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Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities at COP17: Turning participation into co-creation

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The seventeenth Conference of the Parties (COP17) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), to be held in Yerevan, Armenia in October 2026, will mark an important moment for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs). It will be the first COP since the establishment of a permanent body dedicated to better represent IPLCs—the first of its kind among multilateral environmental agreements—the 'Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j)' or SB8(j). While this institutional innovation represents a major step forward, it is also part of a longer trajectory. Since 1992, theCBD has progressively developed one of the most advanced frameworks for the participation of IPLCs into international governance.

COP17 will consider a number of issues emerging from the first meeting of this body in Panama in 2025, including questions related to the way it will function in practice, its representation arrangements, related to key terms and concepts, and several implementation-related issues under the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). These issues also reflect broader and longer-standing debates beyond the COP17 agenda: how biodiversity governance recognizes different actors and forms of agency; how financing reaches and supports IPLCs; how different knowledge systems are recognized, legitimized, and mobilized and what more pluralistic and inclusive approaches to governance could contribute to transformative change and toward halting and reversing biodiversity loss.

This *Issue Brief* aims to clarify the main issues at stake for COP17. It examines both the immediate questions that Parties and IPLCs will face in Armenia and the broader governance debates that these discussions reveal.

KEY MESSAGES

The operationalization of the permanent body dedicated to better represent IPLCs is key to securing genuine influence and participation of IPLCs in biodiversity decision-making. As the first its kind, its functioning will also send an important signal regarding the place of IPLCs in global governance.

Questions of participation are ultimately questions of governance and justice. Debates on representation, terminology, indigenous territories, financing, knowledge systems, are not procedural issues only, but do reflect discussions around legitimacy, authority, and the distribution of power within biodiversity governance.

Recognition without resources will remain symbolic. Despite growing recognition in many multilateral processes, within CBD and beyond, and at many other governance levels, many IPLCs groups continue to face significant barriers in accessing finance, limiting their ability to participate fully in decision-making and in implementation processes.

Indigenous, local or traditional knowledge cannot be simply integrated into existing systems as additional providers of data. It represents a more equitable and non-extractive relationship with the natural world and cannot be understood outside of broader cultural systems or ways of life. Biodiversity governance could learn from this to move beyond knowledge inclusion towards pluralism and reciprocity, with the recognition that different ways of understanding, monitoring and governing biodiversity are valid and respected.

Moving from participation to real partnership may be one of the most important conditions for transformative change. The challenge now is no longer to only consult IPLCs, but to create arrangements that enable co-definition, co-design and co-creation of biodiversity pathways at local, national and international levels.

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1. INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES AS *DE FACTO* CENTRAL ACTORS IN BIODIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

1.1. Central to biodiversity outcomes, yet often marginalized

Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs—a term discussed below) are not marginal actors in biodiversity governance. They are central and manage, steward, or have tenure over a significant share of the world's most biodiverse territories, and their practices and local knowledge systems have long contributed to the conservation and sustainable use of ecosystems.[1] Scientific assessments, including those of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), consistently show that biodiversity loss tends to be slower in territories managed by IPLCs than elsewhere.[2] IPLCs can sustain high levels of biodiversity not only because of their inherent and historic relation to the territory, but also due to knowledge systems and practices that enable adaptive, long-term interactions with ecological cycles (Berkes *et al.*, 2000). Biodiversity protection is thus closely intertwined with the maintenance of indigenous and local knowledge systems, customary institutions and biocultural practices (Chiarolla & Lapeyre, 2013). Much of this work in biodiversity stewardship is carried out through voluntary contributions, customary institutions, and locally embedded governance arrangements, which often remain insufficiently recognized in national and international decision-making processes (Garnett *et al.*, 2018).

