



COVID-19, Biodiversity and Climate Change: Indigenous Peoples Defining the Path Forward

Webinar Report




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Indigenous Peoples and local communities manage more than half of the world's land. These biodiverse ancestral lands are vital to the people who steward them and the planet we all share. But governments only recognize indigenous and community legal ownership of 10 percent of the world's lands. Secure tenure is essential for safeguarding the existing forests against external forces. This is specifically true for forests managed by Indigenous Peoples, where much of the world's carbon is stored.

Recent research states that the recognition of customary tenure in these areas is a highly efficient and cost-effective way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions caused by deforestation. In countries that provide stronger legal rights to indigenous communities to own and manage forests, there is an overwhelmingly positive correlation with reduction of land degradation, and the stabilizing of forested landscapes.

As the world faces an urgent need to reduce carbon emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, more than 26 million hectares of forest are still being cut down every year. To understand the connection between land rights and climate change, it is crucial to recognize that most of the world's forests are managed by local and indigenous communities. However, environmental degradation from deforestation and loss of biodiversity, environmental pollution, contamination of rivers and water sources and extractive industries have had a negative impact on indigenous communities.

This webinar explored the resilience of Indigenous Peoples and their capacity to face the impacts of climate change indigenous landscapes and their community responses based upon fine-tuned local knowledge. It explored direct actions being taken by indigenous communities to defend their territories against those who seek to profit from the COVID-19 crisis and undermine these efforts.

Moderator:

- Zoe Tabary, Property Rights Editor, Thomson Reuters Foundation

Panelists:

- Dr. Carlos Zambrana-Torrel, Associate Vice President Conservation and Health, EcoHealth Alliance
- Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, Coordinator, Association for Indigenous Women and Peoples of Chad (AFPAT)
- David Kaimowitz, Senior Advisor, Climate and Land Use Alliance

A complete recording of the webinar is available on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/iwZ5P-jSU2w>



Key Takeaways

- While many problems have stemmed from a disregard for indigenous land rights and the destruction of their territories, there is a significant opportunity to recognise Indigenous Peoples as guardians of remaining ecosystems, and also as sources of vital knowledge.
- Recognition and strengthening of land rights, government-backed schemes paying indigenous communities for environmental services as well as strengthened land management and land governance are all crucial factors in helping empower Indigenous Peoples
- The pandemic has further highlighted the vulnerabilities of Indigenous Peoples in Chad, where everything from a changing climate to a lack of healthcare, education and information, as well as the temporary shutting down of vital trade and markets, have left them badly exposed.

Webinar Summary

1) HOW CAN HUMANITY AND MORE BROADLY THE PLANET STAND TO BENEFIT FROM PRESERVING LAND, BE IT IN TERMS OF PREVENTING DEFORESTATION, MITIGATING CLIMATE CHANGE, ETC.? (DR. CARLOS ZAMBRANA-TORRELIO)

- Emerging infectious diseases, like COVID-19, for example, have an animal origin, and humans are part of the animal kingdom. We are getting more diseases because we are entering forests and coming increasingly into contact with animals and wildlife. In the case of COVID-19, there is discussion about it coming from the wildlife trade market, but we don't know for sure. We can, however, say that forest and land use change is one of the major drivers of emerging infectious diseases. This change is related to agricultural intensification, as in Southeast Asia with Nipah virus that emerged from bats and then jumped into pigs, and from there it went to humans. We have similar examples, such as lassa fever or Ebola outbreaks in Africa or HIV that originally emerged from non human primates into humans. Examples in Latin America includes seven different hemorrhagic fevers, hantaviruses, or machupo virus in Bolivia, which emerged because of agricultural intensification of sugarcane plantations and increasing contact with wildlife.
- The role of indigenous peoples is in preserving the forests and mitigating these impacts. Indigenous lands cover close to one quarter of the terrestrial land on our planet, so there's a lot of potential for mitigating the impacts of diseases, or to prevent and mitigate the impacts of climate change. Within this big area, around 35% of the land is well preserved and managed, and this helps us to avoid climate change. Forests also reduce temperatures locally in comparison to plantations.

