

IKAP (Indigenous Knowledge and Peoples)  
Network on Capacity Building  
in MMSEA (Mainland Montane SE-Asia)

**Workshop on**

**Bridging epistemologies – indigenous views**

**Indigenous understanding of nature and its changes**

**Indigenous views about science**

**Ways of bridging different knowledges from the indigenous peoples' perspective**



The workshop about **Bridging epistemologies – indigenous views** was part of the International Conference on Bridging Scales and Epistemologies, organised by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment from **March 17 to 20 in Alexandria, Egypt**. The MA-Organisers invited the group of participants from different continents to contribute to the epistemological process within the MA to define the role of scientists and of indigenous experts and search for ways of dialogue.

There is still a great degree of unilateral emphasis on the role of science as the driving force and beneficiary on how to integrate local knowledge into western science. We proposed to go beyond it creating a space for different ways of knowing to engage in an intercultural and dialogical encounter. Each knower gave account of their perceptions elaborated on the 3 issues :

How nature and its changes is perceived from the points of view of knowers,

how they perceive science and

how they imagine a bridge for dialogue with scientists and development actors.

The workshop was organised by Timmi Tillmann and Prasert Trakansuphakon; and Maruja Salas facilitated our day long session (without time pressure, which is the pre-condition for creative thinking).

Presentations of personal experiences were made by Darryn Wilson, Larrakia man from Australia; Marcela Machaca, woman from Quispillaqta, a Quechua community in the Central Andes of Peru; Baramée Boonduang, Noi Santianurothai and Prasert Trakansuphakon, Karen from Northern Thailand; David Millar from Ghana; Jorge Ishizawa from Lima, Peru; Datu Victorino from the Philippines; Yang Fuquan, a Naxi researcher from Yunnan, China; Esther Camac from Costa Rica; Veronica Arbon, Arabunna woman from Australia; Jocelyn Davies, researcher on desert knowledge from Australia; and Malin Almstedt and Marie Bystroem from Sweden. We feel enriched by following thoughts regarding the nature of knowledge, the interactions between different epistemic communities, the role of power and domination, the limitations of science, the potentials of other ways of knowing and imagined ways to build epistemological bridges. We would like to share these ideas :

*“Indigenous wisdom is not western science, it is different from and is more than science.”*

*“Science and the scientists describe how but do not explain why...”*

*“Science lacks sentiments, full use of senses and a recognition of the silent knowledge, the sacred.”*

*“Scientists describe us – without love and respect – without understanding us – from their own world view. We also recognise that some disciplines or members of western sciences are also modifying themselves, diversifying and opening up towards a post-materialist science.”*

*“All knowledge systems have an underlying worldview, and worldviews determine our understanding of nature or reality”*

*“The western scientific paradigm is embedded in a world view that is impacting the world through disciplines which impose values on governance, research, education – all of life. In this context the world view/paradigm of others – indigenous societies which are more horizontal and linked to nature –*

*is denied and only elements of practice are permitted to surface. Actions are taken out of the western world view informed by science and thus tensions between the youth and elders emerge, knowledge is lost and undermined, language is threatened and biodiversity is diminished. Indigenous world views are seriously threatened, as has been witnessed in this conference, sometimes shattered.”*

*“Indigenous knowledge systems are manifold; there are thousands of indigenous ways of knowing, all treasures and potentials of the survival of humankind.”*

*“But within this tremendous diversity of ways of knowing there are commonalities of indigenous wisdoms – we love our land, we are not separated from nature”*

*“Indigenous world views and knowledges are expressed through songs, poems, own language, own representations and practices not easily accessible to outsiders. Each ethnic group is different. Our memory is quick, we map things in our mind, not on paper. And we can easily tell our friends and share our experiences. We go from practice and interpret our own abstract ideas. Outsiders and brokers can help us to conceptualise our ideas, and give back to us and our children and the not-yet-born.”*

*“It is important to be open to all aspects of local/traditional knowledge from all corners of the world, indigenous and non-indigenous.”*

*“Scientists say that local knowledge is useful locally. Local indigenous knowledge is not living in a container; it is not only useful locally, but also has an idea and an experience of global processes.”*

