Baguio City, Philippines, 14 August (Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service) — A story was told about a team of urban-bred academic researchers who would like to know about how the indigenous Aeta folk of the Philippines were coping after Mt. Pinatubo, a long dormant volcano, erupted in 1991. After an hour uphill climb, the researchers, along with an Aeta tribal elder as guide, chanced upon some wild guava trees with ripe fruits.
Excited with what they saw, the researchers stopped and had a field day munching on the ripe guavas. After they had their fill, they harvested more, filling their pockets and bags. But the Aeta elder picked only a couple of ripe guavas to eat during their stopover along the trail.

So to their surprise, the researchers asked why the Aeta elder picked and ate only two guavas when there were plenty ripe fruits. “There would be many travelers passing through this trail so it would be good to leave some (ripe guavas) for them,” the elder said.

Often told and re-told in many conferences, the story has become a classic illustration of indigenous wisdom.

The story has become a metaphor for two distinct paradigms—one represented by the team of “schooled” researchers and the other represented by the “unschooled” indigenous elder, who has learned and kept the wisdom of his ancestors.

The first paradigm is one based on consuming and amassing more than what one needs. Consuming and amassing more than what one needs has been acknowledged as “unsustainable.”

The other is based on knowing one’s real basic needs and having a deep concern for others, including those of the next generations. This paradigm or perspective is largely cultural or a way of life, which is deeply rooted in indigenous peoples’ belief and value system.

**Culture as fundamental dimension**

In the search for assurance that this world’s future generations would be in good hands, indigenous representatives from all regions worldwide met from 17 to 19 June at the Museu da República in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil ahead of the 20-22 June official Rio +20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development.

Meeting for what was called the “International Conference of Indigenous Peoples on Self-determination and Sustainable Development,” the participants from 72 indigenous organizations worldwide highlighted the role of “culture as a fundamental dimension of sustainable development.”

“Our fundamental cultural belief systems and world views based on our sacred relationships to each other and Mother Earth have sustained our peoples through time,” said the indigenous participants in a two-page statement.

In their statement, they paid tribute to their traditional knowledge holders, women and youth, who, they said, contributed and participated in sustaining and wisely managing the
land and resources in their ancestral territories.

Noting how the dominant economic growth-oriented development model has been pursued at all costs and how it has encouraged unsustainable consumption patterns, the indigenous participants asserted that there must be a brake system to this madness for economic growth. And that brake system is culture.

“Cultures are ways of being and living with nature, underpinning our values, moral and ethical choices and actions,” said the indigenous participants in their statement. “Indigenous peoples’ abiding survival is supported by our cultures, providing us with social, material, and spiritual strength. We believe that societies must foster cultures of sustainability, and that Rio +20 should highlight culture as the most fundamental dimension of sustainable development.”

Despite some criticisms of the Rio +20 official outcome document, indigenous leaders were happy with the official recognition of culture in sustainable development.

Reflecting on what transpired in Rio, Tebtebba executive director Victoria Tauli-Corpuz noted that the outcome document veered away from the dominant economic growth-oriented kind of development. “The message is clear—the dominant economic growth model has failed,” she said.

She cited paragraph 40 of the outcome document. “We call for holistic and integrated approaches to sustainable development that will guide humanity to live in harmony with nature and lead to efforts to restore the health and integrity of the Earth’s ecosystem,” the paragraph read.

Paragraph 41 also reflected what indigenous peoples have been articulating all along. “We acknowledge the natural and cultural diversity of the world and recognize that all cultures and civilizations can contribute to sustainable development,” it said.

**Green economy policies**

There have been many statements from civil society organizations condemning the Rio Outcome as promoting the green economy. But a careful reading of the document shows otherwise.

The language under the section on “Green Economy” usually uses the term green economy policies, which is not the same thing. Indigenous peoples had pushed for the recognition of diverse and plural economies and not a single green economy, an assertion that was reflected and acknowledged by the outcome document’s use of “green economy policies.”

Indigenous leaders and representatives in their statement stressed on strengthening diverse local economies and territorial management. They had asserted their right to self-determination, from which, they said, “BuenVivir” or “living well” is anchored.

