MARIA LATUMAHINA AND MEGAN MACINNES

Bringing Life to Land

a conversation about land rights movements in Southeast Asia and Scotland

Maria Latumahina has been working for more than 20 years supporting community organising and advocacy for recognition of Indigenous peoples' birth rights, including land rights in West Papua, the most eastern region in Indonesia. She now lives in Glasgow. Megan MacInnes has worked for 25 years on land reform, community land rights and natural resource governance in Scotland, internationally, and in Southeast Asia. She now lives in Applecross in the Northwest Highlands of Scotland. Maria and Megan met at the annual conference of Community Land Scotland, at the Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on the Isle of Skye, where they began and have since continued a conversation and exploration of land rights movements in Scotland and Southeast Asia.

MEGAN MACINNES: Maria, how did your journey in land rights begin?

MARIA LATUMAHINA: I was born in a small town in West Papua and grew up on a nearby small island; my parents moved there when I was six months old as my father got a job as a mechanic for a mining company. We lived in the village and that's I think how my connections with land, with people, with nature, with indigenous practices began. So it's not something I was introduced to, it's something I was born into, being with Indigenous people, being with an indigenous territory, being in connection with all of those, it's just something given. As a teenager I moved to a town and then to a city where I went to university and that's where my activism started, around land rights and Indigenous people.

I came to Scotland through Alastair McIntosh, a Scottish land rights campaigner and a Fellow of the Centre for Human Ecology (he writes on p57 of this issue of *Dark Mountain*). I met him at Schumacher College on a course on land rights movements that he was leading, and we connected

because he had previously spent time in West Papua. I applied for an independent study programme at the Centre for Human Ecology which broadened my perspective and deepened my understanding of land rights through the lens of human relations with the land and with one another. After that, I and my colleagues at Seventy-Three Foundation, a UK-based social enterprise working with marginalised communities to reconnect with our cultures, worked with Alastair to facilitate a series of exchange programmes between West Papua and Community Trusts in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Over the past ten years, representatives from provincial government and community groups came from West Papua to Scotland and engaged in dialogue and learning with the leading community trusts in various places including Lewis and Harris. They learned about how land rights give life to people who are emotionally and physically connected to land and are dependent on it.

MM My journey also starts on a small island – I was born and grew up in the Isle of Skye. My Dad is from Skye, there are four generations of my family in the churchyard near where we met at the Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, but my Mum came from England, so maybe we both share that insider–outsider perspective. Both of my parents lived in Africa when they were younger, which meant they raised my brothers and I to feel connected to and part of the wider world. They brought us up to care about the situation in other countries and to feel we had the power to change things, and I suppose that's where my activism started. As a teenager I left the island as quickly as I could, moving first to Edinburgh, then India and then going to university in London where I made a good friend who introduced me to Southeast Asia. I first travelled to Cambodia and Laos in 1997 and then spent much of the next 12 years based there. I worked for many years in Cambodia with indigenous communities to map and secure their land rights, supporting community forestry projects and urban housing rights projects. After that I moved back to the UK to work with Global Witness. I was still supporting the advocacy of community groups in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar but through international human rights mechanisms, UN frameworks and regulations governing investors and company behaviour. I eventually moved back home to the Highlands and now live in Applecross, which is a large peninsula on the mainland, but looks across to Skye. I work with the local community development trust, the Applecross Community Company, and have just finished a seven year post as Commissioner with the Scottish Land Commission. Those two jobs, which both relate to land reform but from different perspectives, have been a really interesting mix of absolute

grass-roots development activities in my own community, while also working on how Scotland's broader land reform regulations and policies could evolve to better support community and national ambitions.

ML To what extent does the work you do in Applecross involve land rights?

MM It is fundamental. Meeting the development needs and aspirations of the local community is very difficult without access to land and buildings to do it from, and there are related examples across Scotland. In some of the most deprived parts of Glasgow, communities have no access to green space. But at the same time there are huge numbers of vacant and derelict sites across the city which are not just unused, but attract anti-social behaviour. Land rights movements in these urban areas have empowered community groups to acquire or take on the management of even the smallest sites for food production, for community gardens and social space. Here in Applecross the problem is the lack of land for affordable housing and the fact that our communities are so fragile because there are not enough houses for rent. People are being forced to live in horrendous conditions or move away. There are plenty of houses on the peninsula, but nearly half are second homes or short-term lets, and the cost-of-living crisis has made this so much worse. But then if I reflect back on my work in Cambodia, I am not sure how comparable the community land movement here is with the desperate struggle for indigenous land rights in Southeast Asia…

ML I agree that the form of poverty is different, but I can see there are similarities, as both movements see land rights as a way of meeting basic needs. The reoccupations of land by Papuan groups frustrated at the Indonesian Government not recognising their land rights, for example, are driven by people's need to grow food, have homes and generate incomes, as well as to liberate themselves from colonial oppressors.

