

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN ADDRESSING THE TWIN CRISES OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND LOSS OF NATURE: HOW POWERFUL NEW PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, FAITH COMMUNITIES AND SCIENCE TO PROTECT FORESTS CAN TURN THE TIDE

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Abstract

This paper argues that Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, culture, ways of life and spirituality provide essential contributions to addressing the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss and it reviews how global support for Indigenous Peoples' issues has grown dramatically over the past 30 years through United Nations processes, with support from NGOs, the scientific community, philanthropies, government, etc. This new movement is among the most significant and encouraging developments to date in the fight to protect our climate and nature. One recent and significant development – strongly advanced by His Holiness Pope Francis – is the way religious leaders and faith-based organizations are joining this global movement to rally support for Indigenous Peoples, their rights and knowledge. An important expression of this trend is the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI), working in major rainforest countries to give greater voice and power to Indigenous Peoples – in spite of the 500-year-old torn relationship between Western religions and Indigenous Peoples. Examples are provided of how IRI's work is advancing the collaboration between Indigenous knowledge and science in Brazil, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia and Peru. This effective model and methodology of interfaith cooperation can be applied to other issues and geographies to make further progress on combatting climate change and sustaining nature.

Introduction

It is well established that we are facing a twin crisis of climate change and loss of nature that is now threatening all life on the planet.

I argue here that another historically significant change is also underway – only this one is positive and life-affirming – the growing understanding of, and support for, Indigenous Peoples in our world.

This trend is very good news because of the rapidly expanding body of evidence that Indigenous Peoples' culture, ways of life and spirituality have a powerful and far-reaching impact in addressing those twin crises through their traditional knowledge and stewardship of their lands.

I also argue that Indigenous knowledge and links to modern science – the focus of this conference – is vitally important – but the securing of rights to indigenous lands and resources is a critical 'enabler', without which indigenous knowledge and culture are not sustained.

The increasing support for Indigenous Peoples is thanks to the concerted efforts over decades of many indigenous leaders here in this conference – Vicky Tauli Corpuz, Myrna Cunningham, Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, Jen Rubis, Elifuraha Laltaika, Stanley Kimaren and countless others.

I explore here key events, programs and processes that have led to this increased power and influence of Indigenous Peoples from the perspective of my 32 years in the United Nations – starting with my first UN assignment, the 1992 Rio Earth Summit.

Recently, and significantly – advanced by His Holiness Pope Francis – many religious leaders and faith communities have also joined this movement to support Indigenous Peoples. For example, His Holiness provided inspiration for the creation of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) – an effort that I have devoted the past 6 years of my career to build – and which has mobilized religious communities to protect rainforests and Indigenous Peoples' rights and knowledge, as I explain below.

Thirty-Year Trend of Growing Support for Indigenous Peoples Rights and Knowledge

Over the past 30 years since the Rio Earth Summit, Indigenous Peoples have skillfully contributed to, and influenced, key international environmental bodies and initiatives, including the Rio Conventions and their associated Conferences of the Parties (COPs). As a result, we are now seeing the world's most powerful institutions – public and private – begin to align behind Indigenous Peoples' efforts to be incorporated into decision-mak-

ing to secure their rights and help combat climate change and protect biodiversity. (See here Vicky Tauli-Corpuz' account of Indigenous Peoples' struggles for access to international processes during an even earlier period: 1970 to 1999).¹

Indigenous Peoples' territories cover about 20% of land worldwide, and yet contain 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity²³ and there is a wealth of other evidence that Indigenous Peoples have been far more effective than other land uses in maintaining intact tropical forests that store and protect immense amounts of carbon, biodiversity and critical water circulation. In other words, Indigenous Peoples across the world are doing what other groups have not succeeded in doing: retaining the forests standing with the carbon and wildlife intact too.⁴

And formal recognition of indigenous territories is crucial to enable these benefits of reducing deforestation, maintaining a stable regional climate, mitigating climate change, preserving biodiversity, and sustaining local livelihoods.⁵⁶⁷ Securing self-determination and the rights of Indigenous Peoples to their lands is also a matter of both social justice and climate justice.

