

ANNUAL MEETING REPORT

FLARE 2026

12th Annual Meeting

Bilbao, Basque Country, Spain

October 21–24, 2026

Forests as Spaces of Hope and Solidarity

Hosted in partnership with the
University of Deusto, Bilbao
FLARE Secretariat, Keough School of Global Affairs,
University of Notre Dame

FLARE | NOTRE DAME

THE 12TH FLARE ANNUAL MEETING

MEETING REPORT

The 12th FLARE Annual Meeting took place from October 21 to October 24, 2026, in Bilbao, Basque Country, Spain, hosted in partnership with the University of Deusto. This report provides an overview of the meeting and highlights some of the key events that took place during the meeting. It concludes by looking forward and thanking the 2026 Annual Meeting Team and Sponsors.

DATES	LOCATION	CO-HOST	THEME
October 21–24, 2026	Bilbao, Basque Country, Spain	University of Deusto	Forests as Spaces of Hope and Solidarity

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WELCOME REMARKS



Dr. Daniel C. Miller, FLARE Coordinator, welcomes participants to the 12th FLARE Annual Meeting.

Professor Daniel C. Miller

Welcome to the 12th FLARE Annual Meeting! This place is special to me. My wife's family is from the Basque Country; we were married here, and I have spent much time here since my first visit in 1997. The forests here are central to Basque culture, identity, and economy, and many of the issues they face resonate with forests elsewhere around the world. I am deeply grateful to our hosts from the Basque Government, represented by Dr. Adolfo Uriarte, Director of Natural Heritage and Climate Change Adaptation, and the University of Deusto, led by Rector and Dr. Juan José Exteberria, S.J., and his team, and to my colleagues at Notre Dame.

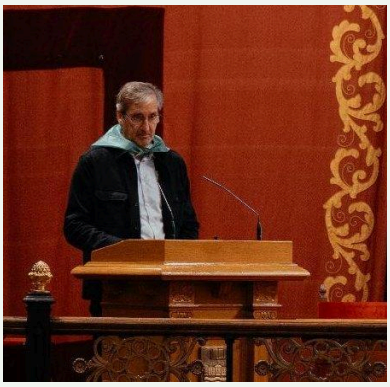
We have gathered to understand and care for what Pope Francis called "our common home." What is happening to our home is often not good: accelerating deforestation, the killing of environmental defenders, yawning inequality, technology-fueled alienation, and governments that seem unwilling to do more. This could lead to despair. But, as writer and climate activist Mary Annaïse Heglar puts it, home is always worth it.

That is where hope comes in. I do not mean passive optimism or blind faith, but a courageous commitment to possibility amid uncertainty. In forests—in the awe they can inspire, in those who steward and rely on them for their livelihoods, in their very existence—we can find hope. Hope inspires collective action, and solidarity, especially with the most marginalized, gives us hope in return. So, hope and solidarity exist in a kind of dance, informing and reinforcing each other in dynamic movement. I invite all of us to reflect on this dance and ask ourselves: where do you find hope, and how might you act even more in solidarity?

Welcome from our Hosts

Dr. Adolfo Uriarte

Director of Natural Heritage and Climate Change Adaptation,
Basque Government



“

The words hope and solidarity in the title of this conference are not passive ideas. They call for collective action in a time of uncertainty…Protecting forests means protecting our capacity to face the future.”

Dr. Juan José Etxeberria, S.J.

Rector of the University of Deusto



“

For those who live in and around a forest, it can also mean work, memory, identity, and belonging. It can hold the possibility of a future…We cannot care for forests without caring for the lives, rights, and hopes of the people whose futures are bound to them.”

