

A Briefing Paper

Building the Resiliency of Indigenous Communities on Climate Change Adaptation



Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact

Background

Resiliency and indigenous peoples have become terms that define each other. Resilience being the ability and capacity to cope and recover from abrupt or unexpected change has been proven and illustrated in various occasions in many parts of the planet by indigenous peoples in varying levels of organisation and capacity. They have shown remarkable confidence and persistence to adjust their systems and practices to changes and circumstances that impact on them, and still manage to maintain their particular and distinct identity. This has always been proven and demonstrated with their adjustment and adaptation to the effects and consequences of climate change and threats to their ecosystem and biodiversity.

This resiliency may be attributed to the indigenous peoples' traditional environmental knowledge and intimate relationship with land and nature. Their daily survival directly hinges on the resources around them and whatever changes in the environment that have bearing or impact on their lives are carefully studied and drawn lessons from. They have mastered the law of nature, up to a certain level, except with technological, capitalist and destructive intrusion that they have difficulty warding off. Contrary to mainstream and capitalist



notions of dealing with environmental crisis such as climate change where technologies and corporate measures are applied, indigenous systems and coping mechanisms are devised by indigenous communities in varying modes of sustainability. There are factors considered, nevertheless, such as changing cultural views interfacing with economic necessities and influences. These are major elements shaping the responses and approaches of indigenous communities in dealing with this environmental crisis.

M^{eeting at the Adaptation Route}

In recent years, there has been dynamic exchange of milestones and experiences regarding efforts and successes in building resiliency as an adaptation to climate change among indigenous peoples in global and regional platforms. The Adaptation Learning Highway initiated by the Environment Programme of the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) was a three-day interaction and immersion held in the Philippines from 16-20 March 2018. AIPP's partner organization, Cordillera Disaster Response and Development Services (CorDisRDS) hosted the exchange in two indigenous communities in northern Philippines, namely Kayan, Tadian, and Sagada in Mountain Province. The exchange was organized as part of the ongoing partnership on "Building the Resiliency of Indigenous Communities on Climate Change Adaptation" between AIPP and MISEREOR. The project partners of AIPP are CorDisRDS in the Philippines; Network of Indigenous Peoples of Thailand (NIPT), in Thailand; and NGO-Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NGO-FONIN) in Nepal.

ALH participants discuss the different effects of Climate Change on rain-fed and irrigation-dependent ricefields in the indigenous community of Kayan West, Tadian, Mt. Province, Philippines.



The community visits and interaction with indigenous communities of the Philippines were to provide the indigenous peoples' and government representatives from Thailand, the Philippines, and Nepal productive sessions of exchange of knowledge and experiences for them to gain common insights, lessons, and strategies about adaptation in the face of climate change. The three-day learning highway was expected to provide a new map of perspectives by diverse communities to pursue and implement their plans in the face of increasing challenges brought by socio-economic developments. The indigenous peoples' common experiences, traditional knowledge and innovations proved to be valuable lessons that would guide them in their concerted action to building resilient and adaptive communities in the time of climate change. It also opened possibilities of further and sustained partnership between local communities and government agencies, as is the experience of Nepal and Thailand.

Diverse Communities, Common Insights

Indigenous peoples in the Philippines face different violations of their rights such as dispossession of their ancestral domain, development aggression, discrimination, non-recognition of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), and continuing militarization in their resource-rich territories. However, there is revitalization and strengthening of indigenous knowledge, institutions, practices and forms of struggle, strategies, and advocacies that Philippine indigenous peoples are carrying out.

Thailand's indigenous peoples have to contend with the legal aspect or the laws and resolutions pertaining to the recognition or non-recognition of their rights as indigenous peoples. At the international level, the Thai government is a signatory to various UN mechanisms and conventions that supposedly safeguard the rights of indigenous peoples and other vulnerable groups. However, there is still a long way for the recognition of the country's indigenous peoples' rights as they witness the loss of their traditions, threat to their livelihood, and experience discrimination. They face many challenges but they have a growing indigenous peoples' rights movement which is gaining strength.

