

From Colonial Legacies to the Climate Crisis: Why Indigenous Knowledges and Movements Matter

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A Glimpse of Maya Territory-Heritage-Community in Toledo District, southern Belize

This brief, which is based upon research supported by the British Academy, illustrates the ways in which Q'eqchi' and Mopan Maya communities in Toledo District, southern Belize are fighting for land, dignity, and self-determination in the face of the enduring aftermaths of empire and mounting climate crisis. The broad aim of the brief is to illustrate why respecting, taking seriously, and offering solidarity to Indigenous knowledges, territorial struggles, and grassroots movements are all crucial for redressing colonial injustices, preventing climate catastrophe, and mitigating disasters related to global environmental change and persistent structural inequality.

A more specific goal of the brief is to critically interrogate the protocol of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), which is a crucial element of Indigenous people's right to self-determination and significant (yet intensely contested) international instrument that can be used to avert land dispossession and ecosystem damage. Whilst acknowledging the importance of FPIC with respect to safeguarding Indigenous communities, we contend that the protocol is a politically fraught procedure that at once legitimates and reproduces state power, limited liberal conceptions of human rights, and Western worldviews, which often clash with and can undermine Indigenous people's pluralistic customary governance systems, environmental relations, and ways of being.



Summary

Indigenous people and their diverse knowledges play a crucial role in both resolving enduring injustices owed to colonialism and addressing the planet's escalating climate crisis. Despite this, they are frequently pushed to the margins if not entirely excluded from formal institutions and mainstream conversations related to scientific and solutions-oriented approaches to global challenges, poverty alleviation, and environmental sustainability. While Indigenous communities, activists, and elders have fought to be heard and taken seriously for decades, state policymaking bodies, multilateral organisations, international funding agencies, and even world-leading research institutes have, regrettably, been slow on the uptake.

More recently, however, things have slowly started to change, albeit admittedly only in limited and incremental ways. Nevertheless, and in turning to intensifying climate risk as an example, the latest IPCC (2022, 53) report explicitly states: 'Supporting Indigenous self-determination, recognising Indigenous Peoples' rights and supporting Indigenous knowledge-based adaptation are critical to reducing climate change risks and effective adaptation.' Indeed, listening and paying heed to the perspectives, experiences, and communal land rights of Indigenous communities are all essential in shaping and implementing effective climate action—not to mention correcting the lasting legacies and historical wrongs wrought by empire.



Indigenous Ecological Knowledge(s) and Environmental Relations

Numerous Indigenous communities across the world have lived in balance with their environments and sustained forms of participatory governance for centuries. As a result, many have unique intergenerational understandings of the effects of climate change, what it takes to preserve ecosystems, and just how vital democratic inclusion, mutuality, and collective action are when it comes to breathing life into sustainable and socially just futures. Globally, various Indigenous groups continue to maintain rich traditions of reciprocal and interdependent relationship with land and territory, not to mention have historical track records of responsibly stewarding resources provided by nature.

While diverse in expression, Indigenous worldviews, ecological knowledges, and land management practices often reflect a profound respect and abiding reverence for local ecosystems and non-human life. In short, Indigenous communities and grassroots movements, as pluralistic as they are, have deep knowledge and cultural heritage that are inextricably linked to the environment. This can provide scientists and policymakers invaluable insight into effectual climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies, as well as disaster risk reduction and resilience-building efforts.



Indigenous Agency, Resistance, and Environmental Defence

Throughout the world, Indigenous communities continue to take to the frontlines to address the ongoing consequences of colonial power and adverse effects of climate change. Despite their pivotal role in defending the environment and reckoning with extractivism, imperialism, and the plantation system, Indigenous people remain marginalised if not deliberately silenced in decision-making processes related to economic development and conservation. Indigenous lands are repeatedly targeted for privatisation, extraction, and the consumption of fossil fuels, cash crops, and rare earth minerals, all of which release significant amounts of carbon emissions and contaminants. This frequently leads to displacement, the destruction of ancestral territories, and the degradation of ecosystems. As a response, Indigenous movements continue to collectively organise and confront the political and economic forces that are compromising the health of the planet.



Climate Risk and Environmental Change in the Caribbean

In the Caribbean, a region that experiences a disparate amount of risk globally regarding environmental degradation and disaster, climate change poses a grave threat to entire populations. For example, in Belize, a recently released International Monetary Fund (2021) report paints a bleak picture of the future fallout to come by noting that the country ‘already faces hurricanes, flooding, sea level rise, coastal erosion, coral bleaching, and droughts, with impacts likely to intensify given expected increases in weather volatility and sea temperature.’ Exacerbating this risk is the fact that Belize’s sovereign debt burden has swelled to over 125% of its GDP and is currently designated as ‘unsustainable’ (IMF, 2021). In turn, the nation lacks necessary capital for robust disaster mitigation and adaptation packages.



