Indigenous Rights at COP30 in Brazil

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Indigenous Rights at COP30 in Brazil: Assessing Climate Change Impacts on Indigenous Peoples and Identifying Pathways to Strengthen Rights

The United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, has stated that the 'climate crisis is the biggest threat to our survival as a species, and it is already threatening human rights around the world', affirming that the climate crisis is a human rights crisis. Whilst its impacts are widespread, Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected. Their livelihoods, cultural survival, and territorial integrity are highly vulnerable to environmental disruption, placing them in a distinct position within human rights discourse (Mardikian & Galani, 2023).

For this report, Indigenous peoples are understood as communities with distinct cultural and political characteristics, with autonomous governance structures, a shared history of domination by non-Indigenous groups, and a strong connection to their lands and resources. This aligns with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which recognises specific protections, particularly concerning land and self-determination. It is that Indigenous groups often inhabit ecologically sensitive regions, making them among the first to experience rising sea levels, extreme weather, biodiversity loss, and drought. They are also disproportionately harmed by the drivers of climate change, including deforestation and resource exploitation, processes frequently occurring on Indigenous land without consent.

This is especially evident in Brazil, where many Indigenous communities live in the Amazon rainforest, an area experiencing severe deforestation and environmental degradation. With COP30 hosted in Brazil, expectations were high that the link between human rights and climate change would be prioritised, particularly given Brazil's recent commitments to protect the Amazon and strengthen indigenous land governance (Téllez, 2025). Whilst COP30 acknowledged the role of Indigenous peoples in climate mitigation, its outcomes fell short of delivering the urgent and comprehensive protections required. This brief evaluates the extent to which COP30 addressed

the rights and participation of Indigenous peoples in Brazil, what was expected from the summit, and where significant gaps remain.

Indigenous rights under threat

Climate change threatens the fundamental human rights of Indigenous communities. From livelihoods and food security to land rights, health, and culture, these communities are often directly dependent on ecosystems that are under threat. This is also the case in Brazil, where the climate summit is taking place. The two most at-risk human rights will be highlighted.

Amazonian Indigenous Lands (ILs) in the Brazilian Amazon are a key example of a vulnerable human-environment system (Rorato et al., 2021). They cover over 1.16 million km², about 22% of the Amazon, and are home to approximately 355,000 Indigenous people (Kesler & Walker, 2015). ILs are essential for the preservation of tropical forests but face multiple environmental threats, including deforestation, forest degradation, fires, road construction, and economic activities such as logging and agriculture (Rorato et al., 2021). Data shows that the directly affected right is the right to territory and housing. Between 2019 and 2021, deforestation within Indigenous Territories (ITs) increased by 195%, pushing further into the interior, roughly 30% beyond the borders (Silva Junior et al., 2023). This represents physical destruction of the territory with all its consequences. UNDRIP emphasises this right, in the form of self-determination, as a core principle in the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous communities worldwide are hit hardest by climate change because they depend on local ecosystems and also carry the effects of historical trauma. In the United States, for example, American Indians and Alaska Natives lost most of their original land and were forced to move long distances. This relocation increased their exposure to extreme heat, less rainfall, and fewer economic opportunities, directly affecting their health and well-being (Farrell et al., 2021). Climate stress affects health in many ways. Extreme drought, heatwaves, and air pollution threaten water, food, and key crops and increase mental health problems.

The ability of Indigenous peoples to keep their culture and traditional way of life is closely tied to the health of the land. Exploitation and conversion of ecosystems and water sources threaten traditional foods and food systems (Science Panel for the Amazon, 2025). Food security for Indigenous peoples in Brazil is under growing pressure. Brazil is a top exporter of maize, soy, coffee, fruit, and beef. These products support a fast-growing agricultural sector. Whilst this helps Brazil in global markets, it also increases land use and pressure on ecosystems important for Indigenous communities, who rely on forests for food, hunting, and fishing (Silva Junior et al., 2023).

Land destruction is not the only threat. Rising temperatures are also a major problem. Temperatures are expected to rise by 1-4°C, with rainfall dropping by 30% (Silva Junior et al., 2023). This causes drought and makes

farming less predictable. Other problems that reduce ecosystem productivity include disease and pollution (Science Panel for the Amazon, 2025). Because traditional food systems and cultural practices depend on healthy land, indigenous health remains very vulnerable to climate change (Science Panel for the Amazon, 2025).

The Expectations of Indigenous People

Indigenous peoples have long been advocating for greater participation. Together with advocacy groups, they push for the inclusion of indigenous communities in climate policy. In the lead-up to the summit in Brazil, indigenous communities made their voices heard, and even more strongly than before. Never before had so many people from indigenous communities attended a summit (Agência Brasil, 2025). The need for more direct democracy was high for them. As one of their leaders said, "We don't just want to listen. We want to be part of COP30." They also emphasised that they are not only victims but part of the solution: "Indigenous peoples and local communities are not only among those most affected by climate change, but we are also part of the solution" (ACV News, 2025).

They truly wanted to be part of the Blue Zone (the negotiation area), and they were included (although only the leaders were allowed inside) (Infoamazonia, 2025; Euronews, 2025). World leaders regularly indicated that they were taking indigenous voices seriously, and indigenous peoples were mentioned notably often (ACV News, 2025; Euronews, 2025). Media attention amplified the large turnout, raising hopes for genuine participation.

