Decoding Injustice: Lessons from the frontlines of resistance and reimagining rights



CENTER for ECONOMIC and SOCIAL RIGHTS

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1. Introduction and lessons learned

The Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) has long championed economic and social rights as tools for challenging systemic inequality.

Traditional human rights approaches, often narrow, legalistic and individualistic, frequently fall short when addressing structural injustices such as austerity, inequality, extractivism and patriarchy. In response, CESR has developed Decoding Injustice, a framework for understanding and addressing the root causes of economic and social injustice through three steps: Interrogate, Illuminate and Inspire. Within Interrogate, the OPERA framework helps map the problem through four dimensions: Outcomes, Policy Efforts, Resources and Assessment, using relevant indicators and benchmarks. Decoding Injustice puts tools in the hands of activists, researchers and communities to uncover systemic injustices, expose human rights violations and organize to challenge the structures that sustain them.



This report showcases how CESR and its allies apply the Decoding Injustice framework to challenge inequality, shift power and drive systemic change. Section 2 presents nine country profiles from across the Global South, illustrating how these approaches are being put into practice in diverse contexts and the transformative potential of collaboration. Developed through a process of reflection with our allies, these profiles offer grounded insights into why and how organizations have drawn on the framework to advance justice in their own contexts. Together, they also highlight common strategies, experiences and achievements, revealing key lessons about what makes these approaches effective.

Beyond documenting impact, this report is about connection and momentum. It invites allies, activists and movements to learn with us, to build on these lessons, and to join in reshaping the global struggle for rights and justice.

Decoding Injustice: explaining its approach

Decoding Injustice is CESR's flagship approach and methodology for exposing the hidden structures of power that create and sustain systemic injustice. It is grounded in feminist, anti-colonial, and redistributive perspectives. It begins with people's lived experiences and then "decodes"- translates, explains, reveals - the systems of power and inequality that shape those experiences. In doing so, it shows why some of today's deepest injustices, such as gender inequality, racial discrimination, and climate crisis, are not accidents. These injustices are choices that have been deliberately "coded" into economic systems in ways that conceal both their causes and their effects.

Decoding Injustice is about uncovering those hidden codes together with communities that experience these injustices most sharply. It actively challenges the biases and exclusions embedded in traditional frameworks.

This approach places community knowledge at the center, not as an afterthought. It is developed in collaboration with movements, communities, and local organizations. It connects daily experiences to structural forces, showing how personal struggles reflect broader patterns of injustice. The approach is deliberately political: it treats human rights not only as legal tools but also as a language for organizing and legitimizing demands for justice. In this way, it reclaims human rights and grounds them in the political realities of each context.

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The three steps of Decoding Injustice are:

- **Interrogate**: Map the problem in depth using the OPERA framework to identify indicators and benchmarks.
- **Illuminate**: Shine a light on the underlying issues by collecting, analyzing, and visualizing data.
- **Inspire:** Mobilize communities and activists to take action, build power, and hold decision-makers accountable.

OPERA: A Framework to Assess Rights Fulfilment

The OPERA analytical tool supports step one above. CESR developed the OPERA framework to help put economic and social rights into practice. This tool helps answer a simple but powerful question: Is the government doing what it should to realize rights, particularly for the most marginalized? Rather than relying on a single indicator, OPERA uses a triangulation method—looking at rights from multiple angles to uncover deeper insights.

OPERA stands for:

- **Outcomes**: Are people's rights realized in practice? This focuses on real-world experiences, i.e. do people have access to quality healthcare or education, adequate housing, or the right to land, to assess rights fulfilment.
- **Policy Efforts**: Is the state taking appropriate steps? This assesses whether laws and policies align with human rights standards.
- **Resources:** Is the state using the maximum available resources? States have a duty to use their "maximum available resources" for the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights.[1] This pillar thus analyzes budgets, taxation, and public spending to determine whether resources are mobilized and allocated fairly and effectively.
- **Assessment**: How well are these actions addressing structural inequalities? This final step brings together findings from the other pillars and evaluates compliance with human rights obligations. It also asks whether measures reduce or reinforce inequality, with particular attention to marginalized groups.

How OPERA and Decoding Injustice Work Together

OPERA gives Decoding Injustice analytical muscle. It translates broad principles into measurable questions—while staying grounded in a power-conscious, rights-based analysis. Where OPERA brings rigor through evidence and legal norms, Decoding Injustice uses that evidence to build political strategies. Decoding Injustice is about process, participation, and movement building. Together, these tools reveal not just what's happening but why—and who is responsible. This can help communities and partners not only document harm but also trace it back to its causes—and propose alternatives grounded in human rights.

Common themes and lessons learned

In Section 2, there are detailed profiles for each organisation or coalition. Below we have drawn out some of the common themes and lessons from across these. This builds on the reflective conversations – through interviews with allies – that shaped each profile, offering insights into how allies experienced the process and worked alongside CESR.

The project started out with the aim to explore both outputs and outcomes: What did using the framework produce? And what changes, if any, did it spark in people's rights and realities?

[1] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (n.d.). Economic, social and cultural rights. United Nations Human Rights. https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights/economic-social-cultural-rights#:~:text=Use%20of%20maximum%20available%20resources,economic%2C%20social%20and%20cultural%20rights

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Two things stood out immediately in the conversations that helped inform the profiles. First, partners consistently stated their appreciation for CESR's style of allyship. Second, the process—of listening, organizing, and building alternatives—was often as powerful as the outcomes. In other words, the process mattered to those who had used the framework.

Lesson 1: There is no one-size-fits-all – flexibility matters

Decoding Injustice is not a rigid template, but a flexible framework – organizations used it differently. Each organization adapted it to fit local context combining legal, political, economic, and narrative tools based on what made sense in their setting. Whether through workshops, storytelling, or participatory research, no two processes looked the same. Interviewees valued this flexibility. It allowed them to center their own methods and the lived realities of their communities, grounding the framework in what felt meaningful for their work.

This shows that flexible, context-driven approaches are essential for movements everywhere seeking to translate rights into meaningful local strategies.

Lesson 2: Collaboratively co-designing approaches is crucial to success – co-creation builds power

A significant strength of the framework that was highlighted is how it promotes teamwork and co-creation—not just among disciplines but between communities, researchers, and advocates. This horizontal, participatory process fosters trust, shared analysis, and joint strategy.

Time was taken to co-design methods with communities. Research questions, indicators, and goals emerged from collective dialogue. In all cases, participants were seen as co-researchers and co-strategists.

This approach emphasized learning and adaptation. In South Africa, the co-design process highlighted the importance of building a shared understanding of success and grounding discussions in participants' everyday experiences. It also reinforced the need to reflect on how power, voice and participation shape collective spaces. These lessons show that co-creation requires ongoing attention to whose priorities guide the process and how decisions are made.

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Lesson 3: Rights must speak people's language

Many partners said Decoding Injustice helped make rights frameworks more accessible. By starting with lived experience, it connected abstract legal concepts to material struggles—like access to land, education, water, or the unfair burden of care shouldered by women.

Rights can feel distant or technocratic. But when grounded in people's stories and values, they become strategic tools for change. In the Philippines, IBON International and CESR showed how land rights violations were tied to structural inequality. One participant said:

> *"Telling our story helped people understand this isn't just about land titles—it's about how our whole way of life is being redefined without us."*

For wider movements, this underscores the power of translating rights into everyday struggles, making them accessible tools for mobilization and advocacy.

Lesson 4: Blending knowledge and complementarity of approaches makes Decoding Injustice most powerful

Working across disciplines—combining legal, economic, political, and experiential knowledge—makes analysis stronger. The most potent work came when Decoding Injustice was combined with the organizations' own tools of analysis – from feminist research to frameworks to expose racial injustice, or grassroots organizing.

In Colombia, ILEX combined the framework with their own deep knowledge of racial justice to integrate fiscal policy analysis and highlight how it reinforces racial discrimination. This has helped create a clear approach, which the ILEX team has further developed to blend into their unique racial and fiscal justice framework. This is now being rolled out across the region in acknowledgement that the everyday experiences of Afro-descendent communities in Latin America span borders.

In Tunisia, a process of deep reflection between the Tunisian Observatory of the Economy (OTE) and CESR revealed the value of combining different starting points. CESR's bottom-up approach, beginning with the realities of rights holders, complemented OTE's policy-first method, prompting a deeper analysis of the choices regarding the resource mobilisation and allocation and their impacts on the right to education.