The precarious economic and environmental situation Belize finds itself in is partially due to the shock the tourism sector experienced because of the recent coronavirus pandemic, and because, historically, Belize was seen as a rich extraction site for natural resources and a source of enslaved and indentured plantation labour for imperial authorities and administrators. Undoubtedly, colonialism is a root cause of the climate crisis. Generations of industrial extraction and economic dependency have subsequently meant that the environmental impacts and climatic repercussions Belize now faces include:

- A temperature increase of 20C by 2030 with equal sea surface temperature warming.
- Degradation of marine ecosystems via coral bleaching and invasive seaweed species.
- A decrease in annual rainfall with an increased risk of drought and water shortages.
- A net rise in sea levels with intensifying threats to carbon-capturing mangroves.
- An increase in extreme weather events like tropical storms, hurricanes, and floods.
- Accelerated soil erosion, groundwater contamination, and salinisation of water sources.

Amidst the growing climate risk and escalating environmental damage, both scholarship and social movements continue to reassert the point that securing land tenure for Indigenous people is one of the most effective ways to mitigate climate breakdown and stave off the collapse of the planet. Worldwide, a vital element of Indigenous struggles for land has been the protocol of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), which is a specific right granted to Indigenous communities recognised in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).



FPIC: Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (...or lack thereof)

FPIC is the ostensible right Indigenous people have to refuse or permit development, research, or any activities that may impact their communities and ancestral lands. As a protocol and principle, it is endorsed by UNDRIP and authorises Indigenous communities to negotiate the terms and conditions through which projects that will affect their territories will be developed, initiated, monitored, and assessed. Broadly, FPIC is meant to ensure that Indigenous people can grant or withhold consent after being fully and transparently informed ahead of time of what any given project entails. As a human rights standard, FPIC also stipulates that Indigenous communities must be able to deliberate on issues free from coercion, manipulation, and intimidation, as well as via their own preferred systems of decision-making.

Adhering to the FPIC protocol is the responsibility of both governments and third-party actors (e.g., corporations, researchers). It is a process that is applicable to a wide array of development and research agendas that purport to promote economic growth. This includes activities related to resource extraction, ecotourism projects, conservation efforts, the construction of transportation networks, and the installation of renewable energy infrastructure, amongst others. While FPIC has gained a tremendous amount of international traction with respect to securing rights, mitigating environmental damage, and attenuating deforestation, numerous grassroots movements contend the protocol might be best thought of as an imperfect tool or even trap that, at times, can be used to shield Indigenous communities from extractivist development aggression and the enclosure of ‘the commons.’

‘The commons’ refers to shared environments and resources that are accessed, managed, stewarded, and regulated collectively by communities to prevent depletion and over-exploitation (e.g., land, water, forests, air). It is a polysemic term, particularly across diverse Indigenous groups, meaning its interpretation varies across differing times, places, and cultures. On this point, it is crucial to note that the FPIC protocol, whilst a useful partial measure of protection, legitimises state power, reproduces Western legal systems, and entrenches governmental claims to territorial sovereignty, all of which can directly undermine and erode Indigenous people’s self-determination, customary laws, and relationships with ancestral lands (i.e., ‘commons’).



Confronting the Lasting Legacies of Colonialism and Empire

Throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, and in countries like Belize, comparatively large groups of Indigenous people and Afrodescendant communities continue to be negatively racialised and are experiencing enduring forms of dispossession, displacement, exploitation, and environmental ruin. In many cases, the oppressive conditions they face are induced by development projects and economic growth schemes that are increasingly being marketed as ‘green’, ‘sustainable’, and necessary to make a nation more ‘modern.’ Consequently, subsistence-based and agrarian communities across the region must contend with encroachments into their territories and homes. These incursions typically coincide with refusals by states and corporations to fulfil their duty to consult with communities via culturally safe and sensitive processes, as well as through good faith FPIC protocols.

The harmful ecological and social effects of development-driven activities that result from rubber-stamping and violating FPIC, which are often minimised as ‘externalities’, include but are not limited to: landlessness; forced displacement; abject poverty; biodiversity loss; ecosystem damage; ill-health due to contamination; increases in gender-based violence and sexual exploitation; the desecration of heritage sites; loss of cultural identity and native languages; habitat destruction; targeted smear campaigns against social movement organisers; and even the assassination of environmental defenders. Countless critical voices argue that these dynamics are manifestations of structural violence and systemic discrimination (Vindal Ødegaard and Rivera Juan, 2019), which are inextricably linked to the historical trajectories of empire, race, and (post)colonial state power.

