

Recognising the contributions of Indigenous Peoples in global climate action?

An analysis of the IPCC report on Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability

On 28 February 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a groundbreaking [report on Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability](#), a contribution of the Working Group II (WGII) to the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6). This IWGIA briefing analyses the IPCC report's findings with regards to Indigenous Peoples and critically assesses how Indigenous Peoples' knowledge is regarded in broader global climate action.

In the new report, the IPCC claims to have made a major effort to integrate natural, ecological, social and economic sciences, and among its principles is the recognition of the interdependence between climate, ecosystems and biodiversity, and human societies. Linked to this, the report recognises

"...the value of diverse forms of knowledge such as scientific, as well as Indigenous knowledge and local knowledge in understanding and evaluating climate adaptation processes and actions to reduce risks from human-induced climate change"

As a result, in addition to being informed by more than 35,000 scientific papers, the IPCC explains that the new report has paid increased attention to the knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous scholars, and strengthened the focus on social justice. In line with this, the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) [reports](#) that it gained IPCC observer status in 2021. In addition to participating

as an expert reviewer and a contributing author of the new report and the *Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*, now as the first Indigenous Peoples' organization to achieve this observer status, the ICC can participate autonomously in IPCC meetings and provide direct interventions.

Vulnerability to human-induced climate change

The IPCC report concludes what we already know: Indigenous Peoples are among the most vulnerable to climate change. Particularly affected are the Arctic communities, which perceive and experience changes and impacts more accelerated than in the past, such as ocean acidification and loss of permafrost and associated impacts of methane release. Vulnerable Indigenous communities from the other socio-cultural regions –Africa; Asia; Central and South America and the Caribbean; Eastern Europe, Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia; North America; and the Pacific– are also exposed e.g. to severe droughts, extreme flood, fires and persistent organic pollutants. Like in the Arctic, the situation is particularly difficult for remote communities with high levels of endemism, whose territories face severe disruption.



Asháninka woman harvesting cocoa in Peru. Credit: Pablo Lasansky / IWGIA



Reindeer herder in Russia. Credit: Alexander Afansev /IWGIA

According to the IPCC, the vulnerability of Indigenous Peoples is produced and exacerbated by the intersection of multiple constructions that produce inequity –like gender, income, class–, and by the marginalisation that historically has excluded them. This marginalisation stems from patterns of inequity which have been shaped since colonial times and are reinforced in different forms today.

The impacts of human-induced climate change faced by Indigenous Peoples are daunting. The report highlights: malnutrition; water scarcity and food insecurity; mental health effects; exposure to fires; livelihoods losses and rising costs; and rising mortality and morbidity from climate-sensitive diseases, increased respiratory problems and greater exposure to floods and droughts. Further to this, the IPCC recognises that Indigenous Peoples are experiencing irreparable damage to their languages, knowledge systems and livelihoods due to loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services with their cascading effects.



Maladaptive practices

The IPCC report further finds that all these biophysical impacts and cultural losses diminish the otherwise strong adaptive capacity of Indigenous Peoples. In addition to this, many Indigenous communities are

affected by adaptation practices that fail to consider adverse outcomes and indeed reinforce inequalities and exposures to risks. The IPCC report recognises that such ‘maladaptive practices’ further increase the vulnerability of Indigenous Peoples. The risk of maladaptation is most significant when approaches fail to be interdisciplinary and do not include Indigenous Peoples’ knowledge. Particular emphasis is given to cultural and financial consequences of the relocation of Indigenous Peoples that distress cultural and spiritual bonds to the territories, disrupting their livelihoods and sense of place. Another maladaptive practice highlighted is the planting of unsustainable tree species that affect Indigenous Peoples’ rights, ecosystems, land tenure and adaptive capacity.



Rethinking global climate action

Current institutional arrangements and practices have been ineffective in reducing risks, reversing dependency, preventing maladaptation, and facilitating climate resilient development. Although the new report proposes justice approaches to avoid maladaptation and decrease vulnerability, the IPCC recognises that efforts to prevent severe risks in highly vulnerable contexts will not be sufficient, especially in relation to water. Accordingly, the report calls for the inclusion of diverse actors, especially Indigenous Peoples, in climate change governance, and collaboration between diverse knowledge systems.



Side event with Indigenous representatives at COP 25. Credit: Stefan Thorsell / IWGIA



Inuit delegation at COP25

This requires improving justice, equity and gender considerations, recognising and engaging Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, and integrating diverse cultural resources consistent with the rights of the Indigenous Peoples concerned.

Contributions of Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge holders

Due to their vulnerability and historical marginalisation, the IPCC notes that the participation of Indigenous Peoples in climate governance is an ethical and essential requirement. Such involvement also has multiple positive outcomes, including more equitable and socially just adaptation. These benefits are mainly attributable to the high value of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and are widely recognised throughout the entire report. The report's conclusions in this regard can be grouped into five main points:

1. Indigenous Peoples' knowledge is crucial to the resilience of social-ecological systems. This resilience is based on centuries of interaction with, and adaptation to, environmental change and the Indigenous Peoples' capacities to assess interrelated ecosystem functions. Indigenous Peoples' knowledge is associated with better management, conservation, and sustainability of biodiversity and therefore fundamental to developing so-called 'nature-based solutions'. These solutions are most successful when they are context specific and tailored to the ecological and cultural conditions of the particular area where they are implemented.

