



## **Understanding Sustainability Education: A Community-Based Experience**

**Compreendendo a educação para a sustentabilidade: uma experiência  
centrada na comunidade**

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## *Abstract*

Sustainability education policies are widely focused on modern technologies, green profits, and development projects in many Indigenous communities. However, there has been minimal attention given to critical areas such as: Indigenous world views, spiritual and relational practices, culture, lands, and revitalization. This imbalance, combined with the destruction and lack of recognition to Indigenous knowledge (systems), suggests that Indigenous environmental education policies are still in a state of adolescence as a field of academic inquiry. The present study examines how an Indigenous community understands sustainability and analyzes these understandings in relation to the literature on the politics of nature as well as Indigenous and postcolonial studies. This research followed a relational Participatory Action Research (PAR) research approach with a focus on the researchers' relational accountabilities and obligations to study participants and site.

**Keywords:** Sustainability Education, Indigenous, Development Projects, State.

## *Resumo*

Políticas de educação para a sustentabilidade são amplamente focadas em tecnologias modernas, lucros verdes e projetos de desenvolvimento em muitas comunidades indígenas. No entanto, pouca atenção tem sido dada às áreas críticas, tais como: visões de mundo indígenas, práticas espirituais e relacionais, cultura, terras e revitalização. Este desequilíbrio, combinado com a destruição e falta de reconhecimento ao conhecimento tradicional (sistemas), sugere que as políticas de educação ambiental indígenas ainda estão em um estado de adolescência como um campo de investigação acadêmica. O presente estudo analisa como uma comunidade indígena entende sustentabilidade e analisa esses entendimentos em relação à literatura sobre a política da natureza, bem como dos estudos indígenas e pós-coloniais. Essa pesquisa seguiu uma abordagem de Pesquisa Ação Participativa (PAR) relacional com foco na prestação de contas e obrigações relacionais dos pesquisadores para estudar participantes e sítio.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação para a sustentabilidade, Indígena, Projetos de desenvolvimento, Estado

## Introduction

We, both scholars and local co-researcher participants, are interested in exploring how an Indigenous understanding of sustainability can inform educational reform in the country. In this paper, we present a range of learning experiences, drawing on everyday practices that collectively establish the kind of capacity we see as potentially creating the conditions to explore the meanings of sustainability in environmental education. To explore the meanings of sustainability in environmental education from the perspective of Indigenous communities, where diverse concepts such as relationality, hopes, dreams, expectations, and imaginations interconnect, we as researchers need to first acknowledge the spirituality and experiences that connect one actor with other actors. For this reason, we employed participatory action research (PAR) approach from a relational ontological perspective to work with Indigenous communities in relation to issues of relationality, dreams, hopes, expectations, and imaginations. This research approach suggests that meanings of

sustainability are connected to both the material and the spiritual world through everyday interactions with each other. This research approach takes a significant step in exploring identity and justice in relation to Indigenous understandings of sustainability (MCKENZIE et al., 2009).

Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and learning have been ignored in many Indigenous regions and there has been minimal research on these intersecting issues locally or internationally (TUCK; MCKENZIE; MCCOY, 2014). Through the quite unique lenses of relational PAR, this research tried to address this gap in an examination of postcolonial Indigenous communities' complex and shifting relationships to nature (DATTA, 2013; WILSON, 2008) and in relation to discrimination and oppression regarding Indigenous environmental education and sustainability (UN DECLARATION, 2008).

Through imagining the future of both traditional education and our responsibilities as researchers, it became evident that collaboration and understanding participants' practices were key to the process of exploring the meanings of sustainability in an environmental education that values and enacts participants' community. Thus, the purpose and intention of this paper is only such due to its acknowledgement that an exploration of the meanings of sustainability from traditional relational and spiritual learning experiences is necessary. In beginning our research journey together it was critical to consider that we could not understand the community's sustainability perspectives solely through our relational PAR; however, we learned that our study could be understood as a step forward toward decolonizing learning and reclaiming Indigenous ways of learning within the Bangladesh state's education curriculum. This realization presented us with a rich context for developing collective research processes, and informed an understanding that doing research in Indigenous communities' collective "rights" (i.e., community and researcher both own research and research findings) meant respecting traditional and spiritual practices, honouring spirituality, sharing and learning stories, taking responsibility, and talking with participants about their education needs.

