

## Rights, Land, and Legacy: Indigenous Peoples Demand Structural Reform at HLPF 2025

By Mitch Teofilo

*United Nations Headquarters, New York-* At the 2025 High-Level Political Forum, Indigenous Peoples delivered with clarity, conviction, and collective force. From ocean governance to labor justice, climate solutions to community-led development, their message resounded across SDG clusters: Indigenous Peoples are rights-holders, knowledge-keepers, and agents of transformative change, not vulnerable groups to be merely included.

In the words of Ivan Vaalbooi of EVDO, South Africa, ***“To whom are the SDGs for if people are dying and the planet is continuously ravaged by corporate greed? The time to act is now.”***

In the SDG 14 discussion on Life Below Water, Jimrex Calatan of the Philippines delivered a powerful intervention grounded in coastal realities. “Recognition of Indigenous knowledge must go hand-in-hand with the recognition of our inherent and collective right to our resources,” he said, highlighting the critical role of Indigenous marine governance systems. He called for legal recognition of customary stewardship practices and robust protection for small-scale artisanal fishers threatened by industrial fleets. Citing recent outcomes from the UN Ocean Conference, Teofilo emphasized the need for direct financing of Indigenous-led conservation efforts, community-based monitoring systems, and IP-led data gathering and monitoring initiatives. He also joined global calls for a moratorium on deep sea mining, urging policy frameworks to uphold Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and collective rights over ocean territories.



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At the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) session, tribal woman leader Ruth Kissam from Papua New Guinea emphasized the injustice of climate impact on low-emission countries like hers. “We did not start the fire—but our forests help put it out,” she declared, referring to PNG’s vast and carbon-rich tropical rainforests. With 70% forest cover and 7% of the world’s biodiversity, PNG serves as

a global climate stabilizer, yet faces existential threats from illegal logging and extractive industries. Kissam called for scaled-up climate finance, debt-for-nature swaps, access to carbon markets, and technology transfer mechanisms. She emphasized the need for partnerships that honor Indigenous stewardship and rights over land and forests. “We are not just another vulnerable SIDS, we are a global climate lifeline,” she added. “We borrow the land from our children. Let our partnerships reflect this wisdom.”



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In the dialogue on SDG localization and community-led development, Uzzal Azim of Kapaeeng Foundation in Bangladesh, centered the right to self-determined development. “Indigenous Peoples are not merely vulnerable groups or beneficiaries. We have the agency to lead a truly, just, and sustainable development,” he affirmed. He highlighted the Indigenous Navigator funded by the European Union and IFAD’s Indigenous Peoples Assistance Facility as examples of effective, direct financing partnerships. At the same time, Azim condemned the continued imposition of large-scale development projects- mines, dams, and conservation zones that violate

FPIC and displace communities. He called for States to embed UNDRIP in SDG implementation, ensure Indigenous Peoples inclusion in national planning, and strengthen data systems to reflect realities. The demand was clear: SDG localization must be responsive, inclusive, and resourced through direct partnerships.

In the session ‘Strengthening alliances for SDG implementation: multi stakeholder engagement for the 2030 Agenda’, Ivan Vaalboi of EVDO, South Africa highlighted, “In Africa, all people being seen as Indigenous creates confusion- it erases those of us still struggling for recognition.” Ivan called for urgent legal and policy reforms to recognize the San and Khoekhoe as distinct cultural communities with rights to identity, language, and land. The demand included



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secure tenure mechanisms, FPIC-protected development processes, and direct collaboration with Indigenous-led and Indigenous women-led organizations to co-design culturally relevant development programs.

At the Special Event on Climate and SDG Synergies, Robie Halip of the Philippines, the Executive Director of Right Energy Partnership with Indigenous Peoples and the Coordinator of Indigenous Peoples Major Group for Sustainable Development (IPMG), reframed development discourse through relational ethics. “We are not looking at this from a commodity perspective, we are protecting ecosystems because they are borrowed from future generations,” she shared.



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Robie highlighted that climate, biodiversity, and development are not siloed issues in Indigenous lifeways, they are part of a holistic worldview grounded in responsibility and reciprocity. She called for Indigenous Women’s leadership in climate governance and insisted that policy

solutions must elevate Indigenous knowledge, protect territories, and embed intergenerational accountability.

In the side event on the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), Ellen Dictaan-Bang-oa, of Tebtebba and the Asia Indigenous Women's Network, stressed that biodiversity goals must reflect Indigenous Peoples' contributions and priorities. "Real progress demands more than acknowledgement, it requires restructuring frameworks to center Indigenous voices," she said. Ellen linked biodiversity to critical SDG indicators- health, education, poverty, and environmental sustainability. She called for direct funding for Indigenous monitoring and review processes and emphasized that national biodiversity strategies must be co-implemented with Indigenous communities. Citing Target 22 and Article 8(j), she highlighted the intrinsic connection between Indigenous lands, knowledge systems, and environmental stewardship.



In the General Debate held at the UN Trusteeship Council, Ivan Vaalbooi addressed Member States with uncompromising clarity. "We only have less than five years left... and the pledge of leaving no one behind still remains a rhetoric," he stated. Vaalbooi called for full implementation of UNDRIP and the Declaration on Future Generations, especially as climate and development projects continue to be imposed in Indigenous

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territories without consent. He urged governments to strengthen national data systems through ethnicity disaggregation and ensure the visibility and inclusion of Indigenous development priorities. Vaalbooi emphasized that Indigenous-led solutions must shape the outcomes of the Second World Social Development Summit in Doha. “Beyond these four corners and august halls, people are barely surviving from conflicts, hunger, and climate disasters. To whom are the SDGs for if people are dying and the planet is continuously ravaged by corporate greed? The time to act is now!” he concluded.

On SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth, the Indigenous Peoples Major Group created a statement demanding the recognition of Indigenous economies that are deeply rooted in ecological stewardship, cultural survival, and intergenerational knowledge. “Decent work is inseparable from dignity, safety, and recognition,” the statement asserted. Traditional livelihoods such as farming, fishing, seed preservation, hunting, and knowledge transmission are legitimate forms of work that sustain communities and biodiversity. The statement called for the repeal of laws that criminalize these occupations and urged States to embed Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) into labor policy frameworks. It demanded macroeconomic restructuring to include non-standard and informal work, implementation of labor programs co-designed with Indigenous Peoples, and the transformation of national data systems- not just to disaggregate by ethnicity, but to be governed by Indigenous communities themselves. It also highlighted the invisibility and exploitation faced by Indigenous migrants, especially women in informal and domestic work sectors, who are often denied access to justice.

The interventions delivered by Indigenous Peoples at HLPF 2025 were not appeals for inclusion- they were mandates for justice, backed by lived experience, policy expertise, and generations of stewardship. Indigenous Peoples are not asking for acknowledgement- they demanded recognition of land, culture, labor, and governance as rights, not as charity. From climate finance and marine sovereignty to labor protections and biodiversity reform, Indigenous Peoples offered solutions that are proven and practical.

As the world accelerates its efforts toward 2030, Indigenous Peoples must not be consulted as an afterthought- they must be at the helm. As Ruth Kissam reminded us, ***“We don’t inherit our lands from our parent, We borrow it from our children.”*** The time to honor that wisdom-in law, in financing, in governance, is now. Anything less is a betrayal not only of the SDGs, but of the future itself.

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