



BEYOND FRAGMENTATION:

Advancing Coherence, Equity, and Indigenous Leadership Across the Rio Conventions

Photo: A Yanomami woman with jewelry prepares for a ritual in the Brazilian Amazon rainforest, by Bruno Kelly / Nia Tero

Table of Contents

1	Executive Summary
2	I. Introduction: From Rio to the Present
3	II. The Rio Conventions: Structure, Mandates, and Indigenous Peoples
	2.1 Overview of Three Conventions
4	2.2 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)
	Framework
	How Indigenous Peoples are Reflected in the CBD
5	Indigenous Peoples' Gains from Participation in CBD Processes
7	2.3 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)
	Framework
	Treatment of Indigenous Peoples
	Indigenous Peoples' Gains from Participation in UNFCCC Processes
9	2.4 United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)
	Framework
	Recognition of Indigenous Peoples
	Indigenous Peoples' Gains from Participation in UNCCD Processes
11	2.5 Comparative Analysis Across the Three Conventions
12	2.6 Shift in Terminology
14	III. 2025 Engagements and Dialogues
	3.1 CBD SB8(j)
	3.2 UNFCCC COP30
15	3.3 UNCCD CRIC23
17	IV. Insights: Fragmentation and Its Impacts
	4.1 Fragmentation in Governance, Participation, and Representation
18	4.2 Fragmentation in Resource Mobilization and Access to Finance
20	V. Voices from Different Regions
	5.1 Regional Perspectives
20	Kittisak Rattanakrajangsri
21	Jacobed Solano Miselis
22	Tunga Rai
23	Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim
24	Daria Egereva
25	Hanieh Moghani
26	5.2 Cross-Regional Insights
27	VI. Recommendations
	6.1 Strengthen Collaboration Across the Rio Conventions
	At the Convention Level
28	6.2 Strengthen Indigenous Peoples' Caucuses
29	6.3 Strengthen Links to Regional and Local Processes
	6.4 Enhance Information Sharing and Coordination
	6.5 Recommendations for Funders
	What to Fund
30	How to Fund
	What to Avoid
31	VII. Conclusion



Executive Summary

Interconnected Crises

More than 30 years after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, the three Rio Conventions — the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) — remain the principal global frameworks addressing biodiversity loss, climate change, and land degradation. Yet the crises these Conventions seek to address do not occur separately in nature, nor are they experienced separately by Indigenous Peoples.

For Indigenous Peoples, climate instability, biodiversity loss, and land degradation are interconnected manifestations of a broader imbalance in the relationship between people and the earth. This understanding was articulated by Indigenous leaders during UNCED and reflected in the Kari-Oca Declaration. However, the institutional architecture that emerged from Rio divided this reality into separate thematic and governance tracks, resulting in parallel systems of negotiation, reporting, financing, and implementation.

This fragmentation has direct implications for both policymakers and funders. For policymakers, fragmentation contributes to inefficiencies in governance, duplicative reporting, competing mandates, and missed opportunities for coordinated action. For funders, it reinforces silos by supporting interventions, institutions, and processes in isolation, rather than investing in integrated solutions that reflect realities on the ground. The result is a system that is misaligned with the interconnected nature of these crises. Without deliberate structural reform, the current model of environmental governance will remain insufficient to address global crises at scale.

From Fragmentation to Coherence

This report reflects on what Indigenous Peoples have gained — and, in some cases, lost — through decades of engagement in global environmental processes. It also provides strategic insights for funders and policymakers. These actors play a decisive role not only in advancing reform, but also in sustaining existing structures. Viewing these processes through the lens of Indigenous Peoples provides a basis for reassessing priorities, strengthening coherence, and directing investments toward more integrated and effective outcomes.

Drawing from cross-convention dialogues among Indigenous representatives, side events convened in Panama and Belém, bilateral discussions, and analysis of institutional developments, the report finds that recognition of Indigenous Peoples, their knowledge systems, and the importance of their participation has advanced. However, fragmentation across Conventions has served as a structural barrier to effective implementation, efficient resource use, and meaningful participation. This issue is both institutional and procedural. Indigenous Peoples are increasingly recognized in policy language and provided opportunities to speak and contribute, yet remain largely excluded from the spaces where negotiating texts are drafted and final decisions are made. Recognition has advanced, but it has not yet translated into meaningful influence over outcomes.

This report offers targeted recommendations to States, funders, Convention Secretariats, and Indigenous caucuses with the goal of supporting a more coherent, effective, and equitable approach to global environmental governance. The overarching call is to create shared systems for information exchange, align national implementation, improve Indigenous Peoples' access to negotiation spaces, and support States willing to champion Indigenous participation and cross-convention coherence. It also recommends sustained support for Indigenous caucuses and community-rooted participation. This includes direct and flexible funding, stronger accountability, annual inter-caucus dialogues, regional and local feedback processes, and transparent caucus governance. Improving coherence across the Rio Conventions is not only a governance issue, but a question of resource efficiency — ensuring that limited global funding delivers integrated and lasting impact.



Introduction

From Rio to the Present

It has been more than three decades since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, marked a defining moment in global environmental governance. It was also a defining moment for Indigenous Peoples. For perhaps the first time at such a scale, Indigenous representatives from across the geo-sociopolitical regions gathered not merely to respond to an emerging environmental agenda, but to articulate their own analysis of the crisis and the principles that should guide its resolution.

At Kari-Oca village, hosted by the Terena people, Indigenous leaders adopted the Kari-Oca Declaration. This foundational political and ethical statement articulated Indigenous Peoples' relationship with land, waters, and territories, and affirmed responsibilities of guardianship amid accelerating threats posed by extractive industries, deforestation, and other forms of ecological destruction. Long before the language of interconnected crises entered global policy discourse, the Declaration asserted a truth Indigenous Peoples have always understood: that the degradation of ecosystems, the erosion of cultures, and the violation of rights are inseparable.

UNCED took place while the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was still under negotiation. The demands brought forward by Indigenous Peoples were both urgent and far-reaching: to halt environmental destruction, to recognize Indigenous Peoples not as vulnerable populations alone but as peoples with rights, governance systems, and knowledge essential to safeguarding the earth, and to ensure that global environmental governance would not proceed without them.

The Rio Conventions emerged from this moment with a shared ambition to address environmental decline. Yet the architecture that followed divided what Indigenous Peoples understood as an interconnected reality into separate domains of climate change, biodiversity, and land degradation. It also translated Indigenous requests for participation into procedural forms, such as observer interventions, side events, expert inputs, technical submissions, and voluntary platforms. Such mechanisms are important avenues for engagement, but remain largely structured and controlled by State-led processes. As a result, Indigenous Peoples gained visibility yet limited direct influence over negotiations and decision-making.

A Moment of Stocktaking

More than 30 years later, a moment of stocktaking is warranted; an assessment of whether the structures built since Rio are delivering outcomes commensurate with the scale of the crisis. It is also an opportunity to consider what has been gained through decades of participation, what has been compromised or left unresolved, and what reforms may now be necessary.

This moment is particularly timely as a new generation of Indigenous leaders emerges, while many of those who shaped the early struggles from Kari-Oca onward gradually step back. Their experiences, insights, and warnings carry lessons that should inform the future of the Rio Conventions.

As Parties prepare for the 2026 Conferences of the Parties (COPs), this report is offered in that spirit: as a contribution to reflection, but also as an invitation to re-examine whether the current architecture of environmental governance is sufficient, and what deeper coherence, equity, and Indigenous leadership might require.



II. The Rio Conventions: Structure, Mandates, and Indigenous Peoples

2.1 OVERVIEW OF THREE CONVENTIONS

UNCED gave rise to three landmark multilateral environmental agreements that continue to form the principal legal and institutional architecture of global environmental governance: the Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. Together, these Conventions established the core international frameworks through which States have sought to address the interrelated crises of biodiversity loss, climate change, and land degradation/desertification. Over time, each Convention has been further strengthened through the development of protocols, subsidiary bodies, work programs, and implementation mechanisms designed to operationalize their mandates and advance their objectives.

Key Convention Details

CONVENTION	ADOPTED	IN FORCE	APPROX. PARTIES*
 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)	1992	1993	198
 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)	1992	1994	197
 United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)	1994	1996	196

Figure A.

**Approximate Number of Parties as of May 2025*



2.2 CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY (CBD) ¹

Framework The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) aims to conserve biological diversity, promote the sustainable use of its components, and ensure the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources. Together, these three objectives have shaped the CBD as the principal global framework governing biodiversity conservation and use.

The Convention has been further strengthened through three legally binding supplementary agreements that operationalize key dimensions of its mandate. The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (2003) establishes international rules governing the safe handling, transport, and use of living modified organisms in order to safeguard biodiversity and human health. The Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-Sharing (2014) provides a legal framework for the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources, including associated traditional knowledge where relevant. The Nagoya-Kuala Lumpur Supplementary Protocol on Liability and Redress (2018) establishes international rules on response measures and liability for damage resulting from the transboundary movement of living modified organisms.

Taken together, these instruments have expanded the institutional and legal architecture of the CBD, reinforcing its role not only as a conservation treaty but as a broader framework linking biodiversity governance, equity, and benefit-sharing.

