

Report on the Workshop & Panel on Indigenous Knowledge (IK) & Natural Commons in Myanmar

at the 3rd International Conference on International Relations and Development (ICIRD 2013)
“Beyond Borders: Building a Regional Commons in Southeast Asia”, 21-23 August 2013,
Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

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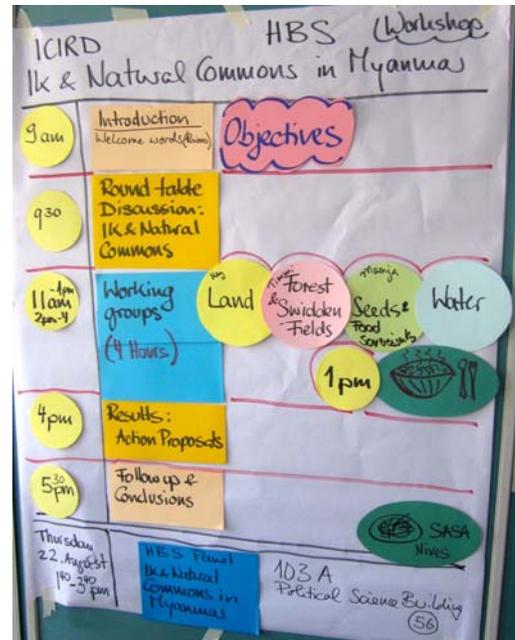
This year’s International Conference on International Relations and Development (ICIRD), hosted by Chulalongkorn University, invited practitioners, civil society actors, scholars and community representatives in order to debate and investigate current developments in Southeast Asia with particular focus on the Commons. The region’s rapid economic, social and political developments, in the context of an increasingly liberalized market economy, have raised questions regarding traditional concepts of the Commons – be it natural resources, knowledge, culture or digital information. It is with regards to these current trends, that the Myanmar Program of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung (hbs) organized a workshop on Indigenous Peoples’ natural resource management and the creativity of Indigenous Knowledge and the Natural Commons. The recent opening up of Myanmar has led to an influx of foreign investments, in particular in the resource sector, which in combination with a general top-down approach has led to a disregard of Indigenous Knowledge and communally managed natural resources. The focus on economic development and neglect of sustainable approaches does not only pose a threat to the environment but also to the livelihood of the many ethnic people that are dependent on their surrounding natural resources.

WORKSHOP on 21st of August, 2013

The workshop moderated by Dr. Timmi Tillmann and Dr. Maruja Salas, brought together about 30 development practitioners, activists, scholars and representatives of ethnic communities from different parts of Myanmar and Thailand. The diverse ethnic background of the participants

allowed for an opportunity to gain insights about different traditional concepts and practices of indigenous resource management in Myanmar.

After a brief introduction by the representative of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, the workshop started with the screening of two short films, "[7 Short Films on the Commons](#)" (by the Foundation for Ecological Security) and "[What are the Commons?](#)" (by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung) which presented an overview of the concept of the Commons. This was followed by an initial round table discussion, moderated by Dr. Maruja Salas. During the discussion Prof. Emeritus Anan Ganjanapan (Chiang Mai University), Mr. Sai Sam Kham (Metta Development Foundation) and Mr. Win Myo Thu (EcoDev/Alarm) were asked to share their personal experiences how they got interested in the Commons and the main threats they perceive as pivotal.



Prof. Ganjanapan focused mainly on the importance of communal managed forests and their endangerment through government led projects such as logging and the establishment of national parks and forest reserves. Consequentially, he noted the importance of community forestry, and its manifestation through a forest community law. He considered these as vital alternatives to monopolized government management. Reforestation and conservation projects by the government have led to the marginalization and displacement of the local people, who remain helpless due to the absence of legal protection.

Mr. Win Myo Thu and Mr. Sai Sam Kham focused on the general threats that communal management is facing in the wake of emerging privatization and globalization. The new focus on private ownership rights stands in stark contrast to the use rights based interests of the community. According to the speakers, a main challenge is to find a middle way, which incorporates both sides (private and collective) in order to establish participatory communal management with multiple rights. Local governance and the involvement of Civil Society are key factors for the well-being of the Commons.

