

Committee: United Nations Environmental Project (UNEP)

Issue: Modernising Strategies to Integrate Indigenous Practices Into Modern Environmental Policies

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Introduction

Indigenous agricultural practices have historically maintained biodiversity and natural ecosystems whilst promoting sustainability and management. These traditional methods have been naturally tweaked and adapted to best fit land that an indigenous group has been living on for generations. Despite this, Modern Environmental Policies are often developed with little to no influence from Indigenous practices despite these repeatedly being proved the most effective and environmentally friendly.

As the UNEP battles with Global Climate Change, Habitat Destruction and loss in biodiversity, it is imperative to learn from Indigenous practices which have been environmentally sustainable for generations. However, previous efforts to integrate indigenous practices into conservation have often lacked modern efficiency needed to make a real mark.

Definition of Key Terms

Indigenous Peoples: Self-identifying communities with historical ties to a land prior to colonization or the formation of modern borders and countries.

Modern Environmental Policies: A course of action adopted by the United Nations Environmental Project (UNEP) or by associated Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) which aims to improve the state of the global climate by taking actions such as; increasing the prevalence of sustainable farming, guarding endangered species, etc.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Agricultural and Environmental traditions and practices developed by Indigenous Communities as a result of generational direct contact with the land. Includes conservational strategies such as water harvesting.

Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC): A United Nations concept which awards indigenous communities the right to oppose any development that may negatively impact their ecosystems or farming practices.

Biodiversity Conservation: Efforts to maintain and promote sustainable management of ecosystems, in order to prevent habitat and species loss.

Environmental Governance: The decision making by governments in which they attempt to address and overcome environmental challenges whilst championing sustainability and diversity.

Greenhouse Gases: Atmospheric Gases such as Methane and Carbon Dioxide that trap heat from the sun in the atmosphere resulting in climate change.

Sustainable Farming: Farming strategies that prioritise biodiversity conservation.

Background to the Issue

This issue has come about due to the massive rise in Climate Change and Environmental destruction witnessed over the past three decades. Scientists estimate that 20-30% of plant and animal species are at risk of extinction by 2045 as a result of climate change and by 2045, Food Production could decline by 10-30% in many areas due to the changing weather patterns. These insane results of climate change have resulted in the Governments of various member nations, the United Nations Environmental Project (UNEP) and other Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) developing environmental policies attempting to increase environmental sustainability and avoid the dire consequences of Climate Change.

Critics argued that the policies often had limited success because they failed to integrate indigenous practices into the Environmental Policies. This resulted in the UNEP beginning to recognise the crucial role that indigenous groups played in conservation. At the 1992 Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Agenda 21 (Chapter 26) officially recognized Indigenous peoples' vital role in environmental management, at the 2014 World Parks Conference, the congress emphasised the rights of indigenous people to make decisions over their land in order to conserve biodiversity.

As the world became more aware of the vital role of indigenous people in conservation, indigenous practices were included more in environmental policies. However, the common consensus still remains that although Indigenous Practices are being included in environmental policy more frequently, they are still not done so enough. This conclusion was reached at the UNEP Making Peace with Nature conference in 2021 where the UNEP concluded that despite indigenous practices playing a vital role in environmental policy, the indigenous peoples are still systematically underrepresented in environmental decision making. Therefore, it is clear that the UNEP desires a more efficient and modern framework to integrate indigenous practices into environmental policy.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

Many UN member nations have been attempting to modernise the inclusion of indigenous practices in climate policy, these include:

Brazil: Established the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and centered its COP30 (2025/2026) strategy on the "Belém Vision," a concept targeting the wide scale inclusion of indigenous perspectives in Climate Policy

New Zealand: A nation at the forefront of the 'Rights of Nature' legal movement, it also granted the indigenous Māori People management rights over the Whanganui River and Te Urewera forest.

Norway: One of the largest funders of Indigenous-led forest conservation through the NICFI (Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative). They advocate for direct financing, ensuring funds bypass central governments to reach local communities.

Organisations concerned with Modernising the Inclusion of Indigenous Practices into Modern Climate Policy include:

The UNEP: This is the main UN Forum for environmental policy, therefore it is directly responsible for incorporating Indigenous practices into its policies.

The Green Climate Fund (GCF): This is the largest environmentally-focused NGO and has a dedicated specific Indigenous People's Policy making it much easier to fund indigenous climate groups.

