



# The role of indigenous communities in reducing climate change through sustainable land use practices

A Webinar Report




**Columbia Center  
on Sustainable Investment**  
A JOINT CENTER OF COLUMBIA LAW SCHOOL  
AND THE EARTH INSTITUTE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



**Landesa**<sup>™</sup>  
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The climate crisis demands urgent action, yet we live in a politically polarized and paralyzed world. As governments and other actors struggle over climate change, our environment is irreversibly changing. A United Nations report on the Global Assessment of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services revealed that three-quarters of the earth's land-based environment has been significantly altered by human actions. Land degradation has reduced the productivity of 23% of the global land surface, nearly \$600 billion in annual global crops are at risk from pollinator loss and 100-300 million people are at increased risk of floods and hurricanes due to the loss of coastal habitats. In one glimmer of hope, the report emphasizes that in areas managed by indigenous peoples and local communities, these trends have been less severe or avoided entirely. Nonetheless, climate change threatens the survival of indigenous peoples around the world.

How can the land use of indigenous and other communities help address the climate crisis, and what is needed to protect the ability of these communities to sustainably manage their lands and resources, and to adapt to the effects of global heating? This webinar explored these questions.


This webinar was co-hosted by the Land Portal Foundation, the Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment and Landesa.

Moderator: Sam Szoke-Burke, Legal Researcher, Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment

Panelists:

- **Dr. Kanyinke Sena, Director, Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee**
- **Antonella Cordone, Senior Technical Specialist, Nutrition and Social Inclusion, Environment, Climate, Gender and Social Inclusion Division, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)**
- **Janene Yazzie, Co- Founder and CEO, Sixth World Solutions**

A complete recording of the webinar is available on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/vY7iW8BXoVc>



## Key Takeaways

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- Indigenous communities do not engage in practices, such as large scale commercial agriculture, which contribute to climate change. They own land communally, and these communal practices have a net positive impact on the environment and therefore, very little impact on climate change.
- Colonization has always been tied to the capitalist exploitation of indigenous peoples' lands, territories and resources. Colonization has led to the theft and privatization of these lands, territories and resources that were held communally and managed sustainably.
- Living and evolving indigenous knowledge systems that bring a different perspective on how to build and share information and data can inform us on how to build better societies, including climate change.

## Webinar Summary

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### **1) HOW DO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' TRADITIONAL LAND USE PRACTICES HELP TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE?**

- Indigenous peoples are able to offer solutions to climate change because their knowledge systems and lifeways are place based and built over generations. The key aspects of indigenous land management practices that help accomplish this is that they teach us that effective solutions are decentralized, community led, egalitarian and are not hetero-patriarchal and hetero-normative. They are conscious stewardship practices that understand they value of all life forms and elements vital for existence.
- We do not see indigenous communities doing large scale commercial agriculture, for example. Among indigenous communities' land is communally owned as opposed to the current system where it is managed individually to satisfy individual greed. In this communally owned land, grazing and hunting patterns are controlled on the basis of customary law. This has a net positive impact on the environment and therefore, very little impact on climate change.

### **2) WHAT THREATS TO THESE PRACTICES EXIST, AND WHAT STRATEGIES CAN INDIGENOUS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND THEIR ALLIES PURSUE TO PROTECT THEM?**

- With approximately 370 million indigenous people in the world, spread across 90 countries, indigenous peoples own, occupy or use up to 22 percent of the global land area, which crucially is home to 80 per cent of the world's biological diversity. Their knowledge, frequently accrued over generations and centuries, guides their interactions with their surrounding environment. This locally fine-tuned knowledge is of the utmost importance in the struggle to adapt to climate change.

- Generations of colonization has had a huge impact on the ability of indigenous peoples to carry out these practices. Colonization, both historic and ongoing, has always been tied to the capitalist exploitation of indigenous peoples' lands, territories and resources.
- Colonization has led to the theft and privatization of lands, territories and resources that were held communally and managed sustainably. Over time, the management of these lands became controlled and embedded in the institutions of government created by the people who benefited most from this theft.
- One must be educated on the Doctrine of Discovery on indigenous peoples' rights all over the world. The Doctrine of Discovery still conforms the laws and policies in most countries in the world and these laws and policies favour privatization and individualization of land over communal ownership. This privatization leads to the breakdown of indigenous peoples' cultures and community structures.

