**SELF-STRENGTHENING OF TERRITORY OF LIFE BY EKURI COMMUNITY**

1. **Introduction:**

Ekuri is an indigenous community consisting of Old Ekuri and New Ekuri villages in Cross River State of Nigeria with a population of 6,200 rightsholders who are peasant farmers, forest gatherers, hunters and traditional healers. Ekuri community is on Latitude 5.884400 and Longitude 8.123650, and has 33,600ha of tropical rainforest which they have continuously managed for many centuries. However, since 1982, the threats of logging this rich forest by external interests leading to stiff opposition by Ekuri villagers. The struggles to protect this forest from concession approval, superhighway road project by the government of Cross River State in 2016, illegal logging concession in 2021 informed the community to seek means and ways to secure the forest for the benefit of present and future generations. They deliberated and agreed that the Indigenous Community Conserved Area (ICCA) is a solution to their situation. Consequently, they began the processes (meetings) of self-strengthening to assist the community to obtain the status of an ICCA as follows:

1. **REFLECT:**

**A ‘territory of life’? Answers from a grassroots discussion in Ekuri community**

The territory of life has strong connection with the custodian community of Ekuri who for centuries, have been living together in harmony. The Ekuri community is depended on this territory for food, livelihoods, income, water and medicine and provide ‘’the community’s sense of security and capacity to withstand hardship’’ The Ekuri community ‘s ‘’communal tenure is based on state laws and customary local legitimacy and oral history. Tenure comprises a bundle of rights that normally include access and use (for subsistence or income generation), management and exclusion of others. In general, exercising tenure in Ekuri means governing, managing and regulating access and use, and it can go with or without a formal title.

For many indigenous peoples and traditional communities like Ekuri, customary land tenure without a formal title is the main form of land regulation, including access, use and transmission of tenure itself. Land tenure is deeply entrenched in social and cultural customs and implemented through collective community, group, and family arrangements’’. These collective community, group, and family arrangements prevent hardships as each member of the community is guaranteed access to collect and use resources from territory of life for self and common development.

‘’The villages of Old Ekuri and New Ekuri otherwise called Ekuri community is 7km apart, deep within primary high moist forest and surrounded on three sides by forest reserve and Cross River National Park (CRNP). Though much of their original land is now under the jurisdiction of the State or Federal Government, they still own and controlled 33,600ha of un-spoilt primary high forest. Unusually, the two communities share forest ownership as a result of individuals from Old Ekuri founding New Ekuri during the 1938’s, long after the boundaries of between Old Ekuri and neighboring communities had been established.

The people of the Ekuri ethic group (known to themselves as **Nkukole**) live in a total of five villages (the others three are Ekuri Eyeyeng, Okokori and Edondon. They have one clan head, and speak their language **Lokole** (Morakinyo, 1993).

The Ekuri villagers are ruled by village heads, assisted by other village elders. The village ‘youth’ (males younger than about 40 years) also have great influence and are always represented in important village meetings. The population is divided into age-grades which comprise people born during the same years, each which has a name chosen by the members. Age-grade members (Morakinyo, 1993). have a strong affiliation to each other and will always give help, if possible, during times of need.

Until 1989, members of both villages had a four-hour walk to the nearest motorable road. Prior to this, both villages tried separately to make agreements with logging companies – in effect swapping their rich forest resources for a road. However, in every case, the other village vetoed the agreement. These disagreements have been a primary for the villages’ isolation. It was the people of Old Ekuri, led by a dynamic city-based villager, Oliver Enuor, who eventually organized and subsidized the construction of a road to their village. They also set up a village Cooperative to facilitate the harvesting and marketing of forest products and these activities were entirely village-based and not a response to outside intervention. As a result of the initiative that they demonstrated, the CRNP became interested in assisting the villagers to manage their forest, which lies within the Support Zone of the Park’’.

