

Building community to transform the world

Resilient Communities partners from all over the world gathered in Lourdes for a week of exchanges and meetings. The stakes? To continue building a shared vision of a fair ecological transition.

From 27 to 31 May 2024, at the Cité Saint-Pierre in Lourdes, in the south of France, the second edition of the Stakeholders Assembly (APP) of the Resilient Communities programme brought together around sixty people from all over the world. The aim of this key event in the programme is to reinforce a common position on the fair ecological transition. Representatives from the twenty partners, around thirty people from Secours Catholique - Caritas France, academics from GEMDEV, a representative from CCFD-Terre solidaire and a representative from the French Development Agency (AFD) spent a week together discussing the uniqueness of the Resilient Communities programme, its relevance and its cross-cutting nature.

The APP, which is held every two years, is always a powerful and important event, during which the various stakeholders share their realities, their projects, their experiences, their difficulties and doubts, but also their successes and motivations. All with the same objective: to build together a common vision of a fair ecological transition.

Taking action for the most vulnerable

It's quite a challenge to come up with a common definition of a fair ecological transition across the world. It's certainly a long and tedious task, but one that can be built horizontally, taking into account the specificities of each and every one of us. Consequences of the climate change crisis are being felt around the globe, but they are not felt in the same way everywhere and by everyone, particularly by the most vulnerable who remain the first to be affected. As Luiza from AS-PTA in Brazil sums up: "This week we have been able to follow up this work [from the first APP] by developing and studying what this fair ecological transition means".

Let's take a look back at the logbook from this week, which aims to build this common ground.

Monday 27 May 2024 - Defining a charter for living together.

After meeting in the morning, the members of the Resilient Communities programme got down to work. First of all, they drew up an operating charter to guide the way we work together by answering the question: *"What do we need? What do we need to look after to make things work, both formally and informally?"* Despite the best intentions to put an end to inequalities, the goal is to raise awareness of what persists in terms of gender bias, power relations within organisations and North/South relations of domination. The way we live and work together can have an impact on how we build a shared vision of a just ecological transition.



The inclusion and originality of this approach was welcomed and appreciated by all, even if difficulties arose in the practical implementation of the charter and in feeling collectively responsible for its application. This showed the importance of discussing and experimenting with working methods in a multicultural context where there are different understanding of terms and procedures.

Tuesday 28 May 2024 - Defending the commons

This second day saw the first of the cross-cutting thematic sessions on the need to oppose the commodification of nature and to reclaim the management of common goods such as water through short circuits, community organisation and traditional knowledge. The first panel was proposed by the Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado (CIPCA) and the Groupement pour l'Étude de la Mondialisation et du Développement (GEMDEV), a research laboratory. They proposed definitions and theoretical frameworks for the representations that people may have of common goods. According to one participant, "the participants disagreed on the definition of common goods, between those who thought they belonged to everyone and those who said they belonged to indigenous populations in particular. The discussions were rich", she explains.

Secours Catholique - Caritas France presented an advocacy campaign in the Orbiel valley (Aude department) where, in 2018, floods took a heavy human toll, revealing a major environmental disaster caused by soil contamination by arsenic buried for many years. The association took action to help people in precarious situations. This took the form of advocating to the authorities, combining the fight against poverty with the defence of the environment.

Elsewhere in the world, our partners are also facing threats to common goods, with issues involving GMOs, climate change and agribusiness, as well as political threats leading to restrictions of public policies and civic spaces. Luiza from AS-PTA in Brazil explains: *"We had some very important training sessions and discussions on the defence of common goods, what they mean and what they are, because the organisations have different visions and it is also one of the aims of the assembly to find common ground between us all."*



The afternoon was then devoted to the link between urban and rural areas, focusing on building sustainable and inclusive cities - one of the regional dynamics of the programme. More than half the world's population lives in urban areas. It is therefore crucial to include cities in our work towards a fair ecological transition and reinforce the urban/rural linkages, including through reconnecting producers from rural areas to consumers from urban areas. Aravind Unnii and Srijita Sircar, affiliated with IGSSS in India, Saran Soeung from Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT) in Cambodia, Alexander Tripura from Caritas Bangladesh, Patricia Serrano from the Loyola Cultural Action Foundation (ACLO) in Bolivia and Edouard Ndong from Caritas Kaolack in Senegal demonstrated the vulnerability of cities and urban communities to climate change and extreme weather events.

The members of the Resilient Communities programme then discussed the issue of strengthening the urban/rural linkages through addressing the issue of food systems and agriculture. Promoting local agriculture could be a way of reconnecting city dwellers with their surrounding land and supporting local food systems. There is therefore an urgent need to relocalise food production, which requires the introduction of public food security policies and integrated territorial planning.

Wednesday 29 May 2024 - Community mobilisation: from local to global

On the agenda for this day: territories and agro-ecology. The "territories" session began with a panel entitled "Sharing experiences and cross-analyses between Asian and Latin American partners working with indigenous communities". Several partners presented their experiences: Quézia Martins from CIMI in Brazil, Manuel Cornejo for CAAAP in Peru, Thet Htwe Aung from KMSS-Loikaw in Myanmar and Gandhai Kamol from Caritas Bangladesh. They highlighted the rejection of the commercialisation of nature, confirming the previous day's work on common goods. Examples included the rejection of false solutions such as carbon vouchers, and of nature conservation practices carried out without considering the communities and their role in protecting nature. The importance of recognizing the knowledge, practices and customary law of indigenous peoples in order to define a shared vision of a fair ecological transition was raised. We must counter a romantic vision of nature and an idealization of indigenous peoples by promoting community mobilisation and civic participation of local stakeholders, particularly young people and women. The similarities observed and experienced between the different territories encourage us to devise a collective response, starting at the local level and working our way up to the global level. *"The cause of indigenous peoples is the cause of us all"* is the slogan of CIMI in Brazil. Not to reinforce the invisibility of indigenous peoples, their presence at future Stakeholders Assembly is widely hoped for.

