



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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BEYOND FRAGMENTATION:

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

Photo: Armlet of an Indigenous person, Federal District, Brazil, by Kujãesage Kaiabi

Report Highlights

INTRODUCTION:

From Kari-Oca to the Rio Conventions

In May 1992, shortly before the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio Earth Summit), more than 700 Indigenous representatives from around the world gathered in Kari-Oca, Brazil, for the International Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Environment and Development. The gathering produced the Kari-Oca Declaration and Indigenous Peoples Earth Charter, which articulated an Indigenous vision of environmental stewardship grounded in relationships among peoples, territories, waters, forests, biodiversity, and future generations.

States negotiated what would become the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and later the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Collectively known as the Rio Conventions, these became the principal international frameworks for separately addressing biodiversity loss, climate change, and land degradation. Meanwhile, Indigenous Peoples advanced a perspective that understood these challenges to be deeply interconnected. More than three decades later, this contrast remains profoundly relevant.

While the Rio Conventions have generated important advances in environmental governance, they have also institutionalized fragmentation, dividing interconnected realities into separate thematic and governance tracks. What Indigenous Peoples understood as one environmental crisis became three distinct policy domains, each with its own institutions, negotiations, reporting systems, financing mechanisms, and participation structures.

This report draws on a review of developments across the three Rio Conventions, cross-convention dialogues with Indigenous representatives, side events in Panama and Belém, bilateral discussions with Indigenous leaders and Convention representatives, and reflections from Indigenous experts engaged in biodiversity, climate, and land governance.

The analysis focuses on how Indigenous Peoples experience and navigate the opportunities and constraints created by fragmented environmental governance. It asks whether the current architecture is sufficient to address interconnected environmental crises and suggests what reforms may be necessary to strengthen coherence, equity, and Indigenous leadership across the Rio Conventions.



Recognition Has Expanded Across the Rio Conventions

The story of Indigenous engagement across the Rio Conventions is, in many respects, a story of remarkable progress.

Within the CBD, Indigenous Peoples have secured some of the strongest forms of institutional recognition found anywhere in the multilateral environmental system. Article 8(j), the Nagoya Protocol, and the establishment of the Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j) have helped position Indigenous knowledge, customary practices, and rights as central components of biodiversity governance.

Within the UNFCCC, Indigenous Peoples have moved from near invisibility within the original Convention text to the establishment of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP), recognition of traditional knowledge under the Paris Agreement, and increasing engagement in climate policy discussions.

Within the UNCCD, Indigenous Peoples have secured growing visibility and institutional recognition, culminating in the establishment of the Indigenous Peoples Forum and the continued development of Indigenous caucus structures.

These gains were not inevitable. They reflect decades of advocacy, negotiation, coalition-building, and persistence by Indigenous leaders who insisted that global environmental governance could not succeed without the meaningful participation of those who steward many of the world's remaining intact ecosystems.

Today, Indigenous Peoples are widely recognized as knowledge holders, rights holders, and partners in addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation. Yet recognition alone does not guarantee influence.

Recognition Has Not Yet Translated Into Meaningful Influence

A central finding of this report is the growing gap between participation and influence. Across all three Rio Conventions, Indigenous Peoples are increasingly invited to participate in meetings, contribute technical expertise, share knowledge, and engage in consultations. Dedicated spaces for engagement have expanded, and references to Indigenous Peoples have become more common within decisions, frameworks, and work programs.

Influence over outcomes remains uneven.

However, many Indigenous representatives continue to experience exclusion from the spaces where negotiating texts are drafted, compromises are brokered, and final decisions are made.

This distinction emerged repeatedly throughout interviews and dialogues conducted for this report. Contributors acknowledged that participation opportunities have expanded considerably, yet influence over outcomes remains uneven. Indigenous Peoples often participate through advisory, consultative, or observer mechanisms, while decision-making authority remains concentrated within State-led processes.

The challenge facing the Rio Conventions is therefore no longer whether Indigenous Peoples should participate. That question has largely been settled. **The challenge now is whether participation can lead to meaningful influence over decisions, implementation, and outcomes.**

Recognition has advanced but has not yet translated into meaningful influence.



