

Collective efforts for successful advocacy

Indigenous peoples in rural areas face many challenges: poverty, hunger, weak access to basic social services and productive assets like land, water, or seeds. The root causes are inequality and exclusion from political discourse. However, the communities have long refused to accept these conditions. Supported by international development cooperation, they are demanding that their rights be enforced as well as being involved in decision-making processes. With success, as our example from Kenya shows.

By Ralf Kaminski and Christa Suter

Judy Kipkenda belongs to the Ogiek people, an indigenous hunter-gatherer community in Central Kenya. She is 35 years old, a mother of three, and farms in Koibatek, in the Great Rift Valley. She also founded an organisation to help local indigenous farmers with the adaptation to climate change, particularly women and young people. As executive director of the Koibatek Ogiek Women and Youth Network (Kowyn), she even participated in a side event of the 51st Session of the UN Committee on Food Security in Rome, Italy, last autumn. “Governments and organisations should acknowledge the value of indigenous knowledge systems in promoting sustainable practices and conservation,” she said in her presentation. “This involves incorporating traditional knowledge into climate action plans and agriculture policies.” Kipkenda also emphasised that indigenous people should be included in decision-making processes concerning climate action and food security. “They need to be part of the negotiations, not just on the side-lines,” she said.

Elevating the voices of indigenous communities

The young woman not only represented her own organisation in Rome but also Cemiride, the Center for Minority Rights Development. This Kenyan organisation was established in 2001 to strengthen the capacities of minorities and Indigenous Peoples – pastoralists, forest peoples and fisher communities – to advocate for their rights. Raise, a project that seeks to promote the agroecological transition and the implementation of peasant rights as enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peas-

ants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), recently started supporting the organisation in this endeavour. Although Kenya and 120 other countries voted in favour of UNDROP, the translation of peasant rights into national laws is routinely lacking, and even when progressive laws exist, their systematic implementation is often not guaranteed. The Raise partners, which are coordinated by the Swiss NGO Fastenaktion, want to ensure that peasants know their rights – and are empowered to demand their implementation at national and international level. Kipkenda’s presentation in Rome shows just how important such advocacy work is. She was the only indigenous young woman participating in this event. And she feels that she has made an impression.

“Overall, we have made substantial progress in Kenya,” comments Nyang’ori Ohenjo, team lead at Cemiride. “Together with community representatives for Cemiride and Raise, the Kenyan policy-makers formulate plans that incorporate indigenous food systems and recognise the relevance of agroecology,” he explains. One important

achievement is that Indigenous Peoples’ needs and experiences have been integrated in Kenya’s National Climate Change Action Plan (2019 – 2024) and that they are addressed in politics via the Climate Smart Agriculture Multistakeholder Platform. Cemiride also facilitated the active participation of Indigenous Peoples at the international UN climate conferences COP27 and 28 and at regional forums. “During these engagements, the African Commission on Peoples and Human Rights unequivocally aligned with Indigenous Peoples, emphasising the critical nature of land and land rights in ensuring the right to food and food security,” Ohenjo notes. Successful engagement in these forums had elevated the voices of indigenous communities, fostering a broader understanding of their rights.

Implementation remains a challenge

“However, the path has not been without hurdles,” Ohenjo adds, looking back at the last one and a half years. “Not only did we have to cope with a famine, but there was also a change in political leadership, which to some extent led to a restart with the newly elected leaders.” In addition, there is the change in weather patterns because of climate change. “Prolonged droughts impact our agricultural activities, affecting the very core of the Raise project which revolves around sustainable agroecology,” Ohenjo explains. And, despite a positive change of Kenyan policies, the practical implementation of these commitments remains an ongoing challenge, he says. “It demands sustained efforts from various stakeholders.”

Judy Kipkenda is campaigning for policy change in Kenya’s legislation on seed so that traditional indigenous seeds can be widely used and exchanged through seedbanks.

Photo: Fastenaktion



Integrated approaches are crucial to the success of these efforts. Just like in many other countries, in Kenya too, agricultural policy dialogue is often detached from the land issue. And economic development policy is often separate from land rights. It takes holistic advocacy work with an integrated reference to land rights to satisfy the needs of indigenous communities, farming families and pastoralists. Cemiride's advocacy work always includes the active participation and empowerment of Indigenous Peoples themselves. Developing and strengthening networks within indigenous communities is another key factor, as is using UNDROP as an important advocacy tool with policy-makers.

