WORLD AGRICULTURE FORUM

INDIGENOUS POPULATION AND THE FUTURE OF FOOD SYSTEMS

Protecting Rights, Advancing Traditional Knowledge and Strengthening Global Food Security

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International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples

Executive Summary

The Indigenous population stewards over half the world's land under customary tenure but holds secure legal title to barely a tenth of it, a gap that costs formal protection, climate finance, and increasingly lives: 146 land and environmental defenders were killed or disappeared in 2024, most of them Indigenous. Indigenous-managed forests store more carbon, lose less to deforestation, and hold more biodiversity than comparable land under other management, yet financing has not followed the evidence: under 10 percent of the COP26 Forest Tenure Pledge has reached Indigenous-led organizations, and the 2024 World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge (GRATK) introduced disclosure requirements but lacks effective enforcement mechanisms.

Published to mark the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples (9 August 2026), this Issue Brief argues that the principal challenge is no longer one of evidence, but of implementation. The case for securing Indigenous land rights, protecting traditional knowledge, and directing finance to Indigenous-led institutions is well established. What remains is to translate existing commitments into measurable action. The World Agriculture Forum calls for strengthened legal recognition of customary tenure, enforceable protection of Indigenous knowledge systems, and transparent, accountable financing that enables Indigenous communities to continue their essential role in building resilient, sustainable, and food-secure agri-food systems.

Key findings

1. The Indigenous population stewards 50%+ of the world's land under customary tenure but holds secure legal title to only 11.4% of it.
2. Indigenous-managed Amazon forests were a net carbon sink (2001–2021) while forests outside those territories were a net source.
3. At least 146 land and environmental defenders were killed or disappeared in 2024, most of them Indigenous.
4. Only ~10% of the COP26 Forest Tenure Pledge reached Indigenous-led organizations by 2023.
5. Deforestation rates on Indigenous and community lands run up to 26% lower than the global average.

476M Indigenous People worldwide	**50%+** of land under customary tenure	**11.4%** of that land is legally owned by the Indigenous population	**18.2%** of people in extreme poverty worldwide, despite being 6.2% of the population	**2.5 billion** people depend on indigenous and community land.

Introduction and Context

Indigenous population is estimated at 476 million people across more than 90 countries, roughly 6.2 percent of the global population. They manage or hold tenure rights to close to one fifth of the world's surface area, steward over half of the planet's remaining intact forests, and their lands hold a significant share of global biodiversity. Forests managed by Indigenous Population in the Amazon were net carbon sinks from 2001 to 2021, removing 340 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, while forests outside those territories were a net carbon source. Their food systems, combining hunting, gathering, fishing, pastoralism and shifting cultivation, are among the most resource efficient and climate adapted in existence, reflecting generations of knowledge developed in close relationship with local ecosystems.

That contribution sits alongside acute deprivation and exposure. Indigenous Peoples make up 6.2 percent of the global population but 18.2 percent of those living in extreme poverty worldwide. The disconnect between stewardship and legal recognition is equally stark. Despite customary stewardship of at least half the world's land, they hold formal legal ownership of only about 10 percent of it, with government recognised management rights over a further 8 percent. Two thirds of the land formally owned or controlled by communities worldwide is concentrated in five countries: China, Canada, Brazil, Australia and Mexico, leaving vast Indigenous territories elsewhere without legal recognition and therefore without protection from expropriation, environmental degradation and competing land uses.

This imbalance between contribution and recognition shapes many of the challenges facing Indigenous communities today. Insecure land tenure undermines environmental stewardship, weak protection of traditional knowledge limits equitable benefit-sharing, and displacement from ancestral territories threatens food systems that have sustained communities for generations. The following sections examine these interconnected challenges across three dimensions: land, knowledge, and food security.

Land: Custodianship Without Security

Land is the foundation on which every other dimension of Indigenous food security rests, and it is the dimension most exposed. Globally, Indigenous Peoples and local communities steward an estimated 50 percent or more of the world's land under customary tenure; systems of use and governance recognised within their own communities but not necessarily by national law, yet only 11.4 percent is legally owned by them. Two thirds of the land formally owned or controlled by communities worldwide is concentrated in five countries: China, Canada, Brazil, Australia and Mexico, leaving vast Indigenous territories elsewhere without legal recognition and therefore without protection from expropriation.

