

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES MAJOR GROUP
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR POLICY RESEARCH AND EDUCATION
TEBTEBBA

POLICY BRIEF

Indigenous Peoples in Migration Pathways

Policy Brief: Indigenous Peoples in Migration Pathways

Copyright © Tebtebba Foundation, Inc. and Indigenous Peoples Major Group for Sustainable Development (IPMG), 2026

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the written permission of the copyright owner and the publisher.

Published by:

Tebtebba Foundation, Inc.
No.1 Roman Ayson Road, 2600
Baguio City, Philippines
Tel. +63 74 444703 tel/Fax: +63 74 4439459
Email: tebtebba@tebtebba.org
Website: www.tebtebba.org

Author: Wilfredo V. Alangui
Layout: Paul Michael Nera
Photos: Indigenous Navigator, Photographer: Pablo Lasansky

Funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union.



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES MAJOR GROUP
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



POLICY BRIEF

Indigenous Peoples in Migration Pathways



CONTENTS

Executive Summary **6**

Introduction **8**

Drivers of Indigenous Peoples' Migration **9**

Indigenous Migration Pathways **10**
- Rural-to-Urban Migration 10
- Rural-to-Rural and Seasonal Migration 10
- Transborder and Cross-Border Mobility 10
- Forced and Internal Displacement 11
- Stepwise Migration 11
- Return, Circularity and, Short-Term Mobility 11
- Cyclical Mobility 11

Dominant Narratives about Migration **12**
- Migrants as Individuals Rather than Collectives 12
- Movement Between Nation-States Rather Than Across Indigenous Territories 12
- Borders as Natural and Legitimate 12
- Mobility as Economic Rationality 13

Consequences of Dominant Migration Frameworks **13**
- Intersectional Invisibility and Epistemic Erasure 13
- Reproduction of Racial and Linguistic Hierarchies 14
- Policy Gaps and Socioeconomic Vulnerabilities 14
- Labor Exploitation and Colonial Continuities 14
- Territorial Disruption and Urban Transformation 15
- Exclusion from Governance 15

Gaps in Key International Frameworks **16**
- Indigenous Peoples' Response: Business, Human Rights, and Indigenous Migration 17

Data Invisibility of Indigenous Migrants and its Impact **18**

Policy Gaps and Recommendations **20**
- Structural Policy Gaps 20
- Policy Recommendations 22
- Concluding Policy Imperative 24

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Indigenous Peoples' migration is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by historical, socio-economic, cultural, environmental, and political factors. Indigenous Peoples migrate along diverse pathways, including rural–urban, seasonal, cyclical, transborder, forced, stepwise, and return migration, but remain systematically invisible in policy, data, and governance frameworks. This invisibility reflects structural biases in dominant migration theories, which prioritize economic rationality, sedentary territoriality, and individual decision-making over collective rights, ancestral mobility, and cultural continuity.

Existing international frameworks like the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), ILO Convention 169 (1989), Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018), Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and Sustainable Development Goals provide normative recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights and collective territoriality. However, these instruments are weakly operationalized, leaving migrant Indigenous Peoples exposed to discrimination, labor exploitation, territorial disruption, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Corporate practices and development-induced displacement further exacerbate vulnerabilities, particularly for women, children, and youth.

Key findings include:

- Indigenous Peoples' mobility is relational, cyclical, and embedded in histories of dispossession and resilience.
- Dominant migration narratives and data systems erase Indigenous Peoples' identity, misclassify cross-border movement, and obscure structural inequalities.
- Policy gaps persist in integrating Indigenous Peoples' rights into migration governance, protecting culturally embedded mobility, and ensuring corporate accountability.

This policy brief provides actionable recommendations:

1. Recognize Indigenous Peoples as collective rights-holders in migration policy.
2. Embed Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in development, labor, and migration interventions.
3. Implement disaggregated, community-controlled data systems respecting Indigenous data sovereignty, and support initiatives like the Indigenous Navigator that produces data by and for Indigenous Peoples.
4. Ensure corporate accountability for displacement-induced migration.
5. Integrate culturally and gender-responsive services for Indigenous migrants, including women, children, and youth.

By aligning migration governance with Indigenous Peoples' rights, participatory data practices, and corporate accountability, states and international institutions can address structural vulnerabilities, safeguard cultural continuity, and uphold the collective rights of Indigenous migrants.



INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Peoples' migration is a complex phenomenon shaped by historical, socio-economic, cultural, environmental, and political forces. Pathways include forced relocation, rural–urban mobility, seasonal and cyclical movement, transborder flows, and international displacement.

There are approximately 370–500 million Indigenous Peoples worldwide (UNESCO, n.d.), many residing in rural or marginalized areas and facing systemic inequalities in land access, livelihoods, services (World Bank, 2015), and political representation. Migration, whether voluntary or involuntary, often becomes a strategy of survival and adaptation. Yet Indigenous migrants frequently face:

- Discrimination and marginalization in destination areas;
- Statistical invisibility due to inconsistent ethnic identifiers;
- Disruption of spiritual and cultural ties to ancestral lands; and
- Insufficient legal and policy safeguards across borders.

International instruments such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and ILO Convention 169 affirm collective rights to self-determination, land, culture, and governance. Indigenous Peoples do not relinquish these rights upon migration. However, existing migration frameworks, including the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), largely fail to operationalize collective rights protections, leaving Indigenous migrants "vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination and systemic exclusion from justice mechanisms" (IPMG, n.d.).

