

*View Beyond the Western Tower: Embracing Global South Indigenous Knowledge for Climate Justice*

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**Kariuki Muigua**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper critically examines how the ideal of climate justice can be achieved in the Global South by embracing indigenous knowledge. The paper defines indigenous knowledge. It argues that the Global South is a hub of indigenous knowledge which can be harnessed towards climate justice. The paper discusses how indigenous knowledge contributes to the attainment of climate justice in the Global South. Despite its viability in fostering climate justice, the paper notes that indigenous knowledge faces several challenges in the Global South undermining the pursuit of climate justice. The paper examines some of the key threats facing indigenous knowledge in the Global South. In light of these challenges, the paper discusses how indigenous knowledge can be adequately embraced in the Global South for climate justice and Sustainable Development.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

Achieving climate justice is fundamental for Sustainable Development in the Global South. It has been argued that the consequences of climate change including extreme flooding, severe droughts, warmer temperatures, rising sea levels, declining biodiversity and resource scarcity, are not distributed equally, with the poor, marginalized and disadvantaged populations often bearing the brunt of these effects despite their little contribution to the climate crisis<sup>1</sup>. In particular, it has been observed that developing nations and communities in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean Islands and the Pacific Islands which due to an unfortunate mixture of economic and geographic vulnerability, continue to shoulder the brunt of the burdens of climate change despite their relative innocence in

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<sup>1</sup> Climate Justice Global Alliance., Available at <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/climate-justice-global-alliance> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

causing it<sup>2</sup>. Despite climate change being a global problem, it has a more destructive and widespread effect on communities living in the Global South, which have been marginalised and have fewer resources to adapt or respond to its adverse consequences<sup>3</sup>. It has been argued that climate change contributes to poverty, the destruction of property and infrastructure, reduction of crop yields, displacement of communities and in several cases, the destruction of lives in the Global South<sup>4</sup>.

In light of the foregoing, achieving climate justice is an urgent priority in the Global South for people and planet. It has been argued that climate Justice recognizes the disproportionate impacts of climate change on low-income communities and communities of color around the world, the people and places least responsible for the climate crisis<sup>5</sup>. The concept of climate justice links human rights and development to achieve a human-centred approach on climate action, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable including the poor, women, the youth, indigenous peoples and communities in developing countries, and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly<sup>6</sup>. It has been argued that climate justice means putting equity, inclusivity, fairness and human rights at the core of decision-making and action on climate change<sup>7</sup>.

By fostering climate justice, it is possible to protect the poor, marginalized and vulnerable communities in the Global South. It has been argued that at its core, climate justice focuses

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<sup>2</sup> Giles. M., 'The Principles of Climate Justice at CoP27.' Available at <https://earth.org/principles-of-climate-justice/#:~:text=That%20response%20should%20be%20based,the%20consequences%20of%20climate%20change> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>3</sup> Bandera. G., 'How climate colonialism affects the Global South' Available at <https://www.fairplanet.org/story/how-climate-colonialism-affects-the-global-south/> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> What is Climate Justice?., Available at <https://centerclimatejustice.universityofcalifornia.edu/what-is-climate-justice/> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>6</sup> Mary Robinson Foundation Climate Justice., 'Principles of Climate Justice' Available at <https://www.mrfcj.org/pdf/Principles-of-Climate-Justice.pdf> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Development Programme., 'Climate change is a matter of justice – here's why' Available at <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/climate-change-matter-justice-heres-why> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

on the protection of human rights and of the most vulnerable including the poor, women and girls, the youth, indigenous peoples and local communities in the face of climate change<sup>8</sup>. It seeks to promote solutions that address the root causes of climate change and in doing so, simultaneously address a broad range of social, racial, and environmental injustices caused by climate change<sup>9</sup>. It has been argued that climate justice focuses on respect and protection of human rights, sharing of the benefits and burdens of climate change equally and equitably, ensuring that decisions on climate change are participatory, transparent and accountable, and fostering gender equality and equity in climate action<sup>10</sup>. Achieving climate justice in the Global South is therefore necessary in the pursuit of Sustainable Development.

This paper critically examines how the ideal of climate justice can be achieved in the Global South by embracing indigenous knowledge. The paper defines indigenous knowledge. It argues that the Global South is a hub of indigenous knowledge which can be harnessed towards climate justice. The paper discusses how indigenous knowledge contributes to the attainment of climate justice in the Global South. Despite its viability in fostering climate justice, the paper notes that indigenous knowledge faces several challenges in the Global South undermining the pursuit of climate justice. The paper examines some of the key threats facing indigenous knowledge in the Global South. In light of these challenges, the paper discusses how indigenous knowledge can be adequately embraced in the Global South for climate justice and Sustainable Development.

