

# CUSTODIANS OF BIODIVERSITY AND HEALTHY ECOSYSTEMS

Indigenous and local communities such as the Borana in Ethiopia or the Flower Picking Communities of the Brazilian Cerrado, with their sustainable lifestyles and traditional knowledge, make an eminently important contribution to preserving global biodiversity and healthy ecosystems, both of which are key factors in overcoming the climate and environmental crisis.

The climate and environmental crisis and its consequences are currently of great concern to people. Since the beginning of 2019, thousands of young people from the "Fridays for Future" movement have been taking to the streets around the world. They demand loud and clear that politicians finally acknowledge the climate and environmental crisis, present effective solutions and implement them quickly, because there is not much time left. And they demand justice – climate justice – for themselves, because the young will suffer more from the consequences of climate change than the generations that caused it. But above all justice also for the poorest in developing countries, who themselves have contributed little to the climate and environmental crisis, but who are already feeling the effects most today. The increase in extreme weather events such as storms, floods, droughts, the progressive degradation and salinization of soils, rising sea levels and the never-ending greed for land to promote industrial food production or mining threaten the livelihoods of the poorest and most marginalised people on our planet.

## **Constant adaptation to changing conditions**

However, to see people in developing countries simply as victims of the climate and environmental crisis does not do them justice. They have always been confronted with difficult environmental conditions and external threats to which they had to adapt. HEKS/EPER experiences this in its project countries: Local and indigenous communities which manage their territories collectively have adapted their lifestyles over centuries to the environmental conditions of their habitat. They use natural resources in a way that they are always able to regenerate and are available also to future generations.

For the Borana pastoralists, for example, who live in the semi-arid lowlands of Ethiopia, prolonged dry periods and droughts have always

been part of everyday life. Over centuries, they developed a common production system that makes sustainable use of the scarce grazing and water resources in the region and is very resistant to climatic fluctuations. Certain parts of the pasture may only be grazed by cattle during the rainy season, others only during the dry season. The Borana therefore move their livestock to different areas depending on the season. Thus, the pasture and water resources can regenerate sufficiently, so that during the next grazing season sufficient fodder and water is available again.

Another example is the "Sempre Viva" flower picking communities that live in the Brazilian savannah region, the Cerrado. For generations, these communities have practiced a complex agricultural production system in the Serra do Espinhaço that is similar to alpine farming in Switzerland. In the lower areas of the Serra, around their small farms, the people practice smallholder agriculture. They cultivate around 80 locally adapted varieties of vegetables, maize, cereals, cassava and sugar cane. They also collect wild fruits and medicinal plants in the savannah. During the dry season, the flower picking communities move to the higher areas of the Serra, where they collect wildflowers and grasses. These are then used for handicrafts or dried and sold as bouquets. Here



too, seasonal migration and sustainable management of the natural resources are crucial for the regeneration of the sensitive ecosystem of the Cerrado, which again is crucial for Brazil because the Cerrado serves as a water reservoir for a large part of the country's population.

### Traditional lifestyles against climate change

The way of life and traditional knowledge of the Borana in Ethiopia or the flower pickers in Brazil, who are concerned about the preservation of important ecosystem services such as the provision of food and water, the regulation of the local climate and water quality and about biodiversity, are of great importance for overcoming the challenges we have to face because of the climate and environmental crisis. Intact ecosystems can mitigate climatic shocks such as heavy precipitation or extreme drought. And a great diversity of species and varieties is enormously important for adapting to changing climatic conditions. Only the greatest



possible diversity will guarantee the availability of that are adapted to drier, hotter conditions and are thus able to ensure food security under changing climatic conditions.

Another important factor associated with global heating and collectively managed territories is that more than a quarter of the carbon stored in soil or vegetation worldwide is located in collectively managed forest and savannah areas. If these areas are converted, for example to industrial agriculture or mining areas, this carbon is let into the atmosphere accelerating the problem once more. The importance of ecosystems which are

sustainably managed by local and indigenous communities has been confirmed recently by two international scientific reports. In May 2019, the World Biodiversity Council (IPBES) published its first report on the global state of biodiversity.<sup>1</sup> It points out that territories managed collectively by local and indigenous communities generally have a higher biodiversity which is decreasing less rapidly than elsewhere. Building on this, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on Climate Change and Land, released in August 2019, states<sup>2</sup>, that management systems involving local and indigenous knowledge are more capable of addressing multiple challenges arising from climate change and environmental degradation. In this sense, local and indigenous communities are guardians of ecosystems, biodiversity and carbon sinks whose preservation is vital for future life on our planet.

### Key actors

Neither the Borana in the Ethiopian lowlands nor the flower pickers in the Brazilian Cerrado have a formal right of ownership or use for their collectively managed territories. This means that there is a constant danger that the land will be used for commercial purposes, which will further boost the climate and environmental crisis. For HEKS/EPER, the fight against the climate and environmental crisis is therefore inevitably also a fight for land rights and rights of use for local and indigenous communities. Together with local partner organisations, HEKS/EPER supports them in their fight for formal rights of use and the recognition of collective land use as a sustainable form of farming which makes an important contribution to the well-being of present and future generations. HEKS/EPER is also committed to ensuring that local and indigenous communities are recognised as important actors who, with their immense traditional knowledge, can offer solutions for coping with the climate and environmental crisis and are included in the discussions about these solutions.

<sup>1</sup> IPBES (2019). Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services, <https://www.ipbes.net/global-assessment-report-biodiversity-ecosystem-services>

<sup>2</sup> IPCC (2019) Special Report on Climate Change and Land, [https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2019/08/Edited-SPM\\_Approved\\_Microsite\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2019/08/Edited-SPM_Approved_Microsite_FINAL.pdf)

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