How Indigenous Peoples are Reflected in the CBD The Convention on Biological Diversity is among the few multilateral environmental agreements that explicitly recognize Indigenous and Local Communities (ILCs)² within its normative framework. This recognition is clearly reflected in Article 8(j), which calls on Parties, subject to national legislation, “to respect, preserve, and maintain traditional knowledge, innovations, and practices relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity; to promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of knowledge holders; and to encourage the equitable sharing of benefits arising from their use.”

This recognition is reinforced in the preamble of the Convention, which acknowledges the close and traditional dependence of many Indigenous and local communities on biological resources and recognizes the desirability of equitably sharing benefits arising from the use of traditional knowledge relevant to biodiversity conservation.

Additional provisions further reflect the relevance of Indigenous Peoples and local communities to the Convention’s objectives. Article 10(c) recognizes the customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation and sustainable use. Articles 18 and 19 provide openings for technical cooperation, biotechnology, and benefit-sharing that may involve community-held knowledge and resources.

The supplementary protocols further deepen these references. The Nagoya Protocol contains more developed provisions relevant to Indigenous and local communities, including recognition of prior informed consent or approval and involvement, fair and equitable benefit-sharing, and respect for customary laws, community protocols, and procedures, where relevant, in access and benefit-sharing arrangements. The Cartagena Protocol also provides limited openings, including Article 26, which allows Parties, in decision-making concerning imports of living modified organisms, to take socio-economic considerations into account, including potential impacts relevant to Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

¹ Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), Preamble and Articles 8(j), 10(c), 18 and 19.

² Throughout this report, ILC refers to the historical terminology “indigenous and local communities” used in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Article 8(j), the Nagoya Protocol, and other early CBD decisions. IPLC refers to the more recent terminology “Indigenous Peoples and local communities” adopted in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (COP15, 2022) and subsequent CBD decisions.



Indigenous Peoples' Gains from Participation in CBD Processes

Taken together, these provisions have positioned Indigenous Peoples and local communities not only as stakeholders within the Convention, but increasingly as knowledge holders, rights-bearing actors, and contributors to biodiversity governance. However, stronger normative recognition does not automatically translate into greater influence over decision-making. Even within the CBD, where Indigenous Peoples have achieved some of the most advanced forms of formal recognition among the Rio Conventions, influence remains mediated through Party-led decision-making processes, agenda-setting, access to negotiating spaces, and the political willingness of States to support rights-based language and proposals.

Indigenous Peoples' sustained participation in CBD processes has contributed to important advances in the recognition of rights, traditional knowledge, and roles in biodiversity governance. These gains have been uneven and often hard-won; they reflect the cumulative impact of decades of Indigenous Peoples' engagement in shaping normative developments, influencing decisions, and securing institutional spaces within the Convention.

Evolution of Indigenous Peoples' Engagement in the CBD (1990-Present)

GAIN	LEGAL INSTRUMENTS	IMPACT
 Recognition of Traditional Knowledge	 CBD Article 8(j) (1992)	Obligates Parties to respect, preserve, and maintain ILC knowledge, innovations, and practices relevant for biodiversity conservation and sustainable use.
 Right to Prior Informed Consent	 - Nagoya Protocol Articles 6.7 (2010) - Kunming-Montreal Framework (2022, COP15)	ILC must give consent before access to their genetic resources or associated traditional knowledge; FPIC is formally acknowledged in global biodiversity governance.
 Right to Fair and Equitable Benefit-Sharing	 - Nagoya Protocol Articles 5 (2), 5(5) (2010) - Global Benefit-Sharing Mechanism / Cali Fund (2024, COP16)	ILC are entitled to financial or non-financial benefits from use of their resources or knowledge; 50% of Cali Fund benefits are designated for IPLCs.
 Participation in Decision-Making	 - International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (IIFB, 1996) - Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2024, COP16) - Kunming-Montreal Framework (2022)	IPLC have a formal advisory role, a permanent institutional mechanism for engagement, and recognized rights to participate in biodiversity governance.
 Respect for Customary Laws and Practices	 - Nagoya Protocol Article 12 (2010) - CBD & COP Guidance	Parties must consider ILC customary laws, community protocols, and procedures, ensuring access and benefit-sharing respects traditional practices.
 Recognition of Broader Community Contributions	 COP16 (2024)	Includes Afro-descendant and local communities, expanding recognition of community roles in biodiversity governance.

Figure B.



The trajectory illustrated in Figure B demonstrates that Indigenous Peoples have achieved some of the most significant institutional gains within the CBD compared to the other Rio Conventions. What began as recognition of traditional knowledge under Article 8(j) gradually expanded into dedicated work programs, voluntary guidelines, and formal mechanisms that institutionalize the participation of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in biodiversity governance. These developments reflect sustained advocacy over several decades and demonstrate how participation can influence normative and institutional outcomes. However, the progression shown in the figure also highlights the limits of these gains. While recognition and participation have expanded considerably, decision-making authority remains concentrated within Party-led processes, leaving Indigenous Peoples with limited influence over final negotiation outcomes.

Alternative Table for CBD Gains

	PERIOD	MILESTONE	KEY DEVELOPMENT/GAIN
	1990–1993	CBD negotiations	Recognized ILC knowledge, practices, and sustainable use in the CBD.
	1996 (COP3)	Formation of International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (IIFB)	Created an officially recognized advisory group for Indigenous Peoples within CBD.
	2010 (COP10)	Nagoya Protocol adopted	Recognized ILC as holders of traditional knowledge, requiring consent, fair benefit-sharing, and respect for customary laws.
	2011–2020	Strategic Plan & Aichi Targets	Integrated ILC values into global biodiversity targets.
	2022 (COP15)	Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework	Recognized IPLC rights, knowledge, participation and Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in global biodiversity goals.
	2024 (COP16)	Creation of Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j) (SB8J)	Established a permanent mechanism for IPLC engagement in CBD governance.
	2024 (COP16)	New Programme of Work on Article 8(j)	Promoted systematic implementation of IPLC rights and traditional knowledge.
	2024 (COP16)	Recognition of Afro-Descendant Communities	Broadened recognition of local communities' roles in biodiversity governance.
	2024 (COP16)	Global Benefit-Sharing Mechanism	Advanced fair benefit-sharing via Cali Fund, with 50% designated for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs).
	Ongoing	IPLC involvement in National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs)	Encouraged IPLC participation in national biodiversity planning and implementation.

Figure C.

2.3 UNITED NATIONS FRAMEWORK CONVENTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE ³ (UNFCCC)

Framework The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) establishes the overarching principles, commitments, and institutional arrangements guiding international cooperation to address climate change. Its ultimate objective is to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that prevents dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. Central to the Convention is the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities” (CBDR-RC), which recognizes differing national circumstances and underscores the obligation of developed countries to support developing countries through finance, technology transfer, and capacity-building.

The UNFCCC has been further operationalized through two major legal supplementary agreements. The Kyoto Protocol (1997) introduced legally binding emission reduction targets for developed Annex I Parties and established market-based mechanisms — including the Clean Development Mechanism, Joint Implementation, and emissions trading — to facilitate compliance. The Doha Amendment (2012) extended these commitments through a second commitment period (2013–2020). The Paris Agreement (2015) marked a shift toward a universal framework in which all Parties submit nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and collectively pursue efforts to limit global temperature increase to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, while aiming for 1.5°C.

Treatment of Indigenous Peoples The original UNFCCC text does not explicitly reference Indigenous Peoples or local communities. Recognition has evolved through subsequent decisions, most notably under the Paris Agreement. The Agreement’s preamble acknowledges the importance of respecting human rights, including the rights of Indigenous Peoples, and recognizes the value of traditional knowledge systems. Article 7.5 further calls for adaptation actions to be guided by the best available science and, where appropriate, traditional knowledge, knowledge of Indigenous Peoples, and local knowledge systems.

Institutional recognition was significantly advanced with the establishment of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) at COP21 (2015). The LCIPP serves as a permanent mechanism within the UNFCCC to strengthen knowledge exchange, enhance the engagement of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and inform climate policy processes. It was operationalized through the creation of the Facilitative Working Group at COP24 (2018), which supports the implementation of its workplan and ensures balanced representation between Parties and Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous Peoples’ Gains from Participation in UNFCCC Processes Since the UNFCCC negotiations in the early 1990s, Indigenous Peoples have gradually gained more recognition and a role in international climate decision-making.

³ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Kyoto Protocol (1997); Doha Amendment (2012); and Paris Agreement (2015).



