Indigenous Peoples’ Customary Governance for Sustainable Management of Natural Resources and Protection of Biodiversity

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Acknowledgements

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CONTENTS

Indigenous Peoples and climate change 3
Role and contributions of Indigenous Peoples 5
Historical trend of inequitable laws and policies for Indigenous Peoples in Nepal 6
Background of the communities 8
Customary institution, “Shagya” 9
Richness of biodiversity 12
Natural vegetation 14
Traditional livelihoods 14
Climate change impacts 15
The tragedy of customary institution, “Shagya” 16
WayForward 17
References 19
Indigenous Peoples’ Customary Governance for Sustainable Management of Natural Resources and Protection of Biodiversity

This study reflects on how Indigenous Peoples’ customary institutions with self-governance systems have been contributing to sustainable management of the natural resources, biodiversity and climate change resilience despite the challenges imposed by national policy. It provides examples from Tsumba and Nubriba Indigenous Peoples’ Groups in the Mountain region of Nepal. The study also aims to deliver recommendations to strengthen the recognition of indigenous peoples’ customary institutions, knowledge and governance systems.

Indigenous Peoples and climate change

Indigenous Peoples around the world have been living with nature since time immemorial and continuing the rich knowledge systems, skills, culture, and traditional livelihoods based on the principle of Nature-Based Solution (NBS) that the world has been craving for to deal with global crises, especially climate change resilience, biodiversity and conservation (Townsend et al., 2020).
However, the role and contributions of Indigenous Peoples have been hardly realized, acknowledged and recognized in the discourse of climate change and conservation (Granberg & Glover, 2014). Consequently, day by day, we are losing our languages, diverse knowledge and cultural values and inviting further deterioration of our environment, nature and social-ecological systems (Karki et al., 2017). Therefore, this study reflects that it has already been getting late before we understand, acknowledge, and value Indigenous Peoples’ role and contributions for sustainable management of the natural resources, biodiversity and conservation.

Indigenous Peoples represent 6.2 percent of the world’s population and have been safeguarding 80 percent of the world’s remaining biodiversity and at least a quarter of the global land areas (IPBES, 2019). The different studies on the environment, biodiversity and climate change concerning indigenous peoples present how Indigenous Peoples play essential roles and contributions for the sustainability of the natural resources, ecosystem, biodiversity and climate change mitigation, adaptation and resilience (Garnett et al., 2018; Vogel & Bullock, 2020; Townsend et al., 2020). However, despite becoming visible discourse of climate change concerning the crucial role of Indigenous Peoples at the global level, the reflection of the outcome of the discourse is still to be seen at regional, national and local levels. Out of the total population of Indigenous Peoples globally, 70.02% are in Asia (IPMC, 2020), but the presence of issues and concerns of Indigenous Peoples in the climate discourse and natural resource governance in the region is hardly reflected.

