

# Just climate change action: Centering Indigenous wisdom and perspectives

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Julie Maldonado. Credit: Columbia University

The climate crisis threatens to dramatically alter people's relationships with the land on which they rely. Meanwhile, many climate solutions are themselves land-intensive: solar and wind energy, carbon dioxide sequestration, and finding places for people displaced by climate change to live and grow food. The result is an ever-increasing competition for land, as well as governance and justice challenges that are both intractable and inextricably linked.

On September 27th, 2019, Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment, Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, Landesa, and Wake Forest Law School will host a day-long conference on the intersection of the [climate](#) crisis, global land use, and human rights. This series of blog posts turns to experts and key stakeholders in relevant fields to offer their perspectives on relevant challenges, gaps, and solutions at the nexus of these issues.

In this interview, Julie Maldonado, associate director at Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network (LiKEN) and co-director of Rising Voices: Climate Resilience through Indigenous and Earth Sciences, discusses the importance of centering Indigenous wisdom and perspectives and relational-based approaches in the pursuit of just [climate change](#) actions.

## **How does your work relate to climate change, land use and/or human rights?**

The Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network (LiKEN) is a non-profit link-tank between [communities](#), scholars, and practitioners for policy-relevant and evidence-based work toward post-carbon livelihoods and communities. Particularly relevant to climate change, land use, and human rights, is the Rising Voices: Climate Resilience through Indigenous and Earth Sciences program, co-administered by the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research / National Center for Atmospheric Research and LiKEN, in partnership with Haskell Indian Nations University, the Indigenous Peoples' Climate Change Working Group, and NOAA's Office for Coastal Management. Rising Voices is a network of Indigenous, tribal, and community leaders, atmospheric, social, biological, and ecological scientists, students, educators, and other experts. The program facilitates intercultural and relational-based approaches for understanding and adapting to extreme weather and

climate events, variability, and change.

My background is as a public anthropologist, working to effect change through public engagement at the science-society interface, leveraging different steps—sometimes at tension but often complementary—along the way to reach diverse audiences of scientists, community leaders, educators, and policy- and decision-makers. Much of my work is focused on bringing together groups of people from different cultural and community backgrounds with varying ways of knowing and understanding, to work collaboratively on climate change actions. Much of this work is with Indigenous communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis, who are leading the way for innovative actions rooted in first-hand accounts and experiences of climate disasters and climatic shifts, and knowledge transferred between and across generations of living in relationship with the lands in which they dwell.

## **Within the nexus of the climate crisis, land use and human rights, what do you see as the biggest issues?**

Already, in some extreme circumstances, coastal lands around the world are becoming unviable to maintain livelihoods and settlements due to increasing flooding, coastal erosion, sea level rise, and/or melting permafrost. Our climate crisis and the resulting harms, including the social, cultural, spiritual, and economic risks to people forcibly displaced due to climate impacts, calls for innovative actions that include all types of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom to enact sustainable pathways. Yet, the voices and wisdom of Indigenous peoples have been largely excluded from climate science, decision-making, and governance. It is a distinct challenge to bring people from diverse cultural and community backgrounds to the same table; it might be the first time the individuals have met, but the centuries of past harms and injustices are brought into the current context and determine the power dynamics of the present

encounter. Too often, these encounters—driven by Western-oriented frameworks—further the process of extraction and are done in a transactional manner.

Recently, a shift has occurred as some scientists have started to recognize the critical importance and value of Indigenous peoples' wisdom, observations, insights, and knowledge. However, there are few venues devoted to relationship building that is essential for knowledge exchanges between and across cultures. This work—and it is work—of building relationships and trust is seldom funded or adequately supported by scientific, funding, and other institutions.

## **What strategies or solutions are you pursuing to address these issues? And what are the main hindrances you face?**

Intercultural collaborative work requires time to build trust, relationships, and to learn how to translate and communicate between different ways of knowing and understanding, to move from a process of extraction to one of relationships. Provisioning that missing space is what the Rising Voices program sets out to do, focusing on the initial phase of relationship building. Further, the historical context needs to be recognized and brought to the forefront of engagement to move forward in a more just and equitable manner that enables people to most effectively and culturally appropriately work together on climate change actions.

If you held the microphone on a world stage, what would you ask of your fellow colleagues—be it activists, lawyers, climate scientists, etc.—working on the issues of the climate crisis, land tenure, and/or human rights?

For climate scientists engaging with communities, first listen and learn what a community's priorities are, such as what the data gaps are that they need filled to support the actions they have decided to take. It is not about crunching numbers through a climate model and handing over a report. It is about learning how people communicate, and translating the information to align with the way people in the community receive information. Go in with an open heart and open mind and actively listen!

Turning to the issue raised earlier about climate-driven displacement, there are significant policy obstacles and practical and regulatory challenges of community resettlement. There are no or limited funds or federal agency or institutional support for the lengthy and sensitive process of resettling an entire community. Further, there is currently no institutional framework at the national level governing environmental disasters that occur incrementally and require relocation. Without such support, when plans fall through, communities are forced to start the process all over again, losing time that they can no longer afford. We need to establish mechanisms that provide community-wide—not just individual—support. Most federal policies and programs are written and designed based on individual—not community—rights. For many tribes and culturally connected communities, being recognized as a community, and not just individuals, requires flexibility built into existing policies to provide community-wide support. Offering support only at the individual level further scatters communities and perpetuates the harms, such as loss of culture and identity, incurred through forced assimilation policies.

This is not about some process of "managed retreat." Resettlement is about more than just moving people from one place to another. Resettlement is about re-establishing an intact community settlement that includes the key physical, economic, cultural, social, and spiritual infrastructure that enables the community—which constitutes more than a geographic location—to thrive in such a way as they determine, in a

location that the community chooses and makes sense to them. Community-led resettlement requires including the communities' voices and input in all decisions. It is imperative that the Tribal and [community leaders](#) who have spent a generation or longer already pro-actively working on such efforts are the ones guiding the process to hold community's rights and cultural sovereignty intact.

What do you wish more people better understood regarding the intersection of the [climate crisis](#), land tenure and human rights?

Often times, discussions about climate-driven displacement and resettlement get lost in the seemingly abstract world of policy and economics. However, this is not some abstract concept to those experiencing it. This is happening to real people, families, and communities at this very moment. It is a growing human rights issue that needs to be addressed. What is really at stake due to the impacts of extreme weather events, moving beyond economic losses to the losses that cannot be financially compensated, such as cultural and spiritual resources and practices, identity, dignity, and self-determination?

Layered on top of legacies of unsustainable land management practices, fossil fuel extraction, deep-rooted and pervasive colonization, racism, and sexism, climate change can act as a tipping point to push people over the edge upon which they are already teetering. It is often not just about experiencing one extreme event or environmental shift, but the accumulation of repeat events, and layers of environmental contamination, marginalization, oppression, and injustice. The experiences of [extreme weather](#) events and climatic shifts are not due to physical processes alone; they are deeply embedded in historical, social, and political structures that require more than a technocratic fix.

Providing support to communities who are proactively pursuing adaptation strategies, including community resettlement, to keep their

community together and maintain their culture, should not be set up as a competition. It is not a matter of figuring out a cost per person or pitting communities against each other in a race for financial and material resources. Often, the challenges dealt to communities at-risk of displacement are founded on centuries of injustices and accrued unpaid reparations. It is taking decades for communities to move forward with their proactive efforts. This is unacceptable. There is no excuse for not providing the support now.

Provided by Columbia University

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