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<sup>8</sup> Aliozi. Z., 'Climate Justice and Human Rights, in a World in Climate Emergency' Available at <https://repository.gchumanrights.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/2eba3de1-1427-481b-a2d6-07818e00a53b/content> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>9</sup> Center for Climate Justice., 'What is Climate Justice?' Available at <https://centerclimatejustice.universityofcalifornia.edu/what-is-climate-justice/#:~:text=Climate%20justice%20connects%20the%20climate,least%20responsible%20for%20the%20problem> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>10</sup> Mary Robinson Foundation Climate Justice., 'Pursuing Climate Justice within Environmental, Social and Governance Investment Frameworks' Available at [https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/documents/Pursuing\\_Climate\\_Justice\\_within\\_ESG\\_Investment\\_Frameworks\\_FINAL.pdf](https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/documents/Pursuing_Climate_Justice_within_ESG_Investment_Frameworks_FINAL.pdf) (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

## **2.0 Indigenous Knowledge and Climate Justice in the Global South: Prospects and Challenges**

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), indigenous or local knowledge refers to the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings<sup>11</sup>. Further, it has been argued that indigenous knowledge also referred to as traditional knowledge is a body of observations, oral and written knowledge, innovations, practices, and beliefs of indigenous peoples and local communities which foster sustainability and the responsible stewardship of cultural and natural resources through close relationships between humans and their landscapes<sup>12</sup>. Indigenous knowledge can also be described as a network of knowledge, beliefs, and traditions that are intended to preserve, communicate, and contextualize indigenous relationships with their culture, environment and landscapes over time<sup>13</sup>. It has been argued that indigenous knowledge is usually accumulated and transmitted across generations within specific cultural contexts<sup>14</sup>.

The Global South is a reservoir of indigenous knowledge which has played a key role in maintain harmony with nature for many centuries even before the emergence of Western knowledge systems. For example, it has been argued that humans were generating, transmitting, and utilising information about the natural world long before modern scientific inquiry emerged<sup>15</sup>. The knowledge systems, innovations and practices of indigenous peoples and local communities that have been passed down from generation

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<sup>11</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS)' Available at <https://en.unesco.org/links> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>12</sup> What is "Indigenous Knowledge" And Why Does It Matter? Integrating Ancestral Wisdom and Approaches into Federal Decision-Making., Available at <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/ostp/news-updates/2022/12/02/what-is-indigenous-knowledge-and-why-does-it-matter-integrating-ancestral-wisdom-and-approaches-into-federal-decision-making/> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>13</sup> Dhungana. G et al., 'Foundation of indigenous knowledge theory for disaster risk reduction' *Multi-Hazard Vulnerability and Resilience Building.*, 2023., pp 347-361

<sup>14</sup> Jessen. T et al., 'Contributions of Indigenous Knowledge to ecological and evolutionary understanding' Available at <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/fee.2435> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

to generation have allowed different cultures and communities in many parts of the world to live sustainably for many centuries, emphasizing the balance between humanity and nature<sup>16</sup>. It has been observed that indigenous peoples and local communities who primarily live in the Global South have developed, maintained, applied and evolved knowledge systems via direct experience interacting with landscapes, ecosystems, habitats and species over millennia<sup>17</sup>.

The Global South therefore has a rich history of indigenous knowledge. It has been argued that the abundance of indigenous knowledge in the Global South provides opportunities to foster sound environmental governance, protect biodiversity, combat climate change and realize the ambitious vision of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>18</sup>. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), indigenous knowledge - gained through trans-generational experiences, observations, and transmission - can contribute to sound environmental protection, sustainable ecosystem management and tackling environmental threats including climate change, resource depletion and biodiversity loss<sup>19</sup>.

Indigenous knowledge can play a key role in fostering climate justice in the Global South by enabling vulnerable and marginalized indigenous peoples, local communities and women to confront and adapt to the impacts of climate change. For example, it has been argued that traditional farming, agriculture and resource management systems including

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<sup>16</sup> 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> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>17</sup> Jessen. T et al., 'Contributions of Indigenous Knowledge to ecological and evolutionary understanding' Op Cit