There are engagements and dialogues to resolve conflicts arising between Thailand's Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and communities in state-owned land such as the Phadang National Park where the indigenous peoples are involved in planning and implementing the policy to increase forest cover within ten years and resolve the problem of forest destruction or deforestation. All forest lands are state-owned, thus restrictions and regulations are imposed on the extraction of forest products which is the source of survival of forest dwellers who are mostly indigenous peoples. These policies are enforced mostly in forest conservation areas and national parks where the government sees the need for forest management, however, in the process resorting to violation of the rights of indigenous peoples. Mr. Saranyawit Thodsieng, Senior Forestry Officer and head of

Phadang National Park in Chiang Dao district in Chiang Mai shared that “We had to arrive at compromises where the two stakeholders i.e., indigenous peoples and government agencies, negotiated on best practices in forest management such as conducting a study on community history and data collection; community mapping by the forest dwellers; and self-regulation by the community.”

In Nepal, the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation implemented the Local Adaptation Plan for Action (LAPA) which responds strategically to the challenges and opportunities posed by climate change. The LAPA mainstreamed the climate change agenda in the country’s national development plan which includes reducing poverty; improving and/or diversifying livelihoods; and building the resilience of communities. Emphasizing the specific roles of organizational bodies from the national down to the community level, communities and the forestry based groups contribute to reduce vulnerability and improve livelihoods and as effective mechanisms, take adaptation efforts forward. These groups have huge potential in mitigation and adaptation actions and protection of biodiversity.

The adivasis in India who include scheduled tribes and traditional forest dwellers, and who have lived in such forests for generations but have no records to prove this, rely on the Forest Rights Act of 2006 that recognizes and gives them forest and occupation rights. The rights also include the responsibilities for sustainable use, strengthening conservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological balance while ensuring livelihood and food security of the forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers. The Act recognizes that indigenous peoples living in National Park and Sanctuaries can not be resettled without their prior informed consent. However the implementation of FRA in the ground is weak. There are even attempts by government and private companies to dilute the act that was created to legally recognize the rights of indigenous peoples and undo the historical injustices and discriminations faced by indigenous peoples.

Overcoming the Odds

Likewise, there are alternatives that sectoral groups have opted for. The Indigenous Nationalities Women Network (INWN) of Nepal shared how the United Mothers Group in the Tamang community of Churiyamai gained economic empowerment. Their geographical location rendered them vulnerable to various disasters such as floods, landslides, fire, earthquake, storms, and loss of vegetation. Compounding this was the gradual disintegration of their traditional culture, skills, and knowledge, which they fear would lead to eventual loss of identity. Nirmala Ghalan, the Chairperson of INWN said, “Previously there were no job opportunities except for agriculture which was rain-dependent, so the women set up a cooperative from which they could loan for their daily survival, their children’s higher education and other income generating activities. To address the problem of unemployment and the youths’ migration to urban centers and overseas in search of jobs, the women decided to form their network in the community and engaged in organic farming and awareness raising on Tamang culture. They accessed funds from the government for their skills training, raised awareness on traditional rites, attire, culture and language. Empowered by their knowledge of indigenous peoples’ rights and understanding of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), they succeeded in establishing livelihood and providing jobs for the Tamang community.”

Agroforestry is a viable agricultural response to climate change, as demonstrated by Lahu villagers like Mr. Wichai Khongamonphana from Northern Thailand. His community was faced with uncertain rainfall, drought, landslides and soil erosion. With the government’s promotion of cash crop cultivation arose health problems in the community due to the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Soil degradation was another consequence. Wichai and his village mates then resolved this by combining traditional and modern knowledge, and modifying agricultural methods. Households turned to agroforestry and planted fruits, coffee, tea, banana, and many other crops. Wichai confidently shared that “Traditional seeds are conserved because they are a stronger variety and can tolerate drought, pests, and heavy rain. To rehabilitate the soil, we planted banana trees to keep moisture in the soil. Then we raised earthworms on warm soil which



“I thought if I have a lot of money, I would be happy. So I decided to go to work in town as well as cultivate mono crop in the village but I didn’t find happiness. so I decided to change my way of thinking. Now I have no debt and have food security throughout the year.”

