

Side Event for the Commission for Social Development, 6-15 February 2008 – ‘Full Employment and Decent Work for All’

‘Indigenous Peoples’ Knowledge and Full Employment,’ 6 February 2008

Introduction

The adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the General Assembly in 2007 indicates the growing political will of governments to recognize and promote the rights of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples are often disproportionately poorer and less educated than other groups in the dominant society around them. As the descendants of the original inhabitants of a region possessing unique linguistic, social and cultural attributes, it is important for policy makers to consider the needs of indigenous people in matters regarding full employment and decent work for all. In many regions of the world, there are many private companies that exploit indigenous peoples’ lands for mining, oil, gas, timber extraction as well as other industries such as monocultural plantations and dams.

Among the least educated people, rural indigenous peoples in particular are less likely to find new employment if dispossessed from their lands. In addition, the poorest of the poor can spend the greatest proportion of their income on basic services. Without basic services, disease incidence increases and the likelihood of gaining education decreases. These problems and others can be ameliorated by sensible measures that define and protect indigenous people's rights so that policy makers can better serve indigenous peoples and the community as a whole.

Thus, the challenge faced by states and inter-governmental organizations is to develop, in cooperation with indigenous peoples and their communities, programs and policies that guarantee economic and social development with a sense of community ownership and self-identity. Indigenous peoples’ knowledge has to be a central component in these policies in accordance with the right to self-determination. Such approach is crucial to cultivating the seeds of indigenous peoples’ entrepreneurship while simultaneously accomplishing sustainable development. Therefore, efforts to provide opportunities for the full inclusion of indigenous peoples in the labor market have to take into account their knowledge and their special needs that are grounded on communal values and linkage to their lands and resources.

Recognizing indigenous cultural practices as work.

Indigenous peoples’ maintenance of their lands and cultures is often not recognized as a legitimate form of employment and this issue has to be seriously considered. For example, there is a growing recognition that indigenous community-based involvement in natural resource management can bring significant economic and sociocultural benefits. In particular, people living on their ancestral lands and harvesting wildlife produce important sources of foods with associated economic and health benefits. In situations where there are few commercial opportunities, engagement in productive customary

activity can provide one of a very few avenues for improving socioeconomic well-being. Similarly, harvesting of wildlife and other naturally-occurring resources can provide important inputs to the arts industry that generate badly needed funds for participants.

Moreover, the inter-generational engagement of children and young adults in such activity indicates that the skills required to hunt successfully and to maintain conditions favouring hunted species are being effectively transferred. Continuity and associated transfer of knowledge are important because they indicate that skills and interest in applying them to manage ecosystems are culturally sustainable under contemporary circumstances.

However, threats to cultural sustainability include poor recognition of the value of indigenous knowledge and practice in the wider society, and little or no external support for exercising those skills in new and difficult contexts that generate public benefits. Status and esteem for skilled indigenous practitioners is thereby eroded within indigenous communities. In many regions of the world, this problem is exacerbated by policy decisions that directly or indirectly call into question the validity of indigenous peoples' customary practice, mostly on philosophical grounds rather than on evidence of its contributions to sustainable resource use. Indigenous peoples' commitment to maintain their cultural obligations through work has to be recognized.

The International Labour Organization

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is a specialised agency of the United Nations (UN). It was founded in 1919 and became the first specialised agency of the UN in 1946. Its main objectives are to promote social justice and international recognition of human and labour rights. It achieves this by formulating international labour standards in the form of conventions and recommendations which set minimum standards of basic labour rights and provides practical help to governments and others to implement them.

ILO was the first UN organization to specifically address indigenous peoples' issues in 1957 when it adopted the Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention 107. Governments at the time thought that the best way to protect the health and well-being of indigenous peoples was to assimilate and integrate indigenous peoples with other peoples within their countries. As the name suggests, the ILO 107 made it a duty of governments to integrate indigenous peoples within their countries. ILO 107 was rejected by indigenous peoples around the world who called for the adoption of new standards that would recognise indigenous peoples' rights to exist as separate, distinct peoples. The International Labour Conference adopted a new Convention, ILO 169, in 1989 which revised ILO 107.

A Case Study

Bolivia has undergone a democratic revolution when, Evo Morales Ayma, was elected as its first president of indigenous origin in 2005. Since then the Bolivian government has been implementing reforms to elevate the situation of indigenous peoples. In November 2007, for example, Bolivia was the first state to turn the Declaration to a national law.

The Bolivian case demonstrates an interesting case of how the international and the local levels interface with regard to the protection of indigenous rights.

As a demonstrative case from the local sphere, the potato production in Bolivia emphasizes how indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge contributes to full employment. Potato is considered Bolivia's most essential food crop and its production over the past decade has steadily increased. It is an integral part of indigenous peoples' diet and culture. Acknowledging the importance of the potato as a source of food security, which has assisted the goal of poverty alleviation, the General Assembly declared 2008 'International Year of the Potato' as a way to meet its Millennium Development Goals.

Side Event

The panel for the side event will highlight ways in which international instruments on indigenous rights, such as the Declaration on Indigenous Rights and ILO Convention No. 169, as well as activities of UN bodies affect developments at the local level concerning the goal of full employment in regards to indigenous peoples while at the same time protecting their knowledge and rights.

The panel will consist of three people who will address the following:

- ILO Conventions that protect indigenous and tribal populations;
- Recognizing indigenous peoples' community based natural resource management as legitimate forms of work;
- Recognizing indigenous peoples traditional knowledge as a contribution to full employment.

The speakers include:

- Mr Djankou Ndjonkou, ILO
- Ms Sonia Smallacombe, Secretariat of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
- Ms. Julia Yana - National Secretary of Rural Women's Organization "Bartoline Sisa" (Aymara people of Bolivia).