



Interview with Galina Angarova (SIRGE Coalition)

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you start by introducing yourself and your organization, and sharing a bit about your approach to working with Indigenous people and Indigenous territories.

Galina Angarova: My name is Galina Angarova, and I come from the Buryat People in Siberia. A lot of the arboreal forests are in Canada and Russia, especially Siberia; it is a highly biodiverse bioforestry region. I currently live and work from the unceded territories of the Multnomah people, which is now known as the city of Portland. I serve as executive director of the SIRGE Coalition, which stands for Securing Indigenous Peoples' Rights in the Green Economy. We are focused on the operationalization of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, especially the right to FPIC [free, prior, and informed consent] in the transition to the green economy and digital and energy transition.

I have been working and supporting several institutions in a volunteer capacity, like GEF [Global Environmental Facility]. GEF is a multilateral fund that supports biodiversity protections and various conservation methods globally. I also work with the Wildlife Conservation Society, and I will be launching a new initiative that focuses on promoting Indigenous-led climate solutions. It is focused on land-based solutions that benefit livelihoods, economic prosperity, autonomy, and climate solutions.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you share a bit more about how you use FPIC as a guiding principle, and share some examples of such consent?

Galina Angarova: We co-developed and co-authored a guide on FPIC for communities. It is a step-by-step guide on how to create your own protocols and how to understand that FPIC is not just a right, it's a process with four principles. Our guide helps communities and their leaders move through the FPIC process, whether it's consent or a withdrawal of consent, with any project that arrives in their lands and territories.

We work with FPIC as both a right and a process within the SIRGE Coalition. We mostly apply it to extractives, as we work with mining and transition minerals that go towards digital energy transitions, but it can be applied universally. Any project that arrives in Indigenous peoples' lands and territories has to seek FPIC. It doesn't matter whether it's even Indigenous land or not;



if you are not from the land or territory [where you are proposing a project], the project has to seek FPIC.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you share some examples of how that's changed the relationship between organizations doing the activities and the Indigenous communities?

Galina Angarova: It gives the community time to think everything through, and it gives them the ability to have self-determination. It also builds trust. It builds respect for the community. It provides all the good, important things that Indigenous peoples are requesting: respect, reciprocity, trust, time to make a decision, and the ability to use their own governance systems to make decisions.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When was the last time you used FPIC?

Galina Angarova: We use it every time. We make sure that we request consent prior to doing anything that requires consent, so I do it on a daily basis.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you have any examples of how you've used it specifically for extractives or renewable energies?

Galina Angarova: In Norway, companies and the government decided to go onto the lands of Indigenous peoples to build windmills, and it has caused a lot of issues. The Indigenous people went to court, and they had a favorable decision; however, the company and the government decided they're working together on this case, and that they're still going to build those windmills, so they're basically breaking the law.

We work with multiple communities, and we support their self-determined decisions. There have been cases in Guatemala and in the United States. Recently, in the US, we've supported the Paiute-Shoshone people in understanding FPIC and how they can apply it in their self-determined development as they fight against a lithium mine. There was a huge investment from GM to develop the mine on their land. We've supported communities in Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile on lithium mining, as well as communities in Peru, Brazil, Indonesia, Sweden, and Norway. There are multiple cases.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: The issue and the communities you are working with are so location-specific in terms of culture, language, and geography. How do you work on a global scale?

Galina Angarova: It's reflected in the governance. We have an Indigenous Peoples Council, and we have two representatives per each of the seven sociocultural regions. One of them is a global, political leader from that region, and one is a leader from an affected community. We recognize that everything is very place-based and very specific to a context, and we all operate from that understanding. When we provide this guide to FPIC, we articulate that you can use some principles, but you also have to understand that you are the ones who have to come up with your own protocols based on your governance system, based on your landscape, based on your local context, and especially based on the legal context you are working with because, in some places, there is no recognition of Indigenous peoples' rights.



The first thing that identifies Indigenous peoples is self-identification, and then there are other characteristics like language, culture, specific land use practices, pre-colonial existence, and so on, according to the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In the African context, it becomes very complicated very quickly, so it's up to the community to decide how they're going to approach that. Communities that do not identify themselves as Indigenous can still use FPIC and still build a FPIC protocol.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How many people sit on this Council, and how often do you meet? Do you meet remotely? How does the governance structure work in terms of cadence?

Galina Angarova: There are currently 14 people, and our max is 16. Just an hour ago, I had a meeting with someone who serves on the Saami Council in Norway, and he agreed to join, so we'll have a new one. We're also looking for someone from Asia. The representatives serve a three-year term, and then they can be renewed for another three-year term. After six years, there will be an opportunity for someone else to step in.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How long has this Council existed?

