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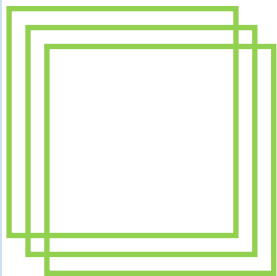


# Green Initiative policy brief



## Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change: From Victims to Change Agents through Decent Work





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Climate change affects indigenous and tribal peoples in distinctive ways, as do the policies and actions aimed at addressing it. As change agents however, indigenous peoples are essential to the success of policies and measures directed towards climate change. As workers they are essential to the success of a just transition to a green economy. (In this note, for practical reasons, the term “indigenous peoples” is preferred. It includes tribal peoples and is now also the most commonly used term.)

Due to the scale and scope of the threats indigenous peoples face with regard to climate change, including specific threats to their livelihoods, cultures and ways of life, their situation is different from that of other groups and of the poor. At the same time, indigenous peoples, with their traditional knowledge and occupations have a unique role to play in climate action (UNFCCC, 2015), cutting across both climate mitigation and adaptation efforts, as well as just transition policies.

### Key messages

**1** Unlike other groups in society, there are **six key characteristics** that indigenous peoples share where climate policies and the impacts of climate change are concerned.

**2** Traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples is essential for environmental conservation, furthering green jobs, enhancing resilience and addressing climate change.

**3** Indigenous peoples should be specifically considered in public policies, and it is vital to ensure that they are included in all levels of decision-making on sustainable development and climate action through strong mechanisms for consultation and participation.

### How are indigenous peoples threatened by climate change?

1) Indigenous peoples are among the poorest of the poor (World Bank, 2011), and thus the most threatened segment of the world’s population in terms of social, economic and environmental vulnerability. There are 370 million indigenous peoples, constituting nearly 5 per cent of the world’s population but representing 15 per cent of the world’s poor (World Bank, 2003), with 80 per cent spread across Asia and the Pacific (Rural Poverty Portal;

World Bank 2011), a region particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The World Bank (Hallegatte et al, 2016) estimates that 13 million people in East Asia and the Pacific could fall into poverty by 2030, with indigenous peoples hit the hardest. Such figures highlight an important and difficult challenge in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted with the pledge that “no one will be left behind”. Surmounting this challenge will require focusing on indigenous peoples and harnessing their potential as agents of change and development.

2) Indigenous economic, social and cultural activities depend on renewable natural resources that are most at risk to climate variability and extremes. Around 70 million indigenous peoples are dependent on forests to meet



Event Marking International Day of the Indigenous Peoples 2016 ©UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

their livelihood needs (See SDG 15, UN Sustainable Development website). They care for and protect 22 per cent of the earth’s surface and 80 per cent of the planet’s biodiversity (World Bank, 2008). Their role is particularly crucial in the sustainable management of resources as well as environmental and biodiversity conservation, which are essential for combating climate change.

3) Indigenous peoples live in geographical regions and ecosystems that are highly vulnerable to climate change. These include polar regions, humid tropical forests, high mountains, small islands, coastal regions, and arid and semi-arid lands, among others. The impacts of climate change in such regions have strong implications for eco-



system-based livelihoods on which many indigenous peoples depend (Hallegatte, 2016). Moreover, in regions such as the Pacific, the very existence of many indigenous territories are under threat due to rising sea levels (see fact sheet: indigenous peoples in the pacific region, UNPFII) that not only pose a grave threat to indigenous peoples' livelihoods but also to their cultures and ways of life.

