

## Voices that must be heard: minorities and indigenous people combating climate change

By Farah Mihar

### Introduction

From the Batak people of Indonesia to the Karamojong in Africa, those who are least responsible for climate change are amongst the worst affected by it. They are often referred to in generic terms such as 'the world's poor,' or 'vulnerable groups' by international organizations, the media and the United Nations (UN). But these descriptions disguise the fact that specific communities – often indigenous and minority peoples – are more vulnerable than others. The impact of climate change for them is not at some undefined point in the future. It is already being felt to devastating effect. Lives have already been lost and communities are under threat: their unique linguistic and cultural traditions are at risk of disappearing off the face of the earth.

In a statement to mark World Indigenous Day in August 2008, the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon commented on the threat to indigenous languages saying, 'The loss of these languages would not only weaken the world's cultural diversity, but also our collective knowledge as a human race.'<sup>1</sup>

But all too often the impacts of global warming on human diversity are overlooked. More column inches have been devoted to the plight of the polar bear, than to the Inuit, the Arctic people who live in harmony with the wilderness.

This briefing paper addresses this gap and brings together a rare collection of interviews with members of minority and indigenous groups from across the world.<sup>2</sup> The people presented here include communities from the El Molo on the shores of Lake Turkana in Northern Kenya, to Sami reindeer herders in Finland, that live in remote regions of the world, who have very limited access to the media or to international organizations, and whose voices are rarely heard.

These stories are being told in critical times when major international decisions on climate change are being taken. UN member states are currently negotiating a climate change deal that will set carbon emission and other targets for countries to achieve beyond 2012 (see fact box).<sup>3</sup> This deal is expected to be reached at a state level meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark in December 2009. The penultimate state level negotiations on this issue will take place in Poznań, Poland in December 2008. Yet these vital discussions will take place with little or no input from the

communities most affected. As indigenous and minority communities are often politically and socially marginalized in their own countries, and in some cases discriminated against, they are unlikely to be consulted on any national or international level climate change strategies.

But the message from the interviews presented here is clear: these communities want their voices heard. They want to be part of the climate change negotiations at the highest level.

This briefing paper starts by outlining the key issues – including how communities are affected by climate change and their role at international level discussions. It presents the testimonies, and in conclusion, it considers the way forward for these communities and makes a series of recommendations on how their distinct knowledge can be harnessed by governments and the UN.

### Living with climate change

There are two reasons why minority and indigenous communities are more affected than others as the world's climate changes. Firstly, because they have a close and unique relationship with nature and often the entire community's livelihood depends on the environment. Secondly, these communities already live in poor, marginalized areas and in some countries are already victims of state discrimination.

The livelihoods of indigenous and minority communities including Sami reindeer herders in Norway, Sweden and Finland or Khmer Krom rice farmers in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam depend heavily on the environment. Indigenous communities in particular live in fragile ecosystems; from small islands in the Pacific, to mountainous regions, to arid lands in Africa, to the ice covered Arctic. Melting ice caps and desertification occurring as a result of climate change prevent animals accessing food and hinder herding and livestock rearing. This leads to loss of livestock, which in turn curtails incomes and leads to poverty, hunger and food shortages. The eventual long-term impacts include migration to cities, often condemning generations to poverty, and a shift from traditional ways of life. Communities dependent on farming are also unable to follow regular harvesting patterns because of change in the climate.

Indigenous peoples' relationship with the environment is exceptional. They are the original inhabitants of their lands and consider themselves its guardians. The interviews that follow emphasise the unique and special relationship these communities have with nature. For some, the earth is the dwelling place of their ancestors: they believe the decaying of land or increased flooding as a result of climate change disrupts the peace of their dead. Others believe the waterfalls or the rivers are their gods and goddesses and dwindling water levels affect aspects of their spirituality. For the Shuar people in Ecuador for example, waterfalls are like places of worship. People from Taiwan's indigenous Paiwan community would never 'speak bad words in the mountain valley' because the words are echoed across the rest of the environment.

Indigenous and minority communities, because they are already often poorer and marginalized, are also more in danger when climate related disasters strike. They are more likely to live in worse conditions and face more serious loss to life and property in times of climate related disaster. In India socially ostracized communities such as Dalits live in low lying areas in poor housing conditions; they faced the harshest consequences of recent heavy flooding in Bihar.<sup>4</sup> Minority communities are also likely to be the last to have access to relief in such situations and like Dalits they may be discriminated against in the aid distribution process.<sup>5</sup>

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, considered the most authoritative source of climate-change related data in the field) warns that the societies most vulnerable to the impact of climate change are those living in areas prone to extreme weather and whose economies are closely linked to climate sensitive resources.<sup>6</sup> Indigenous and minority communities exactly fit this description.

The grave impact of climate change on these communities can no longer be ignored. In some cases, as in the Arctic where people have fallen through thinning ice, Ethiopia where loss of livestock has brought about food shortages, climate change is already resulting in a loss of life.<sup>7</sup> Indigenous and minority communities have also lost their homes to bio-fuel crop plantations in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Brazil and Colombia. A few years ago, bio-fuel was hailed by some governments in industrialized countries as a solution to climate change. At the same time, some governments in the developing world saw it as a good opportunity for generating revenues.<sup>8</sup> Like other so-called mitigation strategies aimed at off-setting the heating effects of CO<sup>2</sup> (such as the construction of hydroelectric dams and financial incentives for governments to protect forests) the rush into bio-fuels has happened without consultation with local communities. They are already suffering the consequences.

