

# Asian regional capacity-building workshop report: the impact of the China Belt and Road Initiative on forests

Bogor, Indonesia | 17 & 18 February 2020



## 1. Introduction

The Asian regional workshop on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was led by the Global Forest Coalition's (GFC) Extractive Industries, Tourism and Infrastructure (ETI) campaign, and was held in Bogor, Indonesia, on

17 and 18 February 2020. The aim of the workshop was to learn from each other's experiences, analyze the key barriers to engagement with relevant actors, identify campaigning opportunities and develop a work

plan for 2020 and beyond for the newly-created ETI campaign. In total there were 48 participants from 25 countries, including representatives from GFC's Asian member groups and a number of external experts.

## 2. Key objectives of the workshop

- 1) To raise awareness among, engage and mobilize GFC members and allied social movements (including indigenous, peasant and women's movements) in affected countries of the risks and the social, environmental and gender-differentiated impacts of the BRI and similar investment projects through the sharing of evidence-based analysis.
- 2) To build the capacity of GFC members and allied social movements to campaign against BRI investments and similar projects where there is a disregard for social and environmental safeguards and human rights, including indigenous rights, and to defend community rights and livelihoods against the corporate capture of biodiversity policy-making.



The BRI land and sea routes. Fahmi/WALHI

### 3. Methodology

Throughout the two-day workshop a number of participants and experts were invited to deliver presentations on key issues and topics, which were followed by interactive dialogue and discussion. A representative of WALHI/FoE Indonesia and GFC's executive director led the workshop's opening session (click on the links below to view presentations).

**Session 1: What is the China BRI?** This session helped participants to better understand the BRI and its implications and impacts on countries where projects are being implemented. It included presentations by:

- [Hemantha Withanage](#) (Centre for Environmental Justice, Sri Lanka)
- [Wen Bo](#) (Centre d'Economie de l'Université de Paris Nord/ CEPN, China, via Skype) and
- [Anna Kirilenko](#) (BIOM, Kyrgyzstan).

**Session 2: The BRI and human rights instruments.** This session drew attention to the impacts of the BRI on women and forest-

dependent communities in particular. It included presentations on:

- [“Indigenous rights and the BRI” by Pham van Dung](#) (CENDI/CIRUM, Vietnam), and
- [“Women’s rights and the BRI”](#) by Diyana Yahaya and Arieska Kurniawaty (APWLD).

**Session 3: Strategies for targeting international banks and other large investors in harmful BRI projects.** This session included the following presentations:

- [“Strategies targeting multilateral funds” by Ann Perreras](#) (NGO Forum on ADB, Philippines)
- [“Strategies targeting the Green Climate Fund” by Coraina de la Plaza](#) (GFC, Spain) and
- [“Strategies targeting private investors in the tourism industry” by Dario Solano](#) (Afrodesc, Dominican Republic).

After Session 3, participants shared their experiences of the BRI in Asia and other continents in an open discussion.

On the second day, three parallel working groups were held to discuss successful examples and lessons learned from campaigns against the impacts of BRI investments and other projects relating to the ETI campaign. There was also an initial discussion on strategies for wider collaboration between GFC's member groups and allies.

The topic for the final plenary session was “Political opportunities to address the BRI and other ETI projects”. The following presentations were made:

- [“The Convention on Biodiversity Conference of the Parties” by Simone Lovera](#) (GFC, Paraguay)
- [“The Framework Convention on Climate Change” by Souparna Lahiri](#) (GFC, India) and
- [“The High-Level Political Forum” by Jeanette Sequeira](#) (GFC, Netherlands).

Following the plenary, working groups continued their discussions on ways forward and planning joint activities for the ETI campaign.





## 4. Workshop discussion and results

### The development model underpinning the BRI

The BRI is a multi-trillion dollar project that involves hundreds of infrastructure projects connecting China to Central Asia, South Asia, Africa, Europe and beyond. The BRI is financed by numerous institutions including the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM), Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and several privately-owned Chinese banks that between them have a wide-ranging infrastructure and extractive industries portfolio, as well as investments in tourism-related projects in many parts of the world. More than 70 governments are directly involved in the BRI, although investments in some areas, such as Latin America, are poorly documented. Some BRI projects are economically

disastrous for the receiving countries, such as projects in Venezuela that have suffered huge losses and ports in Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Mombasa in Kenya where China has assumed full control once repayments were defaulted on. So-called “debt-trap” diplomacy has been frequently associated with BRI investments.

