



Tropentag, September 17-19, 2014, Prague, Czech Republic

“Bridging the gap between increasing knowledge and decreasing resources”

Living on the Margins: Indigenous Peoples’ Food Systems, Biodiversity and Food Security

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Abstract

For millennia, communities of Indigenous Peoples have been the custodians of the vast majority of the planet’s food and genetic resources and stewards of the diverse ecosystems and cultures which have shaped these resources. Indigenous Peoples’ food systems are remarkably diverse and represent important repositories of knowledge from long-evolved cultures and patterns of living. Local ecosystems have provided healthy and resilient diets which have had minimal impact on the environment and ensured food and nutritional security. This has dramatically changed in recent times and food insecurity now presents a serious and growing challenge among indigenous communities. The nutrition transition - the process by which development, globalisation, poverty and subsequent changes in lifestyle have led to excessive calorific intake, poor quality diets and low physical activity - is particularly prevalent among many communities of Indigenous People. These influences have also placed much traditional knowledge under threat. As a consequence, alarming dietary shifts from traditional foods and healthy diets towards consumption of poor quality processed foods and diets have taken place, manifesting in the dramatic emergence of obesity and associated non-communicable diseases (NCD) among indigenous compared to non-indigenous groups. Regardless of geographic location, Indigenous Peoples suffer higher rates of health disparities and lower life expectancy compared with non-indigenous Peoples. The irony is that Indigenous Peoples’ food systems often contain foods that are nutritionally rich and provide ample levels of both macro- and micronutrients. While no single response can solve the problem of food insecurity, strengthening and leveraging Indigenous Peoples’ food systems is one important strategy in a multidisciplinary approach to improve diets and reverse negative food-related health outcomes. Not only do these food-based approaches potentially improve nutrition and health in a sustainable manner, they also revive biocultural knowledge and heritage, strengthen food sovereignty and food system sustainability and contribute to the conservation of biological diversity. There is potential to learn a great deal from Indigenous Peoples, and for indigenous leaders to steer the future course of food sovereignty and food system sustainability. In this context, the paper will present case studies of Indigenous Peoples’ food systems from across the world.

Keywords: Agrobiodiversity, food security, indigenous peoples