Galina Angarova: We have been working informally since 2020, initially as a response to a tragedy in the Russian Arctic in May of 2020, when 21,000 tons of diesel were spilled into the local waterways by Norilsk Nickel. At the time, they were the largest producer of nickel in the world. Since then, Indonesia and the Philippines have become number one and two in nickel production, but Norilsk Nickel remains the number three company in the world. They have engaged in multiple violations of human rights, Indigenous peoples' rights, and environmental rights. We started campaigning for clarity and transparency in supply chains and working with about a dozen end-user companies such as Tesla, GM, BMW, Stellantis, among others, pushing to implement Indigenous peoples' policies. We've had some successes.

Now, the Indigenous Peoples Council meets once a quarter. They get informed about what the executive committee, work streams, and member organizations are doing, and they engage in some of our day-to-day activities. We invite them to the work streams because our coalition is organized through work streams. We currently have about 55 people from six organizations joining different work streams based on their job descriptions and the time they can allocate.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How many different work streams do you have?

Galina Angarova: We have six work streams: policy advocacy, corporate engagement and advocacy, communications, research priorities, support to communities, and fundraising.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Are the same people who are deciding on the work streams' goals actually implementing the work?

Galina Angarova: Yes. Even though we have been in existence for five years, and officially since 2022, we only just launched the SIRGE Secretariat in February, when I stepped down from Cultural Survival to lead the coalition as executive director. I sent a memo at that time saying that decisions have to be made by the frontline staff.



Those who are in the work streams have to decide their priorities and implement them, but they also have to be able to make those decisions, and I will be going to those meetings. They can have feedback loops in real time.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: They're paid members?

Galina Angarova: Yes.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Your communications work stream has several people who collaborate to create goals for communication and decide what to prioritize. When they implement the work, do they assign it to a larger group, or do they implement it themselves?

Galina Angarova: The communications work stream is made up of comms professionals from each of the six organizations. It is the most agile group out of the six, so they know what they're doing. They come up with a plan, one, two, three. I don't even have to monitor them, but within the Secretariat, we have a comms coordinator who is leading and supporting this group. She's organizing meetings, taking notes, and reporting back to the Secretariat about how we can support them, but they're professionals. I come to their meetings sometimes because I'm interested, or I bring new ideas for them to consider, but that's it.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Are these six organizations global organizations, or are they place-based organizations?

Galina Angarova: Yes. Cultural Survival is a global organization where I used to serve as executive director. That was the birthplace of the coalition. Then, Tallgrass Institute, formerly First Peoples Worldwide, joined. They used to be US-specific, but now they're going global because they're focusing on investor relationships and trying to make a business case for FPIC. They have access to various financial circles. They also have legal expertise, which is what we needed to fill.

Batani Foundation used to be a Russia-based organization. The founder had to flee the country. He settled in Maine in the United States, and he moved the organization over as well. About a month ago, the Russian government again declared Batani a terrorist group. We took all of our profiles down from the website to wait out the threats. The founder used to be a member of the UN Permanent Forum, and for several years, he served as chair of the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights. He has expertise with the UN system and really strong relationships throughout all seven sociocultural regions of the world. They have very specific expertise in the Arctic and Russia.

The fourth organization, Earthworks, is not an Indigenous-led organization, but is the first organization to cover the topic of transitional critical minerals and discuss the future demand and supply sites. They were the first ones to generate reports about that and to examine the potential impacts on Indigenous peoples. We invited them because they had that information, experience, and knowledge. They're one of the co-founders.

Society for Threatened Peoples has renamed itself The Voices. We wanted to have a partner in Europe, and specifically in Switzerland, as a lot of the financial flows are going through Swiss banks. The organization has experience in dealing with those financial institutions and also connections to the Swiss government.



The sixth is the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs. They're based in Denmark and have 35 years of experience working globally, so have fostered many global relationships.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Does anybody ever approach you about being a part of these groups and join your work?

Galina Angarova: It's complicated because coalition work is not easy. Everybody has their own agenda, but we serve the mission. Our mission is to secure the rights of Indigenous peoples in the green economy and in energy and digital transitions. We have groups who approach us to be part of it, but at this moment, at this stage of our evolution as the coalition, we are only managing this one group of organizations. In the future, I hope to be able to bring in other organizations, especially local organizations and regional organizations in areas where the issues are taking place, but we're not there yet.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I know you've gotten support from Ford and other funders. What's helpful about philanthropic relationships? Is there anything in that relationship that you would advise other funders to duplicate?

Galina Angarova: That's complicated, too. As a secretariat, we're okay. We're a small team, and I was able to raise funds for us. The larger question is: how do I support the entire coalition? That's when the larger funding is needed. If we want to do the full scope and meet the ambition that we have as the coalition, the need is enormous. I need \$5 million a year.

