



Policy Brief 2: Nurturing Biocultural Diversity

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LIVELIHOODS, FOOD SOVEREIGNTY, HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

In May 2019, more than 120 participants - Indigenous Peoples from Canada, the United States of America, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Australia, together with partners and supporters - came together at a Regional Indigenous Research Action Conference and at the first North American Dialogue on Biocultural Diversity to advance joint strategies to promote the diversity of life on Earth. This series of policy briefs draws from the discussions held at these meetings and the recommendations of the Atateken Declaration,¹ adopted by the participants of the Dialogue.

Introduction

The livelihood practices of Indigenous Peoples across settler states (Canada, the United States of America, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand) have been and continue to be subjected to severe pressures and restrictions. From jurisdictional restrictions to extractive pressures to climate change, multiple factors curtail the practice of traditional occupations, which have sustained human communities and local ecosystems from time immemorial.

The erosion of Indigenous livelihoods has had dire impacts on communities' food sovereignty, health, and well-being, as well as on the transmission of culture and environmental knowledge. Across settler states, Indigenous livelihoods are traditionally based on a combination of hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering, and sometimes agriculture. Traditional food systems are therefore based on continuous interactions with local ecosystems through land- and water-based occupations. Traditional diets also provide health and environmental benefits compared to diets higher in refined sugars and trans-fats.² The livelihood practices that emanate from the customary sustainable use of natural resources are also central to the maintenance and transmission of Indigenous cultures, languages and worldviews.

Hence, the maintenance and revitalization of customary sustainable use of lands and waters by Indigenous Peoples are essential to preserving and restoring healthy ecosystems and communities. This policy brief summarizes the main chal-

Key points

- Maintaining and revitalizing Indigenous Peoples' customary sustainable use of lands and waters contributes to healthy ecosystems and communities.
- Lack of management control over ancestral lands and waters, colonial legacy, climate change, extractives and other development pressures all have negative impacts on Indigenous livelihoods, food sovereignty, health, and well-being.
- We recommend supporting Indigenous Peoples' efforts to restore, protect, and sustain their traditional foods, diets, and lifeways as well as Indigenous languages and knowledge systems.

lenges to Indigenous livelihoods, food sovereignty, health, and well-being, examines the opportunities for maintaining and restoring traditional livelihood practices, and provides policy recommendations.

Main challenges

Control over and management of lands and waters

Restrictions on Indigenous governance, management, and use of natural resources threaten Indigenous livelihoods and food sovereignty. In many contexts, Indigenous ownership and stewardship on their traditional territory are denied or are only partially recognized by the state, and Indigenous institutions have limited participation, if any, in determining how their ancestral lands and waters are used and managed. One example of such issues is the criminalization of traditional harvesting in national or provincial parks located on ancestral lands and waters.

Even in instances of natural resource co-management, state governments and Indigenous governance institutions frequently do not operate on an equal footing, with Indigenous actors often playing an advisory role to the 'primary' jurisdiction of the state. This prevents Indigenous priorities, laws, practices, and knowledge from effectively informing

decisions that would secure the relationships of Indigenous communities with their ancestral lands and waters, based on stewardship and responsibility.

Extractives and other ‘development’ pressures

Extractive activities, such as mining and oil drilling, have substantial direct and indirect impacts on Indigenous livelihoods, food sovereignty, health, and well-being, impacts which are often poorly captured or even obscured by consultation processes.³ Contamination of soils and waterways, landscape fragmentation, and biodiversity loss resulting from resource exploration and extraction entail health risks, including threats to wild food safety, and diminished access to culturally-significant places and resources, detrimental to livelihoods and to cultural, spiritual, and knowledge transmission and revival.⁴ Similar effects are associated with other types of project and infrastructure such as hydroelectric dams, logging activities, bottled water extraction, and the spread of genetically-modified organisms.

The paragraph above should not be construed as a straightforward rejection of all forms of development or resource extraction on Indigenous ancestral lands and waters. Some projects may be supported by Indigenous Peoples for benefits such as employment opportunities, which can have positive livelihood impacts. The key issue is whether project impact assessment and approval processes truly consider Indigenous perspectives and rights, and provide appropriate information for free, prior and informed consent.



Policy Brief 4, “Safeguarding Biocultural Diversity: Territorial Defense in Extractive Contexts”, provides more information on extractive pressures on Indigenous territories.

