Towards an Indigenous Women-Led Just Recovery

Key Recommendations

Today, we face an unprecedented set of crises: a global pandemic, economic recession, and climate breakdown. To lead us towards a just recovery, policymakers can:

1. **Strengthen collective and self-governance, and the leadership and representation of Indigenous women and girls in all levels of policy.**
   Policymakers must center the leadership of Indigenous women, girls, people with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ people in decision-making and policy implementation at all levels, as a matter of justice and because they bring intersectional approaches, key expertise on climate and environmental justice, and vital analysis on collective rights.

2. **Protect Indigenous sovereignty and right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent.**
   We must preserve Indigenous sovereignty and the right to free, prior and informed consent, which is under threat every day from governments, settlers, ranchers, and extractive industries. Land rights strengthen Indigenous communities’ health, well-being, culture and traditions — and are also vital to preserving biodiversity and confronting the climate crisis.

3. **Support grassroots, Indigenous women and girl-led local solutions and feminist alternatives.**
   We must fund Indigenous women’s and girls’ grassroots responses to the pandemic — from local food distribution to providing health information via Indigenous radio. Their solutions effectively reach those most marginalized through culturally appropriate, inclusive methods.

4. **Bring an intersectional lens across policy and programs.**
   The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on Indigenous communities. Policies for a just recovery must bring an intersectional approach, recognizing the ways multiple identities — Indigenous identity, gender, age, sexuality, and disability, among others — combine to make some more vulnerable.
Transform our food system through food sovereignty. The combination of lockdown measures and the economic breakdown triggered by the pandemic has made food scarce for many Indigenous Peoples. Policymakers can champion a transition to food sovereignty, an approach that has enabled many Indigenous communities to remain resilient through this crisis by ensuring local autonomy and control over food sources.

Guarantee access to clean drinking water. Due to poor access to clean water, many Indigenous communities struggle to practice essential protective measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Policymakers must secure Indigenous Peoples’ right to clean water and fund solutions developed at the community level — like rainwater harvesting.

Tackle the root causes of the climate crisis and reject false and harmful “solutions.” Indigenous women’s movements have long called for policymakers to confront the root causes of the climate crisis like the extraction of fossil fuels and the exploitation of natural resources, and to reject false solutions like the market-based approaches, such as carbon trading, that commodify the sacred.

Support and resource community-based solutions to confront gender-based violence. Due to lockdown measures, domestic and gender-based violence has increased. We must resource and fund Indigenous women and girl-led solutions to confront this danger, such as online counseling, the documentation of cases, and support for Indigenous survivors through art, music, weaving, and Indigenous healing and traditional medicine.

Promote a care economy grounded in Indigenous worldviews. The pandemic has revealed how much our economy depends on care work — largely performed by women and girls. To advance a just recovery from this crisis, we must properly value, pay and visibilize this work and build our economies around values drawn from Indigenous concepts of balance and right relationship with each other and with the Earth.
Towards an Indigenous Women-Led Just Recovery

Today, we face an unprecedented set of crises – the compounded threats of a global pandemic, economic breakdown, and the climate crisis. Together, these threats have deepened existing inequalities, with a disproportionate impact on Indigenous Peoples globally.

We know that these crises did not come out of nowhere. Their origins lie in decades of neoliberal attacks on public spending for water, food, sanitation, housing, and health services. They can also be traced to resource extraction, rollbacks of global cooperation and human rights, and the degradation of ecosystems and animal habitats.

This crisis has laid bare just how much policies fail to protect all people, and especially those most at risk due to systemic discrimination and inequality – like Indigenous women and girls. Due to the legacies of colonization, many Indigenous Peoples have had higher COVID-19 infection and mortality rates than the general population,\(^1\) while Indigenous women and girls\(^2\) have faced greater risks of domestic violence and heightened responsibilities of care for the sick, the elderly, and children.\(^3\)

That’s why, even as we work to advance an emergency response, we know we cannot return to “normal” or to a status quo that enriches and protects a few at the expense of most.

We must prioritize a just recovery that tackles the systemic, root causes of these crises — and reimagines our society in ways that safeguard human and planetary health. To do so, policymakers can learn from the solutions of the Indigenous women’s movement to shape domestic and foreign policy. And we must ensure that policies and governance spaces recognize and center the identity, dignity, rights and leadership of Indigenous women and girls.

We can learn from the value that Indigenous women’s movements place upon intersectionality, ensuring those made most at risk are centered in policymaking. Their organizing advances collective rights and approaches to governance, while bringing a worldview of interdependence between people and the planet that sustains us. These are the values that must be at the heart of a just recovery from the pandemic.
As the coronavirus pandemic began to spread, MADRE supported our Indigenous partners in convening to exchange lessons from the solutions and strategies they were employing to avert the worst impacts of this crisis on their communities.

