

Justice at Last: Realising Environmental Rights for Indigenous Peoples in Africa and the World

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Abstract

This paper critically examines how the environmental rights of indigenous peoples in Africa and the world can be realised for sustainability. The paper argues that indigenous peoples play a critical role in environmental conservation towards Sustainable Development. It discusses ways through which indigenous peoples in Africa and the world are contributing towards achieving the Sustainable Development agenda. Despite their crucial role in environmental conservation and Sustainable Development, the paper argues that the environmental rights of indigenous peoples in Africa and the world are being violated. The paper posits that failure to foster environmental rights for indigenous peoples undermines environmental sustainability and the Sustainable Development agenda. Consequently, the paper discusses approaches through which the environmental rights of indigenous peoples in Africa and the world can be realised towards justice and Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

Indigenous peoples, communities and nations are those who having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them¹. It has been pointed out that indigenous peoples form non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity in accordance with

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¹ United Nations., 'Defining Indigenous Peoples' Available at https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/workshop_data_background.doc (Accessed on 09/06/2025)

their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems². Indigenous peoples can therefore be described as descendants of those who inhabited a country or a geographical region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived³. The new arrivals later became dominant through conquest, occupation and settlement among other means⁴. Indigenous Peoples have been identified as culturally distinct societies and communities from other sectors of the society⁵.

The United Nations sets out the criteria for identifying indigenous peoples. This is based on: self-identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member⁶; historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies⁷; strong links to their lands, territories and natural resources⁸; distinct social, economic and political systems⁹; separate language, culture and beliefs¹⁰; and forming part of non-dominant groups of society¹¹. In addition, the *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention*¹² points out that self-identification is a fundamental criterion for determining and classifying indigenous peoples and groups¹³.

Indigenous peoples are located all over the world. It is estimated that there are over 476 million indigenous people living in 90 countries across the world, accounting for

² Ibid

³ United Nations., 'Who are Indigenous Peoples?' Available at https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf#:~:text=Spread%20across%20the%20world%20from%20the%20Arctic,of%20different%20cultures%20or%20ethnic%20origins%20arrived.&text=Indigenous%20peoples%20are%20the%20holders%20of%20unique,for%20the%20sustainable%20management%20of%20natural%20resources. (Accessed on 09/06/2025)

⁴ Ibid

⁵ World Bank Group., 'Indigenous Peoples' Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/indigenouspeoples> (Accessed on 09/06/2025)

⁶ United Nations., 'Who are Indigenous Peoples?' Op Cit

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² International Labour Organization (ILO), C169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989, No.169, 27 June 1989

¹³ Ibid, article 1 (2)

approximately 6.2 per cent of the global population¹⁴. Further, it is estimated that there are more than 5,000 distinct indigenous groups globally¹⁵. Among the well-known indigenous groups include the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia, the Maori of New Zealand, the Maya in Mexico and Central America, the Lakota in the United States of America, and the Saami of Northern Europe¹⁶. Further, indigenous peoples are spread all over Africa including nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists and hunter-gatherers¹⁷.

It has been argued that indigenous peoples in Africa and the world are custodians of invaluable knowledge and practices that are crucial in conserving and sustainably managing the environment and natural resources¹⁸. The knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples are key in tackling environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation¹⁹. However, the environmental rights of indigenous peoples are often violated including through being dispossessed from their land, territories and natural resources²⁰. Realising the environmental rights of indigenous peoples in Africa and the world is thus crucial in enhancing their role as custodians of the environment towards Sustainable Development.

This paper critically examines how the environmental rights of indigenous peoples in Africa and the world can be realised for sustainability. The paper argues that indigenous

¹⁴ United Nations., 'Indigenous Peoples' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/fight-racism/vulnerable-groups/indigenous-peoples#:~:text=There%20are%20over%20476%20million,more%20than%205%2C000%20distinct%20groups>. (Accessed on 09/06/2025)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ United Nations., 'Who are Indigenous Peoples?' Op Cit

¹⁷ United Nations., 'Indigenous Peoples in the African region' Available at https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/2013/Media/Fact%20Sheet_Africa_%20UNPFII-12.pdf (Accessed on 09/06/2025)

¹⁸ International Fund for Agricultural Development., 'Indigenous Peoples' Available at <https://www.ifad.org/en/indigenous-peoples#:~:text=Indigenous%20Peoples%20are%20the%20custodians,investments%20based%20on%20their%20perspectives>. (Accessed on 09/06/2025)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

peoples play a critical role in environmental conservation towards Sustainable Development. It discusses ways through which indigenous peoples in Africa and the world are contributing towards achieving the Sustainable Development agenda. Despite their crucial role in environmental conservation and Sustainable Development, the paper argues that the environmental rights of indigenous peoples in Africa and the world are being violated. The paper posits that failure to foster environmental rights for indigenous peoples undermines environmental sustainability and the Sustainable Development agenda. Consequently, the paper discusses approaches through which the environmental rights of indigenous peoples in Africa and the world can be realised towards justice and Sustainable Development.