Migration governance must therefore recognize Indigenous Peoples not merely as migrants in need of protection, but as collective rights-holders whose mobility is rooted in dispossession, resilience, and self-determination. Failure to integrate this perspective undermines cultural continuity and perpetuates structural vulnerability.

This Policy Brief synthesizes existing evidence, identifies governance gaps, and advances recommendations to ensure migration frameworks meaningfully protect Indigenous Peoples. It situates Indigenous Peoples' mobility within historical, territorial, cultural, political, and environmental pathways shaped by colonialism, land dispossession, development interventions, environmental change, labor markets, and imposed state borders.

DRIVERS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' MIGRATION

Indigenous Peoples' migration is driven by intersecting economic, environmental, and political forces embedded in structural inequality and colonial histories.

Economic exclusion and erosion of traditional livelihoods are primary drivers. De Campos et al. (2021), analyzing Brazil's 2010 census, demonstrate that Indigenous Peoples' rural-to-urban migration correlates with declining land access, weakened subsistence systems, and unequal development policies. These are patterns reflected globally where poverty, unemployment, and restricted customary economies compel movement. As a key driver of involuntary migration, economic pressures impact many Indigenous communities across sectors, gender, and age. During the period 2018-2024, 20% of young Indigenous women and 40% of young Indigenous men, aged 15-24 and surveyed across more than 260 Indigenous communities worldwide, left their traditional territories to seek employment and better economic opportunities in other places (Indigenous Navigator, n.d.).

Environmental degradation and land appropriation further intensify mobility. Mezzanotti and Kvalvaag (2022) identify mining, agribusiness expansion, logging, and infrastructure development as major catalysts of displacement.

The International Organization for Migration (2008), in *Indigenous Routes: A Framework for Understanding Indigenous Migration*, synthesizes global push-pull dynamics including structural poverty, discrimination, environmental change, and development-driven displacement. Crucially, it situates Indigenous Peoples' mobility within longer histories of colonization and territorial erosion, emphasizing that migration must be understood through political and historical contexts and not solely economic ones.

Across contexts, three patterns emerge:

1. Economic drivers are inseparable from colonial structural inequities.
2. Environmental degradation and extractive development undermine land-based livelihoods.
3. Political exclusion, weak recognition of rights, and dispossession shape both necessity and conditions of migration.

Indigenous Peoples' mobility thus reflects structural compulsion rather than purely voluntary opportunity-seeking. At the same time, migrants sustain collective identities and trans-local ties, challenging migration models that treat movement as individual and territorially detached.

INDIGENOUS MIGRATION PATHWAYS

Indigenous Peoples' mobility is often cyclical, relational, and multi-sited rather than linear or permanent. The IOM (2008) identifies key pathways: rural-urban, rural-rural, transborder, international, and seasonal/nomadic mobility, while situating them within colonial dispossession.

Rural-to-Urban Migration

Rural-to-urban migration is one of the most visible patterns. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA] 2009 report *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples* notes rising urbanization among Indigenous populations. Migration is often driven by land dispossession, environmental degradation, extractive industries, and weakened subsistence economies rather than voluntary preference (Oliver-Smith, 2009). Urban movement frequently reflects structural push factors.

Rural-to-Rural and Seasonal Migration

Seasonal rural mobility remains significant yet underrecognized. Indigenous communities participate in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and seasonal labor (UNFPII, 2006), combining engagement in cash economies with continued residence in home territories.

Such mobility often reflects continuity with precolonial circulation systems like pastoralism, shifting cultivation, fishing cycles, and ceremonial travel that long predated fixed state borders. Rural mobility therefore represents adaptation rather than rupture.

Transborder and Cross-Border Mobility

Many Indigenous territories were divided by colonial boundary-making. For these communities, crossing international borders often constitutes continuity of ancestral movement rather than "international migration."

The Tohono O'odham Nation, whose territory spans the United States–Mexico border, routinely crosses for cultural events, education, religious practices, and family visits (Leza, 2019). Maasai pastoralists similarly move between Kenya and Tanzania in accordance with ecological and cultural imperatives (Hirani, 2022).

Such mobility challenges state-centric migration governance. What states classify as irregular migration may represent legitimate assertions of territorial continuity and self-determination.

Forced and Internal Displacement

Development projects, extractive industries, conflict, conservation initiatives, climate disasters, habitat destruction, and genocidal acts disproportionately displace Indigenous communities (Riley & Carpenter, 2021). Difficulty securing legal recognition and territorial sovereignty exposes communities to violence (Bellier & Préaud, 2011; Berger, 2019; Riley & Carpenter, 2021), while human rights violations result in forced removal (Leyvras, 2020).

Large-scale dams, mining concessions, infrastructure projects, tourism, and conservation initiatives in Brazil, Mexico, Thailand, and Tanzania have produced expulsions and relocation (EMRIP, 2019). Such displacement may occur without crossing borders, yet still constitutes profound territorial rupture. For Indigenous Peoples, displacement disrupts governance systems, cosmologies, and community cohesion.

Stepwise Migration

Stepwise migration involves incremental relocation facilitated by social networks and accumulated capital (Massey et al., 1993; de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020). Among Indigenous populations, this pathway often reflects structural constraints including language barriers, educational disparities, and limited financial resources. Movement may proceed from remote communities to regional towns and later to national or international destinations. Migration is therefore strategic and phased rather than abrupt.

Return, Circularity and Short-Term Mobility

Return migration is central to Indigenous Peoples mobility systems. The International Organization for Migration highlights cyclical return patterns, often driven by ceremonial obligations, land stewardship, political participation, and kinship ties (Memmott et al., 2004; Yescas, 2010). Migrants frequently maintain governance and cultural participation despite residing elsewhere.

