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Accountability Note



Advancing Accountability in Development Finance: the Sandra Smithey Fellowship

Rachel Nadelman and Anushka Bose



About Accountability Research Center (ARC)

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Cover photo: Members of the AfDB Working Group , including Smithey Fellow Joillesse Videle, attend the opening of the 2025 AfDB Annual Meetings in Abidjan.

Credit: LSD

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About the authors

Rachel Nadelman, PhD is a research professor at the School of International Service at American University and is affiliated with the Accountability Research Center and the Department of Environment, Development, and Health. A scholar-practitioner with two decades of experience, her work draws on long-standing engagement with transparency, participation, and accountability in international development. She has held roles across multilateral and bilateral institutions, grassroots organizations, foundations, and university-based research centers, and considers leading the Sandra N. Smithey Fellowship a highlight of her professional life.

Anushka Bose is a PhD Candidate at the School of International Service at American University, where her dissertation explores investment migration globally. She holds an MPhil from the School of International Service at American University, an MA in International Security from the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver, and a BA in Political Science from Purdue University. Since Summer 2025, she has served as a Research Assistant to Dr Rachel Nadelman at the Accountability Research Center.

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Summary

The Sandra N. Smithey Fellowship for Equity and Accountability in International Development was created to honor the career of Sandra Smithey, particularly her legacy in amplifying frontline voices that champion transparent and accountable approaches to development finance.

Between 2023 and 2025, the Smithey Fellowship, administered by the Accountability Research Center (ARC) at American University, provided support to eight advocates advancing accountability in development finance. The central premise of the Fellowship is that accountability work is most effective when driven by those directly affected by development decisions and supported by flexible, trust-based funding. ARC worked with each of the fellows to define their own strategic goals and approaches within the time or resources available, seeking to ensure that each could meet the most pressing opportunities or challenges they faced. It provided them with significant flexibility to make mid-course changes to respond to political realities on the ground.

The philosophy of “putting the fellows first” resulted in eight bespoke fellowships that reflected the breadth of civil society efforts to promote community- and context-based accountability in international development finance.

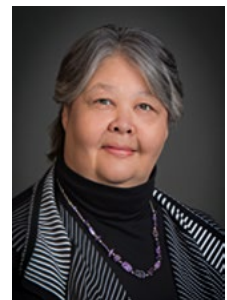
Across these experiences, several key lessons emerge:

- **Flexibility is a foundation for impact and sustainability.** When fellows were given space to adapt to rapidly changing contexts, they achieved outcomes that rigid programs might have constrained.
- **Altering conventional fellowship designs can change the balance in north-south knowledge hierarchies.** An adaptable fellowship structure enabled some fellows to pursue their projects whilst embedded in their local communities, accessing support where their work was already taking shape.
- **Translating knowledge can enable power shifts.** Fellows who converted technical or bureaucratic language into practical tools enabled communities to engage institutions on their own terms.
- **Collaboration is a vehicle for continuity of both projects and relationships.** Collaboration among mentors, allies, and civil society organizations extended the reach of individual projects and embedded learning in broader movements. Longer-term influence depended on intentional efforts to maintain networks, communication, and financial stability after formal support ended.
- **Enabling frontline expertise to shape accountability narratives can effectively support existing movements for rights and remedy.** The fellows demonstrated that it is those closest to injustice that have the insight and credibility to define what accountability should mean in their own contexts as a basis for transformative change.

This Accountability Note describes the work of these fellows and explores how a targeted package of direct funding, reflecting the fellows’ priorities and accompanied by trusted partners, enabled them to respond effectively to new and changing conditions. Ultimately, the Smithey Fellowship demonstrated that modest, well-structured support, grounded in trust, autonomy, and solidarity, can enable progress towards accountability and enable advocates to define and pursue their own paths in building durable movements for justice.

Foreword by Sam Passmore, Environment Program Director, C.S. Mott Foundation

For nearly 20 years, I worked alongside Sandra Smithey at the Mott Foundation. During that time, we also became close friends, celebrating one another's triumphs and lamenting our losses—both personal and professional. Much of this bonding came during a carpool commute from our homes to the Mott offices in Flint. Those drives revealed who Sandra truly was: far more than a brilliant grantmaker who relentlessly promoted pro-poor development approaches. She was that, of course, yet she was also an animated film devotee, American whiskey connoisseur, cat lover, Bauhaus enthusiast, political junkie, devoted Auntie, foodie's foodie and much, much more. A fantastic conversationalist with strongly expressed opinions; but still, an extraordinary listener.



Sandra died unexpectedly in 2022 at the far-too-young age of 62. Her passing was a shock at many levels. Even though Sandra had left the Foundation two years prior, she was still very much part of our extended institutional family and I think we assumed that she would continue championing her social and environmental concerns for—well, forever. In a way, Mott's decision to support the Sandra N. Smithey Fellowship for Equity and Accountability in International Development was an expression of the Foundation's expectation that her work would continue indefinitely—and certainly not be extinguished prematurely.

The Foundation, however, cannot take credit for creating the fellowship itself. The idea emerged spontaneously as word spread about her death. Sandra had many talents, but her true gift was her networking ability. Her collegial relationships spanned issues, sectors, and continents. She drew people in, never let them go, and made sure we got to know each other. Moved by their sadness and admiration, leaders in the network of advocates, academics, and development professionals that Sandra helped create and nurture over many years came forward with the fellowship concept to honor and continue her work. At Mott, we are grateful to American University's Accountability Research Center for seizing the idea and making it real.

Some of the eight fellows profiled here knew Sandra and others did not, but all their fellowship experiences align with Sandra's values and life's work. Perhaps more importantly, I am certain that Sandra would have delighted in each of them, eagerly sought to know them, discover their passions and introduce them to others in her sprawling network. What I would give for each of the eight to have one of those wide-ranging carpool conversations with Sandra themselves! Alas, life moves on.