## Background

Meanings of sustainability education have been either misunderstood or misrepresented by the state's educational institutions in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh. The political history of the region begins with the history of "modern" forestry in South Asia. During colonial rule (1757-1947), the British marked the CHT as a spatially distinctive ecological region and declared the whole area forest in 1865. More recently, the CHT has become a site of political struggle for identities, power, and control over resources and lands, leading to an armed struggle between the Bangladeshi armed forces and the Chittagong Hill Tracts People's United Party (a regional party in CHT). The state's ecological exploitation has come to dominate traditional ways of learning and doing through the state's essential<sup>1</sup> education processes, the privatization of Indigenous lands and forests, and displacement, all of which are partly enabled through mainstream forest management,

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<sup>1</sup> We used term essential to explain the state's institutional educational curriculum, which is mostly not only unrelated to Indigenous communities' traditional learning systems, culture, and cultivation, but also poses a risk to their traditional customs, spirituality, and sustainability. (ADNAN, 2004).

development, and essential educational processes (ADNAN, 2004; SCHENDEL; MEY; DEWAN, 2001). Recently, Indigenous communities traditional cultivation practices and learning process have changed a lot as a result of the state's development projects and institutional education. In addition, misconceptions about sustainability education and nature are embedded within the state's existing essential education systems.

The CHT Laitu Khyeng<sup>2</sup> Indigenous community includes thirteen Indigenous groups (CHAPOLA, 2008) and is the most affected and vulnerable community in terms of access to their traditional cultivation practices in education, as well as in relation to the government and NGOs' plant privatization processes, militarization, settlement, and administrative oppressions and discriminations (DATTA; CHAPOLA, 2007). Moreover, government and transnational bodies' development projects' forest management practices and mainstream environmental education have misrepresented the CHT (Adnan, 2004) and have resulted in increased environmental and cultural vulnerability. We believe that exploring traditional education through Indigenous customs and experiences will potentially benefit the participants and allow them to engage in diverse traditional education and solutions.

In this study, we propose to explore meanings of sustainability through relational PAR with members of the Laitu Khyeng Indigenous community in the CHT, Bangladesh.

## Methodology and Methods

Research methodology greatly influences both the research process and its outcomes. PAR as a methodology is used in this study as it is unique from other research approaches because it reflects a relational ontology in several ways (BATTISTE, 2000; DATTA, 2013; WILSON, 2008). Indigenous scholars Battiste (2000) and Wilson (2008) refer to PAR as an approach that can be used for Indigenous research if researchers have empathy for their participants and aim to be accountable to Indigenous communities in their research. Indeed, according to Wilson (2008), PAR is used to understand participants' relationships "rather than treating participants only as source of research data" (p. 177).

Research methods used for this research project include: traditional sharing circles, individual storytelling, creating and using commonplace books, and photovoice (DATTA et. al., 2014). These methods were undertaken according to participants' culture, traditional experiences, and spirituality. At the beginning of the research process, we were charged with gathering data within the villages, and used an inductive coding process in the analysis of the data. An inductive approach was used "to discover the meaning that people award to their social worlds and to understand the meanings of their social behaviour" (BOEIJE, 2010, p.12).

Elders, knowledge-holders, and youths participants wanted to be sure their needs and dreams were included in the findings so that this study would have an impact on sustainability education policy and speak on their behalf (DENZIN; LINCOLN, 2008).

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<sup>2</sup> Laitu Khyeng Indigenous people are those who inhabit the villages of *Gungru Muke Para* and *Gungru Madom Para* in the Bandarban district, CHT, Bangladesh (ADNAN, 2004; CHAPOLA 2008).

## The Traditional Meanings of Sustainability Education

The first research question we asked in this study was “What was traditional Indigenous Khyeng education, particularly in relation to environmental sustainability?” This question was asked during our field study and the answers revealed that the Laitu Khyeng Indigenous community’s meanings of traditional education were interconnected with their everyday practices. Elder Kosomo Prue Khyeng stated that the purpose of traditional education was “to protect our traditional cultivation culture.” According to him, the community’s traditional cultivation culture served several roles: to protect Mother Nature, to encourage everyday relational and spiritual practices, to preserve ancestors’ stories, and to fulfil everyday needs. Female activist Mathui Ching Khyang explained why their traditional cultivation culture was an important issue for their community’s education. After talking to the community’s Elders and knowledge-holders, she described the community’s meanings of traditional education as follows in her commonplace book:

Our traditional education is our traditional cultivation culture. Our traditional cultivation culture is our relationships with the mountain, sun (i.e., it rises everyday in our Mother mountains’ laps. It delights and inspires us like an ongoing flame), land, culture, history, and traditions. Our traditional cultivation culture is not only for our Khyeng Indigenous people, but also for our relationships. Our traditional cultivation culture is to grow up with our culture, spirituality, language, history, and traditions.

