



POLICY BRIEF REPORT

By All Burma Indigenous Peoples' Alliance

Rethinking Indigenous Leadership Amid Climate Change, Conflict and the Coup in Burma

Across the globe, indigenous peoples control and sustain near **80% of the world's biodiversity**, despite comprising only 5% of the world's population, and facing systemic and long-term marginalization and oppression from governments, corporations and militaries. This international trend is no different in Burma, where indigenous peoples control and manage a vast majority of biodiverse forests across the country's uplands, despite having faced over seven decades of cultural suppression, militarization, and land and resource confiscation at the hands of authoritarian and majoritarian regimes.

While there is growing recognition that indigenous peoples play a vital role in prospects for climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation, they continue to face many obstacles in controlling and sustaining their territories. These include a lack of financial and technical support, a denial of recognition of indigenous sovereignties and aspirations for self-determination, continued colonization and resource extraction in indigenous territories, and unremitting oppression and marginalization.

These challenges and obstacles are further amplified in Burma and other conflict affected countries, where indigenous peoples are subject to militarized violence. Following the 2021 military coup, indigenous territories have faced repeated **crimes against humanity**, including aerial bombardments on civilian targets, sexual violence, and extrajudicial killings. The coup has also given way to a dramatic acceleration of resource extraction and **environmental plunder**. Despite enormous challenges, indigenous communities across Burma continue to protect and sustain their forests and biodiversity, in turn playing a vital role in safeguarding

some of South East Asia's largest remaining forest landscapes. Examples such as the **Salween Peace Park** and the **Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park (TTIP)** exemplify the ways in which indigenous communities have continued to protect and sustain their territories in the face of sustained aerial bombardments. Similar cases can be seen across the country from Kachin to Tanintharyi, where indigenous and local communities have worked to sustain and protect their territories from extractive projects.

In this policy briefing we call on the United Nations, embassies and donors to rethink approaches to supporting climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation, particularly in conflict affected regions, by providing direct support to indigenous communities and organizations. We also call on a future federal government of Burma to recognize the substantial contribution indigenous communities are making to climate change mitigation and adaptation, providing guarantees for the protection of their rights and sovereignties in a liberated Burma.



Figure 1: Communities gather for world rivers day at Myitsone

Rethinking Approaches to Climate Change in Conflict Affected Contexts

The recent violent conflict and oppressive state rule in Burma underscore the critical need to reevaluate international approaches to climate change and environmental protection in conflict-affected regions. The situation in Burma reveals the growing urgency of incorporating conflict analysis and people-centered approaches into international climate action programs.

In 2022, the **United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change** (IPCC) issued a warning that the impacts of the climate crisis would be acutely felt in economically disadvantaged and conflict-ridden countries. Moreover, several researchers have identified **climate change** as a 'threat multiplier,' exacerbating violent conflicts when combined with socio-political factors such as poverty, state incapacity, and inequality. However, addressing climate vulnerabilities in regions marred by violent conflict and state oppression remains a challenging task, as evidenced in Burma.

Burma's situation presents an alarming example of a potential 'climate collapse.' Since the military coup in February 2021, extractive activities and war

economies have wreaked havoc on the country's natural environment, endangering communities through displacement, violent persecution, and food shortages. These conflict-induced effects hinder local communities' ability to adapt to climate change and obstruct civil society's environmental protection efforts. In light of these challenges, climate change programs should prioritize conflict analysis and replace state-centric and purely technical approaches with people-centered strategies, aligning with the localization of the aid agenda.

Escalating tensions following the military coup have led to the military regime's exploitation of the country's rich natural resources, funding its oppressive rule and violent operations. This further exacerbates a long history of resource exploitation, which had only been partially curbed during a brief reform period. **Satellite data** has revealed significant deforestation since the coup, while civil society organizations **report** unregulated mining that pollutes waterways, destroys forests and causes landslides. The reimposition of military rule has also eroded the civic space for environmental and climate justice activists, who played a protective role for customary lands and the environment during the previous reform period.



Figure 2: Gold Mining operation in Myitsone

Burma faces serious climate change vulnerabilities. It is the second-most vulnerable country to extreme weather events, as indicated by the 2021 **Global Climate Risk Index**. Frequent heatwaves, floods, cyclones, droughts, and rising sea levels threaten livelihoods and sustainable development. Burma is home to biodiverse-rich rainforests crucial for global climate stabilization. Indigenous communities have protected these forests for generations, but top-down conservation interventions, extractive activities, and conflict dynamics have undermined their efforts. Despite growing dangers and challenges, indigenous communities and organizations don't give up and they continue **defending** their environment and territories. Due to campaigning by Indigenous communities to have their territories and conservation efforts recognized both within Burma and internationally, a paradigm shift has started to take place. Indigenous Community Conserved Areas are now recognized in the following conventions, declarations and

government plans and strategies such as Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), UNDRIP and NBSAP.