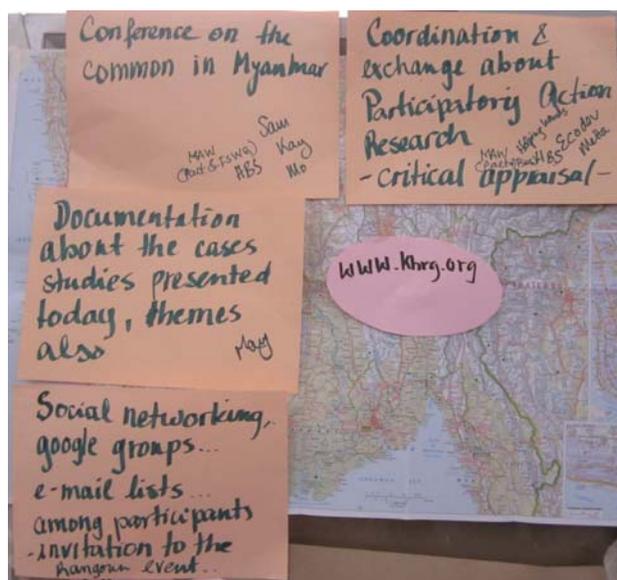
In order to further explore the importance of the Natural Commons in different areas of Myanmar, four main topics were proposed to serve as issues where local values and practices can be clearly identified. Thus the participants were split into four working groups based on their interests and backgrounds:

1. Indigenous Knowledge on water, irrigation and soil management
2. Resistance to land grabbing, and legal means and political action to support the rights of the Commons on their land
3. Forests and Shifting Cultivation
4. Defense of local seeds and promotion of ecological agriculture (based on indigenous heritage)

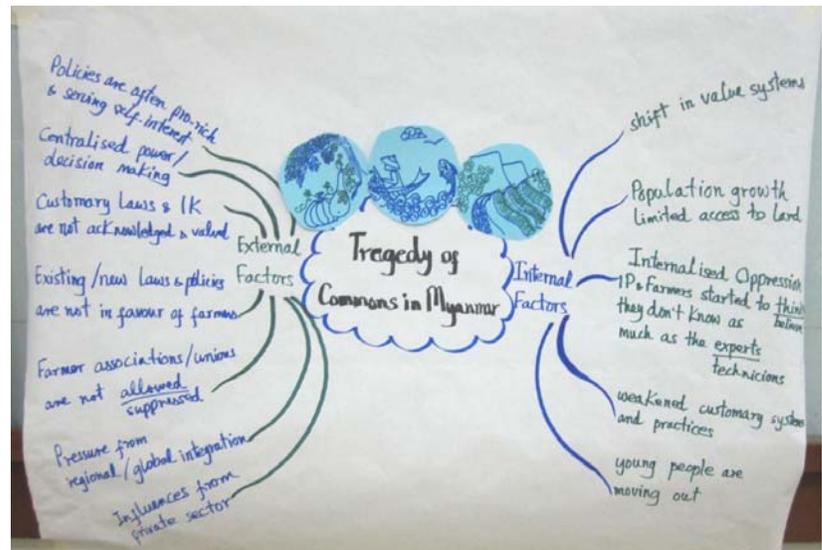
These main topics were used as guidelines for the working groups and quickly developed their own dynamics according to the participants' main concerns and visions for improvements. Throughout the day, experiences of Indigenous Knowledge and the Commons were shared, based on experiences from working with local communities, research and personal experiences. The findings were structured around a SWOT (Strengths – Weaknesses - Opportunities – Threats) framework for the presentation and panel discussion. The working groups further proposed action plans and created posters and other visuals in order to communicate their issues and concerns. The working groups' results were then presented in the plenary in order to provide room for feedback and suggestions for the finalized presentations at the public panel at the ICIRD Conference the day after.

The participants presented several follow up actions with responsibilities:

- Organize a National Conference in Myanmar on the Natural Commons
- Coordination and exchange about Participatory Action Research – with a critical appraisal of the methodology for its application in Myanmar to enhance the dialogue and collaboration between NGOs and local communities and CSO.



