



## INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

### BRIEFING

#### COP26: Integrate a **Rights-Based & Ecosystem Approach** to climate change policy

#### **Tibet-informed recommendations for climate action policy**

**October 2021**

The Tibetan plateau is a fragile and strategically critical ecosystem that is extremely sensitive to climate change. As the source of Asia's eight major river systems and home of the largest volume of ice outside the poles, changes in the Tibet plateau ecosystem significantly impact regional and global weather patterns, river systems, and biodiversity.

Tibet is currently warming 2-4 times faster than the global average. This has accelerated glacial and permafrost melt and exacerbated desertification, which results in the loss of a major carbon sink. Climate change in Tibet is therefore threatening the livelihood of at least 1.4 billion people, as well as the region's rich biodiversity, which strengthens the earth's resilience to environmental stress.

Given the importance of Tibet in the regional climate, it is clear that new approaches are needed to respond to climate change. A proportionate response that matches the challenge of climate change in scale, character and complexity is gravely needed. Such a response is captured by the **Rights-based** and **Ecosystem approach**.

The **Rights-based approach** empowers those affected by environmental degradation to improve environmental outcomes and to ensure state actors fulfil their environmental obligations with respect to transparency, inclusion, accountability, and justice. In Tibet, local Tibetan farmers and nomads need to be empowered to fulfil their traditional roles as the traditional custodians and first line of defence against environmental destruction.

The **Ecosystem approach** (from the environmental conservation movement) recognises that humans are an integral component of ecosystems. It treats ecosystem management as a social process that must involve communities in decision-making, and seeks to balance the conflicting goals of conservation and consumption for economic and social interests. This approach captures the complexity of natural resource management as well as traditional approaches to nature.

Drawing on the Tibetan experience, ICT proposes three recommendations for shaping a meaningful and sustainable global climate policy at the COP26 meeting:

1. Improve access and transparency in scientific research on climate change, in particular in regionally critical ecosystems, such as Tibet.
2. Integrate a rights-based approach to climate change responses, as it is empowered people who enact and sustain meaningful and sustainable environmental interventions. This can be achieved by inserting procedural rights and the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities into Article 6 of the Paris Agreement.
3. Integrate an Ecosystem approach to climate action policies and focus on critical ecosystems. This:



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- provides a methodology for assessing actors and forces in a regional climate system, and facilitates transboundary responses;
  - aims to balance the conflicting goals of conservation and natural resource consumption for economic and social benefit;
  - recognises ecosystem management is a social process that must involve communities in the decision-making and management to achieve equitable and sustainable environmental outcomes.



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## Where is Tibet, the third pole?

The boundaries of Tibet approximately align with the Tibetan plateau. The Tibetan plateau is a distinct geographical region located about 4,000m above sea level. The plateau spans 2.5 million square kilometres and constitutes one quarter of the People's Republic of China.

Tibet is often known as the Third Pole, because it contains the largest mass of frozen fresh water outside the Polar Regions. Tibet is also the water tower of Asia, as Asia's eight major river systems originate in Tibet (Indus, Yarlung-Tsangpo/Brahmaputra, Ganges, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong, Yangtze, and Yellow Rivers).

## Tibet's occupation is at the root of environmental mismanagement

Many of the environmental challenges facing Tibet have been caused and/or exacerbated by the political disempowerment of Tibetans, who have been under the occupied rule of the People's Republic of China (PRC) since 1949/50. Prior to the Chinese invasion, Tibet's environment historically enjoyed protection by natural geographic barriers and approximately six million Tibetan inhabitants whose subsistence lifestyles and animistic and Buddhist traditions have promoted coexistence with nature.

The Chinese government have since re-engineered the Tibetan landscape through large infrastructure projects, resource extraction, nomad relocation and urbanization, Han in-migration and the creation of enclosed nature parks. These policies have expanded the human footprint, marginalized traditional inhabitants and significantly altered the ecosystem – ultimately accelerating the causes and effects of climate change. Dr. Yonten Nyima, a Tibetan geographer highlights the glaring political, and not technical, challenge to environmental issues in Tibet. Speaking on nomad resettlement policies, he notes:

“The role of China's authoritarian political system, including the absence of participatory governance and the imposition of uniformity over diversity, cannot be overstated. A fundamental problem in Tibetan pastoralism vis-à-vis the Chinese state is that Tibetan pastoralists are entrapped into accepting decisions made by others, with little space for participation in policy-making. Hence, the problem is political rather than technical in nature.”<sup>1</sup>

## Why is Tibet important for the regional climate system?

Tibet deserves particular environmental attention and concern because it is a fragile ecosystem that is of regional importance. It is also extremely exposed to climate change. Tibet is not only the source of Asia's eight major river systems (supporting at least 1.4 billion people), its vast grassland and stock of permafrost is a major carbon sink. The Plateau also plays a significant role in the regional climate system shaping hydrological and atmospheric dynamics, in particular influencing the start of the Asian summer monsoon and the dynamics of the easterly and westerly wind streams in the northern hemisphere.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nyima, Y. Review of *Tibetan Pastoralists and Development: Negotiating the Future of Grassland Livelihoods* edited by Andreas Gruschke and Ingo Breuer. *Pastoralism* 9, 17 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13570-019-0154-8>

<sup>2</sup> Yang, H., Shen, X., Yao J., and Wen, Q., 1 March 2020, *Portraying the Impact of the Tibetan Plateau on Global Climate*, Journal for Climate, <https://journals.ametsoc.org/view/journals/clim/33/9/jcli-d-18-0734.1.xml#container-43616-item-43640>.