Community structures are being severely threatened by climate change. Smaller ones fear becoming extinct, others may scatter as people become environmental migrants. Some are already having to give up their traditional way of

life and are being forced into new and different jobs which are alien to them – changing the entire character of their community. In Uganda for instance, the harsh drought in Karamoja region has led to people moving to the capital, Kampala, in search of jobs. According to one report, a high number of street children in Kampala come from the Karamajong community.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from this, indigenous communities also have 'traditional knowledge' that could be of immense use in developing adaptation and mitigation strategies on climate change. 'Traditional knowledge' can't be simplistically defined but can be understood as a collection of knowledge that is passed down and is developed through generations within these communities. It includes a variety of information, from being able to predict weather patterns and identify medicinal plants, to adapting new plant and animal conservation techniques. As many indigenous communities have survived through cycles of environmental change, much of this knowledge includes information that would undoubtedly be of use in the current climate change debate.<sup>10</sup>

## The international response

These issues concerning indigenous and smaller communities are being held at the periphery of the international agenda on climate change. In 1992, states signed up to a multilateral environmental treaty – the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – aimed at tackling the threat of global warming and sharing adaptation and mitigation strategies.<sup>11</sup> The treaty was adopted in 1994 and today enjoys near universal membership with 192 states having signed up. But unlike the Convention on Bio-diversity (CBD), the other major international environmental treaty (see fact box below), the UNFCCC does not recognize indigenous and other smaller communities.<sup>12</sup> Article 8(j) of the CBD specifically calls on states to respect, preserve and maintain traditional knowledge and practices of indigenous and local communities.<sup>13</sup> The Conference of Parties (COP) or state parties to the CBD has also set up a Working Group to specifically implement Article 8(j) and indigenous representatives have a significant role to play in most of the CBD meetings through this Working Group. There is also a voluntary fund that has been set up by CBD state parties to help finance indigenous peoples participation at these events.<sup>14</sup>

This is far from the case with the UNFCCC. The climate change convention makes no mention of indigenous or local communities. Indigenous activists were merely given an observer status. At best, this means they can observe major UNFCCC meetings such as those with the Conference of Parties (COP or state parties) and participate at sideline events, making statements and lobbying governments. In 2001 the UNFCCC decided to add indigenous communities as a 'constituency' – a cluster group for observer NGOs. This gives these groups slightly

more recognition and capacity and they can make statements at preliminaries of COP meetings at the discretion of the chairperson.<sup>15</sup>

Indigenous leaders describe their experience with the UNFCCC process as stifling and frustrating. 'We have been going to UNFCCC meetings since 2000 but in all these years there was not a single mention of indigenous peoples in any of the documents or resolutions that came out of the meetings. It was only in 2005 that mention was made,' says Johnson Cerda, an Ecuadorian indigenous activist. Patricia Cochran, Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC), describes the exclusion indigenous people experienced at the COP meeting in Bali in December 2007, 'Trying to get into places where policy and decisions were being made was impossible. Our badges didn't allow us to get into a lot of places.' Reasons varying from simple confusion, problems of accreditation and deliberate exclusion led to many indigenous representatives being left out of meetings in Bali and resulted in representatives publicly demonstrating outside the venue.<sup>16</sup>

There are three main arguments that make up the indigenous case for more effective participation in the UNFCCC process. Firstly, unlike the rest of the world's population, they live in ecologically fragile areas in the world and are already facing the consequences of climate change. Secondly, their traditional knowledge base built through centuries of surviving different types of climate changes could be of tremendous use in formulating international level adaptation and mitigation strategies. Finally: because key international and national level mitigation strategies will be implemented in indigenous lands. State parties are, for instance, in the process of setting targets for the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) and when these targets are set, their implementation will undoubtedly impact indigenous people who constitute the largest number of forest dwellers.<sup>17</sup>

These are compelling reasons. UN states can no longer afford to shut indigenous and minority communities out of the climate change negotiating process.

## Testimonies

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### 'Mother nature is very confused' Adelard Blackmard, Dene People, Canada



There has to be an understanding that indigenous people have a role in taking care of Mother Earth and have to look after it. It's a part of who we are; our life and our spiritual well being. Our people understand what is there on Mother Earth and the healing that we have to go through, we have to understand. We have to recognize what Mother Earth is telling. Mother Earth is telling us she has had enough but nobody will listen. We have to find

a way to deal with that, and part of that is creating an awareness that as indigenous people, maybe we have the solution – if you listen.

● Adelard Blackmard  
Buffalo River Dene Nation, Canada

*The Dene people are a nomadic community of about 1200 people who live in north eastern Saskatchewan, Canada.*

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### 'Because of climate change mountains are crumbling' Tung Chun-fa, Paiwan, Taiwan



The most serious problem is that in the last couple of years there have been typhoons, earthquakes and higher temperature. Because of climate change, mountains are crumbling, the river has changed the way it is going, the village could disappear and be destroyed. Without the right relationship with nature we can't maintain our traditional culture.

We have a special relationship with nature. When we fish, we don't fish all the time. We never say bad words in the

mountain valley because there is an echo. We sing and communicate with the mountain valley.

In our community you have to name land, so we identify land like a human being, like a newborn baby. It is an important custom we have. When the government takes over land it gets a number – or is just [called] forest land.

● Tung Chun-fa  
Paiwan community, Taiwan

*Paiwan is Taiwan's third-largest tribal group. They live scattered across the country's mountainous regions.*

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### 'Climate change will create a socio-economic crisis'

Sereivuth Erak, Khmer Krom people, Vietnam



We are concerned about climate change because we live in low lying land, so just like the Maldives, if it happens like predicted, if the water level rises, the Delta may be flooded. The rainfall is not normal, but before people did not see it as a part of global warming. Farming is now affected more and more.

Because the whole family depends on farming, so when the output is lower it is not adequate for them to live. Some may escape from the land to find a job in urban areas. This area is

already poor, because the political system discriminates. Our people are poorer than ethnic Vietnamese, so when there is climate change it will affect us more and more and create a socio-economic crisis.

● Sereivuth Erak  
Khmer Krom people, Vietnam

*The Khmer Krom people live in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam.*

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## 'It is not just that we lose people, we are losing communities' Patricia Cochran, Inuit, Alaska



The Arctic is the place where the most devastating effects of climate change are being witnessed. In our communities there is not one of us who knows someone who has not perished. We have many people in our communities who are experienced

hunters/gatherers, who go out on the land and simply fall through the ice and are never seen again. This is not a theory to us, it is our reality that we have to live with every single day.

