

Key points

Recognising Indigenous Knowledge Systems as distinct, legitimate ways of knowing with their own methods, protocols and criteria for validating knowledge can foster more equitable and inclusive knowledge practices and enhance IPCC assessments.

Meaningful engagement with Indigenous Knowledge Holders depends on ethical approaches that respect their rights, uphold their authority to define how their knowledge is shared and used, and create conditions that can sustain long-term, trust-based collaboration.

IPBES experience shows that legitimising multiple knowledge systems via dedicated institutional structures and early and formal roles for Indigenous experts can help build institutional memory, avoid tokenism and enable inclusive approaches.

Coordinated action by the IPCC, its donors and partners is essential to improve the legitimacy of global climate assessments. This includes funding for participation, building institutional frameworks and structures and amplifying ethical engagement practices.

Engaging meaningfully with Indigenous Knowledges to transform IPCC assessments

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)¹ offer critical insights into climate impacts and responses, yet despite progress, they remain marginal within Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessments. This briefing draws on interviews with nine IPCC and Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) authors experienced in working with IKS to examine why meaningful engagement remains elusive and what needs to change. We identify key pathways including: early engagement that embeds Indigenous participation from scoping onwards; building institutional architecture; rethinking evidence and its governance, respecting Indigenous data sovereignty and free, prior and informed consent (FPIC); and navigating political dynamics with Indigenous Peoples' observer organisations.

As climate impacts intensify, global assessments such as those of the IPCC face growing pressure to reflect the lived realities of the communities most affected.

Indigenous Peoples have observed and responded to environmental change over generations, using place-based IKS to guide their responses. Indigenous organisations, scholars, civil society and several governments are calling for more inclusive, equitable knowledge practices in global environmental assessments.² These calls challenge the dominance of Euro-Western science and the marginalisation of IKS in global environmental governance, linking IKS to struggles for self-determination, territorial rights and climate justice, while emphasising their indispensability for adaptation, mitigation and resilience. How the IPCC engages with IKS matters for fairness and the quality and usability of its assessments: by failing to draw meaningfully on the full range of knowledge systems, it risks overlooking critical insights.

IPBES has institutionalised approaches to engage with IKS, grounded in its foundational conceptual framework and multi-evidence approach that explicitly recognises the coexistence of diverse, legitimate knowledge systems. The IPCC, despite improved recognition of IKS in the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6), still faces significant barriers to meaningful engagement.

This briefing draws on semi-structured interviews with nine authors involved in the IPCC and IPBES, all with experience working with IKS, to identify constraints and opportunities for strengthening IKS engagement in the Seventh Assessment Report (AR7) and beyond.

Persistent barriers

Unethical approaches often stem not from intent but from a lack of understanding of Indigenous and non-Euro-Western epistemologies and ontologies, alongside structural and institutional constraints that shape how these knowledges are engaged.

AR7 marks a significant step forward, with Indigenous authors participating for the first time as coordinating lead authors and lead authors

A key structural constraint is what is considered legitimate evidence. The IPCC relies on an evidentiary base centred on peer-reviewed scientific literature, creating inherent tensions with IKS, which are typically oral, place-based

and collectively held. Even when IPCC authors acknowledge IKS' importance, its absence from the peer-reviewed literature precludes its inclusion. Positioning Euro-Western scientific

epistemologies as universal and superior compels IKS to conform to external criteria, undermining the internal protocols and relational accountability that give them meaning.

Scientific assessments often treat IKS instrumentally, as decontextualised data sources rather than systems of knowledge production with their own methods, criteria and processes for validation.³

The open data commitments of the IPCC and IPBES often conflict with the rights and protocols of Indigenous Peoples regarding who may access, interpret and share their knowledge and under what conditions.

The IPCC and IPBES are state-centric structures, affording Indigenous Peoples limited formal standing. IPBES has mechanisms for Indigenous experts to contribute, but participation remains limited because many governments don't prioritise nominating or funding Indigenous experts.

Structural barriers, including a lack of resources and institutional capacity, and visa and travel restrictions, affect many participants, but they can make it particularly difficult for Indigenous experts to participate, especially in critical in-person meetings.

The near absence of Indigenous lead authors in the IPCC leaves key content and framing decisions to non-Indigenous scholars. The lack of dedicated funding puts disproportionate burdens on those involved. Indigenous experts face constraints around funding, language support and institutional capacity, while the small number of actively engaged Indigenous climate scholars are consequently chronically over-committed.

Differences in how knowledge is produced and shared create challenges, for example, between knowledge based on long-term observations of specific places and environments, often shared through lived experience and oral traditions, and

quantitative approaches used in climate modelling. Research cultures that prioritise rapid timelines make it difficult to build the trust and relationships needed for meaningful engagement; even where Indigenous contributing authors are included, late involvement frequently renders their participation tokenistic.