The lasting legacies of colonialism are inextricably linked to and indeed perhaps most evident in contemporary neoliberal development agendas that are driven by land acquisition, capital accumulation, and profit motives. In the face of a sobering reality that the region remains one of the deadliest in the world for Indigenous and Afrodescendant land defenders who are confronting capitalist logics and development, grassroots movements and environmental activists across Latin America and the Caribbean continue to exhibit their political agency by organising resistance; protecting land and water; and defending their homes, communities, and ways of being. The Maya of southern Belize are one such group.



Historical and Geopolitical Context: Maya Realities of Belize

Belize is part of Maya ancestral territory and emerged as a modern nation-state in the colonial crucible where British and Spanish imperial forces targeted and dispossessed Indigenous populations, as well as aggressively deracinated and enslaved African people and indentured South Asian groups, amongst others.

Colonial violence across the Caribbean fractured and drastically changed societies, landscapes, and ecosystems. European administrators, chauvinistic entrepreneurs, and imperial cartographers deployed socially constructed hierarchies of race, installed industrial plantations, and drew artificial borders that did not exist in the region before. Such impositions dehumanised, divided, and subjugated the Indigenous peoples who had been living in the Caribbean for centuries, as well as ‘arrivant’ groups who were forcibly brought to the region from other places via the Middle Passage, enslavement, and indentureship.



Attaining independence in 1981 means that Belize, formerly ‘British Honduras,’ is one of the newest members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). At present, it is neither coincidental nor should it be overlooked that the Government of Belize maintains a hierarchical governance structure based upon the Westminster model—a colonial institution installed by the British Empire. Today, Belize is a multi-ethnic and multiracial society that is home to wide array of diverse people from varying backgrounds, including Mestizo/Latin American (the largest group), Creole, Garifuna, East Indian, Maroon, Middle Eastern, Asian, and White settler (primarily Mennonite), along with three Maya linguistic groups: the Q’eqchi’, Mopan, and Yucatec. The Q’eqchi’ and Mopan groups live primarily in Toledo District, which is the southernmost district of Belize and where 41 Maya communities and over 20,000 Maya people reside.

Since contact, the Q’eqchi’ and Mopan Maya have been engaged in a prolonged fight to defend their lands, lives, and self-determined futures. The Maya have traditionally held lands in common and derive individual rights of use from the community through collective process. Central to their communal and complex land tenure system are the *alcaldes* (village leaders), an expression of Maya governance that existed prior to European imperialism and has since been reconfigured over centuries via the interplay of colonial power and Indigenous resistance. The democratically selected *alcaldes* of Toledo District are internal to Maya villages across southern Belize. The *alcaldes* manage land use and boundary harmonisation processes, as well as facilitate processes of participatory decision-making, conflict resolution, and social cohesion. Markedly, the practice of reciprocity lies at the heart of the Maya’s social and economic relations, customary governance system, and relationships with land and the environment.



A Tradition of Grassroots Struggle and Self-determination

For generations and despite being subjected to imperial rule and post-independence state authoritarianism, the Maya in southern Belize have been able to maintain a certain degree of relative autonomy and retain their communal approaches to holding and using land, which is much different from claiming individual ownership over private property. Whilst centuries-long, the latest iteration of the Maya struggle for self-determination started in the mid-1980s as a response to concessions that were granted by the Belizean state to third-party corporations to ‘develop’ Maya lands without the free, prior, and informed consent of Q’eqchi’ and Mopan communities.

Specifically, the government granted permits to foreign logging companies (initially from Malaysia) for timber extraction on nearly half a million acres of land that had been customarily occupied and stewarded by Maya villages. Maya farmers only became aware of the concessions because they were confronted by loggers and heavy equipment. With respect to land rights, it is vital to note that both the Belizean Government and third-party extractive corporations (e.g., US Capital Energy) have been responsible for a litany of documented violations of FPIC. Essentially, that the Maya people own, use, and depend upon traditional lands—and have a right to the FPIC protocol for anything that happens in their ancestral territories—has been ignored for decades. It is state-sponsored FPIC violations of this nature that led to the Maya’s most recent land rights struggle in southern Belize, which included a protracted legal battle of nearly 30 years.

