

# The Autonomy and Resilience Fund

TRANSFORMING FEAR INTO HOPE



GLOBAL ALLIANCE  
FOR GREEN AND  
GENDER ACTION

## The Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action (GAGGA) rallies the collective power of women's rights, environmental and climate justice movements around the world.

**G**AGGA's vision is a world where women's rights to water, food security, and a clean, healthy and safe environment are recognised and respected. GAGGA is facilitated by Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (FCAM), in cooperation with Mama Cash and Both ENDS. GAGGA involves partners working at local, national, regional and international levels in more than 30 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe (Georgia) and Latin America. Partners include 20 women's rights and environmental justice funds, more than 40 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and more than 400 women-led community-based organisations.

For more: [www.gaggaalliance.org](http://www.gaggaalliance.org)



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## THE AUTONOMY AND RESILIENCE FUND AT A GLANCE

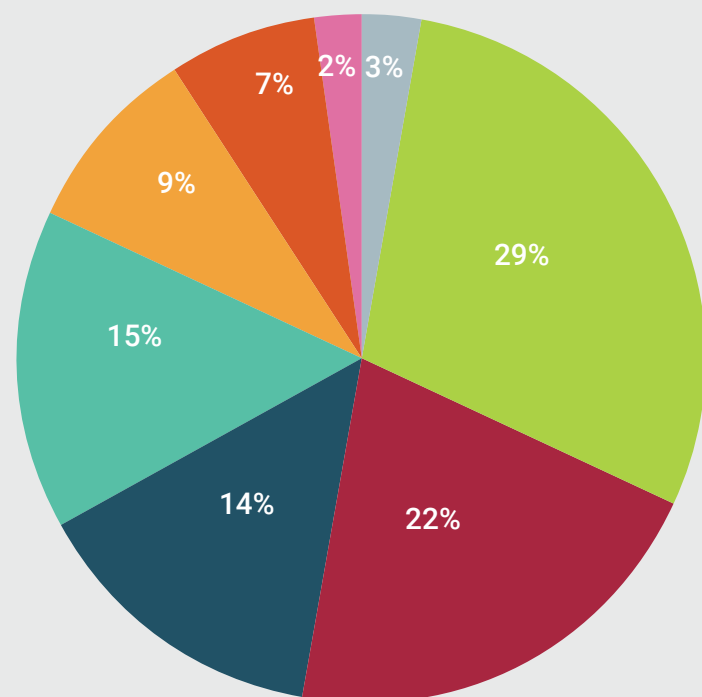
**The Autonomy and Resilience Fund** was a one-time funding initiative aimed to address the urgent needs of women environmental defenders and their communities. The fund addressed these needs through the strengthening of community-driven systems of resilience and autonomy that are based on principles of equity, solidarity, and collective care for people and nature.



In total, **€255,000** was distributed to **41 women-led community-based organisations** and **7 NGOs** in 21 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe (Georgia) and Latin America.

