

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND THE MDGs

We Must Find Inclusive and Culturally Sensitive Solutions

BY THE SECRETARIAT OF THE UN PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) summarize the development targets agreed to at international conferences and world summits during the 1990s. At the end of the last century, world leaders distilled the key goals and targets in the Millennium Declaration adopted in September 2000. The Declaration reaffirms the universal values of human rights, equality, mutual respect and shared responsibility for the conditions of all peoples. It also seeks to redress globalization's hugely unequal benefits and Governments' commitments to fulfilling their obligations by 2015.

The Millennium Declaration, signed by 147 Heads of State and Government, has provided an opportunity for a renewed focus on indigenous peoples in the international development debate. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) stated during its fourth session on 16 to 27 May 2005: "Indigenous peoples have the right to benefit from the Millennium Development Goals and from other goals and aspirations contained in the Millennium Declaration to the same extent as all others. Indigenous and tribal peoples are lagging behind other parts of the population in the achievement of the Goals in most, if not all, the countries in which they live, and indigenous and tribal women commonly face additional gender-based disadvantages and discrimination."¹

UNPFII has devoted a great deal of attention to the MDGs. Its fourth session addressed both MDG 1 (eradicate extreme poverty and hunger) and MDG 2 (achieve universal primary education) within the context of indigenous peoples' issues, while its fifth session in 2006 was devoted to the special theme "The Millennium Development Goals and Indigenous Peoples: Redefining the Goals". In September 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which provides, particularly in Articles 41 and 42,² a crucial opportunity and a call to action for Member States and the United Nations system to integrate indigenous visions of development into their work towards the achievement of the MDGs.

Indigenous peoples have historically faced social exclusion and marginalization. They are disproportionately represented

among the poor and the extremely poor, their levels of access to adequate health and education services are well below national averages, and they are especially vulnerable to the consequences of environmental degradation. If the MDGs are to be met, States need to give priority attention to the situation of indigenous peoples.

Although there is little data on indigenous peoples and the MDGs, few figures illustrate the situation faced by approximately 300 million to 370 million indigenous peoples around the world. While they constitute approximately 5 per cent of the world's population, indigenous peoples make up 15 per cent of the world's poor. Furthermore, they constitute about one third of the world's 900 million extremely poor rural people,³ and face huge disparities in access to, and in quality of, education and health. In Guatemala, for example, 53.5 per cent of young indigenous people aged 15 to 19 have not completed primary education, compared to 32.2 per cent of non-indigenous youth.⁴ In Bolivia, the infant mortality rate among the indigenous populations is close to 75 of 1,000, compared to 50 of 1,000 for the non-indigenous population.⁵

During the fifth session of UNPFII, most of the organizations representing indigenous peoples made statements about the urgent need to redefine the MDGs. While the Permanent Forum realizes that it is not possible to redefine these Goals, it also recognizes that there is a clear need to redefine the approaches to the implementation of the MDGs, so as to include the perspectives, concerns, experiences and views of the world's indigenous peoples. Statements also confirmed that there was a need for indigenous peoples to provide their own definitions of poverty and development, and for them to have full and effective participation in the implementation of the MDGs.⁶

Achieving gender equality and empowering women, including the indigenous, is an important part of achieving the MDGs. Owing to the cross-cutting nature of gender equality, it is also critical that gender perspectives be fully integrated into the implementation and monitoring of all the other objectives associated with the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs.

Human rights-based and culturally sensitive approach. If the MDG targets are to be reached by 2015, they must be underpinned by a human rights-based approach to development that emphasizes universality, equality, participation and accountability. Working with indigenous peoples on the MDGs also requires a culturally sensitive approach, based on respect for and inclusion of their world-views, perspectives and experiences, as well as their concepts of development. The importance of a rights-based and culturally sensitive approach has been repeatedly emphasized by UNPFII, particularly in the reports of its fourth and fifth sessions, which include a series of recommendations on the issue to States, the UN system and indigenous peoples' organizations.