OUR THEME

Forests as Spaces of Hope and Solidarity

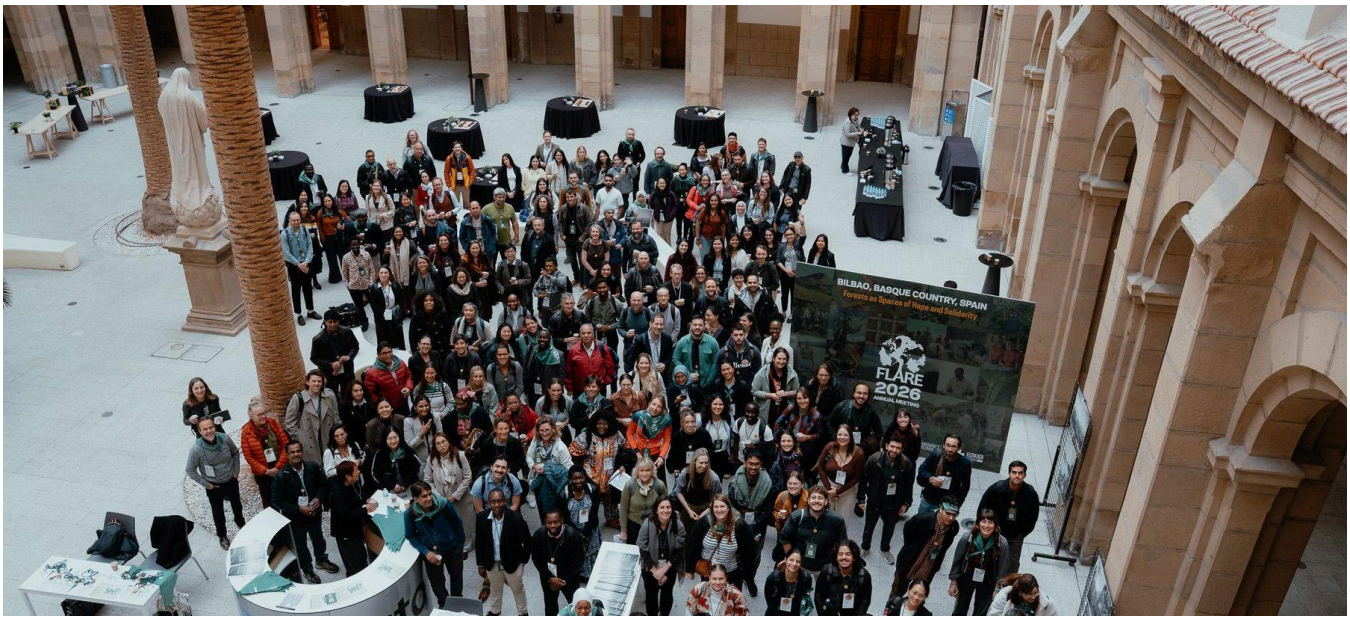
Forests are symbols of hope worldwide, and they are also literal spaces of hope for hundreds of millions of people who rely on them for their livelihoods and well-being. The theme defined hope as a courageous commitment to possibility amid uncertainty, not passive optimism. It asked participants to face the pressures that erode hope and solidarity, including violence, deep inequality, technology-driven alienation, and climate breakdown. It also asked them to show where hope persists in new forms of collective action. Speakers were invited to build the theme into their presentations and discussions.

The meeting also included research presented around a range of topical sub-themes.

MEETING SUB-THEMES

- Forest livelihoods amidst (geo)political change
- Forest governance from local to global
- Forests, trees and human well-being: New methods and collaborative approaches
- Green energy transitions
- Forests, equality, and justice
- Forest livelihoods in a changing climate
- Tree-based (socio)bioeconomies
- Beyond the forest: trees and human well-being from farm to city
- Biodiversity conservation and forest lifeways

