

# **Guardians of Mother Earth**

*Histories of Collective Action*

## Credits

### General coordination:

Teresa Zapeta, FIMI Executive Director  
Nadezhda (Nadia) Fenly Mejía

### Coordination and content review:

Nadezhda (Nadia) Fenly Mejía.  
Isabel Flota  
Alba Reyna Farje Rodríguez

### Style and writing:

Clara Roig Medina

### Production coordination:

Nadezhda (Nadia) Fenly Mejía

### Illustrations:

Dora Beatriz Orozco León

### English translation:

Stephen Pearson

### Layout:

Corina Salazar Dreja



# Index

<b>Introduction</b>	5
<b>United against climate change</b> Paran Women Group Leadership Award Africa 2020 - Kenya	7
<b>Adding voices for the defense of territory</b> Aguaruna-Huambisa Council Leadership Award Latin America 2020 - Peru	17
<b>Leadership that sows change</b> Cambodia Indigenous Women’s Working Group (CIWWG) Leadership Award Asia 2020 - Cambodia	27

# Introduction



**I**ndigenous Women in the Global South suffer first-hand from the impacts of the climate crisis. But far from resigning ourselves to this, we stand as the main carers of our environment, natural resources and livelihoods in our communities, in harmony with Mother Nature.

Since 2003, the International Indigenous Women's Forum (FIMI-IIWF) has awarded the 'Leadership Award' in recognition of women or Indigenous Women's collectives who through their work, commitment and responsibility achieve significant changes in their own or other communities.

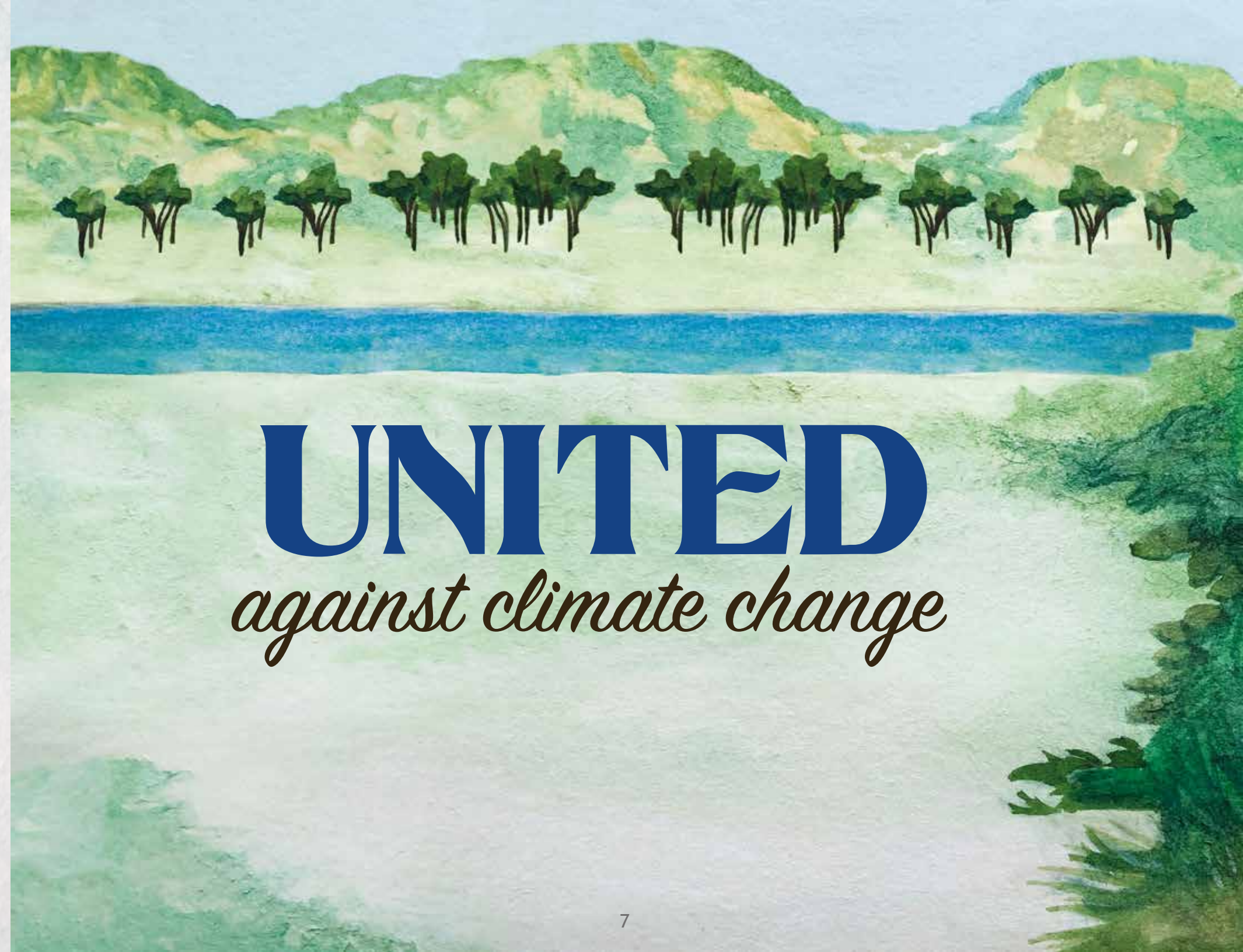
In 2020, we are dedicating the FIMI Leadership Award to the protection and defence of Mother Nature. Three Indigenous Women's organisations have stood out for their perseverance, collective efforts and leadership to ensure forests remain forests, rainwater continues to create life and extractive industries are kept at bay from their territory: the Paran Women Group from Kenya (Africa), the Aguaruna-Huambisa Council from Peru (Latin America and the Caribbean) and the Cambodia Indigenous Women's Working Group (Asia).

These are their success stories to date, as their struggle is ongoing. Nevertheless, recognition represents a spur to persist. Moreover, the 'Leadership Award' seeks for Indigenous Women's organisations around the world to find inspiration in, share, continue or undertake collective struggles.



