

Policy Brief (Climate Change and Equity)

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Background

Climate change poses severe challenges for societies and economies around the world, and in particular the most vulnerable countries and groups.

The melting of glaciers in parts of the Andes and other mountain areas, the increasing drawdown of aquifers, rising sea levels, the growing intensity of storms and saltwater intrusion of water tables have affected different socio-economic groups in different ways. This brief proposes to highlight climate change impacts on Native American groups in Latin and North America.

Research topic

The focus of research on uncovering the nexus between climate change and social justice would be to comparatively assess current and potential impacts of climate change in vulnerable indigenous communities in Latin America and North America.

Latin America

Indigenous groups in Peru, Ecuador and Chile, who once depended on relatively consistent seasonal patterns of melting snow and glaciers for agriculture, potable water and other uses are now experiencing erratic water cycles, reduced bio-diversity, damage to agricultural production, reduced productivity and food security problems.

Higher temperatures in highlands are likely to lead to increased pests and crop diseases as well as water shortages and declines in production and productivity as a result of higher erosion, greater runoff and low levels of reservoirs that support irrigation.

In Central America, it has been documented that mountainous coffee-growing areas and yields have already been impacted by unprecedented warmer temperatures and the spread of fungi such as coffee rust up to altitudes of 5,000 feet.

Further incidence of drought would reduce Latin America's rain-fed agricultural areas and affect the household income of smallholders and farm workers.

The intensity of such occurrences under warming scenarios from between 2 degrees to 4 degrees centigrade is likely to unleash harsh social impacts for indigenous and other poor highland groups and in the long run further exacerbate inequity and social injustice.

Reduced agricultural production not only affects food security and nutrition levels of the poorest households, but also reduces employment in the agricultural sector, especially for indigenous smallholders and female farmers.

Increased migration of poor communities and families to cities in the wake of greater rural impoverishment would also exacerbate urban poverty and swell the ranks of the unemployed and underemployed in major cities.

Vulnerable indigenous communities already bear the disproportionate burden of higher rates of infant and maternal mortality and lower levels of coverage of education, health, water, social and sanitation services as well as historic exclusion, discrimination and marginalization.

A collapse of agricultural livelihoods would lead to severe hardships and greater social inequity. At the same time vulnerable farmers are unable to avoid costly mitigation and adaptation measures such as innovative technologies, the use of water resistant crops and micro-irrigation and new tilling methods.

North America

In North America, drought patterns and intensive weather events are coupled with accelerated drawdown of aquifers, increased fracking, fossil fuel extraction and pipeline development as well as expected reduction of environmental regulations.

The corollary of the research on North America would be to explore the impact of climate change and fossil fuel extraction on North American indigenous groups, especially in the Dakotas, Oklahoma, drought-ridden Southwestern states and the situation of Native American communities/First Nations in Alaska, Northern Canadian territories and in low-lying and coastal areas of the North American continent.

The experience of European settlement and colonization and displacement of indigenous peoples in past centuries has been devastating for indigenous communities in North and Latin America.

In this century it is imperative that we not only research climate change related factors and their impacts on native peoples' livelihoods, but also use documentation to feed into the knowledge base of factors that continue to affect the social, cultural and economic survival of indigenous communities in the so-called "New World".

The information garnered would provide a foundation to propose fact-based policy and other measures to address ongoing and future challenges to social justice for vulnerable indigenous peoples.