

**PRESERVING, STRENGTHENING
AND PROMOTING INDIGENOUS
PEOPLES' FOOD AND
KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND
TRADITIONAL PRACTICES FOR
SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS**

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PARAGUAY 2025. PROEZA project. Woman from the Y'aka Poty Indigenous community carries medicinal plants gathered from the forest. Paraguay. July 2025.

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In this summary, all references have been omitted to facilitate readability. The references are provided in the full report.

Referencing this report: HLPE. 2026. *Executive summary of the report Preserving, strengthening and promoting Indigenous Peoples' food and knowledge systems and traditional practices for sustainable food systems*. Rome, FAO.

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Context and rationale

Indigenous Peoples' food systems (IPFS) are complex networks of interrelationships between humans and nature that have developed over millennia and have contributed to shaping Indigenous ways of life. This report responds to the Committee on World Food Security's (CFS) request for a High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE-FSN) report on preserving, strengthening and promoting Indigenous Peoples' food and knowledge systems and traditional practices for sustainable food systems.

Three objectives frame the report:

1. preserve and promote functioning Indigenous Peoples' food systems;
2. restore and strengthen systems under pressure or disruption; and
3. identify lessons that can inform the transformation of other food systems.

Indigenous Peoples are rights holders. They must be at the centre of food systems that are grounded in the right to food, the principles of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), access and benefit-sharing (ABS), and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Foremost, the right to self-determination is fundamental and foundational, as it enables Indigenous Peoples to exercise their other individual and collective rights.

Transforming conventional agricultural and food systems is urgent. Global quantified hidden costs of agrifood systems have been estimated at 11.6 trillion 2020 purchase power parity [PPP] dollars. While commercial food production has increased food availability, it has not resolved inequities in food access and has generated substantial long-term health and environmental consequences. These include land degradation, water depletion and pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Over a third of the world's fisheries are overfished, driven in part by industrial fishing, with consequences for Indigenous Peoples' and small-scale fisheries. More broadly, the expansion of conventional food systems has contributed to the marginalization of IPFS and the displacement of diverse traditional foods by increasingly processed and standardized diets. These changes have contributed to the growing triple burden of malnutrition: undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, overweight and obesity – a risk factor of non-communicable diseases.

While recognizing that there are major differences between industrial food production and small-scale farming systems, this report contends that IPFS offer lessons that can be applied to all food systems.

Indigenous Peoples' food systems (IPFS) are not only food production systems; they are systems of integration, where territorial rights, governance, knowledge, culture and food provisioning are inseparable. Colonialism systemically dismantled Indigenous governance, tenure systems and knowledge transmission structures, replacing them with extractive structures that continue to impact IPFS today. While many IPFS are deeply rooted in territory, displacement, migration and urbanization have altered access to these territories without severing these relationships. Indigenous Peoples continue to maintain, adapt and renew food-related connections to their territories, cultures and communities across distances.

This report follows the established HLPE-FSN methodology, drawing on published and grey literature and the expertise of the panel and drafting team. This process involved multiple rounds of public consultations. The HLPE-FSN views the report as a starting point for further consultations and discussion.

Our key message is that Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems are independent of and complementary to scientific knowledge and other forms of evidence and should be recognized as valid in their own terms. They are built through generations of observation, experimentation, practice and adaptation, and continually tested through relationships with land, water, animals and communities. They can therefore bring knowledge and dimensions that conventional scientific approaches may overlook or be poorly equipped to capture.

Indigenous Peoples' food systems: concepts and definitions

Indigenous Peoples' food systems (IPFS) are premised on an Indigenous worldview where everything, tangible and intangible, is in a state of balance. As a simple example: When a food source is depleted, such as shellfish, Indigenous Peoples, such as the Maori, place a *rahui* (ban) over the area until the food source is replenished; then the ban is lifted. This philosophy achieves well-being, sustainability and respects biodiversity.

Indigenous Peoples' food systems are also dynamic, complex socioecological and biocultural systems that support both food generation (hunting, gathering, fishing) and food production (different farming systems, such as cultivation, shifting cultivation and animal husbandry). They integrate biodiversity management, Indigenous knowledge, cultural and spiritual values, customary governance, livelihoods and territorial relationships.

The report's core analysis pertains to Indigenous Peoples as recognized by UNDRIP and the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No.169). A working definition frames IPFS as dynamic, relational and communal systems grounded in Indigenous Peoples' territories, that include interrelated elements of nature, people, customary tenure and governance for the growing, harvesting, processing, preserving and consumption of food. Indigenous Peoples' food systems are underpinned by Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, cultural and spiritual values, and reciprocity, and guided by nature's seasons. They support livelihoods and well-being, deliver culturally appropriate, healthy and diverse diets, and generate socioeconomic, cultural and environmental outcomes that support the resilience of both people and food systems.