‘ We unite to solve our problems, mitigate climate change and claim our rights from the government. Through union comes the strength of the Paran Women. ’

Naiyan Kigaplat  
*chair of the organisation*



# UNITED

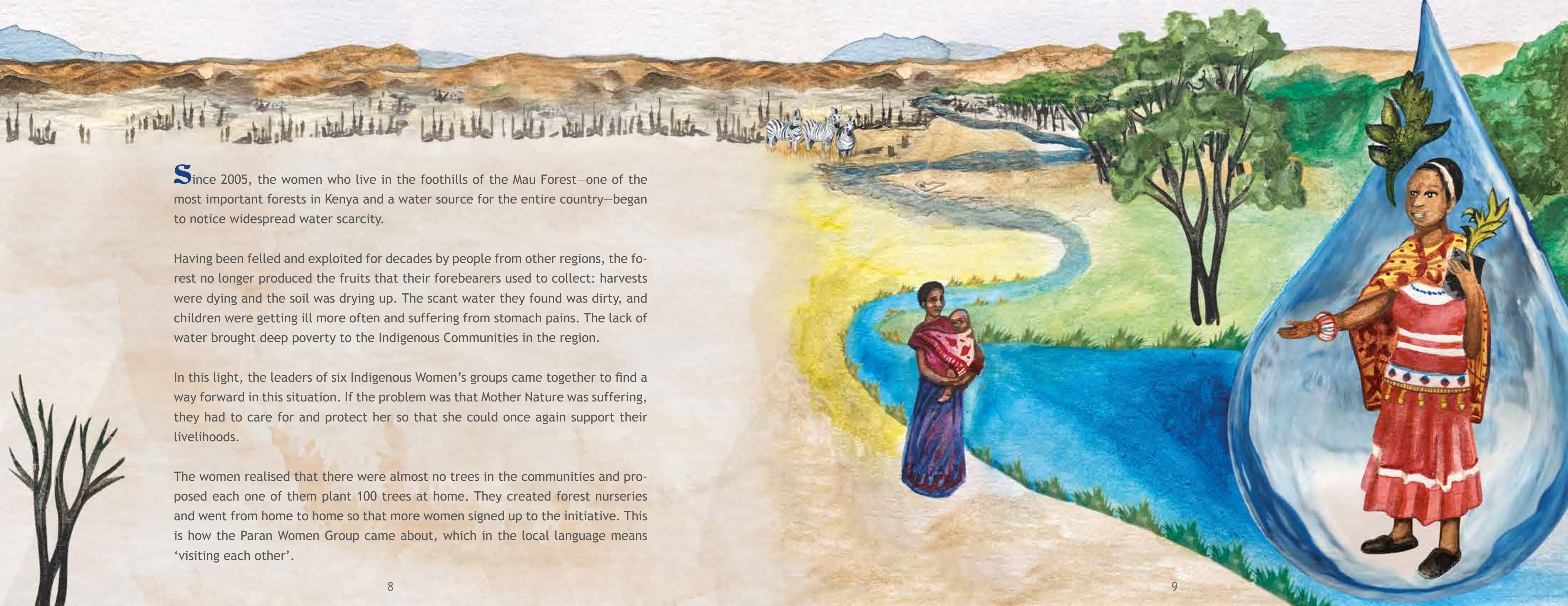
*against climate change*

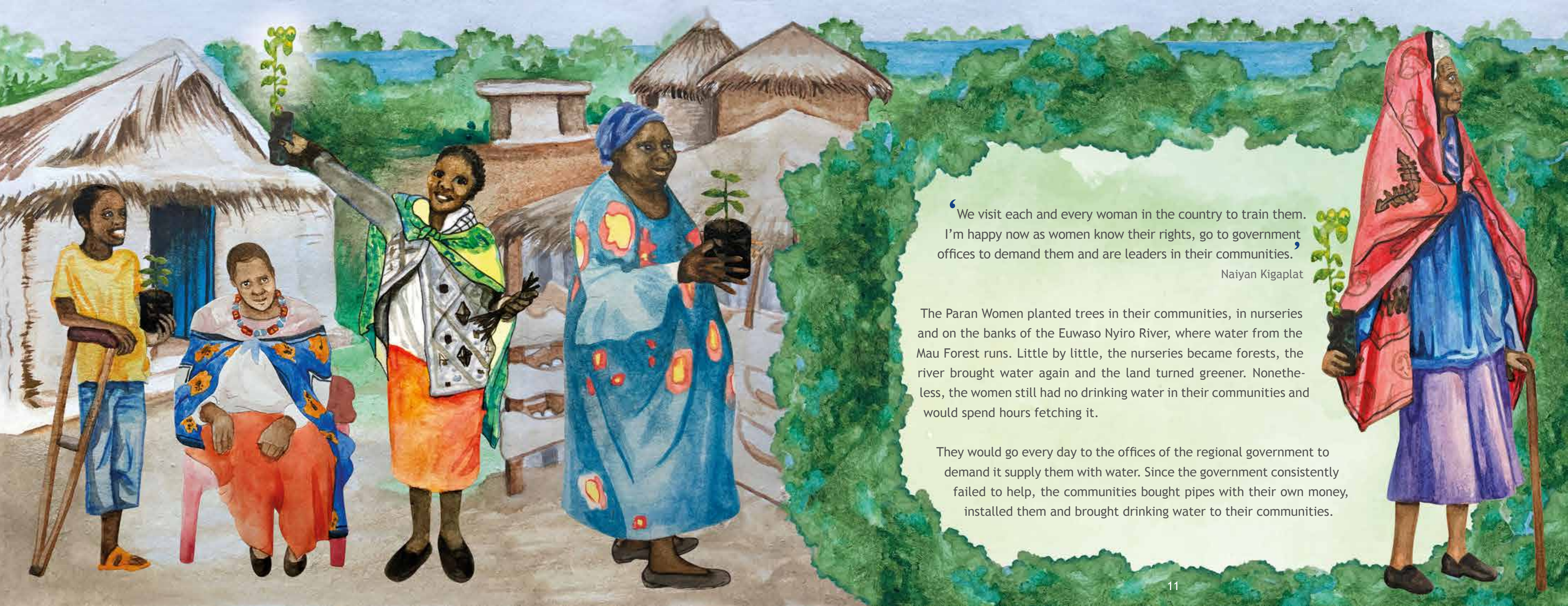
Since 2005, the women who live in the foothills of the Mau Forest—one of the most important forests in Kenya and a water source for the entire country—began to notice widespread water scarcity.