Short-distance circulation in Australia similarly reflects ceremonial obligations and service access rather than permanent relocation (Taylor & Bell, 2004). Mobility may therefore be normative and culturally embedded rather than transitional.

Cyclical Mobility

Lewis et al. (2024) identify cyclical migration among Alaska Native elders moving both from rural to urban communities and from urban to rural communities. Motivations include healthcare access, cultural practice, kinship obligations, and continued community leadership. Mobility here reflects Indigenous Peoples' identity and relational governance rather than economic displacement alone.

In summary, the literature demonstrates that Indigenous Peoples' mobility is multidirectional, cyclical, and relational. Rural-urban migration, seasonal labor, transborder movement, forced displacement, stepwise migration, and return patterns collectively challenge linear, state-centric migration models (Salazar & Gonzalez, 2021). Indigenous Peoples mobility foregrounds land-based identity, sovereignty, and historically structured inequality.

DOMINANT NARRATIVES ABOUT MIGRATION

Mainstream migration theory has historically marginalized Indigenous Peoples experiences. Its dominant assumptions inadequately reflect Indigenous realities (de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020). These include the view that migrants act as autonomous individuals rather than collectivities; that migration occurs between nation-states rather than across historically continuous Indigenous territories; that borders are fixed and legitimate; and that mobility is primarily driven by economic rationality.

Migrants as Individuals Rather than Collectives

Mainstream theory conceptualizes migrants as autonomous decision-makers guided by individual or household economic calculations (de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020). This framing marginalizes Indigenous Peoples, whose mobility decisions are often collective, shaped by kinship systems, clan obligations, and cultural responsibilities.

Seasonal and transborder movements may aim to maintain family cohesion, fulfill ceremonial obligations, or access shared resources rather than maximize income (Mezzanotti & Kvalvaag, 2022). Ignoring this collective dimension erases the communal logic underpinning Indigenous Peoples' mobility and risks policies that fail to accommodate community-based relocation or transboundary governance (Walter & Suina, 2019).

Movement Between Nation-States Rather Than Across Indigenous Territories

State-centric migration models assume movement between formally recognized countries, treating political borders as primary spatial frameworks (de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020). This erases Indigenous territoriality, as many homelands predate and span modern borders.

Sámi communities in Scandinavia, the Wayúu in northern South America, and the Karen in Southeast Asia navigate territories divided by colonial and postcolonial boundaries (EMRIP, 2019; IOM, 2023; IPMSDL, 2018). Framing mobility solely within nation-state terms criminalizes longstanding cross-border practices and delegitimizes Indigenous territorial continuity (Mezzanotti, Kvalvaag & Silva, 2025).

Borders as Natural and Legitimate

Dominant theories treat borders as fixed and neutral, overlooking their colonial origins (de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020). For Indigenous Peoples, borders frequently divide ancestral lands, sacred sites, and ecological systems central to governance and identity (Mezzanotti & Kvalvaag, 2022; Krauzman, 2022).

Caribbean Indigenous Peoples such as the Lokono and Wayana face restrictions on inter-island and cross-border movements because contemporary boundaries do not reflect precolonial maritime networks and territories (IOM, 2023). Treating borders as inherently legitimate obscures histories of dispossession and marginalizes Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty claims.

Mobility as Economic Rationality

Economic-centric models explain migration primarily through income disparity and labor demand (de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020). While economic factors influence Indigenous Peoples mobility, they do not capture its cultural, spiritual, and relational dimensions.

Migration may be motivated by subsistence cycles, ceremonial obligations, access to education or healthcare, and defense of collective land rights (IOM, 2008; UNPFII, 2007). In Puno, Peru, rural-to-urban migration reflects lack of services (34.4%), economic insufficiency (23.4%), and education (18.8%) (Ajrota et al., 2024). Mobility often carries emotional, political, and symbolic dimensions tied to land and kinship (Salazar & Gonzalez, 2021).

Reducing Indigenous Peoples' mobility to economic rationality renders these embedded motivations invisible in policy discourse.

CONSEQUENCES OF DOMINANT MIGRATION FRAMEWORKS

Neoclassical and assimilationist frameworks have shaped migration scholarship and policy but inadequately address Indigenous histories and political realities. The result is misrecognition, policy exclusion, and structural marginalization.

Intersectional Invisibility and Epistemic Erasure

Migration systems categorize individuals as "economic migrants," "temporary workers," or "refugees," without recognizing Indigenous Peoples' identity as analytically or administratively significant. Mezzanotti and Kvalvaag (2022) argue that such categorization reduces layered identities to singular classifications. They describe how Indigenous migrants fall between Indigenous Peoples' rights regimes and migrant rights frameworks, producing intersectional invisibility. The absence of disaggregated data and Indigenous-specific protections reinforces this marginalization.

Epistemic erasure is also embedded in scholarship and policy. Migration narratives in settler-colonial states prioritize immigrant integration while overlooking Indigenous mobility (Pellerin, 2019). Indigenous Peoples are implicitly constructed as territorially fixed, reproducing colonial assumptions equating Indigeneity with immobility (Salazar & Gonzalez, 2021).

Reproduction of Racial and Linguistic Hierarchies

Dominant frameworks obscure how racial and linguistic hierarchies structure Indigenous Peoples' mobility. Gómez Cervantes (2023) shows that Indigenous Mexican and Guatemalan migrants in the United States face compounded disadvantages shaped by race, language, and perceived illegality. Immigration systems often assume Spanish proficiency, marginalizing migrants whose primary languages are Indigenous, for example, Mayan.

