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POLICY BRIEF

Indigenous peoples, water, and climate change

This policy brief was prepared following the momentous UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP25) outcome in which Parties adopted a two-year workplan for the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples' Platform (LCIPP). The adoption of the workplan recognizes the important role and contribution of indigenous peoples as partners and agents for change, equipped with traditional knowledge, customs, and solutions in mitigating and adapting to climate change. As Parties prepare for COP26, including the task of enhancing their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), this policy brief highlights water-related insights and solutions emanating from indigenous communities in our global response to climate change.

Background

Indigenous peoples, defined as communities that live within, or are attached to geographically distinct traditional habitats or ancestral territories, and who identify themselves as being part of a culturally distinct society or community (WHO, 2020), constitute more than 370 million people spread across 90 countries, accounting for 5 per cent of the world's population (World Bank, 2019). They play a vital role when it comes to the environment – they are custodians of many of the world's most fragile and important ecosystems, including water ecosystems and headwaters, and tend to have significant knowledge of the natural resources where they live. Indigenous peoples occupy, own or manage an estimated 20–25 per cent of the Earth's land surface (UNDESA, 2019), and this land area, amounting to about 38 million sq km, is estimated to contain about 80 per cent of the Earth's remaining biodiversity and intersects with about 40 per cent of all terrestrial protected areas and ecologically intact landscapes (ibid).

Indigenous peoples' relationship to nature can be understood as deep connections to specific territories, their local environment and water in its various forms and bodies. Their relationship to water can often be strongly connected to their spiritual worlds, with water seen as a sentient or living entity. The values and perceptions of water are built upon social-cultural values that place importance on the relationship and the interconnections between people and water. Many indigenous value systems often contain a strong ethic of stewardship as opposed to a resource-centric principle which focuses on the management of waters for a specific purpose. Stewardship, in this context, implies a role in making sure that water bodies flow as they should and that the river basins or lakes are supported to be able to reach their fullest purpose. Many indigenous peoples' management systems look to balance immediate and future human needs with those of plants, animals, and spirits based on traditional ecological knowledge and principles and practices (Finn & Jackson, 2011).



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Water risks in the context of climate change

Many of the adverse effects of climate change manifest themselves as changes in water availability and quality, affecting the human rights to water, food, and sanitation. Increased climate variability will affect the availability of water, in terms of both quantity and quality, and expose already vulnerable populations and ecosystems to even greater risks (UNESCO, UN-Water, 2020). Too much water (floods and extreme weather), too little water (droughts and desertification), or too dirty water (extreme weather events can lead to contamination of fresh water) will result from climate change affecting the hydrological cycles upon which natural and human environments entirely depend.

Vulnerable groups, such as indigenous peoples, especially indigenous women, and local communities are among the first to face the direct water-related consequences of climate change due to their wide-ranging reliance on natural resources and ecosystems. They are especially vulnerable to, and disproportionately impacted by, its effects on food security and agriculture among other factors. According to the FAO, indigenous peoples' holistic foods systems combine gathering, hunting, and cultivation and rely on communal resources like forests, lakes, rivers, lands, and pastures. This means that climate change-induced water risks pose a direct threat to their food security. For instance, the reduction in Arctic sea ice affects wildlife distribution and complicates ice-based travel, undermining the ability of Inuit hunters to secure food. Communities located across the Pacific are directly threatened by partial or total disappearance of their lands as a result of sea level rise due to climate change. Indigenous pastoralists in Turkana County, Kenya, are struggling because climate change is negatively affecting water supplies, grazing opportunities and livestock herds, and increasing competition, conflict and insecurity (HRW, 2015).

Resilience inspired by indigenous peoples' knowledge and solutions

Indigenous peoples manage the aforementioned water-related risks in a changing climate with traditional knowledge and solutions that deserve greater attention and consideration within national and global climate action arenas. Indigenous peoples' traditional ecological knowledge is often based on a life lived in marginal and challenging environments, already implementing what could be termed as both mitigation and adaptation strategies as part of ancestral or traditional natural resources management (Kelles-Viitanen, 2018). These strategies include traditional responses to drought or other disasters and strategies for reducing vulnerability, that have been passed on from one generation to the next (UNISDR, 2009).

