Habitat International Coalition
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التحالف الدولي للموئل
अंतरराष्ट्रीय पर्यावास गठबंधन

HIC

ICARRD+20

Habitat International Coalition Delegation at ICARRD+20





Background and Context

The International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD+20) marks two decades since the original global convening on agrarian reform, land governance and rural development.[1] The conference renewed the multilateral platform for States, United Nations entities, Indigenous Peoples, civil society organizations (CSOs), social movements, academia and other stakeholders to assess progress, identify persistent challenges, reaffirm commitments and adopt new ones toward more-equitable and sustainable land, natural resource governance and the continuous improvement[2] of rural livelihoods.

Hosted by the Government of Colombia at Cartagena de Indias, with support from the Government of Brazil, ICARRD+20 took place on 24–28 February 2026 in a context of deepening land inequality, increased land concentration, climate change impacts, rural displacement, food insecurity and shrinking civic space for land and environment defenders. The global convergence of climate, biodiversity, conflict, food and financial crises has further intensified pressure on land and natural resources, disproportionately affecting small-scale farmers, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, women, youth and other marginalized communities.

The conference was to build upon internationally recognized frameworks developed since the 2006 ICARRD, including the 2010 Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Land, Fisheries and Forest Tenure (VGGT), the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2018 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' 2022 General Comment No. 26, authoritatively interpreting state obligations related to land, other relevant human rights instruments and sustainable-development commitments, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. ICARRD+20. Therefore, ICARRD+20 represents not only a process for reviewing 2006 ICARRD commitments, but also a strategic moment to strengthen accountability, reinforce human rights-based approaches to land governance, and promote needed democratic and inclusive agrarian reform processes.

In response to ICARD+20's purposes and composition, FAO's Director-General withheld support and endorsement of the conference. This official estrangement by the UN's relevant agency at the highest level of management posed an added institutional, political and material challenges to ICARRD+20's organization.

For the Habitat International Coalition (HIC), participation in ICARRD+20 was closely aligned with its mandate to promote human rights to land, housing and habitat. Land governance is

[1] The original International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD) was convened in 2006 at Porto Alegre, Brazil, under the auspices of the Food and Agriculture Organization. https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/91ca8a1c-9e7a-4b27-a5e9-6279a12eac67.

[2] States parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) are obliged to ensure "progressive realization of rights" (article 2.1) and "the continuous improvement of living conditions" (article 11). ICESCR (1966), https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights.

intrinsically linked to adequate housing, gender equality, climate justice, and the realization of habitat-related rights in both rural and urban contexts. HIC's engagement at ICARRD+20 reflected its commitment to ensuring that agrarian reform processes are grounded in human rights principles, social justice, gender equity, and meaningful community participation.

Against this backdrop, ICARRD+20 provided a critical opportunity for HIC to contribute its expertise, amplify the voices of grassroots movements and habitat defenders, and strengthen global and regional alliances aimed at securing equitable, sustainable and rights-based land governance systems.

Objectives of Participation

HIC delegation aimed to

1. Represent human rights-grounded civil society perspectives on land, housing, and habitat governance;
2. Contribute to policy discussions on equitable land governance and agrarian reform;
3. Strengthen collaboration with global civil society networks and grassroots movements;
4. Highlight the linkages between land governance, climate justice, and housing rights.

Composition of the Delegation

The HIC delegation comprised representatives from Member networks and CSOs working on land and habitat rights. Delegates brought expertise from diverse regional contexts and contributed perspectives on land governance challenges affecting communities in different parts of the world.

Name	Member Organisation/Structure	Country
Ms. Hassiba Belghith	Association de Citoyenneté et de Développement Durable (AC2D)	Tunisia
Ms. Maede Salimi	Center for Sustainable Development and Environment (CENESTA)	Iran
Name	**Member Organisation/Structure**	**Country**
Mr. Joseph Schechla	Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN)	Egypt
Mr. Derrick Sebaka	Habitat Defenders Africa (HDA)	Uganda
Ms. Laura Tabet	Nawaya	Egypt
Mr. Hilary Zhou	Zimbabwe Peoples Land Rights Movement	Zimbabwe

