



From Traditional Economies to Global Transformation: Indigenous Leadership in Rebuilding Economic Systems*

Abstract

Several Indigenous leaders and experts recently gathered for a panel entitled, “From Traditional Economies to Global Transformation: Indigenous Leadership in Rebuilding Economic Systems.” The discussion occurred July 16, 2025, at a side event hosted by The Implementation Project, in conjunction with the 18th Session of the U.N. Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This document compiles contributions by Ambassador Justin Mohamed (Australia), Dr. Ojot Ojulu (Ethiopia), Fmr. President Fawn Sharp (USA), and Mr. Alexey Tsykarev (Russian Federation). These individuals offer insights on Indigenous Peoples’ traditional ways of life and climate change adaptation, along with access to financial resources and international trade networks. Additional topics include the Convention on Biodiversity’s CALI Fund as well as work in the World Intellectual Property Organization and World Economic Forum connecting Indigenous Peoples’ local situations with global institutions. Commentary by Ms. Andrea Carmen (USA) and TIP Co-Directors Sue Noe and Kristen Carpenter, further illuminates developments associated with rebuilding Indigenous economies today and in the future. The discussion is commemorated in the lightly edited, excerpted transcript that follows.

Panel Transcript

July 16, 2025, Palais des Nations, Geneva Switzerland

Introduction by Ms. Sue Noe – Co-Director, The Implementation Project and Senior Staff Attorney, Native American Rights Fund

Good morning and welcome to our side event. I am Sue Noe, a Senior Staff Attorney at the Native American Rights Fund and Co-Director of The Implementation Project. [The Implementation Project](#) is a joint initiative of the Native American Rights Fund and the University of Colorado Law School that engages in education and advocacy to advance implementation of the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#). My colleague and Co-Director of the Project, Kristen Carpenter, is a professor at University of Colorado Law School and also a former

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Chair of the [Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (EMRIP). I want to thank our co-sponsors today for this panel: the Australian Government, the Indigenous Movement for Peace Advancement and Conflict Transformation, and the Center for support of Indigenous Peoples and Civic Diplomacy, Young Karelia.

I'm going to provide very brief introductions of our panelists in the order in which they'll be speaking. First, we have Ms. Fawn Sharp from the United States, who is the former President of the Quinault Indian Nation and also of the National Congress of American Indians. Next, we have Ambassador Justin Mohamed, who is Australia's Ambassador for First Nations People. Following is Mr. Ole Kaunga from Kenya, who is the founder and director of the Indigenous Movement for Peace Advancement and Conflict Transformation (IMPACT). Next is Mr. Alexey Tsykarev from Russia, a member of the Convention on Biodiversity's [Cali Fund](#) Steering Committee. And finally, Dr. Ojot Ojulu from Ethiopia, who is a member and Vice-Chair of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We'll begin with President Sharp, who will share her vision for the transformation that we will be discussing today, and the subsequent panelists will share their perspectives from their own work, including with connections to the [EMRIP Study on Traditional Economies](#).

Ms. Fawn Sharp – Former President, Quinault Indian Nation and National Congress of American Indians and Council Member of the World Economic Forum's Global Future Council on Natural Capital

Distinguished colleagues on our panel and esteemed guests, good morning. I open the session with deep respect, gratitude, and the full weight of our collective ancestral responsibility.

This is an unprecedented global dialogue that we, as Indigenous leaders, have envisioned, led, and brought to this international convening. This moment marks a turning point. Over the past year, my journey has led me from the shores of my ancestral lands along Lake Quinault, to global finance and policy forums in Siem Reap, Bellagio, Baku, Sao Paulo, Nice, Boston, New York, Washington, and now, here. These travels have deepened the clarity that the world is at a crossroads and Indigenous Peoples are not only ready in a world that is crumbling around us -- we are rising.

The economic systems that dominate our world today, designed for conquests rooted in extraction and measured by exploitation, are failing. They are failing our climate, failing our peoples, failing global stability, and the future of our planet.