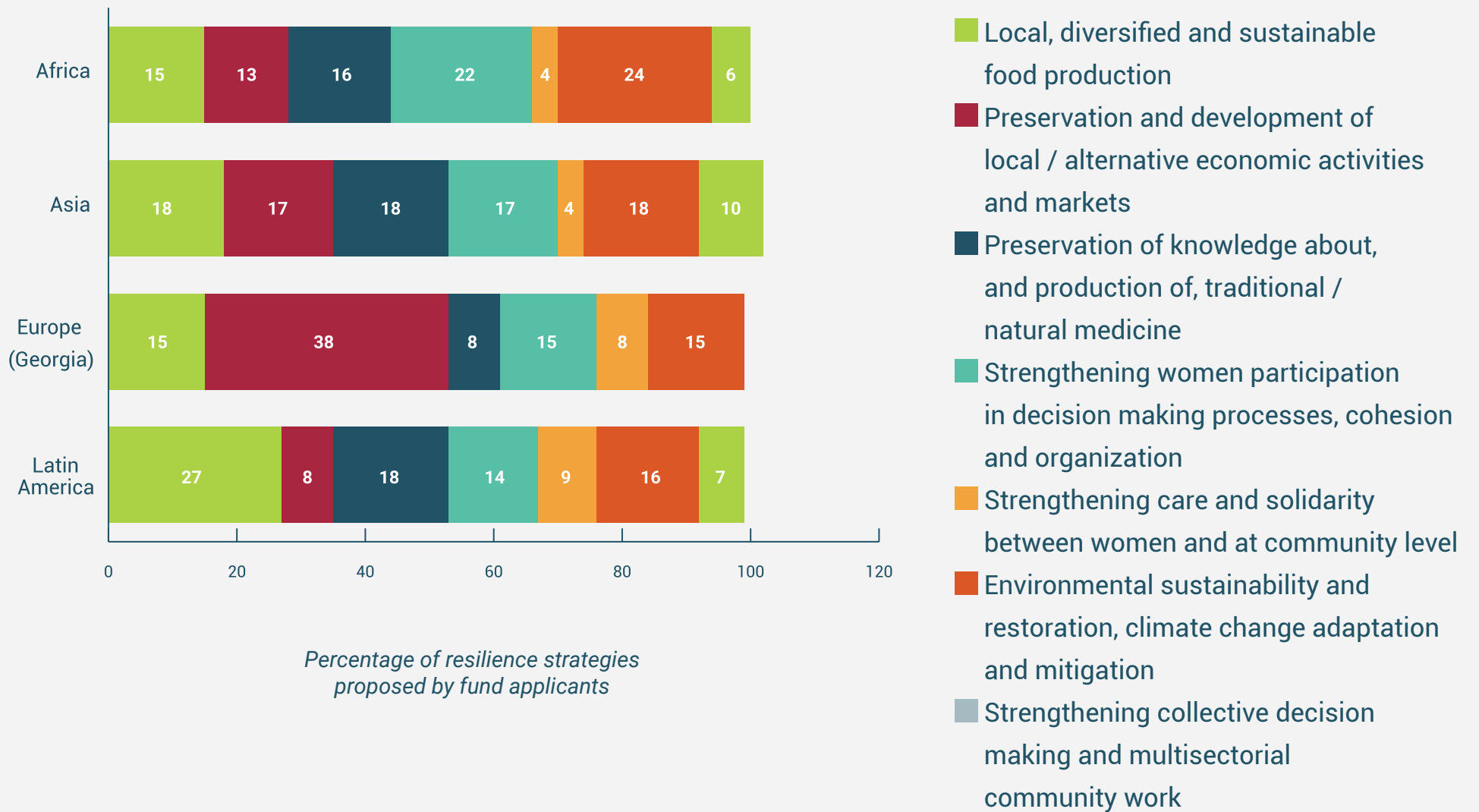
### Issues affecting local communities

- Food shortages
- Loss/reduction of income
- Worsening of health
- No access to water for sanitation and production
- Disarticulation of communities and CBOs' resistance and organization
- Weak and deficient health systems (not prepared to address COVID-19)
- Advance of extractive industries/mega-projects in territories during pandemic
- Increasing gender-based violence



Percentage of issues experienced by fund applicants

## Local communities' resilience strategies by region



## Some key takeaways from the Autonomy and Resilience Fund:

- **Trust women to identify the challenges** and propose the most suitable solutions based on their own analysis, contexts and capacities.
- **Make use of networks and relationships** with partners and allies; trust their knowledge and the relationships they have built over the years with the communities to allocate funding where it's most needed.
- **Avoid unnecessary layers of complexity** to ensure that funds get distributed quickly and directly.
- **More resources are needed** for this type of urgent, responsive funding alongside sustained organisational support.



## Introduction

*'We understand resilience and autonomy as the ability of communities (and their members) – those who are exposed to disasters, crises, and other underlying vulnerabilities – to anticipate, prepare for, reduce the impact, cope with, and recover from the effects of threats and stresses, without compromising their long-term vision.'*

– A woman environmental defender from Latin America<sup>1</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on women environmental defenders and their communities. On top of the problems they already faced, including lack of clean water and the advance of extractive industries and large infrastructure projects into their territories, the pandemic brought with it shortages of food and medicine, adverse health impacts, loss of income, and increased levels of unemployment and gender-based violence (GBV). In many countries, governments took measures – allegedly to deal with the pandemic – that prohibited communities from defending their territory, while at the same time, creating special mechanisms for corporations to advance their agendas. The pandemic jeopardised community-based systems of autonomy and resilience, which are necessary for communities and movements to continue their advocacy efforts for women's rights, social, racial, climate and environmental justice.

In response to the crisis and the needs of the movements it supports, the Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action (GAGGA) acted swiftly to create the Autonomy and Resilience Fund (ARF). Launched in May 2020, this one-time funding initiative aimed to address the urgent needs of women environmental defenders and their communities through the strengthening of community-driven systems of resilience and autonomy that are based on principles of equity, solidarity, and collective care for people and nature. In total, €255,000 was distributed to 41 community-based

organisations and seven NGOs in 21 countries around the world.

### In their own words: the wisdom of women environmental defenders

Following the conclusion of the grantmaking process, GAGGA commissioned a study of the Autonomy and Resilience Fund to determine:

- What were the Autonomy and Resilience Fund's direct outcomes in terms of types and location of groups supported?
- What were the main issues and needs of applicants, how did they define and understand systems of resilience and autonomy, and what is the role of women in these systems?
- What features supported the effectiveness of the ARF and what could be improved?

The study was based on an analysis of 211 proposals submitted to the ARF between May and June 2020, the vast majority from women-led community-based organisations. As such, the proposals offer a rich source of information about the experiences, perspectives, analysis, knowledge, wisdom and strategies of women environmental defenders and their communities in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, described in their own words.

Analysis of the proposals was complemented by responses to a questionnaire (47) and qualitative interviews (16) with community-based organisations supported by the ARF, as well as with GAGGA alliance members and partner women's and environmental justice funds that supported the execution of the fund. Questionnaires were received and interviews conducted in September and October 2020.

With this briefing paper, we share with the donor community some key findings aimed at advancing understanding about the needs and strategies of women environmental defenders and

<sup>1</sup>All quotes included in this publication are from women environmental defenders or partner funds who were supported by or supported the implementation of the Autonomy and Resilience Fund. They have been kept anonymous for their safety and security.

their communities in times of crisis. Our goal is to contribute to critical discussions about inclusive, flexible, feminist, and community-driven resourcing for gender, environmental and climate justice work.

