

Resilience and Rights: Navigating Climate Change with the Indigenous Wisdom of the Chittagong Hill Tracts

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Introduction:

Climate change presents a pressing global crisis, impacting diverse regions and communities worldwide, though its effects are felt unevenly. Particularly vulnerable are indigenous populations, who find themselves on the frontline, struggling to cope with the effects of climate change. A striking instance of environmental injustice can be observed in Bangladesh, where its geographical susceptibility paints a vivid picture of disparity. Within its borders, the Chittagong Hill Tracts stand out as a critical area of focus, demonstrating the multifaceted ways in which climate change adversely affects indigenous communities.

This commentary sets out to examine the specific impacts of climate change on the Chittagong Hill Tracts, exploring both the environmental and socio-economic dimensions. By focusing on this region, the aim is to highlight the unique vulnerabilities and resilience of its indigenous communities, thereby contributing to a nuanced understanding of climate justice. Furthermore, it underscores the necessity of adopting inclusive strategies for climate action, emphasizing the importance of addressing these challenges through a lens of equity and justice.

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Background: Understanding the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Its Indigenous Communities

Bangladesh, characterized by its unique deltaic landscape, ranks among the countries most vulnerable to climate change. The Chittagong Hill Tracts, situated in the south-eastern corner of Bangladesh, present a distinct ecological and climatic profile that diverges from the rest of the nation. This region is marked by its rugged terrain and extensive river systems, fostering a tropical monsoon climate. These geographical features make the Chittagong Hill Tracts particularly susceptible to a variety of climate change effects, including irregular rainfall patterns, rising temperatures, and an increased risk of natural disasters such as landslides and floods.²

Home to a variety of indigenous groups, including the Chakma, Marma, and Tripura, the Chittagong Hill Tracts host communities with distinct cultural practices and traditional ways of life. Despite representing just a small fraction of Bangladesh's overall population, these communities are a vital part of the country's cultural diversity. These communities have a deep-seated bond with their environment, relying on it for not just their livelihoods but also for cultural and spiritual needs. Practices such as jhum cultivation³, fishing, and forest foraging are integral to their way of life, deeply embedded in their cultural identity and communal structures. Worldwide, the food systems used by various indigenous peoples were recognized to be among some of the most sustainable in terms of efficiency, minimal waste production and adapting to the seasons. These communities' diets predominantly consist of renewable resources gathered locally, leading them to tailor their land use practices to the rhythms of the seasons. Until recently, the concept of "waste" was non-existent in their food systems.⁴

² Roy, Rajkumari Chandra Kalindi. 2000. *Land Rights of the Indigenous People of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*. Copenhagen.

³ The practice of jhum cultivation, or shifting agriculture is a technique involves the temporary clearing of forest areas for agriculture, followed by a period of fallow that allows the land to regenerate. When practiced within sustainable limits, jhum cultivation promotes biodiversity, sustains soil fertility, and aligns with the local climate's natural rhythms, showcasing the indigenous communities' knowledge of crop rotation and natural pest management.

⁴ Teixeira, Fabio. 2021. "Climate Change Threatens Age-Old Indigenous Food Systems, Says UN." World Economic Forum. June 30, 2021. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/06/united-nations-highlights-how-climate-change-is-affecting-indigenous-communities/>.



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While this strong connection to the natural environment highlights the communities' resilience and sustainable living practices, it also underscores their vulnerability to climate change. Shifts in climate directly impact their agricultural practices, water resources, and food security.⁵ Thus, the issue of climate change in the Chittagong Hill Tracts transcends environmental challenges, representing a critical socio-cultural concern. Aiming at underscoring the need for inclusive climate action the following sections examine the impacts of climate change on indigenous populations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, their traditional knowledge, and coping mechanisms.

Direct Climate Change Impacts on the Chittagong Hill Tracts:

In this region of the country, climate change is not just a distant threat but a present reality, bringing about significant environmental changes that deeply affect the lives and traditions of indigenous communities. Notable among these shifts are unpredictable rainfall patterns, disrupting traditional agricultural practices like jhum cultivation, and heightened temperatures, causing ecological disruptions including water scarcity. These changes jeopardize the

⁵ Chakma, Kamily. 2023. "Climate Change Impacts on Chittagong Hill Tracts." YECAP. July 24, 2023. <https://www.yecap-ap.org/post/climate-change-impacts-on-chittagong-hill-tracts>.

indigenous communities' reliance on natural water sources and traditional farming, as they are rooted in consistent seasonal cycles.⁶

This shift in climate patterns is doing more than just altering the landscape; it's challenging the very biodiversity that's integral to the region's identity. The rich variety of life that supports traditional food sources and medicinal practices, crucial to the indigenous peoples' cultural heritage, is under threat. As a result, the connection between the people and their environment, built on centuries of knowledge, faces unprecedented challenges.



