

ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME THROUGH COMMUNITY ACTION

Laura Ávila Rivera

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The environmental defenders, rural and farming communities, Black communities, Indigenous Peoples, and others with whom ECO-SOLVE has had the privilege to engage and work have been the main source of inspiration for this handbook. Their commitment, persistence and determination to protect their territories, the environment and the people around them have shaped this work throughout.

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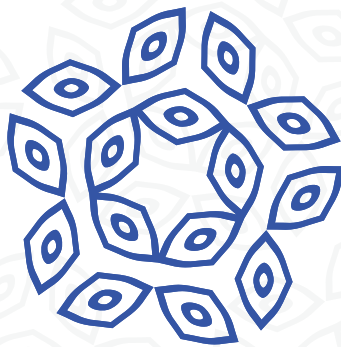
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INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

Environmental crime has become one of the fastest-growing forms of organized crime worldwide. Illegal mining and logging, wildlife trafficking, illegal fishing, and waste dumping generate enormous profits while causing lasting damage to ecosystems, livelihoods and social cohesion. In many regions, these activities are closely linked to corruption, violence, armed groups and weak governance, further undermining security and sustainable development. As environmental crime expands in scale and sophistication, it increasingly threatens not only biodiversity and climate stability, but also human health, food security and economic opportunities for present and future generations.

Addressing environmental crime requires coordinated action across government institutions, civil society and affected communities. While law enforcement and regulatory frameworks remain essential, there is growing recognition that enforcement alone cannot address the complex social, economic and governance conditions that allow environmental crime to flourish.

Over recent decades, approaches such as community-based natural resource management, participatory action research, community conservation, Indigenous territorial governance, and locally led development have demonstrated the value of engaging communities in the protection and governance of natural resources. In practice, these approaches have included community patrols and territorial monitoring, awareness-raising and education programmes, biodiversity protection and restoration, sustainable livelihood initiatives and co-management arrangements. While their design and results vary across contexts, they offer useful lessons for prevention-oriented responses to environmental crime, particularly by strengthening local stewardship, improving monitoring and early detection, and increasing community ownership over natural resources.

Despite this growing recognition, there remains limited practical guidance on how to engage communities in territories affected by environmental crime, criminal governance and violence. Working in these conditions presents specific challenges. Communities may be directly affected by environmental harm, dependent on activities linked to illicit economies, resistant to illicit activities, exposed to intimidation by criminal actors or even involved in illicit activities in different ways. They may also be operating in areas where state presence is limited and trust in institutions is low.

KEY MESSAGE

PRACTITIONERS FACE A FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION: HOW CAN THEY WORK WITH COMMUNITIES SAFELY, ETHICALLY AND EFFECTIVELY, WHILE SUPPORTING THEIR ROLE IN PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME?

This is especially important because environmental crime is often embedded in local economic realities, power structures and territorial dynamics. Understanding these dynamics therefore requires working with the people who live alongside them and experience their effects directly. Practitioners face a fundamental question: how can they work with communities safely, ethically and effectively, while supporting their role in preventing and responding to environmental crime?

This handbook seeks to answer this question. Drawing on the experience of ECO-SOLVE, an EU-funded global programme that aims to strengthen responses to environmental crime,¹ as well as broader lessons from community engagement, participatory approaches and feminist methodologies, this handbook provides practical guidance for designing and implementing community engagement processes in contexts affected by environmental crime.

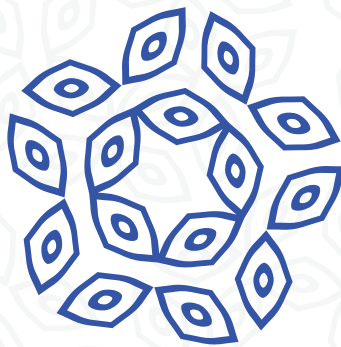
Rather than presenting a single model to be replicated, the handbook offers tools, examples and reflections drawn from implementation experience, providing a foundation that practitioners can adapt to their own objectives, contexts and constraints.

WHO IS THIS HANDBOOK FOR?

This handbook is designed for practitioners seeking to integrate, strengthen or improve community engagement in efforts to prevent and respond to environmental crime. It is intended for civil society organizations, international NGOs, donor agencies, United Nations entities, government institutions and anyone designing or implementing community-level initiatives in affected territories.

It will be particularly useful for those seeking to understand how to engage with a specific community, facilitate dialogues, support community-led responses to environmental crime, or explore collaboration between communities and institutions.

The chapters that follow begin by examining why community engagement matters in the context of environmental and organized crime, as well as some of the challenges involved in putting it into practice. The second part of the handbook presents a practical toolkit, drawing on relevant approaches and principles, and incorporating examples from ECO-SOLVE's experience, to support practitioners in designing engagement processes that are inclusive, context-sensitive and grounded in local realities. The final section explores possible actions that can emerge from community engagement and offers some reflections on strengthening future practice.



**WHY IS COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT
NECESSARY WHEN
ADDRESSING
ENVIRONMENTAL
CRIME?**

2. WHY IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT NECESSARY WHEN ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME?

Environmental crime is often driven by global markets, organized criminal networks or international demand, but its impacts are first and most directly experienced locally. Illegal logging and mining, wildlife trafficking, illegal fishing and other forms of environmental harm can affect livelihoods, food security, access to natural resources, public health, cultural practices and community safety. In many cases, these effects are further intensified by violence, corruption, weak governance and the presence of criminal actors operating within or around affected territories.

Historically, responses to this type of crime have focused primarily on enforcement, regulation or conservation interventions designed and implemented by people and organizations operating outside the affected territories. These approaches have contributed to disrupting criminal networks, enforcing legal protections and strengthening accountability. However, there is growing recognition that no single approach is sufficient to address environmental crime, and that enforcement-led responses, in particular, have significant limitations when applied in isolation.

For instance, research in conservation and environmental crime has highlighted the risks of heavily securitized responses. In some contexts, anti-poaching and conservation efforts have relied on increasingly militarized approaches that prioritize surveillance and enforcement. While these measures may contribute to short-term reductions in certain forms of environmental crime, they can also create tensions with local communities, weaken trust, and, in some cases, contribute to dispossession and exclusion.²

For this reason, environmental crime needs to be understood and addressed as a multidimensional phenomenon. Communities are a critical part of these responses, not only because they are often directly affected, but also because environmental crime is frequently embedded in local governance systems, power relations and territorial dynamics. Responses that fail to engage communities may therefore overlook important drivers of crime, as well as opportunities for prevention, resilience-building and longer-term change.

2.1 WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE TELL US ABOUT COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES?

The idea that communities have a role to play in environmental protection is not new. Over the past several decades, a growing body of research and practice has demonstrated that community-based approaches can contribute to more effective and sustainable management of natural resources and ecosystems. This evidence points to three main reasons why communities should be part of responses to protect natural resources and address environmental crime, as outlined below.



People plant trees during the launch of the Mau Forest Complex Integrated Conservation and Livelihood Improvement Programme led by President William Ruto in Kenya. © James Wakibia via Getty Images

Communities occupy and steward a significant share of the world's land

Indigenous Peoples and local communities manage or occupy a substantial proportion of the world's land and biodiversity-rich areas. Indigenous Peoples alone manage or have customary rights over territories covering approximately 28% of the world's land surface, much of it located in areas of high biodiversity and ecological importance.³ Many maintain deep cultural, spiritual and economic ties to their territories, often built through generations of stewardship and environmental management. Research has shown that lands managed by Indigenous Peoples and local communities frequently experience lower levels of deforestation and environmental degradation than comparable areas without community stewardship.⁴

Because environmental crime often occurs within or around these territories, communities are frequently among the first to observe environmental harm, detect changes in local ecosystems or experience the consequences of environmental degradation. They can also play a role in documenting, denouncing and responding to these activities. Yet taking such action can place

communities and environmental defenders in direct confrontation with actors benefiting from the exploitation of land and natural resources, exposing them to serious risks.⁵ Threats, intimidation, criminalization and lethal violence aimed at environmental defenders around the world illustrate the risks involved in protecting territories and natural resources.⁶

Community knowledge and capacities are central to natural resource governance

Evidence from conservation and environmental governance increasingly shows that community knowledge is not only useful but necessary. Local and traditional ecological knowledge is often based on generations of observation, practice and adaptation, offering detailed understanding of species, ecosystems, seasonal patterns and environmental change.⁷

In recent decades, Indigenous Peoples and local communities have also become more guarded about their knowledge and have increasingly used it politically and strategically to support territorial claims. This has been documented in cases across North America, Central America, South and South East Asia, and Oceania.⁸ As a result, research and practice based on traditional ecological knowledge have increasingly moved towards participatory approaches, where communities become partners in the process of knowledge creation, interpretation and use.

