

Joint Report of the Ecumenical Indigenous Peoples Network Reference Group and the Working Group on Climate Change of the World Council of Churches

January 2022

Introduction

Climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecological degradation are existential threats, raising spiritual, moral, and justice issues that demand our response in faith. The World Council of Churches' (WCC) Ecumenical Indigenous Peoples Network Reference Group and the Working Group on Climate Change at their inaugural joint meeting in Yu-Shan Indigenous Theological College and Seminary, Hualien, Taiwan June 26, 2019, affirmed the essential role of Indigenous wisdom and spirituality in addressing the climate crisis, the loss of biodiversity and the threat to human life.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, that prevented our planned meetings in Fiji, with a heightened awareness we have continued to meet online and to draft this report together, and to seek opportunities to collaborate within the WCC, and with ecumenical and interfaith partners in appropriate international spaces. We have worked closely together in the Pilgrimage for Justice and Peace in North America and the Arctic; at COP25 in Madrid and COP26 in Glasgow; and at the virtual 2021 Parliament of the World's Religions, as well as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; and in preparing for the Indigenous Pre-assembly and the WCC Assembly in 2022. We acknowledge and affirm that Indigenous perspectives are crucial not only for addressing the burgeoning climate emergency but also for navigating the way forward to a hopeful post-COVID, post-growth and post-fossil fuel future.

Indigenous communities occupy 20-25% of the Earth's land surface, and 80% of that land mass holds the world's remaining biodiversity.ⁱ Indigenous Peoples of the world have been and still are the protectors of ecosystems. Indigenous communities have been caretakers of the Earth for millennia, but their knowledge has been devalued. Their prophetic wisdom has not been taken seriously in the decision-making tables. But there is no liveable future without Indigenous People's rights. They are key to mapping a path to a habitable and sustainable future on this planet.

The Ecumenical Indigenous People's Network Reference Group (IPRG) and the Working Group on Climate Change (WGCC) are committed to working together to address this gap.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Mr. José Francisco Cali-Tzay asserts "indigenous peoples and their traditional practices, are key to achieve sustainable development, combat climate change and the conservation of biodiversity."ⁱⁱ

Furthermore, the Statement on the outcome of COP26 by the WCC Executive Committee, 16 November 2021, reminds us that the WCC has "continuously emphasized the need for climate justice and a just transition that respects the rights and perspectives of poor and vulnerable nations and communities, of Indigenous Peoples, of women and girls, and of those least responsible for the climate emergency... We acknowledge and affirm the agency and leadership of Indigenous Peoples"ⁱⁱⁱ

The Climate Emergency and the COVID-19 Pandemic

It is a well-established fact that climate change is real and is human induced.^{iv} Excessive development motivated by insatiable human greed, materialism, and consumerism has put the whole of Creation at risk and has led to the urgent necessity to declare a climate emergency. A more than 1.5 degrees Celsius temperature rise will have devastating effects on many people, most especially on the already vulnerable communities. Indigenous communities are among the many on the frontlines of climate change. The world is now faced with the compelling need to move and act quickly for the sake of the whole of Creation, of which all humans are a part. It is a moral and spiritual imperative.

The impacts of climate change fall on people differently and disproportionately. The cry of Mother Earth is the cry of the poor (Gen. 4:10). Twenty percent of the world's wealthiest are responsible for nearly 70% of all emissions of greenhouse gases.^v Those who have contributed the least to climate change are those with the least capacity and resources to cope with mitigating its effects, neither adapting to it nor recovering from losses and damage. The nexus between development, market capitalism, consumerism, and climate change and the suffering of marginal communities needs to be exposed for there to be genuine radical transformation, equity, and justice. The climate emergency is clearly a matter of economic justice.

The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered and exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. It too is a moral and spiritual issue. The pandemic has also shown more clearly than ever before how intricately interconnected human beings are with Creation. It has revealed the delicate balance and links between the "damaging effects of deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and expansion of large-scale industrial development" on wellbeing and health.^{vi} COVID-19 is an example of how the pollution and destruction of ecosystems and the impact of human activities on nature makes it easier to spread zoonosis viruses to humans. Protecting ecosystems and natural habitats lowers the risk of spreading such diseases. Aggravated by deep-seated socio-economic inequalities, COVID-19 is also clearly a matter of eco-justice.