Climate change

Since Indigenous livelihoods, food sovereignty, health, and well-being are tied to ancestral lands and waters, they are highly susceptible to the effects of climate change. Sea level rise and coastal erosion, heating climate, altered seasonal patterns, frequent extreme weather events, and shifting

species’ ranges all alter the availability and quality of water, traditional food and medicines, and other culturally-significant resources and places. Climate change is also one of the many factors that facilitate the introduction of invasive species, which compete with native species and alter ecosystems on which Indigenous livelihoods depend.⁵ Indigenous communities have demonstrated their resilience and adaptability over time, and their knowledge and value systems have an important role to play in informing climate change mitigation and adaptation. However, appropriate policy support is required since human-induced climate change is significantly accelerating the pace of changes, and centuries of colonialism have weakened the socio-ecological resilience of many Indigenous communities.⁶

Colonial legacy

Since the beginning of colonisation, Indigenous Peoples across contemporary settler states have experienced displacement and assimilation policies. Forced displacement and sedentarization on reservations as well as boarding/residential school systems are flagrant examples of states preventing the reproduction of Indigenous livelihoods, languages, and cultures, which are intrinsically linked. Systems and policies that have cut whole generations from their community and forced them into abandoning their language, culture, and lifeways have negatively affected gender, family, and community relations and created an intergenerational disruption within Indigenous communities. Such disruption and other forms of colonial and cultural violence against Indigenous groups have created what has been termed ‘historical trauma’, bringing about significant negative psychosocial impacts.⁷ Anger, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal tendencies among Indigenous individuals have been identified as responses to historical trauma.⁸ Historical trauma is also one of the root causes of violence suffered disproportionately by Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people in Canada.⁹

The loss of culturally-significant livelihoods and food sovereignty affects Indigenous health holistically, in its physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.¹⁰ The erosion of traditional occupations, which promote active lifeways, and the growing reliance on store-bought processed food have led to an increased incidence of obesity, type-II diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases among Indigenous communities.^{11,12} Indigenous livelihood practices also provide space for fostering relationships with the land and water, and for living and transmitting language, culture, and spirituality. Lack of connection to the land, loss of language and identity as well as cultural/spiritual disconnection have all been found to negatively affect Indigenous health and well-be-

ing.¹³ In urban contexts, this is exacerbated by the lack of social cohesion¹³ and low access to cultural food.¹⁴

Opportunities

Supporting the maintenance and revitalisation of Indigenous cultures, languages, and livelihoods is central to protecting biocultural diversity. The positive impacts of such support on natural ecosystems and on human communities are two sides of the same coin.

Livelihoods and healthy ecosystems

Respect and support for Indigenous Peoples' customary sustainable use and management of lands and waters represents a positive conservation measure. Indigenous Peoples have sustained local ecosystems from time immemorial by rooting their livelihood practices as well as their rules, principles, and laws in deep place-based knowledge and relationships. Supporting Indigenous livelihoods therefore preserves Indigenous Knowledge that is vital to sustainable resource management and conservation. The recognition and revitalization of Indigenous rules, principles, and laws also represent great opportunities for sustainable resource management. As an example, the fire management practices of Aboriginal Australians, based on their knowledge of the land and maintained for livelihood, social, and religious reasons, have been found to be vital for ecological integrity and species abundance and diversity in northern Australia.¹⁵



Nadab lookout in Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory, Australia. Kakadu National Park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site co-managed with the Bininj/Mungguy traditional owners.

Livelihoods and healthy communities

The maintenance and promotion of Indigenous lifeways have an important role to play in promoting healthy diets, re-establishing food sovereignty, and fostering well-being in Indigenous communities. Indigenous cultural practices have been found to play a central role in the healing process of Indigenous Peoples recovering from historical trauma.⁷

Participation in Indigenous cultural practices rebuilds a sense of identity and belonging as well as a spiritual connection, which points to the potential of cultural revitalisation for fostering Indigenous health.⁷ Cultural restoration and transmission efforts, including through Indigenous language revitalization, are therefore important for the long-term health of Indigenous Nations. For example, Indigenous language and cultural immersion programs that bring Indigenous youth in the bush to learn-by-doing with Elders foster a positive sense of identity and re-establish land and community relationships through Indigenous knowledge, skills and values.

Policy recommendations

We call for actors from government, industry, and academia to support Indigenous Peoples in their efforts to restore, protect, and sustain their traditional foods, diets, and lifeways, including through policies, programs, and projects which:

- Respect and recognize the sovereignty, jurisdiction or customary land tenure and stewardship of Indigenous Peoples throughout their ancestral lands and waters.