Nepal has legally recognized 59 Indigenous Peoples’ groups, called Aadibasi Janajati. Indigenous Peoples account for 35.6% of the total national population (Dahal, 2014) of Nepal. However, the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) believes that more than 40% of Indigenous Peoples have been living in different geographical and ecological regions with a distinct culture, identity and way of life in Nepal. Nevertheless, Indigenous Peoples have an extraordinary social, cultural, economic and spiritual relationship with natural resources, including forests and forestland maintained by Nepal’s customary laws and practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Indigenous Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Group (2)</td>
<td>Newar, Thakali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged Group (15)</td>
<td>Barahgaunle Thakali, Byansi, Chhattyal, Gurung, Jirel, Limbu, Magar, MarphaliThakali, Rai, Sherpa, Tangbe, Teengaunle Thakali, Yakkha, Yolmo, Chhiarotan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginalized Group (20)</td>
<td>Bhote, Darai, Bhujel, Dhimal, Dura, Dolpo, Gangai, Kumal, Larke, Lhopa, Mugali, Pahari, Rajbanshi, Sunuwar, Tamang, Tajpuriya, Tharu, Topkegola, Walung, Phree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Marginalized Group (12)</td>
<td>Bote, Baramu, Chepang, Danuwar, Dhanuk, Jhangad, Majhi, Lhomi (Shinsaba), Santhal Shiyar, Thami, Thundam,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endangered Group (10)</td>
<td>Bankariya, Hayu, Kisan, Kuswadiya, Kusunda, Lepcha, Meche, Raute, Ragi, Surel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indigenous Peoples have a symbiotic relationship with nature to continue the traditional knowledge, cultural practices and spiritual values that contribute to sustainable management of the natural resources, ecosystem, biodiversity and traditional livelihoods (Garnett et al. 2018). However, the
interconnectedness of Indigenous Peoples has been hardly acknowledged and addressed by the concerned bodies and reflected in the relevant laws and policies (Adger et al., 2005). Consequently, day by day, along with modern development and education systems with a more decisive influence from western values in developing countries like Nepal, Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural and spiritual values are slowly disappearing and losing the charm of continuation among the youth.

In most Asian countries like Nepal, the decision-making bodies and policymakers are hardly either sensitized on the issues and concerns of Indigenous Peoples’ or even aware of the importance of the protection, promotion and recognition of the knowledge systems and cultural values that are interrelated to the sustainability of natural resources and livelihoods. Thus, the practices of seeing Indigenous Peoples as public policy objects have persisted (Belfer et al., 2017), and efforts to disconnect Indigenous Peoples from the natural resources and ancestral land continued in the name of modern development and education.

Like most developing countries, Nepal has been following the trend of modern education and development strategies that were once developed with the aim for colonization without realizing the richness of the cultural diversities of the countries, where different Indigenous Peoples with unique knowledge and values. The modern strategic development in the name of the unification of the country, language and culture, Indigenous Peoples' diverse culture, knowledge systems have been under the shadow. The Indigenous Peoples' traditional customary institutions and governance system—the solid institutions for the management of the natural resources, conservation of ecosystem and biodiversity— are slowly undermined by the new legal framework of Forest Nationalization: “all forest, including of Indigenous Peoples, came under government control. Indigenous Peoples lost their customary forests to the government” (Sherpa et al., 2018, p. 55).

The global climate crisis invited the world communities to reflect on the business-as-usual model with the exploitation of nature and continued the climate change discourse within United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to reduce global emissions and develop climate change adaptation and mitigation. However, the attention of the unheard voice of Indigenous Peoples has never been heard until the adoption of the Paris Agreement of 2015, which recognizes Indigenous Peoples’ human rights and promotes the considerations of their knowledge. The same year, Decision number 1 of the COP21 (paragraph 135) establish the creation of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) as one of the constituent bodies of the UNFCCC. This Platform has been one of the historical benchmarks of Indigenous Peoples to get the space to share the experience, knowledge and cultural values embedded with the principle of NBS to deal with climate change adaptation and mitigation.

**Role and contributions of Indigenous Peoples**

Indigenous Peoples’ customary institutions administer customary laws and the validity of such laws and practices, including the related procedures generally led by community elders (Cajete, 2016). Indigenous peoples have their own internal customary legal and social matters, including any reforms to these, in a manner of choosing, unless expressed barred otherwise prevented from doing so. Such systems are an integral part of Indigenous Peoples’ identity and way of life. In Nepal, Indigenous Peoples have a long history of customary laws, practices and institutions such as the
Indigenous Peoples’ Customary Governance for Sustainable Management of Natural Resources and Protection of Biodiversity

Nawa systems of Sherpa, Ghapu and Dhebu systems of Dolpo, Kipat systems of Limbut, Riti-thiti systems of Magar, Mirchang systems of Thakali, Mithewa systems, among Ngishyawas, Badghar in Tharu, among many others.

