



Report: Land Rights for Climate, Forests, Biodiversity, and Sustainable Development

17th Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Monday, April 16, 2018

New York, USA



On Monday, April 16 the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Equator Initiative and the Global Platform for the New York Declaration on Forests (NYDF Global Platform), together with the UN REDD Programme and Tribal Link, organized an official side event at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII). This meeting welcomed six expert panelists to discuss the impacts that the recognition of land rights has on climate, forests, biodiversity, and sustainable development. The event attracted 30 participants from UN agencies, Member

States, indigenous people's organizations, and non-governmental organizations. The panel was moderated by Eva Gurria, Policy Adviser for UNDP's Equator Initiative. Panelists included, Nicole DeSantis, Coordinator of the NYDF Global Platform; Lucy Mulenkei, co-founder and co-chair of the Indigenous Women Biodiversity Network and Executive Director of the Indigenous Information Network; Yon Fernandez-de-Larrinoa, Indigenous Peoples Team Leader at FAO; Grace Balawag, Deputy Program Coordinator at Tebtebba and Indigenous Peoples Observer for the UN-REDD Executive Board; Lok Bahadur Poudel Chhetri, Counsellor/Spokesperson for the Permanent Mission of Nepal to the United Nations; and Christine Halvorson, Program Director of Rainforest Foundation US. This session was convened to discuss the importance of land tenure security as essential for the success of many multilateral policy initiatives including the New York Declaration on Forests (NYDF), the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity's Aichi Biodiversity Targets, the UN Programme for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), among others.

Eva Gurria opened the session by outlining the issues indigenous peoples face with regards to their rights to lands, resources and territories, and the impact on the environment and sustainable development. She cited that indigenous peoples and local communities are estimated to hold as much as 65% of the world's land through customary tenure systems, yet they only have legally recognized rights to 10% of it. This gap in recognition of land rights is a major driver of conflict and environmental degradation. Additionally, insecure land tenure and property rights is cited as a primary cause of contemporary global poverty and inequality. Eva reminded event participants that indigenous traditional territories hold 80% percent of the planet's biodiversity in their lands and waters, and that at least one quarter of the forest carbon in the world is stored in communal indigenous lands; important

figures to keep in mind when discussing the role of land rights for climate, forests, biodiversity, and sustainable development.

Nicole DeSantis provided an overview of the role indigenous peoples play in protecting forests, stating that “forests are best protected when they are managed by the communities that depend on them”. She also pointed out that forests can act as a source of carbon emissions or a carbon sink depending on how we choose to manage them, and discussed the role of the NYDF in protecting indigenous people’s rights. Goal 10 of the NYDF seeks to strengthen forest governance, transparency and the rule of law while also empowering communities and recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples, especially their land and resource rights. Nicole noted that in the Amazon annual deforestation rates were two to three times lower inside indigenous tenured forestlands, further emphasizing the important role indigenous peoples play in achieving the goals of the NYDF and improved forest conservation.

Lucy Mulenkei complemented this discussion by expressing the importance of indigenous people’s lands for their identity. From gathering food, to collecting medicine, to visiting sacred sites, indigenous peoples, particularly women, rely on their land to preserve their cultures and livelihoods, however, they have become victimized because of their efforts to protect their lands. She reminded us that it is important to discuss issues such as land tenure and indigenous peoples’ rights at the United Nations to inform and encourage governments who have failed to address these issues to take action. Lucy pointed out that policies exist to protect indigenous land rights but they have not been effectively implemented. She called on indigenous peoples and civil society to work together to achieve their rights and gain the respect of governments.

Yon Fernandez-de-Larriñoa from FAO discussed the relationship between land rights and food security. In the same way that insecure land rights can lead to increased food insecurity, lack of food security can also lead to increased land and natural resource degradation, as a result of coping mechanisms by local communities, like unsustainable agricultural practices. Yon expressed the need to incorporate discussions about food security into the groups who are working on land and tenure and reminded the audience of the importance of FAO’s [Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security](#) (VGGT), which serve as a reference and set out principles and internationally accepted standards for practices for the responsible governance of tenure.