At the same time, IPBES (2019) recognized that IPLCs are also disproportionally impacted by biodiversity loss, are among the populations with the highest risk of impact from pollution (Fernandez-Llamazares *et al.*, 2019) and are under "unprecedented pressure" from the expansion of extractive and industrial activities (Global Alliance of Territorial Communities and Earth Insight, 2025) due to—inter alia—their high dependence on nature. Their vulnerability is not inherent, but structurally (re)produced, through insecure land rights, political marginalization, violence,[3] and exclusion from decision-making and access to resources. These dynamics often affect indigenous women and youth in particularly acute ways, due to intersecting forms of discrimination and limited access to leadership space. This paradox lies at the core of current debates: IPLCs are simultaneously presented as both "custodians" of biodiversity and affected groups. Above all, however, they are political actors whose voices have long been filtered or sidelined in governance at many levels.

1.2. A growing place for IPLCs in environmental governance

There has been, however, a growing recognition of IPLCs within the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), reflecting both their essential contribution to biodiversity, and a recognition within broader international fora, e.g. to better understand and respect their rights and knowledge systems. Since the adoption of the treaty in 1992, its Article 8(j) [4] has acknowledged the importance of the knowledge, innovations and practices of 'indigenous and local communities' embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Parties to the Convention thus committed to respect, preserve and maintain such knowledge, promote its wider application with the approval and involvement of knowledge holders, and encourage the equitable sharing of benefits arising from its use.

To support the implementation of these commitments, Parties established in 1998 the 'Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Article 8(j) and Related Provisions'. Composed of Parties, observers, indigenous, and local community representatives, the Working Group became the main forum for advancing participation, developing guidance, and addressing issues related to "traditional knowledge",[5] customary sustainable use, benefit-sharing, and rights-based approaches. Over the years, it contributed to the development of numerous guidelines and tools, including guidance on free, prior and informed consent, cultural and environmental impact assessments of projects

[1] Indigenous Peoples manage or hold tenure rights over around 40% of the world's remaining natural lands and terrestrial protected areas (Garnett, 2018). Indigenous territories overlap significantly with areas of high biodiversity value (Schuster *et al.*, 2018; O'Bryan *et al.*, 2020). While the commonly cited 80% figure is scientifically contested, the evidence nonetheless demonstrates a substantial and well-documented intersection between Indigenous lands and the world's remaining biodiverse ecosystems (Fernández-Llamazares *et al.*, 2024).

[2] When matched for habitat type and location, these lands perform at least as well as protected areas in terms of species richness, while often showing lower levels of biological invasion. Loss of intact forest landscapes has been lower on Indigenous Peoples' land than on other lands (Garnett *et al.*, 2018; Fa *et al.*, 2020).

[3] Indigenous Peoples represent approximately 6% of the global population yet Indigenous human rights and environmental defenders accounted for nearly 20% of documented attacks worldwide between 2015 and 2022, and were significantly more likely to face violent attacks and judicial harassment, particularly in the context of private-sector operations. This figure is cited from Indigenous Peoples Rights International, as referenced in the report of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues on the criminalization of Indigenous Peoples' human rights (February 2024). The report also characterizes the criminalization of Indigenous Peoples a structural phenomenon, rooted in discriminatory legal frameworks, policies and practices often linked to the non-recognition of Indigenous Peoples' legal personality, land tenure and collective rights, intertwined with denial of access to justice.

[4] Article 8(j) of the Convention implies the "respect, preservation, and maintaining of knowledge, innovations and practices of Indigenous and Local communities embodying traditional lifestyles for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge".

[5] Throughout this Brief, the term "Indigenous and local knowledge" is used to refer to the diverse knowledge systems, practices, and institutions developed by IPLCs, while "traditional knowledge" is retained when referring specifically to CBD terminology under Article 8(j).

affecting sacred lands and waters, or the integration of traditional knowledge into biodiversity governance.

The establishment of the Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j) (SB8(j)) at COP16 in Cali (Landry & Hallosserie, 2024), in 2024, therefore represents a sort of culmination of a three-decade trajectory. The new body replaces and renders permanent the former Working Group, while signaling the growing political importance of IPLCs within the CBD.

BOX. 1. WHERE DOES THE "IPLCS" CATEGORY COME FROM?

