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Securing indigenous and community land rights in the future we want

Explicit inclusion of secure land rights for local communities and indigenous peoples is key to "leaving no one behind" in global Sustainable Development Goals.



Guest blog by [Jenny Springer](#)

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Securing land rights for indigenous peoples, such as these members of the Xingu tribe, pictured in Brazil, is critical to alleviating poverty (Photo: Rights and Resources Initiative)

This week in New York, representatives of United Nations member states will meet to discuss an ambitious new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and targets for countries around the world to achieve by 2030, inspired by the ethos that the world must "leave no one behind".

The post-2015 development agenda will define what governments aim to achieve in a world in which more than a billion people still live on [less than US\\$1.25 a day](#).

The current draft of the SDGs includes targets on ownership and control of land and natural resources, a critical foundation for reducing poverty and enhancing food security, women's rights and ecosystem conservation. However, a notable omission in the current draft is explicit language on the land and resource rights of the estimated 1.5 billion indigenous peoples and local communities who govern at least 6.8 billion hectares of land around the world through [community tenure arrangements \(PDF\)](#).

Explicit inclusion of indigenous and community land rights will be critical to efforts to change the striking poverty statistics for these already marginalised groups. For example, even though they make up only five per cent of the world's population, indigenous peoples account for nearly [15 per cent of the world's poorest people \(PDF\)](#). This reality cannot be left unaddressed in the post-2015 development agenda.

Including indigenous and community land rights will further align with and ensure the SDG targets do not fall below existing international agreements such as the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(PDF\)](#) and the [Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure](#).

Moreover, experiences from around the world demonstrate how recognition of community land rights have contributed to alleviating poverty while increasing food security and protecting critical ecosystems from climate change and natural disasters.

Lessons from Brazil

In Brazil's Pará state, for example, the 25,300 inhabitants of Gurupá municipality succeeded in securing their collective land rights after decades of struggle. The valuable açai palm – a source of food, income, and wildlife habitat – had all but disappeared from the region. Armed with legal titles, the community was able to invest in sustainably harvesting the açai, bringing with it a host of side benefits.

According to local resident Zé Trindade: "We found that managing the açai area was the way to bring back wildlife, fish, and the açai palm."

Increased recognition of the benefits associated with devolution of land rights to indigenous peoples and local communities has driven a "tenure transition" around the world over the last 20 years. In the forest sector, for example, at least [513 million hectares](#), representing 15.5 per cent of global forest land, were legally recognised as owned or designated for forest communities as of 2013.

In lower- and middle-income countries, this figure stood at approximately 30 per cent. Yet, statutory recognition of indigenous peoples' and community forests is concentrated in only a handful of countries and the rate of recognition has [declined sharply since 2008 \(PDF\)](#), even as the body of evidence on the benefits has grown.

The UN Commission on the Legal Empowerment of the Poor lists the lack of secure land and property rights is a central cause of poverty. When communities have rights to their land and natural resources, and rights to benefit from these resources through local enterprises and other activities, they can generate substantial income. For example, the use of land and natural resources make up roughly [50 to 90 per cent \(PDF\) of the total source of livelihoods](#) of rural households living in poverty worldwide.



An aerial image of land occupied by members of the Xingu tribe, in Brazil (Photo: Rights and Resources Initiative)

Women also benefit substantially from legal rights to land, including equitable rights to community lands and resources. Women with strong property and inheritance rights earn up to [3.8 times more income](#), while their children are more likely to receive an education, and are less likely to be ill or severely underweight. Women are also [less likely to suffer from domestic violence](#) when they have secure land rights.

Community values

In relation to ecosystem and climate goals, communities have proven to be highly effective at protecting and conserving forest ecosystems. In the Brazilian Amazon, for instance, the deforestation rate is 11 times lower in community-managed forests than in surrounding areas. In Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, it is 350 times lower.

In addition, community forests often [store more carbon](#) than non-community forests – [36 per cent more per hectare \(PDF\)](#) in indigenous community forests in Brazil, for instance. Taken together, the limited formally recognized [community-managed forests store at least 37.7 billion tons of carbon \(PDF\)](#), the equivalent of 29 years of emissions from every passenger vehicle on earth.

The indicators used to track progress towards the SDGs targets must also be disaggregated to include local communities and indigenous peoples, in order to fully reflect these values of community land ownership. Country representatives in the UN are rightly concerned about ensuring that targets are feasible and can be measured effectively.

In response to this concern, a group of organisations working on land has just released a [technical brief on land rights indicators \(PDF\)](#) for women, men, indigenous peoples and local communities, demonstrating clearly that such indicators are "meaningful, universal, and feasible, and that they capture fundamental realities affecting key stakeholders at the heart of the SDGs".

A tool for tenure rights

Over the last decade, RRI has tracked the status of forest tenure across nearly 90 per cent of forest land worldwide. A [forthcoming Global Baseline \(PDF\)](#) on indigenous and community lands is extending this [analysis of forest tenure](#) to other countries and terrestrial biomes, and will serve as a comprehensive database of government-recognised tenure rights in at least 60 countries.

We hope this tool will contribute to global efforts to measure progress in recognition of indigenous peoples' and community tenure rights.

The global community must ensure that international agreements protecting the land rights of indigenous peoples and local communities are reaffirmed in the SDG targets. The land and resource rights of these communities – often the most disenfranchised – must be recognised as a key component of achieving global goals on eliminating poverty, ending conflict, and protecting the earth's ecosystems.

We must act now, or risk "leaving behind" the roughly 1.5 billion people who rely on rural community lands and forests for their livelihoods for the next 15 years of international development.

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Tags: [Indigenous peoples](#), [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), [Post-2015 agenda](#), [Land rights](#).

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