Information Systems Can Empower Indigenous Communities

ONCE TRAINED about research methods and information systems, indigenous communities can have full control over data and information about their lands and resources. And these vital data and information can help protect them from systematic land grab.

Undertaking participatory mapping and biodiversity inventory in Thai Nguyen, northern Vietnam.

Photo credit: CERDA
Take the case of Guyana, a sovereign state on the northern coast of South America. In 2012 the nongovernment Amerindian Peoples Association or APA, which seeks to promote and defend indigenous peoples’ rights in the country, embarked on a case study of community-based tenure assessments and information monitoring systems.

APA launched the study to document the status of lands in order to press for policy reform and recognition of land rights in the “context of indigenous rights and global land grab.” APA also sought to “generate information communities want documented and need rather than reflecting the priorities of others” such as logging, mining, hydropower and plantation companies.

“We wanted to gather and analyze independent and reliable information generated by, about and for the communities,” said Jeanne Sharon Atkinson, current APA president.

For example, different government agencies, according to Atkinson, are creating their own maps and are “adjusting” the maps to suit the interests of companies.

“So we need to make our own maps because we have our communities who know well their territories,” she said.

Atkinson was speaking at a workshop in Bonn, Germany on 25-28 April that was co-organized by Tebtebba, a Philippine-based indigenous global institution focusing on indigenous rights and concerns, six other organizations. These were Forest Peoples Programme, Indigenous Peoples’ Partnership on Climate Change and Forests, International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity, 10c
Partners, Swedbio at Stockholm Resilience Center, and the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The workshop was aimed to “establish Community-Based Monitoring and Information Systems (CBMIS) towards securing rights to land, territories, forests and resources, ensuring integrity of ecosystems and the well-being of indigenous peoples.”

The workshop gathered over 50 indigenous leaders and representatives from Asia, Africa, Latin America and representatives from donor agencies and governments, UN agencies, non governmental organizations, and the academe. Several indigenous leaders each presented other case studies, all of which were aimed at developing and strengthening community-based monitoring systems to measure indicators of indigenous peoples’ rights and well-being.

Learning research tools

Research is usually done by consultants. But the APA case study on community-based tenure assessment was “carried out by, for and with the communities rather than top down research by experts.”

For APA, the right people to document the situation of indigenous communities and assess their rights to and status of their lands are the communities themselves. APA knows full well that indigenous peoples themselves can understand better their issues such as environmental health and resource conflicts than outside consultants.

APA also understands that research, if done well, can be a powerful weapon of communities which, in turn, can send a strong message to target audience such as governments and banks.

APA thus mobilized experienced social researchers to train leaders and members of communities on research methods. For four days 16 delegates from the country’s five regions met in the capital city of Georgetown to design the project.

The training included what questions were to be asked. To equip them with scientific research methods, participants were taught how to interview, take notes, make public presentations, store information and use gadgets such as smart phones, GPS, audio recorders and laptop computers.

The participants also practiced to receive feedback from colleagues. During the first part of the training, the participants were able to draw up a survey form made up of over 90 questions. The questionnaire included inquiries about demarcation details, village participation, among other things.

Part of the training community participants received were the importance of field work. They had to test the survey questionnaires in the field. From their field testing, the community researchers were able to generate online maps of key issues such as boundary problems and mining-related conflicts. They were also able to document testimonies of villagers about the status of their lands.

Part of the research method was validating data initially gathered. This process was important if the communi-
ty was to produce a case study that could stand the scrutiny of critics.

Validated data were still field-tested. And the purpose was to re-modify the methodology if necessary. When the methodology was tested with trainers, four groups visited two different communities, spending three days in each village.

Then they regrouped to share lessons and review methodology and questions. Based on the field test, they agreed to modify the methodology. The modification included the need for validation meetings to be held in the villages on the final day. The questions on the survey form also had to be modified, prioritizing approximately 40 key questions.

Community participants in the research also cited a common need—sharpening basic research techniques such as cross checking and providing more detail, particularly on complex boundary issues.

**Lessons learned**

In facilitating the participatory case study on community-based tenure assessments and information monitoring systems, APA learned some important lessons.

The first lesson APA cited was that researchers must give back information to communities and not just to extract data. It was only proper for the communities to have access to the information, which they needed in securing their tenure and rights to their lands and resources.

APA also learned that the whole participatory research exercise was empowering. The whole case study process helped strengthen APA as an organization by connecting APA managers and staff with communities. As a result, APA came to understand and know better the situation on the ground.

On the part of the community participants in the case study, the research exercise helped build their capacity as team players, advocates and activists. And they have proved that research was not the exclusive domain of academics and consultants. Research is a skill that could be learned and practiced to generate vital information, which communities could use to protect themselves against land grabbers and speculators.