In the Asia Pacific, the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) integrated Decoding Injustice with their feminist research traditions to create a new tool—Women Human Rights Impact Assessment (WHRIA)—for women resisting displacement. As one interviewee noted from APWLD: "What we appreciated the most about Decoding Injustice was its simplicity – but with a punch. The three clear steps – interrogate, illuminate, and inspire – gave a clear approach and path. But what made it even more powerful for us was how we combined it with our feminist participatory approach. This ensured that our movement stayed deeply rooted in the community while gaining the tools to fight using international human rights frameworks."

These examples show that different kinds of knowledge don't dilute each other—they deepen understanding and sharpen strategies.

Lesson 5: Political solidarity and supporting movements-- rights as political tools

For many partners, rights are not just tools, they are political instruments. Partners used rights to build alliances, demand recognition, and strategize for change. Rights were not abstract legal tools but sources of political legitimacy—language used to claim space, assert voice, and demand accountability in struggles for their rights.

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In Nepal, CESR supported Majhi women resisting a dam project. The final workshop ended in a press conference, centering their voices and connecting personal stories to global advocacy. As one woman said:

> *"To us, the river is not just water, it is life, memory, identity. When they take the river, they take everything."*

In Zambia, the Women's Life Wellness Foundation (WLWF) used the OPERA framework to strengthen women farmers' voices in climate finance debates. It wasn't just about securing the right to water through the boreholes that had been built in response to their advocacy, it was about building platforms for long-term advocacy. As one interviewee said:

> *"This work has done more than secure resources, it has opened doors that will remain open for years to come."*

This reinforces that rights are not just legal standards but political instruments, language that movements and allies can wield to build solidarity and demand accountability.

Lesson 6. From local to global—and back again

Decoding Injustice made visible how local realities and struggles are shaped by global forces, and vice versa. In Ghana, the approach helped partners trace local rights violations to the global debt crisis. In Nepal and the Philippines, it supported community-led resistance to World Bank-backed projects. In Tunisia, it linked national issues to IMF-driven policy conditionalities, while at the Marrakesh Alternative Summit, partners called for a just financial system.

This looping process—from local to global to local—made struggles more visible and strategies more powerful. For allies and networks, the takeaway is that connecting community struggles to global dynamics—and channeling solidarity back down—makes advocacy both more visible and more impactful.

Moving forward

In a world facing compounding crises—climate change, deepening inequality, and rising repression—human rights remain a powerful tool. But they must be reclaimed from legalism and reimagined through collective struggle.

Decoding Injustice offers more than analysis. It is a roadmap—grounded in lived realities and strengthened by rigorous evidence—for turning rights into organizing tools. The tools matter. But so too does the approach: listening deeply, navigating complexity, and keeping dignity at the center.

This is not just a methodology – it is an evolving tool, rooted in dignity, grounded in resistance, and committed to building a more just world. We invite partners to take up this tool, adapt it to your own contexts, and join us in advancing rights-based economies.

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2. Partnership profiles

Ghana: Protecting human rights in Ghana from a combined debt and cost of living crisis

Ghana's public debt has left the country in a state of crisis. By the end of 2022, Ghana's public debt had surged to over $55 billion, equivalent to about 93% of GDP;[2] meanwhile, debt servicing was taking the equivalent of around half of revenues.[3] This culminated in the country – not for the first time – defaulting on its external debt payments in December 2022.

This sent shockwaves across the economy, leading to macroeconomic instability, resulting in the Ghanaian cedi depreciating over 50% in 2022, making it one of the worst-performing currencies globally, and inflation soared above 50%,[4] increasing the cost of living and putting pressure on government finances.

The Integrated Social Development Centre (ISODEC) set out to investigate Ghana's debt crisis. They collaborated with CESR to use the Decoding Injustice framework to situate the economic impact on human rights.

The ISODEC team travelled across communities and embarked on a nationwide study to document how the debt crisis affected ordinary citizens. Their research focused on four communities across the Western, Volta, Upper East, and Oti regions - representing some of Ghana's poorest populations. They gathered testimonies, engaged directly with policymakers, and developed evidence-based advocacy messages emphasizing the government's responsibility to protect its citizens from economic instability.

The study helped to highlight the debt crisis not just in numbers but in the lived experiences of ordinary people. Families struggled to buy food, women earned less than their male counterparts, and entire communities were unable to save as their meagre incomes were swallowed by skyrocketing inflation.

The report revealed more than just an economic downturn: it exposed a growing human rights crisis.

The debt crisis and Its human cost

For the poorest Ghanaians, especially in rural areas, the debt crisis wasn't just about numbers—it meant choosing between eating and sending their children to school. **The team's study found that over 90% of respondents cited rising costs as the most significant impact of the crisis, with women-led households suffering disproportionately due to earning significantly less than their male counterparts.** Savings had declined drastically as inflation had eroded their ability to save, as well as any existing savings. Many households have been forced to borrow more, increasing financial instability. Finally, public services deteriorated, with government spending on healthcare, education, and transportation decreasing due to both debt servicing and the debt deals imposed by the IMF. Indeed, the report also pointed to the damaging impact of the inability of the IMF and World Bank to police a better financial architecture. In the case of Ghana, these institutions can be cited as complicit in inflicting pain on people with low incomes through their actions and inactions.

ISODEC's study revealed a direct correlation between high debt servicing costs and worsening poverty. The government's inability to invest in social programs due to debt repayments widened the inequality gap between the rich and the poor.

[2] Naadi, T. (2023, October 6). How Ghana's central bank lost $5bn in one year. BBC News. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-66947202
[3] World Bank. (2025). World Development Indicators. https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators
[4] Mensah, K. (2022, December 31). How Ghana, Africa's rising star, ended up in economic turmoil. Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/12/31/how-ghana-africas-rising-star-ended-up-in-economic-turmoil.

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Voices from the communities

"The impact of the national debt has been deeply felt, particularly with my SSNIT benefits. The payments I receive are barely enough to cover the rising cost of living, as inflation continues to erode their value. Basic necessities like food, medication, and transportation have become much more expensive, leaving little room for anything else. I also worry about the sustainability of the pension scheme itself, as the government's debt might affect future disbursements. With limited savings and no other source of income, it's becoming harder to live with dignity and peace of mind in retirement."

"As an unemployed person, the rising cost of living has made life extremely difficult. Prices for food, transportation, and other necessities keep going up, and without a steady income, I often have to rely on family or friends for support. The national debt seems to be making things worse, as government programs that could help people like me are underfunded or unavailable. It's also harder to find a job because businesses are cutting back due to the tough economy."

ISODEC is now transforming the findings into a tool for advocacy. Applying lessons from their Decoding Injustice training, they reframed the issue as a human rights violation, emphasizing that government policies disproportionately harmed people with low incomes.

ISODEC shared its report, The Impact of Debt Crisis on Poverty in Ghana, with Ghana's Ministry of Finance. In July 2025, it also engaged with a visiting IMF team on Ghana's tax and value-added tax (VAT) system. Its advocacy priorities included:

- Reinstating fiscal responsibility laws that were suspended during COVID-19 to prevent reckless spending.
- Protecting low-income people from economic downturns by designing policies that reduce inequality.
- Increasing investment in social services such as healthcare and education to close the widening economic gap.
- Ensuring that debt restructuring prioritizes people over creditors, and supports future economic stability.

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Uganda: Connecting debt, public services and human rights

The Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) and CESR collaborated to investigate how Uganda's growing debt obligations affect the resources available for health, education, social protection and climate action. Building on ISER's research, community engagement and advocacy on public services, the partnership used Decoding Injustice to connect borrowing and budget decisions with people's experiences of accessing their rights. It asked whether the way public debt is managed enables the government to meet its human rights obligations, and whose needs are overlooked when debt payments take priority.

The collaboration produced five complementary policy briefs: an overarching analysis of public debt and human rights, alongside four briefs examining education, health, social protection and climate change. Together, they connected pressures often discussed separately and provided a shared evidence base for challenging fiscal choices that deepen inequality.

Investigating the choices behind underfunded services

ISER applied OPERA to examine the relationship between people's enjoyment of rights, government policies and the resources committed to putting those policies into practice. The analysis brought together evidence of shortages in teachers, medicines and health workers; gaps in income support for older persons; and inadequate protection against climate-related disasters.