Introduction

Between 2023 and 2025, the Sandra N. Smithey Fellowship for Equity and Accountability in International Development supported eight frontline advocates from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Cameroon, Colombia, Haiti, Nepal, Peru, and Tanzania. Each fellow addressed urgent issues related to development finance in their home context, from land rights and climate accountability to gender parity and civic space, through an individually designed six- to twelve-month program. Working with local and international partners, fellows led self-designed professional development initiatives that ranged from advancing Indigenous representation in multilateral banks and strengthening women's leadership in climate finance, to defending communities displaced by aid-funded projects and sustaining civil society networks amid funding collapse.

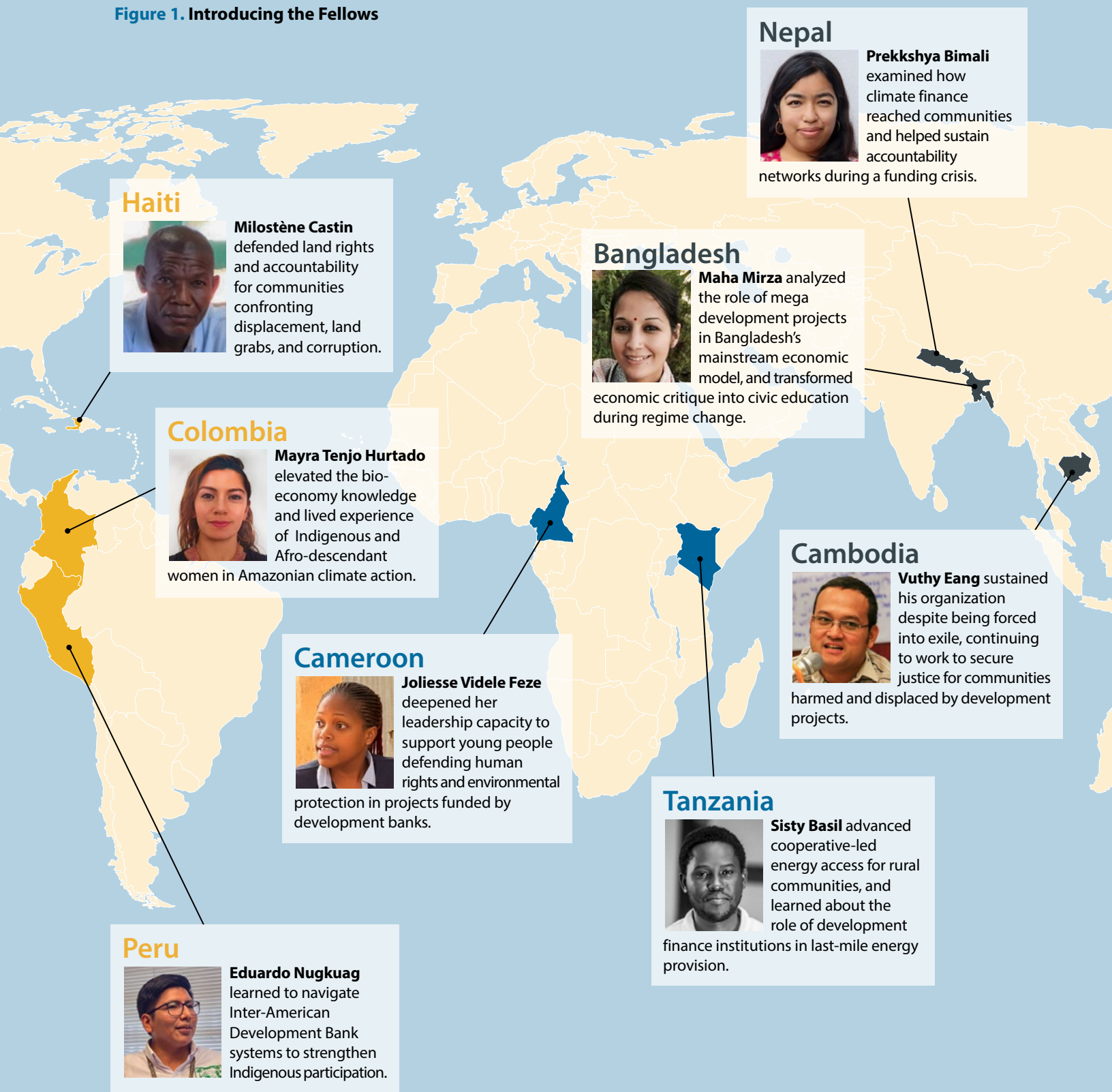
The fellowship was established to honor the legacy of Sandra N. Smithey, a longtime environment program officer at the Mott Foundation. Her death in 2022 prompted several advocates, academics, and development professionals that had benefited from Sandra's multi-faceted, long-term support to propose a fellowship program that would provide similar support to a group of fellows. As Sam Passmore writes in the Foreword, Sandra's greatest gift was her networking ability, spanning issues, sectors, and continents. A fellowship program that reflected Sandra's approach would identify vibrant emergent leaders, focus on understanding their priorities, and facilitate resources and relationships that would help them be successful.

The Accountability Research Center (ARC) at American University's School of International Service administered the fellowship, under the leadership of Rachel Nadelman. ARC collaborated closely with partner organizations to co-design each program, including tailoring activities, locations, and goals to fellows' contexts. This approach largely sacrificed any aspiration of the fellowship program to claim synergistic benefits or any significant cross-fertilization of ideas, strategies, or lessons among or between the fellows. These are often important goals and outcomes for fellowship programs but can over-emphasize priorities not fully shared by the fellows. Instead, the bespoke structure reflected the fellowship's central premise: that accountability work is most effective when driven by those directly affected by development decisions and supported by flexible funding.