Having been felled and exploited for decades by people from other regions, the forest no longer produced the fruits that their forebearers used to collect: harvests were dying and the soil was drying up. The scant water they found was dirty, and children were getting ill more often and suffering from stomach pains. The lack of water brought deep poverty to the Indigenous Communities in the region.

In this light, the leaders of six Indigenous Women’s groups came together to find a way forward in this situation. If the problem was that Mother Nature was suffering, they had to care for and protect her so that she could once again support their livelihoods.

The women realised that there were almost no trees in the communities and proposed each one of them plant 100 trees at home. They created forest nurseries and went from home to home so that more women signed up to the initiative. This is how the Paran Women Group came about, which in the local language means ‘visiting each other’.



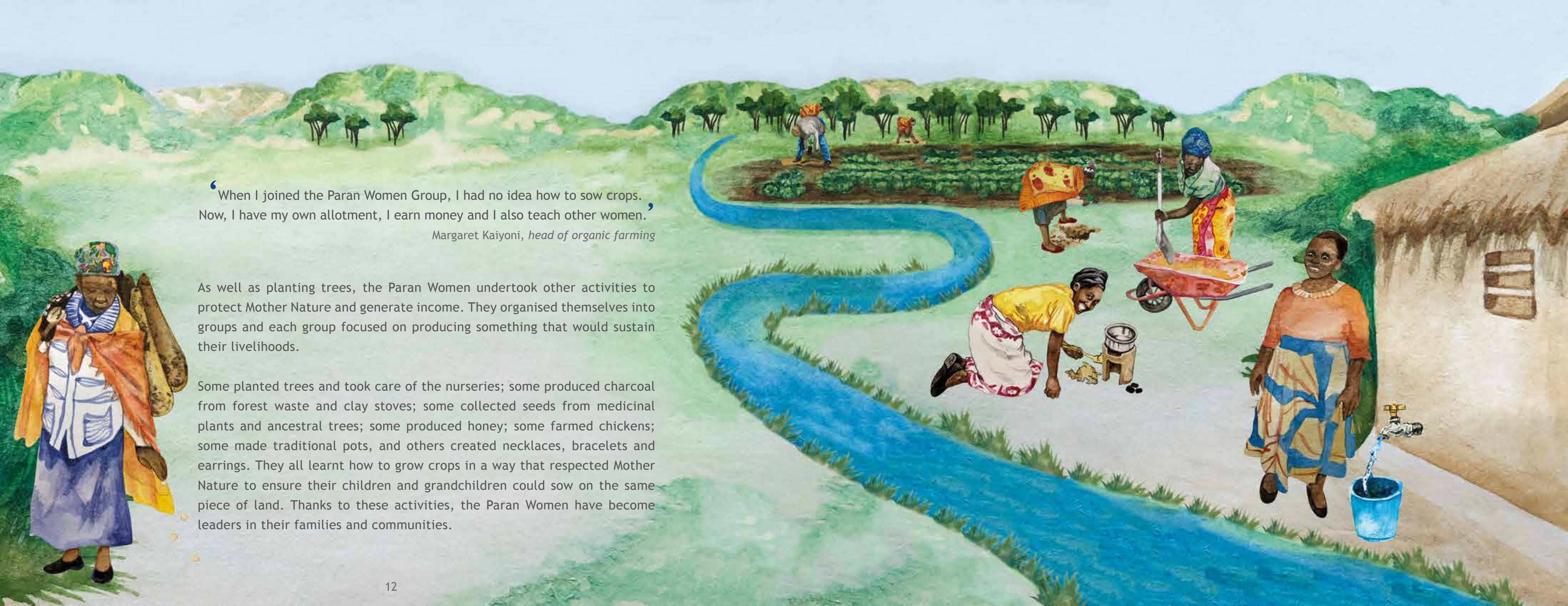


‘ We visit each and every woman in the country to train them. I’m happy now as women know their rights, go to government offices to demand them and are leaders in their communities.’

Naiyan Kigaplat

The Paran Women planted trees in their communities, in nurseries and on the banks of the Euwaso Nyiro River, where water from the Mau Forest runs. Little by little, the nurseries became forests, the river brought water again and the land turned greener. Nonetheless, the women still had no drinking water in their communities and would spend hours fetching it.

They would go every day to the offices of the regional government to demand it supply them with water. Since the government consistently failed to help, the communities bought pipes with their own money, installed them and brought drinking water to their communities.



‘When I joined the Paran Women Group, I had no idea how to sow crops. Now, I have my own allotment, I earn money and I also teach other women.’

Margaret Kaiyoni, *head of organic farming*

As well as planting trees, the Paran Women undertook other activities to protect Mother Nature and generate income. They organised themselves into groups and each group focused on producing something that would sustain their livelihoods.

Some planted trees and took care of the nurseries; some produced charcoal from forest waste and clay stoves; some collected seeds from medicinal plants and ancestral trees; some produced honey; some farmed chickens; some made traditional pots, and others created necklaces, bracelets and earrings. They all learnt how to grow crops in a way that respected Mother Nature to ensure their children and grandchildren could sow on the same piece of land. Thanks to these activities, the Paran Women have become leaders in their families and communities.

‘We ask each woman to pass on what she has learnt to other women who, in turn, pass it on to even more. Now, all women in the county are copying the Paran Women.’

Naiyan Kigaplat

Soon, more women wanted to join the Paran Group and the members went from village to village to run workshops. They recall that the women were initially shy and not used to speaking in public. Now, however, they feel brave, empowered and know their rights. They no longer have any doubts when it comes to standing up and speaking, regardless of whether there are men or women in the room.