Land issues could be complex. But the community researchers found that they could understand the complexities of their land problem through a thorough study, which involved cross-checking and validation.

Since doing good research is hard work, takes commitment and can be painful, the community researchers also learned that their outputs would be too precious to lose. Thus, one of their vital lessons was to backup their file.

**Policy reforms**

Over the years Amerindian land rights have remained and continue to remain unrecognized. This, despite decades of Amerindian activism, said Atkinson.

She said the government of Guyana has been portraying a land situation as resolved before international donors supporting carbon mitigation programs. “How can we talk about carbon mitigation when we have not yet secured rights to our lands?” she asked.
APA thus sought to produce “a robust study that documents and identifies the reality of Amerindian land rights in Guyana that could empower communities to press for recognition of rights and pushes for effective policy reform.”

In 2011 the APA General Assembly prioritized a community-based tenure assessment to document the status of Amerindian lands in Guyana and press for legal and political reforms.

The assessment is already generating powerful information. According to Atkinson, the assessment had highlighted the systematic failings of the government titling process. These ranged from failure to incorporate traditional lands into legal titles to farmlands and houses left out from land titles.

Meanwhile, the problems with titles have been exacerbated by demarcation processes that have failed to demarcate according to title descriptions. These had created conflicts and disputes within and between communities.

The case study also provided geo-referenced photos of illegal logging and environmental destruction caused by mining.

“Early information has also been fed to policymakers and international donors to highlight holes in government discourse,” said Atkinson.

APA’s case study could be one of the templates for other indigenous and local communities seeking to assess their land tenure status and information monitoring systems.

As the participants in the Bonn workshop contemplate on what next steps to undertake, APA’s case study could give clues to other indigenous communities about community-based methods and...
strategies on how to strengthen community-based information systems or CB-MIS.

**Measuring carbon**

Other indigenous communities elsewhere can also offer some lessons in implementing and monitoring government projects, according to the other participants in the Bonn workshop.

A REDD+ pilot project in Thai Nguyen, northern Vietnam shows that indigenous and local communities can measure carbon, inventory biodiversity, and push for an equitable benefit distribution system, says Vu Thi Hien of CERDA or Centre of Research and Development in Upland Areas.

REDD+ refers to Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries plus Conservation, Sustainable Forest Management and Enhancement of Carbon Stocks.

The participating communities included ethnic minorities and local communities, a total of 1,568 households, organized in three new cooperatives. Local governments and government agencies concerned with forests or REDD+ were also involved.
The pilot project itself developed institutions and governance at community level, built capacity and assisted with technical aspects of REDD+. It also conducted advocacy at national and provincial level.

The cooperatives are composed of self-governing groups of households, which elect a steering committee and an independent community monitoring group. The steering committee operates a management board, responsible for planning, advice and consultation, and community-based monitoring. Sub-groups of the board are responsible for finance, information and REDD+ technical aspects.

The technical sub-groups and community monitoring groups received training in use of GPS and in measuring carbon. The project district staff turned the GPS data into maps. The carbon measurement was based on above-ground biomass: the wood in sample plots was measured, the carbon was calculated, and these were plotted on a carbon map.

Interestingly, the participatory monitoring and information system was financed and maintained by the cooperatives.

The monitoring also included biodiversity inventory, based on traditional knowledge and science. Methodologies included mapping use of forest land, water resources and changes in biodiversity. Species were identified through survey and observation. Community mapping took in the past, present (changes in land use) and future (planning).

The project developed a methodology, tools, indicators, rules for using the information, and ways to update and maintain the information system.

Community radio

The community radio networks established in some Asian indigenous communities are not only effective tools in asserting land and tenure rights. They are also vital in monitoring how governments are implementing land laws and related international conventions.

In Nepal, the national indigenous federation and its partner communities have been using community radio as a platform for sharing and learning about climate change issues and REDD+. Community radio has proved to be the best tool there because it is “easily accessible and affordable to all,” said Pasang Dolma Sherpa of Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN).

NEFIN has been working on climate change and REDD+ since 2009, initiating community-based REDD+ processes with indigenous peoples at national and local levels.

For NEFIN, community radio is the best means of disseminating information to build awareness and capacity, to pass on traditional knowledge to young people. Because it reaches local government and national government agencies, it is an effective advocacy and lobbying tool. It is also a means to document traditional knowledge and livelihood systems.

Community radio in Nepal is distinct from commercial radio. Community radio aims for the ownership, involvement and voice of the community, while commercial radio is profit-oriented.

