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## Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change

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# Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change

## **Abstract**

There has been a growing attention on the need to take into account the effects of global climate change. This is particularly so with respect to the increasing amount of green house gas emissions from the United States and Europe affecting poor peoples, especially those in developing countries. In 2003, for example, the experts of several international development agencies, including the World Bank, prepared a special report titled "Poverty and Climate Change: Reducing the Vulnerability of the Poor through Adaptation" (OECD 2003). This report followed the Eighth Session of the Conference of Parties (COP8) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in New Delhi, India in October 2002. It showed that poverty reduction is not only one of the major challenges of the 21st century, but also that climate change is taking place in many developing countries and is increasingly affecting, in a negative fashion, both the economic conditions and the health of poor people and their communities.

## **Keywords**

Indigenous populations, climate change, green house gas emissions

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction

There has been a growing attention on the need to take into account the effects of global climate change. This is particularly so with respect to the increasing amount of green house gas emissions from the United States and Europe affecting poor peoples, especially those in developing countries.

In 2003, for example, the experts of several international development agencies, including the World Bank, prepared a special report titled “Poverty and Climate Change: Reducing the Vulnerability of the Poor through Adaptation” (OECD 2003). This report followed the Eighth Session of the Conference of Parties (COP8) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in New Delhi, India in October 2002. It showed that poverty reduction is not only one of the major challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but also that climate change is taking place in many developing countries and is increasingly affecting, in a negative fashion, both the economic conditions and the health of poor people and their communities.

The “Poverty and Climate Change” report by the OECD (2003) notes that, in order to deal with the effects of climate change on poor people and their communities, it is necessary to create and strengthen several climate change adaptation efforts that have a significant and concurrent effect on both poverty reduction and sustainable development. Further, this report also suggests that progress in such adaptation efforts necessarily requires provision of “improved governance” and “empowerment of communities” so “they can participate in assessments and feed in their knowledge to provide useful climate poverty information” (2003, XI). Finally, the report also states that to empower such poor communities “they will also need full access to climate relevant information systems” (2003, XI).

It is also interesting to note that along with this report on “Poverty and Climate Change,” there was also a very important statement by Indigenous peoples from around the world, who held a special Indigenous Peoples Caucus at the COP8. This “Indigenous Peoples Statement” stated that “We consider that our Mother Earth is sacred...[and] it must be honored, protected, and loved” (UN 2002, 1). It also affirmed that “this special relationship to Mother Earth binds us to conserve the biodiversity for the survival of the present and future generations” (UN 2002, 1).

[Furthermore, O]ur duty as indigenous peoples to Mother Earth impels us to demand that we be provided adequate opportunity to participate fully and actively at all levels of local, national, regional and international decision-making processes and mechanisms on climate change...[And that w]e, Indigenous Peoples, live in sensitive zones where effects of climate change are most devastating. Traditional ways of life are disproportionately affected by climate change particularly in polar and arid zones, forests, wetlands, rivers and costal areas (UN 2002, 1).

Based upon these and other noted reasons, the “Indigenous Peoples Statement” called upon the members of the UNFCCC to

recognize the fundamental role of Indigenous Peoples in tackling climate change and environmental degradation [and to] approve the creation of a Working Group of Indigenous Peoples on Climate Change to meet the objectives to study and propose timely, effective and adequate solutions in response to the urgent situation caused by climate change (UN 2002, 2).

Despite this attempt by several of the world’s Indigenous peoples in 2002 to get greater international focus on the role that climate change was having on their lifestyles, environments,

and cultures as well as their capacity to assist in the protection against and control of climate change, there was little formal attention to the concerns of Indigenous peoples relating to climate change until five years later. In 2007, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In that same year we note a growing amount of attention on the part of the United Nations and other international agencies on the need to take into account the rights, needs, and knowledge of Indigenous peoples in projects dealing with climate change.

