“Films Are Like *Alarms*”

The cultural impacts of three environmental justice documentaries

BY ROS DONALD & JESSICA NEWELL

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A Social Science Investigation of Film Impact Campaigns

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The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), based at American University's School of Communication, is a creative innovation lab and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for equity, social change, and social justice. Focusing on independent, documentary, and entertainment media, the Center bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners across media industries, social justice, public policy, and public engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and academic research; creates original media; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter.

About the Documentary Power Research Institute

Based at the Center for Media & Social Impact, the Documentary Power Research Institute produces public research and convenes topical conversations to investigate and strengthen the role and power of documentary storytelling in democracy, social change, and justice. With seed funding from the Perspective Fund, the multi-disciplinary Institute grapples with the field's most urgent challenges and works to expand access to timely learnings, needs and tools of documentary-centered research in order to serve academic and practitioner communities interested in the role that documentaries can play in community building and fields of social impact, justice and change. The Institute also spotlights the legacies and present-day work of impact producers, activists, filmmakers, and organizations who are committed to leveraging documentaries for social impact.

The quotation we use in the title, "Films are like alarms," came from our interview with Kisilu Musya, an environmental activist in Kenya whose years-long campaign to encourage his community to plant trees to cushion them against increasingly erratic rains inspired the film, Thank You For the Rain. *In our interview, Musya said films are powerful advocacy tools, acting like alarms that show where the weaknesses are. "They are waking people up," he says. "They are opening our eyes. They are speeding up our governments and waking them up also."*

Summary of the Report

Three environmental justice documentaries have acted like fire alarms for the communities they depict, raising awareness and inspiring action. They have galvanized Indigenous environmental activists, increased the local, national, and international influence of these groups, and spurred powerful actors to remedy their concerns.

In this study, we use in-depth interviews with protagonists, film teams, and impact producers for three films—*Thank You For the Rain*, *The Territory*, and *Delikado*—to explore these documentaries' cultural impacts throughout their lifecycles. Our findings highlight that the most important thing that shaped the three films' cultural impacts was their focus on co-creation practices and Indigenous narrative sovereignty. Interviewees also emphasized the need to cultivate the impacts communities want, the importance of customized community screenings in the process of achieving community goals, and the long and surprising afterlives of documentary films as agents of change.

Table of Contents

Key Findings

The importance of co-creation

A SPECTRUM OF CO-CREATION APPROACHES: All three documentaries used co-creation arrangements to ensure participants had a say in the films. These took different forms and changed over time. They included full co-production agreements, producer credits, and veto power over footage, showing that co-creation practices can be flexible and responsive.

BREAKING THE MOLD: Dominant framings of environmental problems often flatten the experiences of Indigenous people, portraying them as victims, ignoring their expertise, and obscuring their significant contributions to environmental solutions. While documentarians know narrative is a powerful advocacy tool, these documentaries were particularly effective at both reaching desired audiences and elevating the contributions of people whose voices are often sidelined, including in environmental advocacy circles.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING EARLY AND OFTEN: A proactive plan can help everyone associated with the impact teams, from protagonists and communities to impact producers and filmmakers, navigate the process from planning to after the release. Careful planning can manage expectations and ensure films align their strategies with protagonists' priorities. Revisiting the plan over the course of the film can help to ensure impact campaigns adapt to new realities and take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

Cultivating impact

CENTERING COMMUNITY SCREENINGS: Customized community screenings that continue after a film's initial release are the heart of a film's cultural impact, providing powerful moments of emotional connection, recognition and representation, offering opportunities for dialogue and community building, and creating key opportunities to influence powerful audiences. In an era of digital streaming, it can be easy to overlook the importance of these smaller-scale events, but interviewees emphasized that nothing could replace the cultural impact of collectively experiencing a film.

NAVIGATING RISKS: For many interviewed, political risk poses the greatest obstacle to impact. Production and impact teams must be aware that greater publicity, while necessary to achieve change, can also increase the scale of the risks protagonists face. Long-term relationships between film teams, impact producers, and protagonists, as well as creative approaches to screenings in high-risk areas may help to mitigate the dangers.

Films surprise us and live on in unexpected ways

REAPING THE BENEFITS: Protagonists also experienced positive changes following the release of the films and their associated impact activities, such as greater protection against threats, increased community buy-in to their environmental protection efforts, and greater financial security.

BUILDING MOMENTUM: The documentaries and their impact campaigns created enduring connections that increased activists' influence in governmental, national and global networks well beyond the production team's initial goals for outreach and sustainable impact. Many of these benefits occurred following the films' release as a result of engagement activities.

RIPPLES OF IMPACT: Documentaries create ripples of impact that extend far beyond productions' initial expectations, from opportunities to meet influential people to invitations to partner on promoting international legislation, so interviewees found they had to be prepared to prioritize and respond to opportunities.

Films can act...

AS CULTURAL TOUCHPOINTS THAT CREATE MOMENTS OF EMOTIONAL CONNECTION.

AUTHORSHIP, KNOWLEDGE, AND EXPERTISE: Protagonists and other interviewees highlighted that by telling their stories on their terms, it is possible to create spaces in which Indigenous perspectives are at the center, offering hope and nuance in contrast to apocalyptic environmental narratives.

Key Opportunities

1) Traditional industry standards of measuring impact have centered around audience numbers and the priorities of the filmmakers (Borum et al., 2024a). But, instead, **interviewees prioritized social and cultural impacts**, suggesting an expanded definition of success. These included goals for community consultation, measuring awareness among key groups, the potential to support legislative changes, and investigating different types of long-term support for those who are featured in the film.

2) The experiences of these films highlight the benefits of talking to protagonists about what they can expect over the life of the film, from production to impact campaign. **Early agreements between filmmakers and protagonists, revisited to reflect changes, enhance consent, increase transparency, and may help to manage expectations.** The documentary community, from funders to incubators, has an opportunity to work with communities and filmmakers to promote best practices in creating equitable agreements that can also include discussions about impact campaigns and plans for earnings.

3) Co-creation practices can take different forms but have the potential to foster richer stories and more equitable relationships. The filming process changes protagonists and their communities in profound ways. Collaboration helped film teams tell more nuanced stories that foster a sense of self esteem and pride among protagonists and their communities. Co-creation practices can help make filming less extractive, ensuring documentaries add more to communities than they take away. For instance, some protagonists are now filmmakers themselves with the tools and resources to tell their stories on their own terms and nurture new generations of journalists, documentarians, and artists.

4) To increase films' capacity to achieve protagonists' goals and take advantage of new opportunities, the documentary community has the opportunity to support impact campaigns that build on evolving best practices centering care for featured people. These might include toolkits for agreements with protagonists, guidelines for proactive discussions about impact, and resources for making films available in local languages.

5) According to our interviewees, distributors and funders should prioritize community screenings where possible. Individuals we spoke to said screenings are powerful catalysts for community impacts that include legislative change, community cohesion, and increased awareness of historically marginalized stories. Greater support for screenings, including in high-risk areas, such as resources for security, would help to support these goals.

6) Documentaries can create positive impacts in the lives of the people they feature, but there may also be risks. **Careful, considered, and prolonged engagement that continues even after filmmakers move on to new projects can help featured people to feel safer and more supported.** Impact campaigns have their own lives after a film is released during which many opportunities emerge. Several interviewees, including directors, impact producers, and protagonists, felt there were fewer resources for this phase, however. This made it harder for filmmakers to move on to new projects because they did not want to leave protagonists unsupported. Some suggested that greater support for impact campaigns may include investing in impact producers and building in models of impact financing that are not tied to filmmakers.

Introduction

Kisilu Musya was disappointed his signal was too weak for him to turn on his video. Occasionally, it would drop out altogether, interrupting his flow. We could hear the birds in the background as they welcomed the evening. As he reflected on the many changes that had occurred for him, his community, and the wider climate movement after the release of the film, **Thank You For the Rain,** ***he suggested our conversation was proof of its continuing impact: "Films connect countries. Now, we are talking from some distance because of the film."***

This study delves into the social impact of three documentary films by examining their cultural influence. **We define cultural influence as the many ways in which documentaries and their impact campaigns, over their lifetimes, can change people and communities at different scales, creating new connections, elevating narratives, and inspiring ripples of impact.** Films can act as cultural touchpoints that create moments of emotional connection, which can translate into a host of opportunities for change when filmmakers, impact producers, and advocates harness them effectively. After showings of the films, a Kenyan village received a dam guaranteeing residents reliable access to water; European Parliamentarians voted for legislation to tighten up on imports like beef and wood from the world's forests; and environmental justice activists who live with the threat of violence have gained access to powerful networks who offer them a measure of protection and visibility. Documentaries can elevate underrepresented points of view within cultures where they are often sidelined. In these films, narrative helps to create windows into the lives and knowledge of Indigenous people, communicating the importance of nature in countries like Brazil and the Philippines, where forests are often portrayed as of little value compared to farmland and tourist developments. And films have longevity, sustaining effects in new ways as they circulate within evolving cultural landscapes.

The Authors

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About the Study

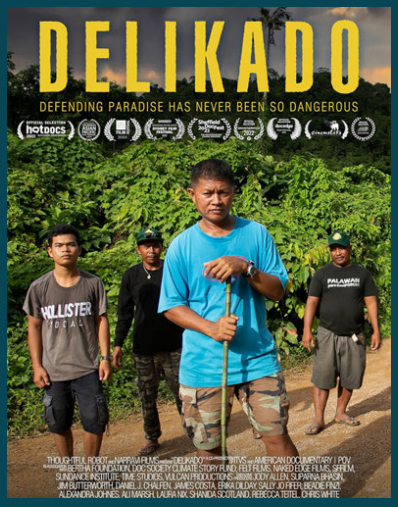
We conducted 16 in-depth interviews with protagonists of all three films, filmmakers, contributors, producers, and impact producers based in the United States, Brazil, Kenya, and the Philippines. We examined the evolution of these individuals' views of impact, from very personal changes to witnessing their films' evolving lives as catalysts for change around the world.

We wish to thank all of those who gave their time to help us shed light on the cultural impacts of the three films.

This report, and the interviews that made it possible, also counts as one of those ripples of impact. We ask: What did the different contributors want to achieve with the film, how did these criteria for impact change over time, and how may we use contributors' understandings of a film's impact to assess its effect on culture?

In the first section, we define cultural influence and explain its components. We then describe the methods we used to explore these elements, and situate them in the literature about documentary impact and environmental justice. In the third section, we highlight our findings as key insights, based on data from our interviews. In the final section, we discuss our conclusions alongside the opportunities we and our interviewees identify. The italicized passages that introduce each section capture moments that occurred while we recorded our interviews.

Synopses of Climate Justice Documentaries[1]

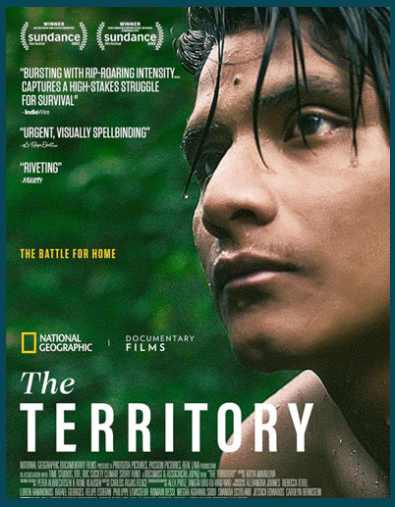


Delikado

WWW.DELIKADOFILM.COM

DIRECTOR: **KARL MALAKUNAS**
PRODUCERS: **MARTY SYJUCO, MICHAEL COLLINS, AND KARA MAGSANOC-ALIKPALA**

Delikado focuses on Palawan NGO network (PNNI), Filipino forest defenders led by Attorney Bobby Chan, who fight to protect their island's resources from illegal logging and fishing. While Mayor Nieves Rosento supports the group's efforts, powerful figures like the region's governor challenge the authority of the land defenders, back illegal development of Palawan for tourism, and threaten their lives.



The Territory

FILMS.NATIONALGEOGRAPHIC.COM/THE-TERRITORY

DIRECTOR: **ALEX PRITZ**
PRODUCERS: **DARREN ARONOFSKY, SIGRID DYEKJÆR, WILL N. MILLER, GABRIEL UCHIDA, LIZZIE GILLETT, AND ALEX PRITZ**

The Territory focuses on the Uru-eu-wau-wau, who occupy a portion of the Brazilian Amazon rainforest in the conservative state of Rondônia, as they battle illegal invasions of their land. After the election of Jair Bolsonaro as Brazil's president in 2018, political support for would-be invaders increased. But access to cameras created new opportunities for the Uru-eu-wau-wau to demand accountability from politicians, the media, and other powerful interests.

Thank You for the Rain

WWW.THANKYOUFORTHERAIN.COM

DIRECTOR: **JULIA DAHR**
PRODUCERS: **HUGH HARTFORD AND JULIA DAHR**

Thank You for the Rain focuses on Kisilu Musya and Christina Kisilu, a Kenyan couple who become environmental activists in their local community as extreme weather intensifies. From extreme droughts to sudden storms that cause devastating floods, Kisilu champions tree planting in his community to mitigate the impacts of climate change and builds connections with foreign environmental organizations, such that he eventually speaks at the 2015 COP21 meeting in Paris.

[1] These synopses were written by the report's authors. For the filmmakers' own synopses, please see Appendix II.

