



नेपाल आदिवासी जनजाति महासंघ
Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities



Indigenous Peoples' Experience with the Revision of Nepal's National Biodiversity Strategic and Action Plan

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Indigenous Peoples and biodiversity planning:
An AIPP series



About the series

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), adopted in 2022, marks a historic milestone in international environmental policy through its explicit and unequivocal recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights and contributions to conservation.

As a next step, Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity were required to update and revise their National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) to align with the KMGBF within two years. These updates, still ongoing in many countries, provide a prime opportunity to strengthen Indigenous Peoples' rights and integrate their knowledge system.

This paper is part of a series documenting Indigenous Peoples' and advocates' experiences with NBSAP revision processes in several Asian countries where AIPP members and partners are active. By examining both successful engagement strategies and persistent challenges, they offer insights for other Indigenous advocates, highlight key concerns for policy-makers, and point to important opportunities for allies to support Indigenous Peoples. AIPP's goal is to inform on-going and future policy development, implementation, monitoring and reporting to enable more meaningful engagement of Indigenous Peoples in biodiversity governance and decision-making across the region.

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Mountain view from the traditional water mill of Thakali Indigenous Peoples in Syang village, Lower Mustang.
Photo by Lakpa Nuri Sherpa.

Introduction

The Nepal Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan Vision Document (2025–2030)¹ describes the process of revising the country’s National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) to align with the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF). The Ministry of Forests and Environment (MoFE) has led the process, with technical support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), taking a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. In June 2023, MoFE established a dedicated NBSAP Revision Secretariat and formed technical and steering committees to guide the process.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Secretariat asked countries to submit national targets by 1 August 2024. Following a national consultative workshop, Nepal submitted 40 national targets, developed with input from conservation partners, Indigenous Peoples, as well as local communities. From June 2024 to March 2025, sub-national and national consultations were conducted to refine these targets and identify priority areas for biodiversity. This process informed the preparation of the NBSAP, which also builds on reviews of the previous NBSAP, assessments of biodiversity status, and analysis of key drivers of change.

As this paper was being completed, work on the NBSAP was still ongoing, with committee meetings, thematic workshops and stakeholder consultations scheduled through July and August 2025. Final validation and approval by MoFE were expected by late August 2025, with an updated biodiversity finance plan due by October 2025.

