



POLICY BRIEF 01

Climate Justice for Mindanao:

Centering Indigenous Peoples Rights and Environmental Protection

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Executive Summary

Mindanao faces a compound crisis of climate vulnerability, environmental degradation, and systemic injustice.

Despite contributing minimally to global emissions, Indigenous Peoples (IPs), including the Lumad and the Bangsamoro, and rural communities have been disproportionately affected by extractivism, militarisation and climate change. Without urgent structural reforms, Mindanao's future independence and sustainability are at risk. This brief calls for a shift from extractive development models to Indigenous-led, rights-based climate action. To achieve this, the Philippine government must dismantle harmful legal regimes, uphold indigenous rights and embed community-led solutions at the center of climate governance.



A Land Under Siege:

Climate and Rights in Mindanao

Known as the "Land of Promise," Mindanao is rich in natural resources but suffers from severe climate vulnerability driven by extractive industries, militarized development, and systemic land dispossession. Despite its global biodiversity significance, the island now finds itself at the brink of environmental collapse. The World Risk Index 2024 ranks the Philippines as the most at-risk country globally for climate-related disasters, with Mindanao facing heightened vulnerabilities due to its geography, poverty rates, and resource-driven conflicts.

Climate change impacts in Mindanao are deeply intertwined with human rights violations, as IPs and rural communities are systematically displaced and denied their rights to self-determination and environmental protection. Despite these glaring realities, there has been limited scrutiny of the Philippine government's role in perpetuating these vulnerabilities through contradictory policies, militarized development, and weak climate governance.

This policy brief addresses these gaps in legislation by advocating for transformative and inclusive approaches that prioritize justice, community leadership, and systemic reform. It outlines key findings, strategic policy recommendations, and an urgent call to action positioning Mindanao's frontline communities not as passive victims but as powerful agents of resilience and justice.

RESEARCH APPROACH

This brief draws on secondary data from international climate risk indices, national government reports, academic articles, and submissions to United Nations mechanisms.

FINDINGS

Analysis of secondary data confirms that Mindanao's Indigenous and rural populations suffer intensified climate risks not solely due to environmental factors, but due to governance failures, development aggression, and militarization. While protective laws exist, government policies frequently prioritize extractive industries and security agendas over Indigenous rights and environmental protection.

The lack of meaningful participation in and rights-based approaches to indigenous advocacy efforts underscores the urgent need for institutional reforms to achieve true climate justice—and to embed community-led solutions at the center of climate governance. Without transformative action grounded in Indigenous rights and local leadership, climate governance will remain hollow—falling not only those most affected, but the broader goal of just and lasting resilience

Climate Impacts and Human Rights Violations in Mindanao

Climate Vulnerability and Environmental Degradation

Despite Mindanao's wealth in natural resources, it remains one of the poorest regions in the Philippines. Here, environmental vulnerability intersects with structural inequality. The island contributes 43% of the country's agricultural output and hosts over half of its mineral wealth.

Yet, more than 80% of its original forest cover has been lost to commercial logging and mining. Key biodiversity areas such as Mt. Apo and the Pantaron Mountain Range, home to endangered species, are increasingly threatened by habitat destruction, mining, and poaching.

One notable case is the post-siege reconstruction in Marawi, where rushed infrastructure projects raised concerns about environmental degradation and excluded displaced Meranaw families from reconstruction efforts. For example, the Agus Hydroelectric Power Plant has threatened the biological systems of the Agus River, a body of water with considerable environmental, economic, and cultural importance not only to the Lanao del Sur province and the Bangsamoro but to the Philippines altogether.

Development Aggression and Resource Exploitation

Mindanao's economy has been shaped by extractive industries and infrastructure expansion projects that prioritize corporate profit over community welfare and environmental integrity. The region remains dependent on coal, with 90% of its electricity still generated from fossil fuels, despite national plans to increase renewable energy.

Large-scale projects under the "Build, Build, Build" program often proceed without proper consultations or Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), which is guaranteed under both Philippine law and international human rights standards. The Samal Island-Davao City Connector Bridge, for example, threatens fragile marine ecosystems and Indigenous territories.

Additionally, large-scale plantation agriculture has displaced Indigenous farmers, degraded soil, and heightened vulnerability to climate change. The remoteness of affected areas and lack of proper consultation hinder full understanding of these projects' impacts on Indigenous communities.

