

The central roles of

Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities

in achieving global commitments on biodiversity.

Technical policy brief for the HPLF on
Sustainable Development Goal 15

 Mixed landscape Khumbu valley Nepal, Courtesy Maurizio Farhan Ferrari Caption: Sherpha people caring for their mixed productive landscape in Khumbu Valley, Nepal

SDG 15, with its environmental dimensions, is a critical measure of overall progress against the 2030 Agenda, as well as a **key enabler of many other goals and targets**. Importantly, it is also central to the lives and well-being of many indigenous communities, pastoralists and others traditionally viewed as excluded, marginalized or at ‘risk of being left behind.’ It is also central to providing environmental support services critical to ensuring, amongst others, safe and sustainable water supplies and mitigating climate change. **Biological and cultural diversity together increase resilience to social, environmental and climate changes.**

A number of UN conventions and fora provide direct support for the achievement of SDG 15. Most of these processes, particularly the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), recognise that indigenous peoples and local communities (**IPLCs**) **play a vital role in biodiversity conservation and sustainable use**, including through their traditional knowledge, customary sustainable use and collective actions in the various ecosystems that they inhabit. Their engagement and effective participation is critically important for the achievement of SDG 15 and related global commitments. **A human rights-based approach to the implementation of the CBD and the SDGs creates a virtuous circle of multiple benefits.**

CBD and Aichi Biodiversity Target 18

- ✔ Traditional knowledge, innovations and practices and their customary use of biological resources are respected
- ✔ Protect and encourage customary use
- ✔ Respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities
- ✔ Approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices
- ✔ With the full and effective participation of indigenous and local communities

Human Rights

- ✔ Obligations to respect, protect and fulfill indigenous peoples human rights
- ✔ Self-determined economic, social and cultural development
- ✔ Lands, Territories and Resources
- ✔ Clean and healthy environment
- ✔ Cultures and identity, free from discrimination
- ✔ Self-governing institutions
- ✔ Free Prior and informed consent
- ✔ Full and effective participation in national life



📍 Diaguita indigenous communities of Tucuman, Argentina
By FPP

Also, more than 1/3rd of the SDG targets are linked to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.²

There is mounting empirical evidence, particularly from Central and South America, which confirms that secure legal title for indigenous peoples and customary landowners is often associated with intact forest cover and low or zero deforestation rates, even in the face of intense pressure at the forest frontier where land is being cleared for commercial farming. Scientific studies show that indigenous titled lands managed through community governance frameworks are often more effective in sustaining healthy and intact forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, and other ecosystems than conventional government-run protected areas.³ **Supporting IPLC's collective actions and securing their land and resource rights can be one of the most effective ways to secure Life on Land.**