How did this understanding and support for Indigenous Peoples evolve over these past three decades since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit?

¹ Tauli-Corpuz, V. (1999). "Thirty years of lobbying and advocacy by Indigenous Peoples in the international arena". *Indigenous Affairs* 1, 4-11.

² Kamal, B. (2017, Feb. 9). "Indigenous Peoples Lands Guard 80 Per Cent of World's Biodiversity", Inter Press Service News Agency <https://www.ipsnews.net/2017/02/indigenous-peoples-lands-guard-80-per-cent-of-worlds-biodiversity/>

³ CBD News Headline (2022, July 20) "Indigenous Communities Protect 80% of All Biodiversity", <https://www.cbd.int/kb/record/newsHeadlines/135368?FreeText=protected%20areas>

⁴ Kruid, S. Madedo, M. et al., (2021, July 27), "Beyond Deforestation: Carbon Emissions from Land Grabbing and Forest Degradation in the Brazilian Amazon, Front. For Glob. Change, Sec. Tropical Forests, Vol. 4 – 3021, <https://doi.org/10.3389/ffgc.2021.645282>

⁵ Soares-Filho, B., Moutinho, P., et al., (2010, May 26), "Role of Brazilian Amazon protected areas in climate change mitigation", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, 107 (24) 10821-10826 <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0913048107>

⁶ Nolte, C., Agrawal, A. et al., (2013, Mar 11). "Governance regime and location influence avoided deforestation success of protected areas in the Brazilian Amazon", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, 110 (13) 4956-4961, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1214786110>

⁷ Walker, W.S., et al. (2020). "The role of forest conversion, degradation, and disturbance in the carbon dynamics of Amazon indigenous territories and protected areas". *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 117, 3015–3025. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1913321117

For the 1992 UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Indigenous Peoples have been influential since the beginning because they succeeded in being formally recognized in the Convention itself, especially in Article 8(j), where Parties agree to respect, preserve, and maintain the knowledge, innovations, and practices of Indigenous Peoples which are essential to reach the Convention's objectives.

However, Indigenous Peoples' access to the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) processes occurred much later, with no significant recognition of Indigenous Peoples issues in its decisions until 2001 when they were recognized as a constituency in the UNFCCC.

When the Global Environment Facility (GEF) became the implementing mechanism for the three Rio Conventions in 1992, Indigenous Peoples had little voice or impact on GEF priorities or decision making. However, through their own efforts, supported by many of us in UNDP and others, Indigenous Peoples have earned an enhanced role over the years, including through the establishment of the UNDP GEF Small Grants Programme (SGP) which celebrated its 30th anniversary last year and has allocated over \$725 million to more than 25,000 community-based projects since Rio. GEF now consults Indigenous Peoples in a serious and organized way so there has been an enormous growth in influence of Indigenous Peoples in the world's largest environmental granting body.

The establishment of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) under the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 2001 was another important milestone towards giving voice and influence to Indigenous Peoples at the highest levels of the UN.

The "Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems" (LINKS) program in UNESCO has also played a valuable role since it was established in 2001 in facilitating exchanges between the holders of Indigenous and local knowledge with science policy processes, among other contributions.

In 2002, during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, the Equator Initiative⁸ – and the Equator Prize – were launched by my colleagues at UNDP and I to identify and honor thousands of successful indigenous and community projects from tropical countries to be resourced, scaled up and to foster south-south exchange of experience among communities. The Equator Initiative is still active, 22 years later – and represented here in this conference.

⁸ Equator Initiative. www.equatorinitiative.org

After nearly 30 years of intense negotiations, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007 – signifying since then a strong global commitment to rectify historical injustices and promote indigenous rights around the world.

In 2008 the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) was established as the caucus for Indigenous Peoples participating in UNFCCC deliberations. They have continued to expand their interventions and influence in UNFCCC COP processes since then.