Mr. Sai Sam Kham (Metta Development Foundation) elaborated in his presentation on the “external factors” and “internal factors” which contribute to the decline of communal managed resources which he named the “**Tragedy of the Commons**”. As “external factors” he identified issues such as centralized decision making processes and new laws which are in favor of the private sector, pressure of regional and global economic integration and the pressure on farmers associations. Internal factors discussed were changes in demographics, changes in value systems, and a feeling of inferiority within the rural ethnic population due to “internalized oppression”.



Following this brief overview, the issues of **land grabbing and land rights** were addressed by the **second working group**. Several development projects related to cases of land grabbing were listed in the presentation. It became clear that the main factors that contribute to this issue are the discrepancies between the various conceptions of land ownership rights. Customary land laws that have been handed down through generations are not recognized by the government and local communities consequentially lack any legal protection when it comes to land confiscation by private investors. Legal reforms by the government fail to address this issue and mainly act in the interests of the private market and do not provide any protection or benefits for the indigenous people. As most farmers do not hold actual land titles, the only way to stop land grabbing, is to include customary laws into a legal framework. Among the possible actions identified were media campaigns, civil disobedience in case other complaint mechanisms fail and education measures for farmers in order to raise awareness of the legal situation and to strengthen the capacity of the community to defend their land rights.

The importance of Indigenous Knowledge was especially highlighted during the presentation on the findings of the **third working group concerning forests and shifting cultivation**. A case study from Karen State was used to illustrate the traditional communal ways of managing forests through shifting cultivation. Traditional shifting cultivation can be a way of sustainable forest management through long fallow periods and a high diversity of plants and seeds. Community forests in these areas are traditionally protected through spiritual beliefs but also on the grounds of environmental and communal responsibility of using them as a Commons. Inevitably, logging companies have faced strong opposition by the local communities.



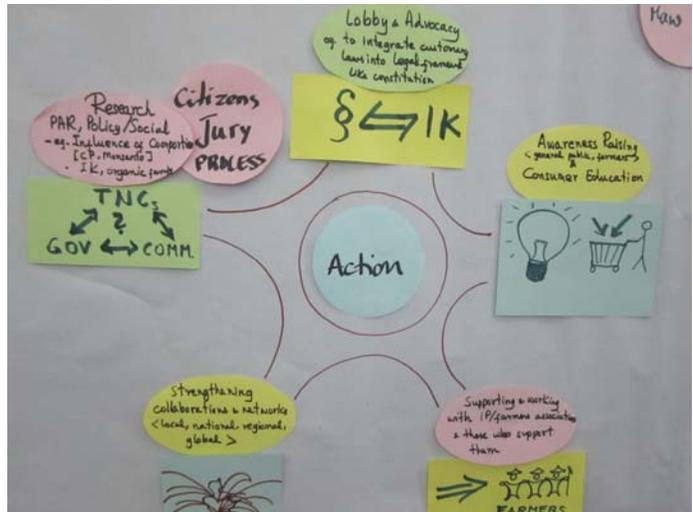
The traditional practices in Karen State demonstrate the importance of Indigenous Knowledge in the face of new developments and privatization; the more profit orientated methods such as crop monoculture, extensive logging and shifting cultivation with shorter fallow periods due to increasing pressure on lands affect the sustainable use of the resources, the Karen livelihood and food sovereignty of local communities.

There is a need to revise the public policies on collective forest management, recognizing the value of knowledge and local practices. We propose to elaborate a participatory research project to protect, preserve and promote the traditional shifting cultivation technologies in Myanmar.



The fourth working group focused on the **defense of local seeds and the promotion of ecological agriculture for food sovereignty**. Economic pressures and centralized policy making have forced farmers to buy their seeds from the market rather than reproducing their own local seeds. Although farmers own good quality seeds, the influence of profit driven transnational corporations has led to the abandonment of traditional and sustainable management towards the use of hybrid seeds and genetically modified varieties. Thus, local seeds and local varieties which are often more suitable for the local climate and soil conditions are disappearing fast and with them the Indigenous Knowledge on the use of these plants.