Fragmented Systems, Interconnected Realities

Fragmentation emerged as one of the most consistent themes across interviews, dialogues, and side events.

Fragmentation creates practical and political challenges.

Climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation are deeply interconnected challenges. **Climate change accelerates biodiversity loss. Biodiversity loss contributes to ecosystem degradation and reduced resilience. Land degradation affects both biodiversity and climate outcomes.** Yet these issues continue to be governed through separate institutions, negotiations, funding streams, and implementation frameworks.

For Indigenous Peoples, this fragmentation creates practical and political challenges. Representatives frequently navigate multiple Convention processes simultaneously, often discussing related issues through different institutional structures. Safeguards, traditional knowledge, participation, land tenure, finance, and territorial governance are often addressed separately despite their interconnected nature.

Fragmentation also affects resource allocation. Climate finance has expanded dramatically over the past decade, while financing for land degradation remains comparatively limited. These disparities influence national priorities, institutional arrangements, and participation in international processes.

At the national level, ministries and agencies responsible for different Conventions often operate independently. This creates duplication and limits opportunities for coordinated action. Similar dynamics are reflected internationally, where Convention processes frequently advance in parallel rather than in partnership.

The result is a governance architecture that struggles to reflect the realities experienced by Indigenous Peoples on the ground.

The Cost of Participation

The expansion of participation opportunities has also created new burdens.

Indigenous representatives are increasingly expected to engage across multiple Conventions, technical processes, working groups, consultations, and regional meetings. Sustaining this level of engagement requires substantial investments of time, expertise, and resources.

Sustaining this level of engagement requires substantial investments.

Many Indigenous organizations rely on a relatively small group of experienced negotiators and technical experts to maintain continuity across negotiations. This expertise has been essential in advancing Indigenous priorities, but it also creates risks related to burnout, succession, and the concentration of knowledge within a limited number of individuals.

Participants also reflected on the personal costs associated with sustained engagement, including impacts on family life, community responsibilities, and well-being. These realities are rarely reflected in discussions about participation but are critical to understanding the sustainability of current engagement models.

The report therefore highlights the need to strengthen leadership development, support intergenerational learning, and ensure that participation remains grounded in community realities.



Voices from Across Regions

Despite differences in geography, political context, and institutional experience, Indigenous participants in this analysis identified strikingly similar concerns.

Kittisak Rattanakrajangsri (Mien, Thailand) reflected on the early years of Indigenous engagement within the CBD and UNFCCC, emphasizing both the achievements of caucus structures and the risks of homogenizing Indigenous voices. He highlighted the importance of maintaining strong connections between global advocacy and community realities.

Jacobed Solano Miselis (Guna, Panama) underscored the continuing gap between global commitments and local implementation, noting that many negotiated gains have yet to translate into tangible benefits for Indigenous communities.

Tunga Rai (Rai, Nepal) emphasized the risks of fragmentation and co-optation, warning that sustained engagement in highly technical processes can gradually distance Indigenous representatives from the communities they seek to represent.

Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim (Mbororo, Chad) argued that fragmented governance is fundamentally inefficient and called for stronger alignment across the Rio Conventions, particularly in relation to Indigenous rights, leadership, and access to resources.

Daria Egereva (Selkup, Russia) highlighted the need for stronger coordination among Indigenous caucuses and proposed mechanisms that would facilitate collaboration across Conventions while respecting their distinct mandates.

Hanieh Moghani (Qashqai, Iran) emphasized that participation should be understood not merely as presence, but as access to resources, decision-making, and influence.

Together, these perspectives reinforce a common conclusion: fragmentation affects not only institutions, but also the ways Indigenous Peoples are organized, represented, and engaged within global environmental governance.

Moving Toward Greater Coherence

Importantly, participants did not call for entirely new institutions.

Instead, they called for stronger coordination across existing structures.

Participants emphasized the importance of addressing inequities in participation.

This includes stronger communication among Indigenous caucuses, closer collaboration among Convention bodies, better information sharing, greater support for regional engagement, and improved connections between global negotiations and territorial realities.