Through the Outcomes dimension, ISER examined what these gaps meant for people's access to services and support. Policy Efforts focused on the adequacy of government measures, including protections for essential spending and the rules governing social assistance. The Resources analysis compared debt payments with social and environmental allocations and examined how inflation and population growth affected their value. Assessment brought these findings together to consider whether fiscal choices supported progressive realization, used the maximum available resources and protected against retrogression.

The public debt brief showed the scale of the imbalance. In FY2025/26, debt servicing absorbed approximately 36.5% of the national budget, compared with 6.2% for health and 7.7% for education. The research also examined the consequences of expensive borrowing and delays in using borrowed funds, including commitment fees paid while public services remained underfunded. These findings helped identify decisions that could be challenged through advocacy on borrowing, debt management and budget priorities.

Making hidden losses in public investment visible

A central contribution of the research was to look beyond headline budget increases. ISER adjusted allocations for inflation and examined spending per person, showing how an increase on paper could coexist with declining resources relative to people's needs.

The health brief, for example, found that real spending per person fell by nearly 20% between FY2023/24 and FY2025/26. It connected these financing pressures with medicine shortages, staffing gaps and the costs households face when public facilities cannot provide care. The education brief examined funding against both enrolment and the wider school-age population, making visible children excluded from school. It also highlighted the inadequacy of grants for schools' operating costs and the resulting pressure to charge families additional fees.

The social protection brief showed how the Senior Citizens' Grant, provided through the Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment programme, had lost purchasing power while remaining fixed at UGX 25,000 per month. The climate brief examined the gap between climate-related spending and the resources needed to protect communities and public services from floods, droughts and other shocks.

The analysis also made its boundaries explicit. The social protection figures covered a particular government sub-programme, while the climate figures drew on a broader programme

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CESR's Peninnah Mbabazi Tashobya (second from left) and ISER colleagues at the launch of the briefing series.

encompassing natural resources, environment, land and water management. Recognizing these limits strengthened the basis for advocacy without presenting the figures as complete measures of all social protection or climate expenditure.

Across the briefs, gender analysis connected public financing with the unpaid work and costs transferred to households. When services are inadequate, women and girls often spend more time providing care, lose income and face additional barriers to education and healthcare. This helped establish debt management as a question of gender justice as well as public finance.

Connecting fiscal analysis with lived experience

ISER's community engagements illustrated what inadequate financing means for older persons and their families. An 82-year-old grant recipient in Kayunga District described the difficulty of meeting household needs while caring for her elderly mother and a grandson with a severe disability. Her experience showed how an individual transfer may also support wider care responsibilities.

Exclusion was equally significant. John Oteede, a 78-year-old resident of Kumi District living with physical disabilities, described being unable to access the programme because of its age threshold, despite difficulties earning a livelihood:

> *"For financial support, my children and I are at the mercy of good Samaritans."*

These experiences connected the adequacy and coverage of social protection with everyday questions of dignity, care and independence. They also helped explain why evaluating a programme requires looking beyond its overall allocation to consider who receives support, who remains excluded and what the benefit can actually purchase.

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Turning evidence into national and international advocacy

Each brief translated its findings into concrete proposals. These included protecting essential social and climate spending from debt pressures; increasing and adjusting the Senior Citizens' Grant for inflation; expanding coverage; improving school funding; and strengthening rights-based and gender-responsive budgeting. The research also supported demands for greater debt transparency, better use of borrowed funds, progressive domestic resource mobilization, less reliance on expensive borrowing, and debt restructuring and relief. For climate action, it emphasized the importance of grant-based financing.

In July 2026, ISER and CESR launched the five briefs with representatives from the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Members of Parliament, civil society, academia and other stakeholders. The launch provided a forum to discuss how borrowing and budget decisions affect essential services and to place human rights considerations within debates on debt sustainability.

The evidence also contributed to international advocacy. In a joint submission to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, CESR, ISER and the Government Revenue and Development Estimations (GRADE) project used the Uganda findings to show how debt payments constrain investment in rights. The submission connected this evidence with proposals for progressive taxation, fair international tax cooperation, debt reform, investment in public services and care, and meaningful public participation in economic decisions.

The partnership's documented contribution is a connected body of evidence and advocacy that makes fiscal choices open to scrutiny. ISER's planned engagement with the Ministry of Finance and Parliament provides a route for pursuing the recommendations and monitoring government responses. The experience demonstrates how Decoding Injustice can connect detailed budget analysis, community testimony and advocacy across different policy spaces, while keeping attention on the resources people need to realize their rights.

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Zambia: Women are Decoding Injustice in climate finance

In the heart of Zambia, the women of Lukolongo, Kapongo, and Shimabala wards have long battled the harsh realities of climate change. As smallholder farmers, they are the backbone of their communities, yet they bear the brunt of weather patterns becoming ever more erratic due to climate change - prolonged droughts, failed crops and economic uncertainty.

Despite the availability of the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) - a government-allocated financial resource designed to support local-level development projects in various constituencies - these women found themselves excluded from accessing these vital resources. This is in spite of the fact that local women often possess knowledge on the local needs of climate adaptation for themselves and their communities.

For too long, cultural norms, limited decision-making power, and the burden of unpaid care work have worked to silence their voices in local government funding allocations. But things began to change when the Women's Life Wellness Foundation (WLWF) stepped in with a transformative approach to amplifying their voices in shaping CDF funding for climate adaptation —the Decoding Injustice framework.

From exclusion to action

WLWF recognized that climate justice could not be achieved without gender justice. Through targeted training, they introduced women to the OPERA framework, helping them dissect the barriers preventing them from benefiting from CDF resources.

The first phase of their research uncovered a worrying truth: **women were largely unaware of the available funds, and those who knew about them struggled to access financing due to deeply ingrained cultural barriers.** The second phase revealed another injustice: **while funds were designated for women and youth, they were spread so thinly across thousands of applicants that their impact was minimal.** Additionally, **social expectations discouraged women from applying for business loans, causing a disproportionate share of funding to go to men.**

But armed with new knowledge and advocacy skills, the women refused to accept the status quo.

Raising their voices, changing their future

WLWF facilitated meetings between women's groups and local leaders, ensuring that their concerns and demands were heard. The women advocated for increased transparency in CDF allocations, more targeted funds for climate adaptation projects, and equal opportunities to access financing.

One of their significant victories was securing funds to construct boreholes, ensuring their right to clean water. But beyond these tangible successes, something even more powerful took root—the women gained confidence. They started participating in decision-making processes, challenging outdated norms, and asserting their right to economic and social justice.

As Mzingo Botha, Acting Executive Director of WLWF, proudly stated:

> *"This work has done more than secure resources—it has built a platform for women to advocate for themselves. It has opened doors that will remain open for years to come. It helped us to create a platform and open the door for women in communities to meet their local leaders, advocate for their rights to be addressed through the CDF, with a strong understanding of what their economic and social rights are. That will stand the test of time over the longer term and the years to come"*

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The impact of WLWF's work extends far beyond these three communities. By interrogating injustices, illuminating gender disparities in funding, and inspiring local leaders to take action, they have created a model for gender-inclusive climate finance across Zambia.



The WLWF team and allies.

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South Africa: At the intersection of human rights, gender justice and climate justice —lessons in the delicate location of power and voice

In late-2022, CESR, in collaboration with Mining Affected Communities United in Action (MACUA) and Women Affected by Mining United in Action (WAMUA), brought together 30 activists from mining-affected communities across South Africa to co-create popular education materials that connect human rights, gender justice, and climate justice.

MACUA and WAMUA represent a bold, radical movement for people-centered power. Their work challenges the deep, violent legacy of colonial land and mineral dispossession—by raising the voices of communities and confronting the toxic alliance between mining corporations and the State.

South Africa's mining industry has long relied on the exploitation and marginalization of Black communities. A central question for MACUA is whether human rights can meaningfully support their struggle. South Africa has a progressive Constitution and firm commitments under international human rights law. Yet, for many low-income Black communities, these rights remain very far out-of-reach.

CESR and MACUA's previous work identified a need for greater rights literacy. Through workshops and in-depth interviews, this work explored how those involved in redistributive struggles understand and use human rights. The feedback was clear: human rights frameworks are credible and valuable, but there's a gap in understanding and applying socio-economic rights to everyday life. Activists also made it clear that, in their work, rights were not abstract legal tools but sources of political legitimacy—language used to claim space, assert voice, and demand accountability in struggles over land, livelihoods, and environmental justice.