Indigenous migrants thus experience discrimination both as migrants and as Indigenous Peoples whose identities are institutionally illegible. Economic rationality models fail to capture these structural inequalities.

Policy Gaps and Socioeconomic Vulnerabilities

Individualized migration frameworks contribute to policy gaps affecting Indigenous migrants. León-Pérez (2019) finds that internal migration among Indigenous populations in Mexico correlates with poorer health outcomes due to socioeconomic disadvantage and discrimination. Migration does not automatically yield upward mobility.

Walls and Whitbeck (2012) document long-term mental health and cultural impacts of forced relocation in the United States, with community narratives describing displacement as "loss that continues long after movement ends."

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme [UNHSP] (2010) reports that rural–urban migration often results in spatial segregation, precarious employment, and inadequate housing. Similarly, State of the World's Indigenous Peoples (UNDESA, 2009) highlights growing urbanization alongside persistent inequalities in services, land tenure, and political representation. Migration governance rarely integrates collective Indigenous Peoples' rights.

Labor Exploitation and Colonial Continuities

Arango (2025) situates Indigenous labor migration within histories of dispossession and economic marginalization. Indigenous labor is frequently undervalued and shaped by intersecting racism and structural exclusion.

Hagen and Minter (2020) describe development-induced displacement from dams, mining, and infrastructure projects as "another form of colonization." Relocation severs spiritual and territorial relationships and often forces migration into urban peripheries.

These analyses challenge economic models that naturalize migration as market participation, revealing it instead as structurally conditioned by colonial and development processes.

Territorial Disruption and Urban Transformation

Migration may disrupt spiritual and epistemic ties to ancestral lands, yet it can also generate innovation. The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA, 2007) frames migration as both disruptive and adaptive: while it often leads to discrimination, economic marginalization, and weakened territorial ties, migrants also carry knowledge and cultural practices that are re-created and transformed in urban contexts. While migration is a cultural disruption, it also offers continuity and change. For example, Yup'ik youth migrants describe migration as opportunity and loss, balancing education access with cultural continuity (Wyman, 2013).

Urban spaces may foster new community formation and political organizing, yet Indigenous migrants frequently face spatial marginalization and exclusion from services (UNHSP, 2010). Women and children may experience heightened vulnerability, many falling prey to human trafficking.

Importantly, Indigenous migrants often maintain ceremonial, social, and political ties to home communities after movement, challenging binary distinctions between origin and destination.

Exclusion from Governance

Migration regimes prioritize state sovereignty and border control, limiting Indigenous Peoples' participation. Policies affecting Indigenous territories are rarely designed through meaningful consultation. Although UNDESA (2009) emphasizes culturally grounded policy and Indigenous Peoples' participation, implementation remains uneven.

Intersectional invisibility, racialized governance, labor exploitation, territorial disruption, and limited decision-making power are structurally embedded in frameworks privileging nation-states, labor markets, and assimilation trajectories.

Reframing migration theory is therefore essential to recognize mobility as embedded in colonial histories, collective rights, and self-determination rather than solely economic adaptation.



GAPS IN KEY INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

The preceding discussion highlights a persistent implementation gap between existing international commitments and the lived realities of Indigenous migrants. Many international instruments already contain principles capable of addressing the harms produced by dominant migration narratives, yet these standards remain weakly operationalized within migration governance.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) affirms rights to self-determination, maintenance of political, legal, economic, social, and cultural institutions, and spiritual relationships with traditionally owned or occupied lands (Articles 3, 5, 25). These provisions challenge sedentary assumptions embedded in migration governance by recognizing relational and often transboundary territoriality. Despite this normative foundation, states rarely interpret border enforcement or migration controls in light of Indigenous Peoples' rights to maintain kinship, ceremonial, trade, and governance relations across divided territories. The gap lies not in the absence of standards, but in the failure to embed UNDRIP principles into migration law and border administration.

Similarly, ILO Convention No. 169 requires ratifying states to safeguard Indigenous institutions and to consult Indigenous Peoples in good faith on legislative or administrative measures affecting them (Articles 6–7). These obligations logically extend to migration and labor policies, particularly where extractive industries displace communities and generate labor mobility. Yet migration governance and bilateral labor agreements rarely incorporate Indigenous Peoples consultation or protections. Convention 169 provides a mechanism for embedding Indigenous Peoples' participation in migration-related decision-making, but remains underutilized in this domain.

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) calls for improved data (Objective 1), minimization of adverse drivers (Objective 2), and protection of migrants in vulnerable situations (Objective 7). These objectives are directly relevant to Indigenous migrants affected by land dispossession, environmental degradation, and economic marginalization. However, the GCM does not explicitly recognize Indigenous Peoples as distinct rights-holders under international law. As a result, Indigenous migrants are subsumed within generalized "vulnerable groups," reinforcing invisibility. Alignment with UNDRIP would require explicit Indigenous identifiers in migration data systems, recognition of colonial dispossession as a structural driver, and safeguards for culturally embedded mobility.

The Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) provides important guidance on cross-border rights and participation but its impact on migration policymaking depends on States' willingness to cooperate, reflecting weak integration between Indigenous Peoples' rights mechanisms and migration governance bodies. Greater institutional coordination would enhance policy coherence.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goals 1, 8, 10, and 16, and the commitment to "leave no one behind," offer entry points for inclusion. However, SDG indicators rarely capture Indigenous-specific mobility patterns, especially cyclical and circular

movement. Without disaggregated data aligned with Indigenous Peoples' data sovereignty principles, Indigenous migrants remain statistically invisible, undermining accountability.

