The world has arrived in Shillong: Welcome to the future we want

Among the rolling green East Khasi Hills, indigenous peoples and their supporters from around the world have gathered in Shillong for the second Indigenous Terra Madre (ITM 2015), or International Mei-Ramew*, as it is referred to locally. The theme of this year’s event is “The Future We Want: Indigenous Perspectives and Actions”, and the inauguration provided the delegates with an inspiring vision of what this future could be. With the participation of over 600 delegates from 140 tribes living in 58 countries, ITM 2015 has created a space for exchange on how to shape a future for food that is more just, holistic and reverential of the land and its resources.

Following the first Indigenous Terra Madre held in 2011 and hosted by the Sami People in their Arctic homelands, this event once again draws international attention to the wealth of traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable practices that safeguard the rich agrobiodiversity found in indigenous lands and local communities. Not only does ITM 2015 provide a forum for the world to celebrate how indigenous peoples in North East India contribute to resilient food systems, but it also allows for these same people to dialogue with others from around the world facing similar successes and pressures. By bringing these communities together with scientists, policymakers and the private sector, ITM 2015 challenges us to lead the way to the “The Future We Want,” a future where sustainable approaches like agroecology and local food systems are incorporated into meaningful public policies, where marginalized voices are championed, where food is honored and where wellbeing and intrinsic values are recognized as important components of local livelihoods. This is the future we would like to discuss at ITM 2015.

*Mei-Ramew means Mother Earth in the Khasi language, and the local communities hosting this event refer to ITM 2015 by this name.
Many Voices as One

The inauguration of ITM 2015 commenced with the beating of drums and a blessing of Mei-Ramew, without whose gifts none of the delegates could have gathered together. The event proceeded for the next several hours to showcase the broad diversity that is crucial to maintaining the health of our planet and our cultures. From musical performances to keynote addresses – the message was clear: we must protect the diversity of languages, foods, music and dress woven into the culture of indigenous peoples and local communities if we hope to have any

future at all. Only by learning from these agroecological systems, can we begin to gather the building blocks we need to construct a “more human and diverse world,” stated Phrang Roy, Coordinator of the Indigenous Partnership and Chairman of NESFAS, in the opening remarks of the day. Warning of the devastation that will result if we continue to worship the idol of money, Carlo Petrini, President of Slow Food International, rallied us to fight the globalisation of a “criminal” food system by defending our unique fruits and vegetables, animal breeds and processing techniques. An indefatigable fighter for Native American rights, economist and activist Dr. Winona LaDuke shared a story of hope, and spoke of the battle that the Anishinaabeg have won in protecting their ancestral wild rice from genetic manipulation. Holding in her hand some of these sacred grains, she spoke of the

amazing ability of the seed to wait patiently at the bottom of a lake until the conditions are just right, and only then will it rise to the surface and grow once more, providing life for the Anishinaabeg who protect the waters where it grows. Like the wild rice, the time has come for indigenous peoples and local communities to rise to the surface as leaders of a more just and equitable food system.

ITM 2015 calls us to give voice to the marginalised, as eloquently expressed by a young member of the Bethany Society singers, who, reading from her braille script, said that “human diversity must be a value for the

future we want,” and argued for a world that respects the full spectrum of humanity. It also means supporting the invisible custodians within communities, especially women, youth and the elderly, who together ensure the continuation of knowledge. Pius Ranee, a Khasi Associate of NESFAS, spoke of the challenges faced by indigenous youth who leave their home communities, many of them forced to forget their ancestral knowledge, and ultimately becoming disconnected from their heritage. Ranee argues that even though outside knowledge in business and other mainstream professions can lead to some form of success, “it is difficult to learn others’ knowledge when we have to forget our own.”
The Days Ahead

The inauguration introduced major themes that will be explored in depth in the coming days, themes that have been raised by the global Slow Food community and the Indigenous Partnership, and continue to be at the fore of discussion at global gatherings with representative communities and indigenous leaders. These themes have also been key to preliminary research studies by NESFAS and 41 host villages during the past three years, and include the following:

**Food is not a commodity**

Whilst many agreed that local livelihoods sustain indigenous small-scale producers in an increasingly globalised world, speakers emphasized that food must not be seen as a commodity but as an intrinsic element of one’s cultural identity. This calls us to question what “sustainable development” really means to people and the environment. This will be explored further during the sessions, “Promoting Local Indigenous Economies & Livelihoods for Wellbeing” and “Sustainable Development Goals & The Future We Want.”

**Land and its resources should be revered**

In his video address, HRH Prince Charles expressed his dismay at the state we have reached where we no longer see ourselves as being within nature, but standing apart from it - a sentiment echoed by many of the other speakers. Land is the source of all, and until this is reflected in the food system, it will not be honored or protected. “The School & Community Gardens Programme” will discuss efforts to rebuild relationships to land, while “Pastoralists and Their Challenges” will give the floor to those whose relationship to land is largely misunderstood and highly at risk.

**Giving Voice to Marginalised Communities**

While terms like “agrobiodiversity” and “sustainability” have become buzzwords (even for the likes of McDonalds), there is still little understanding of, or rights for, those who are the greatest stewards of the world’s agrobiodiversity - the indigenous, women, farmers and elders. Public policies rarely account for the value systems of the marginalised, and therefore do not protect their food systems. ITM 2015 aims to put these food leaders at the forefront of discussion.
“Hishuk ish Tsawaak.”
[“Everything is one, everything is interconnected.”]
Eli Enns, Nuu-chah-nulth Leader, Vancouver Island, Canada

“You do not want to put things that end in -cide in your food.”
Dr. Winona LaDuke, Environmental Activist

“It is time for us to enrich ourselves with the knowledge and skills that have been passed down through generations.”
Dr. Mukul Sangma, Chief Minister of Meghalaya

“[Indigenous Terra Madre is] a model for linking traditional indigenous thinking with modern science as equal partners – a beacon of inspiration for others to learn from”
HRH Charles, Prince of Wales

“We need to focus on which energy we are going to be using to cook food in the future.”
Chef Jose Andres