

What are the Rio Conventions?

1.1 Earth Summit 1992

In 1992, more than 100 heads of state, 100s of NGOs, indigenous peoples and many other stakeholders gathered in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). UNCED, also called the Earth Summit was a major event in the life of the United Nations. It focused on creating instruments for environmental protection and socio-economic development. The UN member states signed the Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity; endorsed the Rio Declaration and the Forest Principles. They also adopted Agenda 21, an action plan to follow up the Conventions (see below).

At the Earth Summit in Rio, conservationists and indigenous peoples worked together to influence these first major international treaty agreements on protecting the planet's environment. The Earth Summit adopted a number of environmental instruments, guidelines and action plans. Three interlocking conventions were adopted to try to address the grave threats to the environment; these include the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD), and the Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC).

The alliance between indigenous peoples of Latin America and environmentalists ensured that indigenous peoples were recognised as a 'Major Group' in relation to the Rio Conventions, and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in particular. The Conventions were supplemented with Agenda 21, a comprehensive plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally by United Nations bodies, States, and Major Groups in every area in which human beings impact on the environment. Agenda 21 was refreshed with specific calls for strengthening the role of major stakeholders including indigenous peoples¹. The Major Groups recognised in the Rio process include: Women, youth, indigenous peoples, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, the scientific community, and farmers.

1.2 WSSD 2002

Ten years after Rio, the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa re-affirmed and amplified the importance of the partnership between States, conservation agencies and indigenous peoples. The full implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the Commitments to the Rio principles were strongly reaffirmed at the WSSD. The realisation of the importance of involving indigenous people in all aspects of conservation and defining sustainable strategies hints at the similarity of the forces that are threatening both the world's environments and its first peoples.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development generated the [Johannesburg Plan of Implementation](#) (JPol). The JPol is a framework for action to implement revitalise commitments originally agreed on in 1992 but not properly implemented. The JPOI sets out priorities for action on sustainable development in areas as diverse as poverty eradication, health, trade, education, science and technology, regional concerns, natural resources, and the institutional arrangements.

The UNCED / WSSD platforms have highlighted that the survival of indigenous peoples' knowledge systems, cultures, languages and livelihoods are directly related to the protection of the environment and biological diversity, as well as securing and maintaining rights to land and natural resource management.

1.3 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change

The core issue in this convention is that industrialised Western countries are releasing too much pollution (greenhouse gases) which is in our atmosphere, trapping solar energy and causing the planet to heat up. The effects are varied, but they include more extreme weather, such as droughts, floods,

¹ See <http://www.iisd.org/rio+5/agenda/chp26.htm>

very bad storms, and a general heating up of the oceans and the planet. The polar ice caps and glaciers of ice all over the world are melting which cause the oceans to rise and change sea temperatures. This is affecting all of life on earth and is generally going to cause a lot of suffering, particularly in dry parts of Africa and on small island states.

The FCC Convention is meant to put pressure on Western countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and try to protect the global environment. The most important issue for indigenous peoples in Africa is that they are experts in knowledge about how nature ought to be, what is normal over long cycles of time, and people in the bush see the changes with the new weather patterns. Often desert peoples have back up plans of how to deal with bad droughts. This is called 'adaptation', and is an important aspect of the FCCC. Indigenous peoples in Africa can work with their governments and scientists to monitor the changes to nature and the environment, and make recommendations on how to cope with drought and reduction of biological diversity. In particular, indigenous peoples see which birds, insects, plants or mammals are starting to disappear and they can help warn scientists about this.

IPACC is looking to run more training on what the FCCC means for indigenous peoples in Africa. The Republic of Burundi has offered to work with IPACC to help build awareness and capacity in both the government and indigenous civil society in Africa to work with the FCCC processes and mechanisms.

1.4 UN Convention to Combat Desertification

The UNCCD deals with the global fight against land degradation and the spread of deserts and related phenomena like silting up of water systems and loss of top soil. The Convention was especially designed for Africa where land degradation is particularly serious and there is a spread of non-arable lands. The Convention recognises that there are both human and climatic causes for land degradation. There is an irony in climate change that the countries which are causing it are the rich countries and can cope; whereas the countries in Africa which did not cause it are the ones that suffer the most. There is a similar irony about desertification. Hunter-gatherers and nomadic pastoralists do not cause desertification. Their cultures traditional protect biodiversity and rely on human mobility (moving camp, following the rain or the game, trekking from one water hole to another, transhumance) and letting nature recover from human impact.

Colonialism promoted the political power of agricultural peoples and they are the ones primarily destroying the land in Africa from over-grazing, slash and burn agriculture, cutting down forest lands, and over using the top soil. Also agricultural people have many more children than indigenous peoples. They are causing the population explosion in Africa and are invading the lands of hunter-gatherers and pastoralists. Desertification is caused primarily by poor government policies and the political power of agricultural and dominant peoples. Indigenous peoples are mostly not consulted in policies which could measure and protect arid and semi-arid areas.

