

SEI Asia Podcast miniseries: “Women Environmental Defenders”

Episode 01: Solidarity and alliances by women environmental defenders

By Dayoon Kim, Tami Alvarez and Lia Mai Torres

00:00:34 – 00:00:50

Hello everyone, I’m Dayoon Kim, a research associate from SEI Asia. Our episode today is about woman environmental human rights defenders and their powerful and inspiring work on the ground that contributes to social and environmental justice.

00:00:51 – 00:01:15

We have two very special guests with us today, Tami Alvarez from Sabokahan Unity of Lumad Women and Lia Mai Torres from Center for Environmental Concerns. Both of them are based in the Philippines. Tami is joining us from Mindanao Island. There may be issues with audio quality. Please bear with us when you're listening to this episode.

00:01:16 – 00:01:56

So my name is Tammy Alvarez. I’m the current vice Chairperson for external relations of Sabokahan Unity of Lumad women. I'm a queer Lumad law student, scholar and activist from the Manobo Diabound tribes. It is my main task to ensure representations, build and strengthen our alliance work to foster global solidarity, connections and partnerships so that we as Lumad women are able to connect our plight and aspiration and rise in solidarity with other groups, locally and internationally, for the broader national and global fight for social justice through development and genuine peace and right to self-determination.

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Hi, thank you also for inviting me. So I’m Lia. I’m the executive director of the Centre for Environmental Concerns in the Philippines. CEC is a non-profit organisation mainly focused on environmental research, education, policy, advocacy and campaigns. CEC is also the secretariat of the Asia Pacific Network of Environment Defenders, or APNED, which is a solidarity campaign network of different organisations working on environmental rights and the defence of environmental defenders.

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[Dayoon] Thank you very much. Let us move on to the first question, which is please tell us what drives you to fight for the environment and human rights?

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[Tami] As an indigenous person from Lumad indigenous tribes of Southern Mindanao, Philippines, what drives me to continue to fight for the environment and human rights is our aspiration to have genuine self-determination, liberation which is our right because, as they say, land is life. It is where we practice

our traditional dance, singing and art. It is where we practice our self-governance and collective leadership. It is where we get our food, medicine and practice our traditional healing. So if we lose it then we would risk losing our very own identity.

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And if that happens, where will it go? Room in the cities becomes scavengers and beg for food and then afterwards get all the blame and hatred for being poor because we are so-called lazy. And we don't know the ways of living in the cities. I personally know how difficult it is because when we move to the city, I remember feeling so shocked when I saw an ice water bottle held by my classmate.

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And in my head, like I was wondering how on Earth did that ice get inside the tiny hole because we didn't have electric appliances in the mountains. And you know, in our community, everything is shared by the tribes members. Everyone has to perform their share of responsibility in food production, and I grew up with a constant reminder of my mother not to waste food, because it's the fruits of the blood, sweat and tears of the tribesmen and farmers.

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And she said that even the clothes we wear are owned by the workers in the sweatshop that we are a society of people and our lives are intertwined and interconnected.

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Therefore, we have a responsibility to care for each other. But these peaceful lives have been ruined by militarization and corporations who encroach on our lands, and I can still recall the sounds of gunshots reverberating on the ground as we buried our heads in the soil while our house was stripped by the military when I was five years old.

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And I lost the count of the number of times where we evacuated and unbearable that my family live offers to move to an urban poor community in the city and my experience is not different from the rest of indigenous people not only in the Philippines but around the world and they took advantage of our people, illiteracy, and lack of education to steal our lands.

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That's why we in Sabokahan will continue to fight towards building a society of social justice through equality and genuine peace, where the political, social, economic and cultural roots of the marginalisation and exploitation of women, indigenous peoples and other oppressed people will be resolved.

00:05:19 – 00:05:38

[Dayoon] Indeed, your movement have been tackling the bare roots of marginalisation of indigenous peoples and meanwhile striving for protection of environment and human rights comes with several challenges. What are some recent issues and challenges that you and your communities had faced?

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[Tami] So one of the major problems that our organisation has faced is perhaps the closure of Saluja Bungan Lumad indigenous schools that our organisation has built with the support of other IP organisations, NGOs, and other supporters from the cities, and also the enforced evacuations due to intensified militarization.

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Lumad indigenous schools are everything to us because on top of basic literacy and numeracy in other subjects. In Lumad schools, we develop our knowledge of making herbal medicines and significantly improve our agricultural food production through our knowledge of agrology because over time we realise that our nomadic old ways are no longer necessary for survival because our tribes lived off from sustenance, agriculture, and hunting.

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But this way of life has become impractical due to the shrinkage of available ancestral lands as a result of land grabbing by corporations and land use conversion to monocrop plantations. In Lumad schools, we study and learn about the impacts of climate change and our critical role in protecting our biodiversity, how to respond to various climate prices and make our communities prepared and resilient to various natural and man-made calamities.

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In fact, our comprehensive knowledge and learnings have been very helpful for us to prepare for evacuations, when necessary, in times of impending strong typhoons and even militarization.