Indigenous Peoples have their own customary laws and traditional governing systems in conserving and managing forests, land and pasture lands and maintaining a close relationship with natural resources and own territories (UN DESA, 2016; Garnett et al., 2018). These systems contributed to the continuation of traditional livelihoods and maintaining synergy with nature, and the feeling of ownership for the protection and continuation of the crucial role and contributions for sustainable management of the natural resources, biodiversity and climate change resilience (Sherpa et al., 2013). Besides the conservation and management of the natural resources, customary institutions also contribute to maintaining peace, prosperity and unity within the society.

Customary laws and practices have been transferred from the community elders to the young generations to maintain the norms and values of the Indigenous Peoples. Despite these unique, imitable and sustainable qualities of the institutions, the customary laws and practices are slowly disappearing because the existing government laws, acts and policies have not recognized these customary assets governed by Indigenous Peoples for generations (Karki et al., 2017). Apart from few Indigenous groups in the mountain region in Nepal, the customary practices are almost on the verge of extinction in the hill and plain regions of the country.

Historical trend of inequitable laws and policies for Indigenous Peoples in Nepal

In the name of the territorial unification of Nepal in 1769, the Indigenous Peoples were already displaced from their ancestral domain by imposing different discriminatory land legislation that ignored all the customary land tenure systems and laws. In some cases, Kipat lands were provided to some Indigenous groups through legislation of special laws like lalmohar, sanad and sawal (Sherpa et al., 2010). However, the displacement of the Indigenous Peoples from their land and territories continued during the 103 years long of the Rana regime, which introduced further discriminatory laws and registered the lands and Indigenous Peoples in their name.

Along with modern development and education, in the name of natural resource conservation and unification of the nation, the 1957 Forest Nationalization Act made all forests, including those of indigenous peoples, government property. The government invited all lands to be registered under the new laws, but a majority of the Indigenous Peoples were not aware of these changes and did not or could not register their lands, which rendered them landless legally despite inherited from their ancestors for generations. So Indigenous Peoples came under government control and lost ownership of their customarily managed forests.

The majority of the Indigenous Peoples in Nepal who have been living in close interdependence with rich territory experience bitter truth after the adoption of the Wildlife Protected Act in 1972 and the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act in 1973 that promoted restrictive nature resulted in the eviction of Indigenous Peoples from the ancestral territory. Although Nepal has never been colonized by other countries like in the rest of the world, Indigenous Peoples have undergone a process of internal colonization by suppressing Indigenous Peoples’ mother tongue languages and diverse
cultural values to unify the nation with dominant culture and language. Throughout the country’s modern history, the government of Nepal continuously discouraged Indigenous language, knowledge systems, and cultural values that were banned entirely from children speaking Indigenous language in the school, especially after 1950, when modern education started in Nepal. Along with expanding the conservation and national park, the laws and policies further undermine the contributions of Indigenous Peoples’ customary institutions and governance systems of the natural resources. Thus, the national conservation laws and policies have further created a wall that prevents Indigenous Peoples from continuing their traditional knowledge, cultural values and livelihood practices.

According to Article 56 of the Constitution of Nepal, the basic structure of Nepal consists of three levels: federal, provincial and local. These three levels can exercise state power in accordance with the constitution and prevailing laws, and they must aim to protect the egalitarian society, inclusive representation and identity based on equality. Although this could translate into a strengthening of the rights of Indigenous Peoples, the constitution does not recognize their collective tenure rights over forest forests and forest land. It does not envision customary rights within the jurisdiction of federal, provincial and local levels of land governance.