It is not just that we lose people: we are losing communities. With the erosion and storms many communities have to move entirely because they have been destroyed by the storms; their homes and their schools have literally fallen into the ocean, so now many of them are looking to move their village. Communities that have been there for 10,000 years are being asked now to move from their homeland to some place else.

It is a very difficult thing to think about losing your culture, identity, and your home. How would anybody feel if you are told you have to leave your community where your roots are? Eighty five percent of our communities are coastal communities because that is where we live, we hunt and we fish so 85 percent of our communities, hundreds of villages, are facing this situation.

The indigenous worldview, the way we view things around us, the way we are educated and we are taught within our communities is very different from the western perspective where things are separated. Climate change is seen as if it is something on its own that has no impact on anything.

It makes no sense to us, for us it is connected/related to everything, human beings, animals and plants.

My understanding of traditional knowledge is that it is not static, it is dynamic. The knowledge I bring is different from what I received from my mother and my grand-mother. It is built upon all of the information of the past thousands of years of stories, songs and information that has been passed from communities. It is passed on.

People think of traditional knowledge as if it is living in a museum. [But] it is living and breathing, living in all of us and it has been passed down [and] survived centuries in the harshest conditions.

We were here long before those other people got here and we will be here long after they are gone. We have the knowledge and experience to survive in any kind of experience, and that is the kind of knowledge that it is our responsibility to bring to the rest of the world.

Indigenous people must have a place at the table where decisions are being taken, where policies that severely and critically impact our people, are being made. It is not enough to have an advisory group; we need to be part of the decision making process, part of an agreement that allows indigenous representation in that decision making.

● Patricia Cochran  
Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), Alaska

*Inuits or Eskimos are Alaska's largest indigenous group, numbering close to 55,000 people.*

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## 'We are in a part of the world that is always overlooked'

Kimo Carvalho, Hawaiian indigenous activist



My family are traditionally into fishing. We rely on fish for our food – it is part of our culture and economy. Climate change has resulted in coral bleaching and degradation of our reefs, causing fish to migrate elsewhere.

The sea and fish are a very close part of our lives and culture. *Kumulipo*, which is our creation story, is centred around the sea. We believe that from a coral polyp emerged ocean species, and then land, and that led to the creation of the world. There are other communities in Hawaii that are seeing water levels rise and in some cases, salt water is seeping into fresh water, affecting agriculture.

There are also a lot of communities in Hawaii that bury their dead by the sea shore and they believe that when people go out to fish their dead ancestors are watching over them and will protect them. When the sea level rises, it desecrates these burial sites and breaks that spiritual connection communities have with their dead ancestors.

My grandparents tell stories of how Hawaiians originally migrated to the islands because they had to adapt to climate change. Elders in our community, however, say this is all happening suddenly and it is something they have never experienced before.

The traditional knowledge we have may not help to solve all problems but if there is collaboration with modern science it can produce answers to climate change.

We feel we are not part of the agenda. We are in a part of the world that is always overlooked. There have been studies to show that the Pacific Islanders have contributed the least to greenhouse gases compared to any other part of the world but face the greatest risk of climate change. As a youth I want a future for me and my family in my homeland.

● Kimo Carvalho  
Indigenous fisher community, Hawaii

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## 'This is the earth's reaction to what people are doing around the world'

Alexandra Grigorieva, Sakha, Siberia



We consider the earth to be alive and there needs to be a harmony.

The climate is changing completely, where it used to be cold it is warm and the earth is changing and I believe it is changing because of the Great Spirit.

I believe that the earth is trying to clean itself in different ways; probably it is the earth's reaction to what people do around the world. We are indigenous people and we will do

everything we can to struggle for our rights, try to live on our lands. We hope and we believe that the situation will get better.

● Alexandra Grigorieva  
Sakha people, Russian Federation

*Sakha or Yakut are a Turkic people who mainly live in the Russian Federation.*

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## 'If the water disappears our Gods are gone' Juan Carlos Jintiach, Shuar people, Ecuador



Indigenous elders are seeing that something is going on. Water inundates some areas where there is low land. This never happened before. The sun usually shines for four to six days; now it does not rain for almost a month and this is in the rain forest. We need some

answers for that.

For us, our church is the waterfalls, the waterfalls keep our gods, in the forest, around the waterfalls. If the water disappears our gods are gone. We become empty and don't have the spiritual connection. [When] the river goes down, the

River God disappears, the fishes are gone. We are very symbolically connected with the land, forest and water. This big huge garden (Amazon rainforest) is not just living animals and plants. There are human beings, there are different languages, different customs, four hundred groups and different cosmos beliefs.

● Juan Carlos Jintiach  
Shuar People, Ecuador  
*The Shuar belong to the Jivaroan ethno-linguistic group and live in the upper Amazonian region of Ecuador as well as in Peru.*

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## 'Enormous environmental changes have occurred in Karamoja'

Michael Kuskus, Karamoja, northern Uganda



Enormous environmental changes have occurred in Karamoja in the past few years. In my childhood, I remember there were lots of forests in Karamoja, and some areas were unreachable because of the thickness of forests. People lived in scattered groups. At

no time was there starvation. Since 1979 rain patterns have been drastically altered and food production and livestock rearing has been greatly affected as a result. Erratic and shorter rains mean that the ground remains dry and nothing can grow. Cattle die.

When cattle die the economic livelihood of people is greatly weakened. This leads to cattle rustling and conflicts arise between groups. Since 2000 we have experienced drought twice. Last year the whole of Karamoja province did not have food. Coping strategies for our people mean having to leave our homes and search in the cities and towns for jobs just to get food to survive.

In 1998 we started to ask people to group together to provide them with loans. A good harvest in 1998 meant loans could be used to purchase food stock that could be stored to be used later in periods of drought.