2.0 Indigenous Peoples and the Environment: Prospects and Challenges

Indigenous peoples in Africa and the world play a vital role in protecting the planet and its natural resources. It is estimated that at least a quarter of the world's land area is owned, managed, used or occupied by indigenous peoples²¹. It has been pointed out that the lands and territories occupied and managed by indigenous peoples are in a better environmental condition when compared to the rest of the world²². Indigenous peoples all over the world are custodians of invaluable knowledge and practices that have enabled them to live in harmony with nature for many centuries²³. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), indigenous peoples are essential in designing and implementing solutions for our ecosystems²⁴. UNEP points out that traditional knowledge and heritage of indigenous peoples can contribute to environmental assessments and sustainable ecosystem management²⁵.

²¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/indigenous-peoples-and-nature-they-protect> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

²² World Economic Forum., '5 ways Indigenous people are protecting the planet' Available at <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/08/indigenous-people-protecting-planet/> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

²³ International Fund for Agricultural Development., 'Indigenous Peoples' Op Cit

²⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Op Cit

²⁵ Ibid

Indigenous peoples are custodians of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) which plays a crucial role in conserving the environment and fostering Sustainable Development²⁶. This knowledge stems from centuries-old observation and interaction with nature²⁷. It has been argued that TEK encompasses practical ways through which indigenous peoples ensure the balance of the environment in which they live, so that it may continue to provide services such as water, fertile soil, food, shelter and medicines²⁸. TEK enables indigenous peoples and tribal communities adapt to socio-ecological changes, improving the long-term sustainability of their livelihood strategies and fostering social-ecological resilience²⁹. It has been observed that TEK has aided in the development of scientific management plans for sound environmental conservation and is becoming more widely recognized as a source of data for natural resource conservation, management, and sustainable usage³⁰.

TEK is enabling indigenous peoples in Africa and the world to conserve and sustainably manage natural resources and address environmental challenges including climate change and biodiversity loss³¹. For instance, indigenous communities in Africa have extensive knowledge about the interaction of plants, animals and people within their ecosystems³². Indigenous peoples in Africa are therefore custodians of TEK that has been acquired over a long period through observing, experiencing and experimenting with nature. This has enabled indigenous peoples in Africa to play a crucial role in biodiversity conservation or natural resource management³³. Further, TEK is enabling indigenous

²⁶ What is TEK?., Available at <https://tek.forestry.oregonstate.edu/what-tek> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

²⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Op Cit

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Haq. S.M et al., 'Integrating traditional ecological knowledge into habitat restoration: implications for meeting forest restoration challenges' Available at <https://ethnobiomed.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13002-023-00606-3> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ International Fund for Agricultural Development., 'Indigenous Peoples' Op Cit

³² Sinthumule. N., 'Traditional ecological knowledge and its role in biodiversity conservation: a systematic review' Available at <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/environmental-science/articles/10.3389/fenvs.2023.1164900/full> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

³³ Ibid

peoples in Africa to play a crucial role in climate action³⁴. Indigenous peoples are strengthening climate action in Africa including through weather forecasting, sound ecosystem management, sustainable agricultural practices and effective responses to natural disasters³⁵.

Indigenous peoples in Africa and the world are therefore playing a crucial role in safeguarding the planet. It has been argued that indigenous peoples maintain deep cultural and spiritual relationships with nature and play a pertinent role in protecting natural resources such as mountains, forests, lakes and rivers³⁶. They have also been identified as the unsung heroes in biodiversity conservation efforts³⁷. For many centuries, indigenous peoples have been successful stewards of the world's biodiversity, and their knowledge, innovations and practices ensure the sustainable use of biological resources³⁸. For instance, it has been pointed out that indigenous peoples safeguard most of the planet's biodiversity and forests on their land are better conserved, with a higher preserved biodiversity than those on non-Indigenous lands³⁹. In addition, it has been argued that many Indigenous traditional practices offer effective climate solutions, such as sustainable agriculture systems and climate-resilient water management⁴⁰. By

³⁴ Africa Policy Research Institute., 'Harnessing Local Knowledge through Community-Based Interventions' Available at <https://afripoli.org/harnessing-local-knowledge-through-community-based-interventions> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ International Institute for Environment and Development., 'Indigenous Peoples are the real solutions to the nature and climate crises' Available at <https://www.iied.org/indigenous-peoples-are-real-solutions-nature-climate-crises> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

³⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples: The unsung heroes of conservation' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/indigenous-peoples-unsung-heroes-conservation> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