The introduction of the Forest agenda into UNFCCC at COP11 in 2005 in Montreal and COP13 in 2007 in Bali brought renewed attention to the importance of Indigenous Peoples.

Significantly, Indigenous Peoples and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) were given full seats on the governing body of the first phase of the UN-REDD Program in 2009, with equal authority to the other members representing governments and UN agencies, enabling them to have strong influence over how the REDD instrument operated and evolved. Prior to this, despite their outsized role in combatting climate change through forest conservation, Indigenous Peoples did not have official seats at the table or decision-making power for climate negotiations. The international community can surely do more to help secure land rights and decision-making power for Indigenous Peoples through more formal recognition of their contribution to, and leadership on, combatting climate change and biodiversity loss.

In 2010, Indigenous Peoples' efforts played a pivotal role in the adoption by the UNFCCC of the Cancun Safeguards, which recognize the need to ensure respect for the knowledge and rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Forest issue was given prominence in the UN Secretary General's Climate Summit in September 2014 as one of its main themes and Indigenous Peoples' rights and knowledge were strongly featured in the New York Declaration on Forests (NYDF) which emerged from that Summit.

In the run-up to the Paris Climate Conference (UNFCCC COP21) in 2015, my colleagues at UNDP and I, supported by Norway, worked with the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) – including by bringing more than 200 Indigenous leaders from all 7 indigenous regions to the COP – to formulate positions and strategies on climate, which were then coalesced into a common position for COP21. They had significant influence over the COP decisions related to their

rights and traditional knowledge. The Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples' Platform (LCIPP) was also established at COP21 to strengthen Indigenous Peoples voices in UNFCCC processes.

Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim and the other IIPFCC leaders created an “Indigenous Pavilion” at the Paris COP, with support from UNDP and Norway – as a powerful platform for indigenous innovations, practices, positions and advocacy to greatly strengthen their presence and impact at Climate COPs, and these influential pavilions have been sustained through the subsequent COPs, including COP28 in Dubai.

In preparation for the Paris COP, the IIPFCC, UNDP and a range of NGOs and philanthropies began the serious exploration of ways to create an Indigenous-Managed Global Fund to support indigenous priorities directly – not through intermediaries as has historically been the case. In spite of their critical role in protecting the climate and biodiversity, Indigenous Peoples receive a very small proportion of financial resources provided by donors.⁹ Concerted work is now underway to create viable platform(s) to channel resources directly to Indigenous Peoples.

The Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use at COP26 in 2021 brought together 145 committed governments, Indigenous Peoples groups, major philanthropies, NGOs and UN agencies to embed Indigenous Peoples rights in government declarations along with an allocation of \$1.7 billion to directly benefit Indigenous Peoples. This represents a serious move from advocacy to real investment in Indigenous Peoples.¹⁰

A wide range of local, regional, national and global funds and organizations to deliver funds at these various levels are being established or strengthened around the world and are reviewed in Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim's report to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issue (UNPFII) meeting on 15-26 April 2024.¹¹

⁹ Rainforest Foundation Norway, (2021). “Indigenous People Receive Little Climate Funding”, <https://www.regnskog.no/en/>

¹⁰ Ford Foundation (2021, Nov 1). “Governments and private funders announce historic US\$1.7 billion pledge at COP26 in support of indigenous peoples and local communities”, www.fordfoundation.org

¹¹ Oumarou Ibrahim, H, (2024, Jan 26). “Financing the future: the financial needs of Indigenous Peoples to support their actions for biodiversity, climate and the protection of Mother Earth”, UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; www.un.org

