

## Develop a Collective Voice

In this episode of VoiceTalks, we speak with Sushila Thapa Mugar from the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact, a global influencing grantee based in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Last July, AIPP successfully organised an official side-event at the United Nations High-Level Political Forum. They were able to release a [collective statement](#) on COVID-19's impact to indigenous women, what role they can play in mitigating these impacts, and how stakeholders can further sustainable development.

The HLPF typically happens in New York at the UN headquarters but as you might have guessed, everything was done online. You can watch an archive of the side-event on [YouTube](#).

I asked Sushila what was it like to coordinate the side-event? How did AIPP manage to develop their statement, which contains numerous voices across multiple countries? How important is it for indigenous women to be able to access international fora like the HLPF?

Below is a transcript of our conversation, edited for clarity and length.

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**ZL:** Can you introduce yourself?

**STM:** I am Sushila Thapa Magar. I am from Nepal and currently working with the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP). We are the regional network of indigenous peoples organisations that defend the rights of indigenous peoples in Asia.

**ZL:** Congratulations, you just had a side-event at the High Level Political Forum. Is that the first HLPF event AIPP organised?

**STM:** This HLPF 2020, we recently concluded a side-event led by the Indigenous Women Programme, which is the partner of Voice. Actually, this is our 2<sup>nd</sup> side-event but it is first one recognised and approved by the UN itself. Earlier, we did a side-event outside of the UN programme.

**ZL:** Can you briefly tell me, what is the HLPF and why is it important for AIPP to attend?

**STM:** At the global, the HLPF is where national governments voluntarily make reports on how they're progressing, share updates, and what are the challenges in achieving their Sustainable Development (Goals) targets by 2030. There are 17 SDGs and country reports on the priorities set by the ECOSOC (UN Economic and Social Council) every year. This is the platform where civil society can respond to the reports and express their concerns and voices through different side-events. Some of them can be formal, which are under the UN programme, while some can be informal, which are outside the programme. Here people from all over the world, come

together, develop their network, and express solidarity on issues people are facing. One of the key principles of the HLPF is “Leave No One Behind”.

**ZL:** Is this the first one done completely online because of COVID-19?

**STM:** Yes because of COVID all the side-events were online, even the states who presented their voluntary national reports. There restrictions on peoples movement so it was the first time we did it virtually.

**ZL:** How did the impacts of COVID-19 start changing what you wanted to say at the HLPF or did it change at all?

**STM:** When we conceptualised this side-event, we planned for it to be in-person, developing our networks, sharing our experiences, amplifying our voices in-person. It was also an opportunity for us to bring in the people who were not able to travel for many other reasons. Some of them live in remote areas or were not able to get their visas. This virtual platform has broken that barrier. It provided opportunities for our sisters and our people to interface with each other and with panelists, organisers, and other stakeholders. This also provided access to the HLPF for people who had less information and do not interact with the HLPF. We used social media and other outreach strategies to tap into our network. This made it easier for them to access this platform. Of course they needed some technical support on how to be there. We are happy to say that we reached 110 people, which was only 50-60 last year.

**ZL:** What you’re saying is that you were able to reach more people by being online rather than just going to New York?

**STP:** Yes and I’m only talking about direct participation. Because it was a recorded session, we also disseminated it through social media, emails, and to our networks. We see lots of people are following the recordings too. The outreach is bigger this time.

I think another factor is the collaboration we had this year. We had many organisations like FIMI (Foro Internacional de Mujeres Indígenas), MADRE working much more at the global level, not only in Asia but across the globe. It made our voices stronger and louder.

**ZL:** What was the impact on your sisters or indigenous women in participating in the side-event?

**STP:** They felt they had the space to speak out. Their voices were not only limited to the national level but now has gone globally. They felt very happy to know their voices are heard in different parts of the world. Second is that they were happy to receive so much solidarity from people across the globe on their issues and good practices, hearing how indigenous knowledge is helping others, and how their advocacy work is impacting globally.

**ZL:** A lot of the issues indigenous women face are at the local level or their community. How important is it for their stories to be amplified? What does that bring to their causes?

**STP:** Especially for indigenous women, one of their greatest challenges is their contributions are not recognised in terms of their struggles, contributions, leadership, and participation. I think these are some of the steps or enabling practices, which make their voices louder. It accounts the struggles they are facing at a national level and build their confidence in doing the right things. They hear the same kind of struggles from all around the world. The solidarity and coalitions they will be developing brings them into a network to help amplify their voices and their struggles. This strengthens their movement.

**ZL:** Presenting to a global audience is daunting and nerve-wracking. How did you prepare the speakers and other panelists to be able to share their stories to a global audience?

**STP:** At the community level, the speakers are stronger, much more visible, much more vocal, and much more explicit. As the tier changes, their voices become smaller, limited, and restricted. We had to put in much more effort to groom those voices in a consolidated manner. We had multiple levels of meetings with the speakers, facilitators, co-organisers, and supporters so we remain streamlined in our message. We had a preparatory meeting to explain the purpose of the side-event and discussed jointly on how we can make our message to attract global attention.