Water-related ecosystems such as lakes, rivers, and vegetated wetlands are among the world's most biologically diverse environments and provide multiple benefits and services to society, many of them crucial for both reaching several of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement (UNESCO, UN-Water, 2020). Many of these ecosystems, particularly forests and wetlands, are at risk, and with them their water-related ecosystem services. It has been demonstrated that complex systems of water harvesting, conservation, and management can successfully be developed in parallel with conflict resolution mechanisms rooted in indigenous peoples' collective responsibility to protect the water resources for future generations (WWF et

al., 2005). A stewardship approach based on social and cultural values and improvement of the overall wellbeing of ecosystems can consequently enhance nature-based solutions (NBS) and contribute to improved climate resilience.

In addition to knowledge, traditional legal systems and cultures have proven effective at conserving land, water, biodiversity, and ecosystems, including forests (UNPFII, 2018), and as such, indigenous peoples provide important responses to many problems attributed to climate change, including water challenges.

For instance, indigenous women and elders in the community are often the bearers and keepers of such knowledge and transfer it across generations. This is through the role they play in the community and traditional practices such as after-life cleansing. For instance, women often hold the main responsibilities in domestic water handling. A study conducted by SIWI on [Water, sanitation and hygiene, and indigenous peoples](#) (Jiménez et al., 2014), outlines such endeavours and recommends that holistic views of water and environment and of human health and society, including recognition of the traditional ecological knowledge, are needed to inform and influence the way resources and services are managed in indigenous areas and beyond.

Indigenous peoples and the UNFCCC

Indigenous peoples groups have, since the early 2000s, experienced increased recognition at the international level, including the groundbreaking United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007. However, translating this political recognition into concrete progress remains a great challenge (IWGIA, 2019). Some promising strides have been made more recently: the 2018 Green Climate Fund's Indigenous Peoples Policy sets the standard for incorporating indigenous peoples' considerations when the Fund makes financing decisions on climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) made their first-ever acknowledgment of indigenous peoples' knowledge and crucial role in implementation of ambitious climate action through its 2019 Special Report on Climate Change and Land. Despite these advances, only a few concrete platforms for meaningful engagement between indigenous groups and national or local governments exist, and still too few decisions are made at the international level that take into account indigenous peoples' perspectives, knowledge, and solutions.

In this context, the establishment of the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) in 2008 as the caucus for indigenous peoples participating in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) processes marks a significant milestone. The IIPFCC represents the caucus members who attend the official UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) and intersessions of the subsidiary bodies in between COPs. Its mandate is to build agreement specifically on what indigenous people will negotiate for in specific UNFCCC processes.

The Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP), created at COP21 in 2015, serves as a mechanism for developing common positions and statements of indigenous peoples, and for undertaking effective lobbying and advocacy work at UNFCCC meetings and sessions. The platform was established to

strengthen the knowledge, technologies, practices, and efforts of local communities and indigenous peoples in relation to addressing and responding to climate change. The platform also aims to facilitate the exchange of experience and the sharing of best practices and lessons learned on mitigation and adaptation in a holistic and integrated manner, and to enhance the engagement of local communities and indigenous peoples in UNFCCC processes.

Three years later, in 2018, the Facilitative Working Group of the LCIPP was established as a constituted body at COP24 to further operationalize the LCIPP and facilitate the implementation of functions related to knowledge, capacity for engagement, and climate change policies and actions. Composed of 14 representatives, half who are representatives of Parties, and the other half representatives from indigenous peoples' organizations across different geographies, the Facilitative Working Group made additional progress at COP25 when its first-ever two-year workplan was approved by Parties. The workplan outlines 12 activities, with the first thematic focus being on Food and Water Sovereignty. As the history of indigenous rights recognition and empowerment at the global level has shown, there is a long way ahead in connecting local and global processes. The workplan presents a unique opportunity for translating into action what it means for indigenous communities to work on a formal international process and to bring positive change to the lives of indigenous communities on the ground. There is also an opportunity to connect with other processes across the UNFCCC (including other constituted bodies within the UNFCCC as well as with Parties and observers) and to build on the work of both the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change Caucus and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Finally, as countries undertake the task of updating their NDCs and enhance the ambition of their contributions and goals in 2020, the LCIPP is actively contributing to enhancing the recognition and inclusion of indigenous peoples and their traditional and local knowledge in countries' NDCs.