The paper provides:

1. An overview of ARF facts and figures
2. A description of the main issues affecting applicants
3. An analysis of applicants' strategies to address these issues and strengthen autonomy and resilience

4. Reflections on women's leadership in community and organisational resilience
5. A summary of lessons learned

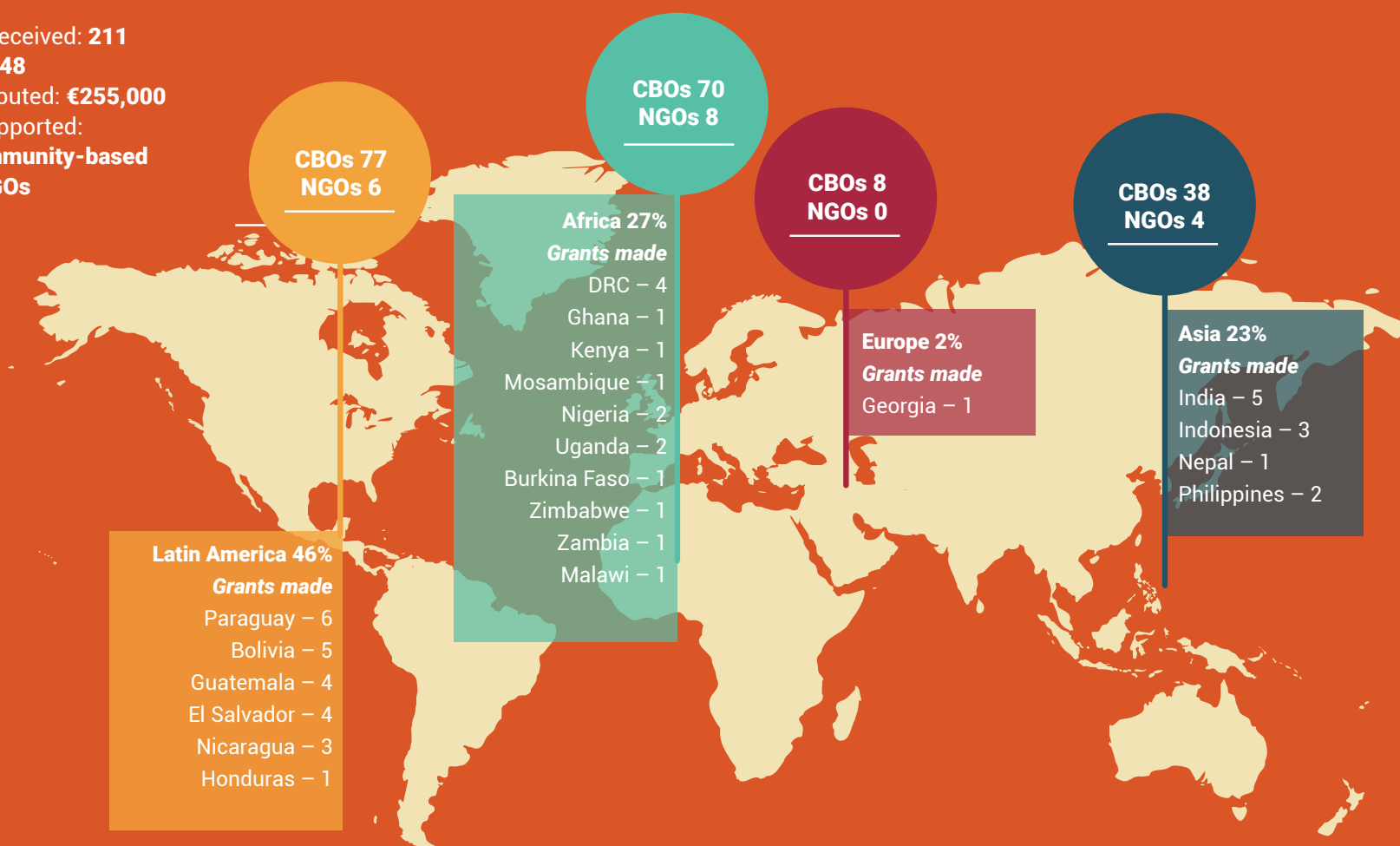
The paper concludes with key takeaways for donors to consider to ensure that funding responds to the agendas of women environmental defenders and their communities, particularly in times of crises, and helps to effectively and sustainably strengthen their communities, their organisations and their vitally important work.

## 1. Rapidly moving resources to women environmental defenders and their communities: Facts and figures

The Autonomy and Resilience Fund was made available to current and former grantee-partners of the three GAGGA alliance members (FCAM, Both ENDS and Mama Cash) and the 19 women's funds and environmental funds<sup>2</sup> involved in the GAGGA network. The structure of the GAGGA network – and the relationships and trust it facilitates – proved crucial to

the success of the ARF, which rapidly moved vital resources to women environmental defenders and their communities. In a period of just six weeks, GAGGA received a total of 211 applications, including 193 from women-led community-based organisations and 18 from GAGGA's NGO partners.

- Total applications received: **211**
- Total grants made: **48**
- Total amount distributed: **€255,000**
- Types of groups supported:  
**41 Women-led community-based organizations, 7 NGOs**



<sup>2</sup> **Africa:** Fonds pour les Femmes Congolaises, Global Greengrants Fund, Urgent Action Fund Africa, Women's Fund Tanzania; **Asia:** Keystone Foundation, Mongolian Women's Fund, Non-Timber Forest Exchange Program (NTFP-EP), TEWA - Nepalese Women's Fund, Women's Fund Asia; **Europe** (Georgia): Women's Fund Georgia; **Global:** FRIDA - Young Feminist Fund, International Indigenous Women's Fund (FIMI), Mama Cash; **Latin America:** Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres, Fondo de Acción Urgente – América Latina y el Caribe, Fondo de Mujeres de Bolivia - Apathapi Jopueti, Fondo de Mujeres del Sur, Fondo Tierra Viva, Fondo Socioambiental CASA.

