

FORUM: HUMAN RIGHTS

ISSUE: Protecting Indigenous Populations from Climate Change

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Introduction

"I am convinced that climate change, and what we do about it, will define us, our era, and ultimately the global legacy we leave for future generations. Today the time for doubt has passed." - Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 24 September 2007

The topic of climate change is a preoccupation for our generation. Climate change, however, implies more than just the environmental consequences of human activity - seasonal temperatures, sea levels, air quality, fish stocks, and food supply, etc. - it also has consequences for the human rights of indigenous peoples. Only now do we talk about protecting indigenous populations and the survival of their culture. Although the ultimate goal is to prevent climate change, measures have to be taken to protect the rights of indigenous groups. The rights of indigenous people are violated every day due to climate change. Indeed, the effects of climate change touch those most vulnerable by rising sea levels or droughts but also have a negative impact on the maintenance of their culture and therefore their identity.

Definition of Key Terms

Indigenous Populations: Indigenous peoples often live in proximity to nature, or simply in a



relatively natural environment, as opposed to cities. They produce most of the food and other various products they need to survive on. This lifestyle gives them an intimate knowledge of animal life as well as plant life and local weather. Unfortunately, minorities in states frequently have very little political say and their voices remain unheard, therefore lacking influence in any protection of their rights which are often overlooked.

Greenhouse Gas (GHG): the gases that trap heat into the atmosphere by absorbing infrared radiation. Many gases dispose of these properties, some occur in a natural environment, such as water vapour or carbon dioxide, whereas others are entirely man-made, for example gases used for aerosols.

Mitigation: the elimination or the effort to reduce the frequency and severity of exposure to risks. It could also signify the minimisation of a potential threat by the use of technology, renewable energies or changing consumers' behaviours.

Human Rights: the rights which are inherent to any human being, no matter the race, culture, gender, geographical residency or other status. They also include the right to life, to adequate food, water and housing, to health as well as self-determination. Following World War Two, a Universal Declaration of Human Rights and was "to be disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, *without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories*".

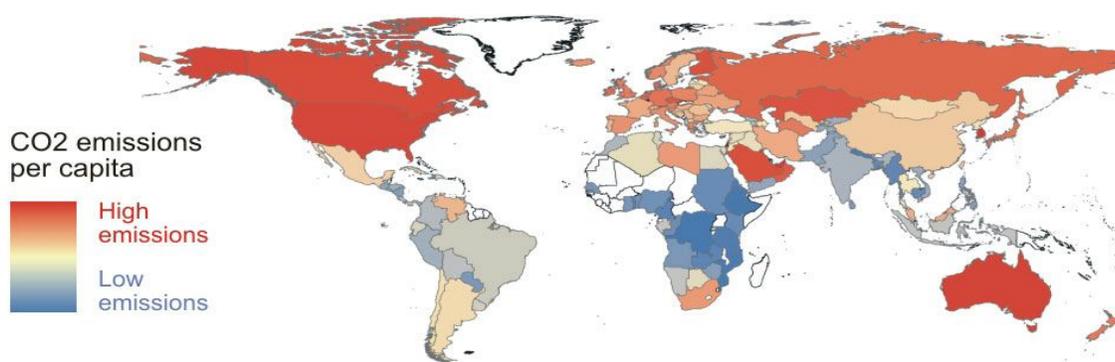
http://www.eycb.coe.int/composito/chapter_6/pdf/1.pdf

Protecting: (in this context) We will be discussing the conservation of indigenous people's heritage and culture, this also encompasses their land as well as their ability to remain sustainable. In addition, for these communities to be self-sufficient, protection is needed so that they don't succumb to selling their wealth for short-term gains which will inevitably lead to their long-term destruction.

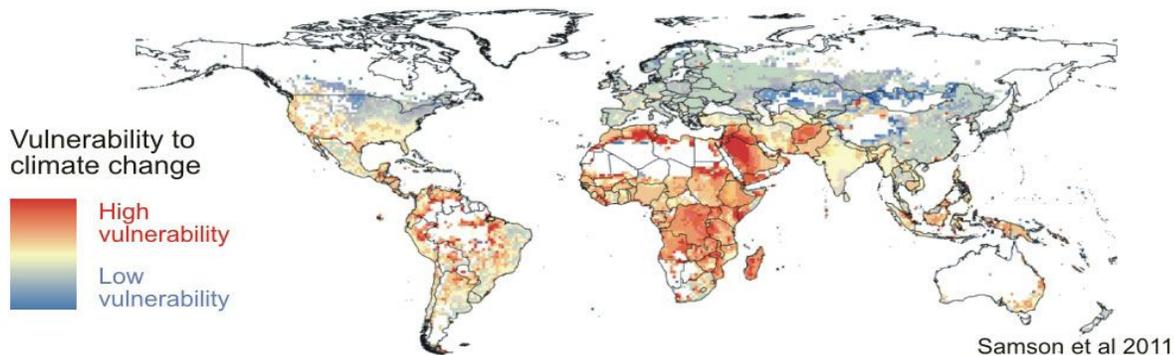


Background Information and Overview

The paradox of climate change is that indigenous populations across the globe are the least responsible for this century's shifts in climatic activity since they have a small ecological footprint and make a negligible contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, and yet they are the most vulnerable to its consequences. Climate change is now a terrible reality for marginalised populations. The survival of culture is a threat for over 370 million indigenous individuals in the



Those who contribute the least greenhouse gases will be most impacted by climate change



world, including countries in Asia, the Pacific, North and Latin America, Africa and also Europe. Despite the consequences being experienced in many countries, social, ecological, economical and ecological impacts have been found in various places including the Arctic, tropical forests,



drylands, low lying coastal deltas and high mountain ecosystems. Tropical forests for instance, home to approximately 1500 indigenous peoples - including 1 million people in the Amazon alone from of 400 different indigenous groups - are increasingly threatened and face drastic consequences. For these humid forests, climate change causes long, dry seasons often coupled with the forest fires. The biodiversity in the ecosystem of these forests depends on the right balance between water levels, sunlight, and oxygen production in trees. Deforestation causes the migration of people and species and is the root cause of vector-borne disease.

