Facilitating Community-Led Research in Challenging Contexts

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More information on the Local Engagement, Action, and Dialogue (LEAD) program can be found **here**.

EARTHRIGHTS INTERNATIONAL

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Introduction

In October and November 2025, EarthRights convened community organizers and human rights defenders from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam for two separate training sessions on facilitation of community-led research. Despite working in different countries and contexts, the LEAD training participants all shared a common goal: to **support communities to lead their own campaigns to protect their human rights and natural resources.**

The training sessions are part of EarthRights' LEAD program, which promotes a community-centered approach to campaigns and legal advocacy. At its core, LEAD supports practitioners to serve as facilitators for communities to create safe spaces, seek technical support, and organize information. Communities own the research and campaign process – leadership, knowledge, and direction come from them.

The two training sessions deepened facilitation and data collection skills of participants, and invited them to grapple with complex questions about community agency, ethics, safety, and knowledge production. This brief captures the key learnings, challenges, and strategies that emerged from discussions to serve as a reference for facilitators of community-led research across the Mekong Region.

Ethics of Care in Community-Led Research

The training emphasized that ethical considerations should go beyond protocols. Ethics of care takes into account relationships, accountability, and healing. It also requires awareness of power, trauma, spirituality, and community concepts of justice. It is a negotiated process that evolves over time while working with a community – it is not a set of fixed rules to be applied universally.

Practicing ethics of care means ensuring the dignity, safety, and agency of participants, before, during, and after community-led research processes. It begins with cultivating safe spaces that attend to the physical and emotional comfort of participants, for example by taking steps such as ensuring accessible toilets and adapting materials for participants with low literacy skills. Participants must also get to know each other and feel secure that the information they share with each other won't be misused. In safe spaces, participants are not afraid of vulnerability or making mistakes and feel encouraged to speak up.

"I keep it simple when I go to the community. I try to adapt to the community, collect the rice, and help with the housework. This is all to build trust with the community."

— Training Participant

Before research, you should:

- Understand community safety concerns.
- Introduce yourself and establish a connection with the community.
- Recognize that building trust takes time.
- Identify existing ethical guidelines by talking with elders or community representatives.
- Explain your purpose for being there and the objectives of your organization with transparency.
- Obtain Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) from the community to move forward with the research.
- Develop community-defined research goals and rules for data storage and use.

"For the participants, their faces may look bright, happy, or calm, but we don't know what kind of pain they are holding inside. So as facilitators, we have to take the opportunity to ask and take time to see what is inside the participants' hearts and what they are feeling,"

— Training Participant

During research, you should:

- Co-create and adhere to a code of conduct.
- Ensure holistic security and safety (emotional, spiritual, physical, and digital).
- Identify and address signs of discomfort or risk.
- Choose safe locations.
- Demonstrate your respect for participants through active listening and avoiding looking at phones or laptops when people are speaking.
- Meet community members at times that fit their schedules.
- Dress simply to avoid intimidation.
- Work with diverse members of communities, rather than just leaders.
- Use simple, everyday language.
- Provide interpretation and translated materials when necessary.

After research, you should:

- Maintain a long-term relationship with the community.
- Abide by community rules for data storage and use.

