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New research suggests governments failing to recognize role of Indigenous and local communities in addressing biodiversity crisis and protecting ecosystems vital for battling future pandemics

Study of 42 countries reveals tropical forest governments are missing investment opportunities to scale up community land rights in response to growing scientific consensus, as momentum grows to conserve biodiversity on inhabited territories

WASHINGTON, DC—(15 September) A new study of 42 countries, released today by the Rights and Resources Initiative, suggests that many governments, conservation groups and investors have ignored a growing body of peer-reviewed [evidence](#) suggesting that recognizing the land rights of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendants must be at the core of [plans](#) now being considered for stopping biodiversity loss and rampant deforestation in tropical forest countries.

Indigenous, Afro-descendant and other local communities manage and protect at least 50 percent of the area the researchers studied, covering the most biodiverse regions of the world and the area most likely to be targeted by global conservation [initiatives](#). According to the new findings, governments have recognized rights to only half of the lands claimed by communities, at a time of growing awareness of a [clear link](#) between deforestation and biodiversity loss and the release of potentially dangerous pathogens.

“Despite compelling evidence that Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendants protect most of the world’s remaining biodiversity, they are under siege from all sides,” said RRI’s Andy White, co-author of the two technical papers released today. “Our work suggests the answer is to invest in the countries and communities that are ready to scale up land rights. Failure to do so puts at risk the health of the planet and all of its people.”

Research published in [Science](#), [Nature](#) and the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#) support findings cited last year by the UN’s climate and biodiversity panels recognizing the important role of Indigenous and local communities in conservation.

“The scientists are saying what we know already,” said José Gregorio Díaz Mirabal, elected head of [COICA](#) (Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica), the umbrella organization for the nine indigenous organizations of the Amazon Basin.

“The UN, donors, investors and governments are calling for a transformation in the relationship between man and nature,” added Díaz Mirabal, a member of the Wakuenai Kurripaco people of Venezuela. “We are ready to show the way, but we cannot do so until our rights have been recognized and we have the technical and financial support we need for scaling up our own projects. Too much is at stake, not just for us, but for all humanity.”

A second RRI paper released today, based on an analysis of 29 countries, identifies 10 countries that the authors say are ready for significant investments aimed at reforming tenure nationwide. In North and South America, the authors identified Colombia, Guyana,

Mexico and Peru; in Africa, they flagged Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Liberia, In Asia, they cited India, Indonesia and Nepal.

“Rather than pointing only at the problem,” White said, “we are proposing an [affordable](#) approach to investing that represents a paradigm shift in how conservation has been carried out in the past, and sometimes in the present. We provide a clear framework for international investments in rights-based conservation, which should begin with investing in scaling up rights in countries that are ready and in preparing the others.”

In commenting on the relevance of RRI’s research to the global conservation movement, Kimaren Ole Riamit, an indigenous Maasai and Executive Director of the Indigenous Livelihoods Enhancement Partner (ILEPA), notes there is a reason the areas of highest biodiversity in the world overlap with the territories of Indigenous Peoples.

“Indigenous Peoples understand the interdependent nature of ecosystems,” Riamit said. “The modern world’s approach to nature represents an artificial fragmentation of nature and it does not work if we are to sustain nature and if humanity is to survive. To save biodiversity will require partnerships with us and often led by us. Right now, the power imbalance is significant and that will have to be addressed as a priority as we negotiate how much of the planet to conserve.”

During the briefing, White said RRI is studying how many people will be affected by the expansion of conservation areas aimed at protecting 30 percent of the planet. The number will be important for informing discussions on financing the scaling up of land rights as an affordable alternative to the cost of compensating people who might otherwise be displaced or otherwise affected by conservation efforts carried out at a significant scale.

Indigenous Peoples, local communities and Afro-descendants, and some civil society groups argue that the proposal to protect 30 percent of the land and ocean by 2030 is not ambitious enough. RRI’s findings suggest it is possible to go much further, White said.

“It is completely possible and necessary to protect 50 percent of the planet by 2030, but to do so affordably and effectively, we must scale up land rights on territories that have yet to be recognized,” White said. “If donors and private philanthropists don’t invest now to save the remaining forests, as well as the lives and cultures of Indigenous Peoples, local communities and Afro-descendants, they’re revealing that they are stuck in the systemic racism of the past”.

RRI’s research also reveals that conservation efforts built on expanding the land rights of Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendant and other local communities would strengthen local food security, ensure more resilient supply chains, and reduce the negative impacts of conservation initiatives on local livelihoods and incomes.

