

Ecological democracy

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Ladies and Gentleman

Welcome to this seminar --- on behalf of Siemenpuu Foundation

Today environmental challenges are more demanding than they have ever been before: increasing forest destruction, land degradation, polluted and diminished groundwaters, destructed swamp and peat areas, and overall climate change have caused the World to become much more insecure place. There is an increasing fear for more conflicts over access to natural resources and water. Similarly we may expect population movements because of the changing environments and related wars.

Today these problems are tackled with scientific research and different cooperation development programs that aim to protect nature and enhance local democracies. However, environmental and development policies of both the donor countries and receiver countries bring challenges that I wish to relate here with "ecological democracy". Principal questions or concerns are: who decide on how and where to protect nature? Who decide what forest is and who grows it? Who decide if local livelihoods may be derived from natural resources? Who define and determinate property rights, rights to water and rights to land. Are they local, national or transnational actors?

Environmental destruction, global warming and climate change are at least partly human caused catastrophes where we have ended up because of the excessive stress on economic development and markets that were supposed to bring us well-being. While it has brought well-being to some, it has caused insecurity and misery to many globally. Because of the current macro-political global structure the "voice" of the local people in determining and controlling their closest environment has diminished, or we could say, almost disappeared.

Our concern is to bring this voice back and to give space for local democratic institutions in protecting nature, maintaining their livelihood methods, and having free access to f.i. water resources.

"Ecological democracy" equates here with "environmental justice." It involves the rights of people to have democratic control of their local environment without the unnecessary influence of outside economic or political forces.

Environmental justice also means that local "plural property rights" are recognized in the development cooperation or f.i. in establishing carbon storage forests in the South; creating of new environments (forests or else) might mean the simplification of property rights into private property which increases poverty of the most vulnerable groups in those countries, and indirectly, conflicts over access to land or water. The assumptions of ecological democracy do not support this kind of environmental protection or tools for reduction of carbon from the hemisphere.

Many scholars have noted that environmental protection is possible only when the poorest and those living close to the nature have real access to decision-making over the use and protection of nature. Conversely, when the decisions are made without real participation, it might cause unintended destruction and carelessness from behalf of the local population. I want to stress here that ecological democracy, as I understand it, do not only involve livelihood methods, but other cultural practices (rituals and so forth), which make the nature meaningful for the local people.

Thus, we need local people to tell what species are important, how water resources could be protected and distributed, to save the world.

This seminar serves to launch the new Mekong programs of Siemenpuu Foundation and Service Centre for Development Cooperation Kepa, and also presenting the results of newly concluded Mekong programs of Finland Futures Research Centre and The Helsinki University of Technology and Finnish Environment Institute project WUP-FIN. The people and nature of the Mekong region are listening to us, let them know that we work for them.