- 4) High levels of vulnerability and exposure to climate change force indigenous peoples to migrate (Larsen et al, 2014). In most cases, migration is not an adequate solution for adaptation. Instead it makes people more vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and environmental hazards in the area of destination. It often leads to the loss of traditional knowledge, essential for climate action, and to the loss of their economic, social and cultural activities, which are equally important. Furthermore, transition to work in other activities in destination areas is particularly challenging for indigenous peoples, especially for indigenous women who face multiple forms of discrimination (Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Peoples' Issues, 2014).
- 5) Gender inequality is exacerbated by climate change. While indigenous women play a vital role in traditional and non-traditional means of livelihood, unpaid care work, and food security, they often face discrimination from within and outside their communities. Indigenous women are frequently forced to work in precarious conditions where they lack adequate access to social protection and are exposed to gender-based violence (Vinding and Kampbel, 2012; Dhir, 2015). For example, in many countries, domestic workers are primarily women from particularly socially disadvantaged groups, including indigenous peoples (Oelz and Rani, 2015). Climate change threatens to exacerbate existing gender inequalities while creating new risks from climate related shocks.
- 6) Indigenous peoples, along with their rights and institutions, often lack recognition (Dhir, 2015). Consequently, consultation with and participation of indigenous peoples in decision making is limited in the absence of dedicated public mechanisms established for this purpose. The limited capacity of their own institutions, organizations and networks compounds the situation. Indigenous peoples are rarely well-represented in political and institutional arenas and their needs are often not addressed in public policies. This is a root cause of social, cultural, economic and environmental vulnerabilities as well as discrimination and exploitation. In some cases however, alliances with workers' organizations have the potential of improving their influence.

## Indigenous peoples as agents of change?

Two key unique characteristics, inherent in no other group, make indigenous peoples critical agents of change in climate action: their wealth creation based on principles of a sustainable green economy and their unique knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is essential for adapting to climate change, and mutual recognition and integration with scientific knowledge has the potential of significantly increasing the effectiveness of adaptation (Adger et al., 2014, p758).

- 1) Indigenous peoples' economy primarily depends on natural resources and ecosystems, with which they share a complex cultural relationship. Natural capital is the core asset, and their economic activity does not allow for it to depreciate. In other words, their incomes depend on the value they derive from nature, for example sustainable agriculture and forestry, sustainably harvesting fish, bush meat, fruits, mushrooms, medicines, roots and other material for construction or handicrafts (FAO, 2013).

This means that 370 million people are at the vanguard of running a modern economic model based on the principles of a sustainable green economy. This is particularly important for climate change mitigation, especially regarding efforts directed at reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. For instance, Brazilian forests managed by indigenous peoples have shown 27 times less emissions due to practically zero deforestation as compared to forests outside their protected area (Stevens et al; 2014).

- 2) Indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge and cultural approach to the issue is unique, and of high relevance and value for climate change adaptation. For example, "climate smart agriculture" (CSA) incorporates a combination of traditional and modern techniques, which is one of the most cited and promoted techniques aimed at mitigating and adapting to climate change (FAO, 2013).

Research has also found that several traditional and innovative adaptive practices exist, including:

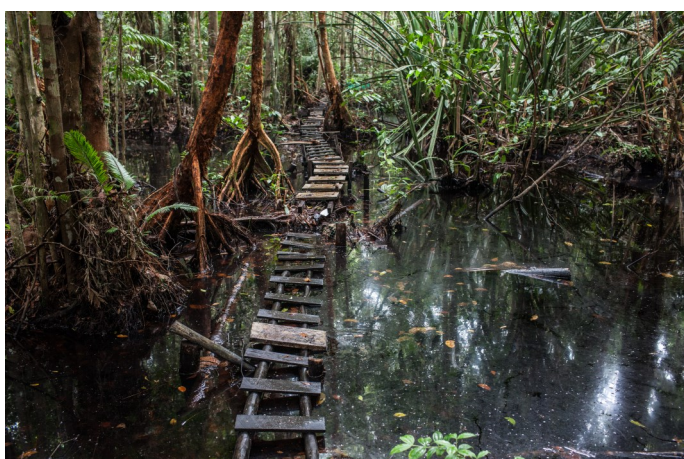
- ◇ shoreline reinforcement;
- ◇ improved building technologies;
- ◇ increased water quality testing;
- ◇ rainwater harvesting;
- ◇ supplementary irrigation;
- ◇ traditional farming techniques to protect watersheds;
- ◇ changing hunting and gathering habits and periods;
- ◇ crop and livelihood diversification;
- ◇ the use of new materials;
- ◇ seasonal climate forecasting;
- ◇ and community-based disaster risk reduction (Macchi et al, 2008).

While most disaster recovery efforts focus on rebuilding damaged infrastructure, another key approach is to design and support balanced development initiatives that would spur local economic growth while protecting the environment. This approach entails a number of soil and water conservation measures: vegetative measures (mulching and planting of vegetation); soil management measures (soil improvement) and physical measures (contour banks).