However, even the category "IPLCs" remains complex and politically sensitive. Historically, the Convention referred to "indigenous and local communities" in its 1992 text. Then, international law evolved considerably, particularly through the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), leading to growing support for the use of the term "Indigenous Peoples". In 2014, CBD COP12 decided to use the terminology "Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities" in future decisions, and in 2018, CBD COP14 included the term in a voluntary glossary of key terms and concepts, while explicitly avoiding any universal definition. This reflects continuing debates among Parties and IPLC representatives themselves regarding recognition, rights and representation, both at the domestic and international levels. While Indigenous Peoples have gained recognition through international human rights instruments and have progressively been organized around regional and international representative groups, the status of local communities remains less clearly defined internationally, generating recurring discussions regarding participation, recognition, and representation arrangements within the CBD. Some groups may identify as both Indigenous Peoples and local communities, while others stress the importance of ensuring that local communities with traditional lifestyles of relevance to biodiversity do not become invisible as international frameworks increasingly align with indigenous rights standards. These debates are shaped by highly diverse national and local histories, constitutional frameworks and political realities, the distinction between groups therefore carries different legal, political and practical implications in each national and regional context (see section 2.1. below). For example, Brazil recognizes both Indigenous Peoples and a broader category of "Traditional Peoples and Communities, while Antigua and Barbuda explicitly refers to local communities in its environmental legislation. These examples illustrate that communities may identify as Indigenous Peoples, local communities, or both, reflecting different historical trajectories, relationships to territories and governance arrangements. As a result, questions of recognition and representation cannot be addressed through universal definitions alone but require attention to how communities understand and define themselves.

With the visibility of IPLCs growing, the adoption of the GBF in 2022 further reinforced their place within the Convention's implementation architecture. The GBF explicitly recognizes the rights, knowledge, contributions, and participation of IPLCs across eight targets and goals, most notably though a specific target (22), encouraging Parties to strengthen their inclusion and rights-based approaches[6] through national implementations processes (when defining their national strategies and actions plans, and developing their national reports).

These developments are not unique to biodiversity. Similar developments can increasingly be observed across other multilateral environmental agreements. Under the UNFCCC, the establishment of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) in 2015 created a dedicated space for dialogue in climate governance. More recently, growing efforts at COP30 in Brazil led to more formal recognition of IPLCs as rights-holders and partners, for instance in the political outcome (the 'Global Mutirão') and in the decision related to just transition pathways. The latter is especially important as energy transitions increase demand for minerals, renewable energy infrastructure and land-based climate solutions, provoking increasing threats to indigenous territories (Owen *et al.*, 2022). Within the UNCCD, COP16 requested consultations on strengthening the participation of Indigenous Peoples as well as local communities, and mandated work towards the possible creation of both an Indigenous Peoples Caucus and a Local Communities Caucus (consultative bodies) for COP17 in August 2026 in Mongolia. Beyond global agreements, regional instruments such as the Aarhus and Escazú Agreements have progressively strengthened procedural environmental rights, including access to information, public participation and to justice. Both frameworks have contributed to protecting environmental defenders. Notably, the Escazú Agreement is the first legally binding treaty to include an explicit and dedicated provision on environmental human rights defenders and also include provisions concerning vulnerable groups (Barchiche *et al.*, 2019).

Yet, among major agreements, the CBD remains the most advanced framework in terms of institutionalized participation, recognition of rights, development of guidelines, and the overall integration of indigenous and local knowledge systems. As such, developments within the CBD are likely to have implications beyond biodiversity governance.

Against this backdrop, the first meeting of SB8(j), held in Panama in October 2025, provided an early indication of these questions likely to shape discussions at COP17. Delegates and IPLC representatives discussed how the body should function in practice but also how traditional knowledge should contribute to the forthcoming Global Review of collective progress under the GBF (Landry & Kok, 2025). Discussions also addressed how biodiversity finance can better respond to the needs of communities who are both deeply affected by biodiversity loss (and its

[6] "The rights-based approach seeks to ensure that people are able to achieve equal opportunities and protect their way of life and environment. It supports the right to receive information, participate in decision-making, and give or withhold consent regarding any actions or initiatives that may affect people's lands, territories, resources, and knowledge." (adapted from SwedBio)

drivers), and remain key actors of the transformations needed to halt and reverse it.