- Humanity depends on a handful of crops - rice, potatoes, a corn, soybeans, and in many cases, those are fed to domestic animals. We are thus reducing the diversity of food. Indigenous peoples are attempting to maintain traditions, yet their food diversity is also diminishing. Much of the Amazon is on fire, which is related to the type of government in power, as well as to exporting meat elsewhere in the world.

2) YOU'RE CURRENTLY COMPLETING A STUDY ABOUT INDIGENOUS TERRITORIES IN LATIN AMERICA. CAN YOU TALK US THROUGH A LITTLE BIT OF THE MAIN FINDINGS, PARTICULARLY IN TERMS OF HOW WELL THE FORESTS HAVE BEEN MANAGED TO DATE? (DAVID KAIMOWITZ)

- Latin American indigenous territories are extremely important for climate mitigation and adaptation, conservation of biological and cultural diversity, and local social welfare. These territories were traditionally protected by a mixture of cultural aspects, government policies, and geographical characteristics, such as remoteness or poor soils. The growing threats to these territories is changing that context in very dangerous ways. In response, we need more international funding and national policy changes to strengthen indigenous territorial rights, compensate for environmental services, promote community forest management, revitalize cultures and traditional knowledge, and strengthen indigenous organizations.
- The research shows that forests are in much better shape in indigenous territories than elsewhere in Latin America. Indigenous peoples have managed them well, in part for cultural reasons, and that is not just a romantic notion. This better shape means more carbon in the forests, cooler temperatures and more stable rainfall, biodiversity that is important for human health, and less disturbance, which is linked to zoonotic epidemics, of both traditional and new diseases. These territories are under increasing attack by outside groups – leading to killings, forest loss, mercury poisoning, and most recently COVID.

3) YOU'VE STARTED ADVOCATING FOR INDIGENOUS RIGHTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION WHEN YOU WERE ONLY 16. COULD YOU TELL US WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO START WORKING ON THOSE ISSUES? AND THEN COULD YOU ALSO TELL US A BIT MORE ABOUT HOW INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN THE SAHEL REGION ARE COPING WITH THE CLIMATE CRISIS? (HINDOU OUMAROU IBRAHIM)

- COVID-19 is hitting indigenous peoples, my people, when they are already struggling on the front line of the climate crisis. We depend on nature for survival. Indigenous peoples have understood for centuries the need to protect and value nature for the health of their communities and the planet.
- In Africa, we have a saying: 'When a grandfather passes away, it's a whole library that disappears'. Today it is entire populations who are under threat of disappearing.

- Yet indigenous peoples are not just victims. They have time tested solutions to address these global challenges with powerful knowledge about climate change and protecting our environment. indigenous peoples are the best guardians of biodiversity. The world's nearly 400 million indigenous peoples make up less than 5% of the global population, yet they support and protect 80% of the world's biodiversity.
- My community, the Mbororo people, are nomadic farmers who practice the seasonal herding of livestock to fresh grazing grounds in the Sahel region every year following the rhythm of the season.
- I am very sad to say that the World Food Program just released their global hunger map which shows that my country, Chad, suffers from chronic hunger more than the rest of Africa
- It is time to support development in the rural areas in the poorest countries. Nearly 90% of indigenous communities lack schools, hospitals, and access to any electricity. Now is the time for a green recovery and green deal for the Sahel (and other regions) to ensure that the world confronts the causes and impacts of the pandemic and climate change.

4) HOW HAS THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC EXACERBATED EXISTING DANGERS TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND THEIR LAND IN RECENT MONTHS?