When food is plentiful, we encourage people to sell their livestock (prices of livestock are higher when food is plentiful)

to purchase food stock and to save their money. This helps them diversify their resources, which is what we need in times of drought.

People need to be able to make profits so that they can sustain themselves in the future. Climate change in the future is going to affect Karamoja very badly. It used to be that we had rain for six months and it was dry for six months. It is now eight months of drought and only four months with rain. And even this rain is spread out and not continuous.

This kind of rain leads to soil erosion, as the ground does not absorb enough water. This makes grass and crops impossible to grow. We are worried that in the next few years the rains will reduce even further, to only one or two months a year. This is going to have a huge negative impact on us and affect our lifestyle drastically. More people will move away and our communities will be splintered, traditions lost. How much more of this will we be able to take?'<sup>18</sup>

● Michael Kuskus  
Karamoja province, Uganda

*Karamojong are pastoralists who live in northeastern Uganda. They number around 475,000 people.*

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## 'Don't wait to get taught' Anna Pinto, Meitei community, India



The first time I ever heard about climate change was from a Meitei farmer, 22 years ago. He said the weather is not what it is supposed to be. It is not just a small shift, it is a big change and we don't know what it is.

Glaciers melt at the same time as the monsoons, so by July you have massive flooding in India.

Indigenous traditional knowledge cannot be understood in terms of discrete giga bites, it is an attitude, it is an approach. It's a real understanding that the earth is alive and not a dead thing.

Among the Meitei the traditional religion is a myth between animism and ancestor worship, so the earth is our mother, the rivers and lakes are our sisters and they are worshipped as elder sisters and goddesses. There is a tremendous amount of knowledge and it is dying because it is not respected.

We understand that if you pour poison in the lake, the lake cannot feed fish, it is like any organic creature, it dies. If you pour poison in your throat, you can't expect to have healthy children you can't have a healthy life.

Indigenous people don't just think like that; they know it, it is part of who they are.

It is an approach that consults with the earth. We don't say, 'The earth is too dry to plant rice and so we will try corn.' That is not going to work; it is not going to happen.

If you don't respect indigenous peoples' knowledge, we will be taken away from you and our knowledge will be lost. Indigenous communities will become extinct soon as a result of climate change. If there is no care given to them, they will not be able to adapt to other environment.'<sup>19</sup>

● Anna Pinto  
Meitei community, India

*The Meitei are a river dwelling community in India but are also found in Burma and hill areas of Bangladesh. They claim their origins from the Infal valley. They are agriculture-based, they harvest the wetlands around the mountain valley system. In India they are sometimes referred to as Manipuris.*

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## 'We are under threat of extinction' Christiana Saiti Louwa, El Molo people, Kenya



One thing we know for sure is that the water level in Lake Turkana has gone down. The eco system is also threatened and desertification is also a major concern of ours because the place is already arid and it is becoming hotter and dryer every year.

The heat has been so severe that we have lost a lot of grazing pastures. Poverty has intensified. We also depend on the lake waters and the water has become concentrated and is causing deformity amongst people.

We are under threat of extinction. Where do people go? They are not accustomed to living in highlands, they don't know farming, they only fish and keep livestock. If the situation doesn't change we could be extinct.

Because women are the ones who work so hard for the family they are emotionally, physically and mentally affected. They are under so much stress on how to feed their children. They undergo a lot of emotional stress.

The UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) has an office in Nairobi to deal directly with indigenous people on the ground. But to deal with UN you have to be accredited. Most of our

local community bodies don't have that and they don't live close to Nairobi.

Also when we talk about issues affecting indigenous people I would like us to talk about 'do-able' things, to help enhance the capacity of indigenous people so we get tangible gains from all the forums we attend rather than it just being rhetoric.

We talk but we don't know if anyone is listening. If governments are really listening then the situation should have changed for the better by now. All these interventions should bring out the desired change for indigenous people. Because the situation is not changing I don't know if the governments and the UN are listening. Maybe they need to change the way they are doing things to suit the indigenous people and not their systems.

● Christiana Saiti Louwa  
El Molo people, Kenya

*The El Molo are a mainly fishing community of a few hundred people who live on the south eastern shore of Lake Turkana in northern Kenya.*

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## 'Many people don't recognize this kind of winter' Aslak Paltto, Sami activist, Finland



It's the first winter that we can really see climate change. Now we have more snow and colder weather at this time of the year than in many years. We have one metre of snow in the north but in south Finland they don't have any snow because it has been so warm during

the whole winter. Usually it is very cold in January and December. Many people don't recognize this kind of winter and it is very easy to say it's definitely climate change. I speak for myself as the reindeer herder. We have reindeers grazing the lands. It rains in autumn and the mushrooms grow and the reindeers eat the mushrooms. But last year it rained then [the temperature fell to] minus degrees and the land froze with ice. When it snows after the ice, the lichens that reindeers eat are frozen. And it's hard, it's impossible to get through multiple layers of snow.

Then in November, December it rains. Suddenly you have 20cm snow and suddenly it becomes warm, the snow melts down a little bit, it rains and then suddenly it is cold, minus degrees, totally ice packed hard. It's like steel hard snow. It's impossible to get through for a reindeer to eat.

It's the inland [areas that] mostly have these kind of problems. Climate change hasn't been an issue before.

Our country can't affect climate change as much as the bigger countries like China, India, America, Canada and Russia. These are the biggest countries that can affect climate change.

In Finland we have the smallest consuming and polluting cars. We are only 5 million people in Finland. We have Russia on the next side of the border. They can pollute as much as they want. They don't have any limitation there. It's almost ridiculous [to think] that we can change something in our country that can make climate change go a better way.

Last year, the Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian Sami, they got involved and had a conference in Sweden. They want to [gather] the traditional knowledge that [can] prove that it [climate change] is happening. But for our generation, it's not going to help. Maybe in 200-300 hundred years it can help [if] issues that I have spoken started right now.