Business and human rights frameworks, including the Report of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises on labor migration, emphasize due diligence and protection against exploitation. For Indigenous migrants, whose mobility is often linked to extractive displacement, these standards are critical. Yet corporate accountability mechanisms rarely assess how land dispossession and environmental harm function as migration drivers. Indigenous-specific due diligence remains largely absent.

Collectively, these instruments demonstrate that the normative architecture already exists. UNDRIP affirms collective rights and territorial integrity; ILO Convention 169 mandates consultation; the GCM calls for data and rights-based governance; EMRIP provides expert guidance; the SDGs require inclusion; and business and human rights frameworks articulate corporate obligations. The central challenge is not norm creation, but integration.

Bridging this gap requires reframing migration governance through an Indigenous Peoples' rights lens: recognizing cyclical mobility as governance practice; non-discrimination, embedding free, prior, and informed consent in development and labor policies; mandating disaggregated and community-controlled data systems; and ensuring corporate accountability for displacement-induced migration. The task ahead is integrative. Coherent implementation across migration, development, human rights, and corporate governance regimes is essential if international frameworks are to meaningfully address Indigenous Peoples' mobility.

Indigenous Peoples' Response: Business, Human Rights, and Indigenous Migration

The submission of the Indigenous Peoples Major Group for Sustainable Development (IPMG) offers a rights-based intervention that centers the structural drivers of Indigenous Peoples' migration, particularly those linked to corporate practices, extractive industries, and state–business collusion. Rather than framing migration primarily through vulnerability or service delivery, the IPMG situates Indigenous labor mobility within a political economy of displacement, emphasizing land grabbing, environmental degradation, agribusiness expansion, and large-scale development projects as structural pressures.

From an Indigenous Peoples' perspective, the submission advances a collective-rights lens largely absent from mainstream migration governance. It connects labor exploitation in destination countries to dispossession in origin territories, revealing a continuum of harm: from land loss to labor devaluation, economic insecurity, and racially stratified labor regimes. Indigenous migrants experience layered discrimination: as migrants, as low-wage workers, and as Indigenous Peoples whose governance systems and cultural identities are rendered invisible in both labor and migration frameworks. Meaningful protection, therefore, must begin with safeguarding land rights, territorial integrity, and self-determination.

A key contribution of the IPMG submission is its insistence that Indigenous-specific standards, particularly those articulated in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including self-determination and Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), apply to business and migration governance. It challenges the assumption that general labor protections are sufficient, arguing that corporate accountability must address the conditions that force migration, including displacement and erosion of subsistence economies.

The submission advances a transformative vision: Indigenous migrants are not merely vulnerable workers, but members of peoples whose mobility reflects unresolved struggles over land, sovereignty, and development. Protecting Indigenous migrants thus requires more than ethical recruitment or workplace safeguards; it demands confronting the structural drivers embedded in corporate-led development models. By situating labor migration within broader struggles for territorial rights and environmental justice, the IPMG reframes protection from harm reduction to structural redress.

DATA INVISIBILITY OF INDIGENOUS MIGRANTS AND ITS IMPACT

A critical dimension of Indigenous Peoples' migration is the lack of both quantitative and qualitative, disaggregated data. Across rural–urban, seasonal, cross-border, forced displacement, circular, and return pathways, Indigenous migrants remain undercounted and under-studied. This dual invisibility is not merely methodological; it reflects structural biases embedded in dominant migration governance, producing policy neglect and reproducing colonial hierarchies.

Migration data systems rely on state-centric categories—nationality, birthplace, visa status—and rarely include Indigenous Peoples' identity. When ethnicity is recorded, Indigenous Peoples are often aggregated into broad racial or linguistic classifications, erasing collective identities. The consequences of statistical invisibility include:

1. Under-counting due to inappropriate categories, language barriers, distrust of authorities, or informal settlement residence.
2. Misclassification of cross-border mobility, erasing ancestral territorial continuity.
3. Policy invisibility, as governments lack empirical bases to design targeted interventions.

Absence of disaggregated data undermines health, education, labor, housing and urban planning, and gender-based protections. Reliance on aggregate data masks structural disparities and hinders corrective policy measures.

Research has privileged macro-economic and state-produced datasets, often overlooking lived experiences. This omission obscures cultural, spiritual, and relational dimensions of mobility, including cyclical or circular migration patterns embedded in kinship networks. Circular or return migration may be misinterpreted as instability or failure, reinforcing assimilationist assumptions.

Without Indigenous Peoples identifiers, vulnerabilities remain unseen, policies target generalized migrant categories, and marginalization persists. Across migration pathways:

- Rural–urban statistics may mask spatial segregation or language exclusion.
- Seasonal labor data may obscure hazardous work concentrations.
- Cross-border mobility may be absorbed into national counts, erasing ancestral mobility rights.
- Development-induced displacement rarely captures Indigenous status, masking disproportionate impacts.

Enhancing Indigenous Peoples' data systems is critical but requires careful consideration of ethical safeguards and community protection. Indigenous communities have experienced extractive research and surveillance. Expanding data collection without safeguards risks exacerbating vulnerability. Indigenous Peoples' data sovereignty emphasizes community control, culturally appropriate methodologies, and free, prior, and informed consent.

Research practices and data gathering techniques to address invisibility require structural reform:

- Include Indigenous Peoples identifiers in data systems with participatory safeguards.
- Require disaggregated indicators in international monitoring frameworks.
- Employ community-based, participatory research centering Indigenous epistemologies.
- Involve Indigenous Peoples' governance bodies in data design and policy processes.