This shift is not only about recognizing community knowledge, but also about recognizing communities' capacities to manage, govern and protect natural resources in collaboration with other parties. In the field of conservation, one way this has taken shape is through co-management, where responsibility for managing natural resources is shared among communities, governments, NGOs, researchers and others. In practice, co-management recognizes that complex environmental challenges cannot be addressed by one stakeholder alone, and often require collaboration at a local, national and international level.

Research in this area also shows that it is not a one-off arrangement, but a developing process that depends on mutual learning, negotiation and trust-building.⁹

Community members may have a detailed understanding of territorial dynamics, environmental change and the risks associated with illicit activities, and they may also have established existing roles and strategies for protecting natural resources. Their knowledge and capacities should therefore not be treated simply as resources to be extracted, but as a basis for cooperation, shared analysis and responses that are better grounded in local realities.

Community-based approaches can contribute to environmental protection and crime prevention

Much of the evidence regarding the potential of communities to contribute to biodiversity conservation, sustainable resource management and environmental governance comes from related fields such as community conservation, community-based natural resource management and locally led development.

However, there is increasing evidence of the role that communities can play in preventing and responding to environmental crime specifically. In the context of the illegal wildlife trade, for example, research highlights the value of moving beyond enforcement alone and developing cooperative strategies that engage communities as partners, including by addressing some of the local drivers and incentives that sustain illicit wildlife economies.¹⁰

In practice, these cooperative strategies can take different forms. They may involve strengthening communities' rights and capacities to manage and benefit from natural resources, which creates livelihood opportunities linked to conservation, and improves cooperation and communication between communities and conservation authorities. Namibia's communal conservancy model, in which local communities collectively manage wildlife and other natural resources, provides one example. By granting communities formal rights over wildlife management and use, the model enables them to benefit from tourism, employment and the sustainable use of wildlife. Similar experiences have also been documented in community conservancies in Kenya.¹¹

THERE IS INCREASING EVIDENCE OF THE ROLE COMMUNITIES CAN PLAY IN PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME.

Evidence from other areas affected by environmental crime highlights the role communities can play in monitoring, reporting and documenting illicit activities. In Cambodia's Prey Lang Forest, community monitors have documented illegal logging and other forest crimes with local patrols and smartphone-based monitoring. Over a two-year period, 36 community patrollers generated more than 10 000 records related to illegal logging and forest resources, of which 4 560 were successfully validated. The study demonstrated the potential of community-led monitoring to generate systematic, cost-effective information on forest crime.¹²

In Mexico's Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, fishing cooperatives and other local actors developed community surveillance arrangements to monitor compliance with fisheries regulations and help fill gaps in formal enforcement. The study found that the system was strengthened by communities' ability to develop their own rules and a degree of autonomy in decision-making, and to foster collaboration among fishing cooperatives, civil society organizations and government actors.¹³

In Myanmar, community-based mining monitoring groups were established to track whether mining companies complied with legal and environmental requirements. The Tanintharyi regional government formally recognized 11 mine-watch committees, giving community monitors a structured channel to document violations and report them to government authorities. Their work was supported by a monitoring mechanism and reporting checklist developed with civil society organizations. In one case, reports of overlapping mining concessions and severe water pollution prompted government inspections and contributed to a company being denied an extension of its permit.¹⁴

A 2025 study from the Brazilian Amazon examined a long-running system of voluntary community patrols in the Mamirauá and Amanã Sustainable Development Reserves, where community leadership was combined with formal recognition and institutional support. Local residents planned and conducted territorial patrols, while government agencies retained responsibility for formal enforcement. Over 11 years, community patrollers carried out almost 20 000 patrols and recorded more than 1 200 environmental crimes, mainly related to illegal fishing, hunting and logging. Over the study period, the number of community patrols in which environmental crimes were detected declined by approximately 80%, with reductions observed in 11 of the 12 territorial units. By comparison, researchers found no comparable downward trend in crimes detected during government-led enforcement operations outside the protected areas.¹⁵

Although these examples demonstrate the value of involving communities in monitoring, information-sharing, coordination and prevention, their role should not be understood as a substitute for law enforcement, nor as limited to these activities. Other approaches may include strengthening community rights and natural resource governance, supporting sustainable livelihoods, environmental education, restoration and other locally led practices that address some of the wider conditions that shape environmental crime.

Given the range of these activities, the contribution of community engagement to environmental crime responses can be difficult to assess. Several factors help explain these evidence limitations. First, attribution can be difficult: it is not always possible to determine whether a patrol, dialogue, livelihood initiative or monitoring activity directly prevented illegal logging, mining, fishing or trafficking. Second, many community-led initiatives are small and implemented locally by individuals and organizations with limited resources for monitoring, evaluation and publication. Third, projects and grants are often short-term, while the effects of greater trust, better prevention and strengthened local capacities may only become visible over longer periods. Finally, the field remains conceptually fragmented, with similar approaches labelled in different ways, making experiences and evidence more difficult to identify, compare and consolidate.

Strengthening this evidence base requires practitioners, donors and organizations working on environmental crime to document not only what appears to work, but also under what conditions, for whom and with what limitations.

2.2 WHY IS MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STILL DIFFICULT?

Despite growing recognition of the significant role of communities in environmental protection and responses to environmental crime, meaningful engagement remains difficult to achieve in practice. This handbook helps identify some of the challenges involved, a necessary step towards designing approaches that are more intersectional, context-specific and grounded in local realities.

First, communities are not homogeneous actors. They are not static or isolated groups with a single set of interests, but complex and changing social and political networks shaped by different identities, priorities and power relations. Different groups within the same community may experience environmental crime differently and may hold competing views about conservation, livelihoods and the use of natural resources.¹⁶

Second, communities can have complex relationships with environmental crime. They may be affected by it, resistant to it, economically dependent on it, or involved in activities classified as illicit. Environmental crime can also take various forms, ranging from subsistence use and informal extraction to highly organized and transnational criminal activity. These distinctions matter when considering the role of community engagement in responses to environmental crime. In some contexts, practices that are prohibited under formal law may nevertheless be regarded as legitimate locally because they are rooted in customary rights, long-standing resource use or livelihood needs.¹⁷

Third, creating sustainable and economically viable alternatives to illicit economies is challenging. The benefits of legal livelihoods can be insufficient, poorly distributed, captured by elites or unable to compete with the economic incentives associated with illicit activities.¹⁸

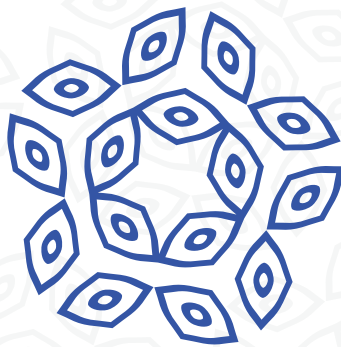
In addition, external actors designing these legal alternatives do not always define benefits in the same way as communities. In community-based conservation, studies have documented mismatches between externally defined benefits – such as revenues from ecotourism – and community priorities, which may include secure land and resource rights, access to natural resources, cultural practices, safety or basic services.¹⁹ Understanding local perceptions, needs and aspirations is essential when supporting communities to design projects and livelihood alternatives that are relevant and sustainable in their context.

A further challenge concerns the wider political conditions in which engagement takes place. In authoritarian or hybrid governance contexts or where civic space is restricted, engagement with civil society organizations, Indigenous Peoples or local communities may carry political consequences and security risks for those involved. Access to communities, the ability of civil society organizations to operate, and the tolerance of community leadership or other non-statal authorities may be constrained. Communities' ability to organize, speak openly, claim rights or engage with external actors without facing repercussions might be limited.

Finally, corruption, weak governance and a lack of trust in institutions can undermine community engagement. In contexts where environmental crime involves high-value commodities and significant illicit profits, corruption can further weaken communities' confidence in the authorities responsible for enforcement and regulation. Building or rebuilding trust may therefore require sustained engagement, transparency and accountability.²⁰

These challenges show that meaningful community engagement is neither simple nor automatic. Rather than diminishing its importance, they reinforce the need for approaches that recognize these complexities and address them intentionally.

