

Dr. Mohammad Taghi Farvar – 1942-2018

Born in 1942, M. Taghi Farvar was heir of Shahsevan indigenous pastoralists in Iranian Azerbaijan. And nomad he remained all his life, working in all continents and being at ease with people from diverse languages, cultures, religions and world views. As President of the ICCA Consortium, he was our inspirer and motivator in chief. Many of us dedicate time and energy to the Consortium beyond the call of duty because of Taghi, because we met him, worked with him, were moved and influenced by him.

Taghi led at least **three international movements** from within—all tied by a **unifying theme**.

The first movement Taghi brought to the fore is the one that **pioneered the critique of development and opened countless eyes to the unintended consequences for environment and health of major “development” initiatives** (dams, ports, roads, urbanization, deforestation, large scale agribusiness and extractive industries...). He did so by doing extensive research and organising conferences while he was working on his PhD with Barry Commoner in the 1960s and early 1970s. This was one of the earliest ever interdisciplinary PhDs, linking anthropology and environmental sciences (his thesis, defended at Washington University, investigated DDT residues in mothers’ milk among plantation workers in Guatemala). It was around that time that Taghi took part in the civil rights movement in the USA, was assigned to share rooms with African-Americans in the university (the USA was an apartheid country and he was an Iranian, after all), was badly beaten by racist thugs, and edited and published the book ***The Careless Technology: Ecology and International Development*** (New York, Doubleday/Natural History Press, Conservation Foundation and Centre for the Biology of Natural Systems, 1030pp, 1972), which remains a classic. This volume, which many used and quoted, provided unparalleled impulse towards more effective assessment of environmental and social impact of development initiatives.



On the wave of that volume, Taghi participated in the **UN Stockholm Conference of 1972** and **UN Rio Conference on Environment and Development of 1992** as a member of the non-aligned movement. The spirit of the times is well summarised in the well-known ***What Now? Another Development!***, a document on which he worked with Marc Nerfin, Ignacy Sachs, Johan Galtung and others (Uppsala, The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 1975). At that time Taghi was one of the most radical and intelligent voices from the South in a world permeated by arrogant colonialism and presumptuous

blind faith in technology. He influenced generations. Made important enemies. Learned to speak without a shadow of fear for himself.

Taghi went on to work in Iran, the country where he was born and which he had left for some years to complete his studies in Lebanon and the USA. As he came back, he became a prime mover behind the birth of the country's Department of the Environment and later founded what is now the oldest and most active NGO dedicated to socio-environmental concerns in Iran (Cenesta). It was in those early years that he started the second "movement"—the one to foster **respect and recognition for the unique ways of life and wisdom of mobile indigenous peoples**.

For the four decades since then, Taghi served as key advocate for the **collective rights of mobile indigenous peoples to remain mobile** and to be fully recognised for the beauty and ingenuity of their cultures, which respect nature and offer valuable services to the environment and society at large. But mobility is seen by many state governments as a threat, and mobile peoples are misunderstood, humiliated and too often forced to abandon their mobile lifestyle. Facing this, Taghi spent countless hours helping tribal elders and youngsters to organise. He assembled evidence of non-equilibrium ecology and advanced understanding of the environmental and social issues at stake with mobility. For years, he kept lobbying for sensible policies, participating in the practical organisation of mobile social services in Iran and other countries, and demonstrating that a mobile lifestyle can be compatible with healthy, sustainable and prosperous livelihoods (see a popular summary of such work [here](#)).

Taghi's key insight about mobile pastoralism is that in semi-arid ecosystems far from equilibrium conditions and subjected to the vagaries of climate, mobile lifestyles are a livelihood strategy that is not only sustainable, but *beneficial* to the environment, and conducive to healthy and wealthy livelihoods. Throughout the years, he managed to get this counter-intuitive evidence accepted by many. He was a key participant in the Dana meeting of 2002, which developed the Dana Declaration. He was the force behind the emergence of mobile indigenous peoples as fully accepted partners in conservation at the Vth World Parks Congress (Durban, South Africa, September 2003). He was the prime motor behind the **World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples (WAMIP)**, established to promote the cause of mobile indigenous communities and their organisation for development based in their unique cultures and values. With Taghi as its first elected Secretary General, WAMIP went to the fore at the seventh Conference of the Parties of the **Convention on Biological Diversity** (CBD, February 2004), when mobile indigenous peoples asserted their legitimacy and took a major step towards international recognition as key actors in natural resource governance and conservation. Slowly it became commonplace in the **International Union for the Conservation of Nature** (IUCN)—where Taghi was twice elected **Chair of the Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy** (CEESP) from 2000 to 2008—to understand mobile indigenous peoples as important potential allies and not enemies of conservation, as they had been considered before.

