

The influence of indigenous peoples in global climate governance

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To what extent do Indigenous Peoples exert influence over global climate decision-making processes? Recent studies observe the increased presence and influence of Indigenous Peoples over climate negotiations while also recognizing the limits of their political influence. For instance, Indigenous Peoples successfully advocated state parties to include language in the Paris Agreement of the United Nations Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that recognized their role in designing, adopting, and implementing climate change policies. Yet, activists continue to push for broader participation of Indigenous Peoples in United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change conferences. This article reviews the state of knowledge on the political impact of Indigenous Peoples in spaces of global climate governance and the mechanisms by which Indigenous Peoples exert political influence. This review identifies three prominent debates on the question of the influence of Indigenous Peoples in global climate governance: (1) What constitutes Indigenous Peoples political influence over global climate governance, (2) the extent to which Indigenous Peoples exert it, and (3) whether the political influence of Indigenous Peoples over global climate governance is enough to stop climate regimes from harming them.

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Introduction

Studies on the organized efforts of Indigenous Peoples to influence global climate governance observe and document their increased participation, political impact, and the conditions under which they exert political influence [1,2**].¹

¹ Global climate governance refers to instances of decision-making about climate issues above the national level.

This article reviews recent literature on the increased involvement and impact of Indigenous Peoples on global climate decision-making processes. This text begins with a review of ongoing debates on the presence and influence of Indigenous Peoples in instances of global environmental governance. It proceeds with a discussion of research on the barriers to the influence of Indigenous Peoples on global environmental governance. The article follows with a discussion of an important instance of influence—the recognition of the role of Indigenous Peoples knowledge in the Paris Agreement. The piece concludes with a discussion of research that points to opportunities for increased influence and a review of the debate on whether instances of political influence over climate decision-making processes constitute progress in climate regimes that exclude and perpetuate harms Indigenous Peoples [3,4*].

This review was conducted using an exhaustive and intentional coverage approach [5], which aims to include all relevant studies that inform the question of the extent to which Indigenous Peoples exert influence over climate decision-making processes. This approach seeks to include but is not limited to peer reviewed studies and ensures the inclusion of studies and manuscripts authored by Indigenous Peoples engaged in global climate advocacy efforts. Thus, conclusions about this body of literature are developed on the basis of a broad and inclusive knowledge base. The studies included in this review were drawn from the Web of Science database, which includes the Science Citation Index, Arts and Humanities Citation Index, and the Social Science Citation Index, as well as from Google Scholar and the websites of advocacy organizations under the leadership of Indigenous Peoples.² Additionally, the

² The author used the following keywords and variations of them through a truncated search (a technique that amplifies a search by including various word endings and spellings): Indigenous Peoples, Environmental Politics, Climate Justice, Marginalized Groups, Global Environmental Governance, Global Climate Governance, Environmental Policy, Activism, Transnational Activism, International Solidarity, Solidarity, Social Movements, Environmental Movements, Environmental Justice, Environmental Injustice, Environmental Justice Movement, Paris Accord on Climate, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC, Non-governmental Organizations, Environmental NGO, NGO Influence, INGO, Transnational Social Movements, Transnational Social Movement Organizations, TSMO, Transnational Advocacy Networks, Adaptation, Climate Change, Climate Policy, Indigenous Knowledge, Traditional Knowledge, Climate Change Mitigation, Indigenous Peoples Exclusion, Indigenous Peoples Inclusion, Local Communities, Frontline Communities, Indigenous Rights, Rights of Nature, Rights of Mother Earth, REDD+, International Rights of Nature Tribunal, Non-state actors, Environmental Advocacy. The author searched through 15 pages of search results on Web of Science and Google Scholar respectively.

author reviewed relevant literature referenced in texts identified through the aforementioned method. The author identified themes in this literature through a grounded theory approach [6]. This approach builds on the strengths of deductive and inductive reasoning by identifying themes that emerge from existing theories on the outcome of interest, the influence of Indigenous Peoples on global environmental governance, as well as new themes that emerge from the studies reviewed.