It is in this context that ECO-SOLVE seeks to contribute. Drawing on broader practice in community conservation, participatory governance, Indigenous rights and locally led development, the programme applies and adapts various approaches to working with communities in territories affected by environmental crime. The rest of this handbook draws on this experience to offer practical tools and critical reflections for practitioners seeking to strengthen community engagement in their own work.



ECO-SOLVE TOOLKIT FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

3. ECO-SOLVE TOOLKIT FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

This toolkit is intended to help practitioners plan, facilitate and strengthen engagement with communities and civil society organizations. It combines practical guidance and strategies for programmes addressing environmental crime; many of the principles presented here can also be applied to other forms of organized crime and related development challenges. Each section provides a general introduction that draws on the approaches of other organizations and practitioners, along with insights, questions, practical prompts and examples from ECO-SOLVE's own experience.

The tools are not intended as a fixed sequence or a one-size-fits-all model. Their relevance will depend on the context, the actors involved and the risks they face, and the objectives of the engagement. They should therefore be selected and adapted in consultation with local partners.



Vilma Aguilar, former secretary of the SATRIKA association of tribal people, speaks at a community meeting
Kayasan, Philippines. © HUM Images/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

3.1 LAYING THE GROUNDWORK: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Before engaging with communities, practitioners need to understand the context in which the engagement will take place. Environmental crime does not occur in isolation: it can intersect with livelihoods, governance systems, territorial dynamics, inequality, corruption, conflict and other forms of organized crime.²¹ Understanding these dynamics can help practitioners determine where and how engagement can take place, identify potential risks and avoid designing interventions based on assumptions that do not reflect local realities.

A context assessment does not need to provide a complete picture before engagement begins. Rather, it should establish a sufficiently informed starting point that can be tested, complemented and revised through dialogue with those involved in the project or intervention.

WHAT TO CONSIDER IN A CONTEXT ASSESSMENT

The scope of the assessment will depend on the objectives and resources of the intervention, but there are several core areas practitioners should consider:

1 Environmental crime dynamics

What forms of environmental crime or harm are occurring? Where are they concentrated? What is known about their drivers and the actors involved? How have these dynamics changed over time?

3 Governance, power and security

Which formal and informal actors exercise authority or influence in the territory? Are criminal or armed actors present? What relationships exist between communities and public institutions? Are there security risks associated with discussing, reporting or acting against environmental crime?

5 Existing local capacities

What local organizations, leaders, networks, knowledge or initiatives already exist to tackle environmental crime? What capacities are already present that an intervention could support rather than duplicate or replace?

If the intention is to identify organizations that could carry out or support future efforts, an additional question is relevant: Based on the organization's mandate, resources, relationships, expertise and risk tolerance, what can it realistically contribute?

2 Territory, livelihoods and socioeconomic conditions

How do communities use and depend on natural resources? What are the main sources of livelihoods? How might legal, informal and illicit economies intersect?

4 Impacts on communities

Which groups are affected by environmental crime, and in what ways? It is important to keep in mind that different groups may be affected differently based on factors such as race, gender and age.

6 Existing responses and gaps

Which government institutions, civil society organizations, community groups, researchers, donors or international organizations are already working on the issue or in the territory? What forms of support already exist and where might important gaps remain?

How to gather the information

A preliminary context assessment can combine different sources and methods. These may include:

- open-source research, including academic research, government data, civil society reports, investigative journalism and available environmental or crime data;
- conversations or interviews with researchers, journalists, civil society organizations, community representatives, government officials and other actors familiar with the territory;
- existing assessments conducted by organizations already operating in the area; and
- direct observation or preliminary field visits, where feasible and safe, to better understand territorial dynamics, existing initiatives and practical conditions for engagement.

No single source will provide a complete picture. Information should therefore be triangulated across different sources and perspectives, particularly where environmental crime, corruption or conflict make reliable information difficult to obtain.

Context assessment should also be treated as iterative rather than final. Initial findings may be incomplete or incorrect and should be revisited as practitioners build relationships, conduct actor mapping and engage directly with communities.

Intended outcomes of this step

The assessment should provide a practical basis for deciding whether and how to proceed. After carrying out a context assessment, practitioners may have the following:

- A preliminary understanding of the environmental crime dynamics and their relationship to the territory.
- An initial picture of affected communities and other relevant actors.
- An understanding of major governance, security and potential harms in the area (see ‘The do no harm principle’ box below).
- An overview of existing responses and capacities and potential gaps.
- Key information gaps that need to be explored through further engagement.
- An initial assessment of where and how the organization may be able to add value.

THE DO NO HARM PRINCIPLE

The do no harm principle originates in humanitarian and conflict-sensitive practice. It stems from an understanding that external interventions become part of the context in which they operate, and that actions intended to help can also create unintended harm.²²

The approach is based on several core lessons: interventions are never neutral; they interact with existing tensions and sources of cooperation; both organizational actions and staff behaviour matter; small operational choices can have significant consequences; and practitioners usually have options to adapt their approach in order to reduce harm.²³

In community engagement, this means considering whether an activity could expose people to retaliation, raise expectations that cannot be met, reinforce local tensions, exclude certain groups, or transfer risks onto partners, communities or staff. A do no harm approach does not mean avoiding engagement, but rather designing it carefully, revisiting assumptions and adapting the process when risks become visible.

Combining sources of local information to determine where to engage in Colombia

When ECO-SOLVE began assessing where in Colombia to focus its engagement, open-source research provided an initial picture of the departments most affected by environmental crime. Deforestation data pointed particularly towards the Amazon region, but environmental crime prevalence alone was not sufficient to determine where to engage. The assessment needed to incorporate additional information.

The presence of armed groups was examined to understand security conditions and determine where engagement could realistically and safely take place. This analysis initially identified the Guaviare, Caquetá, Guainía and Meta regions as possible areas of intervention, all of which were affected by environmental crime, particularly deforestation and illegal mining. The team then examined the presence of civil society organizations and international actors already supporting initiatives in these territories. Where could the programme provide support without duplicating existing efforts?

As a result of the analysis, Caquetá emerged as one of the territories most affected by environmental crime. Guainía was initially considered as a second priority because of its geographic isolation and its border with Venezuela. As part of the project's initial

consultations, the team met with national actors and shared these preliminary findings. During those discussions, government partners recommended prioritizing Meta instead. Although Meta had a lower rate of deforestation, it was receiving significantly less international financial and programmatic support. It also faced important security challenges linked to the presence of an armed group, but because the area was not characterized by active contestation between multiple armed groups, the team assessed that engagement was possible.

ECO-SOLVE needed to consider not only the severity of environmental crime, but also where they could add value without duplicating existing efforts and where it would be safe to engage. Based on these different layers of analysis, ECO-SOLVE ultimately prioritized Caquetá and Meta.

What this example shows: Context assessment is not simply about identifying where environmental crime is most prevalent. Decisions about where and how to engage may also require analysis of security, existing community and civil society capacities, current interventions, gaps in support, organizational feasibility and knowledge from actors familiar with the territory. The assessment can – and should – change as new information emerges.

Questions for planners

The following questions are intended to help practitioners reflect on the information gathered in context assessments and identify what still needs to be clarified before engagement begins. They are not a checklist to complete mechanically, but rather prompts to test assumptions, identify gaps, and assess whether and how to proceed. Before moving forward, consider:

- What do we know about environmental crime dynamics in this territory, and what are we assuming?
- Who produced the information we are relying on, and whose perspectives may be missing?
- How do environmental crime, livelihoods, governance and security interact locally?
- What community capacities, organizations or responses already exist?
- What information is still too uncertain to act on?
- What risks could our engagement create for communities, partners or staff?
- Given our mandate and resources, what can we realistically contribute?
- What still needs to be clarified directly with communities before proceeding?

3.2 MAPPING ACTORS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Once practitioners have developed an initial understanding of the context, the next step is to identify the actors who are affected by, involved in or have influence over the issue, and to analyze the relationships between them. Actor mapping is not simply about developing a list of stakeholders. It helps practitioners understand who should be considered for engagement, why their participation matters, how power dynamics and relationships may shape the process, and whose perspectives may be overlooked.²⁴

These dynamics have practical implications for how engagement is designed. Stakeholders may have different values, priorities and expectations, while relationships between them may be characterized by cooperation, dependency, tension or mistrust. Understanding these dynamics can help practitioners decide how to approach different actors, whether they can participate safely and meaningfully in the same spaces, and what considerations should inform the engagement process.²⁵

Environmental crime also requires practitioners to consider actors who may not be appropriate or possible to engage directly, but whose influence cannot be ignored. Criminal networks, armed actors, corrupt officials or businesses linked to illegal activities may shape what happens in a territory and affect the risks faced by communities and other stakeholders. Their inclusion in an actor map is therefore primarily about understanding the operating context in which engagement will take place, rather than identifying them as potential participants.