Indigenous Peoples' Gains from Participating in UNFCCC Processes

Since the UNFCCC negotiations in the early 1990s, Indigenous Peoples have gradually gained more recognition, influence, and a role in international climate decision-making

PERIOD	KEY ASPECTS	KEY DEVELOPMENT
1992–Present	 Political Visibility, Access	Over time, Indigenous Peoples evolved from participating as general observers to organizing as a distinct, self-coordinated constituency through the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC), enabling coordinated participation and a sustained presence in the UNFCCC process.
2015	 Knowledge Systems	Secured Article 7.5, which explicitly recognizes “Indigenous knowledge systems” as vital to climate action. This changed how Indigenous Peoples are seen – no longer as vulnerable populations but as essential knowledge holders and contributors of climate solutions.
2015	 Rights-Based Framing	Successfully incorporated Indigenous rights into Preamble of Paris Agreement.
2015/2018	 Institutional Space	Created the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform and its Facilitative Working Group. This is the first permanent, designated body in the UNFCCC institutional setup that allows Indigenous Peoples to engage on their own terms and directly inform global policy-making on climate action.
Ongoing	 Procedural Rights	Achieved improved procedural access, including the right to deliver interventions in plenary sessions, participate in technical bodies, and submit formal inputs. This opened up the process, allowing Indigenous experts to participate in technical discussions.
Ongoing	 Policy Influence	Achieved improved procedural access, including the right to deliver interventions in plenary sessions, participate in technical bodies, and submit formal inputs. This opened up the process, allowing Indigenous experts to participate in technical discussions.

Figure D.

Figure D highlights a different trajectory. Unlike the CBD, the UNFCCC did not initially recognize Indigenous Peoples within its foundational text. Recognition emerged gradually through COP decisions, culminating in the Paris Agreement and the establishment of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP). The progression reflected in the figure demonstrates how Indigenous Peoples successfully positioned themselves within global climate governance despite the absence of explicit recognition in the original Convention. These milestones mark a significant shift from limited observer participation toward a more defined role in climate policy, knowledge-sharing, and implementation processes.

The establishment of the LCIPP represents a major institutional achievement, providing a dedicated mechanism for dialogue, knowledge exchange, and engagement between Parties and Indigenous Peoples. However, the figure also illustrates the limits of these gains. Participation, visibility, and recognition have expanded considerably, yet Indigenous Peoples remain outside the Party-driven negotiation of decision texts. Influence over negotiating outcomes, climate finance, and implementation decisions continues to depend largely on the willingness of Parties to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into formal decision-making processes.

2.4 UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION (UNCCD)

Framework The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) provides the global framework for addressing land degradation and drought, particularly in dryland ecosystems. Its objective is to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought through effective action at all levels, with a focus on improving land productivity, restoring degraded land, and strengthening the resilience of affected communities. The Convention links environmental sustainability with livelihoods, emphasizing food security, water availability, and climate resilience.

Unlike the CBD and UNFCCC, the UNCCD does not have supplementary protocols. Instead, its implementation is guided by strategic frameworks and policy instruments. The Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) framework promotes a voluntary approach to balancing ongoing land degradation with restoration efforts to achieve no net loss of productive land. The UNCCD Strategic Framework (2018–2030) provides a long-term roadmap, establishing priorities, targets, and indicators to guide national implementation and monitor progress.

Recognition of Indigenous Peoples The UNCCD does not explicitly reference Indigenous Peoples in its original text. Instead, it employs broader terms such as “local populations” and “populations affected by desertification and drought.” However, the Convention places strong emphasis on participation and bottom-up approaches. Articles 3 and 10 call for the involvement of affected populations — including farmers, pastoralists, and women — in the design and implementation of National Action Programs. Article 17 further encourages the integration of traditional and local knowledge alongside scientific knowledge in efforts to combat desertification and drought. [United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), Articles 3, 10 and 17 (1994).]

Explicit references to Indigenous Peoples have become clearer in subsequent frameworks and decisions. The Land Degradation Neutrality Scientific Conceptual Framework includes Indigenous Peoples among relevant stakeholder groups at the local level. Similarly, the Strategic Framework (2018–2030) emphasizes inclusive stakeholder engagement, though it continues to use broad terminology.

More formal recognition has developed through decisions of the Conference of the Parties (COP). Prior to COP15 (2022), references to Indigenous Peoples were generally indirect. COP15 marked a shift by formally acknowledging Indigenous Peoples as distinct stakeholders within UNCCD processes. This recognition was further strengthened at COP16 (2024), which established the Indigenous Peoples Forum, supported the development of Indigenous caucus mechanisms, and elevated the visibility of Indigenous perspectives in land and drought governance.

The Indigenous Peoples Forum provides a dedicated platform within the UNCCD for engagement in policy discussions on land restoration, desertification, and drought. Complementary mechanisms, including the Indigenous Peoples’ Caucus, support coordination and participation across negotiation and implementation processes. Together, these developments signal a gradual transition — from implicit inclusion within broader stakeholder groups toward more explicit recognition of Indigenous Peoples as distinct actors in UNCCD governance.

Indigenous Peoples’ Gains from Participation in UNCCD Processes Indigenous Peoples’ engagement in the UNCCD has resulted in gradual but notable advances in recognition, participation, and the integration of traditional knowledge in land and drought governance. While the Convention initially relied on broad references to “affected populations,” sustained advocacy has contributed to more explicit acknowledgment of Indigenous Peoples as distinct actors, particularly in recent COP decisions. These gains reflect a shift from indirect inclusion toward more structured participation and visibility within UNCCD processes.



Indigenous Peoples' Gains From Participating in UNCCD Processes

Indigenous Peoples' engagement in the UNCCD has resulted in gradual but notable advances in recognition, participation, and the integration of traditional knowledge in land and drought governance

PERIOD	THEME	GAIN/KEY DEVELOPMENT
 1994	Legal Basis	UNCCD text established principles of local participation are recognized the role of traditional and local knowledge in combating desertification and drought.
 COP12 (2015)	Technical Validation	Indigenous and community-based land management practices increasingly recognized as effective approaches to sustainable land management and land restoration.
 COP14 (2019)	Land Tenure	Decisions highlighted the importance of land tenure security, including customary and Indigenous land rights, as a condition for achieving land degradation neutrality.
 COP16 (2024)	Indigenous Peoples Forum	Establishment of the Indigenous Peoples Forum, providing a dedicated platform for Indigenous engagement within UNCCD processes.
 COP16 (2024)	Political Voice	Indigenous delegates advanced collective positions through declarations (e.g., Sacred Lands Declaration), calling for recognition of rights, protection of territories, and self-determination.
 COP16 (2024)	Representation	Strengthening of Indigenous coordination through the formation of caucus mechanisms to support participation in negotiations and implementation processes.
 COP16 (2024)	Policy and Finance	Decisions reflected increased attention to pastoralist and Indigenous land systems, though access to finance remains mediated through state-led and institutional mechanisms.

Figure E.

The developments summarized in Figure E demonstrate the comparatively recent evolution of Indigenous Peoples' recognition within the UNCCD. Unlike the CBD, where recognition was embedded in the Convention text, Indigenous participation in the UNCCD has developed primarily through advocacy within COP processes and implementation frameworks. Recent decisions establishing the Indigenous Peoples Forum and supporting caucus structures represent important milestones, signaling a shift from indirect inclusion toward more explicit recognition of Indigenous Peoples as distinct actors in land and drought governance.

Because these mechanisms remain relatively new, they also present a unique opportunity to shape governance arrangements, accountability measures, and participation practices before they become fully institutionalized. At the same time, the figure highlights that recognition within the UNCCD is still in an early stage of development. While visibility and participation have expanded, the long-term effectiveness of these mechanisms will depend on whether they strengthen Indigenous influence over policy development, implementation, and resource allocation, rather than creating additional consultative spaces with limited impact on decision-making.

**Siloed
Governance vs.
Ecological
Interdependence**

2.5 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ACROSS THE THREE CONVENTIONS

The three Rio Conventions were designed to address distinct dimensions of the environmental crisis — biodiversity loss (CBD), climate change (UNFCCC), and land degradation (UNCCD). This separation allowed for focused analysis and targeted interventions, but fails to reflect the ecological interdependence of these issues. Climate change accelerates biodiversity loss, both contribute to land degradation, and efforts to conserve biodiversity can also support climate mitigation and land restoration.

When governance remains siloed, interventions can become incomplete or counterproductive. Climate-focused forest protection, for example, may overlook the role of sustainable use in maintaining ecosystem health. Reforestation initiatives that focus solely on tree density can ignore vital ecosystem dynamics. Indigenous Peoples have long practiced integrated resource management in recognition of the interdependence of biodiversity conservation, climate regulation, and livelihoods.

Fragmentation is most visible in resource allocation. Climate change continues to receive the largest share of global environmental funding, while land degradation remains significantly under-resourced. This imbalance shapes national priorities, institutional arrangements, and participation in international processes. In many developing countries, dedicated agencies exist for climate governance, while responsibilities for land degradation are assigned to smaller or less-resourced units. As a result, attention to UNCCD processes is often limited compared to the CBD and UNFCCC.

Indigenous Peoples' participation across the three Conventions reflects both progress and limitations. All three Conventions now recognize the role of traditional knowledge in addressing environmental challenges. The CBD has established the most advanced institutional mechanism through its subsidiary body on traditional knowledge, while the UNFCCC has created platforms for knowledge exchange, and the UNCCD has formalized Indigenous caucus structures.

Indigenous Peoples continue to engage primarily as observers, with limited influence on negotiations and policy outcomes, while formal decision-making authority remains with Parties. Participation is often restricted to delivering caucus statements, subject to time constraints and procedural rules. This limits the ability to convey the diversity and specificity of Indigenous experiences, particularly those grounded in local realities.