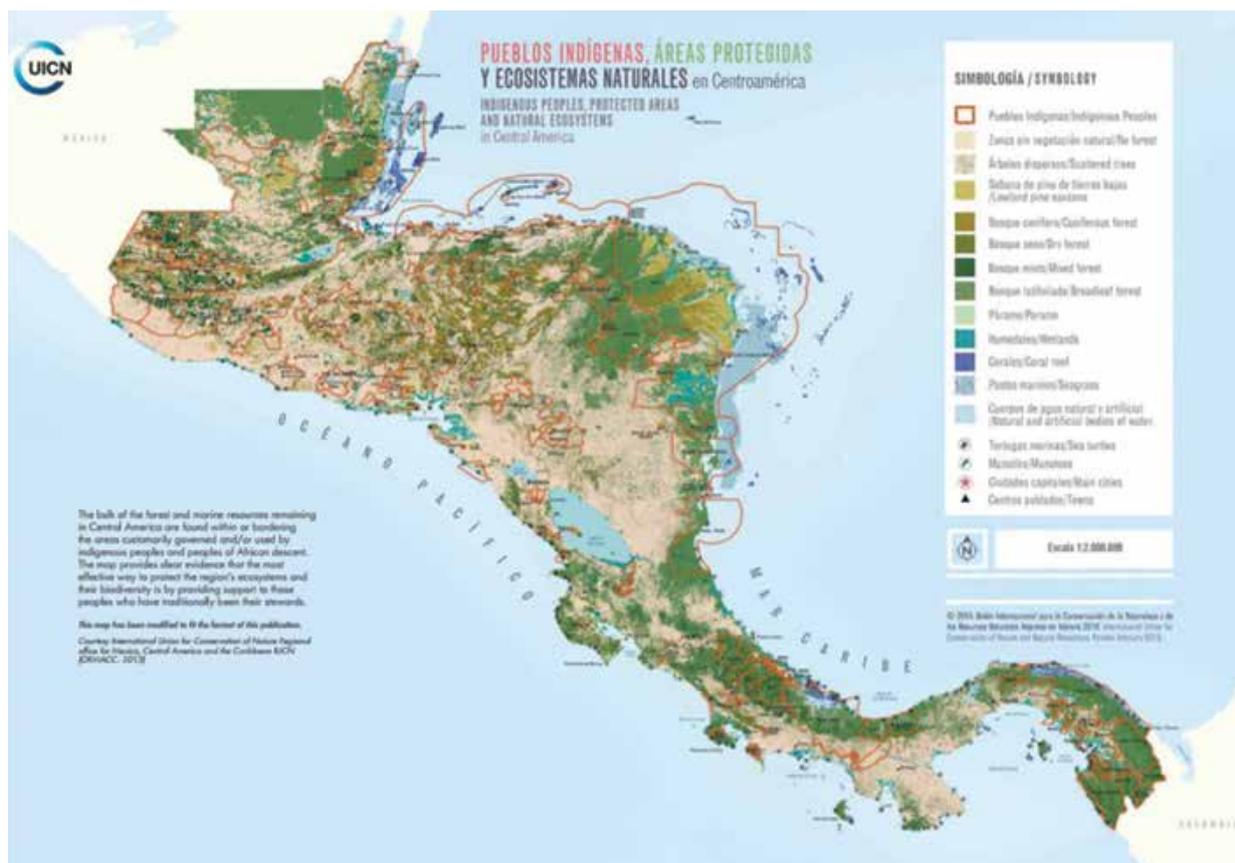
¹Including: the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF); the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and its Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization, and Aichi Biodiversity Targets; the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD); the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands; the UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES); the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS); the World Heritage Convention (WHC); and the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGR).

² Indigenous Peoples' Sustainable Development Matrix - Where are Indigenous Peoples' Rights in the Sustainable Development Goals? www.indigenousnavigator.org

³ Forest Peoples Programme (2018), Closing the Gap: Rights-based solutions for tackling deforestation. Moreton-in-Marsh, England, page 37. At <https://www.forestpeoples.org/en/node/50213> and <https://rightsanddeforestation.org/case-studies/>.

While there are countries that demonstrate good practices that can serve as examples ⁴, many forest peoples face a series of obstacles to securing collective tenure in line with their legitimate rights under international law and human rights treaties. Actions on tenure would help ensure land titling programmes are fair, transparent and properly aligned with state obligations on the recognition of indigenous and community lands. It would also allow rights holders to fully participate in the governance and implementation of such land titling initiatives.⁵

Moreover, indigenous and local knowledge systems, together with sciences, underpin the knowledge base for innovations and solutions to 21st century problems.⁶ Community-based mapping and monitoring complements wider data and reporting systems and promotes accountability for social, biodiversity, development and climate commitments.⁷ Also, there is scope to improve the set of indicators used to track progress towards SDG 15, as there are no specific targets and indicators addressing the central role of IPLCs in biodiversity conservation and sustainable use in the SDG 15 framework.



IUCN map

The bulk of the forest and marine resources remaining in Central America are found within or bordering the areas customarily governed and/or used by indigenous peoples and peoples of African descent. The map provides clear evidence that the most effective way to protect the region's ecosystems and their biodiversity is by providing support to those peoples who have traditionally been their stewards. This map has been modified to fit the format of this publication.