What to consider when mapping actors

The actors and relationships that need to be mapped will vary depending on the context and purpose of the intervention, but the following questions can help guide the process:

- **Who is affected and how?** Which communities and groups experience the impacts of environmental crime? Are particular groups affected differently, and whose experiences may be less visible?
- **Who holds relevant knowledge, influence or decision-making power?** This may include community organizations and leaders, Indigenous authorities, local and national government institutions, law enforcement and environmental authorities, civil society organizations, researchers, journalists, businesses and international agencies.
- **Who is already responding to – or influencing – the issue?** Which actors are involved in protecting natural resources, preventing environmental crime, supporting affected communities or advocating for change? Are there also actors who may facilitate, benefit from or obstruct efforts to address environmental crime?
- **How do these actors relate to one another?** Where are their relationships of cooperation, trust, dependency, tension, competition or conflict? What power imbalances exist between actors? Are there relationships that could influence whether particular actors can participate safely and openly in the same engagement process?

- **Who might be missing?** Communities are not homogeneous, and the most visible organizations or leaders do not necessarily represent all perspectives. An intersectional approach can help identify groups whose voices may be less visible because of gender, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic position, geographic isolation, language, disability, digital access or other factors. Actor mapping should consider not only who is represented, but also who is not and why.²⁶

ACTOR MAPPING SHOULD CONSIDER NOT ONLY WHO IS REPRESENTED, BUT ALSO WHO IS NOT AND WHY.

How to carry out the actor mapping

An initial actor map can be developed using information gathered during the context assessment, and from existing networks, previous research and preliminary outreach to people familiar with the territory. Practitioners can then organize this information according to actors' relationship to the issue, their interests and priorities, their level of influence, their relationships with other actors, and any considerations or risks associated with engaging them.

A simple mapping tool might include the following categories and could be structured as in the example in Figure 1 below.

ACTOR OR GROUP	RELATIONSHIP TO THE ISSUE	INTEREST AND PRIORITIES	LEVEL OF INFLUENCE	RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER ACTORS	RISKS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT
Community-based organization working on forest protection	May be directly affected by environmental crime and involved in monitoring, awareness-raising, advocacy or resource protection.	May include protecting forests, strengthening local livelihoods and gaining recognition or support for existing work. Other organizational or community interests may also be relevant.	May have significant influence within some parts of the community but limited influence with authorities or other groups. Its representativeness and legitimacy should not be assumed.	May be trusted by some community members and have relationships with other community organizations, authorities or enforcement actors. Relationships and levels of trust should not be assumed.	May face retaliation if its work becomes too visible; confidentiality and safe communication channels may be needed. Internal capacity, competing interests or community tensions may also affect engagement.

ACTOR OR GROUP	RELATIONSHIP TO THE ISSUE	INTEREST AND PRIORITIES	LEVEL OF INFLUENCE	RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER ACTORS	RISKS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT
Local environmental authority	May have formal responsibilities for regulation, permits, protected areas, natural resource management or environmental enforcement.	May prioritize implementation of environmental rules, institutional mandates, conservation objectives, public accountability or maintaining institutional legitimacy. Priorities may also be shaped by political or resource constraints.	May have medium to high formal influence depending on mandate, resources and political context.	May coordinate with law enforcement, local government and civil society organizations. Levels of trust and cooperation may vary considerably.	Consider institutional capacity, accessibility, community trust, political pressures and overlapping mandates. Authorities may be effective partners in some contexts, but in others perceptions of absence, ineffectiveness or corruption may affect participation and trust.
Criminal actor	May control territory, benefit from illicit economies and intimidate communities.	May seek to maintain access to resources, routes, labour or illicit profits or other benefits associated with illicit activity.	Influence may range from limited and informal to significant economic, political or coercive power.	May have relationships with community members, intermediaries, businesses, officials, enforcement actors or other criminal networks. The existence or nature of these relationships should not be assumed.	Engagement may create risks of retaliation, coercion, surveillance or exposure for communities and practitioners. Consider carefully whether direct engagement is appropriate, safe or ethical, and how the actor's presence may affect participation by others.
Foreign company	May operate in or depend on natural resources, and may be affected by, contribute to, benefit from or help prevent environmental crime.	May include maintaining operations, income, supply chains and market access; protecting reputation; regulatory compliance; sustainability commitments; or maintaining relationships with authorities and communities.	May have significant economic or political influence, depending on its role, scale of operations and relationships with authorities and communities.	May have relationships with communities, suppliers, buyers, intermediaries, authorities, enforcement actors or criminal networks. These relationships may involve cooperation, dependency, conflict or competing interests.	Consider possible conflicts of interest, power imbalances, links to illicit economies, labour or land disputes, and effects on community trust or safety. Also consider resources, expertise or other contributions that the company could potentially bring to prevention efforts or solutions.

ACTOR OR GROUP	RELATIONSHIP TO THE ISSUE	INTEREST AND PRIORITIES	LEVEL OF INFLUENCE	RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER ACTORS	RISKS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT
Law enforcement	Has formal responsibility for investigating and responding to criminal activity and may hold relevant intelligence, investigative powers and enforcement capacity.	May prioritize disrupting criminal activity, gathering evidence, enforcing the law, protecting public safety and meeting institutional mandates. Priorities may vary across agencies and contexts.	May have high formal authority, although operational capacity, resources and practical influence may vary.	May have established relationships with communities, environmental authorities, prosecutors, businesses and other government actors. Levels of trust and cooperation with these groups may vary.	Consider community perceptions and trust, accessibility, institutional capacity, conduct and potential risks associated with information-sharing. In some contexts, law enforcement may provide protection and effective cooperation; in others, fear, corruption, misconduct or perceived links with criminal actors may create risks or inhibit participation.

FIGURE 1 Example of an actor map.

NOTE: These examples are illustrative only. The interests, relationships, levels of influence and risks associated with any actor should be assessed in the specific context rather than assumed on the basis of the type of actor.

The mapping should be treated as an ongoing process rather than a final representation of the territory. Desk-based research and existing networks may privilege actors who are already visible, formally organized or well connected to institutions and international organizations. Initial assumptions about representation, influence and relationships should therefore be tested and revised through direct engagement with actors in the territory.

Intended outcomes of this step

By the end of the initial actor mapping, practitioners may have the following:

- An understanding of the actors and groups relevant to the issue.
- Greater clarity about why different actors may need to be engaged.
- An overview of relationships, power dynamics, trust and potential tensions between actors.
- An initial sense of groups or perspectives that may be under-represented or missing.
- An understanding of potential risks or sensitivities associated with engaging particular actors or bringing them together.
- A set of assumptions and information gaps that should be tested through direct engagement.

How relationships between actors can shape engagement design – Brazil and Indonesia

One of the broad objectives of the ECO-SOLVE programme was to explore opportunities to strengthen connections between community-level responses to environmental crime and law enforcement efforts, with the aim of enhancing responses to environmental crime at the local level in six countries: Colombia, Brazil, Indonesia, Vietnam, Madagascar and Mozambique. However, initial actor analyses and engagement processes revealed important differences in the relationships and levels of trust between communities and law enforcement across the six countries. These differences influenced how subsequent engagements were designed.

In Brazil, historical tensions, unresolved grievances and reported experiences of violence and intimidation have contributed to significant mistrust of law enforcement among some communities and environmental defenders. Rather than assuming that bringing both groups together would strengthen collaboration, the ECO-SOLVE team conducted an initial visit to the country in early 2024, meeting with them separately to better understand these tensions and their implications for project implementation, including the organization of dialogues, and the selection and implementation of community grants.

Based on these conversations, the programme decided not to hold a joint dialogue between communities and law enforcement at a later stage. Community actors expressed strong distrust, and environmental defenders raised concerns about violence and intimidation by state actors linked to their activism.²⁷ Bringing the groups together without first addressing these concerns risked limiting open participation and potentially undermining the engagement process.

The situation was different in Indonesia, where ECO-SOLVE began its engagement in June 2024, with a focus on the Sumatra region. The Sumatra region is a particularly relevant study area in the context of environmental crime due to the pressures placed on its forests and biodiversity, including illegal logging, wildlife trafficking and other forms of illicit exploitation of natural resources. A preliminary assessment conducted remotely ahead of the visit suggested that relationships between communities and law enforcement were less polarized and that participants might be more open to the possibility of a joint dialogue, even though concerns around corruption and institutional trust remained.