China’s role as a major investor with wide-ranging trade agreements means that its reach extends to far-away places, across oceans and deep into rural areas. This form of neo-colonialism targets governments with weak democratic governance and takes advantage of insufficient local laws and enforcement, where

little protection is offered to ecosystems and communities. Once agreements have been reached between governments and Chinese investors, all too often the rights of marginalized communities are violated in the name of resource extraction. Infrastructure is political, and not neutral as we are made to believe. The colonizing hegemony of China’s developmental model is rooted in historical processes built on patriarchy, neo-liberal capitalism and militarism, and is designed in large part to counter the US-led development model that has a similar if waning political agenda.

### Country summary: Indonesia

The major driver of deforestation in Indonesia is the palm oil industry, and WALHI recently opposed a presidential decree allowing protected forests to be converted into palm oil plantations, which would

dramatically increase deforestation rates. Forest fires are also a leading source of air pollution in Indonesia and communities are working to reduce the amount of land that is burned each year in order to clear

land for palm oil. WALHI is working with communities to conserve peatland ecosystems through mitigation and adaptation activities, since significant community benefits can be gained from peatlands. In

Participants at the workshop. Fahmi/WALHI



relation to BRI investments, WALHI is working against a big hydroelectric plant and new coal-fired power station in northern Sumatra. Licenses have also been issued there to develop extractive industries and mining operations mostly with investments from India. There are also several US-funded projects worth billions involving coal export terminals (mostly exporting to China), but there is little information available to the public.

Indonesia's engagement with Chinese investors began in West Java over a high-speed train project from Bandung to Jakarta, financed by a state-owned Chinese development bank. The project was opposed by WALHI due to the forest destruction it involved. There was no community consultation or participation in the process, and WALHI filed a case in court and launched a campaign targeting all of the banks financing the project. A letter was sent to the Chinese embassy in Jakarta requesting a dialogue with communities on these issues, but it received no response from any of the actors involved.

WALHI is also advocating against a joint venture (an Indonesian subsidiary of a China-based investor) that wants to build a dam in northern Sumatra that would affect many communities living downstream. Communities alerted WALHI about the project, and a campaign was then started which included a petition signed

Presentation on targeting investors in the tourism industry. Fahmi/WALHI



by more than 1 million people, in order to advocate against the project's impacts on biodiversity. WALHI also targeted the Bank of China, one of the suspected financiers of the project. A letter was sent to the bank as part of a public campaign against their investment in the project, and as a result the bank withdrew from it and has said they will not finance it. However, the decision has not yet been confirmed in a public statement. Through these campaigns, WALHI has learned that the private banks are more concerned about their reputation than public banks, and are therefore more likely to listen to dissenting voices.

Networking in the environmental movement, in particular with academia, has been important for campaigns in Indonesia, and using the media is also a powerful tool for empowering communities. To strengthen the movement, organizations have been networking locally and globally, and linking grassroots struggles with global networks. Community participation is

essential, but it is often a challenge faced by CSOs during campaigns, especially where they must advocate and engage on behalf of communities. Women are also playing a central role in community-based campaigns, particularly in central Java, and in central Kalimantan where women are on the front lines of protests against a coal mine.

A key message to reinforce is that China's investments are to further their own interests, in order to secure their economic future and to have greater geopolitical influence, rather than to support the development of countries such as Indonesia. Communities must understand that although infrastructure developments such as road construction can be positive, they may also have negative consequences that must be fully disclosed and understood before projects are implemented. The role of civil society is therefore to be a bridge between communities and policymakers, and to mobilize communities where necessary.

## The impacts of the BRI on forests and communities

A number of case studies evidence the huge and damaging impact of the BRI on communities, women, youth, cultural identity and ecosystems, as well as violations of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Countless examples show how rural communities become victims when their natural resources are plundered.

There are also significant gender-differentiated impacts of BRI projects, particularly relating to the impacts of commodity trade and the industrialization of food production, but also involving the trafficking of women into China. Recent examples from Pakistan and Afghanistan point to women being employed in the sex industry without any protection, with similar concerns in the Mekong region due to easy connectivity and migration between states.

Mass tourism-related projects often go hand-in-hand with large infrastructure developments and lead to environmental destruction as well as changes in cultural identity. The example of a civil-society campaign that successfully halted the construction of hotels

inside protected areas in the Dominican Republic, and forced a government review of future developments, was discussed as a model for tourism-related BRI projects that require international struggle and attention.

Although the Chinese renewables sector is the largest in the world, renewable energy projects are only a small part of the BRI. As a consequence, BRI projects are increasingly controlling ports, airports and other point-sources of harmful emissions, which is shifting the burden of air pollution and carbon emissions onto other countries. Despite the fact that the climate emergency requires immediate and drastic emissions reductions, many

investments are geared towards carbon-intensive technologies and industries, and increased trade in polluting and damaging commodities such as palm oil, wood and livestock.

