



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations



## Indigenous Peoples in the Asia-Pacific region

Indigenous Peoples<sup>1</sup> have unique and ancestral cultures, traditions, languages, food systems and governance systems. They share a strong connection to their land and have developed a rich body of traditional knowledge on agro biodiversity and preservation of endangered plant and animal species. Indigenous Peoples Territories host 80 percent of the remaining biodiversity in the world. Different estimates place the indigenous population globally at about 370 million people living in more than 90 countries. Indigenous Peoples make up 5 percent of the global population and comprise 15 percent of the global extreme poor.<sup>2</sup>

The Asia and the Pacific region is home to the largest number of Indigenous Peoples, more than 260 million people, or 70 percent of the total indigenous population in the world.<sup>3</sup> Based on ingenious strategies and traditional knowledge, indigenous food systems are locally and climatically adapted and resilient to climate threats.

In addition, they are fundamental to broadening the available food base.

Despite their numbers and relevance to food and nutrition security, Indigenous Peoples are among the most marginalized subgroups in the Asia Pacific region. The lack of respect to their basic human rights, cultures, spirituality and traditions, and the encroachment on their traditional lands and natural resources increase their vulnerability by undermining livelihoods, shelters and identity.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) recognizes that it will not be able to achieve hunger eradication and food security for all unless it works directly with Indigenous Peoples alongside farmers, fishers and forest people. In 2010, FAO released its Indigenous Peoples Policy, which is aligned with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The term "Indigenous Peoples" was agreed at the 2007 UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The "s" was agreed as a way to recognize the variety and numbers of peoples that go under different denominations. For instance in the Asia and Pacific region, denominations for Indigenous Peoples include: tribal people, Adivasi, hill tribes, aboriginal people and traditional people, among others.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank. Indigenous People. Last Updated in Apr 11, 2018. Accessed Sept 20, 2018. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/indigenouspeoples>

<sup>3</sup> The rights of indigenous peoples in Asia. ILO. March 2017.

<sup>4</sup> While all countries have endorsed the 2007 UNDRIP, only Nepal in Asia and Fiji in the Pacific have ratified the 1989 Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No. 169).





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## Indigenous livelihoods and food systems: the centrality of land and natural resources

The Indigenous Peoples living in Asia and the Pacific pursue a variety of livelihoods and rely on food systems that include shifting cultivation, pastoralism, hunting and gathering, farming, intercropping, fishing and collection of forest products. These systems constitute an integral part of their livelihoods as well as their identity, spirituality, culture and way of life.

Their traditional knowledge and livelihoods depend directly on sustained access to their land, natural resources and territories. Indigenous Peoples in Asia and the Pacific depend on customary collective and individual rights to communal lands and natural resources.<sup>5</sup>

Indigenous peoples in the Asia-Pacific region have long practiced shifting cultivation. While agronomists and development practitioners have begun to recognize shifting cultivation as a form of sustainable agroforestry, most rural development programmes and policies in the region still seek to replace shifting cultivation.<sup>6</sup>

Shifting cultivation is not simply a farming technique but is a way of life for Indigenous Peoples, closely interlinked with their culture and lifestyle. This is why the sanctions and labels that cast shifting cultivation as environmentally unsustainable and inefficient affect indigenous communities beyond economic intervention. Through shifting cultivation, indigenous communities have been able to practice agro biodiversity, which is being acknowledged as key to promoting sustainable food production and climate change adaptation.

Indigenous Peoples in the Asia-Pacific region have long suffered from dispossession of their ancestral lands, denial of access to forests and other natural resources, as well as prohibition of certain livelihood practices. A few countries in Asia recognize Indigenous Peoples' customary land rights.

The Supreme Court in countries such as India or Indonesia have ruled in favour of acknowledging the rights of Indigenous Peoples to their ancestral lands and, subsequently, there have been policies and plans that take into account these rulings. At the same time, some countries have created national commissions to oversee Indigenous Peoples' rights (e.g. Philippines and India).



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Even if indigenous communities enjoy socially legitimate tenure rights, the lack of formal recognition exacerbates their vulnerability, especially in the context of expanding large-scale land investment, extractive industries and monoculture plantations, all of which have been on the rise in recent years. In addition, the lack of respect of the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) in programmes and investments increases the vulnerability and marginalization of Indigenous Peoples in the region.

