to reach people. I may move 7 km and am not even given money for fuel. I am just volunteering to save my people. When the NGO asks me to come with two representatives, community members will ask why are they calling him all the time and not me? All of them want to come to hear what you are saying, but according to your budget or planning you may need only a few. Those with bad intentions will say: these people are not doing us good, so we must do something to interrupt the progress of the organization.

I was detained seven times, sometimes they abuse or beat me. I wait for someone from the NGO to come and rescue me, or they send lawyers. I feel encouraged when the authorities detain me. They ask me questions and I train them about the constitution. They said they will make a case that I stole money, but they had no evidence so they released me.

We have so many NGOs working in our region, but some don't do their own research on the problems we are facing. When they come here they do some trainings for one or two weeks. They go and never come back to give feedback. The training they give is very shallow. Let the NGOs do their work and come to us to get our views. This local NGO, whatever they do they normally engage us fully. Before writing the final document they come to see about our grievances, if anything needs changing. That engagement touches our community.
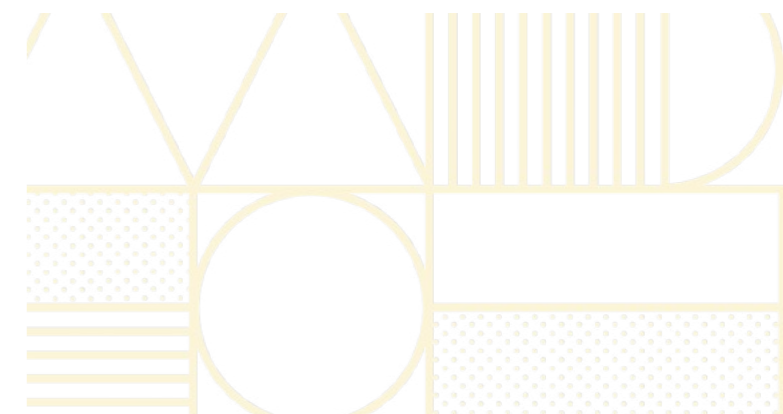
Checklist and questions for discussion

CSO-community relations

The following questions can be used as a basis for self-assessment and internal discussion within your organization and with partners. Not all questions may be equally relevant to all forms of advocacy – please use those questions that best fit the particular environment in which you operate.

✓ **Who are the communities intended to be served by your organization or advocacy project? In case you work with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), how is membership determined?**

✓ **Did communities seek out your organization for collaboration? If not, how did you approach them and how did you seek consent? Did you check which other CSOs are active in the same area, and did you communicate with them to avoid duplication of activities?**

✓ **Which sections of the communities may be underrepresented or left out from your collaboration (e.g. certain gender, generational, ethnic, linguistic or religious groups)? What channels exist for them to make their voices heard and how can your organization support this?**

✓ **In case the advocacy project or campaign is discontinued, do you communicate this to the communities in question? How do you ensure findings and materials are shared with them or stored somewhere for them to access?**
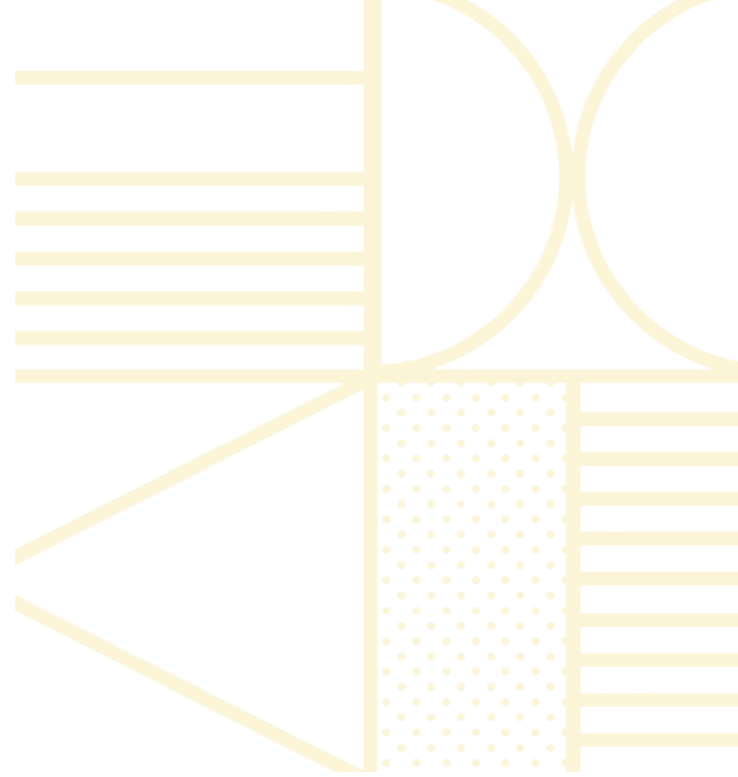
Checklist and questions
for discussion

Role of community spokespersons

✓ **What do the community spokespersons you interact with look like? Are they mostly male, highly educated, English speaking, middle class or otherwise privileged? How and on what basis are they selected (previous leadership position, put forward by community members, other)?**

✓ **How are community spokespersons selected for (inter)national forums, field visits and media appearances? Are there ways you can contribute to more diversity in community representation, e.g. through training of new spokespersons?**

✓ **Does your organization and/or community spokespersons report back to the wider community after advocacy activities? If so, through which means and in which language(s)?**

✓ **How can the community spokespersons' assistance to and interaction with community members in remote locations be facilitated? Are there (non-digital) means available to reach them (e.g. radio performances, messaging through religious leaders and institutions)?**

Checklist and
questions for discussion

Funding

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✓ Are the costs for transportation and communication for community spokespersons included in budgets and funding proposals of your organization, your donors and other partners?

✓ Is small scale funding available to respond to emergency needs on the community level at short notice?

Civic space

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✓ When community members face threats from authorities or other actors, how can you support them and how are support channels made known to them?

✓ What other forms of support and solidarity can you provide to highlight community members' concerns and support their cause (e.g. lobbying on national laws, physical presence during court hearings, connecting to new donors and activists for networking)?

Acknowledgements and references

- Link to science comics Kenya (English version only): **https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/science-comics-on-community-and-ngo-perspectives-in-mui-basin-ken**
- Link to science comics Ghana (English version only): **https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/science-comics-on-donkro-nkwanta-community-in-ghana-resisting-min**

- Link to research projects New Roles of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) for Inclusive Development: **https://includeplatform.net/theme/new-roles-for-csos-for-inclusive-development/**

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