

IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

*on the rights of indigenous peoples
in the South East Asia region*

Abstract

Indigenous peoples are among those who have contributed least to the problem of climate change, yet they are the ones suffering from its worst impacts. In Southeast Asia, Indigenous peoples are heavily dependent on lands and natural resources for their basic needs and livelihoods, such as food, medicine, shelter and fuel. As they are among those most affected by climate change, indigenous peoples have for over two decades been demanding greater protection of their human rights and increased participation in the context of international discussions on climate change. They continue to advocate for the development of a human rights-based approach to climate change, and they play a vital role in conservation and protection of the environment in accordance with their traditional knowledge.

Background

Indigenous peoples are among those who have contributed least to the problem of climate change, yet they are the ones suffering from its worst impacts. They are disproportionately vulnerable to climate change because many of them depend on ecosystems that are particularly prone to the effects of climate change and extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, heatwaves, wildfires and cyclones. Some of the most affected regions are small islands, high altitudes, humid tropics, coastal regions, deserts and polar areas. Global warming increases the risk of disease, changes animal migration routes, reduces biodiversity, causes saltwater inundation of fresh water, destroys crops and results in food insecurity.

Indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia

Referring to indigenous peoples in Asia, in general, implies a dilemma of labeling and definitions, as the region presents a mixed picture concerning the recognition of the concept of indigenous peoples. Most national legal frameworks do not recognize indigenous peoples as distinct collective rights-holders. While for example in the Philippines the term “indigenous peoples” is used explicitly including in the Constitution, several other countries recognize only certain “categories” of people as distinct collective rights-holders, e.g. natives of Sarawak and Sabah in Malaysia. As noted by the former Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, the vast majority of the people in the countries of the Asian region may be considered, in a literal sense, indigenous to the region.



CLIMATE CHANGE AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

in the Southeast Asian Context



Dependence on land and natural resources

In Southeast Asia, Indigenous peoples are heavily dependent on lands and natural resources for their basic needs and livelihoods, such as food, medicine, shelter and fuel.

The World Bank estimates that more than 100 million people across the world risk being forced into extreme poverty by 2030 due to climate change. This has significant implications for indigenous peoples, who are already facing severe socioeconomic disadvantages.

15% of those living in poverty
are indigenous peoples

33% of those living in extreme rural poverty
come from indigenous communities

These figures are particularly alarming given the wealth of natural resources that are located within indigenous territories and the valuable contributions indigenous peoples can provide in alleviating climate change. Therefore, climate change not only poses a grave threat to indigenous peoples' natural resources and livelihoods, but also to their cultural identity and survival.

"Extractive activities, cash crops and unsustainable consumer patterns have generated climate change, widespread pollution and environmental degradation. These phenomena have had a particularly serious impact on indigenous people, whose way of life is closely linked to their traditional relationship with their lands and natural resources, and has become a new form of forced eviction of indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories, while increasing the levels of poverty and disease."

(Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, see A/HRC/4/32, para. 49).



The role of indigenous people in mitigating climate change land conservation, protection, and traditional knowledge

The role of indigenous people's is vital for sustainable environmental management of natural resources and biodiversity conservation, both of which are essential elements for combating climate change. For example, the indigenous land tenure positively impacts conservation and it is well known to have reduced deforestation resulting in lower carbon dioxide emissions. Indigenous peoples are also repositories of learning and knowledge about how to cope successfully with local-level climate change and respond effectively to major environmental changes such as natural disasters. Indigenous peoples play a fundamental role in the conservation of biological diversity and the protection of forests and other natural resources, and their traditional knowledge of the environment can substantively enrich scientific knowledge and adaptation activities when taking climate change-related actions.

Sources:

A/HRC/36/46

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