In addition, the National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1973 remained the same, without amendment in line with the aspiration of the new constitutions of Nepal, 2015. The 'warden,' a person appointed by the Government of Nepal for the protection and management of National Parks, Reserves, Conservation Areas or Buffer Zone, continue providing the supreme power as guardian in national parks, reserves, conservation areas and buffer zones with least bother about the issues and concerns of Indigenous Peoples. Similarly, the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Regulations of 1974, Rule 36 J, must provide relief assistance for wildlife damage and local communities’ crucial role to provide the recommendation for providing reliefs from different offices of the Protected Area to the wildlife affected communities. However, the pathos of being the victims of wildlife and human conflict remained the same in most national parks in Nepal (Sherpa, P.D., et al., 2018).

The provision of the new Local Government Operational Act 2017 enacted under the new constitution has brought the management of community forests under the jurisdiction of local governments, implying that local governments can formulate laws, policies and modify regulations. This Act has provided some hope for Indigenous Peoples for the recognition of customary institutions and self-governance systems within community forest management systems.

However, there are still problems of awareness and capacity of Indigenous Peoples to claim recognition of their rights in local legislation. Indigenous Peoples’ issues, concerns and layers of challenges are not limited within the community forests but more in the management systems of conservation and national parks, where Indigenous Peoples continuously victimized, suffer and are tortured. The recent dreadful experience of Chepang communities on the death of Raj Kumar Chepang in Chitwan National Park (Personal Communication with Bhim Bahadur Chepang, September 25, 2020) during the Covid-19 pandemic is one of the cases, how Indigenous Peoples are suffering in the name of conservation and national park in Nepal.

Although the recent Forest Act, 2019 of Nepal provides the provision of handover procedures as a community forest, and section 23 of the Act invites traditional users of the forest to be in the
partnership of the forest management, section 5 of the Act states the government with power over the land to demarcate the boundaries of any national forest by incorporating any public or private property that is within or adjoining the forest. This provision impacts Indigenous Peoples residing near national parks as this may result in them being forcibly moved from their ancestral lands. Unlike the Forest Act, the National Forest Policy of 2018 is progressive while recognizing the role and contributions of Indigenous Peoples; however, the provision of Indigenous Peoples’ rights in the forest policy is lacking in the Forest Act.

The Forestry Sector Strategy (2016-2025) has prioritized actions to recognize community-based forest management for the sustainable management of the forest, based on the integrated land-use approach, and emphasized the promotion of gender equity, social and economic upliftment of poor, women, Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized groups within the community forest users' groups. Nevertheless, the voice of Indigenous representatives is often not being heard, and the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' traditional customary institutions and governance systems have not been part of the community forest management systems. Although the strategy has come up with priority actions for a healthy and climate-resilient society, including the conservation of specific sites like spiritual forests, it still lacks explicit mention of the integration of customarily managed forest with traditional governance systems of Indigenous Peoples.

**Background of the communities**

Proof of sustainable nature and biodiversity management through Indigenous governance systems is the customary institution “Shagya”, practiced by the Tsumba and Nubriba Peoples of Tsum and Nubri valleys of Tsum Nubri Rural Municipality in the mountain region of the Gorkha district in Nepal.
The Tsum valley lies in the foothills of the Himalayas, at an altitude of 1578 to 7165 meters above sea level. It covers the two wards of the Tsumnubri Rural Municipality of the Manaslu Conservation Area (MCA) region. It comprises the lower Tsum under ward number 6 of the Chumchet region and Upper Tsum ward number 7 of Chekampar region. The entry point of Tsum valley is started from Lokpa under Chumchet ward of lower Tsum and ends the Mu Gumba near Niley village of ward number 7 of Upper Tsum valley, popularly known as Chekampar region.

The people of Tsum valley belong to Buddhism by religion. The people are called Tsumba and speak Tsumke. In lower Tsum region covers nine small settlements, while the Upper Tsum covers 11 different settlements. The main livelihood activities of the Tsumba and Nubriba Indigenous Peoples are agriculture, livestock, tourism and foreign employment.