This policy brief captures learnings from a series of four online convenings and one public webinar MADRE held with Indigenous women’s organizations between April and July 2020, culminating in a Congressional briefing on July 9th. The analyses and recommendations shared here also build upon our decades of long-term partnership and research with grassroots Indigenous women and girl-led groups.

We are grateful to the following partner organizations, who contributed invaluable feedback and input into this document:

- MUIXIL (Guatemala)
- Indigenous Information Network (Kenya)
- Wangki Tangni (Nicaragua)
- National Indigenous Disabled Women Association of Nepal (Nepal)
- National Indigenous Women Forum (Nepal)
- Pastoralist Information Development Organization (Tanzania)
- Colombian Indigenous women and girl leaders
What does Indigenous women-led just recovery look like?

To forge a just recovery from the crises we face, policymakers can:

1. **Strengthen collective and self-governance, and the leadership and representation of Indigenous women and girls in all levels of policy.**

Indigenous women’s movements advance a worldview that ensures no one is left behind, values of interdependence with the environment, and a systemic analysis of the root causes of the challenges their communities face. We can learn from and advance Indigenous women’s approaches to collective governance, which prioritize inclusion and build community power.

In Nicaragua, Wangki Tangni works to strengthen Indigenous women’s participation in Indigenous governance spaces, including by bringing women into direct dialogue with decision-makers. For instance, they organize annual forums that bring together more than a thousand women to meet with the Indigenous municipal mayor and regional authorities to advocate around key issues like gender-based violence, women’s health, protecting Indigenous territories, food security, climate change, and deforestation. Over the decades, women have taken leadership roles, including by running for office to shift policy and resource allocation.

It is also critical that those made most vulnerable — particularly Indigenous women, girls, people with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ people — are centered in decision-making processes at all levels. At the local level, this improves participatory decision-making around budget allocation, resource extraction, and management of community-owned projects like renewable energy, broadband internet, food programs, public transport, and more. Across the world, Indigenous women and girls’ organizing pushes for policies that bring an intersectional, rights-based view. We must ensure policy is made in ways that are deeply rooted in communities, centering their needs.
Recommendations:

- Ensure the leadership and inclusion of Indigenous women and girls at all levels of strategy formulation, drafting, decision-making, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of policies.
- Promote participatory budgeting and community self-governance of land, natural resources, energy, Internet, transportation and food systems.
- Create spaces for Indigenous women, girls, and frontline communities from across the US and Global South to shape local, state and national policies and programs for a just recovery from COVID-19.
- Finance programs that strengthen Indigenous women’s political participation and leadership, including on issues like climate change.

2. Protect Indigenous sovereignty and right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent.

Despite Indigenous Peoples’ rights to sovereignty, self-determination and collective land rights, including the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent, they have long been subject to the harms of racism, colonization and exploitation of their lands. Even during the pandemic, their territories are being seized by governments, settlers, ranchers, loggers, agribusiness, and extractive companies — often through violence and displacement. In Nepal, for instance, the government has continued to “fast track” the construction of highways on the protected lands of Indigenous Peoples without their consultation — often displacing them, militarizing communities, and destroying livelihoods. In the US, the Trump administration is using this crisis to roll back environmental protections, including by signing an executive order that would waive key legal requirements to review environmental impacts of major infrastructure projects, including highways, pipelines, and oil and gas drilling.

Indigenous sovereignty is vital to protecting the planet. Indigenous Peoples hold rights over 25% of the earth’s land and 80% of its biodiversity. They protect against the destruction of animal habitats – reducing the risk of the transmission of viruses from animals to humans. Indeed, Indigenous women not only farm in more sustainable ways, drawing upon their traditional knowledge, they also tend to use their earnings to support health and education for their children and communities.

Finally, Indigenous sovereignty is vital to guaranteeing Indigenous Peoples’ health, well-being, culture, belief systems, spirituality, language, and traditions.

In Nepal, the Bankariya People – a formerly nomadic community classified as endangered – have returned to their ancestral homelands close to forests. However, the government has not provided them with land titles, instead classifying those lands as community forests. The National Indigenous Women Forum (NIWF) is training Bankariya community members to advocate for government recognition of their rights.

Recommendations:

- Codify principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) into national law and establish a mechanism to obtain FPIC from Indigenous Peoples prior to taking any actions impacting their territories.
- Fully implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples without qualifications.
Long before the pandemic, the global Indigenous women’s movement has been developing strategies and solutions rooted in collective approaches, community care, and Indigenous culture and spirituality to address the many crises we face.