The ARF supported a wide diversity of women-led groups, including peasants, farmers, traditional fishers, artisanal weavers, gatherers. Funding supported the work of women from diverse indigenous, tribal and ethnic groups. Examples include:

- Africa: women from communities such as Nkwota and Lamu
- Asia: Dalit, Adivasi, Lumad and Negrito

- Latin America: Maya Mam and Maya-Ch'orti', Pech, Miskito, Garifuna, Tolupan, Lenca, and the pueblos Enxet, Enlhet, Sanapaná, Angaité, Qom e Yshir

The ARF addressed the needs of mixed-age groups, youth, and the elderly, including organised elderly women who were previously engaged in mining, single mothers and widows, and women survivors of gender-based violence, conflict, and genocide.

## 2. Intensification of injustice: Main issues affecting applicants

*'Those women leaders who were courageously going out to fight against all injustices suffered setbacks at home and at the frontlines of the struggle. They were singled out, they were told there was no way for them to gather a crowd (due to lockdown restrictions), and so the perpetrators of environmental injustice can get off scot-free.'*

– A woman environmental defender from Africa

Analysis of all Autonomy and Resilience Fund proposals gives insight into the main issues that women environmental defenders and their communities faced and sought to address in the early months of the pandemic. Taken together, they show that COVID-19 – and the response to it – intensified what were already extremely difficult dynamics and circumstances for many communities, including the challenge of meeting basic human needs and the need to vigilantly defend their territories. The six main challenges identified in the proposals were:

### Food shortages

In some settings, COVID-19 measures included a complete prohibition on leaving one's house, meaning that farmers could no longer work their land, even for the purpose of subsistence. ARF applicants described reduced access to seeds and other inputs for food production, in part due to long-standing agricultural policies that have discouraged diversification, use and storage of local seeds. In some places, families with seeds were forced to use them for food, rather than save them for replanting. At the same time, prices

for seeds and agricultural inputs increased, making it all the more difficult for farmers and rural communities to invest in agriculture activities.

### Loss of income

In most communities, the contraction of the economy at global, national, and local levels led to the loss of formal employment, while long and strict lockdowns, curfews and border closures prevented people from being able to engage in informal income-generating activities. Markets and local transportation were shut down, and people could no longer travel to cities to sell their products. In some communities, food lay to rot, as people did not have the necessary storage and preservation equipment to deal with the situation. For some families, reductions in income impacted access to food.

### Limited access to water

For many communities, the COVID-19 pandemic affected access to water, especially clean and safe water. On the one hand, there was increased pressure on women and girls to obtain more water for their households due to intensified hygiene measures and the fact that more family members were staying at home. On the other hand, women and girls, who in some places must walk long distances to fetch water for their households, faced limits on their mobility due to lockdowns. Lack of clean water not only made it difficult for people to practice recommended measures to prevent the

spread of the virus, such as regular hand washing, it also limited agricultural production, which in turn contributed to food shortages.

### **Impacts on health and reduced access to health care**

ARF applicants described intensified pressure on women, with adverse impacts on their physical, mental, and emotional health. Under increasingly difficult circumstances, women needed to secure food for their families, manage their children's schooling, and tend to their family's health issues, including COVID-19 illness. At the same time, some communities were not given accurate information about the virus, nor sanitation kits. Due to racism, classism and other forms of social exclusion, the access of many communities to public services, including health services, emergency food and subsidies and medicine was already limited. Where health systems became overburdened and prices increased, some communities' access to health services and medicine further diminished.

### **Increased violence**

Some communities faced an increase in abuse of power by local authorities and an increase in direct violence, with authorities using COVID-19 measures to justify their actions. ARF applicants were also concerned about the increase in violence and sexual abuse against women and girls in the private sphere (partners, daughters, nieces, and other women),

given the prolonged period of isolation with abusive intimate partners, limited space within households and increased economic insecurity.

### **Constraints on organising and ability to resist and defend territories**

Applicants were also concerned that mechanisms imposed by governments to prevent the spread of the virus served to consolidate the presence of agribusiness, large infrastructure projects, and extractive industries in communities' territories. In some areas, governments opened online channels for companies to secure licenses for the extraction of resources, while restricting people's mobility and their ability to defend their territories. Furthermore, although special measures were introduced to facilitate online licensing for companies, no such similar measures were introduced for proper community consultations – a prerequisite for the granting of licenses in many countries.

COVID-19 and the lockdowns in response to it, as well as lack of funding, limited the possibilities of many applicants to communicate and collectively organise their work for the defence and sustainability of their communities and territories. Organisations had to delay implementation of programmes that are vital to communities' well-being. For some, shifting to online work and communication was not possible due to the lack of technological skills and infrastructure, including internet access.

## **3. Systems of autonomy and resilience, for this crisis and the next**

The Autonomy and Resilience Fund supported women-led local groups, networks and movements to confront these problems and address their urgent needs by strengthening their systems of resilience and autonomy. GAGGA's aim was to support movements to sustain themselves both through the COVID-19 crisis and into the future, increasing their resilience in case of future crises.

