

## Spotlight 8: Indigenous peoples

Indigenous peoples have played a crucial role as custodians of the natural world, and their territories are home to 80 per cent of the world's biodiversity. Their traditional knowledge, holistic practices and production systems both provide for sustainable management of resources and ensure that biodiversity is maintained for future generations. Recognizing how indigenous peoples have been able to make social capital, agriculture and the environment work together over centuries is crucial to an understanding of inclusive rural transformation, and offers an opportunity to learn from their sustainable livelihood practices.

### Impoverishment of indigenous peoples

The history of indigenous peoples has been marked by colonization, armed conflict and marginalization. From their first encounter with colonizers, they have faced discrimination, forced displacement and economic exploitation, resulting in decreasing populations, impoverishment and isolation. Occupation and land grabbing have continued for centuries and nation states have favoured private ownership and individual rights over collective ones. More recently, efforts by large corporations to extract natural resources has had negative and often devastating impacts on ecosystems, affecting indigenous peoples and making them even more vulnerable.<sup>139</sup> Development programmes, too, have impoverished them when they failed to build on their distinctiveness and culture (Ramos et al. 2009).

Yet indigenous peoples have shown strong resilience and demonstrated their determination to survive as peoples with their own identities. They have continued to adapt to changing circumstances while maintaining their unity and identity as peoples, and diversifying their livelihood systems, production practices and technologies to cope with new environments. Today, the indigenous population worldwide is more than 370 million, and recent census data have recorded a significant increase in their numbers.<sup>140</sup>

Marginalized and discriminated against, indigenous peoples account for 5 per cent of the world's population but 15 per cent of people living in poverty (IFAD 2009). Their socioeconomic and human development conditions are much worse than those of other population groups, and they fare worse on all human development indicators, despite many developing countries' impressive progress in education and health for both indigenous and non-indigenous groups. In most countries, their poverty rates are far higher than for non-indigenous populations<sup>141</sup> and, even in developed countries, they consistently lag behind the non-indigenous population on most indicators of well-being.<sup>142</sup> Indigenous women are further marginalized and experience multiple forms of discrimination, including within their own communities (UN 2010).

### Indigenous peoples and rural transformation

Overcoming these challenges in partnership with indigenous peoples and their communities is a prerequisite for inclusive and sustainable rural transformation. There is a need for actors at all levels to respect their holistic perspectives, and to acknowledge that their well-being is closely connected to their ancestral lands and territories, sustainable livelihood practices and cultural and spiritual values.

Indigenous peoples' traditions have great potential to contribute to rural transformation, benefitting not only themselves, but also others in the countries where they live. With their deep and varied knowledge of the natural world and traditional land-use practices, they have made invaluable contributions to the conservation and management of ecosystems. Their economies represent sustained interaction with and adaptation to particular locations and ecosystems, and their ability to use biological resources sustainably has historically protected them against crop failure, biodiversity loss, soil infertility and other threats (Kelles-Viitanen 2008). Indigenous food systems generate nutritious food and their

approach to sustainable food production can play an important role in addressing the global food need. Indigenous agricultural practices ensure that natural resources are protected and used in a sustainable way.<sup>143</sup>

Inclusive rural transformation can also bring about potential benefits for indigenous peoples. Improved infrastructure can ease access to services such as education and health care, especially for those who live in remote areas. Improved market access can be a benefit, particularly as their traditional foods are increasingly valued by urban consumers. Increased income-generating and employment opportunities may emerge from eco-tourism, forest management and conservation initiatives. Full and effective participation in decision-making can strengthen the traditional governance institutions of their communities and provide opportunities to affirm their priorities and views.

However, transformation processes also present challenges. The traditional livelihoods of indigenous peoples are potentially at risk as rural areas transform, marked by increased interaction and interdependencies between rural and urban areas, rising demand for and commercialization of food, changes in farm dynamics and practices, and still-rising pressure on natural resources. Unless investments and policies ensure that rural transformation is inclusive, indigenous peoples will be further marginalized and impoverished with less access to their ancestral lands, degradation of natural resources and limited livelihood options.

### Policies and actions for and by indigenous peoples

Indigenous peoples have been struggling to defend their rights throughout history. This struggle has led to a rights framework based on two main pillars: International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (1989),<sup>144</sup> and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). The United Nations has consistently addressed the rights of indigenous peoples with the establishment of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous

Issues (2000), the appointment of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous Peoples (2001), and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). Other international and regional agreements and conferences have also defended the rights of indigenous peoples, and several United Nations organizations have adopted similar policies, including IFAD, which has played a pioneering role in empowering their communities and institutions.<sup>145</sup>