Now, in responding to COVID-19, Indigenous women and girls are implementing emergency relief efforts — from improving access to sanitation and hygiene, to distributing food, to providing health information via radio in Indigenous languages, to supporting economic resilience — all the while setting the stage for a long-term and just recovery.

Because of their deep roots in communities, such women and girl-led, grassroots initiatives tend to be more effective in ensuring that relief, information, and services reach those most marginalized, and in culturally appropriate, inclusive ways.


The Pastoralist Information and Development Organization (PIDO) in Tanzania has trained adolescent Indigenous girls to act as health promoters, distributing soap and providing accurate health information about COVID-19. Through this strategy, they convey vital information to women and girls in their networks, come to be known as leaders in their communities, and can provide trusted information to remote communities otherwise outside the reach of public services.

MUIXIL, an Indigenous women and girl-led organization in Guatemala, formed their own weaving collective centered around Indigenous traditions. The collective is a solution to empower themselves and their communities, and offers healing from a history of genocide and discriminatory policies. Further, their weaving helps to reaffirm their Indigenous identity and transfer intergenerational Indigenous knowledge, ensuring that traditions are passed onto future generations of Indigenous women and girls.
Recommendations:

- Increase funding for Indigenous women and girl-led community-based organizations, both in the US and globally, who can deliver relief and lead a just recovery in their communities.
- Provide resources to Indigenous leaders to implement programs on cultural, traditional and ancestral practices of their communities.
- Sustain platforms for Indigenous women and girls to share and transfer customary knowledge, skills, and best practices to one another, to policymakers, and to governments.
- Improve access to the internet and technology, especially in rural areas, so that Indigenous women and other rural communities can communicate with each other.

4. Bring an intersectional lens across policy and programs.

We must bring an intersectional approach, recognizing the ways multiple identities — Indigenous identity, gender, age, sexuality, and disability, among others — combine to make some more vulnerable. For instance, Native American and Alaska Native populations are more likely to have preexisting conditions than other groups due to proximity to extractive industries, poverty and poor healthcare. Now, the Navajo Nation has the highest infection rate in the US, while many Native Americans also lack health insurance. The underfunding of the US Indian Health Service has resulted in lack of even basic protective equipment and medical expertise, worsening this crisis. Globally, in many countries, public health information is not translated into Indigenous languages.

Further, the pandemic has gendered impacts. Due to the increased need for care, the workloads of Indigenous women and girls — who often shoulder the responsibilities of household and care work — are only increasing.

We need policies and programs that recognize these varied impacts of the pandemic, are designed with the input and leadership of Indigenous women and girls, and effectively address these needs.

In Nepal, the National Indigenous Women Forum (NIWF) is documenting shortcomings in the government approach to the pandemic. For instance, the government requires a citizenship certificate to access aid packages — something that many Indigenous women, girls, people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+, elderly, and poor people lack due to barriers in accessing government institutions. In response, NIWF has been conducting advocacy to ensure that Indigenous Peoples’ rights are respected and has coordinated closely with local governments to ensure aid is delivered to marginalized communities.
The National Indigenous Disabled Women Association Nepal (NIDWAN) has been conducting advocacy and developing a network of grassroots groups in the disability community to address gaps in the government response to COVID-19, such as the lack of government services and information, including health care, available in sign languages, and barriers to Indigenous people with disabilities receiving government relief packages. They are further documenting the challenges faced by Indigenous women with disabilities, who are largely left out of official data.

**Recommendations:**

- Collect and make available accurate disaggregated data on the impact of COVID-19 (infection rates, economic impacts, incidence of gender-based violence), by Indigenous identity, sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, age and disability.
- Review COVID-19 relief and recovery policies for their impacts on people of different genders and identities.
- Shape policies that mitigate the disparate impacts people face. This may reveal changes that need to be made – like providing free transportation to health centers for Indigenous people with disabilities, or compensating the unpaid care work of Indigenous women and girls.
- Ensure those made most vulnerable are shaping policies and programs, including through dialogues between Indigenous Peoples, policymakers, and international development partners.
- Actively resource Indigenous groups led by LGBTQIA+ people, youth, and people with disabilities.

5. **Transform our food system through food sovereignty.**

Indigenous Peoples’ territories have long been under threat from large-scale corporations, including agribusinesses that grab Indigenous land, emit significant amounts of carbon, and convert ecosystems to industrial mono-crop plantations. Lockdowns have shut down markets, limiting the availability of food and making it impossible for many Indigenous people to sell livestock, crops, and wares.