The Global Environmental Facility (GEF): In its newest report, the GEF stated that it aims to dedicate at least 20% of its annual funds to supporting conservational projects encompassing Indigenous Practices.

Current Context

In the last 5 years, there have been many efforts to modernise the integration of indigenous practices into environmental policy. At the 2022 COP15 conference, the involvement of indigenous groups in climate policy was explicitly recognised and encouraged under the Convention of Biological Diversity. In 2023, the UNEP Engagement Mechanisms were expanded and this strengthened formal engagement with Indigenous Major Groups under UN structures.

However, the UNEP and NGOs still face criticism over the marginalisation of indigenous voices as shown at the 2021 UNEP conference.

Timeline

1992: The Rio Earth Summit: Article 8(j) asked states to respect and maintain local indigenous knowledge in making climate policy.

2002: UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII): Established as an advisory body to ECOSOC. UNEP began reporting to this body annually to align environmental projects with Indigenous rights.

2008: IIPFCC Established: The International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change was founded as the official caucus for Indigenous peoples at the UNFCCC, often co-funded by international NGOs to ensure representation from the Global South.

2012: UNEP Policy Guidance: UNEP released its first comprehensive internal policy, "*A Partnership in Caring for the Environment*," specifically for staff to integrate Indigenous perspectives into all project cycles.

2021: COP26 Glasgow Climate Pact: Member nations urged to include indigenous practices in designing non-binding national climate action plans.

2022: IPCC 6th Assessment Report (AR6): The Assessment Report stated with extreme confidence that indigenous practices and knowledge is a major resource in developing Climate Strategies.

2025: Baku Workplan (COP29/30 Transition): At the conference, it was determined that the success of climate policy should be measured through the metrics of indigenous land health.

Relevant UN Resolutions and Events

1992: Rio Earth Summit: (https://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/res_agenda21_26.shtml)

2007: UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)
(<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>)

2014: IPCC 5th Assessment Report (AR5)
(<https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/syr/>)

2015: The Paris Agreement
(<https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/10a01.pdf>)

2017: The Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform is launched
(<https://lcipp.unfccc.int/>)

2024: The Baku Workplan (COP29)
(<https://lcipp.unfccc.int/about-lcipp/workplan-activities>)

2025: COP30 "Belém Vision" is launched in Brazil
(https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/gga_cop30_3.pdf)

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The international community has made many attempts to Modernise the inclusion of Indigenous Practices in Modern Climate Policy. Some examples are:

The creation of Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP)

In 2015, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) established the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP). The LCIPP aimed to maximise the involvement and input of indigenous groups in regard to the formation of Climate Policy.

Canadian Attempts of Integration

Since 2016, the Canadian Government has collaborated directly with indigenous groups to form its climate policy. This included forming a Joint Committee on Climate Action with the Inuit and Métis peoples which would directly form Canadian policy regarding Climate Conservation. Canada has also directly funded Climate Groups led by Indigenous people, in January 2024, the Government announced it would allocate just under \$12.8 million to 27 Indigenous-led climate initiatives.

UNDP Small Grants Programme

The United Nations Small Grants Programme has funded thousands of smaller climate initiatives led by indigenous people but has not really had any impact on major climate policies.

Evaluation of Efforts

Although the UNEP, Member Nations and NGOs have taken significant steps to ensure that indigenous perspectives and practices in their environmental conservation efforts, indigenous practices have only been included in actual climate policy at a domestic level. What this means is that when international climate policy is being developed, indigenous practices are not efficiently included.

Possible Solutions to the Issue

Establishing an Indigenous Advisory Council

The establishment of a council of indigenous representatives within the UNEP would ensure that indigenous groups are able to advise the council on all its policies. It would ensure that indigenous practices are directly included in all modern climate policy formed by the UNEP. Since it would serve as an advisory to the UNEP, this would mean that the council would attend all meetings and the process would therefore be efficient and modern,

Making a Mandate for Indigenous Involvement in all Countries

The UNEP could incentivise all member nations to directly involve indigenous groups in all climate policy that will affect their land. Whilst the UNEP does not have the legal power to make it compulsory, it could link this idea to climate funding, therefore, the UNEP could provide greater funding to member nations who include relevant indigenous groups in all climate policy, therefore guaranteeing that indigenous practices will be incorporated into climate policy.

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