

In case you missed it—Indigenous Peoples’ lived experiences of climate injustice
July 1, 2026

The Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) continued its *Towards climate justice in the Caribbean* webinar series with a session exploring the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples and the ways climate change is affecting their rights, cultures, identities and wellbeing. Bringing together Indigenous leaders and advocates from across the Caribbean, the webinar examined how climate injustice is experienced within Indigenous communities, while also highlighting the actions Indigenous Peoples are already taking to protect their territories, cultures and rights and to advance climate justice.

The session was facilitated by CANARI Executive Director Nicole Leotaud and featured presentations by:

- Nicholas Peters, Amerindian Peoples Association (APA), Guyana;
- Samunda Jabini, Association of Saamaka Communities, Saamaka People, Suriname;
- Whitney Mélinard, Kopounoule Inc., Kalinago People, Dominica;
- Stacey Alvarez de la Campa, Climate Rights & Justice International Inc., Garifuna and Maroon People, St. Vincent and the Grenadines; and
- Donicio Shol, Julian Cho Society, Mopan and Q’eqchi’ Maya Peoples, Belize

The webinar attracted 97 participants representing 20 countries and territories. Participants came from Indigenous organisations, civil society organisations, community-based organisations, regional and international organisations, universities and research institutions, conservation organisations, government agencies, consultancies and the private sector.



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1. Setting the stage: Listening to Indigenous Peoples' lived experiences

Nicole welcomed participants to the fifth webinar in the series, explaining that the discussion built on earlier sessions that introduced climate justice concepts and human rights before examining the lived experiences of women, LGBTQI+ persons, rural communities and natural resource users.

She explained that the webinar sought to create a space to listen to Indigenous Peoples describe how climate change is affecting their lives, cultures and communities in ways that are shaped by their histories and identities. At the same time, she emphasised that Indigenous Peoples are not only experiencing climate injustice but are actively pursuing climate justice through their own leadership, advocacy and action. Participants were therefore invited not only to understand these lived experiences, but also to learn from Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, perspectives and solutions.

Nicole also outlined the broader objectives of the webinar series, which include deepening understanding of climate justice in the Caribbean, strengthening connections among practitioners and advocates, and building collective action towards a more just and resilient future. She noted that subsequent sessions would focus on youth perspectives before turning to practical pathways for advancing climate justice, including access to information, participation, litigation and partnerships.

2. Stacey: Climate injustice, colonial legacies and meaningful participation

Opening the discussion, Stacey reflected on how climate injustice is experienced by Indigenous Peoples in ways that extend beyond the visible impacts of climate change. She argued that one of the greatest injustices lies in the tokenistic inclusion of Indigenous Peoples within climate spaces, where their presence may be acknowledged but their voices are not meaningfully included in shaping decisions or co-creating solutions.

She noted that climate injustice intersects with economic disenfranchisement and affects dimensions of life that are often overlooked, including quality of life, selfhood and intergenerational wellbeing. Rather than focusing only on the physical impacts of climate change, she encouraged participants to consider the more subtle ways in which human rights and Indigenous identity are undermined.

Stacey also linked present-day climate injustice to colonial histories, describing what she referred to as "disaster colonialism." She explained that colonial patterns of land use, including the replacement of diverse ecosystems with monocultures, have weakened natural landscapes and increased vulnerability to climate impacts such as flooding and soil erosion. She further reflected on the displacement of Indigenous Peoples within their own territories, observing that many communities have been pushed towards areas that are now among the most exposed to climate hazards.

While acknowledging these challenges, Stacey concluded on a hopeful note, encouraging participants to move beyond narratives centred solely on resilience and instead work towards creating conditions in which Indigenous Peoples are able to thrive.

3. Samunda: Forest stewardship, land rights and climate injustice in Suriname

Speaking from the perspective of the Saamaka people of Suriname, Samunda emphasised that climate justice is shaped not only by environmental change but also by how communities experience and respond to those changes.

She observed that Suriname retains more than 90 per cent forest cover and contributes very little to global climate change, yet Indigenous and Tribal Peoples continue to bear significant impacts. Living within forest ecosystems, communities are increasingly affected by government decisions that allocate mining and logging concessions without their participation, despite these activities taking place within their traditional territories.

