

International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples – 9 August 2018

Statement on Indigenous People; Thailand, Asia

In today's age of globalisation where mobility is highly valued, the deep-rooted connection of indigenous peoples to their historical place of residence seems very strange and unusual. For Indigenous Peoples whose world view, culture, language and livelihood are so closely linked with their land, territories, flora and fauna and the overall environment, migration is a strange phenomenon except when they seasonally shift from one area to another to reduce the human impact on one farming area or pasture. This is part of their traditional symbiotic relationship with nature. Thus, for the Karen people, the forest around the fields and villages are managed by a set of customs, prohibitions and rituals and includes sacred forests and traditional burial grounds. Cutting a tree in *pga dae pau*, the umbilical-cord forest (i.e. a sacred forest where the umbilical cord of new born babies are tied and establish a long-term relationship of protection with chosen trees) is strictly prohibited. The link of the community with their environment is exemplified by the term that the Karen use for their elders, those who possess wisdom and provide guidance for the younger generations, as '*pga mi pga pga*', which literally means 'the wild and the forest'. At the same time, the rotational farming or *rai mun wian* they practise encourages a remarkable level of biological diversity mimicking the biodiversity around them. More than 200 species and varieties plants are found and used in the rotational system which also creates shelter and habitat for a wide range of animals, birds and insects during the different stages of rotation. Unlike industrial mono-culture, such practises are ecologically sustainable. Indigenous peoples around the world follow similar practises which forge a strong link to the local place and promote a symbiotic relationship between society and environment.

The Thai State claims that indigenous peoples, particularly, ethnic highlanders have been immigrants and mostly originate from mainland China. This is why the Thai Government declines the existence of indigenous peoples in the country and denies their rights to land, territories and resources. However, research, archaeological artefacts and other evidence have reiterated the fact that these indigenous peoples have lived in this region for hundreds of years; and some of them might have lived there before the arrival of Thai/Tai people, or before the building of the Nation State. The State assumes that all the forest lands belong to the State, even though the people have traditionally made use of the land before the enactment of land and forestry laws. For example, the Kaeng Krajan National Park authority relocated the Karen

people from their traditional home without their consent in June 2011. The court decided that the Karen people have resided in the area long before the announcement of the National Park. However, the plaintiffs and their families were not allowed to return to their home land, because it was located in the heart of the National Park (Judgment, dated 12 June 2018).

The root causes of migration:

The main root cause of internal migration in Thailand from the past to the present stems from the State policy to remove people from protected areas and reserve forest areas when most of them have been superimposed onto the traditional farmlands of indigenous people. In many cases, indigenous people were relocated involuntarily to uncultivable land without a viable supportive plan. This has driven indigenous and poor people to urban areas in the hope of finding wage labour.

It is a matter of great concern that at present extractive industries, industrial agriculture and State conservation policies are pushing Indigenous Peoples away from their lands. Like many indigenous groups around the world, the Karen people in Thailand also face tenure insecurity and migration has now also started to severely affect them. Their claims to ancestral lands is not recognized in Thailand as well as in many countries despite the existence of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous peoples living in urban areas:

An increasing number of indigenous peoples are moving to urban areas for various reasons. One of the main reasons is the scarcity of cultivable land, due to the expansion of protected areas and commercial monoculture agriculture throughout the country. Indigenous peoples, both male and female, come to the cities in search of non-agricultural occupation, such as in gas stations, construction sites, and as street vendors.

Another important reason is that students move to town to pursue their higher education.

Unfortunately, in urban centres a number of young indigenous girls end up in sex business.

Trans-border movement and displacement;

Indigenous peoples belonging to different indigenous groups had to flee from war zones to neighboring country to settle down in the confinement of refugee camps with substandard livelihood.

An increasing number of indigenous peoples also come to Thailand with the influx of migrant laborers from neighboring countries, namely Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. There have been reports about violation of labor's rights in different places.

Recommendations:

- Indigenous peoples should be able to organize their own educational system with the integration of indigenous and scientific knowledge.
- There should be a special quota to accept indigenous students to universities.
- Proper accommodation and extracurricular activities must be prepared and provided to indigenous students.
- Indigenous traditional land use systems and rights to land and ancestral domain must be recognized officially.
- States must be made to realize that the status of indigenous peoples is one of self-identification, not a matter of State decision.
- In Asia, as there is increasing evidence that rotational farming (as a customary sustainable use practice) contributes to biodiversity, food security, sustainable livelihoods and development, climate mitigation and adaptation and socio-ecological resilience, full recognition and support should be given to rotational farming and other customary sustainable practices by governments and other relevant sectors through policy and legal reforms.

Considering that there is also increasing evidence that much (40-80%) of the remaining biodiversity on the planet is located on lands and territories of indigenous and local communities, securing their rights to lands, territories and waters is one of the most effective ways to achieve the objectives of the CBD, the Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Accord on climate. We believe that ensuring the security of land rights of all peoples and especially of indigenous communities, with a focus in revitalizing local food systems and local livelihood innovations are the best way to overcome the current problems of migration. Such actions will also reduce violent conflicts that have also very badly affected our communities. Ultimately, it is food and sustainable food systems that will ensure the peace, harmony and well being of our indigenous communities and of everyone else.