HIC Members and affiliates attending ICARRD+20 under other affiliations		
Khalid al-Khawaldeh	Dana and Qadisiyah Local Community Cooperative (attending as World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples)	Jordan
Massa Kone	HIC Board-designated social movement representative (Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles – West Africa (GCLWS WA and Malian Convergence against Land Grabbing (CMAT), attending as LVC)	Mali
Musa Sowe	Attending as Network of Farmers' and Agricultural Producers' Organizations of West Africa (ROPPA)	The Gambia

Pre-ICARRD+20 Events

Participation in the Academic Conference: Land, Life and Society

The International Academic Conference "Land, Life and Society" took place from 20–22 February 2026 at the University of Cartagena. It served as the preparatory event for scholars participating in ICARRD+20, bringing together multi-disciplinary researchers, policy experts, and practitioners from all regions of the world.

The objective of the conference was to provide evidence-based research and policy insights on critical issues such as land governance, agrarian reform, rural inequality, food sovereignty, and sustainable territorial development. The discussions aimed to generate recommendations that would inform the debates and policy directions of ICARRD+20.

During this event, HIC representatives contributed to discussions with academics, researchers, and practitioners on theoretical and substantive issues related to land governance, housing rights, displacement, and social justice in rural and urban territories, and the enjoyment of human rights.

HIC delegates emphasized the strong linkages between agrarian reform, secure land tenure, and the human right to adequate housing. They highlighted that equitable access to land is essential not only for sustaining rural livelihoods but also for enabling sustainable human settlements and ensuring communities' access to remedy and reparation in situations of land dispossession, displacement, or other rights violations.

The delegation stressed that agrarian reform must go beyond mere "access" to land but integrate the international law interpretation of enjoyment of any substantive right, whereby "access" is one of an inextricable bundle of entitlements. Other important discussions addressed the patterns of market forces and climate-change adaptation finance forcing small-scale farmers from their lands. The various inputs were reduced to the "4-R" framework in a written submission from the academic conference, which was to be annexed to the official ICARRD+20 Declaration.

On the first day, a La Via Campesina (LVC) representative asserted a formula for agrarian reform consisting of four "Rs": recognition, redistribution, restitution, and regulation. Over the three days,

scholars debated this abstraction, adding more “R” words to the construct. By the end of the three-day conference, the exercise snowballed into a composite of no fewer than nine “R” words, including "regeneration," “representation,” “resettlement,” “recording” (with adequate cadaster systems), “revolution” and, from the Indigenous perspective, “respect,” “responsibility,” “reciprocity,” and “relationality.”

An interesting finding from the conference was how scholars share common discoveries across disciplines, including international law, when they converge in such forums. Much critical discussion focused on the notions of land as property coinciding with European colonization, a topic that called for deeper interrogation of the dualist Judeo-Christian notion of human adherents dominating and, thus, “owning” and disposing of nature.



HIC delegates Mr. Schechla and Mr. Sebaka, intervening during the “Land, Life and Society” academic conference.

Forum of Peoples and Social Movements

The Forum of Movements and Peoples for Land, Water, Territory, and Dignity, held immediately prior to the official ICARRD+20 on 22–23 February 2026 in Cartagena, Colombia, was organized by the Food Sovereignty International Planning Committee (IPC) with support from the Colombian government. Among the IPC’s preparations involved its Land, Water and Territories Working Group drafting a position paper integrating member inputs. The forum served as the space for civil society to prepare its input to ICCARD+20, including in the form of a statement annexed to the official ICARRD+20 Declaration.

It served as the space bringing together peasant movements, Indigenous Peoples, rural women, youth organizations, fisherfolk, and CSOs to share experiences and articulate common demands to reform land governance and agrarian policy to operationalize justice in the rural sphere. The objective was to ensure that grassroots perspectives and lived realities of communities affected by land conflicts, displacement, dispossession, and manifest inequity inform the global policy discussions during ICARRD+20. HIC aligned with the call of rural food producers, social movements and other stakeholders to use the opportunity of ICARRD+20 to move beyond technocratic fixes, as well as the governments of Colombia and Brazil calling for socially owned land without the pressures of freehold ownership.

During this forum, HIC delegates contributed to the discussions by presenting real-life testimonies and statements reflecting situations where land, housing, and habitat rights are under severe threat, and how urban food-insecure populations relate to the agrarian-reform agenda.