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The fragility of Tibet's environment matters not only for the climate system, but also for the region's rich biodiversity. Tibet is home to at least 4 types of ecosystems, and sits at the intersection of three biodiversity hotspots – defined as the earth's most biologically rich, but threatened terrestrial regions. Understanding the changes in Tibet helps to predict global atmospheric and hydrological changes.<sup>3</sup>

### Chinese policies in Tibet

Since the 1980s, policies such as grassland privatisation and fencing<sup>4</sup>, the resettlement of at least 1.8 million nomads, urbanisation and in-migration combined with increased mining and infrastructure projects, have altered the ecosystem and exacerbated the effects of climate change. The combination of global warming and domestic policies increased desertification, which has not only resulted in the loss of a major carbon sink, but also reduced local biodiversity. The above mentioned domestic policies have been rolled out under the guise of economic development or environmental conservation<sup>5</sup> with limited consultation and to the serious detriment of local Tibetans and the environment.

### What are the effects of climate warming?

The Tibetan Plateau is at the frontline of climate change with temperatures rising 2-4 times higher than the global average.<sup>6</sup> Climate warming in the region has been caused by global atmospheric warming, which has been driven by regional and global air pollution. The combination of black coal use and other local urbanisation and industrialisation policies have accelerated the effects of global warming and environmental damage.

Current predictions report 36 per cent of the glaciers along the Hindu Kush and Himalayan range will be gone by 2100, if global warming is limited to 1.5 degrees Celsius. If emissions are not cut, the loss increases to two thirds.<sup>7</sup> Such changes are expected to increase the *frequency* and *intensity* of extreme weather conditions such as snowstorms, floods, and droughts.<sup>8</sup> Warmer temperatures will also lead to increased permafrost subsidence, which can cause landslides and avalanches. In the short-term, glacial lakes will expand, with water run-off in the off-season slowly declining in the long-run. The loss of permafrost also accelerates desertification and the loss of a major carbon sink.

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<sup>3</sup> Bollasina, M. and Benedict, S., *The Role of the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau within the Asian Monsoon System*, Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society, Vol 85, Issue 7, 2004, [https://journals.ametsoc.org/view/journals/bams/85/7/bams-85-7-1001.xml?tab\\_body=pdf](https://journals.ametsoc.org/view/journals/bams/85/7/bams-85-7-1001.xml?tab_body=pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Emily T. Yeh, *Environmental Issues and conflict in Tibet*, Hillman and Tuttle (eds.), 2016, 'Ethnic Conflict and Protest in Tibet and Xinjiang: Unrest in China's West', Columbia University Press.

<sup>5</sup> For example, nomad resettlement policies have been pursued policies, such as the Grassland Law, Rangeland Household Responsibility System, Nomad Resettlement Project, Converting pastures to grassland, ecological migration project, and the comfortable housing project.

<sup>6</sup> The Tibetan plateau is warming up at an average of 0.4 degrees Celsius a decade. See Op. cit., Bollasina and Benedict, 2004 and The Huffington Post, 13 December 2016: 'Climate change is melting 'The roof of the world'', [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/tibet-melting-glaciers-avalanches\\_us\\_584e552de4b04c8e2bb061ee](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/tibet-melting-glaciers-avalanches_us_584e552de4b04c8e2bb061ee).

<sup>7</sup> IPCC, 2019, 'Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate', <https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/download-report/>, page 149 (chapter 2, page 18).

<sup>8</sup> The Hindu: Business Line, 'Global warming reaches Tibet; extreme weather on plateau', March 23, 2014, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/world/Global-warming-reaches-Tibet-extreme-weather-on-plateau/article20740057.ece>.



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## What needs to be done?

### **1. Improve access and transparency in scientific research on climate change, in particular in regionally critical ecosystems, such as Tibet.**

Despite the serious environmental risks facing Tibet and the wider region, very little is known about the Tibetan plateau's unique ecosystem, its dynamics, and the processes affecting it. Due to geographic and political barriers to access, the region is known as a “white spot” – an area for which there are “little to no data”.<sup>9</sup> The lack of scientific data and knowledge poses serious risks for future generations and downstream countries, as it limits the development of predictions and policies to adapt to anticipated changes in the Himalayan region.<sup>10</sup>

To understand the dynamics of climate change, scientists need to have access to data and physical sites to survey the landscape.