The 900 women who were trained have gradually implemented what they have learnt and, in turn, taught other fellow women. Now, there are women across Narok County implementing and spreading the teachings of the Paran women.

In 2019, the Paran Women went to Marsabit in the north of the country to visit other Indigenous Women’s groups. There, they saw how the Samburu tribe managed to grow crops in even drier land with less rainfall.

When they returned home, they set up large tanks to collect rainwater and planted crops that could be harvested in just a few months. In this way, their crops grew fantastically well.

The training that changed their lives came from international conferences where they learnt about the problems Indigenous Women face around the world due to climate change.

They understood that they were not alone in their struggle and this provided huge motivation to continue with the work they had started, visiting even more women beyond their neighbouring areas.







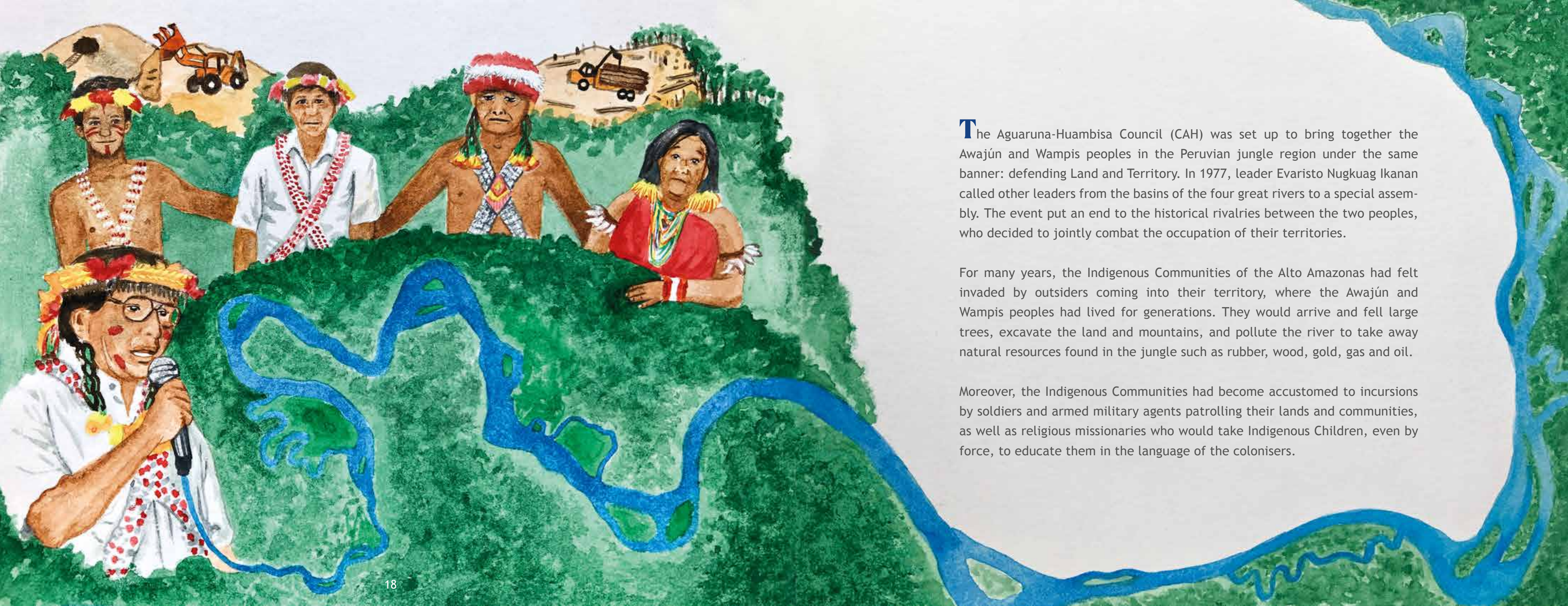
‘Due to all this, because they invaded us,  
we are starting our fight for Land and Territory.’

Raquel Caicat  
CAH chair

# ADDING VOICES

*for the defense of territory*






**T**he Aguaruna-Huambisa Council (CAH) was set up to bring together the Awajún and Wampis peoples in the Peruvian jungle region under the same banner: defending Land and Territory. In 1977, leader Evaristo Nugkuag Ikanan called other leaders from the basins of the four great rivers to a special assembly. The event put an end to the historical rivalries between the two peoples, who decided to jointly combat the occupation of their territories.

For many years, the Indigenous Communities of the Alto Amazonas had felt invaded by outsiders coming into their territory, where the Awajún and Wampis peoples had lived for generations. They would arrive and fell large trees, excavate the land and mountains, and pollute the river to take away natural resources found in the jungle such as rubber, wood, gold, gas and oil.

Moreover, the Indigenous Communities had become accustomed to incursions by soldiers and armed military agents patrolling their lands and communities, as well as religious missionaries who would take Indigenous Children, even by force, to educate them in the language of the colonisers.



After the large foundational event, the CAH leaders established bodies so that all voices from the communities could be heard by their leaders. This internal Colonial-style structure also helped in getting the government and the rest of Peruvian society to recognise them as representatives.

In the years that followed, the CAH expanded and gained popularity amongst the communities spread across the five basins of the Alto Marañón. In a short space of time, it became one of the most influential organisations in the Amazonas region.

In addition to jointly defending Land and Territory, CAH's strength was based on providing solutions to the impoverishment of Indigenous Communities. At the time, many children were malnourished, and women suffered complications during pregnancy and births. After demands from Indigenous Women, the CAH implemented an Indigenous Health programme with a special focus on mothers and children. For the first time in the history of the organisation, an Indigenous Woman led a specific area.

‘In the Baguazo conflict, the Peruvian state acted without taking into account that we exist as Indigenous Peoples.’

