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International  
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**Technical Note**

# **Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change**

*From Victims to Change Agents through  
Decent Work*

2016



The Paris Agreement on climate change, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction highlight the growing international concern and commitment to addressing climate change and its social, environmental and economic implications. With a backdrop of these major achievements of the international community, this note outlines the situation of indigenous and tribal peoples in the context of climate change, and the role of the Decent Work Agenda in empowering people and communities, combating climate change, spurring green growth and achieving sustainable development. It suggests that indigenous peoples<sup>1</sup> are affected in distinctive ways by climate change as well as policies or actions aimed at addressing it. At the same time, it also highlights that as change agents, indigenous peoples are essential to the success of policies and measures directed towards mitigating, and adapting to, climate change and also to just transition policies as workers.

On the one hand, 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. On the other hand, indigenous peoples and their traditional knowledge as well as occupations have a unique role to play in climate action,<sup>2</sup> cutting across both climate mitigation and adaptation efforts, as well as just transition policies. Consequently, for climate action to be successful, indigenous peoples must be seen as powerful agents of change and enabled to access decent work opportunities and participate in the development, implementation and evaluation of sustainable policies as well as measures aimed at combating climate change. Simultaneously, it is also essential that the factors which make indigenous peoples uniquely vulnerable to climate change be addressed in a distinctive and targeted manner.

There are six key characteristics that indigenous peoples share where climate policies and the impacts of climate change are concerned. No other group in society has this combination of characteristics.



First, indigenous peoples are among the poorest of the poor,<sup>3</sup> and thus the most threatened segment of the world's population in terms of social, economic and environmental vulnerability. Nearly 15 per cent of the world's poor are indigenous peoples, even though indigenous peoples constitute an estimated 5 per cent

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> The Paris Agreement explicitly recognizes the importance of indigenous peoples' knowledge in climate action. For more information, see *The Paris Agreement*, UNFCCC, 2015, [http://unfccc.int/paris\\_agreement/items/9485.php](http://unfccc.int/paris_agreement/items/9485.php) [Accessed: 9 June 2016].

<sup>3</sup> World Bank: *Still among the poorest of the poor*, Indigenous Peoples country brief (Washington DC, 2011).

of the world's population.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, up to 80 per cent of over 370 million indigenous peoples worldwide are spread across Asia and the Pacific,<sup>5</sup> a region particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The World Bank<sup>6</sup> estimates that out of the 100 million people that could be pushed back into poverty due to climate change globally, 13 million people in East Asia and the Pacific could fall into poverty by 2030, thereby affecting indigenous peoples the hardest. These figures highlight an important and difficult challenge to 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 a focus on indigenous peoples and harnessing their potential as agents of change and development.

Second, for their economic, social and cultural activities, they depend on renewable natural resources that are most at risk to climate variability and extremes. At the same time, the sustainable and productive use of natural resources are key drivers for green growth and of vital importance in combating climate change. Around 70 million indigenous peoples are dependent on forests to meet their livelihood needs.<sup>7</sup> Although they account for 5 per cent of the world's population, they care for and protect 22 per cent of the Earth's surface and 80 per cent of the planet's biodiversity.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, their role is of particular importance in the sustainable management of resources as well as environmental and biodiversity conservation, which are essential for combating climate change.

Third, they live in geographical regions and ecosystems that are the most 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 ecosystem-based livelihoods on which many indigenous peoples depend.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in some regions, the Pacific region for example, the very existence of many indigenous territories are

#### **Indigenous peoples: dedicated international instruments and frameworks**

- *ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989* (No. 169) — the only international treaty on indigenous peoples that is open to ratification. It has been ratified by 22 countries so far.
- *ILO Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention, 1957* (No. 107) — the older ILO instrument on the issue. Though no longer open to ratification, it remains in force for 17 countries.
- *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007* — the most recent expression of indigenous peoples' aspirations at the international level.
- *World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, 2014* — a forum at which States reaffirmed their commitment to respecting, promoting and protecting the rights of indigenous peoples.
- *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2015* — adopted in 2015 with a pledge to leave no one behind, it called on indigenous peoples to engage actively in its implementation, follow-up and review.
- *Paris Agreement, 2015* — outcome of the 2015 summit on climate change, at which States highlighted the importance of indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge in combating climate change.