We also had preparatory meetings only with the speakers. We work together with them to build their confidence, build their messages in a form they want say it. We then try to shape it the way they want to say it. I think we had like 3 or 4 preparatory meetings, including mock presentations. We went through the common message time and again so that it is a true reflection of what they wanted to say.

These were at our level but they also prepared themselves together with their community. For example, the VNR (Voluntary National Review) countries, which were presented at our panel was South Asian Voice. They had consecutive meetings amongst themselves so that they reflect the issues of South Asia and indigenous women in a collective way. We had multiple levels of preparation, which is similar to the Philippines.

**ZL:** How did you manage to have all those voices at multiple level into one collective message? How did balance all those things coming together?

**STM:** We try to stick to only reflect their voices, issues. We were only the facilitators in this whole process so that we reflect their ground realities. We prepared some guiding questions and presented those to the possible presenters. They brought it back to their own groups for discussion. If it wasn't sufficient, they added more questions. If the questions were not needed then they just discarded those. It was totally contextualized.

Of course when we go down to the grassroots level, they have multiple issues. If there were much more issues to be brought out, each country worked to prioritise which ones should be brought into this platform. It was depending on the urgency and the facts. For example after developing it at the South Asian level, they brought it back to the country level for discussion. It was then brought back to the regional level because it has to reflect the needs, interests of the people.

**ZL:** It sounds like there was a lot of back and forth. How long did this process take?

**STM:** One of the biggest challenges in this preparatory work was the time limitation. It was almost end of June when we got the approval for this side-event on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July. Our first preparatory meeting was about role clarification. Who wants to do what and who has to do what. It was a crucial point where our role division was very efficient for the need to mobilise. The way people reacted and the accountability towards their role was another factor to make things happen within the time. Another one is people's flexibility with the time. Everyone worked so fast to respond to the needs of the preparation process. We also analysed the risk and jointly worked on a strategy to overcome them. I think the collaborative work and the trust amongst each other were the factors that made the side-event successful within a limited time.

The core factor is think is the collective voice we all agreed on, the issues we were struggling for, and our collectiveness on these issues. These were the motivations on the way we acted, the heart of our work.

**ZL:** If you were to do this again next year, what would you change?

**STM:** I will go back to the Asia Pacific Platform on Sustainable Development where we started as participants. We heard about the process and voices of other stakeholders, CSOs. At that time, we were not very prepared on our own voices. The 2<sup>nd</sup> event was the global platform where we had our side-event outside the UN. We received lots of interests and participants than we expected. We prepared on how we can invite more people and let them hear our voices, amplify our voices. Compared to that one, this recent side-event is much more mature and much improved.

Having said that, there are areas where we want to improve in the future. One is that this HLPF is more targeted towards global actors. We might want to reach out to other sisters who are working at the grassroots level to hear, to learn, to see what happens there, how they can take this message, and how it affects their advocacy work. We want to improve on how to bring the message back in a stronger way.

Second area is that we were working with others in the similar field. We want to reach out to other stakeholders, especially governments. We haven't able to bring governments on board on these kinds of platforms. We want to collaborate, outright dialogue, listen, hear their limitations and see where we overlap. We'll work with them to make our voices stronger and achieve what we are yet to achieve.

Third, since the side-event was virtual, we had much more participation from the national and the sub-national level. There were some at the grassroots level but we want more. We want to provide more space to their leaders. One of the barriers is the language. Maybe we want to have translations at the community so that they hear what is happening at the international level and they can put in their questions, share their experiences. Even if they cannot participate in person, their voices can be amplified at the global level.

**ZL:** What are your plans moving forward? How do you bring that message to the grassroots?

**STM:** I think there were very good recommendations from our panelists and from the co-organisers. We have developed the statement, which reflects the future steps to be followed. First is we need to disseminate the statement. Second is dissemination through translation so that it can reach the grassroots levels using their local language. They can then follow-up on the recommendations.

We need to collaborate with the co-organisers, especially since we're still suffering from COVID-19. How can we build on the consolidated voices and advocacies during and post-COVID-19 times.

There are also a few organisations reaching out to us from the side-event, showing their interest to collaborate. These are good opportunities to work with new organisations who want to support indigenous women and indigenous peoples as a whole.

**ZL:** I'm looking at the statement right now. How come there is a lot of mention of persons with disabilities, persons who are LGBTIQ, the youth, the elderly? How did you come to the decision to include them in the statement?

**STM:** When we talked about inclusion and intersectionality, it didn't come at the end. When we started the discussions, we were very mindful of including them in the whole process and the preparations. We made sure their voices are also reflected. This especially happened with the people with disabilities community. We invited them, heard their voices, and jointly decided to include them in the recommendations. This was collective work.

**ZL:** In the process of drafting the statement, you intentionally included persons with disabilities, the youth, the elderly, at the community-level?

**STM:** Yes, and not only physical participation. We provided space where they can share their needs, constraints, and good practices.

**ZL:** What's the impact of including their voices in the statement?

**STM:** They felt much more included, valued, and heard. I think this is the starting point of inclusion, of progressing towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Quick

reflection was that they built confidence in sharing their experiences and challenges. We shared the statement with them so that any unintentional omission of their needs and voices are avoided.

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*Background music: [Happy African Village by John Bartman](#), CC0 1.0*