📍 Training on participatory community mapping and data collection using handheld mobile tools in Liberia. Courtesy John Nelson.

Moving towards 2030 requires enhanced collaboration across broad sectors of society, and IPLCs have an integral role in achieving SDG and other global targets related to biodiversity and well-being. The general recommendations below provide key suggestions for policy making; better and more effective and inclusive partnerships across all sectors, and more coordinated and integrated actions at all levels towards global biodiversity goals.

⁴For instance Bolivia, Ecuador, Aotearoa (New Zealand), Canada, Denmark, Norway, The Philippines, Indonesia and the Republic of Congo. In other countries, such as Colombia, Australia and USA, tracts of lands and/or territories have been set aside for indigenous collective control. The Permanent Forum has welcomed the progress made in those countries in that regard, while emphasizing that, even in those countries, there is still a wide gap between formal recognition and implementation of laws and policies that are supposed to ensure these rights. See: Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, seventeenth session, New York, 16-27 April 2018, draft report, Discussion on the theme “Indigenous Peoples’ Collective Rights to Lands, Territories and Resources” (Agenda Item 8), para 3 and 4.

⁵Closing the Gap, p. 37.

⁶Indigenous and Local Knowledge(s) and Science(s) for Sustainable Development. Policy Brief by the Scientific Advisory Board of the UN Secretary-General, 5 October 2016 (SC/2016/UNSA/ILK). UNESCO, 2016. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002461/246104E.pdf>

⁷Forest Peoples Programme, the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity and the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2016) Local Biodiversity Outlooks. Indigenous Peoples’ and Local Communities’ Contributions to the Implementation of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020. A complement to the fourth edition of the Global Biodiversity Outlook. Moreton-in-Marsh, England

- Target biological and cultural diversity together in an integrated approach to conservation and sustainable use.
- Strengthen participation and partnership mechanisms for IPLCs in global and national policy processes and in national and local implementation; include case studies of community actions in biodiversity reports and databases; enhance collaboration between traditional knowledge-holders and scientists in the development of innovative approaches to sustainable resource use and to ecosystem restoration.
- Recognise, award and support sustainable practices by IPLC practices and initiatives and their actions to stop illegal and harmful activities
- Give primacy to ensuring secure community tenure rights and strong systems of community governance in global, national, sub-national and company schemes to combat deforestation;
- Put in place safeguards for untitled or unrecognised community lands and forests in national policies, while land delimitation and demarcation processes remain pending;
- Strengthen frameworks for the protection of human rights and environmental defenders locally and globally;
- Ensure much stronger components and actions to tackle the industrial and underlying drivers of forest loss;
- Mitigate harmful impacts of biodiversity funding on IPLCs and their lands and territories, by applying social safeguards and free, prior and informed consent (FPIC).
- Increase institutional support and funding for community-based environmental monitoring, including monitoring related to deforestation, degradation, invasive alien species, and pressures on threatened species.

Some Land Facts

- At least 50% of the world's land area is held under customary or community-based regimes but legal recognition of ownership is limited to just one-fifth of these areas (10% of the world's land).
- One-fourth of these areas (12.5% of the world's land area) are rangelands managed by pastoralists.
- Up to 2.5 billion women and men depend on indigenous and community lands and community-based systems.
- This includes estimated 370 million Indigenous Peoples.
- At least 200 million of them are pastoralists.

“90% of Africa's rural land is undocumented [...] making it highly vulnerable to landgrabbing and expropriation”

(Source: World Bank report “Securing Africa's Land for Shared Prosperity” (2013).



 Livestock photo:
Migratory camp of the indigenous Qashqai Tribal
Confederacy in the Zagros Mountains in southern Iran. Courtesy Genesta

National Examples

Peru

Peruvian indigenous peoples control more than one-third of Peru's land area. However, the national Indigenous Federation of the Peruvian Amazon estimates that an additional 20 million hectares are eligible for formal recognition.