Enabling conditions

Interviewees identified enabling conditions for more meaningful engagement with IKS:

Institutional frameworks and leadership commitment

The most decisive enabling condition within IPBES lies in its conceptual framework⁴ and its multi-evidence base approach,⁵ which provides explicit recognition that Indigenous, local and scientific knowledge systems are different manifestations of equally valid and useful knowledge systems that can complement, diverge from or independently constitute evidence for assessments. This recognition is reflected in IPBES' assessment practice, including the Second Global Assessment, which will feature a chapter on different knowledge systems and the role of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

Within the IPCC, incremental advances have created precedents that legitimise the coexistence of diverse knowledge systems. A key example is a figure in the *Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*,⁶ which demonstrated that Indigenous Knowledges and local knowledge can stand on their own terms and co-produce new knowledge alongside Euro-Western science.

These precedents have become especially important because the IPCC still lacks a formal institutional framework for the coexistence of diverse knowledge systems. Authors can invoke them when Indigenous Knowledges are challenged or expected to conform to scientific peer-review standards. This has helped reduce internal disputes over legitimacy and supported Indigenous-led sections and contributions grounded primarily in Indigenous evidence.

Within the IPCC, progress has also depended on the strong leadership of co-chairs and coordinating lead authors. AR7 marks a significant step forward, with Indigenous authors participating for the first time as coordinating lead authors and lead authors across several chapters in all three Working Groups. In both AR6 and AR7, explicit references to Indigenous Peoples in scoping documents have helped shape both author selection and the framing of assessment content.

Structural mechanisms for participation

Structural mechanisms facilitate effective engagement across IPBES, including:

Dedicated coordination bodies: IPBES's Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK) Task Force supports continuity across assessment cycles, helping to retain institutional knowledge, coordinate dialogues, contribute to assessment outputs and provide capacity building to authors, experts and Indigenous and local Knowledge Holders. Mandated by member states, it brings together diverse experts with continuity across assessments. Interviewees called for an equivalent multilingual body for the IPCC, with strong regional representation to support chapter teams throughout the AR7 assessment cycle.

Liaison groups, dialogues and calls for submissions: IPBES's ILK Liaison Groups enable cross-chapter coordination and collaborative outputs, with structured dialogues between authors and Indigenous representatives at key drafting stages formally documented as feedback for report revisions. Open calls for submissions invite ILK contributions in diverse formats — including manuscripts, posters and audio recordings — broadening the evidence and lowering barriers to participation.

Participation in the IPCC has often been shaped through procedural engagement mechanisms, particularly through Indigenous observer organisations and reviewers. The Inuit Circumpolar Council, holding observer status at the IPCC, submitted formal reviewer comments, wrote letters to the IPCC and engaged government delegations directly. This engagement was key to the formal separation of Indigenous Knowledges and local knowledge in AR6 — a distinction with significant implications for recognising Indigenous Peoples' rights.

Intercultural approaches to shift mindsets and redress mistrust

Field visits and immersive workshops: interviewees described IPBES dialogues with Indigenous Peoples, supporting feedback in formats aligned with IKS (in other words, orally), as transformative. Experiential learning — participating in ceremonies and engaging Indigenous Knowledge Holders on their own terms — shifted the authors' understanding of IKS in practice.

Engaging Indigenous organisations on their own terms: some IPBES authors attended Indigenous organisations' meetings rather than expecting Indigenous Knowledge Holders to

attend scientist-designed workshops. This approach built the trust needed for meaningful participation.

Peer-to-peer collaboration, co-production and solidarity networks: meaningful engagement requires both respectful knowledge practices and collective advocacy. One IPBES author engaged an Indigenous contributing author by working with him, transcribing his knowledge and collaboratively grounding it in references, avoiding extractive practices. Authors with IKS expertise are crucial advocates, while solidarity networks among Indigenous and allied authors provide emotional support and collective capacity to navigate institutional resistance.

Collaborative, relationship-based approaches are increasing in assessment practice due to a generational shift among early-career scholars, combined with growing engagement with epistemic justice and decolonisation frameworks, enhancing the scientific community's receptiveness to diverse knowledge systems.

Strategic workarounds

Co-produced proceedings and technical compendium: in IPBES, regional ILK dialogues generate co-produced proceedings, validated by Indigenous collaborators, published by IPBES and cited as grey literature — creating an institutionalised pathway beyond conventional academic formats. AR6 lead authors produced an externally published technical compendium of Indigenous and local climate knowledge contributions, cited in AR6, which preserved Indigenous authorship and ensured FPIC.⁷

Mainstreaming alongside dedicated sections: dedicated sections on IKS provide visibility, while mainstreaming IKS throughout chapters ensures Indigenous perspectives inform the whole rather than remaining compartmentalised. In the AR6 North America chapter, Indigenous contributing authors were given access to the entire chapter, enabling them to contribute throughout.

Autonomous authorship: interviewees said giving Indigenous contributing authors complete autonomy over their texts, including responses to reviewers' comments, is essential for representing IKS on its own terms.

Towards more equitable knowledge practices

Leveraging authors' experiences could meaningfully transform how IKS are engaged in future IPCC assessment cycles. These possibilities also touch on existing power

relations in how knowledge is produced, from who governs and has capacity and responsibility in global assessments, to how IKS are engaged and supported.

