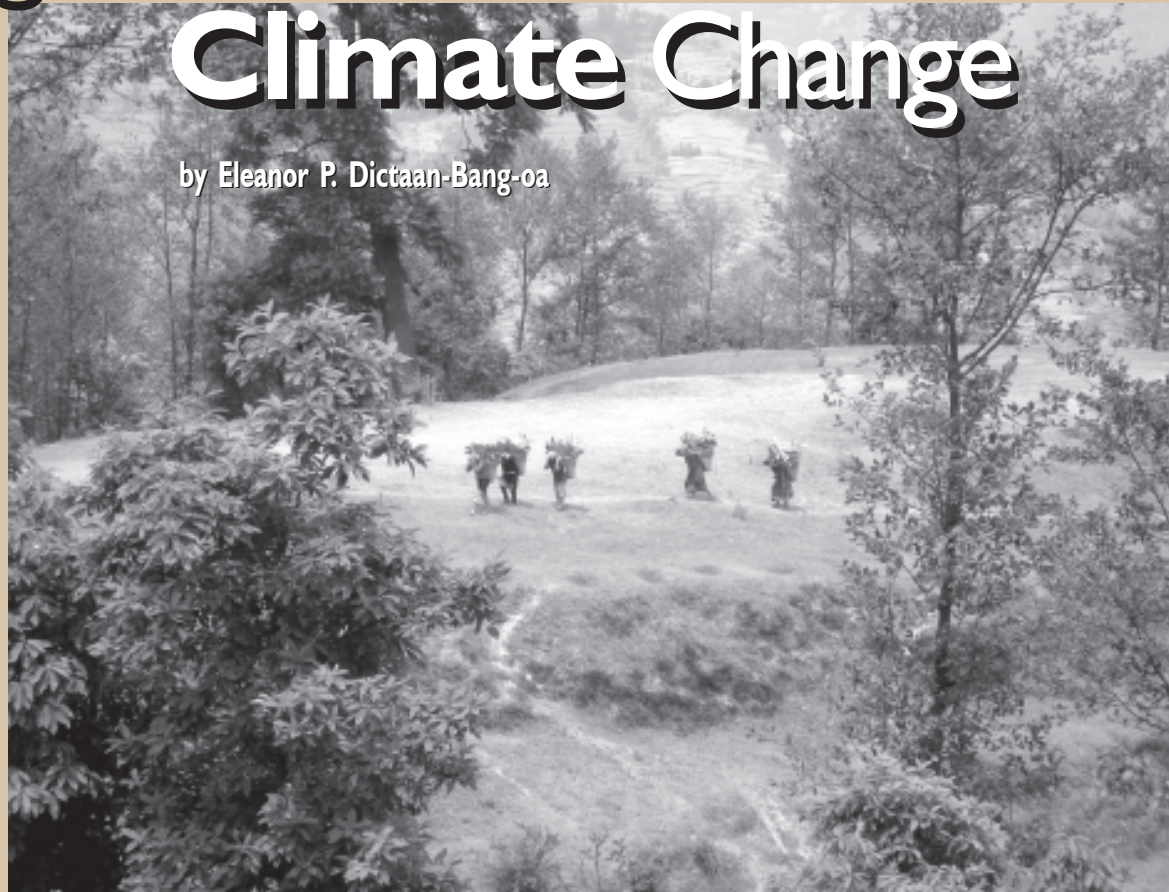


# Perishing **Past** and Pride: Indigenous **Women** and **Climate Change**

by Eleanor P. Dictaan-Bang-oa

**Longer Road Home.** Pahari women head back to the village after collecting twigs and branches for firewood in Kavre, Nepal. With climate change, access to resources such as water, food, firewood and fodder become scarcer and more difficult.

Photo by the author.



*“Mother Earth is no longer in a period of climate change, but in climate crisis. We therefore insist on an immediate end to the destruction and desecration of the elements of life.”*

**- The Anchorage Declaration, 24 April 2009**

**For** centuries, indigenous peoples have been thriving despite the waves of colonisation and cacique politics. Crucial to their struggle to survive is their continuous struggle for their ancestral lands, where they draw their physical, economic, cultural and spiritual nourishment. These lands have been

the very source of their dignity as a people whose human security is constantly under threat.

But what if nature itself is put under tremendous stress and threat? What if its very character is drastically altered in such a short time? It simply hits the very first people

it sees as it turns its head, even as it is the same people who have been its stewards. In its disorientation, it just would not know anymore the difference among communities to whom it will unleash its wrath.

Among those who bear much of the fury are the indigenous women, who have known their surrounding environment so well, managed its resources in ways that allow these to sustainably reproduce and at the same time, provide sustenance for their families and their communities.

---

***Instead of rehabilitating the environment and ensuring the stewardship of forests, rivers and other lands under indigenous peoples, policy makers are buying the idea of converting forested and ancestral lands as profitable carbon sinks.***

---

“[Today], we [are] like thieves stepping into another’s garden,” said Gunn Britt Renner, a young Saami woman from Norway, which was among the first countries to witness the melting of ice caps in the Arctic. Changes in the temperature resulted in the longer growing period of blueberries, a rich source of Vitamin C and other anti-oxidants in the Saami’s diet. These changes have also led to the disappearance of certain plots of blueberries.

Blueberry picking is one of the activities that is passed on by mothers to their daughters. It fact it is a vital aspect in the Saamis’ cultural identity. Aside from blueberries, fish are also dwindling, forcing some Saamis to consume fastfood.