2. Indigenous Peoples' knowledge is fundamental to risk reduction. Indigenous Peoples possess information about past events to understand, assess and facilitate awareness of risks and their consequences. This allows them to improve their understanding and influence behaviours that generate new solutions to present issues in a contextualised manner. Appropriate risk management, in turn, promotes societal transformation.

3. Indigenous Peoples' knowledges and their incorporation into climate action enhance the effectiveness of local adaptation measures, especially in forest contexts. Evidence indicates that the co-management and community-based management of biodiversity by Indigenous Peoples also supports more equitable, effective and durable adaptation outcomes. Indigenous Peoples' knowledge plays a fundamental role in the search for solutions because of its localised characteristics and capacity to link diverse cultures, policy frameworks, economic systems, and biodiversity management. Indigenous Peoples promote intergenerational and holistic approaches that manage to overcome siloed approaches that characterise institutional adaptation approaches.

4. Knowledge of Indigenous Peoples is a fundamental element of climate justice. When Indigenous Peoples are engaged in decision-making, historical inequity and injustice processes are addressed through new approaches. In addition, the application of Indigenous Peoples' customary and traditional justice systems enhance equity in adaptation policy processes. Likewise, justice-based adaptation approaches reduce vulnerability and increase resilience.

5. The involvement of Indigenous Peoples is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable food and water systems. Evidence demonstrates that practices that support biodiversity and ecosystem integrity, such as Indigenous Peoples' practices, yield outcomes that enhance food and water security. The report attests to various adaptation options related to water and food in different socio-cultural contexts –such as rainwater harvesting, soil moisture conservation, agricultural diversification and adaptive ecological fisheries management– noting that their effectiveness is enhanced when genuinely engaging with Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge holders.

Collaborating with Indigenous Peoples in climate governance

The IPCC indicates that collaborating with Indigenous Peoples, promoting dialogue with [non-Indigenous] sciences, and strengthening their decision-making and leadership capacities, increases the chances of sustainable adaptation and climate resilient development. Furthermore, the involvement of Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge holders in climate governance has several positive outcomes related to justice and equity. Such involvement and recognition demand the strengthening of self-determination, the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights, and the support of Indigenous knowledge-based adaptation. This in turn requires more flexible climate governance systems that challenge the values and interests that have underpinned hegemonic adaptation and mitigation practices to date. In this way, policy makers gain the best available information upon which to base their decisions, with potential for wider and more equitable outcomes for all.

The report recognises the calls for justice by Indigenous Peoples' movements. Furthermore, it points out that climate action is interdependent with sustainable development. Both processes must be based on a justice and equity approach that reduces barriers and strengthens Indigenous Peoples' agency in decision-making.

Evidence also shows that processes of maladaptation can be prevented by paying attention to recognitional, procedural and distributional justice, and by facilitating the conditions for communities themselves to adapt in order to avoid harm. This calls for more flexible climate governance that aims for long-term goals and assesses the risks and trade-offs of potential responses. The report importantly concludes that rights-based approaches,

participatory methodologies, the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, consultation and informed consent are essential elements for this to be achieved.

Moving forward

In comparison with previous IPCC reports, the new report is a definite step forward with regards to recognising Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge systems. That said, this recognition seems to be mainly attributed to local actions. The effectiveness of many practices by Indigenous Peoples is acknowledged, but the values and worldviews that underpin them –and contribute to rethinking the social and cultural causes of climate change– are not explored in depth. Diminishing the contribution of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge (or 'knowledges' to express the full range and diversity) and customary institutions to their specific territories, fails to recognise their contribution to addressing the crisis of climate change on a global scale and from a holistic perspective.

Similarly, although the IPCC acknowledges processes of knowledge co-production, the report speaks primarily of the integration of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge. This is somewhat odd in that the IPCC also recognises that integration is generally interpreted as the mere inclusion of Indigenous peoples' knowledge in strategies guided by [non-Indigenous] science, rather than as horizontal collaboration. This approach towards Indigenous Peoples' knowledge reproduces the compartmentalisation that has long characterised adaptation policies. Imposed on Indigenous Peoples, these measures fail to comply with Indigenous Peoples' protocols and indeed their rights. They perpetuate the marginalisation and rejection of entire knowledge systems deeply linked to the ecosystems that suffer the adverse impacts of climate change.





Maasai woman in Kenya. Credit: Espen Wæhle / IWGIA

This shortcoming is closely related to how IPCC reports are produced. They are primarily informed by non-Indigenous scientific knowledge that considers relative evidence, i.e. peer-reviewed articles. Although this evidence refers to Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, this does not ensure that Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge holders contribute equitably and horizontally to how a report is shaped.

