

Peoples And The Planet: Self-Governance, Land Rights And Climate Justice



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The degradation of the environment and the dispossession of land pose a significant threat to the survival of distinct cultures, traditional knowledge systems, and the collective rights of peoples. These injustices are inseparable from the broader crisis facing the human rights system today. The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO)'s 2025 campaign "*Preserving Identities and Re-owning Narratives*"⁽¹⁾ highlights the urgent need to reclaim environmental and territorial rights as part of a wider strategy to enable self-determination, justice, and cultural resilience. For many Indigenous and minority communities, safeguarding the environment is not only an ecological imperative but also a form of political resistance and an assertion of their right to define their own futures.

This policy paper explores the connection between environmental rights and the right to self-determination, showing how land, ecosystems, and natural resources are central to identity, livelihood, and autonomy. For many UNPO members, the environment is more than a backdrop, it is a living, sacred, and political space. Environmental degradation and land grabs do not only destroy ecosystems, they also erode the cultural, spiritual, and legal foundations of communities, undermining their ability to claim recognition as "peoples" under international law and exercise their collective rights. Without secure access to their traditional territories and the ability to participate meaningfully in environmental decision-making, communities cannot fully realise the right to self-determination.

Drawing on the lived experiences of UNPO members, this paper reflects the input and insights shared during the April 2025 webinar, "*Peoples and the Planet: Self-Governance, Land Rights, and Climate Justice*."⁽²⁾ It features case studies from Kabylia, Western Togoland, South Moluccas, and Ahwazi Arab communities, each of which faces intersecting threats from extractivism, militarisation, climate change, and exclusion from environmental governance. These communities show how reclaiming ecological knowledge, asserting land rights, and resisting environmental violence are essential to the broader struggle for justice and recognition.

This paper forms part of the 2025 UNPO webinar series "*Peoples' Rights, Peoples' Future – the Foundation of our Shared Future*,"⁽³⁾ which highlights the interdependence of self-determination and other fundamental rights. Each session explores different dimensions of denial and resistance, followed by a policy paper amplifying member perspectives. The paper begins with a background and legal overview of environmental and cultural rights in international law, followed by a thematic analysis of environmental struggles faced by UNPO members. It then presents detailed case studies, identifies common trends, and concludes with recommendations.

1- "Preserving identities, re-owning narratives," UNPO, May 16, 2024, accessed September 26, 2025, <https://unpo.org/campaing/preserving-identities-re-owning-narratives/>

2- UNPO, "Peoples and the Planet – Self-Governance, Land Rights, and Climate Justice," webinar, April 22, 2025, posted April 25, 2025, 52 min., 49 sec., <https://unpo.org/unpo-webinar-for-international-mother-earth-day-peoples-and-the-planet-self-governance-land-rights-and-climate-justice/>

3- "UNPO Launches its 2025 Webinar Series with Webinar on Linguistic Rights," UNPO, February 24, 2025, accessed September 26, 2025, <https://unpo.org/unpo-launches-its-2025-webinar-series-with-webinar-on-linguistic-rights/>

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INTRODUCTION

The right to self-determination has become increasingly inseparable from the right to a healthy environment, and in the fight towards environmental justice. Globally, the climate crisis is deepening existing inequalities and placing unprecedented pressure on the ecosystems, cultures, and lands of unrepresented and stateless peoples. As frontline communities are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation, many unrepresented nations and peoples find themselves not only defending their lands from ecological harm, but also struggling to maintain their cultural identity, livelihoods, and political agency. At the heart of this struggle lies the fundamental right of self-determination; understood as the right to determine a people's own destiny, in particular, to choose their own political status and to determine their own form of economic, cultural and social development (4), in line with corresponding international law (5). This policy paper is rooted in the lived experiences and voices of UNPO Members, not only experts, but those whose identities and futures are shaped through lived experience. It reflects our unique role as a platform that elevates the voices of unrepresented nations and peoples who are directly experiencing the effects of environmental degradation and cultural erasure.

In recent years, international recognition of the intrinsic connection between human rights and the environment has grown. The 2021 United Nations Human Rights Council resolution affirming the right to a healthy, clean, and sustainable environment marks a significant milestone (6), even if it remains non-binding. This recognition is crucial for peoples whose survival depends on ecosystems currently under threat, particularly those who are denied full representation or autonomy within their existing state structures. Within this growing international framework, the UNPO has long affirmed the interdependence of environmental protection and collective rights. Article 12 of the UNPO Universal Declaration of the Rights of Peoples states: "All peoples have the right to ecological security and protection of their natural environment." (7) This principle reflects the lived realities of unrepresented nations and peoples, for whom environmental harm is not only an ecological issue, but a direct threat to cultural survival. For these communities, including existing UNPO Members, climate justice is inseparable from their pursuit of political and cultural self-determination.

The lands and territories inhabited by these communities are often sites of resource extraction, pollution, and environmental neglect, conditions that are not incidental but closely tied to structural inequalities, historical marginalisation, and the denial of participatory rights. The oil-rich Ahwaz region, for instance, has become one of the most polluted places in the world due to intensive resource exploitation by the Iranian state, while its Indigenous Peoples face repression for protesting such practices. In Western Togoland, intensifying floods, exacerbated by climate change, compound already severe socio-economic vulnerabilities, contributing to a deepening sense of marginalisation by the central government. In South Moluccas and Kabylia, the degradation of coastal ecosystems, deforestation, and land dispossession disrupt both environmental balance and cultural continuity, as local communities lose access to the spaces that sustain their traditional ways of life (8).