Indonesia

Approximately 0.2% of Indonesia's land is currently recognized as community-owned or controlled. By contrast, an estimated 40 million hectares are proposed for recognition by the Indonesian Constitutional Court in favour of communities' forest tenure rights.

Canada

In Canada, 7% of the country is owned by indigenous peoples and local communities, but much of the land is located in sparsely populated tundra and taiga ecosystems.

Law and Implementation Gap

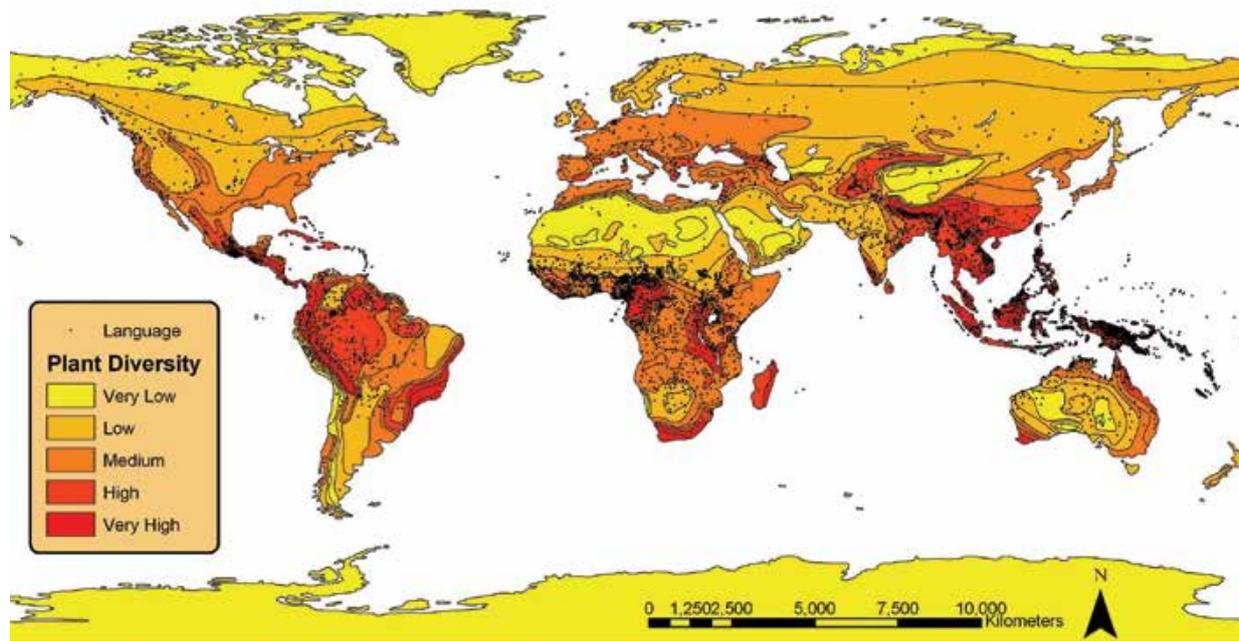
The difference between what is written in law and what happens in practice is enormous, even when land rights are formally recognized. Lack of enforcement (governments not upholding and protecting) legal rights is widespread. For example governments issuing competing claims over the same lands, or refusing to enforce communities' land rights against outsiders. In such a case, commercial concessions may be allocated on the same land, including 99-year concessions to companies without consultation or consent of IPLCs.

Source: Oxfam, International Land Coalition, Rights and Resources Initiative. 2016. Common Ground. Securing Land Rights and Safeguarding the Earth. Oxford: Oxfam. See also <http://www.landrightsnow.org/en/home/>

The relevance of SDG15 for IPLCs - and their contributions to Life on Land

The 12 targets under SDG 15 are extremely relevant for IPLCs as there is a holistic and symbiotic relationship between them and healthy ecosystems. Most IPLCs directly depend on the health of local ecosystems for their lives and livelihoods while, reciprocally, IPLCs are the best custodians and stewards of natural resources as demonstrated by the fact that most of the world's remaining biodiversity is located in their lands, territories and waters. The retention and renewal of traditional knowledge from one generation to the next is a key aspect of this process, as is the collective nature of actions by IPLCs. On the negative side, when ecosystems become damaged and degraded, the livelihoods and health of IPLCs are severely affected.⁸

Plant Diversity and Language Distribution



Source: Stepp, J.R., et al. 2004. Development of a GIS for Global Biocultural Diversity. *Policy Matters* 13: 267-271.

