

## **Indigenous inclusion in the science-policy sphere requires more than symbolic gestures: Interview with Meg Parsons**

*The 9th of August was the International Day of Indigenous Peoples, and this year the focus was on “Leaving no one behind: Indigenous peoples and the call for a new social contract.” We spoke to Meg Parsons about what it would really take to work towards a new social contract in science-policy spaces.*

In the context of the forthcoming UNFCCC COP26 to be held in Glasgow, Scotland, and CBD COP15 in Kunming, China, we spoke to **Meg Parsons**, Senior Lecturer at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, about how to make policy fora like the COP more inclusive of Indigenous voices, and about the role of Indigenous knowledge alongside Western scientific knowledge within – but not limited to – environmental research.

Meg Parsons is a historical geographer of Indigenous and non-Indigenous descent whose research explores the experiences of Indigenous peoples with changing social and environmental conditions. Her article ‘Indigenous peoples and transformations in freshwater governance and management’, co-authored with Karen Fisher and published in *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* was the basis for the Transformations to Sustainability knowledge brief ‘[Promoting Indigenous knowledge and values for more sustainable water resource management](#)’, published as part of the Transformations to Sustainability programme [knowledge brief series](#).

***The organizers of major policy summits, such as the COP, often champion the crucial role of Indigenous peoples for meeting climate and biodiversity goals, at least in public statements. What would it take to turn that kind of rhetoric into real change in policy fora?***

I see huge difficulties in trying to translate this rhetoric of inclusion into tangible action at the COP, because of the ways in which UN summits are structured and the UNFCCC process. Indigenous peoples often occupy a marginal and conflicted position within COP deliberations. The opportunities to have an influence on dialogue and outcomes is highly constrained, and often limited to the mention of the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge in the UNFCCC documentation or IPCC reports, and some photo opportunities with Indigenous people and international and national decision-makers during COPs.

A lot of symbolic gestures are made by international and national leaders who attend Indigenous representatives’ presentations, speak informally with Indigenous leaders, give brief speeches, and get their photos taken with Indigenous representatives. In these moments an emphasis is placed on celebrating Indigenous cultures and showing goodwill to Indigenous peoples’ issues. Yet the demands of Indigenous peoples to be included in decision-making processes, and for concrete actions, are not being addressed. Economically and politically powerful countries and coalitions of countries possess a much more significant influence at UN climate change summits than Indigenous peoples. Indeed, the capacities of Indigenous peoples’ interests to be represented regarding both climate change mitigation and adaptation decision-making at COPs is often dependent on Indigenous peoples’ political influence on their national government. Yet due to the historical and ongoing processes of colonialism and marginalisation, Indigenous peoples’ influence within national and local government politics is often highly constrained.

***How does this play out at events like the COP?***

Indigenous people who attended as Observers described how they possessed limited access to summit halls where important decisions were being made that impacted them, their communities, and their work. Many Indigenous leaders spoke out following previous COPs about how they tried

unsuccessfully to convince the UN Executive Secretary Christina Figueres there was a critical need to include Indigenous peoples within COP meetings where legally binding agreements were being made.

Even those Indigenous people who are members of their nation-states delegation teams and therefore can attend the Parties only meetings report that there is tension and conflict between the goals of their nation-state and that of their Indigenous nation/tribe/kin. One [representative from Norway, who was a member of the Sami Parliament, spoke about the conflict between renewable energy projects \(Wind Power\) and Sami reindeer herding](#) and how she was in a difficult position as a member of the Sami Parliament and a member of the Norwegian nation-state delegation to COP. She was there to represent the whole of Norway and promote interests that aligned with Norway's national commitment to reduce GHG emissions through the expansion of renewable energy projects. Yet, at the same time, those renewable energy projects were threatening and damaging the local interests – the identity, culture, modes of living and economic basis – of Sami people, with reindeer herding grounds being disrupted and lost because of wind power operations (which some scholars refer to as a form of green colonialism).

At UN climate summits the negotiation environment is a source of ongoing injustice for Indigenous peoples because their identities (and sovereignty) do not conform to the established climate governance structure. Indeed, Indigenous sovereignties are frequently unrecognized by their nation-state governments. While the International Peoples Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) was created in 2008 (after the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007), and at COPs the IIPCC runs a caucus devoted to representation of Indigenous peoples who are taking part in the UNFCCC process, its members generally are only Observers and are therefore not able to influence decision-making processes.