The Ekuri territory of life is home to a number of animals, plants, rivers, hills and a mountain. The animals include elephant, chimpanzee, species of monkey, duiker, forest buffalo, chevrotain, antelope, porcupine, grass cutter, bat, owl etc. Others are diversity of tree species used for timber, and, species of valuable non-timber forest products among them are bush mango (Irvingia gabonensis) afang (Gnetum africanum), Chewing stick (Garcunia spp – Randia spp) etc. Agumdugum is the highest peak in this territory of life, and Lokpoi, Lowai and Ibija are the major rivers running the breadth of Ekuri forest. Ekuri community have evolved an innovative decision-making process that is conclusive and ‘ensuring the conditions for their effective implementation” This is made possible that all age grades contribute inputs at the age-grade levels on community issues, present them at the general assembly’s meetings of the community, and such inputs are integrated and harmonized to form common decisions of the community which they keep taking, regarding their territory. Apart from the General Assembly, the members of the chiefs’ council and elders as well as committed leaders of the custodian community makes decisions about the territory.

The community have rules about access to and use of the territory and its resources. These rules include the power of attorney to Worthy Association for Tackling Environmental Ruins (WATER) to manage the Ekuri forest on behalf of the custodian community, land use plan and community bye-laws which prescribed access, harvesting and marketing of timber and non-timber forest products, registration of dealers of NTFPs and gate fees.

There are existing mechanisms in Ekuri where decisions taken about the territory are enforced. The enforcement is by WATER when there is external violation or abuse of the territory - illegal logging, farming etc. Others are by community eco-guards that carry out regular patrols of the territory, arrest and handover the arrested to WATER/ community for diligent prosecution locally or externally. The committee in-charge of NTFPs harvesting and marketing are enforcers of decisions in this sector. The chiefs/elders handle matters on traditions or others referred to them. These enforcement mechanisms have considerably aided positive results for nature and community livelihoods and wellbeing of Ekuri indigenous people.

The Ekuri territory was well conserved until 2016 when the State authority approved 20km span superhighway, seized all Ekuri territory which led to influx of loggers and farmers (under government cover) despite desperate and coordinated opposition by the custodian community. However, through coordinated campaigns and institution of court cases against the State authority, soil fertility, water quality and quantity, species populations, agricultural productivity, forests and vegetation being the main elements of healthy nature are being maintained or improving through regeneration.

**Planning self-strengthening? Answers from a grassroots discussion**

The main hopes and concerns of Ekuri community regarding her territory of life is to protect and conserve the long-term survival of timber, non-timber forest products (NTFPs), wildlife, landscape, medicinal plants, streams/ rivers, aquatic lives, food, sources of livelihoods, culture etc. Illegal logging is a serious threat, and has been increasing. The population of villages in the Ekuri is growing, and farmers have started to encroach. Levels of hunting, (Ernst Lutz; Julian Oliver Caldecott; World Bank; 1996) fishing and transitory cultivation are increasing, and damaging the ecosystem. Chemicals used for fishing have affected fish stocks in the face of its dwindling population due to deforestation, logging, exploitation and unsustainable uses. ‘’Our concerns as indigenous people are that if the current use of our territory of life are not carefully and properly managed and used, these resources will be over-exploited, extinguished thus not benefiting the present and future generations’’. The resultant effects will be poverty, hardships, insecurity and low social status of Ekuri community.

We are motivated to engage in self-strengthening for our territory of life to make sure that the current benefits from our territory of life are passed on unto future generations, the linkage and the knowledge of the use of territory of life is unbroken now and into the future, and, to sustain the global recognition of Ekuri as one of the indigenous communities at the forefront of conservation in Nigeria.

The traditional leaders (Chiefs), men, women, youth, religious and cultural groups, the vulnerable and marginalized, the local CBO/NGOs are all involved in discussing and taking action.

The Worthy Association for Tackling Environmental Ruins (WATER), is an NGO that has been working with Ekuri community for years, and, is responsible for coordinating the self-strengthening and keeping track of the process. Mr. Michael Imoh, Pastor Louis Agbor, Mr. Esira Otey, Mrs. Lawrencia Agbor, Mr. Godwin Akamo, Mr. Martins Egot and Chief Edwin Ogar of WATER are members of Ekuri community who constitute the facilitating team of the process team.

The facilitating team met in four weeks during the process. Meetings were organized for each social group of men, women and youth and general assembly meetings where information gathered from each group were presented, and further inputs made and integrated into the process.