MM This connection between land movements and historical injustice is something I wanted to ask you about. Traditionally in Scotland the community land rights movement has been strongest in the Highlands and Islands where a significant driver was the need to redress the injustice of the Highland Clearances. But more recently, the land rights movement in these areas and across other parts of the country are now often focusing on current and future community need for land, without there (necessarily) being the ancestral connection to a specific site. Are the groups you work with in West Papua fighting for ancestral lands?

ML It's a very different context due to the colonisation for so long of West Papua by other ethnic groups within Indonesia and beyond. And that feeling of being colonised still exists and is underpinning everything even

today in West Papua. The land rights struggles are mainly to protect what is left of Indigenous peoples' ancestral lands, reoccupying land that was taken by extractive industries and plantations. But during some of the periods of colonisation, for example the Dutch missionaries and the Indonesian government's recent resettlement programme, Indigenous peoples were relocated from the forest to the coastal areas. So for these communities, the land rights movement is about securing rights to these new areas, separated from their ancestral land. And when people are disconnected from the land like this, they are also disconnected from its value.

MM When you say value, I am guessing you don't mean market value?

ML No. The financial benefit for a community from securing rights to land is important, but this has to be balanced with social and spiritual values. If we focus only on the market value of land, or think about the fight for land rights only from the perspective of narrow rights to land, we miss out on the wider and spiritual meanings and connections. If this happens, the movement is stagnant. Most importantly of all, working on land rights issues is about building connections with others and about leadership and organisational development. And that is why I believe that community organising is a very important pillar within the wider land rights movement. Together we work to try and find the answer to what exactly gives life to people and to community, and how land and rights to land can give life. When I say spiritual, I don't mean in an organised religious way, but I mean being able to tap back into everything I learned growing up from stories my Mom told me and from the Indigenous community I grew up part of. Realising those connections helped me internalise the meaning of what working with and for the land actually means. It's just like working with and for the people, the two are not separate. Winning the fight for a land title certificate is not the end, it's just the beginning for communities in terms of rebuilding a connection with the land!

MM It is really interesting the importance you place on community organising in West Papua. This echoes my experience of Scotland's land rights movement. The Applecross Community Company is a community-led membership organisation, so everything we do is based on consultation and suggestions. It is a challenge finding the right balance between involving everyone and asking too much of a small pool of volunteers – with only 250 people across a 26,000 hectare peninsula, there is a lot expected from a small number of people. But across the community ownership movement in Scotland I think we sometimes suffer from a similar reductionism. It's easy to become focused on the completion of a community buy-out and

not spend enough time on either the organising that needs to be the foundation of the effort, or on what will happen afterwards to the land or asset which the community is acquiring.

ML One of the most inspiring things for us as West Papuans visiting Scotland was that the Government has regulated a system for recognising and giving community rights to land and a route to community land ownership. That is just so different to the situation for the West Papuan communities I work with, where all land belongs to the State. As I speak, the government has come up with several forms of tenure rights, yet changing its attitude toward ownership rights feels like it will need hundreds of years of struggle.

MM I agree that is one of the ways in which the Scottish government and the community land movement has been hugely progressive when compared to others. Not only does Scotland regulate to enable communities to own land, but it measures progress against that goal. No doubt communities here still face significant challenges, but to have a government that is sympathetic, and a legal framework that is enabling, is just so different from the situation facing community groups I worked with in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar where you are advocating for land rights which are not even recognised in law or by the Government. I wanted to ask, were the West Papuan government officials able to try and make changes after their trips to Scotland?

ML They did try. They cannot change community ownership legislation as that is controlled by the central Indonesian government, but they did improve regulations at the local level for community management and use of land, as well as setting much more ambitious targets for protecting intact forest. These measures are considered very radical across Indonesia. It's one thing to introduce regulations, though. The ability to implement or enact it, is another thing entirely.

But one other element of the challenge we are currently facing within the Seventy-Three Foundation, is a recent trend to over-romanticise Indigenous peoples. It's another colonial way of thinking, just from a different perspective. It's connected to the long history of colonialism and oppression in West Papua. It's the other side of the trauma but this time from the perspective of the oppressors, who have flipped from being militaristic to romanticising Indigenous peoples. This is simply creating further dependency in terms of these communities' relationship with funders. They simultaneously believe that Indigenous people can do no wrong, while also victimising and disempowering them. The funder is

imposing their own view of what Indigenous people should be on local communities.