More broadly, the meeting raised a fundamental question for multilateral environmental governance: how can vulnerable and historically marginalized groups be meaningfully represented in international processes that remain driven by sovereign States? With subsequent and more precise questions: who in these groups should be represented in international processes? How should IPLCs be recognized within global governance frameworks? And how can different forms of knowledge and authority coexist within decision-making systems historically designed around State actors and scientific expertise in the Western sense of the term? These debates are no longer only about simple participation to discussions. They increasingly concern how biodiversity governance itself is organized, whose knowledge counts, how resources are allocated, and what meaningful co-construction might look like in practice.

2. COP17 WILL TEST WHETHER RECOGNITION CAN TRANSLATE INTO MEANINGFUL CO-CREATION

2.1. How autonomous will the new body be? Between Party control and meaningful participation

The establishment of SB8(j) represents a significant evolution in the governance architecture of the CBD. For the first time, a permanent subsidiary body is explicitly mandated to address issues related to IPLCs across the Convention's work, in addition to the existing bodies (the "implementation" body and the "scientific and technical" body—SBI and SBSTTA). Symbolically, and in continuation of a practice that already took place in the Ad Hoc Working Group, this innovation was reinforced by the way the first meetings of COP16 were co-chaired, by Colombia as the COP16 Presidency and an indigenous representative, a powerful signal in a system historically dominated by States.

Substantively, however, SB8(j) opens a set of unresolved governance questions that will attract debate at COP17, starting with its modus operandi. These debates reflect long-standing differences between Parties regarding how IPLCs are recognized in domestic legal systems, differences that directly shape negotiation positions at the international level. Some countries, such as Brazil and Colombia, recognize Indigenous Peoples explicitly in their constitutions.[7] including their collective rights or jurisdictional functions over lands and territories, reflecting legal and jurisdictional pluralism, with varying degrees of implementation. Others, including the Philippines[8] and Indonesia,[9] adopt more functional or administrative forms of recognition closely mediated by the State. Countries such as Kenya or the Democratic Republic of Congo[10] do not constitutionally recognize Indigenous Peoples as distinct political subjects, on the basis of the indigeneity of the entire population and rely on broader categories granting certain protections without autonomous or jurisdictional recognition. France illustrates a model where recognition has evolved mainly through cultural and territorial accommodations, while the constitutional principle of indivisibility continues to constrain the recognition of collective rights or autonomous representation.[11] Some countries view any form of direct representation at the international level or direct financing mechanism (bypassing national authorities) as a challenge to territorial integrity and national sovereignty.

These differences surfaced clearly in the negotiations on the SB8(j) recommendation on its functioning. The text comes to COP17 unresolved, reflecting diverging views on several sensitive issues: the degree of autonomy of SB8(j) vis-à-vis other subsidiary bodies; whether it should remain entirely Party-led or allow stronger IPLC-driven processes; and, critically, how IPLC representatives should be nominated.

These debates risk reproducing a familiar stalemate: symbolic participation on one side, fears of eroding sovereignty on the other. Yet the challenge for COP17 is not to choose between symbolic inclusion and formal political representation. The real task is to build a credible relational governance framework: one in which IPLCs are neither treated as mere implementers nor positioned as competitors to State sovereignty. Reciprocity can exist through structured, continuous dialogue, through obligations to respond, justify, and learn from IPLC contributions, and through institutionalized processes that connect local, national, and global levels (Parks & Tsioumani, 2023). In other words, the key question is how decisions are constructed, and whose

[7] Article 231 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution recognizing their "social organization, customs, languages, creeds, traditions and original rights to the lands they traditionally occupy" & Articles 7, 246 and 330 of the Colombia Constitution (operationalized by a decree in May 2025) recognizing indigenous territorial entities.

[8] Article II, Section 22 of the Philippines' Constitution recognizes the rights of communities "within the framework of national unity and development" without granting autonomous jurisdictional authority. The Indigenous Peoples' Right Act recognizes "ancestral domains", but their governance and administration remain mediated by the State through the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples.