Yet, Indigenous Peoples, despite centuries of dispossession and systemic exclusion, are not the victims in this story. We are true to the legacy of leadership that we all have inherited, we are visionaries. For millennia, our economies have been governed by principles of reciprocity, regeneration, and intergenerational accountability. We know what it means to measure wealth, not by accumulation, but by the abundance that we share across generations. Not by what we consume, but what we sustain. And now the world is finally listening.

At this critical juncture of climate collapse, biodiversity loss, and global inequity, Indigenous leadership is not just relevant, it is indispensable. Our traditional economies are not relics of the past; they are the blueprints for the future. They offer the intellectual, spiritual, and

practical foundations for entirely new systems. Financial architectures that value living systems, trade policies that advance human and planetary dignity, and governance rooted not in domination, but in kinship. This side event is more than a panel, it is a movement — a movement to redefine prosperity, to reimagine value, to rebuild economic systems that are regenerative, not destructive, and to do so through Indigenous-designed, Indigenous-governed, and Indigenous-led institutions. Imagine a world where capital flows align with our worldviews and values; where investment strategies follow ecological thresholds and spiritual principles; where carbon, biodiversity, and water are governed by Indigenous institutions, not as commodities to be exploited, but as relatives to be honored. That world is not only possible, it is already emerging.

As a member of the [World Economic Forum Global Future Council on Natural Capital](#), I have the opportunity to help shape a bold, values-driven shift in global finance, one that centers Indigenous Peoples, not as stakeholders, but as co-creators of the world's next economy. We are working to move beyond gross domestic product (GDP) and extractive valuations toward metrics that recognize ecosystems as living systems and Indigenous knowledge as foundational asset. This work supports Indigenous Peoples by elevating our governance systems, embedding our legal frameworks into natural capital policy, and advancing financial models that channel investment directly into Indigenous-led stewardship. It is not about integrating us into the existing economy. It is about co-designing a new one grounded in abundance, balance, and interdependence.

To our colleagues in finance, diplomacy, and multilateral governments: the path forward does not lie on repackaging colonial systems. It lies in full recognition, resourcing, and return of power to Indigenous-envisioned, Indigenous-led, and Indigenous-governed economies. The transformation we are calling for is not incremental, it is systemic. It requires financial leaders to move from transactional to relational, it calls on governments to center justice over geopolitics, and it demands that global institutions evolve from consultation to co-governance. We are not merely adopting and adapting to global markets, we are redefining and transforming them.

Let me close with this declaration: Indigenous Peoples are no longer the moral conscience on the margins. We are the strategic partners at the center of global recovery and regeneration. Our ancestors long foretold of a day of reckoning, a day when the world is on a trajectory that simply is not sustainable; that time is now. The prophecies of many generations that have gone before us are unfolding before our very eyes. We are prepared, we have prepared an entire lifetime, and with my colleagues here, we're going to share with you some examples.

Amb. Justin Mohamed – Australian Ambassador for First Nations People

I'm the Inaugural Ambassador for Australia — the only, I think, in the world, Ambassador for Indigenous First Nations People. And in the two years that I've been in this role we've had a fairly broad mandate. Some of these areas which we've been focused on, and my role and my office have been able to work on, is embedding First Nations' perspectives into Australia's foreign policy.

I think most people know that many of our governments, and especially Australia, has strong relationships and a lot of impact and diplomacy which has been respected across the globe. For many years in Australia it has been done without the additional 65,000 years of knowledge of the Indigenous Peoples and their foreign policies, and we're doing that now.

The other areas of our mandate are answering Australia's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, progressing First Nations' rights and interests globally, supporting First Nations' trade and investment, and bolstering Australian First Nations' diplomatic capability and advocacy. So, as you can see, there's a lot of work, and I think you all would agree, as Indigenous People that we should do nothing in silos, it's got to be holistic. And though the broad mandate I was given may seem a lot to get around, I don't think we could do any of this without any of those single areas being on that list. And in doing so, we've seen that the economic positioning for Indigenous Peoples in Australia—and we know globally—it is growing. It's growing to the point where the economy needs us, and we need the economy.