Recently, our global coordinator, Brian, has become the lead negotiator for the Just Transition Work Programme under COP. This is an additional thing that was put on our plate. Even though we work through our constituencies through the seven sociocultural regions, it's still SIRGE that will have to allocate the time to do this.

The ambition is high, the plate is big, but the funding is not sufficient. I would love to be able to bring that funding. We got a \$2 million commitment just recently from one funder, \$1 million from another funder, but they're multi-year grants, so the gap is fairly big.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you partner with many NGOs, or do you have any advice about partnering with NGOs?

Galina Angarova: We have some really good partners in the community. We work in partnership with multiple organizations through the Lead the Charge campaign and the Sunrise Project. We work with Public Citizen, Rainforest Foundation Norway, Somo, and many other organizations. The list is pretty long.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Why do you work with so many NGOs? How do they help the work you're doing move forward?

Galina Angarova: Information sharing campaigns. We're pretty active in Europe. We're part of the Raw Materials Coalition, and our goal is to influence decision makers in the EU Parliament to include language in legislation that prioritizes Indigenous peoples and safeguards like FPIC. We were fairly successful in the past few years because some of these people have opened doors, like the European Environmental Bureau. I started engaging with them four years ago, and I went to Brussels multiple times. Whenever I was there, they would say, We organized this meeting



with this MEP [member of the European Parliament], and we would like you to go in with us and talk to them specifically about Indigenous peoples' rights. I thought that was a really good collaborative effort. We were able to influence the EU battery regulation, and we were able to influence the CSDDD [Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive]. We were also able to influence the Critical Raw Materials Act. A lot of local groups have been instrumental in moving that forward and opening doors.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you tell me a bit more about how you were able to influence those acts? How long did it take? What does that work look like?

Galina Angarova: I hired someone locally two years ago. She's Indigenous, and she's a scientist; she's incredible. I met her four years ago when I started traveling to Brussels. I couldn't keep travelling that way, but if we want to include a safeguard in a paragraph A, Section B somewhere that recognizes Indigenous peoples, or the UN Declaration of FPIC, or UN guiding principles, then we have to stay on top of things. We have to have meetings.

It's not one meeting, it's not two meetings. Sometimes we organize delegations, and we bring in community members from affected areas and impacted communities. We usually bring in ones we have been partnering with because they are from Europe, and are Saami people. Every year, we try to bring Saami representatives from Sweden or Norway to Brussels to speak directly to the MEPs, to the council members, and to folks from the EU Commission.

However, there's been a legislative rollback on a lot of things that we have achieved over the past four years. There are omnibus proposals that are trying to delete everything that we've achieved so far. It's very sad. If they're approved, I don't know what's going to be left of our efforts, especially the work we've done on the CSDDD, establishing requirements for companies to have certain due diligence in their operations.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Who's pushing it back? EU governments?

Galina Angarova: It mostly comes from the EU Commission, and the parliament has also moved more towards the right.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Where do you stand on the narrative around all of this? There are so many trade-offs and nuances and complexities in climate work. In this case, you have concerns about Indigenous peoples' rights, but you also have concerns about transitional economies, transition minerals, and bioforestry. So much of the renewable energy sources right now are coming from Indigenous peoples' territories. How do we make sense of that, or what are the alternatives, if any?

Galina Angarova: It's complicated. We're trying to move that narrative, but I'm also looking at it from different perspectives. I am part of this study group organized by CLUA [Climate and Land Use Alliance]. It's a consortium of six foundations, including ClimateWorks, Ford, Packard, Good Energies, and Porticus. It's a grant-making facility. They have a new strategy called FPC [Forests, People, Climate], and I'm one of the advisors to their sub-strategy on supply chains. I'm also supporting their communications study on narratives. I just had a meeting with them and they have done a pretty good analysis of what's working, what's not working, and what kind of narratives they want to move forward. They've studied all kinds of news and narratives in the



past several months. One of the things that they came up with is that the narrative on Indigenous peoples doesn't stick.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What narrative on Indigenous peoples doesn't stick?

Galina Angarova: The narrative that 54% of all transition minerals are on Indigenous peoples' land and territories. The narrative that we cannot mine ourselves out of the climate crisis. We cannot build the green future at the expense of Indigenous peoples, or at the expense of justice. That doesn't stick in the general population.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you say it doesn't stick, you mean it doesn't resonate? People don't understand it?

Galina Angarova: Yes. It's hard to face the truth. I'm actually planning to go over those study results later in the afternoon and try to understand word for word, line by line, what they came up with.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you think it doesn't stick because people feel like, If we can't mine, then what are we going to do? How are we going to get out of this?