The fellowship operated during a period of profound global instability. Funding crises decimated civil society organizations (CSOs), authoritarian crackdowns forced advocates into exile, and climate-related disasters intensified. Political upheavals and shrinking civic space shaped every fellow's experience. While some of the fellows followed their original plans, others pivoted in response to crisis, demonstrating how adaptability and solidarity can sustain accountability work even in volatile conditions.

This Accountability Note draws on reflective interviews with the fellows and their partner organizations (July-October 2025), as well as fellowship reports and correspondence. It traces what fellow-centered, trust-based support made possible. In particular, it examines how a targeted package of direct funding—combined with accompaniment from trusted partners and access to new networks and opportunities—enabled frontline advocates to reimagine responses to development challenges and shift power and agency toward those most affected. Together, their experiences illustrate how a fellowship model can protect and amplify local actors during periods of crisis and generate lessons for donors and practitioners seeking to make accountability funding more responsive, inclusive, durable, and effective.

Figure 1. Introducing the Fellows



Decoding Bureaucracy for Indigenous Federations:

Eduardo Nugkaug

Eduardo Nugkaug, a young Indigenous leader from the *Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana* (AIDESEP, Inter-Ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Forest), was nominated for the fellowship by the US-based Bank Information Center (BIC), with ongoing mentorship from Latin America Coordinator Carolina Juaneda. His fellowship built on years of BIC-led advocacy to reframe the Inter-American Development Bank's (IDB) *Amazon Initiative*—launched in 2021 and rebranded *Amazonia Forever* in 2023—around the priorities of Amazonian peoples.

The IDB selected AIDESEP to implement a three-year, US\$1 million grant to support and strengthen its *National Indigenous Bioeconomy Program*—an initiative to promote Indigenous bioeconomy enterprises across the Amazon. The program emerged from sustained civil society advocacy, particularly by BIC and its allies, to ensure that *Amazonia Forever* channeled resources directly to Indigenous and Afro-descendant organizations. Crucially, allowing these organizations the option of directly managing the project marked a significant departure from past practice which mandated that financial resources be managed by external implementing partners.

Still, there remained a persistent disconnect between IDB's administrative practice and their desire to work directly with indigenous organizations. As Carolina explained, "The IDB did not consider, how do we facilitate our processes for Indigenous organizations, which are not private companies or states or governments?" The IDB's administrative processes created lengthy delays in finalizing the agreement with AIDESEP.



Eduardo sharing insights and lessons learned from implementing the first IDB-approved initiative designed and implemented directly by an indigenous organization, at the IDB in Washington DC.

Credit: Mariana Pereira A. Cohen

Eduardo recalled, “At first, I didn’t understand their systems. I was an outsider in every meeting. It’s the first time I’ve managed a project like this—every step comes with many requirements, and responses can take days... If there isn’t agreement on timelines on both sides, the project just stretches out.”

Eduardo and BIC designed his fellowship program to bridge that disconnect, bringing him to Washington, DC to work alongside the IDB team and gain fluency in IDB procedures and practices so he could better represent AIDESEP and other Indigenous communities. As Carolina reflected, “Eventually, AIDESEP could learn to navigate this because they have someone like Eduardo, but not every Indigenous organization has an Eduardo.”

Once the in-person phase of the fellowship began, Tatiana Schor, then Chief of IDB’s Amazonia Coordination Unit, used her credibility as an IDB insider to open informal spaces where Eduardo could meet staff, ask questions, and build trust. She saw these efforts as part of broader reforms to strengthen the Bank’s engagement with Indigenous communities. Tatiana’s role illustrates the importance of institutional allies within development banks who are willing to use their positions to make bureaucratic systems more penetrable. Such allyship can be the difference between tokenistic inclusion and genuine capacity-building. Eduardo’s time in DC did not just advance his capacity; it also challenged assumptions among IDB staff about how Indigenous organizations work and the kinds of expertise they bring to development partnerships.

As Eduardo reflected, “I felt more confident that I could represent and stand up for my ideas and principles after spending time in DC working alongside the IDB team.”

At the same time, Eduardo’s, learning, experience and insights became evidence that substantiated BIC’s call for broader institutional change in how IDB relates with Indigenous groups in the future. As Carolina from BIC states: “Eduardo may have made this project viable, but it’s not scalable unless the institution adapts.”

Together, Tatiana and Carolina helped Eduardo transform his individual learning into a collective resource. After months of observation, he became fluent in the Bank’s bureaucratic language and confident enough to explain it to others. The manuals and trainings he developed in Indigenous languages are now used by other Indigenous organizations.

Eduardo’s experience shows how a well-supported institutional placement—anchored by an insider ally and a civil society partner—can translate complex rules into practical capacity for Indigenous federations, while also revealing where procedures need to change to remove structural barriers.

Centering Indigenous Women’s Knowledge in Climate Finance: Mayra Tenjo Hurtado

Mayra is an advocate for Indigenous and Afro-descendant women in the Amazon region. Her work addresses a critical gap in climate action: Indigenous peoples—essential stewards of vital ecosystems, knowledge, and strategies—remain underrecognized by development finance institutions designing climate interventions. Indigenous women’s leadership, in particular, is often rendered invisible.

The fellowship supported Mayra’s ongoing efforts to elevate the voices and presence of Indigenous and Afro-descendant women in DFIs and climate change. Although Mayra originally expected to ground her project on interviews with networks of Indigenous women in the Amazon regions of six countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Guyana, Suriname, and Venezuela) she quickly recognized that local Indigenous women’s viewpoints, priorities, and definitions of “climate action” did not match her assumptions.



Amazonian Indigenous women leaders meet in Bolivia to advance a collective assessment of Indigenous women's bioeconomy efforts and elevate their climate action agenda ahead of COP30 in Belém do Pará, Brazil.

Credit: Anonymous

Maya quickly adapted her plans. “If we want to strengthen leadership, we must start from how women themselves frame the problem,” she explained. This shift reshaped her work into a phased study that grounds international advocacy for climate finance reform in women's lived experiences of environmental loss, caregiving burdens, and resource management. By documenting how different groups of women describe the risks and responsibilities created by climate change, her research challenged the idea of a single, unified “community” and revealed how intersecting identities shape both vulnerability and leadership in local contexts.