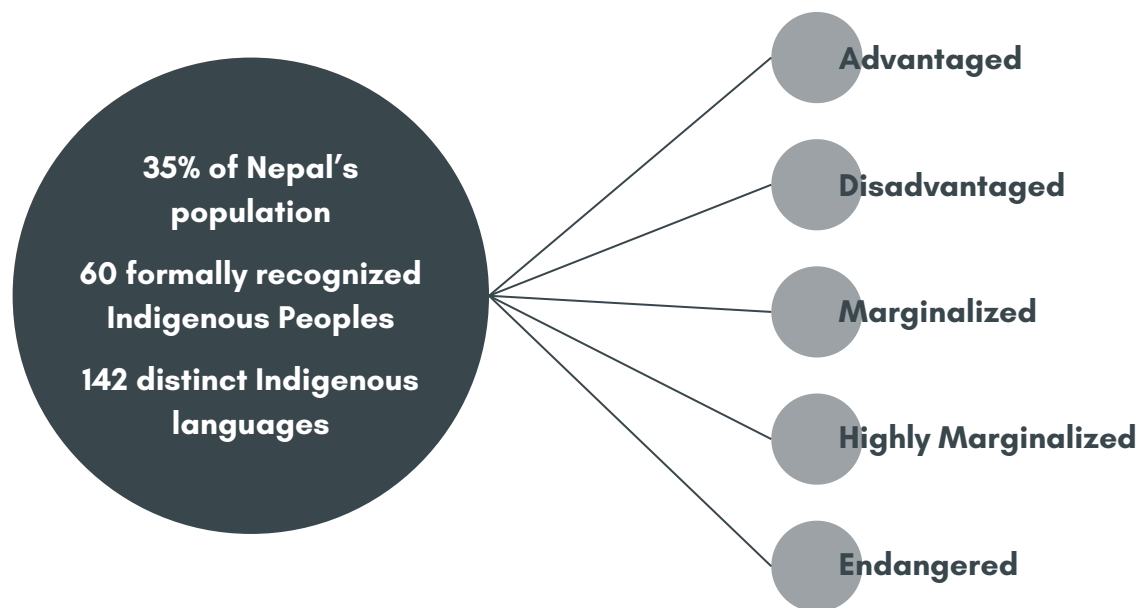


Figure 1. Categories of Indigenous Peoples in Nepal

The legal context for Indigenous Peoples in Nepal

Nepal is the only country in Asia to have ratified the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 under the International Labour Organization.² The state officially recognizes 60 Indigenous nationalities. As shown in Figure 1, Indigenous Peoples are classified into five groups.

Nepal's Constitution promotes multiculturalism and ethnic diversity. However, the legacy of the Muluki Ain of 1854, which institutionalized caste-based hierarchies, continues to shape patterns of exclusion. Despite formal recognition, Indigenous Peoples still experience structural discrimination and marginalization, pointing to the limits of constitutional guarantees when not paired with systemic reform.

Nepal has multiple Indigenous Peoples' organizations dedicated to rights-based approaches: the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), National Indigenous Women Federation, Youth Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, Nepal Indigenous Disabilities Association, Federation of Indigenous Kirat Associations and the Nepal Indigenous Women Forum (NIWForum). They work from national to the local level.

Entry points for Indigenous Peoples' participation in the NBSAP update

The Government of Nepal did not inform Indigenous Peoples of any NBSAP revision consultation. Instead, Indigenous Peoples' representatives actively sought out the CBD national focal point, the Department of Environment and Biodiversity within MoFE, and demanded to be part of the process.

Through extensive negotiations, workshops, roundtables, advocacy, and lobbying, Indigenous Peoples secured key positions within the NBSAP revision structure. NEFIN serves as the Chair

of the Steering Committee, the NIWForum as the Co-Chair, and the Nepal Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity as a member of the Technical Committee.

This is the first time that Indigenous Peoples have been represented on the Steering and Technical Committees. Government officials were initially reluctant, but Indigenous Peoples were able to convince them of the need to include Indigenous representatives in both committees. These roles have been critical to ensuring the collective, full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples, including women, youth, and persons with disabilities.

The NBSAP Revision Secretariat at MoFE was planning to have mainly consultations at the federal and provincial levels, but Indigenous Peoples demanded to have consultations at the local level as well, and the secretariat commissioned consultants to do so. Over 30 consultations were carried out in different ecological zones across the country.

Separately, prior to the NBSAP revision process, Indigenous Peoples-only preparation workshops were conducted with Indigenous Peoples, including communities with comparatively small populations, underscoring the principle of “no one left behind”. The workshops were held at the federal and provincial level by NIWForum and NEFIN, with funding from WWF Nepal.

Indigenous Peoples were also able, as part of the public, to provide written inputs on the vision document that informs the NBSAP, through the official website of the NBSAP Revision Secretariat. However, the official call for public input was open for just 10 days. Indigenous Peoples organized several discussions and engaged with the NBSAP Revision Secretariat, asking for a one-month extension to ensure they could contribute.

The Secretariat agreed verbally, with no public announcement, to provide an extra 10 days. The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) then provided resources for a three-day workshop, designed and run by Indigenous Peoples to develop inputs to the NBSAP. The results were officially shared with the MoFE, including the CBD national focal point and NBSAP Revision Secretariat.



Bonn Popo Indigenous Ceremony for Summer in Shy Phocksmdho Kailash Sacred Landscape. Photo by author.