We know to uphold human rights, to uphold Indigenous rights, to be able to ensure our families and the future generations have the right to education, housing, health, etc., the economies play a very strong role with that. So how do we ensure that our knowledge, our thousands of years of expertise, is protected and not abused or taken advantage of, as we've seen happen over generations.

So, today I'm going to speak a little bit about the work that has been done with the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO); specifically the [Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources, and Associated Traditional Knowledges](#) (GRATK), as contributing to this Indigenous economic empowerment. With anything to do with advancing Indigenous Peoples and economies, we also want to work on how we protect the knowledges and these ancient ways of doing business. So, May last year, I was honored to co-lead Australia's negotiation team to the WIPO Diplomatic Conference here in Geneva. The Treaty had been hard fought by many Indigenous Peoples from Australia and globally for over 20 years, and to see the government agencies working right alongside our First Nations People from around the world to deliver this historic Treaty was truly an inspiring moment for myself. Having the Australian government to include First Nation's perspective as part of their negotiation team was the first for Australia. Also having the ability in the conference itself to have Indigenous Peoples represented and given speaking rights in those negotiations was also something which I took heart from.

The Treaty aims to enhance the efficiency, transparency, and the quality of the patent system with regard to the genetic resources and traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources. It enables Australian First Nations Peoples and all Indigenous Peoples to promote our unique and diverse export offerings and is an important step to further protection for Indigenous Peoples' traditional knowledges. Under this project, the [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#) is now running a bush foods pilot, which aims to help First Nations bush foods exporters to navigate and better engage with international intellectual property systems. The systems are sometimes very foreign to Indigenous Peoples, but we know as we get closer to and understand these systems how important they are, and how they need to be established and held in the best interests of Indigenous Peoples. So, Australia is delighted with the successful adoption of the WIPO Treaty last year that recognizes First Nations' traditional knowledge (TK) and traditional cultural expressions (TCE) and intellectual property. We're looking to further embed that.

I think is very important to ensure that as we advance and move into the economy, that our Indigenous Peoples and their knowledges will be protected for generations to come. We have a unique place in the global economies that will not only advance our own people and our family but provide a strong economy for our Nations and our States, where we live and reside.

Mr. Alexey Tsykarev – Member, Cali Fund Steering Committee and Chair, Center for Support of Indigenous Peoples and Civic Diplomacy, Young Karelia

I was inspired by President Sharp's words about the movement that we declare now to redefine prosperity. And this movement is occurring alongside another set of events redefining geopolitical spheres of influence. Indigenous Peoples are truly leaders in that first movement, and it's important to construct a global economic system that is not destructive as President Sharp said. Ambassador Mohamed said now that the economic positioning of Indigenous Peoples is growing in Australia, and I think it's also the case in many other regions of the world. In Russia for example, Indigenous People speak more and more about their economic rights. They truly believe that their cultural and linguistic rights will be more secure if Indigenous Peoples' economies are thriving. Ole Kaunga's comments about land rights, and the repatriation of Indigenous Peoples' stolen knowledge is important and discussed in so many regions of the world, including my own.

We see consensus emerging about the need for direct funding with respect to the development needs of Indigenous Peoples in particular. Indigenous Peoples are the rightful recipients of such funding. First of all, they are most dependent on lands and biodiversity; secondly, they are the ones who safeguard these lands and biodiversity. I know that Dr. Ojulu will elaborate on the current Draft Study on traditional economies by EMRIP.

Instead, I would like to refer to an earlier [EMRIP study on access to financial services](#), including discrimination associated with that access. Experts said that sustainable economies of Indigenous Peoples are based on their traditional knowledge, on sustainable use of biodiversity, and on their culture. The traditional economy doesn't mean based on archaic technology, as is sometimes described by politicians or decision makers and government structures. Indigenous Peoples of my country advocate for the perception of the traditionality of economies as economies based on the traditional way of life and traditional knowledge. It's not about fishing with old equipment; it's fishing because it makes you Indigenous. Indigenous Peoples have the right to modernize their way of life, to modernize their economies, to modernize their livelihoods. And for that, of course, since they are in a worse position than other actors, they need their capacity to eliminate discriminatory barriers. To make Indigenous Peoples' starting points close to equal, because we probably will never get equal to non-Indigenous actors and societies, we need benefit-sharing from States and the private sector.