Indigenous Peoples, who manage or have tenure rights over more than a quarter of the world's land surface [7], have expanded their participation across various instances of global climate governance since 1998, when Indigenous activists began attending United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of Parties (COP) [8^{*},9–11]. Indigenous Peoples activist efforts had impact on the Paris Agreement's article on averting, minimizing, and addressing loss and damage stemming from the effects of climate change [10] and over the creation of a Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform [11,12,2^{**}]. Yet, the extent to which Indigenous Peoples had an impact on the outcome of the Paris Agreement on Climate is a matter of debate. Various scholars observe that the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in instances of global environmental governance and their influence within these spaces remains limited [12–19]. Whereas some studies locate the influence of Indigenous Peoples mobilization in the outcomes of climate negotiations, such as the creation of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform as part of the Paris Agreement and its recognition of the role of Indigenous Knowledges in climate change adaptation [2^{**}], others conceptualize influence more broadly in terms of changes in representation as a result of power struggles [18,20]. Despite its importance, the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform created under the Paris Agreement is seen as an inadequate mechanism for Indigenous participation, as it fails to frame Indigenous Peoples participation in terms of human rights and avoids recognizing the colonial systems and practices that marginalize Indigenous Peoples [13,14,21]. Future scholarship can advance this area of study through analyses of the pathways by which Indigenous Peoples achieved the inclusion of language in the Paris Agreement that recognizes the role of Indigenous Knowledge in climate change adaptation. Further attention should also be placed on the differences among groups of Indigenous Peoples in relation to engagement with climate financing mechanisms and the extent to which these differences affect the influence of activist efforts among Indigenous Peoples in instances of global climate governance.

Barriers to indigenous influence

Scholars have identified various barriers that obstruct the political impact of Indigenous Peoples over global climate governance. These include financial constraints, coping

with differences among groups, nation-state dominance in UNFCCC negotiations, and challenges related to the pace with which negotiations take place. A commonly observed barrier is the material needs and financial constraints that Indigenous Peoples face in their efforts to maintain their presence in spaces of international climate negotiations [13,22^{*},17]. Alliances among well-funded environmental international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), also known as green groups, have allowed resource redistribution through formal and informal arrangements. Transnational environmental advocacy efforts must also cope with differences and disparities across social groups and among the many actors that engage in contention within this issue area [23]. Their efforts to cope with this broad range of differences can impact their ability to achieve cooperation and political influence [24,25]. Indigenous Peoples involved in transnational climate justice activism are engaged in a constant struggle to balance the tactical aspiration of portraying Indigenous Peoples as a unified bloc [13] all the while working to cope with the differences that mark the diversity of perspectives and identities that mobilize under the collective identities of Indigenous Peoples. Yet, achieving unity across different groups of Indigenous Peoples is not merely a strategic aspiration. For some Indigenous Peoples activists and scholars, embracing universalism, collective identities, and cultural diversity is a condition for achieving human rights [26,27^{*},28,29].

The UNFCCC is marked by the continued dominance of nation-states and the marginality of non-state actors [13,22^{*}]. Formal and informal norms within UNFCCC COPs limit the participation of Indigenous Peoples and non-state actors more generally [30,18]. The gains of non-state actor participation do not necessarily translate into gains for the participation of Indigenous Peoples [13]. Indigenous Peoples challenge the absence of meaningful recognition and representation within the UNFCCC [13,14,18] and within environmental movements [25,2^{**}]. Indigenous Peoples report having to cope with the delicate balance between tokenism and meaningful inclusion, which [13] refers to as the double-edged sword of visibility. Assertions of Indigenous identities and perspectives are celebrated in instances of global environmental governance in so far as they remain ceremonial and absent of political claims on the process and outcome of the negotiations [31]. Nation-states often suppress the issues of Indigenous Peoples during climate negotiations by depicting them as domestic matters, all the while portraying themselves to be champions of Indigenous Peoples and claiming to represent them in international fora [32]. Outside of COPs, colonial and capitalist exploitation and mining ignores the ecological limits of the planet [33], local claims on land, and customary use rights, while also opening up new battlegrounds for Indigenous resistance [34]. Indigenous activists and nature defenders are subject to bodily harm, repression of their political

activism, state-sponsored violence, and the consequences of colonial and capitalist violence [35,36]. While repression is widely considered to thwart social movement emergence and influence, in the case of Native Americans, the US government's repression of the Indigenous activists led them to 'embrace, insist on, and apply international human rights law' [35,36].

