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From Participation to Power: Indigenous Peoples, NBSAPs, and the Implementation Gap in Asia

A summary brief for governments and funders

The Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) marks a turning point in global biodiversity governance by explicitly recognizing Indigenous Peoples' rights, knowledge systems, and leadership as fundamental to effective conservation. The question is whether governments translate these commitments into practice. National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs) offer one critical window into how, and how seriously, states are implementing these pledges. This policy brief highlights a recent study that examines Indigenous Peoples' engagement in NBSAP revision processes across 15 Asian countries where AIPP members and partners are active.

Key messages

- **NBSAPs show increased recognition of Indigenous Peoples, but decision-making power remains limited:** Indigenous Peoples appear more frequently in NBSAPs and consultation processes, yet are rarely positioned as conservation partners with defined roles, decision-making authority, or access to adequate resources.
- **Participation models constrain inclusion and effectiveness:** Barriers related to language, location, timing, and format continue to limit the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples, especially women, youth, elders, and persons with disabilities, reducing the quality and representativeness of voices in biodiversity planning.
- **Gaps in rights implementation weaken KMGBF delivery:** Insufficient recognition and operationalization of Indigenous Peoples' rights, including land rights, undermine effective implementation, monitoring, and accountability under the KMGBF.
- **Indigenous-led approaches strengthen implementation outcomes:** Indigenous-led initiatives align closely with KMGBF principles and improve conservation planning, but require formal recognition, power-sharing arrangements, and direct financing to be sustained and scaled.

Graphic: Lu Mien Indigenous motifs by Kanjana Maran.



Drawing on ten national biodiversity planning documents, a regional survey of 85 respondents from Indigenous organizations in 15 countries, and interviews with 21 Indigenous leaders and advocates, the study reveals a pattern: **while Indigenous Peoples appear more frequently in consultation processes, substantive decision-making power, financing, and accountability mechanisms remain concentrated elsewhere.** This gap not only undermines biodiversity outcomes and states' KMGBF commitments – it creates avoidable political and programmatic risks for governments and funders.

1. Recognition of Indigenous Peoples in NBSAPs has increased, but KMGBF commitments are weakly operationalized

The biodiversity plans make references to Indigenous Peoples, but unevenly across countries and selectively across thematic areas. Integration of Indigenous Peoples ranges from zero to half of the national targets. There is no reference at all to Indigenous persons with disabilities, while limited attention is given to Indigenous women (four countries) and youth (three countries).

Across the countries, Indigenous Peoples are more frequently framed as contributors of traditional knowledge than as rights-holders. On average, Indigenous communities are mentioned in 25% of the national targets and traditional knowledge is discussed in 17% targets. Free, Prior and Informed Consent appears in only around 6% of targets—indicating that Indigenous Peoples' knowledge is often acknowledged without equivalent safeguards over how it is used and governed, raising concern regarding compliance with KMGBF Target 22 and CBD Article 8(j).

The imbalance is also evident in relation to land and territorial rights. While most countries include some human rights language and references to environmental human rights defenders, only four countries refer to Indigenous Peoples' land rights within a target or indicator, and just two treat Indigenous Peoples' land tenure security as a headline or complementary indicator.

Beyond recognition at the narrative level, inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in implementation is limited. Only four countries mention resource allocation or funding mechanisms to support Indigenous Peoples' participation in NBSAP implementation. Similarly, discussion of Indigenous Peoples' roles in monitoring and evaluation appears in four countries. No country explicitly recognizes or promotes Indigenous leadership in implementation.

6%

of national targets, on average, mention Indigenous Peoples' right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent

0

country mentions Indigenous persons with disabilities in their biodiversity plan

2

countries include a human rights-based approach as a guiding principle of their biodiversity plans

2. Indigenous Peoples are included in process, but excluded from power

“[NBSAP revision] is a process that is organized for government agencies, civil society agencies, and the private sector and businesses... [Indigenous Peoples] had to try to find a way to participate rather than being invited directly.”
– Nittaya Earkanna, Indigenous woman in Thailand

59%
survey respondents who participated in NBSAP revision reported not having enough time, information and resources to participate meaningfully

“Two or three [Indigenous] people may be invited and given two or three minutes to speak in a meeting that lasts the whole day, with at least 10 ministries present. To call this ‘effective’ or ‘meaningful’ participation is deeply problematic.” – Sanjeeb Drong, Indigenous man in Bangladesh

While increasingly visible in NBSAP revision processes, Indigenous Peoples have little influence over outcomes. Authority over NBSAP revision processes remains concentrated within national governments, with substantial influence exercised by international conservation NGOs, UN agencies, academics and consultants. While some of these actors have supported Indigenous Peoples’ participation, others reinforce a technocratic conservation model that privileges technical expertise over rights-based and community-led approaches.