OUR HOST: UNIVERSITY OF DEUSTO, BILBAO

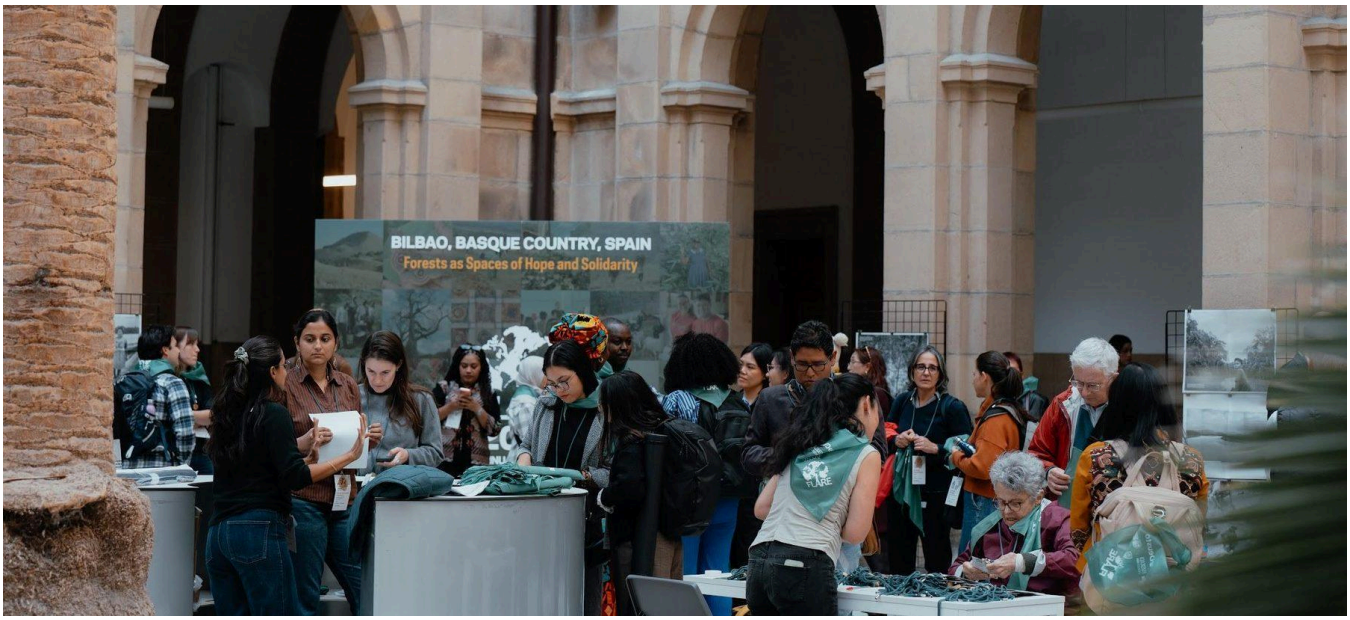


Bilbao, in the Basque country of Northern Spain, was a fitting home for a meeting on forests and livelihoods. Our host, the University of Deusto is a Jesuit institution with its main campus in Bilbao. The University grounds its mission in justice, respect for life, human rights, the fair distribution of resources, and the protection of nature as our common home. It also feels a special closeness to the Basque society it serves. Central to this mission is educating free-thinking individuals and skilled professionals who become responsible citizens, grounded in values, equipped with abilities, and committed to advancing knowledge and driving social transformation. Deusto enrolls some 12,000 students, including more than 1,400 international students from 76 countries.

To achieve its desired social impact and strive for a fairer world, the University of Deusto relies on partnerships that strengthen its mission. Such are the roots of the collaboration with FLARE and the University of Notre Dame. Deusto's mission is close to FLARE's own commitment to more just and sustainable futures for people and forests. The region itself offered a living example of how history, language, culture, and landscape shape the way people relate to forests, a theme taken up directly in a session on weaving nature-human relations in the Basque Country.

Participants spent four days between the Deusto campus and the city, with the Nervión river and the Guggenheim Museum close at hand. Conversations that began in sessions carried on over pintxos, at restaurants that became extensions of the meeting, in the Basque tradition of walking and talking while enjoying food and drink at different venues.

SCOPE AND REACH



The 12th FLARE Annual Meeting brought together 215 participants from 35 countries, united by a shared commitment to forests and the people who depend on them. Nearly three in four attendees (73%) presented their own work, which made the meeting a space for exchange rather than listening, and 16 lightning talks added to that energy. Researchers and students made up most of the participants (67% and 27% of attendees), joined by practitioners from NGOs, government, the private sector and research centers. Hosting in Bilbao drew a strong European presence (43%), alongside participation from North America (28%), Latin America and the Caribbean (13%), Asia (10%) and Africa (5%). Together, participants brought forest livelihoods into conversation across regions and sectors.