The discussions then turned to agro-ecology. Denis Monteiro from AS-PTA in Brazil, Doctor Arook from Caritas Bangladesh, Brother Jules from CARTO in Togo, Laurent Seux from the SCCF's "Ensemble Bien Vivre Bien Manger" programme, and Coline Podlunsek from CCFD-Terre solidaire in France spoke about the practices developed or promoted over the last two years through the programme. They highlighted the challenges they face: monoculture, chemical inputs, land pressure, land grabbing, but also insecurity in areas of armed conflict and the preponderance of the patriarchal model reinforcing unequal access to land for women, exclusion from decision-making and unequal sharing of income.

To overcome these issues, the legal recognition of agro-ecology and the encouragement of its deployment via public policies were widely mentioned, as well as a struggle in the field of ideas around the terms "sustainable growth" and "clean energy".



The discussions also provided an opportunity to take a more strategic viewpoint, imagining coalitions of stakeholders with the capacity to influence public policy and proposing territorial governance with the participation of local stakeholders who have accumulated know-how that is now being undermined and rendered invisible by the logic of domination at work.

How can we produce sustainably and organically? What balance should be struck between nature and production? Although we don't have all the answers, justice seems to be a crucial element.

On a subject as central as agro-ecology, it is necessary to integrate all the hidden costs of food (health, environment, etc.) into the debates if we really want to establish a shared vision of a fair ecological transition.



Thursday 30 May 2024 - Raising awareness of gender relations and empowerment

Thursday morning was devoted to a bit of rest for the participants, who were able to recharge their batteries by visiting the town of Lourdes, hiking to the summit of Béout or getting a bit more sleep!

The themes of gender and empowerment were addressed in the afternoon. On gender, the challenge was to re-read the week through the prism of three questions: "What inspired me? The participants then paid particular attention to gender issues and the place of women as a source of emancipation and progress towards a fair ecological transition. They were able to question certain projects and draw inspiration for the future. This focus on gender is essential to the programme, which is based on the premise that the socio-environmental crisis is having an impact on us all, and in particular on women, who are often marginalised and therefore the first victims of this crisis.

When it comes to the power to act, one thing is certain: environmental inequalities are correlated with social injustices, and in the face of that, we are all agents of change. The session provided an opportunity to reflect, on an individual and collective scale, on the obstacles to and needs for developing the power to act. Many interesting and valuable points emerged, and a consensus took shape on the need for community, local, and bottom-up approaches. Indeed, many expressed the need to build on what we already have without creating new structures. What we already have are actors who are raising their voices, people who are confronting the challenges of the socio-environmental crisis on a daily basis, and innovative group dynamics. To ensure that these emancipation dynamics are not held back, it is important to have confidence in the people concerned, to help them become aware of the problems they face, and to strengthen their capacities by giving them access to knowledge and power, for example by forming alliances or identifying places of power. It is also important to bear in mind that patriarchy remains a major obstacle and that it is necessary to take into account the balance, albeit a difficult one, between personal health (physical and mental) and commitment.

Friday 31 May 2024 - Telling stories for change

Strategies of influence as a lever for structural change were at the heart of this final day. This gave the partners the opportunity to discuss several types of influencing strategy. For Caritas Colombia, Juan Felipe presented local institutional advocacy, while Aravind Unni, associated with IGSSS India and Judith Lachnitt from SCCF shared their experience of institutional advocacy. The COP (Conference of the Parties) framework was taken as an example, with urban issues and issues relating to the false solution of carbon offsets, respectively.

For his part, Rafael Santos Neves, for ASA in Brazil, illustrated the changing narrative with regard to water issues. The participants then worked in sub-groups according to regional dynamics - the different parts of the world - on the issue of narratives. For each item (agroecology, sustainable and inclusive cities, common goods and ecological transition in rural areas), the idea was to identify both the model we no longer want by looking at the causes, those responsible and the way in which this model is 'sold' to us, and also to identify the model we want by focusing on the solutions we are promoting, the players involved in this change and why this model is better for everyone. The basis of this narrative was the stories of injustice told by the participants. This work makes it possible to identify more broadly the work on narratives as an important and effective lever for change to bring together, mobilise and engage as many people as possible.



Living interculturally

As well as working to build a shared vision of a fair ecological transition, the week also provided an opportunity to live together in an intercultural way. For example, each evening was an opportunity to discuss either the situation in Palestine with people concerned, to tackle the issue of integral ecology through the film "La Lettre", to dance and share our musical culture, and to share songs, poems and texts during the final spiritual celebration. Spirituality was a common thread of the Assembly, so as not to lose our direction. The challenge was to reconnect with nature through the practices and cultures of the partners who make this resilient community. These 'informal' moments are just as important for forming a community, because they allow us to get to know each other, to forge links, to learn more about each other's daily lives, to see the world through different eyes and to gain a sense of the importance of the solidarity that binds us together.