<sup>18</sup> International Labour Organization., 'Sustainable Development Goals: Indigenous Peoples in Focus' Available at [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed\\_emp/@ifp\\_skills/documents/p\\_publication/wcms\\_503715.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@ifp_skills/documents/p_publication/wcms_503715.pdf) (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous peoples and their communities' Available at <https://www.unep.org/civil-society-engagement/major-groups-modalities/major-group-categories/indigenous-peoples-and#:~:text=UNEP%20recognizes%20the%20importance%20of,indigenous%20livelihoods%20and%20the%20ir%20survival.> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

agroforestry, inter cropping, cover cropping, use of drought resistant and climate-resilient crops, biological management of pests and diseases, water management and conservation of vital ecosystems including forests have ensured that indigenous peoples and local communities harness the power of nature towards achieving food security, conserving water, mitigating climate change and fostering biodiversity conservation<sup>20</sup>. The spiritual beliefs which are inherent in indigenous knowledge systems in the Global South provide a more effective and responsible perspective for a harmonious existence between humanity and nature than the ideas of Western knowledge systems which establish human domination over nature<sup>21</sup>. The environment and its natural resources are viewed as sacred by indigenous peoples and local communities in the Global South placing a responsibility on humanity to live in harmony with nature<sup>22</sup>. Through this perspective, indigenous knowledge has been utilised for many centuries in the Global South to protect vital carbon sinks such forests and conserve biodiversity therefore enabling humanity to effectively tackle mounting environmental challenges including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss<sup>23</sup>.

Harnessing indigenous knowledge is therefore vital in the pursuit of climate justice. It has been argued that as the climate crisis intensifies, indigenous knowledge provides valuable climate solutions that can advance mitigation efforts, enhance adaptation strategies and build resilience thus protecting vulnerable and marginalized communities for climate justice<sup>24</sup>. However, indigenous knowledge is yet to be fully embraced for climate justice in the Global South. For example, it has been argued that the application

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<sup>20</sup> Latief. A., 'Harnessing Indigenous Knowledge for Climate Change Resilience in Africa' Available at [https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/harnessing-indigenous-knowledge-climate-change-africa-aatifah-latief/?utm\\_source=share&utm\\_medium=member\\_android&utm\\_campaign=share\\_via](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/harnessing-indigenous-knowledge-climate-change-africa-aatifah-latief/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_android&utm_campaign=share_via) (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>21</sup> Harnessing Indigenous Knowledge Systems for Global Knowledge Cooperation., Available at [https://www.idos-research.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdfs/publikationen/aktuelle\\_kolumne/2024/German\\_Institute\\_of\\_Development\\_and\\_Sustainability\\_EN\\_Segueda\\_Banerjee\\_28.10.2024.pdf](https://www.idos-research.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdfs/publikationen/aktuelle_kolumne/2024/German_Institute_of_Development_and_Sustainability_EN_Segueda_Banerjee_28.10.2024.pdf) (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> United Nations Development Programme., 'Indigenous Knowledge is Crucial in the Fight against Climate Change - here's why' Op Cit

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

of indigenous knowledge in environmental governance and climate action remains inconsistent due to historical marginalisation, weak legal protections, and systemic biases in laws, policies and science<sup>25</sup>. Further, since indigenous knowledge systems are primarily based in the Global South, mostly in rural and land-dependent communities, their relevance in the Western science-based world order is usually diminished<sup>26</sup>. Consequently, indigenous knowledge is often marginalized or dismissed by mainstream scientific and governmental institutions undermining its significant role in confronting climate change and fostering climate justice<sup>27</sup>. Indigenous knowledge systems which have played a key role in shaping environmental sustainability in the Global South for many are usually ignored and deemed inferior, 'uncodified' and 'unscientific'<sup>28</sup>.

The foregoing challenges are undermining the pursuit of climate justice in the Global South. It has been argued that failure to integrate indigenous knowledge in climate policies and actions undermines the ability of indigenous peoples, local communities and rural women to manage the adverse impacts of climate change leaving these populations disproportionately affected by the climate crisis<sup>29</sup>. Consequently, it is imperative to embrace indigenous knowledge in the Global South for climate justice.

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<sup>25</sup> Integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems into Global Policy Frameworks., Available at <https://t20southafrica.org/publications/integrating-indigenous-knowledge-systems-into-global-policy-frameworks/#:~:text=Policy%20Brief-Integrating%20Indigenous%20Knowledge%20Systems%20into%20Global%20Policy%20Frameworks,foundation%20for%20operationalising%20this%20transformation>. (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>26</sup> Harnessing Indigenous Knowledge Systems for Global Knowledge Cooperation., Op Cit

<sup>27</sup> The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Environmental Conservation., Available at [https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/role-indigenous-knowledge-environmental-conservation-eurasia-carbon?utm\\_source=share&utm\\_medium=member\\_android&utm\\_campaign=share\\_via](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/role-indigenous-knowledge-environmental-conservation-eurasia-carbon?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_android&utm_campaign=share_via) (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>28</sup> The African Manifesto for Science, Technology and Innovation., Available at [https://atpsnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/the\\_african\\_manifesto\\_for\\_sti.pdf](https://atpsnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/the_african_manifesto_for_sti.pdf) (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>29</sup> United Nations Development Programme., 'Indigenous Knowledge is Crucial in the Fight against Climate Change - here's why' Op Cit

