Indigenous Peoples Enhance Traditional, Earth-Friendly Livelihoods

To grow corn, their main staple, many indigenous communities in the upland regions of Mexico need to clear a portion of their forests. But they leave cleared areas fallow after a few years so these could regenerate into secondary forests.
Still, they realized that there must be a better way than the usual practice of clearing a portion of the forests and burning this in order to grow corn and other upland crops.

“Now we still slash some portion, but we no longer burn clearings. We instead turn these (cleared reeds and weeds) into compost,” said Carlos Sanchez of the Asamblea Mixe para el Desarrollo Sostenible (ASAM-DES), a non-government organization working with indigenous peoples in the upland regions of Mexico.

ASAM-DES also embarked on reforesting barren areas and enhancing existing forest areas. “Each family now has committed to establish and maintain nurseries from which to get seedlings for reforestation,” said Sanchez, a community leader from Ira. Priv. Sabino in the Mexican state of Oaxaca.

To learn and appreciate early on the value of taking care of their lands and resources, children have been encouraged to also help set up nurseries. Sanchez said parents now would accompany their grade-school children to retrieve seedlings from wild or native trees.

“We have to instill them early in life the value, dignity and pride of working with their hands and taking care of their environment,” he said.

Sanchez was speaking during a meeting of Tebtebba’s partners last 2 September in Bangkok, Thailand. Tebtebba is a Philippine-based nongovernment organization promoting indigenous peoples’ rights and “self-determined development” (a kind of development in which indigenous peoples determine and influence their future through participatory governance.)

Tebtebba and its partners from Asia, Africa and Latin America took time off to meet in between the 30 August to 5 September intersessional meeting of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Bangkok during which the partners also participated.

During the partners’ meeting, leaders of each organization updated each other about their activities in the field. The sharing turned out to be a rich exchange of each other organization’s “best practices” about home-grown innovations, which are enhancing existing traditional knowledge, practices and livelihoods.

For example, to increase the yield from their upland farms, villagers in Sanchez’s community apply natural or organic fertilizer, which is processed with the help of certain species of earthworms called “African night crawlers.”

Using organic or natural fertilizers, farmers there raise tropical vegetables such as tomatoes, pepper, cabbages, and other crops. During the cold months when their community experiences frost, farmers can still grow crops inside greenhouses. “But we don’t sell these. Our goal is to be self-sufficient in food,” said Sanchez.

What they sell are lilies and other flowers. The flower industry is where upland communities in Oaxaca can get extra income.

“The food crops we raise in our farms and greenhouses ensure our survival and the flowers are for our income,” said Sanchez. Through this arrangement, “our people won’t abandon
their lands and migrate to the U.S. because they can find opportunities here,” he said.

Another source of good income is their organic coffee (both green beans and parchment or un-hulled coffee), which has been certified as organic by CERES, a Happurg, Germany-based outfit that certifies organic products and is accredited by the US Department of Agriculture.

For example, last May 2012 CERES certified as organic 80 metric tons of parchment coffee, which was produced by 133 growers from an aggregate of 270.50 hectares of coffee farms. In March 2011 CERES certified as organic 68.18 metric tons of parchment coffee and 51 metric tons of green coffee raised by 289 growers from an aggregate of 289 hectares of coffee farms.

With the organic seal from CERES and the US Department of Agriculture, growers, through ASAM-DES, could demand a good price based on internationally competitive price of certified organic coffee.

For traceability, the USDA recommends that trade partners request from CERES transaction certificates for each shipment of organic product.

Traditional seeds

Farmers in Oaxaca also have begun retrieving and conserving their traditional seeds. “Our traditional seeds are more diverse, more resistant to pests and can be planted again and again without decreasing in yield,” said Sanchez.

He said conserving and propagating their own traditional seeds would also safeguard local farms from invasive crops, which contaminate local crops or destroy the local ecosystem’s biodiversity.

Another farming technique, which Oaxaca farmers adopted to enhance their traditional rotational farming is agro-forestry or integrating fruit trees with forest trees. “Again, our goal is food security while helping maintain our biodiversity,” said Sanchez.

Still another innovation that ASAM-DES introduced was helping households install an earthen stove, which requires less firewood. “Since it is more convenient, this stove is most welcome by our women,” said Sanchez.

The stove caught the interest of other partners. Nadesca Pachao of the Centro de Culturas Indigenas el Peru or CHIRAPAQ said her community would be interested in the simple technology, which Sanchez describes as not only fuel-saving but women-friendly as well.

Eunice Sinoro Parsitau Nkopio of the Mainyoito Pastoralists Integrated
Development Organization (MPIDO), a non-government organization in Kenya, also shared that her community has innovated a similar earthen stove. Both the Kenya earthen stove model and the Oaxaca version could be shared with other partners, she said.

ASAM-DES has been and continues to educate other indigenous and local farmers about these innovations and farming techniques. Sanchez said trainers and facilitators have embarked on various workshops about what they call conservation agriculture through diverse cropping, soil conservation (such as tapping earthworms), agro-forestry, conserving and propagating traditional seeds, and how to make earthen stoves.

Alternative livelihoods

In Vietnam, the Center for Research and Development in Upland Areas or CERDA has embarked on “alternative livelihoods,” which are aimed at helping reduce carbon emissions.