In particular, HIC delivered a strong statement highlighting the realities faced by communities in conflict situations, including those in Palestine, Sudan, Western Sahara and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where armed conflict, occupation, displacement, and territorial control continue to undermine communities' land and housing rights.

The statement placed a special focus on the situation in Palestine, emphasizing the impacts of war, forced displacement, destruction of homes, and restrictions on access to land and basic services. The statement was delivered by HIC delegate Dr. Mohamed al-Salimiya from Palestine, who shared first-hand perspectives on the ongoing humanitarian and human rights crisis affecting the Palestinian People, in general, and land-based food-producing communities, in particular, within the system of Israeli apartheid across historic Palestine.

Through this intervention, HIC underscored the importance of defending against gross violations of housing, land, and related habitat rights in situations of conflict, occupation and war, calling for stronger, better-informed and practical international solidarity and preventive and remedial policy of states to protect affected communities and uphold their international human rights obligations.



HIC delegate Dr. Mohamed al-Salimiya sharing first-hand insights on the humanitarian and human rights challenges facing the Palestinian People under Israeli colonization.

Furthermore, HIC delegates played an active role in facilitating discussions during the forum's breakout sessions. HIC delegates contributed to discussions in the Africa Working Group and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Working Group. These regional workshops were designed to enable participants to exchange experiences, reflect on context-specific challenges, and develop regionally grounded recommendations to ICARRD+20.

Organizers asked each regional group also which "R" word of the LVC-proffered construct (recognition, redistribution, restitution, or regulation) would be most relevant for each region in

advancing agrarian reform, rural development, and social justice. The MENA group reported back to the plenary its support for applying instead the remedy-and-reparations framework (RRF) already adopted by acclamation in the UN General Assembly, also exactly 20 years ago, but overlooked by both the academic and civil society agrarian reform deliberations.

The argument for adopting that framework was that it forms a construct more comprehensive than the proposed four Rs and a minimum standard that states must not derogate in their ICARRD+20 Declaration and associated commitments. The RRF entitlements apply to the deprivation typically inflicted upon small-scale food producers and other marginalized constituencies and align with the outcomes of the codification debate initiated 50 years ago in the UN Commission of Human Rights.

During these sessions, HIC representatives guided dialogue among participants on critical issues such as reparation as a key pathway for advancing community-led habitat solutions. The discussions provided a platform for participants from different regions to share grassroots experiences, identify common structural challenges, and articulate collective advocacy messages. These contributions later informed the broader civil society recommendations presented during ICARRD+20.

Through its active engagement in both plenary interventions and regional breakout discussions, HIC contributed to the cross-regional dialogue in plenary and solidarity among movements working to achieve land, housing, and habitat justice worldwide.



HIC delegation actively engaging in the Africa Working Group discussions.



HIC delegation actively engaging in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Working Group discussions.

The Main Conference (ICARRD+20)

The Ministerial representatives of the Colombian and Brazilian governments opened the official conference, which brought together governments, United Nations agencies, civil society organizations, social movements, academic institutions, legal experts and community representatives from around the world to review progress made since 2006 and to identify pathways toward more-equitable land governance, agrarian reform, and inclusive rural development. The formal proceedings followed a rally of the nongovernmental participants, whereupon many organizations draped the conference stage with their self-identifying banners and flags.

Amid this colorful setting, the conference focused on key themes such as equitable access to land, sustainable land governance, food security, climate resilience, and the protection of communities whose livelihoods depend on land and natural resources. It also provided a global platform for dialogue on how land policies can support the achievement of the United Nation 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

HIC delegates actively participated in the main conference sessions, engaging in plenary discussions, thematic dialogues, and civil society exchanges and networking opportunities. Through these engagements, HIC contributed perspectives grounded in the human rights to adequate housing, land, habitat and remedy, highlighting the importance of addressing land governance challenges from a human right–based approach.

On the second day of the conference, Colombian President Gustavo Petro addressed participants with a speech that celebrated his country's diversity and progress through decades of turmoil. He celebrated the alignment of policy with the priorities of Colombia's small-scale food producers but also warned of the impending international war that was brewing. In fact, the US-Israeli aggression against Iran began two days later, while ICARRD+20 was in session.