Therefore, during the initial engagement, the team met separately with community actors and relevant authorities to test this assumption and better understand their perspectives. Based on these conversations, the programme decided to invite relevant local law enforcement and government authorities involved in natural resource governance and environmental crime to participate alongside community actors in a joint dialogue over two days in the last quarter of 2024.

What this example shows: Actor mapping is not only about deciding *who* should be engaged, but also *how* engagement should take place. Relationships, power imbalances, levels of trust and potential risks can determine whether actors should be engaged together, separately or at different stages of the process. The same engagement design may therefore be appropriate in one context and counterproductive in another.

Questions for planners

The following questions can help practitioners critically review their actor map before moving into direct engagement. They are intended to identify assumptions, representation gaps, power dynamics and potential risks that may need to be explored further.

- Are we identifying the most relevant actors, or simply those who are easiest to reach?
- Who might be missing from our map, and why?
- Who claims to represent whom, and what do we know about that representation?
- What power imbalances could influence participation or whose views are heard?
- Are there tensions or relationships that could make bringing particular actors together unsafe or counterproductive?
- Could engaging one actor create risks for another actor or group?
- Which assumptions about actors, representation, trust or relationships still need to be tested directly in the territory?

3.3 VISITING THE TERRITORIES AND BUILDING TRUST

Desk-based context assessment and actor mapping provide an important starting point, but they cannot fully capture how communities experience environmental crime or how local relationships and priorities operate in practice. Where feasible and safe, visiting the territory provides an opportunity to test initial assumptions, hear directly from communities, identify actors and initiatives that may have been overlooked, and begin building the trust and relationships needed for meaningful engagement.

Initial visits also provide an opportunity to introduce the proposed intervention to other relevant stakeholders, communicate its objectives and limitations, understand whether and how communities are interested in engaging, and clarify what should shape the next stage of the process.

The information gathered during these visits should feed back into the context assessment and actor mapping. This iterative process can help correct biases associated with remote or top-down project design and make subsequent engagement more inclusive, responsive to local realities and less likely to cause unintended harm.²⁸

What to explore in an initial visit

The scope and format of a visit will depend on the context and objectives of the intervention, but the following considerations can guide initial engagement:

- **Validate and deepen the understanding of the context:** Do communities recognize the environmental crime dynamics identified during the initial assessment? What has been misunderstood, overlooked or changed? What local dynamics are important for understanding how environmental crime operates and affects communities?
- **Test and expand the actor mapping:** Are the actors who were initially identified relevant and representative? Which organizations, leaders, informal networks or groups may have been missed? Who do communities themselves identify as important actors?
- **Understand community priorities and needs:** What do communities see as the most important issues? How are they affected by environmental crime, and what would they like to see change? These priorities may differ from those initially identified by external actors.
- **Begin building trust with different actors:** Direct engagement can help create trust by giving communities and other stakeholders an opportunity to be heard, to ask questions and to provide input on the proposed intervention before decisions are finalized.
- **Recognize existing capacities and initiatives:** What are communities already doing to protect their territories, natural resources, livelihoods or safety? What knowledge, organizations, networks, practices and initiatives already exist? Understanding existing capacities can help practitioners identify what could be supported or strengthened rather than duplicated or replaced.
- **Understand risks and constraints:** What risks do communities face when responding to environmental crime? Could participation in the proposed intervention expose individuals or groups to additional risks? Are there issues, actors or relationships that cannot be discussed safely or openly?
- **Understand interest and expectations:** Are communities interested in participating? What do they expect from the intervention? What can the organization realistically provide, and what falls outside its mandate or resources?
- **Identify potential allies:** Which government institutions, civil society organizations, local authorities or other actors could help strengthen the intervention, facilitate coordination, provide access or support longer-term sustainability?
- **Prepare for next steps:** Field visits can also generate practical information needed for implementation, including where activities could take place, how accessible the territory is, how existing initiatives operate in practice and what next steps are realistic.

How to approach initial visits

There is no single format for a preliminary visit. Depending on the context, it may involve meetings with community organizations and leaders, small-group discussions, informal conversations, observation or visits to existing community initiatives. Where relationships between actors are sensitive or uncertain, it may be useful to meet with them separately at first, as existing tensions, power dynamics or levels of trust can influence what people feel able to communicate openly.

The following principles can help guide the process:

- **Listen before proposing solutions:** Enable space for communities to describe the problems, priorities and possible responses in their own terms.
- **Be transparent about the purpose of the visit:** Explain why the team is there, what stage the intervention is at, what has and has not been decided, and how information gathered during the visit will be used.
- **Manage expectations from the beginning:** Be clear about what the organization can and cannot offer. Initial engagement should not unintentionally create expectations of funding, partnerships or other forms of support that have not been agreed on.
- **Pay attention to who participates – and who does not:** Engagement with formal leaders or established organizations may not capture the experiences of less visible or under-represented groups.
- **Communicate next steps and follow through:** Before concluding the visit, explain what will happen next, what participants can expect from the organization and when they are likely to hear from the team again. Following through on commitments and maintaining communication can help build credibility and trust over time.
- **Prioritize safety and do no harm:** Consider whether the presence of external organizations; particular questions, photographs and documentation; or association with certain actors could create risks for participants. Ask communities whether the proposed meeting place, participants and activities are considered safe, and adapt the approach accordingly. Consider how information will be recorded, stored and shared, and avoid making people, organizations or sensitive locations visible without informed consent.
- **Be prepared to change the initial plan:** Information gathered during visits may challenge the context assessment, actor map, proposed activities or timelines. Revising the approach in response to what is learned should be considered part of the process rather than a failure of the original design.

Intended outcomes of this step

After the initial visits, practitioners may have the following:

- A more grounded understanding of how environmental crime and its impacts are experienced locally.
- An updated actor map that incorporates actors and perspectives identified in the territory.
- A clearer understanding of community priorities, needs, existing capacities and initiatives.
- Greater clarity about the risks and sensitivities that should shape future engagement.
- A better understanding of community interest in, and expectations of, the proposed intervention.
- A clearer basis for adapting the engagement strategy and determining appropriate next steps.

How field visits expanded the initial understanding of local actors in Colombia

In Colombia, ECO-SOLVE's initial context assessment and actor mapping were conducted largely through open-source research, online searches and existing networks. However, this provided only a partial picture of the civil society landscape. Many small community and grassroots organizations working on environmental protection had little or no online presence, while public institutions and other actors did not necessarily know about their work.

To address these gaps, ECO-SOLVE visited Florencia, in the department of Caquetá, and La Macarena, in the department of Meta, in early 2025. The team met with community members, local authorities and grassroots organizations identified through the initial mapping to deepen its understanding of the local context. Those consulted were also asked to identify other grassroots organizations and community actors that should be considered for engagement. This process brought several additional organizations into the mapping that would otherwise have remained unidentified.

The visits also allowed the team to better understand how these organizations operated in practice, the challenges and priorities they identified, and the different approaches communities were already using to address environmental harms, including awareness-raising, ecotourism and sustainable wood production.

What this example shows: Desk-based assessments and actor mapping can provide an important starting point, but direct engagement can reveal actors, initiatives, priorities and capacities that are difficult to identify remotely.

3.4 CREATING COLLABORATIVE SPACES THROUGH COMMUNITY DIALOGUES

Community dialogues can create spaces for people to collectively examine a particular issue – in this case, environmental crime – share different experiences and perspectives, identify priorities and explore possible responses. However, bringing people together in the same room does not automatically result in meaningful participation. Who participates, whose knowledge is recognized, who feels able to speak and whose perspectives influence the discussion are all shaped by existing power relations.

For this reason, community dialogues can benefit from feminist and participatory approaches to facilitation, which understand participants not as passive recipients of information but as active contributors to the production of knowledge and the identification of possible solutions. These approaches recognize that participants bring different forms of knowledge and lived experience, and that meaningful participation requires intentionally creating conditions in which different voices can be heard and everyone can contribute, particularly where power imbalances may otherwise limit participation.

