

GEDSI Learning and Leadership Hub: Leadership of Indigenous Peoples

Key learnings from the meeting held on 30th September 2025.

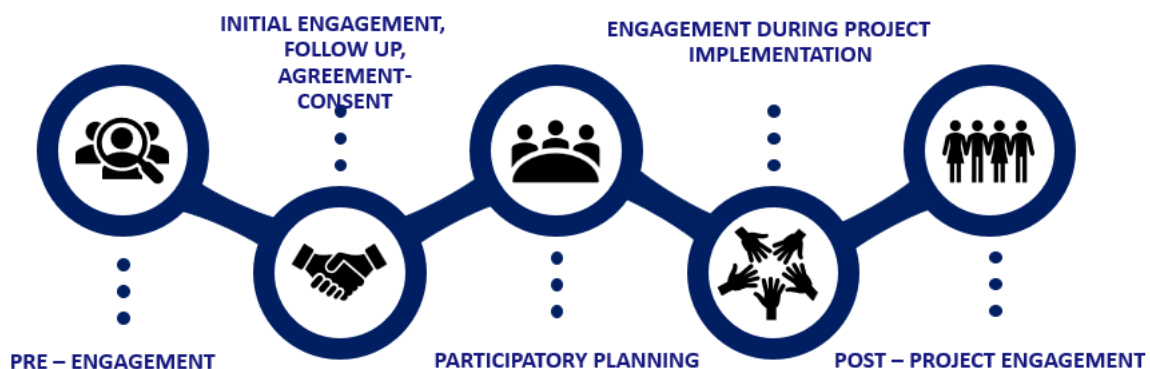
Promoting the participation and leadership of indigenous peoples

Rani Noerhadhie, UK PACT ASEAN Green Transition Fund GEDSI Expert

Indigenous peoples and local communities are showing strong climate leadership and have key skills and information needed to support programming. Inclusive climate programming can also support inclusion of indigenous peoples, for example, [only 57 percent of households](#) among indigenous communities have access to electricity for lighting purposes in the Philippines, compared to 95 percent among non-indigenous households.

Indigenous peoples and local communities across Southeast Asia have a deep connection to their land and hold a [holistic view of forested landscapes](#) that encompasses spirituality, life, culture, and the biotic and abiotic components within an ecosystem. The policy framework of the [ASEAN Food, Agriculture, and Forestry \(FAF\) vision and strategic plan \(2016-2025\)](#) acknowledges the importance of forest tenure rights for indigenous peoples and local communities to achieve sustainable forest management goal.

There are multiple phases of engagement needed to meaningfully include indigenous peoples in project planning, as shown by the graphic below.



The Seed to Tree Project in the UK PACT ASEAN GTF have taken the following steps to promote the participation and leadership of indigenous peoples in their work:

- All information handouts about the project activities, consent, and grievance mechanism are tailored to local language, idioms, terminologies, and cultural norms.
- Hiring local facilitators (men and women) who are fluent in local culture and language(s).
- Holding introductions and consultation with local indigenous leaders and communities.

Working with Communities for Climate Just Transitions

Vinitha Murukesan, Programme Coordinator, Keystone Foundation

Vinitha Murukesan from Keystone Foundation, an implementing partner, shared learnings from the UK PACT project, 'Embedding Strategies and Action Plans for Climate Just Transitions in Communities.' The project is co-developing community-based Monitoring, Reporting, Verification (MRV) modules across three ecosystems: mountains forest, wetland plains, and coastal mangrove.

From challenges to trust-building: When the project began, communities were hesitant to engage, gender and cultural norms limited participation, and women, particularly women from scheduled tribes, rarely spoke or participated in public spaces. The project built trust through key community stakeholders anchoring the MRV process, transparent communication, consistent engagement, and tools adapted to meet the linguistic and cultural needs of communities. GEDSI integration was prioritised through a GEDSI Action Plan and the collection of data disaggregated by age, gender, and other characteristics, ensuring inclusivity was mainstreamed from the start. **The team found that change is not instant; trust and inclusion grow step by step through consistent, long-term engagement.**

Navigating social norms and ensuring inclusivity: Gender and cultural norms are powerful gatekeepers. Keystone Foundation engages respectfully, sensitive to traditions, and its long-term presence helps build trust while carefully navigating these dynamics. Socially excluded groups were identified across all settlements where project activities were taking place, and supported during livelihoods activities and ecosystem monitoring. This approach strengthens GEDSI mainstreaming, ensuring participation is meaningful, not tokenistic.

Overcoming barriers to leadership: Barriers for indigenous people, particularly young mothers and older people, included gaps in childcare, low literacy (written and digital), and accessing remote locations. The project focused on building empowerment, knowledge and shared ownership to overcome these barriers. Practical steps were taken, including making trainings accessible for women with children, bridging logistical gaps in remote areas, and involving elders to improve participation. As a result, elders' indigenous knowledge was used to complement scientific data, and social and financial gains enabled women to transition from participants to facilitators, with Panchayat linkages reinforcing trust and intergenerational collaboration.

By celebrating Indigenous Peoples Day with the community, the project showed that their work is not only about climate justice, but also dignity and cultural pride. At the event, indigenous people celebrated their contributions and expressed happiness at being recognised and valued.



Celebrating indigenous peoples day on 9th August built pride and deepened the sense of inclusion.