The facilitating team presented and explained the seven elements of the self-strengthening process – **reflect, document, understand, vision & celebrate, act & communicate, act with others, and review & review**. The most important self-strengthening process chosen by Ekuri community because of it relevant to the community’s context are reflect, document, understand, vision & celebrate, act & communicate, act with others, and review & review

The time period was agreed for the commencement and end of the process as resources from Rights and Resources Institute (RRI) is already secured to support these activities for 6 months duration.

1. **Document**

**What do we know already? Answers from grassroots discussion**

The Ekuri community with a population of 6,200 people is found in Akamkpa Local Government Area in Cross River State, a sub-national in Nigeria on the border with south-west of the Republic of Cameroon. Ekuri community is endowed with 33,600ha rich tropical forest called Ekuri forest and is managed communally. ‘’There is a close and deep connection between a territory and a custodian indigenous people or local community’’ of Ekuri.  The forest is sandwiched to the north by Ukpon River Forest Reserve, to the south-east by the Cross River National Park, to the north-east by Okokori, Etara/Eyeyeng community forests and to the west by Iko Esai community forest. The forest remains largely untouched and less accessible but, in some areas, *(*Ernst Lutz; Julian Oliver Caldecott; World Bank (1996*)* it has been affected by human activity. In some places, secondary regrowth has occurred and an approach to involving local communities in management of forests in the buffer zones has been tested with some success in the Old and New Ekuri villages in the northwestern part of the Oban division. The Ekuri forest is rich in forest resources with variety of flora of timber, vegetables, nuts, vines, medicinal plants, fruits, rattans/ cane ropes and cultural materials. Other are fauna consisting of elephant, gorilla, monkeys, duikers and streams and rivers that meet water needs of Ekuri and down- stream communities. These have sustained the livelihoods, health and well-being of the indigenous people of Ekuri community for centuries.

A perimeter survey of the territory of life of Ekuri community was implemented and completed in 1997 which showed that the territory is 33,600ha. A land use plan (LUP) of 1999 for this territory of life designated 9 land use zones made up of village expansion, farmland, farmland expansion zones, protected areas (accounting for 50% of the entire forest) and sustainable timber management zone, commercial cash crops, agro-forestry stream buffer, non-timber forest product, eco-tourism and animal corridor zones. In addition, a two – 50ha timber inventory plots were laid in 1993 and 1997 where timber are harvested sustainably. An agriculture and non-timber forest products plan and a detailed 5-year timber management plan were implemented in 1997.

Since the delineation and survey of the boundary in 1997, the boundaries have not changed but the land use plan, the timber inventory plots and the agriculture and non-timber forest products plans have changed considerably because of:

1. Abuse of the LUP by farmers and illegal loggers.
2. Incursions into Ekuri territory of life by neighboring communities.
3. Illegal approvals by the state authorities to log and farm in Ekuri forest.
4. Unsustainable use of biodiversity
5. Farming unto the banks of streams and rivers.
6. Low awareness on the value of the forest by neighboring communities.
7. Lack of fund to implement awareness education on forest conservation.
8. Lack of fund to enforce non-compliance and prosecute perpetrators.

The approximate surface area of the territory of life is 33,600ha made up of tropical forest. There is surveyed map of the territory of life. The Ekuri territory of life is overlapped with the Ukpon River Forest Reserve to the north and to south/ east by Cross River National Park, to the northeast by Okokori, Etara/ Eyeyeng community forests and to the west by Iko Esai community forest. The condition of nature in this territory life is disrupted, that is, ‘’the territory previously had all three characteristics, but currently some are not fully present because of disturbances that the custodian community believes can be reversed or counteracted’’. The territory of life is ‘’good in some areas but threatened or poor in some areas’’. There are existing documentation or information to back-up our responses to these questions.

The languages spoken by our community is Lokole (indigenous language), Efik and English. The community is not homogenous in terms of power, wealth, function, religion, language or others characteristic. The Chiefs, women and youth leaders wield power and function as they constitute the local authority of the community, while plantain and cocoa farmers control the wealth of the community. The elders speak fluently the Lokole and Efik while the educated and the young are good in English. In general, the members of this territory of life are mostly food croppers and participates in cultural activities or events

These differences in the characteristics of the community does not reflect the diverse ways we relate to this territory which is always collective approach.

Ekuri community have a distinctive culture, ceremonies, institutions and/or norms. These include greetings, coronation and burial of a chief, age-grade system, new yam festival, Ikpe & Obon (enforcement group). The patriarchal norm is still practiced but is slowly dying away. All these distinctive aspects do relate to the territory of life.