At the Paris Summit, for instance, the Indigenous Peoples' Pavilion was in the Climate Generations Space that was located at a distance from the "Blue Zone" (where all the official meetings with decision-makers took place). Few decision-makers, therefore, went past the Indigenous Peoples' Pavilion. In contrast, the private sector was given space for pavilions and delegation offices within the official COP premises. The location of the Indigenous Peoples' Pavilion at COP21 exemplifies how uneven and unjust geographical arrangements at the micro-level can reproduce global and national power structures and processes wherein Indigenous peoples, amongst the groups most vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change, are physically side-lined in discussions about how to address climate change.

Symbolic recognition of Indigenous cultures and Indigenous knowledge might occur at UN summits, but it is not translated into procedural justice (participation in decision-making processes) and distributive justice (such as financial support for Indigenous mitigation and adaptation efforts). Emphasis is often placed on recognition of Indigenous identity rather than recognition of status as Indigenous peoples' who possess self-determination rights (as outlined in United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), which should be allowed to negotiate on par with other nations within the UNFCCC process.

While symbolic acts that fall within the broad domain of "cultural identity" (such as wearing traditional clothing) are permitted at COPs, other acts (deemed non-cultural) are censured, such as at COP21 when Indigenous climate justice activists put up a banner on the wall of the Pavilion that read "Indigenous Peoples Defending Mother Earth". Security personnel moved quickly to remove the banner and disperse the crowd around it. The small act of political resistance by Indigenous people and the response of security demonstrates the significant linkage between power and space that determines who is being heard and what is permitted to be said (and heard) within the walls of COP.

The marginalisation of Indigenous people within the COPs, despite the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, highlights how there is yet to be effective and equitable (meaningful) inclusion of Indigenous people within UNFCCC decision-making processes.

This is not to say that Indigenous people are not active in making demands for climate justice and seeking to engage at the COP summits – often outside the COPs in the variety of autonomous free spaces. Protests, presentations, and alternative summits emphasise the shared interests of non-Indigenous activists and scientists, with Indigenous activists, scientists and leaders calling for governments, businesses and communities around the world to adopt and implement large-scale reductions in GHG emissions, sustainable adaptation, the transformation to low emission economies and lifestyles, alongside other actions to address the numerous other environmental crises humanity is facing.

***In the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it seems likely that it will be more difficult than usual for people – including Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists – to physically attend the next conference in Glasgow. Do you think that this will affect the kinds of engagement and impact that representatives of these groups can have?***

I think the absence of critical voices, Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists, will be sorely missed at COP. Even if they are not included within decision-making processes, the voices are important for raising awareness, promoting dialogue outside formal UNFCCC processes, and providing an important alternative that provides a much-needed antidote to the deliberations that far too often focus on making small-scale changes.

The emphasis continues to be on framing climate change as an economic and/or technical problem(s) with economic and technical solutions that aim to maintain business as usual without many any substantive changes – specifically the economies, politics, lifestyles, and practices of private sector especially in the Global North. I think that we should be advocating for UN summits to be more inclusive and transformative spaces, which allow for Indigenous peoples and members of civil society to be included in a way that breaks down traditional hierarchies and centres of negotiations that transcend nation-state or country blocks.

***What can non-Indigenous researchers and decision-makers do to support this aim?***

The importance of collaborations between Indigenous peoples and researchers stress the need for joint efforts that serve to enhance understandings of climate change impacts, adaptation, and mitigation, and increase public and decision-makers' awareness of Indigenous climate change issues.

Non-Indigenous decision-makers and scientists need to be willing to hear and learn from Indigenous peoples. This requires them to spend time and effort listening to and learning from Indigenous peoples, which goes beyond them just attending a brief presentation given by Indigenous representatives at a UN summit or conference.

A way to move beyond rhetoric to action, therefore, is the shift more broadly to recognize formally Indigenous Knowledges (IK) as legitimate and valid knowledge systems, which are cumulative, dynamic, and adaptive, by those organizations who are influential within the UNFCCC process as well as climate change mitigation and adaptation policy-making, projects, and practices around the globe. While this is already occurring, most of it is focused on making statements about inclusion that sometimes verge too far towards tokenism rather than changes to the status quo.