Similarly, knowledge-holder Kasamong Prue Khyeng told us that he and his fellow community members could not imagine community traditional education without their traditional cultivation culture.

The community’s sense of traditional education was interconnected with their everyday spiritual practices, as knowledge-holder Ching Shao Khyeng explained. There were spirituality practices devoted to each of the various spirits, including the sun spirits, Motherland spirits, exchange spirits, and nature spirits. He believed the spiritual practices (from their traditional education) would be able to protect their natural resources and their lives. For example, as Elder Basa Khyeng said, “the spiritual practices are our god(s) who are able to protect us.” He also said, “we always pray to our land and water gods by saying please protect us from sickness as you give us life. Without you we will not be able to survive.” Knowledge-holder Kasamong Prue Khyeng also revealed the relationship between spirituality and traditional education through the following poem, translated by Mathui Ching Khyang:

Oh our sun god, you have divine power.  
Keep me in your blessing and show me the right direction for the day.  
Give me power to control my mind from the wrong thinking and doing.  
Keep me in courage so that I can do good things for me and for my community.  
Keep me in our Elder spirit so that I can save our land, river, and *jhum*.

In sum, according to community Elders and knowledge-holders, the community’s meaning of traditional education was collective action, centred on a strong desire to protect the community’s traditional cultivation culture, animals, plants, land, and water through relational and spiritual practices. Young participants also explained their ways of understanding traditional education as continuous learning processes and achieving needs (e.g., protecting land rights, getting back lost land, cultivation, food, and traditional stories).

## The Current State's Education

In this study we discuss to what extent the Laitu Khyeng Indigenous community's traditional education processes were affected by introduced development projects, such as those promoted by government, NGOs, commercial companies, and multinational corporations. Our participants explained the danger to the community posed by the government and non-governmental organizations' (e.g., private commercial companies) development projects, such as the government reserve forest, brickfield, tobacco plantations, and profit oriented wood plantations. The community's Elders and knowledge-holders discussed why the Bangladeshi government development projects were seen as a danger for traditional education. The community felt that the government or non-government projects organizations' development projects transformed the Indigenous community's learning spaces (e.g., cultivated and uncultivated land, forest, hills, river, animals, and birds) into 'profit-making tools'. The state had given natural resource management, the Indigenous community's source of traditional educational power, to outsiders.

Why did the Bangladeshi government and non-government development projects become painful for Laitu Khyeng education? In exploring this issue, we heard many upsetting stories from Elders, knowledge-holders, leaders, and youth participants. We were taught that the community's learning spaces were transformed into sources of profit for the different agencies' development projects. We were told that most of the development projects and mainstream educational curriculum created serious challenges for the Laitu Khyeng Indigenous community's traditional practices. Thus, the knowledge-holder Kasamong Prue Khyeng said that "Our government policies on our mother land not only affect our traditional learning spaces but also negatively impact our lives." Along the same line, the activist Mathui Ching Khyang asked, "Who is deciding our land policies and management projects for us? Why didn't they take into account our own knowledge about our education? Who is responsible for creating poverty in our community?"

According to the Laitu Khyeng community, the government and non-government agencies' development projects and education policies contributed to the community's unsustainability because of the negative effects on community food sovereignty, spiritual practices, and health.

## Reclaiming Traditional Education

When looking at the Khyeng's meanings of sustainability education, we realized that for them, sustainability education means much more than the government's development projects and education policy priorities. The community members' collective hopes, expectations, and inspirations were connected with their traditional education (i.e., land-water management practices, land, identity, and life). According to knowledge-holder Thui Jo Khyeng, the community's first significant goal for sustainability education was that their traditional land-water spiritual practices would be preserved and that they would be officially approved by the Bangladeshi government. Likewise, Elder Okko Khyeng explained that "it is very essential to get back our rights to practice our traditional customary land-water management practices on our land to eliminate poverty from the community, and to build a sustainable education curriculum." Similarly, Mathui Ching Khyeng said that "We

urge the Bangladeshi government and non-government agencies to recognize the Khyeng Indigenous customary land-water management practices in their education curriculum.” Along the same line, Elder Okko Khyeng explained why it was important to recognize their customary laws in state education policies. She said:

Our customary land-water spiritual practices were weakened by the Bangladeshi government and non-government agencies. As a result of this, we are having serious poverty in our community. Through our customary land-water spiritual learning, our traditional self-sufficient economy can be established.