Understanding Community-Led Research

Even if there was broad agreement reached that community-led research is both valuable and necessary, defining what qualifies as *"community-led"* can be challenging. During the training, participants highlighted the benefits of community-led research and key themes that help to define what this entails:
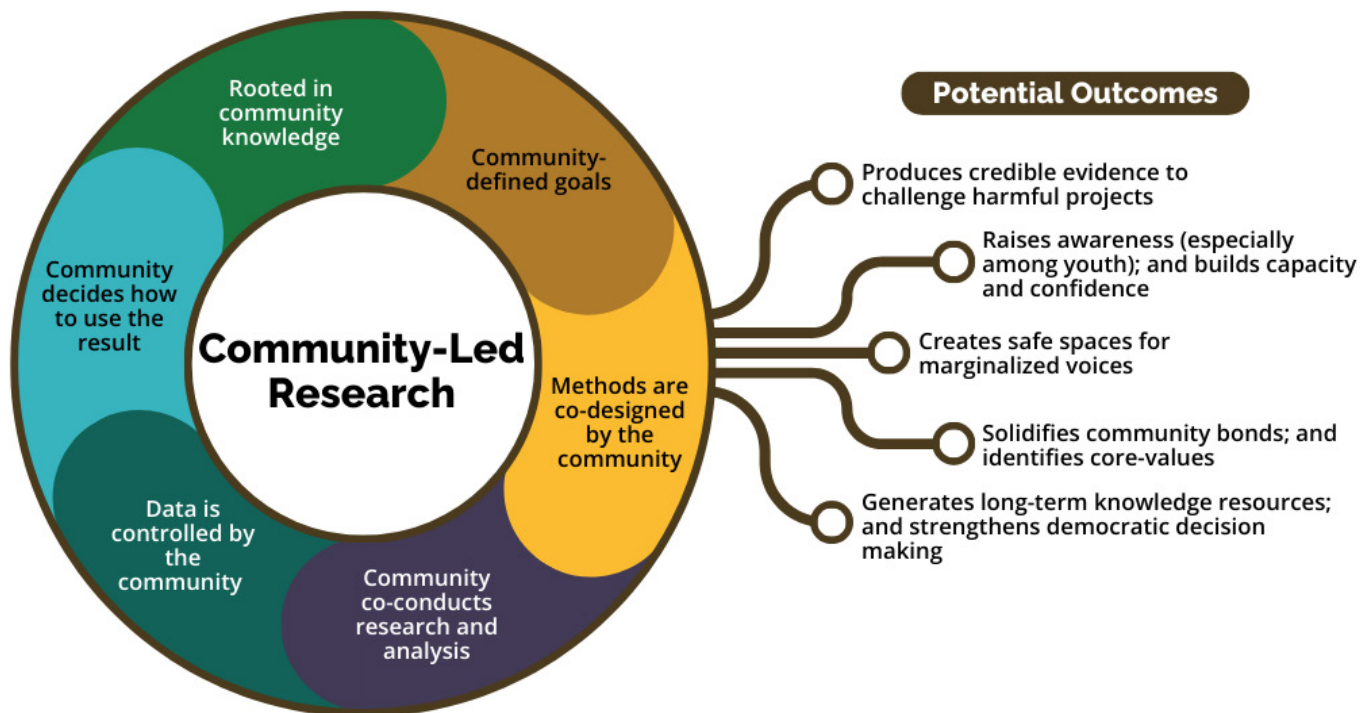
Rooted in Community Knowledge:

Communities possess deep knowledge of their lands, resources, traditional practices, and changes to these over time. An appropriate question for a facilitator is not *"what do communities need to learn?"* but *"how do we bring out community knowledge?"*. This requires recognizing community members as **experts**, not as subjects of research.

Community-Defined Goals:

Participants challenged the assumption that community-led research focuses solely on addressing problems, noting they can also assess opportunities and assets. However, they acknowledged complexities: communities may lack awareness of certain issues, such as the potentially harmful environmental impacts of a project that provides obvious monetary benefits. Therefore, facilitators should be aware of and reflect on how awareness-raising intersects with the development of community-led research goals.

Community Co-Design and Participation in the Research Process:

While community members possess expertise that outsiders cannot replicate, they may need support with systematic research approaches, documentation, GPS mapping, or using specific technical instruments. In addition, there can be some situations, such as conducting an Environmental Impact Assessment, that may require legal support and scientific expertise.

Structural biases toward credentialed knowledge create challenges, with governments and companies often demanding degrees to legitimize claims. Most participants agreed that neither community-led research nor external expertise achieves completely accurate results alone, and that both approaches complement each other. The goal is

collaboration that amplifies community voices while strategically leveraging external support.

Community Ownership of the Data and Usage of Results:

True community-led research means the community owns the results and benefits from the process. It is not extractive and avoids practices where researchers take information from communities without sharing findings.

Facilitation Strategies

Through facilitation of practice sessions and reflection, participants identified practical lessons for each stage of the facilitation cycle: preparation, delivery, and adaptation.

Facilitation Cycle

Preparation:

- Understanding and researching the community context.
- Managing diverse literacy levels and language barriers by preparing adequate materials, including visual aids.
- Having clear role divisions within the team.

