

Indigenous Peoples' Human Rights Defenders (IPHRD) Network

"Towards a Unified Network: Envisioning the Future of Indigenous Rights Defenders"

Vision

We envision a resilient and united network of grassroots Indigenous Peoples' Human Rights Defenders (IPHRDs) organizations across Asia, dedicated to upholding universal human rights, Indigenous Peoples' rights, and addressing the root causes of human rights violations. Our goal is to counter criminalization, land grabbing, and environmental destruction while elevating these critical issues to national, regional, and global platforms. We aim to foster sustainable, empowered communities and create a strong, interconnected network where IPHRDs can communicate openly, engage in mutual learning, and collectively pursue self-governance, peace, justice, equality, and the well-being of all Indigenous Peoples.

1. Introduction

The Indigenous Peoples Human Rights Defenders (IPHRDs) Network was established in 2010 by Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP). It is a thematic network created under the Human Rights Campaign and Policy Advocacy (HRCPA) program of AIPP addressing the militarization and criminalization of Indigenous Peoples across Asia. With 500 member organizations and individuals in 14 countries, it coordinates actions at the country level through nine IPHRD Focal-Organizations. It is a platform for solidarity, coordination, and support among indigenous human rights defenders in Asia. It aims to promote and advocate for Indigenous Peoples' rights at national, regional, and international levels.

The human rights situation for Indigenous Peoples in Asia remains dire due to colonial state policies, aggressive development practices, and rapid technological changes, leading to violations of their sovereignty over land and territory and criminalization of human rights defenders. Tactics such as psychological warfare, harassment, and militarization further restrict their rights and advocacy efforts. The lack of recognition and implementation of Indigenous Peoples' rights perpetuates a cycle of violence and limits civic spaces for effective advocacy.

The HRCPA program and the IPHRD Network focuses on building leadership, training, documentation, and advocacy to strengthen the network and support indigenous rights. It also builds capacity to confront or address issues arising from:

- a) **Colonial State Policies and Lack of Legal Recognition:** Historical and ongoing policies that undermine Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty, rights, and self-governance, coupled with inadequate recognition of their legal rights to land, resources, and self-determination.
- b) **Development Aggression and Land Grabbing:** Large-scale development projects like mining, dams, logging, and infrastructure development on indigenous lands, and illegal or unjust acquisition of these lands by corporations, governments, or private entities without their Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC).
- c) **Criminalization of Defenders and Militarization:** Persecution, harassment, and intimidation of indigenous human rights defenders and activists, alongside military or paramilitary deployments in Indigenous territories, leading to violence, displacement, and other abuses.

- d) **Psychological Warfare, Harassment, and Gender-Based Violence:** Use of threats, intimidation, sexual harassment, and other forms of abuse against indigenous rights defenders, leaders, and activists, including targeted violence against indigenous women and girls.
- e) **Environmental Degradation and Imposition of Extractive Projects:** Destruction and pollution of indigenous lands, water sources, and ecosystems due to extractive industries and other environmentally damaging activities without proper consultation or consent.
- f) **Forced Evictions, Displacements, and Economic Marginalization:** Removal of indigenous communities from their ancestral lands and systematic exclusion from economic opportunities, resources, and benefits.
- g) **Closing Civic and Democratic Spaces and Lack of Access to Justice:** Restriction of freedom of speech, assembly, and association, along with limited access to legal recourse and justice for indigenous communities.
- h) **Cultural Erosion and Assimilation:** State-led efforts to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into dominant cultures, eroding their languages, traditions, and identities.
- i) **Rapid Technological Changes:** Disruption caused by unregulated digital shifts, including artificial intelligence, that disproportionately affect marginalized indigenous communities.

2. Milestones of HRCPA Program in Strengthening IPHRDs:

In 2021 and 2022, IPHRD Network members reviewed their first decade, highlighting key achievements, challenges, and areas for improvement, while reaffirming the network's role in fostering leadership, skills, and secured spaces for dialogue and strategy development. Some of the important achievements are as follows:

- a) Expanded the IPHRD network to include around 500 individuals and organizations, including AIPP members, partners, and allies.
- b) Supported the operationalization of nine IPHRD Focal-Organizations in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines, Myanmar, Malaysia, India, and Thailand.
- c) Established four national IPHRD networks in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Thailand, and Nepal, with ongoing efforts in other countries.
- d) Strengthened co-responsibility with AIPP Secretariat, streamlining and institutionalization of mechanism for collaboration, strengthening IPHRD Focal-Organizations, including aligning strategies and capacity building initiatives at local and national levels enhanced. As a result, capacity building and advocacy efforts have become more coordinated at all levels.
- e) Improved capacity for documentation and advocacy, recording over 100 cases of human rights violations and producing effective advocacy materials and reports for state agencies, regional, and UN bodies. Additionally, the regional database has been strengthened and is increasingly used for advocacy and trend analysis.
- f) Enhanced the ability of IPHRDs to build networks, lead movements, and expand emergency grant provisions and mechanism for greater effectiveness.