Mr. Wichai Khongamonphana

are food for the fish, whose wastes or manure are in turn, good fertilizer. Another solution to soil degradation was the application of organic fertilizer by regularly putting cow dung while plowing the field, mixing these continuously for three years which eventually improved the soil’s fertility.”

The Akha village’s clear forest management system aligned with the government policy on forest management aimed to increase the forest area and to stop all deforestation activities. Reforestation is implemented with clear community regulation and participation. The community’s forest management is also illustrated with the creation of the firebreak and check dam, where they increase the moisture in the watershed area.

Regarding financial resources, households are encouraged to reduce their expenses even with the setting up of a self-reliant group fund for the community. The people's health has improved with the (lower the risk) reduction of non-communicable diseases, thus they are able to minimize their expenses and decrease poverty. They can pay their debts and keep money as savings. This body of knowledge is gradually being transferred to the next generation. Women and the youth are clearly aware of their participation and role in the community; with the women tasked with



Participants from Thailand witness the similarities and differences of indigenous practices in the host community's agricultural production.

culture preservation, seed collection and preservation, weaving and embroidery. All these endeavours contribute to the community's food security and general stability in the time of climate change.

The case of the host community of Kayan, Mt. Province in Northern Philippines is a clear example of how, in recent years, the agricultural system has been severely affected by climate change, resulting in economic difficulties and diminishing cultural practices of the indigenous inhabitants. Farmer Michael Benigno lamented thus: "I fear we may be the last generation of farmers because the young generation is wary of the hard work and crude implements we use for farming, plus the drought caused by changing weather. We need to transfer the knowledge, the practices, and there has to be innovation, while we preserve the traditional rice varieties." The increasing need for cash leaves many farmlands

untended. However, just as in the situation of other indigenous communities globally, the resurgence and revitalization of cultural values boost the communal spirit of support and sustain the resources threatened by economic developments and needs. Time-tested mechanisms such as the Early Warning System drawn from keen observation of natural elements, and the integration of ub-ubbo (spirit of community sharing of labor or collective work) have proven to be effective measures in Disaster Risk Reduction and Management long before this term was conceptualized.



We don't need to wait for the next disaster to come to revive our ub-ubbo (spirit of community sharing of labor or collective work) practice, we can do it now.

Mrs. Regina Velasco

Analyzing the characteristics of the physical terrain and the aspects of agricultural and early warning systems resulted to a realization of common traditional practices and contrasting approaches and situations. Clearly, cultural practices such as rituals and traditional knowledge play crucial roles in building resiliency.

The offshoot of climatic change is disturbance and disruption in agricultural patterns and calendar, leading to crop diversification and innovations in the irrigation system. Leaving indigenous farmers no options but to acquire high yielding or new varieties of rice, for instance, has altered the soil's fertility with the introduction and infusion of chemical-based inputs. Crop yield is gravely threatened with pest infestation. Water supply has dwindled significantly that farmers have devised water distribution methods, which have affected communal farming that illustrated community support.



Transplanting of the young seeding at 1 plant per hill as part of the palay training.

In Abra, Philippines there are innovations in improving palay production. Rice is the main crop in the communities but the main reason for rice shortage is the lack of irrigation. Area for possible expansion is limited because the community is located in steep mountains. Relying mostly on rain and with the unpredictable weather condition, the agricultural calendar is also disrupted, thus few farmers plant during the second cropping. Elder farmer Ranetha said, “There is a dire lack of farming equipment and draft animals, thus farmers have to wait for their turn with the carabaos, resulting to unsynchronized farming and pest infestation and poor harvest.” With these persisting problems, the CorDisRDS introduced the Palay Production Improvement technology which includes less use of seed, less water, younger and spaced seedlings and use of organic fertilizers such as indigenous micro-organism, fermented fruit and plant juice and others. After observing positive results from the demonstration farm, the community tried to apply the technology, which, increased their rice production.

