While many documented cases of indigenous community-centered enterprises have succeeded, many more have failed either fiscally or in strengthening community well-being. For example, multi-community enterprises of Belize, such as the Toledo Ecotourism Association (TEA), have struggled to meet expectations in regards to community engagement, cultural empowerment, and market implementation. In collaboration with Maya Leaders Alliance (MLA), an advocacy organization for 39 Maya villages in Southern Belize, we documented a human-centered process to connect the principles of biocultural heritage with multi-community governance and management. Biocultural heritage encompasses the interplay between traditional knowledge, biophysical diversity, and culture.

TEA was founded in 1990 to unite and support Maya communities interested in inviting guests into their homes to share in their traditions, biocultural resources, and natural beauty. However, the devastation of Hurricane Iris in 2001 resulted in subsequent governance struggles for the TEA. Eventually, community membership declined until only two communities remained.

Aiming to support Maya communities, including the ones that were once part of the TEA, MLA has been working towards the development of a new multi-community enterprise focused on Maya biological and cultural resources. By analyzing the governance structure of a TEA ecotourism initiative in a specific Maya community, we identified key guiding principles for successful community initiatives that supports the preservation of biocultural heritage.

To inform our work, we compiled a literature review on indigenous economic governance and ecotourism models, and conducted working session with community members. Using the human-centered design approach, we gained contextual information, as well as captured emotional responses further gauging user desires and aspirations. Our work outlines the process of identifying key principles for holistic business development in indigenous communities. Our proposed process is centered in respecting indigenous knowledge when scaling for market expansion. Oosterlaken (2009) suggests that human-centered design is effective in inspiring the exercise of individuals capabilities by fostering their agency. The individual's capabilities are characterized as the assets and capitals, that when nurtured, allow them to pursue the life they value (Sen, 2000). Development strategies must therefore respect the sovereignty of indigenous people when scaling community enterprises.