3. Approach and Strategy

- a) **Advocacy and consensus building:** The Human Rights Program of AIPP will continue to lead in advocacy, capacity-building, and dialogue facilitation with UN agencies, governments, and key stakeholders. The program will mobilize communities from the grassroots to the global level, playing a major role in regional and global platforms to build consensus and coherence on strategic issues like human rights advocacy and business and human rights. This will involve shaping unified positions and strengthening our influence in these areas. These efforts will be supported by IPHRD Focal-Organisations.
- b) **Cross-cutting and integrated methodologies:** AIPP will apply cross-cutting and integrated methodologies, ensuring a bottom-up approach in all planning and implementation. The Human Rights Campaign and Advocacy (HRCPA) team will coordinate with the Organisational Strengthening and Movement Building (OSMB) and Regional Capacity Building program (RCB) to strengthen movement-building, consolidation, and indigenous leadership. Additionally, coordination with Environment and Indigenous Women's Programs will focus on mainstreaming land rights and the roles of women and youth defenders program implementation. This inter-program coordination will be enhanced for more effective advocacy and project implementation. The HRCPA will also leverage with organisations with specialisations in areas where the IPHRD needs technical support, such as in addressing issues relating to international financial institutions, business and human rights and banks.
- c) **Emergency and sanctuary support mechanisms:** AIPP will establish secured spaces and improve local and regional mechanisms to provide emergency and sanctuary support for Indigenous Peoples' Human Rights Defenders (IPHRDs). Drawing from experiences and lessons learned, these mechanisms will enable quicker and more reliable responses across all countries.
- d) **Capacity building:** To address the critical need for awareness and capacity at the local level, AIPP and IPHRD Focal-Organisations will revise and develop training modules tailored to specific contexts. These local modules will also include fundamentals of indigenous leadership systems, understanding the root causes of human rights violations, and addressing long-term issues like territorial sovereignty and self-governance. The regional modules will focus on advance level training on the use of regional and international human rights mechanisms, along with documentation for evidence-based advocacy and strengthening national and regional databases, will also be a priority.
- e) **Network strengthening:** The IPHRD network will be expanded and consolidated at both regional and country levels. Efforts will be on establishing national networks and by focusing on building the capacities of IPHRD Focal-Organizations and fostering solidarity. These processes will be linked to the overall movement building efforts of AIPP led by the Organisational Strengthening and Movement Building (OSMB) program for a holistic result.

f) Contribution to AIPP's Vision and Goal:

The program will align with AIPP's flagship initiatives, including:

- **Centre of Excellence in Village Governance (COE-VG):** Promoting democratic self-governance based on indigenous values.
- **Indigenous Community Protocols (ICP):** Strengthening women's rights, collective decision-making, self-governance and protection of land and territory. The ICP includes documentation to connect community to their history and identity, and evidence of historical rights and occupancy.

- **Indigenous Knowledge and Data Sovereignty:** Ensuring communities have full control over their knowledge and data as well as for use in planning for community development.
- g) Institutionalisation and streamlining:** AIPP will align its regional strategy with IPHRD Focal-Organizations with the aim of expanding and consolidating the IPHRD network at the country level. This will include joint planning, technical and financial support, and establishing a team of volunteer experts and advisors to strengthen the human rights movement.
- h) Monitoring and Assessment:** AIPP and the IPHRD Focal-Organizations will maintain a joint monitoring role to assess the situation and address emerging issues in each country. This will include evaluating and making course corrections in the implementation of actions and engagement within the IPHRD network. The process will also ensure the internalisation and promotion of the rights of women, persons with disabilities, and other intersectional groups, fostering solidarity and collaboration with IPHRD Focal-Organizations and IPHRDs.

4. Centre of Defenders: A Flagship Initiative of AIPP

In March 2024, the Kapaeeng Foundation (Bangladesh) and the Lawyers' Association for Human Rights of Nepalese Indigenous Peoples (LAHURNIP) were designated as the first "Centres of Defenders" during the Asia Preparatory Meeting for Indigenous Peoples' engagement with UN mechanisms. These organizations were honoured for their exceptional leadership in defending Indigenous Peoples' rights, combating human rights violations, resisting the criminalization of defenders, and addressing environmental destruction in Asia.

The "Centre of Defenders" designation recognises Indigenous Peoples' Human Rights Defenders (IPHRD) organizations that demonstrate:

- a) **Courageous Leadership:** Significant contributions to defending the rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- b) **Effective Advocacy:** Proven effectiveness in addressing human rights abuses, criminalization of defenders, and environmental destruction.
- c) **Visionary Impact:** Contributions that advance the dignity, justice, peace, and equality of Indigenous Peoples.

Kapaeeng Foundation and LAHURNIP are among the nine IPHRD Focal-Organizations of the IPHRD network, recognized for their outstanding contributions over more than a decade to the work of the network. The "Centre of Defenders" (COD) serves as both an inspiration to network members and a beacon of hope to indigenous communities. It embodies the vision and goals of AIPP and the IPHRD network.

While AIPP mobilizes support for the CODs, these centres, along with AIPP, will act as key drivers of the network's vision and goals by supporting defenders through capacity building, knowledge-sharing, solidarity, and advocacy. The initiative will also contribute to AIPP's broader objectives, including developing indigenous leadership, promoting gender justice, and reinforcing indigenous governance and sovereignty over land and territory.

Over the coming years, AIPP aims to develop and capacitate all IPHRD Focal-Organizations as "Centres of Defenders" in phases, ensuring a stronger, more unified network in the pursuit of Indigenous Peoples' rights.

Planning/Action- Group work

1. General thought on strengthening the IPHRD network- list top 3 priority areas and ideas on how to strengthen the network
 - At the Country Level
 - At the regional level
2. How do we strengthen the regional solidarity? Provide your top 3 priorities
 - Eg. Regional archive, how to cross-fertilize campaigns and advocacy
3. Advocacy, lobbying, Campaigns
 - Focus areas
4. Capacity building priorities
5. Documentation/research/knowledge product priorities
 - At the country level
 - At the regional level- eg, there was suggestion to document terror laws, documentation of success stories
6. Institutional strengthening
 - Identify areas of institutional strengthening
7. Thematic/training priorities for 2026 IPHRD exchange and training