Participants also emphasized the importance of addressing inequities in participation, including barriers related to language, financing, accreditation, technical complexity, and access to negotiation spaces.

Greater coherence should not be understood as institutional uniformity. Rather, it should be understood as the ability of different institutions, processes, and actors to work together in ways that reflect the interconnected nature of environmental challenges and the realities experienced by Indigenous Peoples.



Key Recommendations

For Convention Secretariats and Convention Bodies

The Rio Conventions should move beyond rhetorical commitments to coherence and strengthen practical collaboration across processes. Priorities should include better information sharing, cross-convention learning, coordinated programming, and stronger safeguards to ensure that Indigenous participation mechanisms are not treated as isolated structures. Convention bodies should also improve Indigenous Peoples' access to negotiating spaces and create more opportunities for input before negotiating texts are finalized.

For States

States remain the primary decision-makers within the Rio Conventions and therefore play a critical role in translating recognition into influence. Governments should strengthen coordination across national focal points, ensure that commitments relating to Indigenous Peoples are implemented consistently across Conventions, and support meaningful Indigenous participation in national and international processes. States that have expressed support for enhanced synergies between the Rio Conventions should also champion efforts to advance greater coherence and Indigenous participation within multilateral negotiations.

For Indigenous Caucuses

Indigenous caucuses have become essential vehicles for coordination, advocacy, and representation. However, strengthening participation requires continued attention to transparency, accountability, regional balance, leadership renewal, youth engagement, and community legitimacy. Greater coordination across caucuses should be encouraged, while preserving the diversity of Indigenous perspectives and avoiding the creation of homogenized positions that fail to reflect distinct territorial realities.

For Funders

Funders play a critical role in shaping the direction, priorities, and outcomes of engagement across the Rio Conventions. Funding decisions influence which issues receive attention, which actors are able to participate, and how Indigenous perspectives are represented within international processes. As a result, funding approaches can either reinforce fragmentation or contribute to greater coherence.

**Funding should
be flexible,
predictable, and
long-term.**

Funders should prioritize support for integrated approaches that reflect the interconnected nature of climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation. Greater investment is needed in Indigenous-led institutions, community-based organizations, regional preparatory processes, interpretation, leadership development, and independent caucus coordination. Funding should be flexible, predictable, and long-term, enabling Indigenous Peoples to determine priorities based on community needs rather than donor-driven project cycles.

At the same time, funders should avoid approaches that unintentionally reinforce fragmentation, including narrowly siloed funding structures and support mechanisms that prioritize technical participation without maintaining strong connections to territorial realities. **Funding strategies should actively encourage integrated approaches that reflect Indigenous understandings of the interconnectedness of nature.**



Conclusion

More than 30 years after the Rio Earth Summit and the adoption of the Kari-Oca Declaration, the central challenge remains remarkably similar.

Indigenous Peoples continue to emphasize that climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation, cultural survival, and territorial governance are interconnected realities. Yet global environmental governance continues to address them through fragmented systems.

The inclusion of Indigenous Peoples within the Rio Conventions has advanced significantly. Recognition has expanded. Participation has increased. Institutional mechanisms have emerged. Yet recognition has not yet become commensurate influence.

The challenge is to redesign practices of participation.

The challenge is not simply to create more opportunities for participation. The challenge is to redesign the practices of participation so that Indigenous Peoples can shape decisions while preserving the diversity, autonomy, and legitimacy of their voices.

The realistic objective is not to replace State-centered multilateralism, but to reshape its practices so that Indigenous Peoples are not confined to symbolic recognition. The task ahead is to convert recognition into influence, influence into safeguards, and safeguards into outcomes for Indigenous lands, waters, and communities.

As the Kari-Oca Declaration reminded the world more than three decades ago, the environmental crisis cannot be separated from questions of rights, governance, culture, and stewardship. **Building systems capable of responding to interconnected realities may ultimately require learning from the peoples who have long understood those connections.**

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

Indigenous Leaders, in the Kari-Oca Declaration, 1992

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Thank You



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Photo: Tawarawana dance performed by the Kisedje at dawn, in Khikatxi village, Mato Grosso state, Brazilian Amazon, by Kamikia Kisedje