Methods

This study covers the cultural impact of issue-focused documentaries using qualitative data. We draw on 16 in-depth interviews with protagonists, filmmakers, producers, impact producers, and co-producers; a photovoice analysis through which participants shared images that best described their films' impact; and a network analysis to understand the connections each film created with other organizations (see Figure I for a complete list of interviewees).

FIGURE I: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Interviewee	Film	Role
Kisilu Musya	*Thank You for the Rain*	Video Diarist
Christina Kisilu	*Thank You for the Rain*	Video Diarist
Emily Wanja	*Thank You for the Rain*	Impact Producer
Neidinha Suruí	*The Territory*	Protagonist
Tangãi Uru-eu-wau-wau	*The Territory*	Cinematographer and Protagonist
Alex Pritz	*The Territory*	Director
Will Miller	*The Territory*	Producer
Marianna Olinger	*The Territory*	Impact Producer
José Kaeté	*The Territory*	Former Impact Producer
Gabriel Uchida	*The Territory*	Producer
Nieves Rosento	*Delikado*	Protagonist
Karl Malakunas	*Delikado*	Director
Anne Marie Corominas	*Delikado*	Legal Representative: PNNI
Michael Collins	*Delikado*	Editor and Producer
Marty Syjuco	*Delikado*	Producer
Alex Poblete	*Delikado*	Impact Producer

To examine the films' cultural impacts and the networks they have helped to create, we interviewed the people who contributed to each of the productions. These include directors, producers, impact producers, editors, cinematographers, and protagonists—although many played more than one role. Finally, we discussed the codes we had assigned to passages and decided which were most illustrative of our themes. Borum and Das (2014) outline a number of different qualitative and quantitative approaches suitable for investigating different aspects of a film's social impact, from user engagement to institutional changes. We chose to focus on qualitative measures because we wanted to understand how film teams, and particularly protagonists, experience and define impact, with the goal of generating new insights and opportunities for investigation. Our "storytelling about storytelling" (ibid.) encompasses the films' influences observed at the personal, community, national, and international scales; legislative changes; the definition of problems and solutions; and raising the profile of individuals and groups as activists and experts.

We focus on the films' contributors to examine their cultural impacts and the ways they have facilitated connections with wider networks of activists and other stakeholders, from local NGOs to international funders.

We asked each participant what they would like to see in the study, and how it may be useful to them. For instance, Emily Wanja, an impact producer for *Thank You For the Rain*, noted she would like to see a visual aspect to the study inspiring us to adopt a photovoice component that would allow protagonists to express impact using images as well as words. Others said they appreciated that the study was another opportunity to raise their cause's profile.

Our approach is inspired by the practices of the environmental justice movement and participatory research, as well as the processes of the specific films. Therefore, we compensated interviewees in recognition of their time and expertise. We also offered opportunities to guide the study and vet the quotes we use from their interviews. We wanted to ensure that everyone felt part of the process and guard against missing important points and nuances. Each interviewee received $150 US for their contribution, which they were free to keep or donate.

How documentaries enact change: Highlights

Documentary films encourage audiences to feel the struggles they encounter on screen as their own (Barrett and Leddy 2008). This narrative power allows them to shape social change in a number of ways as "political platform, mirror, vehicle of representation, axis of collaboration, conduit of information exchange, tool of political intervention, and organizing agent" (Aguayo 2019, p. 59). By building infrastructures of support, film teams can extend their influence beyond the initial excitement audiences may feel on seeing a film into what might be termed real change.

One way filmmakers have encouraged social change is to provide immediate outlets that allow audiences to respond to a film's call to action. During the early 1990s, for example, the filmmaker Barbara Trent pushed organizations holding screenings of her film *Panama Deception* about the US government's 1989 invasion of Panama to offer audiences options to act. These included contacting government officials and local media about their concerns and information about joining local activist organizations (Whiteman, 2003). By showing audiences how they can answer the film's call to action, films capitalize on the emotions they generate, helping audiences feel empowered to do something—even in the face of an overwhelming problem or resistance to a film's message (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). In Nigeria, for instance, individuals surveyed after they watched a documentary about the polio vaccine knew more about the disease and were more likely to say they would get the vaccine (Onuekwe, 2015).

Over the past 10 years, issue-based documentaries have increasingly incorporated on and offline campaigns to engage with audiences on social issues in a practice Nash and Corner call strategic impact documentary (Nash and Corner, 2016). For instance, the impact campaign for the 2013 documentary *Blackfish* incorporated a call to action embedded in the film, an online, and an offline campaign, all of which have led to dramatic changes in public attitudes about the keeping of killer whales in captivity as well as legislation to curb the practice (Borum, 2020, p. 103).

Filmmakers also build coalitions among interest groups to further their impact: The 2002 film *Blue Vinyl*, which exposed the use of cancer-causing vinyl in the building trade, partnered with grassroots organizations, international NGOs like Greenpeace, and large industry bodies like the American Institute for Architects, for example (Barrett and Leddy, 2008, p. 8).

These infrastructures ensure that while documentary films tend only to reach small audiences, their networks can exercise considerable influence in the policymaking process (Borum 2020). For instance, Borum and Jenkins (2019) argue that filmmakers, policymakers, legislative staff, and advocacy groups have formed what the political theorist Sabatier (1991: 148) terms "policy sub-networks" in response to documentaries that shape legislation related to concerns ranging from sexual assault to pollution and shepherd it through legislative processes.

Documentary production teams that prioritize a long-term impact campaign after the film's release and find ways to resource it put themselves in the best position to create more concrete change (Borum 2020). Key orchestrators of these meaningful outcomes tend to be impact producers, a term that describes the person in charge of "building an intentional network and community of practice" based on the film's objectives, from legislative initiatives to screenings in schools (ibid., p. 87). Impact producers have become fixtures on many documentary teams, forming coalitions between relevant organizations and creating fundraising strategies in support of the film's cause (Nash and Corner, 2016).

Stakeholder impact: Blurring the boundaries between participants, producers, and audiences

A human-centric view of impact allows for nuanced investigations of the ways films change people over their lifecycles and the ethical obligations filmmaking entails. Take, for example, the definition of impact described by the nonprofit Learning for Action. It says: **"We define impact as change that happens to individuals, groups, organizations, systems, and social or physical conditions. Typically long-term and affected by many variables, impact represent the ultimate purpose of community-focused media efforts — it's how the world is different as a result of our work"** (Learning for Action, 2013, p. 1). These indicators refer to a film's social value, which goes beyond financial measures of success to take into account criteria such as improving individual and collective well-being across a range of dimensions (Napoli, 2014, p.6).

Films have a participatory and transformative effect for filmmakers, protagonists, and audience members. Clark and Aufderheide talked about this kind of transformation in their 2009 description of a new kind of public media powered by the Internet, through which "[p]eople come in as participants in a media project and leave recognizing themselves as members of a [...] group of people commonly affected by an issue." They call these projects "transformative acts of communication" that create a stake in that issue for all involved and inspire some to take action as a result (Clark and Aufderheide 2009, p. 11). Understanding documentaries in this way can help us to see how they change everyone involved, from filmmakers to audiences.

And these transformative relationships can become fraught, raising questions about the inequities of storytelling. For instance, the 1990 film, *Paris is Burning* (Livingston, 1990), which focuses on New York's drag ball scene continues to highlight cultural erasure and filmmakers' long-term obligations towards protagonists (Green, 1993). After Brooklyn-based arts center BRIC invited an all-white panel to speak at a 2015 screening celebrating the film's 25th anniversary, members and supporters of New York's ball community demanded the event's cancellation with a Change.org petition, a Facebook campaign, and the social media hashtag #ParisIsBurnt. Brooklyn activist Heather Dockray (2015) wrote:

> **"At what point does a director/storyteller's job end? Once the movie is released in theaters, and streaming on Netflix? Or far later, after substantive change has been made? Documentary journalists almost always pick the former, but that doesn't lessen the hurt felt by the subjects left behind. It's difficult for a storyteller to know when to end a story when its plot, and its pain, feels endless [...]."**

Aufderheide (2016) cites this example to show how "endemic and historical" confusion about films and filmmakers' social roles pushes questions of impact into the territory of ethics, equity, and care.

Some of these questions are particularly acute in relation to who should be paid and when: during production, during distribution, or both? During production, journalistic norms of nonpayment still dominate—a practice Panse (2017, p.171) has criticized as "image-taking," which avoids recognizing the work of protagonists as work and denies them the right to the images of themselves. Challenging this paradigm, the Documentary Accountability Working Group encourages filmmakers to think about "possible compensation for [participants] in the production, distribution, or impact phases," as well as giving participants opportunities to shape their stories (Documentary Accountability Working Group, 2022).

The agreement with contributors to the Australian film *In My Blood It Runs*, which follows 10-year-old Dujuan Hoosan and his Arrente community amid the disproportionate institutional scrutiny of First Nations Children, incorporates several of these aspects. The film's creators draw on First Nations initiatives to ensure that the Indigenous people who contributed to the film have the right to control the narratives about them. For instance, the production practiced continuous consent, creating agreements throughout the filming process and after, including with Dujuan as he grew older and more able to understand the implications of sharing his life on screen. As part of the production's policy of transparency, each new partner or funder signed on to the collaborative structure, formally recognizing that creative control remained with Dujuan's family. Other aspects of the production included a "duty of care" plan from inception through to the film's release and impact campaign, as well as profit sharing that distributed the royalties of the film among the contributors (Borum et al., 2024b). The family received equal profits to the director and proportionately more than the producers. Maya Newell, the film's director, producer, and impact producer said: **"We felt we could not make a film about the critical need for agency and self determination of First Nations people in the decisions that are about them if we did not practice this behind the scenes"** (Edwardson et. al., 2023).

Several interviewees for this study also stated their commitment to fostering new films led entirely by Indigenous people. Many of these discussions come together under the umbrella of "narrative sovereignty". Jesse Wente, Director of Canada's Indigenous Screen Office defines the term in his memoir as "the idea that people, communities, and nations should control their own stories and the tools used in that storytelling" (Wente, 2021, p. 168). Filmmaker Crystal Echo Hawk, founder and Executive Director of Illuminative, a Native woman-led nonprofit dedicated to amplifying Native stories, says: "There is always a way to tell a story with respect for community, and this is something Native filmmakers know" (Echo Hawk, 2022).

"We felt we could not make a film about the critical need for agency and self determination of First Nations people in the decisions that are about them if we did not practice this behind the scenes."

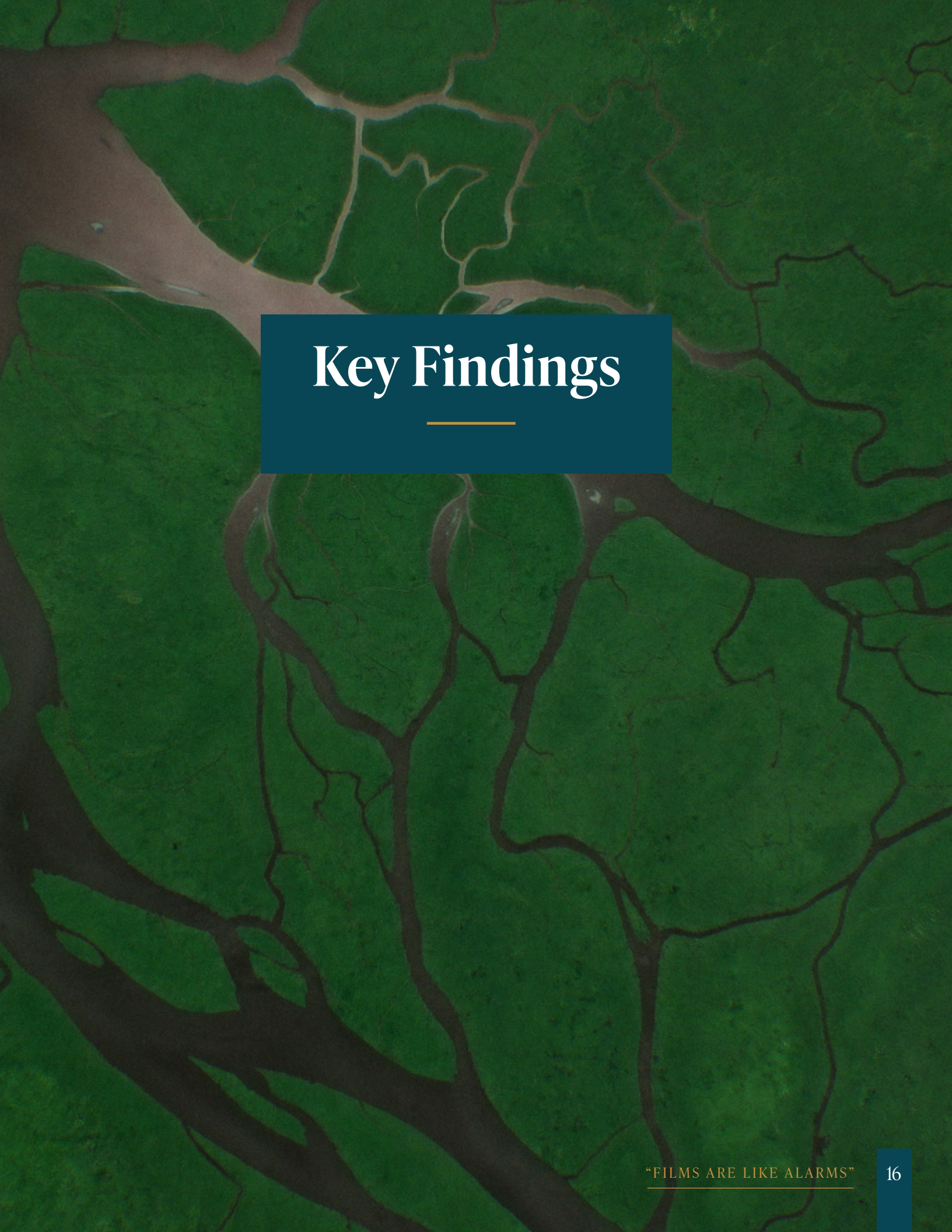
Studying cultural impact through participatory methods

In this study, we gather stakeholders' diverse perspectives on and experiences of impact, rather than coming with a preconceived definition, measure, or purpose. We do so using interviews, photovoice, and qualitative network analysis.

