Indigenous peoples assert check-and-balance role in government-UN biodiversity programs

CHIANGMAI, Thailand – By actively engaging governments and various United Nations agencies, indigenous peoples from various parts worldwide continue to assert their check-and-balance role in ensuring that official biodiversity programs won’t unduly jeopardize their rights, livelihoods, community life and ecosystems.
For example, indigenous peoples’ representatives from some Asian countries appreciated a UN program called Geographically Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) but at the same time cautioned against its downsides. “The GIAHS program seems nice but what are some safeguard mechanisms in place to ensure that indigenous communities benefit from these?” asked Mani Prasad Nirola, Biodiversity Officer of the Bhutan Ministry of Agriculture and Environment.

The indigenous peoples’ representatives had the chance to raise their concerns before some representatives of concerned UN agencies during the recent Capacity Building Workshop for Asia on Traditional Knowledge and Customary Sustainable Use under the Convention on Biological Diversity or CBD.

The biodiversity workshop was held back to back with two other activities in Chiang Mai, Thailand from June 1 to June 7—the Regional Workshop on Intellectual Property Rights and Traditional Knowledge and the Regional Workshop on Community-Based Monitoring and Information Systems (CBMIS).

Forty two indigenous peoples and government representatives from 13 Asian countries participated in the three activities co-facilitated by Tebtebba, Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), the Secretariat of the CBD and the World Intellectual Property Office or WIPO. GIAHS is a program of the Food and Agricultural Organization that started in 2002, which the UNESCO and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity or SCBD also adopted as a joint program from 2010-2020.
The program seeks to recognize, safeguard and support the world’s agricultural heritage systems, their associated landscapes, agricultural biodiversity, knowledge systems and cultures by registering them in the GIAHS. Through the GIAHS, culturally important agricultural sites may gain national and global recognition.

Local communities of registered GIAHS may access capacity building programs to conserve and manage, generate income and add economic values to their GIAHS in a sustainable fashion.

The participants welcomed the idea of recognizing the role of indigenous peoples in sustaining geographically important agricultural areas. But some expressed apprehension over the GIAHS.

Like Nirola of Bhutan, participants from Sri Lanka, Myanmar and New Zealand asserted that the GIAHS should have a safeguard mechanism in place to ensure that the program benefits indigenous peoples. Others also were concerned that the GIAHS might simply promote its project sites for commercial tourism, which, they said, may adversely affect community life and local ecosystems.

“What difference would it make when we enrol them (indigenous communities) in the GIAHS program since indigenous peoples have been managing their agricultural areas for centuries in a sustainable manner?” asked Nimal Hiwanila, who chairs the Nirmanee Development Foundation in Sri Lanka.

“If these areas are recognized in the GIAHS like heritage sites are recognized in the UNESCO, we are afraid it might open these sites to tourism,” he said.

Citing other countries’ experiences, Hiwanila added that tourism has a potential to alter traditional occupations and uses of these areas.

Participants from the Philippines particularly cited the Banaue Rice Terraces in northern Philippines, a recognized UNESCO heritage site also open to ecotourism. They said the tourism in the rice terraces has definitely boosted the economic opportunities in the area.
“But traditional knowledge attached to farming in the rice terraces is slowly dwindling because more people have become interested in entrepreneurship to respond to the growing tourism economy,” said Florence Daguitan of Tebtebba.

The same concerns were also brought up during a discussion with WIPO. Begonia Venero of WIPO introduced possible conventional intellectual property tools to protect traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples such as patents, trademarks and collective marks, among others.

These concepts were being presented as choices for indigenous peoples who would want to protect their traditional knowledge and resources against misappropriations. The participants did not agree whether these options were the best alternatives for indigenous peoples.

But the participants agreed that the best safeguard was to strengthen existing community protocols on resource management and protection.

Despite these concerns, the workshops became an opportunity for indigenous peoples to discuss their issues with some government representatives.

“(Through these workshops and in the spirit of dialogue), we can listen and understand indigenous issues deeper,” said Dr. Norini Haron of the Malaysian Forest Research Institute (FRIM).

The SCBD also encouraged the indigenous participants to help make the Convention work and help make the world a better place for the next generation. The active participation of indigenous peoples at different levels has elevated in international debates the importance of traditional knowledge, said John Scott of the SCBD.

“But this (recognition of traditional knowledge) has to be pushed further and implemented at the national level,” he said.

Scott and his colleague Djessy Monnier also encouraged indigenous participants to tap the Voluntary Funding mechanisms for indigenous and local communities to participate in different CBD activities. One vital activity is the upcoming Conference of Parties (COP 12) at Pyeongchang, South Korea in October 2014 in which indigenous peoples’ representatives must participate, they said.

The last two days of the workshops showcased indigenous peoples’ experiences on community-based monitoring and information systems (CBMIS). The participants agreed that CBMIS activities do not only result to a database of flora and fauna but also inform communities about their resources and the traditional knowledge attached to these.

They also agreed that community-based monitoring could generate much-needed data that communities could use to counter existing government policies, which are not friendly to indigenous communities.

Participants on the fifth day of the seven-day workshop visited northern Thailand’s Karen communities who are recognized by the government as model stewards of the forest. (Helen Magata, Tebtebba)