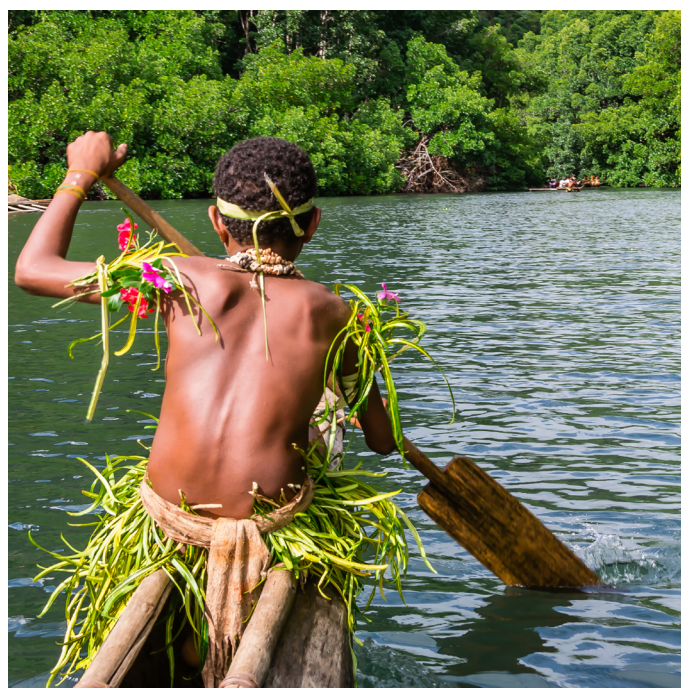


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Recommendations

- **Provide platform to indigenous peoples and involve them in relevant policy processes.** National and local governments and civil society organizations should continue supporting the participation of indigenous peoples and their voices. Supporting their representation in relevant global, national, and sub-national policy fora including UNFCCC platforms such as the LCIPP and the NDC processes is a good start.

The paper on 'Enabling Environment for Participation in Water and Sanitation' (Jiménez et al., 2019), provides a useful framework on participation and highlights the need to focus on both the contextual (legal jurisdiction and recognition i.e. often women and minority and vulnerable groups like indigenous peoples are not recognized in water related policies and laws) and procedural elements (adequate representation and leadership of women and vulnerable groups such as indigenous communities, and integration of their traditional knowledge) of participation in water services management.

- **Include and promote indigenous peoples' knowledge and practices in climate policies.** Indigenous peoples' knowledge and experiences in water stewardship or governance should be integrated in dominant climate policies, at international, national, and local levels. This also includes bridging the gap between traditional and scientific knowledge to make contributions from indigenous peoples to climate action more visible. Indigenous groups and local communities are custodians of many of the world's most fragile and important ecosystems, hence indigenous knowledge and customs offer solutions to both mitigation of and adaptation to climate change.

The report on [Working with indigenous peoples in rural water and sanitation: Recommendations for an intercultural approach](#) (2014) suggests ways for implementing an intercultural approach throughout the project cycle in rural water and sanitation projects with indigenous peoples, based on research in Latin America. Among the recommendations are developing intercultural dialogues to build long-term supportive relations, deeper trust and mutual respect among government, development agencies, and service providers with the indigenous communities across different age groups, gender, and disabilities.

- **Respect, protect and promote the rights of indigenous peoples.** Despite the international framework, many countries have still not recognized and integrated indigenous peoples' rights in their national legislation. National and global policymakers should respect, protect, and promote the rights of indigenous peoples to their land and water resources and self-determined development, including free prior informed consent, in climate policy and action plans (including NDCs).

The global climate agenda as well as the Sustainable Development agenda directly influence and impact the lives of millions of indigenous peoples around the world. There is an imperative to analyse any adverse human rights impact of climate mitigation and adaptation measures on indigenous peoples. Applying a human rights-based approach and equitable partnerships are critical in the pursuit of and progress on goals and ambitions addressing water, health, and environmental sustainability.

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About this publication

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SIWI is a leading water institute, focused on water governance and capacity building in order to reach a just, prosperous and sustainable water wise world. It is well-known for its research, knowledge generation, and applied science, which helps to develop policy recommendations and supports the implementation of programmes. In addition, SIWI uses its trusted convening power to facilitate multi-stakeholder dialogues, most evident in its annual event, World Water Week.

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