



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES INDIGENOUS VOICES

BACKGROUNDER

The Rights of Indigenous Peoples to Food and Food Sovereignty

Eleventh session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Discussion on Monday, 14 May 2012, 10 a.m. – 1 p.m.

In most countries where data exists, hunger and malnutrition are disproportionately higher among indigenous than non-indigenous populations¹. Due to long historical processes of colonization, exploitation and political and economic exclusion, indigenous peoples are among the most vulnerable to poverty, hunger and malnutrition.

In international law, the right to adequate food and the fundamental right to be free from hunger apply to everyone without discrimination, yet the rights to food and food sovereignty of indigenous peoples are frequently denied or violated, often as a result of systematic discrimination or the widespread lack of recognition of indigenous rights.

This discussion as part of the eleventh session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues aims to identify the issues, challenges and opportunities to improve and preserve indigenous peoples' food systems, and to ensure their rights to food and food sovereignty.

Over the years, indigenous peoples have expressed deep concerns over the obstacles and challenges their communities face in fully achieving their right to food sovereignty.


The Declaration of Atitlán, drafted at the First Indigenous Peoples' Global Consultation on the Right to Food in April 2002 in Guatemala, stated that the denial of the right to food for indigenous peoples is a denial of their collective indigenous existence, not only denying their physical survival, but also their social organization, cultures, traditions, languages, spirituality, sovereignty, and total identity.

Food sovereignty of indigenous peoples incorporates different dimensions, and understanding what it means to indigenous peoples is far more complex than merely examining statistics on hunger, malnutrition or poverty. In general, it is difficult to

¹ A/60/350 *Right to Food, Note by the Secretary General* (2005)



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conceptually separate indigenous peoples' relationships with food from their relationships to land, resources, culture, values and social organization.

The realization of indigenous peoples' rights to food and food sovereignty depends crucially on their access to and control over the natural resources in the land and territories they occupy or use. Food, procurement and consumption of food are often an important part of culture, as well as of social, economic and political organization. Subsistence activities such as hunting, fishing and gathering are essential not only to the collective right to food, but also to the nurturing of indigenous cultures, languages, social life and identity. Only then can indigenous peoples maintain traditional economic and subsistence activities to meet their nutritional and sustenance needs, as well as protect and preserve their culture and distinct identity.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the General Assembly in September 2007, contains provisions on land, natural resources and subsistence activities relevant for the realization of indigenous peoples' right to food and food sovereignty. It also includes the protection of traditional knowledge, biodiversity and genetic resources, and sets limits to activities of third parties on the territories of indigenous communities without their consent.

The Permanent Forum is expected to adopt recommendations at the conclusion of the half-day discussion.

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For more information on the eleventh session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, please see: <http://social.un.org/index/IndigenousPeoples.aspx>