The lack of income, combined with the spike in food prices and the continued effects of the climate crisis, is making food scarce for Indigenous families. The United Nations has warned that the number of people dying from hunger, or hunger-related illness, could double this year.

This crisis has made it all the more apparent that food sovereignty, long advanced by Indigenous women’s movements, is a key solution to mitigate the climate crisis and enhance community resilience, including in the face of pandemic. This framework guarantees the right to healthy, culturally appropriate food produced through dialogues between Indigenous Peoples, policymakers, and international development partners.
through sustainable methods. Food sovereignty centers local ownership, so communities have the right and resources to define where their food comes from and how it is produced and distributed. Food sovereignty reconnects Indigenous people with their land, improves their health, and draws from Indigenous women’s traditional knowledge of sustainable agricultural practices.

In Nicaragua, community organization Wangki Tangni has organized a collective of Indigenous Miskito women farmers to promote organic farming and enhance women’s self-sufficiency. They run a seed bank, through which women cultivate, save, and share local, organic seeds from one growing season to the next. The program emphasizes sustainable land-use techniques and safeguards and applies Indigenous women’s traditional knowledge of resource management. These efforts are now enabling improved access to food amidst this crisis for Miskito communities.

Recommendations:

- End subsidies and other policy supports for agribusinesses that encroach on Indigenous lands, undermine local food sovereignty, and threaten community health.
- Fund and support Indigenous women-led locally-rooted, sustainable approaches to agriculture — like preserving and exchanging seeds, growing food in kitchen gardens, and agroecology.
- Provide training and funding for all farmers to adopt agroecology-based approaches to strengthen sustainability.
- Provide funding for Indigenous and Tribal governments to invest in community-owned food systems that center traditional knowledge.
- Provide economic resources for small-scale Indigenous fisherfolk and farming communities.

6. Guarantee access to clean drinking water.

Indigenous and Pastoralist communities often have poor access to clean drinking water, for instance due to contamination by extractive industries and waste dumping in their regions, or because they live in remote areas and depend on seasonal rivers. One report found that Native Americans have more difficulty accessing clean water than any other group in the US. A third of the Navajo Nation lacks access to running water.

Many, who previously were compelled to buy potable water, can no longer afford or access it. This means many Indigenous communities cannot practice essential protective measures — like handwashing — to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
In Kenya, the Indigenous Information Network (IIN) has worked to improve community resilience in the face of the climate crisis, which worsened droughts and limited water access for Pastoralist communities even before this pandemic. Today, IIN’s prior efforts to promote rainwater harvesting is helping to offset the pandemic’s impact in Indigenous communities. Indigenous women have access to water tanks and storage containers, which they can use to collect and store water for handwashing and sanitation. IIN is further promoting handwashing stations with soap and water at women’s centers in rural Indigenous communities. Further, community-based groups are using innovative online methods to improve access to water.

**Recommendations:**

- Improve the implementation of the right to clean water, including by increasing funding for water infrastructure for Indigenous communities and preserving water at its source.
- Strengthen environmental regulations and review of development or extractive projects, including to prevent pollution, contamination and toxic dumping that impacts access to water.
- Fund community-based programs to improve access to clean drinking water in rural and desert areas across the US and Global South.
- Call on the United Nations to urge state parties to pass laws ensuring access to potable water.

7. **Tackle the root causes of the climate crisis and reject false and harmful “solutions.”**

We must confront the root causes of the climate crisis — the extraction of fossil fuels and the exploitation of natural resources. The droughts, floods, and extreme weather patterns exacerbated by climate breakdown have impacted Indigenous communities by worsening access to food and water. This has only exacerbated the effects of COVID-19 on vulnerable communities. Despite this, more than $3 billion in US COVID-19 stimulus aid has gone to the fossil fuel industry.²⁹

We must also reject false and harmful “solutions” to this problem, including policies and programs branded as ‘green’ that commodify land, water, and natural resources. These include market-based approaches like carbon trading and offsets,³⁰ which allow industries to pay to pollute, and often result in the displacement of Indigenous communities. Likewise, biofuels promote industrial monoculture³² that impoverish smallholder farmers³³ and increase food prices.³⁴ Further, nuclear energy produces toxic waste, often dumped or stored on Indigenous lands.³⁵ Hydroelectric dams have displaced 40 to 80 million people globally, often infringing on Indigenous territorial rights.³⁶

Indigenous women’s movements have long pushed against the commodification of the sacred, including land, air and water, and challenged the extractive mindset that views the earth solely as a source of resources for human use. Instead, we must tackle the root causes of the problems we face.