[9] Article 18B(2) of the Indonesian Constitution recognizes traditional communities and their customary rights, conditional upon their continued existence and compatibility with national unity. Land tenure and resource rights are however subordinated to national forestry and mining legislation, limiting the effective exercise of customary governance and territorial authority.

[10] The Kenyan Constitution refers to "minorities" and "marginalized communities". The State remains cautious regarding any form of jurisdictional recognition beyond the national legal framework. In the DRC, Indigenous Peoples are primarily framed as "vulnerable groups". Although Pygmy communities were formally recognized through specific legislation adopted in 2022, concerns remain over land tenure, territorial claims, and pre-existing conflicts particularly acute in the country.

[11] In the French Constitution, the first article indicates that "France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion". A report by the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH) in 2017 however argued that the universality of rights requires recognition of multiple identities and territorial specificities, and that belonging to Indigenous or culturally distinct groups remains fully compatible with French citizenship.

knowledge, priorities, and lived realities shape them. Concretely, this could involve systematic requirements for Parties and CBD bodies to explain how IPLC inputs have been considered in decision-making.

A central condition for this will be sustained support for IPLCs to engage effectively in negotiations, including in increasingly technical subsidiary bodies that now function as negotiation spaces as much as advisory fora. Discussions at SBSTTA in Panama in October 2025 repeatedly highlighted the need not only for capacity-building, training and long-term support, but also for efforts to make participation itself more accessible, including though addressing logistical barriers such as language, visa restrictions, or unequal familiarity with negotiation procedures, while ensuring that participation extends beyond already well-connected organizations and representatives to accommodate a wider diversity of communities.

2.2. Representation and recognition remain contested questions

COP17 will have to address questions regarding who speaks for whom within CBD processes. A contested issue concerns whether nominations should be carried out by IPLCs through their own governance structures or through organizations and representative bodies endorsed or registered at the national level, effectively granting Parties a right of oversight. Discussions have touched upon whether representation should be organized through UN regional groups (to respond to sovereignty concerns), the UNPFII socio-cultural regions, or a combination of both. While these debates appear procedural, they raise broader questions of legitimacy and inclusion. A recent report from the UNPFII (2026) suggests that international participation processes should ensure that participation is geographically balanced, socially inclusive and accountable to the communities being represented. In Panama, discussions touched upon other dimensions of inclusivity, including people of African descent, women, youth, and other vulnerable groups. To achieve this, the UNPFII report calls for a "differentiated inclusion model".

These questions are salient for local communities. In 2011, an expert group meeting highlighted concerns regarding their limited participation in Article 8(j) processes. Participants rejected the idea of a rigid definition imposed by governments and instead emphasized self-identification, calling for stronger spaces through which local communities could organize. The CBD experience suggests that the objective may not be to settle once and for all who qualifies as indigenous or as a local community, but rather to design participation arrangements that are sufficiently flexible to accommodate this diversity while ensuring that no group becomes invisible or is left behind.

Questions of recognition also emerge in discussions surrounding indigenous territories and traditional lands. While many Parties recognize the contribution of indigenous territories to biodiversity conservation, debates continue regarding whether these territories should be recognized as a distinct category, as governance arrangements within protected areas and "Other Effective Conservation Measures" (OECMs),[12] or through other approaches. Within the CBD, categories such as "Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas" (ICCAs) have helped make visible the conservation contributions of territories governed by IPLCs, navigating a persistent tension between recognizing these territories as conservation areas and recognizing them as self-governed socio-ecological territories. Current draft guidelines developed under the SB8(j) highlight controversies *via* provisions that remain unresolved, including regarding whether indigenous and traditional territories should be considered as a distinct system contributing to Target 3 of the GBF. According to Immerzeel *et al.* (forthcoming, 2026), one third of Parties mention recognition and respect of the rights of IPLCs, or recognition of Indigenous and traditional territories in their submitted national targets.

Ultimately, debates over representation and recognition of territories determine who and what is visible and integrated within biodiversity governance frameworks at various scales, whose rights are acknowledged, and how different governance systems can coexist within the implementation of the GBF.

2.3. Including IPLCs also means more implementation capacity

Across CBD processes and beyond, access to finance remains one of the most frequently cited barriers preventing IPLCs from fully engaging in governance, implementation and monitoring efforts (see for instance the second Local Biodiversity Outlook).