The evidence on outcomes is consistent. Deforestation rates on Indigenous and community lands run up to 26 percent lower than the global average, and tenure secure Indigenous lands in the Amazon show markedly lower deforestation than comparable unsecured land. Yet the Global Forest Resources Assessment 2025 finds that the share of publicly owned forest under Indigenous and local community management rose only from 2 to 3 percent between 1990 and 2020, while the public administration share fell and the business and institutional share more than tripled. In 2025 alone, Indigenous and community lands in Brazil lost 676,000 hectares of forest, nearly two and a half times the size of Samoa, 80 percent of it to fire.

Financing has not matched the recognised value of these territories. Of the 1.7 billion dollar COP26 Forest Tenure Pledge, just over 10 percent reached Indigenous and community led organizations in 2023, and from 2011 to 2024 less than 1 percent of international climate financing reached programmes supporting Indigenous and community land tenure, with only a fraction of that going directly to community led organizations. Where territories lack legal recognition, they are also unprotected against the people defending them. At least 146 land and environmental defenders were killed or disappeared in 2024, with Indigenous Peoples and small scale farmers each accounting for a significant figure, nearly two thirds of the global total, despite Indigenous Peoples representing around 6 percent of the population. Colombia alone accounted for a third of documented killings worldwide, including 19 members of Indigenous communities, 13 of them from the Nasa people in Cauca.

Knowledge: Recognition Without Enforcement

Indigenous population hold rights over their traditional knowledge, cultural expressions and genetic resources under Article 31 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, much of it agricultural: crop varieties, soil management, water harvesting and pest control knowledge developed and refined over generations. This knowledge remains vulnerable to biopiracy, the unauthorized use of genetic resources or traditional knowledge for commercial gain, typically arising from the absence of prior consent and a failure to share resulting benefits as required under the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Nagoya Protocol.

After more than two decades of negotiation, WIPO member states adopted the Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge in May 2024, the first WIPO treaty to reference Indigenous Peoples and their rights directly and to affirm the UN Declaration in its preamble.The treaty requires patent applicants to disclose the country of origin and Indigenous or local community source of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge used in an invention. Its limits are already visible: implementation is largely optional for member states, and the treaty lacks defined penalties or legal recourse where companies or states fail to comply.

Separate WIPO negotiations on traditional knowledge beyond its association with genetic resources, and on traditional cultural expressions, remain unresolved. The United States has a documented pattern of delay on comparable instruments, having taken three years to adopt the UN Declaration after its passage.

Within the CFS process itself, the 2022 HLPE-FSN note found that Indigenous Peoples' traditional knowledge systems are methodologically, substantively and contextually strong, and can contribute to evidence based agricultural and food system policy, yet much of that knowledge remains undocumented and therefore under-utilized. FAO's case studies of Indigenous food systems, including the Baka people in Cameroon, the Inari Sámi in Finland, the Khasi, Bhotia and Anwal peoples in India, the Melanesians of the Solomon Islands, the Kel Tamasheq in Mali, the Tikuna, Cocama and Yagua peoples in Colombia, and the Maya Ch'orti' in Guatemala, found that these systems are likely to disappear within years under current pressures unless researchers listen to and learn from their holders.

Food Security: Displacement and Dietary Disruption

Land insecurity and knowledge erosion converge directly on nutrition. FAO's 2025 technical brief documents how conservation projects, extractive industries and infrastructure development, often promoted in the name of sustainable development, frequently result in forced displacement that separates Indigenous Peoples from the territories their food systems depend on. Resource extraction projects for rare earth elements and minerals needed for non-fossil fuel energy transition are identified as a growing driver of pressure on Indigenous territories. Where communities are able to rely on their traditional food systems, outcomes improve: FAO's 2021 analysis found Indigenous Peoples who could draw on traditional food systems coped better through the COVID-19 pandemic than communities dependent on market food supply.

That resilience is not only a local finding. Indigenous food systems draw on a far wider range of species, cultivation methods and land uses than the handful of staple crops most global food supply now depends on, which is precisely why they held up when centralized supply chains did not. A food system this diversified is a hedge against exactly the shocks like climate, conflict, market disruption, that global food security policy is designed to guard against. Treating Indigenous food systems only as something to protect from disruption overlooks what they could contribute if their agroecological practices, crop diversity and land-management knowledge were deliberately drawn into national food-security and climate-adaptation planning, rather than left parallel to it.