Improving data is not technical alone; it redefines whose mobility counts and whose knowledge is authoritative. Recognizing Indigenous migrants as rights-bearing collectives requires transforming both measurement systems and migration theory.

The lack of qualitative and quantitative data constitutes a structural barrier to justice. It perpetuates intersectional invisibility, obscures structural inequalities, and reinforces colonial assumptions. Transforming migration governance requires reconfiguring data systems to recognize Indigenous Peoples' mobility as historically grounded, territorially embedded, and politically significant. Making Indigenous migrants visible consistent with collective rights and self-determination is essential for policies that move beyond the constraints of dominant migration paradigms.

A notable effort is the Indigenous Navigator that provides a framework and a set of tools to monitor data by and for Indigenous Peoples. Data gathered by the Indigenous Navigator reveals that Indigenous Peoples continue to face dispossession, removal and relocation from their lands and territories, often without adequate consultation, compensation or restitution.

POLICY GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Structural Policy Gaps

Despite an existing international normative architecture capable of protecting Indigenous Peoples in migration pathways, significant policy gaps persist. These gaps are not primarily due to absence of standards, but to fragmentation, state-centric implementation, and failure to integrate Indigenous Peoples' collective rights into migration governance.

1. Fragmentation Between Indigenous Peoples' Rights and Migration Governance

Indigenous Peoples' rights instruments (e.g., UNDRIP, ILO 169) operate largely in parallel to migration governance regimes (e.g., GCM, border enforcement systems, labor agreements). Migration policy rarely incorporates Indigenous-specific standards such as self-determination, territorial continuity, or Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC).

Gap: Indigenous migrants are treated as vulnerable individuals rather than as members of rights-bearing peoples.

2. Invisibility in Data and Policy Design

Most migration systems do not disaggregate data by Indigenous identity. Cross-border Indigenous Peoples' mobility is misclassified as conventional international migration. Circular and cyclical mobility patterns are poorly captured.

Gap: Policy frameworks lack the empirical basis to recognize Indigenous-specific migration patterns, vulnerabilities, and contributions.

3. Failure to Address Structural Drivers

Migration governance focuses on border management and labor market integration, while structural drivers like land dispossession, extractive industries, development-induced displacement, and climate change remain insufficiently addressed within migration policy.

Gap: Indigenous labor migration is regulated at the point of employment but not at the point of dispossession.

4. Criminalization of Transboundary Indigenous Peoples' Mobility

Border enforcement regimes often criminalize mobility across territories historically unified prior to state formation. Indigenous Peoples' cross-border movement is treated as irregular migration rather than as continuity of ancestral territorial practices.

Gap: State sovereignty is prioritized over Indigenous territorial continuity.

5. Limited Indigenous Peoples' Participation in Migration Policymaking

Migration policies affecting Indigenous territories are rarely designed with meaningful Indigenous Peoples consultation.

Gap: Implementation deficit in participation and FPIC in migration-related governance.

6. Weak Corporate Accountability for Displacement-Induced Migration

Business and human rights frameworks emphasize due diligence in labor recruitment but rarely assess how corporate activities function as migration drivers.

Gap: Corporate accountability mechanisms do not adequately address Indigenous Peoples' displacement as a precursor to migration.

7. Gendered and Intergenerational Invisibility in Migration Governance

Migration governance frameworks acknowledge gender and child protection in general terms, yet rarely operationalize these protections through an Indigenous Peoples' rights lens. Indigenous women, children, youth, persons with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ experience compounded vulnerabilities shaped by colonial histories, racialized labor markets, linguistic exclusion, and territorial displacement.

Indigenous women migrants face heightened risks of exploitation and gender-based violence. Indigenous children and youth experience disruption of language transmission, cultural continuity, and access to culturally grounded education. Persons with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ face discrimination in labor markets due to ableism, homophobia/transphobia, and racialized exclusion.

Gap: Migration governance insufficiently integrates Indigenous-specific persons with disabilities, gender and child rights protections, resulting in intersectional invisibility and long-term cultural harm.



Policy Recommendations

Addressing these gaps requires integrative implementation across migration, development, corporate governance, and human rights regimes.

A. Integrating Indigenous Rights into Migration Governance

1. Explicitly recognize Indigenous Peoples as collective rights-holders in national migration strategies and GCM implementation plans.
2. Review border and migration laws for compliance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, particularly provisions on territorial rights and cultural continuity.
3. Incorporate Indigenous Peoples' mobility protections into bilateral border and labor agreements.

B. Addressing Structural Drivers

4. Embed FPIC requirements in development projects with foreseeable displacement impacts, consistent with UNDRIP, International Labour Organization Convention No. 169, and International Human Rights Treaties.
5. Require corporate human rights due diligence to assess and publicly report how operations contribute to Indigenous Peoples' displacement and migration.

C. Data Reform and Indigenous Peoples' Data Sovereignty

6. Incorporate voluntary self-identification of Indigenous status in migration data systems, consistent with Indigenous Peoples' data governance and sovereignty principles, regardless of whether they are recognized as such in their own countries.
7. Mandate Indigenous-disaggregated indicators in implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the Sustainable Development Goals.
8. Support Indigenous-led research, monitoring mechanisms and community-based participatory methodologies in migration studies, including the Indigenous Navigator that gathers data and provides context on the drivers of migration.