4- UNPO, Strategy-2024-2027 (UNPO, 2024), <https://unpo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/UNPO-Strategy-2024-2027-Final-Online.pdf>

5- UN General Assembly, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, September 13, 2007, art. 3, https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

6- United Nations Human Rights Council, The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment: Resolution, A/HRC/RES/48/13, adopted October 8, 2021, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3945636?ln=en&v=pdf>

7- UNPO, Universal Declaration of the Rights of Peoples, art. 12, adopted 17 February 2004, accessed September 30, 2025, <https://unpo.org/universal-declaration-of-the-rights-of-peoples/>

8- All points on each case study come from the webinar.

For such peoples, land is not merely a physical resource but a living foundation for language, spirituality, subsistence, and identity. As the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) affirms, respecting the cultural and ecological knowledge embedded in traditional practices is essential to achieving sustainable development and effective environmental stewardship (9). Yet, in many cases, state-led development projects, extractive industries, or militarisation efforts override local consent, undermining both environmental protections and the principles of consultation and free, prior, and informed consent as enshrined in the International Labour Organization's *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention* (10).

Climate change adds another layer of urgency to this issue. From rising sea levels threatening low-lying coastal settlements to prolonged droughts and biodiversity loss, the intensifying effects of global warming threaten the very conditions needed for these communities to thrive. These transformations do not occur in a vacuum, rather they are shaped by geopolitical interests, unequal access to climate adaptation resources, and a growing race for greater technologies that often replicate extractive and colonial patterns of exploitation. As the global push for decarbonisation accelerates, the mining of rare earths, lithium, and other minerals, frequently in territories inhabited by Indigenous and unrepresented peoples, new environmental and political risks occur without the delivery of promised benefits to local communities.

This policy paper reflects UNPO's broader strategy to defend the land rights, self-governance, and climate justice of its members as a core dimension of their self-determination. While we may not claim scientific credentials in the conventional sense, the communities we represent are experts in their own right—drawing on traditional knowledge, cultural memory, and lived experience. In a decolonial context, such expertise is not peripheral but essential to just and sustainable climate action. This paper aims to honour their knowledge and amplify their strategies of resilience. It considers how these communities understand and respond to environmental threats, how state policies have shaped the ecological challenges they face, and what pathways exist for asserting their environmental and political rights in an increasingly volatile world. By situating their experiences within the broader framework of environmental justice and international norms on self-determination, this paper aims to highlight the urgent need for inclusive, rights-based approaches to climate action that genuinely empower peoples, not only states, to shape their destinies.

9- UN General Assembly, UNDRIP, 2007.

10- International Labour Organization, *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention*, C169, adopted June 27, 1989, arts. 6–7.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The pursuit of self-determination, land rights, and environmental justice by unrepresented nations and peoples is grounded in a growing body of international and regional legal norms. These frameworks increasingly recognise the links between cultural identity, environmental protection, and participatory governance. However, for communities without formal statehood or legal recognition, these legal protections often remain inaccessible or inconsistently applied. This section outlines the key international and regional legal frameworks relevant to these intersecting rights.

Self-determination is a foundational principle of international law. It is enshrined in the United Nations Charter (Article 1(2)), which affirms the importance of “developing friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples.” This right is further recognised in Article 1 of both the ICCPR and ICESCR, which state that “all peoples have the right of self-determination,” and is expressly recognised as a right for all peoples. For the UNPO, self-determination is understood as the right to determine their own destiny, in particular, to choose their own political status and to determine their own form of economic, cultural and social development (11). It is a core right because it enables communities to exercise agency over their present and future and maintain their identity and integrity in the face of external domination or assimilation.

The right to self-determination belongs to “Peoples” but who qualifies as a “People” is not strictly defined in international law. UNPO adopts a practical and inclusive interpretation, in that Peoples are communities with a shared sense of identity, often defined by common language, culture, historical experience, and connection to a land. Land is not merely a territory, it is the foundation of cultural survival, spiritual belonging, and economic subsistence. When access to land is denied or when the environment is degraded, the social cohesion and distinct identity of a people are weakened. This can lead to diminished recognition of the group as a “people” under international law, thereby undermining their ability to claim self-determination and other collective rights. In this way, dispossession of land or destruction of ecosystems is not only an environmental harm, but a political and legal one; it threatens the recognition of peoples as rights-holders and erodes the conditions necessary for exercising their rights.

Land and environment are central to how communities define and sustain themselves. The natural world carries history, sustains traditional knowledge, and structures relationships both within communities and with the state. For UNPO members, environmental rights and land access are not peripheral, they are essential for self-governance and survival. When communities are excluded from decisions about land use, resource management, or environmental protection, they are also excluded from determining their own futures; a direct barrier to self-determination. Control over land enables food sovereignty, economic agency, cultural transmission, and environmental conservation. Conversely, the dispossession or degradation of land often leads to cultural loss, social disempowerment, and political marginalisation.

INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Central to the international legal system is the principle of self-determination, a right first articulated in the Charter of the United Nations (Article 1(2)) and reiterated in Common Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), affirming that all peoples have the right to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development. Although this was historically framed around decolonisation, it has since evolved to include internal expressions of autonomy and self-governance, principles increasingly reclaimed by unrepresented communities within recognised states.

The 1972 Stockholm Declaration was a pivotal moment in linking environmental and human rights concerns, but formal UN recognition would not come until much later. The UN Human Rights Committee's General Comment No.12 clarifies that the right to self-determination applies to all peoples and includes permanent sovereignty over natural resources⁽¹²⁾. More recently, environmental dimensions of this right have gained international traction. The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), while not legally-binding, is a landmark document in affirming Indigenous Peoples' right to self-determination⁽¹³⁾, and explicitly links this to their rights to traditional lands, resources, and the protection of their cultures⁽¹⁴⁾.