Among the many issues SB8(j) addressed, biodiversity finance is particularly critical. An in-depth dialogue brought together IPLC representatives, Parties, multilateral funds and agencies to present existing channels, innovations, and barriers to access. The recommendation emerging from this dialogue, however, remains broad—it acknowledges the problem but falls short of proposing concrete pathways, leaving COP17 and financing actors with a responsibility to turn dialogue into delivery.

Despite these limitations, the Panama discussions confirmed that the multilateral finance landscape is slowly evolving. In biodiversity finance, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) has expanded its engagement with IPLCs—the Inclusive Conservation Initiative, launched under GEF-7, provides grants "directly" to Indigenous organizations, with a strong emphasis on rights, governance, territorial planning and institutional strengthening. Following COP15, the establishment of the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund (GBFF) marked another step forward, as it includes IPLC engagement as a project selection criterion and introduced a 20% target share of resources dedicated to IPLC actions, reportedly exceeded to date, while discussions continue on how such contributions should be defined and tracked.

[12] A definition was adopted by COP14 in 2018: "A geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic, and other locally relevant values".

The GEF-9 replenishment introduced a similar target of allocating at least 20% across the family of funds of the facility toward "actions by IPLCs".

In the climate and forest finance space, similar efforts are visible. The Dedicated Grant Mechanism (DGM) under the Climate Investment Funds was created by self-selected IPLC representatives to enhance their role in forest management and climate action. While funds still flow through national executing agencies and multilateral development banks for fiduciary and safeguard purposes, decisions on what to fund, where, and how are made by IPLC-led steering committees. This model addresses donor risk concerns while responding to long-standing demands from indigenous organizations for greater control over resources. The proposed governance of the Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF), launched by Brazil at COP30 on climate, follows a similar logic, explicitly drawing on the DGM model by mandating IPLC-led committees and earmarking a minimum share of funding for IPLCs. The Green Climate Fund has also developed policy tools, like its Indigenous Peoples Policy and Readiness Programme, although uptake remains uneven and highly dependent on national contexts. Beyond formal funding windows and enhanced modalities, political momentum has also been translated into targeted pledges, such as the COP30 renewed commitment to USD1.8 billion to support IPLCs' and Afro-descendant communities' forest tenure rights.

As for climate finance, in the biodiversity realm, access to financial support remains one of the most significant challenges. Promising initiatives exist, such as the GBFF target mentioned above and expectations under the Cali Fund, established under the multilateral benefit-sharing mechanism from the use of digital sequence information, that at least half of the funding should support the self-identified needs of IPLCs. Still, much biodiversity finance targeting IPLCs continues to be channeled through intermediaries. This increases complexity and costs, distances funding from local priorities, and often limits communities' autonomy over how funds are used.

In addition, many IPLC organizations lack the accreditation, fiduciary systems and administrative capacity to access funds directly, often because financing architectures and timelines were never designed with them as primary recipients. Available evidence suggests that only a small share of global climate, forest-related, and biodiversity finance reaches indigenous and local communities.[13] IPLC representatives have repeatedly called, including during CBD negotiations, for a dedicated global funding mechanism for IPLCs to protect biodiversity—as a response to layered pathways, insufficient scale and lack of predictability.

Addressing this gap requires clearer operational choices. A few pathways emerged implicitly from the Panama meetings and deserve attention ahead of COP17. First, clarifying what "direct access" actually means, and transparent reporting on different levels of IPLC control over funding decisions, would reduce ambiguity and build trust. Then, balancing capacity development with credible pathways toward more autonomy is essential for IPLCs to move from beneficiaries to partners and stop relying on intermediaries. Finally, embedding IPLCs in national, subnational and/or territorial financing platforms (Spinazze & Hallosserie, 2025), co-designed with governments and sectors, could reconcile national oversight with locally-defined priorities and longer-term visions. The same operational choices will matter for benefit-sharing mechanisms like the Cali Fund, where access, safeguards and accountability will determine whether participation turns into real benefits.