Samunda explained that these activities have affected rivers, food sources and water supplies, particularly during increasingly severe dry seasons when rivers and creeks run low. At the same time, she noted that although Indigenous and Tribal Peoples play a critical role in conserving forests, they continue to receive few of the benefits associated with this stewardship.

A major concern, she explained, is the continued lack of recognition of collective land rights. Without legal recognition, communities remain excluded from decisions affecting their territories, despite a 2007 judgement affirming those rights. Nearly two decades later, she noted, that judgement has still not been implemented.

Throughout her presentation, Samunda returned to the central point that Indigenous and Tribal Peoples continue to experience the consequences of decisions made about their lands while their rights, identities and contributions remain insufficiently recognised.

4. Donicio: Traditional ecological knowledge and consultation in Belize

Donicio described Indigenous Peoples in Belize as being on the frontline of climate change, experiencing longer droughts, changing weather patterns, increased pests and diseases, and growing uncertainty for subsistence farming.

At the same time, he emphasised that Indigenous Peoples are also among those doing the most to adapt to these changing conditions. Traditional ecological knowledge continues to guide how communities manage their lands and respond to environmental change, yet this knowledge is rarely afforded the recognition or value it deserves.

He highlighted concerns about recently introduced carbon policies affecting Indigenous lands in southern Belize, explaining that these policies were developed without consultation despite covering lands that continue to be managed by Indigenous communities. While Indigenous Peoples continue to steward biodiverse landscapes, he observed that extensive deforestation continues elsewhere in the country, raising questions about equity and fairness in environmental governance.

Donicio also noted that some community members have begun migrating because of climate-related impacts, adding another dimension to the challenges Indigenous Peoples now face.

Responding to Nicole's follow-up question, he explained that Maya customary land rights have already been affirmed by the highest court to which Belize accedes. However, despite this legal recognition, policies affecting these lands continue to be introduced without meaningful consultation. He stressed that Indigenous Peoples are already finding creative ways to adapt to climate change through their traditional ecological knowledge, but these approaches are too often overlooked in favour of externally developed policies.

5. Nicholas: Climate justice, human rights and land tenure in Guyana

Nicholas explained that the Amerindian Peoples Association works with Indigenous communities across Guyana and therefore witnesses first-hand how climate change is affecting rivers, forests and livelihoods across the country. Communities have observed changes in river systems, water quality, fire patterns and other environmental conditions over many years.

For Indigenous Peoples in Guyana, he explained, climate justice is inseparable from human rights. Drawing connections with experiences shared from Belize and Suriname, Nicholas emphasised that Indigenous communities continue to look to regional legal decisions as important examples in the ongoing struggle for recognition of Indigenous land tenure and rights.

A major concern, he noted, is the failure to consistently apply free, prior and informed consent. While governments increasingly recognise the role of Indigenous Peoples in climate action,

consultations often fail to provide communities with information in culturally appropriate ways or to respect Indigenous governance systems and decision-making processes.

Nicholas also discussed the rapid expansion of mining and extractive industries within Guyana, explaining that increased interest in oil, gas and minerals is creating new pressures on Indigenous territories. Although some of these activities are associated with the global transition to lower-carbon technologies, he cautioned that climate solutions should not come at the expense of Indigenous lands and communities.

He further reflected on climate finance, acknowledging that some Indigenous communities have benefited from financing opportunities while noting that many continue to experience land tenure insecurity and limited participation in decision-making. In his view, climate initiatives risk reproducing colonial patterns of extraction if they fail to recognise Indigenous rights, knowledge and governance.

Concluding his presentation, Nicholas stressed that effective climate action requires the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant peoples and local communities. Without their inclusion, he argued, climate policies risk repeating many of the same injustices that contributed to the present crisis.



Photo credit: CANARI

6. Whitney: Climate change, culture and the Kalinago people's identity

Whitney began by noting that the Kalinago people experience many of the same forms of climate injustice described by other speakers, including concerns related to mining, limited participation in decision-making and climate-induced migration. However, she chose to focus specifically on the impacts of climate change on Indigenous culture.

She explained that climate injustice is visible in the gradual disappearance of plants once used by previous generations, in the declining transmission of traditional knowledge and in the growing difficulty younger people face in learning customary practices such as basket weaving. Landslides and extreme weather events increasingly isolate communities and interrupt daily life, further affecting opportunities to sustain cultural traditions.