[Map Language and Plant Distribution](#)

Overlap between biodiverse habitats and areas of high cultural diversity: Plant diversity and language diversity serve as indicators to illustrate the interlinkages between biological and cultural diversity (Reproduced by permission of John Richard Stepp)

Indigenous peoples account for most of the world's cultural diversity, representing as many as 5,000 different indigenous cultures. They make up more than 370 million of the world's population – some 5 per cent - but they count among one-third of the world's 900 million extremely poor rural people: the world's diversity immiserated in poverty.⁹

⁸ Local Biodiversity Outlooks, p 24.

⁹ The State of the World's Indigenous Peoples, produced by the Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Produced by the United Nations Department of Public Information — DPI/2551/A — 09-64058 — January 2010. <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/documents/SOWIP/press%20package/sowip-press-package-en.pdf>

Large-scale agriculture and mining, deforestation, and oil and gas production continue to threaten both the biodiversity on IPLC lands and also the diverse cultures and sustainable practices of IPLCs themselves. Biodiversity loss and unsustainable use have led to severe hardship among IPLCs and threaten the very survival of those who meet their daily needs directly from the local environment. Deforestation and reduced access to forest resources have left many IPLCs without a secure source of food and livelihoods. Environmental pollution directly affects the health and wellbeing of many IPLCs, and together with the spread of Invasive Alien Species (IAS), also threatens the cultural and ecological integrity of their societies, lands and resources.¹⁰



Oil spills photo: Numerous oil spills have been documented and reported by indigenous Monitors, Peru. (photo by FECONACO)

Karen elders discussion rotational farming. Courtesy IMPECT.

A few selected specific issues under SDG15 and their relevance for IPLCs are explored below. Many more such issues are explored in emerging studies and publications, including the [Local Biodiversity Outlooks](#).

Forests: Sustainable forestry, deforestation, forest degradation and fragmentation and loss of other habitats

The 4th Global Biodiversity Outlook noted some progress in reducing the rate of loss of forests but insufficient to meet the global target for 2020. Habitats of all types, including forests, grasslands, wetlands and river systems, continue to be fragmented and degraded.¹¹

Despite important global policy gains and zero deforestation pledges, forest destruction is on-going or even increasing. For example, in 2015-2016, Indonesia lost 840,000 ha of old growth forest and its high rate of forest loss is connected with multiple and widespread land disputes across the country. In Peru, annual forest loss tripled between 2001 and 2015 and deforestation increased again by more than 5% in 2016 compared to the previous year. In Colombia, deforestation increased by 44% from 2015 to 2016. In African countries like Liberia and DRC deforestation is likewise on the increase as land is cleared for agribusiness, infrastructure and mining development.^{12, 13}

Many IPLCs across South and Southeast Asia depend directly on shifting cultivation for their livelihoods and food security – in highly sophisticated agro-forestry systems. This practice continues to be one of the most misunderstood and controversial forms of land use. In many Asian countries, there are policies on land use that consider all shifting cultivation to be destructive, casting it as a major driver of deforestation. These policies are damaging indigenous land use systems and are resulting in food insecurity and the loss of biodiversity and traditional knowledge.¹⁴

Traditional knowledge can provide many contributions to ecological restoration, including through the construction of reference ecosystems (particularly when historical information is not available); input into species and site selection for restoration activities; knowledge of historical land management practices; input into management of invasive species, and post-restoration monitoring.¹⁵



Children in integrated landscape, Besao, Philippines. Credit Maurizio Farhan Ferrari

Environment and Human Rights Defenders

Activism at local, national and international levels to stop habitat loss and degradation caused by large-scale commodity production has been increasing in many parts of the world, bringing positive results but also severe risks for IPLCs.

