



CHAPTER III

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Highlights

Indigenous peoples account for most of the world's cultural diversity. Throughout the world, there are approximately 370 million indigenous peoples occupying 20 per cent of the earth's territory. It is also estimated that they represent as many as 5,000 different indigenous cultures. The indigenous peoples of the world therefore account for most of the world's cultural diversity, even though they constitute a numerical minority.

Land rights in law, but not in reality. Only a few countries recognize indigenous peoples' land rights, but even in those countries, land titling and demarcation procedures have often not been completed, suffer delays or are shelved because of changes in political leadership and policies. Even where indigenous peoples have legal title deeds to their lands, these lands are often leased out by the state as mining or logging concessions without consultation of indigenous peoples, let alone their free and prior informed consent. The lack of legal security of tenure remains a crucial issue for indigenous peoples almost everywhere.

New technologies force resettlement. The promotion of new technologies such as improved seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the introduction of cash-crop cultivation and large plantation schemes have caused environmental degradation and destroyed self-sustaining eco-systems, affecting many indigenous communities to the point of forcing them to resettle elsewhere.

The cost of unsustainable development. Large dams and mining activities have caused forced displacement of thousands of indigenous persons and families without adequate compensations in many countries. Several communities have been moved out of national parks against their will, while tourist development in some countries has resulted in the displacement of indigenous people and their increasing poverty. When indigenous peoples have reacted and tried to assert their rights, in most instances they have suffered physical abuse, imprisonment, torture and even death.

The Implementation Gap: Much talk, little action. While indigenous peoples have, since 2002, experienced increased recognition of their environmental rights at the international level, translating this political recognition into concrete advances at the national and local levels remains a major challenge. Many decisions made at the international level are not always respected or implemented at the national level, and indigenous peoples' voices are all too often marginalized, if heard at all.

Climate change threatens very existence of indigenous peoples. For many indigenous peoples, climate change is already a reality, and they are increasingly realising that climate change is clearly not just an environmental issue, but one with severe socioeconomic implications. The World Bank also sees climate change as having the potential to hamper achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, including those on poverty eradication, child mortality, combating malaria and other diseases, as well as environmental sustainability. For many indigenous peoples, climate change is a potential threat to their very existence and a major issue of human rights and equity.

(Continued over page)



Severe impact on women. Forced evictions and the dispossession of lands have particularly severe impacts on indigenous women, who, as a result, often have an increased workload as they must walk long distances to find alternative sources of water or fuel wood, or are driven out of income-earning productive activities and into a situation of economic dependence on men.

** More information and data on specific countries is available in the publication and regional fact sheets.*

The State of the World's Indigenous Peoples was authored by seven independent experts and produced by the Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

For more information, see: www.un.org/indigenous

