

Adopting a pioneering approach that supports indigenous communities and addresses the climate and biodiversity crises

Author

Léna Prouchet is a Ph.D. researcher at the University of Exeter, in the Environment and Sustainability Institute ([profile](#)). Her project is funded and in partnership with the UK-based charity [Cool Earth](#) which works alongside rainforest communities to halt deforestation and its impact on climate change.

Executive summary

- Indigenous communities have developed management practices that are effective and cost-efficient to preserve the rainforest. However, **they only receive a small share of conservation investments.**
- International strategies and **policies** brought forward to address the climate and biodiversity crises often **ignore indigenous interests** and the harm that these communities can suffer as the result of their implementation.
- By directly supporting rainforest Indigenous communities, the UK could develop a pioneering global environmental strategy which puts climate justice at its heart and is based on the latest scientific evidence.

UK Policy implications:

- The UK aid budget should be based on a “**do no harm**” **Indigenous community principle**.
- The Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget for climate and biodiversity funding **should be directed to organisations supporting Indigenous communities**¹ rather than to large INGOs.
- The UK should uphold **Indigenous rights during international climate negotiations**.

Context

In April 2021, the Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab detailed the allocation of the UK Official Development Budget (ODA). More than **5%** of the budget (£500m) **will be dedicated to climate and biodiversity** as the UK aims to maintain a “strong (...) portfolio” in this area. Approximately the same share of the budget has been allocated to economic development and trade with developing country partners. In addition to the aid budget, the Foreign Secretary stressed the importance of **strengthening a “diplomatic network”**, as the UK will **host COP26 in November 2021**.

The importance of considering indigenous peoples during COP26 negotiations is one of the [priorities](#) of its President, Alok Sharma. In a recent speech, he underlined that **Indigenous communities** are highly vulnerable to climate change impacts but are also “**absolutely essential to developing effective solutions**” as they are “stewards of 80% of the world’s remaining biodiversity”.

This research gives key insights on how the UK aid budget could most effectively meet the government international climate and development agenda, by championing direct collaborations with grassroot organisations instead of financing intermediaries, such as large international charities.

¹ Examples of organisation include (but are not limited to): [Forest Peoples Programme](#), [Rainforest Foundation UK](#), [Survival International](#), members of the [Global Forest Coalition](#)

Research aims

- This review aimed to gather the existing research on the role of Indigenous communities in fighting climate change through conservation of tropical forests.
- It then sought to understand the extent to which Indigenous peoples were included in international climate negotiations and accessed funding related to climate and biodiversity preservation.

Research findings

- Tropical forests provide a wide range of ecosystem services (e.g.: food, water, clean air) and store the equivalent to 90 years of global fossil fuel emissions at today's level².
- Conversely, forest degradation is a major driver of climate change and multiplies the risks of pandemics of zoonoses, which are diseases naturally transmissible from animals to humans³.
- Indigenous people and local communities (IPLC) legally own and manage 18% of the world's land. Deforestation rates on Indigenous territories are consistently and significantly lower than the average rates in similar regions⁴.
- In this context, one of the best and most cost-effective strategies to avoid deforestation is to support and empower forest communities⁵.
- Nonetheless, these stakeholders are often excluded from decision-making processes⁶. For instance, they were not invited to join the main events of the COP21 in Paris, in 2015, and reacted by establishing their own Forum on Climate Change⁷.
- IPLC are rarely considered within climate mitigation initiatives and struggle to access climate finance⁸.
- Conservation and development initiatives in tropical forests that lack active leadership from IPLC are less likely to be successful and to bring positive outcomes in the long run⁹.

² Hubau, W., Lewis, S. L., Phillips, O. L., Affum-Baffoe, K., Beeckman, H., Cuní-Sánchez, A., ... & Zemagho, L. (2020). Asynchronous carbon sink saturation in African and Amazonian tropical forests. *Nature*, 579(7797), pp. 80-87.

³ Nafeez Ahmed (2020) Deforestation and the Risk of Collapse: Reframing COVID-19 as a Planetary Boundary Effect, The Schumacher Institute. Available at: <https://www.systemchange.online/index.php/systemchange/article/view/36> (Accessed: 30 Dec 2020).

⁴ Blackman, A., and Veit, P. (2018) "Titled Amazon indigenous communities cut forest carbon emissions", *Ecological Economics*, 153, pp. 56-67.

⁵ NYDF Assessment Partners and IIED. (2019) Empowerment of Forest-Linked Communities: What Progress and Where Next?, International Institute for Environment and Development. Available at: <https://pubs.iied.org/G04461/> (Accessed: 30 Dec 2020).

⁶ United Nations (2018) Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples (A/HRC/39/17). Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/59c2720c4.pdf> (Accessed: 30 Dec 2020).

⁷ Etchart, L. (2017). The role of indigenous peoples in combating climate change. *Palgrave Communications*, 3(1), pp. 1-4.

⁸ For example, it is estimated that only 2% of REDD+ (United Nations programme "Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation") funding has been direct to indigenous communities (source: <https://www.forest-trends.org/wp-content/uploads/imported/reddx-report-2016-final-pdf.pdf>).

⁹ The Nature Conservancy (2017) Strong Voices, Active Choices: TNC's Practitioner Framework to Strengthen Outcomes for People and Nature. Available at: https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/Strong_Voices_Active.Choices_FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 30 Dec 2020)

Key messages

- IPLC have been sustainably managing key ecosystems, such as tropical forests, for millennia.
- IPLC are often excluded from decision-making processes, during international negotiations and in the design on climate mitigation and development programmes implemented in territories they manage.
- Climate and development funding should go directly to IPLC, instead of financing one-size-fits-all programmes that do not adapt to local cultures and needs and are therefore likely to fail.
- Public institutions can play a critical role in supporting Indigenous peoples' endeavours to be included into decision-making processes, especially those related to land rights securing. These efforts have the potential to make a significant contribution to climate change mitigation.¹⁰

Policy implications and proposals

- **UK aid budget should be based on a “do no harm” principle.**
Development and environmental organisations which receive public funding should formulate clear commitments regarding their impacts towards indigenous communities.
- **The ODA budget for climate and biodiversity funding should be directed to indigenous organisations or organisations supporting indigenous communities.**
This would cut intermediaries and maximise the impact of public money.
- **The UK should support the recognition and effective implementation of indigenous rights during international climate negotiations,** including the right to free, prior, informed consent and land rights.

¹⁰ Etchart, L. (2017). The role of indigenous peoples in combating climate change. *Palgrave Communications*, 3(1), pp. 1-4.