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The repercussions of these environmental shifts are profound, extending to the socio-economic spheres of the Chittagong Hill Tracts' indigenous communities.⁷ Climate change exacerbates the risk of displacement from natural disasters like landslides and floods. It risks uprooting families and destroying the social ties that bind these communities, leading to the loss of

⁶ Chakma, Kamily. 2023. "Climate Change Impacts on Chittagong Hill Tracts." YECAP. July 24, 2023. <https://www.yecap-ap.org/post/climate-change-impacts-on-chittagong-hill-tracts>.

⁷ Roy, Rajkumari Chandra Kalindi. 2000. Land Rights of the Indigenous People of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. Copenhagen.

ancestral lands. Additionally, the changing climate conditions contribute to declining agricultural productivity, increasing the risks of poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition among these populations.⁸

Moreover, the health of these communities hangs in the balance, as water shortages and altered environments pave the way for waterborne diseases and nutritional deficits.⁹ These combined environmental, socio-economic, and health challenges significantly undermine the well-being and resilience of the indigenous populations and make them less capable of adapting to the rapid changes brought on by global warming.

Indigenous Responses to Climate Variability:

In the face of environmental shifts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the indigenous populations have cultivated a deep-seated relationship with their surroundings, developing an extensive body of traditional knowledge and practices. This ecological wisdom, shaped through generations, equips them with the tools for sustainable land management, ecological farming, disaster readiness, and a deep connection to local biodiversity. These capabilities have fostered resilience and ingenuity that allows them to adapt to the ongoing changes in their environment.

Yet, these age-old coping strategies are finding themselves increasingly outmatched by the swift advance of climate change. The land once abundant for jhum and other traditional agricultural practices is rapidly diminishing, a consequence of commercial agricultural expansion, deforestation, and land appropriation for development projects. This loss of land represents a direct threat to their traditional livelihoods and the cultural practices associated with these forms of agriculture.¹⁰

⁸ Harper, Cathy. 2023. "INTERVIEW: Despair among the Indigenous Peoples of Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts." Melbourne Asia Review. July 20, 2023. <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/interview-despair-among-the-indigenous-peoples-of-bangladeshs-chittagong-hill-tracts/>.

⁹ Gabriel Tripura et al. 2020. "The Experiences and Challenges of Tripura Indigenous Youth in Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh, during COVID-19." United Nations Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth. August 31, 2020. <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2020/08/the-experiences-and-challenges-of-tripura-indigenous-youth-in-chittagong-hill-tracts-bangladesh-during-covid-19/>.

¹⁰ Chakma, Kamily. 2023. "Climate Change Impacts on Chittagong Hill Tracts." YECAP. July 24, 2023. <https://www.yecap-ap.org/post/climate-change-impacts-on-chittagong-hill-tracts>.



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The surge in extreme weather events puts unprecedented pressure on their ability to adapt. While these communities have a rich legacy of weathering environmental changes, the escalated pace and scale of today's climate shifts are stretching the limits of their knowledge and practices. The compounded effects of landslides and floods, amplified by deforestation and land degradation, jeopardize their disaster preparedness, shaking the pillars of their food security, health, and cultural integrity.¹¹

Addressing these challenges requires strategies that mitigate climate change impacts while preserving and integrating indigenous knowledge into wider climate adaptation plans. Consequently, in the next section, this commentary will explore the intersection of climate change, policy, and indigenous rights, emphasizing the need for inclusive and effective climate action in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This discussion seeks to blend environmental change, indigenous resilience, and policy insights into a unified narrative, advocating for a cooperative, culturally attuned approach to climate actions.

¹¹ Ibid

The Intersection of Climate Change, Policy, and Indigenous Rights:

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the interplay between climate change, policy, and indigenous rights presents a complex scenario with deep implications for the area's indigenous communities. These groups have felt the weight of both historical legacies and modern policies, shaping their current struggles with land rights, traditional practices, and vulnerability to climate shifts. The shadows of British colonialism alongside actions by the Bangladeshi government have set the stage for the socio-economic and environmental challenges these groups face today.¹²

At the heart of these challenges lies the critical issue of land dispossession. The appropriation of indigenous lands for commercial agriculture, infrastructure, and natural resource extraction has not only severed these communities from their ancestral territories but also propelled deforestation and habitat degradation, escalating their climate change vulnerability.¹³ The impact on traditional practices such as jhum cultivation is severe, with restricted land availability leading to shorter harvesting periods and decreased agricultural productivity.¹⁴

Furthermore, the militarization of the Chittagong Hill Tracts casts a long shadow over the peace, security, and rights of its indigenous inhabitants. The military's presence, often justified by large-scale development initiatives, fosters fear and insecurity, disrupting traditional ways of life and further marginalizing these communities.¹⁵

The situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts underscores a critical deficiency in current climate action efforts: the exclusion of indigenous perspectives. Despite their deep-rooted knowledge of local ecosystems and sustainable practices, indigenous perspectives are frequently absent in climate policy discussions. Bridging this gap is not just a matter of justice and rights but a strategic imperative for crafting effective, sustainable climate responses. The indigenous

¹² Roy, Land Rights of the Indigenous People.