Indigenous peoples' organizations themselves have reached global milestones in the form of the World Conference of Indigenous Women in 2013 and the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples the following year. Indigenous peoples have played an important role in negotiations on climate change, including COP21. The Paris Agreement acknowledges their rights and their traditional knowledge in adaptation action (UNFCCC, 2015). As their organizations' participation becomes more institutionalized, their influence on international organizations and regional bodies is strengthening. Indigenous peoples have also made significant progress in enacting laws and decrees in a number of areas.<sup>146</sup>

However, implementation is not always effective and specific investments and policies are required to ensure that indigenous peoples' needs and rights are recognized:

- *Supporting resilience.* Throughout their history, indigenous peoples have developed a great ability to adapt to natural changes. This resilience is a result of their sustainable use of biological resources and their transmission of knowledge down the generations. However, intensified pressure from resource-extractive industries has displaced people and expropriated lands, impoverishing and marginalizing indigenous peoples, who experience greater food insecurity than non-indigenous groups. Ensuring legal recognition of ancestral territories, protecting natural resources and acknowledging indigenous peoples' rights to their traditional food systems are key actions to support resilience.<sup>147</sup> Support is also needed for bottom-up community

adaptation strategies, rooted in indigenous peoples' knowledge.

- *Ensuring self-determination.* The right to self-determination was established in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It includes the right to freely determine their political system and pursue their economic, social and cultural development, and allows for making decisions related to indigenous land, natural resources, administration of justice, education, language, health and culture. At the same time, indigenous peoples retain the right to participate in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the state. In many regions, community-based structures, ancestral institutions and traditional systems are being revitalized and made part of self-government, and are important in administering sustainable local development. Recognition of indigenous institutions, adequate funding and engaging indigenous peoples, including women and youth, in all forms of public decision-making are important steps to ensure their right to participation at national and international levels.
- *Development strategies and partnerships.* Development strategies should be designed with the full and effective participation of indigenous peoples' communities and with their free, prior and informed consent.<sup>148</sup> Support to indigenous peoples must recognize that their aspirations for development, resources and services may be significantly different from other people. Indigenous peoples have continuously questioned the use and relevance of the mainstream development paradigm to frame the discussion of well-being and the realization of their rights.<sup>149</sup> For indigenous peoples the usual concept of development falls short in areas that they regard as essential. An alternative discourse is the concept of "good living," emerging from indigenous traditions as a way of life that is community-oriented, ecologically balanced and culturally sensitive. Good living is connected to respect for their territories, identity, language, food sovereignty and rights (Ramos et al. 2009). There is a need to build mutually respectful partnerships, recognizing that indigenous peoples must be leading actors in their own development, and ensure that their unique contributions and knowledge systems are not only recognized, but can contribute to all humanity.
- *Supporting and acknowledging the role of indigenous women.* Indigenous women play a fundamental role in food security for themselves and their families, and are important custodians of biodiversity and traditional knowledge, which they transfer from generation to generation. This role needs to be recognized and valued, particularly as the need for nutritious and sustainable food systems increases. However, the role of indigenous women is often ignored and they face discrimination in their access to numerous services, such as health care. Child and maternal mortality rates, unwanted pregnancy and prevalence of sexual abuse are higher among indigenous than non-indigenous groups. There is a need to promote a holistic and intercultural approach informed by indigenous perspectives on health, including traditional medicine and health practices, and to support the empowerment of indigenous women. Indigenous women themselves are a driving force in change processes involving the relationship between indigenous peoples and states. They have been promoting their rights and those of their peoples in international forums and have established national, regional and international alliances to promote and advocate for these rights.<sup>150</sup>
- *Supporting indigenous children and youth.* Indigenous children and youth are particularly vulnerable to structural discrimination and marginalization, resulting in alarmingly high levels of poverty and poor health. Despite significant progress in access to education, ethnic, generational and gender, inequalities also persist. Young indigenous women are especially disadvantaged, affecting their opportunities to enter the job market and their ability to make decisions about their

reproductive lives. In recent years, however, intercultural and bilingual education has been recognized and such programmes have had a positive impact on indigenous peoples' communities. Evaluations show that children who participate in intercultural and bilingual education classes perform better, both in their first and second language (IASG 2014). The use of indigenous languages and the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in the curriculum have increased the interest of families and students in their history, and in their present and future learning and development opportunities.<sup>151</sup> Young indigenous peoples are also increasingly engaged in indigenous youth organizations. The Outcome Document of World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in 2014 also emphasizes the status of indigenous youth.<sup>152</sup>

- **Strengthening data.** Data on indigenous peoples' socioeconomic status are lacking, and indigenous peoples remain invisible in most official statistics. Indicators that capture their perceptions of poverty and well-being, and collection of disaggregated data (including by gender and age) at the national level, are needed (UN 2015). More efforts are also required to ensure that indigenous peoples' rights and priorities are included in all processes of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Disaggregation by indigeneity is not proposed under any of the targets, despite the close focus on inclusiveness in the Agenda.

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