As with Climate Change, indigenous peoples can be more involved in the monitoring and analysis of desertification. Namibia, South Africa and Botswana are all signatories to the CCD and have national action plans on desertification. Traditional knowledge is a recognised aspect of CCD and indigenous peoples should be regularly in contact with their Environment ministries about their role in fighting desertification.

CCD requires of States the following:

Article 16

The Parties agree, according to their respective capabilities, to integrate and coordinate the collection, analysis and exchange of relevant short term and long term data and information to ensure systematic observation of land degradation in affected areas and to understand better and assess the processes and effects of drought and desertification. This would help accomplish, *inter alia*, early warning and advance planning for periods of adverse climatic variation in a form suited for practical application by users at all levels, including especially local populations. To this end, they shall, as: ...

- (g) subject to their respective national legislation and/or policies, exchange information on local and traditional knowledge, ensuring adequate protection for it

and providing appropriate return from the benefits derived from it, on an equitable basis and on mutually agreed terms, to the local populations concerned.

Article 17

The Parties undertake, according to their respective capabilities, to promote technical and scientific cooperation in the fields of combating desertification and mitigating the effects of drought through appropriate national, sub-regional, regional and international institutions. To this end, they shall support research activities that:

(c) protect, integrate, enhance and validate traditional and local knowledge, know-how and practices, ensuring, subject to their respective national legislation and / or policies, that the owners of that knowledge will directly benefit on an equitable basis and on mutually agreed terms from any commercial utilization of it or from any technological development derived from that knowledge;

These articles are obligations for your government and you can speak to your respective Ministries about what they are doing and the role that your community can play in these matters.

1.5 UN Convention on Biological Diversity

All three Rio conventions are important, but the CBD provides the greatest opportunities for indigenous peoples in Africa. The CBD Conference of Parties is emerging as a major forum for indigenous peoples to protect their rights and contribute to good governance of the earth's natural resources.

Indigenous peoples are able to speak in CBD meetings through the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (IIFB). IIFB brings together all the regional indigenous caucuses and makes recommendations to the States on how to bring in the interests, needs, wisdom and knowledge of indigenous peoples into the design and implementation of the CBD.

Article 8j of the CBD states that:

Signatory states agree to comply with the following:

Article 8j

Subject to its national legislation, respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilisation of such knowledge, innovations and practices.

Article 10c

Protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation or sustainable use requirements.

There has been a strong involvement of indigenous peoples in the work of the 8(j) working group and the Conference of Parties (COP). A further document emerged from the CBD that emphasises the most important principle in the protection and management of IKS – namely that the practice of natural resource usage and management by local and indigenous peoples is the basis for intergenerational transfer of IKS related to biological diversity. This is embodied in the 2004 *Addis Ababa Principles and Guidelines for the Sustainable Use of Biodiversity*.

Your community has the right to participate in the CBD discussions on traditional knowledge, in the national Programme of Work on Protected Areas (PoWPA), your national Biodiversity Action Plan, and national and international efforts to create a fair system of access and benefits related to genetic resources (ABS). It is an IPACC priority to help your communities understand what these agreements mean, and how your community, elders and activists can be more involved in environmental policy making, monitoring and implementation.

1.6 Commission for Sustainable Development

The Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) was established the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 1992 after the Rio Summit to follow-up on the decisions taken by the member states. It monitors and reports back to ECOSOC on implementation of the programme of action at the national, regional and international levels. Following the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002, the CSD took on responsibility for following up the [Johannesburg Plan of implementation \(JPOI\)](#).

Since Johannesburg, the CSD meets annually with a two-year implementation cycle. There are 53 States represented on the CSD with revolving representation from the Regions. Thirteen representatives are from Africa, making one of the two largest blocks of votes. According to the CSD website:

(A) review year will evaluate progress made in implementing sustainable development goals and identifying obstacles and constraints, while the policy year will decide on measures to speed up implementation and mobilize action to overcome these obstacles and constraints. CSD II agreed on a [Programme of Work](#) based on the two-year cycles up until 2016/17. The current cycle is 2005/06, with themes of energy for sustainable development, industrial development, climate change, and atmosphere / air pollution.

Indigenous peoples do not have a strong presence at CSD even though they are a recognised Major Group. Member states of the UN are obliged by Chapter 8 of Agenda 21 to adopt national strategies for sustainable development (NSDS) that “should build upon and harmonize the various sectoral economic, social and environmental policies and plans that are operating in the country. Indigenous peoples have the right to see and comment on these NSDS documents.

You can read more on the mandate of the CSD at:

http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/csd_mandate.htm

Source: Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC), 2007, Strategic Plan on Natural Resources and the Environment, Appendix 4, Bujumbura, Burundi