The 2015 Paris Agreement marked the first major multilateral environmental treaty to explicitly acknowledge human rights, noting in its preamble that climate action should respect, promote, and consider respective human rights obligations⁽¹⁵⁾. In 2021, the UN Human Rights Council formally recognised the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a standalone human right⁽¹⁶⁾. The UN General Assembly followed suit in 2022⁽¹⁷⁾, marking a milestone in environmental justice advocacy. While these resolutions are non-binding, they reflect a global consensus that environmental degradation undermines the enjoyment of all human rights, particularly for Indigenous and unrepresented communities who are closely tied to their lands and ecosystems.

Building on this trajectory, in 2025 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an important advisory opinion on states' legal obligations regarding climate change, including how failures to act on climate affect the rights of present and future generations⁽¹⁸⁾. The ICJ's engagement is a landmark step in clarifying the binding legal responsibilities of states under international law, and could reinforce the argument that environmental harm constitutes a violation not only of individual rights but also of collective rights, including the right to self-determination.

12- UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 12: The Right to Self-Determination (Art. 1), March 13, 1984, UN Doc. HRI/GEN/1/Rev.1.

13- UN General Assembly, UNDRIP, art. 3

14- UN General Assembly, UNDRIP, arts. 25-32

15- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Paris Agreement, Preamble, adopted December 12, 2015, FCCC/CP/2015/10/Add.1, Decision 1/CP.21, <https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/20830>

16- UN Human Rights Council, The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment.

17- United Nations General Assembly, The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment: Resolution, A/RES/76/300, adopted July 28, 2022, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3983329/files/A_RES_76_300-EN.pdf

18- International Court of Justice, Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change, Advisory Opinion, I.C.J. Reports 2025, 23 July 2025, General List No. 187.

Further, international bodies have promoted free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) as a safeguard against exploitative development practices. UNDRIP (19), and various UN treaty bodies emphasise the importance of FPIC in decisions affecting Indigenous lands and resources, a principle routinely violated in contexts such as Kabylia or Western Togoland, where extractive and infrastructural projects are undertaken without meaningful consultation (20). The right to participation in environmental decision-making processes is further supported by instruments such as the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (21), which affirms access to information, participation, and justice in environmental matters. Yet, unrepresented communities are often excluded entirely from national and international governance processes, lacking both legal recognition and institutional pathways to influence climate or land-use policies that directly impact their futures.

REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights provides one of the most advanced regional legal articulations of collective rights, including the right to self-determination. Article 20 of the Charter affirms the right of all peoples to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic and social development. Article 21 recognises peoples' right to freely dispose of their wealth and natural resources, with the additional safeguard that states shall not deprive them of this right. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has interpreted these provisions progressively, affirming the connection between environmental degradation, economic exploitation, and collective rights. This is highly relevant to the context of UNPO members Kabylia and Western Togoland, where claims of political marginalisation intersect with extractive economic policies and environmental neglect.

While the Arab Charter on Human Rights, adopted under the auspices of the League of Arab States, contains provisions on self-determination (22) and the right to development, its enforcement mechanisms remain weak. Nevertheless, broader international mechanisms and UN Special Procedures, particularly the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran and environmental defenders, have repeatedly raised concerns about the treatment of Ahwazi Arabs, including issues of environmental degradation due to oil extraction, pollution, and forced displacement (23). The Asia-Pacific region lacks a robust regional human rights enforcement mechanism unlike Africa or Europe. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Human Rights Declaration does contain references to the right to a safe, clean, and sustainable environment (24), but the Declaration is non-binding and lacks an adjudicatory body. This limits its practical relevance for South Moluccas, where extractive activities and displacement remain largely unaddressed in regional legal terms. Nevertheless, international norms and UN mechanisms, particularly in the context of Indigenous rights and environmental protection, remain applicable.

19- UN General Assembly, UNDRIP, art. 32

20- UNPO, Peoples and the Planet.

21- United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, June 14, 1992, princ. 10, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.151_26_Vol.I_Declaration.pdf

22- League of Arab States, Arab Charter on Human Rights, May 23, 2004, art. 2, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/551368/files/ST_HR_CHR_NONE_2004_40_Rev.1-EN.pdf

23- UN Human Rights Council, Communication AL IRN 2/2025: Alleged Environmental Degradation of the Hur Al-Azim Wetland, March 27, 2025, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=29770>

24- Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, November 18, 2012, art. 28(f), <https://asean.org/storage/2012/12/ASEAN-Human-Rights-Declaration.pdf>

ENVIRONMENTAL AND GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

ENVIRONMENTAL VULNERABILITY AND EXCLUSION FROM GOVERNANCE

The intersection of environmental degradation and political marginalisation poses a critical challenge for many stateless and unrepresented peoples. Despite growing international recognition, such as the aforementioned UN Human Rights Council resolution affirming the right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment (25), the enforcement of this right remains uneven, especially for communities lacking formal political recognition or representation. For UNPO members like the Ahwazi Arabs, Kabylean people, Western Togolanders, and South Moluccans, environmental harm is compounded by systemic exclusions from decision-making processes that affect their lands.

The result is a cycle of governmental neglect and degradation; polluted air and water, deforestation, soil erosion, and climate-related disasters disproportionately impact their territories. For instance, Al-Ahwaz's oil-rich lands have become heavily polluted, with the city of Ahvaz reportedly ranked among the most polluted in the world, adversely affecting public health and livelihoods (26). This exclusion from environmental governance not only undermines their right to a healthy environment but also denies them effective participation in shaping policies vital to their survival and cultural continuity. This persistent marginalisation fuels grievances that reinforce broader demands for political self-determination.