Indigenous-led Consultation Process

The Indigenous members of the Steering and Technical Committees coordinated with Indigenous Peoples in all five categories shown in Figure 1, along with Indigenous Peoples' federations and organizations, Indigenous research institutes, academics, journalists and lawyers, and their networks at the national, provincial and local levels. They also worked to ensure the full and effective participation of Indigenous women, youth and Indigenous persons with disabilities of both sexes. The Indigenous representatives working with the NBSAP Revision Secretariat communicated and coordinated with all these Indigenous rightsholders and consolidated their inputs as part of the NBSAP revision consultations.

In order to ensure that everyone would be represented, the Indigenous members of the Steering and Technical Committees mapped the types of Indigenous nationalities and their respective organizations, from umbrella organizations to customary associations and traditional institutions at the federal, province and local level. Due to logistical and communication difficulties, it was challenging to actually map all of them across the seven provinces. Sometimes, there were political differences and misunderstandings among Indigenous Peoples and between organizations.

Tools and methodologies

Indigenous Peoples' organizations took a collective and participatory approach to consultations, followed by roundtable discussions. The roundtable outcomes were shared with representatives of Indigenous leaders as well as with relevant government officials at the federal, provincial and local levels. The consolidated outcomes of the workshops were shared with national representatives of Indigenous Peoples' organizations, Indigenous lawyers, Indigenous journalists, Indigenous commissioners, the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities, WWF Nepal, IUCN Nepal, UNDP Small Grant Programmes and NBSAP team members to ensure that the collective voices and priorities of Indigenous Peoples were reflected in the NBSAP revision.

Support from state and other stakeholders

The federal government, including the CBD national focal point and the NBSAP team, have generally been supportive. The CBD national focal point changes frequently in Nepal. Since the beginning of the revision process in 2023, there have been four national focal points, two of whom were Indigenous. Having Indigenous persons as CBD national focal points was helpful, as they were open and willing to listen to the concerns of Indigenous Peoples. It is also important for Indigenous Peoples to have an ally within the NBSAP Revision Secretariat to ensure that our concerns are not overlooked or dropped over time.

The NBSAP Revision Secretariat has said that the process will align national priorities and targets with a human rights-based approach, with a special focus on Indigenous Peoples as well as local communities. There are two national targets - 24 and 25 - that specifically prioritize Indigenous Peoples, alongside local communities, but other targets are also expected to address issues of concern to Indigenous Peoples.

In Nepal, the Indigenous Nationalities Commission has a mandate to "conduct study and research work to protect the rights and interest of indigenous nationalities".³ The Tharu Commission has a similar mandate, focused on the Tharu people in particular.⁴ Indigenous Peoples requested support and invited both commissions to attend Indigenous-led consultations. Representatives from the commissions attended the consultations and expressed their full support for Indigenous Peoples' issues and for their participation in the NBSAP process.

Indigenous Peoples had several rounds of meetings with the UNDP Nepal team, who expressed support for increasing the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, gender and intersectionality in the NBSAP, as well as for addressing complex procurement processes. However, some expert consultants were hyper-technical and showed limited interest in rights-based approaches.



Contributions of Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous Peoples in Nepal advocated strongly for the inclusion of Indigenous and Traditional Territories (ITTs) as a separate target within the NBSAP, viewing it as a critical component aligned with the KMGBF. Through extensive consultations and consensus building, we worked to present a unified voice on ITTs for biodiversity.

Indigenous representatives have made it clear that ITTs should be distinct from both Protected Areas and Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs). The Indigenous position emphasized that without recognition of ITTs as a separate target, Indigenous Peoples might withdraw from the NBSAP revision process and engage directly with the CBD Secretariat as non-state actors, demonstrating their commitment to securing formal recognition of Indigenous and Traditional Territories within Nepal's biodiversity conservation framework, in alignment with the KMGBF and the spirit and objectives of the Convention.

Discussions within the NBSAP Revision Secretariat revealed institutional resistance to addressing Indigenous Peoples' rights comprehensively. The CBD national focal point and team expressed strong reservations about recognizing ITTs due to perceived political and legal complications in relation to land rights. In response to these concerns, Indigenous Conserved Areas (ICAs) have been proposed as an alternative approach that emphasizes customary land tenure, though this terminology has not yet been finalized. Continued advocacy would be needed to ensure the ICA concept would maintain the essential recognition that ITTs for biodiversity represent.