<sup>4</sup> World Bank: *Implementation of operational directive 4.20 on indigenous peoples: An independent desk review* (Washington DC, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> 70 per cent is the figure provided by IFAD and 80 per cent is the figure provided by the World Bank. See *Rural Poverty Portal. Statistics and key facts about indigenous peoples*, Powered by IFAD, n.d., [http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/topic/statistics/tags/indigenous\\_peoples](http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/topic/statistics/tags/indigenous_peoples) [Accessed: 9 June 2016]. Also see World Bank: *Still among the poorest of the poor*, Indigenous Peoples country brief (Washington DC, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> S. Hallegatte, M. Bangalore, L. Bonzanigo et al.: *Shock Waves: Managing the Impacts of Climate Change on Poverty*, Climate Change and Development Series (Washington DC, World Bank, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> See *Goal 15: Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss*, UN, n.d., <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/biodiversity/> [Accessed: 9 June 2016].

<sup>8</sup> World Bank: *Social dimensions of climate change: workshop report 2008* (Washington DC, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> S. Hallegatte, M. Bangalore, L. Bonzanigo et al.: *Shock Waves: Managing the Impacts of Climate Change on Poverty*, Climate Change and Development Series (Washington DC, World Bank, 2016).

under threat due to rising sea levels<sup>10</sup> that not only poses a grave threat to indigenous peoples' livelihoods but also to their cultures and ways of life.

Fourth, high levels of vulnerability and exposure to climate change force indigenous peoples to migrate.<sup>11</sup> In most cases, this is not an adequate adaptation solution, and instead makes them more vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and environmental hazards in the area of destination. Such migration often also leads to the loss of their traditional economic, social and cultural activities. Equally important, it leads to the loss of traditional knowledge, and this knowledge is essential for climate action to be successful. At the same time, transition to work in other activities in destination areas is particularly challenging for indigenous peoples, especially for indigenous women.<sup>12</sup>

Fifth, gender inequality, which is a key factor in the deprivation suffered by indigenous women, 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.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, they are frequently forced to work in precarious working conditions where they lack adequate access to social protection and are exposed to gender-based violence.<sup>14</sup> For example, in many countries, domestic workers are primarily women from particular socially disadvantaged groups, including indigenous peoples.<sup>15</sup> Climate change threatens to exacerbate indigenous women's particular vulnerability to discrimination, exclusion and exploitation, while creating new risks from climate-related shocks.



Sixth, and finally, indigenous peoples, their rights, and their institutions often lack recognition.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, consultation with and participation of indigenous peoples in decision making is limited in the absence of dedicated public mechanisms established for this purpose. Exclusion in decision-making processes is also compounded by the limited capacity of their own institutions, organizations and networks. The lack of consultation and participation is

a root cause of social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities, as well as discrimination and exploitation. More so than is the case for the non-indigenous poor, the social, cultural and economic needs of indigenous peoples are usually not addressed in public policies, and these peoples are rarely well-represented in the political and institutional arenas. In some cases, alliances with workers' organizations have the potential of improving their influence. In this context, the ILO Indigenous and

<sup>10</sup> *Fact Sheet: Indigenous Peoples in the Pacific Region*, UNPFII, n.d., [http://www.un.org/en/events/indigenousday/pdf/factsheet\\_Pacific\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/events/indigenousday/pdf/factsheet_Pacific_FINAL.pdf) [accessed 7 January 2016].

<sup>11</sup> For instance in the Arctic, accelerated rates of change in permafrost thaw, loss of coastal ice, and sea level rise, and increased weather intensity are forcing some indigenous communities in Alaska to relocate. See J.N. Larsen, O.A. Anisimov, A. Constable et al.: "Polar Regions", in V.R. Barros, C.B. Field, D.J. Dokken et al. (eds): *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part B: Regional Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 1567–1612.

<sup>12</sup> See Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Peoples' Issues: *Indigenous Peoples' Access to Decent Work and Social Protection* (2014).

<sup>13</sup> For instance in Asia, see *Indigenous Peoples in the World of Work: Snapshots from Asia* (Geneva, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, D. Vinding and E. Kampbel: *Indigenous women workers: with case studies from Bangladesh, Nepal and the Americas* (Geneva, ILO, 2012). Also see ILO: *Estudio sobre la situación laboral de las mujeres indígenas en el Perú* (Lima, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> M. Oelz and U. Rani: *Domestic work, wages, and gender equality: Lessons from developing countries*, Research Department Working Paper No. 7 (Geneva, ILO, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> For instance in Asia, see R.K. Dhir: *Indigenous Peoples in the World of work in Asia and the Pacific: A Status Report*. (Geneva, ILO, 2015).

Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169)<sup>17</sup> provides for an important framework for strengthening dialogue among all stakeholders, including indigenous peoples' organizations, governments, trade unions and employers' organizations to ensure meaningful consultation with and participation of indigenous peoples in decision making.

Despite, as well as because of their high exposure and vulnerability related to the six factors outlined above, there are two key unique characteristics which make indigenous peoples critical agents of change in climate action, characteristics which no other group exhibits.

First, indigenous peoples' economy primarily depends on natural resources and ecosystems, with which they also share a complex cultural relationship. As natural capital is their core productive asset, their economic activity does not allow it to depreciate: their incomes depend on the value they get out of nature, for example sustainable agriculture and forestry, sustainably harvesting fish, bush meat, fruits, mushrooms, medicines, roots, and other productive material for construction or handicrafts.<sup>18</sup> This means that 370 million people, approximately the size of the US population, are at the vanguard of running a modern economic model based on 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 (e.g. REDD+),<sup>19</sup> and the adaptation of agricultural

With a wealth of traditional knowledge and practices, indigenous peoples have an instrumental role to play in achieving the following goals. Without their meaningful participation, their knowledge and practices, effective climate action and sustainable development cannot be achieved:

- Ensuring biodiversity conservation and the sustainable management of natural resources such as forests or marine resources.
- Enhancing sustainable agricultural practices and food security.
- Enhancing sustainable livelihoods, creating green jobs and spurring climate-sensitive innovation, entrepreneurship and businesses.
- Achieving gender equality and enabling increased participation of women in decision-making and natural resource management, among other areas.
- Raising productivity and economic growth while taking into account environmental considerations.
- Securing peaceful, stable and resilient societies necessary for inclusive socio-economic development.
- Establishing strong mechanisms for monitoring and accountability so as to ensure that no one is left behind.

practices to climate change as well as green growth. For instance, Brazilian forests managed by indigenous peoples have shown a 27 fold reduction in emissions due to practically zero deforestation as compared to forest outside their protected area.<sup>20</sup>

And second, 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.<sup>21</sup> 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;

<sup>17</sup> The only international treaty on indigenous peoples that is open to ratification. It has been ratified by 22 countries so far. For the text of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), see [http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C169](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169)

<sup>18</sup> For example the Qashqai nomadic pastoralists in Iran and the Bantu tribes in Southern Africa. For more information on these examples, see FAO: *Climate Smart Agriculture: Sourcebook* (Rome, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> For instance, the IUCN has stressed that if REDD processes are not carefully designed and implemented through a rights-based approach, "they risk violating their [indigenous peoples'] rights and can increase their socio-economic and environmental vulnerabilities". See *Indigenous Peoples and REDD-plus: Challenges and opportunities for the engagement of indigenous peoples and local communities in REDD-plus*, IUCN, 2010, [http://www.iucn.org/sites/dev/files/import/downloads/iucn\\_briefing\\_ips\\_and\\_redd\\_aug\\_2010\\_summary.pdf](http://www.iucn.org/sites/dev/files/import/downloads/iucn_briefing_ips_and_redd_aug_2010_summary.pdf) [Accessed: 9 June 2016].

<sup>20</sup> C. Stevens, R. Winterbottom, K. Reytar et al.: *Securing Rights, Combating Climate Change: How Strengthening Community Forest Rights Mitigates Climate Change* (Washington DC, World Resources Institute, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> FAO: *Climate Smart Agriculture: Sourcebook* (Rome, 2013).

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.<sup>22</sup>

The ILO has been at the forefront of promoting the rights of indigenous peoples, inclusive social protection floors, employment and livelihoods opportunities, as well as sustainable forms of enterprises, including cooperatives, 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<sup>23</sup> 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), 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.

The ILO's 2015 strategy<sup>24</sup> for action regarding indigenous peoples was designed through a consensus-driven process and has been endorsed by its tripartite constituents. Its key elements are fundamental for empowering indigenous peoples, achieving sustainable development and combating climate change:

- Promoting Convention No. 169 for rights-based, inclusive and sustainable development
- Strengthening institutionalized dialogue, consultation and participation
- Improving livelihoods and working conditions
- Extending social protection
- Addressing specific challenges faced by indigenous women
- Closing the knowledge gap
- Enhancing and strengthening partnerships

<sup>22</sup> See M. Macchi, G. Oviedo, S. Gotheil et al.: *Indigenous and Traditional Peoples and Climate Change: Issues Paper* (IUCN, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> For more information, see ILO: *Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all* (Geneva, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> For more information, see ILO: *Indigenous peoples' rights for inclusive and sustainable development*, GB.325/POL/2 (Governing Body, Geneva, 2015). Available at: [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_412809.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_412809.pdf).