Burma demonstrates that climate change vulnerabilities are not solely linked to global temperature changes but are also influenced by governance, natural resource use, and conflict. Decades of authoritarian rule, agrarian land conflicts, and long-running armed conflicts have severely hindered local communities' ability to respond to climate change. Military-linked militias and businesses are degrading the environment further, exacerbating the long-term impacts of climate change.

It is therefore imperative that approaches to climate change mitigation are reconsidered, including by integrating conflict analysis into program design, embracing people-centered implementation, and supporting pro-democratic movements in developing equitable climate change policies.

Indigenous Peoples Under Resourced and Under Supported, But Continuing to Fight

Despite the enormous challenges that indigenous communities and environmental defenders face in Burma, **they continue their work** to protect and sustain their territories. While working on the frontline of climate collapse, indigenous communities and organizations are increasingly unsupported financially, technically and politically. This is the result of a reluctance of donors to provide resources directly to indigenous communities, declining climate funding for Burma, and barriers to entry in the form of funding requirements that preclude indigenous communities from access to funding opportunities. It is vital that the approach to climate funding is changed in order to better protect and safeguard forests and biodiversity.

Between **2000 – 2019**, Burma was the country in receipt of the smallest amount climate finance in ASEAN. Following the 2021 military coup, climate funding from sources such as the Global Climate Fund and the Green Climate Fund have been further **cut**, due to growing instability. Around 75% of Burma's climate finance used to come in the form of debt through government channels. Private sector investments have also dwindled due to the perceived high-risk nature of investing in Burma. As a result, the options for climate change funding have become limited, with only a handful of multilateral or bilateral donors stepping in. Moving forward, Burma could consider adopting a more holistic approach by integrating climate change considerations across various sectors and giving priority to community-led adaptation efforts. These challenges include shifting priorities due to changing conditions on the ground, increased humanitarian needs, the lack of climate change integration across sectors and programs, insufficient climate data at the sub-national level, limited engagement with civil society organizations, and inadequate support for local partners. Many local agencies are facing immense difficulties due to the lack of project support. The majority of these projects are considered development projects rather than strictly humanitarian, resulting in cancellations or shutdowns.

Institutions like the Global Environment Facility (GEF) primarily work multilaterally with governments to address environmental and climate challenges on a global scale. The ongoing political instability in Burma has **created a challenging environment for climate funding**. The ongoing political situation and military actions in Burma have led to widespread human rights violations, including those against indigenous communities. These violations can exacerbate vulnerabilities related to climate impacts. Climate funds should be allocated to support practices that are environmentally sustainable and culturally appropriate, while respecting the rights and sovereignty of indigenous peoples. The resolution of the political situation and a commitment to human rights are also critical to achieving effective climate action in Burma. While Burma adopted a climate change policy, strategy, and master plan in 2019 and submitted its first Nationally Determined Contribution to the UNFCCC in 2021, achieving the defined targets within these plans will be unlikely without institutional support and international backing.

While there has been a growing acceptance of the substantial role that indigenous peoples play in climate change mitigation, there continues to be significant obstacles for them to access funding and support for their efforts. During the COP-26, governments pledged 1.7 billion USD of climate funding to directly to indigenous communities, however only **7% has gone directly to indigenous communities**, a majority absorbed by intermediary international organizations.

In addition to a continued reluctance of international donors to directly fund indigenous communities, local organizations in Burma find obstacles to gaining funding, because donors have unrealistically challenging requirements. These barriers include limited administrative capacity, language and communication challenges, and difficulties in meeting the demanding reporting, proposal and compliance standards set by many donors. This has left many local and indigenous organizations with huge funding gaps that meant they are unable to conduct their vital work to protect and sustain their lands and forests.



Figure 3: indigenous Karen communities celebrate World Food Day Tanintharyi Region

Recommendations:

Following the 2021 military coup indigenous communities have faced grave challenges as a result of intensifying conflict, human rights abuses and resource extraction. Despite these challenges, indigenous communities and organizations have continued to conserve, protect and sustain their territories, as well as delivering humanitarian support to those affected by conflict. Scarce financial and technical support, however often means that those working on the frontlines are working in extremely difficult circumstances with little resources.