215	35	157	16	115
TOTAL ATTENDEES	COUNTRIES REPRESENTED	PRESENTING ATTENDEES	LIGHTNING TALKS	FIRST-TIME ATTENDEES

Sector breakdown

SECTOR	ATTENDEES
Academic	**145 (67%)**
Students	**57 (27%)**
Nonprofit / NGO	**23 (11%)**
Private sector	**4 (2%)**
Public sector/government	**6 (3%)**
Other	**30 (14%)**

Geographic reach

REGION	ATTENDEES
Africa	**5%**
Asia	**10%**
Europe	**85 (43%)**
Latin America & Caribbean	**28 (13%)**
North America	**61 (28%)**
Oceania	**1 (<1%)**

PLENARIES AND KEYNOTES

Opening Plenary: Forests as Spaces of Hope and Solidarity



The Opening Plenary panel on stage

SPEAKERS

- **Felipe Borman**, Executive Director of Fundación Sobrevivencia Cofán
- **Estefanía Liehr**, Forest Policy Advisor, International Forests Unit, FCDO
- **Preeyaphat Chaiklang**, PhD student, Dresden University of Technology and UNU-FLORES
- **Victoria Reyes-García**, Professor, Autonomous University of Barcelona
- **Cécile Bibiane Ndjebet**, Co-founder of Cameroon Ecology and President of the African Women's Network for Community Management of Forests
- **Edurne Iñigo Alday** (Moderator), Associate Professor, University of Deusto

The opening plenary set the tone for the 12th FLARE Annual Meeting by taking the conference theme, Forests as Spaces of Hope and Solidarity, and asking what it would take for that hope to be real. Speakers from the Amazon, Southeast Asia, Europe and the Congo Basin spoke candidly. They acknowledged the weight of the challenges facing forests while holding on to hope as the thing that keeps people at the work. Hope, they argued, cannot rest on the resilience of communities while the structures around them stay unchanged. It has to be tied to rights, resources and power. The central question the plenary posed was whether solidarity can move from principle to practice: can communities say no, redirect funding, and be embedded in decisions from the start, rather than consulted at the end? The tone was warm, grounded in personal stories and field experience, and pointedly practical. It framed the week as a call to listen first, to value different forms of knowledge, and to make research action-ready.

Watch the full opening plenary
https://youtu.be/1V53_eajEic

Quotes from speakers



> *Hope is not optimism; it needs rights, resources and power. Hope can't depend on individuals staying resilient while the structures around them stay unchanged. Forests become spaces of hope when people hold the power to shape their own future.*
>
> **CÉCILE NDJEBET**
> African Women's Network for Community Management of Forests



> *The Japanese art of Kintsugi as a model for the forest-people relationship. The goal isn't restoring the past but repairing broken links between people and nature, which makes something new and stronger. Examples include Australia's cultural burning and river recovery.*
>
> **VICTORIA REYES-GARCÍA**
> Autonomous University of Barcelona



> *Indigenous communities need to engage on their own terms. That means education, access to knowledge and a seat at decision tables, so consent is informed and not a signature on something people didn't help shape.*
>
> **FELIPE BORMAN**
> Fundación Sobrevivencia Cofán



> *Make research action-ready, not just publication-ready. Researchers should listen first, then share findings in language decision-makers can use.*
>
> **PREEYAPHAT CHAIKLANG**
> Dresden University of Technology and UNU-FLORES

Keynote Remarks

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Prof. Eduardo S. Brondízio is a Distinguished Professor of Anthropology, directs the Center for the Analysis of Social-Ecological Landscapes, and is Co-Executive Director of the Ostrom Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University–Bloomington.





Professor Eduardo Brondízio opened with a question that cut to the heart of the conference theme: whose work and knowledge make forest hope possible? Forests are asked to carry many hopes at once, and the people who work, manage and steward them are often the least visible. He argued that global data helps keep them hidden. Recent global reports on forest employment centre almost entirely on wood, logging, pulp and paper, while non-timber forest products receive little space and almost no data. He attributed this invisibility to three features of these economies: they are multifunctional, diverse and informal, and knowledge-based rather than technology-intensive. Statistical invisibility, he warned, becomes social and policy invisibility, leaving producers without credit, infrastructure or fair shares of value.