What do the ARF proposals tell us about how women environmental defenders and their communities define and understand systems of resilience and autonomy? According to the external analysis of ARF proposals, women environmental defenders and their communities see resilience and autonomy as deeply influenced by an ethics of care for oneself, for one's community, and nature. Their systems of resilience and autonomy are based on the recognition of interdependency between both people and the environment.



For ARF applicants, resilience and autonomy reinforce each other. On the one hand, the capacity to resiliently respond to crises strengthens not only the autonomy of women in communities, but also that of marginalised groups – Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant communities, rural communities – within larger society. On the other hand, when communities autonomously define the type of well-being they seek and recognise their own potential, they have a greater capacity to resist and adapt to crises on their own, which increases their resilience.

The commissioned analysis of ARF proposals found that applicants' main strategies of resilience fell into three broad categories: re-localisation of food, medicine, markets, and knowledge; strengthening sustainable environments and caring communities; and reinforcing the collective power of women and the community. The following table presents an overview of the relationships between these different resilience strategies and how they contribute to the particular types of autonomies or sovereignties identified by applicants.

### **Communities' systems of resilience and autonomy**

RESILIENCE STRATEGIES		→	AUTONOMIES	
Local, diversified, and sustainable food production	Re-localisation of food, medicine, markets, and knowledge	→	Food, health, and economic sovereignties	Food sovereignty
Preservation of knowledge about, and production of, traditional/natural medicine				Health sovereignty
Preservation and development of local/alternative economic activities and markets				Communities' economic autonomy
Environmental sustainability and restoration, climate change adaptation and mitigation				Preserving traditional, indigenous, peasant ways of life and knowledge
Strengthening care and solidarity between women and at community level	Strengthening sustainable environments and caring communities	→	Autonomous organisation of nature-society relations	Autonomous water management
Strengthening women's participation in decision-making processes, cohesion, and organisation				Sustainable/respectful nature-society relations
Strengthening collective decision making and multi-sectoral community work	Reinforcing the collective power of women and the community	→	Women and indigenous communities' autonomy	Land and natural resources defence and redistribution

## Re-localisation of food, medicine, markets, and knowledge

*'IF women associations have knowledge and autonomy to produce and multiply their own local seeds in an agroecological and sustainable manner; IF they can transfer this knowledge to their women counterparts through women-to-women farming learning approaches; IF they have access to affordable finance through village saving and loan associations in the context of solidarity economy; THEN food insecurity will be reduced and farmers will be much more resilient, for example, to agriculture seed price hikes.'*

— A woman environmental defender from Africa

The strengthening of local, diversified, and sustainable food production was the most common resilience strategy featured in the Autonomy and Resilience Fund proposals. For applicants, this entails the developing or enhancing of community/home food gardens and community kitchens, the creation and/or strengthening of seed banks, seed fairs, and other seed exchange mechanisms, and crop diversification to maintain the production of a variety of nutritious and healthy food for the community. Communities also develop resilience

through the production of traditional/natural medicine, which is closely related to food production. They work to preserve and share ancestral knowledge about the production, processing, and use of medicinal herbs and plants, as well as healthy food, to assure their populations' health. They organise ancestral knowledge exchanges between Indigenous women and women from different communities, as well as between the elderly and young people.

Local food and medicine production, and the value and preservation of traditional knowledge, is complemented by the strengthening of local markets, and the development of alternative economic activities adapted to the 'new normal'. These resilience strategies contribute to communities' food, health, and economic sovereignties. Food and health sovereignty for communities means not only being able to cultivate their own food and medicinal herbs and plants, and reducing dependence on global food and health markets, but also gaining more control over the quality of what they consume. It also means valuing their own knowledge and experiences in relation to health; their food culture, including flavours and habits; and the variety of their seeds.



Photo credit: Lokiaka Development Centre, Nigeria



## Fostering solidarity and strengthening food sovereignty in an Andean village in Bolivia

A grant to Colectivo CASA, a women's collective in Bolivia, supported the group to implement a community garden based on an ancient system of work sharing and exchange, known as 'Ayni'. The community was experiencing a decrease in food production caused by quarantine restrictions, on top of existing problems of mining pollution and lack of water. Families had no alternative but to consume their seeds, leading to a seed shortage. The main objective of the garden was to foster solidarity production and exchange of products among women in the community, with the aim of safeguarding biodiversity and strengthening food sovereignty as a measure of resilience to the crisis. The grant covered the costs of seeds, fertilizer, and rental of a tractor, as well as inputs for water harvesting. In addition, the grant supported an ancient ritual of thanks – a community practice to promote solidarity and respect for Mother Earth and gratitude for its fruits. The ritual is important to the community's defence of food sovereignty and their ability to harvest water, and is seen as an act of resistance against patriarchal extractivism.



*Photo credit: Colectivo CASA, Bolivia*

ARF proposals describe the preservation and development of local/alternative economic activities and markets as another important strategy to ensure economic autonomy and enable people to stay in their communities instead of having to migrate to big cities. For applicants, this strategy entails preparation and trainings for the identification of markets for their products, development of agrotourism and ecotourism, recycling products for crafts, production of woven textiles, and bartering of commodities, among others.

The pandemic has proven that food and health sovereignty are of particular importance when communities' ties with external markets break. The crisis has shown how vulnerable communities become when their access to food and health depends entirely on market mechanisms that they do not control. Relocalisation of food, medicine, markets, and knowledge, in combination with autonomous water management systems, are key for diminishing such dependence.