In the remainder of this paper, I will focus on what we have learned in the last two years about the rights, needs, and knowledge of Indigenous peoples in relation to the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change. I would also like to discuss not only how some of the members of the United Nations have focused upon the rights, needs, and knowledge of Indigenous peoples in relation to climate change, but also how there have been some difficulties in introducing these rights, needs, and knowledge of Indigenous peoples into the recommendations that resulted from the UN Conference on Climate Change held in Bali, Indonesia in December of 2007.

### **Recent Studies: Universities and non-Governmental Organizations on Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples**

I would like remind us that there are estimated to be over 350 million Indigenous persons, comprising 5,000 different Aboriginal tribes, who live in more than 70 countries throughout the world, including here in the United States, Canada, and all of the countries of Latin America, as well as within the continents of Africa, Asia, and most of the islands of the Pacific.

In May 2007, a very important report entitled “Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change,” was published as a result of a symposium held at the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at the University of Oxford in England in April of 2007. This report indicated that

several actions need to be taken to respond to the situation of climate change faced by Indigenous peoples in numerous regions and countries throughout the world. Along with the effects of global climate change on Indigenous peoples of the Polar regions of Alaska and northern Canada, who have been affected by the melting of ice shields and permafrost, the report also focused upon the threats that increased droughts and fires pose for Indigenous and other local peoples who occupy tropical rainforests in such areas as Asia, the Pacific, and the Amazon region of South America.

With respect to the Amazon region of South America, the Oxford University report notes that if climate change continues at its current pace, there may be an overall decrease in rainfall of 20 percent or more in this region. Additionally, the report also observes that “the effects of climate change on the Amazon forest are exacerbated by deforestation and forest fragmentation which in turn releases more carbon into the atmosphere and creates yet more climate change” (Salick and Byg 2007, 9). Hope for the future in this region “lies with the indigenous peoples themselves, who are very successful in preventing deforestation and managing natural rainforests” (Salick and Byg 2007, 9).

The Oxford University report also focuses upon the effects of climate change on high mountain cultures or what are termed Alpine regions, such as the Mount Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania in East Africa, the Tibetan Mountain Region in Central Asia, and the Andean Region in South America. In all of these highly mountainous countries, which have large populations of culturally unique Indigenous or tribal peoples, the report notes that there are threats posed by retreating glaciers and changing resources bases: “Alpine ecosystems around the world are warming up at a disproportionate rate (predicted to increase by as much as 5-6 degrees centigrade in the 21<sup>st</sup> century under present conditions)” (Salick and Byg 2007, 7).

Iconic peaks, such as those in the Mount Kilimanjaro Region of Tanzania in East Africa, will have no more snows, if such climate change continues. At the same time, the Oxford University report remarks that some studies have discovered that there has been an upward movement on some of these mountains of tree lines and Alpine plants. It is suggested that Alpine warming and deforestation will further threaten endangered animals such as snow leopards and mountain sheep. Further, the report states that little attention is paid to the importance of these floras and faunas to Indigenous Peoples. For example, Tibetan and Andean highlanders are dependent upon Alpine floras for medicines, food, grazing and hunting: “In the future, when trees cover the high mountains, these people will be deprived of important traditional resources central to their livelihoods” (Salick and Byg 2007, 7).

This same report also highlights the effects of climate change on tribal peoples who occupy desert regions such as Kalahari which is predicted to double in size and wind speeds are expected to increase dramatically. Thousands of inhabitants will struggle to survive with cattle and goat farming becoming less feasible coupled with their traditional resource base for hunting and gathering severely affected. According to the report, in the present day “indigenous groups which have been forced to become sedentary, huddle around government drilled boreholes for water, and many are dependent on government handouts for survival...Without doubt, indigenous peoples of the deserts are on the frontline of global climate change” (Salick and Byg 2007, 9).

Based upon these conditions of Indigenous and tribal peoples in tropical rainforests, alpine areas, and deserts, as well as in other areas such as Polar Regions, islands, and temperate ecosystems, the Oxford University report calls for support of the world’s Indigenous peoples, especially in terms of their capacity to maintain biodiversity as a buffer against climate change

(Salick and Byg 2007). It is also remarked that Indigenous peoples can play an important role in observing, interpreting, and adapting to climate change. The report concludes by outlining a “Proposal with Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change.”

