

Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Arctic Governance

Kamrul Hossain & Giada Giacomini

Indigenous knowledge refers to the wisdom, practices, specific skills and techniques, social interactions, rituals, spirituality and worldview found among Indigenous peoples. This knowledge has been developed over long histories and with the experiences of interaction between Indigenous communities and their surrounding natural and social environment. The knowledge is often known as “traditional knowledge” despite its crucial value in providing insights into social-ecological processes and interactions that today serve to supplement science-based Western knowledge. Given the knowledge value of Indigenous peoples’ sustainable land use behavior, natural resource practices and the functioning of ecological processes and biodiversity, a part of Indigenous knowledge is referred to as “Indigenous ecological knowledge” or “Traditional Ecological Knowledge” (TEK). In a nutshell it is a system of knowledge which, in most cases, is transmitted orally from generation to generation, yet is dynamic and has proven its validity.

The knowledge is context-specific, collective, holistic, and adaptive. Society transforms due to its internal and external stressors, and so its knowledge systems, including Indigenous knowledge, that adapt to such transformation. For Indigenous peoples, this knowledge informs decision-making about fundamental aspects of their livelihood. It provides the basis for locally managed forms of environmental governance and “sustainable development”. However, the knowledge suffers from a lack of strict legal protection in the prevailing Intellectual Property Rights framework because of its subjective existence, as a result of which it lacks proper documentation that would identify the knowledge and its owner.

Yet the knowledge is well-recognized as a fundamental resource, especially in environmental governance. Recognition was first given in the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. Principle 22 of the Declaration stressed the value of Indigenous knowledge in environmental decision-making for achieving sustainable development. The renovated interest in recognizing Indigenous knowledge is evident in the international legal framework, such as in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The

Preamble of the Convention and particularly Article 8(j) reflect such acknowledgement. State parties to the Convention are encouraged to respect, preserve and maintain the knowledge, innovations and practices developed by their Indigenous and other local communities for the conservation of biological diversity and sustainable use of the environment. The 2010 Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and Benefit Sharing under the CBD later undertook to operationalize the use of Indigenous knowledge, particularly that concerning the use of genetic resources associated with traditional knowledge. One aim of the Protocol is to create a system that will protect Indigenous knowledge from biopiracy, misappropriation and misuse.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) – a universally agreed on international instrument – in its Preamble and Article 31 refer to Indigenous knowledge as an essential element not only for sustainable development but also for equitable development and proper management of the natural environment.

Indigenous knowledge plays an integral part in the fight against climate change. The climate change regime calls for integrating Indigenous knowledge in climate governance because of the deep interconnection between Indigenous peoples and the environment, and their profound respect for the planet Earth. Article 7(5) of the 2015 Paris Agreement stressed that adaptation actions to fight against the impacts of climate change should take advantage of the knowledge that Indigenous and other local communities possess. In this regard, an emphasis has been put on community-driven, participatory and transparent processes. Today, Indigenous peoples participate in climate negotiation processes through their representative organizations, such as the International Indigenous Peoples’ Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC), and thereby influence the international climate law-making process.

Instruments that have recognized Indigenous knowledge

The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development 1992	Principle 22
The Convention on Biological Diversity 1992	Preamble & Article 8(j)
The Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and Benefit Sharing 2010	
The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) 2007	Preamble & Article 31
The Paris Agreement 2015	Article 7(5)

Indigenous knowledge forms an integral part of the Arctic governance framework. The peoples have inhabited the region for thousands of years, living in harmony with its pristine natural environment. They have experienced the changes that have affected the Arctic for many generations from time immemorial and have developed survival techniques allowing them to adapt. In their land- and nature-based livelihood practices, such as hunting, fishing, reindeer and caribou herding, Arctic Indigenous peoples have elaborated unique practices. These offer fundamental lessons to promote our understanding of the Arctic's ecological support systems, nature conservation and human-animal interactions in the specific Arctic context. The Indigenous peoples developed characteristic skills allowing them to be extremely resilient in the Arctic's harsh climatic conditions. However, because of the disproportionate impacts on the Arctic driven by climate change, the knowledge held by its Indigenous peoples lacks the predictability it once had. Nevertheless, their knowledge is crucial in Arctic-related legal and policy processes. Such processes are reflected in the Arctic's governance structure, such as in the Arctic Council.

The Arctic Council is the primary institution of the circumpolar Arctic states. The Council's structure includes representation from the Arctic's Indigenous peoples' organizations in the capacity of "permanent participants". The eight Arctic states, together with six permanent participants, form the main decision-making body of the Arctic Council. The permanent participants sit alongside the Arctic states at the same table at all levels of policy-making, including the Council's six working groups. The participatory processes ensure the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in policy developments. Although the resolutions of the Arctic Council are considered "soft law", they provide explicit political obligations, at times translated into legal text, when Arctic states conclude a legally binding agreement, for example, the Arctic-specific search and rescue agreement of 2011. A similar structure is found in the European part of the Arctic, which brings together states and sub-regional bodies as collective entities, such as the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and Barents Regional Council, respectively. The Indigenous Peoples' Working Group was founded as an independent body rooted in this organizational structure. The Working Group plays influential participatory and consultation roles with Indigenous knowledge integrated in and contributing to all decision-making processes. The processes contribute to an improved natural

environment and socio-cultural and political standards, ensuring the quality of life for the over five million people of the Barents region of the Arctic.

For more on this, read...

Eerkes-Medrano L and H P Huntington, 'Untold Stories: Indigenous Knowledge Beyond the Changing Arctic Cryosphere' (2021) 3 *Frontiers in Climate*
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fclim.2021.675805>