The Baguazo conflict pitted the Awajún and Wampis Indigenous Peoples against the Peruvian state, which sought to take away their right to make decisions about their territory. In 2009, the government passed decrees that took away the right to prior consultation with Indigenous Peoples during negotiations of the Free Trade Agreement with the USA. One of the territories set to be impacted was the Cordillera del Cóndor mountain range—an Awajún and Wampis territory protected by law—to allow the Afrodita mining company to occupy the land and extract minerals from the mountains.

The fact that the Peruvian state aimed to break agreements reached on Awajunes and Wampis territory represented a shift from ‘a time of peace’ to ‘a time of war’: for over 53 days, they blocked the entry road to their lands. The Peruvian state responded with ever more violence, and confrontations between police and demonstrators led to deaths and injuries on both sides.

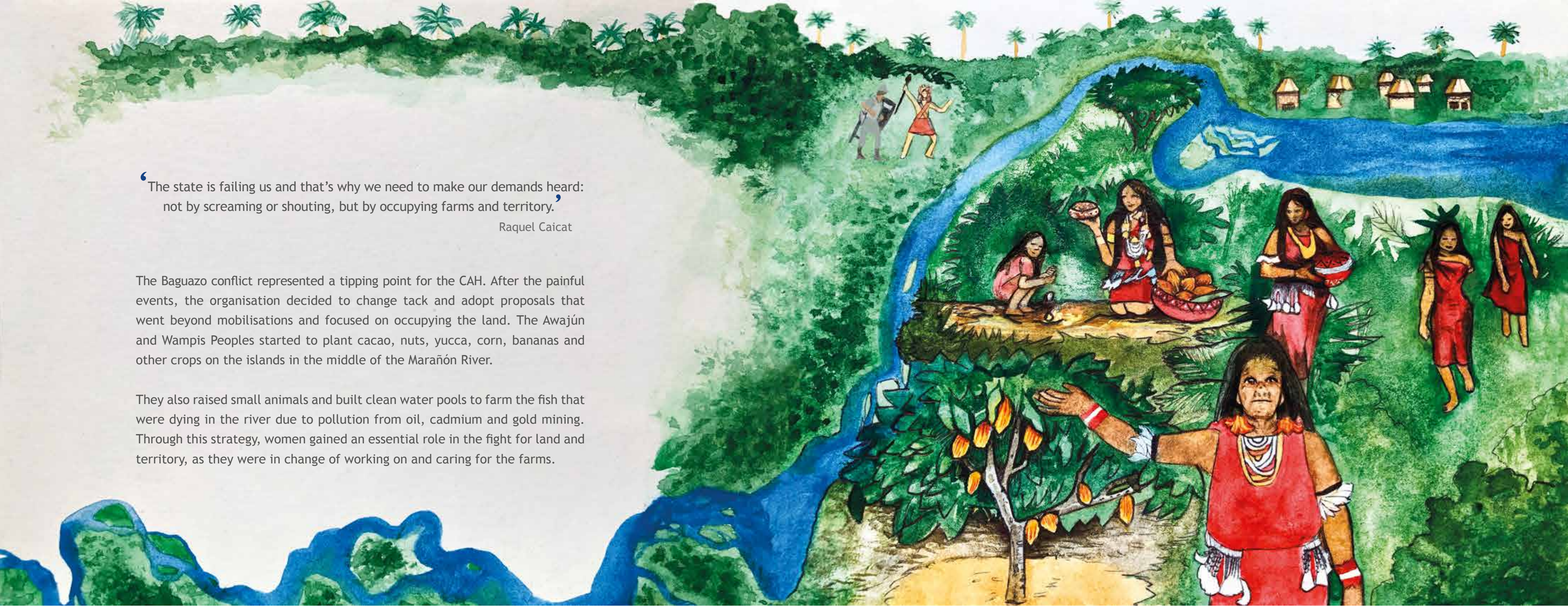
Indigenous Leaders were accused of being behind the conflict in a legal battle that lasted over ten years. They were absolved in 2020. Meanwhile, no police officer was ever charged.

‘The state is failing us and that’s why we need to make our demands heard: not by screaming or shouting, but by occupying farms and territory.’

Raquel Caicat

The Baguazo conflict represented a tipping point for the CAH. After the painful events, the organisation decided to change tack and adopt proposals that went beyond mobilisations and focused on occupying the land. The Awajún and Wampis Peoples started to plant cacao, nuts, yucca, corn, bananas and other crops on the islands in the middle of the Marañón River.

They also raised small animals and built clean water pools to farm the fish that were dying in the river due to pollution from oil, cadmium and gold mining. Through this strategy, women gained an essential role in the fight for land and territory, as they were in charge of working on and caring for the farms.



‘Neither the AIDSESEP nor the CAH trained me. I was trained by Chirapaq and passed on my learning to other leaders and sisters.’

Raquel Caicat

Raquel Caicat was one of the CAH women who promoted a more feminist vision of defending the land. Raquel had to battle hard to be heard and acknowledged in an organisation dominated by men. At just 22 years old, she set up a sewing workshop exclusively for women. It was in these men-free spaces where she began talking to them about their rights.

Over the years, she realised that she herself needed to train up and take part in the workshops that Chirapaq offered to Indigenous Women from the Andes and the Amazon. She passed on these teachings to the rest of her community and gradually gained popularity and respect, including amongst the male leaders. Within a short space of time, they invited her to take part in the Assemblies and appointed her deputy chair in 1999.

The demands from Indigenous Women have gradually seen success and, like Raquel, other female leaders have taken up roles at indigenous organisations, public institutions and in their communities. In 2017, Raquel Caicat became the first Indigenous Woman appointed as chair of the CAH in its 40-year history.



