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**Cultural rights and climate change**

**Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights**

**By Minority Rights Group International**

May 2020

Minority Rights Group International (MRG) has been working extensively for the past ten years on climate justice in relation to minorities and indigenous peoples. This work, in partnership with local partners, has led us to document both:

* threats posed by climate change on the culture and cultural heritage of some of these communities (especially indigenous peoples and pastoral communities).
* how the cultural heritage and traditional knowledge maintained by these communities contain practices, teachings and worldviews that can inform responses to climate change (to prevent it, mitigate its consequences and adapt to it).

Most of what we have documented can be found in our annual thematic reports, and in particular specific chapters of our reports from 2016 on [culture and heritage](https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/MRG-SWM-2016.pdf) and from 2019 on [climate justice](https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/MRG-Key-Trends-Report-2019-FINAL-1.pdf).

**1) Threats posed by climate change on the cultural rights of indigenous peoples and minorities**

This aspect has been developed at length in our [climate justice](https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/MRG-Key-Trends-Report-2019-FINAL-1.pdf) report from last year.

For examples, consequences of climate change on cultures include:

* **Higher temperatures in the Arctic: Loss of livelihoods for indigenous reindeer herders and a way of life under threat** The Arctic is warming twice as fast as anywhere else on Earth. As the Arctic’s sea-ice melts, the ‘albedo’ effect of the region’s usually high surface- reflectivity is reduced, accelerating heat absorption. Furthermore, there is a high risk of runaway climate change as a result of methane release from under the permafrost in northern Canada and Russia’s Siberia. This will have untold consequences for human life in the region and through knock-on impacts on global sea temperatures, and an accompanying impact on the development of extreme weather, such as storms. In this context, northern indigenous peoples – from Canadian Inuit, Métis and First Nations, to Sámi and Nenets indigenous reindeer herders in the Nordic countries and Russia respectively – are facing the domino effect of loss of livelihoods and associated traditional cultures.
* **The total disappearance of human settlements and their associated ancestral cultures**is also a problem for those inhabiting the lowest-lying Pacific Islands, comprising nations such as Kiribati, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Parts of these islands have been all but submerged and a number made partially or fully uninhabitable.
* **Migration patterns** that are very much influenced by climate change, with crop failures and other pressures driving movement elsewhere – a situation that will pose huge challenges for traditional cultures and livelihoods, as well as threaten enjoyment of rights to housing, work, health care and political participation.

We would like in particular to call the attention of the Special Rapporteur on a couple of brief case studies addressing the impact of climate change on communities' enjoyment of their culture and heritage:

1. the situation of the Galggojávri Sámi reindeer-herding community in **Finland** (see attached)
2. the situation of the Nyangatom, a pastoral community in **Ethiopia** (see attached)
3. the difficulties faced by traditional healers in **Bolivia** (see attached)

**2) How the traditional knowledge maintained by these communities can help us to respond to climate change**

The role of indigenous peoples and local communities as stewards of fragile ecosystems, with highly detailed knowledge of how to exist and adapt to these often difficult terrains developed over centuries, is now well established and is largely documented in our report on [climate justice](https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/MRG-Key-Trends-Report-2019-FINAL-1.pdf).

There is already some acknowledgement internationally that indigenous peoples, due to their land-stewardship traditions, can assist in stemming the causes of the crisis and even assess the changes at scales and through recorded baselines that are inaccessible for scientific researchers.

