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ANALYSIS: IPCC Report on 1.5 degrees Celsius

Securing rights of indigenous peoples and local communities may curb global warming

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Implementing a coordinated global response to curb demand for energy and eliminate further deforestation would reduce the need to deploy artificial carbon dioxide removal technologies, according to a decisive report from the U.N. scientific panel on climate change.

The [report](#) released this week by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), serves to inform global efforts on commitments made under the 2015 [Paris Agreement](#) to keep temperatures in check. It states that human activities are likely to push global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels between 2030 and 2052, and urges rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in human activity toward the environment.

The IPCC report makes some references to human rights and equity in the context of climate change, based on the advances made in the Paris Agreement and the [U.N. Sustainable Development Goals](#). But for the most part, it reiterates more of the IPCC's highly technical approach to designing solutions to global warming, a stance criticized by a range of stakeholders because it underplays the connection between human rights and climate change.

This perspective is dangerous as there is evidence that recognizing, protecting and expanding access to the land rights of [indigenous peoples and local communities](#) is an effective, efficient and equitable solution to climate change.

CLIMATE CHANGE, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES – THE EVIDENCE

The [Climate, Land, Ambition & Rights Alliance](#) (CLARA), recently addressed the IPCC's approach, noting that “the battle against climate change should be inseparable from efforts to ensure food security, protect human rights and protect and restore natural ecosystems.”

“We believe dramatic changes in the corporate-dominated global food system—and changes in individual diet—are necessary for preventing dangerous climate change,” [states](#) the [global network](#), which brings together [non-profit organizations](#), scientists, farmers and indigenous leaders to demonstrate the value of local solutions to address climate change.

CLARA expresses concerns that a commitment to large-scale carbon removal technologies risks reinforcing authoritarian state tendencies, reduction of individual human rights, the rights of indigenous and local communities, food insecurity, and a hollowing out of provisions in the [Convention on Biological Diversity](#) by damaging ecosystem integrity.

Many other voices over past decades have reflected upon this connection between climate change and rights, noting that the effects of climate change will be most severe for already marginalized groups such as indigenous peoples and local communities, and even more so for [women](#) in those groups.

In response to these calls, the Paris Agreement and the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) are well aligned with the two main international agreements over the rights of indigenous peoples—the [U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) and the International Labour Organization’s [Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention](#). This recognition is laudable and calls attention to the role of indigenous peoples and their traditional territories in the global climate change effort. However, in practice, their rights — especially those related to land and resource tenure — are not always recognized or respected.

Although they represent 5 percent of the world’s population, these forests are central to global environmental goals, including the Convention on Biological Diversity, the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement as a series of [climate mitigation initiatives](#) exists that are to be implemented in them. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples estimates that 50 to 80 percent of this land overlaps areas managed for conservation such as protected areas. Furthermore, indigenous peoples and local communities [occupy areas](#) that hold at least 24 percent (54,546 MtC) of the total carbon stored aboveground in tropical forests. Almost half of that carbon is at risk, as it is situated in territories [lacking formal recognition](#).

Recent research shows that recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities to land tenure is central to meeting global climate goals. A [study comparing different governance regimes](#) in the Peruvian Amazon revealed that titled territories avoided twice as much deforestation and forest degradation as protected areas.

Studies have also shown the efficiency of investing in securing land rights of indigenous peoples and local communities as a cost-effective measure toward climate change mitigation. For example, when compared to carbon capture and storage initiatives, the [costs of recognizing tenure rights](#) are up to 29 times lower than the estimated costs for coal power plants, and up to 42 times lower than natural gas plants.

Furthermore, there is general agreement that securing land rights has an impact on poverty and inequality. Collectively held land is key for the livelihoods of 2.5 billion people around the world. This includes 370 million [indigenous peoples](#), who disproportionately make up 15 percent of the world’s economic poor.

Work by the World Bank [links strong tenure rights](#) with higher income and socio-economic stability, and there is also evidence that tenure security can address the unequal burden of poverty experienced by women.

CLIMATE CHANGE, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES – WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS

Enough scientific evidence – as well as expectation and need to involve forested areas stewarded by indigenous peoples and local communities in climate change mitigation plans – exists to ensure they are central to any related global effort. This fact should also make it a priority to recognize the lands they occupy but to which they do not hold formal rights.

However, these factors are not reflected in action on the ground. This sector of the population legally owns just 10 percent [of the land](#) they customarily claim. Their territories remain threatened by the global demand for natural resources, and their leaders have been subject to a [growing number](#) of murders, death threats and acts of sexual violence and intimidation by private and government actors. This level of violence has been recognized in the recent [Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean](#) (Escazu Agreement), signed by 24 Latin American and Caribbean countries to guarantee protection for environmental and land defenders.

Unlike the aforementioned international agreements, national legal and political systems have historically limited the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities to land and resources, demonstrated by the fact that [only 21 countries](#) include clear commitments in their [Nationally Determined Contributions](#) to implement land and resource tenure initiatives related to indigenous peoples and local communities.

Evidently, repairing the situation requires more than rights recognition given that the rights of indigenous peoples to ancestral lands and to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) are [already recognized](#) internationally. [Challenges and threats continue](#). Even when rights have been formalized, reflecting a wider ambivalence in addressing inequality and righting historical wrongs.

Climate change is expected to have its most devastating effects on indigenous peoples, local communities and other vulnerable groups. Therefore, mitigation strategies should be based on rights and justice to avoid exacerbating this fundamental inequity. The restoration of tropical forests cannot take place without the restoration of the rights of those who inhabit them.

CLIMATE CHANGE, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES – WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN

- Recognizing, protecting and expanding access to the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities over land is an effective, efficient and equitable climate change solution.
- A transition to rights-based approaches to climate change must be accompanied by a push to ensure and expand the capacity to exercise recognized rights.
- Re-engage with the men and women of indigenous and local communities as rights holders and bearers of climate solutions rather than project beneficiaries.



- Without an emphasis on rights, initiatives in the territories of indigenous peoples and local communities may be unsuccessful and risk exacerbating inequity in some of the most vulnerable ecosystems.
- Climate finance should prioritize financial and technical support to address tenure-related issues.