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Conference report

2.4 Water and indigenous peoples

Rapporteur: Douglas Nakashima. Participants: 90

Presentation

Indigenous peoples have sophisticated knowledge and practices relating to water, its use and management. In this session Aboriginal (Australia), Cree (Canada), Fijian (Fiji), Hopi (USA), Ibaloi-Igorot (Philippines), Karen, Thai (Thailand) and San (Namibia/Botswana) case studies were presented and discussed.

In the great sandy desert of Australia, secret/sacred sites are often associated with water sources. Through song, story and paintings, Tjama Napanangka and Joan Nagomara presented the intricate Aboriginal understandings of the bio-physical, spiritual and mythical dimensions of their country. Central to this is the Tjukurrpa or Dreamtime, a space-time where ancestors create the landscape and its water sources, providing living proof of their eternal presence. Joni Odochao spoke of the Karen relationship with the environment. Through respect for the spirit of nature and protection of forests, the Karen ensure that vital water sources are protected and conserved. Today, this relationship has been disrupted by ‘development’, and it is only through indigenous participation and knowledge that harmonious watershed management can be restored. The cultural importance of water in the Pacific Islands, as well as the techniques and challenges of water management, were then outlined by Milika Naqasima. Freshwater is conserved in Vanuavatu, for example, by bathing in the sea and using coconut oil to counter the effects of saltwater. Water conflicts include recent struggles by traditional landowners who are requesting compensation for land and water resources lost to the Government’s largest hydropower scheme. Joram/Useb stressed two bitter ironies that have led southern African San (Bushmen) to be dispossessed of traditional lands and resources. First, by sharing water knowledge, the San have helped outsiders who have then depleted the land’s resources. And second, by introducing modern technology for bore holes, governments have ‘developed’ the land for settlement and thus, contributed further to the San’s loss of homeland.

Joji Cariño, an Ibaloi-Igorot and Commissioner, World Commission on Dams, emphasised that large-scale water projects frequently target indigenous lands. Indigenous communities stress that developers must recognise customary water and land uses, respect indigenous rights and obtain prior informed consent before proceeding with large-scale water development projects. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti spoke of Thai villagers living along the Mun river whose way of life has been completely disrupted by a hydropower dam built in 1989. Besides the trauma of resettlement, the Pak Mun dam blocked fish migrations and destroyed fish habitats, eliminating the principal

means of livelihood for thousands of villagers. Marie Roué analysed the diametrically opposed visions of nature held by indigenous Cree and government officials. Whereas the Cree valued the First Rapids as a traditional gathering place, abounding with fish, the developers envisioned this place as an ideal dam site, that could convert otherwise ‘wasted’ water flow into ‘useful’ megawatts. Finally, Vernon Masayesva recounted how in Hopi and Navajo territories, springs have gone dry and water levels in wells have dramatically dropped. The excessive exploitation of the aquifer by a coal company operating a coal slurry line is at the heart of the problem. The session closed with a CD-Rom presentation by Barbara Glowczewski that dealt with water in Walpiri Aboriginal cosmology and society.

Discussion

Participants stressed that, having examined the Forum documents, it is clear that indigenous/tribal peoples, their unique systems of values, knowledge and practices have been overlooked in the world water vision process. It was concluded that there is an urgent need to correct the imbalance of mainstream-thinking by actively integrating indigenous women and men in the subsequent phases starting with the framework for action (cf. Actions).

This is a recurrent problem for indigenous peoples who are often constrained to deal with vital issues on terms dictated by others. Many shared their experience of how their people’s traditional knowledge was seen as inferior in the current political, legal, scientific system and therefore, their arguments are time and again discarded by courts and other institutions. A number of other important issues raised in the discussion have been noted directly in the following actions.

Actions

- Strong measures should be taken to allow indigenous/tribal peoples to participate and share more actively their specific experience, knowledge and concerns in the world water vision and framework for action.
- Governments should recognise that large scale water development projects target too often the lands of indigenous/tribal peoples, as the latter occupy so-called ‘marginal’ environments, which are favoured for large-scale development.
- Governments must recognise the significant contribution of customary tenure systems to water/land conservation and must expand their valuation of water and other resources, beyond the material and economic, to encompass the spiritual and sacred.
- Watershed management should be based on women and men’s participation at the community level, as well as their local knowledge and spiritual/cultural relations with water. To ensure that environmental management is effective, governments must provide equitable rights of access to local resource users, such as through ‘community forest laws’ (e.g. in Southeast Asia) and similar legal arrangements.
- Large dams should no longer be built as they lead to massive disruption of ecological and social systems. Small dams and reservoirs, designed and managed with the participation of local people, represent a more equitable and sustainable solution.

- The present process of participation in development is rather one of incorporation and co-optation: this needs to be rectified by requiring developers to obtain *at a minimum* the prior informed consent of indigenous communities.
- Where indigenous communities/landowners provide their prior informed consent for development, it is recommended that compensation be provided through their involvement as shareholders in commercial enterprises, and/or provision of royalties and meaningful employment (as opposed to single lump sum settlements).
- International declarations and conventions on human rights and indigenous peoples should be adhered to. In the case of the San of southern Africa access has been lost to their traditional hunting and foraging lands and subsistence resources of water. This is contrary to the conclusions of the UN Commission on Human Rights special ‘Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination’ (1998). Governments in southern Africa are urged to follow the UN recommendations on indigenous rights and to develop positive initiatives to promote indigenous rights and to support NGOs working to this end. The assistance of the United Nations may also be valuable in this respect.
- International organisations, governments and NGOs should promote and facilitate exchanges between indigenous peoples to share understandings of water problems and their solutions. NGOs, in particular, should help in finding partners and experts to assure the transfer of appropriate technology (e.g. water pumps, windmills, sanitation/purification systems) to indigenous communities in need.

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