Discussions with the NBSAP Revision Secretariat highlighted divisions within the revision process, with strong and heated disagreements and reservations about Indigenous issues at first. Some technical experts remained unconvinced about fully adopting a human rights-based and inclusive approach.

Indigenous Peoples also put forward a key proposal demanding the respect of their rights in the guidelines on OECMs, potential sites for which overlap with Indigenous territories. Indigenous Peoples have advocated for a rights-based approach to OECM designation that includes their fundamental right to withdraw from OECM status, recognizing their sovereignty over traditional territories. These tensions have been complicated by the fact that many Indigenous communities, such as the Chepang, lack formal land certificates despite their historical occupation of these areas. That leaves them vulnerable to the implementation of OECM that could further restrict their access to traditional territories. Lastly, we have called for the creation of an Indigenous Peoples' Biodiversity Advisory Board under the NBSAP and the appointment of Indigenous persons as the National Focal Points for Article 8(j) on Traditional Knowledge, the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in Nepal.

Indigenous fisherfolks in Sacred Himalayan Cultural Landscape, Idrawati. Photo by author.



Outcomes of Indigenous Peoples' Participation

The revision of the NBSAP is still ongoing, and no draft is yet available to the public, though the Government of Nepal and the NBSAP Revision Secretariat have expressed a commitment to secure and fulfil the rights of Indigenous Peoples and their engagement in the implementation of the NBSAP from the federal and provincial to the local level.

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An Indigenous women biocultural restoration site in Sacred Himalayan Cultural Landscape. Photo by author.

Of the 36 targets submitted to the CBD Secretariat via the Online Reporting Tool on 1 August, 2024, 10 mention Indigenous Peoples in the target description or in the indicators. The vision document for the NBSAP, dated May 2025 provides an updated list of targets, with 15 referring to Indigenous Peoples. In both, the terminology used is "IPLCs" (Indigenous Peoples and local communities).

IPLCs appear as rights holders whose participation must be ensured in spatial planning, protected area management and OECMs (Target 1, 3 and 4) and as knowledge owners whose traditional knowledge and practices are essential and must be respected for ecosystem restoration, genetic diversity, wildlife trade, customary sustainable use of wild species and knowledge recognition and integration (Target 2, 6, 10, 11, and 24). The rights of Indigenous Peoples to Free, Prior and Informed Consent are mentioned in Target 22 in regards to biopiracy, in Target 24 as part of knowledge systems integration, and in Target 31 on research and innovation.

Target 14 identifies IPLCs as particularly affected by ecosystem degradation. Target 32 tracks finance solutions specially targeting IPLCs as a marginalized group requiring dedicated support.

Target 25 provides the most extensive rights-based language, ensuring the "full, equitable, inclusive, effective, and gender-responsive representation" in decision making and protecting environmental human rights defenders. Headline indicator 25.1 is "Land-use change and land tenure in the traditional territories of Indigenous peoples and local communities."

According to an updated version of the vision document dated September 2025, Target 24 also references ITTs of Indigenous Peoples for biodiversity.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Indigenous Peoples' priorities are diverse, creating challenges for unified representation in the NBSAP process. As noted above, some Indigenous groups demand land restitution, which presents political and constitutional complications that are difficult to address within the NBSAP framework. Others advocate for the inclusion of ITTs under Target 3. There are concerns that the demand for the return of Indigenous Peoples' lands could cause resistance that would lead to the exclusion of ITTs entirely. These internal contradictions make it difficult for Indigenous voices to be heard effectively. It is thus important for Indigenous Peoples to get organized and come to consensus in order to effectively engage in policy processes.

In general, Indigenous Peoples – especially women, youth and persons with disabilities – face significant challenges in understanding the NBSAP. The technical content and vague terminology are difficult for many to grasp. The same challenge is felt by Indigenous members of the Steering Committee.