Given the huge inequalities in the world, COVID-vaccines have been mostly reserved for rich countries, leaving poorer parts of the world to continue to suffer from COVID and its variants. Moreover, it is the richer parts of the world that disproportionately cause climate change, leading to ever growing suffering in poorer parts of the world. This is double injustice. At the same time, we see rich economies being supported with huge sums of money during the COVID-pandemic, while poorer countries are left with huge debts in order to manage and survive both COVID and climate impacts. Again, double injustice. Where are these huge sums of money when it comes to Indigenous rights, adaptation to climate change, mitigation, and loss and damage? If COVID-19 and climate change show us anything it is this: humankind needs to learn to share wealth and technology urgently.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed trends in many places towards state destabilization and autocratic repression with an alarming increase of human rights violations against Indigenous Peoples and human rights defenders – especially those who advocate against exploitation of natural resources, land grabbing, and environmentally destructive industries. It is a matter of human rights and social justice.

Indigenous Peoples of the world have long recognized the impending climate and ecological catastrophe. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed what Indigenous Peoples have been telling the world for so many centuries. They have warned that the failure to protect our ecosystems and nature's biodiversity will lead to a major crisis. But their voices have been ignored. From the Arctic to the Pacific, from the Amazons to Asia, Indigenous Peoples have been speaking and acting prophetically. But their wisdom has been forgotten and their voices silenced in favour of prioritizing economic expansion, profits, and consumerist lifestyles. In the process, Indigenous communities have been subjected to colonization and the loss of their ancestral lands and cultures, and even a new re-colonization as new technologies are ramped up in response to climate change. Poverty, one-sided development, and the undermining of Earth-centred spirituality are interrelated, and they are at the core of the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Included in a "green recovery" must be Indigenous rights, upholding the Principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), the acknowledgement of their traditional knowledge and way of life in harmony with Mother Earth, and to learn from that by walking together on a path of decolonization and reconciliation. The world needs to urgently shift from an extractive development model to an Economy of Life that affirms the interconnectedness of all beings.

The experiences and observations from Indigenous Peoples are a call and warning to the world that the path undertaken must be changed radically. There is no compensation for the damage caused if human beings do not change their way of life and systems of production and consumption. Like the COVID-19 crisis, the climate emergency demands swift and determined transformations. The pandemic has impacted all people of the world in a very short time. Millions have died or lost loved ones. Livelihoods have been decimated on an unprecedented scale. And like climate change, the most exposed to both the disease and the loss of income are the poor of the world. But it also shows clearly and dramatically that drastic changes can be effected very rapidly when the threat of a clear and present danger is obvious. It is the same for the climate emergency we face today. There is a possibility to change but it must happen urgently now to avoid the most dangerous results of climate change.

The solutions are at hand. Resources are available like the *"Roadmap for Congregations, Communities and Churches for an Economy of Life and Ecological Justice"*^{vii} and the *"Walk the Talk"* toolkit,^{viii} to inspire and assist in taking practical and effective actions at the church and community level, actively promoting the just transition to inclusive and sustainable energy economies. *Season of Creation*^{ix} worship and liturgical resources can help refocus and reframe our understanding of our place in the web of Life. Campaigns for Climate Action Now, Ecocide Law and divestment from fossil fuels can influence governments and decision makers. We have precedents from Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. It only requires the political will and moral courage to act.

The Way Forward

We therefore affirm the integral and pivotal role Indigenous Peoples have in shaping an alternative path of being in right relationship with the whole of Creation.

We also recognize the continuing injustices and racism Indigenous communities face historically and to the current day. Climate change, extraction of land for the sake of development, and the

COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated their already existing vulnerabilities. We thereby urge all nations and seek the advocacy of our brothers and sisters within our global Christian fellowship to ensure the implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples within their countries. We also recognize that in our efforts to address climate justice we must not fail to ensure that the injustices perpetrated against Indigenous Peoples are re-dressed as the two are inextricably linked. We acknowledge the churches' complicity in the past and present that have "de-humanized Indigenous Life, placing it in a category of pre-civilization that has allowed this dehumanizing of Indigenous Peoples and the destructive exploitation of Creation."^x There is no climate justice if there is no justice for and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. We affirm the need for collective reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.^{xi}

We acknowledge and look to Indigenous Peoples and communities for leadership. Although they have suffered and continue to suffer many atrocities, they are not victims, nor are they passive participants whose opinion and wisdom we seek only to justify or validate some of our theological positions.

We recognize the need to go beyond a human-centered narrow approach towards a Creation-centered way of life and to cultivate a culture of hope against hope (Rom. 4:18). We encourage innovative and fresh methodologies as to how we approach and interpret the biblical and sacred texts that affirm the interrelatedness of all life.

