



Urbanization and Its impact on traditional communities: A review of approaches, evidence, and challenges

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Abstract

Urbanization has become one of the defining demographic forces of the twenty-first century: cities now hold 45% of the global population, up from just 20% in 1950, and two-thirds of future population growth is projected to occur in urban areas. For traditional, indigenous, and tribal communities, this shift is rarely voluntary or neutral; it frequently arrives through state-led infrastructure projects, resource extraction, and administrative expansion that displace communities from ancestral land. This paper reviews recent peer-reviewed and institutional literature, prioritizing sources published between 2023 and 2026, to examine how urbanization affects traditional communities and what evidence exists regarding the scale, mechanisms, and outcomes of this impact. The review identifies four recurring dimensions of change: land dispossession and involuntary displacement, the transformation of subsistence-based economies into wage-based urban economies, the erosion of language and cultural practice, and the emergence of adaptive, hybrid forms of urban indigenous identity. Evidence from Indonesia, India, Canada, and Aotearoa/New Zealand shows both the depth of disruption traditional communities face and the resilience strategies they develop within cities. Major challenges to protecting traditional communities amid urbanization include weak enforcement of land and resource rights, exclusion from urban planning processes, and a persistent gap between stated government commitments and implementation on the ground. The paper concludes that urbanization's impact on traditional communities is not predetermined: it depends heavily on whether affected communities are treated as stakeholders in shaping urban futures or merely as populations to be absorbed by them.

Keywords: Urbanization, traditional communities, indigenous peoples, displacement, cultural erosion, urban indigeneity

Introduction

Urbanization has accelerated dramatically over the past seven decades. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, cities were home to only 20% of the world's 2.5 billion people in 1950; by 2025^[6], that figure had risen to 45% of a global population of 8.2 billion, with the number of megacities quadrupling since 1975 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2025)^[6]. This growth is projected to continue, with roughly two-thirds of future global population increase expected to occur within cities and most of the remainder in towns (UN DESA, 2025)^[1]. While urbanization is frequently framed as a marker of national development and economic opportunity, its effects on traditional, tribal, and indigenous communities are considerably more contested.

For many such communities, urbanization does not arrive as a matter of individual choice but as an external force: state-sponsored infrastructure projects, industrial expansion, and administrative city-building frequently intersect with land historically occupied by traditional communities, producing displacement, cultural disruption, and contested claims over how urban growth should proceed (Mondal, 2025; Swara *et al.*, 2025)^[3]. At the same time, recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes that traditional communities are not passive recipients of urban change; many actively reshape

urban space and rebuild forms of cultural continuity within it (Brablec, 2025; Walker *et al.*, 2024)^[1, 7]. This paper synthesizes recent literature to examine three questions: (a) through what mechanisms does urbanization affect traditional communities; (b) what does current evidence show about the scale and nature of these effects; and (c) what challenges most significantly constrain efforts to protect traditional communities amid ongoing urban growth.

Review Approach

This paper adopts a narrative-synthesis review approach, drawing primarily on peer-reviewed journal articles, working papers, and institutional reports published between 2023 and 2026, supplemented by authoritative demographic data from United Nations sources. Literature was located through searches using terms including "urbanization indigenous communities," "indigenous displacement urban development," "tribal communities urbanization India," "urban indigeneity," and "cultural erosion globalization indigenous," with additional sources identified by tracing citations within the initial set of articles. Priority was given to empirical studies, whether qualitative fieldwork, survey-based research, or policy analysis, that directly examined the relationship between urban expansion and traditional community life, spanning multiple regional contexts including South and Southeast Asia, North America, and

Oceania to avoid overgeneralizing from any single national experience.

Dimensions of Urbanization's Impact on Traditional Communities

Land Dispossession and Involuntary Displacement

The most direct and well-documented mechanism through which urbanization affects traditional communities is displacement from land. Large-scale, state-led urban and infrastructure projects are frequently sited on or near land occupied by tribal and indigenous populations, producing involuntary resettlement and disrupted land claims. In Indonesia, the construction of a new national capital in East Kalimantan has required extensive urban water infrastructure development along the Sepaku River, fundamentally altering the relationship between the indigenous Balik people and the waterway that has long anchored their cultural and economic life; researchers conceptualize this process as "indigenous riverine urbanization," a form of change that is materially and symbolically disruptive rather than incidental to development (Swara *et al.*, 2025) ^[5]. The scale of demographic change in this case is striking: the Balik people, once the sole inhabitants of the Sepaku area, now make up fewer than 1,000 individuals within a local population of roughly 40,000 following decades of state-sponsored transmigration (Swara *et al.*, 2025) ^[5].