Among other things, the Oxford University report states in this Proposal that “From the data and perspectives on Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change, it becomes evident that indigenous knowledge and perceptions must be incorporated into the Climate Change forum” (Salick and Byg 2007, 25). It also states that “Indigenous peoples offer local observations and techniques for adapting to and mitigating climate change [and that] Indigenous Peoples must exercise self-determination and be empowered to deal with climate change which threatens their livelihoods, indeed their very existence” (Salick and Byg 2007, 25). In addition, the report remarks that “Integration and feedback loops between climate change science and indigenous peoples must be established and employed. Both parties – that is climate change scientists and indigenous peoples – can gain knowledge from each other and support each other in action” (Salick and Byg 2007, 25).

### ***The National Museum of the American Indian: Recognition of Protection and the Control of Global Climate Change***

It is worth mentioning that, along with the report by the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at Oxford University in England, the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), established in the year 2004 as part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, also began to focus on a similar issue. The NMAI is interested specifically in issues relating to both the needs of America’s Indigenous peoples but also in how the contemporary existence and positive effects of Indigenous people’s traditional knowledge can be taken into account in the mitigation of climate change. This is to say that among other things, the NMAI has a focus on



the role of traditional knowledge in the protection of the environment and the potential control of global climate change in the United States, Canada, and other countries throughout the Americas and the world.

On July 7, 2007, for example, the NMAI organized an event on the National Mall in Washington DC for the inauguration of the so-called “Live Earth Concerts,” which were introduced to rally global action on climate change both here in the United States and in several other countries throughout the world. This event at the NMAI was titled “Mother Earth” and was a “Special Indian Summer Showcase Event in the Spirit of the Live Earth Concerts” (Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian 2007a).

At the opening of the NMAI “Mother Earth” event, a speech was given by Al Gore, the former Vice-President of the United States, producer of the Academy Award-winning documentary film titled “An Inconvenient Truth” on the threat of global warming, and Nobel Peace Prize recipient for work on global climate change (Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian 2007b). I attended this event and what follows is based on notes I took during the speeches at the “Mother Earth” event, starting with Gore’s address.

In his opening speech, former Vice President Al Gore (2007) stated that “The American Indian people and the elders of Native cultures here and around the world, have been very eloquent in their warnings about what we are doing to the earth.” He also remarked that the Indigenous Peoples in the United States and throughout the world “remind us that solving the climate crisis will require not only new laws and new technology, but also new understanding that we are connected to the natural world” (2007).

A number of other persons, many of Native American background in the United States, also spoke and highlighted the role of Indigenous peoples in protecting the environment,

promoting sustainable development and having the potential to counter climate change. Tim Johnson (2007), who at the time was the Acting Director of the National Museum of the American Indian, for example, is quoted as saying at the “Mother Earth” event that “There is no more important matter before us than the question of how to live sustainably on the Earth.”

Similarly, there were two other persons, both Native American women, who also made statements at the “Mother Earth” event in July of 2007. One of these persons was Ms. Katsi Cook Barreiro, who is of Mohawk background and is a maternal child-health coordinator for the United South and East Oklahoma Tribes as well as the field coordinator for an organization called Running Strong for American Indian Youth in Alexandria, Virginia. In her presentation at the “Mother Earth” event, she stated “My message to all the world’s leaders is simple and clear: Think not only of today, [but] think of your grandchildren. Think [also] of your great-grandchildren...[and] think of the impact of your decision on the seventh generation yet to come” (Cook Barreiro 2007). She also said the following:

We human beings who walk about on Mother Earth must remember that our survival depends on our humility, depends on our ability to express our love for Her, and to do everything in our power so that our future generations will enjoy the benefits of this wonderful Earth. (Cook Barreiro 2007)

And, in her conclusion, she stated, “Our mother the earth, it must be that we defend her” (2007).