To this, questions were raised as to government assistance, application of state laws and regulations on land use and ownership and other resource and forest management which are similar realities obtaining in other countries such as Thailand and Nepal where farmers benefit from government intervention and have access to government support.

The prevailing state laws that govern present-day indigenous communities are in parallel governance with customary institutions as exemplified by the *dap-ay* and the *gram sabha* in the Cordillera, Philippines and India, respectively. Their roles as the traditional governance system in a modernizing society wield influence in day-to-day affairs and decision-making, including the handling of crisis situation brought about by environmental disasters and climate change. The concepts of land ownership, ancestral domain, applicability of state laws and the interface with customary laws were further clarified. The elders concluded that “We must remain rooted in traditional culture and not be alienated from indigenous knowledge and practices. This is the key to sustaining our natural resources.”



Community spirit and support for each other in times of disaster is a non-tangible measure that strengthens people in the direst of situations.

Conclusion

Community visits and exchanges are valuable wellspring of insights and lessons for indigenous peoples experiencing similar conditions in the time of climate change. Culture and tradition are vital unifying factors that propel indigenous communities to rely on their own ingenuity and practical wisdom to cope with the impacts of climate change. Cultural institutions such as the Council of Elders in the Cordillera, Philippines, and gram panchayat in India are still strong and influential bodies in decision-making to deal with resource management and disaster risk reduction. Parallel to these customary governance bodies are barangay (village) and municipal officials who are supportive of the community's activities. In various instances, local government officials respect the customary laws and the decisions of the elders especially where resource management, conflict resolutions, and disaster risk reduction are concerned.

With awareness and judicious utilization of their natural resources, indigenous peoples in Asia, as proven in the Philippines, Nepal, Thailand and India can sustainably withstand and mitigate the disastrous effects of climatic disturbances. Indigenous and modern/innovative early warning systems are in place and practiced in the face of emergency/disaster situations.

Affirmative results of indigenous measures, though not in leaps and bounds, are proving to be appropriate and suitable to the communities where these are applied and exercised. If the benefits redound to the majority of community members, then these are signs of revival of the communal or collective spirit that is gradually being eroded by economic necessity and natural disaster. Good practices of indigenous peoples to conserve biodiversity in their respective areas are the response to the onslaught of climate change.

The learning exchange focused on the sharing of knowledge and experiences of representatives of indigenous peoples and government from Nepal, Thailand and the Philippines with regards to impacts of climate change and measures taken to mitigate and adapt to environmental changes. Fostering understanding among each other and strengthening cooperation, collaboration and solidarity between indigenous peoples' organizations and government agencies is crucial to sustain efforts at building resiliency from the community to the national and until regional levels. In pursuit and advocacy of parallel goals, participants forwarded recommendations and developed an action plan to contextualize and implement Philippine experiences and lessons in their respective communities where they find these relevant.

The participants observed and learned from the indigenous practices applied to the agricultural systems in the selected Cordillera villages that adapt to climate change and mitigate the impact on the community. Comparing similar experiences and/or different approaches enriched the knowledge and appreciation of the situation and context of indigenous peoples from various countries. Government's role and policies formulated in relation to climate change and its effect on indigenous peoples were articulated and probed for further collaboration with affected communities and other concerned stakeholders. Ongoing innovations related to the indigenous peoples' land and forest rights in terms of crop production, forest management, sectoral empowerment and capacity building were some of the highlights shared by the participants from the four countries, including India.