WAMUA/MACUA activist workshop.

Armed with this insight, CESR and WAMUA/MACUA began shaping an approach to human rights literacy that could meet people where they are by developing popular education materials rooted in lived experience and collective knowledge.

To start with the struggles people face every day and connect these to larger questions about power and climate injustice, the approach brought together women activists and community representatives from mining-affected areas to help design these materials. This is because it is women who bear the brunt of rights violations by the extractivist economic model of mining - through poisoned water, destroyed land, displacement, and invisible care work.

Lessons in making rights real and locating power

The workshop was built around co-creation. Through storytelling, group discussions and interactive sessions, it created space for participants to reflect critically on the connections between climate change, human rights and everyday struggles for survival. "You're not just telling us things... you're making us think!" - Workshop participant, South Africa, quoted in CESR and MACUA/WAMUA's joint reflection on the workshop.

The process also highlighted some of the challenges involved in making these connections tangible. At times, discussions remained focused on immediate environmental concerns, such as waste management and local pollution, while the broader structural drivers of climate change and environmental degradation were less visible. For many participants, climate change could still feel like an abstract or distant issue, disconnected from their daily realities, but these actions and their consequences were tangible.

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An important lesson was the value of starting from what people know and experience. By grounding discussions in everyday concerns—such as accessing clean water, securing livelihoods and putting food on the table—the links between lived experiences, structural inequalities, human rights and climate justice became much clearer.

The workshop also offered an opportunity to reflect on the importance of power and participation within collective spaces. It reinforced that the inequalities and power imbalances we seek to challenge in economic and political systems can also shape the ways in which movements and organisations are structured, how decisions are made, and whose voices are heard. This is an important consideration for any process committed to transformative change.

One of the key takeaways was therefore that if we are serious about justice—climate, gender and economic—we must pay attention not only to the systems we seek to transform, but also to how power, voice and participation are exercised within our own spaces.

Ultimately, the workshop reaffirmed that rights-based education must begin with people's everyday realities: accessing water, finding work, meeting healthcare needs and paying school fees. These struggles are not separate from climate and economic systems; they are deeply connected to them. Making these connections visible is essential to building a shared understanding of injustice and supporting collective action for change.

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Egypt: Building a shared approach to measuring social progress

Egyptian civil society organizations, independent researchers and field experts came together around a shared concern: dominant accounts of economic progress were overlooking the inequalities and rights deprivations shaping people's everyday lives. Beginning in 2015, this collaboration developed the Egypt Social Progress Indicators (ESPI), a practical tool for assessing whether economic policies were advancing people's dignity and wellbeing.

Partners and collaborators across different stages included the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), the Social Justice Platform (SJP), the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA), the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR), Oxfam and the Arab Forum for Alternatives (AFA), which hosted the ESPI coordinator from 2022 onward. Six thematic teams brought together 23 researchers and advocates, drawing on expertise in health, education, labor, housing, agriculture, environmental justice, gender and economic policy. Academic specialists, independent reviewers, lawyers, feminist advocates and trade unionists contributed to developing and scrutinizing the analysis.

The collaboration responded to the gap between Egypt's constitutional commitments and people's experiences. IMF-backed austerity, including subsidy cuts and regressive taxation, increased pressure on households facing insecure work and inadequate public services. Women and low-income communities bore particular costs, while restrictions on civil society narrowed opportunities to challenge these choices. ESPI offered a shared means of examining these conditions, identifying their policy drivers and advancing alternatives grounded in economic and social rights.

Developing the approach together

ESPI's methodology took shape through sustained exchange, workshops and collective experimentation. Egyptian contributors shaped the priorities, research and advocacy through their understanding of the issues they considered most pressing. CESR contributed methodological expertise, facilitation and coordination, adapting tools through this shared work. CESR's account of the partnership emphasizes trust, equal partnership, local expertise and responsiveness to context.

A steering committee and six thematic working groups supported shared decision-making throughout indicator selection, research, review, scoring and communication. Community consultation and stakeholder validation informed indicator development. Oxfam contributed advice on integrating gender, while CEWLA dedicated expertise to reviewing indicators and strengthening their gender analysis.

The initiative also benefited from collaboration on its digital platform and wider expert review. Backspace developed the website, and Aspiration contributed digital strategy advice. Supporters and collaborators included Fab Riders, Shamseya for Innovative Community Healthcare Solutions, the Community Assessment Portal for Egyptian Hospitals, and the Law and Society Research Unit at the American University in Cairo. Contributors affiliated with 10Tooba, the National Center for Educational Research and Development, the teachers' independent syndicate and universities in Egypt and internationally brought further perspectives on public services, urban development, research and social justice.

The coalition adapted OPERA through ESPI's methodology, connecting outcomes with the laws, policies and resource decisions that shaped them. Indicators covered health; education; labor; urbanization; food, water and agricultural land; and economic policy. They combined official statistics with independent qualitative analysis and assessed progress against human rights commitments, development targets and relevant international comparisons. Indicator selection considered accuracy, authority, added value and relevance to communities.

Accessible scoring and accompanying explanations helped communicate both the extent of deprivation and the decisions behind it. Each indicator retained its own assessment, enabling users to examine particular rights and policy choices in detail. Gender analysis across the

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themes illuminated connections between public services, employment, unpaid care and women's economic participation.

Heba Khalil of the Social Justice Platform explained in a published reflection on the approach:

> *"OPERA helped collectively prioritize indicators, in order to identify areas where improvement is most needed."*

Building an evidence base for sustained advocacy

The public platform, thematic factsheets and annual reports made the findings available in Arabic and English. They provided a common reference for researchers, journalists, civil society organizations and advocates working across different policy debates.

The 2018 annual report brought together evidence on employment, healthcare, education, housing and livelihoods, alongside recommendations on public investment, social protection, legal safeguards and taxation. The 2020 update enabled comparison with the earlier findings, revealing persistent weaknesses and further regression across several areas. This continuity helped partners assess the direction of policy over time.

The findings also made connections across sectors visible. Health analysis linked unequal access to care with public financing and household costs. Labor indicators examined employment outcomes alongside wages, workplace protections and the ability to organize. Housing analysis connected affordability and tenure insecurity with urban policy and public expenditure. Together, these findings challenged accounts of reform that treated macroeconomic stabilization as sufficient evidence of social progress.

Shared learning, practical exercises and indicator review strengthened researchers' ongoing use of OPERA. CEWLA contributed to adapting and applying the approach in Arabic, while researchers and organizations extended its use to issues including health and female genital mutilation. The collaboration developed a continuing capacity to produce and use evidence as circumstances and advocacy opportunities changed.

Connecting evidence with different avenues for accountability

EIPR coordinated the joint submission for Egypt's 2019 Universal Periodic Review, with ESPI evidence informing its analysis of rights, regression and repression. The submission connected socioeconomic deprivation with fiscal choices and restrictions on participation, bringing economic and social rights into scrutiny of Egypt's wider human rights record.

CEWLA coordinated subsequent women's rights reporting, including the 2021 joint submission with CESR to the CEDAW Committee. Drawing on ESPI and other national research, the submission examined women's experiences during austerity and the COVID-19 pandemic. It addressed inadequate public investment, insecure employment, gaps in social protection, housing barriers and unequal access to education and healthcare. This situated economic policy within the state's obligations to eliminate discrimination and advance substantive equality.

Partners also reported using ESPI findings in CEWLA's statements on women's rights and female genital mutilation, and in advocacy around reviews of the Beijing Platform for Action. These applications connected the broader monitoring framework with specific feminist demands and accountability processes.

Engagement with international financial institutions provided another avenue. Oxfam, CESR and partners used ESPI findings in discussions with the IMF and World Bank during their Spring and Annual Meetings, through Civil Society Policy Forums and direct meetings. At the 2018 Spring Meetings, preliminary findings informed debate on Egypt's economic reforms and their consequences for inequality. Related discussions addressed fiscal policy and social protection across the Arab region, alongside barriers to accessing information about the social impacts of international financial institutions' policies.