THE ENVIRONMENT AND SELF-DETERMINATION STRUGGLE

The right to self-determination, enshrined in international law (27), inherently involves control over natural resources and the environment. As noted in General Comment No.12, the free disposal of a peoples' natural wealth is essential for the full exercise of self-determination (28). Environmental degradation often directly threatens cultural identity and economic subsistence, making ecological protection interconnected with political autonomy. In Kabylia, recurrent forest fires and limited state-led environmental management exacerbate socio-political tensions, with local communities demanding greater regional autonomy to protect their lands and resources (29). Similarly, Western Togoland faces increasing flooding due to climate change, compounding longstanding economic neglect and reinforcing calls for self-governance (30).

25- UN Human Rights Council, The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment.

26- "Al-Ahwaz Oil Pollution," EJAtlas, accessed September 26, 2025, <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/al-ahwaz-oil-pollution>

27- See International Framework.

28- UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 12.

29- UNPO, Kabylia in Decay: Algeria's Criminalization of Self-Determination Movements, (UNPO, 2022), <https://unpo.org/downloads/2759.pdf>

30- "Western Togoland," UNPO, accessed September 26, 2025, <https://unpo.org/member/western-togoland/>

GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS IN CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

Climate change has moved from being a purely environmental issue to a central factor in global geopolitics. The hosting of recent UN Climate Change Conferences (COPs) by states with a poor record of respect for human rights, rule of law and democratic practices, such as Egypt (COP27, 2022), the UAE (COP28, 2023), and Azerbaijan (COP29, 2024), signals a shifting dynamic where states with mixed human rights records assert influence over global climate agendas. This reality complicates the fight for climate justice, as fossil fuel-dependent regimes may prioritise economic interests over environmental or human rights commitments. Similarly, the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2020 and 2025, exposed the fragility of multilateral climate agreements and demonstrated how the political will of a single climate emitter can disrupt global climate momentum. For unrepresented peoples, this means that their concerns are often sidelined in international negotiations. The race for control over critical minerals for renewable technologies, such as cobalt, lithium, and rare minerals, further fuels extractivist pressures in Indigenous and minority territories, perpetuating and exacerbating environmental damage and social conflict.

EXTRACTIVE ECONOMIES, ENVIRONMENTAL HARM, AND RESISTANCE

Many regions inhabited by unrepresented peoples are rich in natural resources, making them targets for extractive industries such as oil and gas, mining, logging, and large-scale agriculture. These activities frequently cause significant environmental harm, polluting water sources, degrading soils, deforesting landscapes, and often occur with little or no consent from local communities. The expansion of extractive industries by governments and multinational corporations is often justified by states as necessary for national development, economic growth, and increasingly 'green transitions'. Yet, these projects can increase social inequalities, fuel conflicts over land rights, and trigger widespread displacement. Communities resisting these incursions often face criminalisation, repression, and human rights violations.

Environmental activism and claims for land rights have increasingly become expressions of broader political struggles for self-determination and justice. The intersection of environmental protection and political autonomy reflects the recognition that safeguarding the environment is integral to preserving the social and cultural fabric of peoples. The natural environment is more than a physical space; it is deeply interwoven with collective identities, cultural traditions, and economic practices. For many peoples, their languages, customs, spiritual beliefs, and social structures are intimately connected to specific lands, waters, and ecosystems. The degradation or loss of these environments not only threatens biodiversity but also disrupts cultural continuity and collective memory.

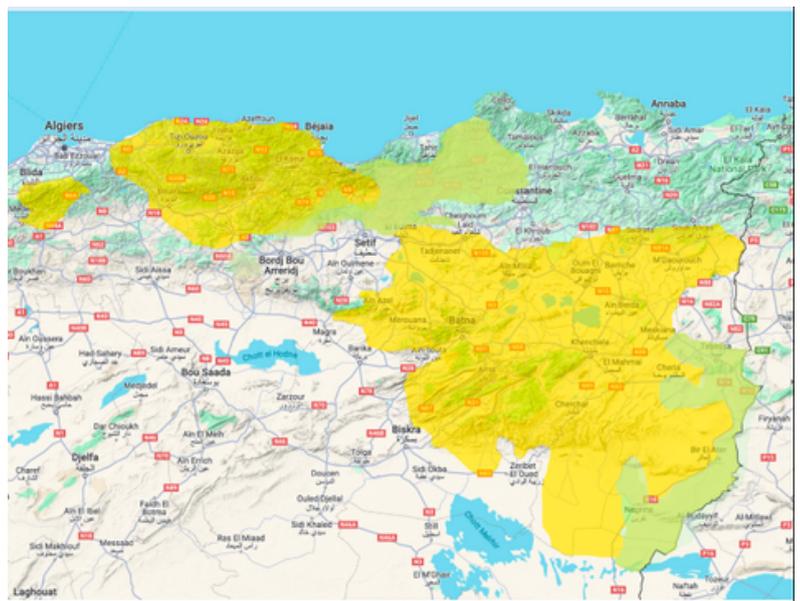
In the absence of political recognition or autonomy, many of these communities have developed peaceful, culturally embedded forms of resistance. This resistance is often expressed through everyday practices; the continuation of traditional land stewardship methods, the revival of Indigenous languages and ceremonies linked to nature, and the use of storytelling and education to transmit ecological wisdom across generations. UNPO has documented how member communities engage in non-violent advocacy to protect their ancestral lands and ecosystems, noting that many unrepresented nations have developed holistic and sustainable environmental practices long before the modern climate discourse (31), practices that are not merely responses to climate change, but proactive assertions of autonomy. Further, peaceful protest, community-led reforestation, cultural mapping, and international advocacy are common strategies of resistance for such communities, with community leaders emphasising peaceful advocacy and ecological education to preserve the traditional relationships with the land (32).