*“As well as being ancient, indigenous knowledge is modern (for us) It reacts to changes and is open to learning. Indigenous peoples have experimentation and ways of research, of knowing, which allow them to innovate local knowledge in local practices and systems, even incorporating external knowledge based on different world views without distorting their own world view.”*

*“Indigenous peoples have visions of their futures and well being which include economic, social, cultural, ecological and spiritual development but which are different to the values promoted by science and development action.”*

*“Western science is separated from nature. Its separation of culture and nature, expressed in its analysis and division into discipline, is part of the western tradition and culture and based on its particular world view.”*

*“There is an ethical responsibility on scientists to be clear about the values/world views/cosmovisions that are embedded in their approaches to ecosystem assessment and about whose purposes are being served by that assessment. Scientists and development agents need to be critical and clear about the risks and benefits for indigenous people from assessing ecosystem goods and services, and of course they need to engage indigenous people in this risk assessment from the outset and develop mutually agreed positions.”*

*“Western science and indigenous science (traditional knowledge, local knowledge, etc), as recognised by the MA, are **equally** important and distinctive in their own right. Continued **respect and understanding** within and for each other’s science is needed to progress forward, without one being more important than the other. To build bridges, indigenous communities need to be empowered to translate their own science in a culturally appropriate way for **all** people to understand and move forward and thus control how and where traditional knowledge is used, without outsiders being the experts.”*

*“Local people can easily cross the bridge to modern science. As a matter of fact, they have been trying to adjust to the modern world dominated by modern science for generations. Because of the assimilationist attitude of modern science, local people have started to realise the losses of their identity, culture and self. Local people are going back to their bases of culture, identity and self having realised the accountability attached to it. Local people have started the reconstitution embracing environment and nature.”*

*“Modern science will have the ultimate problem unless they incorporate culture and religion in the process because they will continue to face the gaps and will continue to exist in isolated fragments or pieces, which does not complete the integrity of humanity and the earth.”*

*“If the scientists could work not just with sophisticated knowledge and rational feelings but with emotional feelings toward the future of the earth, then the bridging between indigenous knowledge and scientists and between humans and nature can be possible. It is arrogant to think that scientific knowledge has the inherent belief that science can solve all the problems.”*

*“We appreciate the efforts of the MA to be open to this discussion. More needs to be done, because the MA has to move within the confines of the governments organised within the UN system. That is why the*

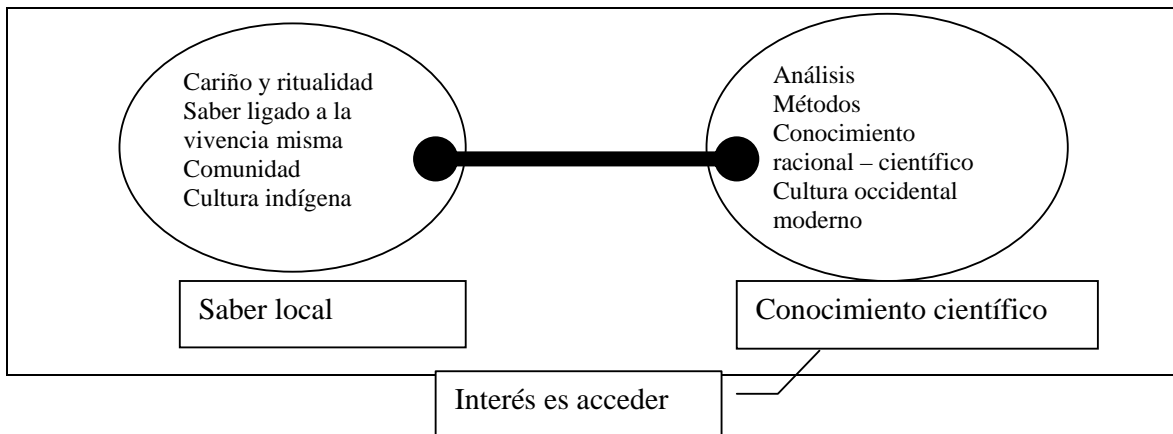
*MA emphasises goods and services and not the needs of the people. We believe that the MA requires a shift of its scientific paradigm (and bias) to be able to work with the efforts of indigenous/local people to fight for our land rights, the rights to our world views and cultures, the right to nurture our nature for the benefit of humankind.”*