Putting this into practice requires attention to representation, accessibility, safety and the format of participation. Facilitators should consider whether the design of the dialogue creates barriers for particular participants and adapt activities where necessary to different languages, literacy levels, cultural practices, communication preferences or accessibility needs.²⁹

The role of the facilitator is therefore not primarily to provide answers or direct participants towards predetermined conclusions, but to create and guide a process through which participants can contribute their knowledge, examine different perspectives and collectively generate insights or possible actions. This requires clear objectives and careful preparation: the purpose of the dialogue should guide who participates, which activities are most appropriate for achieving the objectives and enabling meaningful participation, how discussions are structured, which questions are asked and what is expected to emerge from the process.³⁰

From principles to dialogue design

There is no single formula for designing a community dialogue. Its objectives, participants, duration, activities and expected outcomes should respond to the particular context. However, the information and suggestions presented in the following sections are informed by feminist facilitation approaches rooted in care, accountability, intersectionality, reflexivity and critical praxis.³¹

These principles have been widely used by organizations and practitioners seeking to create more equitable and transformative spaces for participation and learning.³² Feminist facilitation approaches have been applied across different fields, including development practice, gender training, urban planning and participatory action research.³³ While specific methods vary, they share an emphasis on examining power, valuing different forms of knowledge and lived experience, creating conditions for meaningful participation, and reflecting critically on the role of the facilitator and the institutions involved.

Below are some considerations to help translate these principles into the design and facilitation of a community dialogue.

Define what the dialogue is intended to achieve

Before designing the dialogue, clarify its purpose and what should realistically emerge from it. Is it intended to deepen understanding of a particular dynamic? Identify community needs and capacities? Exchange experiences? Strengthen relationships between actors? Develop possible responses? Agree on collective priorities or actions?

A clear definition of objectives guides decisions about who should participate, how much time is needed and which facilitation methods are appropriate. Objectives should also be clear from the participants' perspective: what are they being invited to contribute to, discuss or achieve? This may not be exactly the same as the organizer's internal objectives, and making both clear helps align expectations from the outset.³⁴

Consider who needs to participate and their access needs

Participant selection should draw on the previous actor mapping and territorial engagement. Representation should go beyond inviting the most visible organizations or formal leaders and consider whose experiences and knowledge are relevant but may otherwise be overlooked. Equally important is considering whether all actors can participate meaningfully and safely in the same space.

This includes paying attention to logistical arrangements and recognizing that access may be unequal for different participants. People working on environmental protection, for example, may live far from urban centres or in remote territories and may require additional time, information and logistical support to prepare and travel safely. Where needed, organizers should cover reasonable transport, accommodation, meals and other participation-related costs so that financial or logistical barriers do not exclude relevant voices.

Language should also be considered as part of accessibility. If the facilitator does not speak the language used by participants, organizers should consider providing professional interpretation. It can also be valuable to involve a local co-facilitator who understands the language, relationships and local context, and who can help ensure that the process is appropriate and accessible to participants.

Design participation intentionally

Activities should give participants different ways to contribute and progressively build towards the objectives of the dialogue. Small-group discussions, participatory mapping, collective analysis, visual exercises, storytelling, prioritization exercises and action planning can serve different purposes. Methods should be selected because they help achieve a particular objective, rather than simply because they appear participatory.³⁵

The sequence is equally important. Each activity should build on what came before and help move the conversation towards the intended outcome.³⁶

Recognize and respond to power dynamics

Facilitators should pay attention to who speaks, who does not, whose knowledge is treated as authoritative, and whether particular individuals or institutions dominate the discussion. Facilitation techniques, group composition, language arrangements and the sequencing of activities can all be adapted to create more equitable opportunities for participation.³⁷

Use the dialogue as a space for mutual learning

Dialogues are not only opportunities to understand community experiences and priorities. They can also enable participants to exchange knowledge and experiences with one another, identify technical gaps and, where appropriate, access relevant information, feedback or practical input. This should respond to expressed needs and should not shift the dialogue towards a one-way, expert-led format.

Validate what is heard

Throughout the dialogue, facilitators should check that what they have understood and documented accurately reflects what participants intended to communicate. This can involve summarizing key points, validating emerging conclusions with participants and providing opportunities to correct misunderstandings or add missing perspectives. This helps reduce the risk of external actors interpreting community views through their own assumptions.

Create a safe and accessible environment

Physical and emotional safety are particularly important when discussing organized crime, corruption, armed actors or threats experienced by environmental defenders.

The venue, confidentiality arrangements, documentation practices, seating and even the presence of particular actors can influence whether participants feel able to contribute openly. The space should therefore be physically accessible, perceived as safe and conducive to participation. Practical details matter: seating arrangements should encourage horizontal dialogue, for example by arranging chairs in a circle or U-shape rather than in classroom-style rows; water, snacks and restrooms should be available; and the venue should provide adequate light, ventilation and privacy where sensitive discussions can take place.³⁸

Connect the dialogue to what happens next

Participation should not end when the dialogue closes. Practitioners should be clear about how the knowledge, priorities and proposals generated will be used, what commitments have been made, and how participants will receive information about subsequent steps. Following through on these commitments is also part of maintaining trust.

Designing community dialogues in Madagascar

In August 2026, ECO-SOLVE convened a two-day dialogue in Antananarivo, bringing together community and civil society organizations working on different forms of environmental crime across Madagascar, alongside representatives of the Ministry of Environment. Participants came from across the country and brought experience in issues such as the illegal wildlife trade, illegal mining and threats to endemic plants and forests.

The dialogue was designed as a participatory space. Activities included short presentations in which participants introduced their organizations and initiatives without relying on traditional PowerPoint formats; an actor-mapping exercise to identify who was present in the territories and how resources were being used; and small-group discussions to explore what was working for environmental defenders, their needs and the challenges they faced. On the second day, participants worked mainly within their own organizations to reflect on the challenges affecting their projects and their longer-term sustainability, before presenting their reflections and receiving feedback and input from other organizations.

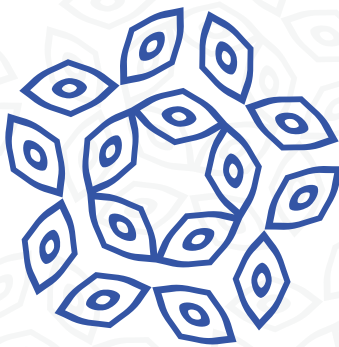
The composition of groups for each activity was intentional, and each segment was structured around guiding questions and facilitation prompts. This allowed participants to contribute their own experiences and knowledge, compare how environmental crime operates across different territories, and identify common challenges and opportunities for collaboration.

The intentional design of the methodology helped create an environment conducive to open communication and constructive exchange. This was reflected in the willingness of peer organizations and government representatives to share experiences, identify common interests and explore ways of working together. Some tangible results included:

- Participants identified opportunities to exchange experiences and methodologies for practices such as community patrols and research, recognizing that organizations could learn from one another's approaches and experiences.
- The participation of government representatives created an opportunity for civil society and community actors to discuss challenges and possible responses directly with institutions responsible for environmental governance. The dialogue provided space for different actors to hear each other's perspectives and identify areas where greater coordination could be useful.
- Participants identified opportunities to continue exchanging information and strengthening coordination with government actors after the event, creating a basis for relationships that could continue beyond the two-day dialogue.

- The dialogue enabled ECO-SOLVE to identify specific gaps and needs among participating organizations, including those related to safe community patrols, monitoring and investigative approaches. This allowed the programme to identify areas where additional training and technical assistance could be provided.

What this example shows: A community dialogue can serve multiple purposes at once. It can deepen understanding of how environmental crime is experienced across different territories, create connections between actors who may not regularly interact, identify opportunities for collaboration, surface capacity and support needs, and generate concrete commitments for continued exchange. It can also help facilitators and programmatic teams to identify forms of support based on needs expressed by participants rather than predetermined assumptions.



**FROM ENGAGEMENT
TO ACTION:
RESPONDING
TO IDENTIFIED
OPPORTUNITIES**

4. FROM ENGAGEMENT TO ACTION: RESPONDING TO IDENTIFIED OPPORTUNITIES

The processes described in the previous sections can help identify priorities, capacities, challenges and opportunities for further action. What follows should not be understood as prescribed next steps, but rather as possible ways of responding to what emerges from community engagement.

Based on ECO-SOLVE's experience, the following sections explore two of these pathways: providing financial support and connecting community actors to broader policy spaces.

4.1 ACCESSIBLE GRANT-MAKING

Financial support may be one way of responding to priorities identified through community engagement. It can help community-based and civil society organizations strengthen existing initiatives or develop responses they have identified as relevant to their context.

Before establishing a grant mechanism, practitioners should consider what communities and organizations are seeking to achieve, what capacities and initiatives already exist, what financial barriers they face and whether funding is the most useful form of support.