● Aslak Paltto  
Sami community, Finland

*The Sami are mostly reindeer herders who live in Finland, Norway and Sweden.*

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## 'People are starving, we need our traditional way of life'

Mazge Gazeto, Gamo tribal elder, Ethiopia



In the past nature and humans were very close. When we pray it rains and as we make a prayer our land yields good.

These days, people are not respecting the traditional way of life. Our rituals are being neglected and elders are being neglected.

These days we don't practise these traditions.

The climate is changing now, now we are starving. We need our traditional way of life, it keeps a relationship with nature. In my childhood our land was productive, now it is unlike what I saw in my childhood. It rains when it is expected to be sunny and there is drought when it should rain. Now because of climate change we are starving.

In the past when the birds sing they tell us it is land preparation season: tillage season, some animals also tell us. Because our rituals are neglected we don't listen to these things.

As an elder what I believe is: if we perform rituals like our fathers were doing, things we are facing now can be solved in the future.

● Mazge Gazeto  
Gamo Tribe, Ethiopia

*The Gamo people live in the highland areas of southern Ethiopia.*

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## 'Bio-fuels are making our peoples' lives worse' Abdon Nababan, Batak people, Indonesia



Climate change has been around for some time but the problem is that now climate change is also affecting the west. Indigenous people have been dealing with climate change for hundreds of years and they have the capacity and knowledge to adapt to it. It

is not a new issue for indigenous people.

Why this is very important for indigenous people is because they live in ecologically sensitive areas; they are already victims of the violations by governments. Climate change makes their daily life worse.

We can see the impact on the agricultural cycle. Now with climate change the rainfall is not like it used to be in the old times and also the weather, the seasons are not the same, so the agricultural calendar has changed. It is difficult to predict the seasons, people already have their own systems – when to cultivate rice and potatoes – but now they can't rely on it any more.

The changing of agriculture also changes the rituals. Every year before they plant rice they have their rituals but now they have no time to prepare that because they don't know when the planting time will be.

Before bio-fuels, before climate change issues, indigenous people already were forced from their land to develop oil palm territories. Now because oil palm is needed for bio-fuel there is an expansion of the oil palm industry almost all over Indonesia so bio-fuels now make indigenous peoples' lives worse. They are suffering.

The oil palm companies work together with the government to take over indigenous peoples' lands and then they change the forest to build plantations, it is very simple.

Their habitats are changed, they don't have social preparation, their environment changes but the social system does not change so there is a gap there and they get into a crisis. It could be a food crisis for instance because there are no animals, no vegetables, so their life gets into a cash economic system but their culture is not cash economic – so it's genocide.

The UN system is helping a lot but it is not enough.<sup>20</sup> The UN can put pressure on our government but our government also have their own agenda, they don't say the truth of what is going on. The UN system cannot force our government to do anything.

The UN takes our reports and asks our government to respond. But if you see the response from the government they don't respond to what really is our problem. The oil palms are still there, violations to the human rights of the indigenous peoples are still there: nothing has changed on the ground.<sup>21</sup>

● Abdon Nababan

Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN), Indonesia

*The Batak, numbering some six million people, live in North Sumatra, Indonesia. Most of them live in the highlands, especially around Lake Toba.*

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## 'In India climate change is about power relations' Sirivella Prasad, Dalit activist, India



Dalit communities in India are treated as untouchable by upper castes. Any change in climate affects Dalits the most because they are a vulnerable and marginalized group.

Floods affect the Dalits' habitat the most as they are low-lying areas. As the Dalits are denied access to services, relief does not reach them in time. Dalits are not allowed to take shelter in upper caste areas during the floods and they are denied shelter [by the upper caste] even in the common shelters set up by the government. Dalit women taking shelter from floods are also attacked/ harassed by upper caste men. In the aftermath of the floods they don't have access to clean drinking water and are not allowed to take water from the common bore-well because of caste-based discrimination. In some areas the Dalits even started drinking flood water during the 2007 floods in Bihar.

Other climate related disasters such as cyclone and drought also affect the Dalits as much as the floods. Eighty five per cent of Dalits are daily wage agricultural labourers and when there is a drought they are out of work and have no access to relief as well. They are landless and don't have stored food grains to tide them through the drought. Climate-related

disasters affect their right to health, education, land and livelihood. Currently the time period of floods in Bihar is five months. This increase in the time period has only been seen in last ten years. In the 1950s, the time period of the flood was only four days. This is the history of floods in this region. The state has not taken proper measures to protect the Dalits from this climate related disaster.

There are national and international agencies that are working with Dalits but more needs to be done to minimize the effects of climate change and to bring in preventive measures. The government is doing some work and we also have the UN agencies working with the Dalits, but Dalits need to be included in finding solutions for the way they are affected by climate change. What is most needed is a better understanding of how uniquely Dalits are placed in relation to climate change related disasters.<sup>22</sup>

● Dr Sirivella Prasad

National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, India

*Dalits are considered 'low cast' in India and Nepal. There are some 166 million Dalits in India alone who are spread across the entire country.*

## Ways forward

Climate change is now higher up on the international agenda than ever before and it is at this level that indigenous and minority communities must play a role. While it is obviously necessary for them to be involved with national level strategy making, much of the direction of climate change policy will be set in motion at an international level.<sup>23</sup> Ahead of the meetings in Poznań and Copenhagen, communities fear these decisions will be made without the voices of those most affected.

Indigenous communities have long been calling for a mechanism to enable them to participate in the UNFCCC process. This mechanism would take the shape of a Working Group where community representatives will discuss major issues of climate change and make recommendations that states will be under obligation to take into consideration. Creating this Working Group would require states to pass a resolution in a Conference of Parties (COP) meeting. This has been one of the main calls by indigenous communities at the sidelines of all the previous UNFCCC meetings.

