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Mitigating and Adapting to Climate Change: Learning From Indigenous Traditions

Thursday, January 24, 2013

1:30-3:00pm

Session Organizer:

- Evelyn Arce, Executive Director, International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP)

Facilitator:

- Evelyn Arce, Executive Director, IFIP

Panelists:

- Galina Angarova, Russia Program Director, Pacific Environment
- Alejandro Argumedo, Director, Asociacion ANDES
- Jaune Evans, Managing Director, Tamalpais Trust

Sponsor:

- International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP)
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Evelyn Arce, Executive Director of International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP), introduced the session by noting that indigenous peoples are the largest minority group in the world. They have the least environmental footprint, yet are affected the most by environmental shifts. She highlighted the importance of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted in 2007, as a tool for funders interested in human rights, environmental defense and climate change.

Alejandro Argumedo, an Indigenous leader from Peru and the Director of Asociacion ANDES, shared his work to promote the role of traditional knowledge in climate change policy. The greatest bicultural diversity in the world sits on lands of Indigenous communities who have adapted to weather change over millennia. The Quechua community in Peru is developing an assessment of local conditions and trends in order to develop a mitigation strategy based on local knowledge. Indigenous knowledge can show how to prepare for the future.

According to Argumedo, while solutions to climate change should be based on the rights of Indigenous peoples, the industrialized world sees little value in their knowledge. Instead market economies propose mitigation approaches, such as the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation Initiative (REDD), which capitalize 'carbon credits' from Indigenous lands. These schemes have resulted in human rights abuses, particularly the eviction of Indigenous communities from their ancestral lands. To reduce the risk of these abuses, funders need to promote official recognition of Indigenous knowledge within the scientific community, the full implementation of the UN Declaration at the local level, through its adoption into national constitutions.

Galina Angarova, Russia Program Director at Pacific Environment and a member of the Buryat people of Siberia, detailed similar challenges in the Russian North and the Arctic from mining and land grabbing. Indigenous groups see the world holistically with everything connected. For them, food sovereignty encompasses a system of belief, underscored by the saying: “If you take away our food, you take away our soul.”

Indigenous peoples constitute the majority of the four million people who live in the eight countries of the Arctic region. This area also contains the largest untapped gas and oil reserves in the world, as well as the last remaining intact ecosystems on the planet. The most obvious manifestation of climate change here is receding sea ice. Climate change has caused an increase in storms, which destroy coastlines and melt ice. The resulting change in season alters migration patterns of basic food sources, such as reindeer and fish, for the Indigenous communities.

Angarova suggested funders could support the food sovereignty of the Arctic region by:

- Funding research on the impacts of climate change on specific animal species
- Supporting community knowledge and leadership
- Understanding the links among land, water, and people
- Building capacity among Arctic Indigenous communities
- Promoting effective sharing of information, knowledge, and research
- Bringing Indigenous leaders to local, regional, and international fora on these issues
- Strengthening legal protections for Arctic resources and maritime safety
- Shining a media spotlight on these issues
- Advocating for these issues in national action plans

Jaune Evans works with the Tamalpais Trust, which globally funds Indigenous-led organizations. The Trust has completely divested from the stock market and is invested in local initiatives. In its first year, the Trust awarded at least one grant on every continent (except for Australia). Grants are generally \$100,000-500,000/year with the view for long-term commitment to strengthen Indigenous-led organizations through general support.

One of the largest and most collaborative Trust grantees is based in Asia and works in a number of countries on gender rights, Indigenous rights, and food rights. It also serves as a re-grantor to smaller Indigenous organizations.

Question & Answer

One participant stated that the world population is getting larger, and people need energy. How do we reconcile the need for more energy and the impacts of climate change?

The panelists responded that people are turning nature into profit. It is important to rethink the way we live and live locally. Oil and food are becoming more expensive, which will cause people in urban areas to return to areas where water and food exist. We need to build regional food exchanges that don't depend on the world market. Indigenous people have these models of sustainability that everyone can learn from. Funders working on these issues should sponsor Indigenous leaders at the UN and other forums, as their stories need to be told.

Another participant stated that there is a conflict between economically depressed regions and their desire for economic growth and environmental stewardship as a community value. How do we address the tension between development and conservation?

Argumedo responded that Peru is now considered a “middle income” country due to mining income. There are so many negative impacts of mining. So whose definition of development is being promoted? We would rather have clean water and healthy children.

Evans responded that the role of funders and NGOs is to provide as much information as possible so that affected communities understand the full implications of the particular project. One example is an area where a company wanted to build a gas pipeline and the community supported it because they were told they would get jobs and access to low cost gasoline. However, the gas pressure at that site would be too strong to tap gas at that location, ultimately raising gasoline prices. The company would bring in outside male workers, likely leading to an increase in sexual violence. Once the community was informed about these issues, they rejected the project. Instead, the Tamalpays Trust funded the establishment of a spiritual ecology school in that region.

One participant asked: Are there examples of where Indigenous knowledge and science complement each other?

Alejandro responded that his work tries to use both, for example, how to grow potatoes in light of climate changes. The world is warming, causing potato cultivation to move to higher altitudes. His group is working to establish a center that will conduct research on potatoes and archive and store heirloom seeds. Their aim is to achieve balance through reciprocal relationship with nature and economic need. IFIP's Arce noted that along with Reciprocity, the core values of Indigenous philanthropy, known as the “Four Rs” are: Respect, Responsibility, and Relationships.