Conventional grant-making processes can create significant barriers for smaller or grassroots organizations, particularly those with limited experience navigating formal funding systems. For this reason, shifting away from top-down grant-making towards approaches that place local actors at the centre of identifying priorities, designing solutions and implementing responses is central to more locally led practice.³⁹

Accessible and trust-based grant-making approaches can help reduce unnecessary barriers. Application processes, language requirements, reporting expectations, timelines and administrative requirements should be proportionate to the size and nature of the funding and adapted, where possible, to the realities of the organizations the mechanism seeks to support.

This approach has been applied by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime through its Resilience Fund,⁴⁰ and is increasingly being adopted by funders seeking to improve access for grassroots and community-based organizations. Examples include organizations such as FRIDA,⁴¹ Mama Cash,⁴² the Global Fund for Children⁴³ and the Global Greengrants Fund.⁴⁴

Accessible grant-making requires attention not only to what is funded, but also to how organizations are able to access and manage those resources. Some strategies to make grants accessible include⁴⁵:

- using simple application forms and clear language, and making applications available in relevant local languages;
- providing different ways to submit information where internet access, literacy or technology may create barriers;
- allowing sufficient time for organizations to develop their ideas and ask questions;
- providing feedback and assistance during the application process rather than treating selection as a purely administrative exercise;
- making reporting and administrative requirements proportionate to the size and nature of the grant and requiring only the information genuinely needed to ensure appropriate accountability;
- maintaining regular communication during implementation to identify challenges, adapt where necessary and provide technical support when requested; and
- creating opportunities at the end of the funding period to reflect jointly on results, lessons, sustainability and possible next steps.



Protesters demonstrate on Paulista Avenue in São Paulo against a bill that aims to end the requirement for environmental licensing, paving the way for more destruction, more disasters and less protection for forests, rivers and communities. © Faga Almeida/UCG/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

Direct support to community-led responses

In the case of ECO-SOLVE, direct financial support has been one way of strengthening community-led responses to environmental crime. Tackling environmental crime requires coordinated action by multiple actors, including initiatives led by communities themselves. Providing financial resources directly to community-based organizations has helped strengthen locally identified responses, including ecotourism and livelihood initiatives, environmental education, community monitoring and patrolling, research, restoration and measures to protect environmental defenders.

To date, ECO-SOLVE has applied this approach in Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Mozambique and Madagascar, supporting 22 organizations with grants of €20 000 for projects lasting between 6 and 12 months.

The grant mechanism was designed to reduce barriers that often prevent smaller or grassroots organizations from accessing funding. In practice, this meant making several adjustments to the usual grant-making process. Rather than requiring fully developed proposals from the outset, interested organizations were first invited to share an initial project idea and received tailored feedback before submitting a full proposal. Application forms were translated and accepted in local languages, formats were simplified, and submissions could be prepared offline through editable Word documents.

This process continued after selection. Support was provided through regular check-ins, technical guidance and flexible reporting options, including written or oral updates, depending on organizational capacity and preference. At the end of each grant cycle, joint reflection calls focused not only on outputs, but also on challenges, lessons learned, impacts and possibilities for continuity beyond the grant period.

In this sense, the grants functioned not only as a funding instrument, but also as a practical tool for building trust, learning from local experience and strengthening more equitable partnerships with community-based organizations. This approach reflects a broader shift towards participatory and trust-based grant-making, which emphasizes relationships, adaptability and mutual learning over rigid compliance.⁴⁶

4.2 CONNECTING COMMUNITY VOICES TO POLICY AND MULTILATERAL SPACES

Community engagement may identify opportunities to connect civil society and community actors with national, regional or international spaces where decisions relevant to their territories are being discussed. These opportunities can help bring lived experience and locally grounded knowledge into policy discussions that may otherwise be dominated by government, technical or international actors.

Examples of organizations supporting greater participation of communities and Indigenous representatives in policy and international forum include Amazon Watch,⁴⁷ the Wildlife Conservation Society,⁴⁸ the Forest Peoples Programme⁴⁹ and Cultural Survival,⁵⁰ particularly in relation to environmental protection, biodiversity, climate change and Indigenous rights.

However, participation in a conference or multilateral meeting does not automatically translate into meaningful engagement. Practitioners should be intentional about identifying spaces where community perspectives are relevant and where there is a realistic opportunity for participants to contribute to the discussion. The following pointers can help you host meaningful and relevant meetings:

- **Identify strategic opportunities:** Monitor relevant policy processes, consultations, conferences and multilateral meetings and assess where community experience can contribute to ongoing discussions. The objective should not simply be visibility or attendance, but should also encompass participation in spaces that are relevant to the issues communities or where local perspectives are absent, under-represented or needed to inform broader analysis and decision-making.
- **Identify the appropriate participants:** Consider whose experience and knowledge are particularly relevant to the discussion, while avoiding repeatedly relying on the most visible or internationally experienced representatives.
- **Prepare participants for the space:** Multilateral and policy processes can be difficult to navigate. Participants may need information about the purpose of the meeting, the actors involved, and the terminology, procedures and opportunities to intervene. Support can also include preparing presentations, statements, key messages or meetings with relevant stakeholders.
- **Address practical barriers to participation:** Travel, visas, accommodation, interpretation, language, registration requirements and other costs can determine whether participation is feasible. Where possible, these barriers should be anticipated and addressed early.
- **Create opportunities beyond formal participation:** The most valuable engagement may not always happen during a formal intervention. Bilateral meetings, informal exchanges, consultations or connections with organizations doing similar work and with relevant decision makers can provide additional opportunities for participants to communicate their priorities, build relationships and identify possible areas for follow-up.

- **Follow up on what emerges:** After the event, practitioners and participants should reflect on what was achieved, which relationships or opportunities emerged, and whether any commitments, advocacy opportunities or connections require follow-up. Practitioners should also invite feedback from participants on how the process could be improved and made more meaningful for those involved. This can help ensure that participation forms part of a longer process, rather than remaining a one-off event.

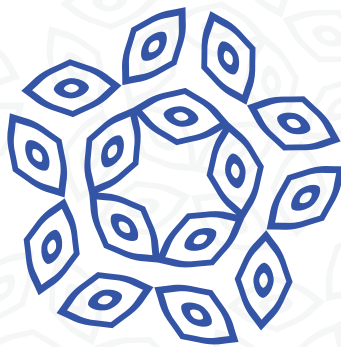
Elevating community voices in multilateral policy processes

ECO-SOLVE has also sought to ensure that community perspectives are not only gathered at the local level, but carried into policy spaces where responses to environmental crime are being shaped. One example is the participation of environmental defenders from Colombia, Indonesia and Brazil in a meeting linked to the first open-ended intergovernmental expert group on crimes that affect the environment,⁵¹ held in Vienna in July 2025.

The expert group forms part of a process mandated by resolution 12/4 of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. This process examines how the Convention is being applied to crimes that affect the environment, what gaps may exist in the international legal framework, and what responses could address those gaps, including the possibility of an additional protocol.⁵² These discussions reflect a broader debate about whether existing international legal frameworks are sufficient to address environmental crime as a large-scale, transnational and increasingly sophisticated criminal economy, or whether stronger legal alignment and cooperation mechanisms are needed.⁵³

In this context, community participation brought direct, locally grounded experiences to a debate that might otherwise have remained largely technical, legal or state-centred. Through this engagement, partners shared direct experiences of the impacts of environmental crime, from the Amazon to the Riau Islands. Their interventions included stories grounded in the experiences of community members, illustrating how environmental crime affects their lives and territories, including threats to defenders, weak protection, corruption, impacts on livelihoods and the need for stronger international cooperation.

The engagement also created an opportunity to move from individual testimony to collective advocacy. Community representatives developed a joint statement, which was later presented in a closed-door meeting with member state representatives.⁵⁴ This helped ensure that their priorities were not only heard in a public-facing panel, but also brought into more formal diplomatic and policy discussions.



REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTATION

5. REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTATION

The guidance presented in this handbook draws on both a broader body of literature and on ECO-SOLVE's experience implementing community engagement approaches in different contexts. Implementation has generated practical lessons that have informed the guidance throughout the handbook. At the same time, it has highlighted challenges for which there are no simple or fully tested solutions. The following reflections identify three such areas that ECO-SOLVE encountered in practice and that require continued learning, adaptation and, in some cases, broader structural change.