Despite securing representation on the NBSAP revision's Steering and Technical Committees, Indigenous Peoples faced limitations in their engagement, constraining their ability to influence decisions. Indigenous representation was minimal: only one Indigenous person among 18 Technical Committee members and two among over 30 Steering Committee members. This severely underrepresents Indigenous Peoples, who the 2021 Census found constitute 35% of Nepal's population.⁵



Indigenous participants encountered multiple challenges working within these committees. Beyond being outnumbered by majority groups, they struggled with the technical language, which further hindered meaningful participation. The situation was compounded by the committees' overall lack of active engagement in the revision process. At the time of this writing, the Steering Committee has only met twice, and the Technical Committee not met at all. Consequently, Indigenous Peoples have bypassed these formal structures, choosing instead to engage directly with the CBD focal point to ensure their voices are heard in the revision process.



There is also a major gap between the technical NBSAP revision team and Indigenous Peoples. The team often lacks understanding of what Indigenous perspectives mean in relation to biodiversity, national targets and priorities, particularly regarding the rights of Indigenous Peoples – including Free, Prior and Informed Consent – as well as intersectionality, customary laws and biocultural community protocols. Experience during the first expert group NBSAP revision workshop in Kathmandu in 2024 suggests that these complexities were not well understood by the technical team.



Furthermore, there is a lack of proper communication about biodiversity and a limited understanding of the value of including the traditional knowledge, practices and innovations of Indigenous Peoples at the country level. Technical experts often view biodiversity as a scientific matter, rather than recognizing its social, intrinsic, intangible, animist and biocultural dimensions.

There is also limited dedication – both individual and institutional – to the meaningful engagement of Indigenous Peoples, women, youth and other local communities. The lack of financial, moral, and technical support has negatively impacted Indigenous Peoples' participation in the NBSAP revision process.