Being at the frontlines of defending local ecosystems and ways of life is increasingly exposing IPLCs to human rights violations. In 2016, more than 1,000 people in 25 countries were murdered, harassed, imprisoned or intimidated while fighting for their communities' rights. Of 281 recorded deaths, half were defending their land and homes. According to Global Witness' Defenders of the Earth report, nearly 40% of the defenders of human rights who died were indigenous peoples defending their rights to their land and the environment.¹⁶

¹⁰ Local Biodiversity Outlooks, page 18.

¹¹ CBD. Global Biodiversity Outlook 4. A mid-term assessment of progress towards the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 (2014), chapter 7. <<http://apps.unep.org/publications/pmtdocuments/GBO-4-en.pdf>>

¹² Closing the Gap, page 12.

¹³ Local Biodiversity Outlooks, chapters 5 and 7.

¹⁴ Local Biodiversity Outlooks, chapter 7.

¹⁵ Local Biodiversity Outlooks, chapter 15.

¹⁶ Closing the Gap, 16-17.



Standing Rock photo: Protesters against Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) at Sacred Stone Camp on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota. Credits: Sacred Stone Camp Facebook Page

Financial resources

IPLCs, through their collective actions, are already making meaningful contributions to global targets. With an increase in financial resources and support, these contributions could be even greater. A strong argument for further and continued investment in local initiatives is that the outcomes often serve multiple policy objectives, including community development, environmental recovery and cultural wellbeing, whilst being highly cost-effective and offering good value for money. A recent study by the World Resources Institute (WRI) concluded that securing indigenous forestland tenure is a low-cost, high-benefit investment and has significant potential for cost-effective carbon mitigation.¹⁷