Indigenous organizers also report feelings of exhaustion that stem from the pace with which COPs take place, late night negotiating sessions, experiences of disrespect, treatment of Indigenous Peoples as novelties [37], having to search for state party allies to gain access to informal but potentially consequential negotiations, coping with internal differences and dissent, reaching movement agreements, building new ties while severing others, facing repression at home and at the negotiating space, grieving for those lost to these struggles, translation across a large number of languages, attendance at pre-COPs, and the need for eternal vigilance [13].

Instances of indigenous peoples political influence: affirming indigenous knowledges

The recognition of Indigenous Knowledge in the Paris Agreement's adaptation section of the text is a notable advocacy victory that merits further attention and points to a direction for future research. Some groups of Indigenous Peoples engage in considerable efforts to assert the legitimacy of their knowledges in spaces of global environmental governance [3,13,18]. Thus, the inclusion of language in the Paris Agreement that recognizes the role of Indigenous Knowledge is a notable instance of the influence of advocacy efforts among Indigenous Peoples.

Scholars have cautioned against pursuing the integration of traditional ecological knowledge as an end in itself [14]. In their view, meaningful integration of traditional ecological knowledge must include participants from a diversity of backgrounds and areas of expertise, and not just participants with academic backgrounds from natural sciences [14]. Others question whether traditional Indigenous ancestral knowledges are recognized in so far as they validate, confirm, or support scientific and technical assessments [13,22]. Further, Wetts [38] finds that technocratic framings of the issue of climate change remain prevalent among most US advocacy organizations. Technocratic framings persist despite the emergence and visibility of climate justice frames [12] and the assertion of the role of Indigenous and ancestral knowledges in addressing climate change [9,39]. There is, however, an increased push for acknowledgement of Indigenous Peoples knowledges in scientific assessments [9,13] and, more specifically, within the UNFCCC Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA). Further, ongoing efforts to implement clauses of the Paris Agreement that recognize the role and value of Indigenous Peoples knowledge seek to achieve a more balanced

participation of Indigenous knowledge holders from various backgrounds, including academics and non-academics.³ Indigenous Peoples activists recurrently evoke climate science as part of their demands for climate action [27,40,41]. Scholars have also proposed pathways to bridging gaps between scientists and publics engaged in climate change policymaking processes [42] while others propose bridging the gap between Indigenous and scientific knowledges [43].

Opportunities for increased influence

The current historical juncture presents various challenges for efforts to influence global environmental governance among Indigenous Peoples, but it also generates numerous opportunities. Indigenous Peoples have found opportunities for influence within UNFCCC COPs and other instances of global governance [44]. Indigenous struggles [36] and climate justice frames [12] are experiencing a period of heightened visibility, which attracts funding support for Indigenous organizing and pressures state parties to adopt measures aligned with movement demands.

Indigenous activists also report benefitting from the support of insiders within UN megaconferences [45]. This support comes in different forms, including invitations to participate in informal gatherings in which negotiations take place [18,31]. Specifically, activists may find support from nation-state delegates. The degree to which nation-states are democratically accountable may have an impact on the extent to which nation-states support advocacy efforts [46]. Scholars have also called attention to the importance of nation-state support for transnational advocacy groups and their advocacy goals as a determinant of transnational activist success [46,47]. Yet, power is not static [18,20], and great power politics outside of climate politics often do not map onto and across each instance of climate policymaking.

Scholars have documented structural and institutional changes in global environmental governance [48] and the conditions under which they take place [45]. Decentralized and polycentric policymaking structures of global environmental governance provide multiple points of entry for Indigenous political influence and participation [2,13,44,49–52]. For instance, Indigenous Peoples are intensely involved in advocacy in regional bodies, such as the Arctic Council, where activist organizations like the Arctic Circumpolar Conference maintain a strong presence. Activist organizations under the leadership of Indigenous Peoples like the Coordinadora de la Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica (COICA) engage in

³ Recent efforts to this end are documented in recent SBSTA meetings, including the SBSTA — In-session Dialogue of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ChRazhU6Zw>.

organizing across multiple scales of governance and across national boundaries. Some have argued that INGOs can evaluate these multiple instances of climate governance and their dynamics as they prepare to engage in mobilization [53]. More generally, globalization provides opportunities for generating new solidarities and promoting Indigenous narratives, discourses, perspectives, and resistance [54].

