

Vulnerable Populations

Everyone faces impacts inflicted by climate change, including compromised health, well-being, and safety. However, the most severe harms fall disproportionately upon populations who are least able to prepare for, cope with, and recover from climate-related impacts. Worse yet, these populations generally *contribute the least* to climate change.

Who makes up these populations? What causes their vulnerability? And why is it critically important to empower them? Understanding these populations can help inform the equitable responses needed to increase their resilience to climate change impacts *and* aid in confronting climate change. Here, we explore these questions for Indigenous peoples, women and girls, and other socially vulnerable populations.

Indigenous peoples

Indigenous peoples are the direct descendants of the earliest known inhabitants of a specific geographic region. These distinct cultural groups share ancestral ties to the lands, natural resources, and biodiversity where they live or from which they were displaced. Their identities, well-being, livelihoods, and cultures are shaped by the places they come from.

Larger cultural groups have been colonizing Indigenous peoples' homelands for hundreds of years. Today, Indigenous communities are often sited on the front lines against deforestation, mining, gas extraction, and the expansion of conventional agriculture. Despite contributing the least to greenhouse gas emissions from these kinds of activities, Indigenous communities worldwide are among the most dramatically affected by climate change. They are typically located in vulnerable areas like primary forests, high altitudes, rangelands, coastal regions, or desert margins. There, climate change impacts threaten infrastructure and the viability of traditional agricultural practices and can result in the loss of essential resources, including land, food, and water.

Yet Indigenous peoples are vital to the ecosystems within which they live. Through their land management practices, they not only preserve traditional ways of life but also maintain ecosystem services and strengthen ecosystem resilience. Estimates suggest that Indigenous communities hold 20% of the Earth's land mass, where they safeguard 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity. Although Indigenous communities have limited ability to protect their lands from some of the worst consequences of climate change, research shows that biodiversity is declining more slowly in areas under their care.

What's more, Indigenous peoples have official rights to an estimated 513 million hectares of forest—about one-eighth of the world's total forested area. These forests store approximately 37.7 billion tons of carbon, which is roughly equivalent to all of the carbon sequestered in the forests of North America. With the increasing threat of deforestation, legal protection for forest communities is not just a land rights problem—it's critical to the climate fight.

Women and girls

Women and girls, especially those in poor countries, have inequitable access to everything from land and credit to education and technology. As a result, they are among the world's poorest, most undernourished, and most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

In the context of agriculture, for example, only 10 to 20% of landowners are women. Most lack capital for fertilizer, farm tools, water, and seeds or access to training and technical support. Women make up roughly 43% of the agricultural labor force, yet they produce 60 to 80% of food crops in poorer parts of the world. If all women smallholders received equitable access to productive resources, estimates suggest that their farm yield would rise by 20 to 30%. This would decrease the number of undernourished people worldwide and significantly ease the pressure to deforest for additional farmland.

Equitable access to education is also crucial for women's and the planet's health. Educated women achieve higher incomes and upward mobility, enjoy better health, and are more resilient to climate-related disasters. Since women with higher education levels also have greater control over their reproductive health, providing equitable access to education is a pathway to avoiding the 74 million annual unintended pregnancies, addressing population growth, and lessening the strain people put on the planet. Given this, securing women's fundamental right to voluntary family planning services is also necessary for confronting the climate crisis.

Socially vulnerable populations

In general, **socially vulnerable populations** include racial and ethnic minorities, low-income communities, the very young and very old, those experiencing homelessness, certain occupational groups, and those with chronic medical conditions, such as asthma, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and dementia. These populations also often bear the brunt of climate-related impacts.

For example, low-income communities with limited resources and inadequate infrastructure may be unable to evacuate or permanently relocate their families due to volatile, climate-related weather events and community damage. Consequently, they may become displaced, malnourished, or mentally distressed. Children, elderly adults, or people with asthma may be more sensitive to air pollution and suffer health consequences. People who work outdoors may be at greater risk of the negative health impacts of extreme heat. And research suggests that people of color are more likely than any other demographic to face more severe climate change impacts in air quality, health, extreme temperatures, and labor. Centering the needs of these and other socially vulnerable populations is crucial for creating an equitable climate-resilient future where everyone thrives.

Enhancing the resilience of vulnerable populations: what can be done?

The impacts of climate change will hit the world's most vulnerable populations first and hardest. Equitable solutions must be designed to enhance their climate resilience or ability to anticipate, prepare for, and respond to hazardous climate-related events.

Designing these solutions begins with understanding the populations disproportionately at risk of climate impacts and bringing awareness to why they face inequities in our current global systems. Next, the work involves engaging them in planning interventions that target their specific needs.

A wide range of interventions are needed and could include: Shifting power into the hands of vulnerable populations, especially communities of color, and empowering their representation in economic and political systems to build their climate resilience. Strengthening the work of local organizations to advance local, state, regional, national, and international policy on environmental and economic justice issues. Securing legal protection, fundamental rights, and equitable access to education and voluntary family planning for vulnerable populations. Or allocating more funding toward infrastructure investments in at-risk communities to help them prepare for extreme climate-related events.

No matter the intervention, it's essential to involve these populations in every step, from decision-making to evaluation, not only to create more equitable systems but also because their leadership is vital to solving our climate emergency. For example, Indigenous leadership has been critical to protecting biodiversity, fighting fossil fuel extraction, countering harmful environmental deregulations, and more. Research also suggests that women reinvest 90% of their income in education, health, and nutrition for their families and communities, compared to only 30 to 40% for men. This shows just how imperative gender equity is for community and climate resilience.

The Foundation's commitment

The DN Batten Foundation supports initiatives that recognize the importance of Indigenous peoples, women and girls, and other socially vulnerable populations who are simultaneously at risk of the worst impacts of climate change and key to the solution. Through its grantmaking, the Foundation seeks to enhance the resilience of vulnerable populations and support their efforts to protect Earth's most valuable resources.

Spotlight

The organizations spotlighted below are among those leading the effort to secure gender equity and strengthen the climate resilience of vulnerable populations worldwide.

[EarthRights International](#) supports frontline communities in more than 20 countries seeking to end earth rights abuses. For more than two decades, EarthRights has trained lawyers and activists to ensure they have the skills and resources necessary to protect their communities' rights, resources, and livelihoods against climate-damaging fossil fuel projects.

[Rare](#) empowers coastal communities and their local leaders through its [Fish Forever](#) program to protect, restore, and manage the marine habitats and biodiversity on which we all depend. Rare also facilitates "savings clubs" that support coastal communities in the Philippines in saving smarter and offer women and men an equal chance to be involved in the leadership of a

community organization. Today, nearly 80% of the clubs' total members are women who come together weekly to contribute to group savings, take out loans, and pay them off for the betterment of their households and communities.

[CHASE Africa](#) empowers women and communities in rural Africa to build healthy and sustainable futures by integrating basic community health and natural resource management. To accomplish this, the organization supports partner organizations that provide access to voluntary family planning, healthcare and rights while protecting the environment and building resilience to climate change.

[Pathfinder](#) elevates women and girls as changemakers in their communities, supporting them with sexual and reproductive health and rights while engaging them to lead resilient, local, and rights-based solutions to climate adaptation. The organization believes that when women lead, a healthier planet follows.

Sources

- *[Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States: A Focus on Six Impacts](#)*, US Environmental Protection Agency (2021)
- *[Gender](#)*, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2023)
- *[People Who Are Vulnerable to Climate Change](#)*, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (2022)
- *[Securing Rights, Combating Climate Change: How Strengthening Community Forest Rights Mitigates Climate Change](#)*, World Resources Institute (2014)