

The impact of climate change

300 IWGIA – The Indigenous World – 2022

The effects of climate change had a major impact on Taiwan's Indigenous communities in 2020-2021. The dry spell persisted from the latter part of 2020, continuing a lack of rainfall into 2021. The spring rainy season did not bring much precipitation and this resulted in depleted water supply for most of the country apart from the east coast region.

By the start of the planting season for farmers in the spring, most water reservoirs and dams had either dried up or their storage capacity was down to less than 10%. According to the weather bureau of Taiwan, it was Taiwan's worst drought in over 70 years¹ and had a serious effect on Indigenous farmers in both lowland and mountainous regions during the spring and summer planting seasons. Water supply and irrigation for Indigenous communities was greatly reduced during the first half of the year, and many farmers resorted to diverting water from rivers whose flow was already diminished.²

The drought caused the soil to dry up leading to heat stress for plants, hampering the normal growth of crops and resulting in much reduced farming productivity. Indigenous communities had to put in more labour, spend more on bringing in water supplies and increase their use of fertilizers.³

These resulted in more economic hardship for Indigenous farmers, degradation of the traditional food production system and reduced agricultural output, with some farmers leaving their fields fallow under the government's subsidy programme.

Fortunately, the seasonal rainfall pattern had returned by the start of May with substantial rainfall in the following months filling up the reservoirs and dams, and restoring water flow to rivers and streams.⁴ The summer typhoons in the Western Pacific also brought more heavy rainfall to replenish the water storage systems and, with a resumption of normal water supply in early August, the government authorities declared the "2021 Drought" over.⁵

COVID-19 outbreak in summer

Throughout most of the past two years, Taiwan has been successful in keeping COVID-19 at bay. However, the country experienced a spike of local infection in the summer of 2021.

Local cluster infections surged to hundreds in May, with the highest level at over 500 testing positive per day in the later part of the month. Health authorities imposed stricter measures, including the wearing of masks outdoors, banning indoor dining, and shutting down entertainment premises.⁶

During a period that lasted for about two months, many businesses were temporarily closed and people were encouraged to work from home, while all religious services were cancelled. The imposed measures were effective as the figures in Taiwan began to gradually decline, to under 100 positive cases per day in late June. The government loosened some restrictions in July, when the daily number of recorded cases had fallen to less than 30.⁷

In December, after a long stretch with no reports of domestic infection, the health authorities announced that Taiwan had achieved "zero COVID-19 status" as all new cases were imported.⁸

As in most other countries, Taiwan's Indigenous people were hit hard by the pandemic. Almost all Indigenous festivals, local gatherings and tourist promotions were suspended during the summer months. This resulted in reduced income, and a shutting down of restaurants and shopping markets in many Indigenous communities.

The changing situation can be illustrated by the east coast region of Hualien County, where Fata'an, Tabalong, Fakong and other Indigenous Amis communities are famous for their summer harvest festivals, attracting many domestic and international tourists in past years.

In June, Amis tribal councils and chiefs held emergency meetings because of the COVID-19 outbreak, resulting in the suspension of the harvest festivals scheduled for dates in July and August. Some communities decided to put them off until next year, and others to postpone them to later in the year.⁹ One of the largest annual events, the Joint Indigenous Harvest Festival, usually held in August, was deferred and finally held at a sports venue in Hualien City from 19 to 21 November 2021.

Fortunately, Taiwan's success in containing the infection later in the year helped domestic tourism to flourish once again, with economic benefits returning to Indigenous communities.¹⁰

Taiwan denies Pingpu Indigenous rights

Taiwan's lowland Indigenous Peoples, known as Pingpu peoples, held a protest rally in front of the Constitutional Court in November. Led by the Indigenous Siraya people of southern Taiwan, they were demanding that the Taiwanese government and the justice system restore their original Indigenous status¹² and protect their Indigenous rights.¹³

The large crowd of Siraya people came from over 12 Siraya communities of southern Taiwan, and held banners stating: "Recognize our Indigenous status", "Comply with UN covenants, Restore our Indigenous Rights." They demanded that court judges restore justice and recognize them as Indigenous Peoples.

