

Scoping

Evaluation

Approval

Use of the assessment findings



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WHY ENGAGE WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN NATIONAL ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENTS?

Who are Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities?

The term “indigenous peoples and local communities” is used internationally to recognize community-based, non-governmental stakeholders and rights holders in international forums and conventions. **Indigenous peoples and local communities cover a vast range of cultural diversity on the planet, including those on the front lines of environmental sustainability, vulnerability and custodianship. Over the past three decades, the term has gained usage in international fora as well as in legal frameworks, standard setting and policy processes.**

There are, however, important differences between indigenous peoples and local communities with respect to law, norms, standards and rights at the international level, as well as at regional and national levels.¹

Indigenous Peoples

Internationally, no definition has been adopted for ‘indigenous peoples’. Instead, the United Nations (UN) works with the **commonly accepted criterion of self-identification, by individuals and their acceptance by a community.**^{2,3} Indigenous peoples have engaged with the UN since its founding. From the 1970s, various UN bodies started generating studies, norms, standards and instruments recognizing the distinct characteristics and rights associated with indigenous peoples.

In 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which is the international standard to which all UN agencies and processes refer. UN expert bodies and studies have recognized and used multiple criteria to identify indigenous peoples,¹ which include combinations of characteristics such as: historical continuity with

pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, non-dominant sectors of society, ancestry; existing treaties and agreements, and distinct cultural features such as language, religion, membership in tribal systems, material culture, cosmology, livelihoods, origin and residence, among others.⁴

Local Communities

Local communities can be understood as communities that are: 1) **not self-identified or specified under national legal frameworks as indigenous peoples**, and which, 2) while highly diverse, are **recognized for having historical ties** to places and natural resources, multiple domains of ecological knowledge, dynamic natural resource management techniques and technologies, customary and/or formal institutions to manage natural resources, and distinctive worldviews and relationships to nature and landscapes.^{1,3,5}

As such, local communities are an important stakeholder in discussions related to the environment, climate, biodiversity and ecosystems services.

Local communities **may belong to the majority ethnic-language group in a country or region**, minority groups or heterogenous communities where people of different race, ethnicity, culture, language or religion may live together; they may have lived in a territory for generations; and, they may be urban, peri-urban or rural, transhumant or sedentary.^{1,3,4}

While there has been a great deal of work within the UN system on recognizing indigenous peoples and formalizing their rights and participation, this has been less elaborated for local communities.

ⁱ One of the most cited descriptions of the concept of the indigenous is that provided by Jose R. Martinez Cobo, the Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, in his landmark Study on the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations. UN Doc. E/CN.4/Sub.2/1986/7 and Add. 1-4.



What is Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK)?

Indigenous and local knowledge (ILK) refers to the understandings, skills, practices and philosophies developed by indigenous peoples and local communities with relatively recent or long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings. ILK is a dynamic system of intricate relationships between people and nature. **ILK is grounded in territory, is highly diverse and is continuously evolving** through the interaction of experiences, innovations, and various types of knowledge. ILK often needs to be understood within a wider cultural experience, associated with worldviews, value systems, natural resource governance regimes, livelihoods, cultural heritage, languages, customary tenure systems, spirituality, cosmologies and belief systems.^{2,3,4,5}

Why Work with ILK in National Ecosystem Assessments?

1. Detailed knowledge of biodiversity status, trends, drivers and impacts



ILK can make significant contributions to national ecosystem assessments. Due to their sustained connection with nature, including through resource-based livelihoods and spirituality, **many indigenous peoples and local communities hold detailed and diverse knowledge of biodiversity and ecosystems.**⁵ As indigenous peoples and local communities may live in highly biodiverse and remote areas, they can have knowledge of ecosystems that are studied little by science. ILK may stretch back over many generations, providing information on environmental trends beyond what is available to science. As keen observers and interpreters of environmental phenomena, they also often hold knowledge of drivers of ecosystem change and their impacts, including, for example, invasive alien species, species loss, climate change and land/sea use change. **ILK also holds distinct philosophies, ethical and spiritual systems** that can interpret environmental phenomena in different ways from other knowledge systems, and conceptions of the future that can bring diverse perspectives to work on scenario building. This diversity of knowledge has allowed many indigenous peoples and local communities to manage their relationships with nature over decades, centuries and sometimes millennia.⁴ In turn, national ecosystem assessments provide an essential platform for the scientific community and ILK holders to exchange and co-generate knowledge through the multiple evidence base approach, as illustrated in the Practical Guide on Working with ILK in National Ecosystem Assessments.