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The evidence also entered sustainable development advocacy. At the 2018 High-Level Political Forum, ESPI offered an alternative perspective alongside Egypt's official Voluntary National Review. CESR drew attention to the limitations of conventional progress measures and used the collaboration to demonstrate how human rights could guide more meaningful assessment of the Sustainable Development Goals. Related events connected Egypt's experience with debates on austerity and fiscal alternatives in other countries.

ESPI findings subsequently informed the 2019 Spotlight on Sustainable Development analysis of the IMF's role in inequality. Drawing on Egypt and Brazil, this contribution connected country evidence with international debates about economic governance, loan conditionality and progress towards SDG 10.



Cairo street scene. Brett Jordan/Pexels

Public communication and learning exchanges broadened the reach of the work. ESPI featured in Tax Justice Network's Arabic podcast, explaining how rights-based indicators could illuminate experiences absent from conventional growth narratives. At RightsCon in Tunis in 2019, the collaboration provided a basis for exchange on jointly designing accountability tools, data visualization and sustaining advocacy under restrictions on civic space. Oxfam's assessment also documents dissemination through the Global South Women's Forum, connecting the findings and approach with wider feminist discussions.

The original case study records continued use of the evidence in international advocacy, including IMF–World Bank meetings in Morocco. This work connected with broader exchanges in Marrakesh in 2023 on fiscal justice, social protection, debt and alternatives to austerity, and with joint advocacy alongside the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI).

Across these spaces, Egyptian organizations contributed their analysis and advocacy priorities, while CESR and other allies supported coordination, exchange and access to complementary international forums. Partners described Decoding Injustice and OPERA as frameworks that:

> *"helped us highlight crises caused by IMF and World Bank policies, debt and its burdens, and their impact on marginalized people, especially women. They also enabled us to present alternative narratives to the official government story." - Sherif Gamal, CEWLA*

Sustaining collaboration, influence and shared learning

Oxfam's 2022 case study, Oxfam in Egypt: Fiscal Justice Influencing in a Context of Shrinking Civic Space, identifies the availability of credible alternative evidence as a central achievement. It documents the use of ESPI in advocacy and its uptake in other research, including work by the American University in Cairo's Alternative Policy Solutions initiative on housing and urban development.

The assessment also records greater acknowledgment of social protection needs in IMF discussions during 2020, while noting the difficulty of attributing changes in institutional discourse to particular advocacy efforts. The clearest documented contributions were a sustained evidence base, stronger connections between research and influencing, and a coalition able to continue working across changing political conditions.

Participatory decision-making and clear governance arrangements helped sustain ownership and continuity. AFA's hosting of the coordinator from 2022 provided a regional institutional base for the partnership. These relationships mattered in a context where access to information, public organizing and direct engagement with decision-makers remained constrained.

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Lessons from ESPI informed collaboration among CESR, Oxfam and partners in Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon on monitoring economic responses to COVID-19. Exchanges through Oxfam's FAIR-EiU Knowledge Hub shared methods, findings and practical experience across contexts. Wider regional work included Arabic-language skill sharing with AFA and its Arab Network for Researchers, bringing together researchers and advocates from seven countries to examine economic and social rights priorities.

The experience demonstrates how sustained collaboration can support a continuing cycle of research, public communication, advocacy and learning. Priorities identified by partners include strengthening monitoring of economic reforms, advancing progressive taxation and public investment, and extending analysis of environmental pressures. Sustaining the coalition and protecting meaningful participation remain central to turning this evidence into stronger accountability.

Tunisia: Advancing rights-based economic justice

The collaboration between CESR and the Tunisian Observatory of the Economy (OTE) illustrates the power of cross-regional, interdisciplinary alliances, from grassroots advocacy on education rights in Kasserine to global tax justice forums in Marrakech, their joint efforts are bridging economic justice and human rights to amplify voices of resistance.

While CESR brings human rights expertise, OTE offers a strong economic justice analysis of fiscal policies. From their different perspectives, they both arrive at the same conclusion: that we must challenge austerity-driven policies and promote alternatives rooted in human dignity, equality, rights, and accountability.

As global inequality intensifies and international financial institutions continue to impose austerity measures, partnerships like this are essential—not only for critique but also for constructing radical, rights-based alternatives. This collaboration shows that a different economic vision can emerge from different contexts and unite across borders.

Reflecting Together: Using OPERA and Decoding Injustice for systemic change

In 2023, CESR and OTE researchers met for a learning exchange in Istanbul to deepen their shared analysis and apply human rights frameworks to economic policy. Using the OPERA methodology—focused on Outcomes, Policy Efforts, Resources, and Assessment—they examined how economic policies in Tunisia impact human rights, focusing on debt and tax justice and redistribution.



CESR / OTE workshop.

The collaboration highlighted the strength of combining complementary approaches: CESR often starts with people's lived experiences, while OTE begins with policy analysis. This reflection emphasized that both top-down and bottom-up perspectives are essential to dismantle structural injustice. A policy-focused approach may overlook how systems affect marginalized communities, while a solely outcome-driven lens may miss systemic root causes.

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Key reflections included:

- **Making rights frameworks accessible through lived realities.** Rights-based tools are most effective when grounded in everyday experiences, particularly for grassroots activists and social movements.

- **Human rights can guide planning and strategy**—not just demand accountability. OPERA was used to assess violations, map priorities, identify power dynamics, and inform movement strategies.

- **Complementary methods strengthen political impact.** Combining legal, economic, and social analysis allows deeper, more intersectional insights and strengthens calls for structural change.

- **Collaboration builds collective power.** Working across disciplines and geographies fosters shared learning, collective strategy, and long-term movement-building.

The Istanbul learning exchange affirmed that rights-based methodologies can drive transformative change when used in participatory, cross-sectoral spaces. It also reaffirmed the importance of centering the voices and experiences of those most affected by economic injustice.

Applying Decoding Injustice in Tunisia: Education as a human right

This work mainly took place between 2023 and 2024, when Decoding Injustice was applied in the marginalized region of Kasserine to assess structural barriers to the right to education. Despite constitutional guarantees of free public education, systemic disparities persist between urban and rural areas and between coastal and land-locked governorates, resulting in unequal access and diminished quality for many students. The study further revealed other layers of inequalities across the lines of gender and disability.



CESR / OTE workshop

This approach was necessary because, although OTE's core work focuses on economic policy, its advocacy increasingly reflects the interconnectedness of economic and social rights, including the right to education. Through public analysis, participatory research, and grassroots engagement, OTE supports communities in exercising their rights and holding the state accountable.

OTE organized a workshop in June 2024 at the headquarters of the Regional Union of Labor in Kasserine. Building on some of the lessons from the CESR and OTE regional workshop—notably about how useful the Decoding Injustice approach is to analyzing problems—the workshop brought together teachers, trade unionists, and community members to analyze the current situation of education in the region; identify structural causes of exclusion and inequality; and develop an advocacy roadmap grounded in OPERA's human rights methodology.

The workshop helped define research objectives, determine resource needs, and build a shared understanding of the barriers to quality education through participatory sessions, group discussions, and collaborative data analysis. In keeping with lessons from the regional workshop, this work reaffirmed the value of participatory, rights-based research in amplifying the voices of marginalized communities and addressing long-standing structural inequalities.

These findings informed OTE's case study on regional inequalities and the right to education in Kasserine, published on 19 May 2025. Using OPERA, the study connects unequal access

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to education with inadequate infrastructure, underfunding, declining teacher pay and hiring freezes, examining how these conditions reflect economic policies shaped by creditors' austerity requirements. Its recommendations include greater investment in underserved regions, measures addressing barriers faced by rural girls, improved support for teachers, and stronger community participation in education decisions.

OTE at the 2023 IMF-WBG Annual Meetings in Marrakech

The ongoing collaboration between CESR and OTE enabled a coming together to pool collective resources and hold space for resistance to a global economic model and policies that harm people's human rights when, in October 2023, the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund held their Annual Meetings in Africa for the first time in 50 years. This marked a pivotal moment for civil society, social movements, and economic justice advocates from across the Global South to come together in Marrakech and call for a transformation of the global financial architecture (GFA).



CESR and allies in Marrakech.

As part of the Learning Collective on a Rights-Based Transformation, OTE played a key role in advocating for alternatives that center people's rights over profits. It helped create space for collective strategy development, contributed to a shared civil society agenda, and fostered cross-movement solidarity.