Although the number of Indigenous representatives attending Convention meetings has increased significantly, this has not translated into proportional influence in negotiations. Only a small proportion of participants are directly involved in text negotiations, with most engagement occurring through side events and informal dialogues. Structural barriers — including language constraints, technical complexity, limited interpretation services, travel and visa barriers, limited accreditation opportunities, insufficient funding for preparatory meetings, and restricted access to informal negotiating spaces — further restrict meaningful participation. In many instances, draft negotiating texts are circulated late, negotiations take place primarily in English, and key discussions occur in informal settings where observer access is limited. The absence of effective feedback mechanisms between global processes and Indigenous communities further compounds these challenges, weakening the connection between international advocacy and local realities.

These limitations point to an important distinction between participation and influence. Participation may include access to meetings, opportunities to deliver statements, and the ability to submit views or technical inputs. Influence, however, is reflected in the ability to shape negotiating texts, participate in key negotiating spaces, affect Party positions, and help ensure that commitments are translated into implementation on Indigenous territories. Indigenous participation across the Rio Conventions has expanded considerably, but the gap between participation and influence remains one of the central



challenges facing Indigenous engagement in global environmental governance.

Taken together, these dynamics highlight a central tension: while the Conventions have expanded Indigenous participation and enabled thematic focus, fragmentation across governance systems continues to constrain coherence, efficiency, and the effectiveness of both policy responses and resource use. These limits are most visible in resource allocation, policy coherence, and the translation of global commitments into locally relevant, integrated solutions.

Rio Convention Comparisons

DIMENSION	CBD	UNFCCC	UNCCD
 Participation	Strong institutional (SB8J)	Platform-based (LCIPP)	Emerging (Caucus, Forum)
 Finance Access	Moderate (GEF-linked)	Highest (climate finance architecture)	Lowest (limited global funding)
 Legal Strength	Strong (Protocols: Nagoya, Cartagena)	Strong (Paris Agreement)	Weaker (framework + decisions)
 Institutional Space	Advanced	Moderate	Limited but growing

Figure F.

These differences demonstrate that while all three Conventions have advanced Indigenous participation, they do so unevenly, reinforcing asymmetries in influence, access to finance, and institutional engagement. Beyond differences in participation mechanisms and institutional arrangements, the three Conventions also differ in how they define and recognize Indigenous Peoples within their respective frameworks.

2.6 SHIFT IN TERMINOLOGY

These shifts have direct implications for recognition, representation, and the application of rights, influencing how Indigenous Peoples are positioned within negotiations and how their claims are interpreted. These differences also influence how Indigenous Peoples engage across Conventions, shaping both advocacy strategies and the extent to which rights-based approaches are advanced or constrained in each process.

Indigenous Peoples have had consistent recognition as a distinct constituent group across the three Rio Conventions. Terminology has evolved over time, reflecting gradual shifts in recognition and political positioning.

Under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), early references used the term “Indigenous and local communities.” More recent Conference of the Parties (COP) decisions have increasingly adopted the formulation “Indigenous peoples and local communities,” signaling a stronger acknowledgment of Indigenous Peoples as distinct rights-bearing actors.

The original text of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) does not reference Indigenous Peoples or local communities. However, subsequent processes and COP decisions have introduced terms such as “Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples,” as reflected in the establishment of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP), as well as the broader use of “Indigenous peoples and local communities” in policy discussions.

Similarly, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) initially relied on broad terminology such as “affected populations” and did not explicitly reference Indigenous Peoples. More recent COP decisions have begun to adopt the term “Indigenous peoples and local communities,” reflecting a gradual move toward more explicit recognition.

Taken together, these shifts in terminology are not merely semantic; they indicate an evolving recognition of Indigenous Peoples — from implicitly included stakeholder groups toward more clearly defined actors within international environmental governance.

At the same time, evolving terminology raises important considerations regarding the distinct legal and political status of Indigenous Peoples under international law. While formulations such as “Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities” may facilitate broader alliances and collaboration around shared environmental concerns, care must be taken to ensure that the specific rights of Indigenous Peoples — including self-determination, rights to lands, territories and resources, free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), and cultural integrity — remain clearly recognized and protected. The challenge is to build solidarity across constituencies without obscuring the distinct legal status and rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Evolution of Terminology Across the Rio Conventions

CONVENTION	TREATY/ORIGINAL TEXT	COP DECISION USAGE
CBD	“Indigenous and local communities”	“Indigenous peoples and local communities”
UNFCCC	Not mentioned	“Local communities and Indigenous Peoples”/ “Indigenous Peoples and local communities” in processes and LCIPP
UNCCD	Not mentioned	“Indigenous peoples and local communities”

Figure G.

This table compares how Indigenous Peoples and local communities are referenced in the original treaty texts and in subsequent Conference of the Parties decisions across the Rio Conventions. It highlights the absence or limited recognition in the original agreements and the gradual shift in terminology toward more explicit acknowledgment of Indigenous Peoples in later processes. These changes in language reflect broader developments in recognition, participation, and positioning of Indigenous Peoples within international environmental governance.



III. 2025 Engagements and Dialogues

3.1 CBD SB8(j)

A roundtable dialogue was convened on the sidelines of the inaugural meeting of the CBD Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j), held in Panama City on 29 October 2025. The session brought together representatives from the three Rio Convention caucuses, including Daria Egereva (IIPFCC), Hanieh Moghani (UNCCD Indigenous Peoples Caucus), and Lucy Mullenkei (IIFB).

The dialogue underscored a shared recognition of the need for stronger coordination across Indigenous caucuses and across the Conventions themselves. Participants emphasized that while each Convention has developed its own processes and priorities, the issues faced by Indigenous Peoples are inherently connected and require more aligned approaches.

Several concrete proposals emerged. These included the establishment of a joint annual planning process among Indigenous caucuses to align positions ahead of global meetings, and the development of a shared platform to facilitate information exchange across Conventions. Participants emphasized that any such coordination mechanism should remain light, accessible, and inclusive, avoiding the creation of additional processes that only well-resourced organizations are able to sustain. Coordination efforts should be regionally grounded, multilingual where possible, digitally accessible, and supported by regional preparatory dialogues. Importantly, shared planning processes should complement rather than replace region-specific and community-based priorities and positions.

Participants also highlighted the importance of grounding global processes in regional and national realities. While engagement at the global level remains critical, there was a strong call to strengthen participation at regional and national levels, where decisions are implemented and where their impacts are most directly felt by communities.

3.2 UNFCCC COP30

At the UNFCCC COP30 in Belém, a side event held on 11 November 2025 built on the outcomes of the Panama roundtable and expanded the dialogue on cross-convention coordination. The session brought together representatives of States, Indigenous Peoples' organizations, non-governmental organizations, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and members of the CBD Secretariat.

Compared to the Panama dialogue, the Belém event broadened participation beyond Indigenous caucuses, allowing for engagement with States and other stakeholders. Discussions reinforced the need for improved coordination, while also highlighting structural constraints within the Conventions.

A key reflection was that the Rio Conventions are primarily environmental agreements rather than rights-based instruments. As such, issues such as land rights and self-determination are not always central within negotiations. Despite this, participants stressed that Indigenous Peoples have been able to advance rights-based considerations within these spaces through sustained and strategic engagement.

This reflects a broader structural dilemma facing Indigenous Peoples across the Rio Conventions. Although decisions taken under these agreements directly affect Indigenous lands, territories, knowledge systems, livelihoods, and self-determination, the Conventions generally address these issues through environmental management objectives rather than rights-based frameworks. As a result, Indigenous Peoples have often advanced rights considerations indirectly through safeguards, participation standards, traditional knowledge provisions, finance access mechanisms, and implementation guidance. Strengthening these

entry points may offer practical opportunities to reinforce Indigenous rights even where Parties remain cautious about explicit rights-based approaches.

Bilateral discussions with Secretariat representatives further highlighted institutional challenges. The CBD Secretariat continues to support efforts toward coherence by synthesizing COP decisions and facilitating technical exchanges across Conventions. However, these efforts are constrained by reductions in funding across the UN system.

The UNCCD Secretariat faces even greater limitations, given its comparatively smaller budget and lower visibility. Nevertheless, sustained advocacy by Indigenous Peoples has led to tangible outcomes, including the decision at COP16 to establish an Indigenous Peoples Caucus. Work is underway to develop its terms of reference, with the aim of formal adoption at COP17 in Mongolia.

3.3 UNCCD CRIC23

During the twenty-third session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC23), held in Panama City in December 2025, further discussions were held with Indigenous representatives to assess progress and identify challenges.

The Indigenous caucus within the UNCCD remains relatively small and is composed largely of newer participants. This smaller composition has enabled more in-depth exchanges and reflection, but it has also placed significant demands on participants, who must simultaneously engage with multiple thematic areas and contribute to ongoing strategy development.

These discussions highlighted both the opportunities and constraints facing Indigenous engagement in UNCCD processes — particularly the need for sustained support, stronger coordination, and continued capacity to engage effectively across both policy and implementation tracks. Across these engagements, three patterns emerged.

