



Voices of Indigenous Women from the Asia-Pacific Region

Our key concerns and demands with respect to sustainable development are:

Our land, our future

Respect indigenous peoples' rights to land, territories and resources

Our rights, our lives

No sustainable development without indigenous peoples

Our knowledge, our role

Recognize and respect the roles and contributions of indigenous women in sustainable development

Listen to our voices

Ensure full and effective participation of indigenous women in development





The famous Brundtland Report “Our Common Future”, released by the United Nations in 1987, gave us the following, today widely quoted definition:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

This definition of sustainable development resonates well among indigenous peoples. Caring for future generations and thus caring for the land on which all life and a community’ well-being depends lie at the heart of indigenous peoples’ own understanding of development. Most indigenous peoples’ economies still depend mainly on the use of natural resources. Since Indigenous peoples inhabit some of the world’s most challenging, most vulnerable but also most biodiversity-rich environments, it is now widely acknowledged that indigenous peoples play a crucial role in the sustainable management of these lands and waters, and the natural resources and species that share these habitats with indigenous communities.



Why indigenous women's voices are not heard

But when discussing, planning and implementing sustainable development and environmental conservation project, a most important voice often tends to remain unheard: the voice of indigenous women.

Being ignored, remaining invisible in development planning is what indigenous women have in common with many non-indigenous women. Indigenous women, however, are facing even greater challenges in asserting their right to equal participation. Being both indigenous and women, they are doubly discriminated. They are discriminated by the wider society but often also within their own societies. For example, in education poor indigenous families often give priority to boys. Thus, many women remain uneducated and they may not be able to speak the country's official language. When there are community consultations in connection with development planning and projects these women are often excluded. It does not occur to those responsible for conducting the consultations to take extra efforts, like using indigenous languages and a time-schedule respecting women's work-loads, to ensure that indigenous women are fully involved.





Why it is important to listen to indigenous women's voices?

Ignoring indigenous women in the planning and execution of sustainable development initiatives not only means that the rights of these women are violated. It also means that valuable, sometimes even critical contributions and thus opportunities for better planning and implementation are lost. This is the case because men and women

- Have different needs and different priorities in connection with resource use and management
- Have different access to and control over natural resources, in accordance with the customary laws and practices of the respective communities
- Are using the environment in different ways: they may use different resources found there or they may use the same resources differently
- Have different knowledge of the environment and natural resources suffer in different ways from environmental degradation as a result of unsustainable resource exploitations and destructive infrastructure and other development projects



Why indigenous women suffer more from modernization and unsustainable development

'Modernization' is the imposition of the dominant political, economic and socio-cultural systems on indigenous peoples. It has dire consequences for indigenous peoples since it is based on massive resource exploitation, market-driven production and unfair trade and competition without regard to cultural diversities, local economies and the sustainable resource management systems of indigenous peoples. 'Modernization' often results in systematic and large-scale displacement of indigenous peoples, the destruction of their resources and livelihoods, and the weakening of their socio-cultural systems. As a result of the loss of access to resources indigenous women become economically more dependent on men, which further weakens their status in society. At the same time, the burden to take care of and provide for the children continues to rest on their shoulders. Their role in ensuring food security is seriously threatened, while increased resource scarcity, environmental hazards and disasters make their reproductive health conditions even more vulnerable. As indigenous women are forced to seek other sources of livelihood, they become more vulnerable to sexual and other forms of violence.





What indigenous women offer

Indigenous women are an important part of a community's social capital that can contribute to the designing and implementation of sustainable development initiatives. With their gender-specific knowledge, skills, social relations and networks they can make contributions which are critical in designing viable, practical solutions to the challenges of sustainable development. They can help

- Identify priorities with regards to the development needs of communities, in particular those of the weaker sections, i.e. children, women and in particular widows, single mothers etc.
- Identify and propose management solutions for resources that are critical for a community's sustainable livelihood
- Conserve the diversity of native domesticated plant varieties that are necessary for maintaining resilience in agriculture and ensuring food security for the community
- Enhance the knowledge on agricultural and seed conservation, medicinal plants and healing practices that can be integrated in community health programmes
- Monitor and document the resources that are under stress and the causes thereof, i.e. over-exploitation, habitat destruction, climate change etc.
- Propose viable alternative land use practices or income sources to reduce pressure on endangered species or resources that are critical for local livelihoods





- Mobilize existing knowledge and skills for sustainable community development, including for monitoring and enforcement of resource use and management rules
- Design appropriate social services to meet the needs of indigenous communities in general, and indigenous women and children in particular



Some of the indigenous women delegates from the Asia-Pacific region can be met during the Rio+20 Earth Summit from June 17 to 22. They are:

Tuiloma Lina-Jodi Vaine Samu is a Samoan. She got the orator chief matai title of "Tuiloma" from the nu'u/ village of Sapunaoa, Falealili district, Upolu Island, Samoa.

One of her areas of interest is sustainable development in all realms of human life. She focuses especially on permaculture and how it can help those living in urban settings who don't read and write to stand on their own and learn how to do so by growing their own food and by using recyclable materials.

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Mila Lingbawan Singson is from the Cordillera Region, Philippines. She belongs to the Kalinga/Kankana'ey tribe. She is the current secretary general of Innabuyog, the alliance of indigenous women organizations in the Cordillera Region, Philippines.

Her main fields of interest and contribution to the Rio+20 conference are indigenous women's contribution to sustainable development and climate change adaptation and on women and mining issues.

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Souknida Yongchialorsautouky belongs to the Hmong indigenous people in Lao PDR. Currently she works as the Coordinator of the Violence Against Women programme at Gender and Development Association..

She has also worked on the impact of land concession for rubber and sugar cane plantations on livelihood of indigenous peoples and indigenous women in particular.

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Grace Shatsang is a Tangkhul Naga from Manipur in Northeast India. She is the former president of the Naga Women's Union and currently a member of the Forum for Naga Reconciliation. Grace is also a member of the AIPP Indigenous Women Programme Committee (IWPC).

During Rio+20 she will share among others on the impact of dams on indigenous women in Manipur state, India.

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Toma Lama belongs to the Mugal indigenous people from the mid-Western part of Nepal. She is a journalist, filmmaker and indigenous woman activist. She represents her people to the Board of National Indigenous Women's Federation, Nepal.

Her particular field of interest which she will share during Rio+20 is traditional knowledge of indigenous women in indigenous movements.

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Tuaine Marsters belongs to the Maori people of the Cook Islands. She is the legal advisor to the Cook Islands Civil Society Organization (CICSO), an umbrella non-government organization in the Cook Islands.

During Rio+20 she will share experiences with food sovereignty and livelihoods of indigenous peoples of Cook Islands.

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