OTE's participation underscored the importance of nationally grounded, regionally informed, and globally connected advocacy. As co-convener of the session "A Global Financial System that Advances Human Rights? Towards a Shared Vision for Change," OTE joined with allies to imagine a just financial system that centers human rights and redistributes power away from institutions like the IMF and World Bank.

Moving forward

Through these initiatives, OTE and CESR together are demonstrating how rights-based, participatory research can uncover systemic injustices and strengthen collective advocacy. **The learning exchange with CESR and ongoing grassroots work in Tunisia highlights the power of uniting legal, economic, and political analysis to challenge oppressive systems and co-create transformative solutions.**

For OTE, Decoding Injustice helped connect economic analysis more closely with people's lived experiences. As Nada Trigui of OTE put it, "we don't talk about inequality without budgets anymore."

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Colombia: Decoding the intersection of fiscal and racial injustice.

ILEX Acción Jurídica is a Colombian civil society organization founded in 2018 by Afro-descendant lawyers. The organization is dedicated to promoting racial justice and addressing ethno-racial inequalities in Colombia through a combination of legal mobilization, advocacy, and social research.

ILEX has developed work to look at the intersection of racial and fiscal justice in acknowledgement of the deep-rooted economic inequalities experienced by Afro-descendant communities in Latin America. These inequalities are not accidental but rather the consequence of historical and systemic discrimination reinforced by fiscal policies that fail to address this injustice.

As part of the journey to developing this approach, ILEX has collaborated with CESR. Firstly, in the development of a comprehensive framework, *"Principles for Human Rights in Fiscal Policy"*[5] that was developed by a number of organizations, to align fiscal policies with human rights obligations. The principles aim to provide clear benchmarks for designing, implementing, and monitoring fiscal policies to ensure they promote and protect human rights. The director of ILEX, Dayana Blanco, serves on this as an expert supporting the integration, in particular, of human rights commitments to non-discrimination into the principles.

The two organizations have also allied to develop an analytical framework to bridge human rights, racial discrimination, and economic policymaking. CESR's Decoding Injustice and OPERA framework proved useful as a reference to bring a human rights and fiscal justice lens, that was blended with ILEX's expertise on racial and fiscal justice – together this enabled a systematic examination of how tax policies, budget allocations, and government spending either alleviate or worsen racial inequalities.



ILEX educational flyer.

The culmination of this work was a report by ILEX and CESR: *"Analysis of Fiscal Policy as an Instrument to Achieve Racial Justice from an Ethnic-Racial Perspective in Latin America."*[6]

This report shed light on fiscal injustices and established recommendations for tax justice, public spending, and equitable economic policies. It highlighted several key areas:

- **Afro-descendant populations face invisibility in economic policymaking.** Gathering evidence on how fiscal policies disproportionately affect Afro-descendant communities, particularly Afro-descendant women who face intersectional discrimination, is a crucial first step to ensuring fiscal policies can re-dress racial injustice.

- **Documenting disparities and inequalities.** Afro-descendant populations experience some of the most significant barriers to accessing their economic rights: for instance, limited access to quality education, barriers to decent work, lower wages, and restricted land rights.

[5] The Initiative for Human Rights Principles in Fiscal Policy. (2021, May). Human rights principles in fiscal policy. https://www.cesr.org/sites/default/files/2021/Principles_for_Human_Rights_in_Fiscal_Policy-ENG-VF-1.pdf

[6] Center for Economic and Social Rights & ILEX Acción Jurídica. (2022, August 29) https://www.cesr.org/report-fiscal-policy-and-racial-justice-in-latin-america/

[7] United Nations. (1966). International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights#:~:text=Article%2011

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- **Assessing government obligations.** States must be held accountable under international human rights instruments and legislative national commitments. The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) commitment to "ensure the maximum use of available resources" to deliver on economic and social rights[7] is at the cornerstone of this. In light of this commitment, states must mobilize financial resources to address racial inequalities.

- **Reforming fiscal systems.** The report highlighted recommendations for policy shifts toward progressive taxation and redistributive fiscal measures to fund racial justice initiatives and address historical and systemic inequalities.

Continuing the journey

ILEX used its joint research with CESR to strengthen its advocacy and organizing around racial justice, connecting experiences of exclusion to decisions about taxation, budgets and public spending. The work supported exchanges among Afro-descendant organizations across Latin America, offering tools for political education and a shared basis for demanding more equitable fiscal policies.

The findings also reached audiences beyond specialist policy circles through coverage in *Rolling Stone*. The article highlighted the research and ILEX's recommendations, bringing the links between fiscal policy, structural racism and the rights of Afro-descendant communities into wider public discussion.

ILEX is now focusing on strengthening transnational collaboration, recognizing that racial injustices experienced by Afro-descendant populations in Latin America transcend national borders; opening space and engaging grassroots organizations in budget monitoring and fiscal policy discussions, while developing technical tools to help communities analyze state budgets through a racial justice lens.

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El Salvador: Connecting community demands for health and education with fiscal justice

The Fundación para el Desarrollo de Centroamérica (FUDECEN), CESR and the Red de Ambientalistas Comunitarios de El Salvador (RACDES) collaborated with communities in Cuisnahuat and Mercedes Umaña to investigate how economic policies were affecting their rights to health and education. The partnership brought together FUDECEN's economic and fiscal analysis, CESR's experience with rights-based monitoring, and community knowledge of public services and local organizing.

Teachers, healthcare workers, parents, students, trade unionists and community leaders contributed their experiences and priorities. Their participation shaped the questions investigated and the demands that emerged. The collaboration also connected with wider research and advocacy involving the Centro para la Defensa del Consumidor (CDC) and the Asociación para el Desarrollo Sostenible Popol Na.

Residents faced overlapping barriers: school closures, inadequate classrooms and sanitation, shortages of medicines, and the withdrawal of community healthcare personnel. Continuing education beyond ninth grade often required travel to distant schools, while accessing healthcare could involve transport costs and private purchases of medicines. These pressures fell particularly heavily on low-income households and women carrying unpaid care responsibilities.

Investigating the decisions behind unequal services

The collaboration used Decoding Injustice and OPERA to connect these experiences with the policies and resource decisions shaping them. FUDECEN combined census and household-survey data with analysis of public spending, taxation and debt. Community discussions helped interpret the figures, identify gaps and examine differences between national commitments and services available locally.

Through OPERA, participants considered outcomes in health and education, the adequacy of policies and programs, and how resources were raised and allocated. This connected questions about a closed school or a health facility without a doctor with broader questions about budget priorities, revenue collection and accountability.

Participatory workshops used the problem tree to organize this analysis. Participants identified deficient public health and education services as a central concern, then traced its causes and consequences. They discussed deteriorating infrastructure, limited school provision, medicine shortages and the withdrawal of health personnel alongside the pressures of debt servicing and inadequate social investment.

The process also brought gender inequalities into the discussion. Women's unpaid work helped compensate for gaps in services, including preparing school meals without wages. Participants identified paid employment for these mothers as a concrete demand. Other priorities included extending upper-secondary education in rural areas and ensuring reliable healthcare close to home.

Limited access to district-level health information and changes in administrative boundaries complicated the research. FUDECEN combined evidence from different geographic levels with community testimony to build a fuller picture. Follow-up interviews helped document how residents subsequently used the analysis and how their priorities developed.

From shared analysis to collective action

In Cuisnahuat, residents organized through their Community Development Association (ADESCO) after their community health team was left without a doctor. They collected nearly 500 signatures and submitted a formal petition to the health authorities. In January 2025, the community received notification that a doctor would once again be assigned. This was a concrete institutional response to organized community advocacy.

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Follow-up interviews in mid-2025 showed that residents were developing demands beyond restoring the previous service. Community leaders called for a properly equipped health unit, a permanent doctor, longer daily opening hours and weekend care. Their priorities reflected the need for dependable services that could respond to local conditions.

Education demands also became more specific. Participants called for provision beyond ninth grade so that young people could continue studying without prohibitive travel and household costs. They also advocated paid employment for mothers preparing school meals, connecting the right to education with recognition of women's work.

As Susana Castro, a community leader from Mercedes Umaña, reflected:

> *"We have the right to continue advocating as social organizations and as a people, because we know that it is not just one family that is affected by these two issues; the entire country is affected."*

Connecting local demands with national fiscal debate

FUDECEN connected the community findings with its wider research on public finance. Its study of health and education spending in El Salvador and Central America examined how resources were allocated and used, while *Tributación progresiva para un nuevo modelo productivo, inclusivo y sostenible* developed proposals for a more progressive tax system.