First, fragmentation is not only institutional but is increasingly reflected within Indigenous engagement across the three Conventions. Participation tends to follow thematic tracks — climate change, biodiversity, or land degradation — resulting in the emergence of specialized groups or “experts” aligned with specific processes. While this specialization is necessary given the technical complexity and distinct mandates of each Convention, it also carries risks. Without mechanisms for coordination and exchange, specialization can reinforce silos, create asymmetries in knowledge and influence, and increase reliance on a relatively small number of Indigenous experts active across multiple processes. While some individuals engage across multiple Conventions, there is no sustained or systematic mechanism to translate decisions, lessons, or strategies from one process to another. As a result, opportunities for cross-learning and coordinated advocacy remain limited, and experiences gained in one Convention are not consistently informing others.

Second, differences in approach and positioning across caucuses further reinforce this fragmentation. Some participants emphasize the distinctiveness of each Convention and caution against directly transferring approaches across processes. This reflects the specific mandates and contexts of each Convention, yet has also contributed to limited convergence in strategy and messaging, and has constrained efforts toward more integrated engagement.

Third, evolving terminology and representation debates have introduced additional complexity. The use of “Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities” (IPLCs) within the CBD, and variations in terminology across the Conventions, have led to differing interpretations and positions within Indigenous spaces. In some cases, this has created tensions around representation and alignment. While the UNCCD has taken steps to differentiate structures, these dynamics highlight the need for clearer approaches to representation that strengthen, rather than divide, collective engagement.

Taken together, these patterns point to a broader challenge: fragmentation is not only a feature of global environmental governance, but is shaping the ways in which Indigenous Peoples are organized, represented, and engaged within these processes.



IV. Insights: Fragmentation and Its Impacts

4.1 FRAGMENTATION IN GOVERNANCE, PARTICIPATION, AND REPRESENTATION

These insights point to structural limitations in the current governance model, particularly in how environmental issues are separated institutionally despite their connected nature in practice.

Across both formal and informal discussions, a central theme consistently emerged: the need to better understand and navigate the different processes across the Rio Conventions to ensure that benefits ultimately reach communities.

At the heart of this challenge is a structural issue — the division of the environment into three separate domains: climate change, biodiversity, and land degradation. This fragmentation does not reflect the worldview of Indigenous Peoples, who understand the environment as an interconnected whole.

There is broad recognition that sustained participation in these processes has led to important gains. Within the CBD, the establishment of a subsidiary body on traditional knowledge represents a significant milestone, placing Indigenous knowledge systems at the center of biodiversity governance. Under the UNFCCC, the creation of platforms such as the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform, alongside decisions recognizing the role of Indigenous Peoples in climate action, marks another key advancement. In the UNCCD, the establishment of an Indigenous Peoples caucus further reflects the effectiveness of Indigenous advocacy in securing space within global environmental governance. These developments represent meaningful progress and should be acknowledged.

However, deeper reflection raises a more fundamental question: do these gains reflect the original intent of Indigenous Peoples' engagement in global environmental processes? Participants who traced their involvement back to the early Rio processes emphasized that there was no intention to divide the environment into separate thematic areas. The objective was clear — to halt environmental destruction, assert the role of Indigenous Peoples as stewards of their lands and waters, and secure support for their continued guardianship of the earth.

The fragmentation that followed the establishment of the Conventions introduced a separation that was not originally envisioned. Over time, this division became normalized, often without explicit reflection. As a result, the connectedness of environmental issues has been diminished within policy discussions, leading to approaches that treat biodiversity, climate change, and land degradation as distinct rather than interdependent challenges.

This has direct implications for both policy and practice. When issues are treated in isolation, solutions also become fragmented. Climate mitigation efforts, for example, may prioritize carbon outcomes without adequately considering biodiversity impacts or community needs. Similarly, renewable energy initiatives, while critical for climate goals, can lead to unintended ecological harm if not assessed within a broader environmental and social context.

Fragmentation also affects the efficiency and sustainability of participation. Indigenous Peoples are required to engage in multiple parallel processes, often at significant personal and institutional cost. Time and resources that could otherwise support community-based work are instead directed toward navigating complex international systems. Fragmentation can also weaken Indigenous negotiating influence by requiring representatives to engage separately across climate, biodiversity, and land agendas, even where the underlying issues are interconnected. As a result, related issues such as safeguards, traditional knowledge, land tenure, finance, and participation are often advanced through separate processes rather



than as part of a coherent cross-convention agenda. At the same time, this dynamic has contributed to the emergence of a small group of Indigenous policy experts tasked with maintaining continuity across negotiations. While this expertise represents an important strength and has helped advance Indigenous priorities within complex international processes, it should be accompanied by strong community accountability, leadership renewal, regional representation, and broader participation to ensure that engagement remains grounded in community realities.

Participants further highlighted the personal toll of sustained engagement in global processes, including impacts on family life and well-being. These reflections underscore that participation is not without cost, and that current systems place considerable demands on individuals.

From the perspective of States, fragmentation also creates inefficiencies. The existence of three separate Conventions requires multiple reporting processes and institutional arrangements, placing additional burdens on governments. While efforts have been made to streamline reporting, challenges remain in achieving coherence.

At the same time, some participants noted that having separate Conventions can facilitate focus and enable targeted resource mobilization. Climate change has attracted significantly greater funding due to its immediacy and visibility. However, this has also contributed to imbalances, reinforcing fragmentation as funding flows disproportionately toward certain areas while others, such as land degradation, remain under-resourced.

This dynamic extends to the national level, where ministries responsible for different Conventions may compete for funding rather than coordinate efforts. Such competition undermines coherent planning and limits the effectiveness of implementation.

Taken together, these reflections point to a broader conclusion: while participation has generated important gains, the fragmentation of environmental governance has introduced structural limitations that constrain effectiveness, coherence, and equity. These insights provide the basis for the recommendations that follow.

4.2 FRAGMENTATION IN RESOURCE MOBILIZATION AND ACCESS TO FINANCE

Resource mobilization remains fragmented, reflecting broader institutional separation across the Rio Conventions. While Indigenous Peoples experience these challenges as interconnected realities within their territories, funding mechanisms continue to be organized through separate thematic and institutional channels, each with its own priorities, eligibility requirements, reporting systems, and governance structures.

This has significant implications for Indigenous Peoples' participation and self-determined action. Accessing finance often requires engagement with multiple institutions and processes, placing substantial administrative and technical burdens on Indigenous organizations. Resources that could otherwise support territorial governance, knowledge transmission, and community-led stewardship are frequently redirected toward navigating complex funding systems and compliance requirements.

Access to finance also varies significantly across the three Conventions. The climate regime has developed the most extensive financing architecture through mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF), the Adaptation Fund, the Loss and Damage Fund, and other climate finance channels. The Convention on

Biological Diversity (CBD) benefits from support through the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and emerging biodiversity finance mechanisms, while financing dedicated to land degradation and desertification remains comparatively limited. Despite these developments, Indigenous Peoples continue to face significant barriers to direct access across all financing systems, including accreditation requirements, fiduciary standards, intermediary structures, and complex administrative procedures that often favor governments and large implementing entities over Indigenous-led institutions.

Although important advances have been made — including GEF policies recognizing the importance of engagement with Indigenous Peoples and local communities and growing discussions within climate finance institutions regarding direct access — financial resources continue to reach Indigenous territories unevenly. This limits Indigenous Peoples' ability to pursue self-determined priorities and long-term territorial strategies.

Participants and contributors to this report emphasized that improving coherence across the Rio Conventions must also include improving coherence in resource mobilization. Greater coordination among financing mechanisms, increased direct access for Indigenous Peoples, simplified access modalities, more flexible and long-term funding arrangements, and stronger support for Indigenous-led institutions would help ensure that financial resources reflect the interconnectedness of environmental challenges and support self-determined priorities at the territorial level. Pathways should be created to enable Indigenous Peoples to access climate, biodiversity, and land restoration finance without needing to navigate multiple fragmented systems.



V. Voices from Different Regions

5.1 REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

The regional perspectives presented in this section reflect a diversity of experiences and viewpoints across the Rio Conventions. Kittisak Rattanakrajangsri provides a historical perspective, drawing on decades of engagement in both the CBD and UNFCCC processes. Jacobed Solano Miselis offers insights from the perspective of an Indigenous negotiator working within a State delegation, highlighting the opportunities and challenges of influencing negotiations from within government structures. Tunga Rai contributes an internal critique of Indigenous participation, reflecting on both the gains achieved and the challenges that have emerged through institutional engagement. Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim brings a global leadership perspective, emphasizing the role of Indigenous Peoples in shaping international environmental governance. Daria Egereva focuses on practical pathways and solutions for strengthening coordination and effectiveness across the Conventions, while Hanieh Moghani reflects on the structural reforms needed to improve participation, representation, and coherence within the Rio Convention processes.

While efforts were made to gather insights from a broader range of regions, scheduling constraints and limited availability of identified contributors meant that perspectives from some regions could not be included in this review. The analysis presented here reflects the inputs available within the timeframe of the study. Further engagement with underrepresented regions would be valuable to deepen and strengthen the findings, and may be considered as a follow-on effort.