**Customary institution, “Shagya”**

The customary institution *Shagya* of Tsum region has been followed for generations. However, the documentation in Sambota script with the efforts of a chief lama from Mu Gumba, labrang from Niley, Ngakyu, Khangsar, Ghanjen of the respective settlement and Venerable Dukpa Rimpochhe, Serap Dhorje Lama with collective commitments of the communities through signing on the Declaration note and taking oath by communities from 221 households in the presence of Venerable Dukpa Rimpochhe, Ngawang Khenrap Lama was held in 1939.

The governance system of the institution is based on seven non-violence principles, “Ahimsa” that prohibits killing, hunting and trapping any animals, harvesting honey, fire in the forest, trade (sell)
domestic animals to the traders and entry for meat trade to the communities. Members in each village are responsible for making sure that the communities follow the rules. The members strictly monitor the implementation of these rules, and anyone found violating these rules is subject to punishment as collectively decided by the members. The punishment depends upon the nature of the offense, ranging from lighting 1,000 butter lamps and bow down 1,000 times at a local monastery to paying from NRs 10,000 (90 USD) to NRs 50,000 (450 USD) in fine. However, apart from few minor punishment cases each year in the valleys, the whole communities have followed the regulations.

The Shagya Conservation Committee has also organized regular forest patrolling and frequent meetings while monitoring Shagya rules and carefully observing if anyone is violating the governance systems. The Shagya team has also been working effectively on an anti-poaching campaign since the very beginning. During the insurgency period of Nepal in 2005, the Shagya team was able to arrest 3 Tibetan poachers from the Upper Tsum and handed over to the Tibetan local government with the commitment not to involve in such activities again. So Shagya has more significant influence over the territories of the international border too. However, the communities are now worried about inviting more security forces (Armies) in Tsum Nubri Valleys on the border to China and checking if they would follow the Shagya non-violence principle with seven codes and conduct communities. The committee members are also responsible for organizing different rituals and ceremonies for the well-being of all. Public notice to be followed in the communities.
Tsumba and Nubriba Indigenous Peoples have announced the “self-declaration of Shagya territory” with four side boundaries of the *Ahimsa Chhetra*, the non-violent area, in 2008. Endorsement of *Shagya* territory declaration was held in 2008 by District Development Committee (decision by DDC council), Gorkha district; and extension of “Shagya territory” in lower Tsum was held in 2012 following rules and regulations of *Shagya*.

Institutionalization of the collective efforts of the recognition of Shagya was further enhanced through the establishment of the Tsum Welfare Committee (TWC) in 2006 with the objectives to ensure the conservation of biodiversity and cultural heritage of Tsum valley. Finally, the “Tsum Shagya Conservation Committee” was formally registered in 2019 in the Chief District Office in Gorkha. There are two Shagya Conservation Committees in the communities now. One is the Upper Tsum valley covering ward number 7 of Tsumnubri Rural Municipality, and another one is Lower Tsum valley covering the ward number of 6 Chumchet regions of Tsumnbri Rural Municipality. There are 35 members in the Executive Committee of the Shagya Conservation Committee in Upper Tsum valley, while 17 members work in the executive body in Lower Tsum Shagya Conservation Committee. Each settlement of the Shagya zone is represented by one female member and two male members. *Ghenchen* (village leader), *Syara* (clan leaders), and *Ghyange* (supporters of the *Ghenchen*), nominated by the village assemblies, are responsible for settling community disputes in line with the Shagya traditions.
The Indigenous communities in Tsum Nubri Valleys have been putting all the efforts to survive and continue Shagya traditional by organizing a series of events since 1997. The first Shagya Festival was organized in 2009, then the second Shagya Festival was organized in 2012, while the grant Centennial event was planned for 2020 being postponed due to the global pandemic.