3. IPLCs CHALLENGE (AND STRENGTHEN) KNOWLEDGE, ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSFORMATION IN BIODIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

3.1. An evidence-based rationale: towards more epistemic pluralism

A central question emerging within biodiversity governance is not simply how to "include" indigenous and local knowledge in biodiversity indicators, but who defines what counts as knowledge, what is measured, and for the needs of those for whom governance is designed. Building on the literature on relational values and relational ontologies of nature (Chan, Gould & Pascual, 2018; Walsh *et al*., 2021; Campbell & Gurney, 2024), we know that many indigenous and local knowledge systems articulate humans, non-human beings and territories through relations of interdependence, care, responsibility and reciprocity, displacing the nature culture divide. In this view, they do not treat nature as an external object to be measured or managed but as part of a wider web of socio-ecological and more-than-human relations. Current global frameworks tend to privilege standardized, comparable indicators, yet the literature shows that IPLCs' knowledge systems use situated, relational, and multi-dimensional indicators that capture ecological, social, and cultural dynamics (McElwee *et al.*, 2020; Brondízio *et al.*, 2021; Pretty *et al*., 2009). A pluralistic approach therefore requires not only technical integration but also epistemic recognition and consideration, acknowledging that different knowledge systems produce distinct yet equally

[13] Tracking of finance flows under the Forest Tenure Pledge shows that despite a total of USD1.86 billion in pledge-aligned funding committed by the end of 2024, only 7.6% of total funding in 2024 reached Indigenous Peoples and local community organizations directly, up from 2.9% in 2021. While philanthropic donors accounted for a growing share of direct funding (34% in 2024), bilateral donors continue to channel the majority of resources through governments and multilateral institutions, rather than IPLC-led organizations. These figures confirm that even within initiatives explicitly designed to support IPLCs, direct access to finance remains the exception rather than the norm—Forest Tenure Funders Group, Progress Report: 2024-2025. IIED (2025) shows that although 24-30% of GEF-6 and GEF-7 funding is nominally "targeted" at IPLCs, most funding flows through intermediaries, with limited transparency and, in some cases, less than 1% of total project budgets reaching local organizations directly. No IPLC women's organizations were identified as direct recipients in the countries studied.

valid ways of knowing and evaluating biodiversity (Hill *et al*., 2020; Salmón, 2000).

This leads to a second, more political question: under what conditions can indigenous and local knowledge be mobilized without being extracted, simplified, or instrumentalized? The evidence consistently shows that knowledge cannot be separated from the people, institutions, and territories that sustain it. Efforts to integrate indigenous and local knowledge into assessments or monitoring risk failure when they treat it as data rather than as part of living governance systems, especially under conditions of unequal power and control (Robinson *et al*., 2023; Öllerer *et al*., 2026; Corson *et al*., 2020). As a result, fostering genuinely bottom-up governance depends not only on methodological innovation (e.g., co-monitoring or plural indicators), but on recognition of rights, support for customary institutions, and safeguards for data sovereignty and knowledge governance (Reyes-García *et al*., 2022; Peacock *et al*., 2020; Hill *et al*., 2020).

3.2. Practical visibility, reporting and accountability challenges

The questions raised above are not only theoretical, they are also reflected in the monitoring, reporting and accountability systems that increasingly shape biodiversity governance in the GBF implementation era. If governance frameworks privilege certain forms of knowledge, indicators and evidence over others, they also influence whose contributions become visible, whose experiences are documented (or not) and ultimately whose priorities inform collective assessments of progress. The first Global Review (Landry *et al.*, 2026) offers a unique opportunity to examine these dynamics. Beyond measuring implementation, it raises questions about whose contributions are recognized through official reporting processes, particularly through national targets, NBSAPs, national reports and global indicators.

Preliminary observations from available National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAPs) and national reports suggest that references to participation, inclusion, human rights-based approaches, or whole-of-society processes remain uneven across submissions, despite these principles being central to the GBF (section C). Information regarding how implementation is taking place on the ground also remains limited. Analysis of headline indicators suggests relatively low levels of reported IPLC engagement, with particularly weak visibility of women and youth. More broadly, information relating to means of implementation under Targets 14 to 23 highlights persistent challenges regarding finance, capacity-building and technology transfer (see 2.3.). Several Parties explicitly report lacking the resources required to undertake monitoring and reporting activities.