Participation of Indigenous Peoples remains limited and tokenistic. Less than half (46%) of survey respondents reported any participation in NBSAP revision processes. Where participation occurred, Indigenous leaders described it as largely symbolic, with limited opportunity to influence decisions. Indigenous Peoples were rarely invited to serve as technical resources or conservation partners, unlike international NGOs or other constituencies.

A gap between participation and influence signals a governance failure: consultation without power-sharing, increasing the risk of poor implementation, low local legitimacy, and financing ineffectiveness. More than half of respondents who participated felt Indigenous Peoples were not treated as equal partners, and almost 60% reported that participation was not meaningful. Among those who engaged in NBSAP processes, nearly half (49%) either did not know whether their inputs were reflected in final documents or knew that they were not.

3. Consultation practices reproduce exclusion and inequalities, weakening policy quality

Information about NBSAP revisions remains

inaccessible. Fewer than half of survey respondents reported receiving information about NBSAP updates, and only eight respondents received such information directly from governments. Most relied on Indigenous networks or civil society organizations. Even when governments shared information, it was often late, incomplete, or provided in inaccessible formats and languages, particularly excluding Indigenous persons with disabilities.

Consultation formats further constrain participation.

Multistakeholder consultation is the most common form of engagement, yet Indigenous representatives are routinely outnumbered, given limited speaking time, and excluded from agenda-setting. Indigenous concerns – such as the impacts of extractive industries – were sidelined in favour of dominant economic or technical priorities. Indigenous knowledge was frequently treated as anecdotal rather than authoritative, undermining policy relevance and effectiveness.

Limited participation opportunities

disproportionately exclude groups already

marginalized within Indigenous communities. Survey respondents rated equality between women and men at 2.8 (on a 1–5 scale), between youth and adults at 2.4, and between persons with and without disabilities at 2.0, indicating severe exclusion of Indigenous persons with disabilities.

Structural factors reinforce these patterns.

Consultations are often centralized in capital cities, privileging national-level organizations and individuals with greater resources, while sidelining grassroots voices. Men were more likely than women to report receiving information and direct participation. With limited seats available, Indigenous organizations often prioritize senior representatives, leaving little space for youth. These dynamics narrow the range of perspectives shaping biodiversity policy and weaken its responsiveness to on-the-ground realities.

9%

of survey respondents reported receiving information about the NBSAP update from the government

13%

of survey respondents participated in dedicated state-led consultations with Indigenous Peoples; direct roles in policy drafting or advisory bodies were rare.

“All of the consultation I heard [of] or participated in was led by Indigenous Peoples Organization with their own resources, which really does not have much potential to impact the document itself.” - Pema Wangmo Lama, young Indigenous woman from Nepal

4. Indigenous-led governance offers a viable and effective pathway for KMGBF implementation

Despite these constraints, Indigenous communities across Asia are not only advocating for inclusion – Indigenous Peoples are modelling alternative approaches to biodiversity governance. Through coalitions, federations, and task forces, Indigenous Peoples have self-organized to deliberate on conservation priorities and develop collective strategies to influence biodiversity decisions. These efforts are grounded in Indigenous systems of self-governance, reciprocity and stewardship, centering grassroots leadership, Indigenous women and youth empowerment, and promotion of traditional knowledge.

Indigenous-led planning processes have filled gaps left by inaccessible state-led processes, enabling informed and inclusive participation. Experiences from countries such as Nepal and the Philippines, where Indigenous Peoples secured decision-making positions or came up with their own biodiversity plan, show that Indigenous leadership ensures that biodiversity governance aligns more closely with KMGBF principles. These cases demonstrate that Indigenous governance is not an add-on, but a necessary condition for effective and rights-based implementation of the KMGBF.

In Nepal, Indigenous Peoples secured formal roles within the national NBSAP revision committees. Leaders of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities and the National Indigenous Women Forum are the Chair and Co-Chair, respectively, of the NBSAP Steering Committee, and the Nepal Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity has a representative in the Technical Committee. This was the outcome of persistent lobbying efforts that started in 2004, when Indigenous leaders proactively sought out engagement with the national CBD focal points.

On the grounds, pre-existing institutions such as the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, National Indigenous Women Forum, National Indigenous Women Federation, Youth Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, and Nepal Indigenous Disabilities Association mobilized to provide structured coordination among Indigenous communities, including Indigenous women, youth, and persons with disabilities, with technical insight from the Nepal Indigenous Forum for Biodiversity, in NBSAP engagement.

In the Philippines, the formation of the Indigenous Peoples and Biodiversity Coalition, with more than 50 members, enabled sustained participation in global and national biodiversity policy dialogues of Indigenous communities, Indigenous Peoples organizations and allies. Indigenous Peoples and allies from different parts of the country came together to review the national biodiversity plan, consolidated inputs, and came up with their own biodiversity plan – the historic Indigenous Peoples' Biodiversity Strategy and Plan (IPBSAP).

