



# How Indigenous Movements (Can) Make a Difference for Development

**Matthias vom Hau**

Institut Barcelona Estudis Internacionals (IBEI), Spain



**Indigenous poverty reduction cannot be achieved solely through the instigation of economic growth or demand-side social programs such as conditional cash transfers.**

Recent decades have witnessed a striking transformation. In the Global South, and especially in Latin America, indigenous peoples have become a formidable political force in their own right, something unthinkable even a generation ago. Their movements, parties, and civic associations constitute important public voices and make indigenous demands heard, and in some countries—the most prominent example being Bolivia—indigenous leaders have been elected to highest public office.

At the same time, indigenous destitution still persists. Recent research shows that in most developing countries indigenous peoples remain among the poorest citizens. And even countries that have experienced substantial progress in the eradication of income-based poverty—Peru comes to mind here—the poverty gap between indigenous and non-indigenous people continues to be as stark as 10 or 20 years ago.

Does this mean that indigenous political activism does little to improve the wellbeing of indigenous people? My research points to a more nuanced perspective. Indigenous movements can and (under certain conditions) do make a difference for indigenous welfare. They primarily achieve impact by enabling indigenous communities to gain public visibility and challenge existing power relations, and transforming the ways in which policymakers and the development community understand and evaluate indigenous poverty.

## **How Indigenous Mobilization Matters**

It is important to realize that poverty reduction as such does not feature prominently in the claims made by indigenous movements. Their demands primarily focus on communal landownership, in many if not most Latin American countries a constitutional right since the 1990s. Motivated by the recent (re)emergence of national development models organized around raw material extraction, indigenous activists and organizations primarily seek the implementation of communal land rights to achieve tenure security and establish control over the use of natural resources found in the territories they consider historically theirs.

Even though in most cases indigenous movements are far from achieving this goal, their struggles already have had significant consequences. For example, in parts of Argentina, indigenous land rights activism has led local communities to stop paying pasture rents to large landlords, a practice that was widespread until very recently. Ending these payments brought some modest economic improvements, yet the most important consequence was symbolic empowerment. It established indigenous communities as a political reality to be reckoned with.

Moreover, in the few Argentine indigenous communities that already secured a land title, formal titling has provided them with a crucial legal resource in struggles for access to public housing and the improvement of services that otherwise would not have been accessible to them.

Indigenous demands also pose a challenge to mainstream conceptions of indigenous poverty. By associating indigenous wellbeing with communal land rights and natural resource control, indigenous movements depart from income-based, individualized conceptualizations of poverty and introduce a different way of understanding of indigenous destitution and its causes. As recent research on Ecuador and Bolivia illustrates, indigenous movements can shift the nature of public debate and transform the ways in which other actors, whether policymakers, other social movements or ordinary citizens, think and talk about indigenous destitution and development.

### Actionable Implications

The understandings of wellbeing and poverty advanced by indigenous movements call for a reassessment of prevailing approaches to overcome indigenous destitution. Indigenous poverty reduction cannot be achieved solely through the instigation of economic growth or demand-side social programs such as conditional cash transfers. Gains from these currently dominant strategies will remain shallow unless policy makers take the diagnosis of indigenous activists seriously and complement existing policies with the implementation of indigenous land rights and the consultation of local indigenous communities about the use of natural resources in those lands. More generally, such an alternative approach to indigenous poverty reduction also implies a critical reassessment of natural resource-based development models.

Even though an immediate modification of current policies may not be viable, policymakers have another feasible option: support indigenous movements in the process of inserting their demands for communal land rights into public debates and make indigenous understandings of wellbeing and poverty heard more widely. Recent research in sociology has found that social movements are more likely to influence public discourse if they have the organizational capacities necessary to devise clever communication strategies and mount sustained public campaigns, and encounter state officials that see movement demands as furthering their own goals (e.g., fostering of favorable public opinion, the formation of new electoral coalitions, legitimization of state agencies and their mission). Seen in this light, policymakers would benefit from strengthening indigenous community organizations while also transforming the wider political context in which indigenous mobilization unfolds.

### CONTACT:

**Matthias vom Hau**  
Institut Barcelona Estudis  
Internacionals (IBEI)  
mvomhau@ibeil.org

### About this Brief

The author would like to thank the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación (MICINN) in Spain (Grant No. CSO2011-28387) for its generous funding of research leading up to this brief.

### Further Readings:

Amenta, Edwin. 2006. *When Movements Matter: The Townsend Plan and the Rise of Social Security*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cress, Daniel M., and David A. Snow. 2000. "The Outcomes of Homeless Mobilization: The Influence of Organization, Disruption, Political Mediation, and Framing." *American Journal of Sociology*, 1063-1104.

Hall, Gillette, and Harry A. Patrinos. 2012. *Indigenous Peoples, Poverty and Development*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

vom Hau, Matthias. 2016. "Advancing While Loosing: Indigenous Land Claims and Development in Argentina." Pp. 173-190 in Rae Blumberg and Samuel Cohn, eds., *Development in Crisis: Threats to Human Well Being in the Global South and the Global North*. London: Routledge.



*Opinions expressed are those of the author(s); not the Section on the Sociology of Development nor the American Sociological Association.*