Militarization and Human Rights Violations

Militarization enables development aggression in Mindanao. Under Executive Order 70 and the Anti-Terrorism Act, Indigenous resistance to mining, logging, and plantations has been criminalized, leading to red-tagging, harassment, forced displacement, and the closure of over 200 Lumad schools since 2016.

The case of the Talaingod 13 exemplifies these abuses, showcasing the wrongful conviction of Indigenous educators seeking to protect Lumad students as well as their right to environmental knowledge.

Due to ongoing militarization and criminalization of Indigenous resistance, many human rights violations, including forced displacement, extrajudicial killings, and harassment go unreported. This lack of documentation limits efforts to hold perpetrators accountable.

Policy Gaps and Recommendations for Stakeholders

Climate change impacts and human rights violations in Mindanao result not only from policy failures but from policy contradictions. Laws meant to protect people and ecosystems are undermined by authorities who actively incentivize exploitation, erode Indigenous sovereignty, and securitize dissent.

At the international level, the Philippine government has failed to uphold commitments under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Paris Agreement, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. These instruments affirm IPs' rights to land, culture, and participation in climate action; children's rights to protection and education; and defenders' rights to organize without threat.

However, Indigenous communities in Mindanao continue to be forcibly displaced, denied FPIC, and subjected to harassment, red-tagging, and extrajudicial killings.

Domestically, the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) remains poorly implemented and is routinely undermined by the Philippine Mining Act of 1995, Executive Order 70, and the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020. These laws prioritize national security and corporate investment over human rights and environmental integrity.

The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), tasked with protecting Indigenous rights, faces chronic underfunding, limited autonomy, and widespread allegations of complicity with military and corporate interests.



The Anti-Terrorism Act and the operations of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) have created a climate of fear. The law's vague definition of terrorism enables the state to label legitimate advocacy as subversion, justifying surveillance, arrests, and even killings. This has undermined community-led climate activism, displaced schools and communities, and criminalized Indigenous education.

These legal contradictions reflect a governance model that treats Indigenous and environmental rights as obstacles to economic policy. The state's development paradigm—founded on extraction, militarization, and elite-corporate partnerships—is fundamentally at odds with its climate and human rights obligations.

To achieve climate justice in Mindanao, the Government of the Philippines must:



Dismantle legal regimes that enable impunity and environmental destruction, including the Philippine Mining Act and the Anti-Terrorism Law



Strengthen the enforcement of Indigenous Peoples' rights and ensure that institutions mandated to uphold them, as well as actors responsible for violations, are held accountable for FPIC violations and ancestral land exploitation



Ensure genuine, community-defined representation within the NCIP, Local Government Units, and other relevant bodies



Recognise IPs not just as stakeholders, but as rights-holders and knowledge-holders, including through their active inclusion in climate adaptation strategies;



Reorient environmental and climate policy from top-down, technocratic interventions to community-led, culturally-rooted, and rights-based approaches.

Advocacy Strategies for Indigenous Protection

Addressing the climate crisis in Mindanao requires transforming the systems that have enabled ecological collapse and social injustice. This means building power from the ground up, centering those who have long protected the land despite violence and neglect.

Grounded strategies based on the lived experiences of IPs include:



Research and Knowledge Generation

Conduct studies and investigations to analyze how climate injustice affects IPs and intersects with **conflict**. Support decentralized renewable energy production, restore and protect Lumad schools as environmental education centers, and implement adaptation projects based on Indigenous **knowledge**.



Community-led Interventions

Strengthen grassroots climate resilience through locally managed renewable energy system, community-driven revival of Lumad educational spaces as hubs for environmental learning and cultural continuity.



Collaborative Partnerships

Foster genuine collaboration across sectors, build the capacity of communities and local actors, and promote advocacy campaigns that center climate justice, sustainability, and human **rights**.

*This policy brief highlights key findings from the research paper **Climate Justice in Mindanao: Addressing Challenges and Imperatives**. It was prepared by University of York interns Emily Heiser and Yordanos Asfaw, with research guidance and support from the Mindanao Climate Justice Resource Facility, Inc. (MCJ).*



The Mindanao Climate Justice Resource Facility, Inc. (MCJ), based in Manila, supports marginalized and Indigenous communities in Mindanao, Philippines.

Through partnerships and advocacy, MCJ works to advance climate justice, human rights, and community resilience, especially for the Lumad and Bangsamoro—linking environmental protection with equity, dignity, and social transformation.

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