

Mobile indigenous peoples

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In 2008 the theme of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII¹) was 'Climate Change, Bio-cultural Diversity and Livelihoods: the stewardship role of indigenous peoples and new challenges'.

Although climate change and the related issue of bio-cultural diversity have been major concerns in the developed and industrialised world, it is only with events like the UNPFII that the threats which climate change pose to the survival of peoples of the developing world are brought to light. Nomadic (mobile) peoples are already deriving their livelihoods from marginal and extreme landscapes; changes in physical and biological resources – and the impacts of increasingly severe weather and climate change – are therefore of particular concern to them.

The 2008 UNPFII session, held in New York, provided a rare opportunity for mobile people to discuss challenges and threats to their environments and livelihoods posed by changing climates and bio-cultural resources. The Standing Committee of the Dana Declaration on Mobile Peoples and Conservation² and the Secretariat of the World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples (WAMIP)³ sponsored 14 representatives of nomadic and mobile peoples from Gabon, Kenya, Tanzania, Senegal, Iran, India, Jordan, Mongolia and the US to attend the session. They also took part in a special event during the UNPFII meetings to discuss the impact of climate change and extreme weather on the livelihoods and bio-cultural diversity of their particular communities.⁴

At this event they discussed how extreme weather events are jeopardising the viability of their livelihoods and limiting the effectiveness of their traditional adaptive strategies. The issues raised by these 14 representatives were often the same. They included:

- the increase in climate-related physical stressors such as more intense droughts, reduced and

unpredictable precipitation, windstorms and increased flooding

- land degradation, limited water supply, reduced vegetation and decreased productivity of pastures
- externally imposed and inappropriate land tenure systems
- reduced migratory routes
- territorial incursion from development and conservation programmes
- alienation from traditional land and resources
- a lack of government understanding or support and difficulty in having input into policy-making
- the increasing marginalisation, sedentarisation and loss of identity, knowledge and customary institutions of mobile indigenous people.

Representatives from Africa stressed that open steppe and range land comprised much of their communities' land and that pastoralism provided a livelihood for millions of people.

They made the case that pastoralists' dependence on the environment made them particularly vulnerable to climate change effects such as reduced biodiversity and new livestock diseases. As a result, there is more tribal conflict – often spiralling into cross-border disputes – over decreasing resources and increased settlement as livestock are lost due to physical conditions and loss of ecosystem resilience. The delegates expressed a need for greater dialogue, both locally and internationally. They want government recognition of the importance of such issues, and comprehensive strategies to address water, livestock and communal matters.

Bedouin from Jordan stressed their connection with nature in a desert environment. Their traditional adaptive approaches can no longer cope with all the challenges and they are being forced to seek new livelihoods. Issues such as extremes of temperature, diminished flora and fauna, fewer buffer zones and poor environmental management need to be addressed if mobility and pastoralism are to remain viable options in the region.

The Mongolian pastoralist representatives stressed their concern over the marked warming of the country over the last 30 years. Climate change-induced extremes of temperature are resulting in large-scale livestock mortality and thus

Tuareg nomads at an oasis, west of Timbuktu, Mali, 2008.

IRIN/Tugela Riley



increased herder poverty. Pasture biomass, number of plant species and vegetation growth have decreased. The resulting poor economic conditions are driving herders from the land in search of alternative income sources such as small-scale mining. High transport costs, lack of government support and limited market organisation for products are all working against sustainability of livelihoods in Mongolia.

This negative picture was reaffirmed in a short documentary film from Iran which highlighted severe droughts – such as have not been seen for 100 years – and strange weather and wind patterns that are drying out wetlands and grasslands. Mobile tribes in Iran are unable to migrate to summer grounds as mist and fog that once nourished pastures have been absent for several years. The Iranian representative stressed that current conditions are more extreme than any in living memory.

The delegate representing India's 100 million mobile indigenous people emphasised the move away from traditional livelihoods among his peoples. Lost access to range and increasing political and economic pressure for pasture land have greatly reduced herd size and thus the

viability of livelihoods. With physical change comes social transition, seen in reduced opportunities for women, dispossession and the settlement of pastoralists. This is perceived as the 'new imperialism' brought on by climate change and government disregard for mobile peoples' issues.

The difficulties facing mobile indigenous people were not limited to developing regions. The Navaho member of the delegation from Arizona in the US talked about nature being out of balance in his region. As water sources dry up and traditional ways are lost, fewer than 1% of his tribe continue their mobile lifestyle. Conflicts over water and business in pastoral areas (such as coal mining), reduced land availability and livestock numbers, and warming weather patterns also cast doubt on the viability of pastoralism for future generations of Navaho.

Out of their hands

Nomadic and mobile peoples were traditionally found beyond the boundaries of settled society, using adaptive strategies to encourage environmental resilience and reduce risks. Climate change now challenges these livelihood approaches but the major causes of

environmental change lie beyond their lands and their actions.

While the UNPFII event brought together mobile indigenous people to confront these issues, it also highlighted the need for decision-makers – intergovernmental organisations, government officials and corporations – to acknowledge the special needs of mobile peoples. In a formal statement, Mossess Ndiyaine, a Maasai from Tanzania, called for greater awareness of their conditions, support for their concerns, recognition of their rights, strengthening of customary institutions and the active promotion of mobile indigenous peoples' involvement in identifying and addressing the impacts of climate change, both globally and locally.

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1. www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/
2. www.danadeclaration.org
3. www.wamip.org
4. Funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development.