Throughout the conflict, Maya villagers and movement leaders have been harassed, slandered, criminalised, and forced into the courts at every level. Amidst the long-standing clash, government administrators have routinely portrayed many Maya in Toledo District as ‘Balkanising’ (i.e., breaking apart) Belize, which is baseless when juxtaposed with the Maya Leaders Alliance’s proposal of co-creating ‘a Belize where many Belizeans fit.’ Contrariwise, at the centre of the Maya struggle in southern Belize is the aspiration to transform the country into a nation will be more inclusive of and respectful towards Indigenous ways of being and connections to land. For decades on end, Q’eqchi’ and Mopan communities have had to fight for their relationships with territory and their right to self-determination as Indigenous people.



A Watershed Moment for Indigenous Land Rights

In 2015, the Maya communities of Toledo District obtained a historical ruling in the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) that affirmed their rights to the lands they occupy, use, and enjoy. The unprecedented Indigenous land rights decision by the CCJ recognised the Maya's communal land rights and notions of complex tenure. In addition, the compliance order issued by the CCJ, over which the international court has retained jurisdiction, requires the Government of Belize to work in good faith with Maya communities, specifically the appellants, the Maya Leaders Alliance (MLA) and Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA), to delimit and demarcate traditional Maya territories.

The CCJ's recognition of the Maya system of communal land tenure as commensurate with the private property rights outlined in the constitution of Belize was a watershed moment. As one of the first implementation steps, the CCJ required the government to develop a FPIC protocol in consultation with the MLA and TAA. Tellingly, the implementation process mandated by the order has been dragged out by the Belizean government for over half a decade. During this time span, state-sanctioned violations of FPIC and land grabs have continued. Such encroachments have resulted in additional judgments against the government due to its disregard for Maya land rights and the destruction of village farmlands, forest gardens, milpas (ancestral regenerative agroecological fields), and heritage spaces, which include archaeological sites and historical temples that are key sources of national tourism revenue (yet ironically are often cost prohibitive for Maya people themselves).



The Inseparability of Dignity, Heritage, and Maya Ways of Being

Notably, the Maya struggle outlined above cannot be reduced to being a mere matter of acquiring property rights and land deeds from the state. Rather, it has been a struggle to protect and sustain their cultural heritage, customary governance system, social-ecological relations, languages, and worldviews all at once. In short, it is a struggle for land, dignity, and ever-evolving Maya ways of being, which have been targeted for elimination and placed under attack by colonial power, capitalist extraction, and state power for over 500 years.

A defining characteristic of the Maya is how they view themselves as *aj ral ch'och*, which is a Q'eqchi' term and notion existing within Maya cosmovisión that broadly means 'people of the land' or 'children of the Earth.' Indeed, the Maya are people whose livelihoods, culture, and collective existence depends upon being connected to and taking care of the environment. This also entails asserting and engendering their Indigenous approach to community, *se' komonil*, which is a deeply layered, intersubjective term that roughly translates to 'living well in dignity together.' *Se' komonil* represents interdependency, intergenerational bonds, and a form of mutuality that weaves together spiritual, material, human, and non-human worlds.

Hence, for the Maya of southern Belize, their relationship with the land, practice of environmental stewardship, and acts of reclaiming and recuperating both territory and heritage mean (re)vitalising their shared senses of identity, community, and oneness.



Rapid Land Grabs and Slow Violence: A Global-Local Challenge

Even though the Maya won the 2015 land rights case in the CCJ, the recurring FPIC violations and a prolonged legal battle were an assault on *aj ral ch'och, se' komonil*, and the wellbeing of Maya communities, and also came at tremendous cost to the health of local ecosystems. In many instances, the costs and consequences went unnoticed, omitted, or were relentlessly disavowed by the state and broader public, even though what the Maya were being subjected to were rapid land grabs and forms of structural and 'slow violence' (Penados, Gahman, and Smith, 2022).

Slow violence, whilst recognised as a structural process, pays specific attention to violence that is often unseen, occurs gradually, and the effects of which are cumulative and coalesce over time (Nixon, 2011). It includes but is not entirely limited to the debilitation of communities and ecologies because of things like mining, deforestation, toxic dumping, wildlife loss, contaminant leaching, pollutant bioaccumulation, the rollback of environmental regulations, and the generative triggers and indelible upshots of catastrophic climate change and so-called 'natural' disasters, which are actually not 'natural' at all. In other words, slow violence is as persistently chronic as it is ostensibly imperceptible. For communities experiencing slow violence like the Maya, however, there is nothing either slow or imperceptible about it.