The community though rich in resources, but is not well off, comfortable, but struggling, poor and vulnerable because of dirt, hilly and rough road that hinders evacuation of abundant farm and non-timber forest products to markets to sell. The poor condition of the road makes it expensive as products ends up being sold at ridiculous prices to middlemen thus perpetrating vulnerability and poverty.

The community have internal solidarity and strength as they see any challenge affecting them as collective and collectively work towards addressing any problem. Financial strength includes levies, donations, registration fees for NTFPs, gate fees and fines. Social strength of the community is cohesion, free labour and local technical services. There are internal divisions and tensions by few to log timber, expansion of cocoa farms for self-benefit against common interest of the community though this is insignificant but the divisions and tensions are widenings.

**Values of the territory**

The community use a specific name to talk about her territory of life and the name is called ‘**Lerang oreh Nkpen’**. (Forest is Life). The essential values of this territory of life for Ekuri community is as source of food, water, employment, income, health and wellbeing, culture, ceremonies and for spiritual purposes. Others include preservation of bodies of ancestors, conserve resources during times of difficulty and serve as coping base, prevent environmental disasters – flooding, windstorms, erosion and bring global recognition to the community. The territory of life is enjoyed and appreciated within the community but by all

Timber, non-timber forest products, water, air, cross-pollination and regulating of the climate are the values of this territory of life for people that do not belong to Ekuri community and there are documentation or information to back up.

**Governance and management—ways of making and respecting decisions and caring for the territory of life**

The main objectives of the community for caring for the territory of life are:

1. Protect legacy of forefathers
2. Conserve biodiversity for long term survival of stakeholders.
3. To ensure sustainable employment and income generation.
4. Strengthen community facilities development.
5. To improve health and wellbeing
6. To meet the needs of present and future generation.

The main decisions are made by the Chiefs, youth and women leaders, after WATER inputs have been obtained from the people during general assembly meetings.

The different social groups (men, women, youth) in the community make active inputs at the general assembly meetings and such are mainstreamed and integrated into the decision making. The governing body (Ekuri Initiative) was created in 1992 but the body died and WATER formally took over in 2019. The governing body was created by Ekuri community and registered with the national government of Nigeria.

The community have taken specific decisions and adopted perimeter survey, land use plan, timber inventory plan, agriculture and non-timber forest products plan as measures and rules to safeguard the territory of life. The decisions though are collective, clear but are not well-known to every member of the territory of life.

The management and staff of the governing body physically manages the territory of life and implements the decisions taken by the governing body. There is monitoring system for the management of results and is handled by an officer in-charge of monitoring and evaluation so that it keeps tracks of activities whether is achieving the objectives or not, resources expended does not overshoot the budget and the project is achieving the expected outcomes.

The community members learn about the rules and engage with the territory of life during social group and general assembly meetings, during workshops and indirect means from a relation, friend or member of his or her family who attended such events.

Ekuri community has made possible by taking actions to let others know about the decisions on the community’s rules over the territory of life and gain acceptance in respect of the rules of access and sustainable use of resource. These are done through community meetings, pictorials, flyers, brochures, oral, books, pamphlets, paper presentations at conferences.

The community’s collective rights and responsibilities to govern the territory is recognized as customary by the State authorities. Though constitutionally, all lands are held in trust by government on behalf of communities, hence any revocation by government has to receive the free, prior and informed consent of the community, otherwise, such attempt will be a futile action.

The external actors recognize and respect the community’s collective rights and responsibilities and the territory of life in practice. That is why they consult the community to seek consent before doing anything. There have been significant conflicts over land tenure and/or use of natural resources because Ekuri is poor, State authorities have made frantic efforts, approved illegal logging concessions without the consent of the community. This often results in conflict with government and is the basis for wanting to acquire ICCA to protect the territory of life for Ekuri enduring development. There are existing documentation or specific information to back-up our responses to these questions.