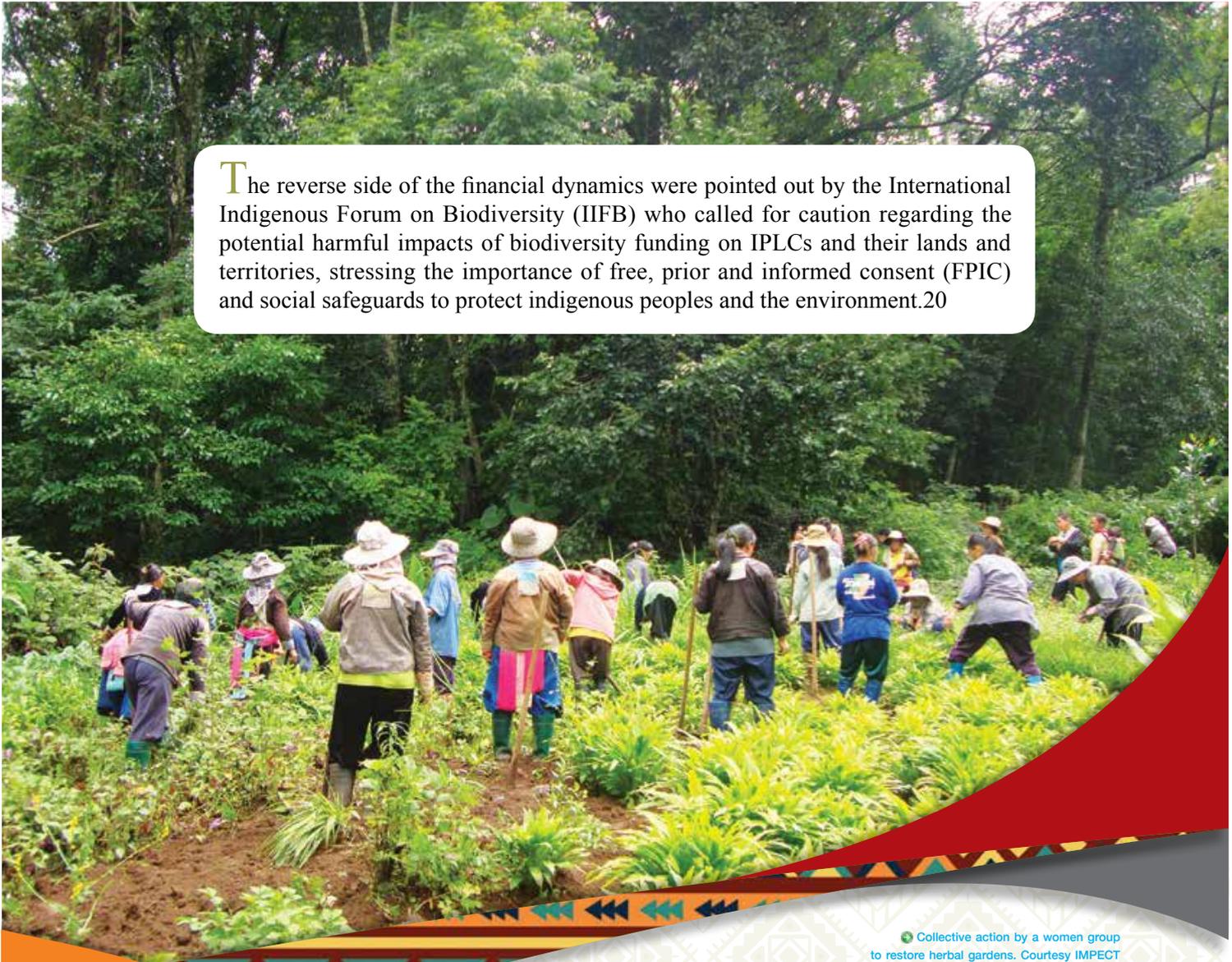
CIFOR reports that community forestry is highly effective and that “the worlds’ best-kept forest and ecosystems tend to be in indigenous peoples’ territories.” Analysis of 73 case studies in the tropics found that annual deforestation rates are significantly lower in community-managed forests than in strict protected forests. The findings also underscore that greater rule-making autonomy at the local level is associated with better forest management and livelihood benefits¹⁸. A study on forest loss by the World Bank Independent Evaluation Group comes to similar conclusions about the effectiveness of community-managed forests, in particular forest areas managed and controlled by indigenous peoples.¹⁹

¹⁷ WRI. Why invest in Indigenous Lands? (Infographic, 2016). at <<http://www.wri.org/resources/data-visualizations/why-invest-indigenous-lands>>. See also Veit, P. & Ding, H. Protecting Indigenous Land Rights Makes Good Economic Sense. (2016). at <http://www.wri.org/blog/2016/10/protecting-indigenous-land-rights-makes-good-economic-sense>; and Ding, H. et al. Climate Benefits, Tenure Costs. The Economic Case for Securing Indigenous Land Rights in the Amazon. at http://www.wri.org/sites/default/files/Climate_Benefits_Tenure_Costs.pdf

¹⁸ Porter-Bolland, L. et al. Community managed forests and forest protected areas: An assessment of their conservation effectiveness across the tropics. *For. Ecol. Manage.* 268, 6–17 (2011).

¹⁹ Nelson, A. & Chomitz, K. M. Effectiveness of strict vs. multiple use protected areas in reducing tropical forest fires: A global analysis using matching methods. *PLoS One* 6, (2011).

The reverse side of the financial dynamics were pointed out by the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (IIFB) who called for caution regarding the potential harmful impacts of biodiversity funding on IPLCs and their lands and territories, stressing the importance of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) and social safeguards to protect indigenous peoples and the environment.²⁰



Collective action by a women group to restore herbal gardens. Courtesy IMPECT

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²⁰ RMIB-LAC. Statement on behalf of the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (IIFB) at WGRI 5-II. Implementation of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020. (2015). at <<http://reddemujeresindgenas.blogspot.co.uk/2014/06/international-indigenous-forum-on.html>>