In line with the above definition, Indigenous food sovereignty here means the ability of Indigenous Peoples to control, manage, create and produce their own types of traditional foods, using their own practices and knowledge, to enhance their health and that of related production systems.

The preservation, protection, strengthening and promotion of IPFS can assist the wider transformation of food systems. This requires policies, careful legislation, recognition of Indigenous governance, and investment in solutions led by Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous Peoples' food systems connect to the six dimensions of food security and nutrition (availability, access, utilization, stability, agency and sustainability), with relationality underpinning all six. Territorial access and agency enable individuals and communities to grow, harvest, process and sustainably manage culturally appropriate food.

Evidence shows that intact IPFS can deliver strong nutrition and health outcomes. Research on food species and nutritional values across nine countries shows that: Baffin Inuit (Nunavut) in Canada use 79 different plant and animal species, providing health beneficial omega-3 fatty acids and micronutrients; Awajun people in Peru use 223 species, many with high micronutrient content.

Indigenous Peoples' foods are largely absent from national food composition tables, making them statistically invisible and excluded from policies meant to address malnutrition. Generating Indigenous

Peoples' food composition data under Indigenous governance is therefore a precondition for recognition of IPFS. This invisibility occurs within a broader marginalization of IPFS that contributes to the triple burden of malnutrition.

Indigenous Peoples' food systems require shifts towards future food production that is adapted to local ecosystems and focuses not only on quantity but also on nutritional quality to ensure food security and nutrition. These systems offer fundamental values: Food is the flow of life, not a commodity; food is to be treated with respect and gratitude; and food systems are holistic and part of nature. Legislation such as the Aotearoa (New Zealand) Hauraki Gulf/Tikapa Moana Marine Protection Act shows how conservation and Indigenous food sovereignty can be reconciled. Diverse food systems support diverse economies, strengthening resilience to climatic and economic shocks.

Diversity, drivers of change, consequences and opportunities

Indigenous Peoples' food systems are territorial systems of life in which food, governance, identity, spirituality and ecological stewardship are inseparable, embedded in land, water, forests, rangelands, wetlands, coastlines and sacred sites governed through customary institutions. They are best understood as biocultural systems anchored in ancestral territories, where territory is the material, social, political and spiritual basis through which food practices are organized and reproduced.

Seven recurrent characteristics define functional Indigenous Peoples' food systems:

- **territorial integrity:** secure relationship with the lands, waters, air and ecological spaces that sustain food systems;
- **biocultural food provisioning:** obtaining food through ecological knowledge and culturally meaningful practices;
- **reciprocity-based food exchange:** sharing food through kinship, mutual aid and ceremonies;
- **knowledge-grounded intergenerational transmission:** passing on food-related knowledge across generations;
- **community governance and self-determination:** authority to make decisions according to Indigenous Peoples' institutions;
- **moral–ecological stewardship:** caring for ecosystems and regulating extraction; and
- **relational values grounded in cosmology:** worldviews in which lands, waters, plants, animals and spiritual beings are living relations.

A two-axis typology captures this diversity:

- dominant socioecological livelihood configurations (forest-based mosaic, mobile herding and pastoral, water and fisheries-based, agrarian, and reconfigured food systems); and
- the current condition of functionality (territorially rooted, pressured, hybrid, fragmented, or externally dependent). These conditions are not necessarily sequential or mutually exclusive, and reconfiguration does not necessarily imply a loss of systemic coherence or autonomy.

Case studies – the Rio Negro forest-river mosaic in Brazil, Sámi reindeer pastoralism in the Arctic, Maasai pastoralism in East Africa, Sibatani Bali Aga agroforestry in Indonesia, Pacific Islands aquatic food systems, and the Bering Strait – show how territorial rootedness, governance and knowledge transmission interact with pressures such as climate change, land dispossession and market penetration. These cases show that IPFS are not static survivals of the past, but living systems shaped by adaptation and collective governance.

Indigenous Peoples' food systems are being reshaped by interacting socioeconomic, sociocultural, behavioural, climatic, political and environmental drivers. These include colonization, land dispossession, extractive industries, infrastructure expansion, market dependence and dietary transitions. Further, the structural drivers of racism and discrimination shape the conditions under which IPFS operate, limiting funding and policy support for Indigenous food sovereignty. These drivers interact and produce cascading and compounded effects.