Indigenous scholars have long called for collaborative research that honors Indigenous communities' knowledge and answers the questions they care about (Chlisa, 2011). For this reason, we sought interviewees' opinions on what the study should achieve and have presented actionable recommendations based on participants' desires for new norms in documentary filmmaking. One interviewee, Emily Wanja (Impact Producer, *Thank You For the Rain*) mentioned her preference for visual as well as textual representations of impact, leading us to adopt the photovoice method, where researchers ask interviewees to take or bring photographs that reflect their experiences.

Wang and Burris developed photovoice as a participatory action method that encourages participants to answer researchers' questions with a photo and a voice recording, interview, or paragraph explaining its significance (Wang and Burris, 1997). By combining narrative and visual elements, researchers hope to add greater nuance to depictions of complex problems, while creating more opportunities for interviewees to shape research. Researchers have used photovoice to document topics including climate change (Russo et al., 2020), mental health challenges (Vansteeenkiste et al., 2023), and gentrification (Erfani, 2021). Photographs also act as objects that allow for communication between multiple social worlds and realities, creating opportunities for people with different experiences to make meaning together (Brock Carlson and Carretta, 2023). Through interviewees' sharing images to accompany their spoken word, they tell their story dynamically, sharing a glimpse into their perspective.

Another interviewee, Karl Malakunas (director, *Delikado*), described his desire to make new connections with the other study participants. The theme of connections inspired us to construct a visual representation of these overlapping networks (see Appendix I). Visual network analysis takes data about relationships and presents it like a map (Decuypere, 2020). In this report, we show selected networks related to different aspects of the films' impact campaigns.



Key Findings

1

A spectrum of co-creation approaches

ALL THREE DOCUMENTARIES USED CO-CREATION ARRANGEMENTS TO ENSURE PARTICIPANTS HAD A SAY IN THE FILMS. THESE TOOK DIFFERENT FORMS AND CHANGED OVER TIME. THEY INCLUDED FULL CO-PRODUCTION AGREEMENTS, PRODUCER CREDITS, AND VETO POWER OVER FOOTAGE, SHOWING THAT CO-CREATION PRACTICES CAN BE FLEXIBLE AND RESPONSIVE.

"From my experience working with international outlets, there are lots of journalists and reporters that are great. But in the end... it's just another person from the global north, telling a story from their perspective and telling their story to their own audience. I think we need to change that." (Gabriel Uchida, producer, *The Territory*)

When white filmmakers from the Global North make films with Indigenous people, they must contend with a legacy of films that have taken other people's stories and shaped them to amplify the director's perspective rather than that of the people in question (Hart 2023). Aware of these deep disparities, the makers of the three documentaries, each helmed by white teams from the Global North, sought to instead center contributors as active participants, albeit in different ways. The key strategies the documentary production teams used to initiate this type of collaborative relationship included inviting participants to become video diarists, affording veto power over content for the final cut, and establishing formal co-production contracts with participants.

From participants to producers

Indigenous communities have complex cultural identities and independent goals, which dominant portrayals often misunderstand and misrepresent (Cummings, 2012, p. 259; Iseke-Barnes, 2005), even in media that advocate for Indigenous rights (Francis and Francis, 2010). Used well, collaborative methods can help to ensure their stories are depicted faithfully. In Brazil, activist Neidinha Suruí set terms with the production team before she agreed to take part in *The Territory*. She told the film's director, Alex Pritz, "I don't trust white men. The white American man has killed a lot of Indigenous people. The Native American people suffered a lot, right? They lost their land, they lost their families[...]."

Suruí, one of the film's key protagonists, highlights the need for participation and narrative control from representation to production. For example, she only consented to collaborating on *The Territory* if Pritz agreed that Indigenous people would shoot it, with training on how to use cameras. She continues: "I said to him, 'look, I don't want you to give them crappy camcorders, I want you to donate a high-quality camera for them to shoot the film, so that after you've left, they can continue[to make films]."' According to Suruí, conscientious and inclusive choices about who gets to make decisions are at the root of ethical filmmaking. She asserts: **"When we talk as equals, the results are good. That's what *The Territory* is."** The film is also noteworthy for its "appreciation for women", according to Suruí. She adds: **"You have an Indigenous woman as producer, who is Txai [Suruí, Neidinha's daughter], and you have me as a protagonist. When you look at the footage, the women are there, working alongside everyone."**

"FROM MY EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH INTERNATIONAL OUTLETS, THERE ARE LOTS OF JOURNALISTS AND REPORTERS THAT ARE GREAT. BUT IN THE END... IT'S JUST ANOTHER PERSON FROM THE GLOBAL NORTH, TELLING A STORY FROM THEIR PERSPECTIVE..."

—GABRIEL UCHIDA, PRODUCER, *THE TERRITORY*

The Territory's co-production agreement contains the provision that the Uru-eu-wa-wau community would receive a portion of the film's profits, equal to the other producers. And in keeping with the principle of continuous consent, the outside film team visited the region frequently to talk with the community about their participation. In 2020, after the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Brazil, the production team agreed with the Uru-eu-wau-wau to leave four professional camera kits at the village gates, and a Brazilian cinematographer held filmmaking workshops with them over WhatsApp. The community and production team created a formalized production agreement (*The Territory* Impact Campaign, 2023).

In the case of *Thank You For the Rain*, collaboration evolved more organically, both as a result of developing close relationships with protagonists and as a moral choice. According to the film's impact report, director Julia Dahr initially intended to abide by the journalistic norm of maintaining personal and financial separation from the film's protagonists, Kisilu Musya, Christina Kisilu, and their family. However, after living with them for more than a month and facing devastating storms alongside them, she realized that continuing with this ethos of 'professional distance' would be both wrong and impossible to maintain" (docimpacthi5, 2019).

Upon this realization, the team reconfigured its structure to bring on Kisilu and Christina as official directors, ensuring them creative control and titled legitimacy. The team also required that Kisilu be paid an honorarium with all expenses covered to be booked as a speaker, and a line for his labor was added to every application for impact funding. These fundraising efforts enabled the couple to rebuild their home and afford schooling for their children, including the ability to send their eldest daughter to university–the first in their family to attend. *Thank You For the Rain*'s impact producer, Emily Wanja, notes:

"When you start looking at the protagonist, you realize that they do a lot of work that's not necessarily in your usual conventional working hours. They are leaders already. They're already building a community. It's what they do every day. A lot of that is not compensated...so, it was important that when we screened the film, we started a crowd fund. And those funds would go straight to him personally to support his work as he wishes. That was one of the best things I think we did because that has come a long way over time to help him in his work outside of the usual compensation that he was getting because of working on the campaign."

Delikado's production team shared their first cut with the film's protagonists so they could veto footage that might place them in danger. Editor and producer, Michael Collins, acknowledges that there is a debate in the documentary industry over sharing the power to decide what is shown. Moreover, *Delikado*'s protagonists had not asked for it. "But we felt that it's such a touchy subject, their lives are already at risk," he explains. " We only want to amplify what they're already doing and make them stronger, safer, more resourced."

Lawyers and protagonists discussed every line in the film in case it might put them at risk of lawsuits from powerful interests such as Palawan's governor. Marty Syjuco (producer, *Delikado*) said cooperating with Doc Society, a foundation which works with documentary makers to amplify their films' impact, was valuable. The group championed the decision to vet the final cut, implement security protocols, and set up insurance in case enemies of the forest defenders filed lawsuits against the production or its contributors. "We were making sure we could step up, even though we did everything we could to be as careful as possible, [in case] the governor wants to start throwing lawsuits at people," according to Syjuco.

"WHEN YOU START LOOKING AT THE PROTAGONIST, YOU REALIZE THAT THEY DO A LOT OF WORK THAT'S NOT NECESSARILY IN YOUR USUAL CONVENTIONAL WORKING HOURS."

—EMILY WANJA, IMPACT PRODUCER, *THANK YOU FOR THE RAIN*

2

Breaking the mold

DOMINANT FRAMINGS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS OFTEN FLATTEN THE EXPERIENCES OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, PORTRAYING THEM AS VICTIMS, IGNORING THEIR EXPERTISE, AND OBSCURING THEIR SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTIONS. WHILE DOCUMENTARIANS KNOW NARRATIVE IS A POWERFUL ADVOCACY TOOL, THESE DOCUMENTARIES WERE PARTICULARLY EFFECTIVE AT BOTH REACHING DESIRED AUDIENCES AND ELEVATING THE VOICES OF PEOPLE WHOSE STORIES ARE OFTEN SIDELINED, INCLUDING IN ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY CIRCLES.

"How do we drop from the head to the heart?" (Michael Collins, editor and producer, *Delikado*)

Stories create the circumstances under which information can cross cultural boundaries, challenge dominant hierarchies of knowledge and expertise, and overcome resistance in audiences (Moyer-Gusé, ibid.). In the case of the three documentaries, film narratives accomplish several objectives: Overcoming prejudice, conveying Indigenous expertise, and raising the profile of stories that many national and international audiences are either unaware of or less than receptive to.

Stories about the climate crisis can create resistance in audiences because, as Karl Malakunas, the director of *Delikado*, says, "things are just so bleak" that people skip them altogether. As a journalist for the Agence France Presse agency, he found audiences were turning off when he wrote stories about the struggles of the people on the front lines of the climate crisis. He found that when watching a film, audiences felt swept up in the stories. By honing the story of *Delikado* into a thriller closely focused on the lives of a few land defenders who risk their lives to stand up to powerful interests, he aimed to "make the audience angry, inspired, [and] energized to take action." Michael Collins (editor, *Delikado*) expressed the process of shaping the film's narrative thus: "My job as an editor is, how do we drop from the head to the heart? By the end of the film, I want their struggle to feel like my struggle. And that's the power of this format, this feature-length character-driven journey."

Visibility and representation

Dominant cultures frequently misunderstand, misrepresent, and sideline Indigenous voices, expertise, and solutions (See e.g. Arnold, 2018; Carlson and Frazer 2020). Documentaries provide the opportunity for participants to see themselves represented authentically on-screen to local and global audiences, fostering an increased sense of cultural pride and alleviating the fatigue of continuously having to retell one's story to people who do not understand, according to interviewees.

After the release of *The Territory*, impact producer Marianna Olinger explains that the visibility of the Uru-eu-wau-wau community changed dramatically both abroad and within Brazil, including in the country's environmental movement. The film meant that the Uru-eu-wau-wau were appearing on national and international television regularly, making a big difference to wider cultural awareness

"HOW DO WE DROP FROM HEAD TO THE HEART?"

—MICHAEL COLLINS, EDITOR AND PRODUCER, *DELIKADO*

of the community. Seeing oneself represented widely and represented well leaves a profound impression. José Kaeté, who is a member of a different Indigenous group, the Tupinambá, and worked as an impact producer on *The Territory*, narrates the unifying effect of seeing Indigenous identities portrayed on screen:

"I think around 15 Indigenous people went to the theater to watch the movie and in the end everybody was crying… [W]e come from different realities, but we felt represented in the movie. And we face the same challenges in different contexts, maybe not with illegal loggers or invaders, but with other kinds of threats. And we really felt represented and that the movie was sharing our common story as an Indigenous person."

Christina Kisilu, video diarist for *Thank You for the Rain*, echoes the value of representation by expressing her own reasons for agreeing to contribute to the film: "My intention was to show that [...] women can also join in the fight of climate change." And following the film's release and subsequent showings in her local community, women have joined in efforts such as tree planting and learning new farming techniques. In fact, the film's representation of the local community motivated increased involvement from many, even those who were most reluctant initially. Kisilu Musya, the film's other video diarist, says:

"Even the people who are resisting to be taking photos during the time we were doing the film, I could see them enjoying [themselves at the screening], saying, 'Hey, I'm inside the film.' They got the information that we are looking at the solution of our challenges. It is not very difficult now to call them and then discuss issues."

These opportunities can help to challenge dominant understandings of problems like the climate crisis and responses to them. "It is very easy for colonialism and extraction to be repackaged and sold as a new product" in conversations about the climate crisis or responses like green energy, says Emily Wanja (impact producer, *Thank You For the Rain*). **"That is still anchored in the principles that have got us where we are right now, so it's been very important to focus on how our communities are represented, how they're involved in the conversation,"** the stories they see and the voices they amplify, she says. Narrative's emotional and persuasive impact can elevate alternative structures, approaches, and leaders that challenge the status quo.

Despite starting the film with a home wrecked by a storm and a ruined garden, Kisilu, Christina, and their children worked tirelessly to adapt to their changing environment and became leaders in their community and abroad. Their story confronts viewers with real faces behind the unjust truth that those who face the earliest severe effects of climate change are often those who have done least to contribute to it and have the fewest resources to protect themselves. It shows their leadership in the fight against the climate crisis, to great personal cost, but it also shows their kindness, their regard and admiration for each other, and their humor. Christina reflects that the family "used to plant, but [had] no harvest", not knowing that climate change was making the seasons more unreliable—a set of circumstances under which many would give up. But instead, they persevere. She says: "It tells us that people can do better, even without money."