### Care and environmental sustainability

*'The resistance to the crisis generated by COVID-19 is demonstrating that among women we take care of each other, with great solidarity, with exchanges of products between women in the communities, with common pots, and applying ancestral*

*knowledge for health prevention. [...] We are in alliance weaving and articulating the socio-environmental demands of women, on the foundation of affection, collective care, solidarity, and reciprocity with Mother Earth.'*

– A woman environmental defender from Latin America

*'We meet to share stories, knowledge and even anxiety.'*

– A woman environmental defender from Asia

Development of livelihoods that are environmentally sustainable and able to respond to the effects of climate change, extractive activities, agribusiness, and large-scale infrastructure projects is integral to the resilience systems described by ARF applicants. This strategy includes the adoption of agroecological systems of production; continuous efforts for the restoration of soils, water, plants, and preservation of the environment; appropriate waste management mechanisms; the systematisation, documentation and dissemination of information about environmental impacts on their territories, etc. Additional examples are the design and implementation of early warning systems and infrastructure for adapting to and mitigating climate change. Strengthening women's knowledge about and participation in these systems is a key element of this resilience strategy.

## Clean water for mining-affected communities and healthy food for hospital patients in Lamu Island, Kenya

A grant to a community-based organisation supported renovation of community-managed rain water reservoirs and water treatment to improve access to clean water. The grant also covered restoration of a hospital vegetable garden to ensure that patients can enjoy a well-balanced diet. With both initiatives, as well as a factsheet on COVID-19 for communities, the group aimed to raise community awareness about the crisis and its links to climate change, and the need for forest and mangrove conservation, and environmentally sustainable development.



ARF proposals show that applicants understand environmental sustainability as an ethics of care aimed at the sustainability of life. This includes valuing the well-being of all members of the community integrally, including mental, emotional, and physical aspects. In moments of crisis, caring for one another entails acts of profound solidarity at community level, from maintaining rituals and spiritual practices, to reducing the workload of women, to comprehensive healing processes. The barter of food and products to cover basic needs, and local practices like *al partir*, in which families collaborate to produce and share their harvest, and *la minga*, a sort of mutual aid system between families, are examples of the construction of economies based on solidarity featured in ARF proposals.

These resiliency strategies point to autonomy in the organisation of nature-society relations. In other words, communities are able to define the way they want to organise their relationship with each other and with nature, based on their own views of development, what some refer to as 'buen vivir'. This environmentally and socially harmonious vision contrasts with the mainstream development model based on destroying nature and disregarding people, while privileging markets and capital. Making their visions possible requires continuous efforts by communities to demand sustainable approaches to development, to defend and re-distribute land

and natural resources, and to fight extractive industries and other businesses affecting their territories.

### **Collective power of women and communities**

*'At our member gathering every year, we determine what steps and actions we can take – with mutual cooperation, and based on the views of women, the wisdom of elders, and traditional community knowledge – so that Indigenous women and our community can live fully in the midst of the onslaught of extractive industries.'*

– A woman environmental defender from Asia

*'We understand resilience and autonomy as: 1) the collective organisation of CARE, where we find our own space to discuss, decide and defend our territory, feeling safe, loved and cared for; 2) the collective organisation for RESISTANCE against capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism, which have made our contribution and work invisible as elderly women, establishing as the only valid subject the "white male, young, owner, active producer"; and 3) collective organisation for the common construction of an ALTERNATIVE, expressed in the struggle for a COMMUNE that does not destroy the rural environment and the ecosystem, but rather is integrated into it.'*

– A woman environmental defender from Latin America

## **Strengthening economic resilience, self-care, solidarity and sorority among peasant women in Nicaragua**

A grant to the peasant women-led community-based organisation Fundación Entre Mujeres in Nicaragua supported the strengthening of women's rural cooperatives, including self-care sessions for the cooperatives' board members. The grant covered the solar-based infrastructure needed for drying and preserving coffee and hibiscus, with the objective of reducing the risk of income loss due to the pandemic. The grant also supported materials, fences and seeds for orchards run by young women – to ensure healthy eating and boost immunity – and the installation of sinks at community centres to enable hand washing.

Analysis of the ARF proposals shows that for applicants, caring for the environment and defending territories from the effects of powerful economic interests require collective and multisectoral work, cooperative production, and networking between organisations, communities, and among women. In this sense, communities' resilience systems include efforts in facilitating the discussion and decision-making processes

about their problems collectively. While individually they are too weak to confront the power of big companies grabbing and contaminating their water and land, collectively they can organise in ways that make them stronger. Acting collectively entails building common views about the way they want to manage their territories, environments, and social relations.

## Restoring communal self-reliance among displaced Indigenous women in the Philippines

A grant was allocated to the Indigenous women's community group Sabokahan Unity of Lumad Women, in the Philippines, whose members have been forced from their ancestral lands due to military violence. The women currently reside at a sanctuary where they can no longer engage in traditional practices of foraging wild foods, raising livestock, and harvesting root crops. Many have no access to social services, such as education, or health and livelihood services. The grant supported the group's efforts to strengthen their sense and practice of communal self-reliance through development of an organic, sustainable and communal urban garden of vegetables, root crops, and herbal plants to be used for both consumption and medicinal treatments. The grant also covered implementation of an irrigation system to deal with the problem of water shortages, which worsened as a result of COVID-19.