**These questions can help the community decide whether and how to create additional documentation about its territory of life.**

The information about Ekuri territory of life is readily available to the community and has been openly shared and discussed at social group and community meetings and during other events. The format use is the storage and sharing information of this territory of life are maps, pictures, stories, written documents, videos and IEC materials – flyers, brochures, banners. Other useful formats to our community are oral information, story-telling that can be documented through participatory mapping; TV information and website are not yet available/documented and that it would be useful to have. The information or documentation will have to be obtained through permission or create new ones. This information or documentation will be shared among members of the community, interpreted and develop stories around it to sink into the minds of the people.

1. **UNDERSTANDING:**

**Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities & threats: Responses from a grassroots discussion**

**Strengths and weaknesses:**

• What are the most important issues that arose regarding the ‘building blocks’ of resilience and security?

The resilience and security in Ekuri territory of life vary. Resilience may occur during period of unstable weather conditions, drought, poor fruiting, low harvests as the rightsholders adapt to the situation. The building blocks to recover from shocks and damage are storage of products, preservation in times of plenty, rationing, fraternity giving, and labor services. The building blocks for security of the territory of life in Ekuri are regular conservation education, sustainable use of biodiversity, enforcement of Ekuri land use plan and community bye-laws, inclusive governance, all these contributes to the ‘likelihood that the territory of life will continue to exist and thrive’.

The key elements of strength in Ekuri territory of life are unity, passion, dedication, inclusive governance, local resources, indigenous knowledge, collaboration and technical skills. The most serious internal and/or external weaknesses of the territory of life are weak benefit sharing mechanism, poverty, irregular patrols, lack of long-term collaboration and unconcerned attitude by the State authority towards conservation of territory of life.

**Threats and opportunities**

Ekuri territory of life is currently facing threats of logging, deforestation for farming and unsustainable use of forest resources including fisheries. I foresee large scale logging and deforestation threats if nothing is done now to halt this crime. These threats would have different implications for various social groups in our community as women, young people who depend on NTFPs for daily survival would have loss of livelihoods, and, resulting in poverty among them. The elders would loss herbs for health and wellbeing of the community, and with poor quality and quantity water supply.

The interest in forest conservation as a carbon offset method stems from the fact that the world's remaining primary forests, both tropical and temperate, represent huge banks of sequestered carbon.

The protection of forests that otherwise would be degraded presents an opportunity to immediately impact carbon flows. The avoidance and mitigation of carbon releases from these banks provides the quickest, forestry based, opportunity to slow the accumulation of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere (Thailand Environment Institute, 1995). Reforestation and rehabilitation activities offer opportunity to slower impact.

In areas substantially affected by conventional industrial logging, the utilization of Enrichment planting techniques may constitute appropriate opportunity in areas substantially affected by conventional industrial logging and deforestation for farming. ’’As an alternative to locking up forests or restricting industrial logging, there is increasing opportunity in using carbon offset financing to implement more environmentally sensitive forest management, particularly related to harvesting in the tropics’’ which benefits the stakeholders. These opportunities are for all as the governance of the territory of life can counteract threats and take advantage of new opportunities. The management of Ekuri forest will substantially and rapidly changed because the community have been desirous for positive change to overcome its destruction.

**Governing a territory of life: Questions for a grassroots discussion Legitimacy and fairness**

The governance institution in Ekuri has evolved in an inclusive manner and is generally accepted by the entire community and all members’ perspectives within the community are fairly represented in decision making and in communication processes. All social groups in the community benefits from decisions about the territory life as there exist benefit sharing mechanism in Ekuri which can be strengthened to be more effective. In terms of enforcement of rules for the territory of life, where gaps are noted, the rules will be reviewed and updated to make it fairer and more effective.

**How? Vision**

The Ekuri community has a shared vision about her territory of life: ‘’A poverty freed community living in harmony with nature’’ and the vision was developed in a participatory manner in agreement with majority members of the community against the few opposed to it because of anti-conservation interest for selfish interest. The vision and the plan have elicited involvement, support and commitment of Ekuri community but accountability and transparency are still a challenge yet to be addressed. Within and outside the community, the rules and ways of caring for the territory if life is well known by the members and external actors – government, NGOs, researchers etc. Though the community members are able to talk about the territory of life governance and management, but there are differing scale of involvement across the men, women, elders and young people. The community maintains documentation of the territory of life be it in governance and management practices, and have access to information about the territory of life and the financial accounting is poor, while leadership and responsibility is good but yet to reach a perfect standard.