Mayra's original plan included presenting key findings to decision-makers—including the IDB, World Bank, and UN Women—in Washington, DC and New York City. However, evolving political circumstances led her to change direction.

The flexibility in the fellowship enabled creative adaptation. Rather than abandoning engagement with development finance institutions, Mayra extended her research to additional Indigenous communities and networks and sought to bring her findings to a different international policy making audience—COP 30, the UN Climate Change Conference in Belém, Brazil. Thanks to Mayra's participatory approach and the strong partnership networks in which she embedded her fellowship, her research served as a critical reference point for Indigenous women's advocacy at COP 30. Her focus on gaining the participation and understanding of local women set her research up for having stronger strategic impact over the long-term. What started as technical research evolved into a political resource, linking global climate debates to the lived experiences of women in the Amazon. By shifting from planned advocacy in the US to extended community research and country-level DFI engagement, Mayra deepened community participation and strategic impact. Her experience illustrates that when safety and flexibility are built into fellowship design, creative adaptation can lead to stronger outcomes than may have resulted from the original plans.

Championing Land Rights: Milostène Castin

Castin¹ became a fellow following his work organizing more than 400 families who were displaced by the USAID- and IDB-funded Caracol industrial park in northern Haiti. He and his organization Association pour le Reforestation et a Défense de l'Environnement (AREDE, Association for Reforestation and Environmental Defense) achieved notable success in reaching an agreement in which the IDB agreed to compensate the displaced families.²



Castin's work with members of communities displaced by the Caracol Industrial Park formed the foundations of his fellowship work. Here, community members, Castin, and colleagues from Accountability Counsel are preparing the case for remedy from the IDB.

Credit: Accountability Counsel

Haiti's political and social context during Castin's fellowship was marked by state collapse and the disintegration of basic government functions, the rise of gang violence and control, and economic devastation. Peasant rights were increasingly under attack and land grabs by politically connected business owners and their intermediaries in the north of the country accelerated. In this tumultuous political context, Castin persisted in pursuing the goals he set at the outset of the fellowship: to defend land rights, strengthen accountability mechanisms, and develop strategies to prevent further peasant displacement.

¹ In contrast to the other fellows, Castin uses his family name rather than his given name.

² For more detail, see Freeman, Scott, Lani Inverarity, and Megan Pearson. 2024. "After the Agreement: Implementing Remedy for Displacement in Northern Haiti." Accountability Research Center. *Accountability Note* 14.

Professor Scott Freeman of the American University School of International Service and US-based Accountability Counsel nominated Castin for the fellowship. It drew on work Castin had begun years before. Building on his experience with the families displaced by the Caracol Industrial Park, Castin had approached Professor Freeman and colleagues at the NYU Law School Global Justice Law Clinic with the idea of establishing a Land Observatory for monitoring land-use change. This inter-institutional team focused on tracking land-use change and examining how data could be used both to prevent and remedy land grabs. Over time, the developed ideas to combine community-based monitoring with emerging research tools and strengthened pathways for accountability. Castin's fellowship brought new support to this partnership, helping to move the initiative forward.

The fellowship enabled Castin to travel to Washington, DC in October 2024. For the Observatory team, this created a rare opportunity for in-person collaboration. During their extended work sessions, in collaboration with Professor Mike Alonzo at American University, they developed plans to integrate remote sensing and collaborative mapping. This links local knowledge—generated through the collective organizing of displaced farmers—with satellite imagery, allowing community observations to be translated into usable evidence for advocacy with international funders. This groundwork also later enabled the Observatory to secure a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant for its research phase, providing Castin with a bridge to structured, long-term support.

Travelling to Washington also allowed Castin to participate alongside Accountability Counsel colleagues in advocacy meetings with the IDB and USAID—which included pushing for compensation for the last of the displaced Caracol families. He was lead panelist at a high-profile American University event, *Our Land Was a Goldmine: How Displaced Haitian Peasants Used an International Accountability Mechanism to Fight for Remedy*, sharing the stage with former IDB Haiti Country Director Koldo Echebarria, Prof. David Hunter, and other faculty and senior officials.

The fellowship's most significant feature was its flexibility, which allowed Castin to go beyond his Land Observatory plans and respond to urgent crises as they unfolded in Haiti. As Scott observed, "What ended up happening was that other fires, literally and figuratively, erupted. And so the plans changed—from these very organized ideas [for a Land Observatory] to allowing Castin to be the advocate and organizer that he is." When, during the fellowship period, the government proposed a referendum that would have centralized decision-making in Port-au-Prince and eliminated local consultation processes about a new constitution—effectively removing the ability of rural communities to participate—Castin mobilized more than 1,000 people across northern departments to take part in public debates and awareness campaigns. "People told me it was impossible," he said. "But when you listen and persist, they come."

Yet perhaps Castin's most notable achievement during this period was linking anti-corruption frameworks to rural land rights. After months of relationship-building, he persuaded the Haitian government's *Unité de Lutte Contre la Corruption* (ULCC, Anti-Corruption Unit) to open investigations into large-scale land theft in the north—an unprecedented move. Previously there were no opportunities for resources for rural families whose land had been stolen, but as Castin explained, "we created a door where none existed." For the first time, rural citizens may be gaining formal pathways through state institutions to denounce corruption and land grabs, and pursue possibilities to reclaim their land rights and seek remedy.

Castin's experience demonstrates how presence and persistence in fragile states can create lasting avenues for community protection and remedy both through engaging with government, and through developing research initiatives that center experiences of dispossession.