1. Short-term funding can leave promising interventions without enough time to consolidate

Grants of €20 000 over 6 to 12 months have enabled organizations to initiate or strengthen locally led responses to environmental crime. However, this timeframe is not always sufficient for the changes these projects are trying to achieve. Initiatives seeking to change behaviour, strengthen local governance, develop alternative livelihoods or establish new forms of cooperation are addressing dynamics that can take years rather than months to influence. This creates a risk that promising interventions lose momentum when funding ends before they have had sufficient time to consolidate.

Across several countries and different types of interventions, partners emphasized that continued sensitization, community monitoring and prevention activities, as well as ongoing technical support to communities, would require financial resources beyond the initial grant period.

It was observed that more established organizations were often able to integrate these activities into their broader programmes and seek support from other donors. For newer and smaller grassroots organizations with fewer established funding streams and less institutional capacity, however, identifying how activities could continue beyond the grant period proved more difficult.

Relatively small, short-term grants can enable locally led organizations to test and develop approaches adapted to their contexts. They can also provide opportunities for smaller organizations to build technical expertise in areas where funding often favours more established organizations with longer track records. However, this creates a persistent challenge for community-level funding: sustaining promising interventions may require support beyond a single funding cycle. Longer or phased funding may provide one pathway, but identifying realistic ways to sustain, connect or build on promising projects remains an area for continued learning.

2. Risk management needs to be more closely tailored to what communities are doing in practice

Despite ECO-SOLVE having security protocols and guidance in place, implementation showed that general safeguards were not sufficient for every situation that partners encountered. After community projects began in Vietnam and Indonesia in early 2025, incidents were reported in which corrupt officials threatened project implementers and community members, despite agreements and prior engagement with law enforcement.

In response, ECO-SOLVE worked with partners to develop additional ethical guidance for engagement between communities and law enforcement, drawing directly on their experiences during implementation. The process of developing the guidance and providing related training also revealed the need for more specialized technical support on risk management.

This points to a persistent challenge: risks cannot always be fully anticipated at the design stage and may change as activities and relationships develop. Activity-specific risk analysis therefore needs to remain an ongoing process, particularly where activities involve sensitive information, engagement with enforcement actors, exposure to criminal networks or potential retaliation. Ensuring access to appropriate technical expertise and mechanisms for partners to identify and respond to emerging risks is an important area for continued learning and adaptation.

3. Building evidence on community engagement remains a challenge

As discussed earlier in this section, ECO-SOLVE's community component has supported highly localized projects responding to the specific realities of selected territories in six countries. This local grounding is a strength, but it also creates a challenge in understanding how lessons from relatively small and diverse interventions can inform change beyond the communities and territories in which they were implemented.

Through their work, partners across ECO-SOLVE have generated various forms of knowledge and shared different types of evidence. However, differences in approach and capacity for documenting results make it difficult to determine which elements could be replicated or adapted elsewhere, and the most effective ways in which local experiences could most effectively inform broader policy and institutional responses.

This experience reinforces a wider issue identified in this handbook: strengthening the evidence base for community engagement necessitates more than just documenting the activities delivered; it requires noting what changed, why it changed, the conditions under which it changed and who it affected. Demonstrating this can help show how community engagement contributes to responding to and preventing environmental crime.

At the same time, stronger evidence alone does not create a pathway to wider change. ECO-SOLVE continues to explore how locally generated knowledge and experience can be connected to relevant institutions, broader networks and policy processes.



Phillip Byarugaba works for the Nkuringo Community Conservation and Development Foundation, which hosts the Buniga Community Forest Trail tour in Uganda. © HUM Images/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

From engagement to stronger responses

These lessons reinforce that community engagement should not be treated as an end in itself. The question is not simply whether communities are engaged, but under what conditions, with what safeguards, whose voices are included and whether their participation ultimately shapes action.

In this context, the purpose of community engagement is ultimately to strengthen responses to environmental crime. ECO-SOLVE has begun to observe this in practice, with structured channels between communities and law enforcement contributing to increased reporting. Meanwhile, support mechanisms have enabled environmental defenders facing threats to access protection, including safehouses. Other community-led initiatives have strengthened monitoring capacities, showing how communities can contribute directly to the management of their territories and help to deter environmental criminals.

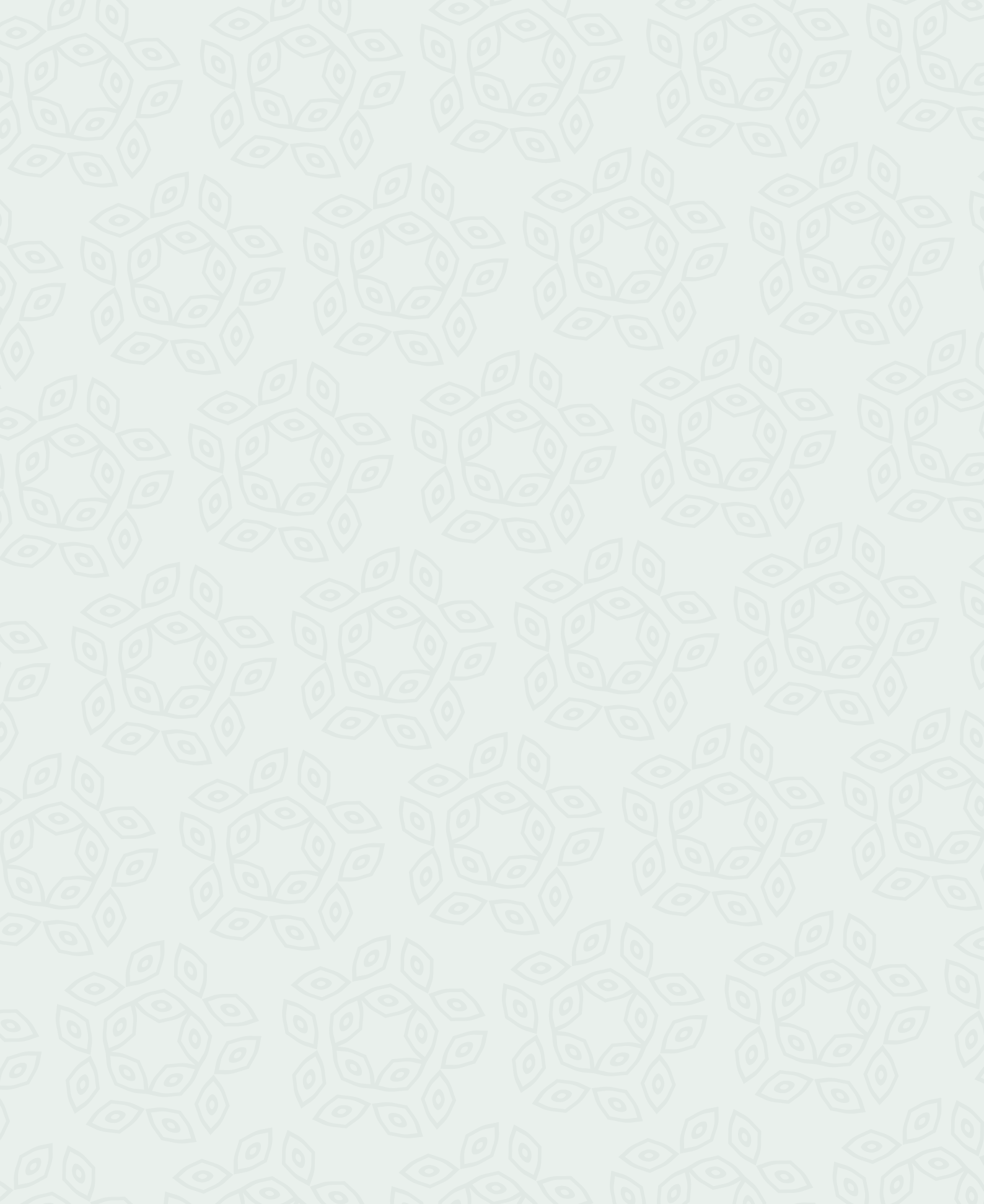
The way in which community engagement contributes to stronger responses to environmental crime will necessarily differ across contexts. The experiences presented in this handbook demonstrate that meaningful engagement requires attention to power and risk and responsiveness to the priorities, knowledge and realities of those involved. This handbook is intended to support this process by offering practical lessons and tools that can be adapted and refined through continued collaboration with communities, rather than by prescribing a fixed approach.

Ultimately, community engagement is a collective effort, requiring practitioners to be reflective and accountable to the communities they work with, as they seek to protect the natural resources on which people and ecosystems depend.

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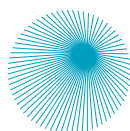
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