One of the ways we can avoid tokenism is to ensure actions are taken to increase the numbers of Indigenous peoples within scientific or research bodies, international and national organizations, and national delegations. Even though Indigenous people may need to reconcile different knowledge systems, political priorities and so forth, Indigenous participation (and freedom to express their different perspectives, identities, values, experiences, and goals) is the key to getting IK appropriately represented and included in a way that is not mere tokenism.

There are Indigenous scientists out there – be it physicists, environmental scientists and others – who are trained in scientific knowledge and knowledgeable about their Indigenous knowledge systems (IK), as well as Indigenous scholars from the social sciences and humanities etc, and non-academic who are experts about IK. A critical part of this recognition, therefore, needs to extend to who is being included and how they are getting included in producing research and informing policies.

At present most researchers who are researching and writing about IK (as well as most policy-makers) are non-Indigenous and there are far too few Indigenous researchers and/or Indigenous leaders whose expertise in IK is being recognized and included within formal organizations and processes. Internationally and in most national contexts, research institutions and organizations continue to be the domain of specific social groups (Global North, men, white, non-Indigenous) who hold positions of long-standing privilege (across global/national/local scales), while marginalized groups (Global South, Indigenous, women, non-white) are in the minority.

Indigenous people around the world face substantive barriers to being able to access good quality formal education so there are not necessarily as many Indigenous scholars working in the field. However, this is slowly changing and there needs to be more promotion of current and future generations of Indigenous researchers, which requires scientists and scientific organizations to promote Indigenous researchers, be it through grants, scholarships, or mentoring programmes.

Indigenous people who possess PhDs still face substantive institutional racism, which makes it difficult to get their work recognized (such as being published in peer-reviewed journals, gaining research grants or getting permanent jobs in academia). There are numerous instances where different organizations (scientific bodies, editors of journals, universities etc) choose to go to a non-Indigenous scholar to write about IK rather than ask an Indigenous scholar. One of the reasons might be because most Indigenous scholars try to not to romanticise IK and seek to present it in a holistic manner. They (or we) do not want to just research and write about cultural dimensions of IK or Indigenous Ecological Knowledge or Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and instead also seek to discuss the socio-economic, political, and spiritual dimensions of IK as well. This includes the ways in which colonialism and neoliberalism have and continue to have negative impacts on the lives, livelihoods and modes of living of Indigenous peoples, and the ways in which climate change is a direct manifestation of unsustainable cultures and ways of living emerging from colonial capitalistic endeavours.

The task of ensuring that the complementariness between Indigenous knowledge and scientific knowledge can be drawn on and fruitful collaborations between knowledge systems and peoples can occur cannot simply be in the hands of non-Indigenous scientists or policymakers. These comments are also applicable to the context of policy-making: Indigenous people need to be in positions of authority to be able to shape policies in a meaningful way.

***The ISC supports the UN's call for a new social contract based on genuine participation and partnership that respects the rights, dignity and freedoms of all, Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in research. What do non-Indigenous scientists need to know about Indigenous Knowledge (IK) to support this aim?***

Instead of seeking to see and test IK according to the standards and procedures set out by western scientific knowledge, scientists need to be open to alternative ways of thinking and doing that does not conform to their ways of seeing the world and their disciplines' practices. Rather than scientists or policymakers seeing IK as a tool to augment gaps in scientific knowledge or as a collection of data that needs to be tested and validated (or invalidated) through scientific measures (to ensure its universal applicability and robustness), IK needs to be recognized as a place-based and holistic system of knowledge (information, practices, worldviews) that is tied to cultures and modes of living.

These knowledge systems emerged over centuries and millennia in specific places and cultures and are used alongside Western scientific knowledge, but IK and scientific knowledge are not the same. One cannot simply integrate into the other as the ontological foundations are different. IK is place-based (context-specific), holistic, and centred on looking at the inter-relationships between things. Scientific knowledge is centred on universalism and being applicable everywhere. It is therefore difficult and sometimes culturally inappropriate to try to take a part of IK (such as plant and animal behaviour associated with climatic changes) and then integrate it into scientific knowledge, often to try to augment or fill in gaps within science. When a segment of IK is taken out of context it loses its meaning and the critical relationships between things and between information, management practices, governance arrangements and worldviews are also lost in translation.