### **3.0 Embracing Global South Indigenous Knowledge for Climate Justice**

Achieving climate justice is vital in protecting people and planet in the Global South. Despite their little contribution to the climate crisis, the impacts of climate change including rising temperatures, severe floods, extreme droughts and rising sea levels have disproportionate effects on people and planet in developing countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean Islands, the Pacific Islands and other regions in the Global South<sup>30</sup>. Climate change is affecting human health, life and livelihoods in the Global South while also fuelling the destruction and degradation of ecosystems with severe consequences for vulnerable groups including women, the youth, indigenous peoples and local communities<sup>31</sup>. Consequently, promoting climate justice is key in securing the health and well-being of people and planet in the Global South.

Indigenous knowledge provides an effective strategy and tool towards attaining climate justice in the Global South. Traditional knowledge and indigenous practices in the Global South have a minimal impact on the environment and are highly adaptive to ecological changes, fostering healthy and resilient ecosystems thus playing a key role in tackling climate change and biodiversity loss among other environmental threats<sup>32</sup>. However, this knowledge is often underutilized, ignored and marginalized undermining the quest for climate justice in the Global South<sup>33</sup>. Consequently, it is imperative to embrace indigenous knowledge in the Global South for effective climate action in the quest towards climate justice.

In order to fully and effectively embrace indigenous knowledge in the Global South for climate justice, it is imperative to involve indigenous peoples, local communities and rural women in climate policies and decision-making processes. It has been argued that

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<sup>30</sup> Bandera. G., 'How climate colonialism affects the Global South' Op Cit

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> United Nations Development Programme., 'Indigenous Knowledge is Crucial in the Fight against Climate Change - here's why' Op Cit

<sup>33</sup> Harnessing Indigenous Knowledge Systems for Global Knowledge Cooperation., Op Cit

by involving these vulnerable groups in decision-making processes, it is possible to develop more contextual, relevant and effective climate solutions, foster innovation, enhance local ownership of climate policies and ensure a larger impact of climate initiatives<sup>34</sup>. Fostering access to climate finance for indigenous peoples and local communities is also key in strengthening the role of indigenous knowledge towards climate justice<sup>35</sup>. It has been argued that by providing adequate climate finance for indigenous peoples and local communities, it is possible to foster climate justice by implementing adaptation and mitigation projects that promote indigenous knowledge and practices, strengthening the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, and enhancing their resilience to climate change and its impacts<sup>36</sup>. Providing adequate climate finance for indigenous peoples and local communities is therefore key in bolstering the use of indigenous knowledge for climate justice in the Global South.

In addition, it is vital to strengthen indigenous education in the Global South. It has been argued that strengthening and formalizing indigenous education in the Global South is vital in making space for indigenous methods of knowing and learning and protecting the intellectual heritage of mostly marginalised indigenous peoples and local communities<sup>37</sup>. Further, governments have been urged to invest in preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge and practices through strengthening indigenous education systems and documenting oral traditions and cultural practices in order to effectively protect indigenous knowledge<sup>38</sup>. Protecting indigenous knowledge is vital in ensuring that such knowledge is available for use in climate action for the benefit of current and future generations<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> United Nations Development Programme., 'Indigenous Knowledge is Crucial in the Fight against Climate Change - here's why' Op Cit

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> Harnessing Indigenous Knowledge Systems for Global Knowledge Cooperation., Op Cit

<sup>38</sup> United Nations., 'Indigenous People's Traditional Knowledge Must Be Preserved, Valued Globally, Speakers Stress as Permanent Forum Opens Annual Session' Available at <https://press.un.org/en/2019/hr5431.doc.htm> (Accessed on 03/12/2025)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

Through the foregoing, it is possible to ensure that indigenous knowledge is effectively embraced in the Global South for climate justice.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

Fostering climate justice is a key imperative for people and planet in the Global South. Despite its marginalisation and under-utilisation, indigenous knowledge holds great potential in driving climate justice in the Global South through sound climate action. It is therefore vital to embrace indigenous knowledge in the Global South by involving indigenous peoples and local communities in climate action, providing adequate climate finance for indigenous peoples and local communities, strengthening indigenous education and protecting and preserving indigenous knowledge for posterity<sup>40</sup>. Embracing Global South indigenous knowledge is therefore a key and valuable solution in the pursuit of climate justice.

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<sup>40</sup> United Nations Development Programme., 'Indigenous Knowledge is Crucial in the Fight against Climate Change - here's why' Op Cit

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