This is where I come to the Cali Fund. In my current role as a member of the Cali Fund Steering Committee, I would like to mention a few points about this new major milestone that the [16th Conference of the Parties \(COP\) of the Convention on Biological Diversity](#) (CBD) established last year. The Cali Fund will receive contributions from the private sector entities that use digital sequence information (DSIs) of genetic resources. The fund will be part of a multilateral mechanism for the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of these DSIs. And we know these industries that use DSIs, they are also mentioned in the COP's decision. It's pharmaceuticals, medicine, food supplements, cosmetics, animal and plant breeding, biotechnology, and other commercial applications of DSIs.

Companies are expected to provide 1% of their incomes to this fund, and 50% of all funds that will be received by the Cali Fund should be distributed for the needs of Indigenous Peoples. Needs include capacity development, national biodiversity activities, and other self-identified

needs of Indigenous Peoples and local communities to implement the purposes of the [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#). I believe that if we achieve these goals and receive broad funding, it will help to enhance implementation of CBD priorities. It will increase fair and equitable sharing of benefits. It will empower Indigenous communities, including youth and women, and it will increase investments in biodiversity, in general.

A few closing points. First, who will contribute? Of course, the companies that use DSIs. In my mind, I think the COP decision also implies that other companies can also contribute, not for greenwashing, but for the true purposes of the CBD. Governments are encouraged to work with industry to encourage them to contribute to the fund, but these contributions can go either directly to the fund or for a nationally established platform. And the Cali Fund is not alone; it can be supplementary to other mechanisms that could be established on the national level. Even though the Cali Fund's decision-making structure is quite inclusive and Indigenous Peoples are represented there, we still should be mindful that we constitute a minority in the government structure of the fund. We are six people right now out of 25, and all the others are mostly representatives of States.

We need to think about how voluntary or obligatory these contributions from the private sector should be. I understand that they are perceived as voluntary, but the reputational factor and the principles of due diligence can become a game changer. The companies that will not share benefits through the Cali Fund, will lose a lot of reputational capital.

We need capacity building, we need direct funding, we need to conclude the Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLC) definition discussion because it's influencing our positions in decision-making. And we also need to discuss how the private sector can in general contribute to Indigenous Peoples' priorities. In my country, we conduct this discussion in many platforms, I see people here in this room who have helped us with their knowledge to understand better how can we use ethical standards, ideas of inclusion and disclosure of information, Indigenous values, to make fair and just agreements with companies and get direct funding for our economic goals and economic prosperity?

Dr. Ojot Miru Ojulu – Member and Vice-Chair, UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Allow me to make some comments in relation to the EMRIP's report on this very topic. But before I do that, it is very important to remind ourselves why this topic is so important and relevant today. The current climate crisis, the exploitative economic systems that have been in place for so many years, and food shortages in many parts of the world are destroying our environment, and our mother nature in general. This reminds us why this topic is so important: the traditional economic systems of Indigenous Peoples. Africa, the region I come from, has become synonymous with conflicts over the past years. Many of the conflicts the region is experiencing are instigated and sustained by these unequal economic systems that promote accumulation by some, at the expense of others.

Thus, you have a large section of societies who find themselves marginalized and dispossessed from their own very ancestral lands where their fathers and forefathers lived, and then they find themselves pushed to the margins. This becomes a source of conflicts and grievances

that are not addressed. Against this background, the Indigenous traditional economic systems, brings an alternative and an opportunity, not just for Indigenous Peoples, but for the entire world. I am glad to hear on this panel that Australia is not just working internally to promote Indigenous traditional economic system but also trying to export some of these good practices beyond its national borders by integrating it in its foreign policy engagement with the rest of the international community. I think these kinds of engagements should be commended and replicated by other countries.