MEMBER CASE STUDIES

KABYLIA

The Kabyle people are one of the several Berber Indigenous groups native to North Africa, primarily Algeria, Morocco, and Libya. There are approximately 10 million Kabyle people, with the majority residing in the mountainous and coastal region of Kabylia in Northern Algeria. As one of the most ancient civilizations in North Africa, the Kabyle people have preserved a distinct identity rooted in language, secular beliefs, and a strong tradition of local self-governance. Despite this deep-rooted cultural heritage, the Kabyle are systemically marginalised under Algerian rule through policies aimed at eroding their linguistic, cultural, and political autonomy. Algerian state policy has sought to impose Arabic as the dominant language and has resisted formal recognition of the Kabyle's Indigenous rights, including environmental governance (33).

Environmental degradation in Kabylia is not simply the result of climate change, but is exacerbated by the political weaponisation of environmental factors. Participants in UNPO's Webinar celebrating Mother Earth Day described how Algerian authorities manipulate natural and environmental crises as tools of repression. For instance, Kabylia's mountainous terrain and Mediterranean climate grant the region relative environmental resilience, with abundant water and arable land. Yet, rather than supporting regional sustainability, the Algerian state has actively diverted Kabylia's water resources to urban areas outside the region, undermining local agriculture and autonomy over water (34).



31- UNPO, *Self-determination and climate change*. <https://unpo.org/downloads/2858.pdf>

32- UNPO, *Peoples and the Planet*.

33- UNPO, *Kabylia in Decay*.

34- UNPO, *Peoples and the Planet*.

This strategy also extends to fire management. In recent years, wildfires, which have become increasingly common due to climate change, have devastated large areas of forest in Kabylia, particularly during the intense heatwaves of summer. Instead of deploying available resources or accepting international assistance to combat the fires, the Algerian government has either delayed intervention or refused support altogether. Reports from the webinar indicated that the military allegedly allowed fires to rage uncontrolled, an act seen by many locals as deliberate. Offers from foreign countries to provide firefighting aircrafts were reportedly rejected, including from France, deepening suspicions of intentional environmental neglect. These fires have destroyed vast tracts of forest, ancestral lands, and farmland, exacerbating ecological collapse and displacing communities. This environmental devastation carries deep cultural implications. For Kabyle people, the land is not merely a resource, it is sacred, tied to collective memory, tradition, and belonging. The destruction of forests and the erosion of self-governance over natural resources are thus not only ecological harms, but acts of cultural erasure.

At the heart of Kabylia's resistance is a long-standing, community-based governance model. Each village operates through a democratic assembly system known as the "tajmaat," where families elect representatives to manage communal affairs. This form of self-governance is deeply entwined with the stewardship of the land. However, Algerian state interference has increasingly infiltrated these traditional structures, imposing bureaucratic oversight and disrupting the organic systems of environmental care and conflict resolution that have existed for centuries (35). Despite these pressures, Kabyle people continue to uphold traditional forms of ecological knowledge and stewardship. Their resistance remains peaceful and grounded in democratic principles, with a strong emphasis on international advocacy. Forums such as UNPO provide vital platforms to voice their environmental grievances and call for international recognition of their cultural and territorial rights.

Consequently, the Kabyle people's environmental struggle is not only ecological but fundamentally political. It is a struggle to maintain control over their territory, traditions, and future in the face of systemic efforts to sever their connection to their land. The Kabyle case underscores how environmental degradation can be weaponised by states to undermine Indigenous autonomy, and how the struggle for self-determination is inseparable from the defense of ecosystems. As climate change intensifies, ensuring Indigenous participation in environmental governance becomes not only a matter of justice, but a necessity for sustainable and inclusive solutions.

WESTERN TOGOLAND

Western Togoland refers to the Western portion of the former German colony of Togoland, which was unlawfully partitioned and occupied during the First World War. Despite having no involvement in the war, the region was divided between British and French control, with the British-administered portion later becoming a League of Nations mandate territory and then a United Nations trust territory.



Rather than moving towards independence, as outlined in the mandate's original terms, British Togoland was controversially integrated into the Gold Coast colony in 1956, a decision made without the genuine (36) consent of the Togolandese and in defiance of Indigenous governance systems (37).

Since Ghana's independence in 1957, Western Togoland has been subjected to systemic neglect and repression by the central government in Accra. Indigenous communities report persistent exclusion from environmental policymaking and an intensification of environmental harm on their lands. In the 2025 Webinar, community representatives described how rising sea levels have submerged critical coastal settlements in Western Togoland. These changes have not only undermined the local economy, displaced fishing and farming communities, but also eroded sacred and cultural sites, accelerating the loss of Indigenous identity. As of April 2025, at least three communities have been completely overtaken by the sea, a catastrophic loss both materially and culturally (38). There has been a glaring lack of sea defence systems, and prior efforts to install protective infrastructure for Western Togoland were rejected by Ghanaian authorities.

Government responses have largely been inadequate to these critical environmental impacts. Relief is limited to token distributions of rice and mosquito nets, while underlying infrastructural and climate resilience needs go unmet. Representatives stress that these communities had long-standing knowledge of environmental cycles and methods of land and water stewardship. Traditional practices, such as setting aside days or months for nature to regenerate by prohibiting fishing or water use, were once integral to the ecological balance. However, these customs have been overridden by state-driven policies that prioritise extraction and development over sustainability and preservation.

