

Indigenous knowledge as a driver of resilience

The Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF) is a biennial event held prior to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. CPF 2015 took place on 23-26 November 2015 and was jointly organised by the Government of Malta (host) and the Commonwealth Foundation. CPF 2015 critically explored policy based actions under the theme of "What Makes Resilient Societies?" It provided an innovative opportunity for civil society organisations to share knowledge and learn from each other as well as to interact with governance institutions on key policy issues. The CPF2015 series elaborates on the issues covered in the Malta Declaration on Governance for Resilience.

Introduction

The experience of colonisation imposed western values and the notion of knowledge that prevailed in 18th Century Europe. This marginalized Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and their worldview. The Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF) in Malta in November 2015, explored the overarching theme of "What Makes Societies Resilient" and posited Indigenous Knowledge as a driver of resilience.

Presenters traced the challenges that Indigenous Peoples have faced in their engagement with institutions, and responded to the following questions: What is missing from the orthodox development discourse from an Indigenous Peoples' perspective? How relevant is resilience as a concept to the experiences of Indigenous People? How can governance systems challenge the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge and operationalize more inclusive policy and decision making systems? What are the implications for governance systems of Indigenous Peoples' experience of resilience?

"It is recognised that historically, Indigenous People have developed an in depth knowledge of their territories, which have been the source of their livelihoods for generations."

The negative impact of western civilisation on the planet has encouraged a reassessment of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge. It is recognised that historically, Indigenous People have developed an in depth knowledge of their territories, which have been the source of their livelihoods for generations. Indigenous knowledge, incorporating Indigenous science and awareness, also includes multiple good practices, which offer different approaches to contemporary challenges such as prediction, adaptation and mitigation to climate change.

Key discussion points

Indigenous' Peoples' perspectives on resilience

Indigenous Peoples' knowledge brings very different perspectives to the dominant narratives of resilience. Dominant and hegemonic interpretations treat resilience as a form of coping with challenges and hazards and bouncing back to the status quo. For Indigenous Peoples however, a minimal footprint should be left on the natural system. The sacredness of the Earth is prioritized and therefore a close relationship is maintained to territory and the preservation of land and sacred sites used by ancestors. This sense of sacredness is present in all the forms of interaction established between Indigenous People and nature.

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These perspectives contrast sharply with the status quo where hegemonic narratives of resilience fail to offer answers. For example, globally a growing number of people are migrating; there are millions of refugees; there is unprecedented ecological collapse. At the same time the supplies of energy, information, food production, water, sanitation and housing are not managed equitably. The dominant resilience narrative offers no pathway out of this set of circumstances. It provides no opportunity to change dominant governance institutions and systems and offers no safeguards for vulnerable communities.

The lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples provide testimony that the promotion of endless development and growth is destroying rather than building capacities for resilience.

The right to Indigenous Peoples' self-determination, that is the free determination of political status, economic, social and cultural development is central to governance for resilience.

The concept of territory is inherent to Indigenous Peoples' epistemological understanding of nature. It is not limited to land but also integrates ancestral terrains and political and cultural identities. Indigenous Peoples have extensive historical connections with the territories in which they have lived – "indeed one cannot be called an Indigenous People without being linked to a territory." That is why the history of journeying is important in indigenous knowledge and culture.

Indigenous People maintain their identities using indigenous laws and ceremonies. These emphasize knowledge on ancestral terrains as well as political and cultural identities to future generations.

At present Indigenous Peoples are not self-governing in their own territories. A society that embraces this more transformative aspect of resilience, opens up real spaces for diversity. This can offer both the inclusion and recognition of Indigenous Peoples' institutions.

Inclusive institutions are central to fostering and sustaining resilience. A resilient society that truly embraces diversity requires a different model of the nation-state, one that acknowledges the right of self-determination of Indigenous People.

Governance for resilience can also be promoted through the recognition of institutions developed by Indigenous Peoples. In addition, rather than creating new institutions the state could recognize the multiplicity and diversity of different nations within a state and acknowledge fully their leaders. This could help make existing institutions function more effectively.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People recognizes the right to self-determination. It appeals to nations to revisit agreements between states and Indigenous Peoples, and also to form partnerships between them.

There are three aspects to nurturing and sustaining resilient societies across the Commonwealth: recognising Indigenous Peoples and their right to self-determination; establishing inclusive and participatory governance systems; and mobilizing national and international voices of Indigenous Peoples.

Malta Declaration on Governance for Resilience: Critical Steps in the Way Forward

The Malta Declaration set out for the first time a comprehensive six-point agenda for Commonwealth action, focusing on recognition of indigenous peoples, their improved representation, harmonising national legislation, recognising and protecting intellectual property and traditional knowledge, increasing opportunities for information sharing and the promotion of indigenous knowledge within the Commonwealth. Concluding remarks of the Malta declaration are as follows:

An excerpt from the Malta Declaration on Governance for Resilience

16. Indigenous Peoples are survivors of historical colonisation, genocide and more recent forms of structural violence, reproduced in contemporary societies and the global political economy.

17. For Indigenous Peoples, resilience translates into the survival of cultural and linguistic identities, preservation of indigenous knowledge, and ownership of their territories and resources. The cosmology of Indigenous Peoples recognises obligations to past and future generations, as well as deep spiritual attachment to their lands, territories and resources. Indigenous Peoples celebrate economic, social, and cultural relationships based on equity and shared prosperity.

18. Indigenous Peoples reject values that promote excessive consumerism and individualistic, competitive values. Indigenous Peoples strongly resist the abuse of ecosystems, commodification of genetic resources and violence arising from forced privatisation and assimilation.

19. We call on all Commonwealth member states to:

a. Fully recognise Indigenous Peoples in their regions including respect for the representatives and leaders determined by the Indigenous Peoples;

b. Consider means for Indigenous Peoples, as First Peoples with the right of self-determination, to be appropriately represented in the Commonwealth and to participate and be integrally included in all processes in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

c. Harmonise national legislation with the rights of Indigenous Peoples, as established in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, by 2017;

d. Recognise and, in the process, safeguard intellectual property and traditional knowledge of Indigenous Peoples, enabling sui generis systems for protection if favoured by the Indigenous Peoples;

e. Increase opportunities for information sharing, encouraging representatives of Indigenous Peoples to share the work they are doing to adapt to and mitigate adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation; and

f. Encourage parliamentarians who are members of Indigenous Peoples communities to meet together and promote information and awareness within the Commonwealth.

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