In that respect, we would like to make 3 points:

* the importance of **recognizing and protecting traditional knowledge** from these communities cannot be overstated. We have published a [full chapter of our 2016 annual report on culture and heritage2016 annual report on culture and heritage](https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Lessons-from-indigenous-knowledge-and-culture.pdf) dedicated to the issue of traditional knowledge in relation to climate change: *Lessons from indigenous knowledge and culture: learning to live in harmony with nature in an age of ecocide*(see attached and [online](https://outlook.office.com/mail/compose/Lessons%20from%20indigenous%20knowledge%20and%20culture:%20learning%20to%20live%20in%20harmony%20with%20nature%20in%20an%20age%20of%20ecocide)). We think this chapter is of high relevance to the work of the Special Rapporteur
* We also think that it is crucial to recognize the**critical role of empowered indigenous women**. Indigenous women are commonly custodians of traditional knowledges, and their particular understandings of the cultivation of traditional crops and of biodiversity are often vital to sustaining the bio-cultural paradigm. In Chile, Mapuche women are sharing their agro-ecological traditional knowledges with other urban women to help them overcome poor food production and hunger.
* As further explained in the above-mentioned chapter, protection of traditional knowledge goes hand in hand with **protection of land tenure and land rights** of these communities. However, one of the paradoxes of some of the responses to climate change adopted by governments, with the support of the international stakeholders, is that "conservation programmes" have tended to be imposed through a very top-down approach and have often resulted in displacement of communities, cultural attrition... but also poor environmental outcomes.

In relation to the latter point, one major global forest conservation scheme, the UN Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (**REDD+**), has been accused of undermining community land rights and causing displacement and conflict among numerous indigenous communities in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. As REDD+ aims to protect forests and reduce emissions from deforestation, the programme could potentially be beneficially to indigenous peoples, given their strong dependence on their surrounding environment and proven ability to manage these resources in a sustainable fashion. However, the OHCHR warned in 2009 that ‘indigenous communities fear expropriation of their lands and displacement and have concerns about the current framework for REDD’. From M’Baka in the Congo Basin to forest-dwelling Adivasi communities in India, REDD+ initiatives have been directly linked to the displacement or forced resettlement of numerous indigenous communities. While the advocacy of indigenous organizations and other NGOs helped push through the adoption of the so-called ‘Cancun safeguards’ in 2010, calling for the full and effective participation of relevant stakeholders, in particular indigenous peoples and local communities, in practice the implementation of these safeguards has proved problematic.

Other ‘conservation’ programmes, some with significant funding from international donors, have also resulted in widespread displacement of communities from their land. One of the most egregious cases in this regard is the situation of **Kenya**’s indigenous Sengwer who, despite living for centuries in the Embobut Forest, have been subjected to repeated evictions by Kenya Forest Service (KFS) guards from their lands, in the name of conservation. MRG has documented their situation in its 2019 annual report (see case study attached and [online story here](https://minorityrights.org/kenya-there-has-been-no-life/)).

Attachments:

* + MRG, ‘Lessons from indigenous knowledge and culture: learning to live in harmony with nature in an age of ecocide’, in *States of the World Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 – focus on culture and heritage*, July 2016, pp. 49 – 59, accessible at: <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Lessons-from-indigenous-knowledge-and-culture.pdf>
  + MRG, “Kenya: ‘There has been no life for us since we were moved out of the forest’ – climate funding and the eviction of Sengwer from their ancestral lands”, in *Minority and Indigenous Trend 2019 – focus on climate change*, June 2019, pp. 69-72, accessible at: <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/MRG-Key-Trends-Report-2019-FINAL-1.pdf>
  + MRG, “Finland: ‘Instability and abnormality are the new normal. Weather can change in an instant.’”, in *Minority and Indigenous Trend 2019 – focus on climate change*, June 2019, pp. 142-145, accessible at: <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/MRG-Key-Trends-Report-2019-FINAL-1.pdf>
  + MRG, “Ethiopia’s Nyangatom”, extract from “Indigenous Rights and Resistance to Climate Change: Progress and Setbacks since the Paris Agreement”, in *Minority and Indigenous Trend 2019 – focus on climate change*, June 2019, pp. 42-43, accessible at: <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/MRG-Key-Trends-Report-2019-FINAL-1.pdf>
  + MRG, “Bolivia: Traditional healers and climate change”, in *States of the World Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2013 – focus on health*, September 2013, pp. 94 – 96, accessible at: <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/old-site-downloads/download-1293-State-of-the-Worlds-Minorities-and-Indigenous-Peoples-2013.pdf>