



IMPACT STORIES

The Value of The Forests Dialogue for Indigenous Peoples

BUILDING TRUST AND DIALOGUE SKILLS

The Forests Dialogue (TFD) is an engagement platform that brings together diverse stakeholders to discuss and address the pressing issues in forest management, conservation, and sustainable development. For Indigenous Peoples, TFD is not just a forum for raising Indigenous issues but also a space for building skills, knowledge, trust, and relationships with stakeholders that would not be feasible in a different setting.

Indigenous Representation in Dialogues

Minnie Degawan, an indigenous Kanakanaey/Igorot from the Cordillera, Philippines, initially joined TFD to ensure that Indigenous voices were included in high-level discussions on forests. Her early motivation was, as she described, somewhat “selfish”—focused on making sure that the perspectives of Indigenous Peoples were not left out. She was rightfully determined that any conversation about forest conservation must include the voices of those who have stewarded these lands for generations.

However, after her second dialogue, Degawan experienced a shift in her perspective. She realized that TFD was not just a platform for advocacy but also a space for learning. This recognition changed how she participated in the dialogues. Instead of merely advocating for the rights of Indigenous Peoples, she became more open to listening and understanding other stakeholders’ viewpoints. She saw that understanding the language, priorities, and concerns of private sector actors, funders, and conservation organizations, could support her in her work to advance the rights of Indigenous Peoples. In particular, she could apply this understanding to her work in other forums and mediations. This shift allowed her to engage more deeply in dialogue and find common ground when multiple stakeholder groups advocate for specific change.





Minnie Degawan (left) at the Field Dialogue for Investing in Locally Controlled Forestry Ohrid, Macedonia.

Joining TFD

One of TFD's contributions is its ability to create an inclusive space where all participants are treated as equals. Degawan emphasized that, in TFD, there is no hierarchy—everyone, whether from the private sector, civil society, or Indigenous communities, has an equal voice. However, achieving this inclusivity required participants to break away from traditional ways of conducting business. Indigenous representatives needed to feel empowered to own the space, while others had to recognize and accommodate the unique challenges faced by some participants, such as language barriers, to ensure all voices could be heard. This process of building trust was essential; simply declaring the space equal was not enough—it had to be actively cultivated to encourage open dialogue.

Degawan described that initially there was skepticism among Indigenous activists about engaging with the stakeholder groups active in



dialogues, especially those in the private sector. However, TFD convened dialogues that Degawan said helped her see that even within corporations, there are individuals, some of whom are Indigenous,

who genuinely want to make a positive impact. By treating all participants as equals, TFD dialogues made it possible for Degawan to move past stereotypes and recognize the potential for collaboration, even with those whose actions may sometimes conflict with Indigenous interests.

Degawan joined TFD at the encouragement of **Marcus Colchester**, founder and Senior Policy Advisor at the Forest Peoples Programme (FPP), a human rights organization, and long-time TFD



Steering Committee member. Colchester could understand Degawan's skepticism towards multi-stakeholder processes as he had held his own. He explained how TFD dialogues led him to reconsider his preconceptions

about corporate actors: "Dialogues led me to realise that corporate people are actually human beings who might actually care about the world and other people, and therefore we shouldn't be pigeonholing them," he said.

Colchester's participation in TFD stemmed from a similar commitment to empowering Indigenous Peoples and defending their right to self-determination. Initially skeptical of TFD, he assumed it would be a space for corporations to "burnish their credentials in front of one another." However, friends persuaded him to attend, and he was surprised that the dialogues encouraged open questioning and demonstrated a genuine interest in understanding challenges from multiple perspectives.

Emphasizing the value of TFD's field dialogue model, Colchester described how field dialogues bring together diverse stakeholders in real-world settings. "People tend to sit in offices and not actually talk to people on the ground," Marcus noted, adding that field dialogues allow participants to "ask different kinds of questions and approach problems in new ways." For example, he reflected on the importance of

hearing directly from community members during the 2023 dialogue on Tree Plantations in the Landscape in Indonesia, where he finds it is less common for government and private sector to directly engage with individuals impacted by their decisions:

"Visits can be made directly to villagers who generally never get heard—which can change people's way of seeing things."

– *Marcus Colchester, Founder and Policy Advisor at the FPP*

He also points to TFD's dialogue initiative on Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) to help the World Bank and International Finance Corporation (IFC) examine how to incorporate FPIC into their amended safeguard policies. Colchester reflected that, while the dialogue may not have been the sole driver, it strategically contributed to broader advocacy efforts that led both institutions to adopt FPIC as a principle in their standards. Although implementation remains imperfect, having FPIC noted in their policies provides affected communities with a tool to challenge harmful projects and has opened political space for their voices to be heard. This example illustrates how the relationships and understanding enriched by TFD can translate into meaningful policy changes that support Indigenous rights on a global scale.

Capacity Building and Skills Development

Early in her career, Degawan said resources were limited for Indigenous advocates to develop their skills in global advocacy. Through dialogues, Degawan observed and learned how private sector representatives communicate effectively and how to navigate complex negotiations.



Marcus Colchester (right) and Cécile Ndjobet at the Ecosystem Restoration Dialogue in East Kalimantan, Indonesia.

These experiences were invaluable as she was often tasked with high-stakes advocacy without the formal training the private sector representatives receive.

A key example of the practical benefits of TFD was Degawan's experience collaborating with **Gerhard Dieterle** while he was Forest Advisor for the World Bank and a Steering Committee Member of TFD.

Degawan felt comfortable working with Dieterle, who she met through TFD, to informally consult on policy language that she and other Indigenous advocates were proposing to the World Bank. While the GEF's Policy on Engagement with Indigenous Peoples was pushed through instead, this example shows how the networks and relationships built through TFD can facilitate collaboration, even within the complexities of large institutional frameworks.

Dieterle, also reflects on the significant impact of engaging in TFD to understand Indigenous peoples' perspectives and through shaping his understanding, he was able to enact change at the World Bank. When he was the developer of a climate investment fund for the World Bank's Forest Investment Program, he recalled that "At certain time in the negotiations, I thought back to discussions I'd had with Indigenous Peoples in Indonesia with TFD." Inspired by the TFD model, he recognized the importance of Indigenous Peoples being able to express their views and organize themselves, rather than be invited as observers merely to fill the formal requirement of consultation.

This led Dieterle to propose a transformative addition—paragraph 38—to the World Bank's Forest Investment Program negotiations. This clause created a dedicated grant mechanism

for Indigenous Peoples and local communities, empowering them to take lead in managing funds and programs. The mechanism, which grew to nearly \$100 million, has since been rolled out in 80 countries. Emphasizing TFD's impact, Dieterle concludes, "The idea to develop that grant mechanism was a direct result of my work with The Forests Dialogue."

TFD has been a driving force for building trust, dialogue skills, and collaborative influence among diverse stakeholders within the forest sector, including Indigenous Peoples. By creating space for inclusive, equal-footing discussions, TFD has motivated individuals like Minnie Degawan and Marcus Colchester to rethink assumptions, cultivate relationships, and achieve impactful policy advancements.

TFD's field dialogues have opened the floor for Indigenous advocates to engage effectively with private sector representatives, funders, and global NGO's, evident in outcomes such as the World Bank's grant mechanism for Indigenous Peoples. By striving to bridge differences and amplify voices, TFD continues to shape a future where collaborative efforts support sustainable forest management and the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

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Tree Plantations in the Landscape Dialogue in Indonesia