A second Native American woman who spoke at the 2007 NMAI Mother Earth event was Henrietta Mann. Mann is Cheyenne and a professor emeritus as well as special assistant to the President of Montana State University, while also serving as an interim President of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribal College at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. She stated in her presentation that:

We agree with the broad consensus of our most respected international climate scientists that global warming is upon us, and it is destabilizing the natural rhythms of Mother Earth. We also agree with the broad scientific consensus that human activity, including deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions, is a primary cause. For these reasons, we call upon all the peoples of the world to awaken and respond to our collective human responsibility to the seventh generation. Ours is a call for consciousness. Each of us is part of the sacred service of life, [and the] Earth is our mother and we must care for her. (Mann 2007)

### **UN Responses to the Rights, Needs, and Knowledge of Indigenous Peoples in Response to Climate Change**

It is interesting to note that a few weeks after the NMAI “Mother Earth” event in Washington DC, Mr. Ahmed Djoghlaif, the Executive Secretary of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, in a statement at the Occasion of the International Day of the World’s Indigenous People on August 9, 2007, noted that:

The celebration of the International Day of the World’s Indigenous People presents an opportunity to draw attention to the contribution of indigenous and local communities to the conservation and sustainable use of the world’s biological diversity. It also provides opportunity to highlight how these communities, as environmental managers with immense ecological knowledge, are crucial partners in our efforts to address the two most serious environmental threats facing mankind today: the loss of biodiversity and climate change (Djoghlaif 2007).

It is also interesting to note that on the same day as the United Nations “International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples,” August 9, 2007, Mr. Ban ki-Moon, the Secretary General of the United Nations, was quoted as saying the following:

Recently, the international community has grown increasingly aware of the need to support indigenous people – by establishing and promoting international standards, vigilantly upholding respect for their human rights, integrating them in the international development agenda, including the projects, and reinforcing indigenous peoples’ special stewardship on issues relating to the environment and climate change (ki-Moon 2007).

Just one month following this “International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples,” the UN General Assembly approved a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This Declaration not only called for the recognition of the land and territorial rights of Indigenous peoples throughout the world, it also presented the idea that indigenous peoples should be provided with a degree of self-determination that would enable them to have prior and informed consent before any outside activities could be carried out on the land and territories that they occupy in order to respond to climate change (United Nations 2007).

Although the UN government representatives for the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand voted against this comprehensive Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in September of 2007, all of the members of the UN Human Rights Council and 143 other country representatives voted in favor of the Declaration. It was also hoped that the adoption of the Declaration would result in more emphasis and focus upon the rights, needs, and knowledge of Indigenous peoples in the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference, held in Bali, Indonesia in December of 2007.

As we shall see in the final part of this paper, there were some problems posed in the consideration of the views of Indigenous peoples at the Bali conference on climate change. Moreover, these problems continue to face Indigenous peoples both in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand as well as in the developing countries throughout the world in terms of how governments and various international development agencies, such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Asian Development Bank, consider the rights, needs and knowledge of Indigenous peoples in dealing with climate change.

### **The Position of Indigenous Peoples at the UN Conference on Climate Change in Bali, Indonesia in December 2007**

I would like to conclude with a brief statement on the position of Indigenous Peoples at the UN Conference on Climate Change in Bali, Indonesia in December 2007. One of the major points of focus for several of the government and international agency representatives attending the UNFCCC in Bali was the idea of focusing future carbon credits on the preservation of tropical forests in developing countries. This was seen as a means of controlling greenhouse gas emissions and reducing climate change in developing countries. It was also seen as a future mode of trade agreements between commercial forestry and agricultural companies in both developed and developing countries (UN 2008b).

Despite the fact that a special delegation of Indigenous peoples was invited to attend the Bali Conference, this delegation was forcibly barred from entering a meeting between the Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, Yvo de Boer, and various civil society representatives invited to the conference (New Consumer 2007; Peterman 2008).