The açaí economy of the Amazon illustrated the point. It is one of the region's most inclusive bioeconomies, built on local management knowledge, yet official maps classify intensively managed açaí forests as untouched "natural forest," and most of the value is captured far from the producers, whose municipalities remain among the poorest in the region. Brondízio closed with three challenges for the FLARE community: make the invisible visible, account for the value of multifunctional landscapes and knowledge, and reframe the conversation by questioning the categories and data we reproduce. He called this "structural solidarity," meaning changing the conditions that keep forest producers invisible. When asked what makes community enterprises succeed, he pointed to three ingredients: being locally led, having supportive partnerships, and working on production, governance and markets together.

Watch the full video of the keynote address
https://youtu.be/L6VXaubJPKM

FEATURED SESSIONS

Weaving Nature-Human Relations in the Basque Country: Forests, Language, History and Culture

MODERATOR AND SPEAKERS

Moderator: Unai Pascual

Speakers: Nahia Bengoetxea, Iñaki Etxebeste, Iñaki Sanz-Azkue, Alvaro Aragón, Unai Pascual

This panel brought the host region into the conversation, exploring how forests, language, history and culture are woven together in the Basque Country. Part of the session was delivered in Basque.



Key insights

01 **Language carries forest knowledge.**

The Basque vocabulary is full of forest words, from wild animals to wild plants. The session was designed so the audience could hear Basque being spoken. The speakers showed that language holds centuries of knowledge about how people live with forests, and that losing a language could mean losing that knowledge.

02 **Invisible things sustain forests, and invisible people sustain science.**

Dr. Nahia Bengoetxea drew a parallel between soil and women in forest science. Both are essential, but both are overlooked, and most of what keeps a forest alive happens below the ground.

- Women are well represented in early education and early career stages, but the “leaky pipeline” thins them out at senior levels, and they are fewer among keynote speakers and other leadership positions.
- “Who gets invited to speak?” shapes which topics and perspectives get heard.
- She illustrated the theme through her own personal experience, noting even field gear is often designed around men’s bodies.

03 **Local practice often anticipates science.**

Panelists discussed a traditional Basque practice of carrying eroded soil back uphill, which reflects a deep understanding of soil that science later quantified. Soil is effectively non-renewable on human timescales, and heavy machinery can compact it. They argued that forestry should treat the forest as an interconnected system of water, soil, culture and generations. An audience member echoed the point, describing how shifting cultivation with carefully controlled burning is labelled “detrimental” in global narratives, yet helps restore “soil memory.”

04 **Europe’s green forests are humanized, not “natural.”**

Forest cover in the Basque Country is high, at around half the territory, largely because agriculture and rural residency have declined, not simply because forests recovered. Speakers urged participants to see forests as cultural landscapes shaped by and needing people, as in the example of paying shepherds to graze fire-prone land.

05 **Who works in the forest?**

They noted that forestry work in Europe has shifted over time to migrant workers, who face higher accident rates. They argued that the sector should be uncomfortable about this when it celebrates its sustainability.

06 **Fragmentation needs collective governance.**

Privatized and inherited land has left very small private plots for trees. Cooperatives and associations were described as the most democratic and appropriate model for forest management in this context. A Swedish example showed how owners can become disconnected when everything is professionalized, raising the question of how to manage fragmented land collectively, linking back to community forestry.

CONNECTION TO THE CONFERENCE THEME

- **Hope** shows up in what endures: a language still spoken, practices that protect soil, and communities that keep forests alive. The opening plenary argued that hope must be tied to rights, resources and power. This panel showed what that looks like at the local level, where knowledge is passed on and valued.
- **Solidarity** means recognizing the people and knowledge that formal systems overlook: women in science, migrant forest workers, local and Indigenous practices, and the soil itself. It also means collective governance, such as cooperatives and associations, so that fragmented land and knowledge can both be cared for.
- **The bridge from the opening plenary:** the opening plenary asked whether communities can say no and shape decisions. This panel asked who is visible enough to be heard in the first place. Together they point to the same shift: from speaking *about* forest communities to making room for them, and for forest knowledge, to lead.