Forging Leadership through Accountability Immersion: Joliesse Videle Feze

Joliesse is a young Cameroonian civic leader who founded and leads Youth for Promotion of Development (YPD), which supports youth activists to defend human rights and strengthen environmental protections in development projects financed by multilateral, bilateral, and private banks. In Cameroon's tightly restricted civic environment, advocacy work is risky and requires careful navigation. Nominated by the Coalition for Human Rights in Development, the Joliesse co-designed the fellowship with the ARC team to meet her specific needs in real time.

Following a suggestion from Mott Foundation Program Officer Theodoros Chronopolous, the fellowship connected Joliesse with *Lumière Synergie pour le Développement* (LSD), an organization in Senegal working on development finance accountability. Using additional fellowship funds, LSD developed a tailored three-week intensive curriculum for Joliesse. This curriculum can now be used with other youth leaders, meaning the fellowship not only strengthened Joliesse's capacity but also contributed to LSD's organizational development and potential for broader impact.

LSD intentionally integrated Joliesse as a full team member rather than as an observer. She met individually with each staff person, traveled to affected communities, and participated in LSD's delegation to the African Development Bank (AfDB)'s annual meetings in Abidjan, experiencing the full arc from community engagement to high-level advocacy. Aly Marie Sagné, LSD's Executive Director, who spearheaded the development of Joliesse's curriculum, reflected on her integration, "By the end of the first week, I was seeing Jolie as a member of the team."



An awareness-raising meeting with the women of Marlothie/Saloum Delta about the challenges of Sangomar, Senegal's first offshore oil exploitation project.

Credit: LSD

Fatoumata Mbodji from LSD, who led Joliesse's immersion, noted that Joliesse was particularly struck by LSD's women-majority team: "She asked a lot of questions about how a team led by women achieves these results." As Joliesse recounted, "In Senegal I saw women taking the lead, and it pushed me to involve more young women on my team [in Cameroon] and give them real responsibility... Back home our team has been mostly men, so I am restructuring so more young women can lead projects from start to finish." During her time with LSD, Joliesse observed how they monitor multiple AfDB projects and engage through both operational departments and its Independent Accountability Mechanism. Joliesse shared some of what she'd seen in practice: "You need a focal point inside the Bank to get a response. When you cannot get one, filing to the Independent Accountability Mechanism becomes the way in." According to Aly, "She learned a lot, and she brought a lot. Having this month created an opportunity to open all these things," which helped surface and systematize the team's decade of community-centered practice.

Joliesse's participation with LSD at the AfDB Annual Meetings in Abidjan offered a strategic vantage point, enabling her to observe and engage the institution at its seat of power. "The [Annual] meetings can feel like a show rather than a place to hear complaints, but if we prepare months in advance it is one of the few places to meet top decision-makers," Joliesse said.

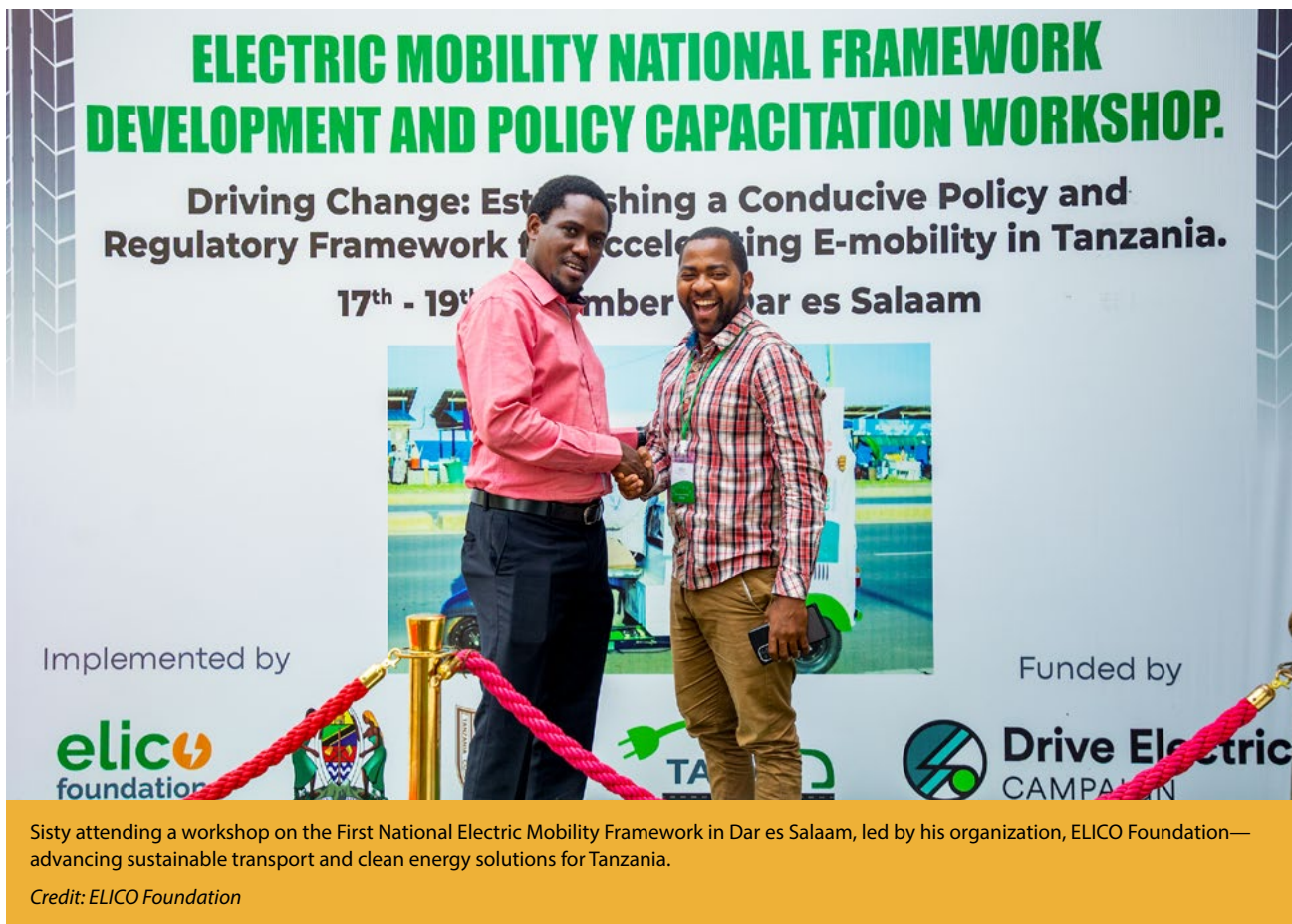
Back in Cameroon, Joliesse recognized that while Senegal and Cameroon share similar political realities—populations without the right to complain or contest unjust policies—Senegal's civil society is more active in monitoring development finance. This realization gave her inspiration for what she could pursue at home. She used her learning as the basis for preparing internal guides for YPD, drafted a strategy tailored to Cameroonian conditions, and prioritized monitoring of AfDB, World Bank, Chinese banks, and multinational companies. "We are developing a project to accompany riverine communities affected by a gas plant and to push for cleaner energy alternatives," Joliesse said. "I want this knowledge to replicate, so we are organizing trainings and working to re-energize a regional platform to track projects by international financial institutions."