A combination of these measures are used to prevent land degradation (soil erosion and landslides) and reduce and guide run-off flow. Soil and water conservation measures not only bring agricultural benefits to local farmers but also reduces the risk of future disasters such as flooding and ensures the preparedness of local governments and communities for quick livelihood recovery when disasters strike.

### Policy level: Empowering Indigenous peoples as change agents

While evidence clearly suggests that indigenous peoples need to play a fundamental role for climate action to be suc-



Peat swamp forest in Berbak national park, Jambi province, Sumatra.  
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cessful, a number of obstacles continue to prevent them from realizing their full potential. Tackling these obstacles is an important first step towards achieving a just transition, attaining the Sustainable Development Goals, and tackling the threats of climate change.

### Promoting green enterprises, livelihoods generation and social protection

Policies promoting green entrepreneurship, creating decent work opportunities and green jobs, and promoting social protection can maintain and develop indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge and livelihood strategies while improving their working conditions and incomes in the framework of adaptation and mitigation policies. Effective social protection coverage can encourage indigenous peoples to take more risks and invest in or enhance innovation, and further

traditional knowledge based entrepreneurship development. Cooperatives and social solidarity organizations, for instance, can provide decent working opportunities and enhance indigenous peoples' capacity to secure their rights, while contributing to green growth (ILO, 2016). Social protection schemes that combine environmental and social objectives within a participatory framework for natural resource management can also play a major role in strengthening indigenous peoples' rights and achieving strong environmental outcomes (Schwarzer et al, 2016).

### Recognizing rights, promoting gender equality and building institutions

Securing the rights of indigenous peoples is dependent on strong mechanisms for consultation and participation, to ensure meaningful participation at all levels of decision-making, including with regard to national development plans and climate action. This also entails developing, with the participation of indigenous peoples, including indigenous women and youth, public policies that aim to address their particular social and economic vulnerabilities and create opportunities for them to pursue their own development priorities. Critically, the participation of indigenous women in decision making is key to overcoming gender inequality and discrimination against them. Efforts to close gender gaps that limit the participation of indigenous women in decision-making across all levels and to enhance their access to opportunities for sustainable livelihoods and income generation are critical for the empowerment of indigenous women, who play a significant role in sectors such as agriculture and forestry. Indigenous women's economic, social and political voice, and contributions, are vital for climate action to be meaningful and development to be sustainable.

### Coordination and collaboration grounded in evidence-based research

Policy coordination is essential to address the magnitude of threats posed by climate change. This entails greater engagement across policies and regimes regarding the climate, development, and labour and human rights standards, including increased coordination among national authorities with responsibility in these various areas. Collaboration across international, national, regional and local levels is also vital for the design and implementation of strong climate action. At the same time, for informed decision-making, knowledge is crucial in building an understanding both of the nuances and of the full scale and scope of indigenous peoples' vulnerability to climate change. Furthermore, a better understanding of the transformations underway in indigenous peoples' world of work, including with regard to their occupations and livelihoods, and their implications for the future of work, is critical for designing sound policies and interventions.



## Role of the Decent Work Agenda

The ILO has been at the forefront of promoting the rights of indigenous peoples, inclusive social protection floors, employment and livelihood opportunities, as well as sustainable forms of enterprises, and has a significant role to play in the efforts to address climate change and achieve sustainable development. A key objective of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda is to empower indigenous women and men -- which is crucial to ensure a just transition (ILO, 2015) towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all.

The ILO's targeted programmes and strategies, including those related to green jobs and indigenous peoples, are instrumental for realizing indigenous peoples' potential as crucial agents of change. They are also important for building on their traditional knowledge systems for effective climate action, as well as poverty reduction and green growth. Guided by the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169, ILO 1989), which calls for ensuring indigenous peoples' consultation and participation in decision making, the ILO approach to indigenous peoples' empowerment promotes social solutions to environmental problems and is well positioned to address the threats stemming from climate change.

### Resources:

This policy brief is based on International Labour Organization. 2017. *Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change: From Victims to Change Agents through Decent Work*, International Labour Office, Geneva .

For more information, see ILO topical page on indigenous and tribal peoples: <http://www.ilo.org/indigenous>

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