Grace Balawag echoed similar concerns to Yon and Lucy’s, that the commitments and frameworks to advance land tenure exist but the recognition and fulfillment of these rights is missing, and that recognition should be prioritized. She pointed to the importance of translating global frameworks into the local and national level context and of the need for human rights-based approaches to conservation and development. Grace closed by stating that it is essential to integrate traditional knowledge into all climate change discussions (and other global processes) and that the recognition of land tenure rights is fundamental to the success of any sustainable development issue.

Lok Bahadur Poudel Chhetri provided an example of Nepal’s Community Forestry System, initiated in 1993 by the Nepal Forest Act. This system of participatory environmental governance is well-regarded as a best practice for sustainable forest management at the national level. The Community Forestry System has benefitted 1.45 million households and it has increased accountability, empowerment, and forest rights in Nepal. Over 35% of the population in Nepal participates in this system, managing more than

one quarter of the forests in Nepal. Lok concluded by sharing that the forestry system in Nepal was designed by the people, for the people.

Christine Halvorson also discussed concrete projects which have benefitted indigenous peoples through the work of Rainforest Foundation US. Through a series of maps, Christine pointed out the effectiveness of indigenous peoples' lands for conservation and how, in many cases, they have proven to be more effective than protected areas. Christine noted that "in defending these lands and forests too many people's lives are on the line". Rainforest Foundation supports indigenous peoples by building capacity through technical support and advocacy work; this support has helped indigenous peoples secure over 28 million acres of land. Christine noted that issues around land rights are long-term battles which require strong local organizations with the capacity to lead this battle. Christine called for the need for direct funding to these organizations and emphasized collaboration driven by local actors. Lastly, Christine shared that mapping and drone technology are powerful game-changing tools to empower indigenous people, especially the indigenous youth.

In closing, there was a strong sentiment that the biggest hurdle to securing land rights is the respect and recognition of these rights and that global multilateral processes need to be better articulated at the national level to help advance land rights, while integrating gender and human-rights based approaches to conservation and climate change. Participants also stressed the importance of including Indigenous Peoples in all policy processes affecting their livelihoods and the building of capacities to facilitate more inclusive partnerships to ensure indigenous people's rights to their lands, resources and territories are respected.

Panelists and side-event participants concluded that to protect biodiversity we need to work with Indigenous Peoples and local communities who have deep roots in their lands and knowledge of how best to protect them; and that indigenous territories are crucial for fighting climate change and therefore it is in everyone's interest to ensure that people who live in these forests have stable land tenure, since they will be the ones taking care of them. Eva Gurria concluded by reminding the audience that indigenous communities can also suffer from conservation efforts if they're not done carefully, and that to ensure this does not happen, governments, development agencies and conservation organizations need to respect indigenous rights and to work directly with indigenous peoples and local communities to ensure that well-meaning conservation initiatives help to secure land tenure, not degrade it.



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Monday, 16 April 2018 - 6:15PM - 8:00 PM
Conference Room 8

 **Light refreshments will be served**

When Indigenous Peoples lack legal recognition of their land rights, they are vulnerable to loss of their territories, identities and livelihoods. By the same token, land rights provide forest-dependent communities with positive incentives to conserve their lands and invest to enhance their potential, increasing agricultural productivity, and contributing to protecting forests and biodiversity, and lessening the harmful impacts of global climate change.

The dynamic side-event will be an opportunity to share examples and good practices of national and global initiatives that are advancing economic development, biodiversity conservation, and reductions in carbon emissions from deforestation, through investments in community land rights. Participants will also discuss how their work contributes to ending deforestation by 2030 and achieving the New York Declaration on Forests.



- **Moderator- Eva Gurria** –Equator Initiative, UNDP
- **Nicole DeSantis-** Coordinator- New York Declaration on Forests Global Platform
- **Lucy Mullenkei** –Indigenous Women & Biodiversity Network
- **Yon Fernandez-de-Larriñoa** - Indigenous Peoples Team Leader – FAO
- **Lok Bahadur Poudel Chhetri** – Counsellor – Permanent Mission of Nepal to the UN
- **Grace Balawag-** Indigenous Peoples' Partnership on Climate Change, Forests & Sust. Development, UNREDD Executive Board
- **Christine Halvorson** – Program Director – Rainforest Foundation