³⁸ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Championing Indigenous Peoples' stewardship of biodiversity' Available at <https://www.unep-wcmc.org/en/news/championing-indigenous-peoples-stewardship-of-biodiversity> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

³⁹ World Bank Group., 'Empowering Indigenous Peoples to Protect Forests' Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2023/08/09/empowering-indigenous-peoples-to-protect-forests> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

⁴⁰ United Nations Development Programme., 'Indigenous knowledge is crucial in the fight against climate change - here's why' Available at <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/indigenous-knowledge-crucial-fight-against-climate-change-heres-why#:~:text=Nature%2Dbased%20solutions%20and%20circular,making%20processes%20on%20climate%20action.> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

safeguarding key ecosystems such as forests that act as carbon sinks and protecting biodiversity, indigenous peoples' contribution is vital in the fight against climate change⁴¹.

Indigenous agricultural practices also provide solutions towards fostering food security⁴². It has been observed that indigenous peoples have sustainable and nutritious food systems rooted in traditional ways of managing land and natural resources⁴³. These practices include planting multiple crops while allowing for natural forest regeneration in previously cultivated plots⁴⁴. It has been argued that the agroecological food systems and resilient crop and livestock varieties of indigenous peoples all over the world provide vital solutions for addressing the nature and climate crises and fostering food security⁴⁵.

Indigenous peoples in Africa and the world are therefore at the heart of environmental conservation. Their TEK provides valuable solutions towards addressing environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation. However, indigenous peoples in Africa and the world are facing several challenges undermining their role as custodians of the planet. For instance, indigenous peoples have been dispossessed of their lands, territories and resources over centuries⁴⁶. The United Nations points out that the rights of indigenous peoples to self-determination, territories and resources are usually violated to support mining, logging, oil, gas exploration among other activities being undertaken in their land and territories⁴⁷.

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² International Fund for Agricultural Development., 'Indigenous Peoples' Op Cit

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ United Nations Development Programme., 'Indigenous knowledge is crucial in the fight against climate change – here's why' Op Cit

⁴⁵ International Institute for Environment and Development., 'Indigenous Peoples are the real solutions to the nature and climate crises' Op Cit

⁴⁶ International Fund for Agricultural Development., 'Indigenous Peoples' Op Cit

⁴⁷ United Nations., 'Indigenous Peoples' Territories, Resources Still Being Seized, Exploited, Despite International Standards Guaranteeing Their Rights, Speakers Tell Permanent Forum' Available at <https://press.un.org/en/2022/hr5468.doc.htm> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

Further, due to their subsistence economies and spiritual connection to lands and territories, indigenous peoples suffer disproportionately from loss biodiversity loss and environmental degradation⁴⁸. According to UNEP, the lives, livelihoods, knowledge systems, environment and health conditions of indigenous peoples are threatened by environmental degradation, large scale industrial activities, toxic waste, conflicts and forced migration, and exploitation of the land to support agriculture and resource extraction⁴⁹. Further, it has been observed that indigenous peoples are among the first to face the direct consequences of climate change, due to their dependence upon, and close relationship, with the environment and natural resources⁵⁰. According to the United Nations, climate change worsens the difficulties already faced by indigenous peoples including political and economic marginalization, loss of land and resources, human rights violations, discrimination and unemployment⁵¹.

From the foregoing, it is evident that the environmental rights of indigenous peoples are being violated including through dispossession from their lands and territories, environmental degradation, conflicts and forced migration and extreme vulnerability to biodiversity loss and climate change⁵². It is therefore necessary to protect the environmental rights of indigenous peoples in Africa and the world for justice and Sustainable Development.

⁴⁸ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Op Cit

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ United Nations., 'Climate Change' Available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/climate-change.html> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Op Cit

3.0 Realising Environmental Rights for Indigenous Peoples in Africa and the World

It is imperative to foster environmental rights for indigenous peoples in Africa and the world. The knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples including TEK can strengthen environmental governance and protection⁵³. UNEP points out that when the rights of indigenous peoples are protected—and particularly their rights to land, territories and resources—their culture thrives and nature thrives⁵⁴.

The environmental rights of indigenous peoples are upheld in a number of international documents and declarations. For example, the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*⁵⁵ affirms that indigenous peoples and their communities and other local communities have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices⁵⁶. The Declaration urges states to recognize and duly support the identity, culture and interests of indigenous peoples and enable their effective participation in environmental governance in order to achieve Sustainable Development⁵⁷.

