

# The Models of Supporting Climate Action by Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples



**Pa O Women Hoeing their Field  
Oo Hmin, Aung Ban, Myanmar**

## **The Search for the ‘Good Life’**

For thousands of years, Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities have been searching for the ‘Good Life,’ a life that is resilient in the face of unforeseen challenges and can be maintained from one generation to the next. These peoples are found clustered together in countless regions around the world, each rooted in the traditional knowledge and tried-and-true practices of their ancestors, which have been transmitted through oral tradition to the present day. By living close to the earth and in harmony with the seasons, over time the Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities have developed their culture in sustainable ways, giving them an interconnection with the environment and the wisdom to sustain the planet’s natural resources.

## **The Necessity to Redefine ‘Sustainable Indigenous Practices’**

The world has been warming in response to the destructive human activity of burning fossil fuels and converting land from forests to irrigated agriculture, thereby replacing foraging as the predominant economic subsistence activity of local communities. This change has set in motion a devastating sequence of alienating man from the land. A looming issue before us is that while ‘indigenous communities’ were once the majority of the population, they now constitute only a very small minority. The balance of power has shifted – and will shift further as the climate continues to warm and the population grows, creating untold pressure to increase food supplies.

Because the history of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities’ cohabitating with forests and natural parks in harmony is often unappreciated or misunderstood, it is regarded as a violation of the law. Recently, many Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities have found themselves living illegally in areas designated as ‘reserves’ by national laws in spite of the fact that their ancestors traditionally settled, worked, and protected the land before the laws were legislated. As a result of such regulations, these people have been excluded from practicing their traditional methods of conservation.

It is for this that Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in many parts of the world have been evicted or relocated from arable lands. When forced relocations occur, traditional local communities are physically and culturally disconnected from their natural surroundings and

their traditional nature-based lifestyles. Weakened by circumstances and threatened by multiple new challenges, they lose their traditional ways of life and sense of identity. This leads to their becoming 'resource users,' serving as seasonal laborers in cornfields, palm oil plantations, and mines, among others, and hence participating in a massive never-ending cycle of resource destruction.

How can the majority of our global citizenry be convinced to adopt – on a scale large enough to make a difference – the sustainable practices evolved over the millennia by Indigenous Peoples? This is the big question. Yes, there are some initiatives – such as the 'tiny house' movement, 'living off the grid,' or 'slow food.' But while these are popular in small regions here and there, the overall global trend is still moving in the opposite direction. We must redefine 'Sustainable Indigenous Practices' in terms of how they can be applied to modern industrial society.

A fundamental shift, in both attitude and action, towards Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, as well as their invaluable knowledge, is urgently needed to inspire dramatic behavioral change in the greater worldwide population. We must all join together to save and sustain our shared environment, our one and only planet.

### **Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities are First to Experience Climate Change**

The Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, who have been so greatly weakened, now find they are among the first to face the impacts of climate change. That said, many communities do not give up – they remain resolute in contributing to environmental protection in small but effective ways. Forest-to-sea protests in many parts of the world reflect efforts to protect their natural surroundings by practicing their local knowledge. They possess a deep understanding, well-established skills, and cultural resources to support the environment and to adapt to the effects of the climate crisis.

It becomes imperative that we all ask ourselves: How can we embolden Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities around the world to be strong, to voice their concerns, and to take a formidable stand to confront our climate emergency? How can we support their invaluable efforts to restore nature?

### **Urging Cultural Organizations to Form a Climate Strategy to Create Change**

The focus of most museums, libraries, universities, research institutes, and other worthy organizations is on preserving cultural and historical heritage. They serve as repositories of knowledge with the aim of showcasing artifacts and their provenance to inform the public. However some of these also adopt a mission of sharing the wisdom of the past in order to prepare for the future. Knowing that climate change affects us all, cultural organizations have no other recourse than to take this issue seriously, to highlight it consistently and often to bring awareness to the communities they serve.

### **Organizations that Walk the Walk**

**The Climate Heritage Network (CHN)** is an interconnected community of arts, cultural, and heritage organizations around the world that are dedicated to addressing the climate crisis by aiding their communities in taking on climate change and achieving the ambitions of the Paris Agreement. Each group is able to communicate the collective message far and wide through its public platform in order to rally support for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities.

### **Following are just a few examples of CHN organizations and their initiatives:**

**The Ethnographic Museum of Geneva (Switzerland)** aims to document indigenous cultures around the world and to share their collections with the public in thoughtful, dynamic ways. With a global societal and environmental perspective in mind, the MEG has over time transformed its mission to decolonize the museum, to strengthen local and international partnerships, to develop new audiences, to inspire original projects, and to achieve high standards in sustainability that other museums may follow.

**The Chiang Mai City Arts and Cultural Center** (Thailand) is the cultural center that works in historical and cultural heritage communication aimed at developing the city by recovering and promoting cultural heritage as an engine of sustainable development. The Center has successfully mobilized a network of empowered, fully engaged local communities working on city regeneration projects and environmental concerns. With its community-action approach, the Center provides a public space in the heart of the city, a ‘central hub’ where government, civil society, and citizens can work together to advance a shared vision.

**The Charlotte Library** (USA), with a keen awareness of global culture, is passionate about engaging with our rapidly changing world. To this end, it seeks to enhance the role of the library by collaborating with the community to respond to climate change and to build resilient neighborhoods.

**The Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition** (USA) works with and for the citizens of the Gullah/Geechee Nation to ensure that their human rights, and their landscape which is called "the Sea Islands" and "Lowcountry" are protected so that their Cultural Heritage continues for generations to come.

**The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage** (India) has established a mission of conserving heritage and educating its community using a variety of innovative approaches using networking and memberships. INTACH has specially prioritized measures to combine climate change with cultural heritage in their exhibits and outreach.

**The Youth Foundation of Bangladesh** (Bangladesh), focusing mainly on youth-centric initiatives, is dedicated to building awareness of the Bangladeshi people. YFB works towards the eradication of poverty, quality education, gender equity, empowerment, reducing inequality, human rights, social economic problems, and environmental issues.

### **The Whole is Greater than the Sum of its Parts**

There are many cultural organizations pursuing environmental objectives at the regional and national levels to tackle the problem of climate change. However, as Aristotle wisely wrote, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” Many small local movements do not sufficiently create change unless there are enough numbers. What is critical now more than ever is an effective international climate strategy to combine the cultural knowledge and efforts of all Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities into unified, widespread, overwhelming action.

If small cultural organizations in all parts of the world work together, coherently and synergistically, towards the common goal of combating climate change, their efforts may be strong enough to change the direction of the destruction that is threatening to harm our basic necessities of life – fresh water, clean air, safe food, and renewable energy for the whole world.

Cultural organizations can and must share the responsibility of changing the course of climate change by acting urgently and contributing to global solidarity. We are capable of making our world a hospitable, habitable place for all living creatures, present and future, if we do so together. Time and camaraderie are of the essence.

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