A commonality between many BRI investments is a democracy deficit, where governments are unable to look after their own communities and instead prioritize the interests of Chinese investors and the Chinese government. It is therefore necessary to protect communities, women's rights and human rights in general from BRI projects, through a strong movement that can advocate against politically and economically harmful projects.



### Country summary: Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has been significantly impacted by Chinese-funded projects due to its strategic location. China played a critical role in the civil war in Sri Lanka, and once it ended China began funding infrastructure developments including

Colombo's Outer Circular Expressway. In another development, Sri Lanka was not able to pay back its debt accrued in the construction of Hambantota Port, and as a consequence China has now gained full control over it. Further

to the BRI, the United States is pushing the government to participate in the Millennium Challenge Corporation, a project that brings geopolitical advantages and access to resources for the US government.



## Country summary: Vietnam

Indigenous farming systems are being challenged by a private company that is planning to build a tourist resort, posing a threat to the land rights and farming practices of communities. Working with communities to claim traditional land rights and safeguard their way of life is important, as well as engaging with local authorities to make sure that their rights are respected. Communities must also be supported to develop

sustainable livelihoods, for example through training on integrating crops (such as herbal medicines) with forestry, as alternatives to large tourism developments. Community-based tourism, where visitors are introduced to local culture and identity, must be promoted carefully to avoid rapid commercialization, which would impact negatively on communities. Securing legal and customary land rights for

Indigenous Peoples and local communities would give them more confidence in negotiations with outside actors, including investors. However, in Vietnam Indigenous Peoples are referred to as "ethnic minorities" as the government is unwilling to define and recognize them as such. Communities also require support to analyze future investments.

## Country summary: Nepal

There are sound legal and policy provisions in Nepal for protecting forests and biodiversity, including through women's participation in forest management, although enforcement is a challenge. It is important to develop monitoring mechanisms in order to make sure that policies are properly implemented, for example for the distribution of income generated

by community forestry groups and for women's empowerment at the community and national levels. The results of monitoring must also be fully disclosed and widely disseminated.

The impact of the regional hydroelectric agreement between Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Nepal is significant, where

community forestry user groups are being increasingly affected by hydropower electricity generation and transmission lines. Communities are also increasingly impacted by tourism, and in two areas of the country communities are opposing monoculture tree plantations.



## China's environmental double-standards

China promotes the BRI as an effort towards 'ecological civilization', but this must be challenged. Although China implements its own environmental policies and protections, including Green Credit Guidelines, they are non-binding and non-compulsory and are not valid in foreign countries. Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and grievance redressal

mechanisms are also usually not considered as part of Chinese investments, meaning that communities are rarely fully consulted and projects are often implemented despite strong opposition.

Information on bilateral trade agreements and BRI projects is also often restricted, with processes being nontransparent

and inaccessible, which is another major concern. For example, details of the agreement between the Sri Lankan and Chinese governments over the development of Colombo Port were not made available to the public, and in other instances information has not been granted in some European countries even under the Aarhus Convention.

### Country summary: Cambodia

Grassroots empowerment and activism is playing a critical role in Cambodia, where Chinese companies are now shutting down their operations. Women are at the forefront of this struggle, which has enabled open consultations with the government on Chinese investments. One such investment involved a deep seaport and an airport, which the Cambodian government allowed a Chinese company to build, granting them 10,000 hectares of land in the process. There were allegations, especially from the United States, that the project was for the purpose of a Chinese military base. Impacted

communities and displaced fisherfolk have protested against the project for more than 10 years, aiming to be fairly compensated or for their land to be returned to them. However, the Chinese government has not responded to their demands, and the Cambodian government has defended the companies involved in the project. It is very risky for communities to be involved in the protests, and some members have been arrested. Most NGOs in Cambodia are based in Phnom Penh and far from rural areas, making it difficult for them to respond on the ground. However, support for the communities is urgently needed and it is very

important to protect these frontline defenders.

In 2018, with the help of international groups, a fact-finding mission and evidence-based study of the impact of Chinese operations in Cambodia was conducted, and the subsequent report was used to lobby governments and the UN. Lessons learned included the importance of strong organization, sustained resistance from communities despite continued harassment, international support (such as media work, fact-finding missions, and lobbying), solidarity and using social media.

### Country summary: Russia

Investments in oil and gas exploration, mostly in Siberia, have been prioritized in terms of BRI projects. Boreal forests play an important role in climate mitigation, but forest areas are

being destroyed at an alarming rate, partly due to forest fires which have increased significantly in recent years. Fires near Lake Baikal are also degrading the lake ecosystem and polluting drinking

water. The Baikal region is important for tourism and requires greater levels of protection.