**Recommendations:**

- Resist bailouts for and end government subsidies for fossil fuel corporations.
- Transform our energy system away from
fossil fuels and towards 100% renewable energy.

- Ensure a rights-based approach to climate policies, including ensuring that policies are fully compatible with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).
- Support Indigenous communities in the US and Global South through reparations and by resourcing Indigenous women and girls’ solutions for climate mitigation, adaptation, and a just transition.


Despite lockdowns, extractivism and mining has resumed, and violence against Indigenous women has continued and even escalated — from the killings of social leaders in Colombia to the sexual violence from “man camps” adjacent to infrastructure projects.

Further, as people are in lockdown with abusers, rates of domestic violence — physical, emotional, sexual or psychological — have increased worldwide. Due to movement restrictions, survivors have limited access to justice. Moreover, given widespread job losses triggered by the pandemic, many may be unable to report their perpetrators, who may be the primary or sole breadwinners. As some communities face unemployment and food insecurity, they increasingly turn to early marriage to cope, such as in Tanzania and Kenya.

In response, Indigenous women’s groups are offering psychosocial support and counseling online and via phone. They have focused on documentation of cases to fill gaps in the availability of domestic violence data disaggregated by Indigenous identity, gender, and disability. Indigenous women and girls continue to advocate for justice within customary Indigenous tribunals, while supporting survivors through art, music, weaving and artisanry, and Indigenous healing and traditional medicine.

Wangki Tangni is utilizing its Indigenous women-led radio station to provide information in the Indigenous Miskito language on gender-based violence and rights to 115 remote communities who live along the Nicaragua-Honduras border, and who disproportionately lack access to essential services and resources. They further work through promotoras, young women who conduct outreach in communities to tackle domestic violence. In addition, they have created local networks composed of promotoras, communal judges, and the municipal government — including police, the mayor’s office, the judiciary, and the ministries of health, education, and family. Monthly, Wangki Tangni convenes this group — including via phone — to advocate for better government responses to cases of violence that have not been adequately addressed by the authorities.
Increase funding and support for community-based and Indigenous women and girl-led responses to confronting domestic and gender-based violence.

Collect disaggregated data about the rates of gender-based violence faced by Indigenous women, girls and gender non-conforming people, to understand the scope of the problem and allocate funding and resources accordingly.

Support training of health workers to identify and respond to gender-based and domestic violence.

Ratify and implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and support efforts led by Indigenous women to strengthen that treaty with provisions responding to the threats they face.\(^\text{41}\)


The pandemic has made it very clear how much our economy depends on care work — from the unpaid care for children, elderly, the sick and people with disabilities — to the paid care work of nurses, doctors, teachers and child care workers. The majority of people performing care work are women, including Indigenous women and girls.\(^\text{42}\) To advance a just recovery from this crisis, we must properly value, pay and visibilize this work and promote feminist economic values.

To do this, we can draw from Indigenous movements — who have developed alternative measures of well-being that move beyond inadequate measures like GDP that simply mask inequality. For example, we can turn to the concept of “buen vivir” — which is recognized by the Bolivian and Ecuadorian Constitutions and focuses on the value of living in harmony with one another and with the planet.\(^\text{43}\) The right to “buen vivir” also indicates a caretaking economy, one where we value the low-carbon work of caring for our communities and our earth.

Recommendations:

- Invest in the care economy, including by guaranteeing paid sick days, paid family and medical leave, parental leave, free childcare, a universal basic income, a living wage, and universal health care. These services and benefits must be equitable and available to all, across race, gender, Indigenous identity and immigration status.
- Provide adequate funding to Tribal and Indigenous governments to properly compensate care work.
- Develop alternative indicators to measure our human and planetary well-being, drawing from Indigenous concepts, such as “buen vivir.”
Resources and Recommendations on COVID-19 from Indigenous Movements

- Statement from Indigenous Women’s Organisations of Nepal on COVID-19
- Joint Statement of Network of Indigenous Women’s in Asia (NIWA) and Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)
- COVID-19 Indigenous Women’s Collective Call
- The impact of COVID-19 on the lives of Indigenous Women and their Strategies to Deal with the Pandemic (FIMI)
- COVID-19’s Growing Impact on Indigenous Communities Globally (Cultural Survival)
- A People’s Orientation to a Regenerative Economy: Protect, Repair, Invest and Transform
Endnotes


11. Recommended by many Indigenous and frontline groups, including A People's Orientation to a Regenerative Economy: https://www.ienearth.org/regenerativeeconomy/.