<sup>5</sup> Indigenous peoples' rights to lands, territories and resources at the centre of UN annual forum. UN DESA, April 2018. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/social/unpfii17.html>

<sup>6</sup> Shifting Cultivation Livelihood and Food Security. AIPP, FAO, IWGIA. 2015.

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## Indigenous women

Indigenous women are even more vulnerable than indigenous men and often face 'triple discrimination' not only on the basis of their ethnicity and socio-economic condition but also on the basis of their gender. Despite the broad international consensus on the important role indigenous women play in eradicating hunger and malnutrition, they still face limitations in the recognition and exercise of their rights.

Food production in Asia-Pacific indigenous communities was traditionally in the purview of women.<sup>7</sup> Most women spent time working in the fields to produce food for their families' nutrition and well-being. They were responsible for seed selection, weeding the fields, identifying medicinal plants, gathering crops, food preparation, processing and selling surplus products. While men identified land suitable for shifting cultivation, women helped in clearing the land, harvesting and conducting the rituals during the shifting cultivation.<sup>8</sup>

As indigenous communities went through agrarian transitions, women faced considerable challenges. The loss of access to land and natural resources forced indigenous women to migrate in search of alternative means to support their families with some ending up being trapped in the informal economy, which weakened their role in contributing to food security and sustainable resource management. This caused women to become more dependent on men and more vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

## #INDIGENOUSWOMEN

visible women

As countries face agrarian transitions, indigenous women face greater difficulties in changing their traditional livelihoods due to lack of education, language barriers, family-care responsibilities and exposure to multiple forms of discrimination.

Not only social discrimination but also violence within their communities and families threatens many indigenous women in Asia-Pacific. Indigenous women and girls are especially at risk of violence in communities where deeply rooted patriarchal systems and practices continue to exist and relegate women and girls to subordinate roles and positions in society. There are also long-running conflicts within some Asian countries that have left indigenous women defenceless against rape, trafficking, sexual enslavement and murder.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> AIPP Gender Policy

<sup>8</sup> *Shifting Cultivation Livelihood and Food Security*, AIPP, FAO, IWGIA, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> The rights of Indigenous Peoples must be protected and respected. UNFPA. Aug 9 2016. <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/news/rights-indigenous-peoples-must-be-protected-and-respected>



## Call to Action

Only few countries have enacted national laws to protect Indigenous Peoples,<sup>10</sup> and an explicit recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights through a dedicated legal, policy and institutional framework is absent in most countries.

The cultural restriction and lack of recognition of indigenous men and women has isolated indigenous communities from socio-economic development, setting back the Asia-Pacific region from achieving zero hunger and sustainable agriculture. Indigenous women in particular should be empowered to fully participate in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda through the following actions:

- Make indigenous women visible in public policies for rural development, social protection, agriculture, fisheries, and livestock among others through the collection and dissemination of disaggregated data.
- Respect indigenous women's traditional knowledge and guarantee their effective participation in decision-making processes when developing policies that affect or support Indigenous Peoples and their traditional agriculture, food and livelihood systems – Support the #VioletChair Initiative.
- Recognize and protect customary tenure rights of Indigenous Peoples and ensure that within these systems discriminatory practices and gender inequality issues are properly addressed.
- Implement land tenure reforms in a gender-equitable manner, acknowledging women's contribution to food security, and social and economic development of their communities.
- Ensure indigenous girls' and women's access to social services such as formal and informal education and affordable health care.
- Recognize indigenous women's social and economic role, and protect their contribution in unpaid care work and natural resource management.
- Guarantee legal protection for indigenous women and girls from sexual exploitation and violence.

**#VioletChair** represents the place of indigenous women in decision-making processes. It is a call to authorities, organizations, the international community, academia and civil society to guarantee the full and effective participation of indigenous women in decision-making processes that affect them and their communities, and to make them visible.

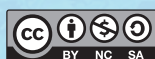
<sup>10</sup> The Philippines has issued a national law on indigenous peoples' rights.



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