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ICCAs – TERRITORIES OF LIFE

Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend and M. Taghi Farvar

Keywords: territory, life, governance, indigenous peoples, local communities, commons

At all times and in all world cultures, a phenomenon appears so strong and so natural as to be nearly invisible. This is the association – unique, profoundly rich, at times visceral – that ties a specific people or community to its own territory: the land, water, and natural resources on which and of which it lives. Around the world, many different terms are used to describe that special bond: *wilayahadat*, *himas*, *agdals*, *territorios de vida*, *territorios del buen vivir*, *tagal*, *qoroq-e bumi*, *yerliqorukh*, *faritraifempivelomana*, ancestral domains, country, community conserved area, sacred natural site, locally managed marine area, and many others – representing unique meanings for unique peoples and communities. In this second millennium, this phenomenon has been singled out as an essential feature of humanity and offered a *lingua franca* name as ICCAs – territories of life, which can be used across languages and cultures.

In a nutshell, ICCAs are ‘territories and areas conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities’ – those unique natural spaces where a strong community – territory association is combined with effective local governance and conservation of nature (Borrini-Feyerabend *et al.* 2010; Kothari *et al.* 2012). ICCAs thus encompass, but should never submerge, a wealth of local terms, which is a value in itself. To be sure, for custodian indigenous peoples and traditional communities the association that connects them to their territory is richer than can be expressed in words. It is a bond of livelihood, energy, and health, and a source of identity, culture, autonomy, and freedom. It connects generations, preserving memories and practices from the past and linking those to the desired future. It is the ground on which communities learn, identify values and develop self-rule. For many, ‘territory’ also bridges visible and invisible realities, material and spiritual wealth. With territory and nature go life, dignity and self-determination as peoples.

The presence of an ‘ICCA – territory of life’ implies a ‘local governance institution’ – a council of elders, village assembly, spiritual authority, ingrained

cultural norms. It develops and ensures respect for the rules of access to and use of the natural commons, with positive outcome for both nature and people. It thus describes the presence of three characteristics:

- a ‘strong and profound bond’ between an indigenous people or local community and a territory or area
- the concerned people or community ‘makes and enforces decisions’ about that territory or area
- the decisions and efforts of the people or community lead towards the ‘conservation of nature’ and ‘associated life, livelihoods, and cultural values’.

Of course, the socio-ecological phenomena are complex. There may be ‘defined ICCAs’ (exhibiting all three defining characteristics), ‘disrupted ICCAs’ (fulfilling the three in the past, but failing today because of disturbances, which can be reversed or counteracted) and even ‘desired ICCAs’ (having only one or two defining characteristics, but also possessing the potential of developing the third) (Borrini-Feyerabend and Campese 2017).

An ICCA can only be self-identified and kept alive by the people or community that governs and manages it. The fisherfolk who engage in surveillance operations for their estuarine conserved area in Casamance, Senegal, and the indigenous pastoralist communities of Iran, who take momentous decisions about when to migrate to their summering and wintering grounds – ‘they’ know they have an ICCA. The indigenous peoples of the Amazon region, who strenuously resist disruption by dams, roads, and mining operations, and the rural communities of Spain, whose commons are at the heart of local identity and culture – ‘they’ know that their bond is strong and effective enough. The forest dwellers of Borneo who recognize hundreds of plant and animal indicators, and the Malagasy women who regulate octopus collection to secure abundance in the next fishing season – ‘they’ can recognize and discuss conservation outcomes.

Today, the term ‘ICCA’ has taken on a life of its own. It is now used by conservationists and government agencies as a type of governance for the conservation of nature (UNEP WCMC’s Protected Planet Reports 2012–16). ICCAs are recognized as protected areas of a specific governance type or as ‘conserved’ areas (Borrini-Feyerabend *et al.* 2013; Borrini-Feyerabend and Hill 2014), and/or through arrangements appropriate in overlaps with protected areas under various governance types. In coverage and conservation contribution, ICCAs are in all likelihood equally or more important than official protected

areas, and therefore crucial to achieve global conservation goals.

ICCAs deliver ‘lasting patterns of conservation’ that depend on local integrity and capacities rather than external expertise and funding. They sustain livelihoods, peace and security, and cultural identity and pride. They are a non-market based mechanism to mitigate climate change and to help in adapting to it. They help achieve most of the targets of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–20 (Kothari and Neumann 2014). And they contribute to most of the goals in the UN Sustainable Development framework. For custodian indigenous peoples and local communities, however, ICCAs remain essential for sustaining life and livelihoods, enjoying collective rights and responsibility to land, water, and natural resources, and ensuring respect for the knowledge, practices, and institutions essential to culture. These are crucial reasons why hundreds of indigenous peoples and community organizations and civil society supporters and individuals have joined forces in the ICCA Consortium¹ – an international association that, around the world, defends ICCAs against several pervasive threats, and fosters their appropriate recognition and support as ‘territories of life’.

Notes

1. ICCAs – Territories and Areas Conserved by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities. See www.iccaconsortium.org.

Further Resources

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Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend is a co-founder and elected Global Coordinator (2010– present) of the ICCA Consortium, iccaconsortium.org. After developing the Social Policy Programme for the IUCN in the early 1990s, she has been active in the IUCN CEESP and WCPA Commissions ushering and leading the discipline of ‘governance for the conservation of nature’. She has worked in five languages in over sixty countries and published 25 volumes.

The late **M. Taghi Farvar** was a co-founder and in 2010 elected President of the ICCA Consortium, www.iccaconsortium.org. Son of a Shahsevan nomadic tribe in the Iranian Azerbaijan, Taghi defended the rights of indigenous people’s ancestral domains and promoted understanding of indigenous nomadic tribes as the original conservationists: <https://www.iccaconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Mohammad-Taghi-FARVAR-24-July-2018-1.pdf>.



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