This includes supporting Indigenous customary use, even on lands and waters encompassed by protected areas, recognizing and revitalizing Indigenous laws about resource management, and ensuring proper consultation before allowing resource exploitation or industrial development.

- Respect and make space for Indigenous leadership, including contemporary and customary Indigenous governance systems.

Self-determined management must be prioritized wherever feasible. Systems of co-management should adopt a co-governance or co-stewardship model, in which Indigenous Peoples are equal partners in decision-making. This approach would allow Indigenous needs, priorities, perspectives, and laws to effectively drive sustainable management, for the benefit of biocultural diversity.

- Provide capacity development and on-going funding of Indigenous Peoples so that they are empowered to exercise their rights and responsibilities over their ancestral lands and waters.

Capacity development and funding opportunities should help strengthen Indigenous institutions and support Indigenous-led initiatives geared toward restoring, protecting, and sustaining traditional foods, diets, and lifeways, including through the establishment of Indigenous and community conserved areas.

- Explore the relationships between traditional diets, traditional medicines, and human health as well as the impacts of socio-environmental and climatic changes on food sovereignty and human health and well-being.

Policies, programs, and research on these topics should recognize and reflect Indigenous Knowledge, values, and holistic perspectives, alongside Western knowledge, when appropriate. For instance, public health research and policies aimed at supporting Indigenous healing from historical trauma should be driven by/co-constructed with the relevant Indigenous community, respecting its specific context, worldview, and holistic approach to health.¹⁶

We also recommend supporting Indigenous-led strategies and actions to protect, revitalize, and sustain Indigenous languages and knowledge systems, in particular through initiatives which:

- Support intergenerational language and knowledge transfer through formal and non-formal education.

Examples include language immersion programmes in schools and community centers, youth-Elder immersion camps, and the development of traditional and technological tools for knowledge transmission.

- Support Indigenous communities developing education based on their own cultural values as well as efforts that enable more culturally-appropriate education.

Indigenous-controlled education, based on the communities' teaching methods, values, and languages, should be

recognized and supported.¹⁷ Concurrently, the curricula of non-Indigenous educational institutions, such as universities, should accommodate diverse, including Indigenous, worldviews.

- Facilitate youth engagement in building a future based on their communities' cultural values, including Indigenous knowledge systems and identities.

This should entail both supporting community initiatives for youth engagement and providing opportunities to Indigenous youth through formal education.

- Support the repatriation and restoration of Indigenous languages, knowledge and related information, and artefacts.

Repatriation and restoration of intangible and tangible cultural heritage should assist Indigenous Peoples in protecting, revitalizing, and strengthening their knowledge systems.

Conclusion

The livelihoods, food sovereignty, health, and well-being of Indigenous Peoples are closely tied to the health of their traditional territory and culture. It is important to recognize the historical injustices and destruction that Indigenous Peoples have suffered regarding their culture, language, identity, and spirituality, and to construct processes of reconciliation and cultural restoration. The policy recommendations highlighted in this document can sustain these processes and yield substantial benefits for biocultural diversity.



Participants of the 2019 North American Dialogue on Biocultural Diversity, which informed this series of policy briefs.

Endnotes

- 1 The Atateken Declaration is available in English and in French at <http://www.cbd.int/lbcd/resources/>.
- 2 Tilman, David, and Michael Clark. "Global diets link environmental sustainability and human health." *Nature* 515 (November 2014): 518-522, <http://doi.org/10.1038/nature13959>.
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- 9 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. *Reclaiming power and place: Executive summary of the final report*. Ottawa, ON: Author, 2019. <http://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca>.
- 10 This holistic perspective of health is reflected in the Medicine Wheel used by many Native American tribes.
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- 13 King, Malcolm, Alexandra Smith, and Michael Gracey. "Indigenous health part 2: the underlying causes of the health gap." *Lancet* 374 (2009): 76-85.
- 14 Cidro, Jaime, Bamidele Adekunle, Evelyn Peters, and Tabitha Martens. "Beyond food security: Understanding access to cultural food for urban Indigenous people in Winnipeg as Indigenous food sovereignty." *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* 24, no 1 (2015): 24-43.
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- 16 Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Maria, Josephine Chase, Jennifer Elkins, and Deborah B. Altschul. "Historical Trauma among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas: Concepts, Research, and Clinical Considerations." *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 43, no. 4 (2011): 282-290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02791072.2011.628913>.
- 17 In accordance with Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, available at <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/61/295>.



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