D. Protecting Mobility Across Pathways

9. Recognize cyclical, circular, and seasonal Indigenous Peoples' mobility as legitimate governance practices rather than irregular or unstable migration.
10. Ensure transferability and continuity of social protection benefits across rural–urban and cross-border contexts.
11. Develop culturally grounded urban service systems that support language access, housing security, and community organization.

E. Advancing Gender-Responsive and Intergenerational Protections

12. Integrate Indigenous women's rights protections into migration governance in alignment with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN, 1979) and fully and effectively implement CEDAW General Recommendation No. 39 on the rights if Indigenous women and girls..
13. Align migration policy with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) while recognizing collective cultural rights, including:
    - Access to mother-tongue education
    - Prohibition of detention of Indigenous children
    - Culturally grounded psychosocial services
14. Recognize Indigenous youth mobility for education, circular labor, and political participation as part of collective continuity rather than assimilation.

F. Strengthening Indigenous Peoples' Participation in Governance

15. Establish formal Indigenous Peoples advisory bodies within migration ministries and border agencies.
16. Ensure representation in bilateral labor migration agreements affecting Indigenous populations.
17. Strengthen coordination between EMRIP, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and migration governance bodies.
18. Include Indigenous Peoples' migration issues in Human Rights Council reporting cycles.

G. From Vulnerability to Self-Determination

Finally, migration policy must shift from a vulnerability-centered paradigm to one grounded in self-determination and territorial justice.

Indigenous Peoples' mobility should be recognized as:

- A continuation of ancestral territorial systems;
- A strategy of resilience amid dispossession;
- A governance practice embedded in collective identity;
- A political expression of sovereignty.

Policy responses must therefore protect not only migrants in transit and destination, but also communities at origin whose dispossession drives movement.

Concluding Policy Imperative

The standards necessary to protect Indigenous Peoples in migration pathways already exist across the following international instruments:

- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- International Labour Organization Convention No. 169
- Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration
- Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- Sustainable Development Goals

The challenge is coherence and integrative implementation across migration, development, corporate governance, and human rights systems. Migration governance must move beyond vulnerability-centered approaches toward a framework grounded in:

- Collective rights
- Territorial continuity
- Structural justice
- Meaningful participation
- Intergenerational equity

Without such integration and grounding, migration policy risks reproducing the very colonial hierarchies that have historically structured Indigenous Peoples' displacement. Only by embedding Indigenous Peoples' collective rights into migration governance can policy move beyond managing movement toward advancing justice.

References

Ajrota, L., Ari, C., Incacutipa, W. & Cutipa, R. (2024). *Migration from Rural to Urban: Case Analysis of the Peasant Community of Antacahua, Puno-2024* (arXiv:2402.03341v1). arXiv. https://arxiv.org/abs/2402.03341

Arango, L. (2025). Indigenous migrant labourers and land: towards an exploration of indigenous' socio-cultural reproduction in the Colombian *Altillanura*. *Agriculture and Human Values, 42*(4), 2375–2395. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-024-10693-x

Bellier, I., & Préaud, M. (2012). Emerging issues in Indigenous rights: Transformative effects of the recognition of Indigenous peoples. *The International Journal of Human Rights, 16*(3), 474–488. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2011.574616

Berger, D. N. (Ed.). (2019). *The Indigenous world 2019*. International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA).

de Campos, M. B., Ventura Santos, R., Vilela, E. M., Ayer de Noronha, C. L., Okamoto da Silva, L., Coimbra Jr., C. E. A., Bastos, J. L., & Welch, J. R. (2021). *Indigenous migration patterns in Brazil based on the 2010 national demographic census: Analysis and critical reflection.* SN Social Sciences, 1, 257. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-021-00264-w

de Haas, H., Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (2020). *The age of migration: International movements in the modern world* (6th ed.). Red Globe Press.

EMRIP. (2019). *Indigenous peoples' rights in the context of borders, migration, and displacement*. United Nations Human Rights Council. https://www.iitc.org/wp-content/uploads/Indigenous-peoples%E2%80%99-rights-in-the-context-of-borders-migration-and-displacement-EMRIP-Study-2019.pdf

Gómez Cervantes, A. (2023). Language, race, and illegality: Indigenous migrants navigating the immigration regime in a new destination. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 49*(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1968294

Hagen, R. V. & Minter, T. (2020). Displacement in the name of development: Indigenous land rights, displacement, and migration dynamics. *Third World Quarterly, 41*(10), 1721–1738. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1768397

Hirani, H. R. (2022). *Global warming impacts displacing the Maasai community in East Africa: Challenges and responses.* Revista Tecnológica ESPOL – RTE. Retrieved from http://portal.amelica.org/ameli/journal/844/8445030008/html

Indigenous Navigator. (n.d.). *Indigenous Navigator*. https://indigenousnavigator.org/

Indigenous Peoples Major Group for Sustainable Development [IPMG]. (n.d.). *Submission to the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights: Thematic report on labour migration, business, and human rights*. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/business/workinggroupbusiness/cfis/labour-migration/subm-labour-migration-business-cso-indigenous-peoples-major-group.pdf

Indigenous Peoples' Movement for Self-Determination and Liberation [IPMSDL]. (2018, August 21). *The Karen struggle for self-determination in Kawthoolei*. https://www.ipmsdl.org/campaign/the-karen-struggle-for-self-determination-in-kawthoolei/

International Labour Organization [ILO]. (1989). *Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries*.

International Organization for Migration. (2008). *Indigenous routes: A framework for understanding Indigenous migration*. IOM.

International Organization for Migration. (2023). *Invisible Movements: Recommendations for Facilitating the Cross-Border Migration of Indigenous Peoples in the Caribbean.* IOM.

