



Keynote Speech

Community-led responses – From local to global

Dr. Lindiwe Sibanda, FANRPAN

Perspective from community representatives:

Mohammed Alyi Ahmed and Abdela Alyi Mohammed

Session summary

The keynote address was delivered by Lindiwe Sibanda of FANRPAN. This was followed by a response from Mualalem Birhane Lieh and Wubalem Mengist Sewagne, husband and wife community representatives, who were originally farmers and have now become environmental activists within their region.

The Q&A and discussion session focused on the following:

How do you ensure that the campaigns of farmers reach policy makers and feed into the policymaking process? The government is listening to us, forests are conserved through individual and community efforts.

Gender sensitivity issues in the farmer's campaign i.e. youth interested in cooking only if the kitchen is clean, when women are continuously working in it. How can this be right?

Why is agriculture ignored in international negotiations? No agriculture, no deal. Negotiations are usually among environmentalists. Agriculture is at the heart of African economy. We don't just push for trees and conserving the environment – we need to focus on climate-smart agriculture.

Networking is needed. It is about partnerships that are built on trust. If this trust is broken, it becomes a talking shop. This can only happen if there is continuity. Networks need to be homegrown and institutionalized. We need to invest in a Secretariat of networks to give quality products which are derived from quality people. There is no investment in them because governments see them as a threat. Instead it is donor's short-term investments which drive the agenda.

The career system in academia is designed to promote or encourage quality research i.e. peer reviewed journal. Who is to be blamed? How do we change? We are afraid to change rules, and we need champions. Research/Academic Institutions should adapt local communities i.e. developing constituencies within neighboring communities where issues on sociology and economics are used within the curricula.

Is the complex policy environment documented or put into papers? How do we move forward with the 'truth-telling'. First we need to answer: Who is making policy, and who advises them? Recognizing the sources of information for real evidence-based policy making.

Lindiwe Sibanda – Keynote Address

Social and economic aspirations of rural communities and the national developmental agenda remain detached as a result of top-down approaches. Community-led responses are a fundamental prerequisite for linking research, policy and practice. There is a frequent, but often unacknowledged disparity between research and policy agendas versus actual community needs. My organisation, FANRPAN, has used theatre for policy advocacy as an innovative tool for communicating community-led responses and connecting on complex global challenges such as climate change and food security.

Enhanced capacity, involved communities and innovative communication

To set the scene, we can identify three major challenges: the establishment and capacity enhancement of inter-sectoral research teams; the need to involve communities in vulnerability assessments; and the use of innovative tools to enhance communication and move the development agenda from local to global levels.

Community engagement in research and the use of culturally appropriate communication tools in policy dialogues are critical ingredients for community development. The lesson learned is that community-led responses should be based on respect for local cultures, as this creates a conducive environment for the operation of science and policy development. At national, regional and global levels language is rarely a barrier; hence multi-stakeholder dialogues have proven effective in policy advocacy.

There is a need for an Africa-led climate resilient development agenda that demystifies climate change, promotes inter-sectoral and community participatory research and maps the household assets to better develop evidence-based policies aligned to community needs. The take home message is that Africa needs validated evidence to help 'push' for a post-Kyoto policy framework that recognises the multiple benefits of agriculture and its potential contribution to climate mitigation. The clarion message for the upcoming UNFCCC COP 17 conference, to be hosted on the African soil, should be: "No Agriculture, No Deal".

Mualalem Birhane Lih and Wubalem Mengist Sewagne – Perspective of community representatives

Mualalem and Wubalem lived in Ethiopia during the devastating droughts of the 1980s. Witnessing famine and death around them, The husband and wife pledged to dedicate their lives to environmental protection and social justice. Seeing climate change as a major reason they and other Ethiopians were suffering, they campaign in local communities and lobby their government and the UN.

To tackle the huge problem of deforestation in their country, Mualalem started a tree-planting project. Their hard work has led to the land transforming from eroded dust to a forest that provides berries, flowers and a natural spring that locals can drink from. Mualalem and Wubalem have also planted Vetiver grass. This wonder grass can offer communities multiple benefits: it captures water, it traps CO₂, it's good for the soil, it can be used for handicrafts, and the roots are edible.

The couple work with other development agents to share knowledge and learn about new technologies that are then combined with their own understanding of local solutions. Mualalem points out that he's proud to play a part in teaching the younger generations to deal with these issues, and coordinates with schools in the region to celebrate events like World Environment Day.

Wubalem is a social entrepreneur who engages with local communities to move from open traditional stoves to fuel-saving stoves. Cooking is now cleaner and less smoky: as a result boys (who previously refused to enter the smog-filled kitchens) are now being taught to make Injera as well as girls.

Both Wubalem and Mualalem campaign at international events, including COP15 in Copenhagen, to raise awareness of the environmental issues that they face. They have also worked with Nobel peace winners Al Gore and Wangari Mathaii, and are part of a campaign against pollution that has been supported by a petition signed by 5 million people.