Norairri Thungmuang, Thailand

Personal background

I am a Karen woman who is 35 years old and I was born in the mountainous area north of Chiangmai.

Now I have 2 children who are in high school. Currently I am involved in activities of the Karen Ethnic Group Network, Indigenous Women Network in Thailand (IWNT) and Inter Mountain Peoples' Education and Culture in Thailand (IMPECT Association) as a board committee member of these Indigenous Peoples' Organizations. This is to participate in the public sphere of indigenous women. Moreover, I also have to spend a lot of time for my family and economical activities. The major way of making livelihood for my family is agriculture: paddy fields, vegetable plantations, and husbandry; cows and chicken, with the supplementary income being handicraft.

My environment

As I had inherited lands from my parents, nowadays I have 2 pieces of paddy fields. In my plantation there are several varieties of wild and planted fruits: avocados, bananas, mangos, and many sorts of vegetables, lemon grass, Chaom _ galanga_ and bamboos. As part of the plantation, there are 2 fish pools, with a variety of fruits and vegetables around. Several kinds of turmeric and cotton are also grown there. In my vegetable plantation, I grow salad and vegetable, however, I plant it once a year. In my upper rice field cultivation is mixed, most are vegetables, fruits and all kinds of plants for family subsistence. Since my field is located on the upper paddy field, it is very good because of the caring and making use. Once I go to the paddy field, I can gather up all the plants from the field for my ingredients to cook. Also when the neighbours and school children pass by my field, we can give them whatever they want to eat. This is the Karen tradition, if we have plenty of fruits, we need to share them, then we will have more and more fruits in the upcoming year.

When I was 8 years old, I was living with my grandmother. So every day I went to the field with her and learned a lot. She always taught me the use of all plants and she also insisted that she did the plantation just for the next generation, for my children and grandchildren. What I learned from my grandmother is, whatever we do, it’s for our future.
My grandfather gave me a banana once and asked me, is it delicious? If it is delicious, we have to plant more for our own consumption and not to beg from others. He always gave everything to children. Then he would also ask the same question. Afterwards he would tell them to take a banana shoot and plant it in their garden. When I was young, I plant everything from the seeds which I was given by my grandmother. When I was in school, I also planted some fruits in the school’s compound and there wasn’t any teaching to students about planting. My grandmother always kept teaching me about planting trees and plants. She points out that there were some families which did not plant anything, so their children had nothing to eat. She also shared another example with me: one of the neighbours also did not plant anything for the next generation. They had to steal fruits from other plantations. It was so embarrassing.

In my village, there are only 2 Maprang trees that were grown by my grandmother. She perhaps planted them 15 years ago. My grandmother died 13 years ago, now it produces fruits and we harvest it. It is so sad to me since my grandmother cannot taste it, yet I feel very good because she grew Maprang for us. I’ve gained experience and taught others, regarding planting and growing trees for the next generation. And I am much appreciated to do so. When I was child, I was asked to gather all herbal ingredients from the field, too. We had no herbal garden because at home we raised animals; chicken and pigs. All were for the home consumption, either for food, ceremonies or sharing with relatives. From my experience, nowadays I gather the seeds and shoots from wherever I can get them. I do not plant everything by myself. I plant it with my family and we grow everything together in our fields. And I also have seen my neighbour tend to do so.

Recent developments: climate change and other impacts

A few years ago when I was single, in the community fields, there were plenty of plants. After cash crop was introduced to the community, the variety of crops had decreased since many rice fields and plantations became cash crop plantations. In consequence, some kinds of crops have almost disappeared from the village, since most of the families went the opposite way of our traditional agricultural practices such as practicing the rotation system. There were less edible crops in both, plantations and paddy fields. In the first period, growing cash crops gained a lot of profit but after some time, we had to increase the investment for pesticide and fertilizer since the productiveness of the soil has declined.

Now I have a total of 5 pieces of land: a house, 2 paddy fields, 2 vegetable plantations on the upper side of the 2 paddy fields. When I was a child, there were many big trees and wild fruit abounding. Since we made paddy fields, we have no big trees in our lands. In my grandmother’s time, we used paddy fields once a year, but in the past 5-6 years, we had grown cash crops in our paddy fields which were introduced by The Royal Project. In consequence, villagers have to use fertilizers and pesticides. People who brought it into the community had given neither training nor taught us how to use this new products safely. As results, obviously, we can see in the community there are many people with health problems, such as skin disease, heart problems and high blood pressure. Most of the farmers have been finally indebted and lost their ancestral land to others. The first few years when a huge amount of chemicals was used, there were a large number of youths committing suicide after disappointment from their love relations.
Obviously we have seen the death of river fish and the degradation of soil. The trees are growing very slowly ever since the cash crop fields had been constructed. Besides, growing cash crop has caused the degradation of soil quality, it became hard. We also have realized that planting any kinds of crop needs more and more water.

