



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES INDIGENOUS VOICES

Backgrounder

Indigenous Peoples: Development with Culture and Identity Articles 3 and 32 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Many indigenous peoples continue to suffer the consequences of historical injustices, including discrimination, marginalization, and dispossession from their lands and resources, and often their right to development is denied. In this year's session, from 19 to 30 April 2010 in New York, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues will discuss the issue of development and its impact on indigenous peoples.

Dominant development paradigms unsuited to indigenous peoples

Since the Second World War, the concept of development has often been conceived in strictly economic terms. It was thought to follow an evolutionary process that commenced from basic commodity suppliers, through capital accumulation to industrialization, in turn leading to urbanization and “modernization”. Development paradigms of modernization and industrialization have often resulted in the destruction of indigenous peoples’ political, economic, social, cultural, education, health, spiritual and knowledge systems as well as extraction of their natural resources. Specific examples of the disconnect between dominant development paradigms and indigenous peoples include:

- ◆ Indigenous peoples’ societies have often been regarded as “backward, primitive and uncivilized”, where their “development” is understood to be their assimilation into the so-called “civilized world.”
- ◆ Indigenous peoples’ cultures and values are seen to be contradictory to the values of the market economy, such as the accumulation of profit, hyperconsumption and competitiveness. Indigenous peoples are seen as “obstacles” to progress because their lands and territories are rich in resources and indigenous peoples are not willing to freely dispose of them.
- ◆ In many countries, the history and the continuing practice of assimilation has resulted in blanket public policies that have excluded indigenous peoples and are discriminatory with respect to their cultures and identities.

The pursuit of economic growth at all costs is not only destructive for indigenous peoples but also for the rest of humanity and the planet. The focus on GDP as a main measure of progress has distorted the true meaning of progress and wellbeing. For example, damage to ecosystems, irreversible loss in biological diversity and the erosion of cultural and linguistic diversity and indigenous traditional knowledge, are not factored into the balance sheet. Such ecological, cultural, social and spiritual indicators, which provide more comprehensive measurements of national and global situations, are seldom used.



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Indigenous concepts of well-being and sustainability: self-determination and development with culture and identity

The failure of the dominant development paradigm, as evidenced by the lingering global economic crisis, the environmental crisis of climate change and the erosion of biological diversity, signals the need to evolve alternative ways of thinking about and pursuing development. Indigenous peoples' visions and perspectives of development provide some of these alternatives that should be articulated and discussed further:

- ◆ Indigenous peoples' concept of development is based on a holistic philosophy underpinned by the values of reciprocity, solidarity, equilibrium and collectivity, understanding that humans should live within the limits of the natural world.
- ◆ Development with culture and identity is characterized by a holistic approach that seeks to build on collective rights, security and greater control and self-governance of lands, territories and resources. It builds on tradition, with respect for ancestors, but is also forward-looking. It includes social, cultural, political and spiritual systems.
- ◆ Indigenous peoples' interpretations of well-being have a number of common elements, such as:
 - Importance of collective economic actors and community economic institutions
 - Integrity of indigenous governance
 - Purpose of production should not only be considered in terms of profit but rather in terms of improving quality of life
 - Enriching the notion of development where human beings are in harmony with Mother Earth
 - Self-determination
 - Interaction between people, resources and the spiritual aspects of life, as well as strengthening indigenous peoples' knowledge institutions.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples provides a strong basis from which indigenous peoples can affirm their rights and define their aspirations in their relations with States and corporations around development with culture and identity. Article 3 is central to the Declaration as it refers to the right to self-determination. Article 32 is also a key provision that captures the essence of culture with development and identity. These articles are the result of advocacy and concerns raised by indigenous peoples at the United Nations.

Development and the right to self-determination

The Declaration recognizes that indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination and that by virtue of that right they freely determine their development. Indigenous peoples are thus free to determine their own notions of development, as well as help to reconstruct current institutions in order to improve their situation and that of humanity as a whole. Key elements of "development with culture and identity" include:

- ◆ Indigenous peoples' interests, knowledge and experience must be at the centre of methodologies when constructing knowledge about indigenous peoples. The development of indigenous research practices will strengthen indigenous peoples' identity and in turn will





support indigenous peoples' efforts to ensure self-determination in legal, political, economic and intellectual spheres.

- ◆ Holistic concepts of development have to consider the reality and struggle that indigenous peoples experience in order to live in a market-driven society. Development policies, institutions and systems established by States must allow for diversity and plurality and the coexistence of indigenous governance, economic, social, education, cultural, spiritual and knowledge systems and natural resources with systems adopted by the State. This is part of indigenous peoples' right to self-determination.
- ◆ In pursuing their well-being and sustainability, indigenous peoples should reconstitute, restore, and revitalize their cultures, priorities and perspectives. This change is in line with their rights enshrined in the Declaration and other international human rights standards.

Development with culture and identity can be further strengthened through genuine collaboration among indigenous peoples, academics, States, United Nations bodies and NGOs. When pursued correctly, collaboration can be beneficial not only for empowering indigenous peoples and their cultures but also for enriching and having a positive impact on the broader society and environment.

Sources

International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Peoples: Development with Culture and Identity: Articles 3 and 32 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 12-14 January 2010. Available online at: www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/EGM_DCI_Concept_Paper.doc

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For more information on the UN Permanent Forum in Indigenous Issues, please visit:
www.un.org/indigenous

