

DR. DARIO NOVELLINO'S OSTROM AWARD SPEECH

First of all, best wishes for the successful outcomes of this 2021 General Conference. Thank you so much for this honor. I must say, I am truly humbled to be, although virtually, in the company of so many respectful colleagues who have dedicated their career to the study of the commons. And I wish to express my thanks to the members of the Elenor Ostrom Award Committee for choosing me, as one of the award's winners.

This must have been a very difficult choice, as there are so many incredible people out there who are risking their life for the protection of collective resources, every day, and also at this very moment in time. So although this award has been given to me as an individual - I wish to regard it as a 'collective' award.

I like to share this award with all the people who have inspired me over the years and have helped me to shape my own thinking. In particular, I am tankful to my good friend Grazia Borrini who decided to nominate me for this award and to all my other colleagues and friends who supported my nomination. I also like to thank those professors at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and at the University of Kent who believed in me and helped me to acquire an academic qualification. I did not use this qualification as a means to pursue an academic career but rather as a tool to empower my advocacy for indigenous peoples.

In fact, and I like to stress this, when I began my work to support the collective rights of native communities I had no academic qualification at all. I left my home in Italy when I was only nineteen. However, at the age of thirteen, my plan to live with remote indigenous communities was already set in my mind. As a young boy, I was dismayed by the destruction of tropical forest around the world and I wanted so much to live with the indigenous peoples, especially those communities in Borneo. And this is exactly, what I wrote in a letter dated back to 1976.

However, mysteriously, in 1983, at the age of 19th life took me to Canada after thousands of miles hitchhiking across Europe and North America. There I lived with the Inuit in a small village called Paulatuk, in the Northwest Territory. It was only in 1986 that I reached Southeast Asia, and I began to live with the Batak tribe in Palawan (this island is the last ecological frontier of the Philippines). Geographically, botanically and from an ethnological perspective, the area is an extension of Borneo. This is the place where I always wanted to be.

In 1987, when I was living with the Batak, a logging company penetrated the area causing much destruction and fear amongst the people. At that time, I organized the

community and helped them to file a petition against the logging company. This was submitted to Corazon Aquino, the first democratic president of the Philippines - after 21 years of Marcos dictatorship. A month later, the company license was revoked, that forest was saved and it is still in good conditions until now.

Of course, helping the Batak against companies and corporations had put my life at risk. Nevertheless, I continued to support them and other communities through legal and paralegal means, as well as through international campaigns. Thousands of hectares of ancestral domain have been secured since then.

But in 1992, something happened, I was stopped at the Manila Airport and discovered that my name had been included in the list of “persona non grata”. My passport was confiscated. Then, a friend lawyer told me that the only way for me to return to the Philippines was to affiliate myself to an academic institution and enter the country as a researcher. This would have protected me from false accusations, such as that of being a member of the communist guerrilla.

So, at that time, I took the only reasonable course of action open to me, I went back to Europe and applied for a Master in Social Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies and - a few years later - I won a scholarship to do a PhD in Environmental Anthropology at the University of Kent, which I completed in 2003.

So this is to say that my encounter with the academia took place several years after my engagement as an activist and advocate for indigenous peoples. Honestly, in my life I have never visited an indigenous community with the idea of doing a research on them, rather it was that very special encounter with these people that encouraged me to acquire an academic qualification.

It is in this respect that I would like to recognize the huge impact that the indigenous communities have had in my life, such as the Inuit of Paulatuk, the Penan of Sarawak, one of the most spiritually evolved people I have ever met, the Batek of Malaysia, the Sakai of Sumatra, the Hmong, Dzao and Jarai people of Vietnam and several others. But the indigenous people of Palawan, in the Philippines, are the people with whom I ended up spending most of my life, learning their language and becoming a member of their communities.

To them, and to my friends of the local Coalition against Land Grabbing, goes my highest gratitude. Living with the indigenous people has led to a total re-positioning of my own self to embrace their distinctive perspectives and worldviews. Until now I carry with me their wisdom and knowledge, which is now also my knowledge and -

whenever I go – and - as much as I can - (although in different cultural contexts) I try to pass it on, as for instance to my 10 years old twins girls Lavinia and Emilia.