The environmental degradation of Western Togoland is further compounded by large-scale deforestation and unregulated mining operations sanctioned by the Ghanaian government. These activities had led to soil degradation, water pollution, and the displacement of communities. Local populations are unable to farm the land or rely on traditional livelihoods, deepening economic marginalisation. Environmental impacts are intertwined with broader political repression; activists who speak out against land grabs or resource exploitation are often met with intimidation, arrest, or military force, demonstrating the heavy securitisation of environmental resistance in the region. These security measures disproportionately target Indigenous voices who call for autonomy over their lands and resources. Without recognised political status or autonomy, communities in Western Togoland have little recourse to protect their lands, and by extension, their identity, livelihoods, and ecological balance.

Critically, the Indigenous knowledge systems of Western Togoland offer viable models for environmental restoration and sustainability. However, these are consistently, and systematically, sidelined in favour of short-term profits. The understanding that political autonomy is necessary for effective environmental sustainability is reflected in the community's ancestral connection to their land, known as 'Togo' meaning 'riverbank'. This is not merely symbolic, it underpins their ecological knowledge systems, social organisation, and cultural identity. The environmental degradation in the region and state-led repression intersect in contexts of denied self-determination. The Togolandese call for recognition and political autonomy is not only about independence, but also about restoring their role as custodians of an ecosystem that is rapidly being destroyed. As in many Indigenous contexts, protecting the environment means securing the right to self-governance, cultural survival, and intergenerational justice.

36- United Nations General Assembly, The Future of Togoland under British Administration, A/RES/1044 (XI), adopted December 13, 1956, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/207747>

37- Ignacio Madurga-Lopez, "Western Togoland: A Secessionist Conflict in the Heart of Ghana," *Wilson Center*, May 13, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/western-togoland-a-secessionist-conflict-in-the-heart-of-ghana>

38- UNPO, *Peoples and the Planet*.

SOUTH MOLUCCAS

The South Moluccas, an archipelago of over 150 islands located in eastern Indonesia, is home to an Indigenous peoples with a rich maritime and ecological heritage; the South Moluccans. Once a Dutch colony, the region briefly declared independence as the Republic of South Maluku in 1950, only to be swiftly and violently reabsorbed by Indonesia. The Indonesian government has since imposed tight control over the region, curtailing (39) political dissent and denying the South Moluccans their right to self-determination.



Environmental degradation is one of the most urgent challenges currently facing the South Moluccans. The region, once lush with tropical rainforests and vibrant marine ecosystems, has suffered extensively from illegal deforestation and large-scale extractive industries, particularly nickel, copper, and gold mining. These activities, often sanctioned by the state and carried out by multinational corporations, have encroached on Indigenous territories and disrupted local ecosystems that have sustained local communities for generations. Representatives have highlighted how mining companies, supported by the Indonesian army, have displaced entire communities (40).

As forests are cleared and coastal zones polluted, traditional ways of life, including fishing, hunting, and rotational farming, are disappearing. Water sources have been contaminated by chemical runoff, while marine biodiversity, central to both nutrition and culture, has decreased substantially. Despite these pressures, local resistance is strong and rooted in community-based environmental care. Indigenous Moluccans have long relied on sustainable fishing cycles, selective hunting, and fallow farming systems that allow the land and sea to regenerate. Elders in the community continue to pass down ecological knowledge that informs when and where to fish, harvest, or rest the land. Yet, this wisdom is increasingly disregarded by the state and private actors, who prioritise profit over ecological resistance and sustainable development.

Grassroots mobilisation remains central to the South Moluccan struggle. Numerous peaceful demonstrations have taken place, both on the islands and within the Moluccan diaspora, to protest environmental destruction and demand political autonomy. These efforts have led to some notable successes. For instance, following advocacy supported by the UNPO, German authorities reconsidered a proposed mining contract that would have further harmed local ecosystems. While this marks a step forward, the risks remain high; activists face the threat of imprisonment, and the use of the South Moluccan flag remains criminalised (41). Despite ongoing repression, the Moluccan people continue to organise around the principle that only through self-governance can they truly protect their land, waters, and future. The efforts of the South Moluccan people underscore that sustainable environmental governance cannot be achieved through centralised, extractive policies but must be rooted in Indigenous autonomy, local communities, and localised knowledge.

39- Amnesty International, *Indonesia: End Criminalization of Peaceful Political Activities in Maluku*, AI Index: ASA 21/017/2010, August 19, 2010, <https://www.amnesty.org/ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/asa210172010en.pdf>

40- UNPO, Peoples and the Planet.

41- Amnesty International Australia, "Amnesty International Raises Concerns over Crackdown on Freedom of Expression in Maluku," April 29, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org.au/amnesty-international-raises-concerns-over-crackdown-on-freedom-of-expression-in-maluku>

AHWAZI ARABS

Ahwaz, located in Iran's southwestern Khuzestan province along the northern coast of the Persian Gulf, is home to the Ahwazi Arabs, an Indigenous people who speak Arabic and maintain a distinct cultural identity. Once semi-autonomous under local Arab leadership, the region was fully integrated into the Iranian state in the early 20th century. Currently, Ahwaz is one of Iran's richest regions in natural resources, producing the majority of the country's oil and gas. Yet, the Ahwazi Arab people inhabiting the region are among the most economically and environmentally marginalised.



Environmental degradation in Ahwaz is both a by-product of and a tool for political repression. The Iranian regime has implemented aggressive resource extraction policies that have devastated the local ecology and traditional ways of life. Wetlands have been drained, rivers diverted, and over 70 large dams constructed in the region. These interventions have dried up marshlands, disrupted seasonal water cycles, and destroyed agricultural livelihoods. Thousands of families once dependent on the marshes for fishing, farming, and livestock have been forcibly displaced (42).