UNPFII has called for the full and effective participation of indigenous peoples in designing, implementing and monitoring MDG-related programmes and projects that concern, or may affect, them. In this spirit, the Secretariat of UNPFII carries out annual desk reviews of national MDG reports to determine to what degree indigenous issues are considered in these reports and whether indigenous peoples participate in national MDG-monitoring.⁷ The reviews carried out in 2006 and 2007 covered about 25 countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia and the Pacific. They found that, with very few exceptions, indigenous peoples' input has not been included in national MDG-monitoring and reporting. The reviews also highlighted clear gaps in data on indigenous peoples and the MDGs. While many reports discussed the disparities affecting indigenous peoples, very few actually provided disaggregated data. Another gap identified in the reviews was the lack of mechanisms through which to ensure the input and participation of indigenous peoples in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies to achieve the MDGs.

The way forward. The following are a few key recommendations to better integrate indigenous peoples' issues into MDG programmes and policies:

- ✓ The human rights-based approach to development should be operationalized by States, the UN system and other intergovernmental organizations. The recognition of indigenous peoples as distinct, as well as the respect for their individual and collective human rights, is crucial for achieving a just and sustainable solution to the widespread poverty that affects them.



UN PHOTO/MARK GARTEN

Rio Sucio, Colombia, 2006. Indigenous culture is closely linked to the land, and displacement often leads to the total collapse of traditional authority and cultural patterns.

- ✓ Policies must be put in place to ensure that indigenous peoples have universal access to quality, culturally-sensitive social services. Some areas of particular concern are inter-cultural/bilingual education and culturally sensitive maternal and child health care.

- ✓ MDG-related programmes and policies should be culturally sensitive and must include the active participation and prior, free and informed consent of indigenous peoples, so as to avoid their loss of land and natural resources, and the

accelerated assimilation and erosion of their cultures. For example, United Nations country teams in Bolivia and Kenya have established advisory committees to guide programming on indigenous peoples' issues.

✓ UN Member States and the UN system must make greater efforts to include indigenous peoples in MDG monitoring and reporting, as well as in the production of national MDG reports, and the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of MDG-related programmes and policies that will directly or indirectly affect indigenous peoples.

✓ Improved disaggregation of data is indispensable to properly monitor progress towards the achievement of the MDGs in countries with indigenous populations and should be a key priority for Governments and the UN system. Several initiatives are currently underway to improve data disaggregation at both the national and regional levels. The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), for example, has played a key role in improving data on indigenous peoples in the region, and UNPFII has organized a series of regional meetings on indicators of the well-being for indigenous peoples. ❖

Notes

- 1 UNPFII (2005), *Report on the fourth session*, E/C.19/2005/9.
- 2 <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/declaration.htm>
Article 41 reads: "The organs and specialized agencies of the United Nations system and other intergovernmental organizations shall contribute to the full realization of the provisions of this Declaration through the mobilization, inter alia, of financial cooperation and technical assistance. Ways and means of ensuring participation of indigenous peoples on issues affecting them shall be established."
Article 42 reads: "The United Nations, its bodies, including the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and specialized agencies, including at the country level, and States shall promote respect for and full application of the provisions of this Declaration and follow up the effectiveness of this Declaration."
- 3 IFAD (2007), *Statistics and key facts about indigenous peoples*.
- 4 UNESCO (2004), *La conclusión universal de la educación primaria en América Latina: ¿estamos realmente tan cerca? Informe Regional sobre los objetivos de desarrollo del Milenio vinculados a la educación*.
- 5 ECLAC (2005), *Millennium Development Goals: A Latin American and Caribbean Perspective*.
- 6 UNPFII (2006), *Report on the fifth session*, E/C.19/2006/11
- 7 Desk reviews are available through the UNPFII website: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/>

The Secretariat of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was established by the General Assembly in 2002 within the Division for Social Policy and Development of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. It prepares for the annual sessions of UNPFII and provides support to all members. The Secretariat advocates for, facilitates and promotes the implementation of recommendations that emerge from each UNPFII session. It also promotes awareness of indigenous issues within the UN system, Governments and the general public. It serves as a source of information and coordination point for advocacy efforts relating to the Forum's mandate and ongoing issues concerning indigenous peoples.