Furthermore, the collaboration with Indigenous authors and organisations, and their particular contributions, are not appropriately acknowledged in the report. Indigenous authors are represented only by the countries where they live or work, rather than by their peoples or socio-cultural regions. This infringes their right to self-identification.

Therefore, although the contributions of Indigenous authors were recognised and more attention was paid to Indigenous Peoples' knowledge during this 6th IPCC Assessment Report cycle, recognition of this knowledge as holistic and broader systems, rooted in and distilled through interaction with the territories, remains an outstanding debt.

The report notes that the barriers that marginalise Indigenous Peoples from decision-making processes, and contribute to their vulnerability, can be traced back to structures of inequity forged during colonial times. However, there is no in-depth analysis of how these colonial processes influence how climate change

and especially adaptation is addressed. Nor does the report include a proper reflection on how the IPCC may contribute to reinforcing or contesting these patterns.

IWGIA recommends that the IPCC looks more closely at the relationship between climate vulnerability, inequality, and colonialism for its next cycle while examining the diverse and contextualised responses that Indigenous Peoples are deploying to overcome the feedback loops of these barriers. The IPCC can also explore further, in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples, potential approaches to better assess the impacts of climate change on the interrelated rights of Indigenous Peoples and their communities, as yet incomplete in the absence of the recognition of their knowledge.

Further to the above, the IPCC also falls short of considering the diversity and the intersectionality among Indigenous Peoples. The references are often presented without acknowledging the diversity of Indigenous Peoples from the seven socio-cultural regions of the world. Also omitted are specific groups within Indigenous Peoples themselves. This is especially the case for women, who tend to be pushed to decide between identifying themselves as "women" or "Indigenous" in adaptation policies. Their omission may increase existing inequalities within the same communities. Also missing is a more substantial mention of elders, who along with children are central to the intergenerational transmission of this knowledge.

Meaningful recognition of Indigenous Peoples also necessitates recognition of the particularities that affect each people, noting how structural inequalities can be reproduced even within the same communities. The particular situation, and concrete contributions, of different Indigenous Peoples and particular groups among them, should be examined more closely in the next cycle.

To avoid compartmentalisation of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, it is necessary to involve Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge holders in a permanent and differentiated way in IPCC processes. This can be addressed by including more Indigenous authors – especially Lead Authors– and generating formal mechanisms for informed, sustained and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples, and especially knowledge holders, in IPCC meetings and discussions.

Accordingly, it would be expected that in its next cycle, the IPCC examines how horizontal collaboration between plural knowledge systems can facilitate co-production of knowledge. It would also be necessary to look more deeply into how these collaborative processes translate into adaptation policies and promote transformative change. Addressing these gaps will strengthen the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' contributions to climate change adaptation.



Recommendations

Following the IPCC WGII assessment, and seconding the declarations of ICC, IWGIA calls for recognition of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge (or knowledges) in national and global climate action to ensure climate resilient development and true climate justice. States must acknowledge all the evidence that shows that strengthening and implementing Indigenous knowledge-based adaptation practices, as well as the rights of Indigenous Peoples at the national, regional and local level, including the right to self-determination, goes hand in hand with the transformative change required to effectively and comprehensively respond to climate change. Based on this evidence, it is possible to provide following specific recommendations for States:

1. Strengthen the direct participation of Indigenous Peoples in the design and implementation of all instruments and plans that address climate change, considering territorial diversity and an intercultural and gender approach. All based on processes of Free, Prior and Informed Consent and effective empowerment of Indigenous Peoples consistent with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).



Indigenous woman farming in Peru. Credit: Pablo Lasansky / IWGIA.

2. Establish permanent mechanisms for the participation of Indigenous Peoples in national climate governance that is inclusive of territorial diversity and specific cultural contexts.

3. Strengthen monitoring and reporting systems that allow for the effective engagement of Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge holders, and establish grievance mechanisms to ensure the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives and understanding of climate change impacts upon them and their communities.

4. Secure meaningful and respectful recognition of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems, promoting the horizontal collaboration with non-Indigenous knowledge systems and the co-production of knowledge – consistent with the protocols and guidelines of the Indigenous Peoples concerned, and always taking into consideration recognition of and respect for Indigenous Peoples' interrelated rights.

5. Include Indigenous representatives in national delegations in climate change conferences and intergovernmental fora, and strengthening both the capacities of UN member states and Indigenous Peoples for such participation.

6. Affirm, acknowledge, welcome, and provide the resources to strengthen Indigenous communities' capacity, based on the Indigenous knowledge systems and customary institutions of the Indigenous Peoples concerned.

7. Consistent with the desires of Indigenous Peoples' organisations, include Indigenous representatives in the national delegations of IPCC plenary meetings, including sessions concerning potential creation of a durable mechanism to ensure direct Indigenous peoples' participation in the IPCC processes.

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International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) is a non-governmental human rights organisation promoting, protecting and defending the rights of Indigenous Peoples for more than 50 years. We support Indigenous Peoples' advocacy at the international climate negotiations at the UNFCCC.

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Indigenous man farming in Peru. Credit: Pablo Lasansky / IWGIA