Emily Wanja (impact producer, *Thank You For the Rain*) describes the ways storytelling can cross boundaries and form the basis for transformational action:

"[S]eeing stories of people everyday: Activists, organizers, champions, keepers of ancestral knowledge, and traditional scientists bring a different perspective to understanding and creating a real relationship of love and care for nature, because you can't want to save or care for something that you don't understand or know how to live with."

Narratives can also overcome audiences' resistance to learning more about uncomfortable topics by absorbing them in compelling stories (Moyer-Gusé, ibid.). Alex Poblete (impact producer, *Delikado*) acknowledges this type of impact: "A lot more people are more conscious or more alert and vigilant when it comes to harassment and killing of, and even arresting activists and our human rights defenders." In addition to presenting new information in a compelling format, narrative advocacy is also an invaluable tool for counteracting harmful preconceptions.

Fighting prejudice

"We hear a lot from non-Indigenous people, like right here in Brazil, that Indigenous people have to live in the bush...how can we live in the bush if our land is being destroyed?"

(Tangãi Uru-eu-wau-wau, cinematographer and protagonist, *The Territory*)

CREDIT: TANGÃI URU-EU-WAU-WAU
DESCRIPTION: "The other photo of an indigenous man sitting at the edge of a completely burnt field. That was precisely on a day we were shooting the documentary. And on that day we took a photo of the cacique (chief) there, because he saw the burning, he sat down and became sad thinking about the future."

By seeing communities who are protecting nature and living sustainably, stories like *Thank You for the Rain* can overcome perceptions that Indigenous lifeways are primitive, notes Emily Wanja (impact producer, *Thank You For the Rain*). On the contrary, they call for audiences to interrogate their own lifestyles and beliefs. For Wanja, films form part of a cultural intervention that she feels is missing from the climate conversation. Behavioral change can only come about as a result of reflection and, also, collaboration. She concludes: "I don't know of a medium that can do that so simply and so vividly like storytelling."

Screenings have a pivotal role to play in interventions that challenge stereotypes. For instance, the *Delikado* team held a screening of the film at the Philippine College of Criminology, a high school and university for law students. Karl Malakunas (director, *Delikado*) recounts that he was told several young future lawyers went into the film as fans of Rodrigo Duterte, the hardline former president of the Philippines, whose allies continue to persecute forest defenders, and "came out with different views".

Countering anti-Indigenous prejudice often falls on the shoulders of Indigenous people themselves as they weigh how their actions and decisions will be assessed by outsiders, a phenomenon depicted frequently in *The Territory* when the Uru-eu-wau-wau faced tense interactions with forest invaders. According to Tangãi Uru-eu-wau-wau, one of the film's cinematographers, the ever-present pressure on the Uru-eu-wau-wau to serve as exemplary representations of civility is evident. He shares:

"Apart from a few people, we know that there's not a lot of... affection for us, for the Indigenous cause. So, I think that the greater number of people who are at least watching is enough for people to feel some of the reality of our struggle. Maybe a lot of people don't know, so there's no way for them to feel anything or even try to help, right? The more visible we are, the more we will be recognized. So, in *The Territory*, we didn't display any violence, right? We didn't display anything other than respect. We talked, in a civilized way, as people, you know, human beings, and we followed procedure, which is to hand them over to the authorities."

Narrative can also show the socio-political problems associated with climate change in their complexity. Neidinha Suruí (protagonist,*The Territory*) rejects the lack of nuance inherent in narratives that cast some individuals as heroes and the others as villains. One condition of her participation in *The Territory* was that it gave equal time to the Uru-eu-wau-wau and the farmers who attempted to encroach on their land, allowing viewers to weigh the opposing stances and choose their own conclusions. José Kaeté, who worked as an impact producer on the film, describes how the film team counted the number of minutes each group had in the movie to avoid privileging one group over the other. With screen time devoted to both perspectives, Suruí observes the opportunity for a larger story to be told, one that acknowledges how the farmers "are also used by people in positions of power. They are also under pressure from the big boys."

The films' focus on Indigenous people's authorship and input, which might also be called narrative sovereignty, has also helped to ensure their stories are more complete. Tangãi Uru-eu-wau-wau (cinematographer, *The Territory*) notes that **"when Indigenous people tell our own story, there are parts that aren't left out. If we call an outsider, it won't come out the way we expect [...] So, many times, Indigenous people telling their own story is twice as good as [outsiders] telling it, because they tell it [...] their way, and we tell [...] it as if it were real life."**

The importance of Indigenous authorship leads into our second key finding: The need for formal arrangements that allow for people featured in the documentaries to have a say over the filming process, the final product, and the impact campaign.

Neidinha Suruí is always in demand. Halfway through our call, in the midst of telling us how people constantly reach out asking her to help with more films, came a knock on the door—someone with a question about a current project. We paused, smiling at the perfect accidental timing. Minutes later, she picked up with us exactly where she left off as if the interruption never occurred.

3

The importance of planning early and often

A PROACTIVE PLAN CAN HELP EVERYONE ASSOCIATED WITH THE FILM, FROM PROTAGONISTS AND COMMUNITIES TO IMPACT PRODUCERS AND FILMMAKERS, NAVIGATE THE PROCESS FROM PLANNING TO AFTER THE RELEASE. CAREFUL PLANNING CAN MANAGE EXPECTATIONS AND ENSURE FILMS ALIGN THEIR STRATEGIES WITH PROTAGONISTS' PRIORITIES. REVISITING THE PLAN OVER THE COURSE OF THE FILM CAN HELP TO ENSURE IMPACT CAMPAIGNS ADAPT TO NEW REALITIES AND TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OPPORTUNITIES AS THEY ARISE.

"I didn't realize running an impact campaign was going to be as time-consuming as making the film." (Karl Malakunas, director, *Delikado*)

Although the measurement of a documentary's impact occurs after a film's completion and release, a proactive mindset that considers impact in the earlier stages of production is key to enhancing the eventual outcomes of the film. Many low-budget films do not have the resources to invest in impact planning from the beginning and frequently have to wait until a few waves of funds roll in, if they choose to pursue an impact campaign at all. However, across the board, the film teams agree that the earlier impact planning can be incorporated into the production process the better.

Looking at the end from the beginning

Alex Pritz (director, *The Territory*) attributes being able to build the campaign around the goals and priorities of the Uru-eu-wau-wau people to early-stage impact planning. This aligned with the production team's ethos of co-production and respecting the autonomy of the Indigenous community. Rather than imposing a campaign purely based in Western ideas of publicity on the Uru-eu-wau-wau community, Pritz notes, **"[collaboration] was part of our approach... not being out there with our own hashtag, starting new petitions, or positioning ourselves as leaders. We want our impact campaign to be supporting the goals of the movement itself and trying to bring new money and new attention into it that might not have been accessible otherwise..."**

A second benefit of proactive impact planning is acquiring the best footage to achieve a certain goal. Knowing they would be tasked with constructing an impactful story arc in the editing room, Marty Syjuco and Michael Collins (director, *Delikado*) kept narrative in mind from the earliest phases of filming. Collins explains: **"Marty and I weren't on the ground with Karl [during initial filming], but we were chatting with him as he was going back out [...] following the story and making sure that there was character journey at the center of it, making sure all of the observation that was happening there was gonna give us what we needed to make the most powerful story in the edit so that we could reach a wide audience [...]. We understood that this was urgent, there was extreme injustice, there were some extraordinary heroic characters at the center of this but that it had to be captured a certain way in order to translate that into a 90-minute film that was gonna resonate all over the world [...]. Then we're simultaneously thinking about partners, funders, and potential broadcasters."**

"I DIDN'T REALIZE RUNNING AN IMPACT CAMPAIGN WAS GOING TO BE AS TIME-CONSUMING AS MAKING THE FILM."

—KARL MALAKUNAS, DIRECTOR, *DELIKADO*

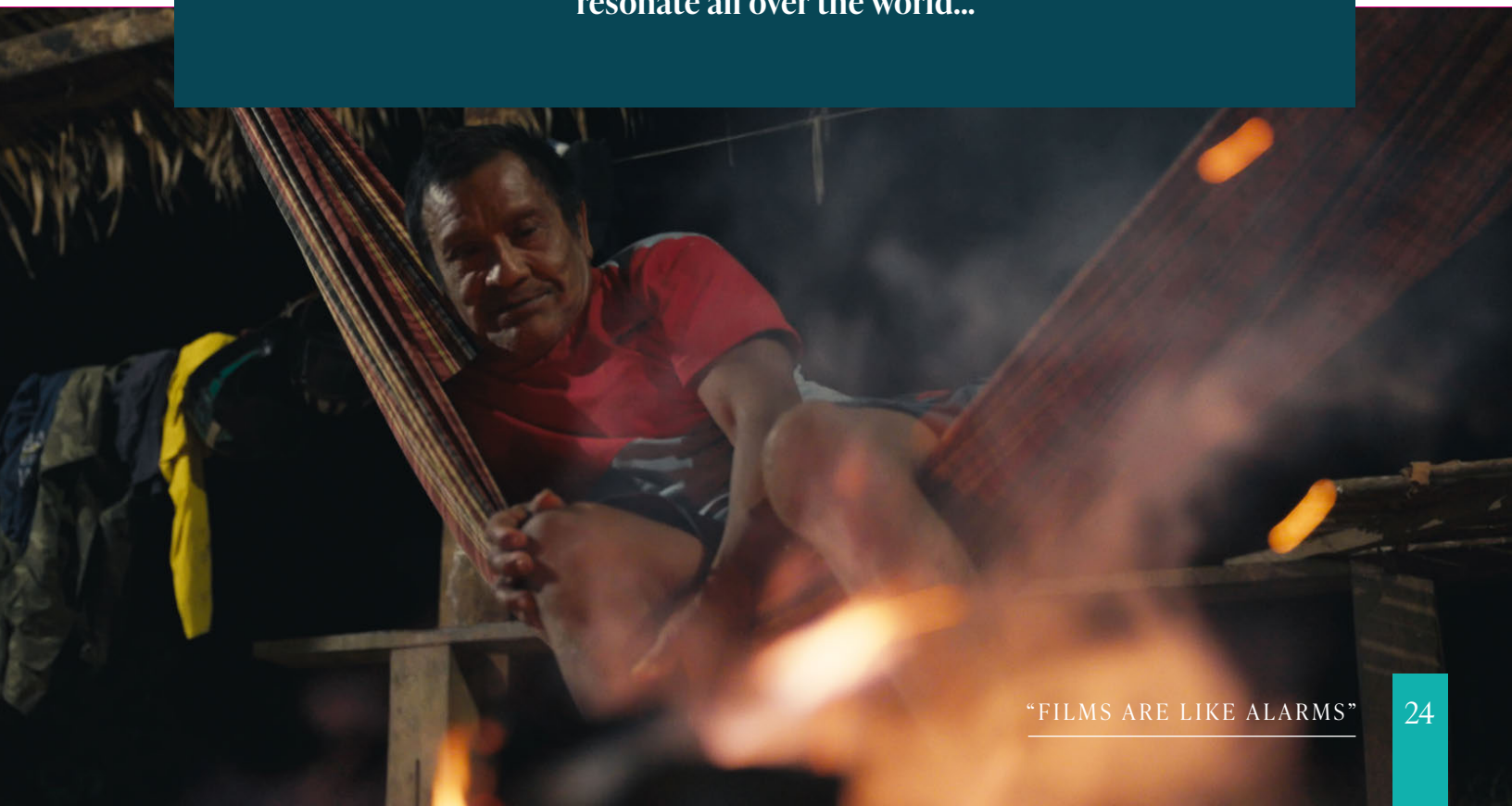
Emily Wanja (impact producer, *Thank You for the Rain*) echoes the importance of proactive impact planning. Although the team in Kenya planned major elements in fundraising and promotion, they had not fully prepared the hand-off phase of the impact campaign. She says:

"We realized that we did not have an exit plan [...] so that became the [...] main thing, which was to just work on capacity building with a community. Things like transforming their community-based organization into a cooperation, a vehicle that can access, for instance, funds or loans, things like business plans, which they were all involved in [...] so that the project can carry on even when we're not there, the rest of the team that is."

In addition, when a film becomes successful, an overwhelming number of opportunities to further the objectives of the film can emerge thick and fast. The desire to stick to a few well-chosen aims can be tested when new possibilities emerge. Will Miller (producer, *The Territory*) discusses the challenges this presents:

"We were doing legislation in the EU, advocacy and awareness raising in Brazil, we were doing directed campaigns about Ari, we were doing also similarly legislative campaigning in the U.S. on Capitol Hill, and we were also trying to work with private companies who were doing business with Brazil, pushing for supply chain due diligence type commitments. A lot of things that came up, opportunities for just visibility, Indigenous representation in different conferences and decision-making spaces...we were just running around chasing opportunities as they came. I would like to know personally, what was a waste of time? What was a good use of time?"

> "We understood that this was urgent, there was extreme injustice, there were some extraordinary heroic characters at the center of this but that it had to be captured a certain way in order to translate that into a 90-minute film that was gonna resonate all over the world..."