- The biggest threat is to people living in indigenous communities in remote areas where access to health care is difficult. In some cases people have to walk two days to get to the nearest health facility to get medical attention. On one hand, this limits contact with with other and reduces the risk of infection, but once it's there, it becomes a big problem.
- Everybody depends on the work of each other in indigenous communities, and thus you cannot really isolate or quarantine people. It is also worrisome that indigenous peoples may be the last to get any vaccine that becomes available.
- Access to the information on the pandemic is important, but in remote areas, where they may have a radio or a TV, so they cannot get access to this information at all, which is the case for many people in indigenous communities.
- When weekly markets get closed, the community gets really confused, and they are unable to sell their fresh products in the market, such as milk and butter, or gain access to basic foodstuffs.
- Many people do not have access to clean drinking water. Indigenous peoples rely on water from rivers and lakes, the same water that both cattle and humans use. It is impossible to maintain hygiene. People do not have access to soap either to wash their hands.
- There are too many communities to reach out to and provide sufficient support, so they are left behind by the government measures by the NGOs or big institutions measures that are giving the masks in cities or hand gel, and indigenous communities do not have that privilege.

5) WHAT ARE THE BROADER CHALLENGES OF HOW INDIGENOUS PEOPLE CAN CAN PROTECT THEIR LAND, BE IT THROUGH LEGALIZING THEIR RIGHT TO TENURE OR GOVERNMENT POLICIES?

There are five things that can be done to support indigenous peoples and Afro descendant efforts and to collaborate and work with them:

- The first area is everything that has to do with land rights and forest rights and strengthening those rights. Not only giving people titles, but making sure that when they have titles that they're actually able to push out or keep from coming in groups that come from outside, or to keep petroleum companies or mining companies from having concessions that are on top of their area that have titles.
- The second key issue is payment for environmental services. Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, Guatemala, have all had government programs to pay indigenous communities or territories for their environmental services that are providing very important results, very positive results that need recognition and need more support than they're getting.
- A third area is community forest management to be able to sell products and to manage the forest collectively as a way to extract forest products, both for themselves and for other people.
- The fourth area is the importance of cultural revitalization, and traditional knowledge, which are closely linked to forest management.
- The fifth area is territorial governance, and support for territory, government governance and support for the indigenous and Afro descendant organizations that are fundamental to all these things, from managing their territories themselves, to making their voices heard in the capitals and across the world.

Notable Quotes from the Panelists



“THE DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC PLAYS OUT NOT JUST ON INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES, BUT ON ON WOMEN AND GIRLS AS WELL.”

**- ZOE TABARY, PROPERTY RIGHTS EDITOR,
THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION**



“WE ARE STILL ABLE TO CATCH UP IF WE WANT. IF WE LOOK AT COVID-19, AND HOW THE WORLD CHANGED RADICALLY OVERNIGHT, THAT SHOWS WE ARE ABLE.”

**- HINDOU OUMAROU IBRAHIM, COORDINATOR,
ASSOCIATION FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND
PEOPLES OF CHAD (AFPAT)**



“INDIGENOUS PEOPLES HAVE LOTS OF KNOWLEDGE WHICH HELP US SURVIVE AND WHICH WE CAN SHARE WITH OTHERS – IN TERMS OF FOOD SYSTEMS, AND HOW TO PRODUCE IT... (BUT) OUR KNOWLEDGE IS BASED ON OUR LAND AND TERRITORIES. ONCE THAT LAND IS GRABBED FROM US, WE CANNOT APPLY THAT KNOWLEDGE.”

**- DR. CARLOS ZAMBRANA-TORRELIO, ASSOCIATE
VICE PRESIDENT CONSERVATION AND HEALTH,
ECOHEALTH ALLIANCE**



“INDIGENOUS PEOPLES HAVE BEEN PLAYING A VERY IMPORTANT ROLE IN LATIN AMERICA, PROTECTING THE FOREST NOT ONLY FOR THEMSELVES, AS GUARDIANS OF THE FOREST, NOT ONLY FOR THEMSELVES, BUT ALSO FOR THE WORLD, TO HELP STABILIZE THE GLOBAL CLIMATE HELP MAINTAIN THE BIODIVERSITY THAT THE ENTIRE PLANET DEPENDS ON.”

**- DAVID KAIMOWITZ, SENIOR ADVISOR, CLIMATE
AND LAND USE ALLIANCE**



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