Concrete examples highlight the magnitude of the change: Over 70 percent of Yucatec Maya farmers have adopted non-traditional technologies. These shifts often have negative consequences for food security, nutrition and health: lower access to traditional foods, higher dependence on ultra-processed foods, erosion of Indigenous knowledge, and increasing rates of obesity, diabetes and other non-communicable diseases. Weakened IPFS also undermine biodiversity, ecosystem stewardship and customary governance across forests, rangelands, coasts and wetlands. Biodiversity loss on Indigenous Peoples' lands is driven by extractive practices such as overfishing, overhunting, overgrazing, shortened fallow periods and herd expansion due to insecure tenure, compounded by climate change.

Indigenous Peoples demonstrate resilience and adaptability to these pressures through cultural-ecological resilience, the ability of communities to sustain and regenerate their identities, knowledge systems and relationships with land through food practices. Examples include Sámi reindeer herders' seasonal mobility strategies, Kel Tamasheq grazing rotation and Tangkhul Naga seasonal calendars.

To strengthen IPFS, there is a need to protect territorial integrity and Indigenous Peoples' governance and self-determination. In addition, to support the transmission of knowledge and the co-creation with Indigenous Peoples climate and food-system policies that are adapted to local cultural, ecological and political contexts. Solutions must be context specific and led by Indigenous Peoples themselves.

Understanding the value of Indigenous Peoples' food systems

The value of IPFS extends beyond production and market exchange, generating intertwined production, sociocultural, knowledge and well-being, and ecological values central to food security, nutrition, well-being, identity and ecological sustainability. Current valuation approaches, however, systematically marginalize these non-market and intangible contributions.

Global subsidies for fertilizers and pesticides are over USD 635 billion per year, but little comparable support exists for IPFS. Marketable values (crops, livestock, wild foods, medicines, value-added products and employment) are different from non-marketable values that support cultural continuity, food sovereignty and ecological integrity.

A review of 53 global studies (2010–2025) found that only two put a monetary value on IPFS produce. Non-marketable values – social cohesion, cultural values, knowledge, food sovereignty, ecosystem services – appeared far more often. Governance and empowerment, by contrast, came up less, which

suggests they are under-recognized in policy. Existing frameworks largely fail to capture Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, well-being, identity and cultural values.

Based on the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity [TEEB]-Agrifood framework, an evaluation specific to Indigenous Peoples is proposed that replaces “capital” with “values”: production value, knowledge and well-being value, governance and relational value, and ecological value. These four dimensions interact to generate production values while contributing to Indigenous Peoples' well-being and identity. The framework gives equal weight to cultural governance, knowledge and well-being, and ecological values. It addresses the six food security dimensions and adds “Peoples' well-being and identity” dimension. Importantly, not all dimensions of IPFS can or should be measured in economic terms. Social and ecological relationships – based on reciprocity, spirituality and kinship with nature – cannot be priced and monetized.

Recognizing the true value of IPFS can inform policy instruments, investment mechanisms and Indigenous Peoples-led programmes. It can also help deliver healthy diets, diversified food economies, enhanced resilience to climate shocks, biodiversity conservation, climate mitigation and culturally grounded well-being.

Land, water and territorial rights

Four interconnected pathways link territorial rights to IPFS: governance and self-determination; ecosystem stewardship; knowledge systems; and food and nutrition security, connecting governance and ecological processes to concrete food and nutrition outcomes. Territorial rights extend across water and marine environments, yet these are often far less recognized than land rights. Territorial rights are the upstream structural foundation of nutrition and health. Effective recognition and implementation of collective, seasonal and overlapping tenure rights are therefore essential to improve indigenous Peoples' food security and nutrition.

Territorial dispossession always undermines governance, ecological stewardship and food security, including diverse, culturally appropriate traditional diets, such as the Sawhoyamaxa ruling in Paraguay, the Baka and Bakola forest dispossession in Cameroon and the Ogiek legal victory in Kenya demonstrate. In Kenya, the Ogiek of Mau Forest were evicted for conservation and logging, disrupting resource use and undermining knowledge. In 2017, the African C on Human and People' rights found Kenya had violated the rights of the Ogiek to property, culture, natural resources and development.

Territorial rights also ground essential knowledge, since place-based knowledge of soils, seeds, fisheries, water systems and seasonal indicators depends on continued access to and responsibility for specific lands and waters. Territorial rights are therefore a knowledge infrastructure that allows Indigenous Peoples to maintain and pass on ecological knowledge.