As a concept, slow violence casts light on long-term damage that is typically hidden, denied, and aggregative (O'Lear, 2021). It can be the result of seemingly banal state planning procedures, economic policy decisions, and development contracts signed in offices and boardrooms far away from the places and communities where the ecological and climatic consequences of said planning decisions and development contracts are felt. For example, signatures on permits that grant mining, logging, and oil concessions to entrepreneurs might seem mundane in the moment, however, they can give rise to a string of expropriations and environmental impacts that when added up are tantamount to disaster.



Critically Reflecting upon FPIC, State Power, and Time

As an instrument for safeguarding against land grabs and partial aspect of self-determination that is fervently disputed, we contend that FPIC is also a politically fraught protocol that legitimises and entrenches the modern nation-state, Western-liberal notions of human rights, and colonially-imposed legal institutions, which often clash with Indigenous cosmologies and can undermine Indigenous people's governance systems. In many ways, rather than guaranteeing relative autonomy for Indigenous communities and putting an end to the colonial enterprise, i.e., capitalist exploitation and the privatisation of land, FPIC merely mediates it. Despite its limitations, the FPIC protocol can be an effective mechanism of accountability that communities can employ to defend their territories from development programmes that result in extractive dispossession and ecological harm.

In practical terms, when engaging with communities regarding FPIC, conceptions of time, cultural differences, and budgetary limitations must be considered and respected as the costs of implementing the protocol are often prohibitive and taxing for subsistence-based, cash-poor villages where an Indigenous language may be primarily spoken. Developers and state officials are often more concerned with fast progress and cost efficiency than transparency and cultural safety. This, coupled with a preoccupation about keeping development projects on schedule, often means that engaging on the terms and preferences of local communities is either a non-starter or an afterthought.

In the context of Belize, FPIC has regularly been seen as an obstacle in the way of project implementation, which has resulted in haphazard consultations, shortcuts being taken, villages being pressured, blatant disregard for due diligence, and incisive criticisms aimed at local decision-making processes. The FPIC process simply takes time and Indigenous communities often have their own calendars and rhythms of life, which may not be in sync with or move at the same pace as the calendars and schedules of corporate developers and state ministries.



Five Key Takeaways for States, Scholars, NGO Advocates, and the Private Sector

In essence, what is at stake in Belize regarding FPIC is at once Indigenous people's right to self-determination and the overall health of ecosystems in the face of intensifying climate change and disaster risk. And while private business interests and profit-oriented market forces were responsible and remain culpable for the injurious social and environmental consequences that have ensued in Toledo District, it is crucial to recognise that the state's development and economic growth agendas have also enabled both corporate extractors and conservation organisations—the primary beneficiaries of the enclosure of 'the commons'—to violate FPIC and dispossess communal Maya lands.

Even so, as evidenced throughout this document's text and images, the Q'eqchi' and Mopan Maya communities of southern Belize continue to demonstrate their agency by defending and breathing life into *aj ral ch'och* and *se' komonil*. On this point and notably, in Toledo District of southern Belize, an Indigenous customary system of community-based governance remains; the *alcaldes*, which has a grassroots representative body, the TAA, and is a direct product of consensus, democratic process, and the political agency and territorial relations of Maya communities.

In critically reflecting upon the development challenges and incendiary FPIC clashes detailed throughout this brief, as well as the broader global environmental politics at hand, we provide five key takeaways below for researchers, policymakers, philanthropists, NGOs, and activists alike to consider.

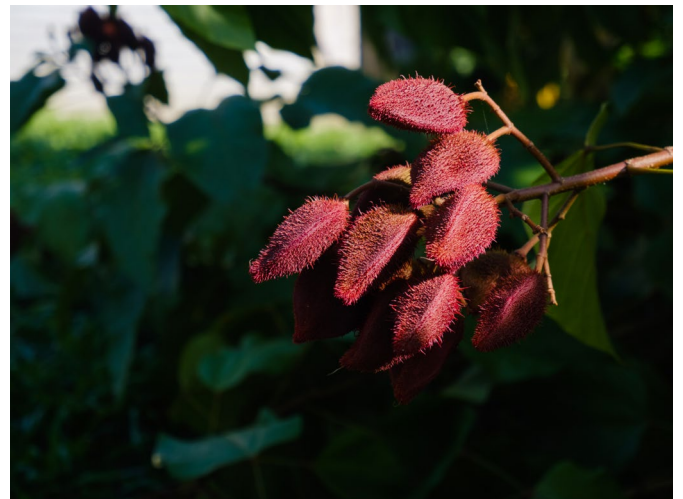


Key Takeaway #1: For Scientists, Researchers, and Scholars

For generations on end, differing Indigenous communities and subsistence-based societies have maintained interdependent and regenerative relationships with the environment, as well as have been engaged in low-impact land management practices, ecological stewardship, and sustainable resource use. These reciprocal relations are often deeply embedded in Indigenous people's customary governance systems and cosmovisiones, which are heterogenous and ever-evolving yet consistently value nature and maintain biodiversity.

