

Indigenous groups win greater climate recognition at Bonn summit

World governments have acknowledged for the first time that 'first peoples' can play a leadership role in protecting forests and limiting global warming



The world's 370 million indigenous people live in territories estimated to contain 20% of the world's tropical forest carbon. Photograph: Kiara Worth/ENB/IISD

Jonathan Watts
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Indigenous groups claimed a victory at the UN climate talks in Bonn on Wednesday as governments acknowledged for the first time that they can play a leadership role in protecting forests and keeping global temperatures at a safe level.

Long marginalised and often criminalised in their home countries, the “first peoples” – as they often refer to themselves – also achieved breakthroughs in terms of official international recognition of their rights, autonomy and participation in negotiations.

This represents considerable progress for the world's 370 million indigenous peoples, whose territories are estimated to contain 20% of the world's tropical forest carbon and often have to defend it against encroachments by loggers and farmers.

“This is a victory for indigenous peoples who have always been fighting for recognition of our rights as a way to protect forests and tackle climate change. This is a big

advance,” said Juan Carlos Jintiach of Coica, a group representing indigenous communities in the Amazon.

For much of the past 20 years, indigenous groups have been a disgruntled, fractious presence on the fringes of climate talks who were primarily portrayed as victims, but this has gradually changed along with a growing body of research showing that respect for the territorial rights of communal land is one of the most cost-effective ways of sequestering carbon.

The 2015 Paris accord recognised the contribution of indigenous knowledge in dealing with climate change, but the document approved in Bonn this week goes further by acknowledging that countries “should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities.”

It also proposes greater participation of indigenous communities in “leadership roles” and mentions this will have budget implications, opening the possibility that they could be covered by the Green Climate Fund.

“This shows that the international community increasingly recognises the way indigenous peoples and local communities manage their lands and territories can be an important climate change solution, because they help to protect forests and other natural resources. Now for the first time the UNFCCC [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change] is establishing concrete mechanisms, with funding to support those efforts,” said Penny Davies of the Ford Foundation.

In a sign of the change in status, the French president, Emmanuel Macron, was scheduled to meet indigenous representatives in Bonn on Wednesday. China, which is keen to appear as a climate leader, has also softened its position on indigenous rights, long shaped by Beijing’s concern about separatist movements in Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia.

Governments should now be obliged to talk to indigenous communities when drawing up national climate targets, though their influence remains to be seen.

Former Brazilian environment minister Izabella Teixeira welcomed the move and hoped it would have positive domestic as well as international implications.

“Indigenous rights are really important to move towards a fair, low-carbon planet,” she said. “I hope this can also help us avoid backsliding on this agenda in Brazil.”

Clare Shakya of the International Institute for Environment and Development said new mechanisms for indigenous participation should not be used to channel their voices away from the main debate.

“This is an important step forward but only if it really does mean that indigenous and local communities are listened to and their knowledge recognised,” she said.

“This decision is an opportunity to make sure that they drive the solutions to tackling climate change. Throughout this climate meeting numerous representatives from

developing countries have said how top-down responses to addressing climate change actually marginalises them. Today's decision is a chance to change that."