

International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples promotes health and well-being



Representatives of indigenous peoples meet with IFAD President Kanayo F. Nwanze at the second Global Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples' Forum in February. ©IFAD/Giulio Napolitano

Rome, 7 August - On 9 August, the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples will focus attention on the health and well-being of indigenous peoples around the world.

Indigenous peoples have a long history of living off the land and developing food systems that depend on the traditional knowledge of their local ecosystems.

More recently, however, indigenous foods have become popular outside indigenous communities for their strong health benefits and high nutritional content.

Whether it is quinoa from Bolivia or teff from Ethiopia, eating indigenous "super foods" to improve health has become trendy in high and middle-income countries. [Some experts are even calling for a return to indigenous diets to help fight modern illnesses.](#)

And yet, globally, indigenous peoples themselves suffer disproportionately from poorer health, are more likely to experience disability, and reduced quality of life, and ultimately die younger than their non-indigenous counterparts.

According to a report by the UN Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Peoples' Issues (IASG), poor nutrition is one of the key health issues that most affects indigenous peoples around the world.

Rates of malnutrition for indigenous children in Latin America are double that of the general population of the region.

Among the reasons why, many indigenous staple foods, as in the case of quinoa, are becoming less available to indigenous peoples as a result of international demand.

Listening to indigenous voices

In February, IFAD hosted its [second Global Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples' Forum](#) to discuss the root causes around some of these issues.

Representatives of indigenous peoples from all over the world came to IFAD's forum to shine a spotlight on the challenges and opportunities surrounding indigenous peoples' food systems and sustainable livelihoods.

“Learning from indigenous peoples helps us to better support their traditional food systems through our programmes and projects,” said Antonella Cordone, IFAD’s Senior Technical Specialist on Indigenous Peoples.

"And our partnership also enables us to advocate for their rights to self-driven development in every national and international policy forum.”

The forum addressed the fact that indigenous peoples’ food systems are under pressure, due to factors such as lack of recognition of land tenure systems, climate change challenges and the transitional processes towards mono-cropping production.

This pressure contributes to malnutrition because of environmental degradation and contamination of ecosystems, biodiversity loss, loss of land and territory and a decline in abundance or accessibility of traditional food sources.

Treena Delormier, Assistant Professor, Native Hawaiian and Indigenous Health, University of Hawaii, described how changes in traditional diet such as purchasing cheaper less nutritious foods, combined with other changes in lifestyle, have resulted in widespread malnutrition among indigenous peoples.

As a member of the Mohawk Council of Kahnáwake, Treena also emphasized that often indigenous products are of higher nutritional value than food bought in supermarkets – which, while inexpensive, is low-quality food that increases carbohydrates and sugars in diets and can lead to obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, premature heart disease and shortened life spans.

Wauras woman cooks pequi fruit, Amazon, Brazil. Indigenous peoples themselves suffer disproportionately from poorer health, are more likely to experience disability, and reduced quality of life, and ultimately die younger than their non-indigenous counterparts.

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Receiving the proper nutrients

Harriet Kuhnlein, Professor Emerita of Human Nutrition and founding Director of the Centre for Indigenous Peoples’ Nutrition and Environment (CINE) at McGill University in Canada,

presented her research at the forum on the impact of indigenous food in indigenous peoples' diets.

Kuhnlein described an interesting example from the Inuit community, where the traditional food is muktuk, the skin and underlying blubber of the whale.

These products contain vitamin C and A, besides micro-nutrients such as iron and zinc, that can be of particular relevance in areas where the growth of fruits and vegetables is constrained by ecological features.

Kuhnlein noted that her team found that when indigenous products are part of people's diets, they have a positive nutritional impact and should be protected.

"Traditional food systems need to be documented so that policymakers know what is at stake by ruining an ecosystem, not only for the health of indigenous peoples living there but for everyone," said Kuhnlein.

Supporting innovative food systems projects

IFAD works with indigenous peoples on projects that support traditional food systems and help to improve indigenous peoples' health and well-being.

Some recent projects funded by the IFAD Indigenous Peoples Assistance Facility (IPAF) include:

- Working with tribal peoples in India to develop a farming system that uses local plant varieties based on local resources and land conditions to sustain food production for both domestic consumption and the market.
- Encouraging groups of indigenous women living in urban settings in the Philippines to engage in growing medicinal plants and vegetables in flower pots for home consumption.
- Supporting the indigenous peoples of the Solomon Islands to maintain traditional fishing practices that are environmentally sound, while also supporting a land restoration programme on some of the islands.
- Sustaining the production of indigenous food through family gardening projects with indigenous peoples in Guatemala. The project facilitates the exchange of ancestral recipes as well as sharing of ancestral knowledge on medicinal plants.
- Ensuring the rights of pygmies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to preserve their traditional way of life through the sustainable management of community forests.

"All of these innovative projects demonstrate that maintaining traditional food systems and improving the health and wellbeing of indigenous peoples is possible," said Cordone.

"However, this can happen only if we work hand in hand with indigenous peoples to preserve their traditional knowledge and food systems while ensuring that indigenous peoples communities' land rights and their free prior and informed consent are observed and respected."