These livelihoods in Vietnam’s “ethnic minority” communities also include introducing organically-grown commodities, which is new to many farmers. “We have been promoting compost so farmers won’t rely on chemical fertilizers (which require much fossil fuels to manufacture),” said Vu Thi Hien of CERDA.

So shortly after CERDA’s partnership project with Tebtebba began in June 2010, partner-farmers have been producing organic potatoes, ginger and canna (a root crop, which can be made into flour).

The farmers have a ready market for their products. Organized into cooperatives, they have ironed out a contract with a company to buy their products, said Hien.

The farmers’ organic agriculture complements CERDA’s REDD Plus program, which covers two demo communes in Vo Nhai and Dai Tu District, Thai Nguyen Province in north Vietnam. (REDD stands for “Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest degradation in Developing countries.” REDD Plus goes beyond deforestation and forest degradation, and includes the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks.)

Being piloted under CERDA’s REDD Plus program are two systems of forest land management. One program is being managed by the community, which covers 1,312 hectares of natural forests in 20 villages within the Binh Long commune.

The other is being managed by households in five villages, covering 229 hectares of natural forests within the Phuc Luong commune.
In implementing its REDD Plus programs, CERDA combined various approaches. “We have applied the landscape and rights-based approaches and have been guided by the FPIC (free and prior informed consent) principle,” said Hien. “We have learned all these through a workshop training Tebtebba organized in Baguio (a city in northern Philippines).”

(Under a landscape approach to sustainable development, all critical sectors like water, forest and agriculture are well considered. This is opposed to working with one sector, e.g., water, in isolation of other sectors, e.g., forests and agriculture. The landscape approach recognizes that everything in a landscape is interconnected.)

(On the other hand, a rights-based approach to development is “a framework that integrates the norms, principles, standards and goals of the international human rights system into the plans and processes of development,” according to the Danish Institute for Human Rights. “It is characterised by methods and activities that link the human rights system and its inherent notion of power and struggle with development.”)

For her part, Mina Setra of the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN) shared about her organization’s food self-sufficiency and agro-forestry programs. For example, she said AMAN has embarked on teaching indigenous peoples to combine forest trees with fruits such as durian and other crops such as cacao.

She describes as “mixed economies” the kind of program AMAN has been advocating.

In the upland town of Tinoc in the northern Philippine province of Ifugao, Tebtebba and its partner-organization, the Montanosa Research Development Center, have initiated a campaign to reintroduce traditional agriculture.

Reintroducing traditional agriculture, which includes retrieving and restoring traditional crop varieties, is aimed at countering the massive conversion of virgin forests into commercial vegetable farms, which rely heavily on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, said Grace Balawag of Tebtebba.

Indigenous calendar

In the state of Roraima, Brazil, the farming activities of indigenous peoples there have been guided by a 60-day cycle traditional calendar. Through this indigenous calendar, farmers have synchronized their planting and harvesting schedules, which are also marked with scheduled religious rituals, said Mario Nicacio, coordinator general of the Conselho Indigena de Roraima or CIR, a nongovernment organization in Brazil.

“This indigenous calendar can serve as one of the baselines for tracking climatic changes,” said Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, executive director of Tebtebba, who moderated the daylong meeting of the partners.

As elsewhere in the world, Roraima, said Nicacio, has noted climatic changes, which have affected changes in cropping and harvesting schedules.

And like ASAM-DES and CERDA, CIR has also been advocating about organic farming.
Coping with drought

In Kenya, pastoralists and farmers have discovered a way to cope with drought. Through the help of the MPIDO, they have learned to harvest and save rainwater in tanks, which they use during the drought season, said Parsitau Eunice Sinoro Nkopio of MPIDO.

She said MPIDO helped organize a community water association, which equitably distributes water to each household.

The association also has an irrigation project, serving at least 44 families, she added.

MPIDO likewise taught locals about bee-keeping and how to harvest and market honey. “Bee-keeping is one way through which our partner-communities continue to maintain and protect their forests,” said Nkopio.

Securing tenure

Equally important as ensuring food self-sufficiency is securing tenure for indigenous lands. The Centro para la Autonomia y Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indigenas (CADPI) in Nicaragua, for example, has focused on resolving border demarcation-related conflicts.

“This (resolving border conflicts) can help secure the lands of indigenous peoples from outsiders who encroach into our lands,” said Dennis Mairena of CADPI.

Mairena was one of those who were convinced that participatory community mapping, which was the focus of an earlier training also in Bangkok, could help indigenous peoples to secure their land rights.

Communication and advocacy

Tebtebba’s partners in Nepal and Peru are making a dent in advocacy work through community radio.

Through community radio, indigenous peoples’ organizations in Nepal have been able to communicate their various advocacies despite their mother tongue problem, said Kamala Thapa of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities or NEFIN. Nepal has more than 100 local languages.

In Peru, community radio has proved effective in communicating “good practices” of indigenous peoples in traditional farming, forest conservation and other indigenous knowledge, practices and values, said Nadesca Pachao of CHIRAPAQ.

After the daylong exchange of Tebtebba and its partners in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the partnership no doubt improved the skill of each partner so much so that each has become “highly visible, making sensible and relevant interventions, and making a difference” in the local, national and international arenas, said Tauli-Corpuz.