Knowledge-holder Thui Jo Khyeng also explained that the Bangladeshi government should grant institutional recognition to the community’s customary practices for their children’s education. The youth’s sense of sustainability education was similar. The youth Hla Prue Khyeng explained that the Bangladeshi government needed to recognize traditional cultivation practices in primary education to promote sustainability education. He said that “from my childhood I had to learn lots of negative things regarding my Khyeng identity and our cultivation systems from the Bangladeshi institutional education curriculum. I used to get angry whenever I heard dirty and wrong information about my Indigenous community.” Similarly, school teacher, Nyojy U Khyeng, explained that their traditional cultivation culture needed to be institutionally recognized to ensure self-dependency and sustainability. He said:

The state’s institutional education systems teach the incorrect information to our Khyeng Indigenous children and youths. They [the Bangladeshi government education system] teach us to hate our cultivation and spirituality. This kind of education forces us to forget our culture so that we can be so called *civilized*. I see this *civilized* as dependency. Our state education system is nothing but a system for grabbing our land and creating us as day-labor for outsiders.

He further explained that “Our traditional cultivation culture is able to enrich us and others. Our cultivation culture can contribute new culture for the state’s sustainability education practices.” Therefore, he also believed that they needed to be educated first [at least up to grade five] according to “our ancestors and our traditional cultivation culture.”

The community Elders and knowledge-holders stated that “our children should have learning opportunities about our cultural and cultivation, at least up to grade five.” Another Khyeng school teacher, Ching Shao Khyeng, sadly explained that “I wish we would have opportunities to tell our stories to other Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. I think our education system can enrich us and can create opportunities to relate our stories to others.”

The community stressed the need to protect their traditional knowledge system as one of their responsibilities to achieve sustainability education. The community wanted cooperation from the Bangladeshi government in adding their traditional knowledge to their current education curriculum. They explained that their community’s traditional land-water management knowledge was important for creating a self-sufficient economy. Similarly the youth Usa Aung Khyeng explained that “we do not need lots of money or infinite land; however, we need our traditional knowledge. Our traditional education can protect our land, and build our sustainability.” He further explained that “we want to learn our traditional knowledge first as we believe our traditional knowledge can help us to build relationships with our forest and spirituality.” Likewise our youth participant Nyojy U Khyang explained why he wanted to protect the community’s traditional knowledge and would like to incorporate it into the institutional education system. He said he did not want to lose their Elders’ traditional of story-telling sessions on full moon nights. He said that they

wanted to keep alive their ancestors' traditional stories, not only because they want to learn their stories, but also because their ancestors' stories have the capability to build their community's sustainability. He said, "Our ancestors' stories are our ways of doing and thinking, loving our mother land, animals, birds, and others as our family members."

In sum, according to community Elders and knowledge-holders, the meanings of sustainable education is collective action. The Elders and knowledge-holders explained collective action as a strong desire to protect the community's traditional cultivation culture, animals, *jhum*, plants, land, and water through relational and spiritual practices. Similarly, the youth participants also explained their ways of understanding sustainability were as continuous learning processes and achieving needs.

## Discussion

The severity of state's institutional education curriculum crisis requires a radical departure from current development-dominated knowledge and education models. Indigenous sustainability education offers the possibility of education that is appropriate and responds to development projects and state institutional education's conditions. We believe that if, in the development tradition of environmental education, the state really wants to know and teach about places which form its landscapes, the state must create an education that includes the traditional stories of those whose lands these are: the Indigenous peoples.

We learned that the Laitu Khyneg community had become landless and poor in the last couple of decades as a result of the Bangladeshi government and private companies, NGOs, and development agencies' profitable development projects. However, community members were not hopeless. The community had been fighting for their traditional education rights and to protect Mother Nature. The Laitu Khyneg Indigenous community has been dreaming, hoping, and working hard to rebuild their traditional education as part of their responsibility for sustainability. We also gained knowledge that their meanings of education not only had the ability to build a self-sufficient economy and protect their ecosystem, but could also contribute to Bangladeshi education and create new forms of sustainability education practices.

The meanings of sustainability education in Indigenous communities have the potential to inform the next generation of environmental educators and scholars at a deeper and heightened level of understanding. Through the acknowledgement, respect, honour, and application of Indigenous knowledge systems with non-Indigenous knowledge systems in environmental education, a strong new relationship will emerge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

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