It is because of these indigenous people that I came to the realization that a life spent to advocate for bio-cultural diversity and for the rights of traditional communities is, at least for me, the best life that I could have had but, surely, not the easiest and the safest.

There are a lot of things I have learned on this incredible journey, which I am unable to summarize here but, at least, I would like to say a few words on how my own work connects, somehow, with some of the empirical approaches of Elinor Ostrom.

The first thing has to do with collaboration on the governance of the commons. Elinor Ostrom believed that this collaboration is possible, also among individuals of different rationalities and within a large variety of contexts. Indeed, this is really the case. However - in my own experience - mutual and successful collaboration between people from different cultural backgrounds, for instance between indigenous people and foreign supporters like me, is possible but is not something that should be given for granted. This is because of different cognitive structures, different languages, ontologies and metaphysical presuppositions. So, while empathy with the people your work with is essential, this is not enough: one really needs to build a strong common ground with these communities, some sort of shared 'background knowledge'. This is not something that you can do in one week or in one month, it really requires a strong dedication and a life time commitment. And this is exactly why, I ended up spending almost three decades in the Philippines.

The Second consideration is on the circumstances that can constrain collective actions, in spite of the best intentions that one might have in promoting these. It is essential to be aware, always, of the complex relationship linking people amongst themselves, organizations with each others, as well as with the State and other powerful non-state agents (for instance corporations). If you, as an advocate for the commons, do not understand this complex set of relationships you might end up being part of the problem rather than a solution to it. For instance, in the Philippines, you have some of the best laws dealing with the commons in general: laws for the protection of the environment, laws for the recognition of ancestral land, laws for building up partnership between communities and government agencies and so on and so forth. However, all these laws are promoted and implemented by different government institutions, which have the tendency to operate as 'separate kingdoms'. So, as a result of this poor coordination amongst agencies, those laws dealing with the governance of the commons are generally

overlapping and even conflicting with one another.

So there is really a need for harmonizing these laws on the commons at the national level, to make them effective and efficient; but you cannot do this unless you harmonize first the different players, such as the key officials and politicians within the various government institutions. Now, from my own experience, to do this, it is very difficult and sometimes impossible. It is clear that, under these circumstances, the potential role of institutions as 'rules-in-use' (using Elinor Ostrom's own words) might be completely jeopardized.

Now we go to my third and final point

I would like to say that in this kind of work for the protection of common resources, one should always be aware and prepared on how circumstances can change at any time. You may spend many years fighting for the protection of an indigenous territory, and for having that area legally recognized and demarcated. But then the political scenario changes, an election takes place. Sometimes - just for half sack of rice - people will sell their votes, a new President comes along, new governors take the lead, the law is amended and modified and that territory for which you and the people have been fighting for, is open again to industrial exploitation.

This happens all the time in Palawan where so called 'core zones' and 'restricted zones' are reclassified as multiple use areas by the same government agency that should be in charge of Palawan sustainable development.

So this leads to another considerations: the outcomes of our actions cannot be measured in the short-medium term. Sometimes the ramifications of what we do can be felt many years later. So also when it seems that we have failed, we do not have to feel discouraged. Sometimes our failures become the beginning of a new victory that builds up very slowly, and this is very true, especially when you try to empower and build awareness amongst marginalized communities...it can take a long time.

Now, in this state of uncertainty that we all experience, and while the World around us is changing at an incredibly fast speed, it is difficult for anyone, and surely for me today, to provide any special recommendation for academicians, researchers and colleagues on how commons should be best protected and safeguarded for future generations.

I have no silver bullet; the only recommendation I could give is more at a higher ethical level and applies to all of us as human beings, independently of our professions and walks of life. For instance, I strongly believe that we should always

be aware that **Not only Words** but also **Silence** has consequences: “If you decide not to take a position in situations of injustice, then you are not just being neutral, rather you have chosen to become complicit with that system. So always **say Yes** when is time to say **Yes** and **say No**, when is time to say **No**; do not allow compromises to pollute your mind and your soul. So my final words or perhaps my own motto is simply this:

**Stand until your last breath for what is right,
for the collective interests,
defend beauty, defend innocence always,
have faith in others to succeed and Life will stand up for you.**

I believe that gaining this prestigious Ostrom award, today, is for me the most tangible and clear evidence of how these principles work.

So thank you all, again and again, for this incredible recognition.

Thanks