The governance institution for the territory of life in Ekuri is energetic, and is committed, impartial and courageous as well as has relevant to the important values of culture. In Ekuri, there are committed leaders and continued to be champions of the territory of life within the community. These includes Chief Abel Egbe, Chief Edwin Ogar, Barr. James Oyi, DSP Godwin Akamo (retrd), Esira Otey, Lawrencia Agbor, Mike Imo, Pastor Louis Agbor, Martins Egot etc. They continuously inspire commitments and mobilize the involvement of members across the community and neighboring communities and demonstrate performance which demonstrate learning among members. The Ekuri territory of life was well conserved prior to 2016 when the state authority revoked all the forest of Ekuri which has provoked deforestation, forest degradation with its ecological health being less maintained or improving through regeneration. The threats affecting the territory of life is deforestation, timber logging, unsustainable use of NTFPs, hunting and these are responded to by varying measures to overcome them. The opportunities are also applied and these contribute to the local sustainable livelihoods from vegetables, fruits, nuts, rattans, cane ropes, fishes, animals, and, helped in contributing to maintaining the cultural heritage of new yam festival, obon, Ikpe, nkim etc. The territory of life surely contributes to self-determination but the logging and deforestation is a hindrance to achieving this and has eroded the enjoyment or collective rights and responsibilities of the members.

**Managing a territory of life: Questions for a grassroots discussion**

**Management Plan:**

There is a (written or oral) management plan in place which consist of timber inventory plots, land use plan, agriculture and NTFPs plan, a detailed 5-year plan etc and these plans are fully informed by the community’s knowledge and experience, and knowingly these plans respect the community’s decisions and vision for the territory of life. While the management activities and their results/impacts are monitored but current anti-conservation activities have reduced monitoring with poor results and negative impacts. The management plan has been integrated with broader plans in other communities in three Local Government Areas in Cross River State of Nigeria which makes ways and help the needs of the territory of life to be recognized and associated problems addressed in terms of human and technical capacities – capacity building, acquisition and application of basic equipment. Though there are enough people but only few have the capacities and are engaged in managing the territory of life and are able to enforce the rules that have been commonly agreed by the community. The few have the basic skills and equipment required to effectively implement the management plan and needs training and equipment to acquire and improve skills for effective implementation. The resources to use in training and acquisition of equipment is lacking but plan to raise it through contribution, levies, incomes from the territory of life, grants, donations and CSR, and, the source of these resources and contributions are not secure and sustainable. Ekuri community plan to diversify and improve sources or appropriate resources to use in meeting the needs of this territory of life.

1. **VISION & CELEBRATE**

**Self-recognizing as custodian of a territory of life: Questions for a grassroots discussion:**

The Ekuri forest totaling 33,600ha located in Cross River State of Nigeria have been conserved for its rich biodiversity which benefits the livelihoods, culture and spiritually of the indigenous people of Nkokoli. This territory of life has been communally managed for centuries and in 1992, the Ekuri community took a decision to manage it as a ‘community forestry project’ with a vision of ensuring the sustainable development of the community and members.

Ekuri community has a population of 6,200 residents. After many years of consultations with the various social groups, the community agreed and surveyed the territory of life to know the size, and, implemented a land use plan and a bye-laws which set the rules on the conservation and manageme8nt of the territory. The cardinal focus of the community forestry is: conservation, sustainable forest management, rural development and poverty reduction. The territory is devoted to protecting the rich biodiversity, generation of incomes, maintenance of customary land governance and management systems and integration of new systems. The community is poised to rigorously pursue the land use plan by respecting the various use zones, ensuring enforcement by eco-guards, hunters, forest gatherers, prompt and appropriate sanctions meted to deter others.

1. **ACT & COMMUNICATE**

**Plan and act: Questions for a grassroots discussion**

Nigeria has the highest deforestation rate (4%) in the world and Cross River State, a sub-national, is host to 70% of the remaining forests in the country. ‘’The contentious convergence of conservation and extraction is reconfiguring forests in Nigeria’s Cross River, with the emerging resource assemblage of carbon forestry, agro-industrial plantations, timber exploitation and infrastructure development’’ and this is affecting Ekuri territory of life. In 2016, the state authorities revoked all of Ekuri forest for a superhighway project, and, in 2021, a logging and agro-industrial plantation concession was granted to Sibawood Industries & Agriculture Nig, Ltd. These approvals by the state authorities were without the free, prior and informed consent of Ekuri community. The opposition against the superhighway finally paid off in 2021 as government cancelled the project but went ahead and approved logging & agro-industrial plantation, a potential threat to long-term survival of Ekuri territory of life. Other threats are illegal small-scale logging, farming and forest gathering by stakeholders from outside of Ekuri. These poses potential threats to biodiversity, livelihoods, health and wellbeing for custodians of the territory of life.