Kittisak Rattanakrajangsri

Mien, Thailand

- Former Executive Secretary, International Alliance of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests (IAITPTF)
- Executive Director, Indigenous Peoples Foundation for Education and Culture

Kittisak Rattanakrajangsri has been actively engaged in both CBD and UNFCCC processes since their early years, including serving as a secretariat for the Indigenous caucus during its formative stages. Although he did not participate in the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), he was among the early Indigenous representatives involved in the initial Conferences of the Parties (COPs) under both Conventions.

In the early UNFCCC processes, the International Alliance of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests (IAITPTF) served as an Indigenous focal point at a time when participation was limited to only a small number of representatives. The organization played a critical role in maintaining Indigenous presence within the negotiations and mobilizing resources to support broader participation.

A significant shift occurred during COP13 in Bali (2007), where participation of Indigenous Peoples increased substantially, driven in part by negotiations on REDD. Preparatory meetings were organized to align positions and strategies — IAITPTF convened one such meeting, while Tebtebba organized another. At the COP itself, Indigenous representatives consolidated their efforts, eventually leading to the formalization of the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) as the Indigenous caucus. Earlier Indigenous focal points included Parshuram Tamang, Max Ooft, Ben Powless, and Estebancio Castro.

Within the CBD process, Kittisak recalls that under the leadership of Jannie Lasimbang of the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (IIFB) was formally recognized at COP7 (2004) in Malaysia as a key grouping representing Indigenous Peoples and local communities. The IIFB functioned as a coordinating body, convening before and during CBD meetings to develop shared positions. Its rotational leadership model ensured geographic balance and supported the emergence of new leaders.



Reflecting on these early processes, Kittisak emphasized that the effectiveness of Indigenous participation was grounded in strong preparation and the ability to bring concrete, community-based experiences into global discussions. Preparatory meetings served as spaces for exchanging lived realities, which were then translated into common positions and negotiation inputs. Caucus processes functioned as platforms for knowledge exchange and, to some extent, capacity-building for Indigenous negotiators.

At the same time, he identified unintended consequences arising from the institutionalization of caucus structures. While the IIPFCC and IIFB have been instrumental in advancing recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights, they have also contributed to a degree of homogenization of Indigenous voices. Representatives, while rooted in diverse communities, are often required to speak on behalf of a collective caucus position, which can limit the expression of distinct experiences and perspectives.

This challenge is further compounded by the constraints of formal negotiations. Time limitations and the need to negotiate specific textual language often result in generalized statements that may not fully capture the diversity of Indigenous realities. In some cases, the process of negotiating language risks prioritizing technical precision over the articulation of lived experience.

These dynamics have also contributed to the emergence of a group of Indigenous policy experts who specialize in negotiation language and navigating UN processes. This expertise is essential, though there is a risk that engagement becomes detached from the communities it seeks to represent.

Kittisak reflected on the importance of maintaining an accurate and inclusive historical account of Indigenous engagement in these processes. Narratives can sometimes become centered on specific organizations or actors, overlooking the collective efforts that have shaped and sustained Indigenous participation. A more objective documentation of the histories of bodies such as the IIFB and IIPFCC would provide valuable lessons for future generations.

Jacobed Solano Miselis

Guna, Panama

- Indigenous Negotiator, Ministry of Environment, Panama

Jacobed Solano Miselis first participated in the UNFCCC COP25 in Madrid in 2019 and has since engaged in CBD and UNCCD processes as part of the Panama State delegation. Within this role, she brings Indigenous perspectives into national positions, navigating both State and Indigenous priorities in international negotiations.

She noted that Indigenous participation has achieved greater visibility and formal recognition across the Conventions. Negotiation texts increasingly acknowledge the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems, consultative spaces have been established, and references to collective rights and safeguards have been incorporated. At COP30, for example, the Just Transition discussions included, for the first time, references to Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and Initial Contact (PIACI). Similarly, elements of the Just Energy Transition work program referenced free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) and Indigenous self-determination. These developments have enabled Indigenous Peoples to influence agendas, raise concerns, and build alliances within the negotiation process.

However, Jacobed emphasized that progress remains uneven. Influence over technical and financial decision-making continues to be limited, and participation is often constrained by highly technical processes that do not fully reflect Indigenous knowledge systems and epistemologies. Implementation of commitments also remains uncertain.



A key structural challenge is the fragmentation of environmental governance across climate, biodiversity, and land agendas. Each Convention operates with distinct priorities and processes, which can obscure the interconnected nature of these issues and lead to fragmented policy responses.

She also highlighted constraints related to capacity and continuity. Limited financial and technical resources — both for States and Indigenous Peoples — affect the ability to sustain participation, prepare effectively, and follow through on negotiations. Frequent changes in government delegations further weaken institutional memory and continuity of engagement.

Questions of representation and legitimacy also arise. While some States raise these concerns to challenge Indigenous participation, there are also internal reflections among Indigenous Peoples regarding whether caucus structures continue to reflect the priorities of communities. Addressing these concerns is essential to maintaining credibility and effectiveness.

Additional barriers include language and epistemological gaps within negotiation processes. Discussions are often conducted primarily in English, and interpretation, where available, may be insufficient. This limits meaningful participation for many Indigenous delegates.

Uneven legal recognition of Indigenous land and territorial rights across countries further constrains engagement. Where such rights are not formally recognized, Indigenous representatives face limitations in advancing specific claims or solutions, particularly when required to speak within broad group positions rather than from localized contexts.

Finally, Jacobed underscored the persistent gap between global commitments and local implementation. When negotiated gains are not realized on the ground, trust in these processes diminishes. Many communities remain disconnected from global discussions, either due to lack of awareness or because they do not perceive tangible benefits. This highlights a critical challenge for Indigenous caucuses and representatives: strengthening the connection between global advocacy and local realities, and ensuring that participation translates into meaningful outcomes for communities.

Tunga Rai

Rai, Nepal

- Executive Secretary, Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities

Tunga Rai, who has participated in UNFCCC processes since 2011, reflected on gains achieved and the deeper challenges emerging from sustained Indigenous engagement in global climate negotiations.

He noted that one of the most visible gains has been the increased presence of Indigenous Peoples and their issues within UNFCCC processes. Today, it is difficult to find a decision or document that does not reference Indigenous Peoples in some form. While this may not constitute a substantive win in itself, it reflects the cumulative impact of consistent participation. By maintaining a sustained presence, Indigenous Peoples have asserted their relevance and ensured that their perspectives cannot be ignored.

Another significant achievement has been the creation of dedicated spaces for dialogue. Mechanisms such as the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) have provided opportunities for engagement between Parties and Indigenous Peoples and local communities. While these spaces are primarily consultative rather than decision-making, they offer important avenues for building mutual understanding and articulating perspectives. They have also facilitated intergenerational exchanges, contributing to the transfer of knowledge and leadership within Indigenous communities.



Participation in these processes has also had less visible, but equally important, impacts. It has increased Indigenous leaders' awareness of the Conventions and the implications for rights and governance. It has also strengthened advocacy and negotiation skills, enabling more effective engagement in international forums. These gains have been achieved despite persistent structural challenges. Limited financial and technical resources continue to constrain consistent participation. The frequency and complexity of meetings make it difficult for individuals and organizations to follow processes comprehensively, leading to gaps in understanding and engagement.

At the same time, those who are able to participate consistently may experience a growing distance from community realities. As engagement deepens, there is a tendency to prioritize technical negotiations and textual language over the lived experiences and priorities of communities. This dynamic risks shifting the focus from substance to process.

Tunga also highlighted the impact of the fragmentation of environmental governance across the three Rio Conventions. Indigenous Peoples are often required to frame their holistic worldview within the narrower categories of climate change, biodiversity, or land degradation. While Indigenous perspectives emphasize the interconnectedness of these issues, engagement within separate processes can reinforce the dominant paradigm, requiring Indigenous Peoples to adapt their positions accordingly.

This dynamic contributes to broader concerns about co-optation. Participation in highly structured, theme-specific processes can gradually shape the way Indigenous issues are framed, potentially aligning them with dominant policy approaches rather than community-defined priorities. Funding structures further reinforce this trend. Many Indigenous organizations rely on project-based funding tied to specific thematic areas. This influences which processes they can engage in. For example, historically lower levels of participation in UNCCD processes have been linked to limited funding attention compared to forest- and climate-related initiatives.

Tunga also raised concerns regarding the growing influence of external actors within Indigenous caucuses. The involvement of conservation organizations and funders — particularly where they support caucus secretariats or advisory roles — can shape priorities and decision-making dynamics. In some instances, informal agreements with States have been made without full caucus awareness. While these dynamics are not always openly discussed, they point to emerging governance challenges within caucus structures.

Overall, his reflections point to a complex reality: while Indigenous Peoples have secured greater visibility and access within global climate governance, these gains are accompanied by structural tensions related to representation, fragmentation, resource limitations, and the risk of co-optation. Addressing these challenges will be critical to ensuring that participation remains grounded in community priorities and leads to meaningful outcomes on the ground.

Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim

Mbororo, Chad

- Chair, Association for Indigenous Women and Peoples of Chad (AFPAT)

Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, one of the most prominent Indigenous leaders in global climate and biodiversity governance, has consistently emphasized that the continued fragmentation of environmental governance is both inefficient and unsustainable. She advocates for reforming the governance architecture of the Rio Conventions to enable more coordinated and holistic approaches to decision-making, including closer alignment of COP processes and outcomes.



Her central message is clear: the crises facing the planet — climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation — are deeply interlinked. Addressing these challenges through separate negotiation tracks undermines both efficiency and effectiveness. At the same time, fragmentation creates competition for limited financial resources, as different processes draw from the same pool of funding from governments and private actors. Greater coordination across the Rio Conventions, she argues, could strengthen collective bargaining power and improve both resource mobilization and outcomes.

Hindou also underscored the uneven nature of progress for Indigenous Peoples within these processes. While there is growing recognition among Parties and stakeholders that Indigenous Peoples are key contributors to climate and biodiversity solutions, this recognition has not translated into equitable access to resources. Indigenous Peoples continue to receive less than one percent of global climate finance, highlighting a significant gap between rhetoric and implementation.

She identified two urgent priorities. First is the need for direct and flexible access to finance for Indigenous Peoples. Current funding structures are often siloed — separating support for forests, water, and other sectors — while Indigenous livelihoods and territories are inherently interconnected. Flexible, community-driven financing is essential to support holistic approaches to stewardship and development.

Second, she raised concerns regarding the role of Indigenous territories in the global transition to renewable energy. The growing demand for critical minerals — often located in Indigenous lands in biodiversity-rich regions — poses new risks of environmental degradation and rights violations. She called for stronger global frameworks, potentially including new international agreements, to ensure that the transition to clean energy does not replicate the extractive harms of the past and that safeguards are in place to protect Indigenous lands and ecosystems.

Hindou also challenged prevailing narratives about Indigenous Peoples within global environmental discourse. Indigenous knowledge, she emphasized, is not anecdotal or symbolic; it is grounded in lived experience and practical engagement with ecosystems. However, discussions often frame Indigenous Peoples primarily in terms of vulnerability rather than as providers of solutions.

Her message is ultimately one of clarity and urgency: Indigenous Peoples have consistently demonstrated their capacity to steward their territories and contribute to global solutions. The challenge lies not in generating solutions, but in ensuring that systems of governance, finance, and decision-making are aligned to recognize, support, and learn from Indigenous leadership.

Daria Egereva

Russia

- Co-Chair, International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on Climate Change

Daria Egereva underscored that the Rio Conventions were founded on a shared vision: restoring balance between humanity and nature. However, she emphasized that this vision has been implemented through fragmented processes, and calls for stronger alignment across the three Conventions, particularly in areas related to Indigenous Peoples.

She highlighted the need for consistent recognition and application of Indigenous Peoples' rights, knowledge systems, and governance across biodiversity, climate, and land agendas. A more coordinated approach, she argued, would enhance both the effectiveness and coherence of global environmental action.



To advance this objective, Daria proposed the exploration of a Permanent Indigenous Coordination Mechanism linking the Indigenous Peoples' caucuses of the UNFCCC, CBD, and UNCCD. Such a mechanism could facilitate information exchange, align advocacy strategies, and strengthen collaboration among Indigenous representatives across the Rio Conventions, while respecting the autonomy of each caucus.

She also recommended the establishment of an Annual Indigenous Roundtable of the Rio Conventions to bring together caucus co-chairs, focal points, and Convention Secretariats ahead of each COP cycle. This platform could serve to review progress, prepare common positions, and reinforce coordinated advocacy.

More broadly, Daria stressed that without strengthening the enabling conditions for participation, progress will remain limited. This includes ensuring the full and effective participation of Indigenous experts in technical and negotiation processes, investing in capacity strengthening, and providing consistent access to relevant information.

Her perspective reinforces the central theme of this report: that improved coordination across the Rio Conventions is not only desirable, but necessary to support meaningful Indigenous participation and more effective global environmental governance.

Hanieh Moghani

Iran

- Expert Member and Vice-Chair, United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2024)

Hanieh Moghani emphasized that while Indigenous Peoples steward interconnected ecosystems, the governance systems that shape their realities remain fragmented. This, she argues, translates directly into fragmented outcomes for communities. She called for a shift from parallel approaches toward genuine structural collaboration across the Rio Conventions. This includes advancing joint programming, coordinated reporting, and shared resource mobilization — designed and implemented in partnership with Indigenous Peoples. Such measures would move beyond symbolic alignment toward practical coherence in addressing environmental challenges.

Hanieh further stressed that Indigenous Peoples should no longer be positioned merely as observers, but recognized as full participants within Convention processes, including within caucus structures. Inclusion must be understood not only as presence, but as access — to spaces, resources, and decision-making. These elements are fundamental to the principle of full and effective participation. She underscored that participation cannot be considered “full and effective” when Indigenous communities face barriers to engagement, including financial constraints, administrative hurdles, and logistical limitations. These systemic challenges continue to restrict meaningful participation and limit Indigenous Peoples' ability to influence outcomes.

Ensuring meaningful engagement therefore requires direct, predictable, and equitable access to funding that reaches Indigenous rights-holders without discrimination. It also requires addressing structural barriers that constrain participation across all stages of the policy process.

Looking ahead, Hanieh highlighted the need for convergence. The interconnected crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation demand coordinated responses across the Conventions, their respective caucuses, and — critically — States and Indigenous Peoples working together.



5.2 CROSS-REGIONAL INSIGHTS

Across the perspectives shared by representatives from different regions, several common patterns emerge, pointing to both the progress achieved and the structural challenges that persist in Indigenous engagement across the Rio Conventions.

First, there is clear convergence on the gains achieved through sustained participation. The establishment of Indigenous caucuses, the designation of focal points, and the increasing number of Indigenous representatives attending Convention processes have contributed to a more systematized and organized form of engagement. Indigenous organizations are now better able to prepare for negotiations, coordinate positions, and engage with decision-makers across different thematic areas.

However, inequalities in participation persist. Not all Indigenous organizations have equal access to resources, resulting in uneven representation. Well-funded organizations are more likely to maintain sustained engagement, while others face uncertainty in attending meetings. This disparity directly affects levels of preparation and the ability to contribute meaningfully to negotiations. Additional barriers, such as visa constraints — particularly for participants from the Global South — further limit equitable participation.

Addressing these inequalities requires a more deliberate focus on equitable participation across the Rio Conventions. Key considerations include support for underrepresented regions, visa and travel assistance, interpretation beyond formal plenary sessions, direct support to community-based organizations, transparent selection processes for speakers and representatives, regional rotation of leadership opportunities, and the inclusion of youth and elders. Strengthening these enabling conditions would help ensure that participation is broader, more representative, and equitable.

A related concern is the evolving nature of representation within these processes. Indigenous NGOs increasingly dominate participation, with fewer representatives coming directly from community-based organizations. Within caucus structures, many of those actively engaged in negotiations are professional staff, rather than community representatives. This raises important questions about whose perspectives are reflected in formal processes and how closely these align with community realities.

Language and technical barriers also remain significant. While official sessions often provide interpretation, many negotiations — particularly in working groups and informal settings — are conducted primarily in English. The technical nature and pace of discussions limit opportunities for real-time translation, effectively restricting participation to those with both language proficiency and familiarity with negotiation processes.

Taken together, these dynamics highlight a central tension: while Indigenous participation in the Rio Conventions has become more structured and visible, it remains shaped by structural inequalities in access, representation, and capacity. Addressing these challenges is critical to ensuring that participation is expanded, meaningful, and grounded in Indigenous realities.

Indigenous Peoples continue to recognize the importance of engaging in the Rio Conventions. For many, the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) remains a landmark moment — bringing together Indigenous leaders from across regions with the shared purpose of addressing the environmental crisis while safeguarding Indigenous rights and ways of life.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that while the current model of engagement has enabled important gains, it remains insufficient to fully realize the original vision of Indigenous Peoples' participation and to translate that participation into equitable influence and tangible outcomes.



VI. Recommendations

The findings suggest that improving coherence requires action at multiple levels — from Convention procedures and State practice to Indigenous caucus governance and funding structures. The following recommendations respond directly to the structural gaps identified across the analysis, particularly fragmentation in governance, inequities in participation, and limitations in translating global commitments into local outcomes.

6.1 STRENGTHEN COLLABORATION ACROSS THE RIO CONVENTIONS

In parallel with efforts to improve coordination across the Conventions, greater attention should be given to strengthening Indigenous Peoples' access to decision-making processes. While participation opportunities have expanded, procedural barriers continue to limit influence over negotiations. Parties and Convention bodies should explore practical measures to enhance Indigenous engagement. This includes improved access to negotiating spaces, opportunities to provide inputs before negotiating texts are finalized, regular consultations with presiding officers and Convention leadership, and clearer channels through which Indigenous caucuses can communicate recommendations. Strengthening these procedural dimensions would help translate participation into more meaningful influence while remaining consistent with the Party-driven nature of the Conventions.