MM I recognise this. Here in Scotland rural communities are also feeling challenged at the moment by a new trend of romanticism. But this isn't the romanticisation of their communities, but the romanticisation of a rewilded landscape. We can see this happening now as new areas are considered for National Park status. This approach is ahistorical because it ignores the archaeological and historical evidence of Scotland's 'wilderness' in fact being a peopled landscape. It also excludes and disempowers local communities from involvement in decisions about how the land and landscapes around them should be managed.

ML The romanticisation of the Indigenous peoples I am working with is resulting in money being poured into communities, so the biggest challenge I am working on is preventing this from creating further dependency – because that's what money does. Without a clear and robust approach to empowerment which focuses on governance, leadership and accountability within the community, money just creates a cycle of corruption.

MM You mentioned the connection here with trauma, and I know this is something you've done a lot of work on. Can you say a bit more?

ML Working on community organising with deprived community groups is about enabling people to become agents of their own lives. Oppression and loss of land leads us to experience apathy, fear, anger, and dependency, individually as well as collectively. My understanding of the type of psychological attitude as such, and being able to name it as psychosocial trauma, was shaped during my work with Alastair at the Centre of Human Ecology; and reading his book *Soil and Soul*. Then I realised that while the oppressed are living in apathy, anger and dependency, the oppressor may be living with feelings of guilt or embodying the archetypal character of a superhero. Romanticisation of Indigenous people is seemingly an expression of guilty feeling embedded in the psyche of white middle class groups, and may be transmitted through a class system that's common in capitalist societies, including in Indonesia.

Seventy-Three Foundation and Training for Transformation Papua, the other organisation I work with, are fully aware of this reality within which we live. We are a bunch of middle-class, well-educated people. So, we are simultaneously working with our own trauma, as much as we are working with other people's trauma.

MM I think you have touched on something really important there. I share your admiration of Alastair's work, but you've given me a new insight into the

role of trauma and guilt as a driver within the work of middle class activists. Criticism of the 'white saviour' approaches of activists from the global north getting involved in the global south has had quite a bit of coverage, but not so the role of class, education, background and trauma for activists working within their own communities. This is certainly something I need to consider more in my own work.

For me this is connected to the lack of attention that class gets within Scotland's community land movement. For a whole range of reasons, this movement has frequently been dominated by middle class folk, and it's not as diverse or as inclusive as it could be. But overcoming these challenges is difficult, especially in the cost-of-living crisis which is pushing so many families and households into really difficult situations. For households really struggling with bills and debt, can we expect land reform and community land movements to be a priority? Not unless we start back at that foundation stone of reconnecting people to land, so we can reidentify with the deep and wide value of land to our lives.

But land reform as a topic in Scotland has been quite niche. There are a small number of people, including me, who get deeply interested and invested in the detail of it. But it is a real bubble. This is why one of the main aims of the Scottish Land Commission has been to try and break out of that bubble and reconnect people to why land reform is important to their lives, at a much more everyday level. This is more challenging where the historical and ancestral ties to the land are weakened. You mentioned that relocation of communities and the loss of land rights was a colonial inheritance and an ongoing problem for the indigenous communities you are working with in West Papua. How do you begin to rebuild those reconnections?

ML One of the biggest challenges in my work right now is building connections with land across diverse communities – indigenous, incomers, native peoples, people like me who are a mix. All of these categories and characteristics of people in West Papua require a redefined connection with the land. This isn't a topic you find discussed within the wider land rights movement, but it has really been coming to the fore within my network and with community partners as we begin to talk about guardianship of the land. Who are the guardians, who gets to be included and who is excluded? Is this a topic which is coming up here in Scotland?

MM These are hard conversations to have, and often not done because people feel it's too challenging, but I think it is one of the most important parts of this. Anyone who works on community organising knows that

communities are rarely completely unified on issues. There are always tensions. In the Highlands there have been long-standing tensions between who is considered to be local and who are the incomers. These lead you to questions about identity and belonging, who belongs and who doesn't. Like you, I am particularly aware of this because my Dad's family is originally from Skye but my Mum's family are not. My personal view is that the future of rural communities like Applecross depends on not just meeting the aspiration and development needs of the local community, but also attracting an inclusive and diverse range of people to come and live here. I hope we're able to value and welcome anyone moving to the area, as long as they are making a positive contribution to the community, and of course, that is so much easier to do with functioning social structures to support it. It all comes back to the importance of community organising again!