The Iranian government attributes many of these changes to climate change, but local voices argue that the damage is largely the result of state mismanagement and militarised development. For instance, instead of using traditional systems that allow rainwater to recharge aquifers and support local agriculture, the government opted for megaprojects that accelerate evaporation and erosion in the region's extremely hot climate. This has also increased the frequency of catastrophic sandstorms, which regularly disrupts air travel and causes widespread respiratory illness (43).

Ahwazis' attempts to defend their lands are often met with brutal repression. Activists are labeled as separatists and imprisoned for peaceful advocacy. Speaking in Arabic, a marker of the Ahwazi Arabs distinct identity, is restricted in schools and public institutions, further severing the community from their cultural and environmental roots. Accordingly, the Ahwazi struggle is not only for political rights but also for the ability to live sustainably and autonomously in their ancestral lands. Importantly, the Ahwazi people possess generations of ecological knowledge. Traditional practices such as selective fishing, sustainable livestock rotation, and marshland agriculture were once key to preserving the delicate ecosystem of the region. Community members understand the rhythms of seasonal rains and how to live within the limits of the land. However, these practices are increasingly undermined by external actors, including international oil companies, such as those backed by China, which operate with minimal oversight and contribute to the collapse of such ecosystems (44).

42- Ahwaz Human Rights Organization and Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, *Water and Environmental Crisis in Khuzestan Province (Al-Ahwaz): Submission to the UN Special Procedures*, December 2021, <https://ahwazhumanrights.org/en/>

43- Ahwaz Human Rights Organization and UNPO, *Water and Environmental Crisis in Khuzestan Province*.

44- UNPO, *Peoples and the Planet*.

The situation facing the Ahwaz Arabs illustrates how environmental degradation serves both as a mechanism of control and as a unifying force for resistance. A representative during the Webinar noted how “displacing minorities does not only affect them, it destroys the country...environmental injustice anywhere is a threat to global justice.”⁽⁴⁵⁾ The Ahwazi struggle highlights that Indigenous Peoples must be recognised not as obstacles to development, but as custodians of sustainability, and leaders on the continued protection of local biodiversity and ecosystems. Protecting their rights is essential not only for ecological restoration in Ahwaz, but for climate resilience across the region.

COMMON TRENDS

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AS A TOOL OF CONTROL

In all four regions, environmental degradation is not merely a consequence of neglect but often a deliberate strategy employed by state actors to assert control over Indigenous territories. This process echoes what scholars have termed “slow violence”—a gradual, invisible harm inflicted over time, particularly through environmental destruction (46). In Ahwaz, Iran’s diversion of the Karun and Karkheh rivers, alongside the draining of the Mesopotamian marshes, has led to catastrophic ecological collapse. Dust storms, salinisation, and water scarcity have displaced hundreds of thousands, stripping the Ahwazi Arab population of both land and livelihood. State-engineered projects have served economic interests in central Iran while marginalising local populations in Khuzestan.

In Kabylia, forest fires in 2021 exposed how insufficient state response and infrastructure can worsen environmental disasters. Civil society groups argue that the Algerian state deliberately neglects reforestation and fire prevention in Kabylia, leaving the region more vulnerable due to political motives. Kabyle forests, which hold both economic and cultural significance, have seen degradation tied to a lack of recognition of local stewardship systems. Similarly, in Western Togoland, mining concessions and timber extraction projects, often awarded without consultation, have eroded local farming systems and ecosystems. The creation of monoculture plantations has diminished biodiversity and contributed to land alienation. The state’s control over resource-rich areas comes at the expense of traditional ecological zones, further fuelling dispossession. In South Moluccas, extractive ventures such as nickel and gold mining have proceeded despite local opposition, with deforestation, water contamination, and displacement of customary landholders following in their wake. These projects are typically backed by military or state security forces, underscoring the role of violence in facilitating environmental exploitation. This pattern demonstrates that environmental degradation is not simply a failure of good governance, it is often a tactic of statecraft, particularly in contested or colonially inherited regions where Indigenous identity is perceived as a threat to national unity.

45- UNPO, *Peoples and the Planet*.

46- Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

SUPPRESSION OF INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE

Across all four communities, Indigenous and local knowledge systems, developed over centuries in relation to specific landscapes, are sidelined by centralised state policies and commercial imperatives. The result is not just cultural erasure, but the undermining of ecologically sustainable practices that could contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation.

In Kabylia, traditional systems of land care, such as agraw (communal council) and forest cooperatives, have been displaced by state-run forestry regimes. These local systems historically managed fire risk, protected watersheds, and upheld collective stewardship. Yet they are unrecognised under Algerian law, which imposes top-down management disconnected from regional ecological realities. In Western Togoland, rotational farming and agroforestry, once central to food security and biodiversity, are now criminalised or discouraged by government extension services promoting cash crops and industrial agriculture. This has led to soil depletion, loss of crop variety, and increased vulnerability to climate variability.

The South Moluccas have long upheld sustainable fishing zones and forest use regulations through adat (customary law). However, these are often overridden by extractive permits issued from Jakarta. Sacred forests and coastal areas, which also serve as ecological buffers, are frequently sacrificed to economic development without compensation or consent. In Ahwaz, Arab farmers and marsh dwellers possess deep knowledge of dryland farming and water harvesting systems. Yet Iranian authorities neither recognise these practices nor include Arab communities in water governance. Instead, mismanaged irrigation projects and dam construction have led to widespread desertification. These examples point to a global pattern in which environmental governance is dominated by centralised or extractivist paradigms, rather than participatory models rooted in lived ecological experience. This trend not only disrespects Indigenous sovereignty but undermines effective environmental policy.

