

Old wisdom can help us cope with new problems



A nomadic tribe moving to greener pastures in Chad.
[Photos: (above) David Stanley; (below) Fatakaya]

Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim believes that if people combine different types of knowledge, we will have a better chance to protect our planet from climate change.



Most of us check the weather on our smartphones before we go out. Not Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim (left). In her TED Talk, she says, “My best app is my grandmother.”

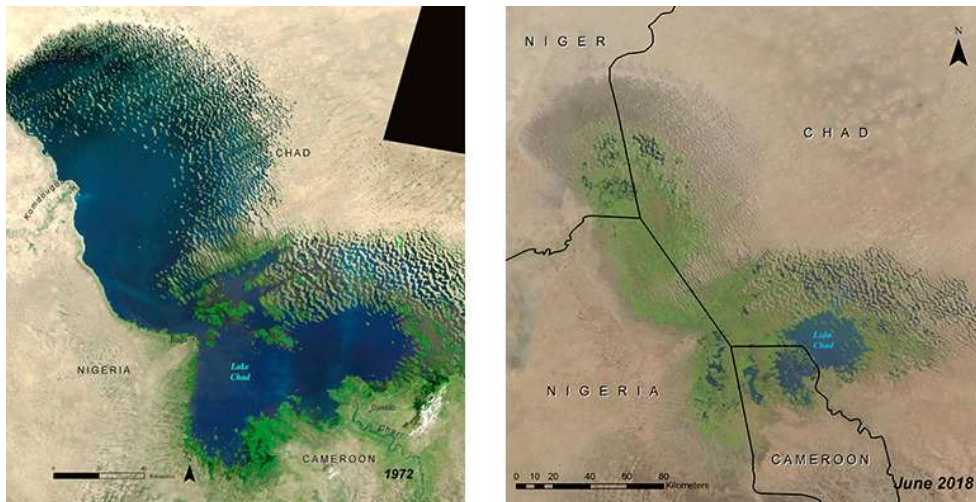
“She can tell you not only today's weather, but she can predict the next 12 months, if it's going to be a good rain season or not. She can tell you just by observing her environment, by observing the wind direction, the cloud position, the bird migration, the size of fruits, the plant flowers. She can tell you by observing the behaviour of her own cattle. That's

how she knows better the weather and the ecosystem that she's living in," says Ms Ibrahim about her grandmother.

Ms Ibrahim is from Chad, a country in north-central Africa. She comes from a community of nomadic cattle herders, also known as pastoralists. They move from place to place to find water and **pasture** for their cattle. They can move up to a thousand kilometers a year, while living in harmony with their ecosystem.

"We understand each other. For us, nature is our supermarket, where we can collect our food, our water. It's our pharmacy where we can collect our medicinal plants," she says. "But, it's our school, where we can learn better how to protect it and how it can give us back what we need."

Impacted by climate change



These satellite images taken in 1972 (left) and 2018 (right) show how much Lake Chad has shrunk.

[Photo: UN Environment Programme.]

Ms Ibrahim's community has been impacted by climate change. Her community lives near Lake Chad, a large freshwater lake in Africa. When Ms Ibrahim's mother was born, Lake Chad was about 25,000 square kilometers. When Ms Ibrahim was born 30 years ago, the lake had shrunk to 10,000 square kilometers. Now, it is just 1,200 square kilometers. Some 90 percent of the water has disappeared.

More than 40 million people live around Lake Chad and depend on it, including cattle herders, fishermen, and farmers.

"They do not depend on the end of the month's salary. They depend on the rainfall. They depend on the crops that are growing or the pasture for their cattle. The **shrinking** resources, you have many communities that are fighting to get access. The first come is the first served. The second have to fight unto death," says Ms Ibrahim.

Climate change is also impacting social life in Ms Ibrahim's community. Men and women have different roles in her community. The men are supposed to feed their families and take care of their communities. When climate change makes it hard for the men to do that, they migrate to the big cities. If they find jobs there, they will send money back. If not, they will try to migrate to Europe. "Some of them die there, but none of them stop going," says Ms Ibrahim.

While countries hosting migrants may face problems, Ms Ibrahim says that the women and the children left behind have even bigger problems. "They have to take care of the security, of the food, of the health of the entire family, children and old people," she says. She says these women are her heroes, because "they are **innovators**, they are solution makers, they are changing the little of the resources into the big for the community".

Traditional knowledge

Ms Ibrahim's people use their traditional knowledge to survive the difficulties of climate change. It helps them to be resilient. Ms Ibrahim explains that, among the **indigenous** peoples from the Pacific, "the grandma and the grandpa, they know where to get food after the hurricane hits them".

She wants to share the knowledge of the indigenous people with the rest of the world, to help people survive the impact of climate change. Ms Ibrahim points out that indigenous people around the world are saving 80 percent of the world's biodiversity. This is based on a World Bank report which shows that indigenous territories overlap with areas that hold 80 percent of Earth's species.

Ms Ibrahim shares an amusing anecdote. One day, she invited some scientists to her community. She says that as they were sitting down to talk, the nomadic people suddenly started to pack their things. The scientists asked if they were moving.

"No, we are not moving. It's going to rain," Ms Ibrahim told them.

"Oh, there's no cloud. How do you know it's going to rain?" the scientists said.

Heavy rain poured down just as the locals finished packing their things.

"We are seeing the scientists running around, hiding under trees and protecting their stuff. We already packed ours," recalls Ms Ibrahim.

Using all knowledge

After the rain stopped, the scientists were curious as to how the indigenous people knew it was going to rain.

“Well, the old woman observed the insects taking the eggs inside their homes. And, while the insect cannot talk or watch TV, they know how to predict to protect their generations, how to protect their food. So, for us it's the sign that it's going to rain in at maximum a couple of hours,” explained Ms Ibrahim.

“I think, if we put together all the knowledge systems that we have — science, technology, traditional knowledge — we can give the best of us to protect our peoples, to protect our planet, to restore the ecosystem that we are losing,” says Ms Ibrahim.

Ms Ibrahim feels that the traditional knowledge of indigenous people is important for all people. “Science knowledge was discovered 200 years ago, technology 100 years ago, but indigenous peoples' knowledge, it's thousands of years ago,” she points out.

Climate change will impact not just developing countries but developed countries as well. “We need the decision makers to change, scientists tell them, and we tell them, and we do have this knowledge,” she says. “We have 10 years to change it. Ten years is nothing, so we need to act all together and we need to act right now.”

– *By NG SOCK LING. Watch Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim's TED Talk at the Web version of this story. Visit www.digital.whatsup.sg.*

.....
VOCAB BUILDER

pasture (say “**pas**-cher”; noun) = grassland suitable for grazing by sheep or cattle.

shrinking (say “shring-king”; adjective) = becoming smaller.

innovators (say “in-no-**vey**-ters”; noun) = people who introduce new ideas or ways of doing things.

indigenous (say “in-**di**-je-nes”; adjective) = native, the original people of a place.