Notably, Indigenous self-determination and practices of collective governance—as well as approaches to peace, diplomacy, knowledge production, food production, resource management, sustainability, and economic relations—precede colonial contact. Indeed, all have been alive for generations on end and carry on across a wide array of differing geographies. These dynamic participatory forms of governance and connections to ecosystems and Mother Earth continue to be adversely affected if not outright denied by numerous (post)colonial institutions and state authorities in both the Global South and North.

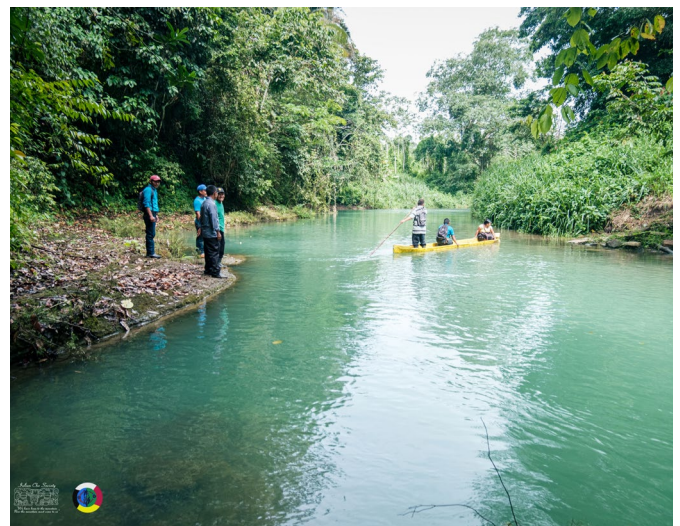
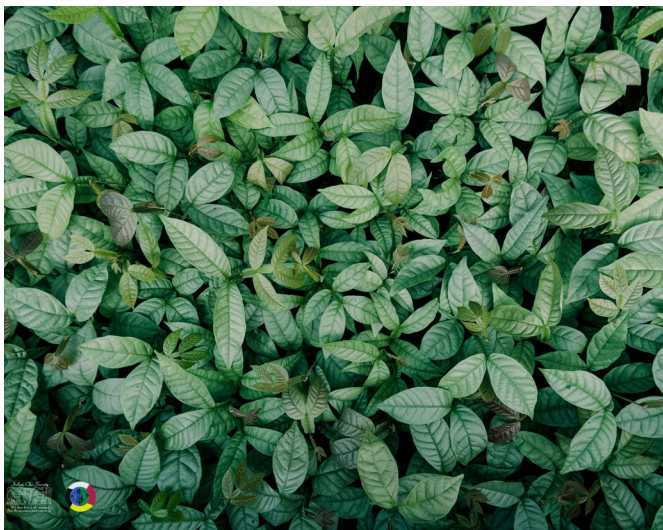
Researchers who appreciate and see merit in such Indigenous knowledges, environmental relations, and effective forms of climate action—as explicitly recognised in the latest IPCC report (2022)—must proceed cautiously and respectfully. Collaborations must prioritise listening carefully, cultural humility, and establish relationships that are rooted in trust, transparency, relevance, and reciprocity. In short, Indigenous people's self-determination over data, authorship, and project design are a mandate. This is necessary to avoid harm and prevent research partnerships that are extractive, exploitative, and parasitic.



Key Takeaway #2: For Entrepreneurs and Private Enterprise

Corporate representatives, government administrators, and high-ranking political officials across Latin American and Caribbean countries like Belize frequently mobilise discourses of national development, economic growth, and entrepreneurial empowerment to divide and debilitate Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities. In the case above, the Government of Belize has deployed appeals to patriotic nationalism to frame the Maya as recalcitrant and irrational in order to pit the wider Belizean population against them. Government representatives have also used liberal-Western conceptions of inclusion and authenticity to discredit and disrupt Indigenous economies and forms of communal governance (e.g. the *alcaldes*), grassroots organising, and multi-racial solidarity. Such actions are often seen by Indigenous communities as state-sponsored authoritarian attacks, as well as frequently viewed as a foreclosure of their right to self-determination.