Improvements in daily life

Judy Kipkenda sees considerable progress in the lives of the people she works with. The Ogiek community – in total around 52,000 people – has only a little land left for beekeeping and agriculture after the government evicted them from their forests in 1987 to harvest timber and other natural resources. “So, we trained the farmers to still grow enough food through agroecology with traditional seeds and kitchen gardens. This not only helped with food security, but it also reduced the cost of planting, created a feeling of togetherness, and promoted cultural traditions,” Kipkenda explains. The situation of women has improved as well. They do most of the agricultural work and can sell some of the produce. “Their confidence has grown, since they earn their own money and get more respect and recognition from the men,” she maintains.

However, that progress is limited to the people in her project, around 100 households, the farmer explains, adding that the overall situation of Indigenous Peoples in Kenya is challenging. “There are still many land evictions, culture and language continue to deteriorate, and food security remains an issue as well,” she points out. Then again, there are many small indigenous communities which benefit from similar projects by Cemiride and Raise, for example the Endorois and Ilchamus people. “And that collective effort also has an effect on the national level,” Kipkenda notes.

The struggle against powerful business interests

Judy Kipkenda's current big project is to push a policy change in Kenya's seed laws, so that traditional indigenous seeds can be widely

Strong partnerships

The **Koibatek Ogiek Women and Youth Network (KOWYN)** was founded in 2021 with the aim to improve the living standards of the Ogiek community – by enhancing food security and food sovereignty. In addition, the organisation seeks to amplify the voices and capacities of women and youth to tackle the Community's economic, social and environmental problems for sustainable community development.

More information: koibatekogiek.org

The **Kenyan Center for Minority Rights Development (CEMIRIDE)** was established in 2001. The initiative was prompted by the denial of citizenship rights for the Nubian community in the country. Cemiride was thus established to “bring the conversation of the existence and violation of the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples in Kenya into the public and explore redress mechanisms especially with the Kenyan government”.

More information: cemiride.org

The **RAISE** project stands for **Rights-based and Agroecological Initiatives for Sustainability and Equity in Peasant Communities**. In this context, “peasants” refers to smallholder farmers, pastoralists, fishermen/ women, and farmworkers; it also considers that many of them are women, youth, ethnic minorities, or Indigenous people. The project partners are especially concerned with the right to food, land and seeds, and with strengthening the rights of peasants – including Indigenous Peoples – to participate in decision-making. Its partners in the international consortium are the Rural Women's Assembly (RWA), *Vétérinaires sans Frontières Suisse* and their local partners Cemiride and Réseau Billital Maroobe, as well as DKA Austria and their local partner organisations. The consortium is led by **Fastenaktion**, a Swiss NGO which focuses on the right to food and is committed to achieving a more equitable world and to overcome hunger. Drawing on local knowledge, it develops approaches in dialogue with partner organisations in 14 countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America.

RAISE is co-financed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Its activities take place in Kenya, South Africa, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, India and Nepal.

More information: fastenaktion.ch/projekt/raise/

used and exchanged through seedbanks. Those seeds are not only part of the cultural identity, but also work better under climate crisis conditions. “This change would be a very important step for us; there is however considerable opposition from the business people who profit from the current law. And they have more money and power to influence politicians,” the young farmer explains.

This national law prohibits farmers from sharing, exchanging or selling uncertified and unregistered seeds – which most of the seeds of the Indigenous Peoples are, because registering them is expensive. Offenders are punished with a high fee or even a prison sentence of up to two years. Kipkenda hopes that the combined lobby efforts will at least help to change the policies of some of Kenya's counties, even though the regulation of seeds is a matter of national policies. For example, Kenya ratified the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) convention to this end in 1999. Nevertheless, local authorities, such as county governments, do

have the possibility to influence national policies. “Then the national government would have to come around at some point,” she says.

From where does she take the energy and the time to do all this, next to caring for her children and running her own farm? Kipkenda smiles. “I was inspired by my mother who already started to work with indigenous seeds,” she recalls. “And I have a supportive husband and family, which helps a lot. Most of all though, I see the changes our work achieves for indigenous women. That is very satisfying and gives me the energy to go on.”

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