

accelerating global climate crisis takes center stage. In this critical moment, we underscore the indispensable role of Indigenous



Myanmar, is part of one of the world's last remaining biodiversity hotspots, the Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot. Recognized by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, this hotspot hosts over 1,200 globally threatened species. Regrettably, the territory has weathered over 74 years of civil war and environmental challenges, resulting in significant levels of poverty and posing threats to biodiversity and land rights, leading to the mass displacement of Karen communities. Since 2012, the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN)—a community-based organization that works for the protection of Indigenous People's rights in the Karen State—has collaborated with the Karen National Union (KNU) and local villages to demarcate agricultural plots and community forests using GIS technology. In 2017, Cadasta Foundation joined their efforts, further expediting the documentation and management of land and forest data.

Cadasta's involvement provides communities and KNU land officials with training and tools to manage and secure their land and forest mapping and data. This collaborative process has contributed to increased technical skills for KNU land officials and civil society, and supported the Kawthoolei communities' efforts to document and protect their land, water, and forests.

This approach stands as a testament to the dynamic impact of technology and cross-sectoral partnerships in the self-empowerment of Indigenous communities. The online land and forest data management platform has facilitated the identification, documentation, and mapping of Indigenous Karen lands, equipping KNU officials, communities, and civil society with the tools to monitor and report on the state of their lands, forests, and biodiversity.

Using participatory methods, more than 3.5 million hectares of land have been mapped. With this data, 107 forest reserves, 18 wildlife sanctuaries, 204 community forests, 328 Kaw (customary lands), and four herbal medicine forests have been formally designated and cooperatively managed by Kawthoolei communities and the KNU.

The KNU authorities have also issued more than 107,000 land title documents for agricultural family plots covering 367,188 hectares. In the [video "Protecting our Ancestral Lands and Rich Biodiversity,"](#) Dooplaya District villager Naw Paw Wah Shee noted, "With this land title certificate, our land is secured. When we die, our children can inherit this land. If someone is going to take our land, we can either show this certificate to prove our ownership, or we can ask the KNU government to help us. We are happy and grateful."

What sets this partnership apart is its focus on blending traditional knowledge and modern technology. By integrating Indigenous knowledge about their territories with GIS software, maps, data analysis, and storytelling, a powerful tool for defending land rights and fostering community-led conservation efforts has been crafted.

This approach goes beyond mapping and data management, providing essential data-backed evidence for reclaiming lands unjustly taken by military and corporate entities.

The spiritual and cultural values that communities attach to these lands represent irreplaceable environmental protection measures that no State-led protected area system can match. A growing body of scientific findings shows that biodiversity levels are higher in territories managed under Indigenous governance, compared to private or state-led systems.

Given the inextricable link between Indigenous communities and their lands, participatory mapping and land use planning offer an innovative nature- and rights-based solution for tackling biodiversity loss and climate change.

The project's success is deeply rooted in its commitment to community-led conservation and self-governance, aligning with the global movement towards recognizing the pivotal role of Indigenous Peoples in conservation efforts.