In two meetings held in Ekuri and attended by 305 members, the community through facilitation, identified measures to counteract these problems. One is awareness raising of members of the community and neighboring community on the current situation affecting the territory of life to elicit their supports and reverse it; defending the territory of life against specific threats of logging and deforestation; restoring or better protecting the ecosystems or species in our territory of life; enhancing the capacity of our territory of life to support our community livelihoods (e.g. by providing us with productive resources, protection from disasters); receiving concrete backing of local rules from the police, technical agencies, the justice system and gaining better external or internal socio-economic support to do what we need to as custodians; review and update the land use plan, digitized and chart the surveyed plan to prevent future lease or revocation of Ekuri forest).

Ekuri community and WATER have taken the state authority (Cross River State Forestry Commission) and Sibawood to court over the illegality of the logging concession in Ekuri territory of life; will also implement awareness raising in Ekuri and neighboring communities on local landscape management, regeneration through natural and agro-forestry to restore deforested ecosystems. The capacities of youth will be built to enhance the local education and livelihood opportunities in and outside the community. The duration of these activities is three years and will involve WATER talking the lead, the community men women and youth, NGOs and hired technical persons.

The committed leadership, passion of members, good community cohesion, local sources of incomes, labour, grants and collaboration with Cross River National Park, NGOs (local & international) and development agencies are the internal and external strengths of Ekuri community. Few anti-conservation elements in the community, distraction, spending on court cases, government unconcerned attitude and sabotage, irregular grants, weak capacity to attract partnership/ grants constitute the weakness faced by the community.

The community will communicate strategically by: ‘’**internally**– e.g., making sure that everyone knows the rules and regulations for the territory; celebrating the community’s relationship with the territory; enhancing care for and commitment to the territory across generations; increasing community self-awareness, transparency, and accountability; **across the local landscape**– e.g., raising awareness about the territory of life, including the rules and regulations; enhancing respect from and helping to coordinate with custodian communities of other territories of life and other actors’’. The methods of communication will include: Holding direct exchanges in informal or formal meetings and/or celebrations within the community and with neighboring communities; organizing walks inside the territory of life with both elders and youth, ensuring enough time to discuss information in depth; creating and sharing video- and photo-stories and songs about the territory; inviting journalists to do interviews or writing content for newspapers, radio, television; writing and diffusing leaflets, articles, books or posters; sets up a web site about our territory of life and organizes a group exchange in the most common social media available.

The potential communication risks include health, environment, safety, project risks and can be avoided or minimized by displaying warning on a label in a particular place, restriction put in place, training to raise awareness and communicate actions and stakeholders given the opportunity to identify risks and means to remedy it. The opportunities in sharing information about the territory of life is to enhance support and security for the territory of life and the custodian community by leveraging internal and external supports, tap into relevant national and international laws on biodiversity, indigenous and tenure rights, climate change etc. The youth leader can best communicate within the community who has specific communication skills and resources in writing skills, a great voice and social media experience

**Sketching out a simple situation analysis and identifying the priority actions to move** **towards the vision of the desired future for the territory of life and the custodian community.**

Reflecting on the strengths, challenges, threats, and opportunities facing our territory of life, what needs to happen, or change, to achieve the positive vision of our community and our territory of life, now and in the future are: intensify and improve storage of products, preservation in times of plenty, rationing, fraternity giving, and free labor services. Other mitigation measures are regular training, inclusive conservation education, sustainable use of biodiversity, adding value, review of Ekuri land use plan and its enforcement, review of community bye-laws, inclusive governance, working collaboratively with neighboring communities, exchange visits, prosecution of defaulters, equitable benefit sharing, regular patrols, improved livelihoods, attitude by the state authorities towards conservation of territory of life. All these will contribute to the ‘likelihood that the territory of life will continue to exist and thrive’ now and into the future.