Tainan Siraya Culture Association chairwoman Uma Talavan (吳玉蘭) and other Siraya community leaders were joined by the deputy mayor of Tainan City and other local government officials who were supporting the Pingpu peoples

activist movement in their demand to get their official status as Indigenous Peoples restored and for protection of their rights as Indigenous Peoples, similar to those of the other 16 IP groups currently recognized by Taiwan's government.¹⁴

In the past, Talavan has participated in Taiwan's Indigenous Historical Justice and Transitional Justice Committee¹⁵ where she has talked of the many barriers erected by the CIP and other government agencies that have violated the UN covenants and Indigenous Peoples' rights by removing IP status from the Pingpu peoples. Officials still look down on the Pingpu peoples with the colonial era's discriminatory attitudes. (For more information on Pingpu and Kavalan groups' struggle for recognition, see *The Indigenous World 2020*).

Court ruling on hunting and rearm use

In May, the Constitutional Court ruled to lift some hunting restrictions for Indigenous communities but did not overhaul the current legal framework, leaving many of the existing restraints in place.

In the hearing, various stakeholders made their presentations on the case, in which Taiwan's law-enforcement authority, the National Police Agency (NPA), had argued to keep the existing restrictions on re-arms and hunting of wildlife.

NPA officials opposed any lifting of restrictions for the general public or for Indigenous communities, apparently due to consideration for public safety, and law and order measures. They cited the dangers that using rearms for hunting could pose to fellow Indigenous community members, as well as to people engaged in hiking and recreational activities in forest and mountain settings.¹⁶

Indigenous Peoples who are advocating for their right to hunt wildlife and want to loosen most restrictions said they were disappointed with the court decision. However, their defence team did acknowledge one positive outcome – the fact that it was the first time a Taiwanese court had recognized that Indigenous hunting was “a cultural right that should be respected and protected by the state.”¹⁷

This development is directly linked to the Supreme Court's 2015 ruling on hunting of protected wildlife by Indigenous Bunun man Tama Talum, who was handed a 3.5-year prison term for killing barking deer and the Formosan serow.¹⁸ The case had since then been challenged and had led to debates over the Indigenous right to hunt wild animals. Talum and Indigenous activists have been striving to uphold their Indigenous rights by filing for a constitutional interpretation to review the hunting regulations, resulting in the ruling in May.

In May, Tama Talum received a presidential pardon, thereby voiding the earlier guilty conviction and lifting the rest of his sentence. The presidential pardon carried significant weight and sent a strong message to society that the Taiwan government has made progress in promoting historical and transitional justice for Indigenous Peoples, according to Presidential Office spokeswoman Kolas Yokata, an Amis journalist who had previously served as an Indigenous legislator.¹⁹

“The Constitution clearly supports the values of a multiethnic and multicultural society, guaranteeing Indigenous Peoples the right to express their culture in the form of hunting,” she said.

Austronesian Forum

In December, Indigenous delegates from ten countries, including former Palau President Tommy E. Remengesau, gathered for the “Austronesian Forum”, held in Taipei City. Two other member nations joined the sessions through videoconferencing links. For the first time, officials of the AIT (American Institute in Taiwan, the official US diplomatic presence in Taiwan), participated in the Forum to demonstrate US support, with talks of becoming an observer member in the future.

Launched by the then Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government in 2002, the Austronesian Forum is an important platform for international cooperation between Taiwan's Indigenous Peoples and the CIP and other Austronesian peoples.

The event was hosted by the CIP, with its main themes on reconciling traditional Austronesian systems of leadership with contemporary politics, and on how to promote international peace while facilitating exchanges and cooperation between Austronesian peoples in the Indo-Pacific region.²⁰

CIP Minister Icyang Parod acted as the host for the Forum, and also for the Executive Council Meeting, under which Canada, Australia and Papua New Guinea had representatives taking part for the first time.

Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen welcomed the delegates with her opening address, affirming that Taiwan will work with fellow Austronesians and other countries in the Indo-Pacific region to utilize the Austronesian Forum as a platform to facilitate meaningful exchanges and cooperation, and to maintain the dynamism of Austronesian communities in order to spur on sustainable development across the region.²¹

The next Austronesian Forum is scheduled to be held in the Marshall Islands, while the “Austronesian young talent cultivation programme” will take place in Palau in March 2022.

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