Influence through solidarity

The development of solidarity is an ongoing process that, if achieved and maintained, can enhance the political influence of environmental movements [13,25,55,56]. Indigenous alliances with other groups representing them generates opportunities for mobilization and political influence [13,8*,2**]. To this end, movements must cope with internal differences and adopt norms of inclusion and solidarity whereby movements prioritize the issues and support the leadership of intersectionally marginalized groups [55–57]. It is, however, important to engage in discussions about what constitutes a marginalized group, as these conceptualizations have organizing and policy implications [58]. Educational struggles with a focus on Indigenous Peoples sovereignty help generate solidarity [59*]. Yet, research on Indigenous Peoples is often cited as an epistemologically extractive endeavor [13,60], and as part of longstanding colonial practices [61].

Differences among Indigenous Peoples climate justice organizers are not only identity-based, but also emerge along the lines of policy preferences. Distinct positions in relation to issues like carbon pricing and financing make portrayals of unity at international fora particularly challenging. While some groups consider carbon pricing and trading schemes to be false solutions to climate change [27*,62,10], others have engaged in joint climate financing ventures like the UN's Green Climate Fund and alliances with transnational advocacy groups like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Conservation International (CI) [8*,63–66]. Recent analyses point to the limited participation of Indigenous Peoples in projects like REDD+ [66].

Pressures to exert influence in global decision-making arenas push leading INGOs to advance incremental policy gains and choose more moderate demands over more far-reaching demands to alter the status quo [67]. Organizational leaders must balance the opportunity to make decisions internationally without local consultation or risk losing this opportunity in the interest of internal movement democracy. Further, leaders may have to consult and seek acceptance from various audiences [67]. For some organizations, embracing the slow pace of translocal movement democracy requires a drastic reshaping of the procedures that govern global environmental decision-making processes. Scholars have cautioned against acting on the basis of urgency and in the name of progress while

adopting policies that ultimately harm Indigenous Peoples [4*]. Suppressing internal dissent and local participation as well as failing to enact norms of movement inclusion and democracy may ultimately undermine a movement's political influence [2**,25,56,57,68]. While transnational movement participants may seek to build unity in diversity [69], movement participants are also subjected to political pressures to homogenize Indigenous identities so as to enable delegations of the 'Indigenous diplomat' who can represent all Indigenous Peoples [13]. Indigenous Peoples identities and systems of governance have been described as continuously shifting [70] and inclusive of nature [3].

Conclusion

This review identifies three prominent debates on the question of the influence of Indigenous Peoples in global climate governance: (1) What constitutes Indigenous Peoples political influence over global climate governance, (2) the extent to which Indigenous Peoples exert it, and (3) whether the political influence of Indigenous Peoples over global climate governance is enough to stop climate regimes from harming them. While there is some progress towards the participation of Indigenous Peoples in global climate policy design, adoption, and implementation, scholars call into question whether exerting influence is a form of progress if the policies adopted continue to harm Indigenous Peoples [3,4*]. Coming out of Paris, a longtime international Indigenous rights lawyer, Alberto Saldamando, voiced an opinion shared by many Indigenous organizers engaged in transnational climate mobilization: the Paris Agreement was a human rights violation, and nothing other than a trade agreement [17,21,28]. What constitutes influence is itself a matter of debate [18]. While some focus on the impact of advocacy efforts on the outcome of climate negotiations [2**], others identify the influence of the mobilization of Indigenous Peoples in both the process and outcome of global environmental negotiations [18]. These analyses, as well as others [71] stress that influence is non linear [16] and that persistence is needed to secure and expand previous gains [25,2**]. Policies enacted by nation-states within instances of global climate governance like the UNFCCC, however, may not be enough, and instead, decolonization might be a necessary condition for addressing the ecological crisis [3,72,34]. Indigenous activists have a rich history of challenging the United Nations, the Westphalian system of territorial sovereignty [35*], and its norms of representation [35*]. Indigenous Peoples are among the various groups of non-state actors who call the legitimacy of this system and its norms into question [3]. Scholars debate whether the planet has already reached a point of no return [4*], and whether international environmental regimes can actually usher in progress if, ultimately, their policies pose greater risk to Indigenous Peoples [73].

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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