There are factors impeding the change, that is, government lukewarm attitude towards Ekuri community’s commitments and efforts towards conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. This is followed by logging and farming trespasses from neighboring communities to the north and south west of this forest. To surmount or counteract these impediments, we will lobby the government through advocacy, meetings and use of influential individuals, corporate bodies to mount pressures on government officials to win government’s supports. We will organize outreach conservation education in neighboring communities, advocacy on traditional leaders, and organize series of workshops for members of these communities on the value of the forest and elicit supports on its conservation. Others include measures on defending the territory of life against specific threats, and, enhancing respect for our community governance, restoring or better protecting the ecosystems or species in our territory of life, enhancing the capacity of our territory to support our community livelihoods (e.g. by providing us with water, productive resources, protection from disasters) and enhancing the connection between our territory and community gaining better external or internal socio-economic support to do what we need to as custodians. Within our community, the chiefs, age-grade, women and youth leaders together with WATER, will provide leadership and inspiration in accordance to our customs and programs.

Ekuri will need human, financial and material resources to implement priority actions including knowledge, skills, information, cameras, GPS, vehicles, communication and patrol equipment. Ekuri will obtain these resources from self, other communities, partners and donors.

**How shall we monitor and report on our progress?**

Ekuri will put a monitoring system which will comprise of some elements. The first element of the monitoring system is the collection of routine/periodic data using monitoring matrices that will be developed by WATER. These matrices will clearly detail what information will be gathered, when and by whom. The monitoring intervention will involve the project participants in data collection and monitoring to promote downward accountability to beneficiaries. The second element is the six-monthly reviews between Ekuri key stakeholders and WATER which will assess the extent to which indicators have been achieved. Also, at the end of the year, joint annual review involving WATER and key stakeholders will be carried out. Both six monthly and annual reviews will create an opportunity to capture learning, check progress and make any necessary amendments to ensure that all activities are coherently contributing to the realization of the goal. The third element of the monitoring system is the utilization of the outcome mapping to capture changes in the behavior of local leaders -government, loggers and ordinary citizens in the focus area. The findings of the monitoring process will describe what has been observed to date by government leaders as well as ordinary citizens. In principle, a combination of generic quantitative and qualitative data collection methods/tools will be used to track progress on indicators and to monitor changes in behavior of participants, local leaders and ordinary citizens with respect to land rights. Basically, the monitoring process will track and record changes in behaviors, altitudes, relationship and ideas of participants in respect of land ownership rights.

The expected outputs/effects of the monitoring intervention include:1) Documentation of progress and learning to date as well as making recommendations for improvements; and 2). Informing the decision on the key elements to be carried forward into the next phase of activities. Also, the information obtained will be useful in re-shaping and re-designing further follow-up project activities/interventions.

**Communicate in a strategic way: Questions for a grassroots discussion**

Ekuri have different levels on which the community may wish to communicate and internally, these include updating and making making sure that everyone knows the rules and regulations for the territory; celebrating the community’s relationship with the territory; enhancing care for and commitment to the territory across generations; increasing community self-awareness across the landscape, transparency, and accountability. Others are raising awareness about the territory of life, including the rules and regulations; enhancing respect from and helping to coordinate with custodian communities of other territories of life and other actors.

Ekuri will at the national and/or international level and with relevant territory of life networks seek and backing-up appropriate recognition and support for the territory of life by communicating its importance, identified problems and challenges, institutional gaps and inadequate funding. The audiences WATER/Ekuri wish to reach are Ekuri rightsholders, local, regional, national and international stakeholders including donors. The specific objectives to reach the diverse audiences is through age-grade general assembly, Okwa meetings, exchange visits with neighboring communities, workshops, newsletters, mails, website, media and feedback. Ekuri also plan to organize walks inside the territory of life with both elders and youth, ensuring enough time to discuss information in depth, develop poems, or songs, writing and distributing leaflets, articles, or posters about the territory and carry out media publicity. Others include asking the schoolteachers to hold topical discussions with our kids in school and setting up a website about the territory of life.

The community will establish and manage specific communication team and this will need external supports in advocacy campaigns, communicating the community purpose to the public, networking campaigns, conferences and newsletters.

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