IK was and is still used by many Indigenous peoples to understand and monitor environmental conditions, sustainably manage their environments, and prepare for and respond to environmental variability and changes. In doing so, Indigenous communities seek to maintain the health & wellbeing of humans and more-than-humans.

IK, however, should not be romanticised or left to outsiders to determine if and how it is valid to discussions of climate change. It is – as Indigenous scholars stress – important to not romanticise Indigenous people as pre-modern, traditional, or inherent conservationists, and IK as holding all the solutions to all the problems (ecological ethics). Rather, Indigenous scholars stress the need to recognize that Indigenous peoples' cultures, ways of life, and knowledges are multiple and dynamic. Most Indigenous people use non-renewable resources, some participate in activities that generate high GHG emissions, some consume fossil fuels in ways that differ substantively from their ancestors. Therefore, Indigenous people generate GHG emissions (even though they often generate less than non-Indigenous peoples) and recognize that they need to be involved in mitigation efforts. At the same time, they are often vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change and need to be involved in – and to lead – adaptation efforts. Yet they often lack the financial resources to be able to fund mitigation or adaptation projects and many Indigenous peoples (be it in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and the United States of America) report facing difficulties accessing financial grants provided by government and NGOs to support their sustainable development and climate change mitigation and adaptation plans.

Indeed, accessing information about climate change mitigation and adaptation plans or projects in certain areas is difficult and Indigenous peoples often express their frustration at being excluded or marginalised within national and local climate change policies and planning processes.

Accordingly, they are amongst the most vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change, produce far less GHG emissions than their non-Indigenous counterparts within their nation-states, and yet cannot access resources or information needed to allow them to adapt to and mitigate climate change. The question is thus how to ensure Indigenous inclusion is the norm, not the exception.

Some of the ways suggested include a focus on economic remedies, such as redistribution of the means to mitigate climate change and adapt to the impacts of climate change to ensure that

Indigenous peoples can access funding to support their local and/or regional initiatives that transcend nation-state boundaries (which themselves are a product of colonialism).

Another is the formal recognition of not only Indigenous knowledge but also Indigenous experiences, responsibilities and rights within UNFCCC processes and other forums. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People provides formal recognition of Indigenous rights and values, but this needs to be translated into the climate change sphere, be it in terms of global climate change governance sphere or national climate policies.

Indigenous peoples' diverse knowledge systems (which are founded on their diverse worldviews) share a common thread that emphasises human-nature relations (socio-natures or human/more-than-human ethics) that often stands in contrast to Western worldviews, which are Anthropocentric (humans over nature or command-and-control). Indigenous peoples' worldviews frequently emphasize holistic connections wherein it is impossible to try to divorce the environment from social, cultural, economic or political as everything is bound together. Such views are often expressed in terms of environmental guardianship, stewardship, or protectors (that traverse local, national, and global scales).

In Aotearoa New Zealand we use the concept of kaitiakitanga (environmental guardianship) to refer to Māori people's duties as environmental guardians to maintain a sustainable and balanced relationship with our taiao (environment) at the local level (but extending to global efforts) and ensure that the mauri (life force) of all things is maintained and enhanced. As kaitiaki (guardians) Māori iwi (tribes) and hapū (sub-tribes) are responsible for caring for the ecosystems in which we are part of and ensure that the health and wellbeing of our rohe (ancestral lands and waters) is maintained across the generations (past/present/future). The emphasis on reciprocal and ongoing relationships with nature at all scales is not unique to Māori people, and is shared by countless Indigenous peoples around the world. This is not saying that Māori (or any other Indigenous peoples) are inherent conversationalists and do not use non-finite things in our daily lives, but rather that the emphasis is (unlike in Western cultures) on the sustainable management of environments and longer-term management (intergenerational justice) that frequently extends 100 years plus into the future and about responsibilities to more-than-human worlds, rather than about who owns property and resources and who can exploit them for short-term profit.

Rather than thinking about IK as simply information about the environment, I think the shift to thinking about it in terms of sustainable governance and management practices is helpful. Environmental guardianship can be seen in Indigenous peoples' local-level efforts to sustainably manage their ecological products and human-environment relations, but also in global efforts to raise awareness of the threat that climate change poses to Indigenous peoples and all of humanity. So I think a shift towards a more expansive discussion of IK as knowledge-practice-worldviews is needed and it gets around the focus on trying to test and take IK and use it within scientific discourse.

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