## Country summary: Armenia

There is a new initiative to establish an environmental public court on television aiming to increase public participation in the justice system. It could be used in ETI-related campaigns and as a model for other countries. Cases are taken up by local communities and heard by respected people such as judges, and the discussions are open and broadcast on TV and Facebook. The initiative takes decisions on behalf of the Armenian people and submits them to the government. After the first case, organizers faced a lot of backlash and persecution from the companies involved, but criminal cases have now been opened



against numerous companies for charges of illegal deforestation (10 cases in total), corruption,

selling forest lands and violation of environmental legislation and human rights abuses.

## Advocacy strategies for BRI campaigns

Targeting financiers and banks that aren't controlled by China could be an effective way to oppose BRI projects. For example, the Asian Development Bank's safeguards policy and Green Climate Fund's (GCF) Right to Information Regulations could prove effective in some countries. Similarly, some European banks also complement Chinese funding, and could be more accountable to governments, shareholders and other actors. However, the number of complaints received by Multilateral Development Bank accountability mechanisms are low compared to the number of projects that are financed, suggesting that they aren't particularly effective.

Although accountability mechanisms could play a role in monitoring more accountable or state-owned financial

mechanisms, they are not suitable for dealing with private sector institutions, meaning that other strategies must be sought for targeting private sector investments. However, as described earlier in this report, experience in Indonesia has shown that privately-owned banks can more more susceptible to the risks associated with damage to their reputations, and as a consequence more likely to listen to community concerns.

Another potential tactic could focus on UN Conventions where enforcement action can be taken against ratifying countries. Although most are non-binding, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is, and under Article 14 of it each country must report back to the UN Human Rights Council and

implement the council's recommendations. China has not yet submitted its Voluntary National Review under CEDAW, and a Voluntary National Report is expected from China in 2021.

Regressive forces in China and a number of other like-minded countries are trying to shift the narrative around the BRI towards prioritizing the right to development over human and environmental rights, making it vital to counter these attempts in order to secure progress that has already been made in the field of human rights and environmental protection. Multilateral spaces are also increasingly being captured by corporate players, which pushes the neo-liberal development agenda further in the wrong direction. This makes the ongoing effort to negotiate a legally-binding treaty on trans-national corporations (TNCs) to



regulate their actions and violations ever more important.

Finally, it will be important to expand GFC advocacy capacity

and membership within China and to develop links between campaigns and networks there in order to more effectively focus on BRI projects and finance that lead

to deforestation and impacts on communities.

## 5. ETI campaign priorities and linkages to other GFC work

A number of proposals came out of the workshop relating to future work under the ETI campaign and how it interlinks with GFC's other campaign areas. These included:

- *A coordinated effort between GFC member groups in Asia* that work on ETI-related campaigns from a forest protection and community rights perspective and on priority issues such as the BRI, palm oil, monoculture tree plantations, airport construction, REDD+, nationally determined contributions (NDCs) under UNFCCC, and community-conserved and protected areas.
- *Support for member groups to work on NDCs*, and a suggestion that member groups should share updates,

engage in national monitoring and produce country-specific shadow reports. It is important that the BRI is understood in the context of the NDCs and the need for development that contributes to drastic emissions reductions. Since all NDCs will be revised in 2020, this presents a good opportunity to engage with governments on them.

- *Bridging the communication gap between ground-level campaigns and advocacy work in international processes.* This is particularly relevant to work on climate change, including NDCs.
- *A proposal for GFC to host a dialogue on tourism and forests*, given that tourism can be a way for communities to

generate income from forests and their traditional practices, whilst acknowledging that for some countries, such as Indonesia, mass tourism is more environmentally destructive than fossil fuel extraction. Deepening analysis and understanding of the impacts of tourism on forest-dependent communities is important for the ETI campaign.

- *Strengthening understanding of the cross-cutting issues between all of GFC's main campaign areas*, and ensuring that the regional priorities that have come out of the recent member's meetings are reinforced in the Women2030 program and the climate, livestock and ETI campaigns. These regional priorities



Group discussion. Fahmi/WALHI

should also be reflected in campaign work plans. In particular, gender-justice should be prioritised as a cross-cutting issue throughout GFC's campaigns.

- *A proposal that the ETI campaign's steering committee produce and publish a conceptual framework in 2020 based on the discussions and outcomes of this workshop.*

- *Support for the campaign to host more workshops and to produce detailed case studies on a number of emblematic examples of the impacts of BRI projects on forests and women.*



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