*Photo credit: Sabokahan, Philippines*

Besides building cohesion, another important aspect of this strategy is the preparation of community leaders for advocacy work with authorities at different levels. Connecting with authorities is necessary but not sufficient to assure the well-being of communities. Communities engage with their authorities, but they also understand that economic interests are prioritised over the interests of communities. In this regard, communities organise themselves and create alternative institutions that are more accountable for their members. In the context of the pandemic, some communities have created their own work committees. While during the day women organise to provide food and health care to their families and communities, at night brigades of men challenge the military and go out to guard their territories from the

nightly advance of the legal and illegal occupation by local mafias and companies that have been awarded licenses.

An essential aim of most communities is achieving women's and Indigenous people's autonomy. Initiatives include strengthening women's participation in decision-making processes that affect them and their community; their access to land, resources and training; fighting gender-based violence; re-valuing and redistributing care and domestic work; and building visibility, identity and recognition for women farmers, midwives and healers. Communities also fight for the recognition and reinforcement of traditional governance systems, the strengthening of leadership capacities of Indigenous authorities, grandparents, and healers, based on their values and views.

## 4. Women's leadership in community and organisational resilience

*'We are the ones leading the actions and assuring aid and support to families within the community. [...] We are the first, the frontline in humanitarian response, and in the recovery and rehabilitation of livelihoods.'*

— A woman environmental defender from Latin America

The analysis of Autonomy and Resilience Fund proposals confirms that local women are playing a leading role in their communities in ensuring both survival and resilience. Community systems of resilience are deeply linked to the care economy in which women, due to historical gendered roles, are mostly in charge. Women plant and harvest. They sell their products at the market. They cook, they cure. They exchange knowledge, conduct research, manage the water systems. They organise the seed banks and fairs, build infrastructure, and articulate their communities' demands and advocate for solutions at all levels. They contain the fear and insecurity of their families and other fellow community members. They organise for their rights as women, as well as for protecting their environment. They find creative solutions to the loss of income. They fight extractive industries and agribusiness. In sum, women are often in charge of making the necessary decisions and taking the necessary steps to facilitate the conditions for the sustainability of life. They are key in managing crises and coordinating the care work

that is the backbone of their families and communities' survival and resilience.

Similarly, women leaders play a crucial role in ensuring organisational resilience. Many have devoted their lives to working for the well-being of their communities, women and the environment. Women leaders are actively identifying opportunities and organising their communities towards the achievement of collective goals. They are translating the vision of the communities into the language of funders, and making sure that this vision does not get lost in the process. They are finding creative solutions to a number of obstacles brought by the pandemic, which include restrictions on mobility and communication, laws limiting the movement of money at local levels, the closure of banks and the difficulties of implementing proposed initiatives due to the limited access to inputs, closed markets and transportation, etc. Women leaders are also dealing with the increased needs of their communities and the limited resources to fulfil them. They are coping with immeasurable stress and pressures on mental and emotional health experienced by both themselves and other women in the communities, including attacks or persecution for their role in organising other women and their communities, which has intensified due to the pandemic.

## 5. What works: lessons from the Autonomy and Resilience Fund

*'GAGGA values our work, especially our proximity to communities and our knowledge of the context. GAGGA has a continuous relationship with us. We have never stopped communicating. They know what we are up to. This knowledge comes from the fact that they have promoted joint activities. We get to know each other, and we create spaces for communication and meaningful relationships.'*

– Staff of a Latin American partner fund

The Autonomy and Resilience Fund was extremely successful in its main goal: quickly putting resources into the hands of a wide range of women environmental defenders and their communities in a time of crisis to ensure that they can sustain

their work. Overall, the evaluation of the ARF revealed that the strong, layered relationships within GAGGA ensured that the ARF was an agile and highly relevant response to communities' urgent needs. This was due to the solid base and structure that GAGGA has built since 2016. The mechanism's effectiveness was facilitated by, on the one hand, the close relationships between the participating women's and environmental funds and the organisations, networks and movements that were eligible to apply, and on the other, the relationships between these funds and GAGGA members (FCAM, Mama Cash and Both ENDS). Below, further information is provided on lessons and possible areas of improvement for the Autonomy and Resilience Fund.





## The Autonomy and Resilience Fund process – building from GAGGA's structure and networks

**Eligibility:** The ARF was made available to GAGGA's current and past grantees (grassroots groups and community-based organisations) of partner women's and environmental justice funds, as well as current GAGGA-supported NGOs.

**Dissemination:** The call was disseminated through GAGGA's partner funds, who sent it through different channels to their local counterparts.

**Application process:** An application form asked for a few hundred words in response to four main questions. The options for applying to the ARF included: a) sending a text document by email; b) completing an online form; c) sending an audio/voice note through a mobile phone. Applications were received on a rolling basis from June 5 until July 15, 2020. Three rounds of review (every two weeks) took place, as new applications came in.

**Selection:** In each round of review, GAGGA selected a number of proposals to support, and articulated the necessary mechanisms to deliver the grants as soon as possible.

### **Pertinence and clarity, based on accumulated knowledge**

GAGGA's focus on the interrelation between women's rights and environmental justice makes it a one-of-a-kind ally for community-based organisations and NGOs. Most funds and development agencies work on these topics separately, but in women's lived realities they are interwoven. The ARF was pertinent because it recognised that interrelation and it covered issues that are very relevant for communities. Moreover, GAGGA has a clear understanding – shared by environmental defenders and their communities – that achieving women's rights and environmental justice is a process that requires long-term commitment.