Delivery:

- Introducing yourself and your organization clearly.
- Setting and abiding by community-defined ground rules.
- Explaining the objectives of the discussion.
- Explaining the principle of confidentiality.
- Obtaining consent for photos and other documentation.
- Using understandable language.
- Asking questions about subjects of community expertise.
- Ensuring less active participants feel empowered to participate.
- Demonstrating active listening through eye contact or other body language and avoiding looking at phones or laptops when people are speaking.
- Managing time while remaining flexible.
- Checking in and working together as a team.

Adaptation:

- Pursuing alternate plans when sessions go over time, or do not land well with participants.
- Staying flexible to the community pace.
- Addressing disruptions calmly.
- Managing emotions when faced with difficult questions.

Facilitation is cyclical, not linear. Therefore, you should debrief and continuously move through the different research stages. The community should remain at the center throughout.

Participants explored what effective facilitation means by defining what facilitation is and is not, as visualized in the table below:

What Facilitation IS:	What Facilitation is NOT:
Guiding the Process — Helping communities analyze their own situations through collective learning.	**Controlling Outcomes** — Telling people what to think or decide.
Active Listening — Drawing out quiet voices and hearing multiple views without judgment.	**Lecturing or Teaching** — Delivering top-down or expert opinions.
Asking Questions — Encouraging understanding and supporting communities to analyze their own situations.	**Solving Problems** — Imposing answers instead of facilitating the process.
Creating Space — Making room for marginalized voices while acknowledging power structures.	**Picking Participants** — Deciding who gets to participate or excluding voices.
Upholding Ethics — Holding responsibility to do no harm; intervening against discrimination.	**Forcing Participation** — Pressuring or persuading communities to further their self-interests.
Working with the Whole Community — Welcoming all who want to participate, not just leaders.	**Staying Neutral on Harm** — Remaining silent when discrimination or harm occurs.

Underlying these principles is **"DO NO HARM."** This means that facilitators don't take sides in community disagreements, but also never remain neutral regarding harm or discrimination. Participants did acknowledge, however, that how to best intervene against harm or discrimination requires sensitivity to the context and power dynamics. These complexities are reflected in their discussion of the following challenges and strategies.

Addressing Power Imbalances:

Community power imbalances occur across gender, leadership role, age, and economic status. In particular, participants noted that *"elder and male leaders dominate the conversation"* while *"youth and women remain silent"*. Participants proposed:

- Forming specific gender-based groups.
- Meeting women in their spaces to validate expertise and document knowledge.
- Collecting all opinions to reach a consensus and using open-ended questions to draw participation from quieter members.
- Acknowledging existing hierarchies while creating a space for all voices;
- Creating a pre-session Code of Conduct/Agreement.
- Using icebreakers and working with religious/youth leaders to address internal conflicts.

Managing Authority Interference:

Participants described scenarios where uninvited government officials dominated community spaces, perceiving community organizing as political work, with some attempting to control discussions. When this happens, participants suggested:

- Understanding both official and community perspectives.
- Suspending meetings to speak separately with different parties.
- Building community resilience through rights awareness trainings.
- Conducting a risk analysis and preparing a risk-mitigation plan beforehand.
- Obtaining permission letters when necessary, working together with university affiliates and partner organizations.
- Maintaining a low profile by participating in everyday community activities rather than conducting formal group sessions or interviews, and recording observations during these interactions.
- Changing discussion topics when necessary, prioritizing safety and ethics over neutrality.

"What we want is to ensure that communities are self-resilient and that even if there are no NGOs or CSOs in the communities, that they will be able to stand by themselves,"

— Training Participant

Building, Maintaining, and Rebuilding Trust:

Facilitation cannot be rushed. It takes time and requires you to meet the people in their own spaces, often participating in other community-led activities such as helping to maintain gardens and sharing meals. Trust can only be built through consistent presence, transparency about intentions and results, and following through with your commitments.

> *"You have to fit the community's schedules and time, not the other way around,"*
>
> — Training Participant.

When communities experienced failed consultations with no follow-up or retaliation, participants emphasized the importance of acknowledgement and repair.