Indigenous communities entered the summit with confidence, proud to take part and glad that they could finally present their interests and concerns. They sought more access to policy processes, funding for climate resilience, and better legal protection (ACV News, 2025).

However, critics warned that a large presence does not necessarily mean that Indigenous voices are truly heard or that they have real influence. It could also be symbolic, they said (AP News, 2025).

What Were the Outcomes?

Due to the proximity of the Amazon, Indigenous representation was unusually strong at COP30, which is an important shift given the long-standing exclusion of Indigenous peoples from previous years. For the first time, their participation was truly central to the conference's messaging. Indigenous leaders stressed that climate justice is inseparable from human rights protection and that safeguarding their territories is essential not only for their cultural survival but also for the planet's ecological stability (UNFC, 2025).

Brazil's Minister for Indigenous Peoples, Sônia Guajajara, highlighted this in her address, calling for Indigenous land rights to be integrated directly into climate policy as a way of addressing climate change causes

(Ministry of Indigenous Peoples, 2025). President Lula da Silva similarly highlighted the link between indigenous land and preservation of nature by taking steps at COP30 to advance the demarcation of ten Indigenous territories, which the Indigenous Climate Change Committee (CIMC) estimates could prevent up to 20 per cent of future deforestation (Secretariat for Social Communication of the Presidency, 2025). Whilst this represents a welcome step, its impact remains uncertain without stronger enforcement against illegal land grabbing and resource extraction.

This gap between policy and practice is most visible in the ongoing expansion of illegal gold mining across the Amazon. Greenpeace reports that 4,219 hectares of rainforest have been destroyed by miners in just four Indigenous territories (Sararé, Yanomami, Munduruku and Kayapó) in the last two years – an increase of up to 93 per cent in some areas (Greenpeace, 2025). The consequences for Indigenous communities are devastating. Mercury contamination is poisoning the earth, destroying food sources, and causing irreversible health damage. Entire regions risk becoming uninhabitable, forcing communities to abandon their homes, economies, and cultural traditions (de Thije & Salman, 2018). These harms represent clear violations of the rights to land, health, and culture recognised under UNDRIP. Yet COP30 delivered no concrete commitments to curb illegal mining or reduce the international demand for the minerals that fuel it. Without significant meaningful action, symbolic recognition of Indigenous rights does little to address these long-term structural threats.

One of the more interesting, though still tentative, initiatives to emerge from COP30 was the proposal for the Tropical Forests Forever Facility (TFFF). The scheme aims to redirect funding from governments and financial institutions toward compensating countries for forest conservation, with at least 20 per cent of payments earmarked for Indigenous peoples and local communities. In principle, this could strengthen community-led stewardship and provide stable financial support for protecting Indigenous lands. However, only USD 5.5 billion of the targeted USD 124 billion has been pledged so far, leaving its implementation uncertain and its potential largely aspirational (SECOM, 2025).

Overall, COP30 marked a noticeable improvement in the visibility of Indigenous voices and the acknowledgement of their rights. Yet the measures adopted remain insufficient. Without stronger enforcement, long-term funding, and concrete action on resource extraction, Indigenous rights in the Amazon remain vulnerable.

Recommendations

Climate policy still too often excludes the knowledge, values, and future visions of Indigenous peoples. This is the result of climate coloniality, a system in which mainly Western and Northern perspectives decide how climate problems are defined and which solutions are seen as legitimate

(Sultana, 2022). As a response to this structural exclusion, Indigenous communities in the Amazon are increasingly developing their own climate initiatives (Osborne, 2024), through which they highlight both their housing rights and their right to self-determination. In this brief, we focus on what world leaders and international climate institutions can do to take Indigenous peoples seriously. This requires a fundamental shift in power and representation within global climate policy. The following measures are crucial.

Firstly, there is much to learn from Indigenous ways of caring for land and natural resources, which are focused on conservation and avoiding depletion (Redvers, 2023; Townsend, 2020; Vogel, 2022). This requires recognition of Indigenous peoples and an understanding that their knowledge is not simply an addition but a necessary condition for effective climate policy. Such recognition must be broad and institutionally embedded (Redvers, 2023).

Secondly, full and rights-based participation of Indigenous peoples is essential (Vogel, 2022). This includes guaranteed representation and direct influence on decision-making agendas. Only in this way can direct forms of rights violations, such as deforestation and mining, be more effectively prevented. In addition, equal collaboration is needed to counter Western dominance in knowledge production (Krishna, 2011). Research centres, governments, and international institutions such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) must fully acknowledge Indigenous knowledge and actively involve Indigenous communities in the research that underpins policy decisions. This provides not only direct influence in negotiations but also indirect influence through the scientific knowledge that guides policy choices.

Thirdly, world leaders must ensure a fairer distribution of climate finance (Osborne, 2024). To reduce both the direct and indirect impacts of climate change, it is necessary that Indigenous communities receive compensation. Despite their key role in forest protection, they currently receive less than 1% of international climate finance (Hatcher, 2021). Logical first steps include (1) higher carbon prices that reflect the true social and ecological costs and (2) direct funding for indigenous communities to support their own climate initiatives (Osborne, 2024).

Direct and indirect participation, together with fair compensation, will enable Indigenous peoples to take on a leading role in global climate action. This can break the dominant vision within climate policy and ensure that indigenous peoples have a strong voice at future climate summits.

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