4

Centering community screenings

CUSTOMIZED COMMUNITY SCREENINGS THAT CONTINUE AFTER A FILM'S INITIAL RELEASE ARE THE HEART OF A FILM'S CULTURAL IMPACT, PROVIDING POWERFUL MOMENTS OF EMOTIONAL CONNECTION, RECOGNITION AND REPRESENTATION, OFFERING OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIALOGUE AND COMMUNITY BUILDING, AND CREATING KEY OPPORTUNITIES TO INFLUENCE POWERFUL AUDIENCES. IN AN ERA OF DIGITAL STREAMING, IT CAN BE EASY TO OVERLOOK THE IMPORTANCE OF THESE SMALLER-SCALE EVENTS, BUT INTERVIEWEES EMPHASIZED THAT NOTHING COULD REPLACE THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF COLLECTIVELY EXPERIENCING A FILM.

"It's a collective feeling of hope in the room that we're all together in this and we support everyone and we also do our part. There's this sentiment every time after the screening." (Alex Poblete, impact producer, *Delikado*)

Screenings mark the culmination of all those months of relationship-building, dialogue, and filming. Much has been written already about the importance of screenings for different kinds of impact, but we hope that these interviews offer additional understanding of these events as cultural inflection points–when people can see themselves represented, or be transported into worlds they have not experienced, with transformative results for people, their communities, and wider movements. These moments are particularly important in cases where stories challenge dominant ways of knowing and acting on problems of climate change. In particular, narrative appears to be capable of creating space for Indigenous knowledge and solutions, often sidelined in many kinds of decisionmaking, to count alongside, or over, dominant forms of knowledge and expertise.

Local

Interviewees described local screenings as possibly the most rewarding and cathartic moments in the lives of the films. For Christina Kisilu and Kisilu Musya, for instance, the local screening of *Thank You For the Rain* marked a turning-point in their community's attitude toward their tree-planting efforts. While the film depicts how a damaging storm opened the eyes of his neighbors to the impacts of climate change and inspired people to plant trees, Musya says the screening itself has been a far greater galvanizing force.

The *Thank You For the Rain* team screened the trailer before the release and the entire film once its international release was confirmed. According to the film's impact producer, Emily Wanja, these occasions gave the impact campaign opportunities to elicit community feedback. **"We are constantly thinking about how [...] all this feedback [...] can be a strategy of sorts for what we can do with the film,"** she says. The team also arranged a screening with local officials and other partners where the community shared their priorities for improvements, such as an earth dam for harvesting water, information on climate smart agriculture, and their desire to inform and lead on policies that affect them.

This series of events has led to improvements for the community. Christina mentions a range of impacts, from being able to send her children to school to strong new buildings and a ready water supply thanks to the dam, facilitated by the Climate Justice Resilience Fund, which means community members no longer have to travel searching for water. **"We have also grown from self help groups to cooperatives,"** she says, noting that the impact has also strengthened community bonds. Christina's chosen photographs show a visit from the county women's representative, Irene Kasalu.

CREDIT: CHRISTINA KISILU

National

While the *Delikado* team were only initially able to hold limited screenings behind closed doors in Palawan, they have held several in Manila and around the country. For protagonist Nieves Rosento, the former mayor of El Nido, the screenings in Manila gave extra cover from the threat of violence. To illustrate the impact of the film, *Delikado*'s director, Karl Malakunas selected a photograph showing Rosento receiving a standing ovation from a full house of 1,500 people in Manila. In a description, Malakunas explained how this worked:

"At this event, there were some of President Duterte's opponents in the audience, senior members of the new President Marcos's administration, officials from the Department of Environment and diplomats. Nieves (and the film's other participants) received a standing applause. There were cheers and tears. Nieves got up on stage and raised her fist and looked at the crowd in disbelief. Afterwards, the British Ambassador asked the first question in the Q+A, so everyone in the crowd knew that she supported Nieves. The ambassador then invited Nieves to the embassy and had a photo taken together that she posted on Twitter, again to show her public support for Nieves. In the Philippines, these acts were essentially a security blanket. It made it much harder for Nieves' enemies to slander her and, in the extreme, to even kill her. Nieves continues to work as a politician and grassroots environment campaigner, and I think the film has played an important role in this success."

CREDIT: BASILIO SEPE. COPYRIGHT: DELIKADO LLC.

Screenings have also accompanied greater access to important networks. For the *Delikado* team, screenings have been a way to multiply the film's reach. The impact team has held screenings with environmental organizations, which have then collaborated to hold their own community screenings (mentioned in an interview with impact producer, Alex Poblete).

And during the national gathering of Indigenous leaderships in Brasilia in 2022, *The Territory*'s impact team hosted a private screening for Indigenous leaders attending the event—the first time the film had been screened for Indigenous groups other than the Uru-eu-wau-wau community. **"It was really moving and powerful [...] to see the love and support they got back from other Indigenous peoples and big leaderships that barely had spoken to any of them before,"** says Marianna Olinger (impact producer, *The Territory*). A month after this screening, the chief of the Xingu, one of the most powerful Indigenous activists, invited Bitaté, Neidinha, and her daughter, Txai, to their meeting for the first time. Olinger adds:

"When I first visited the Uru-eu-wau-wau territory, [their vulnerability] was the first thing that hit me [...] [F]rom the capital of Rondônia to the territory is eight hours driving through cattle farms. In that sense, I think this film and campaign, this collective work [...] really made a difference to the Uru-eu-wau-wau, the way they're positioned, their visibility, and in expanding the connections they have both locally and in the world."

The Territory's international successes include a primetime Emmy and wins at the Sundance, Bergen, and Stockholm film festivals. But reaching domestic audiences has been a challenge. The film's distributor, National Geographic, restricted community screenings after a two-month window according to some interviewees, possibly due to concerns about political pushback. The impact team scrambled to hold as many screenings as they could over the two-month period. While they managed 150 community showings in Brazil, one of the team members noted regretfully that they had a "massive potential" to do many more. *The Territory* premiered at Sundance in January 2022, and although Bolsonaro left office in October that year, the restrictions on screenings have remained. According to Olinger, while the campaign has still been very influential, National Geographic's decision has limited the impact campaign's ability to build needed momentum in Brazil, where hostility toward Indigenous people is widespread. The film is available on the Disney+ streaming platform but, she argues, this cannot replace the impact of an in-person screening.

International

Given the restrictions on screenings of *The Territory* within Brazil, several interviewees involved with the film agree that its largest general audience has been international. As cinematographer Tangãi Uru-eu-wau-wau notes: **"In Brazil, there has been very little talk about *The Territory*."**

Delikado has also faced distribution struggles, which partners inside and outside the Philippines are working to overcome. For example, *Delikado* gained a Walkley award, Australia's highest award in journalism, after Documentary Australia launched an effort to gain viewership in the country. Michael Collins (editor and producer, *Delikado*) assesses the value of this alliance with global partners: **"It's bringing... attention to this story... what happens to each individual as they walk out of the room, how they're reconnecting with this issue... whether it's directly by going onto the website and supporting PNNI and donating money... or it's saying, "What can I do in my country, in my sphere of influence?"** In reference to the transnational appeal of the film's narrative, Collins adds: **"This is a very specific story about mostly Indigenous people from Palawan, the Philippines. And yet, it's being experienced all over the world. That makes us feel like we've done our job. That we've crafted a story and we've tapped into that universal connection. That gives the impact campaign potential to be everywhere."**

Thank You for the Rain's international impact campaign has focused on amplifying Kisilu's voice at events including TedGlobal and the 2017 COP23 climate negotiations in Bonn, Germany. The film's impact producer, Emily Wanja, says: **"We just took advantage of whatever climate event was happening and made sure Kisilu was there and he was the global face of the film, talking and taking questions."**

Legislative

Screenings and media attention have netted legislative gains for environmental defenders. In the case of *The Territory*, restrictions on community screenings have not prevented the Uru-eu-wau-wau community from attracting scrutiny to illegal invasions. While filming was underway, former President Jair Bolsonaro championed the destruction of the Amazon, gutting Brazil's National Indigenous People Foundation (FUNAI) and replacing its officials with his cronies. During the film, a clip plays with the head of the agency claiming that Indigenous peoples' accounts of an increase in invasions are lies. When the Uru-eu-wau-wau release footage showing them peacefully detaining a would-be invader to a national news program, local political support for land invaders dissipates.

The Uru-eu-wau-wau community's ability to document invasions means they can now produce photographic proof when they call on the local and national government to enforce laws. But the biggest transformation happened when President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was reelected in October 2022, bringing in officials willing to enforce laws that protect Indigenous land. Despite being limited in scope, screenings with policymakers, coupled with the film's awards buzz, have pushed the government to enforce the laws protecting the Uru-eu-wau-wau and their land. With the change in government, the justice minister, who saw the film, sent the army into the territory to kick out any invaders and ensure they do not return.

Producer Gabriel Uchida says:
"In the past we would die for that and it never happened before. So because of the film and because what we're doing, because of all of the media buzz and all of the connections and how our guys here got more connected, now that the federal government decided to send this national force to remain in the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau territory initially for three months, but now they have extended for three more months."

Part of *The Territory*'s impact strategy, given the challenges of releasing the film during an election year in Brazil, was to dedicate some efforts to influencing the international legislative landscape. The impact team became active in the campaign to introduce the European Deforestation-Free Products Regulation. The law requires EU-registered companies to prove agricultural products like coffee and beef have not been produced on land deforested after 2021, and that production complies with human rights, labor, and land laws. They held screenings all over Europe, hosting events in partnership with Indigenous spokespeople. The law was passed in 2023 and, according to José Kaeté, a former member of the team, four European parliamentarians said that watching *The Territory* influenced their decision to vote for it.

5
Navigating risks

FOR MANY INTERVIEWED, POLITICAL RISK POSES THE GREATEST OBSTACLE TO IMPACT. PRODUCTIONS MUST BE AWARE THAT GREATER PUBLICITY, WHILE NECESSARY TO ACHIEVE CHANGE, CAN ALSO INCREASE THE RISKS PROTAGONISTS FACE. LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FILM TEAMS, IMPACT PRODUCERS, AND PROTAGONISTS, AS WELL AS CREATIVE APPROACHES TO SCREENINGS IN HIGH-RISK AREAS MAY HELP TO MITIGATE THE DANGERS.

"I'm 64. So that's 64 years of fighting to survive in a world that views the forest as an enemy, that looks at Indigenous peoples as enemies." (Neidinha Suruí, *The Territory*)

A cultural approach to impact illustrates the interdependence of different types of change. The global rightward political turn deeply affected both Brazil and the Philippines, for instance, heightening the already considerable dangers the land defenders in *The Territory* and *Delikado* faced.

Obstacles to impact

The greatest obstacles to impact that emerged from our interviews are corruption, persecution, and threats of violence. Gabriel Uchida, one of *The Territory*'s producers, also talked about the dangers plaguing his every move in Brazil as a journalist covering the destruction of the Amazon. He says: **"It's a matter of life and death. For example… the minister said that they will remove the invaders from our territory. If it happens, they will come after me and Neidinha and Bitaté for sure, because these invaders, they know us, they know that we've been working there, they know that we've been investigating, producing reports about their cases… I'll have to leave my house for a few months and be hidden somewhere… I have fake IDs, I have 10 different SIM cards, I have three different phones, I have lots and lots of email accounts under different names. I use VPN… I cannot go to parties… I need to avoid open-air spaces… I cannot share my exact location with people. When I post silly things on my Instagram account, it's never where I am exactly. So on a personal level, it's very stressful. It is very risky. I've never seen so many guns. I've never seen so many rifles and pistols."**

Perceived risk and fear of political pushback may also have motivated the actions of *The Territory*'s distributor, National Geographic. The company was hesitant to hold screenings in Brazil—particularly in the month prior to the elections, when it forbade them, interviewees said.

At present, National Geographic will not allow community screenings unless one of the participants attends the event. As a result, people outside Brazil are currently more likely to have seen the movie than people in the country, where very few people have Disney+ subscriptions.

New research suggests that grassroots screenings have emerged as a point of tension for other films with commercial distributors. In their book, Radical Reality: Documentary Storytelling and the Global Fight for Social Justice, Caty Borum and David Conrad-Pérez (2025) find that media companies afraid to be associated with "political" engagement have blocked community screening events in "a growing number of whispered-about cases", indicating that filmmakers and funders will have to advocate for this kind of engagement if it is to continue

> "…64 YEARS OF FIGHTING TO SURVIVE IN A WORLD THAT VIEWS THE FOREST AS AN ENEMY, THAT LOOKS AT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AS ENEMIES."
>
> **—NEIDINHA SURUÍ, PROTAGONIST, *THE TERRITORY***

a distribution landscape increasingly dominated by streaming companies.

In the Philippines, the political order remains hostile to environmental defenders, who represent a threat to powerful interests intent on exploiting places like Palawan for timber, minerals, and tourism. The current governor of Palawan, the region featured in the film, is a cousin of former President Rodrigo Duterte, who put Nieves Rosento (protagonist, *Delikado*) on his infamous narco-list for her resistance to the governor's plans to increase tourism-focused development. This placed her in grave danger of being killed by Duterte sympathizers as she campaigned for reelection as mayor—a contest she lost because of vote-buying in favor of a candidate friendly to the governor. Security concerns are the most important reasons why, beyond a closed-door screening with advocates, the *Delikado* team was unable to bring the film to Palawan until August 2024, two years after its release in 2022.

Interviewees discussed the continuing threats to people featured in the documentary, threats to the impact team warning them not to screen in Palawan, and reports that the governor was monitoring any attempts to show the film. For Rosento, these obstacles represent a great sadness as she has worked against the tide since the 1990s to raise awareness locally about the threats to the forest and promote good governance. She decided to take part in the documentary because **"I really wanted [...] people in Palawan to know what is really happening,"** she says. While people are aware, she adds, they are not speaking out because of the political situation.