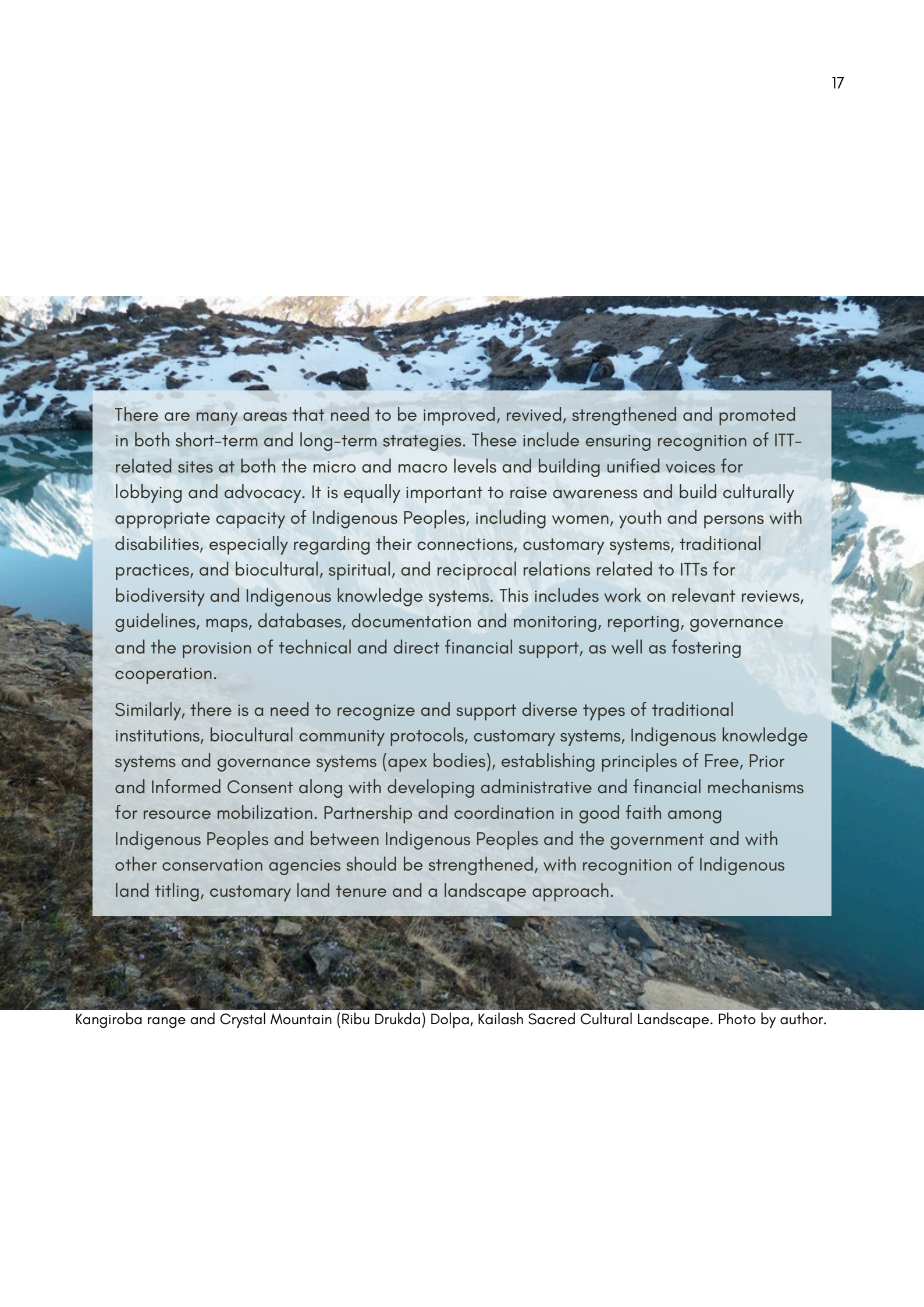
On Indigenous Peoples' side, it is equally important to build a unified voice, mutual understanding, self-support, clear communication and collective action. A spirit of self-determination, financial support, and volunteerism is needed to achieve the goals, targets and mission of the KMGBF and NBSAP implementation, reporting and localization of the Convention's principles. As a result of our engagement in the NBSAP, Kathmandu University has decided to incorporate the topic of ITTs, biodiversity conservation, biocultural protocols and customary systems in the Master Study Programme starting in 2026.

Syang village of Thakali Indigenous Peoples, Lower Mustang. Photos by Lakpa Nuri Sherpa.

Next Steps and Future Roles

There is strength in the well-established presence of Nepal's Indigenous Peoples and our networks across the federal, provincial and local levels. An Indigenous Peoples' Biodiversity Advisory Body will be established within all three tiers of governance to enable collective action and promote customary and biocultural governance systems for the implementation, monitoring, and reporting of the revised NBSAP, in line with the goals of the KMGBF.

Although the Steering and Technical Committees may be dissolved after the NBSAP revision is finalized, Indigenous Peoples' organizations, including the Nepal Indigenous Forum for Biodiversity, will continue their activities across all levels of governance. The Nepal Indigenous Forum for Biodiversity and the Steering Committee members are strongly committed to implementing the NBSAP across the three levels of government. We will take an active role in preparing the 7th National Biodiversity Report and continue our efforts to localize the NBSAP in Nepal. This will be done with the full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples, including women, youth and persons with disabilities from Indigenous communities. Our goal is to uphold environmental rights in alignment with circularity and the reciprocal relationship with Mother Nature, and to recognize the diverse values of biodiversity by strengthening ITTs and Indigenous knowledge systems as distinct foundations for conservation and customary sustainable use.

A photograph of a high-altitude mountain landscape. The foreground is a rocky, scree-covered slope with sparse, dry vegetation. In the middle ground, there are several large, dark rocks scattered across a field of snow. The background shows a range of jagged, snow-capped mountains under a clear blue sky. The overall scene is rugged and alpine.