### **3) HOW ARE INDIGENOUS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES ADAPTING TO CLIMATE CHANGE? ARE THERE ANY STRATEGIES AND LAND GOVERNANCE PRACTICES THAT WE CAN LEARN FROM AND SEEK TO REPLICATE?**

- The best strategy for indigenous peoples to adapt to climate change is to ensure that their rights to lands, territories and resources are protected. Evidence shows that lands and territories which are collectively owned, used and managed by indigenous peoples contribute significantly to low-carbon sustainable development, biodiversity conservation and genetic diversity.
- It is important to understand that, when we are talking about traditional knowledge and traditional land use practices, we are not talking about something that is stagnant or relegated to a distant past. Living and evolving indigenous knowledge systems that bring a different perspective on how to build and share information and data can inform us on how to build better societies, including climate change. Laws and policies continue to impede these practices through making them illegal or cutting them off from funding etc.
- Putting indigenous peoples at the forefront, especially through their land rights, is quite important. Also, utilizing their traditional knowledge would play a significant role in adapting to climate change. All ecosystems that are intact in Africa, for example, have something to do with an indigenous community living there. The biggest threat we see in Africa, is the lack of political will.

### **4) WHAT UNDERLYING LAND GOVERNANCE PRACTICES INCREASE THE ABILITY OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES TO FACE CLIMATE CHANGE?**

- Any interventions encroaching on indigenous territories should respect the right of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), which must be systematically and properly obtained in order to ensure full understanding, participation and ownership of the project by indigenous peoples.
- Developing land governance practices that are the result of community led decision making processes and that take into life every life form, including animals and plants, will help indigenous communities to face climate change.

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## Notable Quotes from the Panelists



**“WHEN WE LOOK AT INDIGENOUS PEOPLE’S CULTURES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, IT IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO FIND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES THAT ENGAGE IN PRACTICES THAT CAUSE CLIMATE CHANGE.” - DR. KANYINKE SENA, DIRECTOR, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF AFRICA COORDINATING COMMITTEE**

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**“GIVEN THE EXTENSIVE AREAS THAT THEY DWELL IN, INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES ARE CUSTODIANS OF A VAST QUANTITY OF NATURAL RESOURCES, INCLUDING A SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF THE WORLD’S BIODIVERSITY. INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ARE ALSO ON THE FRONTLINE OF CLIMATE CHANGE.” - ANTONELLA CORDONE, SENIOR TECHNICAL SPECIALIST, NUTRITION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION, ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE, GENDER AND SOCIAL INCLUSION DIVISION, INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT (IFAD)**

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**“THE FOUNDATIONS OF OUR MODERN ECONOMY WERE STRUCTURED TO FACILITATE THE ACCUMULATION OF WEALTH FOR WHITE LANDHOLDING MALES. OUR MODERN SOCIAL INEQUALITIES ARE ALSO WOVEN INTO THE FABRIC OF THESE EXTRACTIVE ECONOMIES. THIS HAS LED TO THE THEFT OF LANDS, TERRITORIES AND RESOURCES THAT WERE HELD COMMUNALLY AND MANAGED SUSTAINABLY.” - JANENE YAZZIE, CO- FOUNDER AND CEO, SIXTH WORLD SOLUTIONS**

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**WHILE A CHANGING CLIMATE ALREADY INCREASED THE RISKS OF FOREST FIRES, WHEN THIS WAS COMBINED WITH DELIBERATELY WEAKENED ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTIONS, POLICIES AIMED AT OPENING UP THE AMAZON TO INDUSTRY BY EXTENDING INFRASTRUCTURE, AND DANGEROUS RHETORIC CALLING FOR THE “DEVELOPMENT” OF INDIGENOUS LAND, FARMERS AND RANCHERS WERE EMBOLDENED TO ANNOUNCE A “DAY OF FIRE.” - SAM SZOKE-BURKE, LEGAL RESEARCHER, COLUMBIA CENTER ON SUSTAINABLE INVESTMENT**



**LAND PORTAL FOUNDATION**  
Postbus 716, 9700 AS Groningen, the Netherlands  
[www.landportal.org](http://www.landportal.org) | [hello@landportal.org](mailto:hello@landportal.org)