To address climate, food and water crises, Traditional Knowledges must be heard

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As the global community looks towards the UN Climate Change Conference **[1] (COP26), it's clear the impacts of climate change are being most felt by communities experiencing systematic racism. Bushfires, droughts, cyclones, rising sea levels and a warming ocean are all exacerbating food and water insecurity in First Nations and Tribal communities around the world.**

Knowledge of how to preserve food and water systems and maintain a healthy eco-system requires community and cultural connection, beyond what can be briefly observed or studied. These knowledges have been built upon over thousands of years and are rich in understanding, but in recent centuries have been ignored, with disastrous consequences. It's time to put that right.

Since time immemorial, Australia's First Nations are a thriving people. For thousands of years, land has been central to First Nations people, as individuals and collectively as a community. First Nations people have spiritual connections to land and water that includes an obligation to care for the land and the natural environment. The land is spiritual and has a deep symbolic meaning; it's not just a simple physical environment.

The colonisation of Australia has caused First Nations people to be marginalised and face significant inequities. Colonisation and the dispossession of, and forced removal from Country, has resulted in a loss of culture, language, and identity for many First Nations people. First Nations people often don't get a seat at the table when it comes to decision making that impacts on their lives, remaining unrecognised in the Australian Constitution despite decades of campaigning by Elders and community organisers. However, sovereignty cannot be destroyed; First Nations people and their communities are strong, tenacious and have Traditional Knowledges and song lines that expand across Australia.

Through generations of Elders, many First Nations communities have preserved a deep knowledge of climate, and food and water systems, from living on Country. First Nations people's connection to land, natural resources and Traditional Knowledge is passed down, ensuring food and water is in abundance, all the while maintaining a healthy natural environment.

Overcoming a legacy of colonisation

First Nations communities, and their custodianship of knowledge of country, have significant contributions to make in securing the future of food and water systems, and the health and wellbeing of community. Yet the lasting impacts of colonisation are manifest in the food and water insecurity faced by First Nations communities, where Traditional Knowledge goes ignored. The prevention of access to traditional hunting lands and natural resources has caused food insecurity and forced First Nations people to replace traditional diets with western diets, causing a tidal wave of non-communicable disease. Again, this is not unique to First Nations communities – colonised peoples around the world continue to suffer the legacy of colonisation.

A recent example is that of the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit [2]. The Summit, held up as a beacon of global collaboration and knowledge sharing on food systems, demonstrated that there is still a long way to go. A lack of transparency, corporatization and lack of First Nations and Tribal representation have all been cited as failings of the Summit. Organisers of the counter-summit [3] called for unheard voices to be genuinely represented in discussions through better governance and community-informed priority setting. Unfortunately, these calls remain largely unanswered.

This is not the first time First Nations voices have been unheard at a global summit, and sadly it won't be the last. Creating structures that exclude the voices and knowledge of First Nations and Tribal people reflects a typical top-down approach that privileges westernised and colonising paradigms. It represents a failure to recognise the diversity within communities across nations, and the value of Traditional Knowledges. The result is commitments that don't reflect community concerns, and ultimately worsen inequities in food and water systems.

Positive change through First Nations voices

To create effective and meaningful change, policy makers and other stakeholders should adopt multiple strategies and a multi-sector approach, that works in partnership with Elders and communities, while respecting Traditional Knowledge. Governments, multilaterals, and food and water system stakeholders should respond to the crisis of climate impacts on food and water systems by listening to and supporting First Nations and Tribal communities in co-developing plans that will last. This includes actively recognising the paradigms that privilege colonising, westernised approaches. Instead, food and water systems solutions should be created through a process of community-led policy development that recognises Traditional Knowledges and includes engagement with Elders and community leaders.

As the global community comes together for COP26, it is incumbent upon negotiators and world leaders to consider the role that First Nations and Tribal peoples around the world have to play in addressing the biggest challenges we face, if we are going to get closer to righting the wrongs of the past.

The George Institute for Global Health partnered with the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service and Dharriwaa Elders Group, and the Pacific Research Centre for the Prevention of Obesity and Non-Communicable Diseases, to call for Traditional Knowledges and First Nations and Pacific Island priorities to be recognised at the UN Food Systems Summit and beyond. To read the full report, click here [4].

About the author

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