The Importance of Imagery: Image-Based Technologies for Indigenous (Cofán) Forest Protection, Scholarship and Storytelling

SPEAKERS

Felipe Borman, Executive Director of the Fundación Sobrevivencia Cofán and Director of Territory for the Nacionalidad Originario A'i-Kofán del Ecuador

Michael Cepek, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Texas – San Antonio and President of the Board of the Cofán Survival Fund

Roberto "Bear" Guerra, Documentary Photographer

Gissela Yumbo, Director of the Cultural Transmission Project of the Fundación Sobrevivencia Cofán

This workshop showed how the Cofán people and their allies use photography, video, drones and maps to protect their territory, pass on their culture and tell their own story. The Cofán live where the Andes meet the Amazon, in eastern Ecuador and southern Colombia, on more than a million acres of exceptionally biodiverse forest threatened by oil extraction, illegal mining and the drug trade. The speakers also asked what these tools hide and what risks they carry.



Key insights

01 **Technology can help keep culture alive.**

A youth-led Cultural Transmission project documents elders' knowledge, from medicinal plants and crafts to words falling out of use, through a Cofán Encyclopedia and a pilot course for young women. "The loss of an elder is the burning of an entire library."

02 **Access to technology is not mastery.**

Communities still depend on outsiders to supply and interpret satellite and GIS data. The **Fundación Sobrevivencia Cofán (FSC)** invests in higher education so that Cofán professionals themselves "understand both worlds" and become "users, creators and developers" of technology, not permanent recipients.

03 **Tradition and modern tools work together.**

Fiberglass canoes have replaced dugouts that each cost a hundred-year-old tree, saving countless trees as the idea spread across Ecuador's Amazon. River turtle nests recovered from about 300 to more than 3,000 a year. Rangers now patrol with drones, GPS and cameras.

04 **Power of an image**

Video captures gesture and context that notes cannot, yet a single photograph can never tell a full story. Outsiders' images should sit alongside the Cofán's own documentation. As Borman put it, ***"we want the stories that we tell to actually be told by us."***

05 **Storytelling is hard to fund, and it needs real investment.**

Social media campaigns have not reliably raised money, funding is unpredictable, and journalists often cannot compensate community sources. The presenters urged researchers to write professional storytelling into their grants and to try low-cost formats such as pop-up exhibits.

06 **Gender and leadership remain a work in progress.**

Women are organizing and leading projects, and serve as park guards, though a long history of sexual violence and language barriers still limits their leadership.

CONNECTION TO THE CONFERENCE THEME

The session closed on hope. The Cofán still exist and even thrive after centuries of exploitation. They have recovered 400,000 to 450,000 hectares that many expected to disappear. In the spirit of Forests as Spaces of Hope and Solidarity, the message was that solidarity means supporting Indigenous people to hold the tools, skills and storytelling power themselves.

Journal Editors' Roundtable

MODERATOR AND SPEAKERS

Moderator: Adriana Molina-Garzón, Assistant Professor, Indiana University

Zan Dodson, Recruiting Editor, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences

James Neenan, Journal Development Manager, PLOS Sustainability and Transformation

Unai Pascual, Editor-in-Chief, PLOS Sustainability & Transformation; Ikerbasque Research Professor, Basque Centre for Climate Change

Key insights

01 The "how" matters as much as the "what."

- Journals value research for the way it was done, not only for novel or high-impact results.
- Long-term, deep engagement, such as transdisciplinary research common in the Global South, deserves space even when results aren't "wow."
- Rigor is not negotiable: peer review, "no shortcuts."

02 Journals as a home for underrepresented voices.

- Structural inequities make it hard for Global South scholars, women and early-career researchers to publish in major internationally recognized outlets.
- Editors described the journal ethos as opening the process to these groups.
- PLOS Sustainability and Transformation explicitly encourages decolonial perspectives and transparency about researchers' positionality.

03 Fit is what makes or breaks a paper.

- The PNAS editor said most rejections come down to fit, not quality.
- Authors should show broad appeal beyond one city or region by unpacking their results: why they apply elsewhere and to adjacent fields.
- For PLOS Sustainability and Transformation, the paper must clearly connect to sustainability *and* transformation. Strong analysis without that link will be sent back.
- There is a home for almost all solid research. Know your target audience.