In order to deal with the increasing environmental and humanitarian crises facing Burma during this period of intensifying armed conflict, we call on national and international actors to adopt a new approach. This approach must be people centered, recognize and support the sovereignty and ingenuity of indigenous peoples, and remove obstacles for local and indigenous communities

and organizations to access financial and technical support. Moving away from state-centered approaches to climate change and humanitarian assistance will provide new opportunities to advance climate mitigation goals, as well as effectively addressing the humanitarian challenges facing local and indigenous peoples across Burma.

To The Future Federal Democratic Government of Burma:

The challenge of dealing with climate change will be among the biggest that a future government of Burma will face. Indigenous people in Burma control, sustain and depend on a vast majority of the forests and biodiversity within its borders. As such we call on a future government to:

1. Recognize the sovereignty of indigenous peoples over their territories, and their roles in land and forest management
2. Enshrine the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in a new constitution, and

along with this the right of Indigenous peoples to Free, Prior and Informed Consent

3. Guarantee the participation of Indigenous peoples in the drafting of any laws, policies and initiatives that concern them and their territories.

To Ethnic Armed Organizations:

EAOs have a central role in the governance of indigenous territories and resources. During this period of armed conflict, we call on EAOs to operate with diligence and care for indigenous communities and the resources that they manage over. In order to do this, we call upon EAOs to:

1. Collaborate with indigenous communities and organizations to protect and sustain the forest
2. Stop viewing our natural resources as commodities to be exploited for revenue generation. During the revolution and the period of the rebuilding of Burma, our territories, forests and resources must not be sacrificed, this would only serve to make Burma poorer and more insecure in the future
3. Ethnic Armed Organizations are formed with the will of the people, and therefore, they must listen and act with the consent of the people
4. Conduct activities and operations with transparency and accountability, seeking the consent of the people first.

Civil Society Organizations

Indigenous and local civil society organizations play a key role in delivering humanitarian aid, protecting vital water, land and forests, and providing services to marginalized communities. In order to create

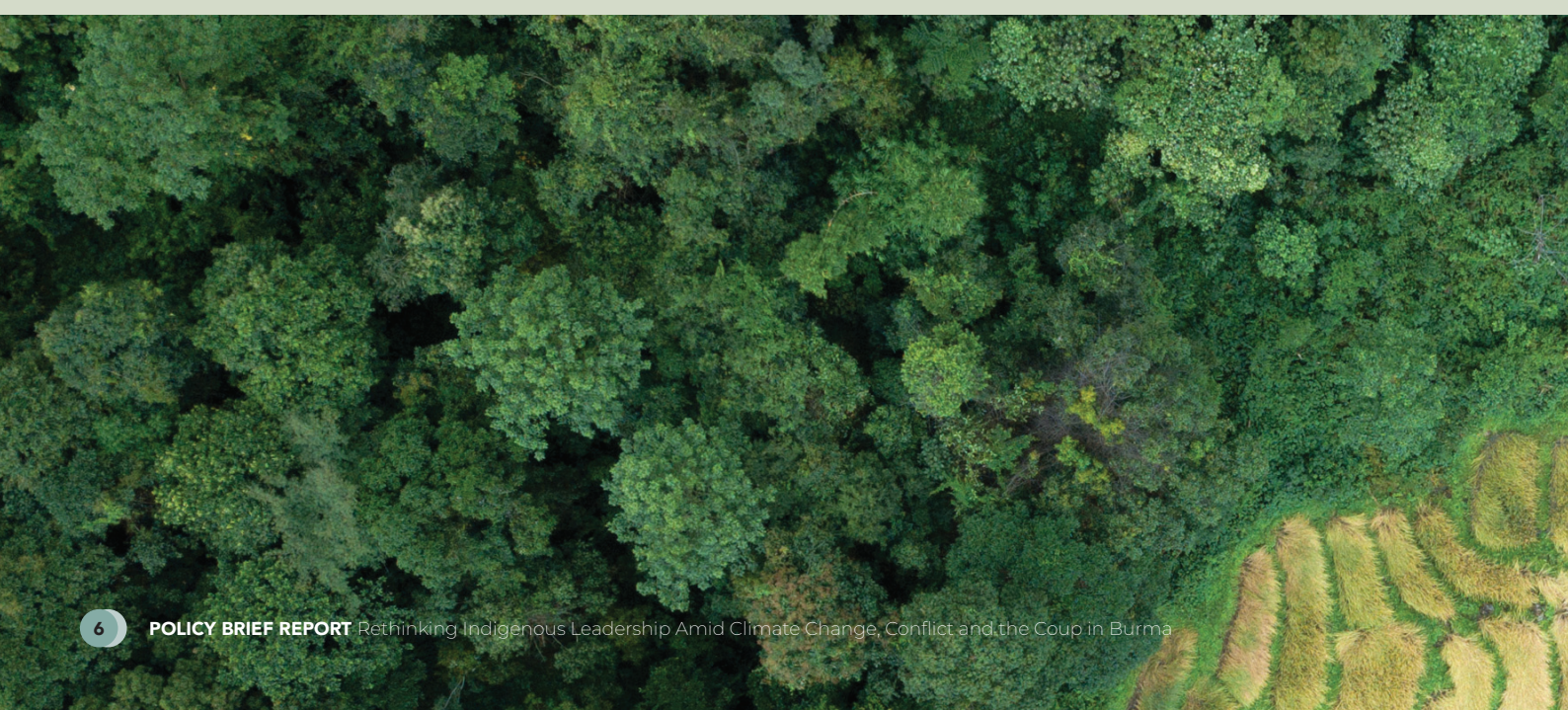
collaborative visions during this period of hardship, we call upon CSOs to:

1. Abandon project-based work and develop bigger visions, strategies and approaches to supporting indigenous communities to maintain and protect their lands and forests
2. Collaborate with and advocate to relevant EAO departments and bodies in order to improve land governance and protection
3. Collaborate with each other, rather than competing over funds. Form overarching strategies and work together to deliver humanitarian aid and protect lands and forests.

Donors & Embassies in Rangoon:

Indigenous lands and territories across Burma border regions are under attack. Facing crimes against humanity such as aerial bombardments and attacks from heavy artillery, as well as rapid mining and logging across their territories, indigenous communities are struggling to survive. Indigenous peoples and organizations are hugely resilient and are best placed to resolve the challenges that they face, in order to support them, we call on donors and embassies to:

1. Recognize the vital role that indigenous communities play both in provision of services and humanitarian support, and in the protection and sustenance of forests and biodiversity by providing financial and technical support directly to communities and CSOs that work with them
2. Reduce barriers to entry for indigenous communities and local organizations to access funds for both environmental work, and cross border humanitarian aid. This should include



lowering linguistic barriers (allowing organizations to report in Burmese and indigenous languages), lowering administrative barriers, and being flexible with financial requirements

3. Provide support to organizations that have strong relationships with communities and are working on the ground, as part of enacting a bottom up, locally based approach towards climate action. Rather than supporting organizations who may be adept in reporting or speaking in English, prioritize those who are delivering change on the ground.

The National Unity Government

During this period of revolution, Burma faces myriad challenges. As the interim government, we call upon the NUG to use its role and responsibilities to address the long-standing marginalization of indigenous peoples, as well as fast growing environmental and humanitarian crises. In order to achieve this, the NUG should:

1. Develop and implement a new Federal Constitution of Burma in coordination with EAOs and ethnic and indigenous communities and organizations
2. Recognize and pay contrition the many ways in which indigenous peoples have been marginalized and oppressed under the previous government
3. Recognize indigenous peoples and the significant role that they play in protecting natural resources in Burma, including them in decision making and actions around climate change and conservation.

The United Nations:

Burma, along with other countries that are conflict affected, face significant challenges in addressing climate change. Despite these challenges, indigenous and local communities across the country have continued to actively defend and protect their territories and resources from destruction. In order to address climate change mitigation and adaptation in these areas:

1. The UNFCCC pledged \$1.7 billion of climate funding directly to indigenous peoples, however only 7% has been provided. Make good on this pledge and provide direct support indigenous communities and organizations standing on the front line of the climate crisis
2. Do not make the SAC a partner for climate change mitigation; providing resources and support to the SAC and other authoritarian regimes will only work to further oppress environmental defenders and perpetuate climate injustice
3. Devise an alternative paradigm for working in conflict affected territories. This should revise state-centric approaches that work through central governments, instead working on local climate action that support the sovereignties and efforts of indigenous communities directly
4. Support and include the voices of indigenous peoples in conflict affected regions in climate negotiations and decision-making platforms, as they are leading on the front lines of climate mitigation despite of threats from authoritarian states.