Hundreds of NGOs are now supporting Indigenous Peoples causes, including international NGOs with a focus on indigenous issues like Amazon Watch, Amazon Conservation Team (ACT), Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN), FERN, Forest Peoples Programme (FPP), International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), Indigenous Peoples' Rights International (IPRI), Pachamama Alliance, Rainforest Foundation Norway, U.S. and UK, Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), Tebtebba Foundation, Tenure Facility, World Resources Institute, etc.; as well as the major conservation organizations such as: Conservation International, IUCN, The Nature Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Society, WWF, etc. Also, major foundations like: the Bezos Earth Fund, Climate & Land Use Alliance (CLUA), Ford Foundation, Christensen Fund, Good Energies, Kellogg Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, Moore Foundation, Nia Tero, Open Society Foundations, Packard Foundation, Porticus, etc. are also investing seriously. For more than 15 years, the Meridian Institute has offered invaluable support to the UN (UNDP, UNEP, FAO) and the UN-REDD Programme, and many other organizations, to advance the forest protection and indigenous peoples' rights agendas. The government of Norway has shown extraordinary commitment to the protection of tropical forests and Indigenous Peoples over the past several decades through programs of the Norwegian International Climate & Forest Initiative (NICFI) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD).

Indigenous Peoples groups at the local level are becoming stronger and so are regional and global indigenous organizations including: AFPAT, Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), African Indigenous Women Organization (AIWO), AMAN, AMPB, Asian Pacific Indigenous Youth Network (APIYN), Coordinator of the Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA), Global Territorial Alliance of Territorial Communities (GATC), ILEPA, Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC), IIPFCC, REPALEAC, etc.

As a result, we are seeing increasing coverage of Indigenous Peoples issues in mainstream media and social media, including by Mongabay, the Guardian and countless others, thereby shaping and directing global public opinion to support indigenous issues.

And modern science is taking note and recognizing Traditional Knowledge in new ways as well, evidenced by recent reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), as discussed in this conference.

IPBES embodies “one of the most ambitious attempts to date to bridge the divide between scientific and indigenous and local knowledge”¹² by establishing a task force on Indigenous and local knowledge systems, methodologies and an approach to recognize and work with Indigenous and local knowledge across all its assessments. Work on this ambitious and challenging agenda continues.

The 2019 report by IPBES adds further urgency to this growing movement to recognize and respect Indigenous rights because the authors conclude that without this recognition, the ability of Indigenous Peoples to continue to protect life on Earth through their lifestyles will be compromised.¹³

As I explain in the next section, through the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) and other faith initiatives, religious leaders have also joined this multi-sectoral movement to support Indigenous Peoples’ rights, traditions, knowledge and ways of life. And Pope Francis has been leading and supporting this encouraging development in important ways.

It has taken more than 30 years for Indigenous Peoples to embed their rich and long-lasting traditional knowledge and worldviews in the international arena in such a substantial way and all of this adds up to a massive and encouraging global movement of support for Indigenous Peoples. I believe this is among the most positive and significant developments in today’s world towards addressing the climate and biodiversity crises.

However, many policies and laws at national and global levels still fail to provide appropriate and explicit recognition and support to Indigenous Peoples in the formalization of rights to lands and resources. With the rapid evolution of multiple threats to Indigenous Peoples and their lands, we can acknowledge the tremendous successes of the past 30 years but let us remain vigilant and committed to even more progress on this critical agenda going forward.

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (Iri)

His Holiness Pope Francis’ visionary leadership on nature, climate and Indigenous Peoples issues has inspired many important efforts around the world, including the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI).

¹² Lofmarck, E & Lidskog, R, (2017). “Bumping against the boundary: IPBES and the knowledge divide”, *Environmental Science & Policy*, vol. 69, issue C, 22-28. <https://econpapers.repec.org/article/eeeenscpo/>

¹³ Brondizio, E.S. et al., eds. (2019). “Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services” (Bonn, IPBES Secretariat).

IRI is based on the fact that tropical deforestation is a major driver of the global climate and biodiversity crises that undermine the lives and livelihoods of Indigenous Peoples, and deprives us all of water, food and jobs.

A number of the speakers in this conference have supported IRI since their participation in the IRI launch event in 2017 at the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo, notably Bishop Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, HE Sonia Guajajara, Vicky Tauli Corpuz, Nigel Crawhall and others.