¹³ Harper, Cathy. 2023. "INTERVIEW: Despair among the Indigenous Peoples of Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts." Melbourne Asia Review. July 20, 2023. <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/interview-despair-among-the-indigenous-peoples-of-bangladeshs-chittagong-hill-tracts/>.

¹⁴ Chakma, "Climate Change Impacts."

¹⁵ Roy, Land Rights of the Indigenous People.

expertise in resilience, biodiversity conservation, and ecosystem management stands to enhance the adaptive capabilities of broader communities against climate impacts.



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To realize truly inclusive climate action, it's imperative to confront and amend the policy-induced challenges faced by indigenous groups. This involves rectifying historical wrongs like land dispossession, reaffirming indigenous sovereignty over lands and resources, protecting indigenous territories from further degradation, demilitarizing the region for the safety of its inhabitants, and ensuring indigenous involvement in all stages of climate action are crucial. Merging traditional ecological knowledge with scientific research through participatory methods can develop resilient and culturally attuned climate strategies.¹⁶ Ultimately, a holistic approach that respects indigenous knowledge, corrects historical wrongs, and actively involves indigenous peoples in climate discussions is essential. This would not only protect indigenous

¹⁶ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2022. "Bangladesh: UN Expert Concerned about Non-Implementation of Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord." Ohchr.org. December 2, 2022. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/12/bangladesh-un-expert-concerned-about-non-implementation-chittagong-hill>.

rights but also significantly improve the effectiveness of climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.¹⁷



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Recommendations for Inclusive Climate Action:

In addressing the escalating climate crisis, particularly its disproportionate impact on indigenous populations like those in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a revised approach to climate action is urgently needed. This strategy should centre on the rights, knowledge, and practices of indigenous communities, ensuring their crucial role in formulating solutions to climate change. Following are several recommendations that are based on the Chittagong Hill Tracts’ experiences and the Unrepresented Nations and People Organization report on the topic.¹⁸

¹⁷ Gabriel Tripura et al. 2020. “The Experiences and Challenges of Tripura Indigenous Youth in Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh, during COVID-19.” United Nations Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth. August 31, 2020. <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2020/08/the-experiences-and-challenges-of-tripura-indigenous-youth-in-chittagong-hill-tracts-bangladesh-during-covid-19/>.

¹⁸ Unrepresented Nations and People Organization. 2018. “UNPO: Chittagong Hill Tracts.” Unpo.org, May 31, 2018. <https://unpo.org/members/7867>.

First and foremost, strengthening indigenous land rights is critical. The historical appropriation and degradation of indigenous lands by external actors have severely limited indigenous peoples' abilities to maintain traditional livelihoods and contribute to climate resilience. It is imperative for governments and international bodies to enact policies that recognize and protect the land rights of indigenous peoples. This entails legally acknowledging their land rights and entrusting indigenous communities with significant control over their land's management and utilization. Solidifying these land rights paves the way for indigenous peoples to engage fully in and benefit from climate action endeavours.

Furthermore, incorporating traditional knowledge into climate strategies is crucial for developing more sustainable and effective climate solutions. Indigenous communities possess deep-rooted ecological wisdom and sustainable practices, honed over millennia, crucial for climate adaptation and mitigation. However, meaningful integration of this knowledge requires policies grounded in respect for, and partnership with, indigenous peoples. Establishing collaborative frameworks between indigenous communities and scientific researchers, through joint research initiatives and knowledge-sharing platforms, will ensure that traditional ecological knowledge is not only conserved but actively leveraged in contemporary climate initiatives.¹⁹

Lastly, empowering indigenous-led climate solutions is essential. Indigenous communities should be seen not just as victims of climate change but as frontrunners in environmental protection. Providing financial, technical, and policy support for indigenous-led projects empowers these communities to implement their own climate solutions. Emphasizing community-driven conservation and resource management projects showcases the potential of these efforts to deliver sustainable, cost-effective, and culturally aligned solutions. By making funding, capacity building, and technical support readily accessible to indigenous groups, we can enable their indispensable role in the forefront of climate action.

¹⁹ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2022. "Bangladesh: UN Expert Concerned about Non-Implementation of Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord." Ohchr.org. December 2, 2022. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/12/bangladesh-un-expert-concerned-about-non-implementation-chittagong-hill>.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the path to inclusive climate action, while complex, is essential. Highlighting the importance of strengthening indigenous land rights, integrating traditional knowledge, and supporting indigenous-led initiatives offers a way to rectify historical injustices and leverage indigenous contributions in combating climate change. This not only respects the rights and dignity of indigenous populations but also contributes to global sustainability efforts. The experiences from the Chittagong Hill Tracts vividly showcase the susceptibility of indigenous communities to climate change, underlining the imperative for justice, equity, and human rights in our climatic responses. This commentary calls for a re-evaluation of our climate strategies to include indigenous perspectives comprehensively, advocating for policies that address both the impacts of climate change and the inequalities that amplify these effects for indigenous peoples. By ensuring the meaningful participation of indigenous communities in climate action, we can move towards a more sustainable, just, and effective approach to tackling the global climate crisis.