The community visit enabled the participants to have a close observation of an indigenous community that is practicing adaptation measures to build their resiliency in the face of climate change. The exchange of knowledge and experiences between and among the members of the community and the participants strengthened and validated commonalities and differences in contexts and practices in adapting to climate change. The paper presentations further enriched information and knowledge of various cultures and conditions. The sharing of situations and local strategies aided in clarifying how indigenous communities in various places and conditions contribute to validating the wisdom and sustainability of indigenous practices in coping with impacts of climate change. This was also a gauge in analysing how multi-stakeholders complement or differ in approaching the issue of resource management in the period of continuing climate disturbance. The open forum in every activity was the venue for strengthening solidarity among indigenous peoples to affirm their diversity and commonality in building their resilience.



Land rights and ownership are closely linked to how this resource is managed and sustained by communities in times of environmental threats and danger such as climate change.

Recommendations and Action Plan

Recommendations forwarded by the 4th Adaptation Learning Highway participants were relevant and appropriate regarding disaster mitigation and these were much appreciated by the local communities.

The participants were unanimous in recommending that their short and long-term action plans must include capacity-building and awareness-raising of their communities through training workshops on the following: water utilization and waste management; use of safe and organic pesticides and fertilizers; soil erosion control and landslide prevention for food production; identifying pilot area and determining appropriate crops and other plants which are endemic and native species for agroforestry implementation and disaster risk reduction; food processing and preservation of farmers' surplus products; piloting at least one village or municipality on disaster/vulnerability mapping and identification of disaster hotspots through GPS mapping.

In India, there is a need for forest dwelling indigenous peoples to secure access rights and their right to own and use forest resources instead of being forced out due to State development projects. Also, State legislation on the panchayats should not conflict with customary law, social and religious practices, and traditional management practices of community resources. In the Philippines, there are existing threats to the community like militarization, but the people's organizations work together to resist these challenges.

On the cultural and political fields, the action plans were the following: listing of community's best practices and indigenous knowledge to combat climate change; revitalization and transfer of knowledge on traditional culture; holding of Cultural Exchange between countries and peoples; studying indigenous practice of customary laws and reviewing cases that have been drafted, and lobbying with local government agencies to ensure policies are implemented for the benefit of the community; and collaborating with government agencies to formulate a local adaptation plan of action on climate change.

Necessitating external intervention from partners and potential donors are the following: the conduct of activities for capacity-building and other skills training; upgrading livelihood equipment in the case of the labor-intensive food processing; advocating the right of indigenous peoples and local communities to their land and resources so that they can determine their own appropriate ways of dealing with the impact of climate change. It is through their own definition of their needs to survive and sustain their resources that they can mitigate the onslaught of unwanted development and increasing danger of man-made disaster that they have the least contribution. The indigenous peoples are left with no option but to build their resiliency.

AIPP at a glance

The Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) is a regional organization founded in 1988 by indigenous peoples' movements. AIPP is committed to the cause of promoting and defending indigenous peoples' rights and human rights and articulating issues of relevance to indigenous peoples. At present, AIPP has 48 members from 14 countries in Asia with 18 indigenous peoples' national alliances/networks (national formations), 30 local and sub-national organizations. Of this number, 16 are ethnic based organizations, six (6) indigenous women and four (4) are indigenous youth organizations and one (1) organization of indigenous persons with disabilities.

Our Vision

Indigenous peoples in Asia are fully exercising their rights, distinct cultures and identities, are living with dignity, and enhancing their sustainable management systems on lands, territories and resources for their own future and development in an environment of peace, justice and equality.

Our Mission

AIPP strengthens the solidarity, cooperation and capacities of indigenous peoples in Asia to promote and protect their rights, cultures and identities, and their sustainable resource management systems for their development and self-determination.

Our programmes

Our main areas of work among the different programmes are information dissemination, awareness raising, capacity building, advocacy and networking from local to global. Our programmes are ;

- » Human Rights Campaign and Policy Advocacy
- » Regional Capacity Building
- » Environment
- » Indigenous Women
- » Communications Development
- » Organizational Strengthening

AIPP is accredited as an NGO in special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and as observer organization with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Global Environment Facility (GEF), Green Climate Fund (GCF), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). AIPP is a member of the International Land Coalition (ILC) and Global Environment Facility NGO Network.



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