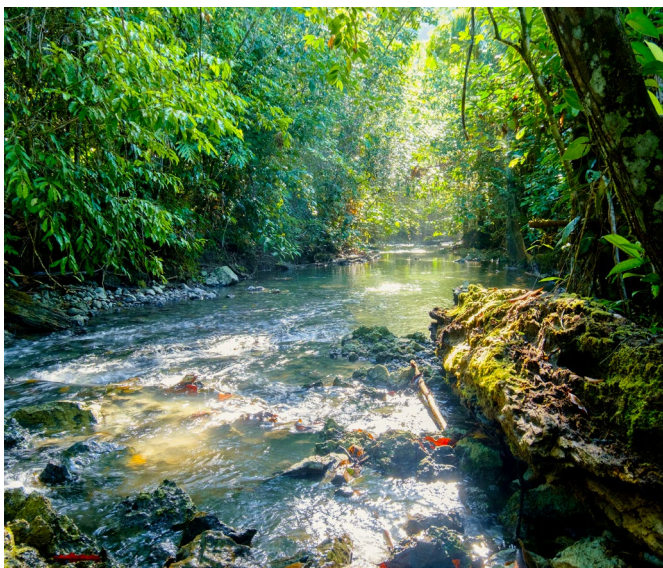
Consequently, isolated villages can more easily be subjected to misinformation, manipulation, coercion, intimidation, and pressured to acquiesce or accept state-driven economic development that might negatively affect their people, culture, and the environment at large. This is as discomfiting as it is threatening given that multinationals and governments across Latin America and the Caribbean have well-documented histories of violating FPIC protocols, expropriating land, and damaging ecosystems, i.e., both structural and slow violence. Notably, Indigenous people and subsistence-based communities are regularly on the frontlines of confronting, preventing, and halting extractivist land grabs that result in environmental degradation.



Key Takeaway #3: For State Officials and Policymakers

The historical-ongoing strategies and policies of contrasting empires and colonial powers have been to deliberately fracture Indigenous communities and sow seeds of internal discord, i.e., to divide and rule as a means to exploit and extract. These splintering processes continue to this day in Belize, albeit in a different post-independent yet arguably ongoing colonial form. This is evidenced by the state-sanctioned dispossession of Indigenous lands, authoritarian nationalism, and racial discrimination exhibited by the state. On this point, it is well worth remembering that the Government of Belize is a hierarchical Westminster-modelled institution imposed by the British Empire, which numerous postcolonial scholars argue has been an abject failure regarding good governance across the Commonwealth.

In short, formal governance in Belize is a just one indicator of how deeply entrenched colonial institutions, worldviews, and class stratifications remain across the Anglo-Caribbean. In a context of escalating climate risk, such assertions of state power often clash with the customary governance systems, internal economic relations, and land and resource management practices of Indigenous groups and subsistence-based communities. As a consequence, and despite the degree to which Indigenous people are engaged in sustainable ecological practices across multiple scales, they continue to face numerous obstacles in terms of being allowed to concretely shape national, regional, and global environmental governance.



Key Takeaway #4: For NGO Advocates and Philanthropists

Despite habitually being excluded from or even deliberately silenced in relation to official conservation efforts and state-sponsored development projects that include things like establishing protected areas, building transportation networks, wildlands philanthropy, and implementing so-called ‘green’ ecotourism initiatives, the contributions of Indigenous people and subsistence-based communities to land and resource management—in conjunction with their regenerative food systems and environmental restoration efforts—have demonstrated significant success in maintaining biodiversity and healthy ecosystems. Their efforts come with regional and global impact but are frequently dismissed.

Moreover, international and domestic NGOs, even if well intentioned and doing ‘good’ work related to conservation, sustainability, and the empowerment of local communities, are not necessarily beholden to Indigenous worldviews, forms of governance, communal land holdings, and relationships with nature. As independent Indigenous activists and revolutionary movements from all over the world have pointed out, NGOs frequently reproduce neoliberal ideals, racist tropes, and classist relations that hamper transformative praxis. In several cases across the Global South and North, and despite the fact that civil society organisations can be powerful and important actors in terms of advocating for key reforms related to inequality, it is crucial to note that numerous NGOs have either been complicit in or are the immediate beneficiaries of the enclosure, privatisation, and dispossession of the commons. These dynamics and tendencies undermine processes related to Indigenous people’s established yet variable forms of complex tenure and participatory and communal governance, not to mention interfere with grassroots resistance and the efforts of autonomous social movements.