The draft goal of expanding protected areas to 30% of the planet was analyzed by more than 100 economists and scientists in a report released in June. They found that such an initiative would have very little impact on the global economy and may even lead to an economic gain. However, they also noted that under some approaches to conservation, indigenous peoples and local communities could suffer disproportionate negative impacts.

“However,” the authors [observed](#), “if governance arrangements permit and respect customary uses of biodiversity by such groups – as is recommended in the Global Biodiversity Framework – then such non-market opportunity costs are largely minimized. Indeed, under rights-based

governance approaches, the presence of a conservation area... can be a benefit rather than a cost, for example by strengthening (Indigenous Peoples and local communities') land-use rights."

Under the different scenarios considered by the report, the area recognized as representing the stewardship of Indigenous Peoples and local communities would expand between 63% and 98%, depending on the scenario, said Anthony Waldron, the lead author of the report and an expert on conservation finance, global species loss and sustainable agriculture. "Any negotiation that involves territories claimed by local communities," he added, "will need to respond to what they want, and will need to be based on a common understanding of the goals of conservation, free, prior and informed consent of local communities, and a shared understanding of how achievements will be measured."

In opening the virtual press briefing today, Raina Thiele, representing the Campaign for Nature, said RRI's findings should influence the design of any national or global initiative to conserve biodiversity.

"We can only achieve the goal of protecting at least 30% of land and oceans by 2030 with the leadership of Indigenous Peoples and of other local communities, including Afro-descendants, with full respect for their rights," Thiele said. "As protectors of 80 percent of the planet's remaining biodiversity, local communities must be central to any solution for protecting biodiversity. The evidence shows that to succeed, we will need to scale up community land rights, but we will also need the wisdom and guidance of Indigenous Peoples. If they are to continue to protect our biodiverse world, they must not be displaced, or otherwise have their rights violated, in the name of conservation."

In addition to identifying the 10 countries that are ready for large tenure reform investments at the national level, the RRI reported today that 14 countries are ready for medium-scale investments to support rights recognition, recommending they be led by local rights-holder organizations or civil society partners. Five additional countries require additional support for building a policy and legal structure required in order to attract more substantive investments.

"We have defined a framework that can be used to quickly evaluate the readiness for tenure reforms in additional countries," White said. "And our goal in 2021 is to expand our work to cover all priority conservation countries in 2021."

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COICA (Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica) was founded in the Peruvian capital Lima in 1984 and is the umbrella organization for the indigenous organizations of the Amazon Basin, representing all nine countries and the leaders of the region's Indigenous Peoples in advocating for their rights and supporting their strategic goals for recognition of their land rights and for the right to free, prior and informed consent regarding any initiative that would impact their territories and their way of life.

Indigenous Livelihoods Enhancement Partners (ILEPA) is a non-for-profit community-based non-governmental organization for human rights, community health and development registered in Kenya, with National NGO Coordination Board. The organization is serving amongst the Indigenous Peoples in Kenya with a focus on the Maasai pastoral community in Narok County, southern Kenya. The history of the organization is embedded in the land rights struggle of Maji

moto Group Ranch (GR) in Narok South, Southern Kenya. In the course of the struggle, ILEPA's founders, who were all members of Maji moto GR, came to represent the face of the struggle over land rights.

The [Rights and Resources Initiative](#) is a global Coalition of more than 150 organizations dedicated to advancing the forestland and resource rights of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, Afro-descendants, and women within these groups. Members capitalize on each other's strengths, expertise, and geographic reach to achieve solutions more effectively and efficiently. RRI leverages the power of its global Coalition to amplify the voices of local peoples and proactively engage governments, multilateral institutions, and private sector actors to adopt institutional and market reforms that support the realization of rights. By advancing a strategic understanding of the global threats and opportunities resulting from insecure land and resource rights, RRI develops and promotes rights-based approaches to business and development and catalyzes effective solutions to scale rural tenure reform and enhance sustainable resource governance. RRI is coordinated by the Rights and Resources Group, a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC.

The [Campaign for Nature](#) works with scientists, Indigenous Peoples, and a growing coalition of over 100 conservation organizations around the world to protect at least 30% of the planet by 2030 and to support an ambitious global Deal for Nature to be agreed upon at the 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity to be held in 2021. Only by dramatically increasing the capacity of communities, Indigenous peoples, and nations to conserve lands, waters, and wildlife can we hope to safeguard the natural world upon which we all depend.