**Richness of biodiversity**

Although the Indigenous communities know how rich they are in natural resources and biodiversity, a survey carried out by National Trust for Nature Conservation and Manaslu Conservation Area Project (NTNC-MCAP, 2019) shows that "Shagya" has contributed to the sustainable management of the natural resources, land, ecosystem and richness in biodiversity despite impacts of climate change in Tsum valley (Table 2).
Table 2. Richness of biodiversity in Tsum Nubri Valleys (NTNC-MCAP/Hariyo Ban program Semi Annual report, 2019).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.N.</th>
<th>Wildlife (Ungulate)</th>
<th>Total number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Himalayan Thar</td>
<td>588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Blue Sheep</td>
<td>754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Goral</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Musk Dear</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Himalayan Serow</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>1537</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey also shows that there has been lesser pressure upon grazing land due to the low number of livestock. There is sufficient grazing land for the wildlife. The Shagya committee strictly bans forest fire and indirectly contributes to sustaining wildlife habitat and wildlife. There have been increasing trends of wildlife sightings in lower Tsum valley. The increasing trend of wildlife sightings is due to a strict ban on poaching wildlife by the Shagya Conservation Committee (NTNC-MCAP, 2019).
Natural vegetation

Due to the complete ban on forest fire, the availability and production of non-timber forest products and high-value medicinal plants like a Yarcha Gumba, Kutki and Panchaaule - among others - have increased considerably in the Shagya region. Furthermore, the strict ban on natural honey bee extraction has also significantly contributed to the pollination of different plant species, fostering more natural vegetation expansion and growth. Encroachment and destruction of the natural forest become substantially more minor as the natural forest area is considered the prime habitat for the wildlife.

Traditional livelihoods

Almost all the households in upper Tsum valley have been involved in farming activities. They produce biannual crops in a single year. The harvested crop is nearly sufficient to feed the Indigenous communities of the Upper Tsum. They have been mainly growing potatoes, wheat, barley and buckwheat. Since the last decade, the villagers have also started growing leafy vegetables, legumes and tomatoes. Since 2008, when the area opened for foreign tourists, vegetable farming also increased polytunnels.
Nevertheless, Indigenous communities of lower Tsum valley find it hard to sustain their lives. They support their livelihood through subsistence farming such as maize, millet, wheat, potatoes, buckwheat, oat and barley. Since the last decade, the productivity of crops has been decreasing as compared to the previous years. Therefore, they have been seeking alternate livelihoods such as tourism, foreign employment, and some working as porters.

**Climate change impacts**

Different studies show the ever-increasing temperature of the globe (IPCC, 2021, 2014). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has already predicted that if business as usual continue, the rises of the temperature would be from 2 to 4-degree centigrade by the end of the century, inviting severe, pervasive and irreversible negative impacts on people, ecosystems, biodiversity of the world (IPCC, 2018). Indigenous Peoples in mountain regions like Tsum and Nubri Valleys have already been experiencing the impacts of these changes in their day-to-day lives.

Although the average rise of the temperature of Nepal is only 0.056 degrees Celsius (from 1971 to 2014), the increase of the temperature is different in the regions. The average temperature rise is only 0.021 degrees Celsius in the plane region, whereas the mountain is already crossing 0.086 degrees Celsius (Department of Hydrology and Metrology of Nepal, 2017). However, the rise of the average
temperature of Manang district is already 0.092 degrees Celsius, 0.070 degrees Celsius of Gorkha district and 0.076 degrees Celsius of the Manaslu (Rai and Rijal, 2014), which are much higher in comparisons to the average rise of the temperature of Nepal. Consequently, Indigenous communities in the Tsum and Nubri Valleys have already experienced changes in the precipitation patterns. They are not able to follow their traditional practices of farming. The typical vegetation pattern has been unpredictable with unexpected heavy rainfall, dryness, or uncertain floods and landslides, which became one of the main reasons for drying water sources, decreasing Indigenous seeds' growth, and even becoming climate refugees.

Although Tsumba and Nubriba Indigenous Peoples have continuously followed 'Shagya' norms and values and contributed to the well-conserved forest, wildlife, and pasture land by institutionalizing the Shagya tradition formally since the last 100 years, they are the most victims of the impacts of climate change. There has been no attention of the local government nor federal government to protect Indigenous valuable traditional values and cultural practices and recognize the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Nepal.