Drawing on research conducted between 2024 and 2025 within the Kalinago Territory, Whitney shared findings showing that a large majority of respondents reported losses of traditional knowledge linked to climate change, alongside reductions in plant diversity, traditional medicine and Indigenous cuisine. She emphasised that these are non-economic losses that cannot simply be replaced through financial compensation but instead represent a gradual erosion of Indigenous identity.

Whitney also described the impacts of a major landslide event that affected the Kalinago Territory in April 2026, cutting off communities, blocking access roads and destroying homes. She explained that outdated census data has left many families effectively invisible within disaster response systems, limiting access to relief despite their needs.

Looking ahead, she warned that without urgent intervention many traditional practices—including basket weaving and boat making—could disappear within the next few decades. For Indigenous Peoples, she stressed, climate change is not only threatening livelihoods but also the transmission of culture from one generation to the next, making it a direct threat to Indigenous identity itself.

7. Discussion: Common themes emerging from the first panel

Nicole reflected on several themes that had emerged consistently across the presentations. These included the continuing invisibility experienced by Indigenous Peoples; insufficient recognition of Indigenous rights, knowledge and stewardship; and the wide-ranging impacts of climate change on food security, water, culture and identity.

She also highlighted recurring concerns about procedural justice, particularly the failure to obtain free, prior and informed consent and to meaningfully involve Indigenous Peoples in decisions affecting their lands and communities. Participants had also drawn attention to unequal access to climate finance, disaster relief and other resources needed to respond to climate change.

Finally, Nicole noted that speakers had emphasised the intergenerational nature of climate injustice and the urgent need to protect Indigenous cultures, knowledge systems and relationships with nature for future generations.

8. Indigenous Peoples leading climate action

Turning the discussion towards action, Nicole invited the panellists to reflect on what Indigenous Peoples are already doing to advance climate justice and what additional support and action are needed moving forward.

Samunda: Building capacity, documenting knowledge and strengthening advocacy

Samunda began by emphasising that Indigenous and Tribal Peoples are not waiting to be rescued. While acknowledging that they continue to seek justice and support because they are disproportionately affected by a problem they did not create, she stressed that communities are already undertaking extensive work on their own.

She highlighted the continued advocacy for the implementation of the 2007 judgement recognising collective land rights, noting that despite years of legal action, communities continue to press for their rights to be respected.

She also described efforts to document traditional knowledge, map Indigenous territories and record biodiversity. Because much of the Saamaka people's knowledge has traditionally been transmitted orally, documenting cultural knowledge has become increasingly important, particularly as biodiversity changes and younger generations migrate away from their communities for education and employment.

Samunda explained that her organisation also works to strengthen understanding and implementation of free, prior and informed consent. She observed that while governments often present this principle as something new, meaningful community participation has long been embedded within Indigenous governance systems, where decisions are traditionally made collectively with the involvement of elders, women and young people.

She further highlighted efforts to build communities' capacity to manage climate finance directly. Recognising that direct access to funding is increasingly important, she explained that communities are preparing themselves to manage financial resources effectively while reducing dependence on intermediaries.

Finally, she stressed the importance of continuing advocacy at the local, national and international levels while ensuring that Indigenous communities themselves understand emerging climate agreements and policy processes. She noted that many community members remain unfamiliar with instruments such as the Escazú Agreement, making education and awareness an essential part of advancing climate justice.

Nicholas: Grounding climate action in Indigenous rights

Nicholas explained that the Amerindian Peoples Association continues to anchor its work in Indigenous and human rights while strengthening the capacity of communities across Guyana to advocate for themselves.

He described ongoing efforts to provide technical support and information to Indigenous communities representing Guyana's diverse Indigenous Peoples, while also undertaking research and producing reports that demonstrate the importance of secure land tenure for both Indigenous rights and climate action.

Nicholas also mentioned mapping and monitoring initiatives with communities to document changes in rivers, fire patterns and other environmental conditions while supporting Indigenous advocacy and land tenure work.

Recognising the growing pressures facing civil society and Indigenous organisations, he emphasised the importance of strengthening community leadership so that Indigenous Peoples are equipped to represent themselves at national and regional levels. He also highlighted collaboration with organisations in Belize and Suriname, noting the value of sharing experiences and legal developments across the Caribbean.

