



Indigenous Peoples Can Help the World Mitigate Climate Change

GoodCitizen senior advisor Lowell Weiss recently spoke with Vicky Tauli-Corpuz about the upcoming COP 26 meeting, in Glasgow, UK, and the role of Indigenous peoples in reducing carbon and protecting biodiversity. He reached her in Marseilles, France, at the IUCN World Conservation Congress.

Weiss: Thank you so much for sharing your insights, especially given that it's late there in France, and you've just completed an exhausting six presentations.

Tauli-Corpuz: I'm so pleased to talk to you. And it's only 7 pm. That's not late at all.

Weiss: Where do you get the courage for your work? I know many of your Indigenous friends and fellow forest guardians have been murdered for their advocacy, such as the Honduran activist Berta Cáceres. The Duterte government once targeted you for arrest.

Tauli-Corpuz: The Igorot peoples are quite brave. We fought the Spanish colonizers. We fought the Japanese in World War II. And we have very strong

customary laws that give us the duty and obligation to take care of natural ecosystems. We believe we are part of nature, not separate from nature. We grew up fearing the consequences if we destroy forests and rivers. We are compelled to protect them. I also think my courage comes from being a woman. In the Philippines, it's the women who race to the frontlines. We don't like the men to be on the frontlines, because we know that can quickly turn into violence and bloody conflicts. Women have a different way of standing up for what we believe.

Weiss: Can you help our readers understand the connection between Indigenous lands and climate change?

Tauli-Corpuz: Indigenous peoples have not contributed to the problem of climate change, but they are ones who are the most adversely affected. We live in fragile ecosystems, such as low-lying islands. In spite of the fact that we didn't create the problem, we have conserved ecosystems in a better way. Our territories, which cover 22 percent of the planet, contain 80 percent of the world's biodiversity. Others have colonized us and discriminated against us, but we have maintained most of the world's most precious biodiversity- and carbon-rich areas. This means we're in a position to protect the ecosystems that the world needs for climate-change mitigation—especially if national governments grant us the legal right to our ancestral territories. We need to keep intact areas standing. That must be the first priority. I cannot see how the world can meet the Paris climate targets without this kind of nature-based solution. New energy technologies are important, but they can't do it alone.

Weiss: What are you and other Indigenous leaders hoping to achieve next month at COP 26, in Glasgow?

Tauli-Corpuz: COP meetings always end with a decision document. The member states are then supposed to implement the decisions. We want the COP decision document to include language acknowledging the unique role that Indigenous peoples can play. We also want big governments to steer greater support and resources to Indigenous peoples to allow them contribute fully to mitigating

climate change. Indigenous communities and organizations have little in the way of resources. We'd like to see a two-year program to do two things: strengthen Indigenous peoples' capacities and help governments understand how Indigenous land rights can be a key part of the solution to climate change. Of course, we will also be pushing governments to do more to protect the human rights of Indigenous forest guardians.

Weiss: How do these broad international agreements affect the reality on the ground in Indigenous territories?

Tauli-Corpuz: They are very important. I worked for a long time on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which set minimum standards for the survival, dignity, and well-being of Indigenous peoples. International standards like these have been extremely useful in our efforts to protect our lands and water when state and private-sector interests come to destroy them. They give us the ability to protect our rights in the courts, access the international complaint mechanisms at the UN, and take our case to regional human rights monitors.

Weiss: How can non-Indigenous people be allies to Indigenous communities?

Tauli-Corpuz: Being an ally starts with learning about and being able to explain what Indigenous peoples are fighting for, aspiring for, and what kind of support they need to help protect the Earth. A good ally is someone who is consciously educating other people and making them more conscious of consumption and production. So many consumer choices affect Indigenous territories in ways they don't realize. We need much more focus on these choices and the consequences. A growing number of people are aware of how demand for palm oil is leading to the razing of pristine rainforests in Borneo. But almost no one seems to be aware of how Tesla's insatiable demand for nickel for batteries is leading to the destruction of forests for new strip mines. There are so many examples like this.

Weiss: How optimistic are you about the prospects for progress in Glasgow?

Tauli-Corpuz: I'm quite optimistic. Since the last COP meeting, in 2017, we've generated a lot of great science on carbon accounting. We can now show that forests, savannahs, and grasslands that are better protected will sequester more carbon. We can now show that the benefits of protecting intact lands is not just about biodiversity; it's also about preserving whole ecosystems and their ability to absorb gigatons of carbon. And in late September, large foundations came together to commit at least \$5 billion toward the goal of safeguarding 30 percent of the planet by 2030—the largest-ever private commitment for biodiversity. I like the momentum I'm seeing.

Weiss: You're a veteran of these COP meetings. Can you give us an insider's view of what it feels like to participate?

Tauli-Corpuz: It's very tense. It's very busy. Negotiations typically go on until three in the morning. Indigenous peoples have to be in so many spaces and to follow so many documents. You have to talk to the friendly governments and the opposing ones. You really need to hear all the arguments, debates. There's a lot of strategy. We spend months preparing.

Weiss: If Glasgow goes well and world leaders embrace natural climate solutions alongside technological ones, what will that look like for Indigenous peoples around the world?

Tauli-Corpuz: If we get the support, we will increase the capacity of our territories to contribute to climate change mitigation. Given the floods and fires and storms around the world, I can see the political will growing for real action on natural climate solutions. We won't stop all fossil fuel extraction or all new palm oil plantations any time soon, but these activities won't be happening nearly as much in Indigenous territories that are so critical for biodiversity and carbon sequestration. I might be naïve, but I'd like to think we will see much less

harassment and criminalization of Indigenous activists as governments come to see Indigenous peoples as a big part of the climate solution.

Weiss: Do you have any recommended readings for those who want to learn more about Indigenous stewardship?

Tauli-Corpuz: Absolutely. There are great resources on the websites of Nia Tero (full disclosure: I'm the board chair), The Tenure Facility, World Resources Institute, and the Ford Foundation. If you like TED Talks, I recommend this one, by my colleague Hindou Ibrahim, who will have an important role in Glasgow.