Workshop: Research to Policy Impact

SPEAKER

Alexandra Towns, Keough School of Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame

A 90-minute workshop introducing the Research Translation Continuum and offering tools for stakeholder mapping, dissemination strategy, and networking beyond academic circles. Followed by a facilitated panel with Keough School faculty.



THE CHALLENGE

Academic research often fails to reach the policymakers best placed to act on it. Academics are trained to produce scholarship, not to build the networks, relationships and dissemination strategies that research translation needs. The session contrasted how we imagine policymaking (a straight line from problem to research to evidence-informed policy) with how it actually happens (a tangle of voters, interest groups, elections, economic crises and values).

LIVE POLL

The audience dropped pins on where their own research sits on the spectrum. Most pins clustered in the middle (uptake, application, dissemination). Only a few sat at the co-productive end, and one sat at “minimal.”

LINK TO THE CONFERENCE THEME

This links directly to the opening plenary’s call for research that is action-ready, not just publication-ready. The poll suggested most of the room does uptake and dissemination, with few working at the co-productive end.

SOCIAL EVENTS AND COMMUNITY

In recognition of the importance of informal exchange and community-building, the FLARE program held deliberate spaces for conversation outside the formal sessions.



Welcome Reception / Early Career Mixer



Daily Coffee and Networking



Pintxos @ the Guggenheim Museum

AWARDS

Two FLARE Awards recognized outstanding student research contributions. These awards included a cash prize.



BEST STUDENT ENGAGED RESEARCH AWARD

Paula López-Vargas

Cornell University

Her paper "Restoration beyond trees: values, motivations and aspirations from the Ngäbe-Buglé Indigenous Comarca, Panama" was recognized for its collaborative approach and potential to benefit communities, practitioners and policymakers beyond academia



BEST STUDENT PAPER AWARD

Matilda Kabutey-Ongor

University of Manchester

Her paper "The Welfare Costs of Mining Exposure in Ghana: Licensed, Unlicensed, and Downstream Evidence from a Hydrological Treatment Framework" was lauded for its innovative and rigorous approach to a key topic in forest livelihoods research.

FLARE FORWARD

Closing remarks

SPEAKER

Dr. Anthony Bebbington, Director, Natural Resources and Climate Justice Program, Ford Foundation



As a leading scholar on extractive industries, rural livelihoods, and natural resource governance, and Director of the Ford Foundation's Program on Natural Resources and Climate Governance, Dr. Bebbington was exceptionally well-placed to provide closing reflections on the 2026 FLARE Annual Meeting. He organized his remarks around four themes: FLARE, Spaces, Hope, and Moment.

01 FLARE

The meeting highlighted the vitality and importance of research on the topic of forest livelihoods. FLARE is critical infrastructure for this field. It is a way to build, expand, and regenerate the field and the community around it. But, like any infrastructure, it requires care and maintenance.

02 Spaces

Forests are spaces where people are building their lives. This implies different visions for forests – from residents, businesses, forest advocates, governments, and others. We should therefore not essentialize forests and work to understand how they connect to other spaces, especially cities.

03 **Hope**

The idea of co-existence must then be taken seriously. A challenge to FLARE and those who care about just futures for forests and livelihoods is to consider whether and how different interests might co-exist. Should there be "no-go" zones for extraction? Where would extraction zones, necessary for economic transition, go?

04 **Moment**

Calls to "meet the moment" are popular in philanthropy now. But we should not "fetishize" the current moment. Work is needed to contextualize contemporary challenges and understand forest histories so that we might learn from previous struggles while identifying what is truly new. In so doing, we might imagine and work toward better future earth systems and ways of fostering collective well-being. Dr. Bebbington concluded by suggesting "The Myth of Sisyphus" by Camus may provide insight as we do so.

The Next FLARE Annual Meeting

Mark your calendars! The 2027 FLARE Annual Meeting will be held in Kathmandu, Nepal, October 19-23. Stay tuned for final confirmation of the dates and more information about the conference.



2026 ANNUAL MEETING TEAM

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CO-HOST

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