Manila Global Workshop Spurs Interest in Indigenous Studies

Manila, PHILIPPINES (June 28, Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service) - At a time when Western paradigms are acknowledged to be in crisis, some 60 local and foreign scholars, indigenous leaders, researchers and educators, activists, policymakers, and practitioners met here for a revived interest in indigenous models of learning and education.
“(It is time) to create our own institutions and alternative universities where, using our own language, our wise persons can teach,” said Dr. Myrna Cunningham, member and former Chairperson of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

The Miskito educator from Nicaragua was speaking at the opening of a June 26-28 International Seminar Workshop on Indigenous Studies in Manila.

Among other things, Cunningham recommended a “decentralized” approach to indigenous education, which calls for “affirmative action” for women. “For example, we should not open courses unless at least half of enrollees are women,” she said. “There should be also a special program for remote communities so education, which is a basic human right, can be accessible to all.”

The seminar-workshop struck a chord with the Philippines, which is currently overhauling its educational system through what is called the K+12 program. Although patterned after the educational systems of the US, U.K and Australia, the program stresses, among other things, the use of mother tongues or local languages to help students understand concepts and principles.

Co-sponsored by Tebtebba, a Baguio City-based global indigenous non-government organization concerned with indigenous peoples’ rights and development, and the government-run University of the Philippines Baguio, the workshop was being held also in the wake of the Philippine Department of Education’s recent announcement that it would invest P100 million (US$2.3 million) in indigenous education.

Education secretary Armin Luistro said the funds would be used to train educators, build partnerships between the government and indigenous peoples’ advocacy groups, and establish a baseline data about the state of education among the country’s 12 million indigenous peoples.

“This is part of our commitment to achieve the Education for All 2015 targets and the Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations which we are duty bound to fulfil,” he told reporters on June 12.

The education departments and ministries around the world could learn a lesson or two from seminar-workshop participants’ sharing of lessons and experiences about indigenous ways of
knowing, teaching, learning, training, and research.

In recent years, some universities provided space for a field called Indigenous Studies, seemingly privileging the “indigenous” as a legitimate category of inquiry. Indigenous academics, especially in the developed countries, recommended establishing indigenous studies in their universities.

There are now several indigenous studies centers in universities in the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Latin America and the Caribbean, and in the Arctic, whose representatives presented papers during the three-day exercise.

There are also universities and colleges established, run and managed by indigenous peoples, sometimes with the support of government, sometimes set up independently. There are the Sami University College in Norway and the indigenous intercultural universities set up in Latin America through the initiative of indigenous peoples’ movements and some with the support of the State.

In the Philippines, the UP Baguio has committed to studying issues confronting indigenous peoples and communities, particularly those inhabiting the Cordillera in northern Philippines. Thus, it established the Cordillera Studies Center (CSC) in June 27, 1980 or 33 years ago today.

These developments in indigenous studies here and in other parts worldwide have prompted both Tebtebba and UP Baguio to conceive the idea of holding a forum where participants could share experiences and lessons and discuss the critical issues that tend to “unsettle” scholars, researchers, and practitioners.

Some academic institutions like UP Baguio’s CSC may have blazed the trails in indigenous studies and research. “But at the end of the day, indigenous studies and research should empower indigenous peoples in the grassroots,” said John Bamba, director of the Institute of Dayakology, an NGO concerned with empowering the indigenous Dayak of Western Kalimantan, Indonesia.

And as they are struggling to free themselves from over 500 years of colonization, various indigenous peoples worldwide are appreciating again the traditional knowledge and principles of their forbears. The newly established Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has acknowledged that there are diverse knowledge systems, which include indigenous traditional knowledge, which should be equally valued as modern western science.

This renewed interest in indigenous knowledge, ways of knowing and methodologies, principles and values, say educators and indigenous peoples’ leaders and advocates, may yet serve as a brake system to the current greed-driven economic development model, which stresses on wanton wealth accumulation and consumerism.

At the three-day seminar workshop, various scholars shared about indigenous spirituality, “cosmo-vision,” and worldviews, which stress on care for Mother Nature, stewardship, wealth sharing, reciprocity and a deep concern for the needs of future generations.