Colonial legal regimes, large-scale land acquisitions, financialization of ecosystems and climate change continue to undermine territorial governance. These outcomes are influenced by gender, youth and equity dimensions: Women are often custodians of seed banks and food knowledge but are disproportionately burdened by land encroachment. Some countries have moved forward: Canada's 2021 Fisheries Resources Reconciliation Agreement, Aotearoa's (New Zealand) Te Awa Tupua Act recognizing the Whanganui River as a legal entity and Mexico's 2024 constitutional reform recognizing Indigenous Peoples as “subjects of public law.” This kind of recognition matters, not just on paper.

Indigenous Peoples who are displaced from their territories or living in urban and peri-urban contexts often maintain linkages with their food systems through rural–urban food networks, remittances, cultural

gatherings and seasonal return. However, such adaptations cannot substitute for restored territorial rights. Territorial rights need to evolve to be applicable in these circumstances. For example, they can be exercised as rights of return, seasonal harvesting or co-management and benefit-sharing over ancestral territories, applying FPIC and ABS mechanisms. Closing the gap between formal legal recognition and effective implementation requires binding FPIC, legal protection of customary tenure, cross-sectoral policy coherence, Indigenous data sovereignty, and redirected financial flows towards Indigenous Peoples-led conservation and food systems.

Co-creation of knowledge

Co-creation of knowledge can support the transformation of disrupted food systems by bringing scientists and Indigenous Peoples' knowledge holders into meaningful dialogue. Indigenous Peoples' food systems (IPFS) draw on knowledge developed, tested and adapted over generations through close relationships with territories, waters, plants, animals and communities, including through periods of profound disruption. They contain rigorous concepts, methods, analysis and synthesis, expressed through storytelling, oral histories, ceremonies, land-based observation, and community-guided research. Co-creation does not require merging knowledge systems or validating Indigenous knowledge through scientific standards. It requires conditions for respectful and reciprocal engagement: Indigenous knowledge holders must choose whether and how to participate; Indigenous Peoples' rights, governance and ownership of knowledge must be protected; different knowledge systems must be respected on their own terms; and the process must be inclusive, consensual and transparent, with no obligation to co-create or to cede governance.

A shift is needed from a narrow science-policy interface to a broader knowledge-policy interface – one that recognizes Indigenous Peoples' knowledge as a legitimate basis for public policy that is in addition to conventional scientific evidence. Indigenous Peoples must participate as rights holders and knowledge holders, not simply as stakeholders or informants. They are the primary interlocutors and the only ones authorized to assert their voice and knowledge before third parties, without external intermediaries. Co-creation depends on self-determination, FPIC, knowledge safeguarding, equitable benefit-sharing and governance arrangements that address colonial power asymmetries.

Critical requirements underpin effective co-creation

Co-creation of knowledge that is applicable to agricultural and food systems requires an enabling policy and governance interface that is based on common principles, values of mutual respect, reciprocity, transparency, trust, plural evidence and shared benefits, and a methodologically sound process for bridging science with Indigenous Peoples' ways of knowing.

Such a methodology connects Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems and scientific approaches around four shared pillars – concepts, methods, analysis and synthesis – without subordinating one to another. Establishing conditions for the validity of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems is a power that belongs exclusively to Indigenous Peoples.

Co-creation of knowledge can transform disrupted food systems only if territorial rights, cultural protocols, language, spirituality and Indigenous knowledge governance are respected throughout. Strengthening Indigenous-led knowledge systems requires secure territorial rights and public policies that recognize Indigenous Peoples' knowledge on its own terms. It also requires the conditions for such knowledge systems to remain living and dynamic: opportunities for knowledge holders to practice, transmit and renew their knowledge, and for younger generations to learn through relationships with territories, communities and other knowledge holders. The erosion of

intergenerational transmission threatens not only the continuity of Indigenous knowledge, but also the knowledge that Indigenous Peoples can choose to bring into dialogue with the formal scientific community. Supporting knowledge holders and intergenerational learning is therefore urgent, irrespective of whether such knowledge ultimately enters processes of co-creation.

Future pathways for Indigenous Peoples' food systems

A forward-looking outlook for IPFS illustrates how present governance choices and interacting polycrises may either deepen disruption or enable transformation.

Two trajectories frame this outlook

A business-as-usual (BAU) trajectory envisages that existing systemic risks (territorial fragmentation, climate change, biodiversity loss, extractive expansion, land grabbing, policy incoherence and weak recognition of Indigenous governance) result in IPFS becoming increasingly constrained, hybridized and externally governed.