One should not imagine that this kind of work is only made up of pleasant participation in glamorous events. For instance, in Iran, successive political regimes have consistently failed to understand the need for mobility, and—as Taghi used to say—have done so by bullet (violent coercion and sedentarisation of tribal groups, killing and exiling of their leaders), by chalk (brainwashing of the youth through the forced scholarisation imposed by the Shah, for whom mobile indigenous lifestyles were backward and shameful) and by kiss (the natural resource agencies nationalized the rangelands previously held in commons and attempted to privatize what they were proving unable to manage...). The planners of most of these schemes were sedentary bureaucrats who could hardly understand the ways and reasoning of mobile indigenous peoples. Back in the 1970s, Taghi fought against the establishment of a very large park

announced by the Shah, which would have incorporated within a no-go area the migratory routes of the Qashqai people (without even considering compensation). This resulted in him having to leave his job at the Department of Environment and being **persecuted by the Shah's police (Savak), blacklisted and threatened** with a “political trial” (usually carried out by extra-judiciary means). Between 1979 and 1984, he was forbidden to leave the country and had to limit his work to technical subjects (e.g., energy technologies for rural areas, such as biogas and solar). In 1984, he attempted some community organizing with the Luri people as part of a project that he was asked to direct. His advocacy work and his “too participatory” attitude got him expelled from the project after only six months. After that, he managed to leave the country and found a job with mobile communities in Sudan, including fostering co-management approaches in pastoral environments. After the Islamic Revolution, Taghi went back to Iran, but he was soon **jailed for having advocated autonomy for some Kurdish mobile tribes** in the Zagros mountains and objecting to the government taking control of their lives. In 1992, after organizing the first International Conference on Nomadism and Development, he again engaged in fierce debates about the right to mobility and became *persona non grata* for the government organizations dealing with mobile tribes, which used to run huge programmes for their sedentarisation. These events involved both **political and economic hardships** for Taghi. Cenesta -- the organizer of the conference -- had incurred large expenditures on behalf of the government, which were never reimbursed. For years, the NGO had to scrape together funds to recover from the debt it was left to deal with.

The third movement that Taghi embraced and energized is the one for the **appropriate recognition and support to the territories and areas conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities** (also known as **ICCAs—territories of life**)—a phenomenon also emerging from a past of arrogant incomprehension and neglect. The ***World Parks Congresses of Durban (2003) and Sydney (2014)*** saw Taghi as a powerful advocate for “community conserved areas”, which emerged and came to prominence in the IUCN as in the Convention on Biological Diversity, today fully aware of their extent and importance. Taghi nurtured and energised the movement as Chair of CEESP (promoting work on governance and equity, sustainable livelihoods, culture and conservation, accountability of the private sector, and community conservation) and as **three-times elected President of [the ICCA Consortium](#), an international association he co-founded in 2008**. The Consortium today unites 130 organisations, indigenous tribes and nations and 300 committed experts from over seventy-five countries. It is a regular partner of the CBD and has managed to positively affect its decisions as well as the policy and practices of many countries.

The movement for ICCAs calls attention to the **strong bonds that exist between some human communities and their territories of life**. These bonds, coupled with local institutions that take and enforce decisions that are positive for the local environment and livelihoods, define the ICCA phenomenon and point at different ways of perceiving a future for our planet—a future of **community agency and responsibility**. Under the leadership of Taghi, his seven fluently spoken languages and unfailing smile and humanity, indigenous leaders and scholars have joined forces with policy makers and conservation practitioners from five continents to support the movement and bring about its unexpectedly rapid achievements in policy and practice.

Drawing together the three movements briefly recalled, and always motivating Taghi from within, was his **unshakable allegiance, respect and passion for the wisdom and multiple values of traditional human communities** (and indigenous peoples at their core). As rare as it may be, Taghi had an intimate knowledge as a member of several indigenous/traditional communities, but also a broad understanding of a myriad of other communities that share similar concerns around the world. And, as doubly rare, he interacted with such communities not to study or use them, not to collect data, pictures and “case examples”, not to convert them or sell them something, but for the sheer pleasure of **being one with them**, and the sincere desire to **act together for shared values**.