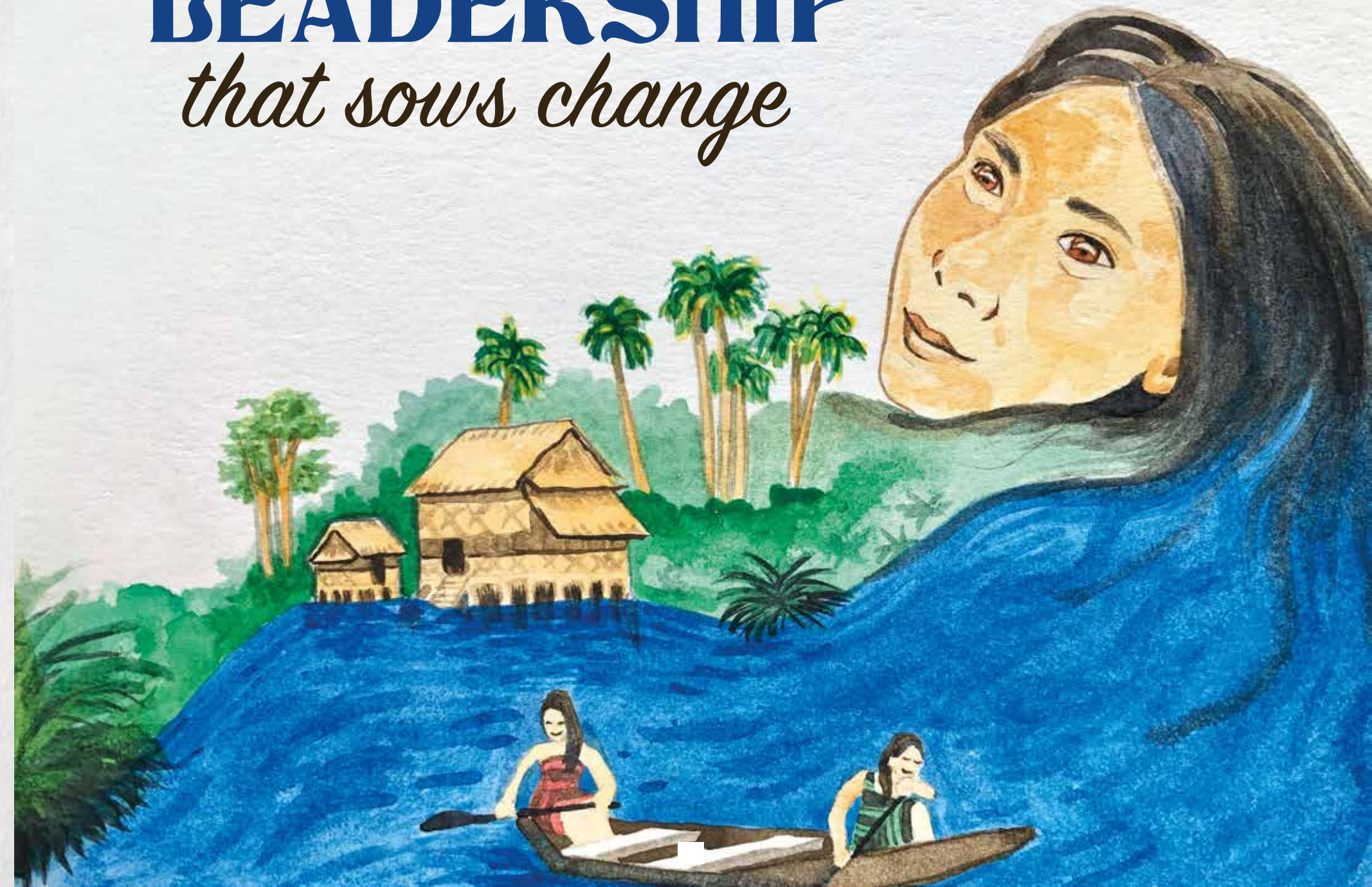


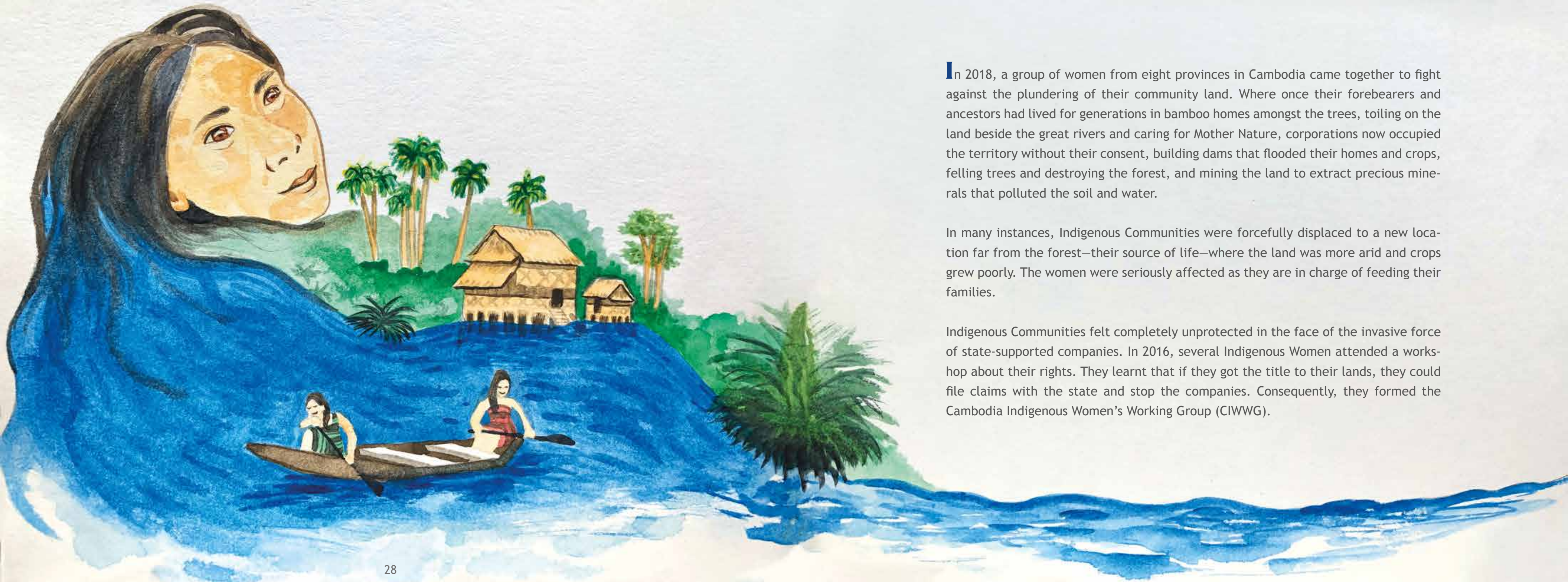
‘For us, the forest is our life, culture and identity. We find the food we need in the forest, collect materials to build our homes and bury our ancestors there.’

