

**SEI Asia Podcast miniseries: “Women Environmental Defenders”**

**Episode 02: Working on the ground for social and environmental justice**

By Dayoon Kim, Indira Sheesh and Kakay Tolentino

00:00:37 – 00:00:52

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.

00:00:53 – 00:01:08

Dayoon Kim: We have two very special guests today. Indira Sheesh from Indigenous Woman Legal Awareness Group in Nepal and Kakay Tolentino from Bai Indigenous Woman’s Network in the Philippines.

00:01:09 – 00:01:28

Indira Sheesh: I’m an advocate Indira Shreesh. I’m belong to Magar indigenous community from Nepal. I have one organization, Indigenous Women Legal Awareness Group. Short name is INWOLAG. INWOLAG is working for indigenous women.

00:01:29 – 00:02:02

Kakay Tolentino: Good afternoon, good morning, good evening to everyone. I’m Kakay Tolentino, an indigenous Lumad woman in Sierra Madre mountain range in central Luzon in the Philippines. I’m also a present national coordinator of Bai Indigenous network and I’m human rights defender and environmental defender.

00:02:03 – 00:02:12

Dayoon Kim: Thank you very much. Then let us start with the first question, which is please tell us what drives you to fight for environmental and human rights?

00:02:13 – 00:02:51

Indira Sheesh: Thank you for the questioning when I have to explain my drive to fight for the environmental and human rights, my memories take [me] back to my childhood experience that has had a deep impact on me. I was born and grew up in a remote place in Nepal. I remember my childhood when luckily, I survived from the floods that swept [our village] that day due to heavy rainfall. There was devastating landslide from the floods in the village.

00:02:52 – 00:03:33

Indira Sheesh: I still remember most of houses were swept, damaged, both private and community property, loss of agriculture land and domestic animals. Most of my relatives migrated to a new location and we were disconnected [from our] culture, tradition values and more importantly with their ancestral land. However, there was no any sympathy in empathy because of formal government of Nepal and other non-governmental organizations did not support any means.

00:03:34 – 00:04:17

Indira Sheesh: Simultaneously, I have seen and faced several discriminations with people in my country, for example, there is still discrimination on gender-based violence for poor people and more importantly the indigenous women who are real victims of climate crisis and government policies. Now I am engaging as a lawyer academically and environmental advocate by profession. With this privilege, I devoted my career to advocate the right of indigenous women against every aspect of discrimination.

00:04:18 – 00:04:48

Dayoon Kim: Thank you very much for sharing this story and indeed as you mentioned a lot of environmental degradation and climate change impacts as well as development activities and make further challenges to defenders and communities. Would you tell us one specific challenge that you, your community and your organization have faced, and what were the strategies that you have used to address this challenge?

00:04:49 – 00:05:10

Indira Sheesh: The indigenous people women are main characters of biodiversity conservation. However, government or non-governmental organizations never recognize their role and responsibility towards biodiversity conservation as rights holders.

00:05:11 – 00:06:01

Indira Sheesh: For example, at least 25 Indigenous girls [were] raped, and out of them, six girls were raped repeatedly, during the establishment of the first national park in the country, called Chitwan National Park. In the name of national park, indigenous peoples were abruptly relocated from their ancestral land, and they did not get any meaningful care from the state. The benefit-sharing mechanism and development of indigenous people in the biodiversity, conservation and climate crisis are rarely seen in action despite there are written several rights [on] paper.

00:06:02 – 00:06:49

Indira Sheesh: Therefore, we are initiating to build capacity, development of indigenous people, especially the indigenous women, through education and economic empowerment. In doing so, we are forming an indigenous women group. It's community-based organizations and empower them. There are several awareness campaigns such as adult literacy classes, environmental conservation campaigns

and right-based approach classes including alternative income generating activities. We are focusing on empowering indigenous women and advocacy to policymakers.

00:06:50 – 00:07:24

Dayoon Kim: Indeed, as you shared Indira, many efforts are taking place from INWOLAG and different grassroots organizations. I hope that further awareness of the public on this topic to this podcast episode would help amplifying your voices and demands.

Now moving to Kakay, as you are closely engaged in the ongoing efforts to uphold the rights of indigenous peoples and environment, what are the key lessons that you want to share that fellow defenders can learn from?

00:07:25 – 00:07:58

Kakay Tolentino: So the key lessons I want to share to many people in the world, we must not getting away from other peoples in the ground. We must learn and educate with them. We must live with the people. Our ancestral lands that reflect our daily living lives, and indigenous practices and knowledge that trains in our heart and mind that this is all matters about indigenous identity, indigenous rights to self-determination.

00:07:59 – 00:08:30

Kakay Tolentino: Our indigenous knowledge and practices have a big or crucial role in defending our environment and resources, so as the rights of the indigenous peoples in defending our ancestral land. In our ancestral land, the vast tracts of lands, forests, rivers [in which] are embedded our natural resources and that is a big part of the Filipino peoples and building our nation with freedom, sovereignty and democracy.

00:08:31 – 00:08:44

Dayoon Kim: Thank you very much Kakay. Would you explain further on who will be the allies to support the work on the ground and what resources to you and your community need from these allies and actors?

00:08:45 – 00:09:31

Kakay Tolentino: The number one allies on our struggle are the students, the professionals, the church people who are willing to live with us, to go in our communities, to learn with us, teach with us, eat with us and sleep with us. So although in line of the politicians, we treated as this network or how we build rapport with them, we build or form alliances, but this is temporary because most of the politicians are working with the people only because of their personal interest while in power.

00:09:32 – 00:10:02

Kakay Tolentino: As we experience as of now that the government, it seems we are not people of the Philippines. They easily attacked and vilify us as terrorists. And as a result, they kill, they massacre. They enforce the displacement and dislocation of communities, and our rights are really violated as indigenous peoples and also, most of all, as people of the Philippines.

00:10:03 – 00:10:41

Kakay Tolentino: This was happening today as the massive killings and different kinds of human rights violation in the indigenous peoples' communities because of these imperialists' greed to our natural resources that is found in our ancestral land and territory. So as I'm always speaking, the big problem of indigenous people is the imperialist greed who plunder our natural resources, violate our human rights and nothing was left for us if we will not defend our own.

00:10:42 – 00:10:48

Kakay and Indira, would you like to share any further messages to broader audiences?

00:10:49 – 00:11:14

Kakay Tolentino: We indigenous peoples always calling and challenge the broad masses to clean our hands to one another in defending our basic human rights. We must be united in defending our ancestral land, resources and territories because this is the last frontier of our natural resources and last frontier of our national patrimony.

00:11:15 – 00:11:35

Indira Sheesh: The organizing the illiterate in poor indigenous women is thought, though this is the long process to empower them on the issue and getting their rights, so they need long term strategy and practical actions to empower them.

00:11:36 – 00:12:04

Indira Sheesh: It is essential to implement both approaches in these illiterate and poor societies, that is need-based and right-based approaches education and income-generating activity is a must to organize the people to fight against every aspect of discrimination. Therefore, I believe such activities could be sustainability.

00:12:05 – 00:12:28

Dayoon Kim: We deeply appreciate you, Indira and Kakay for participating in our podcast and sharing your experiences and insights.

For our listeners, if you want to know more about their work, please visit the social media channels of INWOLAG and Bai Indigenous Woman's Network about their important work on the ground.