Recognising the urgency towards the 2009 deadline and based on the so-far lukewarm response from a majority of states, indigenous communities have now slightly adjusted their call. They are now asking for an expert level workshop to be organized where community leaders could address the impact of climate change and make recommendations that are more likely to be reflected in a new climate deal. This also requires a state party resolution but is a smaller demand, requires less funding and is organizationally easier to set up.

The last major Conference Of Parties meeting (COP 13) in its Bali Action Plan (Bali 2007) provided some opening. It recognized that the needs of indigenous and local communities must be addressed when actions are taken to reduce emissions from deforestation and degradation (REDD).

REDD is one of the 2012 targets that needs to be set by 2009 (see fact box). REDD programmes are aimed at mitigating climate change by preventing deforestations in developing countries. Some of the proposed plans include offering developing countries financial incentives including developing a market mechanism where the levels of CO<sup>2</sup> they save on can be traded with other countries. While REDD targets are being negotiated money is already pouring in to fund projects on it. In Bali the World Bank launched the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPC) to support governments to participate in REDD discussions and fund pilot projects in developing countries.<sup>24</sup> The World Bank has been heavily criticised for not including indigenous peoples in the planning of this programme and not allowing them voting rights in the management of funds.<sup>25</sup> Also in Bali the Norwegian government pledged three billion dollars over six years for projects on REDD.<sup>26</sup>

Indigenous peoples have serious concerns about REDD initiatives. Some community leaders do not want to participate in the discussions around them because they are state centred, giving governments the bulk of the say including in funding. Communities are also worried that the funding may be used to win over some groups at the expense of genuine participation. REDD programmes involve zoning of forests based on levels of deforestation, which activists fear will be done without consultation with indigenous people and without respecting communities' existing boundaries. An indigenous representative from the Amazon recently commented on how one of the elders in his community responded to this by saying, 'How can the state tell me to manage my land which I have managing all my life?'

Despite the opposition, other indigenous activists however see REDD as the vehicle to get community voices into a climate change deal. They also feel the funding provides an opportunity for indigenous representatives to participate more widely in international level negotiations.<sup>27</sup>

### Fact box

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is a multilateral treaty that is binding on all states that have signed up to it. It was signed by 150 states at the 1990 Rio earth summit but its membership has now increased to 191. The three main goals of the convention are to conserve biological diversity, sustainably use its components, and share fairly and equitably the benefits from the use of genetic resources. ([www.cbd.int](http://www.cbd.int))

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was also signed by states at the Rio earth summit but does not contain legally binding targets for member states. At present 192 states have signed up to the UNFCCC.

The main decision-making body on implementation of both conventions are the Conference of Parties (COP) or states

that have signed up to the respective treaties. The UNFCCC enables countries to share information on climate change and cooperate on adaptation and mitigation strategies. (see [www.unfccc.int](http://www.unfccc.int))

In 1997 the third Conference of Parties (COP) meeting in Kyoto, Japan, adopted the Kyoto Protocol. It is a binding international agreement that commits 37 industrialised countries and the European Commission to reduce their Greenhouse Gas emissions by five percent from 1990 levels in a five year period from 2008 to 2012 ([www.unfccc.int](http://www.unfccc.int))

Targets beyond 2012 are currently being negotiated and are expected to be decided by the 15th COP meeting in Copenhagen in December 2009.



However all activists assert that no REDD projects should go ahead without free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples.<sup>28</sup>

Another important point indigenous peoples are trying to drive through to the international negotiating process is for the recognition of their traditional knowledge. They are offering to share it with scientists to help better predict, understand and interpret changes in the climate. They are also pressing the important contribution this knowledge can make to adaptation strategies. Again here too some community leaders have concerns on how this indigenous knowledge will be used. They are firm that it must be treated with due respect and understood in line with an indigenous world view rather than broken up into segments and taken out of context. They are also worried about ownership rights of this knowledge. At the recently concluded International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) forum in Barcelona (2008) many indigenous representatives were seeking information on issues of intellectual property rights and how these laws could be used to protect indigenous peoples ownership of their traditional knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

These are amongst the several important issues that indigenous peoples themselves need to reach a common position on whilst they push governments to enable them to input into the UNFCCC process. The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) has provided some platform for this discussion. The UNPFII took up climate change as the theme of its 2008 Forum, giving representatives an opportunity to describe the impact of climate change on their communities. At the conclusion the UNPFII made a series of recommendations including asking for UNFCCC to set up a mechanism to enable indigenous peoples to participate in negotiations.<sup>30</sup> But as the UNPFII is not an intergovernmental body, it has very limited influence on governments. Though the recommendations were adopted by the Forum it was done amidst some protests that the Forum was not taking enough of a hard-line approach against governments and on issues such as REDD.<sup>31</sup>

A global summit on the impact of indigenous peoples and climate change organised by the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) to be held in April 2009 in Alaska is likely to provide the opportunity for better consensus building on these contentious issues. Indigenous peoples expect to come out with a declaration at the conclusion of the summit outlining their common position and making recommendations to governments. They will have close to eight months to lobby governments to take up those recommendations before a climate change deal is agreed in Copenhagen in December 2009.

While indigenous groups have made some strides in lobbying with states on these issues, it is worrying that minority groups are far from represented. In regions of the world – Africa for instance – some indigenous communities also identify themselves as minorities and have therefore

taken part in some of the discussions at the UNPFII and at other international events such as the IUCN Forum. However in most cases whilst some minority communities are affected as critically by climate change, they are far behind in lobbying and campaigning on this issue. It is important that minority communities are increasingly supported to join indigenous communities in their lobbying for a participatory mechanism at UNFCCC. It is equally crucial that if and when such a mechanism is created it includes minority communities as well. The CBD's terminology of 'indigenous and local communities' could be a starting point in the framing of any future UNFCCC mechanism. UN minority mechanisms such as the Forum on Minorities and the Independent Expert on minorities should also begin work on the issue of climate change.