Community radio has also informed communities about their rights, sometimes prompting them to action. For example, information broadcast on Marshy-
andi FM resulted in a community affected by the Upper Marshyandi hydropower project demanding an FPIC process.

Another community, informed by Dhankuta FM, demanded an FPIC process and dialogue over a mineral water project; the result was a three-point agreement: the affected area would be monitored, employment opportunities would be available to the community, and alternative water sources would be identified.

In Illam, a radio program on FPIC in REDD+ prompted the local community to demand an FPIC process, and to raise the need for addressing traditional customary practices and alternative livelihoods.

**Mobile phones and monitoring**

For its education and monitoring work, AMAN (Indigenous Peoples’ Alliance of the Archipelago) of Indonesia also uses community radio, community television, and multimedia. It also maintains a website and print magazine. But one of the most effective ways of reaching members at community level is by mobile phone.

“External communication is a key activity for AMAN because mainstream media are not sensitive to indigenous peoples,” said Henky Satrio of AMAN. “They tend to focus on urban issues, and to portray indigenous peoples as backward.”
AMAN has a membership of more than 2,240 communities across Indonesia, with 20 provincial boards and 85 district organizations. The organization’s mission is to restore the sovereignty of the indigenous peoples of the archipelago, and defend economic, social, cultural and political rights.

Given its scope and mission, the organization needs an efficient and effective system for both internal and external communications.

AMAN’s communication system needs to link its boards at national, provincial and district level; to link members with each other at community level, as well as with the boards; and to enable a two-way flow of information between the various components of the organization and the government, NGOs and the public.

More than 70 percent of AMAN members have mobile phones and the technology allows the organization to reach them immediately, and in a personal way. AMAN’s mobile phone system relies mainly on SMS (text messages). All the organization’s information, to and from board members, individual community members, and from the website, can be accommodated in the SMS system.

Information reaching the AMAN office from a community is edited and then sent to 2,000 mobile phone numbers, reaching not only AMAN members but also advocacy targets such as government agencies and members of parliament. The system allows information from community monitoring to be converted swiftly into advocacy when necessary.

This system spreads information about the problems facing indigenous peoples, including land grabbing and conflicts with mining and palm oil plantation companies. For example, when the Dongi people in Kalimantan faced a threat from a company to drive them off their land, the community sent an SMS to AMAN, which spread the information to put pressure on the authorities. The result was negotiation between the community and the company, and the community kept its land.

The system contributes to monitoring because the feedback from communities helps to measure the impact of programs.

**Good news**

The good news was that after three days of sharing experiences and ideas, the Bonn workshop participants identified three major questions on how to strengthen CBMIS. These were: (1) What to monitor? (2) How to do it? (Tools, methodologies, processes) and (3) Who should we work with?

On the first question, they identified the first key issue—land, territories and resources. Other key issues identified are traditional occupations, traditional knowledge, and full and effective participation.

And for each key area or issue, the participants have identified indicators through which each key issue could be assessed and evaluated. For example, under the key issue on land, resources and rights, the indicators are external threats, land rights, status of land use change, fate control, violations of rights, and how are rules/norms/policies observed in the community.
Under traditional occupations, the indicators are cultural dimension and rituals. For traditional knowledge, the indicators identified are social relationship/community interactions, indigenous languages, cultural integrity, and species and wildlife.

And for full and effective participation, the identified indicators include role of women, men and youth; effective participation that depends on the format/methods; how decisions are made; and FPIC or free, prior and informed consent.

**Key recommendations**

After the workshop in Bonn, participants already had a clearer picture about how to move forward. The participants thus recommended the following:

- Convene national forums to decide how to use the CBMIS process and information to create or access apertures (existing and new) at national and regional levels;
- Prepare for the 2014 World Conference on Indigenous Peoples a publication on the State of Indigenous Peoples (with multiple chapters including for example women’s issues, etc.);
- Advance the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Indicators work within the CBD itself by using the IIFB or International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (including the 10c network) and the 8j Working Group meeting (October 2013) to review the available data to be used for a report for submission to GBO-4 or fourth Global Biodiversity Outlook and national reports;
- Explore some mechanisms or intermediate bodies at national, regional, and global levels that can help us to come together to strengthen the CBMIS work:
  - collecting the data,
  - processing the data into indicators and usable information,
  - reporting purposes,
- Ensure strategic collaboration to influence the Post-2015 development agenda (i.e., land and the TK or traditional knowledge indicators);
- Use Convention 111 to submit reports or complaints to the ILO (International Labor Organization) supervisory bodies of this Convention.
- Identify possible collaborators (e.g., International Land Coalition, IWGIA or International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs); and
- Integrate indigenous women’s processes into the CBMIS.

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