



Indigenous visions of development and collective wellbeing in Arunachal Pradesh

*Roing, Lower Dibang Valley, Arunachal Pradesh
15-17 December 2023*

The workshop/meeting was held on 15-17 December 2023. It focused on the Indigenous People of Arunachal Pradesh, a state in northeast India. Lying at the juncture of Tibet, India, Burma, the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh are ancestral home to 40+ distinct indigenous communities, each with unique yet deep existential interrelations with land and the natural world.

Arunachal Pradesh is currently undergoing rapid infrastructural development, military deployment, connections with capitalist economy, mainstream education, exclusionary conservation practices, monoculture plantations, and religious conversions. While there is both anxiety about and aspiration for change, there have been few, if any, avenues for Arunachal's diverse Indigenous People to collectively discuss.

The circle was titled 'Indigenous visions of development and collective wellbeing in Arunachal Pradesh'. It was a unique meeting where young Indigenous People from different ethnic groups of the state gathered to share their perspectives on a multitude of issues, such as governance systems, notions of development, role of non-humans in their present and future, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and understandings of land and forests rights.

The overarching idea was to have a deep discussion about how the ongoing 'development' articulates with Arunachal's Indigenous People's traditional worldviews, what is the collective vision of wellbeing and sustainability, and how they see their lives and lands fitting in with the ongoing climate and biodiversity extinction crisis.

Learning goals of the circle

1. To create a space for bringing together diverse Indigenous communities of Arunachal and facilitate sharing of perspectives, lived realities, and diverse forms of cultural expressions that enable knowledge generation and sharing.
2. To develop a shared understanding of threats and challenges on ground and articulation of various ways to deal with it as a collective.

Conceptualisation, preparation and agenda setting

It was conceptualised via a discussion between some members of Kalpavriksh and some native youths of Arunachal Pradesh. It was followed by formation of an organising committee and rounds of discussions among the committee to turn the idea into an event. The committee was composed of representatives of Kalpavriksh and indigenous youths of Arunachal Pradesh from different ethnic groups, and from different professional backgrounds. During preparation of a list for inviting the participants for the event, the first priority was to include representatives of various ethnic groups across the state, and secondly, from different professional backgrounds and age groups.



The following six sub-themes were selected based on majority votes among multiple other topics: 1. Governance in Arunachal; 2. What does 'Development' mean for Arunachal; 3. Land, forest and rights; 4. What is the role of non humans (animals and spirits) in future Arunachal?; 5. The future of agriculture - relating to land through farming, agriculture as identity, food security; 6. Collective sharing and thinking towards the future - intergenerational knowledge exchange.

Representation

The participants of the event were from 10 indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh. They came from various regions in the state as such from the Eastern Arunachal Pradesh: Tirap (Nocte, n=1; and Tutsa, n=1;); Changlang (Singpho, n=1); Lower Dibang Valley (Idu Mishmi, n=8); and Central Arunachal Pradesh: East Siang (Adi, n=2); Papum Pare (Nyishi, n=2); Upper Siang (Adi, n=3).

Activities and discussions

Over the course of three days, the emphasis was on creating a safe space as a group and building informal relations and camaraderie which would translate into future collaborations and networks that can aid the work of one another.

Day 1

Session 1: Introductions of participants, their communities and lands

The introductory session featured some ice breaking sessions in addition to the people bringing an object that they identify with from their land and culture.

Session 2: Governance in Arunachal

Questions/prompts to the participants: "Does the present day governance in Arunachal respond to how Arunachali people want to be governed? What are the rifts and/or congruencies between the legal, bureaucratic and top-down governance and traditional values and customary governance?"

- Do the modern day Community Apex Bodies represent the interests of the common person or only the interests of the elites?
- Is it simply identity politics? Or a way for certain individuals to accrue power?
- What should be the scope of governance of the present day Apex bodies?
- What about student politics?

Session 3: What does 'Development' mean for Arunachal?

- What should a developed Arunachal look like?
- Elites and governments think big infrastructure = development? Is this really development?
- Do we need the kind of development that will remove our rights from our land? Or is there another way of developing?
- Human development encompasses social, economic, personal development, but here, it is all about money.
- Is there an upper limit to development? What position should a person be in to call themselves developed?



It was also a platform for learning and sharing of information that was grounded in lived realities along with a discussion on what kind of development is needed to sustain indigenous ways of being.

Day 2

Session 4: Land, forest and rights

- What are the words for land, forest and property in different languages of Arunachal? Are these terms interchangeable? How does that articulate with the new land and forest zonation laws?
- A session on Forest Rights Act 2006 and Unclassed State Forests
- What are the impediments to FRA implementation in Arunachal?
- What is the future of community land in Arunachal?
 - Is protection of ancestral land a viable financial option?
 - What are the opportunities/ challenges in Arunachal?

The session on land, forest and rights was held in Elopa-Etugu Community Eco-cultural Preserve (EECEP). The idea was to have a dialogue on such issues while drawing from an initiative where local communities came together to successfully declare their ancestral lands as community-owned lands and learn about the different ways in which they work towards conservation, livelihoods security, and governance mechanisms.

Session 5: Spirits as agents of governance:

What is the role of non humans (animals and spirits) in future Arunachal?

- When PAs are developed, do spirits go extinct?
- Is modern/outside environmentalism a threat to existing relationships between people and animals?
- Community forests are where people, spirits and animals, all meet
- What happens when land is privatised?

This session provided space for understanding different legislations that are relevant to land and forests in Arunachal.

Day 3

Session 6: The future of agriculture - relating to land through farming, agriculture as identity, food security

- What is the state of traditional agriculture in your areas?
- Is traditional agriculture still desirable for Arunachal's future?

Next steps: Collective sharing and thinking towards the future - intergenerational knowledge exchange; what are the possible next steps?

The group collectively decided to use the opportunity to keep each other connected about vital developments that happen in their region along with building solidarities to support communities' by synergising at various levels.



Outcomes

The circle filled a crucial gap by creating a safe and non-judgemental avenue for shared dialogue, deep reflections and critical thinking about the collective future of Arunachal's Indigenous Communities, while providing the opportunity to build solidarities between the region's different Indigenous Peoples' that rarely find a common platform. The need for such workshops have been time and again identified in various discussions between the IPLCs, researchers, and other support organisations which are part of the ICCA Consortium ([ICCAs](#)), in the context of defending and sustaining ancestral Indigenous territories. These Indigenous territories continue to support rich bio-cultural diversity, hence, aptly being called - territories of life, but which are also increasingly under threat from the dominant development paradigm.