In addition, the *Convention on Biological Diversity*⁵⁸ recognises the prominent role played by indigenous peoples in biodiversity conservation. It urges states to respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity⁵⁹. The Convention further urges states to ensure equitable sharing of

⁵³ Stockholm Environment Institute., 'Advancing Indigenous Peoples' rights for inclusive and sustainable environmental governance in ASEAN' Available at <https://www.sei.org/publications/indigenous-peoples-rights-environmental-governance/> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

⁵⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Op Cit

⁵⁵ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development., 'Rio Declaration on Environment and Development' A/CONF.151/26 (Vol. I), Available at https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.151_26_Vol.I_Declaration.pdf (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

⁵⁶ Ibid, principle 22

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Convention on Biological Diversity, 5 June 1992 (1760 U.N.T.S. 69)

⁵⁹ Ibid, article 8 (j)

the benefits arising from the utilization of knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous peoples relevant to the conservation of biodiversity⁶⁰.

The role of indigenous peoples in climate action is further envisaged under the *Paris Agreement*⁶¹. The Agreement urges states to embrace the knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples in climate action⁶². It further requires all states to uphold the rights of indigenous peoples when taking action to address climate change⁶³.

Fostering the environmental rights of indigenous peoples in Africa and the world is therefore necessary towards strengthening environmental governance and tackling environmental challenges such as biodiversity loss and climate change. In order to achieve this goal, it is imperative to improve security of land tenure for indigenous peoples⁶⁴. It has been pointed out that much of the land occupied by indigenous peoples is under customary ownership, yet governments in most countries recognize only a fraction of this land as formally or legally belonging to indigenous peoples⁶⁵. The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*⁶⁶ recognises that indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources⁶⁷. The Declaration urges states to establish and implement assistance programmes for indigenous peoples for such conservation and protection, without discrimination⁶⁸.

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Paris Agreement to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change., UNTS, Vol. 3156, p 79

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ World Bank Group., 'Indigenous Peoples' Op Cit

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples., Available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

⁶⁷ Ibid, article 29 (1)

⁶⁸ Ibid

Recognising and protecting the land rights of indigenous peoples is vital in bolstering their role in environmental protection, biodiversity conservation and climate action through their TEK⁶⁹. It is therefore necessary to secure the land rights of indigenous peoples by recognising and protecting indigenous land tenure systems, upholding the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent of Indigenous Peoples in instances where development and relocation is necessary on their land and territories and ensuring just and fair compensation and, where possible, with the option of returning to their ancestral lands⁷⁰.

It is also imperative to strengthen the participation of indigenous peoples in environmental governance and decision-making processes⁷¹. Involving indigenous peoples in environmental governance is crucial towards effectively harnessing their customs and practices including TEK for sound environmental governance⁷². Further, there is need to ensure access to environmental justice and effective remedies for indigenous peoples⁷³. Access to environmental justice for indigenous peoples is crucial in protecting their rights especially when they are infringed through dispossession from their lands and territories and the disproportionate burden they bear from pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change among other environmental burdens⁷⁴. It is therefore necessary to ensure that indigenous peoples have access to courts among other legal avenues while also ensuring their access to just, fair, equitable, and gender-responsive compensation that shall take the form of lands, territories and resources equal in quality, size and legal status or of monetary compensation among other adequate remedies in cases where their environmental rights are violated⁷⁵.

⁶⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Op Cit

⁷⁰ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples., Article 10

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Op Cit

⁷³ Magallanes. C.J., 'Indigenous Environmental Justice: Access to Environmental Justice for Māori' *Vermont Journal of Environmental Law.*, Volume 22, No.1 (2022)

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Stockholm Environment Institute., 'Advancing Indigenous Peoples' rights for inclusive and sustainable environmental governance in ASEAN' Op Cit

In order to realise environmental rights for indigenous peoples in Africa and the world, it is necessary to protect environmental defenders⁷⁶. It has been observed that environmental defenders who are at the forefront of fighting for the environmental rights of indigenous peoples are being attacked, tortured, intimidated and in even murdered in some cases⁷⁷. It is therefore necessary for states to denounce attacks on environmental defenders and put in place effective legal and policy measures to protect them in order to enable them to better advocate for the environmental rights of indigenous peoples⁷⁸.

Through the foregoing, it is possible to realise environmental rights for indigenous peoples in Africa and the world.

4.0 Conclusion

Realising environmental rights for indigenous peoples in Africa and the world is vital towards justice and Sustainable Development. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to secure the land rights for indigenous peoples, strengthen the participation of indigenous peoples in environmental decision-making processes, foster access to environmental justice for indigenous peoples, and protect environmental defenders⁷⁹. Realising environmental rights for indigenous peoples in Africa and the world is achievable. We must pursue this ideal in order to ensure justice and sustainability.

⁷⁶ Amnesty International., 'Indigenous Peoples' Rights' Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/indigenous-peoples/> (Accessed on 10/06/2025)

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Op Cit

⁷⁹ Ibid

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Stockholm Environment Institute., 'Advancing Indigenous Peoples' rights for inclusive and sustainable environmental governance in ASEAN' Available at

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