Drylands, however, cover over 40% of the world's terrestrial surface and are home to over 2 billion people of various communities which are some of the most vulnerable and poorest in the world. In some of these areas, water availability is expected to plummet by 10 to 30% in the next 40 years. Most of the Arctic indigenous populations inhabit the highest developed and the highest CO2 emitting states such as Russia, Canada and the US. Despite being citizens of wealthy states, they do not have the same high standard of living and are frequently below the national average. The most acknowledged consequence of climate change is rising sea levels and disappearing islands. Indigenous populations of such islands have their social, physical and economic well being will be threatened. Although the developing countries are predicted to suffer greatly from climate change, the Arctic communities will be the first in the hotseat as well as the first to have to adapt to the transforming environment. Moreover, the difficulties confronting Arctic communities are frequently cited to emphasise the urgency of climate change, and make us pay more attention to action that must be taken.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

The countries involved in this issue are those creating the problem and those suffering -in varying degrees- from its consequences. The USA, China and other major industrial powers are the most to blame for the drastic increase in climate change impacting the most vulnerable and



marginalised communities. Indeed, coal is the fossil fuel held responsible for a third of CO₂ emissions, increasing the temperature and causing a violation of human rights in terms of the impact on their lifestyle and land by its extraction, transportation and burning. The rights those affected are abused of Many coal plants are to be created in the near future notably in developed countries despite leaders reducing the use of this energy. Coal explorations however continue in developing countries as the demand increases in both developing and developed countries. Countries become dependent on its exploitation, and even though the majority of it is exported, they still carry the burden of its production in the first place. Another problem is that other neighbouring countries which have no part to play in coal production, etc., also suffer the consequences of its industrial production.

Timeline of Events

1938 - with records from just under 150 weather stations in the world, Guy Callendar, a British engineer, proved that over the past century, temperatures had risen. Moreover, he showed the increase in the concentration of CO₂ proposing that this was the cause of warming.

1972 - The first UN conference hosted in Stockholm had no part in climate change but formed the United Nations Environment Programme to tackle the said issue.

1989 - The fossil fuel burning and industry reaches 6 billion tonnes per year in carbon emissions.

2005 - small organisations and communities gather to put forth the linkage between climate change and human rights. Additionally, the Inuit petition is presented to the inter-american



commission of human rights and is the first petition explicitly dealing with the damage an indigenous population has suffered from.

2007 - At the United Nations negotiations in Bali, a “Bali Roadmap” is created by governments, designed to find a new global treaty over the next 2 years.

2009 - The US is overtaken by China as the world’s biggest greenhouse gas emitter. However, the US remain ahead on a per-capita basis.

2008 - United Nations Human Rights Council recognises the impacts of climate change on people’s enjoyment of human rights.

2013 - IPCC’s report states that scientists are 95% certain that the dominant cause of global since the 1950s are humans.

by 2019 - coal production is expected to break the 9 billion tonne level.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

In 2007 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change wrote in its Synthesis report, “warming of the climate system is unequivocal as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising global average sea level.” The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues closely followed and held a session on “climate change and the stewardship role of all indigenous people englobing bio-cultural diversity, livelihoods and new challenges”. This same organisation also put forward two of its members to create a report on the “impact of climate change



mitigation measures on the territories and lands of indigenous peoples”. A few, sometimes academic, non-governmental organisations, along with the media reportings of several specific disasters, proves that minorities have been acknowledged as having suffered the worst. However, when indigenous populations are referred to in reports on climate change it is only incidental, in the study of a certain country.

“The rains come late. The sun behaves in a strange way. The world is ill. The lungs of the sky are polluted. We know it is happening. You cannot go on destroying nature.”

- Davi Yanomami

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Many of the previous attempts to solve climate change have not held in consideration the consequences from which indigenous populations might suffer. “Mitigation measures” are the core of this problem. Biofuels, for instance, violate the rights of minorities by the destruction of their livelihoods, it is estimated that, if its expansion continues as planned, 60 million indigenous people across the globe will have their livelihood and land threatened. Palm oil is considered one of the most destructive crops used for biofuels and its plantation, causing millions of indigenous people to be evicted from their land. Not only are there consequences for the environment but also it threatens the very existence of some cultures. Many other “measures” have been taken to solve climate change, including forest conservation, hydroelectric power or carbon offsetting, which themselves have violated the rights of marginalised communities, and also been used as leverage by governments and companies as simple exploitation.



Possible Solutions

The solutions to be discussed should englobe the many different aspects of this topic. Firstly, the actions that the indigenous populations could take themselves despite the responsibility of greenhouse emission not to be their fault.

Moreover, the use of technology to help find solutions and research various local and traditional knowledge should be included in finding answers. Indeed, countries that do not represent indigenous people have more of a chance at discovering solutions, although locals who suffer the most from climate change can be resilient and adaptive due to their indigenous knowledge. The possible solutions to be discussed must consider the economic and cultural factors of the countries. In the face of such challenges, the local knowledge can be just as astute as science. However, such populations are rarely able to participate in decision-making on such issues, since they feel marginalized and generally overawed by the enormity of the doom-laden scenario.

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