Participants stressed that facilitators should:

- Acknowledge community feelings and past failures without becoming defensive.
- Clarify that you are a facilitator, not the decision-maker.
- Allow communities to lead discussions about *"why we're here again",* by creating space for questions.
- Recognize that community-led research may be a long process and prepare accordingly.
- Provide space for feedback and explaining what has changed.
- Remain respectful and do not make promises you cannot keep.

Data Collection and Security

The second training, which focused on Cambodia, addressed how to conduct interviews and safely collect data with community members. Participants discussed how to accurately gather information while considering the risks that they may face when covering politically sensitive topics.

Interviews:

Interviews are a way to learn more about the community's situation, challenges, and perspectives. They can supplement mapping or other data collection activities by providing specific, first-hand information that may be helpful for the community to use in their advocacy efforts. Participants shared that it is important to train community researchers to conduct interviews and collect data, and to practice together before carrying out interviews in a community setting. Best practices for interviewing include:

- Arriving well-prepared, with clear objectives.
- Introducing yourself and clearly stating the purpose of the interview.
- Building trust through creating an initial rapport, then moving to the interview questions.
- Obtaining informed consent by explaining how the interview data will be used, what will be kept confidential, and how the data will be securely stored.
- Demonstrating active listening through follow-up questions, eye contact, or other appropriate body language.
- Starting with general questions before specific ones.
- Avoiding leading questions that suggest a desired answer, as they can lead to inaccurate data.
- Providing a space for interviewees to discuss what matters to them and to ask questions to the interviewer, such as concluding by asking, *"Do you have anything to add?"* and *"Do you have any questions for me?"*

Participants also discussed data collection risks and security challenges and shared strategies on how to address them.

Data Collection Issue	Ways to Address the Problem
Photos of community members could be used to identify them.	• Obtain informed consent for all photos. • Edit photos by blurring faces and obscuring landmarks – paying attention to whether these can be seen in reflections.
Sources provided conflicting information.	• Cross-check against multiple sources to verify all information. • Ensure the research team understands and uses the same terms to refer to key pieces of information. • Summarize and clarify key points with sources before ending an interview.
A source says you can use their name, but later changes their mind.	• Have a security process in place to ensure anyone who can be identified has reviewed the material and provided consent before something is published. • Respect the source's wishes; no means no. • Never use real names; replace them with a pseudonym. • Never store personally identifying information (name, contact information, consent form) in the same drive as the underlying data (interview notes, photos, etc.)
A member of the research team loses their device that contains field photos with identifying information.	• Set up a strong password on devices used to store data. • Set up a different password to access apps on the device. • Require two-factor authentication to log in to any app on the device. • Use software that allows you to remotely delete data if the device is lost or stolen.

Data Collection Issue	Ways to Address the Problem
People are afraid of speaking when they see the interviewer is taking notes with a notebook and a pen.	• Build trust before asking permission to take notes. • After obtaining permission to take notes, if possible, have another person take the notes while you maintain focus and eye contact with the interviewee.
Government authorities are watching and asking community members and the research team questions	• Use encrypted messaging, like **Signal**, to communicate within the team. • Change the appearance of Signal on the home screen. • Set up a system to check in and inform someone before traveling to or from the community. • Prepare a cover story in case you are stopped and asked what you are doing. • In sensitive contexts where visible recording or note-taking may endanger participants or attract unwanted attention from authorities, memorise key information and document it immediately following the interview, using **Kobo** or other tools. Minimize the time between conversation and documentation, and ensure any digital records are stored securely with appropriate encryption. This practice should only be used when standard recording methods would genuinely compromise safety, not as routine practice.

Conclusion

The LEAD training sessions emphasized that effective facilitation unlocks the power that communities have to conduct research and share their knowledge with key stakeholders and audiences. The training modeled this principle by creating space for knowledge to emerge through dialogue and practice, rather than imposing frameworks through lectures. Participants practiced their skills, deepened their understanding of ethical frameworks, and forged new connections with organizers already practicing community-led research. They left prepared to support communities in documenting their experiences, defending their rights, and amplifying their voices in their struggle for justice and dignity.