

EVENT REPORT by Dr Holly Eva Ryan
**Joji Cariño: “The Global Indigenous Movement:
Past Achievements, Future Challenges”**



“Even today, I still consider myself an activist” – Joji Cariño

On 26th March 2015, The Social Movements and Civil Society Research Group at City University London (SMCSRG) held its third evening event, a talk on *The Global Indigenous Movement: Past Achievements Future Challenges*. SMCSRG was delighted to host long-time indigenous peoples’ rights activist and current Director of the Forest Peoples Programme, Joji Cariño, to speak on these themes. The event was Chaired by Dr Mauro Barelli, a Senior Lecturer specialising in minority and indigenous peoples’ rights at The City Law School.

Following an introduction by Dr Barelli, Joji Cariño took the stage to reflect on her experiences in the indigenous peoples’ rights movement. She offered a wide ranging and dynamic talk, covering her journey from national to transnational activism, the politics of the [Universal Declaration on Indigenous Peoples’ Rights \(UNDRIP\)](#) drafting process, as well as some of the on-going obstacles to the realisation of indigenous peoples’ rights globally.

Joji began with an insightful and moving personal narrative. She detailed how she became an activist in the 1970’s, prompted by the threat to communities, lifestyles and territories posed by dam projects in the Cordillera region of her native Philippines. She described how various indigenous communities came together at this time to successfully oppose a series of four large dams planned along the Chico River - projects supported by the World Bank and Marcos regime.

Joji highlighted how the momentum created by these unlikely national victories in the Philippines prompted her community to join with groups from across the globe engaged in similar struggles; calling out ‘development’ projects that failed to fully register their detrimental impact on indigenous communities. She explained how, “engaging with these groups transnationally allowed [her] to better understand the nature of the struggle” within a rights-based framework. This understanding informed her activities at the international level as she part of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) and the negotiating process that culminated in the acceptance of UNDRIP in 2007.

UNDRIP can be thought of as a historic and wide-reaching document, containing provisions relating to self-determination, land ownership, cultural identity, practices and institutions, as well as protection from violence and discrimination. In her talk, Joji emphasized the extent to which UNDRIP draws on existing Human Rights instruments, a strategic move that almost certainly assisted with the Declaration’s widespread endorsement by nation states. She also underlined just how much legal and political learning was necessary for the indigenous leaders involved in the negotiation and drafting processes:

“The drafting process became a deep educational experience for Indigenous Peoples. This learning has been particularly empowering to indigenous peoples when they have subsequently entered other political arenas, for example working on environmental issues”.

UNDRIP has been a huge achievement for the global indigenous peoples movement but not the only one, as Joji highlighted. The movement has also successfully lobbied for more equitable outcomes in World Bank projects, and thanks to tireless advocacy, [‘Free, Prior and Informed Consent’](#) now features as an aspect of ever more private sector agreements. Joji also underlined that one key outcome of the UNDRIP process has been the generation of an informed and connected group of indigenous leaders that have local and international legitimacy. Indigenous leaders have often found that their successes abroad have helped to bolster levels of community support at home. Meanwhile, internationally, there is a growing demand for indigenous peoples’ participation as discussants and observers within UN fora and negotiating processes.

The final segment of Joji’s talk angled in on the prevailing challenges faced by the movement as a whole, including: land grabs; displacements; and the slow transformation of international standards into local law. She also highlighted an on-going problem for indigenous groups the world over - the side-lining of indigenous knowledge and practice, which occurred as a part of the colonial encounter. Notably, communicating the value of indigenous and traditional knowledge for sustainable futures has been one of Joji’s objectives as a member of the [UN Secretary-General’s very first Scientific Advisory Board](#). Her appointment to this position is in itself telling of the significant progress that indigenous peoples have made in destabilizing hierarchies of knowledge.

Overall, Joji suggested that perhaps the domestic arena is now the most important one for moving the rights of indigenous peoples forward. In practical terms, this means helping groups to develop the tools and resources to navigate national legal and political systems, developing the existing body of evidence of the abuses of indigenous peoples’ rights, and advocating for better implementation of existing legal provisions.

For theorists and historians of social movements and de-colonial struggle, Joji’s reflections are significant, highlighting the strategic and practical aspects of indigenous activism at the global level, the learning that goes on within movements; and, the array of factors which can ignite or impede solidarity and progress towards a policy goal.

Joji’s talk was followed by an interesting question and answer session that included questions relating to legal, sociological and cultural aspects of indigenous peoples’ rights activism. One member of the audience asked for Joji’s reflections on the [First World Conference on Indigenous Peoples](#), held in September 2014. Another enquired about UNDRIP’s use of “self-determination”, a right traditionally controversial due to its secessionist connotations.

The event, which took place in the University Building, Northampton Square, attracted approximately forty-five participants from across academe, civil society and the legal sector. Discussion and debate continued on into the wine reception, generously sponsored by the City Law School. On Twitter, event organisers, the Forest Peoples Programme and a diversity of event attendees engaged actively using #CitySocMovts.



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