These strands of research supported demands for greater and more equitable investment in public services. Recommendations included progressive taxation of large fortunes, stronger guarantees for education funding, and directing resources towards primary healthcare and underserved communities. They brought the financing of rural services into debate about how the state raises revenue and whose needs public spending prioritizes.



Scene from FUDECEN video.

The public presentation of the progressive taxation study, organized by FUDECEN, CDC and Popol Na, provided a further avenue for discussing these proposals. The study examined how a wealth tax could help finance health, education and poverty reduction while reducing dependence on borrowing.

The collaboration also produced a 28-minute documentary featuring community leaders, teachers and school principals from both districts. Their accounts brought the consequences of fiscal choices into public discussion through people's experiences. The written studies and public audiovisual resources on health, education and taxation provided complementary materials for dissemination, learning and advocacy.

Together, these activities connected immediate community demands with proposals for changing the fiscal decisions underlying service deficiencies. The response to Cuisnahuat's petition demonstrated the value of collective action, while the wider research supported longer-term demands for redistribution and public investment.

Sustaining participation and following through

The experience showed the importance of beginning with community priorities and making fiscal analysis accessible. Participants contributed to interpreting evidence, identifying responsibilities and deciding what changes to pursue. Follow-up supported continuity between the workshops, subsequent organizing and engagement with public institutions.

The process also strengthened collaboration among FUDECEN, CESR and RACDES around

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a shared fiscal justice agenda. At the same time, restrictions on civic space and difficulties accessing information remained obstacles to participation and accountability. Sustaining the work required attention to the conditions in which communities could organize and engage with authorities.

Priorities identified for the next stage include supporting demands for a fully equipped health unit in Cuisnahuat, advancing dialogue on progressive wealth taxation and minimum education investment, and examining chronic kidney disease and its implications for local services. FUDECEN and its allies also plan to extend participatory research to other rural communities, disseminate the studies and documentary, and bring community evidence into legislative dialogue and regional tax justice spaces.

The collaboration illustrates how a shared analysis of rights and resources can support both immediate service demands and a wider agenda for fiscal change. Its continuing value depends on communities having sustained opportunities to use the evidence, shape the proposals and hold public institutions accountable.

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Philippines: The struggle against the SPLIT project

For generations, peasant communities in the Philippines farmed collectively through traditions of mutual aid and shared labor. However, this way of life came under threat from the Support to Parcelization of Lands for Individual Titling (SPLIT) project, introduced in 2020. SPLIT sought to dismantle these structures. The project, funded by the World Bank Group (WBG) and implemented by the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) was framed as a step toward securing land rights by individualizing land titles.

However, it was used as another mechanism for land dispossession, fragmentation, economic marginalization, and market-based land reforms. Instead of securing land, many who struggled in lean seasons and sought informal work were suddenly vulnerable to land dispossession during these periods and separated from the collective strength that had long sustained them.

Highlighting agrarian injustice through SPLIT

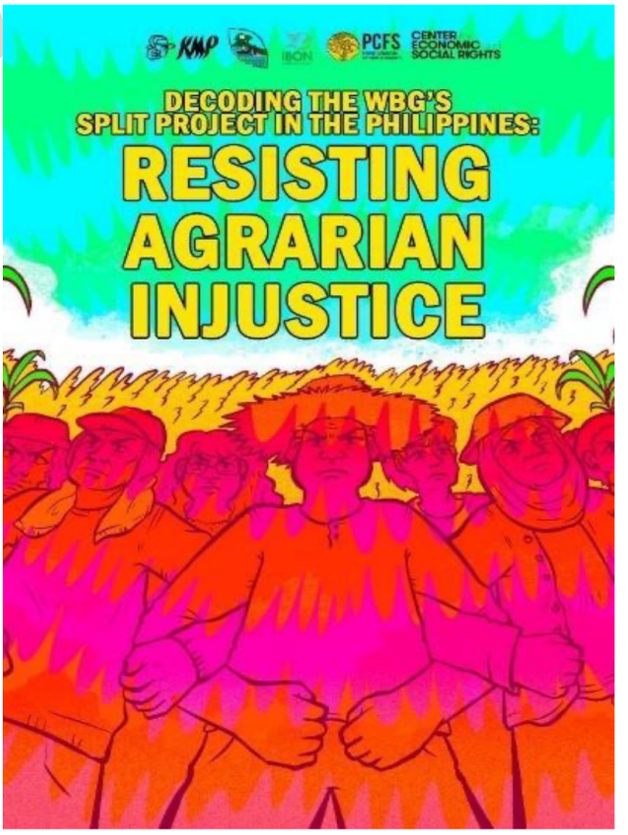
As SPLIT unfolded, reports emerged from Negros, an island known for its long history of agrarian struggles. At first, farmers were invited to "consultation meetings", expecting discussions, only to realize that they risked being coerced into signing documents that would divide their lands. Military forces present at these meetings heightened the fear.

Peasant farmers—who had fought for years to gain land through collective ownership—were pressured to accept individual land titles.

For peasant organizations like Kabuhi-an, Kasmmabi, Bakas, Ammacan, and Ammbo, who had cultivated land together for decades, SPLIT wasn't just a policy but an attack on their rights. That is because land plays an essential role in realizing a range of human rights enshrined in the international treaties that the Philippines has ratified, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The resistance begins

As the project unfolded, IBON International—an organization committed to capacity development for human rights and democracy—was alerted by local partners from the Peasant Movement of the Philippines (Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas). Reports surfaced from Negros, revealing troubling accounts of coercion. Peasant farmers were forced, sometimes under military intimidation, to sign away their collective land rights.



Joint campaign flyer.

Recognizing the need to bring international scrutiny to the project, IBON International, in collaboration with the Peasant Movement of the Philippines (KMP), partnered with CESR.

They deployed CESR's Decoding Injustice framework to assess SPLIT's impact, bringing in the framework's systematic human rights lens to apply this to ongoing grassroots engagement. Together, they travelled to Negros Occidental, holding focus group meetings and interviewing people directly affected by SPLIT in the area.

In response to the findings, IBON International and its partners developed a primer, *"Decoding the WBG's SPLIT Project in the Philippines: Resisting Agrarian Injustice"*.

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The findings were alarming. Despite claims of voluntary participation, SPLIT has been implemented without meaningful consultation. Peasants were often coerced into accepting individual land titles, undermining collective farming practices. The field research revealed that farmers were not adequately consulted before implementation. Some farmers reported home visits by soldiers, urging them to comply. The project was implemented with military and police involvement, leading to intimidation and harassment of peasant organizations - with threats of being labelled as insurgents under the government's counterterrorism laws.

The report also revealed that the project led to new peasant disputes that arose as SPLIT divided farmers' organizations and discouraged cooperative farming. Peasants were left more vulnerable to debt and market exploitation. Unlike corporate farms, small peasant collectives are not given exemptions from SPLIT. The project also facilitates the resale of lands to big landlords and agribusinesses, effectively reversing land reform gains. Former landowners have used SPLIT to reclaim land through legal loopholes and intimidation.

Finally, the World Bank $370 million loan, added to the Philippines' foreign debt. Yet, the money would have been better spent on agricultural subsidies and support services.

The document called for the abolition of SPLIT in favor of genuine agrarian reform and urged international solidarity against the World Bank's influence on land reform policies, which have historically favored corporate interests over small farmers.

Working with CESR's Decoding Injustice framework allowed the application of a human rights-based approach as a tool to hold the government, as the duty-bearer, and the World Bank to account (see box).

Since then, the primer has been translated into local languages and distributed among farmers. It encouraged resistance, empowering farmers to challenge the project and organize against land dispossession.

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Advocating for a rights-based approach to agrarian reform

The right to land is central to securing other human rights, particularly in the Philippines, as recognized in international treaties like the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. The 2018 UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants affirms the right to land for adequate living conditions. The Philippine Constitution mandates fair land distribution, prioritizing landless farmers. Agrarian reform should:

- Respect rights: Prevent State interference and corruption in land tenure.
- Protect rights: Safeguard peasants from losing land to large-scale investments.
- Fulfill rights: Ensure land distribution policies support sustainable use.