In the conference discussions, HIC delegates emphasized that agrarian reform and rural development cannot be separated from broader issues of habitat rights already codified and/or adopted as global policy commitments such as social production of habitat, social and econlogical function of land climate justice, and protection of vulnerable communities, while upholding international law. They shared experiences from HIC Member organizations working on forced evictions, land restitution, community-led housing solutions aligned with states' New Urban Agenda commitments to social production of habitat, policy coherence as defined by the Committee on World Food Security and protection of land and environmental defenders.

On that day also, after months of obstruction by the FAO Director-General, FAO's Global Land Observatory (GLO) launched the findings of its joint study with International Land Coalition and on the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (CIRAD): *The Status of Land Tenure and Governance.* It reveals that only 35% of the world's land has documented ownership, with 1.1 billion adults at risk of losing their land rights. It emphasizes that land inequality drives poverty and environmental damage, requiring improved, inclusive data to support the VGGT. The key findings of the 2026 report indicate:

- Low Documentation: The majority of global land lacks formal documentation, increasing risks for vulnerable populations.
- High Risk: Approximately 1.1 billion adults (nearly 1 in 4) face potential loss of land/housing rights within five years.
- Inequality Crisis: Land inequality drives poverty, hunger, social conflict, and environmental degradation.
- Regional Pressure: "Land squeezes" in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are fueled by population growth and industrial expansion.
- Women's Rights: Policies for women's land rights are often inadequately implemented.

The study identifies its key focus areas and frameworks as:

- Tenure Guidelines: The report supports the VGGT to promote secure rights, especially for indigenous and local communities.
- Data & Monitoring: It highlights the need for better disaggregated data to track land tenure security, particularly regarding gender and customary tenure.
- Sustainability: Secure land tenure is identified as crucial for combating climate change and protecting biodiversity.

The ground-breaking report serves as a primary reference for policy makers, civil society, and the private sector to promote sustainable development, especially in the context of ICARRD+20. While the discussion after the presentation was receptive and welcomed the data, some called for the GLO to develop the scope further to cover all lands, forests and fisheries subject to the VGGT and to identify measures needed to secure tenure for those living without legal protection (as called for in CESCR's General Comment No. 4 on the human right to housing) and to prohibit forced eviction (as required in CESCR's General Comment No. 7 and other instruments of international human rights and humanitarian law).

On day three, HIC provided written input to the special panel on the human right to food, which its moderator instrumentalized, linking agrarian reform to the RRF and the related legal definition of land rights beyond mere "access" to include also "equitable and sustainable…use of, and control over land."

HIC's participation also emphasized the need for greater collaboration across urban, rural and Indigenous movements, reinforcing the understanding that struggles for land justice are interconnected across territories and confront common adversarial forces. This HIC message of convergence highlighted the need for policies that ensure secure land tenure, inclusive land governance, urban agriculture, gender equality and equity, and the protection of communities facing displacement due to conflict, development projects, market forces and/or climate impacts.

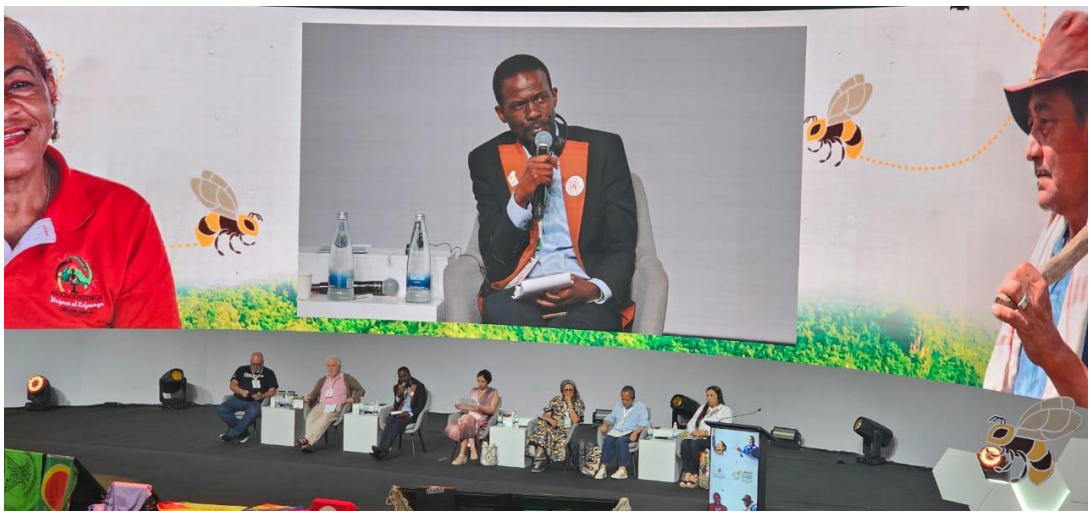
Throughout its engagement in ICARRD+20, HIC reaffirmed its commitment to cross-movement global advocacy for land, housing, and habitat rights, while supporting community-driven