Early engagement: experiences from AR6 and early AR7 suggest that where Indigenous Peoples' participation occurs at the scoping stage, chapter outlines are more likely to include Indigenous Knowledges throughout the assessment, rather than in isolated boxes or as late-stage additions. Interviewees highlighted that this involves deliberate decisions before and during the scoping meeting (for example, on author selection, report framing, outline and evidence) and before and during the assessment (including the roles and responsibilities of chapter authors and identifying primary writers for specific sections).

Building the institutional architecture: AR6 demonstrated that while the commitment of individual authors can lead to significant achievements, the lack of institutional frameworks, resources, mandates or memory can severely undermine progress. Without institutional memory, repeated consultations with Indigenous Peoples risk causing burnout and eroding trust. Interviewees suggested that a permanent, funded body, akin to the IPBES ILK Task Force, familiar with IPCC procedures and Indigenous protocols, could provide one pathway to engage multiple knowledge systems. Such a body could support chapter teams across IPCC Working Groups, coordinate contributions, and facilitate relationships with Indigenous Knowledge Holders and organisations through field visits and dialogues. Building on collaboration between IPBES and the IPCC, such a unit could also help align approaches across assessments.

Rethinking evidence and its governance: AR6 established the precedent that Indigenous Knowledges do not require validation by Euro-Western science. IPBES' participatory mechanisms show how effective engagement can be enabled, whereby Indigenous Peoples and researchers with established, accountable relationships with Indigenous communities, contribute IKS to assessments. The technical compendium produced for AR6 demonstrated that mechanisms respecting Indigenous authorship and FPIC can yield valid evidence for

the assessment. Dedicated special journal issues, commissioned in advance of literature cut-off dates, could further expand the evidence base. Interviewees emphasised that Indigenous Knowledge Holders should be able to define the terms for engaging their knowledge — through mechanisms they deem appropriate — including who is authorised to share it, with safeguards for its documentation, interpretation and use within and beyond the assessment process and with full respect for Indigenous data sovereignty.

Navigating political dynamics: Indigenous authors and authors engaging with IKS in AR7 will navigate significant political pressures, including government delegations shaping approved language, resistance to framings related to colonialism, land rights and Indigenous sovereignty, and epistemic debates entangled with geopolitical interests. Experience from AR6 suggests that navigating unequal power dynamics is most effective when the work is collective, grounded in precedent, and supported by reviewer comments and interventions from observer organisations. The presence of Indigenous Peoples' observer organisations has proven consequential and could be actively supported.

The challenge is whether the necessary resources and collective commitment will be mobilised to make engagement with IKS the norm rather than the exception. If the barriers remain unaddressed, the IPCC risks reproducing narrow, Euro-Western framings of climate knowledge, missing critical place-based insights into impacts and responses and undermining the relevance, legitimacy and applicability of its assessments.

AR7 inherits a richer set of precedents, tools and relationships for engaging IKS than any previous cycle. More strategic, coordinated action by the IPCC and its partners, including sustained funding to support participation, build institutional structures and enable ethical engagement, could unlock more robust, just and actionable assessments that better recognise the plurality of knowledge systems shaping climate responses.

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FIND OUT MORE

This briefing is part of IIED's work to make the AR7 cycle more inclusive and actionable. Find out more at www.iied.org/ipcc-seventh-assessment-report-more-diverse-participation-greater-use-findings

Notes

¹ This briefing, and the research underpinning it, focuses specifically on Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge systems, recognising them as holders of collective rights and highlighting the distinct nature of their epistemological, political and legal frameworks. This focus is not intended to diminish the contributions of other actors or knowledge systems — including local and traditional knowledge — to the IPCC. / ² McElwee, P et al. (2020) Working with Indigenous and local knowledge (ILK) in large-scale ecological assessments: Reviewing the experience of the IPBES Global Assessment, *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 57(9), pp.1666–1676. doi:10.1111/1365-2664.13705. / ³ Nelson, MK (2023) The honourable harvest of Indigenous data, *Environment and Planning F*, 2(1–2), pp.316–321. / ⁴ Díaz, S et al. (2015) The IPBES conceptual framework — connecting nature and people, *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 14. doi:10.1016/j.cosust.2014.11.002. / ⁵ Tengö, M et al. (2014) Connecting Diverse Knowledge Systems for Enhanced Ecosystem Governance: The Multiple Evidence Base Approach, *AMBIO*, 43, pp.579–591. doi:10.1007/s13280-014-0501-3. / ⁶ Abram, N et al. (2019) Framing and Context of the Report, in Pörtner, H-O et al. (eds) IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, p.104. doi:10.1017/9781009157964.003. / ⁷ Mustonen, T et al. (eds) (2021) 2021 Compendium of Indigenous Knowledge and Local Knowledge: Towards Inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge and Local Knowledge in Global Reports on Climate Change. Snowchange Cooperative, Kontiolahti. doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.14498.76485.