The primary focus of this paper has been the UNFCCC process because it is the fundamental international climate change treaty and also because of the 2009 climate change deal. However in the past year another key UN mechanism has also provided some opening for indigenous and smaller communities. In March 2008, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC, the highest UN body on human rights,) passed a landmark resolution recognizing climate change as a human rights issue.<sup>32</sup> The UNHRC commissioned a major piece of research from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on climate change and human rights.<sup>33</sup> The report will be presented to the council in March 2009. It is imperative that the report does not deal just with 'vulnerable' communities, but specifically names and recognises issues pertaining to minority and indigenous peoples.<sup>34</sup> It is also important that the HRC develops this human rights approach to climate change by continuing to discuss and debate on climate change related issues.

For this to be achieved, the Council should appoint an expert on climate change who should be tasked to investigate firstly how climate change is affecting the human rights of people, and secondly if states are meeting their human rights obligations under the several binding treaties they have signed up to. For example the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states that, 'Minorities have the right to enjoy their own culture.....the right to profess and practice their own religion or to use their own language.' This is re-iterated in the Vienna Declaration<sup>36</sup> (Article 19) while Article 20 of the same instrument in reference to indigenous people, lays out that states should 'recognise the value and diversity of their distinct identities, cultures and social organisations.' A UN expert appointed by the council will be able to investigate if states are standing by these and other binding commitments when drawing up national level strategies on climate change adaptation or when contributing to international level discussions. This would be particularly pertinent given that the threat from climate change could affect a range of human rights from the right to food, right to land, right to participation (in REDD projects for instance) and cultural and language rights.

There is also a need for collaboration between scientific studies on climate change and indigenous traditional knowledge. The IPCC is considered to be the authority on scientific research on climate change. Research by this Nobel Peace prize winning team is considered cutting edge; but it took until 2007 for the panel to effectively consider the impact of climate change on indigenous people.<sup>37</sup>

The IPCC has three Working Groups that produce major reports. Working Group 1 assesses the scientific aspects of climate change, Working Group 2 addresses vulnerability of human and natural systems to climate change and Working Group 3 assesses options for limiting greenhouse gas emissions and other mitigation strategies. In its last major report, *Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability* (April 2007), Working Group 2 included some information on indigenous people including a case study on the use of traditional knowledge amongst people in Arctic in climate change adaptation.<sup>38</sup> There is much scope for the IPCC to build upon this work either through future tasks of this Working Group or in a special report.<sup>39</sup> The IPCC should look at issues including the impact of climate change on indigenous communities, and how current adaptation and mitigation strategies are impacting on these communities. The report should also look at how indigenous traditional knowledge can contribute towards adaptation and mitigation strategies.

## Conclusion

Whilst it is obviously important that a global effort should be devoted to tackling the causes of climate change, in the form of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, this alone is no longer a sufficient response to climate change. Global warming is already with us, and whatever action is taken now or in the future, we will feel the effects of a warming planet for years to come. As the international response is cranking up to deliver workable adaptation and mitigation strategies, it is vital that minority and indigenous communities be involved in all discussions. Global warming is causing loss of their lives and livelihoods. It is threatening entire communities, stealing away cultures, traditions and languages.

At the UN level the clock is ticking towards the 2009 Copenhagen meeting but minority and indigenous people have no voice in these negotiations.

For many of the community representatives interviewed for this briefing, exclusion from the UNFCCC process leading to Copenhagen and beyond is unacceptable. Because of the unique and serious manner in which they are affected by climate change, they believe they should play a more significant role in the international negotiations. They also feel they have a significant contribution to make to the discussions.

It is imperative that even in this very late stage the concerns of minority and indigenous communities are reflected in an eventual climate change deal. It is equally vital that global leaders do not lose out the tremendous

traditional knowledge many of these communities have in mitigating and adapting to climate change.

## Recommendations

- The 14th Conference of Parties in its meeting in Poznań must adapt a resolution to organize an expert workshop on the impact of climate change on indigenous and minority communities.
- The workshop must also consider how governments and industrialized countries can address the rights and concerns of indigenous and local communities in the implementation of REDD in developing countries.
- One of the outcomes of the workshop must be to make recommendations on how communities can participate in designing and implementing adaptation and mitigation strategies and should report to COP 15 in Copenhagen in 2009.
- The Conference of Parties (COP) must adapt a resolution to create a Working Group to enable indigenous and minority communities to participate more effectively in the UNFCCC process.
- The COP must create a voluntary fund that could help finance community representatives' participation and capacity building at the various international level meetings.
- The COP of UNFCCC must recognize the Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change (a network of indigenous peoples' organisations) as an advisory body.
- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) should produce a special report on climate change and indigenous and minority communities. The report should look at how current adaptation and mitigation strategies are impacting these communities and how indigenous traditional knowledge can contribute towards adaptation and mitigation strategies.
- The UN HRC should appoint a Special Rapporteur on Climate Change.
- The UN HRC should commission the Special Rapporteur together with the UN independent expert on minority issues and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people to conduct a special study on the impact of climate change on the rights of minority and indigenous communities.
- The newly formed UN Forum on Minorities should take up climate change as the theme of its next session in 2009 in order to specifically study the impact of climate change on minorities.
- The Forum on Minorities should work together with the UNFCCC, the special expert on minorities, the minority unit of OHCHR, and INGOs to better mobilize minority communities nationally and internationally on issues of climate change and support them in lobbying at intergovernmental level meetings.