Today, traditional communities are invisible to most people. At best, they are the subject of documentaries or doctoral dissertations. At worse, they are trampled upon by the marching orders of land and water grabbers, extractive operations and political parties. Even well-meaning researchers and scholars spend years describing how communities are a “myth”, how they are internally divided and imbued with anachronisms, how they resist change for the sake of vested interests and the *status quo*. Taghi stood up against all this. He invited us to consider human history beyond the last decade or any individual’s life span and see how the multiple bonds of reciprocity and solidarity, which are the fabric of traditional communities, are also the wisdom of humans on earth. Each community capable of sustainably drawing its livelihoods and wellbeing from a forest, a pasture, a swathe of sea or a mosaic of tilled land and channelled water is a “healthy cell” of our living planet.

Traditional communities have demonstrated that it is possible to live and develop cultures in the most severe of circumstances, from the ice and wind of the Himalayas to the torrid plains of the Sahel and unforgiving waves of the oceans. They have crafted medicines and irrigated deserts, domesticated powerful animals and passed seeds from hand to hand for countless generations. Their knowledge and wealth are embodied in those seeds, the breeds of their animals, the values and institutions they crafted through time. The loss of collective wisdom and cultural and linguistic diversity that characterise today’s mainstream societies needs to be lamented on par with the loss of biological diversity. And indeed, traditional communities have resisted forced relocation, sedentarisation, nationalisation and privatisation of natural resources, the devastation and militarisation of their territories and the loss of identity and meaning that comes from imposed education, indoctrination and advertisements. While they may have no desire to be autarchic, traditional communities do not need to depend on money and gasoline, jobs and supermarkets. They can live off their land, fish and animals, regulate their lives with the seasons, share their natural commons and craft the beauty of their own diversity. They may suffer problems and ills, but they are usually also self-reliant and resilient via their own cultures and institutions, which risks being flattened by imposed “development”. Change in traditional communities may be desired... but Taghi knew it must come from within, if it is to be uplifting and positive. He knew that communities may need the help of outsiders, but they also demand and deserve their immense respect.

Taghi lived and worked with and for **traditional communities in Asia, the Americas, Africa and Europe**. In Iran, he coordinated and launched the National Agenda 21 Strategy for Environment and Sustainable Development; helped to create and develop two new universities with programmes centred on sustainable community development (as part of that he was Vice Rector of Avicenna University); started major renewable energy production as part of “greening” the Iranian Atomic Energy Organisation (including wind farms feeding the national electric grid and solar/electric power stations for villages in the desert perimeter); organised and coordinated the first International Conference on Nomadism and Development (1992); helped found and served as main advocate for UNINOMAD and UNICAMEL—associations of pastoral indigenous peoples from all regions of Iran; and worked tirelessly with a dedicated team of his Cenesta colleagues to identify the country’s “territories of life” and support their traditional governing institutions. In other continents, he laid the foundations of 180 participatory initiatives for rural and pastoral communities in 50 African countries; co-organised the first World Conference on Conservation and Development (Ottawa, 1986); evaluated the impact of the United Nations system on capacity building and poverty eradication in Madagascar; helped to develop and launch in Guatemala and other central American countries an integrated non-chemical pest management approach; supported innovative community livelihoods and conservation initiatives in Bangladesh and Cameroon, Colombia and Sudan, Palestine, Jamaica, Yemen and DR of Congo; and served for 12 years on the **Board of the Paul K. Feyerabend Foundation**, which supports community solidarity around the world.

Taghi was fluent in **English, Spanish, French, Azeri, Turkish, Persian and Arabic**. He authored and co-authored works in many languages and was a member of prestigious editorial boards (e.g., of the *International Journal of the Commons*). One of his later co-authored books provides the most extensive available guidance on shared governance of natural resources (***Sharing Power***, IIED, IUCN/CEESP and CENESTA, 2004; rep. Earthscan 2007, also available in French). Despite his unfailing engagement with environmental and social concerns, and well in tune with Taghi's personal lifestyle (exclusively vegetarian, barefoot attitudes and personality, totally non-violent and non-competitive), Taghi has never received an award. This is not surprising for the people who know him well, as he was too busy with concrete problems and visionary ideas to promote himself in any way (or even to submit his requests for payment for work accomplished or lists of expenditures for reimbursement...).

Taghi's work is unfinished and could never have been finished... but he has enriched the Earth as an **inspiring scholar, activist, humanist, warmest colleague and friend, and beloved President**—someone who never sang with the prevailing chorus, but inspired many to sing for themselves, and to think and feel in solidarity with others.

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