approaches that promote the already-standing commitments of states to social justice, social production of habitat, the social and environmental functions of land, and sustainable development.



HIC delegates and allies attending the opening of the ICARRD+20 plenary.





Hilary Zhou addressing the final plenary of ICARRD+20, 27 February 2026



Joseph Schechla unpacking the human rights approach to agrarian reform in a ICARRD+20 side event on practical recommendations (L) and in a plenary discussion of initiatives and barriers (R).

In the ultimate plenary session, HIC delegate Hilary Zhou opened the panel on "Who Controls the Land, Oil, and Minerals? History and Future of Resource Geopolitics." He put the question into historic perspective by reminding conference goers that, in addition to the 20-year anniversary of ICARRD, we also just passed the 70th anniversary of the Bandung Conference and its Declaration, which inaugurated the Non-aligned Movement and guided the ensuing decolonization process.

With a view to how far we have yet to advance in that process toward global coherence with those principles, he recalled also that the African Union just completed its thematic focus for 2025 as the year of "Justice for Africans and People of African Descent through Reparations." In response to the question of practical recommendations for restoration of peoples' sovereignty over natural resources, including land, reparation would mean implementation of the RRF by applying its seven integral elements: restitution, return, resettlement (when return is not physically possible), rehabilitation, compensation for those values lost and not subject to restitution, real guarantees of not-repetition and the satisfaction of those affected that justice has been served.

Whether in the academic conference, peoples' forum, the official conference, IPC-organized side events, or IPC platform's position paper, HIC intervened to uphold the relevant international norms developed over the past 20 years, building on the law as a minimum standard and red line not to be breached by states and other stakeholders. While the sessions debated the Rs for agrarian reform, HIC reminded of the preventive nature of agrarian reform to avoid future violations, deprivations and conflict that cause further displacements, dispossession and planetary destruction.

By introducing the RRF, HIC also pointed out the need for operationalizing the remedial function of human rights so that agrarian reform contribute to policy coherence with reparation for past violations. These measures must prevail as colonialism takes many forms today and takes over

basic means of production as well, such as seeds and food sovereignty, while agroecology strategies are also central to the land struggle and autonomy that also heals the planet.

ICARRD+20 outcomes

During the closing ceremony, Colombian women and men from the social movement (Indigenous people, peasants, Raizal people, Afro-Colombians, Palenqueros, and other aquatic communities) signed a National Pact for the Implementation of a Comprehensive and Popular Structural Agrarian and Aquaculture Reform together with the National Government, represented by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

That document is considered a matter of historical and political justice because it reaffirms the legitimacy of popular and community expressions that build life and territory throughout Colombia and fully recognizes the mandate of peasant communities, Indigenous Peoples, Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquero Peoples in the structural transformation of the country. In other words, it is a foundational pact for building a Comprehensive and Popular Structural Agrarian and Aquaculture Reform, moving toward a Colombia at peace, with democracy and social, economic, and environmental justice.



Colombian Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Martha Carvajalino with other signatories of the National Pact.

After an insular process of state delegations negotiating over the ICARRD+20 Declaration language, the outcome was disappointing. The final declaration was weak in its terminology and committed actions. After an emergency IPC meeting held the night before, when all but the final edits were done, the IPC decided to reject it.