Criminalization compounds the pressure. Land and environmental defenders, many of them Indigenous, face not only physical violence but harassment, defamation and legal targeting intended to silence opposition to projects on their territories, a pattern Global Witness documents as intimidation, stigmatisation and the growing problem of criminalisation running alongside outright killings. The result is a narrowing space for the communities best positioned, by direct evidence, to manage land sustainably to actually exercise that role.

Regional Patterns

Latin America and the Caribbean

Latin America carries the sharpest edge of the violence documented above: 82 percent of the 146 documented killings and disappearances of land and environmental defenders in 2024 occurred in the region, with Colombia recording 48 cases, the highest of any country for the third consecutive year. Guatemala's documented killings rose from four in 2023 to 20 in 2024, and Mexico recorded 19 cases, its second most lethal year for defenders in a decade. At the same time, the region holds the clearest evidence of what secure tenure delivers: Indigenous managed Amazon forests were a net carbon sink over two decades while forests outside those territories were a net source.

Africa

Documentation gaps make Africa's picture harder to read rather than less severe. Global Witness recorded nine killings of land and environmental defenders in Africa in 2024, six percent of the global total, while cautioning that this reflects the difficulty of accessing information in the region rather than a lower prevalence of violence. That gap is itself a policy finding, not a footnote: where monitoring infrastructure is weakest, the documented numbers systematically understate risk, and Africa's comparatively thin land-tenure and food-systems data in this brief reflects the same underlying constraint rather than a smaller problem. Pastoralist and hunter-gatherer communities, including the Baka in Cameroon and the Kel Tamasheq in Mali documented in FAO's case studies, face particular exposure where customary grazing and mobility rights are not recognised in national land law, and where conservation area designation has historically proceeded without consent.

Asia and the Pacific

Global Witness documented 16 killings in Asia in 2024, 11 percent of the global total, again with likely undercounting, including cases in the Philippines and Indonesia. FAO's case studies from the region, including the Khasi, Bhotia and Anwal peoples in India and Melanesian communities in the Solomon Islands, document food systems built on shifting cultivation, forest product gathering and artisanal fishing that are increasingly constrained by plantation expansion, mining concessions and, in coastal and island communities, sea level rise and saltwater intrusion into traditional cropland.

Opportunities

1. Ratification and enforcement of the GRATK treaty: concluding the parallel WIPO negotiations on traditional knowledge and cultural expressions, and attaching real penalties to the existing disclosure requirement, would close the treaty's largest gap.

2. Direct, trackable finance: COP30 forest and climate finance commitments can be routed and monitored so that funds reach community-led organizations directly rather than intermediaries, addressing the shortfall documented in the COP26 pledge.

3. Tenure-first project design: treating legal recognition as a precondition for conservation and climate finance, rather than a downstream benefit of participation, would align incentives with the outcomes the evidence already supports.

4. Protection as infrastructure policy: framing defender protection as a food-security investment rather than a separate human-rights track makes the case harder to deprioritize in multilateral forums.

Key Messages

Treat legal tenure as a precondition for finance, protection and participation not as a downstream condition of project participation.

1. Direct new climate and forest finance, including COP30 commitments, towards programmes and jurisdictions that are translating customary tenure into legally enforceable rights, rather than treating consultation as a substitute for legal recognition.
2. Require project-level proof of tenure security, not just consultation, before conservation or carbon-finance initiatives proceed on Indigenous-held land.
3. Titling is slow and often contested, and communities cannot be left unprotected while it proceeds: interim safeguards, including moratoriums on encroachment and formal recognition of communities' rights and participation in decision-making should apply from the moment a claim is filed, not only once it is settled.

Close the enforcement gap in the 2024 WIPO treaty before it becomes a symbolic first rather than a working safeguard.