A transformative trajectory envisages that unequal power, rights, resources and capabilities are redressed through restoration of territorial rights, collective governance, secure land and water access, effective FPIC, knowledge co-creation and recognition of Indigenous Peoples' decision-making authority. This leads to greater climate resilience, democratized governance, territorial reconstitution and biocultural regeneration.

Case studies show that shifts from BAU to transformative pathways are possible when structural conditions change, depending on four interconnected processes: securing territorial rights, supporting biocultural food systems and territorial economies, enabling Indigenous Peoples-led knowledge systems through co-creation and shared governance, and aligning global food-system transformation agendas with Indigenous Peoples' priorities.

Institutional change matters too. Brazil's Comissão de Alimentos Tradicionais dos Povos [Commission for Traditional Foods of Indigenous Peoples] (CATRAPOVOS) and Aotearoa's (New Zealand) Ka Ora, Ka Ako [When you are well, you can learn] show how school-feeding programmes can be reshaped to fit IPFS – through governance, procurement rules, food safety standards, quality criteria and knowledge integration.

The analysis identifies four mutually reinforcing conditions for transformation: secure territorial rights and Indigenous governance; support for biocultural food systems and territorial economies; protection and transmission of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge; and alignment of national and global policies with Indigenous Peoples' priorities. These conditions provide a framework for the recommendations.

Conclusions and recommendations

Strengthening IPFS is both a rights-based obligation and a pathway for broader food-system transformation. Indigenous Peoples' food systems (IPFS) range from intact to fragmented, reconfigured, urbanized or disrupted systems. External factors have eroded Indigenous Peoples' rights, governance, territories and knowledge. Restoring and protecting IPFS is critical for Indigenous food sovereignty, nutrition, well-being and cultural survival, and for states seeking to meet the SDGs. Governments and other institutions should recognize Indigenous Peoples' food systems as living socioecological systems – not vulnerable remnants – whose governance, knowledge and practices can help shape more just and sustainable food futures.

The report presents ten clusters of recommendations

The recommendations derive from the scenario analysis in Chapter 6, which identifies the structural conditions needed for transformative pathways, and are aligned with existing international commitments (UNDRIP, Convention on Biological Diversity [CBD], SDG 2, Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests [VGGT], Paris Agreement, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW], among others) and realistic policy timeframes (2030, 2035 and the Committee on World Food Security Multi-Year Programme of Work [CFS MYPOW] 2028–2031).

1. Recognize the value of Indigenous Peoples' food and knowledge systems.
2. Improve Indigenous Peoples' food security and nutrition outcomes.
3. Secure Indigenous Peoples' collective territorial rights and governance authority.
4. Support Indigenous Peoples' food systems and territorial economies.
5. Enable Indigenous Peoples-led knowledge systems.
6. Align food system transformation agendas with Indigenous Peoples' priorities and rights.
7. Address gender, youth and intergenerational justice.
8. Ensure data and knowledge sovereignty and governance.
9. Prevent and respond to climate impacts.
10. Design and implement fair standards and inclusive regulation.

Central to all recommendations is the recognition that Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems must be recognized on their own terms without subordination or externally imposed validation. Indigenous Peoples are rights holders and their knowledge systems are independent of conventional scientific knowledge.

The CFS should establish a biennial, Indigenous-led monitoring process, supported by a baseline assessment completed by 2027 and a midterm review in 2030. Reporting should track legal recognition, implementation, direct financing, and participation in decision-making, food security and nutrition outcomes. Indicators, data governance arrangements and review procedures must be jointly defined with Indigenous Peoples and respect their data sovereignty.

For these recommendations to be implemented, funding must reach Indigenous organizations directly, political will must be sustained, and the United Nations agencies must coordinate their efforts. Conditional funding, private interests, weak accountability, and continued loss of Indigenous territories and rights undermine political will. These challenges are compounded by limited understanding among many policymakers, scientists and the broader public of Indigenous Peoples' histories, their long struggles for rights and self-determination, and the gains achieved – and sometimes subsequently lost – through these struggles. Addressing this historical and political knowledge gap is essential to avoid treating Indigenous rights as recent claims rather than rights grounded in long histories of resistance, negotiation and recognition. These risks must be tracked and mitigated through transparent reporting and the full participation of Indigenous Peoples in all reviews.

Incremental change is no longer sufficient. These recommendations and targets set out a clear path to recognize, protect and strengthen Indigenous Peoples' food systems. Their implementation is essential to the continuity of Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems, while contributing to global food security and nutrition, as well as planetary health.

