



## Indigenous voices, a policy spark to protect the world's forests

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Forests are crucial to sustainable development in many ways, from local livelihoods to the global commons. Yet, for decades, indigenous peoples – the leading curators and ambassadors of forests – have suffered political exclusion. More recently, forests have been recognised as a key response to the global climate crisis, motivating an international engagement with new financial instruments, notably REDD+. At this juncture, some countries are starting to listen and embrace indigenous voices and knowledge in their quest for policy options and new partnerships to address the deforestation tragedy. This talk, at the Earth Speakers' series of the Global Landscapes Forum, provides a personal account of these novel, inclusive policy avenues in two pioneer countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Colombia. It illustrates how connecting indigenous knowledge with climate finance is drawing up innovative pathways for sustainability, including overdue reforms for the sustainable governance of lands and forests, and actions to recognise community rights. In effect, when countries listen to indigenous insights and address indigenous rights, their development policies are more robust, inclusive, convincing and, indeed, more sustainable.

**LECTURE VIDEO:** <https://www.globallandscapesforum.org/video/indigenous-voices-a-policy-spark-to-protect-the-worlds-forests/> [ from 1:00 | duration: 14 minutes ]

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Exactly 20 years ago, on these dates, but late last century, I was inside indigenous territories in Amazonia, in the Curaray River, the homeland of *Sacha Runa* [the forest people]. I was doing research on indigenous knowledge about the forest as well as on the indigenous movements to protect their forests. Indigenous knowledge was not just a proficiency on biodiversity and ecosystem management, but also comprised social and

political innovations for sustainable development in forest territories – many years before the *Sustainable Development Agenda* of the United Nations and the *Paris Agreement*. The *Sacha Runa* were then scoping and generating development alternatives – or alternatives to "development", if you wish – to overcome the expansion of monocultural farming and oil exploitation, which were threatening their livelihoods and lifestyles.

In the late 1990s, the *Sacha Runa* of the Pastaza territory, in Ecuador, were advancing original endeavours for sustainability: they drafted community development plans that conciliated social and ecological issues (plans that would have met the current Sustainable Development Goals), enacted territorial bylaws to safeguard biodiversity, established a centre to promote wildlife farming, curated an ethnobotanical park, run programmes on agroecology and ecotourism, and even created a platform for Amazon science and technology to combine different knowledge systems to better conserve and use the forest ecosystems.

I was enlightened by the depth of their knowledge and the lucidity of their policy vision. Yet such knowledge and vision had neither institutional status in the mainstream society, nor political gateways to prosper.

When several years later, in 2008, I was offered the opportunity to coordinate a new international initiative on sustainable forest governance in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), I immediately thought of the indigenous peoples and rural communities dwelling within the Congo forests, and the vitality of knowledge and visions they probably held. DRC, which hosts the second largest rainforest in the world, was a leading nation in the negotiations for a new international financial instrument to recognise and support national efforts to reduce deforestation, known as REDD+, and that would become part of the international climate funding framework. At the UN we had just founded UN-REDD as a new partnership to help countries advance this innovative idea that connects forest conservation with climate finance.

The DRC Government requested UN-REDD to assist the country harness the opportunities of climate finance to better protect its tropical forests, thus serving the nation and the planet simultaneously. DRC's commitment to REDD+ and the need to seek novel approaches to address chronic deforestation trends generated a broad stakeholder engagement. The first international mission to DRC to lay the foundations for this new financial mechanism for the forests gathered some 20 international professionals from different organisations, including UN agencies, the World Bank, NGOs and donor countries. We convinced the Government to set up a participatory process to facilitate an inclusive approach and to gather as many different perspectives, experiences and alliances as possible. The first stakeholder assemblies were a monumental clash between government officials and indigenous peoples; in fact, the Government would not recognise the existence of indigenous peoples in the country, let alone their rights over the forest.

Using diplomatic methods and lots of patience, we advanced a process of participatory policy dialogue. The prospects of climate finance as a new source of development aid and a new approach to old issues confederated stakeholders. I remember that indigenous peoples would insist that fair land-use policies and full land tenure reforms were the priority action to protect the forests. They made their case by sharing their local initiatives of territorial cartography and their community knowledge on forest management. Government officials would progressively listen and assume such insights.

Through time, the country drew up a national strategy to reduce deforestation and promote sustainable development in forested territories. The process involved more than a thousand people in technical and policy deliberations, from civil servants to representatives from indigenous peoples, and from local environmental activists to Members of Parliament. This strategy was adopted in 2012 by the Council of Ministers, chaired by the President of the Republic, thus becoming a sort of State policy. The country then established a National Fund for REDD+, led by the Minister of Finances, to channel and coordinate the expected climate finance for implementing the new forest and sustainable development strategy.

To date, DRC's REDD+ strategy has received more than USD 200 million from the international community. These funds are serving to design and implement a new land-use policy, including a national law and provincial blueprints, as well as to conduct a major tenure reform – just as indigenous peoples had claimed since the onset of the REDD+ dialogues. These two policy endeavours will pay special attention to social equality, particularly to recognising indigenous rights and mainstreaming gender issues. The National Fund for REDD+ is also financing several field investments for sustainable and low-carbon development alternatives. And a draft law on indigenous peoples is now at Parliament for deliberation. The challenges ahead are enormous, but the policy transformations in just a decade are substantial. There is no doubt that such policy reforms and the climate finance mobilised owe a significant debt to the knowledge, struggle and determination of the indigenous peoples of DRC. Without them, the national strategy would not have been so transformational, and would not be credible enough to have attracted international finance at such a scale.