2. Environmental stewardship



Indigenous peoples and local communities are stewards of the environment through their long-term protection, sustainable use, management and governance of biodiversity, including agro-biodiversity. Indigenous peoples and local communities often feel an **ethical and cultural responsibility for the conservation of nature** and apply their knowledge to ensure sustainability and equity through their own rules-based customary systems of tenure, governance and institutions. According to the IPBES global assessment,⁶ **indigenous peoples own and/or manage at least 25% of the global land, and approximately 35% of all remaining terrestrial areas with very low human intervention.** These figures increase significantly when local communities are also considered, although this is harder to quantify. Indigenous peoples and local communities are therefore key stakeholders and actors who should be engaged in efforts to effectively conserve or sustainably use biodiversity. Active participation of indigenous peoples and local communities in national ecosystem assessments helps to build ownership of the assessment process and its findings. This can also build a strong base for co-management and co-implementation of the recommendations included in the assessment for policy and planning.

3. Threats to biodiversity and ILK



Nature managed by indigenous peoples and local communities is declining less rapidly than on other lands,⁶ but nonetheless, biodiversity and ecosystems are being degraded at an alarming rate, directly threatening the survival of indigenous peoples and local communities whose livelihoods and lifestyles are primarily dependent on and connected to nature. These pressures (e.g., from mining, deforestation, agricultural intensification and infrastructure development) are sometimes accompanied by social dislocation and violence, and together cause continued loss of subsistence and traditional livelihoods, with related declines in transmission of ILK to younger generations, cultural changes, and the ability of indigenous peoples and local communities to conserve and sustainably manage their territories.⁶ **Engaging indigenous peoples and local communities in the national ecosystem assessment process can strengthen current knowledge of these pressures and provide indigenous peoples and local communities with the tools and resources to work in partnership with experts and decision-makers to counter these threats.**



4. Informed policies and collaborative governance

ILK can guide policies on biodiversity and ecosystem services. Local-level customary governance, laws and institutions can also enhance natural resources management and governance, and policies can seek to work with these existing systems. These customary governance mechanisms can in turn be supported and enhanced through proper consideration in national ecosystem assessments and biodiversity and ecosystem policies. Due to their direct relationship with biodiversity and ecosystems, indigenous peoples and local communities may also be directly impacted by policies that aim to manage or conserve biodiversity or natural resource use. Indigenous peoples and local communities and ecosystems are intricately connected, but policy frameworks often treat them as two distinct systems.⁵ **Policies that do not properly consider local conditions, cultures and customary governance often have unforeseen or negative impacts on both people and nature.** It is therefore important that indigenous peoples and local communities are engaged in policy formulation and implementation. A national ecosystem assessment can be an important tool for this process as it can help shed light on how ILK contributes to the knowledge base supporting decision-making, raise awareness about indigenous peoples' issues, and also connect indigenous peoples and local communities with decision-makers and the scientific community around biodiversity and ecosystems conservation, restoration and sustainable use.



5. New international standards

International norms and standards are being developed around the inclusion of ILK in biodiversity and ecosystem assessments. IPBES "recognizes and respects the contribution of ILK to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystems" as one of its key operating principles. In its 5th Plenary Meeting in 2017, IPBES members adopted an approach for engaging ILK in the assessment of biodiversity and ecosystem services.³ During the 18th Conference of Parties (COP), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) adopted Decision 18.32 to engage indigenous peoples and local communities in CITES processes, including potentially in the identification of endangered status of wild species.⁷ IUCN has also drafted guidance on the integration of ILK into IUCN Red List assessments.⁸

Attention to a **human-rights based approach** has also emerged as an essential framework for safeguarding the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities in natural resources management. The engagement of indigenous peoples and local communities in national ecosystem assessments can help to ensure that conservation policies and practices are compatible with indigenous peoples and local communities' livelihoods, cultures and lifestyles, thereby upholding the rights of indigenous peoples as enshrined in UNDRIP.



6. Value and valuation

Nature provides society, and indigenous peoples and local communities in particular, with livelihoods, economies, food and medicines, and a foundation for creativity, culture, values, skills, practices, traditions, religion, spirituality and identity, as well as moral, intellectual and language development.⁵ **The engagement of indigenous peoples and local communities in national ecosystem assessments can help to better understand and account for these lifestyle-based and cultural values** that could be overlooked or trivialized in the normal valuation of ecosystem services, leading to more inclusive and relevant decision-making.

7. Community-based research



The national ecosystem assessment process can also provide an opportunity for indigenous peoples and local communities to develop and mobilize community-based research on biodiversity and ecosystems services, building their own research and governance capacities in the process, which can further promote conservation, restoration and sustainable use of natural resources.

How to Work with ILK in the National Ecosystem Assessment Process?

The Practical Guide on Working with ILK in National Ecosystem Assessments provides detailed steps for engaging indigenous peoples and local communities and ILK in national ecosystem assessments. ILK holders and experts can contribute to these assessments through tailored community-based research and/or as authors.

The National Ecosystem Assessment ILK Methods Guide expands upon some of the community-based research methods that can be used, for example, walking workshops, dialogue workshops, participatory mapping, yarning and ecological calendars.

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Supported by:



Federal Ministry
for the Environment, Nature Conservation
and Nuclear Safety

SwedBio
A programme at Stockholm Resilience Centre



In partnership with:

 **BESNet**
Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Network

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