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Combatting Climate Change: Involving Indigenous Communities

By Serina Rahman

Synopsis

Climate change combat is often in the hands of policy-makers, researchers and governments. However it is the marginalised and indigenous communities that feel the full force of climate change effects. To be effective the campaign needs to include the wisdom and traditional practices of these communities to better protect those who need it the most.

Commentary

IN CELEBRATION of Earth Day, delegates to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) signed the agreement adopted at the 2015 COP21 meeting in Paris to ratify commitments to reduce carbon emissions and the effects of climate change. Climate change is a phrase tossed about by policy-makers, diplomats and business researchers the world over. But those who face the brunt of its force are not the ones making the decisions or advising policy.

The people most threatened by the loss of their homes to rising seas; loss of farmlands to saltwater flooding; loss of fisheries resources to rising ocean temperatures; and loss of their lives to extreme weather events are usually indigenous coastal communities. These people do not wear the lab coats and suits of those who influence policy and rarely have a say in national or international decision-making.

Climate-linked Conflict

Indigenous input, knowledge and needs are rarely sought in decisions that affect them the most. At the COP21 meeting in Paris, a provision recognising indigenous

people's rights to their lands was removed from the final agreement. In spite of an extensive series of meetings, concept notes and events to ensure local community and indigenous people's inputs into the COP21 agreement, the final outcome did not effectively reflect their urgent needs.

A recent paper in *Nature* linked global climate changes with patterns of civil conflict, while others see it more accurately as a 'threat multiplier'. Put simply, the consequences of climate change add stress to existing problems, which in turn can lead to conflict as desperate communities struggle to survive. Added to that, those in power rule on the side of economic and 'national' interests, which further exacerbate prevailing difficulties; those not consulted in decision-making often stand to lose access to water, land and food resources. A desperate struggle for these basic needs can lead to violent conflict and death.

An example: over the last month, tensions between local communities in Kidapawan, Mindanao and the authorities came to a head; street protests left two people dead. Local farmers and indigenous communities already affected by compromised watersheds as a result of decisions to expand plantations, mining operations and power plants were unable to withstand the final blow of El Niño. This is a region that has had a history of civil unrest as a result of famine and poverty; past incidences of drought led to raids on national food stock warehouses. Desperation knows no bounds.

Where Are The Answers?

In coastal communities in Asia, Africa and Latin America, indigenous peoples' lives are closely intertwined with the natural habitats around them; they are repositories of decades of observational data and experiential knowledge. While the rest of the world was quibbling over the existence of climate change, local communities were already adapting their practices to accommodate and overcome its effects on their lives.

Community-based forest and coastal resource management strategies steeped in the wisdom of those who have generations of experience and understanding of land and sea should be the way of the future. A number of case studies demonstrate the success of ecological wisdom and small-scale shifting cultivation practices of traditional communities in arresting climate change and reducing carbon emissions.

These strategies usually include setting aside areas for conservation, protection of watersheds and reversing deforestation by replanting and rejuvenating the land. In Sabah, Malaysia the *tagal hutan* system is used by the Sabah Forestry Department as part of a community-based forestry approach to improve the management of forest resources.

In Mandailing Province in north Sumatra, Indonesia, the *lubuk larangan* system is used to protect river resources and maintain fish stocks. Fishermen and farmers in Trang province, South Thailand work to prevent overdevelopment of their coastal areas, prohibiting damage to mangrove forests, rejuvenating seagrass beds and restoring sago palm forests.

However, local community attempts at protecting their futures from the effects of climate change are often hampered by bigger decisions to convert their lands and seas for other uses. Plans for hydroelectric dams in the name of climate change adaptation often flood indigenous lands, removing vast areas that could otherwise sequester carbon.

Decisions to move into large scale agro-business with the latest green technology to ensure food security sometimes requires the clearing of natural forests, enhancing the danger of landslides and the destruction of watershed areas. Local community input into decision-making such as these is hardly ever considered and the loss of community resources as a result of these decisions can lead to conflict.

Affirming The Value of Indigenous Wisdom

Although there are a few positive examples of progress in incorporating indigenous knowledge into decision-making processes, very little of this is translated into law. While Sabah Forestry has begun to engage and collaborate with local communities, this approach has not been put into policy for the state and is hardly practiced by the rest of Malaysia.

In Indonesia, a long awaited indigenous rights bill has been brought to the attention of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi); his commitment to *masyarakat adat* (traditional peoples) might result in one of the first laws to allow indigenous people control over their natural resources. This grassroots wisdom still has a long journey to make before it is able to reach the tables of those in power.

In Southeast Asia, of all the ASEAN states' Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) to the UNFCCC, only Indonesia and Vietnam explicitly mentioned their intention to benefit from, scale up, adapt and implement climate mitigation strategies based on traditional wisdom and indigenous knowledge. Southeast Asia is home to more than 800 recognised indigenous communities, many of whom are still deeply dependent upon their natural habitats. More inclusive action needs to be taken to acknowledge the importance of their traditional ecological knowledge, and benefit from it as a source of innovation for climate change adaptation.

But whether the region is able to free itself from the stranglehold of big business and state-driven economic decisions so as to hear and incorporate the voices from the ground, remains to be seen.

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