For protagonists suffering multiple pressures, these limits can be frustrating. Bobby Chan, the leader of PNNI, was declared persona non grata in Palawan, for instance, and his tiny organization has struggled financially. Before the Palawan screening, Chan had been disappointed that the film had not yet been shown locally, according to Anne Marie Corominas, a lawyer and former government official, who was inspired to work with Chan after watching *Delikado*. Chan had stopped talking directly with the film team. Both Corominas and director Karl Malakunas separately said that they wished the production and participants had made written agreements beyond initial filming releases, creating a shared understanding of what to expect during the film's release and impact campaign. Such agreements could include how the campaign plans to navigate dangerous situations, for instance. Fortunately, there is scope for relationships and arrangements to develop long after the film's release. Malakunas re-established direct contact with Chan in 2025 and gave him a copy of the film to use in screenings with local communities.

The case of *Delikado* shows how important changes can occur in the years after a film is released, especially when the political landscape starts to shift. The film team and its impact partners, Dakila and Active Vista are working with local NGOs to support women land defenders across the Philippines, holding a packed screening and panel. The Film Development Council of the Philippines, a branch of the Office of the President, has asked to show *Delikado* as part of a documentary festival in cities across the Philippines, an endorsement which may also help efforts to show the film throughout Palawan. Environmentalists in Palawan, including PNNI and *Delikado*'s impact partners, secured a 50-year moratorium on mining—a development Rosento played a key role in as a provincial board member.

"The case of Delikado shows how important changes can occur in the years after a film is released, especially when the political landscape starts to shift."

6

Reaping the benefits

PROTAGONISTS ALSO EXPERIENCED MANY POSITIVE CHANGES FOLLOWING THE RELEASE OF THE FILMS AND IMPACT ACTIVITIES, SUCH AS GREATER PROTECTION AGAINST THREATS, INCREASED COMMUNITY BUY-IN TO THEIR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION EFFORTS, AND GREATER FINANCIAL SECURITY.

"It really struck me, because I never thought it possible, it never crossed my mind that I would win [an activist film award in Amsterdam]. Winning was a reflection of the importance of the film, how big it was for the rest of the world. Because how could an unknown woman from the middle of the forest win?" (Neidinha Suruí, protagonist, *The Territory*)

Despite the difficulties each campaign faces, interviewees credit the films with achieving significant improvements for the activists and their communities.

Accountability

All three films have, in different ways, created opportunities for the activists to hold figures in authority accountable. The release of *Thank You For the Rain* brought attention from local and national officials to the needs of Christina and Kisilu's community. Kisilu reflects that through the attention films garner and the storytelling they employ to draw in the viewer, films are powerful advocacy tools acting like "alarms" that highlight weaknesses in communities. **"It is like they are waking people up. They are opening our eyes, we, the community. They are speeding up our governments and waking them up also," he says. "After the screening, the government tries to come down quickly and do some repair."** Local improvements as a result include a new dam that has secured a water source for the community where previously people had to search for hours for water each day.

Filmmaking has created new avenues for Indigenous people in Brazil to highlight invasions, too. During *The Territory*, Bitaté Uru-eu-wau-wau recounts that in the past, officials and the media did not believe his community when they raised the alarm about invasions. Even in the years just before filming started, Tangãi Uru-eu-wau-wau says appeals to authorities were producing no results. But the ability to create and disseminate photographic evidence means the community now has proof when they demand protection.

Existing laws already protect Indigenous communities and their land, but the team's decision to release footage to the news while the film was still in production and its subsequent high-profile release have ensured greater protections, even in Rondônia where the Uru-eu-wau-wau live, a conservative state where destruction of the rainforest is normalized and enforcement is lax. **"Where they live is an incredibly right-wing Bolsonarista state, and so the state legislature is still very antagonistic to them,"** says Will Miller (producer, *The Territory*). For Miller, real change would include "a more effective protection management plan for their territory [and others], and for police showing up when they call [...] and accountability for people who get caught committing

"WINNING WAS A REFLECTION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FILM, HOW BIG IT WAS FOR THE REST OF THE WORLD. BECAUSE HOW COULD AN UNKNOWN WOMAN FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE FOREST WIN?"

—NEIDINHA SURUÍ, PROTAGONIST, *THE TERRITORY*

environmental crimes or crimes against Indigenous people," he says, adding that there has been real progress in these areas.

Anne Marie Corominas (legal representative, PNNI) echoed this desire for institutional change, ending the burden on Indigenous people of having to perform the role of the government institutions supposedly charged with protecting them. **"The government should be enforcing the laws and regulations to protect the environment and the communities,"** she says. In the case of the state of Palawan, where the people featured in *Delikado* live, governor Victorino Socrates's hold on state politics makes it much harder for the film to call for local government accountability of this sort due to the dangers it might entail for the film's protagonists. According to impact producer, Alex Poblete, *Delikado*'s impact team has focused instead on the passing and implementation of the Human Rights Defenders Protection Act (Chi, 2023) at the national level, which aims to end extra-judicial killings of activists and human rights defenders. But accountability can also be invoked at an individual level inside and outside the Philippines. Michael Collins and Marty Syjuco (producers, *Delikado*) both discussed the importance of raising awareness among tourists about the human rights abuses occurring in Palawan. Both Syjuco and Collins had visited the region as tourists. **"We had oohed and aahed about the beauty [and had no idea] the land was being pillaged and Indigenous people were being thrown out of their homes,"** Syjuco says.

Collins adds that he hopes the film can be a wake-up call: **"[Audiences] might look at Tata and Bobby and Nieves on screen, and some seed is kind of planted inside of them that makes them think, 'When I move through the world, what am I doing? [...].How can I apply that to my own life?" And it's gonna be different if these are people who are now in the Philippines and they're like, "Wow, this is happening in Palawan, which I was planning to go to for the holidays. Now I'm gonna rethink that. Now I'm gonna be more active."**

Co-creation practices have also bolstered accountability, both in terms of the films' impact and in the relationship between the film teams and people featured. In the case of *The Territory*, the whole team decided to release footage of an Uru-eu-wau-wau patrol arresting an invader before the film was released. Given that the film's release was still a long way off, the team decided to opt for the most immediate impact and incorporate the news clip into the film, which became part of the plot—what Will Miller (producer, *The Territory*) calls a "meta-narrative" around the Uru-eu-wau-wau community's advocacy.

Personal impacts

While large scale impacts such as increasing broad awareness, acquiring sources of funding for a cause, and inspiring behavioral change are worthy measures to consider in an impact assessment, the impacts measured at the personal level–the effects on those who filmed, starred in, and produced the films–can sometimes be the most immediate or have the clearest cause and effect relationship. And, when considering documentary ethics and harm reduction, it is vital to determine what observable or even measurable good was done for the participants who opened their lives to the camera.

For the families of the activists who risk their lives, spend time away from home, and even choose protecting the environment over time that could otherwise be spent earning money, the films serve as a record of why these sacrifices are worth it. At a screening in the Philippines, Marty Syjuco (producer, *Delikado*) recalls an emotional testimonial (see Drilon, 2022) by the daughter of Tata, one of the land defenders (paraphrased from Syjuco's memory):

"I grew up missing you and resenting you, and I felt like I was missing out on...my childhood and my time with you...but now I realize what you were doing, and what you were doing was bigger than me or our family. I understand now, Dad. I understand. And I, I get it... I thank you and I love you." In his own words, Syjuco adds, **"I swear... everybody in there was just bawling ... the tears... it was just so emotional and so raw. She only knew that because she had finally watched her dad's story and journey on the big screen."**

Also in the Philippines, Nieves Rosento (protagonist, *Delikado*) benefited from the filming and release of *Delikado* by finally being able to bring light to her platform and the personal threats against her life after being shunned by local media outlets. The presence of the film crew also added to her security during a potentially dangerous campaign, when every public appearance meant an opportunity for an attack, according to Karl Malakunas (director, *Delikado*):

"Nieves... she's been a long time environmental campaigner, she was a politician who was facing these death threats. And I believe that she welcomed us in to film it because again, no other reporter in the Philippines was going to touch absolute poison. And she was trying to get a message out. And also, she was, I think, aware that having a couple of foreigners following her around was almost a form of security, and

particularly on the campaign trail, in that month leading up to the election. I think she was very happy to have a couple of foreigners with her. I think it lowered the chances of her being shot."

Rosento herself points to how the film's existence as a record of her work bolsters her morale when hope feels elusive. **"[It] gives me more assurance [...] having more assurance of even that you are just only a few who are fighting for ... the future, about environment [...] some people would really appreciate it, and some people would know what you are fighting for."** According to Malakunas, the team are now seeking partners to support the next and most difficult phase of the film's impact campaign. The team plans to hold screenings across Palawan ahead of local elections in May 2025, when Rosento will again run for office.

And Alex Poblete (impact producer, *Delikado*) emphasizes the impact that merely watching the film, let alone working on it as an impact producer, had on her sense of personal responsibility in the climate crisis. She says:

"[S]ince we're handling the film, [...] I think it just became a real consciousness of how far we actually already destroyed our environment. And sometimes it's just like, how did we let it pass?... It kind of makes you feel that there are these people who are willing to do or go this far to defend their environment and sometimes you just feel ashamed that, what have you been doing?"

José Kaeté (former impact producer, *The Territory*) reiterates the idea of the film serving as a reminder of the reasons why he fights for Indigenous rights and the environment, and explains how the existence of the footage eases the fatigue he feels both in relation to the scale of the climate crisis and of having to explain Indigenous perspectives to non-Indigenous audiences. He says:

"I cry every time I watch the movie because it really touched me a lot [...] it always brings me back to why I exist [...] because sometimes I get lost and when I watch the movie I'm like, "Yes, that's why I'm here. I'm here to fight for this, I'm here to work on this." So it always keeps me grounded and sometimes saves energy when I have to discuss the problems about the Amazon. I just tell people: 'Watch this documentary and then we can talk about the reality.'"

Thank You For the Rain documented the steep odds video diarists Kisilu Musya and Christina Kisilu navigated to champion local tree planting and sustain their family and farm in an increasingly uncertain climate when rains come too much or not at all. When asked about how the film has most impacted their family, Christina Kisilu offered: **"The film has done a lot. It has brought a lot of developments concerning our lifestyle,"** adding with a laugh, **"because it has changed from zero."** Kisilu Musya spoke in more detail about the lifestyle changes, supported by the money raised from the film's website, along with the knowledge he gained from connecting with other climate-focused individuals around the world, such as at COP21. The extra income meant he was able to replace the roof on his home, which was blown off in a storm, the couple could send their children to school, and the family has greater food security. According to Musya, the photograph of his home he chose to express the impact of the film shows that he and his family are no longer reliant on one form of income or food: **"I have many ways also to support my family going on," he says. "It's a matter of looking back to see how fast I can move towards improving my life [...]. The film reminds me where I was [so] that I can continue working hard."** In addition to essential financial improvements, the filming process and impact campaigns have created connections at the local, national and international scales.

"I cry every time I watch the movie because it really touched me a lot [...] it always brings me back to why I exist."

7

Building momentum

THE DOCUMENTARIES AND THEIR IMPACT CAMPAIGNS CREATED ENDURING CONNECTIONS THAT INCREASED ACTIVISTS' INFLUENCE IN GOVERNMENTAL, NATIONAL AND GLOBAL NETWORKS WELL BEYOND THE PRODUCTION TEAM'S INITIAL GOALS FOR OUTREACH AND SUSTAINABLE IMPACT. MANY OF THESE BENEFITS OCCURRED FOLLOWING THE FILMS' RELEASE AS A RESULT OF ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES.

"There were people from all over the world...people from Palestine, people from Israel, people from Iraq, people who were immigrants in the United States... They watched the film and said to me: "Wow, your story is our story, it's our struggle. Your movie is our struggle in places other than the Amazon." (Neidinha Suruí, protagonist, *The Territory*)

A common theme in the "before" of these film stories is a sense of working alone and under-resourced, feeling like they were the only ones, or were unable to access other more powerful groups. The films have helped to create empowering local, national, and international connections for all three groups, as well as others working to defend their environment elsewhere. The films' impact campaigns have helped to provide longer-lasting connections and civic infrastructure to help sustain the movements the activists have built.

This has happened in the form of new relationships with larger NGOs and connections with other important organizations. For example, the Climate Reality Project in the Philippines has held community screenings of *Delikado* (see Sario, 2022), while the Uru-eu-wau-wau people have now been invited to important meetings of Indigenous peoples from across Brazil. The groups built coalitions that connect with in-country organizations as well as international NGOs with a range of goals such as screenings, legislative change, and raising activists' profiles (See Appendix I: Network Analysis). For instance, *The Territory*'s impact team worked with WWF and other large environmental groups to promote the European Deforestation-Free Products Regulation.