But they asserted that “living well” could be realized through secure land rights and territorial management and by building “vibrant community economies.” These local economies, they said, provide “sustainable local livelihoods, community solidarity and are critical
components of resilient ecosystems.”

The official document may not reflect the way indigenous peoples’ leaders have strongly articulated their position. But the document recognized how indigenous peoples contributed to sustainable development, said Tauli-Corpuz.

Paragraph 58j stated: “We affirm that green economy policies in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication should... enhance the welfare of indigenous peoples and communities, other local and traditional communities and ethnic minorities, recognizing and supporting their identity, culture and interests, and avoid endangering their cultural heritage, practices and traditional knowledge, preserving and respecting non-market approaches...”

One weakness of the outcome document, however, lies on its texts on mining. Tauli-Corpuz would have wanted the inclusion of “free, prior and informed consent” as a prerequisite to any mining activity.

Still, she noted that the section on mining recognized the importance of “strong and legal and regulatory frameworks, policies and practices for the mining sector.” The section also stressed on economic and social benefits and included effective safeguards that reduce social and environmental impacts, including impacts on biodiversity and ecosystems.

Rights-based approach

Civil society groups, indigenous peoples and their supporters and advocates have long been pushing for a rights-based approach to development. This approach, according to the Danish Institute for Human Rights, is a framework that integrates the norms, principles, standards and goals of the international human rights system into the plans and processes of development.

So indigenous peoples and their supporters and advocates were generally elated over the outcome document’s reaffirmation of “freedom, peace and security, respect for all human rights...” Paragraph 9 particularly reaffirms the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments relating to human rights and international law.

Indigenous leaders and representatives were also particularly happy over the outcome document’s recognition of the importance of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples or UNDRIP “in the context global, regional, national and sub-national implementation of sustainable development strategies.”

The recognition of the UNDRIP’s importance would definitely help indigenous peoples as they assert to strengthen and defend their local economies and rights to their lands, territories and resources. For indigenous peoples and local communities, any kind of development that is pursued through land-grabbing and forced relocation violates both human rights and sustainable development principles.

In their 19 June statement in Rio de Janeiro, they cited large-scale dams, plantations, large-scale infrastructure, tar sands extraction and other “mega-
projects,” as well as the theft and appropriation of biodiversity resources and traditional knowledge.

Pondering on the gains of indigenous peoples in Rio, Tauli-Corpuz said: “The outcome document can be used to push governments to adhere to and implement international human rights laws, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.”

Looking forward

Critics had expected an outcome document with high action points or some kind of a road map for implementation of sustainable development goals. But between those who saw the glass as half-full or half-empty, one of those who chose to be optimistic was Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff. She hailed the outcome document as a “starting point” and not a “threshold or ceiling” for implementing the path to sustainable development.

For Rousseff and the like, their homework did not end with Rio +20. “Rio +20 has not ended, but only started, as the Brazilian President stated,” said Martin Khor, executive director of South Centre, a Geneva-based intergovernmental organization providing analyses of global issues and concerns, which developing countries can use for collective and individual action.

“For the outcome in Rio, the multilateral system in sustainable development lives to fight another day,” Khor added. “The mandated actions in the Rio +20 text, on the high-level forum on sustainable development, the finance strategy and technology facilitating mechanism, and the sustainable development goals, point to more and potentially important work in the year ahead at the UN. The success of any conference is ultimately determined on the strength of the follow-up. Rio +20 could remain a disappointment, or could become the start of something significant.”

Khor pointed to a new item in the Rio +20 outcome document with considerable follow-up implication—the decision to formulate sustainable development goals. This will be done next year through a 30-member working group under the UN General Assembly, nominated through the UN regional groups.

For indigenous organizations, the need for follow-up offers opportunities for engagement and collaboration with international policy-makers. “Indigenous organizations can thus engage in the processes of follow-up actions such as in helping formulate sustainable development goals and helping define international mechanism for implementation,” said Tauli-Corpuz.

Pushing for the recognition of the importance of traditional livelihoods in sustaining local economies is another area of follow-up action, she said.

The follow-up action, which Rio +20 mandated, also offers opportunities for indigenous peoples to elaborate more on the role of culture as a fundamental dimension of sustainable development. With the still urgent tasks ahead, the homework of all those concerned in helping chart “the future we want” indeed has just begun.