The impact on the community’s natural resources also caused conflict among the neighbours because of the water shortage and overuse. The growth of plants and vegetables is delayed, slow and not abundant. If we want all kinds of plants and vegetables to grow consistently and healthy, it needs a very large amount of fertilizer.

The most serious impact on our way of life is in terms of food production and life security. If the natural resources’ abundance declines, we cannot rely on our traditional ways of livelihood making. In the past we gathered all of our food from the forest, fields and plantations. When our lands were replaced by cash crop, our crops have been endangered and we also do not free our cattle in cash crop fields, because the community has become the area of the government project and the rest belongs to the government protected area. We have been strictly controlled not to use any organic fertilizer from the husbandry in the field so no plant naturally breeds its species.

Other consequences are: the new generation has no healthy food and they also do not know about the native indigenous plant species. The parents also have no knowledge transmission regarding the traditional way of food proceeding, preservation and fermenting. This also causes serious malnutrition for the children in the mountain areas nowadays because of lack of food in the dry season and also because the villagers have to consume the non-organic food that is around in the community. Of course, we have seen the disaster nearby the district such as the huge flow of rain water and there was fast flood in the paddy. In the last dry season, it was so hot and no wind as usual.

In Karen tradition, we cannot cut down all trees in the field, otherwise the animals and birds have no shelter and humans will also feel these impacts on life like those animals. In Karen belief, we have “Thoo Bie Ka”. It means the leader of the birds who brings abundance to communities so that people in the community will have plenty of rice, water, food and basic needs. That is why we have to leave some trees in any field for the shelter of this bird, as our traditional teachings are:

- we consume rice, we have to preserve rice (plant)
- we drink water, we have to preserve the watershed
- we consume many things from the forest we have to preserve the forest

Regarding the weather, when we have big trees, we can breathe freshly but now it is so hot (both at home and in the field) it’s harder to breathe because of humidity. And we feel the rise of temperature.

Therefore, nowadays, I spend less investment in cash crop since we have realized and experienced. We better work for our consumption first since it is good for both, our health and the soil fertility.
Nowadays, we face shortage and famine. However, we would have never been suffering if we had maintained our traditional livelihood practices. It is our strong belief that is significant for human survival that this kind of traditional knowledge is passed on to the next generation.

**Lessons learned and strategies applied**

Karen rely on trees from the moment we are born. Part of our body is bonded with the tree, it is a close relationship with something invisible or supernatural to us. Thus, that is why there are many types of Karen traditional teachings about environmental preservation. We recovered “Pha Dhae Por”, the ceremony to preserve the community forest. In consequence we will transmit that traditional knowledge. Moreover, we made a good relationship with people in the community who survive with food, water and herb from the forest. Most of our daily consumption does not come from new technological farms and this will reduce the pollution on the earth as well. Since our life relies on the forest, we must pay more attention to the importance of forest.

Now we expand the area of community protected forest as in the tradition, Karen have several kinds of taboos to keep the community forest restricted for use and consumption. Importantly, promoting the traditional knowledge of women would be the vital way of maintaining and transmitting the traditional way of life, since women are the keepers of the tradition. Also, the women play a significant role in the family and pass on the knowledge to the young generation. However, the discrimination against women has to be eradicated. For example, women need equal access to basic rights, formal education, health care service, justice, and participation in politics. Otherwise, women cannot sustainably involve themselves in all issues since it is all related to political matters including the access and control of resources, both natural and human resource.

Besides, supporting women's full participation in natural resources management is very important, since women experience their daily life that is surrounded by land, forest and water. Women spend a lot of time gathering food, preparing the field for planting, weeding, harvesting, seed collecting etc. Therefore, we should support women to access and control over the natural resources in order to sustain the settlement and survival of communities, since food security and ensuring food on the family table are the vital responsibility of women in the community and family sphere.
Norairri’s Message

I would like to urge my opinion to the public to accept the diversity and differences of society, such as culture, language, history of the nation, ways of life and geographical settlement. In any society, this existence is the multi-value of the group of peoples. As all cultures have their own values, some of those can contribute its value to the bigger society. The culture of indigenous peoples on natural resource management can be applicable in the national policy, too.

It is important to understand that the ideology and concept need to be totally changed since powerful people think that climate change is mainly caused by the vast natural resource destruction, particularly, the slash and burn agricultural practices of indigenous peoples. All perception in policy making has been influenced by this kind of wrong understanding. The reason for this is that the indigenous peoples have less economical and political power. The indigenous peoples are victimized by such a political issue such as the so called “climate change”.

Obviously we can see the control over indigenous peoples’ way of life, such as the protected areas, National Parks, National Preservation Area etc.. Very often we can see the policy implementation has impacts on the traditional way of livelihood, for example, loss of land, no citizenship and so forth. Such a kind of discrimination against indigenous peoples is caused seriously by the so called “climate change” issue.

We have some small poem to teach our own people to be aware of in the natural resource management:

“Ahow Kow Pur Thor Krow Rea Rea”
(We survive on the earth, we have to preserve our mother's land)