The draft global report, published for peer-review in early June 2026, similarly highlights significant information gaps. The lack of disaggregated data makes it difficult to assess progress regarding IPLCs. Across national reports, information on participation varies considerably between targets and countries, while several GBF targets containing explicit references to IPLCs remain among the least operationalized in national target-setting exercises.

These findings raise a broader question: where is progress actually being made, and who gets to define it? What remains invisible in reporting systems is often less likely to shape priorities and resource allocation. If IPLC contributions, governance systems and knowledge practices are insufficiently reflected in monitoring and reporting frameworks, there is a risk that they will remain absent from collective assessments and associated actions. In response, IPLCs are increasingly producing their own evidence and assessments. The forthcoming Local Biodiversity Outlook 3 represents one such effort to complement official reporting, highlight implementation gaps, and provide alternative perspectives on progress towards the GBF.

3.3. Towards transformative co-governance?

Ultimately, the questions raised throughout this *Issue Brief* point toward a broader challenge: how IPLCs will be recognized as real partners shaping transformation pathways in biodiversity governance. Conservation models, as well as climate plans, that have ignored local rights and governance systems have repeatedly generated conflicts and underlined tensions between global goals and local impacts (Scheidel *et al.*, 2020). By contrast, locally led approaches (including community-based economies and management of territories, socio-bioeconomy initiatives (Fofana & Hallosserie, 2025), and territorially grounded development visions) demonstrate that biodiversity protection, socio-economic development and human well-being need not be in opposition, and can create pathways that make trade-offs explicit, strengthen justice and reduce the likelihood of conflict escalation around resource use decisions (Scheidel *et al.*, 2018, Moreira-Muñoz *et al.*, 2025).

For SB8(j) and future CBD negotiations, this implies moving beyond viewing IPLCs only as guardians or beneficiaries and instead engaging with them as co-designers of long-term strategies and pathways. Financial models that align public and private funding with territorial visions, negotiated with governments and communities alike, offer one avenue for this shift, as illustrated by long-term "deal-based" approaches developed in conservation and territorial governance.[14] Moving from participation to partnership also requires additional institutional innovations. The Technical and Scientific Cooperation Support Centres (TSCCs) established under CBD decision 16/3 could represent one opportunity to strengthen collaboration between scientific, policy and community actors, notably as centres have

[14] One illustrative example is the Project Finance for Permanence (PFP) model, which structures long-term agreements between governments, donors, private investors and IPLCs to secure sustained financing for conservation and territorial governance. PFPs typically combine public and philanthropic commitments with private capital, tied to clear policy reforms, governance arrangements and territorial objectives, with disbursements linked to performance and long-term stewardship rather than short project cycles. Further research is needed to assess their effectiveness in practice (regarding decision-making, distribution of benefits and risks, long-term sustainability, and the extent to which IPLCs are able to shape priorities).

incorporated IPLC representation within their arrangements. Ensuring meaningful IPLC participation within their governance structures could increase visibility, strengthen partnerships and support inclusive implementation pathways across regions. Likewise, the Global Review process should help draw attention to current gaps and create space for further action on monitoring, reporting and implementation issues.

More broadly, IPLC worldviews and aspirations challenge the underlying logics that have long shaped biodiversity efforts and can serve as a source of inspiration for the transformative change highlighted by IPBES (2024), one that reconciles biodiversity protection, social justice, and development. Transformative change is not only about scaling up existing actions, but also about reconsidering the values, institutions and governance arrangements that drive biodiversity loss. In this regard, IPLCs are not only actors whose participation should be strengthened, but they can also offer invaluable insights into alternative ways of imagining and governing social-ecological transformations.

The GBF marked a major step forward. The current challenge is not only to strengthen practical participation, but to determine whether the CBD can lead the way towards more enduring forms of partnership. The effectiveness of the GBF may ultimately depend on the ability of institutions to recognize, support and learn from these communities.

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