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For example, in our village, a certain management system is in place to prepare for various kinds of emergencies, like how do we ensure our food supply for a certain number of days, the preparedness of our medic team or communication and information team. We even have teams that are in charge of resource generation and fundraising. Because as indigenous people we were already organised long before, but our collective leadership and management system has improved even more and adapted on current conditions through our valuable knowledge that we learn from this Lumad indigenous schools.

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And we hope that someday for a continuous campaign to reopen the schools become successful, then we would love our visitors from the cities and other countries to witness it.

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So there are many strategies that we used to address this challenge, number one is community organising because of our campaigns and work have always been made to answer to the demands and objective interests of Lumad women and support overall struggle of the Lumad people and in general, because campaigns are a product of a long series of consultations and discussions, meetings with the members and we don't think that there could ever be any successful campaigns or endeavours without the full support and participation of the Lumad women.

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Second is connecting our struggles to other sectors through alliance work locally and internationally because we believe that the struggle to protect the environment and human rights is a struggle of everyone. What we have achieved all this time is something that we can never do alone because we recognise that the root causes of our displacement and disenfranchisement are the same root causes of suffering for workers, peasant farmers, indigenous people, students and all sectors of the Philippines and around the world.

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Third is lobbying and protest actions in order to pressure the government to listen and respond to our just and rightful demands because over the years we have slowly built our strong network of legislators to support our efforts to get various neoliberal policies scrapped because they legitimised land grabbing, development aggression, extrajudicial killings, and human rights violations.

00:09:33 – 00:09:53

[Dayoon] Thank you very much for sharing, Tami. Defenders utilised these strategies to bring about changes that strengthen environmental and human rights in our societies. Now, Lia as a woman environmental defender, what are the key lessons you want to share that fellow defenders can learn and benefit from?

00:09:54 – 00:10:23

[Lia] The most important lesson that we have learned is to work with local communities and serve as facilitators to relate with other communities, networks, organisations and government entities. It is also the local communities that are in the front lines of the environmental defence and are the most at risk, so we should help them in developing their existing capacities. We should also learn from them and adopt effective strategies, as well as share them with other communities.

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This will help create a national environmental movement and eventually contribute to an international movement to seek ecological and climate justice and hopefully for social transformation.

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[Dayoon] Thank you so much Lia. As you mentioned the importance of engaging with local communities, networks and different actors across scale, who do you identify as critical allies to support your work on the ground, and what resources do you and your organisation need from these actors?

00:10:54 – 00:11:21

[Lia] It is important to gain the support of other civil society organisations from different sectors. This will ensure a strong local unity on environmental issues, also institutions such as religious groups and the academe can also help widen the reach of the advocacy. The local government unit, who has direct contact with community members, also have the potential of giving urgent help as well as [support for] legislation.

00:11:22 – 00:11:53

At the national level, civil society, other institutions, other national nongovernment organisations, legislators are also important allies at the international level. Civil society organisations, intergovernmental organisations, UN agencies and international donors are also helpful. From the civil society organisations, they can help with advocacy aspect, education and capacity development and policy lobbying.

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For legislators, then, they can help in terms of passing, amending, or scrapping policies. For human rights organisations, they can help with providing immediate relief and prevention of attacks on environmental defenders and for international donors, they can help us giving funding for the work of environmental defenders.

00:12:13 – 00:12:31

[Dayoon] Thank you. We also believe that this podcast episode can be an opportunity to share the experiences and insights from our partners whose work can be more visible and attract more donors and allies who are interested in your work. Do you have anything you want to add and share to a broader audience?

00:12:32 – 00:12:58

[Lia] Maybe I just would like to highlight that we can all be environmental defenders and it's best if we all get involved with environmental movements, since environmental issues and climate change affects all people. Also, it is through collective action that we can influence positive change. We are really happy with initiatives such as this podcast that helps to reach out to more people so recommend you for that and again, thank you for inviting us.

00:12:59 – 00:13:20

[Tami] I would like to share that please support our book *We Call Her Ina Bai* because 100% of the proceed of this book will go towards supporting Sabokahan advocacy and our work on the ground. You may follow our book *We Call Her Ina Bai* Facebook page, Twitter and Instagram for more information on how to order.

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We are also open to consignment partnerships if you are interested. For more information, you may e-mail us through wecallherinabai@gmail.com and lastly, I would want to share that the struggle of the Lumad is crucial.

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In the worldwide development, justice and self-determination movement, because the Lumad struggle in defence of our ancestral land and protection of the environment is just one example of the many ways in which indigenous peoples, especially indigenous women, are at the forefront of a wider global struggle against extractive capitalism. The wealth of experience that the Lumad have gained through tireless struggle can provide valuable lessons for other movements, for social justice at regional, national and international levels. Thank you very much.

00:14:12 – 00:14:36

[Dayoon] Thank you very much for participating in our podcast and sharing your experiences and insight. For our listeners, if you want to know more about their work, please visit websites and social media channels of Sabokahan Unity of Lumad Women as well as Centre for Environmental Concerns and please spread the word about their important work on the ground.