What is the Right to Say NO?

Why are communities saying NO?

Communities across Africa are organising to STOP large destructive extractive activities. They are saying NO to mega hydro dams, industrial food plantations and large-scale fishing, fossil fuel extraction, false technology solutions to climate change (such as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD) or carbon capture in soil), and infrastructure, such as roads, rail, pipelines, and ports. In many resistances women play a central role because they have most to lose.

This dominant destructive approach to ‘development’ is based on the large-scale exploitation of natural resources, which is a major cause of the growing climate crisis, destroys people’s livelihoods, pollutes water and air, causes health problems, and creates more violence between people.

See information sheet 2 for more information about the economic and social system people are saying NO to.

How do we define the Right to Say NO?

The Right to Say NO (R2SayNO) is a call by communities for the right to a good and decent life, to health and wellbeing, to control over seeds and respect for collective land rights, to living a caring interdependent relationship with nature, to being free from all forms of violence, and to enjoying public and social services. It is a NO to a destructive economic system which harms people, land, and nature so that powerful companies can profit.

When communities say NO, they are defending nature and their daily reliance on different species of plants, fish, animals, and insects for their very survival. In their resistance against nature’s destruction, indigenous and traditional communities and self-identified groups are speaking for and protecting ‘voiceless’ nature.

The R2SayNO stands FOR decision-making by communities. Saying NO supports the right of communities to make decisions about their own future. At the same time, saying
NO challenges the power of companies and governments who take away a community’s land and resources.

This Right is born through resistance and so it is very centrally about POWER and a challenge to those who hold and use power destructively. Saying NO challenges systems of power and claims the right of communities to define their own interests and their own futures.

As communities and groups defend nature against big projects which destroy species and people, they are defending the right of future generations to exist, create family, and build community. If this dominant development model is not stopped, the cycle of life will be destroyed as species are killed off, whole territories will become uninhabitable, and people will not have the food, water, shelter, and safety they need to survive and recreate themselves.

The R2SayNO is driven from below by movements and communities who come together to insist on their right to make decisions and control their development. Their struggles may not immediately be informed by the idea of a legislated right. Theirs is a struggle based on the just notion that they have a right to exist. Tactically, the community or group will be supported to claim their R2SayNO by drawing on existing rights to land, to customary modes of decision-making, to the protection of biodiversity as the basis for the R2SayNO. Even if the right is legislated it is won by people in resistance claiming this right.

The R2SayNO draws on local, national, regional, and international tools and instruments, such as local bylaws, national legislation, regional and international human rights frameworks and protocols, legal precedents, and customary or traditional laws. The R2SayNO draws on Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) which recognises community or group participation in decision-making about their land and is included in some national laws and sub-regional or Africa-wide protocols. See information sheet 3 for more information about where the R2SayNO can be located.

When communities and groups say NO to large-scale natural resource exploitation they are saying YES to a different idea about development. They are defending what they have and how they live – their land and history, the way they produce and exchange, their social life and community, and the nature upon which their life depends. But their YES goes beyond what they have now to their dreams of what they want for their family and community. See information sheet 5 on the YES: the development alternative.

The R2SayNO is for the rights of girls and women to be involved in decision-making about a project that will impact them the most. In most communities, women are
supposed to take care of the family. This means that they need to grow and put food on the table, provide energy and water, and take care of the young and sick. Women are not born to do this work but are given these responsibilities by society. Because of these roles, it is women who are at the frontlines of the harm caused by extractives projects. Their voice in decision-making is very important if we are to live in a just and fair world.

Like FPIC, the R2SayNO is defined by the following four (plus one additional) features:

- **FREE** - Consent is given or withheld without pressure or threat.
- **PRIOR** - Consent is given before the project can begin.
- **INFORMED** - Consent is given or withheld after the community/group have timeously received all the relevant and appropriate information they need to make a fully informed decision.
- **CONTINUOUS** - If at any stage the community or group decides that the project has not fulfilled its promises or negative impacts arise that were never considered, they may withdraw their consent.
- **CONSENT** - The community or group takes a collective decision according to their traditional, customary or group norms to grant or withhold approval for the project.

Why is the Right to Say NO so important?

Many communities across Africa are resisting big projects and saying NO. It is their language of resistance and grows from the bottom-up. This is the power of the R2SayNO.

The R2SayNO brings together communities and movements that are resisting different types of projects which place their lives and livelihoods under threat. It is a thread which can bind together these struggles and create powerful movements for change.

A consent right for communities can undermine the enormous global power corporations have built and roll back the rate of dispossession of people’s land, resources, and livelihoods. The R2SayNO is crucial to deal with power inequalities between communities on the one hand, and powerful corporations and state power on the other.

An economic system which values profit over life (of people and of nature) has expanded into almost every place in the world. The R2SayNO is a powerful barrier against this system. It defends land, life, and nature. And is an important step to reverse benefits flowing to the few. It seeks a society that works for all for us now and for the right of future generations to exist.

“In their resistance against nature’s destruction, indigenous and traditional communities and self-identified groups are speaking for and protecting ‘voiceless’ nature”
Note: Some of the text in this information sheet is drawn from an unpublished concept note developed by a collective of organisations, including the Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC), the Southern African Rural Women’s Assembly (RWA), the Southern African Green Revolutionary Council (SAGRC), WoMin, and the Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE). With thanks to the collective.

This is one of 6 information sheets on the Right to Say No:

Information Sheet 1:
What is the Right to Say NO?

Information Sheet 2:
The Destructive Economic System Communities are Saying NO to

Information Sheet 3:
Laws and instruments communities may draw on to support their Right to Say NO

Information Sheet 4:
Why is the Right to Say NO a women’s rights question?

Information Sheet 5:
Communities say YES to the right to community decision making and the right to development that supports life

Information Sheet 6:
Dealing with risk when claiming the Right to Say NO

Physical Address:
Office 902, floor 9, Southpoint Corner, 87 De Korte Street, Johannesburg, 2001
Telephone: +27 11 339 1024
Email: info@womin.org.za

What is the Right to Say NO?