At the Convention Level

Inter-convention coordination needs to go beyond rhetorical alignment toward practical integration. This may begin with the development of a shared platform to consolidate information, track decisions, and eventually support integrated reporting.

The Secretariats should strengthen mechanisms for both cooperation and systematic information exchange. Funding institutions should prioritize integrated interventions that address the objectives of all three Conventions.

Multilateral environmental financing mechanisms, including the Global Environment Facility (GEF), should play a stronger role in promoting integrated approaches across the Conventions. Project assessments should consider cross-cutting environmental impacts rather than focusing on single thematic outcomes. Other funding institutions should be encouraged to adopt similar approaches to maximize efficiency and coherence.

States that have expressed support for enhanced synergies — such as Panama — should be engaged as potential champions to advance coordinated efforts at the global level. States should align national institutional arrangements across the Conventions to reduce duplication, strengthen coherence, and coordinate delivery of commitments at the national level.

A complementary strategy would be to identify and engage a small group of supportive States across regions that are willing to champion Indigenous participation and cross-convention coherence. These States could help in a number of ways including:

- Elevating Indigenous participation in Bureau consultations, COP Presidency briefings, and subsidiary body agenda-setting processes
- Supporting the inclusion of language on Indigenous participation in COP decisions
- Encouraging the preparation of technical papers on Indigenous engagement across the Rio Conventions
- Piloting practical measures such as Indigenous technical briefings ahead of negotiations on safeguards, finance, biodiversity, land restoration, and just transition issues

As procedural reforms within multilateral processes often require Party leadership, supportive States can play an important role in advancing these efforts.



6.2 STRENGTHEN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' CAUCUSES

- Provide flexible and sustained funding for Indigenous participation, including preparation, technical support, interpretation, and follow-up.
- Strengthen accountability between global advocacy and Indigenous communities through community-to-COP-to-community feedback cycles, including regional consultations, transparent caucus mandate setting, regular negotiation briefings during Convention meetings, and accessible post-COP reporting. States should also be encouraged to include Indigenous representatives within national delegations, while respecting their autonomy and ability to represent Indigenous perspectives independently.
- Establish annual inter-caucus dialogues prior to COP cycles to strengthen coordination and develop shared strategies across the three Conventions. Such dialogues should seek to identify common minimum positions, shared safeguards, and areas of collective concern. The diversity of Indigenous Peoples' territories, governance systems, legal statuses, political histories, and relationships with States must be recognized throughout. Coordination should strengthen collective action without requiring a single homogenized Indigenous position, and should preserve space for regionally and locally specific perspectives.
- Establish a cross-convention Indigenous coordination mechanism to support information sharing, joint agenda scanning, early identification of emerging issues, and the development of common safeguards language across the three Rio Conventions. Such a mechanism should strengthen coordination while respecting the autonomy and mandates of existing caucus structures.
- Conduct periodic reviews of caucus processes to ensure that Indigenous values — such as collective leadership, representation, transparency, accountability, and community legitimacy — are upheld. This may include strengthening caucus governance through transparent leadership selection processes, regional rotation, conflict-of-interest safeguards, community reporting obligations, and mentorship opportunities for youth and emerging leaders. Support should also be provided for Indigenous legal and policy drafting teams, rapid-response text analysis during negotiations, and training on rules of procedure and text-based negotiations to strengthen Indigenous influence within decision-making processes.
- Encourage participation of elders and youth in these processes to strengthen intergenerational knowledge transfer and ensure that advocacy remains grounded in community realities.
- Develop annual caucus reports outlining key achievements, priorities, and upcoming agenda items to enhance transparency and coordination.



6.3 STRENGTHEN LINKS TO REGIONAL AND LOCAL PROCESSES

- Prioritize engagement at regional and national levels to ensure that global processes remain connected to community realities. Existing regional Indigenous gatherings can be leveraged to integrate environmental discussions and strengthen awareness of the interconnections between environmental governance, human rights, and resource mobilization. Regional processes should not be viewed solely as mechanisms for informing global caucus positions. They should also provide space for communities to determine when engagement in global processes is useful, identify concerns and priorities, establish red lines, and assess whether global outcomes are aligned with community interests and aspirations.
- Global convenings, such as Climate Weeks, may also serve as strategic opportunities for Indigenous caucuses to meet and advance discussions on coordination and synergy-building.

6.4 ENHANCE INFORMATION SHARING AND COORDINATION

- Develop a shared information platform to facilitate communication across Indigenous caucuses. While each caucus maintains its own communication channels, dedicated spaces for cross-convention updates would improve coordination and access to information.

6.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

Funders play a critical role in shaping the direction, priorities, and outcomes of engagement across the Rio Conventions. Beyond supporting participation, funding decisions influence which issues are prioritized, which actors are able to engage, and how knowledge and perspectives are represented within global processes. As such, funding strategies can either reinforce existing fragmentation or contribute to greater coherence and equity.

What To Fund

Funders are encouraged to prioritize support for integrated and cross-convention approaches that reflect the interconnection of climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation. This includes funding initiatives that bridge thematic silos and enable coordinated engagement across the three Conventions.

There is also a need to diversify the range of Indigenous organizations supported, with greater emphasis on community-based organizations. Direct support to grassroots actors can help ensure that perspectives from the ground are meaningfully represented in global processes. Opportunities such as side events and official engagements can be leveraged to amplify these voices.

In addition, funders should support regional preparatory processes, which can serve as platforms for information sharing, coordination of positions, and capacity development. These spaces are critical for translating global discussions into regional contexts and for strengthening the participation of emerging Indigenous leaders and negotiators.



Funders should also prioritize core, flexible, and multi-year support for Indigenous-led institutions, enabling them to determine priorities based on community needs rather than short-term project cycles. Support should extend beyond participation in meetings to include interpretation, community feedback processes, independent caucus coordination, and leadership development. Funding approaches should respect Indigenous self-determination and avoid conditioning support on alignment with donor-defined conservation or climate priorities. Appropriate safeguards should also be established to ensure that financial support does not influence Indigenous political positions or decision-making processes.

How To Fund

Funding mechanisms should be flexible, predictable, and accessible, allowing Indigenous organizations to engage across multiple Conventions without being constrained by rigid thematic boundaries. Support should extend beyond travel to include preparation, coordination, interpretation, and follow-up activities.

Funders may also consider complementary funding approaches, where mechanisms such as voluntary funds can continue to support experienced negotiators, while additional resources are directed toward broadening participation and strengthening community-level engagement. This balanced approach can help maintain technical capacity while expanding inclusivity.

What To Avoid

Funders should be mindful of approaches that unintentionally reinforce fragmentation. This includes strictly siloed funding structures that limit engagement to single thematic areas, as well as support that prioritizes technical participation without sufficient connection to community realities.

There is also a need to avoid reinforcing narrow interpretations of environmental issues that separate climate, biodiversity, and land agendas. Funding strategies should instead actively incentivize integrated approaches that reflect Indigenous perspectives on the interconnectedness of nature and discourage siloed interventions that fragment both governance and practice.



VII. CONCLUSION

After more than three decades, Indigenous Peoples have secured important gains across the Rio Conventions including greater recognition of their rights, knowledge systems, and contributions to environmental governance. Yet recognition alone is insufficient. Despite expanded opportunities for participation, influence over decision-making remains constrained by fragmented governance structures, unequal access to resources, and processes that continue to be largely State-driven.

The central challenge is no longer whether Indigenous Peoples should be included in global environmental governance, but whether existing institutions can evolve to reflect the realities they seek to address. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation do not occur in isolation, nor are they experienced separately within Indigenous territories. Addressing these crises requires greater coherence across Conventions, stronger support for Indigenous-led approaches, and pathways that translate participation into meaningful influence and outcomes.

As reflected in the Kari-Oca Declaration, Indigenous Peoples have long advanced a vision of environmental stewardship grounded in reciprocity, responsibility, and interdependence. More than thirty years later, that vision remains highly relevant to the challenges facing the international community today.

The task ahead is not simply to recognize Indigenous leadership, but to create the conditions for it to shape the future of global environmental governance.

**“We walk into the future
in the footsteps of our ancestors.”**

Indigenous Leaders, in the Kari-Oca Declaration, 1992

Author: Minnie Degawan

Technical and Strategic Review: Valeree Nolasco

Editorial Review: Louise Shirley, Nancy Kelsey and Luana Polinesio

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A large feathered headdress, likely a traditional Amazonian headdress, is the central focus of the image. It features several long, dark brown feathers with lighter, frayed tips, radiating from a central point. The headdress is set against a dramatic sky at sunset or sunrise, with warm orange and yellow light filtering through the clouds. A decorative horizontal band with a repeating geometric pattern in gold and black is positioned across the middle of the image, behind the 'Thank You' text.

Thank You



900 E. Pine St. Ste 200
Seattle, WA 98122, USA
+1.206.339.1290



NiaTero.org/RioReport

Photo: Headdress in Enawene-Nawe Territory, Amazonia, by Kamikia Kisedje (Kisedje)/For Nia Tero