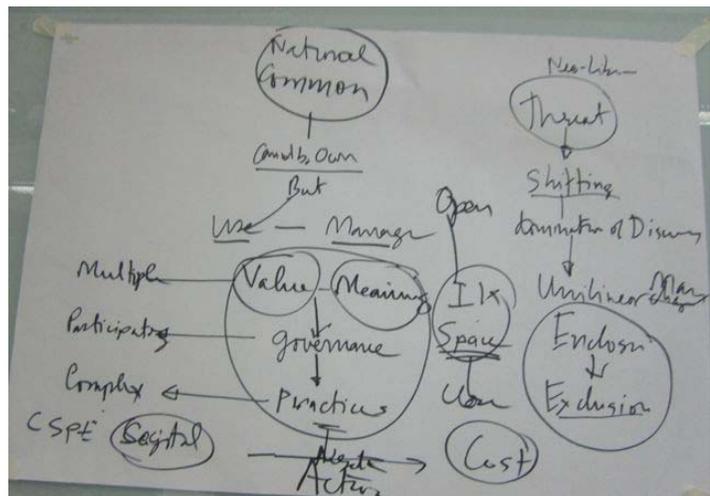
Similarly, agriculture has seen a rapid increase in the use of herbicides and pesticides, which are commonly unsuitable and not properly handled and often add to the financial constraints of farmers. In response to these developments, training of farmers and support for farmers associations is of utmost importance. In addition more needs to be understood about the current situation of indigenous farmers through means of Participatory Action Research. Other actions proposed include advocacy and lobbying which will help to elevate the issue to a national and global level.



Natural Commons and their Governance through Indigenous Knowledge

Before the public discussion, Prof. Anan Ganjanapan (Chiang Mai University) offered some concluding remarks on the links between the Natural Commons and their governance through Indigenous Knowledge. He concluded that: "Natural Commons cannot simply be understood as something communally owned. Instead, they should be seen in terms of how people actually use and manage in a specific socio-political context. Under this perspective, the Natural Commons are regarded as something with meanings and values. These values are multiple (social, cultural, economic etc.). Furthermore, the Natural Commons are also defined by participatory governance through customary laws and Indigenous Knowledge which are carried out by local people in complex practices.

In this sense, Indigenous Knowledge cannot be seen only as given or fixed but an open space of practices which are changing as local people have to continually engage in their negotiation with the state or market as external threats. In other words, these practices can also be considered as some forms of social capital, where local people can accumulate their experience and rely on to empower themselves.



In addition to state territorialization, the current threats to the above local practices lie mainly in the neoliberal market logic which has increasingly become a dominant discourse. Such discourse limits the open space of complex practices of Indigenous Knowledge in favor of a closed system of fixed management. It is endowed with a unilinear-dimension of management with some forms of enclosure especially land ownership that mostly lead to an exclusion of local people especially under a state policy of land appropriation or a highly speculative land market. This type of management practice can thus be considered as a high social cost to the sustainable governance of the Commons. Take forest as an example of Natural Commons. It has a multiple meaning and value for the local community (shifting cultivation, food source, spiritual meaning and community forest etc.). Under neoliberal influences, this complex practice

of forest management experiences a shift of discourse. The multiplicity of forest is simply turned into an unused fallow land or deforestation zone in the eyes of the authorities which needs to be put to productive use. On one hand, this new development imposes the market discourse and adversely changes meanings and values of the forest which gradually marginalize local resource governance. On the other hand, this unilinear-dimensional management creates new spaces of enclosure (land-ownership) and exclusion (forced migration) which endanger the livelihoods and the identities of the local people. Thus the meanings and values have to be continually re-negotiated in order to empower the local practice of the Commons governance.”

The concluding discussion opened up the dialogue between the workshop participants and the audience and raised some interesting questions regarding the influence of NGOs within Myanmar and in how far they are able to promote Indigenous Knowledge and the Commons. Even though the country is in a state of transition, dialogue and trust are still not fully developed. The workshop and the panel have clearly pointed out the wealth of the Commons and Indigenous Knowledge in Myanmar. At the same time however, it is important not to romanticize customary traditions but to intertwine this knowledge with current developments in order to secure a sustainable management of the natural resources in Myanmar.