It is also important to note that Indigenous peoples were not only marginalized from the discussions at the Bali conference, but also there was no mention of the rights, needs, and

knowledge of Indigenous peoples in the large number of UNFCCC documents prepared on climate change prior to the conference. This latter point is particularly problematic given the fact, as mentioned above, that Indigenous peoples, especially in developing countries but also in the Arctic regions of the United States, Canada, Greenland, and parts of northern Europe, are suffering most from climate change.

Many Indigenous peoples, including those who formed part of the Indigenous delegation at the Bali Conference, were concerned that some of the climate mitigation projects being promoted by the UNFCCC might negatively affect the traditional lands and territories where they live. In fact, by shutting the Indigenous peoples out of the climate change negotiations, the Indigenous delegates at the Bali Conference felt that some of the modes of reducing carbon emissions from deforestation in developing countries could lead to the involuntary relocation of Indigenous peoples and some of them could even be killed (Peterman 2008).

This point was made by Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, who is an Indigenous woman from the Philippines and has served as the Chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues for several years. She made a statement at the Bali Conference on December 11, 2007, in which Tauli-Corpuz presented some of her views and the concerns of Indigenous peoples in relation to a special Forest Carbon Partnership Facility being prepared in a number of developing countries by economists and climate change specialists at the World Bank in Washington. In her statement, she said that “Those of us who live and depend on forests, are pleased that there is growing international consensus that policies to address climate change must include measures to combat deforestation and forest degradation in tropical and sub-tropical forests” (Tauli-Corpuz 2007, 1). She also said that the members of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues “welcome the

Stern Review which urges the actions to prevent deforestation on a large-scale must be taken as soon as possible” (Tauli-Corpuz 2007, 1).

However, Tauli-Corpuz (2007) also noted that the tropical and sub-tropical forests, which are the focus of the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility of the World Bank and several other international development agencies, including some of them in the UN, are the home to about 160 million Indigenous persons, the custodians and managers of forest diversity. These same Indigenous persons, she also noted, “remain in very vulnerable situations because most States do not recognize their rights to these forests and the resources found, therein” (Tauli-Corpuz 2007, 1). As the Chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Tauli-Corpuz recommended that the representatives of the Foreign Carbon Partnership Facility of the World Bank and the various governments, corporations and NGOs attending the Bali Conference should unequivocally state that they recognize and respect indigenous peoples rights as contained in the UN Declaration of the rights of Indigenous Peoples and that should be the starting framework for any discussion of negotiations related to access and use of resources by the Carbon Partnership Facility of the World Bank and other international development institutions (Tauli-Corpuz 2007, 2).

She also stated that “Indigenous peoples’ free, prior and informed consent should be obtained before any initiative on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation in Developing Countries (REDD) that is pursued in their territories and forests” (Tauli-Corpuz 2007, 2). Unfortunately, despite these concerns, the government representatives at the Bali Conference did not take into account Indigenous people’s rights, needs and knowledge in the final agreements they proposed at the end of the conference (New Consumer 2007).

Based upon the lack of focus on the rights, needs, and knowledge of Indigenous peoples, especially in relation to the lands and territories in which they live and the future of their existence, in the resource and project recommendations resulting from the Bali Conference, there remains a significant need for both international development agencies and state governments to take into account the role of Indigenous peoples in climate change. These needs are being considered at various fora; for example, the “Social Development and Climate Change Conference,” held by the World Bank in March 2008; a conference held by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in April/May 2008, which had as a special theme “Climate Change, Bio-Cultural Diversity and Livelihoods: The Stewardship Role of Indigenous Peoples and New Challenges” (United Nations 2008a); and, the Student Working Group on Indigenous Peoples of the Georgetown University Center for Latin American Studies also held a seminar in the spring semester of 2008 on “Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change in Bolivia and Peru”. Despite these efforts, there remains much to be done in supporting Indigenous peoples in the face of climate change.



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