Looking ahead, Nicholas expressed hope that Indigenous organisations would continue building stronger regional networks while ensuring that climate policies are informed by the realities experienced on the ground. He reiterated that meaningful consultation, recognition of Indigenous governance systems and respect for Indigenous rights remain essential if climate action is to avoid repeating historical patterns of exploitation and exclusion.

Whitney: Research, data sovereignty and cultural resilience

Whitney explained that the work of her organisation begins with evidence, noting that meaningful advocacy depends upon understanding and documenting what communities are experiencing.

Referring to the aforementioned research on non-economic loss and damage within the Kalinago Territory, she explained that the findings provided the community with its first documented, disaggregated evidence of how climate change is affecting Indigenous culture. Rather than simply publishing the results, she explained that the organisation worked with Kalinago youth volunteers to develop community-led recommendations based on the research.

Building on these findings, Whitney outlined the Kalinago Cultural Resilience Initiative, which supports youth mentorship in traditional basket weaving and crafts, women's health and wellbeing, and community awareness of the Escazú Agreement through meetings held across the Kalinago Territory. She also highlighted the organisation's emergency response efforts following the landslides in April 2026, including rapid assessments and support for affected households.

Looking ahead, Whitney described plans to undertake a climate vulnerability census across the Kalinago Territory. She explained that the proposed survey would generate updated, community-led data to inform disaster planning and climate decision-making while establishing Indigenous data sovereignty within the territory.

Whitney concluded by identifying three priorities for advancing climate justice. First, she called for greater recognition of non-economic losses, including the loss of culture, knowledge and identity, within loss and damage frameworks. Second, she advocated for Indigenous organisations to participate as decision-makers—not simply beneficiaries—in the design and delivery of climate finance. Finally, she emphasised the need for stronger legal and policy protections for Indigenous knowledge so that it cannot be used without acknowledgement or consent.

Stacey: Reclaiming Indigenous knowledge and shaping the future

Stacey reflected on the many common threads emerging across the discussion and emphasised the importance of presenting Indigenous Peoples as living, thriving communities rather than viewing them only through narratives of historical loss.

She described efforts through her organisation to promote Indigenous research methodologies and to challenge assumptions that only conventional academic approaches produce objective knowledge. Indigenous ways of knowing, she argued, are equally valid and should play a central role in climate research, policy and adaptation.

Stacey reflected on examples of colonialism that remain visible in Caribbean landscapes, using monoculture agriculture as one illustration of how historical patterns of land use continue to shape environmental vulnerability. She encouraged participants to view these systems through an Indigenous lens and argued that Indigenous knowledge should inform climate adaptation and policy.

She further advocated for stronger integration of Indigenous knowledge systems into climate adaptation planning, noting that Indigenous communities possess detailed environmental knowledge that can strengthen early warning systems, policy development and climate resilience. Rather than treating Indigenous knowledge as cultural heritage alone, she argued that it should be recognised as a living system with practical value for addressing contemporary climate challenges.

Stacey also emphasised the importance of building solidarity among Indigenous Peoples throughout the Caribbean and its diaspora. Sharing knowledge, opportunities and resources, she suggested, would strengthen collective action while helping communities shape their own future rather than remaining constrained by externally imposed narratives.

Donicio: Advocating for Indigenous-led climate finance and stronger Caribbean alliances

Donicio described the work his organisation is undertaking to advance climate justice through strategic networking and advocacy in international forums, including the United Nations. A major focus, he explained, is advocating for direct financing to Indigenous Peoples and strengthening the capacity of both communities and supporting institutions so that Indigenous-led initiatives can be effectively implemented.

He shared that his organisation is developing what he described as the first Green Climate Fund proposal to be led by Indigenous Peoples, explaining that the initiative is being piloted within communities and is intended to demonstrate how climate finance can be driven by Indigenous Peoples themselves.

Donicio also emphasised that climate initiatives must be designed and led by Indigenous Peoples and local communities if they are to produce meaningful outcomes. He advocated for stronger Caribbean alliances in international spaces, noting that Caribbean Indigenous Peoples often become overshadowed when grouped together with Latin America despite facing distinct challenges.