The government of Norway has generously provided funding for IRI's pilot phases and the following prominent interfaith organizations oversee its work: GreenFaith, Parliament of the World's Religions, Religions for Peace, World Council of Churches and Yale Forum on Religion & Ecology – along with the Rainforest Foundation Norway and UNEP. Joseph Corcoran serves as the Program Manager of IRI. The Meridian Institute supported the launch and establishment of IRI.

IRI works in the 5 countries that hold 70% of the world's remaining tropical forests – Brazil, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Indonesia and Peru – and provides a platform for religious leaders to work hand-in-hand with Indigenous Peoples, scientists, civil society and governments on actions that protect rainforests and safeguard the rights and knowledge of the Indigenous Peoples that serve as their guardians.

One of the most encouraging impacts of IRI that we have seen so far is the beginning of a healing of the historically broken relationship since colonization between major Western religions and Indigenous Peoples.

Pope Francis has contributed enormously to this healing in the world through his recognizing and honoring Indigenous Peoples and their spirituality on many occasions, including through this conference.

To share one anecdote, I was personally deeply inspired to participate in His Holiness' meetings with thousands of Indigenous Peoples from throughout the Amazon who gathered in Puerto Maldonado, Peru in January 2018. There in the Amazon, Pope Francis expressed his profound respect for, and solidarity with, Indigenous Peoples, their culture, knowledge and spirituality – and thereby sent a powerful message of reconciliation around the world.

I will now give examples of how IRI programs are contributing to Indigenous Knowledge on the ground in the Amazon, the Congo Basin and Indonesia.

All of the 5 IRI programs work in the following four areas, among other areas: (1) Developing training materials and training thousands of religious

leaders of all faiths on forests, climate and Indigenous Peoples knowledge and rights. (2) Establishing and supporting local chapters to impact local laws and policies where deforestation and threats to Indigenous Peoples are greatest. (3) Undertaking aligned, coordinated interfaith interventions on national legislation and policy on forests, climate and Indigenous Peoples rights. (4) Carrying out effective communication campaigns on these issues through radio and television, print media and social media and leading highly visible public campaigns.

How Indigenous Knowledge and Science are Coming Together Through the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (Iri)

Brazil: ‘Scientific Immersion Training’ for Religious Leaders & Public Mobilization Through a Virtual Reality Experience of the Amazon

IRI Brazil is managing two major innovative programs to educate millions of Brazilians on the climate crisis and indigenous knowledge – and in particular, I thank HE Minister Sonia Guajajara for her extremely strong support of IRI and IRI Brazil since the beginning, and I acknowledge Mr. Carlos Vicente, IRI Brazil National Facilitator for his capable leadership of IRI Brazil.

‘Scientific Immersion Trainings’ are rigorous two-day training courses for Brazil’s most influential religious and political leaders held in Brazil’s top scientific institutions – CEMADEN (National Center for Monitoring and Alerting of Natural Disasters) and INPE (National Institute for Space Research). The focus is on the most current science on the causes and prevention of climate disasters and on alternative “bioeconomy” development models for the Amazon.

This training combines the science of forest preservation with understanding of the importance of Indigenous Peoples to overcome these crises, both through the preservation of existing forests on Indigenous lands, and also through their vast knowledge of the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of nature.

The “Immersion Training” activates religious leaders in their own institutions to educate their constituencies and encourage political authorities to enact laws and policies that protect forests and respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

This work is vitally important because the Brazilian public generally does not understand the connection between the climate disasters that are occurring in their cities with the destruction of forests in remote Amazon

regions. This disconnect is now being resolved through IRI's educational work with and through religious leaders.

We are seeing many encouraging cases of how – after this “Immersion Training” – the hundreds of prominent Brazilian religious leaders from all faiths with millions of followers are using their own educational systems and social media to powerfully educate their followers about the scientific facts and indigenous knowledge related to the climate and biodiversity crises – and thereby reorienting their choices as voters and consumers.