Language on Indigenous Peoples was harmful, equating and conflating them with the meaningless term “Local Communities” (also appearing capitalized in the Declaration as if a proper noun). In international law, Indigenous Peoples hold distinct collective rights, including to their self-determination, land, territories and resources, as recognized in numerous deliberative instruments,

not least of which is UNDRIP. However, the discussion in the emergency IPC meeting revealed also a lack of common understanding about the Indigenous Peoples issues involved and values at stake. It was learned also that the delegations who drove the right-derogating confusion were India and Indonesia, which are states occupying Indigenous Peoples and usurping their lands and resources (in Kashmir and West Papua/Iryan Jaya, respectively) This effort to degrade language follows experiences with the Committee on World Food Security, where Morocco–along with Indonesia–has sought to also conflate Indigenous Peoples with indistinct "local communities" to derogate their rights. (N.B.: Morocco, having illegally occupied Western Sahara for 50 years as of 2025, did not participate in ICARRD+20.) (See related discussion in the "Terminology Corner" of *Land Times*/*أحوال الأرض*, issue No. 34.)

The Declaration is weak on support and protection of pastoralists, makes only passing reference to agroecology, and recognizes only "the needs and aspirations of rural people," but not their rights and corresponding state obligations. The lawless ICARRD+20 Declaration does acknowledge that relevant global policy processes "should include the participation of civil society, and other UN Organizations dealing with food sovereignty, food security, agrarian reform and rural development." However, the ICARRD+20 political process did not rise to the "participation" as a level of engagement,[3] but remained at the level of tokenism, and the Declaration reflects that shortcoming.

The IPC global and regional Members and constituents found this outcome unacceptable. Although they expressed sincere gratitude to the governments of Colombia and Brazil for having needed agrarian reform back on the international agenda. In response, IPC delegates took the stage and presented their own declaration.

Consistent with HIC experience over the decades, each succeeding iteration of a global policy instrument risks adopting a standard inferior to its predecessor. Notably also, this ICARRD+20 gathered the delegations of 28 states, as compared with the 90+ represented at ICARRD 2006. On the positive side, the official ICARRD+20 Declaration did commit states to reconvening at least every three years to revisit their ICARRD+20 commitments.

Conclusion

The participation of the HIC delegation at ICARRD+20 demonstrated the critical role that civil society networks play in advancing human rights-based approaches to land governance, agrarian reform, and rural development. Through its engagement in the academic conference, the Forum of Peoples and Social Movements, and the official ICARRD+20 sessions, HIC contributed substantive perspectives grounded in international human rights law, grassroots experiences, and long-standing advocacy for housing, land, and habitat rights.

Throughout the conference processes, HIC consistently emphasized that agrarian reform must go beyond technical land redistribution to encompass broader principles of justice, accountability,

[3] See Sherry Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (July 1969), pp. 216–24, https://organizingengagement.org/models/ladder-of-citizen-participation/?print=pdf.

and remedy for historic injustices. The delegation highlighted the need to integrate frameworks such as the Remedy and Reparations Framework (RRF) into global land governance discussions, ensuring that policies address both preventive and remedial dimensions of land dispossession, displacement, and rights violations. In doing so, HIC reaffirmed that equitable access to land is inseparable from the realization of the habitat-related human rights to adequate housing, food, water, continuous improvement of living conditions, and a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

HIC's interventions also underscored the interconnected nature of struggles for land justice across rural and urban contexts, linking agrarian reform to issues such as climate justice, gender equality, conflict-related displacement, and the protection of land and environmental defenders. By amplifying the voices and experiences of affected communities from Africa and the Middle East to Latin America and beyond the delegation helped strengthen cross-regional solidarity among movements working toward socially just and sustainable land governance systems.

While the final ICARRD+20 Declaration fell short of the expectations of many civil society actors, particularly in its weak language on rights, participation, and protections for Indigenous Peoples and rural communities, the conference nonetheless revived global attention to the urgent need for agrarian reform. The response of the International Planning Committee (IPC) and allied movements in presenting an alternative declaration reflected the continued commitment of civil society to uphold international human rights standards and to hold states accountable to their obligations.

Ultimately, HIC's participation in ICARRD+20 reaffirmed its strategic role in bridging grassroots rural, urban and Indigenous struggles, policy advocacy, and international human rights frameworks. Moving forward, HIC will continue working with its members, social movements, and partners in the spirit of unity manifest in the ICARRD+20 closing ceremony. They have redoubled their commitments to strengthen global advocacy for equitable and sustainable land governance, social production of habitat, secure land tenure, and the protection of communities whose livelihoods, cultures, and identities are intrinsically tied to land and territory. Through sustained collaboration and solidarity, these efforts aim to advance transformative agrarian reform processes that promote justice, dignity, and sustainable futures for all.

END