The document clearly articulates the status of biodiversity in Indigenous Peoples' territories in the Philippines and Indigenous Peoples' worldviews on biodiversity and development that make them de facto custodians of biodiversity. It communicates the key contributions and commitments of Indigenous Peoples and a comprehensive analysis of their challenges, threats and opportunities. The IPBSAP outlines a set of 23 targets in alignment with the KMGBF and the action plans through which Indigenous Peoples contribute to reaching those targets.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR GOVERNMENTS

- KMGBF commitments cannot be met through tokenistic consultations with Indigenous Peoples; they require power-sharing, fulfillment of rights and sustained financing.
- Weak recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights and leadership undermines biodiversity outcomes and KMGBF progress.
- Institutionalizing Indigenous Peoples' roles in biodiversity processes strengthens policy legitimacy, effectiveness, and compliance with international obligations.

PRIORITY ACTIONS

- 1 Institutionalize Indigenous Peoples' role in NBSAP implementation, monitoring, and reporting bodies.** Ensure inclusive and equitable representation of Indigenous Peoples of all genders, ages and disabilities in relevant decision-making bodies with real decision-making power. Move beyond ad-hoc consultations and establish formal mechanisms for Indigenous Peoples' representation in biodiversity committees. This should include permanent advisory groups or standing committees rather than short-term, dissolvable structures.
- 2 Earmark dedicated funding for Indigenous Peoples' participation in the implementation, monitoring and reporting of the NBSAP at all levels of governance.** Include Indigenous Peoples' representatives in the governing body of the fund to ensure Indigenous Peoples can use the fund for our self-determined priorities on conservation.
- 3 Adopt and implement a human rights-based approach across biodiversity and climate policies.** Integrate principles of justice, equity and human rights into the finalization, implementation, monitoring and reporting of NBSAPs, ensuring that conservation does not result in dispossession, rights violations, or the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples. Strengthen coherence between NBSAPs and other environmental policy instruments to ensure that activities under the Paris Agreement align with – and do not undermine – the goals and principles of the KMGBF.
- 4 Recognize Indigenous-led plans and initiatives as formal contributions to national biodiversity planning.** Treat Indigenous Peoples' strategies as formal contributions to national biodiversity planning, and allocate resources to support their implementation alongside state-led plans. Co-create, with Indigenous Peoples, a dedicated platform to document, monitor and report on good practices and community-led conservation, and demonstrate their contributions to NBSAP and KMGBF implementation. Ensure institutional support by appointing a national focal point on Article 8(j) – if one is not already in place – to facilitate coordination and uphold Indigenous knowledge and rights within national biodiversity planning. Recognize and protect Indigenous land and territorial rights as a core biodiversity strategy.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR FUNDERS AND DONORS

- Funding that bypasses Indigenous Peoples' governance structures and community-led initiatives reinforces technocratic control and limits impact.
- Participation and consultation mechanisms require careful design and considerations to ensure effective biodiversity conservation planning and implementation.
- Investing in Indigenous leadership, land tenure security, and self-determined governance offers high leverage for durable biodiversity outcomes.

PRIORITY ACTIONS

- 1 Shift funding directly to Indigenous Peoples' organizations, with flexible, long-term, accessible and predictable support.** Channel funding directly to Indigenous Peoples' organizations and communities, with flexibility to cover emerging needs (e.g., travel costs, translation), while ensuring that women, youth, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups fully benefit.
- 2 Invest in Indigenous Peoples and reduce reliance on intermediaries that dilute Indigenous authority.** Create enabling spaces in academia, civil society and policy platforms for Indigenous Peoples of all genders, ages and abilities to speak for themselves. Support translation, interpretation and accessible formats so that language and technical barriers do not exclude Indigenous people who are often marginalized.
- 3 Invest in Indigenous-led knowledge, monitoring, and governance systems, respecting data sovereignty.** Recognize, protect, and help scale Indigenous community-based documentation, monitoring and research initiatives, while respecting Indigenous data sovereignty.
- 4 Hold governments accountable to international commitments.** Use advocacy, research and monitoring to ensure states uphold their commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity, KMGBF, UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of 1989. Push for transparency in how governments implement NBSAPs, especially in relation to Indigenous Peoples' rights. Donors should also adopt a zero-tolerance policy toward human rights violations at all stages of NBSAP preparation, implementation, reporting, and monitoring.

This brief is part of an AIPP Series on Indigenous Peoples and biodiversity planning.

The full study can be accessed here: <https://aippnet.org/>

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:

- Mr. Lakpa Nuri Sherpa (lakpa@aippnet.org)
- Ms. Pirawan Wongnithisathaporn (pirawan@aippnet.org)
- Mr. Prem Singh Tharu (prem@aippnet.org)