Sreymom Choeun  
chair of the CIWWG

# LEADERSHIP

*that sows change*






In 2018, a group of women from eight provinces in Cambodia came together to fight against the plundering of their community land. Where once their forebearers and ancestors had lived for generations in bamboo homes amongst the trees, toiling on the land beside the great rivers and caring for Mother Nature, corporations now occupied the territory without their consent, building dams that flooded their homes and crops, felling trees and destroying the forest, and mining the land to extract precious minerals that polluted the soil and water.

In many instances, Indigenous Communities were forcefully displaced to a new location far from the forest—their source of life—where the land was more arid and crops grew poorly. The women were seriously affected as they are in charge of feeding their families.

Indigenous Communities felt completely unprotected in the face of the invasive force of state-supported companies. In 2016, several Indigenous Women attended a workshop about their rights. They learnt that if they got the title to their lands, they could file claims with the state and stop the companies. Consequently, they formed the Cambodia Indigenous Women's Working Group (CIWWG).



‘If we managed to become titleholders of communal lands, the companies could not enter as we would have a certificate to demand our rights before the government.’

Sreymom Choeun

Sreymom Choeun was part of this group of women and had suffered personally from land occupancy, forced displacement and the destruction of her community in the name of so-called economic development. This young Indigenous Woman from the Pho-Norng ethnicity rose as a leader in her community when her village, Kbal Romeas, located on the banks of the Srepok River, was threatened by the construction of a huge dam that would become the largest hydroelectric project in the country.

In 2012, the Cambodian government awarded a consortium of Chinese, Vietnamese and Cambodian companies vast swathes Indigenous Communities’ lands to build the dam. At that time, Sreymom Choeun was studying in the capital city. Nonetheless, she fully dedicated herself to mobilising her community against the dam’s construction and aimed to unite forces with national Indigenous Organisations.

‘The farmland next to the river was flooded and the school, health centre and roads were completely destroyed by the dam construction.’

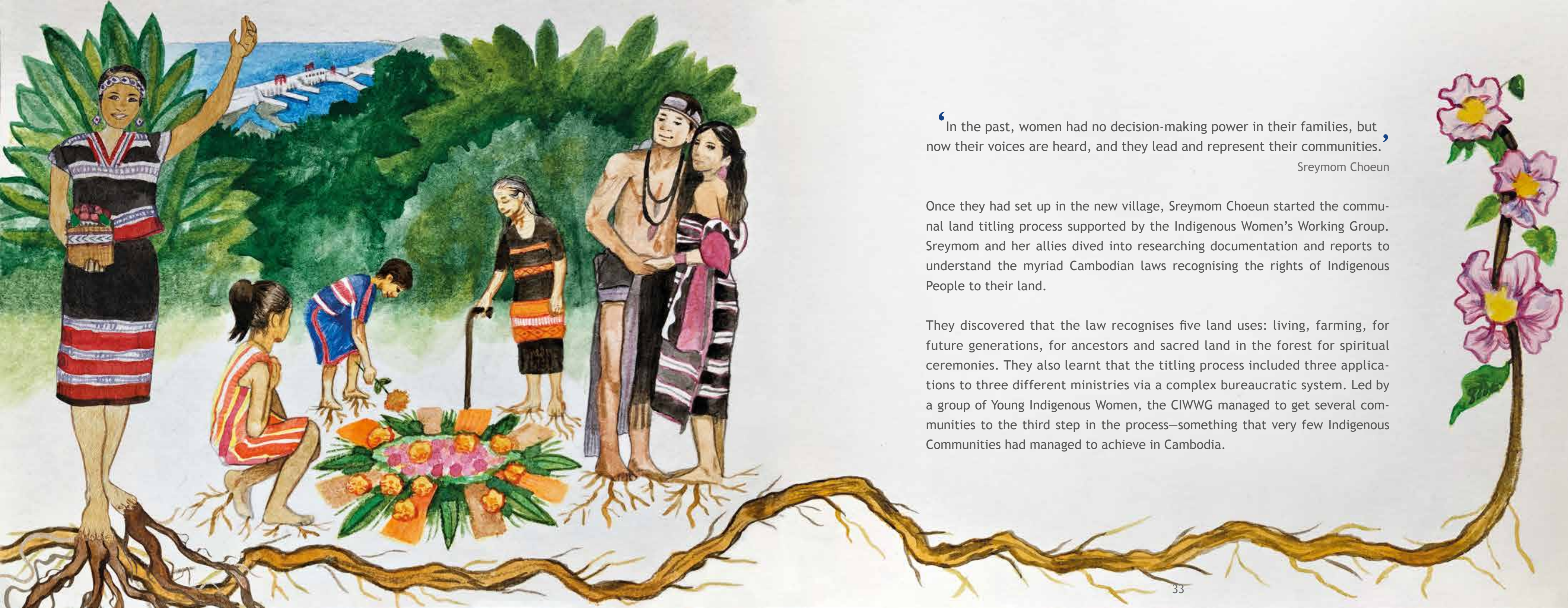
Sreymom Choeun

Despite the Choeun’s efforts, the dam project completed in 2018 and her village disappeared under water. The people in the community lost their homes, crops, school, roads, community centres and ancestral lands. The state offered families the chance to move to another location where they would each receive a small wood and cement home, a plot of arable land and an allocation of rice for the year.

However, even with these incentives, Choeun’s family refused to leave the land of their forebearers. They moved to a spot near an old, more elevated village where the water did not reach, alongside other families who had joined the struggle. They built homes there and started to farm the land.