The challenge remains serious because now – more than five centuries after the colonization of America by Europeans, when the violation of Indigenous Peoples' rights began – Indigenous Peoples still face powerful economic interests that deny their constitutional rights in the governments and courts and they also face prejudice from large portions of the population, including religious practitioners.

The “Amazônia Viva Virtual Reality Film” is a dazzling, award winning 3-dimensional film – based on indigenous knowledge – that offers a 10-minute immersive experience of actually being inside the Amazon rainforest.

The Amazon is unknown to the vast majority of Brazilians, especially the younger generations, and the film is guided and narrated by Chief Raquel Tupinambás, a dynamic young woman Indigenous leader from the State of Pará.

The film's message combines the traditional knowledge of Indigenous Peoples with modern scientific knowledge.

The narrator, Raquel tells us that “it rains in the Amazon because there is a forest” and not “there is a forest because there is rain” as science previously understood. In other words, it is the forest that causes the rain, not the rain that causes the forest, and if we destroy the forest then we lose the water to sustain food production and other needs of life. This is an example of ancestral indigenous knowledge from the Amazon.

The film is a powerful tool for raising awareness, education and mobilization and just last year (2023), more than 50,000 people personally experienced it. A rigorous study of the impact of the film shows that the number of people who donated money to conservation after seeing the film increased by 50% and people's perception of the importance of Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge for the preservation of the Amazon forest increased greatly too.

The film is now being distributed by many religious educational institutions and prominent museums throughout Brazil with constituencies of millions of people.

IRI Brazil also coordinates religious leaders to support the specific mobilizations and campaigns of Indigenous Peoples in defense of their rights. To this end, it carries out advocacy actions aimed at governments, parliamentarians and judges, contributes to the public debate by publishing opinion articles and promotes inter-religious dialogues and dialogues with indigenous leaders.

Colombia: 42 Local Iri Platforms for Indigenous, Science and Religious Cooperation

The IRI Colombia program also provides an excellent example of how indigenous knowledge and science can be brought together to address the climate and biodiversity crises in local municipalities in the Amazon.

In 2018, Ms. Blanca Echeverry, IRI Colombia National Facilitator and her team, set out to improve both national-level and local-level development policies to make them more protective of standing forests and Indigenous Peoples' rights and knowledge. First, they lobbied members of Congress to have two major Articles on halting deforestation introduced into the National Development Plan of Colombia.

With this national-level commitment in place, IRI Colombia mapped the regions of the country with the highest rates of deforestation and most violations of Indigenous Peoples' rights and then launched "local chapters" of faith-based action coalitions in those areas.

With the intention to use local municipal and state-wide elections to further their goals, IRI Colombia brought candidates for Mayor and Governor together throughout the country in public debates that were broadcast widely on TV and radio – and where each candidate signed a commitment statement that — if elected — they would actively promote rainforest protection and stand for Indigenous Peoples' rights and knowledge.

After the elections, IRI Colombia leaders came back to the newly elected Mayors and Governors and reached agreement on having IRI representatives serve on local and state-wide Planning Councils to monitor forest and land use planning to ensure the commitments made by the elected officials are implemented.

By the end of 2023, 42 local IRI chapters had been launched across the country to enable leaders from Indigenous Peoples, the scientific community and all the religions of the country to work powerfully together to protect nature and indigenous knowledge.

Democratic Republic of Congo and Historic Indigenous Peoples' Legislation

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), religious leaders contributed significantly to indigenous issues by bringing their considerable moral authority and political influence to bear in support of a decade long campaign by Indigenous Networks in DRC and to successfully lobby government to adopt a new law in November 2022 on the “Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples”.

This historic law is the country’s first ever legislation to formally recognize and safeguard the rights, land tenure and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and is another high impact example of how multifaith action can make a difference on the ground for Indigenous Peoples. The Reverend Matthieu Yela Bonketo serves as IRI DRC National Facilitator.