There are many areas that need to be improved, revived, strengthened and promoted in both short-term and long-term strategies. These include ensuring recognition of ITT-related sites at both the micro and macro levels and building unified voices for lobbying and advocacy. It is equally important to raise awareness and build culturally appropriate capacity of Indigenous Peoples, including women, youth and persons with disabilities, especially regarding their connections, customary systems, traditional practices, and biocultural, spiritual, and reciprocal relations related to ITTs for biodiversity and Indigenous knowledge systems. This includes work on relevant reviews, guidelines, maps, databases, documentation and monitoring, reporting, governance and the provision of technical and direct financial support, as well as fostering cooperation.

Similarly, there is a need to recognize and support diverse types of traditional institutions, biocultural community protocols, customary systems, Indigenous knowledge systems and governance systems (apex bodies), establishing principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent along with developing administrative and financial mechanisms for resource mobilization. Partnership and coordination in good faith among Indigenous Peoples and between Indigenous Peoples and the government and with other conservation agencies should be strengthened, with recognition of Indigenous land titling, customary land tenure and a landscape approach.

Endnotes

[1] See

<https://mofe.gov.np/uploads/uploads/notices/gonnoticenbsapvisiondocumentjune2025pdf-2832-3991749103534.pdf>.

[2] See <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/162030>.

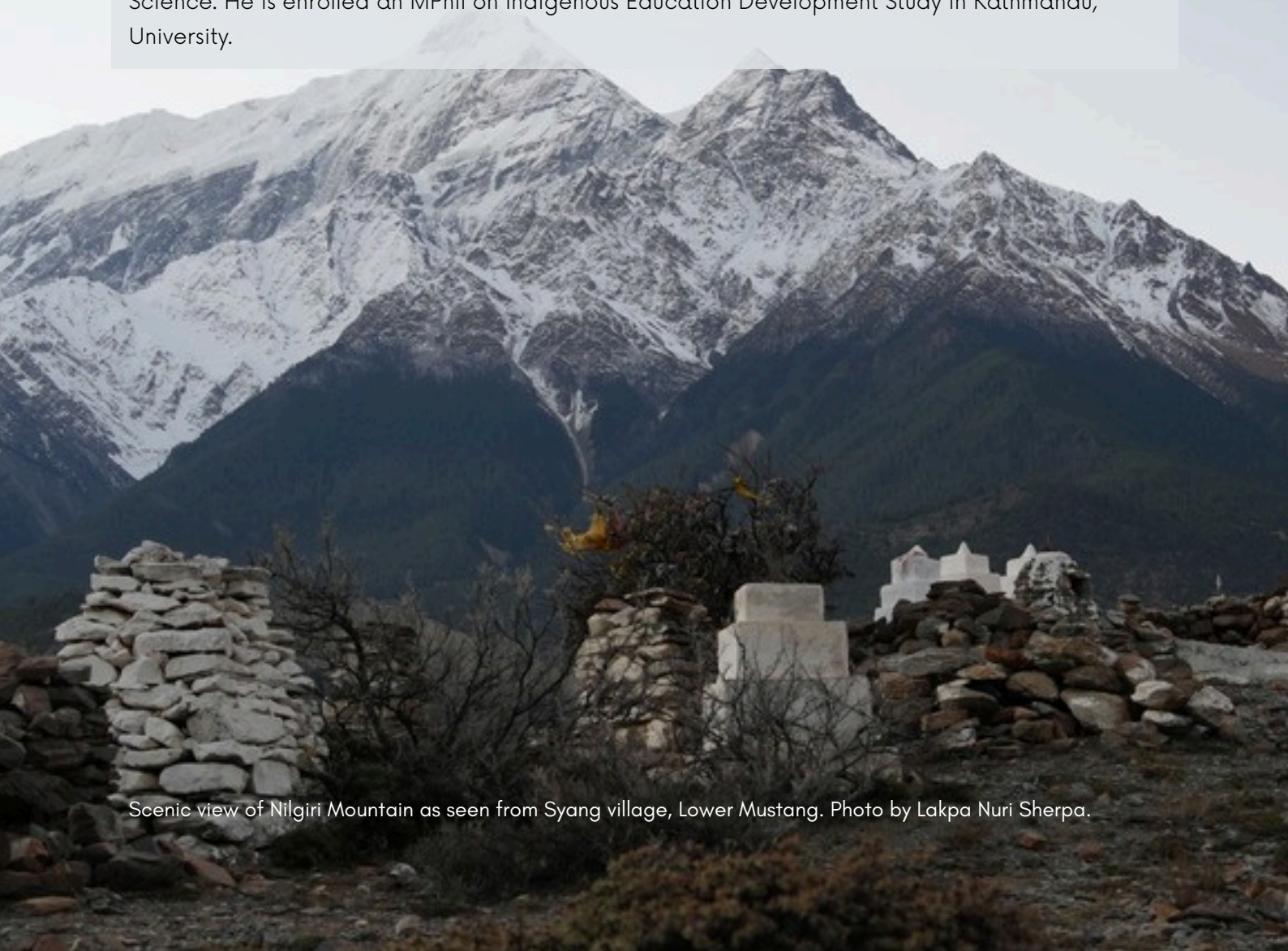
[3] See <http://inc.gov.np/eng/>.

