

Making INDIGENOUS RIGHTS *A Reality*

Indonesia's Indigenous women are leading their communities in the struggle for land rights and equal representation. AVI volunteer Sue-Ellen O'Farrell explains why.



» **W**hen Ibu Den Upa was elected head of her village in South Sulawesi in 1992, she insisted that Indigenous women be involved in village decision-making processes.

After her persistent lobbying, the council elders agreed the women could attend council sessions as observers only. In the following months, the women formed groups and used their domestic experience to start commercial enterprises like catering. Economic independence increased both their self-confidence and involvement in decision making. Eventually, Ibu Den Upa used her position as village head to restore a traditional decision-making process called *kombongan*, which involves all community groups, including the women's groups.

Ibu Den Upa's struggle was one of many stories shared at a training session on Indigenous women's rights, held last year in Central Sulawesi. The training was organised by the Asian Indigenous Women's Network and *Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara* (AMAN), an organisation that fights for the rights of Indonesia's Indigenous people.

Twenty-one women from across the archipelago attended the training and shared their ideas on national and local matters, issues of gender and stereotypes and relevant international conventions. Their stories were told with passion and honesty, highlighting the tenacity and strength with

which Indigenous women deal with the issues that affect their lives.

In Indonesia, the rights of Indigenous peoples have considerably improved since the end of the Soeharto regime. Indigenous peoples now have legal recognition (albeit conditional) and have taken advantage of a more conducive political climate to influence legislation and policy. Despite this, they contend with issue of land and natural resources, and Indigenous women face an additional level of discrimination.

The participants from Kalimantan spoke about their struggles with palm oil plantations, which are often established on traditional lands. Indigenous peoples have relied on these lands to grow rubber trees, rattan, honey or rice. The loss of their livelihoods has resulted in a number of related social impacts, including prostitution, gambling and drug use. Furthermore, herbicides and other chemicals sprayed in palm oil plantations run off into local water supplies, causing environmental health problems for many people.

Another participant spoke about her role in resolving conflict in South Sulawesi, which began when a new district was established in her region. She created conflict resolution teams to research the root causes of the conflict and, eventually, establish dialogue between the conflicting groups. Indigenous women played a special role in resolving this

conflict because they remained unbiased and proved that they could be trusted with sensitive information.

The six-day training session concluded with a traditional closing ceremony attended by the participants, organisers and villagers. It has been heartening to hear that many of the participants have since applied their newfound understanding of Indigenous rights to a range of village activities and government meetings. AMAN plans to multiply these positive results by repeating the training in several other villages around the archipelago. <

AVI volunteer Sue-Ellen O'Farrell is working with AMAN on community education and awareness programs. She helped organise the Central Sulawesi Indigenous women's rights training session in 2006.

The Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women, issued in 1995 at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, calls for Indigenous women to unite against the damage caused by colonisation and the destruction of their cultures and environment.



Opposite left > Ibu Den Upa and AVI volunteer Sue-Ellen O'Farrell wear traditional Ngata Toro costume to celebrate the closing ceremony.
Above > Bapak Alex from Papua and Ibu Ari from West Kalimantan with Sue-Ellen on board a small boat to attend a meeting at Sabang, Weh Island.
Photos > Courtesy Sue-Ellen O'Farrell

Our Plan for Reconciliation



Left > AVI volunteer Elaine Glen worked with AUSTCARE on a peace-building project in Timor-Leste. AVI encourages more Indigenous Australians to share their skills through the Volunteer Program.

Photo > Debra Plueckhahn

» **A**VI is committed to Reconciliation Australia's vision of "an Australia that provides equal life chances for all, recognising and respecting the special place, culture and contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians".

Our experience shows that there are parallels between the issues faced by Indigenous communities in Australia and in many other countries in which we work. There is therefore a unique opportunity to share expertise and apply international best practice to developing the capacity of Australia's Indigenous communities.

Our Reconciliation Action Plan includes ways to enable Indigenous community members

to travel overseas and learn leadership, governance and sustainable development strategies which they can bring back to enrich their own communities. Some of these include:

- > encouraging more Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people to share their skills through the Volunteer Program
- > placing skilled volunteers with Indigenous communities in Indonesia, Cambodia and other countries
- > assisting Australian Indigenous councils and corporations to recruit qualified

and experienced staff through the Remote Recruiting service

- > offering cultural effectiveness training programs for people working in Indigenous communities
- > investigating study tours and other options for developing Indigenous leadership and sharing culture. <

To find out more about Remote Recruiting, visit www.australianvolunteers.com/partners.