MILITARISATION AND THE CRIMINALISATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS

Another recurrent theme is the use of state coercion to silence dissent and suppress local mobilisation around environmental and land issues. The alignment between environmental injustice and repressive state security agendas is particularly acute in regions with secessionist histories or strong ethnic identities. In Ahwaz, environmental protesters and researchers documenting ecological decline have been detained, tortured, or disappeared. Advocacy around water rights and pollution is often treated as a threat to national security, particularly when linked to Ahwazi Arab identity. Environmental activism becomes grounds for terrorism charges under vague laws. Kabyle environmental and cultural organisations are subject to surveillance and intimidation. In the wake of the 2021 fires, multiple activists were arrested under the pretext of national security, despite their involvement in civil society-led aid and reforestation. Cultural expression, including the teaching of the Kabyle language, is also tightly controlled, framing ecological mobilisation as politically subversive.

In Western Togoland, crackdowns on community-led resistance to extractive industries have been intensified under the broader label of counter-secessionism. Activists criticising deforestation or land grabs are often accused of harboring separatist ambitions. This criminalisation deters open organising and limits media coverage of environmental harm. In the South Moluccas, security forces are deployed to protect mining and logging operations, often clashing with villagers defending customary lands. Community members have faced arbitrary detention for resisting development projects, and the Indonesian state's historical framing of the region as a separatist hotspot has resulted in persistent militarisation. These dynamics demonstrate that environmental defence in these regions is not just an ecological issue, it is a high-risk political act. This aligns with global data indicating that Indigenous environmental defenders are among the most vulnerable to violence and repression worldwide (47).

CLIMATE VULNERABILITY AND THE LEGACY OF COLONIAL DISPLACEMENT

Each region also experiences heightened exposure to climate change due to a mix of structural inequality, geographic vulnerability, and historical marginalisation. While global in scale, the climate crisis plays out unevenly, intensifying the burdens already placed on colonised or unrepresented communities. Ahwaz has seen extreme climate issues including prolonged droughts and sandstorms, worsened by damming and oil development. Respiratory illnesses are rampant due to air pollution and desertification. Yet Arab communities remain excluded from national climate planning. In Kabylia, increased temperatures and declining rainfall have escalated the risk of wildfires and crop failure. The erosion of traditional agricultural systems has made local communities more dependent on fragile supply chains and external aid. Western Togoland faces irregular rainy seasons and floods that disrupt food production. The shift away from traditional crops and seed systems has reduced climate resilience, making the region more dependent on external inputs and vulnerable to market shocks. The South Moluccas, with many coastal communities, are directly impacted by rising sea levels, coral bleaching, and declining fish stocks. Deforestation has worsened landslides and water shortages. The island's geography makes adaptation costly and logistically complex, yet Jakarta's environmental investment is minimal. These effects are compounded by a lack of political representation, linguistic exclusion, and institutional racism, which together restrict access to adaptation funding and limit participation in climate policy. In effect, climate change acts as a force multiplier, deepening the marginalisation already faced by these communities.

47- Global Witness, Missing Voices: The Violent Erasure of Land and Environmental Defenders (London: Global Witness, 10 September 2024), <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/missing-voices/>

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Across diverse geographies, from the Mediterranean basin to the Persian Gulf, from the coastal plains of West Africa to the archipelagos of Southeast Asia, unrepresented peoples face systemic threats to their land, environment, and ways of life. The cases of Kabylia, Western Togoland, South Moluccas, and Ahwaz reveal a troubling convergence of state-driven environmental degradation, resource exploitation, and the suppression of self-determination movements. These regions, each rich in natural resources and traditional ecological knowledge, are being steadily stripped of both their material foundations and cultural autonomy through militarization, discriminatory policies, and economic marginalization. A central thread across these communities is the weaponization of environmental mismanagement to disempower Indigenous communities, whether through land grabs, water diversion, unsustainable extraction, or the deliberate dismantling of local governance structures. Moreover, the erasure of traditional ecological knowledge and the exclusion of local voices from environmental decision-making processes have not only jeopardized cultural survival but also contributed to broader ecological harm. Despite these challenges, each community continues to assert its rights through peaceful resistance, international advocacy, and grassroots environmental stewardship. Their struggles underscore the interdependence between cultural identity and ecological health, and the urgent need for global solidarity and structural reforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Recognition of environmental self-determination as a human right.** International bodies and states should formally recognise the right of Indigenous and unrepresented communities to govern and protect their environments, including land use, resource management, and ecological restoration, as an extension of their right to self-determination.
- **Support for grassroots environmental knowledge and practices.** Traditional ecological knowledge should be respected and integrated into national and international environmental policy frameworks. This includes preserving customary systems of forest stewardship, water management, and sustainable agriculture.
- **Establish independent monitoring of environmental and human rights violations.**
- **End the criminalisation of environmental and Indigenous activism.** Governments must cease labeling environmental defenders and self-determination advocates as “separatists” or “terrorists.” International institutions should pressure states to release political prisoners and protect the freedom of expression and association of Indigenous activists.
- **Ensure Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in all environmental projects.** Development projects should only proceed with the genuine and documented consent of affected communities. Where FPIC is not granted, projects should be halted or restructured.
- **Foster Transnational Solidarity Networks.** Support unrepresented communities in building alliances across borders to share strategies, knowledge, and international legal tools. Environmental justice must be approached as a shared global cause, not a fragmented local issue.



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