Through the fellowship, YPD became part of LSD's extended regional networks and the AfDB working group, a cross-border community of practice. This integration demonstrated how brief organizational placements, when structured around active participation rather than observation, can provide emerging leaders with enduring resources and connections.

Community Ownership Models for Rural Energy Access: Sisty Basil

Sisty founded and leads the E-LICO Foundation, which provides access to solar power for rural Tanzanian communities that lack access to the electrical grid. His work addresses the critical challenge of last-mile energy provision in areas where traditional infrastructure may never reach, affecting millions across sub-Saharan Africa. He is also pursuing a PhD in engineering.

Professor Kelly Askew at the University of Michigan nominated Sisty and served as both advisor and collaborator throughout the fellowship. Sisty's fellowship experience was unique among the Smithey fellows. His tailored program had two inter-related components. First, it supported him to take part in the University of Michigan's African Scholars Program (UMAPS), which facilitates the development of the next generation of African scholars. Second, it supported him to pursue his independent exploration into community cooperative-led energy provision in United States, designed to complement the UMAPS programming. He toured community-owned solar systems in Minnesota and



Georgia, visited a massive solar farm in Indiana, and explored innovative agricultural systems at Michigan State University that integrate renewable energy. Professor Askew treated him as a peer and colleague, drawing on his Tanzanian expertise for her own scholarship while mentoring him in academic writing. “It was not just me learning,” Sisty reflected. “She was also discovering new resources through me.” This reciprocal relationship led to co-authored presentations and publications.³

Beyond academic and practical learning, Sisty attended the 2024 World Bank Spring meetings in Washington, DC, where he learned about the role of development finance institutions role in last-mile energy provision, met one-on-one with World Bank staff and civil society advocacy organizations, and began building a network of potential funders. These connections proved crucial for E-LICO’s sustainability. He also headlined public events at the University of Michigan and C.S. Mott Foundation headquarters, raising the profile of community-led energy access work.

Sisty gained what he described as a “wealth of knowledge” that he is now sharing with other frontline advocates working to increase energy access in developing countries. The concept of community ownership and decision-making authority through energy cooperatives “left a lasting impression,” convincing him that community-owned solar systems are the best approach for rural areas and small businesses. As he explained, “When communities have a stake in their energy infrastructure, they not only benefit from direct involvement but also wield significant influence over service delivery.”

Two years later, Sisty and Kelly’s working relationship remains strong, demonstrating how mentoring relationships can thrive when structured as partnerships of mutual learning rather than one-directional knowledge transfer.

³ For example, a seminar at the Michigan Institute for Energy Solutions on ‘[The Social Impacts of Energo-Waste](#).’

Climate Finance Accountability: Prekkshya Bimali

Prekkshya, a program manager at Accountability Lab Nepal, began her fellowship in December 2024 shortly before her organization faced an existential crisis: an 85% budget cut due to foreign aid cancelations. A fellowship originally designed to supplement and strengthen Accountability Lab Nepal quickly became essential for the organization's survival. This period also coincided with the political upheaval triggered by Nepal's so-called Gen Z movement in mid-2025, when sustained youth-led protests over corruption and unemployment forced the government to resign and paved the way for an interim administration and planned elections in March 2026.

Prekkshya received her fellowship nomination from Accountability Lab Global, a separate entity based in the US that is also part of a world-wide Accountability Lab network. The Accountability Lab Global team provided Prekkshya with ongoing support throughout her program.



Community consultation with the locals of Laljhadhi Rural Municipality about grievance handling mechanisms.

Credit: Kramik Kafley

Prekkshya's original research plan focused on examining how multilateral agencies like the World Bank Group, Asian Development Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development allocate climate funds in Nepal. It centered on a crucial question: while some policies mandate that 80% of climate finance reach local communities facing the greatest climate impacts, does this happen in practice? Working with Accountability Lab's global hub, Prekkshya used the Civic Action Teams (CivActs) platform for citizen feedback, dialogue, and community voice⁴ to collect data from community members in areas where World Bank-funded projects have been implemented.

Through interviews with activists, government officials, and World Bank staff, Prekkshya exposed a stark contradiction: while government officials and donors promoted climate finance mechanisms as participatory, they effectively barred local organizations from accessing increasingly scarce funds. As international aid reductions took effect in early 2025, CSOs across Nepal faced difficult choices. Some scaled back programs, while others pragmatically adjusted their language to align with shifting donor priorities. By midyear, as the Gen Z movement escalated and political instability deepened, many groups further softened their public messaging, substituting neutral terms such as "natural resources" for "climate justice" to avoid political risk. As Prekkshya explained, "The funding crisis created a more difficult environment for us to talk about climate change."

