

# Indigenous communities as partners and promoters



Photo: Kasburg

## What are indigenous peoples?

Indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, ethnic groups, indigenous groups or tribal societies are all social groupings which are distinguished from the dominant society as a rule by a different social and cultural identity. According to the standard international definition, indigenous peoples living in particular geographical regions have the following distinctive features:

- a strong bond with their ancestral land and the natural resources it contains
- presence of common law social and political institutions
- a predominantly subsistence-oriented production system
- a distinct language
- self-identification and identification by others as members of a distinct cultural group

## What are natural resources?

All resources occurring in nature, subject to ecological laws and available for human use, particularly air, land, soil, flora, fauna and water. They are influenced by natural factors (e.g. climate, volcanism, earthquakes) and anthropogenic factors (historic and contemporary settlement and use).

## What is resource management?

The planned handling of natural resources so as to achieve sustainable use, i.e. use that is economically and socially balanced and environmentally sound, including management of corresponding resources such as financial and human resources, etc.

## Indigenes face pressure from two sides

With striking frequency, indigenous peoples around the world are found living in centres of biodiversity, so-called called “hot spots”, located primarily in developing countries in the still intact equatorial forest regions or in remote mountainous areas.

One reason often postulated for the connection between high biological diversity and the presence of ethnic minorities is that the forms of land usage they prefer and extensively practice, primarily to meet their own needs, have caused their interventions in the natural ecosystem to be slight or moderate.

Another reason cited is that in the regions to which indigenous peoples have withdrawn, ecosystems limited by high biomass and coinciding nutrient deficiency place constraints on land usage practices.

Apart from the correctness of these assumptions, which are based on the notion of a passive “ecological noble savage”, indigenous peoples have been, and still are, exposed to two long-term changes:

- 1) Because ownership of land is unclear, the regions in which they live are threatened and hemmed in by settlement and colonization programs which channel streams of migration into these seemingly unused areas.
- 2) The environmental protection movement regards traditional ways of life as compatible with its goals and is working for the establishment of nature preserves and biosphere reserves, particularly in areas inhabited by indigenes.

## Land ownership: a question of survival

As democratization progresses, however, more and more indigenous peoples are demanding their right to self-determined sustainable development. Access to sufficient land, education, health services and alternative income sources are the characteristic aims of this movement, which, while striving to preserve traditional ways of life, no longer necessarily clings to the previous alliance with environmentalists.

Traditional lands and natural resources are intrinsically linked to the economic and cultural survival of indigenous peoples. Canada, Finland, Australia, Brazil, and the Philippines have created the legal means of recognizing the rights of indigenous people to their land or have drawn up legal provisions allowing for their participation in settling legal issues concerning land ownership.

Recognizing the high degree of interaction between cultural and biological diversity, the German Federal government explicitly supports the preservation of biological diversity and of indigenous peoples’ practices (Coalition Agreement 2002, CBD [Article 8j], Agenda 21).

## “Untouched” land turns out to be cultivated

Contrary to the aforementioned widely held view that indigenous people passively adapt to natural conditions, it has been proven today that the management practices of many indigenes are highly rational, in that they actively and consciously intervene in the environment, introducing long-term changes.

In the South American Amazon basin, it is assumed that 12% of what are called “terra firme” came into being under anthropogenic influence and today represent cultivated land. The most visible example is the Terra Preta do Indio, a fertile black soil horizon formed in the rain forest through centuries of settlement and cultivation by Indios. The planting carried out by the Kayapó in the Cerrado savannah regions during seasonal migrations has also refuted the

idea that the Amazon basin consists solely of primary forests.

## Management systems are fine-tuned and stable

The long-term management strategies are matched with what are known as risk-minimizing strategies: through a combination of slash-and-burn horticulture and complementary hunting, gathering and fishing, these strategies round each other out or alternate with one another in seasonal and regional variations. In the process, a complex body of indigenous knowledge has developed, distinguished by a high diversity of cultivated fruits and species (up to 40 different manioc varieties) and a great diversity of hunting and fishing techniques.

The finely differentiated classification by indigenous peoples of their environment, of the vegetation, for instance, or of water systems, testifies to refined and complex management systems which, without thoroughgoing study, must remain a closed book to the Western observer. Contrary to the belief that higher population growth and the lure of modernization threaten these complex management systems, they have proved extremely dynamic and stable.

In summary, it can be said that indigenous ways of managing the natural environment are not subject to any predetermined plan or negotiated agreement, but are viewed as resulting from an interplay of indigenous communities' traditional and tested, i.e. socially institutionalized, forms of dealing with the environment. These environmental management practices are closely related to their productive practices and serve them by maintaining a subsistence basis.

## Indigenes in the Convention on Biodiversity

The United Nations Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) does not use the term "indigenous peoples", but refers instead to "indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles". The CBD is an international treaty that promotes legally binding international cooperation "to manage, conserve and foster the sustainable use of the world's biological resources". The convention contains an array of provisions such as articles 8(j), 10(c), 17.2 und 18.4 that are of special significance for indigenes.

Article 8(j) is regarded as the core. It calls on the signatories, in their national legislation, to respect, preserve and maintain the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local

## Biodiversity and the Convention on Biodiversity

The term "biological diversity", or for short "biodiversity" encompasses the diversity of life on earth, ranging from genetic diversity and diversity of species to the diversity of ecosystems. The Convention on Biodiversity adopted in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 comprises three elements: the conservation of biological diversity, its sustainable use and the equitable distribution of benefits arising from its use. In the meantime, 187 countries and the European Union have joined the Convention. By signing the Convention, Germany has agreed not only to conserve biodiversity on its own territory but also to support developing countries in implementing necessary measures.

communities relevant to the protection and sustainable use of biological diversity. Furthermore, their wider application is to be promoted with the approval and involvement of the indigenous communities, and the benefits arising from the application of traditional knowledge are to be shared equitably among those involved. Article 10 calls on the signatories to protect and encourage the use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation or sustainable use requirements.

With regard to action required at national level, amongst other things this means that parties to the convention must recognize land rights and rights of access to natural resources, since they represent the basis for the continued existence and further development of indigenous knowledge systems.

## Example: Diversity protection in Amazonia

A project in Brazil protects areas in Amazonia inhabited by Indios through the identification, proclamation and surveying of 175 areas. During the identification process, ethnologically and environmentally relevant reports are prepared, with the participation of the Indio population in question, in order to determine the dimensions of the areas, taking traditional forms of land use into consideration. Indigenous communities are empowered through self-administered projects to participate in the surveys and to implement their own protective measures following demarcation of the areas. Areas totalling 40 million hectares inhabited by approx. 100 ethnic groups are protected to preserve their biological and cultural diversity.



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