Indonesia: Fatwas to Combat Climate Change

In Indonesia, on 23 February 2024, religious leaders through IRI Indonesia, together with partners and led by the Ulama Council of Indonesia (MUI), the highest authority on Islamic law in the country, issued a ‘fatwa’ against actions that cause climate change. (Fatwa MUI Number 86/2023 on The Law for Controlling Global Climate Change.) A ‘fatwa’ cites the Koran and carries significant moral weight with the majority Muslim population.

Several important MUI fatwas have preceded this one, including: (1) in 2011, forbidding destructive mining operations; (2) in 2014, forbidding activities which threaten endangered species; and (3) in 2016, forbidding “the burning of forests and land that can cause damage, pollution, harm to other persons, adverse health effects”.

Importantly, the MUI is now considering work on a fatwa regarding the protection of Indigenous Knowledge. Dr. Hayu Prabowo serves as IRI Indonesia National Facilitator.

Peru: National Legislation to Protect Environmental Defenders

Peru provides another example of how religious leaders are helping to protect indigenous knowledge and rights in cooperation with NGOs and government.

In early 2021, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) in Peru, in partnership with the NGO, ProPurús Association, alerted the Minister of Justice and Human Rights and other senior government leaders to the alarming increase in threats and violence to indigenous leaders and environmental defenders in the Amazon, especially in the areas of Ucayali and Pucallpa.

Senior religious leaders including Cardinal Pedro Barreto, indigenous leaders from the region, the Minister of Justice, Minister of Culture and many other important religious and NGO leaders participated in a series of meetings which resulted in the adoption on 21 April 2021 of the Supreme Court Decree N° 004-2021-JUS “Intersectoral Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders”, coordinating the work of eight government Ministries to protect environmental defenders.

IRI Peru has been actively supporting this new mechanism that focuses on effective prevention, rapid protection and access to justice and has already shown it can help protect indigenous and other local environmental defenders against violations of their rights across Peru.

IRI Peru Advisory Council member, Cardinal Barreto published an editorial on the topic in an influential Peruvian newspaper on 27 May 2021.¹⁴

These recent examples demonstrate the profound impact of powerful new partnerships between religious leaders and Indigenous Peoples around the world and how this collaboration is providing vitally important and effective support to Indigenous Peoples’ struggles for their rights, livelihoods and ways of life.

Conclusions

To conclude, I summarize the 6 main points proposed in this article as follows:

1. Indigenous knowledge, culture, ways of life and spirituality are key to avoiding cataclysmic outcomes from the twin climate and biodiversity crises and the evidence base for this is growing each year.
2. Securing Indigenous Peoples’ rights to their lands and resources is essential for indigenous knowledge to be sustained.
3. This understanding – along with the allocation of increasing support and resources to Indigenous Peoples – has been growing strongly over the past 3 decades since the Rio Earth Summit – along with powerful new partnerships among Indigenous Peoples, scientists, the United Nations, NGOs, philanthropies and governments – and most recently: with religious leaders and faith communities.

¹⁴ Barreto, P, (2021, May 27). “Peace and Dignity for the Amazon”, El Comercio Newspaper, Peru, https://elcomercio.pe/opinion/colaboradores/paz-y-dignidad-para-la-amazonia-por-pedro-barreto-sj-tala-de-arboles-cardenal-noticia/#google_vignette

4. I argue that this constitutes one of the most hopeful and “game changing” movements to generate effective action on climate and biodiversity in today’s world.
5. One such partnership, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative – inspired by Pope Francis – is demonstrating how faith communities and Indigenous Peoples, scientists and other sectors have formed influential coalitions in key countries to stop tropical deforestation and protect Indigenous Peoples’ rights and knowledge.
6. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiatives’ methodology and experience in tropical forested regions of the Amazon, Congo Basin and Southeast Asia can inform and serve as a model for multifaith efforts on indigenous rights and other aspects of the climate and biodiversity crises and in other geographies to help us build a viable future for all.