**The tragedy of customary institution, "Shagya"**

As mentioned earlier, the governance structure of *Shagya*, based on the non-violence principle with seven codes and conducts to be followed by all communities, including the visitors, contributed to the sustainable management of the natural resources and biodiversity. The President of Tsum Welfare Committee and also the Patron of Tsum Shagya Conservation Committee, Nima Lama says,
We have been protecting our resources and biodiversity for generations before the introduction of the concept of conservation and national park in Nepal. No matter what, we have been continuing our customary governance systems. Our communities are like an open zoo, where both wildlife and communities living together in harmony without interference from each other. To protect our self-governance systems, we have been putting all our efforts into the recognition of Shagya by the relevant local laws, but to our dismay, despite the tremendous contributions for the conservation of resources, biodiversity and ecosystems, we have no support either from Manaslu Conservation Area Project (MCAP) or from local government (Personal communication, October 1, 2021).

The efforts of protecting natural resources and biodiversity are part of the traditional customary governance systems. The absence of the legal recognition of customary institutions of Indigenous Peoples would not encourage protecting the cultural values, especially by the young generations, which have already been happening in other communities in Nepal. The sustainable protection of our resources, biodiversity and ecosystem that played a crucial role in addressing the climate change adaptation and mitigation would not be encouraged. Respecting these traditions would be the most sustainable and cheapest way to protect our natural resources and biodiversity conservation. However, the level of awareness on the importance of the values of customary governance systems is still marginal among the policymakers and stakeholders. Moreover, recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples to continue their traditional livelihoods and cultural practices are often being separated from the discourse of climate change and conservation. Consequently, Indigenous Peoples have been facing challenges of protecting our cultural and spiritual values governed by customary institutions like Shagya.

The impacts of climate change worst hit us (Nakashima 2012; ILO, 2017). Nevertheless, our customary institutions have contributed and played a crucial role in managing natural resources and biodiversity conservation by protecting and using Indigenous knowledge, skills, and cultural values. However, our issues and concerns are hardly recognized by the relevant laws and conservation policies.

**WayForward**

There is a growing understanding that restoration and conservation initiatives external to Indigenous Peoples and local communities’ systems and values can promote conflict. A 2020 global analysis of 2743 environmental conflicts found that conservation accounted for 52 percent of all conflicts in low and lower-middle-income countries (Scheidel et al., 2020) Reports of violence include independent reviews from some of the most well-known conservation organizations on the planet, WWF (Independent Panel of Experts, 2020). These conflicts arise due to the failure to recognize Indigenous Peoples’ customary institutions and governance systems, which are central to climate resiliency, and their ability to cope with the pandemic (Townsend et al., 2020).

A study conducted by the Rights and Resources Initiative (2021) demonstrated the importance of Indigenous territories for climate resiliency. It showed that 110 billion tons of above-ground carbon
Indigenous Peoples’ values are deeply rooted in the basic principle of Nature-Based solutions, so they can significantly contribute to the present climate crisis. However, apart from igniting global discourse on climate change regarding Indigenous Peoples’ issues and concerns, there have been hardly any efforts at national and local levels. The awareness of the essential roles and contributions of indigenous knowledge, cultural values and customary institutions, such as Shagya, to the sustainable management of natural resources and biodiversity, barely exists.

To sustain our cultural values and pass them to our future generations for the well-being of sentient beings on Earth, we need support to protect Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices with legal recognition of customary institutions and self-governance systems. Indigenous issues must be represented on the political agenda of the states and the basis of climate change discourse at all levels. Indigenous knowledge and practices are at the core of the protection of our environment and nature. Therefore, they must be integrated into political discourses and reflected in relevant climate change and conservation laws, policies and programs.
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