This time calls us to *metanoia* and urges us to seek and establish the reign of God that points us to exercise justice, love, and care, and to uphold the integrity of all God's Creation. The Indigenous Pre-Assembly in Busan (2013) affirmed, "In faithfulness to the God of Creation, we must all participate in a new community and economy of Creation, a practical and living expression of our communion with God, each other, and Creation. This will involve both repudiation and repentance from the systems of thought and action that lead to the destruction of Indigenous Peoples and the harmful exploitation of the Land. It will certainly require a careful and critical examination of our church communities' participation and investment in the worldwide economic system."^{xii}

The health and wellbeing of the planet is in the hands of all humanity. But, as we acknowledge this truth, we must also recognize that there is no livable future for our planet's life in which the full rights of Indigenous Peoples are not respected. They are one with the land, caretakers of the lands and waters, and have a critical role in shaping the way forward toward a hopeful future. Their voices, perspectives, and wisdom are crucial for influencing change and maintaining an ecological balance. They embody the wisdom of many centuries and their role in developing spiritualities and theologies which are grounded in deep connection with the Earth and its wholeness must be affirmed. Indigenous Peoples give our faith communities the gift and wisdom of their Indigenous spiritualities which value the interconnectedness of life between Creator, Creation, and all our interdependent relations.

We bring these reflections to the WCC General Secretary for consideration with the expectation that they will be brought to the Executive or Central Committee and ultimately to the Indigenous Peoples Pre-assembly and the WCC General Assembly convening in Karlsruhe, Germany in 2022, and to the fellowship of the churches. We would make some preliminary recommendations to be considered by this due process.

Recommendations

1. Accord priority to climate and ecological justice, restorative justice, transformation of the prevailing economic paradigm at the root of the ecological emergency, and promotion of the transformative role of Indigenous Peoples and spiritualities in the work and life of the Council.
2. Express solidarity with Indigenous Peoples, who are facing the current threats of climate change, extraction of land, and human rights violations, and continue advocating for Indigenous Peoples' rights, especially that of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent.
3. Ensure that Indigenous voices and spiritual perspectives are integrated into all WCC programme areas and especially the Economy of Life, Care for Creation, Sustainability, and Climate Justice programmes.
4. Ensure the continuity and deepening of the WCC's Indigenous Peoples and Economy of Life and Care for Creation programmes following the Karlsruhe Assembly, giving particular attention to the inclusion of Indigenous traditional knowledge, wisdom, spiritualities, and theologies in the work on economic, ecological, and climate justice.
5. Facilitate and resource theological and biblical conversations and methodologies on Indigenous spiritualities that explore concepts of economy, ecology, climate justice, and the interconnectedness of life; and develop and disseminate theological resources on these concepts for use within the Fellowship.
6. Create spaces to listen to Indigenous Christians convey their integration of traditional spirituality with discipleship of Jesus so that we might better discern the way forward.
7. Establish a reference group on economic and ecological justice with Indigenous representation and promote intentional collaboration between the reference group and the Ecumenical Indigenous Peoples Network and the Working Group on Climate Change.

ⁱ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/11/can-indigenous-land-stewardship-protect-biodiversity-/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26213&LangID=E>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-the-outcome-of-cop26>

^{iv} <https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/climate-change/facts-about-climate-emergency>

^v https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/mb-extreme-carbon-inequality-021215-en.pdf

^{vi} https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/03/24/news/COVID-19-crisis-tells-world-what-indigenous-peoples-have-been-saying-thousandsyears?fbclid=IwAR3PT_uon9ykOXp9JKRmTJW_reLknw60tmLewKGpTXQyCgm5QzpLz2MBL8rQ

^{vii} <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/roadmap-for-congregations-communities-and-churches-for-an-economy-of-life-and-ecological-justice>

^{viii} <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/walk-the-talk>

^{ix} https://www.oikoumene.org/news/prayer-service-to-open-2021-season-of-creation-a-home-for-all-renewing-the-oikos-of-god?renewing_the_oikos_of_god%E2%80%9D

^x <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/message-from-the-pre-assembly-gathering-of-indigenous-peoples>

^{xi} <https://kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/samisk-kirkeliv/forsoningskonferanse-foredrag/statement-from-the-indigenous-peoples-youth-pre-conference.pdf>

^{xii} <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/message-from-the-pre-assembly-gathering-of-indigenous-peoples>