At the same time, there remain concerns that support can disappear, such as when projects and grants end, illustrating the need for long-term planning. Tangãi Uru-eu-wau-wau (cinematographer, *The Territory*) says: **"We've gotten help; people are on our side [...]. But we don't feel very safe, because over time things go away, right? So, I think the more people we have helping us, the longer we will be able to work."**

Screenings can also help create connections for other groups working in related areas. For example, the *Delikado* team arranged a screening for Indigenous land defenders in Sabah in North Borneo, which the film's director, Karl Malakunas, participated in over Zoom. The screening helped the defenders see there were others working toward the same goal close by. Malakunas says: **"Part of the impact is that they were saying, 'We had no idea we were fighting the same battles'."**

"THERE WERE PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD...PEOPLE FROM PALESTINE, PEOPLE FROM ISRAEL, PEOPLE FROM IRAQ, PEOPLE WHO WERE IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES ...THEY WATCHED THE FILM AND SAID TO ME: "WOW, YOUR STORY IS OUR STORY, IT'S OUR STRUGGLE. YOUR MOVIE IS OUR STRUGGLE IN PLACES OTHER THAN THE AMAZON."

—NEIDINHA SURUÍ, PROTAGONIST, *THE TERRITORY*

In Appendix I, we share a sample of the networks that protagonists, impact campaigners, and film teams created in relation to different pieces of their campaign. The list of organizations is illustrative, but shows how films can create connections with local, national, and international organizations for a range of different purposes. These include the *Delikado* team's alliances with environmental organizations that allowed for a long-awaited screening in Palawan; the work of those involved with *The Territory* alongside international environmental organizations to pass the European Deforestation-Free Products Regulation, which restricts trade in commodities taken from forests; and the network of organizations that has facilitated Kisilu Musya's international advocacy and funded improvements to his village.

Building trust

The filming process also creates long-term connections between collaborators. Outside filmmakers built trusting relationships with the communities they worked with. In the case of Karl Malakunas (director, *Delikado*), that happened when he agreed to go into the forest with the PNNI land defenders to document the confiscation of a chainsaw. Previously, journalists had contacted PNNI's leader, Bobby Chan, but none had been willing to go out into the forest with the group. **"After that first confiscation, there was this incredible outpouring of emotion and this feeling [...] that how come we are doing this, and no one knows about it, and we don't even really want to be doing this—it just needs to be stopped," he says. "And they felt that my presence and the reporting would help that."** Palawan's former mayor Nieves Rosento also says the team's "empathy and concern" during and after filming meant she felt "really confident."

For *Thank You For the Rain*'s video diarists, Christina Kisilu and Kisilu Musya, the fact that director Julia Dahr lived with them for a month and, at their request, left them with a camera to document their lives meant they built a friendship and felt willing to take part in the film. The process of building trust can lead to important changes for the better: Living with the family also led to Dahr's realization that they should be co-producers with rights to revenues and creative input into the film.

Building trust can also involve introducing communities to the filmmaking process and asking them to take part.

For Alex Pritz (director, *The Territory*), the goal was not to promise future gains at the expense of the Uru-eu-wau-waus' current comfort, trusting outsiders and an unfamiliar medium. Many of the elders in the community had not seen a film before. So Pritz and his colleagues brought cameras and encouraged them to film to see what it felt like to be the ones asking questions as part of a consent process where people could feel they could fully grasp what was being asked of them.

8

Ripples of impact

DOCUMENTARIES CREATE RIPPLES OF IMPACT THAT EXTEND FAR BEYOND PRODUCTIONS' INITIAL EXPECTATIONS, SO INTERVIEWEES FOUND THEY HAD TO BE PREPARED TO PRIORITIZE AND RESPOND TO OPPORTUNITIES AS THEY ARISE.

"There were other films coming out with similar subjects, so at that moment, I felt like we were one more drop in this ocean. But our little drop kind of made ripples. And some of these ripples are still reverberating." (Marianna Olinger, impact producer, *The Territory*)

Documentaries carry the potential to produce dynamic, continuing, impacts long after the final version is cut. Various impacts from these three films far exceeded the initial aspirations of their production teams or arose in surprising ways.

Platforms for leaders

A few of the films' protagonists have risen rapidly to a new level of prominence. A regular visitor to local schools, Kisilu Musya (video diarist, *Thank You For the Rain*) now has the nickname "climate change" among the children. He travels and delivers screenings at home and abroad as part of his effort to develop a multi-scaled climate movement—one where people can "join hands" all over the world. As depicted in the film, Musya has spoken at COP21 alongside world leaders and experts on the climate crisis and was invited back to speak at COP23. Impact producer Emily Wanja also highlights how the networking opportunities from the film and Musya's recognition as a climate leader meant the film team was invited to take part in Doc Society's Climate Story Labs in 2021 and 2022. This opportunity convenes stakeholders in **"candid conversations [about] the climate justice narrative in Africa," according to Wanja, asking questions, such as "what are the stories we need to be telling? Do we have the right representation? If not, why?"**

Recognition of *Delikado* protagonist Bobby Chan's bravery and commitment to protecting Palawan's forests has extended beyond his home shores, too. He is one of nine climate leaders selected for Earth Company (a Japanese NGO)'s Impact Heroes of the Year award for 2024. In addition to a fresh wave of publicity, Earth Company will support Chan for three years with business development, leadership coaching, fundraising and more, all of which can boost his work leading PNNI in the wake of *Delikado*'s release.

The impact team working on *The Territory* has worked hard to ensure that Uru-eu-wau-wau leaders are recognized in mainstream media with the goal of reaching outside the "bubble" of audiences already interested in the story. As a result, Indigenous activist and executive producer Txai Suruí has been featured on the covers of *Elle Spain* and *Vogue Brazil*. Both Suruí and Bitaté Uru-eu-wau-wau (Indigenous activist and coordinator of the Jupaú Association) have been recognized by *Time Magazine*, with Bitaté Uru-eu-wau-wau penning an article about his nation and Suruí earning a spot on the Time100 Next 2023 list of important figures to look out for. Bitaté is also a Rainforest Journalism Fund grantee and has worked since 2020 with the "Young Citizens of the Amazon" blog. Impact producer Gabriel Uchida proudly reflects:

"I remember two, three years ago, no one knew [Txai]. And nowadays, it's impossible to talk to her. Even her mother and her brother, they cannot talk to her because she's always flying around, going to meetings, and speeches, and talks from one country to another with presidents, prime ministers and everything else, spreading the world, talking about how important it is to try to tackle climate change."

"THERE WERE OTHER FILMS COMING OUT WITH SIMILAR SUBJECTS, SO AT THAT MOMENT, I FELT LIKE WE WERE ONE MORE DROP IN THIS OCEAN. BUT OUR LITTLE DROP KIND OF MADE RIPPLES. AND SOME OF THESE RIPPLES ARE STILL REVERBERATING."

—MARIANNA OLINGER, IMPACT PRODUCER, *THE TERRITORY*

Creating a lasting afterlife

Also in Brazil, *The Territory*'s impact team has worked to open a new multimedia production center so that Indigenous filmmakers may continue taking what they learned from their work on the film and apply it to future media ventures. The center hosts a podcast studio, equipment storage rooms, and a screening room to facilitate more post-viewing discussions. Producer Gabriel Uchida adds that the wood used to build the center was reclaimed from illegal logging in the Amazon and that an all-female team of architects led the construction. Director Alex Pritz remarks, **"[The center will] be a meeting hub for several different Indigenous communities in the area to be able to come together and plan their own activities, share knowledge, and strengthen their local Indigenous associations."**

And these films may expand beyond climate as the topic of focus. The documentary filmmaking process has opened the door for members of the Uru-eu-wau-wau to consider which stories have yet to be told and ought to be put to film. Tangãi Uru-eu-wau-wau muses: **"In the future, who knows, we could put together a film team, of just Indigenous people, and be able to do our own [productions] that include evening cultural activities, cultural dances in the day-to-day life of Indigenous peoples."**

The *Delikado* team, meanwhile, has partnered with International Media Support to educate young journalists in the region. According to Malakunas, the partnership has led to a screening and workshop in Jakarta for journalists from Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, as well as a screening in Chiang Mai for exiled Myanmar journalists.

Sometimes, other groups and individuals take inspiration from the film into their own hands. Passersby in São Paulo now witness the impact of *The Territory* through a mural depicting Ari Uru-eu-wau-wau, an activist killed during the film's production and whose death and the community's reaction to it feature prominently in the film. Producer Will Miller, who chose the mural for his photovoice contribution, recounts the screening where a local street artist felt so stirred by Ari's death that he needed to confront his pain through painting. The whole team joined the effort. Miller reflects:

"We found the money and he found the wall and the paint...now there's this beautiful thing that we did together... That to me is kind of how I imagine the impact happening organically ... And it's going to be there long after the film sort of "buzz" dies down. It kind of outlives the cycle of a film's release. It's more about bringing it back to what this was all about in the first place, which was these are real people, these are real stories. But on that mural, if you look at the top, there's a lot of names that are also along the side of his face. So he gets to stand in as an icon and a face for hundreds of people who've come before him and who had the same thing happen."

"

"In the future, who knows, we could put together a film team, of just Indigenous people, and be able to do our own [productions] that include evening cultural activities, cultural dances in the day-to-day life of Indigenous peoples."

CREDIT: GABRIEL UCHIDA
DESCIPTION: A MURAL BY ARTIST THIAGO MUNDANO IN DOWNTOWN SÃO PAULO. MADE OF PAINT CONTAINING EARTH AND ASHES FROM BRAZILIAN FORESTS, IT DEPICTS ARI-EU-WAU-WAU, A FOREST DEFENDER MURDERED DURING THE FILMING OF *THE TERRITORY*. MUNDANO WAS INSPIRED TO PAINT IT AFTER WATCHING A SCREENING OF THE FILM.

From one film to many

Neidinha Suruí jokes that, since the release of *The Territory*, **"I have a big problem because everyone wants to make a film with me. And I say, 'Look, it doesn't work like that, you can make your own film.'"** But Suruí is grateful for the momentum the film has brought to her community, also sharing that her daughter, Txai, was able to create the Indigenous Youth Movement of Rondônia because of the film, uniting young people in her state. Not only will Indigenous filmmakers from the Uru-eu-wau-wau champion the cause of continued environmental and cultural filmmaking but so will other Indigenous groups from around the world. Tangãi Uru-eu-wau-wau mentions meeting another filmmaker from Paraguay who had seen *The Territory* and felt compelled after watching the film to attempt documenting similar experiences in his own territory. *Thank You For the Rain*'s legacy is intergenerational. Kisilu and Christina's daughter, Grace, has followed in her parents' footsteps as a climate leader. She collaborated with Differ media and directors Dina Mwende and Julia Dahr (Dahr also directed *Thank You For the Rain*) on a short film, *With Grace* (Mwende and Dahr, 2024), about young children on the front lines of climate change.

Nieves Rosento (protagonist, *Delikado*) greeted us with a warm smile. Despite the many demands on her attention, and the threats against her life, she focused intently on our conversation and spoke with great humor, emotion, and vulnerability. Near the end of the call, interviewer Jessica Newell expressed admiration for Rosento's work, applauding her bravery in defending El Nido, Palawan. The tone shifted and we sat together in an emotional silence. The conversation resumed as she apologized for taking a moment to collect herself and thanked Jessica for her words. It felt like a moment to sit with others' gratitude for her sacrifices.

Conclusions and Key Opportunities

Environmental destruction, political persecution, and the unpredictability of the climate crisis mean an ever more precarious world for the environmental campaigners and defenders featured in the three films we discuss here.

They are the environment's first line of defense, yet Indigenous people's knowledge and expertise are often undervalued dominant, Western-based cultures. The documentaries Kisilu Musya and Christina Kisilu, the Uru-eu-wau-wau community, and PNNI and Nieves Rosento contributed to create opportunities to circumvent this status quo by increasing their visibility, resources, and power locally, nationally, and on the international stage. In the following paragraphs, we discuss what we and our interviewees have highlighted as important opportunities to support people who contribute to documentaries and ensure that their impacts are beneficial and long-lasting.

1) Traditional industry standards of measuring impact have centered around audience numbers and the priorities of the filmmakers (Borum et al., 2024a). But, instead, **interviewees prioritized social and cultural impacts,** suggesting an expanded definition of success. These included goals for community consultation, measuring awareness among key groups, the potential to support legislative changes, and investigating different types of long-term support for those who are featured in the film.

We take cultural influence to mean the many ways in which documentaries and their impact campaigns, over their lifetimes, can change people and communities at different scales, creating new connections, elevating narratives, and inspiring ripples of impact. Stories, relationships, and attitudes collectively influence our reality–how we see the world, how resources are distributed, how we govern ourselves, how we interact with our neighbors in our community and around the planet. Documentaries deliver stories that shape attitudes, overcome resistance and prejudice, and elevate marginalized or lesser-known worldviews. From the telling of these stories, relationships develop that bridge the divide between nations and cultural groups. Documentary impact campaigns that identify the opportunities presented by this ecosystem have the greatest capacity to achieve their goals.

2) The experiences of the individuals involved in these films highlight the benefits of talking to protagonists about what they can expect over the life of the film, from production to impact campaign. **Early agreements between filmmakers and protagonists, revisited to reflect changes, enhance consent, increase transparency, and may help to manage expectations.** The documentary community, from funders to incubators, has an opportunity to work with communities and filmmakers to promote best practices in creating equitable agreements that can also include discussions about impact campaigns and plans for earnings.

A thorough set of agreements that cover filming, the release of the film, and the impact campaign have the potential to make the documentary process more transparent and equitable. These should reflect community priorities and could cover aspects such as community screenings, how the impact campaign will fundraise for relevant people and organizations, how rights will be distributed, how the campaign will speak to key audiences, potential risks and how to navigate them, and how the campaign will share new contacts. These understandings would help ensure the film team is aware of the main objectives, expectations and hopes that the participants have for the film, and serve as a formal agreement through which the filmmaker can bring such understandings to any funder and distributor as a priority and part of a duty of care that applies to all involved in the film.

