

Embracing the Wisdom of Ages: How Indigenous Values Offer Fresh Perspectives on Climate Action

By Laure-Anne Menke, Laura Mazzoni, Dana Ross, Mostafa Ajamay 29.06.2023

At a time when rapid technological advances are at the forefront of climate change discussions, the wisdom and knowledge of indigenous communities is often overlooked. Donna Mitzi Lagdameo, a renowned figure from the Secretariat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, recently led a workshop that focused on these communities and their precious heritage. Indigenous values, deeply engrained in the fabric of their centuries-old traditions, have proven to be important guides for addressing today's climate challenges. By integrating these values into our strategies today, we can address the current climate crisis with sustainable solutions. This blog will therefore look at the indigenous value of intergenerational thinking and explore its potential to reshape the way we deal with climate change.

Human-induced climate change, characterised by rising global temperatures, erratic weather patterns, and increasing natural disasters, has become one of the most significant challenges facing humanity. However, climate change is not just an environmental issue. It has multifaceted impacts that reach far beyond the environment, affecting economies and societies as well. Tragically, the communities most adversely affected are often those with the least power and resources to implement change. This adds to the complexity of finding solutions, as efforts to combat climate change must take into account the varying impacts and capacities of different communities. These complexities necessitate multi-dimensional strategies and international cooperation to ensure a just and sustainable approach to combating climate change.

Over the years, several international conventions and agreements have attempted to address the issue. The Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC) began with an exclusive focus on tracking and documenting emissions. However, it quickly became clear that developed nations, which historically have been responsible for a significant share of global emissions, needed to extend their support to developing countries in their fight against climate change. This principle was further emphasised in the Paris Agreement, which advocated for collective progress and responsibility. This agreement delineated three major pillars for climate action: mitigation of greenhouse gases, adaptation strategies to handle the impacts of climate change, and financing mechanisms to support these endeavours.

In line with this collaborative approach, it is essential to also consider the role of indigenous communities. These communities have long practised a sustainable lifestyle characterised by low carbon emissions and resource conservation. Although their contribution to climate change is minimal, they bear the brunt of the impacts due to their close ties to the environment. Incorporating their knowledge of sustainable agriculture, forest management, and biodiversity conservation can therefore enhance and strengthen the global strategies pursued in agreements such as the Paris Agreement. This inclusion ensures that solutions are holistic and take into account the communities most vulnerable to climate change.

Building upon the significance of indigenous people in climate action, it is imperative to explore the values they uphold. Among the values held by indigenous communities, four stand out for

their relevance to climate action: connection with nature, intergenerational thinking, interconnectedness, and a culture of gratitude. These values have been passed down through generations and are deeply entrenched in the lifestyles and worldviews of indigenous peoples. They encourage a lifestyle that is in harmony with nature, considers the long-term impacts of today's actions, recognises the interdependence among various elements of the ecosystem, and is rooted in respect and gratitude for nature's bounty.

As an integral aspect of our group work activity during the workshop, we focused on one of the core indigenous values, which is the principle of intergenerational equity. This principle emphasises the responsibility to pass on an Earth to future generations that is as nurturing and viable as it was for the generations before. Indigenous communities embrace this concept, often shaping decisions with consideration for the seventh generation down the line. Such a long-term vision stands in stark contrast to the short-termism that pervades contemporary decision-making. Recognising and embracing this indigenous principle of intergenerational equity offers a transformative lens through which modern society can reevaluate and reshape its approach to tackling climate change, leading to more sustainable and future-oriented solutions.

An illustrative example of integrating indigenous concepts into policy-making is the Māori concept of "Kaitiakitanga". This concept illustrates the principles of environmental responsibility and protection that could be systematically embedded in natural resource management policies. This would help to ensure the sustainability of ecosystems. Furthermore, the principle of "whakapapa" should be taken into account. This is another Māori concept that emphasises the multi-layered connections between people and their natural environment. Integrating this principle into policies can help to recognise and preserve these connections for future generations.

It is also essential that education systems include sustainability and environmental responsibility as core elements. This is not only about imparting knowledge on sustainable practises but also about promoting an ethic of care and appreciation for the environment inspired by indigenous values. Finally, the creation of participatory forums in which representatives of indigenous communities, policymakers, and other stakeholders work together is a key step. These forums should serve as platforms for dialogue and knowledge sharing, with the aim of developing integrated and holistic strategies for climate change mitigation.

In conclusion, embracing the wisdom of indigenous values, particularly intergenerational thinking, can provide fresh perspectives and innovative solutions in the fight against climate change. These values, honed over centuries, offer a blueprint for sustainability that is both holistic and deeply human. In a world seeking sustainable solutions, the insights and wisdom of indigenous communities are invaluable resources that need recognition, respect, and integration into the global fabric of climate action. Through cooperation and mutual learning, humanity can hope to build a future that is sustainable, just, and in harmony with the natural world.