1. Attach defined penalties to the treaty's patent-disclosure requirement and set a ratification timeline for major economies.
2. Conclude the parallel WIPO negotiations on traditional knowledge beyond genetic resources and on traditional cultural expressions.
3. Disclosure alone cannot prevent biopiracy unless it is accompanied by enforceable benefit-sharing. Identifying the origin of traditional knowledge has limited value if the treaty does not also require equitable sharing of the benefits arising from its use.
4. Enforcement closes the leak, but it does not put the knowledge to use: fund Indigenous-led documentation and knowledge-exchange platforms built on free, prior and informed consent and community ownership of the resulting record, so agroecological practices already proven to work can inform agricultural research and climate-adaptation planning beyond the communities that hold them.

Route climate and conservation finance directly to community-led organizations, and track that it arrives.

1. Publish disbursement data against the COP26 Forest Tenure Pledge and any COP30 commitments, broken out by recipient type.
2. Fund community-led monitoring capacity in regions, particularly Africa where under-documentation itself obscures the scale of risk.
3. The objective is greater transparency and accountability, not the elimination of intermediaries. Where intermediaries provide legitimate technical or administrative support, funding mechanisms should ensure that a substantially greater share of resources reaches Indigenous-led organizations directly.

Treat the protection of land and environmental defenders as a food-security investment, not a separate human-rights track.

1. Support the legal and protective mechanisms called for by Global Witness and others, framed explicitly in recognition of the food-system stewardship these defenders protect.
2. Physical protection measures must be accompanied by stronger accountability. Ending impunity for attacks on land and environmental defenders, and reversing the criminalisation of Indigenous land defence, are as important as protecting individuals already under threat

Recognize Indigenous governing institutions as rights holders and partners in National and International decision-making.

1. Ensure monitoring and accountability mechanisms reflect Indigenous communities' own definitions of well-being alongside externally defined indicators.
2. Governments remain responsible for establishing the legal and financial frameworks outlined above, but Indigenous governing bodies should be recognised as equal partners in their design, implementation and oversight and not merely as beneficiaries.

Recognize Indigenous food systems as a resilience asset for global food security, not only a subject in need of protection.

1. Integrate Indigenous agroecological practices, crop diversity and land-management knowledge into National Adaptation Plans, nationally determined contributions and national food-security strategies, on terms Indigenous communities set and consent to.
2. Fund participatory research that documents which Indigenous practices measurably improve yield stability, soil health or shock resilience, so the case for wider application rests on evidence communities have generated on their own terms, not on borrowing without attribution or benefit-sharing.
3. This is additive to protection, not a substitute for it: a food system cannot be drawn on for lessons if the land and knowledge base producing it keeps disappearing.

Conclusion

Every figure in this brief points to the same conclusion: the Indigenous population is not only a stakeholder in global food security, it is part of its infrastructure. The carbon held in Indigenous-managed forests, the crop and soil knowledge refined over generations, the lower deforestation rates on secured land, none of it is a favor extended to the rest of the world in return for recognition. It is the current output of systems that have largely survived without it. A population that customarily stewards roughly half the world's land while holding secure legal title to barely a tenth of it is not a case for sympathy. It is a case for asking what these systems could deliver if the security their record has already earned were actually extended to them.

The evidence is no longer the missing piece. The institutions, legal frameworks and policy commitments required to secure Indigenous land rights, protect traditional knowledge and support Indigenous stewardship already exist. What remains absent is effective implementation: legally enforceable land tenure, intellectual property protections backed by meaningful accountability, and financing that reaches Indigenous-led organizations directly rather than being absorbed by intermediary structures. None of this is novel policy, it already exists on paper. It simply stops at implementation.

The question is whether the international community is prepared to implement, finance and enforce the commitments it has already made. Every year that implementation is delayed carries measurable costs: continued loss of forests and biodiversity, reduced climate resilience, weakened food systems, and the lives of those who continue to defend Indigenous territories at great personal risk. In 2024 alone, at least 146 land and environmental defenders were killed or disappeared; a reminder that the consequences of inaction are measured not only in hectares and tonnes of carbon, but also in human lives.

As the international community marks the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, the opportunity is not simply to reaffirm existing commitments, but to implement them. Securing Indigenous land rights, protecting traditional knowledge, and ensuring direct investment in Indigenous-led stewardship are not only matters of justice, they are essential to building resilient, sustainable and food-secure agri-food systems. The measure of progress will not be the number of declarations adopted, but the extent to which commitments are translated into lasting outcomes for Indigenous communities and the landscapes they have safeguarded for generations.

Disclaimer

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