Once again the fellowship's flexibility proved crucial. While Prekkshya's originally planned research did continue, Prekkshya and Accountability Lab Nepal began to deliver 'ecosystem support'—providing free office space to peers, facilitating collaborative fundraising, and matchmaking among organizations facing the same funding crisis. They focused particularly on organizations that were falling out of favor with the government: climate groups, accountability organizations, and independent media. These were precisely the organizations most needed in Nepal's moment of transition, yet most vulnerable to combined pressures.

As Accountability Lab's co-CEO Blair Glencorse described: "The biggest outgrowth beyond the original fellowship's intentions was investment and outreach to the wider civil society community to keep individual organizations and networks alive into the future—the kind of organizations Nepal cannot afford to lose to the funding crisis." As such, the fellowship enabled both individual research and collective survival, with final research products infographics and multi-media reports—serving as educational and advocacy tools for communities, CSOs, development agencies, and Nepalese ministries.

Scholar-Activism under Surveillance: Maha Mirza

Maha is a scholar-activist in Bangladesh, where writing critically about economic and political issues has carried risks that meant working under constant state surveillance for many years. Her fellowship sought to produce scholarly yet accessible analysis and critiques in both English and Bengali of Bangladesh's mainstream development model and the role of mega development projects, creating educational tools for activist students. The NGO Forum on the Asian Development Bank nominated her for the fellowship.

Maha designed her fellowship to fit with her broader activist-education work, which engages public university students and supports ongoing advocacy campaigns including anti-corruption efforts. She worked to translate technical economic analysis into accessible narratives in both Bengali and English, seeking to "break the monopoly" of economists who "don't speak in layman's language" and "make sure people don't understand."

⁴ See <https://civacts.org/> for details on the CivActs approach.



The fellowship offered her freedom from rigid deadlines and prescriptive outputs. She described this as “the dignity of being a writer, the freedom to create without the deadlines that kill your creative spirit.” This autonomy gave her the space to uncover how colonial railway finance practices continue to shape today’s mega-projects, insights that required patience and independence to emerge.

In June 2024, student-led protests erupted across Bangladesh, ultimately toppling the government in one of the most significant political transformations in the country’s history. Maha took an active role supporting the movement, putting planned fellowship activities on hold to participate in this transformative moment.

As the political landscape shifted completely, Maha resumed her fellowship work in a radically new context. In January and February 2025, she set up seminars with activist student organizations to discuss and solicit feedback on her writing. Her seminars with the Democratic Rights Committee, formed in August 2024 to address and advocate for democratic rights and freedoms across the country, created spaces where citizens could debate and reflect together, giving ordinary people tools to contest policies that directly affect their lives.

Maha’s experience shows how a flexible source of funding allowed an independent scholar to turn specialized knowledge into public resources for shifting collective understanding. Her forthcoming book and ongoing seminar series represent investments in long-term civic education and movement building. While her work remains largely local without extensive international networks, its impact on Bangladeshi civil society and student movements has been significant, particularly given the historic moment in which she operated. The fellowship allowed her to respond to historic transformation while maintaining core objectives of democratizing economic knowledge.

Leading from Exile: Vuthy Eang

Vuthy serves as Executive Director of Equitable Cambodia (EQ), a human rights organization defending community rights and seeking accountability from international financial institutions. He and his organization faced years of threats from the Cambodian government due to their work on land rights cases, particularly those involving powerful sugar companies. The International Accountability Project (IAP) and Inclusive Development International (IDI) nominated Vuthy for the fellowship, with IDI serving as his primary implementing partner.



Vuthy outside Equitable Cambodia's main office in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, before his forced exile.

Credit: Equitable Cambodia

Vuthy's participation as a Smithey Fellow was unique amongst the other seven fellows.

In April 2024, he traveled to Washington DC for the World Bank's Spring meetings. He had been invited as a featured speaker on the Civil Society Policy Forum panel, "When Exits and Accountability Collide," sharing his years-long experience seeking accountability from the World Bank Group's International Finance Corporation. Just as he departed for Washington, the Cambodian government escalated an ongoing civil society crackdown and brought criminal charges against Vuthy, making it unsafe for him to return to Cambodia. In response, a global solidarity network comprising many of Vuthy and EQ's longtime international partners mobilized to support and protect him. Network members IAP and IDI learned of the Smithey fellowship and nominated Vuthy. David Pred, IDI Executive Director and co-founder explained: "We sprang to action, and just 100% committed to doing whatever we could possibly do to support him." The fellowship became a significant part of the larger mobilization, supporting Vuthy to safely relocate with his family outside Cambodia, get his children re-enrolled in school, and pursue asylum. Partners escalated advocacy internationally, securing a European Parliament resolution addressing his case and broader civil society concerns in Cambodia, which provided critical leverage for ongoing engagement.

Throughout this upheaval and personal danger, Vuthy continued his work. As David emphasized, Vuthy's greatest achievement during the fellowship wasn't any single output but rather "keeping his organization running. Keeping Equitable Cambodia going, helping them get funding... The fact that they're still going is a huge accomplishment, and that's all credit to Vuthy." During the fellowship period, Vuthy and IDI colleagues settled a class action lawsuit against Mitr Phol, a Thai sugar company, ending a 15-year struggle that resulted in multi-million dollar compensation for 700 Cambodian families whose land had been seized.

David and Vuthy's relationship long predated the fellowship, rooted in shared history working at Bridges Across Borders Cambodia, which in 2012 became Equitable Cambodia under Vuthy's leadership. Their longstanding relationship provided a foundation of trust and partnership that carried into the Smithey Fellowship. This fellowship provided targeted, flexible support that strengthened the continuity of Vuthy's leadership of his organization and helped a family facing danger to reach safety. In Vuthy's words, "Flexibility is important. It enabled me to continue the work."