At the same time, the World Bank is also **bound by international human rights frameworks**: its Environmental and Social Framework upholds human rights and advocates against land rights violations. However, market-based land reform, especially the SPLIT project, is criticized as violating this.

Mobilizing for change

Armed with knowledge and solidarity, peasant organizations pushed back. Some have refused to sign parcellation agreements. Through protests, interventions, rallies or speaking at events, they have worked to expose SPLIT's coercive tactics to national and international audiences. The movement gained international attention, with human rights organizations, advocacy groups, and global networks condemning the militarized land reform.

However, there are ongoing reports of militarization and state-sponsored violence against land and agrarian reform movements and activists, with several incidents related to land disputes, particularly in Negros.[8] In January 2025, members of Paghida-et Kauswagan Group (PDG), IBON's local partner in Negros who helped with the fieldwork about the implementation of SPLIT in the province, were arrested on trumped-up charges of terrorist financing. PDG is a local civil society organization that supports peasants' right to land and rural development. These incidents often involve communities asserting their right to land against landlord and corporate interests, neoliberal land reform, and extractive projects. Amid President Marcos Jr.'s efforts towards the country's full liberalization for foreign investments, aligned with the policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group, IBON continues to call on the international community to support campaigns and mobilize international mechanisms to investigate killings and human rights violations in the Philippines.

CESR also supported IBON's international advocacy by helping bring findings from the joint SPLIT primer to international audiences. During the 2023 IMF and World Bank Annual Meetings in Marrakesh, CESR and allies convened a Global South dialogue on peasants' rights, food sovereignty and the World Bank's agrarian policies. This brought peasant movements, food sovereignty advocates and human rights activists together to examine the consequences of these policies and connect their struggles.

Nepal: Empowering women's rights defenders through grassroots action

For more than three decades, the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) has been a force in the fight for women's rights across 33 countries in the region. They push for a world where grassroots women's leadership redefines power and development, ensuring policies and economic systems serve people's rights and environmental sustainability rather than fueling a model of exploitation, extraction, and inequality that serves elite and corporate interests.

With over 300 feminist organizations and activists in its network, APWLD aims to put power in women's hands to define their development trajectory, supporting this through a feminist, community-driven, and justice-oriented lens. In particular, they use Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) to help give voice to marginalized women and equip them to define their own struggles and solutions.

Yet, the members had posed a question: how to wield International Human Rights mechanisms as a powerful tool for accountability against powerful structures and forces threatening their communities?

Recognizing the need for change

Large-scale development projects (such as extractive mining and mono-crop plantations) that displace local populations and undermine women's rights can be especially difficult for local communities to fight against. In such situations, grassroots activists and women's groups need extra leverage to frame these struggles within a human rights framework and demand that those in power be accountable on the national and international stage.

[8] IBON International. (2023, July 24). *International solidarity chips away at impunity: Support people's calls for international probe on victims of 'counterinsurgency'* in PH. https://iboninternational.org/2023/07/24/intl-solidarity-chips-away-at-impunity-support-peoples-calls-for-intl-probe-on-victims-of-counterinsurgency-in-ph/

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APWLD understood that this required a shift: an integration of International Human Rights frameworks into their methodologies for grassroots feminist activism. This led to a collaboration between CESR, drawing on the Decoding Injustice approach, and APWLD, using their feminist participatory research methodologies. The partnership aimed to develop a structured approach to equip women's rights defenders with new advocacy tools, rooted in the two approaches.

Together, this blended approach integrates feminist grassroots analysis with a rights-based framework, highlighting how large-scale development projects often violate States' international commitments to uphold and fulfill human rights obligations, for example, to the right to land and livelihoods.

Building a new approach: The WHRIA Toolbox

By merging CESR's Decoding Injustice framework with APWLD's grassroots methodology, the Women Human Rights Impact Assessment (WHRIA) Toolbox was born. This innovative tool was designed to help women's groups systematically identify injustices, collect evidence, and take strategic action to demand accountability.

The WHRIA Toolbox

The WHRIA Toolbox follows a three-step approach, which draws from the Decoding Injustice framework (Interrogate, Illuminate, and Inspire):

- **Defining the problem (Interrogating the problem):** Identifying the issues affecting women's rights and mapping systemic violations. This may include exposing rights violations through desk research and community scoping visits, using an OPERA-inspired problem mapping tree, or examining whether environmental and social impact tools have been used and communities consulted.
- **Collecting and analyzing evidence (Illuminating the problem):** Conducting field research, interviews, and power mapping to substantiate claims. This uses the OPERA Framework (Outcomes, Policy Efforts, Resources, and Assessment) to assess human rights indicators (qualitative and quantitative assessments) as well as power mapping.
- **Taking action (Inspiring action):** Using findings to drive policy change and mobilize advocacy campaigns. This may include engaging with formal accountability mechanisms (e.g., treaty bodies and Human Rights Council sessions). Tools used here are, for example, theory of change, critical pathways or data visualization tools.

A test of strength: The Nepal pilot

In May 2024, the WHRIA Toolbox faced its first major test: a grassroots-led effort to resist the construction of the Sunkoshi Hydropower Dam in Nepal. The project, a public-private partnership, threatened to displace over 6,000 households. This was set to disproportionately impact the Indigenous Majhi community who were set to lose their right to their land and livelihoods. Yet, women in the community were being left out of decision-making processes. The Majhi community also has deep cultural and ancestral ties to the Koshi River. As one participant in the pilot meeting said:

> *"For others, the Koshi river might be a source of entertainment, but for us, it is a sacred entity, a god. It is our livelihood.'"*

Before action could be taken, additional research and consultations with the community were felt necessary (to build on the previous feminist analysis that was carried out[9]) and to

[9] Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) & National Indigenous Women Forum (NIWF). (2022, February). *Indigenous Majhi women resisting the construction of Sunkoshi hydropower dam in Manthali, Ramechhap to protect their land rights.* https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Nepal-Land-FPAR-NIWF.pdf

understand the full scope of the project. The team uncovered critical gaps: the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was inaccessible to the public, transparency around financing was lacking, and there was no evidence of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) from affected communities.

Mobilizing for change



APWLD/NIWF community meeting.

APWLD and CESR, alongside local organizations, including the National Indigenous Women Forum (NIWF), brought the community together to apply the WHRIA Toolbox. Through workshops and discussions, Majhi women mapped their concerns: lack of consultation, environmental degradation, and systemic barriers to land ownership.

The findings were damning. Communities were facing displacement without adequate compensation. But even more importantly, many in the community stated no amount of compensation could make them move voluntarily – their bonds to the land are too strong. But their voices were not being heard. The hydropower project was felt to be prioritizing foreign investors over local well-being. Moreover, patriarchal land laws continued to restrict women's ownership rights – giving them even less rights in this power imbalance.

This community-led WHRIA assessment culminated in a press conference on 30 May 2024, where Majhi women and partner organizations called for the Sunkoshi hydropower project to be halted and their rights to land, livelihoods and self-determination respected. They urged the government, investors and international development partners to uphold Indigenous Peoples' rights and ensure meaningful participation in decisions affecting their communities.

Lessons for the future



APWLD/NIWF community meeting.

The Nepal pilot helped validate the WHRIA Toolbox as a powerful instrument for grassroots advocacy while also revealing areas for improvement. Moving forward, APWLD aims to refine the approach, creating a digital repository of adaptable tools that communities can tailor to their specific struggles. This will be an ever-evolving resource that the movement will grow and learn from, shaping new iterations as this process evolves.

One major takeaway was the need to amplify these campaigns on the regional and international stage. By bringing grassroots struggles to global forums—such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) or the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF)— and targeting those who often maintain the global economic order, such as World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB), APWLD hopes to further challenge power structures and secure lasting change for women's rights.

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As Eloisa Delos Reyes, program officer at APWLD said:

> *"What we appreciated the most about Decoding Injustice was its simplicity, but with a punch. The three clear steps gave a clear approach and path. But what made it even more powerful for us was how we combined it with our feminist participatory approach. This ensured that our movement stayed deeply rooted in the community while gaining the tools to fight using international human rights frameworks. In the next phase, we must amplify these women's voices onto the global stage."*

The journey continues. And with each step, grassroots women's rights defenders grow stronger, more equipped, and ever more ready to challenge injustice—no matter how powerful the forces against them may seem.

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