On this panel, we have also heard a number of principles and values that underpinned Indigenous traditional economic systems such as the sense of belonging to one another, mentioned by my brother from Kenya, the sense that we belong to our mother Earth, that we are not isolated from our environment, and that we care, not just for this generation, but for the generations to come. These principles underscore how important and relevant Indigenous traditional economic systems are, especially for our time. If we need to reinvigorate those systems, we need to address the broader challenges such as the erosion of Indigenous leadership systems – right to self-determination, as well as issues around the lack of political representation and participation by Indigenous Peoples in key decision-making bodies where they can influence both national and global development policies.

Amid these challenges, there are also opportunities. In my work at EMRIP, we have the mandate, which is the promotion of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. UNDRIP articulates what right to self-determination means for Indigenous Peoples. As Indigenous Peoples, if our right to self-determination is not respected and implemented at the national level, it will prove difficult for implementation and enjoyment for other rights. Same is true for the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent. If those rights are not respected, it will lead to lack of respect for other rights such as right to land, territories and natural resources.

All this calls us to go back to the UNDRIP and work hard to ensure that it is endorsed, promoted and implemented at local, national and global level.

Q&A Discussion Moderated by Prof. Kristen Carpenter – Co-Director, The Implementation Project and Council Tree Professor of Law and Director of the American Indian Law Program, University of Colorado Law School:

I would like to thank our speakers and elevate the comments highlighting the human rights framework of EMRIP's study on traditional economies. Implementing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in this context offers guidance with respect to the rights of self-determination, property, health, development, culture, religion. It also highlights the interlinkages among rights, reminding us, for example, that traditional economies are deeply related to land, health, and wellbeing, and security and other rights. We will now turn to questions from our audience.

Ms. Andrea Carmen – Yaqui Nation, Executive Director, International Indian Treaty Council

I have a question specifically for Mr. Tsykarev: I know that we, as the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change, the Indigenous Caucus at the [UNFCCC](#), have a lot of serious questions about issues like carbon markets. And both from an environmental and cultural

perspective, there's a lot of hesitancy around that. I won't go into that as much because I have a question about the Cali Fund. [Article 8 \(j\) of the CBD](#) does not talk about rights, or Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) regarding the biodiversity resources that are up for "benefit sharing".

As a new process, at Cali Fund, there may have been an opportunity to make sure that Indigenous Peoples' rights to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent were inserted when you look at the corporations that were developing DSI or had developed it. I'm just wondering how FPIC was inserted into the structure of the Cali Fund, and could that be a corrective measure to the deficiencies in Article 8(j) in the Convention itself? Thank you.

Mr. Tsykarev:

You are right that FPIC must be part of it. It is true that the CBD does not specifically mention human rights in Article 8(j). But, in my personal view, this is a treaty, and therefore this is about international obligations of States. Norms developed in the CBD process, such as the Global Biodiversity Framework, must be based on the existing international standards, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Back home, I'm involved in the process of developing national strategy on the CBD. I think Indigenous Peoples are eager to include values and rights throughout the strategy. Not only in those sections that are directly linked to Indigenous Peoples, but throughout the document because Indigenous Peoples' practices and knowledge is a cross-cutting priority.

This year, the Cali Fund Steering Committee has been elaborating on its internal operational documents. Another group is appointed to decide on the allocation methodology, and that group also includes Indigenous representatives. This methodology will guide the Steering Committee on the distribution of funding. It is very important for that group to be mindful of Indigenous Peoples rights and priorities.

Finally, it's important to make sure that this process leaves no-one behind. The Cali Fund will prioritize the least developed countries and countries with economies in transition. But it's not necessarily true that in developed countries Indigenous communities are thriving. Therefore, it is important that Indigenous Peoples in all countries, including developed countries, are able to benefit from the commercial use of DSIs. The Indigenous group in the Cali Fund very strong advocates for equal approach to all sociocultural regions. We have our meetings and coordinate with the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity. We will continue to deliberate this to make sure that funding goes to proper needs and also to ensure that Indigenous Peoples actually receive resources directly from this Fund. Not from the governments, not from UN entities, but directly from this Fund.