Conclusion: Lessons from the Smithey Fellowship

The eight fellows supported by the Sandra N. Smithey Fellowship demonstrated that meaningful change becomes possible when individuals are given time, trust, and space to lead. Each fellow faced unique challenges: from Maha navigating surveillance in Bangladesh to Castin creating new legal pathways in collapsing Haiti, from Vuthy maintaining his organization in forced exile to Prekkshya supporting a vulnerable accountability ecosystem through funding crisis.

Their stories converge around several insights. Flexibility emerged not as a convenience but as recognition of fellows' expertise, providing space for authentic knowledge production and crisis response. This flexibility took shape through ARC's responsiveness to fellows' own articulation of goals, even as those goals evolved. Fellows who could adapt their programs, such as Mayra extending the scope of her community research in lieu of meeting face to face with US-based decision-makers, Vuthy encompassing family protection alongside seeking remedy for harmed communities, or Castin pivoting to also respond to real-time constitutional threats, achieved impact that rigid structures would have prevented.

Fellowship structures directly shaped outcomes. Academic placements like Sisty's produced long-term networks and scholarship through reciprocal partnerships while institutional placements like Eduardo's gave access to bureaucracies but required insider allies to navigate. Independent research and writing gave Maha freedom to engage in real-time protest that brought about regime change while significantly reducing the scholarship she had envisioned producing. Crisis contexts enabled precedent-setting reforms but carried enormous personal risk. Each structure had trade-offs that had to be carefully matched to context and the needs of fellows.

Translation of elite knowledge into community tools proved one of the most powerful strategies across fellowships. Maha converted economic jargon into accessible narratives. Eduardo codified IDB procedures into manuals for Indigenous federations. Castin connected anti-corruption frameworks to rural land rights. Joliesse developed guides for navigating international financial institutions. Each act of translation shifted power by moving knowledge from elite spaces into the hands of communities who could use it for organizing and advocacy.

Partners provided essential scaffolding that made continuity possible. Academic hosts like Kelly Askew fostered environments of mutual learning. Institutional allies like Tatiana Schor opened spaces within bureaucracies. Civil society advocates like Aly Marie Sang, Carolina Juaneda, David Pred, and Blair Glencorse linked individual projects to broader campaigns and sustained work through crisis. Without these partnerships, fellows' contributions would have remained more isolated and short-lived.

Continuity beyond the fellowship is a work in progress. Sisty and Eduardo are maintaining strong ties through ongoing research collaboration, training materials in active use, and governance roles. Mayra's research informed regional advocacy ahead of and at COP 2025. Castin's work continues through the NSF-funded Land Observatory. Maha's project was intentionally locally embedded, prioritizing community-led outcomes over international amplification. For Joliesse, the fellowship period emphasized learning and early pilots; post-fellowship collaboration opportunities have been more limited.

These differences reflect structure more than individual effort. Many relationships foundational to the fellowships' progress predated the fellowship, and the longer their prior history, the more likely they are to endure. Some fellows sustained professional collaborations through those existing partnerships, such as Sisty with Kelly, Scott with Castin, and Eduardo with Carolina. Others produced tangible resources that have potential to outlive the fellowship period,

including training manuals, organizational guides, and research frameworks. Because fellowship designs are context specific, Maha and Mayra did not include organizational partners, and their projects did not require them. A lesson for the design of future programs is to invite partnership structures when applicable and useful, while recognizing that not every model will benefit from them.

Building stronger continuity means thinking beyond the fellowship timeline. Fellows need clear pathways into networks that will support them long after funding ends. Their insights need to be embedded in institutional practices or organizational tools that others can use. Partner organizations require communication protocols that survive transitions and busy periods. Work needs financial sustainability rather than dependence on a single champion's goodwill. In crisis contexts, the measure of success shifts; sometimes survival and sustained presence matter more than polished deliverables.

The experiences of these eight fellows reaffirmed several principles at the heart of Sandra Smithey's vision. Even modest, well-structured packages of support that combine flexible funding with accompaniment from trusted partners can generate impact at a scale beyond the immediate context. Direct funding to emerging and at-risk activists allowed them to pursue ambitious goals while protecting their safety, rather than abandoning their work under pressure. Trusting fellows to define their own priorities, choose their collaborators, and determine how best to adapt to changing circumstances consistently led to more creative and grounded outcomes than donor-imposed plans or strict reporting requirements. In several cases, a small infusion of resources bridged critical gaps, allowing progress to continue when it might otherwise have stalled.

Ultimately, the Sandra N. Smithey Fellowship for Equity and Accountability in International Development honored Sandra's legacy by supporting exactly the kind of frontline advocates she championed: people committed to pro-poor, sustainable development that delivers real benefits to communities rather than serving elite interests. These eight fellows showed that meaningful change requires more than money. It demands trust in people's capacity to know what their communities need. It requires flexibility to respond when circumstances shift. It depends on partnerships that recognize fellows as experts rather than beneficiaries. And it needs acknowledgment that lived experience provides a form of knowledge that no academic training can replace.

Their work continues in tools they created, pathways they opened, organizations they strengthened, movements they supported. Sisty's community energy cooperative model is spreading across Tanzania. Eduardo's training manuals are equipping Indigenous federations to navigate IDB bureaucracy. Maha's students are debating economic policy in Bangladesh's new political era. Joillesse's organizational guides are helping her team monitor projects in Cameroon. Castin's Anti-Corruption Unit pathway is available to rural Haitians defending their land. Mayra's research has grounded Indigenous women's advocacy at COP 30. Vuthy's organization not only survived amidst government retaliation and persecution, but reached goals more than a decade in the making. Prekkshya's ecosystem support kept crucial organizations alive through Nepal's funding crisis.

The fellows embody Sandra Smithey's legacy in practice, recognizing that those working on the frontlines of accountability know what they need, and trusting them to lead even when—especially when—circumstances demand changes to the plan.

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Working Papers

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American University
School of International Service
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