

Asian Indigenous Women's Strategy Workshop on Forest/Land Tenure and Climate Change

Baguio City, Philippines, 25 August (Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service) –Indigenous woman leader Norairri Thoungmuengthong of the Karen community in Thailand has found a way of helping her village mates reclaim and eventually manage their lands and forests. By joining local politics, that is.

“With more indigenous women in local politics, they can help craft policies that ensure and guarantee their rights, which include rights to security of tenure of their lands and forests,” said the chairperson of the Indigenous Women’s Network of Thailand.

Speaking through an interpreter, Thoungmuengthong, a Karen, was among participants of an August 16-18 “Asia Indigenous Women’s Strategy Workshop on Forest/Land Tenure and Climate Change” held in Baguio City, Philippines.

The workshop was organized by the Philippine-based Asian Indigenous Women’s Network (AIWN), which federates indigenous organizations across Asia, Tebtebba Foundation (a Philippine-based nongovernment organization working for the respect and protection of indigenous peoples’ rights and indigenous peoples’ self-determined sustainable development), and the Rights and Resources Initiative or RRI.

A Washington, D.C.-based coalition of international, regional and community organizations advancing forest tenure and policy and market reforms, RRI also supported the workshop along with EED (Protestant Church Development Service of Germany).

Some 20 indigenous women from Asia, Africa and Latin America participated in the workshop.

As a community representative of the local parliament in her village in Huai Ei Kang in the district Maewin, Maewang in Chang Mai since 2008, Thoungmuengthong had pushed for local policies that could support traditional income-generating livelihoods. These included weaving and sewing for the women, raising fish for elders, tending organic vegetables for the youth, and properly managing solid wastes.

She also helped initiate a community forest management project in which both men and women participated and continue to participate. Part of the project is building fire break lines to defend vital forests from wild fires.

Raising women’s self-esteem has also been part of Thoungmuengthong’s advocacy as a member of the local parliament. So she was able to help organize local government-sponsored trainings on public speaking and leadership development.

“Now the once shy women in my community have become talkative and can now articulate their issues and concerns,” she told the Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service.

All these trainings, she said, are “tools for women’s empowerment,” which they can apply in asserting their rights such as land and forest tenure.

Land tenure refers to a "bundle of rights," which includes access, rights to use, control, transfer land, and other associated responsibilities and restraints.

Radical departure

Anima Pushpa Toppo, an Oraon, is another indigenous woman leader who has helped her village mates assert and articulate their land and forest tenure rights in the district of Latehar in the state of Jharkhand

in central India.

Since 1856 under British rule, social common property resources including forests had become state property. “This alienated the masses from owning and managing their lands and forests,” she told other workshop participants.

She said that these colonial land and forest policies continued even after India became independent in 1947. But through the protests and lobby efforts and of the likes of Toppo and other Adivasis (indigenous peoples) and other community folk, they persuaded legislators to enact the Forest Resources Act of 2006.

The Act, said Toppo, is “a radical departure” from all the past forest policies.

The Act, among other things, recognizes tenurial and access rights of indigenous and other local communities, ensures their livelihood and food security and recognizes them “as integral to the very survival of the ecosystem.”

Still, Toppo said she and her community have to help ensure that the Act, which is good on paper, gets implemented. “If it is implemented in its true spirit, the Act can help undo a long history of injustice,” she said.

In West Kalimantan, Indonesia, indigenous women have learned to use the mass media to ventilate their issues related to land and forest tenure and threats such as conversion of wide swaths of forests to palm plantation.

“It is a great help that we have our own community-managed television stations,” said Surti Handayan, executive secretary of PEREMPUAN-AMAN or Alliance of Indigenous Women of the Archipelago. The woman leader from the Osing indigenous group also cited a local radio station in neighboring Nusa Tenggara Barat, which also airs indigenous issues.

Coming together

All the indigenous women workshop participants share common histories of dispossession from their lands and forests as a result largely of colonization. The colonial policies persisted and these were adopted by most governments.

But indigenous women are coming and networking together, learning from each other’s lessons and reinforcing each other’s commitment towards a common goal of regaining and reclaiming what was theirs.

Towards the last day of the workshop, the indigenous women agreed to create a global indigenous women’s network. Suggesting this idea was Cecile Ndjebet of the African Women's Network for Community Management of Forests (REFACOF).

Ndjebet said indigenous women from each continent could enrich each other’s experiences and learn from each other’s lessons and best practices.

Arming themselves

As they strengthen their national, regional and global networks, the indigenous women have to arm themselves about some approaches, which can help them assert their rights to their lands, forests and resources.

From the workshop, the indigenous women learned about the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and other international human rights instruments, which they can invoke in asserting their rights to their lands, forests and resources.

Speaking on the first day of the workshop, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, a Kankana-ey and Tebtebba

executive director, for example, cited UNDRIP Article 26. This article recognizes indigenous peoples' "rights to lands, territories and resources traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired." It also recognizes indigenous peoples' "right to own, use, develop and control their lands, territories and resources."

Other UN conventions such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) also reinforce what indigenous peoples, particularly the women, have long been practicing – an "ecosystems approach" to development.

The ecosystem approach is a strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promotes conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way. According to the CBD, application of the ecosystem approach will help to reach a balance of the three objectives of the Convention.

"The ecosystem approach is based on the application of appropriate scientific methodologies focused on levels of biological organization which encompass the essential processes, functions and interactions among organisms and their environment," said the CBD website. "It recognizes that humans, with their cultural diversity, are an integral component of ecosystems."

Tauli-Corpuz also highlighted the need for indigenous women to engage in the UNFCCC processes as these have impacts on their land tenure. For example, the Conference of Parties "requests developing country Parties, when developing and implementing their national strategies or action plans, to address, inter alia, the drivers of deforestation and forest degradation, land tenure issues, gender considerations and the safeguards...ensuring full and effective participation of indigenous peoples and local communities."

Challenge and hope

As they learned about various approaches and shared their common stories, the indigenous women learned that the challenges in relation to securing their land and forest tenure remain tough.

Most lands and forests are still by controlled governments in three continents. The worst case is the African continent where only 0.4 percent of forests is owned by communities and indigenous peoples, said Ganga Dahal, Rights and Resources Initiatives (RRI) regional facilitator for Asia.

Latin America is more advanced than Asia and Africa in terms of forest tenure distribution. According to Dahal, at least 24.6 percent of forests in Latin America is owned by communities and indigenous peoples, compared to 23.6 percent in Asia.

Despite the difficult challenge of enlarging the pie of forest tenure distribution in the three continents, the indigenous women participants of the recent workshop renewed their commitment and vowed to confront the challenge with courage.

"Listening to all your stories of commitment and courage, there is hope that our children's future is in good hands," said Tauli-Corpuz.

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About Tebtebba:

Established in 1996, Tebtebba (Indigenous Peoples' International Centre for Policy Research and Education) seeks to promote and disseminate widely indigenous peoples worldviews, their perspectives on key issues such as individual and collective human rights, sustainable development, climate change, biodiversity, traditional knowledge, customary laws and governance, conflict transformation, gender, etc. To gather and consolidate such perspectives, Tebtebba brings representatives of indigenous peoples' organizations, networks and communities together to elaborate and deepen their views and positions and plan out education and awareness-raising campaigns they can do jointly. These are also

venues to further reinforce their capacities to take the lead in policy advocacy and campaigns on all issues affecting them.

Tebtebba, a word used by the indigenous Kankana-ey Igorot of Northern Philippines, refers to a process of collectively discussing issues and presenting diverse views with the aim of reaching agreements, common positions, and concerted actions.

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