International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs [IWGIA]. (2007). *Indigenous Affairs, 3/07: Migration*. IWGIA. https://iwgia.org/images/publications/IA_3-07_Migration.pdf

Krauzman, M. (2022, May 2). *International borders: Dividing lines for Indigenous Peoples' rights*. Universal Rights Group. Retrieved [your access date], from https://www.universal-rights.org/international-borders-dividing-lines-for-indigenous-peoples-rights/

León-Pérez, G. (2019). *Internal migration and the health of Indigenous Mexicans: A longitudinal study*. SSM - Population Health, 8, 100407. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2019.100407

Lewis, J. P., Kim, S., Asquith-Heinz, Z. & Thompson, L. (2024). Cyclical migration in Alaska Native elders and its impact on well-being. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B, 79*(3), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbad072

Leyvraz, A.-C. (2020). 'Indigenous Peoples' rights in the context of borders, migration and displacement': A UN Study on Indigenous Migration. *Oxford Monitor of Forced Migration, 8*(2), 24–29.

Leza, C. (2019, March 19). *How a border wall would separate Indigenous communities*. Pacific Standard. https://psmag.com/social-justice/a-border-wall-would-separate-indigenous-communities

Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A., & Taylor, J. E. (1993). *"Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal." Population and Development Review*, *19*(3), 431–466.

Memmott, P., Long, S., Bell, M., Taylor, J., & Brown, D. (2004). *Between places: Indigenous mobility in remote and rural Australia* (AHURI Positioning Paper No. 81). Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. https://www.ahuri.edu.au/sites/default/files/migration/documents/AHURI_Positioning_Paper_No81_Between_places_Indigenous_mobility_in_remote_and_rural_Australia.pdf

Mezzanotti, M., & Kvalvaag, I. (2022). *From transnational to trans-Indigenous: A critical analysis of the role of categorization and everyday coloniality in Indigenous mobilities*. Nordic Journal of Human Rights, 40(3), 461–480.

Mezzanotti, G., Kvalvaag, A. M., & Silva, J. C. J. (2025). From transnational to trans-Indigenous: A critical analysis of the role of categorization and everyday coloniality in Indigenous mobilities. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 48*(4), 859–882. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2404491

Oliver-Smith, A. (2009). *Development & dispossession: The crisis of forced displacement and resettlement*. School for Advanced Research Press.

Pellerin, H. (2019). Indigenous peoples in Canadian migration narratives: A story of marginalization. *aboriginal policy studies, 8*(1), 3–24. https://doi.org/10.5663/aps.v8i1.29347

Riley, A. R., & Carpenter, K. A. (2021). Decolonizing Indigenous migration. *California Law Review, 109*(1), 63–102. https://scholar.law.colorado.edu/faculty-articles/1319

Salazar, G., & González, P. (2021). New mobility paradigm and Indigenous construction of places: Physical and symbolic mobility of Aymara groups in the urbanization process, Chile. *Sustainability, 13*(8), 4382. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13084382

Taylor, J., & Bell, M. (2004). Continuity and change in Indigenous Australian population mobility. In J. Taylor & M. Bell (Eds.), *Population mobility and Indigenous peoples in Australasia and North America* (pp. 13–43). Routledge.

UNESCO. (n.d.). *International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples.* UNESCO. https://www.unesco.org/en/days/worlds-indigenous-peoples

United Nations. (1979). *Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women*. Adopted December 18, 1979; entered into force September 3, 1981. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women

United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child*. Adopted November 20, 1989; entered into force September 2, 1990. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child

United Nations. (2007). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA]. (2009). *State of the world's indigenous peoples*. https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/SOWIP/en/SOWIP_web.pdf

UN-Habitat. (2010). *Urban Indigenous peoples and migration: Challenges and opportunities*. United Nations Human Settlements Programme. https://unhabitat.org

United Nations Human Rights Council. (2019, September 18). *Indigenous peoples' rights in the context of borders, migration and displacement: Study of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (A/HRC/EMRIP/2019/2/Rev.1). United Nations. https://undocs.org/A/HRC/EMRIP/2019/2/Rev.1

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. (2007, May). *Urban Indigenous peoples and migration: Challenges and opportunities* (Factsheet, 6th session of the UNPFII). United Nations. https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/6_session_factsheet2.pdf

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues & International Labour Organization. (2006). *Indigenous and tribal peoples and migration* (Workshop paper, Fifth Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, May 2006). https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/workshop_ipm_ilo.pdf

Walls, M. L., & Whitbeck, L. B. (2012). *The intergenerational effects of relocation policies on Indigenous families. Journal of Family Issues, 33*(9), 1272–1293. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X12447178

Walter, M., & Suina, M. (2019). Indigenous data sovereignty. *Statistical Journal of the IAOS, 35*(2), 171–180. https://doi.org/10.3233/SJI-180512

World Bank. (2015). *Indigenous peoples overview.* https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/145891467991974540/pdf/Indigenous-Latin-America-in-the-twenty-first-century-the-first-decade.pdf

Wyman, L. T. (2013). Indigenous youth migration and language contact. *International Multilingual Research Journal, 7*(1), 66–82. https://doi.org/10.1080/19313152.2013.748859

Yescas, C. (2010, May 13). *Hidden in plain sight: Indigenous migrants, their movements and their challenges.* Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/hidden-plain-sight-indigenous-migrants-their-movements-and-their-challenges

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES MAJOR GROUP
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR POLICY, RESEARCH AND EDUCATION
TEBTEBBA



Funded by
the European Union