Galina Angarova: Could be. I'm still trying to understand why. What the SIRGE Coalition is trying to say, in general, is that Indigenous peoples have the right to exist, and we cannot do this at the expense of justice. We cannot use the same extractive methods in this energy transition that we used for fossil fuels. This energy transition runs through Indigenous peoples' lands and lives. Upholding rights, especially the right to FPIC, is a solution. The new initiative I'm trying to birth introduces land-based solutions that can both feed and protect the climate.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are some solutions that come to your head immediately?

Galina Angarova: Mangroves, then kelp, agroecology, traditional agriculture, and soil restoration are a few of them. I've got a whole list.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you think about this year and events like COP, the World Conservation Congress, and Climate Week, and then you think about how this climate space has been gutted and all of these policy systems are moving super far right, do you feel discouraged from attending these events, or do you feel fired up to attend and speak as loudly as possible?

Galina Angarova: I don't want to go anywhere. I'm in my process right now, going through deep thinking, and I need to think about what I'm going to do with SIRGE and in what capacity I'm going to stay there. This is my baby, but I'm going to reduce my role if I want to birth something new, that is focused on solutions. I'm personally tired of fighting. My body can't fight anymore. I have to focus on creating, and I have pretty good fighters on the team already, so they can carry on. I need to provide a different way, to think of a different way of existing in this world. I don't think that COP30 will be a generative space for me, personally. There's a lot of fighting going on in the Indigenous constituency.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Around land use?



Galina Angarova: No, about money. It's become about money, and I don't want to attend it. I think that money will come when you have the right mission and you have a really good structure and grounding and scaffolding around it. It's really complicated right now. Brian just went to SB62 [UN Climate Change Conference]. It was ugly. That's what happens when money is coming into a vessel that's not ready. It's going to break, and that's what's happening.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is it all types of money, or specifically philanthropic or government funding that people are fighting over?

Galina Angarova: It's all of it. There are promises, and Indigenous peoples have been hearing those promises for years. There are billions here, there are billions there, but at the end of the day, [the communities don't see those billions]. I was in Kenya just two weeks ago with my sister Agnes, who's a Maasai leader in her community, and she was talking about how tired she is of fundraising and not getting anything. Their budget is \$45,000 a year. They feel like they're constantly begging. She wants to come up with a solution so she can be fully self-reliant. That's when it clicked for me, and I thought, I'm going to do this because we have to become self-reliant. We can't depend on grants anymore.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When we think about sustainability and scale, especially across regions, there are so many dependencies. It's not sustaining itself organically. The scale is almost becomes another dependency rather than being freeing.

Galina Angarova: Yes. I think that's what we need to rethink. I've been sitting with this, and I think have a proposal. I'm thinking through the details around how Indigenous communities approach this or that because most of this funding doesn't end where it's supposed to end. Those organizations are creating stories of impact that are not there. These communities need some initial funding to jumpstart.

Agnes was recently excited that she'd been able to buy two cisterns for keeping milk cold. They gather all of the milk from the entire village, and they keep it cold in those two, huge cisterns. This way, they're able to sell the milk to a producer. They were not able to do that in the past. I suggested making yogurt, and they said they would love to do that. They also have some beehives and some of the highest quality honey I've ever tasted. It would be great if they could access the local market. They have tons of ideas, but they just don't have the initial investment. Then the goal becomes, how do you make that sustainable?

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I've been hearing from so many people in bioforestry that they feel they can make the work itself sustainable, they can make the products, but they need help with the supply chain, with getting into a market, with getting onto social media, with distribution and access.

Galina Angarova: That's the piece I am working on. How do you provide mentorship over three years so you can build those supply chains? How do you create platforms so their services and their products are available to the local or maybe international market? I found the people who are going to help me do that.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did you find people who can help you do that?



Galina Angarova: In Kenya, I got access to the TED ecosystem because I did a TED Talk last year. Now, I'm getting invited into all these spaces to meet incredible people because I don't have the business expertise. I have Indigenous peoples' rights expertise, and some expertise in nonprofit management. We need people who have this business acumen, who understand how to build those supply chains, how to do good marketing, and I found those people.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's great that you're doing that work because it is definitely a need that has come out very clearly in the field.

Galina Angarova: Yes, I'm excited. I'm in a really good place because I have several young, Indigenous leaders, who I've prepped for this, and they're ready to take on this work.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I'm very honored to be speaking with you. Thank you so much for your time.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is the Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer: She leads on innovation and technology, leverages communication platforms for the network strategy and creates cool content. She has an MFA from Columbia's Film School and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, Praekelt.org, UNICEF, UNFPA, Save the Children, FCDO, Global Integrity and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*