[4] See <https://www.tharucommission.gov.np>.

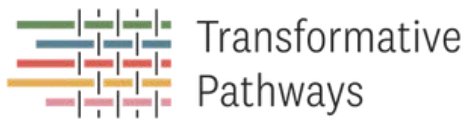
[5] See <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/Home/Index/EN>.

About the author

Kamal Kumar Rai is an Indigenous biodiversity professional promoting the rights, knowledge systems, practices, innovations, bioculture and full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples in matters related to biodiversity and conservation. Since 2004, he has been volunteering for the Himalayan Folklore and Biodiversity Study Program, Indigenous Knowledge and Peoples Network in the Wetland Biodiversity Conservation Society of Nepal, Nepal Indigenous Forum on biodiversity, and ITTs for biodiversity. He lobbies and negotiates with the CBD national focal point in the Ministry of Forests and Environment with regard to recognition, meaningful participation, and principles to obtain Free, Prior and Informed Consent of Indigenous Peoples. He has engaged on issues related to KMGBF, the Nagoya Protocol, the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, CBD Article 8(j) and related provisions, and Indigenous and Local Knowledge Taskforce, Lead Author both for IPBES and GEO-7. He also developed a publication on Indigenous culture and the religious and spiritual significance of Himalayan sacred lakes for biodiversity conservation, looking at nine sites in Nepal. He has travelled around the world to share insights on CBD Article 8(j) and other provisions, Indigenous knowledge, risk assessments and management related to living modified organisms, and socio-economic considerations related to safe handling, transfer and use of living modified organisms. He has a Masters' degree in biodiversity from the Swedish Biodiversity Centre CBM, Sweden, where he focused on CBD articles 8(j) and 10c, a graduate certificate on endangered species management of red panda habitat suitability from the Durrell Conservation Academy, University of Kent, and a Bachelor's degree from Tribhuvan University's Institute of Agriculture and Animal Science. He is enrolled an MPhil on Indigenous Education Development Study in Kathmandu, University.



Scenic view of Nilgiri Mountain as seen from Syang village, Lower Mustang. Photo by Lakpa Nuri Sherpa.



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The Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) is a regional organization founded in 1992 by Indigenous Peoples' movements. AIPP is committed to the cause of promoting and defending Indigenous Peoples' rights and human rights and articulating issues of relevance to Indigenous Peoples. At present, AIPP has 46 members from 14 countries in Asia with 18 Indigenous Peoples' national alliances/networks (national formations), and 30 local and sub-national organizations. Of this number, 16 are ethnic based organizations, six Indigenous Women organizations, four Indigenous Youth organizations, and one organization of Indigenous Persons with Disabilities.



For more information on the AIPP Series on Indigenous Peoples and biodiversity planning, please contact:

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