Similarly, extreme weather conditions and forest degradation have resulted in the

scarcity of resources like mushrooms, caterpillars, fowl and fish as well as medical herbs in Congo. As Pygmee woman Mwavita Elsy lamented, “We have been proud of our roles as providers and forest [stewards]. Now, a feeling of unworthiness and guilt linger among women whenever [they fail] to provide.”

Droughts are also more pronounced in the continent, deeply impacting small-scale livestock industries. Livestock is a major source of income, aside from providing milk for the family. Droughts also force men to bring their herd to farther places where there is enough water and fodder.

Yet the extreme and erratic weather conditions seem unconvincing to many policy makers. Instead of rehabilitating the environment and ensuring the stewardship of forests, rivers and other lands under indigenous peoples, policy makers are buying the idea of converting forested and ancestral lands as profitable carbon sinks.

As part of so called carbon emissions reduction mechanisms, these territories are even eyed to be converted into plantations for biofuels. According to Mina Susana Susetra of the Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara, Asia hosts the world’s biggest oil palm production with Indonesia taking on 44 per cent and Malaysia at 43 per cent based on the 2006 figures from Gerakan Antipemiskinan Rakyat Indonesia (GAPRI). Moreover, Indonesia was expected to produce some 18.3 million metric tonnes of palm oil from 2007 to 2008.

Indonesia’s Department of Agriculture reported that the country has 27 million hectares of so called unproductive forest lands that can be converted into oil palm plantations. Today, almost 20 hectares have already been slated for oil palm development under some provincial land use plans. But Susetra countered this report, asserting that





**Twice Raped.**

*In 2008, Penan girls and women from the Sarawak region of Malaysia came out in the open and claimed to have been raped by loggers. After so much delays, the Malaysian government eventually admitted the occurrence of the crime in Sarawak's remaining forests.*

Photo taken from Hantalaat.

the territories are inhabited by indigenous peoples and therefore have been a source of escalating conflicts, from 140 in 2003 to 514 in 2007.

Moreover, large-scale monocrop agriculture not only facilitates environmental degradation through the pollution of resources and resurgence of pests. It also diminishes the capacity of indigenous peoples to ensure their food security and heightens the competition for resources. As the Indonesian government has yet to fully recognise the rights of indigenous peoples, the latter are thus subjected to displacement that is caused by both developmental encroachment and climate change.

Oil plantations, including those that operate under the rubric of clean development mechanisms (CDMs) have been mushrooming in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. In these countries, indigenous

women are becoming more and more dependent on the men, who find themselves as workers in these plantations.

Unabated logging has also affected the Penans in Sarawak in Malaysia since the 1980s. Protests actions in the form of road blockades have resulted in the disappearances and death of villagers. In 2008, reports of sexual abuse by loggers against Penan girls and women exposed yet another form of violence against indigenous women in these contested area, where they and their families depend for survival.

But instead of putting an end to logging operations, loggers have even found more reasons to fell trees given the expansion of oil palm plantations and the construction of megahydroelectric power dams. They are even encouraged by the climate change talks where another emissions reduction scheme is proposed: Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD). REDD narrowly sees forests as mere trees and wildlife that can easily be transformed into profitable plantations that are projected to provide local employment and earn some carbon credits.

With the emerging market-based approaches as climate change solutions, indigenous women are once more subjected to the margins where their land security, much less

---

***In 2008, reports of sexual abuse by loggers against Penan girls and women exposed yet another form of violence against indigenous women in these contested area, where they and their families depend for survival.***

---



---

*As long as the process is held hostage by the industrialised North who have found allies among the elites in the South, extreme weather conditions, environment degradation and human rights violations are bound to continue.*

---

their human rights and well-being hardly matter. These approaches constitute yet another disregard to otherwise universal commitments such as the UNCED's Rio Declaration, Agenda 21 and the Convention of Biodiversity.

Despite the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, there seems to be a long way to go before the crucial roles of indigenous women and their communities in low-carbon sustainable use of resources can be recognised. In addition, women's multiple experiences of discrimination, owing to their ethnicity, class and gender further limit them in accessing resources and technologies on climate change mitigation and adaptation.

But indigenous women refuse to be vulnerable and helpless with the current climate crisis.

Instead they negotiate with the process starting from their low-carbon lifestyle to the use of drought or flood resistant planting materials or continued raising of livestock that can hopefully mitigate the impact of disasters, among others.

Nonetheless substantial change must happen at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that has increasingly become a bargaining process between developed and developing nations. As long as the process is held hostage by the industrialised North who have found allies among the elites in the South, extreme weather conditions, environment degradation and human rights violations are bound to continue.

Unless substantial changes happen in the ways decision makers respond to climate change, it will become more and more difficult for indigenous women to shed off the guilt that gnaws them for failing to feed their children. In an ever worsening situation, how can they stand up with dignity when their skills that are earned in a lifetime are increasingly eroded and unable to secure their communities? How can a woman live with dignity, when she had no choice but to sell her daughter after her family lost its remaining livestock from the last drought? ■

*Eleanor P. Dictaan-Bang-oa, a Kankanaey Igorot is the coordinator of the Gender Desk of Tebtebba (Indigenous Peoples International Centre for Policy Research and Education) which acts as the secretariat of the Asian Indigenous Women's Network.*