Colombia has also attempted to connect indigenous knowledge with policy work to address deforestation, mobilise climate finance and set new pathways for sustainable development across the country – from the Pacific to the Amazon. The UN-REDD partnership has had the privilege to help facilitate these connections. In 2015, during the negotiations for the *Paris Agreement*, the Government of Colombia signed a forests-for-climate compact with three major donors (Germany, Norway, UK) to provide climate finance at the level of USD 200 million against a set of policy milestones related to forest and land governance. To unlock this potential, the Government, with the assistance of UN-REDD, decided to mobilise indigenous knowledge in order to build, bottom up, a national

strategy to protect the forests that could meet, at the same time, indigenous rights, national development objectives and international climate provisions.

We helped the country create and manage a special political platform on forests & climate in order to facilitate the complex policy dialogues required. This platform, operated at various institutional and geographic levels, mostly from 2015 to 2018, served to integrate the knowledge and proposals of indigenous peoples and forest communities into national policy. Public consultations and deliberations were conducted through a dense organisational network, engaging 5 national indigenous unions, 6 territorial organisations of the Afro-Colombian people, 2 national *campesino* organisations, over 30 local indigenous associations from the Amazon, Pacific and Caribbean regions, and about 40 community councils of the Afro-Colombian people. This intense policy process, sustained with indigenous knowledge, resulted in a national strategy, known as "Forests – Territories for Life". The Government adopted it, registering it officially at the UN climate convention.

The title of Colombia's new national strategy for forests ("Forests – Territories for Life") was proposed by the indigenous peoples themselves and is illustrative of the inclusive character of this process. The term "territories" clearly belongs to the indigenous political language, reflecting the extent to which the political philosophy of indigenous peoples has permeated national policy. The reference to "life" emphasises the cultural and livelihood dimensions of forests for the indigenous and rural communities, as well as the will of the strategy to contribute to the ongoing and delicate peace process in the country. The title thus reflects a fine political blend of indigenous knowledge with national policy: a sign of the new times of inclusive and innovative policy making.

This national strategy has paved the way for Colombia to achieve 15 milestones of the financing agreement on forests & climate with the mentioned European donors. It has also defined investment portfolios across sectors, including agriculture, and across regions. For instance, it maps 150 local initiatives in the Pacific Region with prospective financing viability. It also proposes a forest conservation incentive scheme that will help implement the national law on payments for ecosystems services. In addition, this strategic policy and investment plan, built from the grassroots with indigenous knowledge and perspectives, is oriented to serve the peace process underway because inclusive territorial and community development is a pivotal aspect of peace in Colombia.

However, no path for sustainable development is easy. The governmental change in Colombia last year affected the traction and prospects of the new forest strategy. Deforestation has already increased in the past months. Yet the new forest strategy of Colombia carries such a critical mass of indigenous knowledge and indigenous political capital that it has resisted adversity. It actually served indigenous peoples to negotiate development policy with the new Government.

Earlier this year [2019], the new President of Colombia put the National Development Plan up to public consultation, preparing to get it discussed and endorsed by the Parliament, as required by the Constitution for every presidential cycle. Then, indigenous peoples – a key political stakeholder in Colombia – used the forest strategy as the basis to dialogue and negotiate policy issues with the Government. For instance, they integrated some of the reform and investment measures of the "Forests – Territories for Life" strategy into the National Development Plan. They also secured the agreement of the new national government to continue policy deliberations through the participatory platforms on forest affairs. At the same time, the European donors publicly expressed recognition to Colombia's forest strategy as the policy framework that can unlock the agreed climate finance pledges. In conclusion, indigenous knowledge, empowered through the national REDD+ process, served to enhance the sustainability of Colombia's National Development Plan, making it more responsive to the fate of forests and more inclusive socially. It also helped align governmental policy to international agreements.

DRC and Colombia are pioneer cases of the new ways of building policy in the age of sustainable development. Mobilising diverse stakeholders and their knowledge systems, particularly indigenous peoples and indigenous knowledge, proves a catalyst of policy innovations and reforms. This is particularly valuable for the sustainable governance of lands and forests, to mobilise international climate finance and to generate solid partnerships for territorial sustainability.

In this century, humanity must address various environmental emergencies: the climate crisis, widespread deforestation, biodiversity loss, the need to restore ecosystems degraded by human activities, and the challenge of turning agriculture sustainable. This requires a major pact between people and the planet. I do not necessarily mean a written pact, but a reconfiguration of mindsets, economic practices, stakeholder relations, knowledge systems and policy making.

Forests are a defining ecosystem to test and demonstrate the pact between people and the planet. Before the era of sustainable development, indigenous peoples already led a movement for territorial and forests rights that was, in effect, a precursor of this pact. Let us have the courage to attend, integrate and empower the knowledge of indigenous peoples, and their associated rights, because they prove to be a catalyst of policy changes towards sustainability. Indigenous knowledge does not belong to the past. Actually, it can drive nations to the future: to a future of sustainability, where forests are protected to sustain local livelihoods, to nurture biodiversity and to safeguard our global climate.

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