Comparable dynamics appear in India, where urban expansion, industrialization, and infrastructure development have significantly affected tribal populations, frequently resulting in involuntary displacement and forced migration into urban areas (Mondal, 2025) ^[3]. This displacement disrupts the socio-cultural fabric of tribal communities and exposes them to a cluster of related socioeconomic difficulties, including unemployment, inadequate housing, and limited access to education and healthcare (Mondal, 2025) ^[3]. Legal and policy analysis of development-induced displacement in India further finds that industrial and infrastructure projects have disproportionately been located in tribal-dominated territories, and that resulting compensation and rehabilitation processes have frequently failed to adequately address the loss of livelihood, dignity, and social cohesion experienced by displaced communities (Sapre & Gori, 2025) ^[4].

Economic Transformation and Livelihood Change

Urbanization typically restructures traditional communities' economic base, shifting populations from subsistence agriculture, forestry, or craft-based livelihoods toward wage labor within cash-based urban economies. This shift is rarely a neutral substitution of one income source for another; it frequently severs the connection between economic activity and the land- or resource-based knowledge systems that traditional livelihoods were built around. Displacement research from India documents that affected tribal communities face not only the loss of land itself but a broader unraveling of the livelihood systems,

family networks, and community ties that had previously provided economic and social stability (Mondal, 2025) ^[6].

Cultural and Linguistic Erosion

A recurring theme across the literature is the erosion of cultural practice, ritual, and language that accompanies displacement and urban migration. Economic pressure and land loss frequently force traditional communities to migrate away from ancestral territories, disrupting practices such as farming rituals, craftsmanship, and spiritual ceremonies that depend on sustained connection to specific places (Yılmaz, 2025). This disruption is not merely symbolic: research on urban Indigenous communities in Canada notes that language and culture function as protective factors for community wellbeing and safety, meaning that their erosion through geographic dispersal carries direct consequences for community welfare, not only for cultural preservation in the abstract (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada [CIRNAC], 2025) ^[1].

Adaptive and Hybrid Forms of Urban Indigenous Identity

A growing body of recent scholarship pushes back against framing urbanization purely as a story of cultural loss, emphasizing instead that traditional communities actively reshape urban environments to sustain and reinvent cultural continuity. Drawing on case studies from Chile, Canada, Brazil, and Bolivia, recent theoretical work proposes the concept of "internal diaspora" to describe how Indigenous urban communities engage in ongoing identity production, resistance, and place-making rather than simply assimilating or being displaced culturally; in this framing, cities become platforms for Indigenous continuity and transformation rather than only sites of dispossession (Brablec, 2025) ^[1]. Fieldwork with urban Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand similarly finds that many continue to practice kaitiakitanga, a place-based cultural stewardship relationship with nature, within urban settings, including through community-led ecological restoration projects that intertwine cultural practice such as traditional song and ceremony with the physical restoration of urban natural spaces (Walker *et al.*, 2024) ^[7]. In Canada, government-supported urban Indigenous organizations, including friendship centres, have become key sites for language revitalization and cultural programming specifically designed to counteract the dispersal effects of urban relocation (CIRNAC, 2025) ^[3].

Evidence on the Scale and Nature of Impact

The demographic backdrop to these community-level findings is substantial. Global urban population share has more than doubled since 1950, and the number of megacities, urban areas with ten million or more residents, has quadrupled since 1975, with over half now located in Asia (UN DESA, 2025). This scale of urban growth means that the pressures documented in specific case studies are unlikely to be isolated; they reflect a broader pattern in which rapid, large-scale urban expansion intersects with

land and resources historically managed by traditional communities across multiple regions simultaneously. Case-level evidence reinforces the severity of this intersection. The demographic transformation documented in Sepaku, Indonesia, where the indigenous Balik population has fallen to under 3% of the local population amid state-led capital city construction, illustrates how quickly demographic and cultural balance can shift once large-scale urbanization begins in a traditionally indigenous area (Swara *et al.*, 2025) ^[5]. In India, legal-policy research indicates that the scale of a development project tends to correlate directly with its disruptive impact on tribal populations, with larger infrastructure and industrial projects producing correspondingly greater displacement and rehabilitation shortfalls (Sapre & Gori, 2025) ^[4]. At the same time, survey-based fieldwork with 214 urban Māori in New Zealand found that a majority continued to practice cultural stewardship relationships with nature despite living outside traditional tribal areas, with factors such as age, gender, location, and childhood experience shaping the strength of this ongoing cultural connection (Walker *et al.*, 2024) ^[7]. Together, this evidence suggests both that displacement effects can be demographically severe and that cultural continuity is not automatically extinguished by urban relocation, but instead depends on the specific social and institutional conditions communities encounter in cities.

