

# Instituto Sociedade, População e Natureza



## Principle 3



The ISPN, a member of the Comuá Network, is a non-profit civil society organisation with headquarters in Brasilia, Brazil and an office in Santa Inês (Maranhão). Since 1990, ISPN has worked for socially equal and environmentally balanced development by supporting sustainable livelihoods and strategies for adaptation and mitigation in the face of climate change. ISPN believes that the best means to promote nature conservation and tackle social inequalities is to support traditional peoples and communities to develop sustainable activities in productive landscapes and in defending their rights.

Abdel Rahman Nagy

Director of Learning and Strategy, Sawiris Foundation



## About ISPN

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## What was the challenge?

The Caru Indigenous Land forms part of a mosaic of protected areas that house the largest portion of the remaining Amazon Rainforest in Maranhão State; it is an important site of environmental and cultural heritage for the entire region. However, this socio-environmental wealth is constantly threatened by illegal activities such as invasive logging, hunting, and fishing by non-indigenous groups. These activities increase pressure on indigenous communities and lead to conflicts. In response, indigenous groups have been working to defend their territory through surveillance and reporting of illegal activities.

The indigenous women-led group Guerreiras da Floresta realised that to find sustainable longer-term solutions, they needed a better understanding of what was driving invaders from surrounding villages. To do that they needed to engage beyond their own traditional territorial borders. The group embarked on engagement, dialogues and awareness campaigns, through which they realised that territory invasions were ultimately due to the significant socioeconomic challenges facing many families in surrounding communities – who were driven to move for the sake of their livelihoods. Gaining a better understanding of the complexities of the situation, Guerreiras da Floresta realised that protecting their territory would not be possible without finding ways to improve the quality of life for neighbouring communities around them.

## What was the response?

To support communities and organisations that work on addressing these challenges, ISPN and Associação Wirazu, an indigenous community association of the Guajajara people, partnered with Guerreiras da Floresta to implement the Traçando Novos Caminhos para o Bem Viver project, which involved an innovative grant-making approach that uses micro-projects (or microgrants) as a tool to defend and claim the population's rights in the indigenous land of Caru and to mediate conflicts amongst local communities.

The ISPN has been promoting biodiversity conservation and addressing social inequalities through support for traditional peoples and communities since 1990. This includes empowering grassroots organisations and helping them access funding sources. ISPN has been present in the Amazonian region of Maranhão since 2013 and had previously worked with the Associação Wirazu, which includes the Guardiões da Floresta and Guerreiras da Floresta groups, representing the Guajajara people of Caru Indigenous Land. As one of their core strategies since 2020, ISPN has been providing microgrants to support smaller-scale projects that complement traditional productive activities and integrate environmental and territorial management of indigenous lands. Microgrants are provided 'unbureaucratically', with a simplified proposal and reporting processes.

For this initiative, the idea for microgrants to support neighbouring non-indigenous communities stemmed from the Guerreiras. The ISPN already had a trusted relationship with the Guerreiras and Associação Wirazu, which had been developing since 2013. Thus, recognising the Guerreiras' knowledge of the local situation, the ISPN adopted a novel approach to distributing power to them in the grant-making process. This was a departure from their usual approaches, where the ISPN team would lead, evaluate, select, and monitor projects. In the context of this project, microgrants to fund community-led micro-projects were seen as a suitable mechanism due to their agility with less bureaucracy and simplification of procedures. This streamlined approach enabled more resources to reach the communities they sought to support, which allowed greater effectiveness of interventions and impact on beneficiary families. These groups now have direct access to resources and can leverage local solutions to meet local needs. When creating this new programme, ISPN asked themselves several crucial questions, including:

- ✓ What type of internal transformation will be needed within ISPN itself to integrate shifting power and trust-based approaches into their regular programmatic activities?
- ✓ How can micro-grants be used to achieve high levels of local impact despite their small scale?
- ✓ To what extent can this programme support the broader upliftment of indigenous communities and improve the co-creation of philanthropic initiatives with partner organisations?

ISPN's new programme features key elements that have made it successful in shifting power and building trust:

- ✓ In addition to surveillance activities, the Guerreiras da Floresta carry out **dialogue and socio-educational initiatives** in the areas surrounding their indigenous territory. These are designed to promote awareness of the importance of environmental conservation and protection of the ecosystem, for both indigenous and non-indigenous people. Indigenous groups are represented in the initiatives, and this has led to the realisation that many non-indigenous communities are unaware of the demarcation of indigenous lands.
- ✓ **ISPN's internal transformation as a funder** was pivotal in enabling this innovative approach. In 2017, they implemented a new governance model and established the Indigenous Peoples Program to enhance dialogue with indigenous communities and improve their strategies for engaging partner indigenous peoples. The aim was to go beyond individual project-based work towards a programmatic approach, with specific objectives, approaches, and thematic lines. The new microgrants mechanism was born out of joint reflections through this Indigenous Peoples Program, exploring ways to support Indigenous communities beyond usual mechanisms of funding legally constituted community associations. This broadened the scope of assistance provided to communities and offered relief to indigenous associations, which rarely receive sufficient support to aid families within their communities.
- ✓ The ISPN **launched its open calls for microgrants** to support micro-projects for families in the vicinity of Caru. The experience with micro-projects began in 2020. They adapted well-established ISPN mechanisms through the Small Eco-social Projects Program (PPP- ECOS) to be even more inclusive and accessible to communities. This included a less bureaucratic model for proposal submission, including more flexible formats such as audio and video responses to guiding questions. The calls for proposals also utilised simpler language, and they introduced alternative communication channels like WhatsApp for communications and reporting. They also simplified activity reporting. Microgrants are best utilised in tandem with other actions in the same territory for better and more cost-optimised identification and monitoring. This initiative for the Caru region was ISPN's fourth open call and involved the participation of the Warriors throughout the entire process of development, dissemination, monitoring, and evaluation. BRL 2,000 are provided for each project, including the development of small animal husbandry or vegetable gardens and reforestation. Unlike the ISPN's usual approach of only funding registered organisations, this project empowered women and families directly. Given the vulnerabilities of local families and villages, this initiative helps communities improve their livelihoods while also fostering environmental conservation. Working together, the ISPN and Guerreiras create publicity and visit villages to raise awareness of the initiative. Support and materials are also provided to help communities submit proposals.
- ✓ **A space for indigenous groups** to design, lead and monitor innovative grant-making practices for micro-projects

has been created and promoted, aiming to strengthen community bonds, mediate conflicts and enable those involved to shape interventions through the lens of their own experience. Decision-making power was given to the Guerreiras da Floresta who, in partnership with ISPN, were involved in designing the call for proposals, selecting proposals, and monitoring activities carried out by recipients. This has enabled experimentation with alternative forms of monitoring and evaluation based on indigenous practices and knowledge. Indigenous groups have also been supported in the systematisation of their experience through the production of a documentary, which has helped emphasise the importance of oral traditions in the dissemination of practices and knowledge.

- ✔ **An ongoing process of learning and improvement:** this initiative also served as a basis to reflect on how to improve the microgrant mechanism. They launched a study to assess the legal and administrative factors that would enable scaling up the use of microgranting mechanisms. Initial findings have already identified the need for contractual adjustments and adaptations of monitoring and evaluation strategies. ISPN is also exploring scholarships for indigenous students in higher education as part of its strategy to promote socio-ecological productive landscapes associated with the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples and other local communities.

Through this collaborative project, ISPN aims to influence the wider philanthropic ecosystem to explore alternative grant-making strategies which transfer power to local communities in their claim for rights and to design and implement strategies to mobilise local knowledge and resources. Consequently, ISPN incorporated microgrants in other projects involving indigenous peoples in the region.

## What have they learned?

- ✔ **Respect for existing knowledge & lived experience is vital.** Achieving actual social transformation through philanthropy requires having respect for the existing practices, knowledge and lived experiences of communities. This is only possible through trusting and distributing power to community leaders.
- ✔ **Practising trust and distributing power requires a democratic and inclusive approach.** Indigenous and traditional communities must be involved in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of activities; and actual decision-making power must be transferred to Indigenous leaders. This involves an adaptation of processes and governance to be more inclusive and accessible to the communities you seek to serve.
- ✔ **Collaboration, understanding, and solidarity are vital** in achieving social transformation and environmental conservation, and appropriate, locally led mechanisms for doing this need to be created and put into practice.
- ✔ **The power of microgrants.** A microgranting approach has the potential not only to protect the rights of indigenous and traditional populations but also to foster community development and strengthen bonds between funders and communities. Microgrants are accessible to individuals and families, giving them greater control to use the support and resources in ways that they see fit to improve their well-being.

# Key outcomes and impact indicators

## Better understanding

Guerreiras da Floresta and Guardiões da Floresta were heard by the population surrounding the Gurupi Mosaic. These populations gained a better understanding of the Gurupi Mosaic's importance and the consequences of their actions in the region.

## Environmental conservation

Mapping of surrounding communities for holding lectures and political advocacy, aiming at dialogues in favour of environmental conservation and productive autonomy.

## Involvement

Neighbouring communities around Caru Indigenous Land accessed open calls for micro-projects, through the involvement of Guerreiras da Floresta, Guardiões da Floresta, and the ISPN team.

## Activities

Surrounding communities were mobilised in executing planned activities with the involvement of other families.