Finally, after a long struggle, the Cambodian government accepted that the community could stay in the village they had built. Sreymom’s greatest achievement, however, was mobilising and empowering her community to defend their territory.





‘In the past, women had no decision-making power in their families, but now their voices are heard, and they lead and represent their communities.’

Sreymom Choeun

Once they had set up in the new village, Sreymom Choeun started the communal land titling process supported by the Indigenous Women’s Working Group. Sreymom and her allies dived into researching documentation and reports to understand the myriad Cambodian laws recognising the rights of Indigenous People to their land.

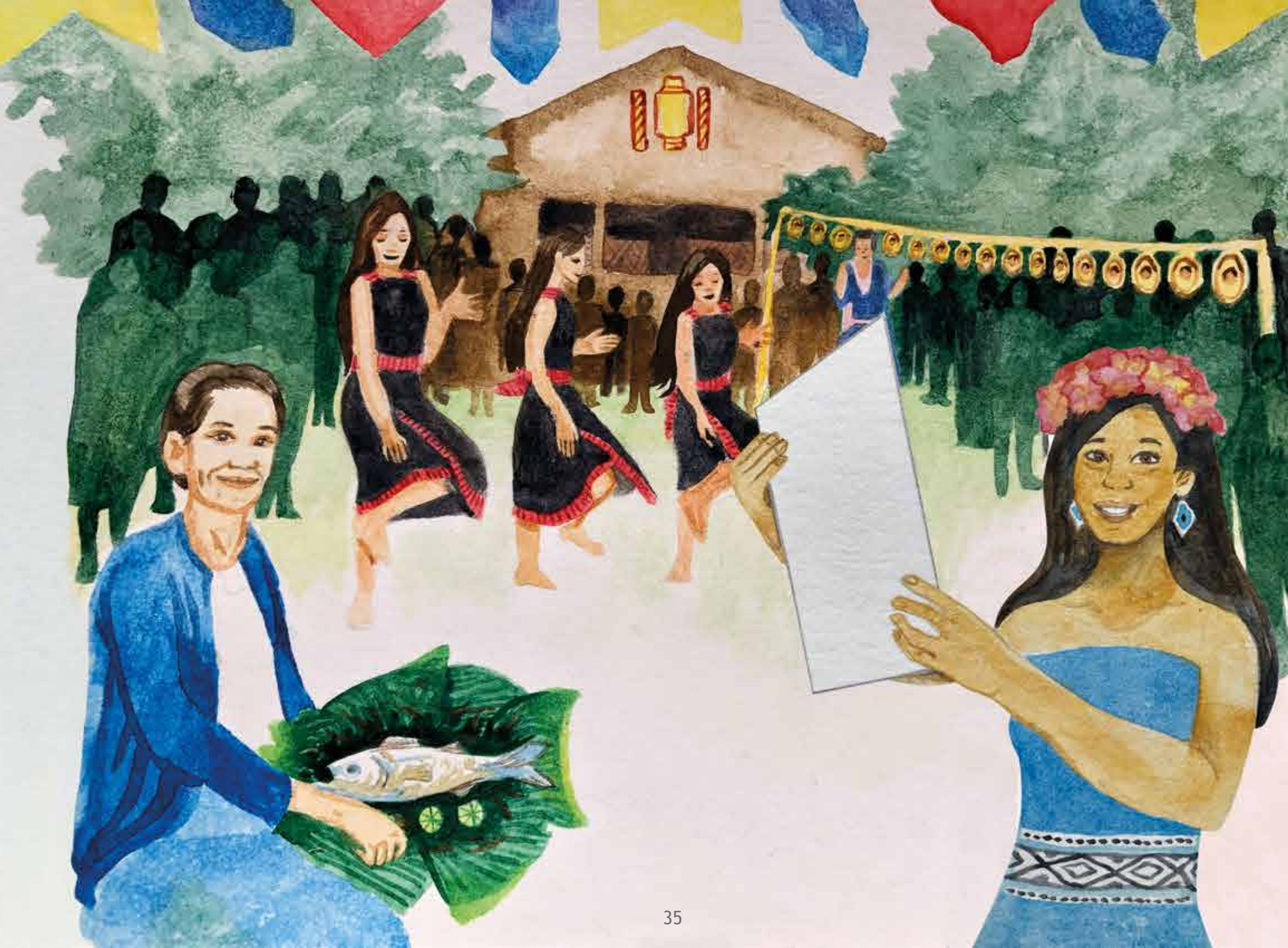
They discovered that the law recognises five land uses: living, farming, for future generations, for ancestors and sacred land in the forest for spiritual ceremonies. They also learnt that the titling process included three applications to three different ministries via a complex bureaucratic system. Led by a group of Young Indigenous Women, the CIWWG managed to get several communities to the third step in the process—something that very few Indigenous Communities had managed to achieve in Cambodia.

‘We want people from outside to know our culture as Indigenous Peoples in order to put a stop to the discrimination we suffer.’

Sreymom Choeun

The CIWWG organised a huge event that brought together the Indigenous Communities from several provinces on the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples. Over 2,000 people attended, and Indigenous Women used the day to explain to colleagues the rights they have as Indigenous Peoples. They also introduced their culture and traditions to visitors, dancing in traditional costumes and preparing traditional dishes from their communities.

Since that day, many more people are aware of the work of CIWWG in protecting Mother Nature, and several Indigenous Communities have decided to entrust the Women’s Group with registering their communal lands.





**Copyright**

© International Indigenous Women's Forum 2020.

**All rights reserved**

The content of this publication may be reproduced for non-commercial purposes without prior permission, provided the source is cited.

The publication received funding from **Mama Cash**.

FIMI is responsible for the contents and comments in this publication, and has permission from the members and communities mentioned in this document.

Any comments related to this publication may be directed to the International Indigenous Women's Forum FIMI-IIWF at: [n.fenly@iiwf.org](mailto:n.fenly@iiwf.org)

Address: Av. Horacio Urteaga 534-602, Jesús María (Lima 11), Peru.