All stakeholders at COP26 should advocate for the opening up of environmentally important regions such as the Tibetan plateau for scientific research and international collaboration. The need to protect and promote scientific freedom, and in particular to promote data sharing and international scientific collaborations has been outlined by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in their General comment No.25 (2020) on science and economic, social and cultural rights (article 15[1] [b], [2], [3] and [4]).<sup>11</sup>

Scientific research in combination with local Tibetan engagement is urgently required to improve our understanding of the ecosystem and to facilitate sustainable local solutions.

### **2. Integrate a rights-based approach to climate change responses, as it is empowered people who enact and sustain meaningful and sustainable environmental interventions. This can be achieved by inserting procedural rights and the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities into Article 6 of the Paris Agreement.**

The relationship between the Rights-based approach and environmental management was powerfully captured by the former Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, John Knox, who said: “Environmental harm interferes with the enjoyment of human rights, and the exercise of human rights helps to protect the environment and promote sustainable development”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> USAID (2010). Malone, E.L. Changing glaciers and hydrology in Asia addressing vulnerabilities to glacier melt impacts, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNADU628.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADU628.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Environment Programme: Environmental Change Hotspots, September 2012: ‘Measuring glacier change in the Himalayas’, [https://na.unep.net/geas/getUNEPPageWithArticleIDScript.php?article\\_id=91](https://na.unep.net/geas/getUNEPPageWithArticleIDScript.php?article_id=91).

<sup>11</sup> United Nations, 30 April 2020, ‘General comment No. 25 (2020) on science and economic, social and cultural rights (article 15 (1) (b), (2), (3) and (4) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) \*’ (E/C.12/GC/25), Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, 24 January 2018, ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment’ (A/HRC/37/59), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/017/42/PDF/G1801742.pdf?OpenElement>, page 7.

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The rights-based approach to the environment empowers those who are impacted by the effects of environmental degradation to improve environmental outcomes and supports state actors to fulfil their obligations with respect to the environment.<sup>13</sup> The approach draws on international human rights standards and laws (such as all civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights) and is guided by the principles of equality and non-discrimination, participation and empowerment, and transparency and accountability.<sup>14</sup> Such rights are protected in Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), which states:

“Environmental issues are best handled with **participation** of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate **access to information** concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to **participate in decision-making** processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective **access to judicial and administrative proceedings**, including **redress and remedy**, shall be provided.”<sup>15</sup>

More specific rights, such as the right to free, prior, and informed consent are also protected by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Rights-based approach is a sustainable approach to environmental management, as it empowers local communities to carry out environmental monitoring and management roles that they would traditionally fill. In the case of Tibetans, their local knowledge, practices (such as nomadic, seasonal and communal grazing) and traditional beliefs (rooted in animist Bön and Buddhist belief) that espouse non-violence and mountain and lake worship make them ideal stewards to protect and improve the Tibetan plateau ecosystem and build its resilience to climate change.

### **3. Integrate an Ecosystem approach to climate action policies and focus on critical ecosystems.**

Adopt and institute the Ecosystem approach in Climate Action plans, as the Ecosystem approach reflects more closely the complexity of environmental systems, provides tools for balancing the competing interests of natural resource consumption and conservation, and facilitates transboundary responses.

The Ecosystem approach (from the environmental conservation movement) recognises that humans are an integral component of ecosystems. It treats ecosystem management as a social process that must involve communities in decision-making, and seeks to balance the conflicting goals of conservation and economic and social interests.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2021, ‘Universal Values, Principle One: Human Rights-Based Approach’, <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/human-rights-based-approach>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Environment Programme, 2021, ‘Principle 10’, <https://www.unep.org/civil-society-engagement/partnerships/principle-10>.

<sup>16</sup> Shepherd, Gill. (2004). The Ecosystem Approach: Five Steps to Implementation. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge, UK, <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/CEM-003.pdf>.



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The Ecosystem approach has many advantages. First, as an approach that accounts for the complex and unbounded nature of the natural world, the approach aligns with more traditional conceptions of nature. For example, the Ecosystem approach is more consistent with Tibetan conceptions of the environment, which perceive nature and all its components as an interdependent. This is illustrated by a Tibetan environmental activist, who observed<sup>17</sup>:

“In the Tibetan approach to environmental protection, all living beings are equal. The western approach designates certain places as protected and leaves other places out....The livelihood and outlook of local farmers and nomads are central to successful environmental protection.”

Second, the focus on the biological unit of ecosystems allows countries to focus on understanding and more effectively managing critically important ecosystems, which play significant roles in the global climate system.

Third, and perhaps most critically, the Ecosystem approach creates opportunities to progress from nationally-focussed climate responses to regional, transboundary responses. In the case of Tibet and the Tibetan Plateau ecosystem, institutionalising the Ecosystem approach can facilitate the creation of a regional environmental council for the wider Tibet region that discusses and mitigates environmental issues facing the Hindu-Kush Himalayan Mountains and the Tibetan plateau.



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<sup>17</sup> Kunga Lama (Director), 2010, *Shielding the Mountains* [Film].