## **The ILO at work: *Promoting rights and participation as well as sustainable livelihoods and enterprises***

*Achieving land and livelihoods security in Cambodia:* The ILO, in partnership with the German Federal Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), has supported the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights to lands and natural resources in connection with the implementation of the country's 2001 Land Law. As of February 2015, the ILO had supported 166 indigenous communities, of which 114 received a certification of indigenous identity from the Ministry of Rural Development, 97 were registered as legal entities, and 16 obtained communal land titles. This intervention has strengthened indigenous peoples' rights and livelihoods security in Cambodia and has played an important role in safeguarding indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge, and providing access to decent work, which together are important precursors for the empowerment of indigenous women and men, enabling them to emerge as agents of change.

*Strengthening mechanisms for consultation and participation:* The ILO has played a key role in supporting the setting up of mechanisms for consultation with and participation of indigenous peoples across all levels of decision-making in several countries. In so doing, the ILO has been bringing together governments, trade unions, employers' organizations, and indigenous peoples' organizations. In 2014 and 2015, with the support of the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), a series of workshops were conducted in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica to improve negotiation skills and dialogue concerning indigenous peoples' rights. Similarly, in Peru, in 2014, the ILO conducted capacity-building activities that focused on participation in consultation processes, with the support of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) and in collaboration with the Ministry of Intercultural Affairs. Also in 2014, the ILO, together with the United Nations Indigenous Peoples Partnership agencies, supported the preparation of the Draft Framework Act on Prior Consultation in Bolivia, in which there were more than 500 participants, ranging from indigenous peoples' representatives to public officials. The strengthening of mechanisms for consultation and participation, in which the ILO possesses significant expertise, is the initial step required to ensure that interventions directed towards development, economic growth and climate change have positive outcomes for all stakeholders, especially those most at risk of being left behind.

*Fighting discrimination and securing rights in Cameroon:* Realizing the important role that the media play in safeguarding rights and destroying stereotypes, the ILO, supported by the European Union, organized training activities that brought together indigenous peoples and media professionals. This intervention sensitized media professionals and strengthened their ability to report on indigenous peoples' issues; established a channel of communication between the mass media and indigenous groups, enabling them to combat stereotypes together; and promoted respect for indigenous peoples' culture, identity and rights. Building such bridges between actors who play a crucial role in bringing about change, and ending cycles of discrimination so as to create an environment where identity, knowledge and innovation can prosper, are essential for the achievement of inclusive, sustainable and climate-resilient development.

**Selected ILO tools and resources:**

- [ILO topical web portal on indigenous and tribal peoples](#)
- [ILO topical web portal on Green Jobs](#)
- [Indigenous Peoples' Rights for Inclusive and Sustainable Development – ILO Strategy for Action](#)
- [Guidelines for a Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All](#)
- [Understanding the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 \(No. 169\) – Handbook for ILO Tripartite Constituents](#)
- [2030 Development Agenda – ILO Focus Targets](#)
- [Sustainable Development Goals: Indigenous Peoples in Focus](#)
- [Securing rights, creating jobs and ensuring sustainability: A cooperative way for empowering indigenous peoples](#)
- [Indigenous Peoples in Cameroon: A Guide for Media Professionals](#)
- [Indigenous Peoples in the World of Work in Asia and the Pacific: A Status Report](#)
- [United Nations Indigenous Peoples Partnership Success Stories – Cooperating to Promote and Protect Indigenous Peoples' Rights](#)
- [Estudio sobre la situación laboral de las mujeres indígenas en el Perú](#)



**Gender, Equality and Diversity Branch (GED)**  
Conditions of Work and Equality Department

**International Labour Organization (ILO)**  
4, route des Morillons  
CH-1211 Geneva 22, Switzerland  
Tel: +41 22 799 6730  
Email: [ged@ilo.org](mailto:ged@ilo.org)  
Website: [www.ilo.org/ged](http://www.ilo.org/ged)