At the community level, he stressed the importance of ensuring that climate finance directly benefits Indigenous communities through appropriate benefit-sharing mechanisms. He also called for effective grievance redress mechanisms so that communities have avenues to address situations where projects fail to deliver intended benefits or create unintended harm.

Discussion: Strengthening Indigenous knowledge, finance and visibility

The discussion that followed reinforced several themes emerging throughout the webinar.

Participants reflected on the importance of recognising Indigenous knowledge as Indigenous technologies, particularly in relation to early warning systems and disaster preparedness. It was noted that Indigenous communities have long relied on their own systems for observing environmental change and anticipating hazards, yet these systems have rarely been recognised within formal national and regional disaster management approaches.

The discussion also returned to the question of climate finance. Participants emphasised the need for simpler mechanisms that allow Indigenous Peoples and local communities to access funding directly, rather than relying on complex intermediary arrangements. The importance of building community capacity to manage these resources was also highlighted.

Participants further reflected on the need for greater recognition of Indigenous identity within official systems, noting that Indigenous Peoples are often not adequately recognised in censuses and other administrative processes. This invisibility has implications for self-determination, policy development and the recognition of Indigenous contributions to climate action.

Several participants also highlighted the importance of strengthening solidarity across Caribbean civil society and Indigenous organisations, sharing examples of advocacy for direct financing, stronger regional collaboration and community-led documentation of Indigenous histories and experiences.

9. Key takeaways from the panellists

Nicole invited each panellist to leave participants with one final takeaway or recommendation for advancing climate justice for Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in the Caribbean.

Whitney emphasised the importance of solidarity among Caribbean Indigenous Peoples while recognising that Caribbean Indigenous communities have distinct experiences and priorities that also deserve focused attention. She encouraged participants to stop working in silos, to keep the momentum from the webinar alive and to move beyond simply supporting one another to actively showing up for one another. She also reiterated the need for Indigenous-led and NGO-led funding mechanisms that place resources directly in the hands of those working within communities.

Donicio highlighted the importance of continuing strategic advocacy while strengthening Indigenous leadership in climate action. He reiterated the need for direct financing to Indigenous Peoples, stronger Caribbean alliances in regional and international forums, benefit-sharing mechanisms that ensure communities receive tangible benefits from climate finance, and grievance redress mechanisms to address situations where projects do not deliver as intended.

Stacey encouraged participants not to allow the conversation to end with the webinar. She urged everyone to continue asking "what next?" and to build on the relationships, knowledge and opportunities emerging from discussions such as these. She also reinforced the importance of recognising Indigenous knowledge systems, strengthening Indigenous research and continuing to build solutions that are meaningful and self-sustaining.

Nicholas reflected on the importance of expanding the conversation beyond climate change alone to include Indigenous rights, governance, education and collective action. He encouraged continued investment in Indigenous-led research, knowledge systems and leadership while ensuring that Indigenous worldviews and governance systems remain central to climate responses.

Samunda concluded by highlighting the importance of investing in young Indigenous leaders and ensuring that education strengthens, rather than disconnects, young people from their communities. She also reaffirmed the need for strategic collaboration across the Caribbean and stressed the importance of understanding the distinction between consultation and free, prior and informed consent.

10. Nicole's closing reflections

Nicole thanked the panellists for their openness, generosity and leadership in sharing their experiences throughout the webinar. She reflected that the discussion had reinforced the importance of continuing to build respectful partnerships with Indigenous and Tribal Peoples and stressed that organisations such as CANARI must remain accountable in the way they engage and collaborate.

She encouraged participants to continue working together through existing regional platforms, including the Caribbean Climate Justice Alliance, and welcomed continued dialogue and collaboration beyond the webinar series.

Nicole also thanked CANARI colleagues, participants and everyone who had contributed to the discussion. She described the webinar as an important step in an ongoing conversation and echoed the view that the dialogue on climate justice, Indigenous rights and Indigenous leadership must continue to grow.

11. Looking ahead

Nicole reminded participants that the webinar series would continue with a session exploring youth perspectives on climate justice, followed by webinars examining access to information, participation and justice, advocacy, litigation and partnerships for climate action.

She encouraged participants to remain engaged with the series as a space for continued learning, exchange and collaboration across the Caribbean.



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