Key Takeaway #5: For Activists, Supporters, and Sympathisers

Indigenous communities are neither uniform nor monolithic. They are characterised by diversity with respect to individual ambitions, cultural values, customary practices, political ideals, spiritual beliefs, relationships with the environment, and day-to-day opinions. At times, select members of communities may side with the aims and agendas of the state or interests and initiatives of corporate extractors, big businesses, and NGOs that are guilty of displacing Indigenous villages and dispossessing ancestral lands.

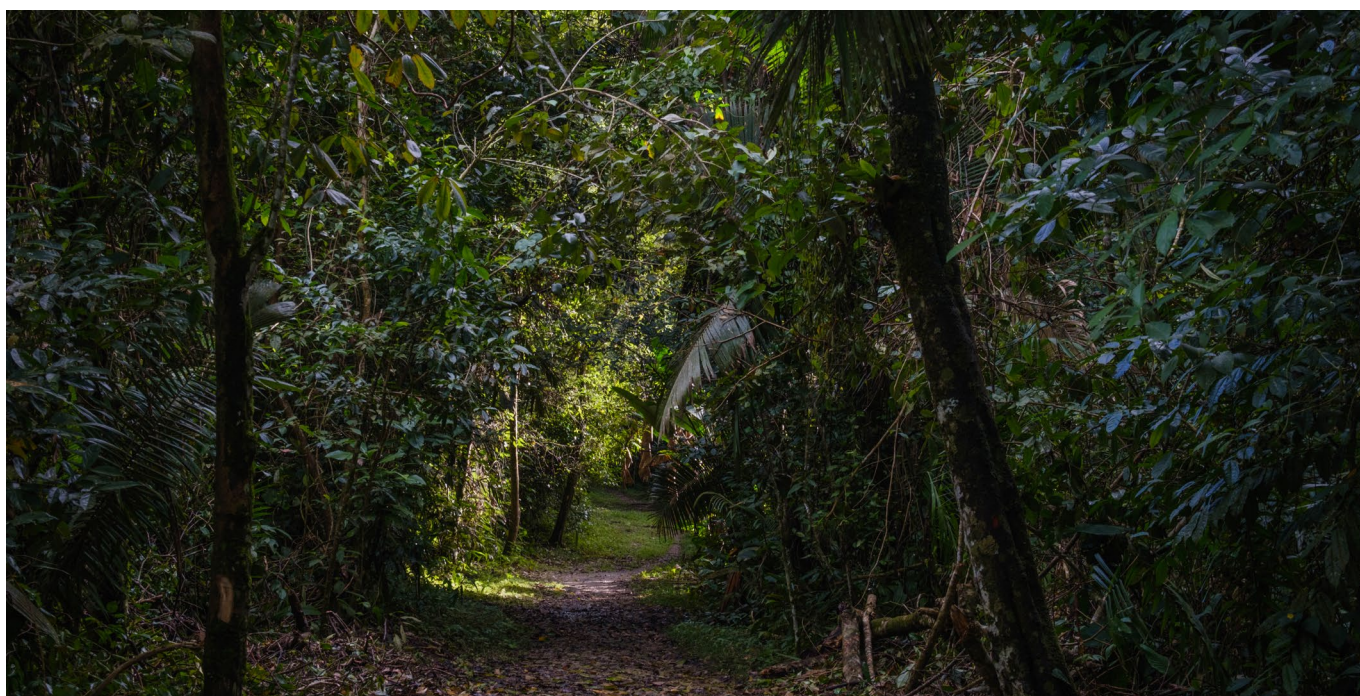
Similarly, some may even accept roles as paid agents of governments, corporations, or NGOs that are actively engaged in the enclosure, expropriation, and alienation of Indigenous lands, territories, and the commons in general. This is a dilemma from which no demographic group concerned with self-determination or sustaining the planet is immune, whatever their identity or geography. Indeed, as the land conflict and FPIC violations in Belize demonstrate all too clearly, while the complexion of postcolonial governments and faces of bourgeois institutions may change, the authoritarianism of the state, the aggression of development, and the repression of Indigenous ways of being remains.

Even so, and equally, Maya community members in Toledo District are continuing to defend their relationships with land and customary system of governance in the shadow of both the enduring legacies of colonialism and an escalating climate crisis that will affect us all.



Conclusion

What the struggle by the Maya for land and self-determination in southern Belize means for addressing global challenges, then, is that it is crucial for Indigenous people, subsistence-based communities, and grassroots land defenders to be recognised, respected, and listened to as key actors on matters of both national economic development and international environmental governance. This is because of the deep knowledge they and their ancestors have generated—and continue to produce—about how to breathe life into sustainable and just futures.



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