Since its launch in 2016, the women's rights and environmental justice organisations and funds involved in GAGGA have

developed a common understanding, strengthening each other by exchanging expertise and experience. Thus, GAGGA was able to successfully transmit a shared clarity of purpose in the ARF call for proposals. Inviting applications exclusively from organisations that have been linked to GAGGA proved to be a good strategy, since these organisations already knew how GAGGA works and vice versa. This also made it easier to communicate information about the ARF and to obtain more than two hundred applications, most of which fit the criteria, in such a short period of time.

### **Agility and simplicity, based on trust**

In a matter of weeks, the ARF was designed, agreements were signed between GAGGA members and the participating funds, the call was disseminated, more than two hundred proposals were received, a selection was made, funds were distributed, and organisations started their work. The ARF

application process was simple and flexible, and avoided overloading organisations with complex formats and reporting requirements. The fact that GAGGA consulted with partner funds to ensure that the funding reached local organisations in the most fast and agile way was important to its success.

The coordination and mutual trust between women's and environmental justice partner funds and GAGGA members (FCAM, Mama Cash and Both ENDS) made it possible to overcome difficulties and delays in international transfers and ensure that resources could be transferred as quickly as possible. For example, when some governments made it more difficult to move money, thereby affecting the ability of some GAGGA partner funds to disburse funding to their grantee-partner organisations, other GAGGA partner funds stepped in to assist.

In line with the principle that local organisations are the experts in their own contexts and best suited to define their own strategies, GAGGA allowed flexibility in ARF proposals. GAGGA did not set strict conditions on proposal topics, and grantee-partners were asked to describe their resilience strategies in brief – just a few paragraphs. The evaluation found that grantee organisations greatly appreciated the flexibility of the funding, which is especially important for organisations responding to continuously changing situations, and the trust shown by

GAGGA members and partner funds in their judgement and strategising. This further strengthened their relationships with GAGGA.

## Possibilities for improvement

Developing and implementing the ARF was a learning experience for GAGGA. The evaluation of the fund also shed light on possibilities for improving such a funding mechanism in the future. Suggestions included:

- Improving the ARF application by using terms that communities use in their daily struggles, allowing groups sufficient space to describe their contexts and approaches, and translating documents into local languages.
- Making the selection procedure more participatory and based less on the application form in order to reduce the risk that organisations with better writing skills were favoured.
- Giving a more prominent role to the partner funds, which among other things would have improved efficiency and spread the workload.
- Ensuring equal chances for applicants across decision-making rounds and better balance between regions in the selection process.

## Conclusion

The Autonomy and Resilience Fund mechanism proved to be an effective and highly valued way to:

- Respond to the issues of women environmental defenders and their communities in a time of crisis and urgency;
- Allocate money where it was most needed and best used;
- And contribute to the strengthening of communities' systems of resilience and autonomy.

The previous work done by GAGGA and its partner funds created a basis of trust and allowed for flexibility and a rapid response to the needs of community-based organisations, NGOs and

communities in a pertinent way. The ARF was not only easily accessible to eligible applicants, it was also strategic for strengthening communities' resilience and autonomy systems and addressing urgent issues. The ARF was able to reach local groups with strong and recognised female leadership and with very limited access to mainstream sources of funding.

The ARF evaluation findings confirm the importance of creating mechanisms to accompany communities during emergencies in ways that support their efforts to strengthen their systems of resilience and autonomy. These efforts are, in the long run, key to reducing their vulnerability and

augmenting their capacity to respond to crises, and for building communities based on social and environmental justice, and respect for women's, and rural and Indigenous communities' rights.

Considering the unprecedented magnitude of the COVID-19 situation globally, and its deep impacts at all levels, more support was required. Due to limited resources, GAGGA was only able to cover about a quarter of the organisations applying, while many other worthy organisations were not eligible to apply. (Fortunately, some of the organisations that were not selected for the ARF were funded by GAGGA's partner funds directly.)

Some key takeaways from the the Autonomy and Resilience Fund:

- Trust women to identify the challenges and propose the most suitable solutions based on their own analysis, contexts, capacities.
- Recognise that practical and simple actions can be part of a transformative strategy.
- Make use of networks and relationships with partners and allies, trust their knowledge and the relationships they have built over the years with the communities to allocate funding where it's most needed.
- Avoid unnecessary layers of complexity to ensure that funds get distributed quickly and directly.

- Define a clear and simple framework for support, eligibility criteria for the organisations and the activities.
- Establish clear, simple processes for application and reporting.
- More resources for this type of urgent, responsive funding are needed alongside sustained organisational support.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 is not a 2020 bad dream. On the contrary, conditions have worsened in many parts of the world and the long-term impacts are expected to be severe. Meanwhile, the world faces continual social and environmental crises worsened by climate change, as well as ongoing pandemics of poverty, exclusion and inequalities, environmental destruction, and violence against women. The problems, needs, opportunities and initiatives that communities addressed with the ARF will continue to be relevant even if cases of COVID-19 decline and the lockdown situations are solved.

Donors need to be prepared to step up in times of crisis, while also providing sustained support that responds to community-based organisations' own agendas and strengthens their organisational and social fabric. For its part, GAGGA will continue to ensure that women-led community-based organisations have the resources to continue organising, lobbying and advocating for women's rights to clean water, food sovereignty, and a clean, healthy and safe environment.



Photo credit: ALGES, El Salvador