## Notes

- 1 The quote is in reference to 2008 being world year of languages. See statement made on World Indigenous Day [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/indigenoustday2008\\_SG\\_en.doc](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/indigenoustday2008_SG_en.doc) (accessed October 2008)
- 2 Most of the interviews were conducted during the special session on climate change of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) in March 2008. Others were conducted directly with community representatives in their respective countries. Only excerpts of the full interviews are in this briefing paper.
- 3 The Kyoto Protocol was adopted in 1997 committing 37 industrialized countries and the European Commission to reduce their Greenhouse Gas emissions by five percent from 1990 levels in a five year period from 2008-2012. The current round of talks is to set new targets beyond this period. [http://unfccc.int/kyoto\\_protocol/items/2830.php](http://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol/items/2830.php) (accessed October 2008)
- 4 *India: Untouchables suffer 'relief discrimination' after flood*, by Randeep Ramesh, the Guardian, 3 September 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/03/india.naturaldisasters> (accessed September 2008)
- 5 *State of the world's minorities 2008*, MRG (2008)
- 6 *Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability*, IPCC (2007) [www.ipcc.ch](http://www.ipcc.ch) (accessed October 2008)
- 7 MRG interviews, New York, April 2008
- 8 *State of the world's minorities 2008*, MRG (2008)
- 9 *Karamajong Street-children in Kampala: Analysing The Root Causes*, 180 United Global Action for Street Children, (2006), [http://www.streetchildren.org.uk/reports/karamoja\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.streetchildren.org.uk/reports/karamoja_report_final.pdf), (accessed October 2008)
- 10 For more information on indigenous traditional knowledge see *Guide on Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples* (2008), Tebtebba Foundation, Indigenous Peoples' International Centre for Policy Research and Education, Philippines. The CBD website also offers a detailed explanation see <http://www.cbd.int/traditional/intro.shtml> (accessed October 2008)
- 11 For more details on CBD see: <http://www.cbd.int/>
- 12 The preamble of the convention recognizes the close relationship between indigenous peoples and bio-diversity and in article 8(j) the convention makes mention of the importance of indigenous traditional knowledge
- 13 Article 8(j) reads 'Subject to its national legislation, 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 diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge, innovations and practices.'
- 14 For more details see <http://www.cbd.int/traditional/intro.shtml> (accessed October 2008)
- 15 See definition of observer constituency in [http://unfccc.int/files/parties\\_and\\_observers/ngo/application/pdf/const.pdf](http://unfccc.int/files/parties_and_observers/ngo/application/pdf/const.pdf) (accessed September 2008)
- 16 See media reports <http://climateandcapitalism.com/?p=274> and [http://www.newconsumer.com/news/item/indigenous\\_peoples\\_protest\\_at\\_bali\\_conference/](http://www.newconsumer.com/news/item/indigenous_peoples_protest_at_bali_conference/) (accessed September 2008)
- 17 At the COP 13 meeting in Bali states recognized that REDD was a major issue in the current climate change debate and decided to include it as one of the areas for which targets had to be set by 2012 see <http://unfccc.org/unfccc/article/article-climate-change/reducing-emissions-from-deforestation-and-degradation-redd.html> (accessed October 2008)
- 18 Interview conducted by Samia Khan of Minority Rights Group International, *State of the world's minorities 2008*, MRG (2008).
- 19 In full on MRG's climate change campaign site <http://www.minorityrights.org/6673/a-show-of-hands/a-show-of-hands.html>
- 20 In 2007 the UN's main body against racism – the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) – expressed concern at the grabbing of indigenous land for oil palm plantations. The Committee asked the Indonesian government to ensure it consults with communities on such projects. See *State of the world's minorities 2008*, MRG (2008).
- 21 In full on MRG's climate change campaign site <http://www.minorityrights.org/6673/a-show-of-hands/a-show-of-hands.html>
- 22 Email interview conducted by Shabana Sundaram of Minority Rights Group International, London, August 2008
- 23 The UNFCCC has set National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs) that also offer some space for indigenous and local communities to participate in but this depends heavily on the relationship the governments have with these communities in their respective countries. Many indigenous representatives involved in international level activism, particularly those from South America and Africa, told the author they had not been consulted at strategy making at the national level. For more information on NAPAs and the process see [unfccc.int/national\\_reports/napa/2719](http://unfccc.int/national_reports/napa/2719).
- 24 *Guide on Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples* (2008), Tebtebba Foundation, Indigenous Peoples' International Centre for Policy Research and Education, Philippines.
- 25 *The Foreign Carbon Partnership Facility: Weakening Indigenous Peoples Rights to lands and resources*, Forest Peoples Programme, (2008) <http://www.forestpeoples.org> (accessed September 2008)
- 26 *ibid.*
- 27 MRG interviews. For more information on indigenous peoples response to REDD see Tebtebba guide.
- 28 MRG interviews and statement from the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change at the Accra climate change talks in August 2008 [www.tebtebba.org/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_download&gid=272&Itemid=27](http://www.tebtebba.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=272&Itemid=27) (accessed September 2008)
- 29 MRG interviews at IUCN Forum October 2008
- 30 See report on the special session on climate change of the UNPFII and full list of recommendations on <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N08/338/82/PDF/N0833882.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed on September 2008)
- 31 See protest at UNPFII on youtube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtORVi7GybY>
- 32 See UN HRC resolution 7/23 [http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/E/HRC/resolutions/A\\_HRC\\_RES\\_7\\_23.pdf](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/E/HRC/resolutions/A_HRC_RES_7_23.pdf)
- 33 See OHCHR website <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/climatechange/study.htm>
- 34 The resolution was limited to recognizing the poor and people who live in certain eco-systems such as low lying areas as vulnerable.
- 35 Article 27, ICCPR
- 36 The Vienna Declaration was adopted by UN member states at the World Conference of human rights in Vienna in 1993, see: [http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/\(Symbol\)/A.CONF.157.23.En](http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/(Symbol)/A.CONF.157.23.En)
- 37 See IUCN report on climate change [http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/indigenous\\_peoples\\_climate\\_change.pdf](http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/indigenous_peoples_climate_change.pdf) (accessed October 2008)
- 38 *Impacts, Adaptation and vulnerability*, IPCC (2007) <http://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/ar4-wg2.htm> (accessed October 2008)
- 39 Special reports have been prepared on issues such as 'regional impact of climate change' and 'land use.' For details on the IPCC report procedure see <http://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/index.htm>

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## *Voices that must be heard: minorities and indigenous people combating climate change*

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