3) Co-creation practices can take different forms but have the potential to foster richer stories and more equitable relationships. The filming process changes protagonists and their communities in profound ways. Collaboration helped film teams tell more nuanced stories that foster a sense of self esteem and pride among protagonists and their communities. Co-creation practices can help make filming less extractive, ensuring documentaries add more to communities than they take away. For instance, some protagonists are now filmmakers themselves with the tools and resources to tell their stories on their own terms and nurture new generations of journalists, documentarians, and artists.

In all three films, elements of co-creation paved the way for more equitable relationships, feelings of pride in the story, and solid foundations for sustained impact through increased resources, skills and equipment to tell their own stories, and increased protection from threats. *The Territory*'s coproduction agreement was the most formal of the three: Uru-eu-wau-wau cinematographers received payment, equipment, and training, and the impact campaign has helped to sustain an intergenerational movement producing Indigenous-led media. In *Thank You for the Rain*, Kisilu and Christina's roles as video diarists also created a more complete story told through their eyes as well as those of the director, Julia Dahr. The shared narrative created a film that was compelling to the Musyas' local community, to the extent that seeing themselves represented at the screening galvanized them to further protect their community through nature-based climate adaptations. Finally, *Delikado* director Karl Malakunas' commitment to documenting the struggles of the forest defenders in Palawan alongside them inspired their trust, while a cooperative editing process meant Nieves, Tata, Bobby and others could ensure the story reflected their experiences and that any footage that might compromise their safety would be left out.

We want to note that when protagonists were paid, it was not for appearing in front of the camera. In the case of the Uru-eu-wau-wau community, Indigenous cinematographers received payment during the course of the production for filming and producing. Neither the *Delikado* nor the *Thank You For the Rain* productions paid their participants for appearing. This indicates that even in the cases of participatory productions, filmmakers tend to maintain norms of nonpayment for people who appear. People agree to appear in documentaries for a host of reasons, of which financial benefits may be low down the list. However, we suggest that discussion interrogating how communities benefit and how this could best be achieved would be beneficial.

4) To increase films' capacity to achieve protagonists' goals and take advantage of new opportunities, the documentary community has the opportunity to

evolving best practices centering care support impact campaigns that build on for featured people. These might include toolkits for agreements with protagonists, guidelines for proactive discussions about impact, and resources for making films available in local languages.

Given that simply starting to film changes communities, planning impact expectations and activities from the film's inception pays dividends, maximizing positive outcomes through the entire process. When a production team is mindful of a few focused goals and has the backing of their distributor, impact producers are in a much better position to do their jobs effectively. Each team created unique impact approaches based on the priorities and visions of the different communities, as well as the obstacles each had to navigate. We also found that these approaches adapted to the unique political realities of each location. For example, in *The Territory*, the Uru-eu-wau-waus' desire to be seen and understood and to fight prejudice that compounded their vulnerability shaped the film's narrative and the thrust of the impact campaign. Getting Txai Suruí (impact producer, *The Territory*) on the cover of Brazilian *Vogue* where she would reach a new audience outside the "bubble" of people already concerned about Indigenous rights and the campaign's insistence on having an Indigenous representative at each screening around the world addressed these major goals. When political tensions in Brazil meant the film's distributor was wary of holding screenings, the impact team focused instead on international campaigns, such as the European deforestation law.

In the case of *Delikado*, meanwhile, the focus has been to raise awareness around the country and abroad about the costs of tourism in Palawan. These goals are complicated by the continuing threats individuals like Bobby Chan, Nieves Rosento, and Tata face. Partnering with sympathetic organizations like Climate Reality in the Philippines has given the impact team access to a well-resourced network that also provides political cover for the forest defenders and, ultimately, allowed them to hold a screening in Palawan with appropriate safety provisions. Before and after the release of *Thank You For the Rain*, the community-focused impact campaign has increased local people's investment in nature-based responses to climate change as they experience significant changes such as an earth dam that makes water more accessible—a life-changing improvement for people used to walking for hours to find water.

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5) According to our interviewees, distributors and funders should prioritize community screenings where possible. Individuals we spoke to said screenings are powerful catalysts for community impacts that include legislative change, community cohesion, and increased awareness of historically marginalized stories. Greater support for screenings, including in high-risk areas, such as resources for security, would help to support these goals. Everyone in the documentary community knows that screenings are an important part of the life of a film. But the variety of work that screenings do, and the effectiveness with which they do it, may still surprise some readers. According to all interviewees, screenings are profound moments of recognition and pride for protagonists and their communities, which can also generate new momentum for the causes the films portray. In the case of *Thank You For the Rain*, for instance, community screenings of the film and trailer led to far greater support for Kisilu and Christina's work to increase tree cover. Consultation as a result of the screenings allowed the impact team to gauge community priorities, and the visibility the screenings granted pushed decisionmakers to improve locals' access to water. Where screenings may be risky for various reasons, such as with the communities surrounding the Uru-eu-wau-wau who would potentially be hostile to Indigenous people putting on a showing, or in Palawan where Nieves, Tata, Bobby, and other members of PNNI are in great danger, there are opportunities for funders and distributors to provide greater security and support, or to research alternatives such as online access for people to see films at home. The nature of a distribution deal will have important effects on impact teams' freedom to execute their strategies: In the case of *The Territory*, community screenings have had the same profound effects for those who have seen it. Yet, the continued limits on community-based screenings has limited the film's reach in a country where few people subscribe to Disney+.

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6) Documentaries can create positive impacts in the lives of the people they feature, but there may also be risks. **Careful, considered, and prolonged engagement that continues even after filmmakers move on to new projects can help featured people to feel safer and more supported.** Impact campaigns have their own lives after a film is released during which many opportunities emerge. Several interviewees, including directors, impact producers, and protagonists, felt there were fewer resources for this phase, however. This made it harder for filmmakers to move on to new projects because they did not want to leave protagonists unsupported. Some suggested that greater support for impact campaigns may include investing in impact producers and building in models of impact financing that are not tied to filmmakers.

Visibility is a two-sided coin that brings awareness and resources to people who need them most but also intensifies the daily lives of those featured in the film, displaying their vulnerabilities and creating frenzied interest and support for them that could vanish just as any media phenomenon risks fizzling out. Building infrastructure that promotes longevity, along with building strong relationships, is important so that production teams may hand off impact maintenance to the local communities and leave intentionally without the departure feeling like an abrupt abandonment. Multiple protagonists praised the long-term commitment of the outside filmmakers. Some interviewees saw it as an antidote to the extractivist relationships they usually associated with collaborating with white, Western outsiders.

Parting words: Doing our part

"How can the global community, surely, be reached 100% to understand that the coming generation needs at least a decent climate? And then, the decent climate will come as a result of our joining hands? How will this be spread to everybody, globally? Last question. Very soon, very soon, very soon, I may disappear from this globe, automatically. Let's say, after 100 years, nobody will be calling Kisilu Musya. I'm aware. Can we as well prepare other climate activists from all coming generations, so that we can sustain the fight for climate change?"

(KISILU MUSYA, VIDEO DIARIST, *THANK YOU FOR THE RAIN*)

"I like the shot of the little ants walking with the leaves because for me, they're the little butterfly ants, something similar to what we are, right? And that's our essence, that's us. Little beings carrying on their backs a great responsibility to try to preserve the planet, so that the planet doesn't destroy itself, so that human beings don't destroy themselves."

(NEIDINHA SURUÍ, PROTAGONIST, *THE TERRITORY*)

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Appendix I: Network Analysis

The Territory: Passing the European Deforestation-Free Products Regulation

Global Witness

Global Witness is one of the 210 NGOs taking part in the #Together4Forests. The Territory's impact team arranged advocacy screenings and panels in support of #Together 4 Forests' campaign to ban deforestation-linked products in Europe.

ClientEarth

Client Earth collaborated with impact consultants Think-Film and distributor National Geographic Brussels to hold a screening of The Territory *for European parliamentarians promoting the European Deforestation-Free Products Regulation.*

WWF

World Wildlife Fund leads the #Together4Forests campaign to ban deforestation-linked products in Europe.

Think-Film
impact production

Think-Film was Client Earth and National Geographic Brussels' partner on an impact screening for 500 key policymakers and stakeholders—as well as meetings between protagonist Kuaimbu Uru-eu-wau-wau and three MEPs—the week before the 2022 European Parliament vote on the anti-deforestation bill. Think-Film also held a private screening of The Territory *for the EU Environmental Council before the legislative debate on the bill.*

Delikado: Screenings in Palawan

DAKILA AND THE ACTIVE VISTA CENTER

Dakila, or the Philippine Collective for Modern Heroism, which campaigns for artists at risk, and the Active Vista Center, which facilitates social impact film outreach in the Philippines, collaborated with other impact partners to bring screenings of Delikado *to Palawan.*

WEDEFEND NETWORK

WeDefend Network formed a network of organizations to create "Project Makiling," which supports women land defenders. The final phase of the project was a screening of Delikado *and training for land defenders in Palawan (Adobo magazine, 2024).*

ENVIRONMENTAL LEGAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

ENVIRONMENTAL LEGAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

The Environmental Legal Assistance Center (ELAC) is an environmental nonprofit which supports environmental defenders in the Philippines. ELAC held a micro-screening of Delikado with its members and helped to facilitate screenings in Palawan. ELAC is also part of Project Makiling, which supports women land defenders.

STORYBOARD COLLECTIVE

Storyboard Collective, an international organization which promotes storytelling for social change, awarded a small grant to fund the Palawan screening of Delikado.

ROBINSONS PALAWAN, PUERTO PRINCESA

Robinsons Palawan Cinema in Puerto Princesa was the venue for the 2024 Palawan screening of Delikado.

Thank You For the Rain: Kisilu Musya's international advocacy and building a dam in the Musyas' village

TEDGLOBAL

TedGlobal hosted Kisilu to speak at its Builders, Truth-tellers and Catalysts event

Mary Robinson Foundation Climate Justice

The Mary Robinson Foundation for Climate Justice helped to fund Kisilu's attendance at the COP23 climate negotiations, where he addressed delegates.

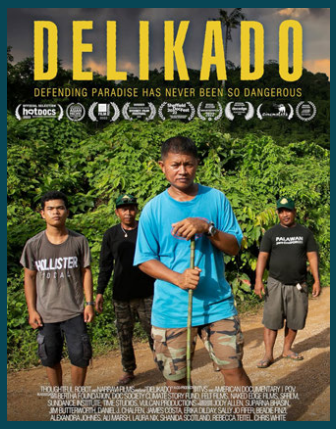
CJRF | Climate Justice Resilience Fund

The Climate Justice Resilience Fund formed a partnership in 2019-20 to build a dam in Kisilu and Christina's village, facilitate screenings and speaker slots for Kisilu, and train farmers in climate resilient techniques.

GREENPEACE

Greenpeace produced a video, Kisilu's Message, to accompany Thank You For the Rain.

Appendix II: Filmmakers' synopses



Delikado

Palawan appears to be an idyllic tropical island. Its powder-white beaches and lush forests have made it one of Asia's hottest new tourist destinations. But for a tiny network of environmental crusaders and vigilantes trying to protect its spectacular natural resources, it is more akin to a battlefield.

Delikado follows Bobby, Tata and Nieves, three magnetic leaders of this network, as they risk their lives in David versus Goliath-style struggles trying to stop politicians and businessmen from destroying the Philippines' "last ecological frontier".

It is a timely film emblematic of the struggles globally for land defenders as they are being killed in record numbers trying to save natural resources from being plundered by corporations and governments. As the world faces its sixth-mass extinction and the climate emergency worsens, it has never been a more dangerous time to be a land defender.

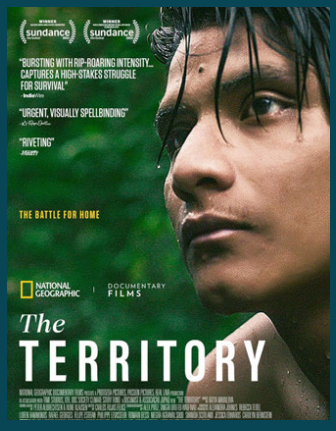
It is also a unique expose of President Rodrigo Duterte's "war on drugs" in the Philippines, which has claimed thousands of lives and the International Criminal Court of Justice has said may amount to a crime against humanity. *Delikado* shows the drug war is used as a tool for politicians to control the levers of economic and political power.

Delikado offers a story of courage and resilience to inspire others into action.

Thank You For the Rain

Five years ago Kisilu, a Kenyan farmer, started to use his camera to capture the life of his family, his village and the damages of climate change. When a violent storm throws him and a Norwegian filmmaker together we see him transform from a father, to community leader to an activist on the global stage.

Thank You For The Rain addresses a range of issues linked to climate change, including climate justice, urbanization, gender equality, education, access to water, climate refugees, and adaptation.



The Territory

The Territory provides an immersive on-the-ground look at the tireless fight of the Indigenous Uru-eu-wau-wau people against the encroaching deforestation brought by farmers and illegal settlers in the Brazilian Amazon. With awe-inspiring cinematography showcasing the titular landscape and richly textured sound design, the film takes audiences deep into the Uru-eu-wau-wau community and provides unprecedented access to the farmers and settlers illegally burning and clearing the protected Indigenous land.

Partially shot by the Uru-eu-wau-wau people, the film relies on vérité footage captured over three years as the community risks their lives to set up their own news media team in the hopes of exposing the truth.

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