Challenges to Protecting Traditional Communities amid Urbanization

Weak Enforcement of Land and Resource Rights

A central and recurring challenge across the reviewed literature is the gap between formal legal protections for traditional communities' land and resource rights and their actual enforcement during urban development. In India, legal-policy analysis finds that despite the existence of statutory protections, tribal communities affected by development-induced displacement have frequently been under-compensated, and rehabilitation frameworks have failed to adequately restore lost livelihoods, dignity, or social standing (Sapre & Gori, 2025) ^[4]. Similarly, in Indonesia, government commitments to inclusive planning around the new capital's infrastructure development have coexisted with continued marginalization of indigenous riverine communities, with researchers documenting the process as materially and symbolically violent despite official assurances of inclusion (Swara *et al.*, 2025) ^[5].

Exclusion from Urban Planning Processes

Traditional communities are frequently absent from the decision-making processes that determine how urbanization proceeds through their territories. This exclusion compounds the material harms of displacement, since communities affected by land loss, infrastructure development, and demographic change have limited formal avenues to shape project design or negotiate terms. Scholarship on urban Indigenous identity argues that overcoming this exclusion requires recognizing Indigenous presence and political legitimacy directly within urban

space, rather than treating Indigenous claims as relevant only to rural or reserve contexts (Brablec, 2025) ^[1].

The Gap Between Policy Commitment and Implementation

Across multiple national contexts, a consistent pattern emerges in which government policy frameworks nominally recognize traditional communities' rights and cultural needs, while implementation on the ground lags substantially behind. Indian tribal displacement research points to significant socioeconomic challenges, including unemployment, inadequate housing, and poor healthcare access, persisting for displaced tribal communities despite formal rehabilitation obligations (Mondal, 2025) ^[3]. In Canada, government reporting itself acknowledges that urban Indigenous peoples continue to require dedicated support to revitalize and protect languages and cultures strained by relocation, indicating that policy attention has not yet fully closed the gap left by decades of dispersal (CIRNAC, 2025) ^[1].

Discussion and Implications

The literature reviewed here presents a consistent picture: urbanization exerts substantial, often severe, pressure on traditional communities through land dispossession, economic restructuring, and cultural and linguistic erosion, and this pressure is amplified by the sheer scale of contemporary global urban growth (Swara *et al.*, 2025; UN DESA, 2025) ^[5]. Yet the same literature complicates any assumption that urbanization simply erases traditional community life. Communities across highly varied national contexts, from urban Māori practicing kaitiakitanga in New Zealand cities to Indigenous diaspora organizations across Latin America, actively reconstruct cultural continuity within urban settings, suggesting that the outcome of urbanization for traditional communities is shaped as much by institutional context as by the fact of urban migration itself (Brablec, 2025; Walker *et al.*, 2024) ^[1, 7].

This has direct implications for policy and planning. First, land and resource rights protections need enforcement mechanisms that match their formal legal strength; multiple case studies suggest that the primary failure is not an absence of stated protections but weak or inconsistent implementation (Sapre & Gori, 2025; Swara *et al.*, 2025) ^[4]. Second, urban planning processes should formally incorporate traditional and Indigenous communities as participants rather than treating them as populations to be managed or relocated, particularly given evidence that Indigenous-led initiatives, such as culturally embedded ecological restoration, can generate outcomes that benefit both cultural continuity and the broader urban environment (Walker *et al.*, 2024) ^[7]. Third, investment in cultural and linguistic infrastructure within cities themselves, such as the friendship centres and language programming documented in the Canadian context, appears to meaningfully offset some of the cultural strain caused by geographic dispersal, and could be more systematically applied in other rapidly urbanizing contexts (CIRNAC, 2025) ^[3].

For research, the literature would benefit from more longitudinal and comparative work capable of tracking how traditional communities' economic, cultural, and linguistic outcomes evolve over extended periods of urban residence, rather than relying primarily on cross-sectional snapshots or single-city case studies. Greater attention to regions currently underrepresented in this literature, including large parts of Africa and Central Asia experiencing rapid urban growth, would also help determine how broadly the patterns identified in Indonesia, India, Canada, and New Zealand generalize to other urbanizing contexts.

Conclusion

Urbanization is reshaping the global demographic landscape at a scale and pace with few historical precedents, and traditional communities are frequently positioned at the front line of this change. The evidence reviewed here shows that urban expansion can produce severe land dispossession, economic disruption, and cultural and linguistic erosion for traditional communities, particularly when large-scale, state-led development projects intersect with ancestral territory. At the same time, traditional communities are not simply passive subjects of urbanization; across multiple national contexts, they actively rebuild cultural continuity, political voice, and place-based practice within cities. The central challenge moving forward is not whether urbanization will continue, it almost certainly will, but whether the institutions shaping it treat traditional communities as genuine participants in the urban future, with enforceable land rights, a voice in planning processes, and dedicated cultural infrastructure, or continue to treat them as populations simply absorbed by cities built without them in mind.

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