*“MA’s present emphasis on environmental goods and services is based on the implicit assumption that the local communities that belong to the ecosystems that provide these goods and services are driven by economic motives, neglecting that their deepest motivations are, rather, of a spiritual kind. As a result, the interventions deriving from the assessments might result in unforeseen impacts which could be detrimental to the livelihoods of indigenous peoples.”*

*“A bridge between epistemologies is not possible or not desirable because it produces invasion and domination. We can only – consciously – sit down at a table of dialogue, in a world where many worlds (or epistemologies) are welcome, where we can talk between us, and also talk with modern science. But at this table we need to leave behind arrogance and the wish or attitude to dominate. We have to come with humbleness, with eagerness to learn, with openness and respect. In this neutral space of encounter, what can everyone contribute, what is our gift? What is the gift of the scientist? Is the scientist prepared for a dialogue? Is he or she able to support us? Do they have the means to talk with us? Can they enter an alliance and commitment overcoming the limitations of their worldviews?”*

*“Yacha, a Quechua concept, means knowing, living, sharing. It is rooted in a positive care for everything. It is a form of appreciation of life manifested in the dialogue with my family, with the mountains, the chakra (fields), rocks, water springs, hail, frost, rain, llamas, and alpacas... Everything communicates and teaches.”*

*“The idea of a bridge implies the existence of communities that are distant and inaccessible, with impenetrable borders that do not exist in our world. Building bridges requires the willingness to walk at the pace of sensing and knowing beyond rational knowledge that has colonised our minds.”*



## Outlook

### **Organisation of the Indigenous Conferences and Fairs**

Indigenous conferences, workshops and fairs will be organised in a decentralised way in different continents to follow up from this workshop. It is planned to hold events in Northern Thailand, in Australia, in the Andes in 2004 and 2005. These will be documented to develop a process of mutual enrichment of concepts and methods about how to organise fertile and gratifying encounters of and for the local people. The events would also have an element of discussion with scientists (including those involved in the MA) about their commitments and contributions to the local processes of indigenous peoples defending their rights and cultures, and about their analysis of global trends and changes.

### **Example: Indigenous Conference and Indigenous Knowledge Fair in Northern Thailand**

Objective: to strengthen networks of indigenous practitioners in the region of SE Asia, to provide a space and ways of exchange and joint learning, to create a voice locally and globally for the ethnic groups in SE Asia and to promote the value of indigenous knowledge towards outsiders (decision-makers, researchers, development workers, donor agencies and the general public).

Participants (about 150 people):

Indigenous specialists (experts) from Vietnam, SW China, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand.  
Translators and brokers and organisers (indigenous and non-indigenous).

Program:

11. – 14. November 2004

Study field trip in Northern Thailand to local villages – to learn about the local situation and to exchange with local villagers to identify the presence of Indigenous Knowledge and the main issues for the ethnic groups in Northern Thailand.

15. – 18. November 2004

Indigenous Conference to learn between each other (different ethnic groups of SE-Asia) and moments of exchange and dialogue with scientists on main issues of how to strengthen indigenous knowledge against the negative impacts of modernization and globalisation.

19. – 21. November 2004

### **Indigenous Knowledge Fair and Ethnic Culture Festival**

Contents: Herbal Medicine and Healers, Games, Food, Seeds, Handicrafts, Livelihoods, Ritual, Music and Dance, Rotational farming practices and livelihoods, sacred life situations.

Methods: Performance, Exhibition, Demonstration, Market and exchange, Competition, Skills training between ethnic groups.

Process: Organise different working committees incorporated by indigenous peoples and supporters. Hold a consultation with donor agencies to overcome patron-client relations and create more ownership on behalf of donor agencies. Organise networks of indigenous practitioners who document their own livelihoods and prepare their best knowledge, products, seeds and skills to share with other participants coming from different communities.

The Conference/Fair to be held in November 2004 is the beginning of a regular event rotating between the MMSEA-countries with increasing participation of indigenous people from the region.

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